





# CIVIL SOCIETY ACTION IN A TURBULENT YEAR

## CIVIL SOCIETY IS PLAYING A KEY ROLE IN RESPONDING TO CONFLICTS AND HUMANITARIAN CRISES – AND FACING RETALIATION

Conflicts and crises left deep scars on millions over the past year. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has had global impacts and political and economic repercussions in countries across the world.

But the war in Ukraine was sadly far from the only conflict that marred 2022. A two-year war has only recently come to an end in **Ethiopia**. In Syria, conflict has raged for years. Violent insurgency continues to claim lives across multiple countries of the Sahel.

These and many other conflicts are causing immense human suffering and bringing devastating costs, measured in thousands upon thousands of human lives lost and violations of human rights on a vast scale. Impacts will be felt for generations to come.

Conflict is creating humanitarian emergencies and displacing people, within and across borders. In a world where a record **100 million-plus people**

are now displaced, conflict is a key driver of **mass migration**, alongside other major problems that force people to flee, such as political persecution, economic strife and climate disasters.

It's during critical times like these that civil society is vital. Civil society provides essential services, helps and advocates for victims, monitors human rights and collects evidence of violations to hold those responsible to account.

But for doing this, civil society comes under attack. It's both caught in the crossfire and deliberately targeted. The vital role it plays was recognised with the **award** of the 2022 Nobel Peace Prize to activists and organisations in Belarus, Russia and Ukraine, working to uphold human rights in the thick of conflict. But acknowledgement hasn't stopped repression. The Russian award winner, human rights organisation Memorial, was ordered to close in the run-up to the war. The laureate from Belarus, Ales Bialiatski, received a 10-year **jail sentence**.

States affected by conflicts and crises often see civil society as a source of counter-power and counter-narratives and a competitor for resources,

and move to suppress it accordingly. In **Ethiopia**, activists and journalists have been detained by a state determined to control the flow of information. In **Mali**, the ruling military junta has banned the activities of civil society organisations that receive funding from France, a government it's at odds with, impacting on organisations providing humanitarian support to people affected by the conflict. In Italy civil society groups **face trial** for rescuing migrants at sea.

Lack of recognition of its crucial roles and stigmatising narratives are major challenges civil society faces around the world, not least because they enable violations of civic space and hamper its ability to do its vital work.

## CATASTROPHIC GLOBAL GOVERNANCE FAILURES HIGHLIGHT THE URGENCY OF REFORM

Too often in the face of the conflicts and crises that have marked the world over the past year, platitudes are all international institutions have had to offer. Multilateral institutions have been

left exposed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The United Nations (UN) Security Council has been **hamstrung** by Russia's veto power, and while the UN General Assembly has passed resolutions on the conflict, many states have voted against or abstained – not just authoritarian states but also several democratic states in the global south.

The **UN Human Rights Council** and institutions including the **International Criminal Court** are doing what they can to collect evidence of rights violations and hold perpetrators to account, including in crisis zones such as **Afghanistan** and **Myanmar** as well as Ukraine. But **China** was able to use its economic muscle to strongarm states into closing down UN attempts to investigate its human rights crimes in its Xinjiang region.

The international system is increasingly unfit for purpose when it comes to tackling the many challenges that cross borders and can't be addressed by single states – conflicts, climate change, disasters and displacement, among others. It's held back by bureaucratic approaches and leaders unwilling to take courageous stances on contentious issues.

Civil society puts immense efforts into engaging with the international system to try to secure ambitious international commitments and human rights norms, pushing for their domestication, monitoring state compliance and using the international machinery to investigate human rights abuses. But civil society remains at the back of the queue for access, with a system still built around states, dogged by narrow calculations of interest by government leaders and with an

open door for powerful private sector interests. Without full civil society participation, global governance institutions are sure to keep falling short of their potential.

Civil society has a well-developed reform agenda. The year's failings show it still faces the challenge of having its proposals adopted by decision makers willing to take on the status quo.

### PEOPLE ARE MOBILISING IN GREAT NUMBERS IN RESPONSE TO ECONOMIC SHOCK – AND EXPOSING DEEPER PROBLEMS IN THE PROCESS

As it drove a massive surge in fuel and food prices, Russia's war on Ukraine became a key driver of a global cost of living crisis. This triggered a mass wave of protests – **over 12,500** – across most of the world: the **CIVICUS Monitor** documented protests in at least 133 countries in 2022.

Protests often mobilised in response to tone-deaf policies that further increased costs, such as subsidy cuts in Indonesia and **new taxes** that hit economically excluded people hardest in Ghana. Although many unpopular policies were quickly reversed, protests often continued regardless, because anger at deeper problems such as corruption, poor governance and economic inequality had been unlocked.

People are increasingly aware that super-wealthy elites have only got richer during the various crises of recent years, including the pandemic and the

Ukraine war. Fossil fuel firms have banked record profits as millions have struggled to pay soaring costs. This has led people to question whose interests the dominant global economic model serves, and how it can be reformed and made fairer.

Protesters often demand better social safety nets and public services, and more progressive taxation systems where those who have more pay proportionately more. People are unionising and organising in workplaces to demand higher pay and better conditions, including in big-brand companies such as **Amazon**, **Apple** and **Starbucks**. Civil society continues to push for stronger business regulation and progressive taxation, including by **advocating** for global agreements.

Civil society faces the challenges of sustaining demands for economic justice beyond protests, connecting with other struggles for justice, including climate, gender, racial and social justice, and putting forward progressive economic ideas that expand access to human rights.

### THE RIGHT TO PROTEST IS UNDER ATTACK – EVEN IN LONGSTANDING DEMOCRACIES

Many states, unwilling or unable to concede the deeper demands of protests triggered by rising prices, have responded with violence. In **Sri Lanka**, for instance, protests sparked by economic meltdown ended with the resignation of the president, but his successor instituted a violent **crackdown** characterised by detentions and torture.

State violence has been the norm when protests motivated by economic despair have erupted in repressive contexts where protests are rare, such as **Kazakhstan**.

And it isn't only protests sparked by the high cost of living that have been met with repression. The right to protest is under attack all over the world, whether people are mobilising to seek economic justice, democracy, human rights and environmental action or articulate other demands. In **Iran**, the women-led mass protests demanding the end of theocracy have been met with brutal force, including indiscriminate killings and executions along with mass arrests. In **Peru**, security forces have killed dozens of people protesting against the ousting of the president.

All kinds of states are repressing protests. Protesters are being criminalised in democracies such as **Australia** and the **UK** for demanding climate action, even when governments claim to take climate change seriously.

Although international human rights law makes clear people have a right to peaceful protest – and the vast majority of protests throughout the year were indeed peaceful – many governments are deploying a wide range of tactics to crack down on peaceful protests and using the occasional violent protest event as an excuse to restrict all protests.

Frequent tactics include disproportionate violence, all the way up to lethal violence, and harassment, arbitrary detention and criminalisation of protesters. There's increasing use of facial recognition technology and other forms of pervasive surveillance



Security forces detain a protester demonstrating against President Vladimir Putin's announcement of partial mobilisation of reservists to fight in Ukraine. Moscow, Russia, 21 September 2022.

Photo by Alexander Nemenov/AFP via Getty Images

enabled by artificial intelligence. Journalists covering protests are often targeted too. There's widespread impunity for violations of protest rights.

Civil society groups are working to defend protest rights, including by engaging with the UN human rights machinery to expose violations and promote progressive norms on the management of protests. At the domestic level, civil society groups often work to advise detained protesters of their rights and campaign for their release. But closing protest space offers a challenge for civil society, particularly in the many contexts where taking to the streets is the only means available to express dissent and try to influence decision-making.

### DEMOCRACY IS BEING ERODED IN MULTIPLE WAYS – INCLUDING FROM WITHIN BY ELECTED LEADERS

Economic strife and insecurity are providing fertile ground for the emergence of authoritarian leaders fostering polarisation and attacking rights. Authoritarianism and populism remain powerful currents and come together in a political approach best described as popular authoritarianism, in which politicians speak to people's demands for change to win elections and go on to dismantle democratic institutions, restrict civic space and violate rights. El Salvador's president, Nayib Bukele, offers one current example of the erosion of democracy from within, concentrating power and trampling on rights in the name of combatting **gang violence**.

Authoritarian politics are also thriving elsewhere. **Hungary's** repressive leader, Viktor Orbán, consolidated his divisive rule, despite the challenge of a combined opposition. In the **Philippines**, ruthless president Rodrigo Duterte, whose so-called 'war on drugs' killed thousands, created the conditions to be succeeded as president by the son of an immensely corrupt and cruel former dictator, with Duterte's daughter as vice president.

No longstanding authoritarian regime made significant progress towards democracy in 2022. Rather than move towards civilian rule, military governments in countries such as **Burkina Faso**, **Guinea** and **Mali** consolidated power, partly by mobilising the public against perceived enemies, particularly former colonial power France.

In countries where genuine elections were held, one distinct trend was a further embrace of far-right-extremism. In **Italy** and **Sweden** far-right parties now lead or hold significant sway over governments. **France** recorded its highest-ever far-right vote – and anti-migrant political discourse has been thoroughly normalised. **Israel** now has the most extreme government in its history.

In **Brazil**, the danger of a far-right incumbent completing his destructive work through a second term was only narrowly averted. Brazil wasn't the only country where some ground was regained: right-wing populist incumbents were defeated in the **Czech Republic** and **Slovenia**, leading to civic space improvements. In the **USA**, midterm elections led to the defeat of multiple extremist candidates as people stepped up to defend abortion and voting rights.

Another emerging trend is the rejection of incumbency. In Latin America, what has been seen as a progressive turn encompassing **Brazil**, **Chile**, **Colombia** and **Honduras** may be more an expression of this rejection: unable or unwilling to tackle deep-rooted problems and deliver on their promises, ruling parties rarely won.

In some cases, a history of disappointments with incumbents translated into a rejection of mainstream politics. This was seen in countries as far apart as **Costa Rica** and **Lesotho**, where the search for new alternatives led voters to embrace candidates presenting themselves as outsiders.

The quest for novelty creates opportunities for innovation and authoritarianism alike. The challenge for civil society is to resist regression, capitalise when opportunities for progressive change come, work to make gains permanent and keep making the case for inclusive, pluralist and participatory democracy.

### DISINFORMATION IS SKEWING PUBLIC DISCOURSE, UNDERMINING DEMOCRACY AND FUELLING HATE

Disinformation played a huge role in elections in countries as diverse as Brazil, **Philippines** and **South Korea**. In **Chile**, it influenced the referendum that resulted in the rejection of a progressive new constitution. It's helping keep anti-war sentiment in check in Russia, promoting the anti-Muslim Hindu nationalism of **India's** ruling party and keeping Trumpism alive in the USA.

Disinformation and conspiracy theories soared under the pandemic, souring every area of public discourse, from vaccines to climate change to gender and racial issues, normalising hate speech and extremist ideas.

Powerful authoritarian states are pumping out disinformation to sow polarisation in democracies and foster confusion over their rights violations, such as Russia's atrocities in Ukraine and **China's** systematic abuses in Xinjiang.

Civil society is often the target of disinformation and hate speech, particularly when activists come from or stand for the rights of excluded groups. Disinformation is pervasive in the pushback against women's and LGBTQI+ people's rights: it's deployed in culture wars waged by well-resourced and influential global networks of ultraconservative, nationalist and white supremacist groups – including those that attack women's rights in the name of what they characterise as the rights of the unborn while attacking trans people's rights in the name of women's rights.

These groups are disproportionately influencing public discourse and enabling regressive moves out of sync with more moderate climates of public opinion, as in the case of abortion bans in the **USA**.

The tech industry clearly isn't up to the challenge of dealing with the problem, not least because it thrives on it: its algorithms get people hooked by feeding them increasingly extreme and simplistic content that reinforces their pre-existing views, distorts their perspectives and isolates them from diverse viewpoints.

Fact-checking initiatives are only a first step and are eclipsed by the sheer scale of the task. The challenge remains of forging a joined-up, multi-faceted global effort to counter disinformation – which must include better regulation of the social media and tech industry, developed through participatory processes and including safeguards for freedom of expression.

### MOVEMENTS FOR WOMEN'S AND LGBTQI+ RIGHTS ARE MAKING GAINS AGAINST THE ODDS

In the face of difficult odds, civil society continues to drive progress. The **USA** made global headlines when a ruling by a politically skewed supreme court restricted abortion rights, plunging millions of women into despair. But the global trend runs in the opposite direction, towards liberalisation, particularly in Latin America, where **Colombia** and many **Mexican** states have recently recognised abortion rights.

It's a similar progressive trend when it comes to LGBTQI+ rights, with the struggle focusing on two broad fronts: decriminalisation where antiquated laws against same-sex conduct remain and marriage equality where the debate has moved further ahead. In 2022, same-sex marriage became a reality in several countries, among them **Chile** and **Switzerland**, while three Caribbean states – **Antigua and Barbuda**, **Barbados** and **St Kitts and Nevis** – scrapped colonial laws that criminalised same-sex relations.

The progressive wave sweeping Latin America is the result of decades-long efforts by social movements

that are active in every arena, from street protest to regional networking and high-level engagement with government institutions. Recognition of sexual and reproductive rights has typically come through parliaments or courts, and occasionally as a result of referendums. In the Commonwealth Caribbean, progress has been won through a multi-country litigation strategy pursued in national and regional courts.

These victories have made civil society the target of a ferocious backlash. Civil society now faces the multifaceted challenge of defending itself, resisting attempts to reverse gains and building public support to ensure that legal change is backed by changing attitudes.

### CIVIL SOCIETY IS THE MAJOR FORCE BEHIND THE PUSH FOR CLIMATE ACTION

Civil society continues to be the force sounding the alarm on the triple threat of climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss. Civil society is urging action using every tactic available, from street protest and direct action to litigation and advocacy in national and global arenas.

The need for action was proven yet again in 2022 by another lengthy catalogue of extreme weather, including devastating floods that left a third of **Pakistan** under water.

Civil society's energy has kept the climate emergency high on the agenda and led to some steps forward.

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In 2022, the **COP27 climate summit** finally agreed to start developing a fund to compensate global south countries for the loss and damage caused by climate change, a move that came after years of civil society advocacy. Meanwhile, at another major summit states committed to a new **global biodiversity framework** to try to preserve planetary assets and arrest cycles of destruction.

The challenge here is that global decisions on climate and environment tend to go ignored. And crucially, there's still no commitment to accelerate the end of fossil fuel use. Quite the opposite: in response to pressure on supplies caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, many states have made a short-term push for yet more extraction. Too little of the current record fossil fuel profits is going into genuine funding for transition to renewable energies. The political power of the fossil fuel lobby remains undimmed.

Civil society faces the challenge of sustaining the movement in the face of repression – including growing protest restrictions and violence against grassroots and Indigenous groups resisting extractive initiatives – while continuing to find new ways to keep commanding public attention and communicate the urgency of action to address the climate emergency.

## **CIVIL SOCIETY IS REINVENTING ITSELF TO ADAPT TO A CHANGING WORLD**

In the context of pressures on civic space and huge global challenges, civil society is growing, diversifying and widening its repertoire of tactics. Drawing on its special strengths of diversity, adaptability and creativity, civil society continues to evolve.

Today, much of civil society's radical energy is coming from outside the NGO universe: from small, informal grassroots groups, often formed and led by women, young people and Indigenous people. In many of today's mass mobilisation, young – sometimes very young – people are at the forefront, taking action on issues that directly matter to them – such as the lack of economic opportunities, the climate crisis that threatens to rob them of their futures and the denial of the rights of excluded groups to which they belong or stand as allies of.

Many new groups organise horizontally, adopt participatory approaches and cultivate distributed leadership. They tend to rely on voluntary engagement and can achieve a lot with little. They're often more intersectional than their more established counterparts, striving to make

connections across society's traditional fault lines, including of class, race and faith. This was seen in many of this year's protests, for example in Sri Lanka, as economic shocks with far-reaching impacts brought diverse groups of people together across deep-seated divides.

New civil society forms and practices have shown an admirable resilience, but questions remain about their long-term sustainability. They don't fit neatly into conventional civil society resourcing models and partners and allies may struggle to find the best ways to support them. There can be challenges of disconnection between different civil society elements. There are also limits to engagement, reflected in the need to avoid burnout and ensure self-care. And there will surely be boundaries on the long-term ability of people to volunteer as work and parental responsibilities kick in. A major challenge ahead will be to sustain and channel this prodigious energy to achieve the deep changes evidently needed in the world today.



## 10 IDEAS FOR ACTION

- 1** Civil society is responding to conflicts and crises but facing retaliation. There is an urgent need for a broad-based campaign to win recognition of the vital roles played by civil society in conflict and crisis response. Parties in conflicts and the international community must commit to recognising and respecting the rights of civil society in conflict settings and to supporting its full range of roles.
- 2** Large-scale public mobilisations have proven critical in shaping the public agenda, pushing for policy change and resisting attacks on rights. Greater emphasis is needed by civil society and supportive states on protecting freedom of peaceful assembly, including by developing preventative actions, advocating for law enforcement reforms and ensuring perpetrators of violence against protesters are held to account.
- 3** A more effective, inclusive and democratic global governance system is acutely needed. Civil society should work with supportive states to take forward plans for UN Security Council reform and proposals to open up the UN and other international institutions to much greater public participation and scrutiny.
- 4** Political shifts can create threats or opportunities for civil society. Even when progressive political change happens, civil society must stay vigilant to ensure political leaders are held accountable and stick to their promises to bring change, and must be alert to the early warning signs of regressive backlash.
- 5** Civil society participation is crucial to ensure free and fair elections and democratic governance. In the run-up to elections, civil society's roles should include the defence of electoral rights, provision of voter education, scrutiny of the integrity of voting systems, promotion of civil debate and advocacy towards candidates to commit to safeguarding rights and freedoms and acting on social justice issues.
- 6** Disinformation hampers civil society's efforts to advance change and is instrumentalised by regressive forces that attack civil society. Civil society should play a leading role in developing anti-disinformation strategies, including fact-checking, enhancement of media literacy and, crucially, advocacy for higher regulatory standards for social media companies, consistent with respect for freedom of expression.
- 7** The climate crisis and economic dysfunction are two sides of the same coin. Civil society should work to enhance economic literacy and critique the flaws inherent in a global economic system that benefits the wealthy and is heavily dependent on fossil fuels. Areas for advocacy could include progressive taxation, social protection floors, universal basic incomes, union recognition, a just energy transition and effective business regulation.
- 8** Strategic litigation at the national and international levels has proven to be an effective strategy to expand rights, including in struggles for climate action and Indigenous and LGBTQI+ people's rights. Civil society should use the full set of tactics available, including litigation, to realise rights and advance progressive change.
- 9** Media engagement is crucial for raising public awareness of issues such as climate change and gender equality, and winning support for action. Civil society should develop media partnerships as part of its advocacy and campaigning strategies.
- 10** Transnational solidarity is vital in struggles to resist regression. Civil society should work to strengthen and enhance the membership and reach of transnational civil society networks, and enable the rapid deployment of solidarity and support when rights come under attack.



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