

# The Future of Civil Society Organisations



A GLOBAL NGO NETWORK  
FOR PRINCIPLED AND EFFECTIVE  
HUMANITARIAN ACTION



# The Future of Civil Society Organisations

The Future is unwritten. Yet, the current challenges and opportunities brought by the COVID-19 pandemic call for a conversation over the transformations we want to see in society, and in the humanitarian, social justice and environmental sector.

In this publication, a group of leaders of civil society networks and platforms share their observations and thoughts, identifying possible directions that civil society organisations may want to go. Not everyone we wanted in the publication was able to contribute, but we will use this as a conversation starter bringing in yet more diversity of perspectives over the coming months.

You will read their views on how the ways we work and organise, need to be adapted and made more agile to keep pace with people's expectations. It is about shifting power, bridging divides and transforming society with a sense of acceleration, caused by the current crisis.

What you will read is both challenging and exciting.

The COVID-19 pandemic can re-energise the demands of civil society organisations to put people at the heart of the changes we need: to protect the planet from degradation, to ensure that all human beings can enjoy prosperous and fulfilling lives, that economic, social and technological progress occurs in harmony with nature and fosters peaceful, just and inclusive societies.

As conveners of influential networks and platforms, jointly we represent thousands of civil society organisations which work with, and on behalf of millions of people who are being marginalised and deprived of their human and civic rights. We are determined to mobilize and lead collectively, based on a spirit of strengthened global solidarity, focused in particular on the rights of those left furthest behind.

## Wolfgang Jamann and Ignacio Packer

### DISSEMINATION

The full document with all the individual articles are online on the organisations homepages and at <https://www.icvanetwork.org/resources/future-civil-society-organisations>

Please help disseminate as widely as possible by circulating to networks, posting links, mentioning it on Twitter and Facebook and adding it to resources lists.

An online conversation, between the authors, is scheduled for June. Please indicate your interest by writing to [FutureCSO@icvanetwork.org](mailto:FutureCSO@icvanetwork.org).

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# Civil Society as Agents of Systemic Change Leaving No One Behind



International cooperation – of which notably development cooperation – has been evolving over many years towards a more mutual-benefit-oriented approach. Admittedly, the benefit accruing to donors was often quite significant. In the EU context, those changes seemed to speed up with the new ‘geopolitical’ European Commission which took office in December 2019. Development cooperation became ‘international partnerships’ with an emphasis on strategic investment providing ‘value for money’. Civil society was left wondering where it fitted in to this picture. At CONCORD, the European Confederation of civil society organisations working on development, we immediately decided to get our heads around this.

And then the COVID-19 pandemic hit us and threw our best-laid plans out of the window. Major threat? Or huge opportunity?

Civil society and governments (or collectives of governments like the EU) don’t generally find ‘partnership’ that easy. Civil society organisations are mission-driven, not profit- or economic growth-driven. We are value-based and rights-based, not interest-based. We focus on reaching the hardest-to-reach, the most marginalised – which does not necessarily offer ‘value-for-money’, nor is it very ‘geopolitical’. So we tend to get labelled as unrealistic utopian dreamers – or as a thorn-in-the-side that needs to be, at best, ignored, or at worst silenced. If this weren’t the case, why would civil society space be shrinking? And even more so now that COVID-19 has struck.

However, if civil society is challenged, so are democracy and participatory decision-making; if civil society is challenged, so are equality, social cohesion and non-discrimination; if civil society is challenged, so are transparency and accountability, especially as regards those in position of power. That cannot be allowed.

Europe and the world have been facing a life-threatening crisis. Many countries, regions and cities have declared a state of emergency or called for extraordinary powers to help prevent the spread of the new Coronavirus, speeding up the decision-making process and the allocation of resources. However, this concentration of power should in no case lead to abuse of power. It is essential that the powers conferred under emergency are exercised only for the specific purposes for which they were assigned. It is therefore ever more important that civil society continues to play its role as a defender of human rights and freedoms.

This particular crisis – or at least our response to it – also challenges our way of life. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic raging across Europe, governments are having to envisage massive support to save jobs and livelihoods, to prop up struggling health systems and strengthen social protection for those who will be most affected by the crisis. Why the sudden urgency? Because, over the past two or three decades, rather than investing in our social systems, governments have preferred fiscal discipline – which in practice equates to cutting back on public service delivery and increasing innate inequalities in societies. We are, in many countries in Europe, now paying the price for those decisions. And so will governments elsewhere, if COVID-19 takes hold there as it has in Europe. The difference is that, in other regions, as in Africa, decisions to focus more on private delivery of services instead of public were often imposed by others, such as the World Bank and the IMF.

So, as governments are having to urgently change tack and invest in our social systems, now is more than ever the moment for civil society to be Propositional. Political. Opportunistic. And to go beyond our natural role as providers of support to communities in times of need. Now is the time to call for a transformation of our political, economic and financial systems. We can no longer accept that governments put economic growth and the accumulation of great wealth for a minority before the well-being of all people and the planet. Little by little, people’s awareness is also growing of the fact that risk is not a simple “side effect”, but the result of specific policy choices made by people in power. Societies themselves may be more aware now of the dangers of the current system and therefore more receptive to ideas for change. Civil society should build on their awareness, stimulate critical thinking, offer solutions and foster active citizenship. Now is the moment for civil society to come together, to build common ambitions.

CONCORD has, over the past decade, been building up its work on systemic change and increasing its efforts to convince policy-makers to move beyond the obsession with GDP, given the havoc it has wreaked on our societies. We have taken up the gauntlet and are researching and reflecting on what impact COVID-19 will have on inequalities around the world and on our efforts to leave no one behind.

Going forward, civil society has an even greater responsibility to the people we aim to represent, to remind governments that their choices may have severe consequences. And as Europe enters a so-called economic recession, we must be clear that governments must turn their backs on austerity measures. They do not pay off! Nor do competition and power games. The corona virus knows no boundaries and respects no free market rules!

It is now time for all of us to truly put people and planet first. That was, after all, the whole point behind the Sustainable Development Agenda we all signed up to in 2015. We must turn what could be a major threat into an opportunity for transformational change in our ways of thinking and acting. Solidarity, justice and equality must be the name of the game henceforth.

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European NGO confederation for relief and development

# How can civil society honour the loss from the COVID-19 crisis and shape a better future?



The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed fundamental cracks in the global system. It has brought inequality within and between countries into sharp relief, and severely tested our resilience as individuals, nations and as an international community. We won't just snap back into business as usual once the pandemic is contained. Civil society will not be left unchanged.

Right now, civil society organisations (CSOs) are playing a critical role supporting the most vulnerable and holding governments to account as they constrain civil liberties to contain the virus. But we also need to look beyond the many risks that Clearly COVID-19 presents and help shape what emerges.

[The Royal Society of Art and Science \(RSA\)](#) describes three elements that cement change after a major crisis: a reason for the change existed before the crisis; the crisis reinforces that case for change; and political alliances and practical innovations that can kick into action as the crisis abates.

We need to understand where these three elements are present to help civil society play its role in cementing necessary change. I would suggest that there are at least four:

## The imperative for local power

There is already a massive case for shifting the power from northern INGOs to CSOs in the global south. Not only is it right that local people make decisions about their own future, but it's also more effective in delivering sustainable outcomes. [Community actions and local innovations](#) were critical to responding to avian flu and the Ebola outbreak in West Africa.

The crisis has reinforced this - CSOs embedded in local communities have direct access to vulnerable groups, and are trusted by local communities and authorities. These organisations can get assistance to those who need it more quickly and effectively.

Grassroots organisations struggle to access finance from the UN system and cover their core running costs. At a time when they are most needed, there is a risk that these organisations are constrained by a lack of funds and government restrictions.

Going forward, stronger political alliances and finance innovations are needed. INGOs are conduits for funding, can advocate for more democratic aid mechanisms that enable local funding, and show solidarity when civil liberties are abused. This change needs to happen in a collaborative way that builds local power and achieves better development outcomes in the long run.

## The need for global resilience

Never has our interconnectedness been more apparent. Any response is only as good as the weakest health system. If we are to be resilient as a global community, then all countries need to have access to the basic services that underpin communities' ability to respond to inevitable shocks that will come along. This is what effective aid is about.

That means investing to tackle the root causes of problems to fix the broken systems that drive poverty and inequality. The COVID-19 pandemic could cost the global economy \$1-2 trillion, whereas the [World Bank suggests prevention of zoonotic disease transfer is a tiny fraction of that](#).

[The Stern report](#) showed climate change would cost 5% of GDP, but preventing it would only cost 1%. [WWF estimates](#) that loss of nature would cost almost \$10trillion, compared to the \$0.23 trillion that could be made from investing to protect it. In the same way, the crisis makes a strong case for investment in prevention - in accessible public healthcare, water and sanitation, social protection and all the other Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). A focus here would help build a more resilient, sustainable global system where people can deal with further shocks and prevent a meltdown like the one we are seeing now. And that needs to happen internationally, with countries supporting each other to take on global challenges, like climate change.

### Repurposing the economic system

The virus has made growing global inequality more apparent to the public. [A survey from the RSA showed](#) that only 9% of people in the UK want to go back to business as usual, highlighting new values that could underpin an economic system that serves us, rather than has us (and our planet) serve it. This is a massive opportunity for civil society, as economic change supports so many of the outcomes we are striving for.

The innovation is there. [Amsterdam is using doughnut economics](#) to rebuild their city post-virus - a bold move away from economic growth to balancing planetary and human wellbeing.

We have a chance to repurpose the economic system, if civil society can build the necessary political alliances (that were lacking following the 2007 financial crisis) and unite with other actors to make the case for transformation.

### A case for learning and collaboration

Civil society has brought crucial learning and experience from previous crises to adapt and be agile to the COVID-19. In the UK, Bond members and others are collaborating effectively to achieve more together. In turn, Bond itself is working with other networks domestically and internationally to share and learn together to further the global response.

There are many risks from this crisis. If we put learning and new alliances at the heart of our actions going forward, we will emerge more resilient, more creative and more impactful.

When conditions in a system change to the point where it can't cope, the system either dies or transforms. If we, as a civil society, are intentional about the system that we want and work together to imagine it, then we might get close to the transformation that we need. For me, this is an important way to honour the pain, suffering and death that COVID-19 brings through shaping a better future.

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<sup>1</sup> Avian influenza: science, policy and politics by Ian Scoones and Epidemics: science, governance and social justice by Melissa Leach, Sarah Dry and Hayley MacGregor

<sup>2</sup> Kate Raworth, Doughnut Economics

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/08/amsterdam-doughnut-model-mend-post-coronavirus-economy>

# Keeping momentum on climate action during the COVID-19 crisis: A case for cross-constituency collaboration



The COVID-19 pandemic has caused disruption to lives, livelihoods, physical and mental well-being. The immediate priority of our movements have justifiably shifted towards addressing this current crisis and to bring as much relief to our people. However, the climate crisis has not paused and now more than ever, given the lessons from the COVID crisis, we should be continuing our fight for climate action.

One of the immediate challenges for civil society to continue pushing for climate action is the limitations on civil society participation, especially at national levels, where climate policies are being developed, such as the NDC enhancement process, or current measures to address the COVID crisis such as economic stimulus packages which may undermine climate policies and actions. The COVID crisis has once again exposed the weaknesses of our economic model as it is the most vulnerable that are paying the highest price of the crisis due to bad social protection schemes and the lack of essential public services. We can't allow the economic system to go back to normal as if nothing happened. Especially because we'll need these public services to tackle the climate emergency.

The cancellation of key meetings at an international level also has an impact on our effective participation in pressuring governments to take ambitious climate action. Those meetings that are happening online raise questions of transparency and inclusivity, especially for CSO participation.

The cross-constituency collaboration during COP25 in Madrid was a good example of working in unity and having impact. It would be important for us to build on this collaboration. We should explore ways of doing this while most of the key international moments that would have assisted collaboration have been cancelled.

It is essential that in the development and implementation of "creating momentum" on climate, that we continue to exercise sensitivity to the current COVID crisis and that our work demonstrates solidarity with those suffering the impacts (social, economic, political etc) of this pandemic.

## Our Objectives for keeping momentum on climate action:

- To keep the pressure on governments to not de-prioritize climate action, even during a COVID-19 pandemic and without physical political meetings, internationally and nationally
- Help maintain the momentum by the wider movement through the creation of our own political moments (time-line) and through innovative collaboration and joined up actions
- To prevent the lock-in of unjust economic interventions through COVID-19 related Economic Stimulus Packages and particularly the bailing out of sectors that contribute to climate change such as the Oil and Gas Industry and other polluting sectors. Our approach to this has to be informed by the need to respect the plight of workers and to ensure a just transition

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# Sharing Power, Strengthening Accountability: Changes needed for civil society to remain relevant and resilient in a post-COVID19 world



The COVID-19 pandemic has not just changed our daily routines, it has altered entire systems of living and working that we had assumed were indispensable to modern society. While civil society has responded through an inspiring array of efforts - ranging from the provision of essential services to the pursuit of responsive policy outcomes - the pandemic has also exposed the extreme fragility of our own operating systems. The degree to which we commit ourselves to achieving these reforms will determine our future relevance and resilience as a sector.

## #1: FLEXIBLE, CORE FUNDING IS THE NORM, NOT EXCEPTION

The availability of flexible and reserve funding to sustain core operational costs will conclusively determine which organisations will survive the adverse economic effects of the crises. While it is heartening to see a wide range of donor organisations engage with this [principles](#) as an immediate response to the pandemic, we need to systematically increase levels of international investment in local organisations from the global south. [Four years](#) after the international community committed to the 'localisation agenda', the percentage of official development assistance (ODA) directly reaching the southern civil society remains at the same level: less than 1 percent. This means that while community organisations - who are best placed to provide a sustained response to complex crises like the COVID-19 pandemic - are pitifully under-resourced. Resource flows to southern civil society can no longer be an afterthought for the global development community.

## #2: SYSTEMS FOR INCLUSION AND SOCIAL PROTECTION ARE UNIVERSALLY APPLIED

It is remarkable in these circumstances that local organisations from the global south have been the first to embrace the [COVID-19 Social Security Protocol](#), developed in line with the ILO's COVID-19 policy framework. The Protocol requires organisations to deliberate a 6-point framework to protect their workers and adopt time-bound, context-specific measures. The fact that current list of 200 signatories includes only one major international organisation is deeply disturbing. For one, it seriously undermines the loud assertions to effect radical inclusion and equity in the workplace that we made a few years ago. Women make up nearly 70 percent of the workforce in our sector and are heavily under-represented in its leadership. In a context of shrinking resources, they will be the first to lose their livelihoods, while having a painfully small say in the decisions that their organisations will make in order to tide this crisis. We must be bolder in adopting the social security measures that we are demanding from governments and businesses. Without the solid foundations of trust and authenticity, our organisations are not equipped to withstand the formidable challenges that all agencies - large and small - will need to respond to in coming years.

## #3: TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE IS MARKER AGAINST WHICH WE MEASURE OUR EFFORTS

Failures in governance and accountability have been all too evident in global and national responses to the pandemic. Civil society must significantly upscale strategies to put human rights at the heart of public interventions. We need a serious and systematic effort to [dismantle systems](#) that perpetuate cycles of poverty, discrimination and violence. This includes rethinking how our economies are structured and ensuring sustainable means of production and consumption that allow for the regeneration of natural resources. Our most important indicator of shared progress must be the transformations needed to make the world fit for future generations.

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# The Opportunity



In his book *The Great Leveller*<sup>1</sup>, the historian Walter Scheidel analyses how inequality in societies around the world has continuously, since the stone ages, worsened. His compelling piece describes the only three scenarios which have reduced inequalities significantly: wars, natural catastrophes and pandemics.

Scheidel is cautious in saying that a historical analysis does not predict the future. And frankly, reading his book in 2019 did not inspire hope and confidence for a concerned reader.

In April 2020, six weeks into the Corona pandemic, this feels different. While we're still grappling with the painful comprehension and immediate management of the situation, our thoughts around a desired future start moving into the foreground. Doing away with inequalities, eliminating the gap between haves and have-nots and creating perspectives for people with lesser opportunities, is definitely part of that desired future.

Inequality is just one of the global injustices we want to overcome. Each of us, irrespective of organisational mandates could name half a dozen threats to global justice – from ruthless wars to a broken food system, from the doom of climate change to political oppression. Over the past years, it has been painful, slow, sometimes seemingly hopeless to move forward on such big themes. And now? Is there a sudden opportunity to overcome these and heal the broken systems?

Well, certainly not by magic nor quickly. But the current crisis has shown previously unimaginable actions and reactions, and might as well be a watershed unfreezing of what we think is possible and not. Do we dare to articulate, with a stronger voice and determination, the transformations we want to see in the global societies?

Futurists and foresighters are currently looking at weak and strong signals on post-Coronavirus situation. The most unlikely scenario will be 'business as before', once a solution - vaccine or treatment - is found. The biggest questions appear around so-called 'systems changes'. Is the globalist, capitalist, financial and political system good enough in times of increasing global challenges? Where will our societies drift – back into nationalist and inward-looking behaviours, or forward towards global solidarity, interconnected actions and multilateral governance? And how will the current experience affect our dealing with 'the other' large global crisis around climate change?

Highly relevant to these future systems will be the role of organised civil society, whether it is aid, social discourse, political decision-making or framing the narratives that hold our societies together. We should not let others define the future of the values and systems that matter for civil society around the world.

Civil society's most significant contribution to overcoming this crisis will be working in collaboration, focusing on solidarity and empathy. The humanistic values that bind us, and the societies we work in, demand that we are forward-looking and strategic in our actions, irrespective of the high operational pressures out there. Putting people, unorganised and organised civil society at the centre of post-Coronavirus planning is the task we need to unite behind and show collective leadership.

But we need more. To start with, the vision of a just and healthy planet, as articulated in the Sustainable Development Goals need refreshing. Following on from that, all major political and societal decisions need to be guided by that vision, by the ambition for a just society and clean environment.

**Here's some ideas. What if:**

- People in the service sector, the formal and informal gig economy, are paid a living wage;
- Mass mobility is drastically reduced in lieu of ecologically sustainable ways to meet and communicate;
- Taxation is directed towards a stronger common good, and tax avoidance loop-holes closed and tax evasion penalties are enforced with lasting consequence;
- Reformed multilateral crisis mechanisms effectively ceasing wars and sanctioning crimes against humanity;
- Production and consumption patterns support local economies, protect the environment and foster healthy diets;
- Inclusion of the 'bottom billion' in digitalisation, job creation and public health care becomes a priority for development ambitions;
- Human rights principles and civic freedom move back into the centre of societal values discussions?

The list can be expanded. We need the courage and the determination to not waste this crisis. Only then, can we bring people together as a society that shows solidarity and cohesiveness in the current crisis and goes beyond the fragmentations and antagonisms that have characterised the past years.

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<https://icscentre.org/>



International  
Civil Society Centre

<sup>1</sup> <https://press.princeton.edu/books/paperback/9780691183251/the-great-leveler>

# Who will write the future of humanitarian NGOs?



Governments, international organisations, the private sector, civil society and private individuals are engaged at different degrees in working together to respond to the current humanitarian challenges to save lives and restore human dignity. Humanitarian principles and human rights must guide COVID-19 response and recovery.

We need sustained political will and the infusion of trust built upon the belief in our collective abilities to ensure that our humanitarian aid system responds to meet the challenges presented by COVID-19. While these challenges are unprecedented in the global nature of the pandemic, they also present a significant opportunity to put into practice many of the existing commitments that humanitarians have already made to improve effectiveness and efficiency in the system. Now is the time to act with agility to transform the current situation into an accelerator of the [Grand Bargain commitments](#) as well as an opportunity to mobilise additional funds through traditional and innovative mechanisms.

In all humanitarian responses, NGOs play a critical role to ensure that funds are transformed into life-giving support in the most difficult field contexts. With the COVID-19 response, NGOs ability to stay and deliver humanitarian assistance is linked to four key elements: (a) field presence and the operational footprint, (b) adaptation to measures imposed by countries, (c) access to flexible funding and (d) ability to procure relevant materials to respond to the pandemic.

Without NGOs, the humanitarian system would not be able to reach the millions of people who need humanitarian assistance. Ensuring the NGOs can remain fully engaged and able to operate is a top priority for leadership from donor countries and from the UN system. This is a race against time and the big question is whether our multiple systems can deliver the resources directly in the hands of people rapidly enough before the social fabric of our societies are further torn.

Shared understanding and open communication between local, national and international actors across medical, humanitarian and development sectors may be central to overcoming these challenges<sup>1</sup>. NGOs need to build new models of support based on strengthening relationships with community workers and volunteers, including engaging emerging leaders within the populations they are supporting. NGOs must continue to support and strengthen women's leadership and rely on the key role that faith leaders can play.

As we address some of the immediate challenges, we are also looking at the longer term for NGOs and how to support the way NGOs navigate change. The future of NGOs in the humanitarian sector is not simply an important question for NGOs; it is an important question for the sector.

A question framed by ICVA in its [ICVA 2030](#) process looking at adaptations in the ways of working and at the future of ICVA's added value.

The current economic and political trends may well see a number of NGOs with insufficient resilience to survive the shocks. This may result in a consolidation within the NGO sector and a reduction in diversity and complexity of NGOs. The humanitarian system would in its turn be at risk of being less resilient than it is today.

International NGOs, national and local NGOs and community based organisations need to find new ways of working together and with others and write the future of humanitarian NGOs. The choice we have is about adaptation, collaboration and re-discovering roles. This requires all of us to consider how power can be shifted, accountability improved, social connections built and trust strengthened.

NGOs themselves are best placed to write their future, so long as they are able to act from a willingness to be reactive to the needs of the people they desire to serve, rather than protect the status quo within the system.

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Link to the full article - [Who will write the future of humanitarian NGOs?](#)

Link to infographic - [COVID-19 and ICVA - Effective and principled response needed more than ever](#)



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<sup>1</sup> ICVA has developed a note to support dialogue on strengthening principled and effective humanitarian action by NGOs during the COVID-19 response, with a focus on reinforcing local and national action wherever possible. [REINFORCE, REINFORCE, REINFORCE: Localization in the COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response](#), ICVA, March 2020

# The vital role of civil society platforms on the path to transformative change



The COVID-19 crisis is an unprecedented test for societies, decision-makers, and communities, and is pushing the world's resilience to its limits. Its consequences have already impacted so many in often dramatic ways, and there is no way of predicting the duration and magnitude of the challenges to come.

Newsfeeds turned into flash floods of depressing figures – and while we try to deal with the extent of the health impacts, the pandemic's relentless shadow and concomitant abuses unfold: violence against women and girls has intensified; deforestation in the Amazon has spiked; the criminalization of social movements and the attacks on activists have continued; and more and more people hesitate to speak up about the impacts and the authorities' management of the pandemic for fear of retaliation.

We can't numb out of this.

And we won't. People are most resilient when faced with great challenges. The creativity, the organizing power, the sense of solidarity that has emerged in many communities where more and deeper connections have been weaved despite physical distancing, are all incredibly inspiring. CSOs and CSO platforms have once again shown that they are at the forefront of today's struggles, to build support networks, to respond to the needs of the most vulnerable and the many to whom the public institutions seem so disconnected from their realities.

This gives me a powerful sense of hope and incredible energy. I'm humbled by the power, commitment and compassion that we witness every day. Putting people at the center is the only way that we can come out of this crisis in a meaningful way, building a path of hope, a path to positive, transformative change.

This can be a pivotal point for mankind, it is up to us to be on the right side of History.

To do that, we need to rebuild better, putting people first, not profit. We need to develop, to own and to implement a new social contract between people, governments and the real economy. One that puts people front and center and lays the foundation for just and sustainable societies. One that isn't inward-looking but that embraces diversity, equality and global solidarity. One where action on the climate emergency and care for our planet are ramped up, and not limited to empty promises or timid incremental steps.

If not now, then when?

Forus and its partners will continue to work closely together and join efforts wherever possible to tackle the current crisis. National and regional platforms have a unique vantage point and provide an inclusive space to spur joint initiatives, to voice demands towards decision-makers, to hold them accountable, and to ensure words are met by action.

This is not only essential in the immediate crisis response, but also in regard to the longer-term trends – all stakeholders will have to work towards creating an enabling environment for civil society to fully play its role. Whether that is from a legislative, a policy or a resourcing point of view. Truly participative processes will be the only way to ensure that the transformative agenda that we need can be co-developed, co-owned and co-implemented.

If there is one thing that is clear nowadays, it is that we will need even more cooperation to build a safe a resilient future.

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*Director, Forus International*



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# A Pandemic Induced Crossroads: International NGOs After COVID-19



The international nongovernmental organization (NGO) community currently sits at a crossroads. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, U.S based NGOs remain highly relevant. However, during this unprecedented time, some organizations will continue to thrive, while others will fail. Across the sector, even as human suffering increases, the ability to operate and add value will become ever more challenging. Neither the strength of governments or the private sector suffice; civil society lies at the heart of a strong community and the ability people to safeguard their safety and security.

Central to civil society's mission is holding governments accountable for violations of human rights, and they have a broad mandate to protect and provide services to the world's most vulnerable. Operational NGOs represent a crucial part of this service delivery. Through a myriad of programs crossing hundreds of countries, NGOs serve as a central piece of the global humanitarian system in saving lives, influencing governments and institutions to focus on people, bringing deep technical expertise, supporting hard to reach populations, representing the values of freedom and equality, and mobilizing billions of dollars..

The COVID-19 pandemic created shocks that many, including NGOs, were not prepared to withstand and will result in a fundamental evolution of the sector. The pandemic has unveiled a resurgence of nationalism, deep cracks in our global economic and social systems, widening inequity, increasing local responses, and a closing civic space. The vicious spiral of a worldwide health crisis, creating a global economic downturn with increased food insecurity, will shape the roles of NGOs for decades.

On calls with U.N. leaders, conversations revolve around responding to the spike in COVID-19 cases anticipated in June and July across the world's most vulnerable countries. Many see this crisis in the context of countries with impressive capacities. We may remember the pandemic as a global health, social, economic, and political crisis that reversed a generation of human progress in the world's poorest countries. Unless NGOs, in concert with governments, the private sector, and the whole of civil society, rise to the occasion to help the most vulnerable population, a global setback to human progress is likely.

While some NGO field operations have paused globally, many have shifted their work to adapt to closed borders, tapping new logistics and food supply chains. During this time, NGOs must increasingly look at cross-sector collaboration and harness local areas of expertise, bringing innovative ideas that could increase rapid mobilization. Innovative NGO practices and partnerships created during this pandemic must persist after the world starts to "open," as it is unlikely that travel across borders will properly reset itself to pre-COVID norms anytime in the near future.

History shows that when countries look inward to focus on domestic threats, fear of the other within those countries grows. As COVID-19 explodes across the Global South, tribalism, xenophobia, and racism will become the mantra of strongmen and will likely be directed at NGOs and their staff members. In response, NGOs will need to accelerate their localization trend—not just hiring local staff to implement programs, but also by supporting local civil society and creating empowered legal entities that further trust within a community.

Even if it becomes harder to work across borders, community solidarity and action are gaining momentum. People are helping each other and contributing to their community. The idea that we must care for those among us who are ill or in need is found in all faiths, all cultures and is seen worldwide. While expatriates from around the world will continue to play crucial roles in a country, local teams, local boards, and local partners must become the face of the NGO.

In a turbulent and uncertain environment like the COVID-19 pandemic, space for civil society closes, and government crackdowns emerge. NGOs play a significant role in public service campaigns to raise awareness of issues and supporting local civil society organizations that represent those without a voice. NGOs must assist in filling information vacuum, countering the misinformation and disinformation that comes when leaders are afraid.

As the NGO community attempts to find its footing in a shifting landscape created by COVID-19, one thing cannot change—the need for transparency. When NGOs work in the light, it helps build local trust, inspires confidence in the work on the ground, and enhances long-term stability. When NGO programs are transparent, accountability to the communities and people they serve grows.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are universal in their reach and mandate; they apply to all countries, whether rich or poor. The global nature of the COVID-19 pandemic will come with aftershocks that include hunger, fear, poverty, gender-based violence, and overwhelmed health systems. NGOs with an international remit will increasingly work at home, here in the U.S., bringing lessons from overseas to confront disease, poverty, hunger, and inequity in America. The solutions NGOs seek are also universal.

Program adaptation and the creation of new programming to fight the pandemic do not come without a monetary cost. The COVID-19 pandemic will bring some of the most substantial U.S government funding opportunities. However, these investments could take the sector in an unsustainable direction. Fiscal realities will eventually stop the flow of new resources. While large global NGOs will only continue to grow, mid-sized NGOs will increasingly need to explore a wide range of options, from mergers to social enterprises, to survive and thrive. Many will face headwinds, and some will close.

As we all adjust to the reality this pandemic necessitated, an opportunity has emerged to become even more agile and innovative. A crisis grants us a moment to embrace new ways of working, including new partnerships, commitments to local actors, and adaptive management approaches. International NGOs are among the most formalized and resilient sectors within civil society—the sector will survive. The question is whether NGOs dare to adjust and adapt their overall programming to be as relevant and impactful as possible during this pandemic. It is a risk to be brave, but this is one risk we must take.

**Sam Worthington**  
*CEO, InterAction*

<https://www.interaction.org/>



# The future of civil society organisations in the light of the coronavirus

## Virtual Meeting

**DATE: June 17, 2020** - 2pm to 4pm CEST  
1pm to 3pm DST; 8am to 10am EDT; 5:30pm to 7:30pm IST

**Organised by:** [Bond](#), [CIVICUS](#), [CONCORD Europe](#), [Forus International](#), [ICSC](#), [Climate Action Network](#), [ICVA](#), [InterAction](#), [NEAR](#), [VANI](#)  
(networks of civil society organisations).

The current challenges and opportunities brought by the COVID-19 pandemic call for a conversation over the transformations we want to see in society, and in the humanitarian, social justice and environmental sectors.

We are holding a two hour workshop to explore this conversation with a group of leaders of civil society networks and platforms.

This builds on a short [discussion document](#) where leaders from a range of different sectors and backgrounds have shared their observations and thoughts, identifying possible directions that civil society organisations may want to go.

We will start with a series of provocations from the authors of the discussion document or from leaders of other platforms. These short insights will highlight the imperatives for change, given the current crisis and where we might be able to build from the COVID-19 pandemic to re-energise the demands of civil society organisations to put people at the heart of the changes we need: to protect the planet from degradation, to ensure that all human beings can enjoy prosperous and fulfilling lives, that economic, social and technological progress occurs in harmony with nature and fosters peaceful, just and inclusive societies.

### **We will then have breakout sessions (45 minutes) to explore:**

- The new normal: Cementing the value of civil society
- Shifting the power: Getting beyond the rhetorics
- Transforming broken systems
- New internationalism: balancing universality and local focus
- Solidarity and protecting rights
- Keeping an eye on the prize: Climate and the sustainable development goals

These will be 45 minute open discussions in smaller groups. We expect them to result in next steps that our organisations will take forward together or separately.

We expect the conversations to result in next steps that our organisations will take forward together or separately. We will close with sharing key suggestions and final remarks.

### **With confirmed participation of:**

- Tanya Cox – Director – [CONCORD Europe](#)
- Stephanie Draper – Chief Executive – [Bond](#)
- Tasneem Essop – Executive Director – [Climate Action Network International](#)
- Harsh Jaitli – CEO – [VANI](#)
- Wolfgang Jamann – Executive Director – [ICSC](#)
- Lysa John – Secretary-General – [CIVICUS](#)
- Hibak Kalfan – Executive Director – [NEAR](#)
- Ignacio Packer – Executive Director – [ICVA](#)
- Sarah Strack – Director – [Forus International](#)
- Sam Worthington – CEO – [InterAction](#)

### **How to join the conversation:**

**To receive registration details on joining the webinar please email:** [FutureCSO@icvanetwork.org](mailto:FutureCSO@icvanetwork.org). After registering, you will receive a confirmation email containing information about joining the webinar.







**INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL OF VOLUNTARY AGENCIES**

**DOCUMENT COORDINATED BY ICVA OFFICE IN GENEVA**

[www.icvanetwork.org](http://www.icvanetwork.org)