



Reimagining democracy - background

1. About the report

Each year CIVICUS publishes our State of Civil Society Report. Our report explores the current state of civil society practice, the contemporary trends that are impacting on civil society, and civil society responses to the major issues of the day. The report is produced in collaboration with a wide range of civil society activists, leaders, experts and stakeholders. In 2018, the report is being published in two parts. The Year in Review section, looking back at the major events of 2017 as experienced by civil society, was published in early 2018. Now CIVICUS is focusing on the thematic part of the report.

2. About the theme

‘Reimagining democracy’ is the focus of the thematic section of the 2018 State of Civil Society Report. The report, being published as a series of outputs up to September 2018, comes as a response to concerns being expressed by civil society about the practice of democracy in numerous countries around the world. These include personal presidential rule, constitution and election rigging and challenges to the rule of law; pushback by the politically powerful against the expression of democratic dissent; public dissatisfaction with contemporary democratic practice; and the rise of extreme and polarising political movements.

As discussed in the [year in review section](#) of our report, these trends directly impact on civil society. They are fuelling restrictions and attacks on civil society, as well as impunity for attacks. People denied voice are unable to put forward solutions to the problems they face. In response many people are protesting, seeking political change that formal processes of democracy are not delivering: 2017 saw many mass protest movements for change in countries around the world, but frequently, they were met with violent repression. Further, in many countries, strategies to gain and perpetuate elite political power are fuelling strife by intentionally setting different population groups against each other: political leaders may demonise groups that oppose them, excluded groups and visible minorities. As numerous attacks on the freedom of expression attest, in many contexts the ability to express dissent is not being treated as a fundamental part of a functioning democracy; instead, it is often characterised by those who hold political power as anti-democratic, destabilising and anti-patriotic. Uncivil forces are also increasingly occupying civil society space. Meanwhile democratic deficits at the national level are carried forward at the international level, where civil society struggles to make our voices heard amid a resurgence of narrow notions of national sovereignty.

At the same time, there are recent examples of civil society breakthroughs in upholding and enriching democracy, which offer some grounds for optimism and show how civil society action can make the difference. Trends of democratic decline are not necessarily the only trend being seen in the world as a whole today, and where democratic decline is taking place, there is nothing inevitable about it. Seeking to move beyond pessimism, our main focus will therefore be on the responses of civil society and others to defend, rebuild and deepen democracy – to reimagine democracy. The report will highlight examples of successful practice in reimagining democracy, as well as the challenges encountered in responding, and make a series of practical recommendations on how civil society

actions to reimagine democracy can be nurtured and strengthened.

3. Process

In preparing our report, we are seeking to reach out and consult widely, and to gather and publish a diverse range of perspectives on the theme, through six approaches, set out below.

Key questions that will be applied and adapted throughout the research and consultation process include the following:

- What do you understand the word ‘democracy’ to mean in your context?
- What is the state of democracy in your context?
- What has changed in recent years? Have things got better or worse?
- What factors lie behind these changes?
- What is civil society doing to address any changes for the worst?
- What creative actions and innovative responses are being taken by communities and civil society to reimagine democracy at the local, national and international levels?
- What have been civil society’s successes and challenges in responding?
- What are the lessons for wider learning and what more needs to be done to support civil society action?

We will publish all outputs (subject to the guidelines below for open submissions) as they are finalised on a special section of our website and through social media. We will then publish an overall short synthesis drawing from all of these, highlighting examples of good practice and making practical recommendations for civil society and other stakeholders. The synthesis will be published in English, French, Portuguese and Spanish, and outputs may be published in any of these languages.

a. Commissioned guest articles

As has been the practice with our past reports, we are commissioning articles, of between 1,500 and 3,000 words, by key civil society personnel and organisations and other relevant stakeholders on aspects of the theme. We are asking selected civil society activists, leaders, experts and stakeholders to write about an issue of which they have direct experience and where there has been civil society action. Guest articles will either offer a global overview of the issue, or present a case study of a particular civil society action. Please see our [guidance for guest authors](#).

b. Open call for submissions

We are inviting open submissions on the theme, through a call to CIVICUS members and networks. We are asking people to make submissions, of up to 1,500 words, that describe a civil society initiative on democracy, setting out the problem addressed, action taken, successes and challenges, and lessons learned. All submissions received will be published, provided they show a clear relation to the theme, highlight examples of civil society action, and are consistent with CIVICUS’ core values and principles, as articulated in our [2017-2022 Strategic Plan](#). Submissions may be made by individuals or organisations. We are encouraging submissions in a range of languages, and audiovisual as well as written submissions. Please see our [guidance on open submissions](#).

c. 25 years anniversary series

In 2018, CIVICUS is celebrating our 25th anniversary, and 25 years of citizen action around the world. To commemorate this, we are producing a 25-part collection of voices and perspectives drawn from CIVICUS leadership, staff, partners and members, reflecting on various aspects of civil society and the theme of reimagining democracy into the next 25 years.

d. Interviews

We are interviewing a wide range of civil society activists, leaders, experts and stakeholders who are working on the issues relevant to the theme, drawing from the key questions set out above, with the aim of helping activists to tell their own stories. Interviews will be published in written form regularly during this year, and some have already been published, including from [The Netherlands](#), [Romania](#) and [Uganda](#). Wherever possible, interviews will be conducted in the interviewee's language and published in bilingual versions, in line with CIVICUS' determination to be multilingual and culturally inclusive.

e. Short video interviews

We are producing short videos with activists and civil society practitioners, to showcase their reflections on two or three basic questions related to the theme:

- (1) What is wrong/not working with democracy in your context/country/sector?
- (2) What are you/your organisation/your fellow citizens doing about it?
- (3) What creative and innovative ideas do you have/practices do you propose to reimagine democracy?

These core questions are intended to capture the problem from various angles (e.g. a feminist activist could focus on the involvement of women, or a trade unionist on the involvement of workers), as well as capturing interesting experiences and innovative solutions that are being experimented with at various levels.

f. Democracy dialogues

We are convening, and encouraging members of our alliance to convene, democracy dialogues – informal discussions on aspects of the theme. Democracy dialogues are intended to work as short, interactive focus group sessions that can be convened as one-off meetings or added onto other events. CIVICUS has so far held a session with international CSOs headquartered in Geneva, in October 2017; a session with youth activists, held as part of International Civil Society Week in Fiji in December 2017; and a series of short sessions with participants at the Ninth Global Assembly of the World Movement for Democracy in Dakar, Senegal in May 2018.

While we intend to hold some further democracy dialogues during events we are convening in the coming months, to broaden the consultation and gather as many inputs as possible we are encouraging CIVICUS members, partners and others in the CIVICUS alliance to convene their own democracy dialogues, ideally by adding them onto existing convening activities. Democracy dialogues may be structured around a specific sub-question related to the theme, or around particular groups of stakeholders (e.g. particular types of organisation, people from civil society working on a shared issue or from the same locality, country or region, or people from particular excluded groups), to gather their perspectives on the theme.

Democracy dialogues should convene small groups of people and be interactive. Democracy dialogues may be held by civil society organisations and other civil society stakeholders, and while the participants should mostly be drawn from civil society and the public in general, participation by other stakeholders, including people from governments and the private sector, may be valuable. Democracy dialogues should focus on gathering practical experience in relation an issue of relevance in the context, and make recommendations for further civil society action. Short reports will be captured using a standardised reporting format, and published. Please see our [guidance on convening a democracy dialogue](#).