OVERVIEW:
A WORLD OF CRISIS NEEDS CIVIL SOCIETY

2024 STATE OF CIVIL SOCIETY REPORT
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Civil society is being tested like never before by a series of multiple and accelerating crises. Amid growing conflict and repression, in 2023 civil society faced mounting obstacles that made it harder to do its essential work of helping people, making their voices heard and upholding human rights. But civil society still managed to hold the line and make a difference to many. It’s still a vital source of hope. The world is currently in a dire state – but it would be much worse were it not for civil society. The way out of crises is to listen to, work with and enable civil society.

CONFLICT AND CRISIS: A WORLD IN DISARRAY

Civil society is under attack amid deepening and intensifying conflict. In too many countries, people can’t take the most fundamental rights for granted. When they wake in the morning they can’t assume they’ll live to see another day. One in six people are currently exposed to conflict. Conflict-related deaths are at their highest in decades, with civilian casualties up 62 per cent in 2023. Global military spending rose a record US$2.2 trillion. The spectre of genocide has returned.

The Gaza conflict has rocked the world. In a grotesque act of collective punishment, Israeli forces are unleashing unrelenting cruelty on civilians. The suffering must stop, immediately. Even after that, the impacts will be felt for generations to come.

Violence threatens to escalate further across the Middle East, and the region is far from the only one submerged in conflict. Russia continues to wage its deadly war on Ukraine, civilians suffer as military fights militia in Sudan and a bloody conflict has set in three years on from a military coup in Myanmar.

These are just some of today’s conflicts. In all of them, belligerents are targeting civilians, often because of their ethnicity. Fighting
forces are systematically using sexual violence and starvation as weapons of war. All are causing humanitarian crises, including mass displacement.

Over 114 million people are now displaced, but those in power are in denial. Instead of recognising the reality of movement, political leaders are becoming more hostile, strengthening barriers, offshoring migration responses and stoking xenophobia. European countries are showing blatant double standards: while their warm reception of Ukrainians may be cooling as the war wears on, they’re still treating them far better than Black and Brown arrivals. Even in the global south, home to most migrants and displaced people, long-established traditions of hospitality are in retreat: Turkey is forcibly returning refugees to Syria and Pakistan to Afghanistan.

Civil society offers a vital response, providing humanitarian aid, leading reconstruction efforts, collecting evidence of human rights abuses, urging the international community to act and calling for justice and an end to impunity. In Ukraine, voluntary initiatives are a huge contributor to resilience, with activists documenting rights violations and helping root out corruption. Journalists are providing crucial first-hand information about Israel’s assault on Gaza. Sudanese youth groups are delivering humanitarian aid in the worst-hit conflict zones and offering solutions to advance democratic civilian rule.

But rather than listen, conflict perpetrators are attacking civil society, humanitarian workers and journalists, and states are criminalising civil society for supporting migrants and refugees. Civil society needs support and all sides in conflicts must respect its rights.

GLOBAL GOVERNANCE: REFORM DESPERATELY NEEDED

Belligerents are brazenly flouting long-established tenets of international human rights and humanitarian law because they expect to get away with it. Global governance institutions are flailing as states make hypocritical decisions that undermine the rules-based international order. Civil society has solutions for global governance reform but isn’t getting a seat at the table.

Powerful states including Russia and the USA are demonstrating selective respect for the rules, shielding allies but castigating enemies. This is clear among the many states that rushed to Ukraine’s defence but continue to back Israel. At the basest level, some states are displaying racism as they show concern for white people’s human rights but not for those of people of colour.

International rules are supposed to make sure atrocities such as those being systematically perpetrated in Gaza don’t happen, and if they do, they’re quickly halted and those responsible face justice. But the key United Nations (UN) body, the Security Council, is immobilised by powerful states using their veto. Among those who hold the cards, principled and empathetic leadership is in short supply, as are humility and a willingness to listen.

The short-term calculations of unaccountable leaders are neutralising international agreements forged to tackle major transnational challenges such as the climate crisis and sustainable development, where delivery is failing far short. At the Sustainable Development Goals summit held last September, civil society put forward innovative ideas to unlock the money needed to finance development and climate resilience, but these were ignored, showing precisely why civil society needs to be included in decision-making spaces. Civil society is often denied access, from the UN General Assembly to the G20 meeting in
India. At the same time, repressive states, even those that sit on the Human Rights Council, are retaliating against activists who take part in UN human rights processes.

Today’s multiple crises are exposing the fundamental design flaws of UN institutions, testing them beyond their limit. But if trust in the UN collapses, people could embrace more authoritarian alternatives. To prevent this, states and the UN must take on board civil society’s many practical reform ideas. The UN must become more democratic and it must fully include civil society as an essential partner.

Civil society calls for a rules-based order where clear laws and policies are followed to tackle climate change, end poverty, address deep economic inequality, de-escalate conflicts and prevent gross human rights violations. The UN Summit of the Future in September 2024 should commit to advancing this vision. Civil society is doing its best to engage with the process, calling for genuine reforms that put people at the heart of decision making.

CLIMATE: REPRESSION AS DENIAL

The climate crisis is a global emergency with immediate and long-term consequences. The need to act has never been clearer. 2023 was the hottest year on record. Seemingly every week brought news of another extreme weather event, affecting the most vulnerable people the worst.

The calls for urgent change are coming loudest from civil society, but in 2023 activists faced growing pushback. Many states are collapsing the space for climate activism, including in global north countries with vibrant climate movements where the right to speak out used to be respected.

German authorities used organised crime laws to target the Last Generation direct action movement, raiding homes, seizing laptops and freezing bank accounts. UK police took advantage of new laws restricting protest rights to jail protesters demanding an end to fossil fuel use. Several Australian states also introduced anti-protest laws to target and jail peaceful climate activists.

The repression of civic space should be recognised as the new frontier of climate denial. Outright denial is now relatively rare, but states and fossil fuel corporations, by suppressing civil society’s ability to keep up the pressure, threaten to delay action on the scale required until it’s too late.

Activism is needed because action by states and the private sector to alleviate the climate crisis is nowhere near sufficient. Global temperatures are on track to rise by close to three degrees on pre-industrial levels by the end of the century, likely triggering catastrophic tipping points. Fossil fuel firms are banking soaring profits and spending little on renewable energies, while states keep approving further extraction. International climate funding continues to offer far less than required. The fundamental inequalities of climate change – disproportionately caused by the richest people in the richest countries but with the worst consequences for the world’s poorest – aren’t being addressed.

Civil society showed why it’s needed in 2023 by winning court cases, notably in Belgium and the USA, making states and companies hold to climate commitments, pressuring institutions such as universities to divest from fossil fuel investments and using disruptive stunts to win media attention.

At the global level, civil society forced the need to cut fossil fuel emissions onto the agenda of the COP28 climate summit, unbelievably for the first time. But the event, hosted by the
United Arab Emirates, a petrostate with closed civic space, didn’t have the civil society access required and didn’t make the progress needed. The experience will likely repeat itself in 2024, with COP29 hosted by another petrostate with closed civic space, Azerbaijan.

DEMOCRACY: CONTESTED TERRITORY

Attacks on democracy are making it harder for people to advance the solutions today’s crises require. As 2023 began, 72 per cent of people lived in authoritarian regimes, and the situation didn’t improve as the year went on. A record number of countries are sliding towards authoritarianism, while the number of countries democratising is the lowest in decades.

Civil society is working to defend democracy and hold political leaders to account, but this is becoming harder as civic space is shutting down. The proportion of people living in countries with closed civic space, 30.6 per cent, is the highest in years.

In countries that have recently undergone military coups, army rule has consolidated. Two further countries – Gabon and Niger – had military coups in 2023, completing a ‘coup belt’ that stretches coast-to-coast across Africa.

In some countries, democratically elected leaders have hollowed out institutions and practices of democracy, accumulating inordinate powers and curtailing freedoms so they can stay in office. Many other countries held ceremonial elections with the sole purpose of legitimising authoritarian leaders.

In free and fair elections, voters have repeatedly rejected mainstream parties and politicians. In a time of economic uncertainty and insecurity, many are disappointed with what democracy has offered so far. Anti-rights political entrepreneurs are exploiting their anxieties and offering deceptively simple solutions to complex problems. They peddle supposedly anti-elitist discourse that presents itself as new and radical even when it’s deeply regressive. They’re gaining ground by stoking prejudice and hatred, including against migrants and LGBTQI+ people.

In several 2023 elections, including in Argentina, Finland and the Netherlands, far-right forces made advances, with some winning power or a share in government. Even where they don’t take office, far-right politicians shift the political centre, forcing others to compete on their terms.

Polarisation is rising, fuelled by disinformation, conspiracy theories and hate speech. All are made much easier by AI-powered technologies that are spreading and evolving faster than they can be regulated. There’s potential good in AI, but also great scope for regressive forces to use it to their advantage. Tech leaders can’t be trusted to self-regulate. States can’t be left alone to set the rules either, since many are keen to harness emerging technology for repressive purposes. Civil society is calling for transnational regulation.

Negative trends are likely to extend through 2024, when a record number of people go to the polls. But hope comes from the fact that movement isn’t in one direction, and civil society has played a major part in any recent good news. In Guatemala, a new party born from mass anti-corruption protests was the unlikely election winner, and people mobilised in numbers to defend the result in the face of powerful political and economic elites. In Poland, a unity government pledging to restore civic freedoms came to power after eight years of right-wing nationalist rule, offering new potential for civil society to partner in retrieving democratic values and respecting human rights.
In 2023, civil society mobilised against restrictions on freedoms, countered divisive rhetoric and fought for the integrity of electoral processes. Throughout 2024, civil society will keep pushing for elections to take place in free and fair conditions, for people to have the information they need, for votes to be properly counted, for losers to accept defeat and for winners to govern in the interests of everyone rather than just their supporters.

GENDER: RESISTANCE AGAINST REGRESSION

In the face of regression, civil society continued to claim rights in 2023. It achieved the decriminalisation of same-sex relations in Mauritius and the legalisation of same-sex marriage in Estonia, Latvia and Nepal took crucial steps towards equal rights, and long-term struggles for marriage equality continue in every region, coming to fruition in Greece in February 2024 and likely soon in Thailand. Women mobilised against gender-based violence in numerous countries, sometimes winning policy changes.

But the year was more about resisting than advancing. The Taliban strengthened its grip in Afghanistan, theocracy reasserted itself in Iran and the global femicide pandemic continued. Russia deepened its anti-LGBTQI+ crackdown, extreme anti-gay laws were passed in Ghana and Uganda and anti-trans hysteria mushroomed in the USA. 2023 saw significant rights regression, putting the lives of still more women and LGBTQI+ people at risk.

Civil society's hard-won, decades-long trend of progress in women’s and LGBTQI+ rights has slowed down, hitting the buffers of a backlash that’s grown more intense. A well-funded, transnational movement with US roots that has fought against gender rights for decades is winning increasing influence. In many countries, as the anti-rights backlash is being instrumentalised for political gain, attacks on activists who defend rights are growing.

But activists across the world continue to resist oppression. Amid rising femicides, major protests by feminists in countries including Bulgaria and Kenya demanded action to stop the killing. Even in Afghanistan and Iran, women activists are finding subtle and clandestine ways to keep up their defiance.

While it’s been a disappointing year for gender rights movements, the situation would have been much worse without their enormous efforts. Although progress slowed, most historic gains endured. Across the world, civil society resisted – through street protest, advocacy, campaigning, solidarity, mutual support and litigation – and stood firm.

TIME TO STOP ATTACKS ON CIVIL SOCIETY

The direction of travel is shown by the fact that civic space is in its worst state since the launch of the CIVICUS Monitor’s global coverage in 2018. Some 118 countries now have serious civic space restrictions and only 2.1 per cent of people live in countries with open civic space. In December 2023, two more countries – Bangladesh and Venezuela – were downgraded to the worst civic space category, closed. Intimidation, protest disruption and detentions of protesters were the top violations documented in 2023, with democracy, climate and environmental activists and women and LGBTQI+ people often in the firing lane.

Despite the many constraints, civil society is doing everything it can to keep going. But restrictions are biting. A youthful generation has risen to lead today’s impressive civic movements.
But it’s questionable how long they can hold out against attrition as those in power deliberately increase the personal costs and dangers of activism.

With more countries shutting down civic space, activists in exile are playing an ever more crucial role in sustaining demands for democracy and human rights. But in response, repression is becoming more transnational as multiple states – China, Egypt and Turkey, among many others – are targeting exiles through surveillance, intimidation, violence and pressure on their families. Host countries often don’t provide the protection required, particularly when foreign policy considerations come into play. Strategies to defend civic space urgently need to offer transnational responses.

There’s a glaring need to reverse the restrictions and enable civil society so it can play its part in everything from building peace to tackling climate change to delivering progress on big international agreements like the Sustainable Development Goals.

The present way of doing things is clearly failing, given today’s crises, and insisting on the same paths that led the world to its current state won’t make things any better. Today’s situation should prompt the question of what kind of world we want to see and how we get there. Civil society has a vision of a future where empathy and compassion prevail, human rights are respected, global threats are collaboratively addressed, resources are more equally shared and diversity is celebrated. It’s a key source of solutions to address crises and make the world a better place. Imagine a world where political and economic leaders listen to civil society. It’s time.