

Reflections for Learning for the social service sector.

## The Future of Civic Freedoms: Lessons from My Time at CIVICUS

By Lysa John [Reprint](#) |

OXFORD, Oct 10 2024 (IPS) - When I joined CIVICUS in 2019, I came in with two decades of work on influencing and monitoring public policies through grassroots and global activism. Joining CIVICUS as Secretary-General felt familiar, like returning home after a period of separation. My first international role in 2006 – as Campaign Director of the Global Call to Action against Poverty – was initially hosted by CIVICUS. One of my most memorable campaign endeavours, The World We Want 2015, was conceptualised in the basement of CIVICUS House in 2011.



Lysa John

My predecessors – Danny Sriskandarajah, Ingrid Srinath, Katsuji Imata, Kumi Naidoo and Miklos Marshall – had made significant contributions to the direction and outcomes of the alliance. I was grateful for the opportunity to serve this remarkable network dedicated to strengthening civil society and civic action. Little did I know that I would be leading CIVICUS through one of the most challenging periods for the world and for civil society. Looking back on these years, here's what I'm taking away as insights and inspirations for the future of civic action and freedoms.

**Civic freedoms cannot be defended without bold commitments to tackle systemic discrimination**

Our research shows that historically excluded groups are the first to be targeted by measures to curtail civic freedoms. Restrictions imposed on groups such as women, LGBTQI+ people, migrants, refugees and ethnic and religious minorities often serve as a precursor to broader interventions to dismantle fundamental rights and freedoms. The unwillingness of initially unaffected groups to challenge actions that violate excluded people's rights sets the stage for more pervasive restrictions on civic freedoms.

Between 2019 to 2024, we saw some of the world's largest public protests call for urgent action to tackle systemic discrimination, including Black Lives Matter and movements against gender-based violence. Movements such as #MeToo, #FreeSaudiWomen, #NiUnaMenos and #AbortoLegalYa are examples of how women have mobilised to advance systemic change for equality and justice.

Civil society has won some successes, including the [passage](#) of a Sexual Violence Bill in Indonesia to criminalise forced marriage and sexual abuse and enhance protections for victims. Spain has seen the introduction of a [new Law](#) on the Guarantee of Sexual Freedom, based on the principle of consent, to challenge widespread impunity for sexual and gender-based violence.

As part of its refreshed strategy for 2022-27, CIVICUS has committed itself to tackling the dual challenges of civic space restriction and structural discrimination. Towards this end, several new programmes, such as our compelling campaigns for Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Local Leadership, have been designed to prioritise the leadership of excluded communities and spotlight their strategies and struggles to protect civic freedoms.

### **Non-state actors are fuelling the backlash against civil society – and we must do more to hold them to account**

Civic space is in its worst state since we launched the [CIVICUS Monitor](#), our collaborative research project on civic space conditions, seven years ago: 118 countries and territories now have serious restrictions and only 2.1 per cent of people live in countries with open civic space. As restrictions mount up, there's a growing trend of culture wars waged by well-organised and well-funded international anti-rights networks who are skewing public opinion for political gain. Our 2019 [report](#) on the rise of anti-rights groups points out that authoritarian and populist leaders are working alongside non-state actors who oppose civil society's focus on social justice and human rights, fuelling negative perceptions of civil society. The viral ability to spread and profit from disinformation has been deliberately used by states and anti-rights groups to sow confusion and discord, distort discourse and attack civil society.

At the same time, there has been an increased recognition of the importance of civic freedoms and the need to combat disinformation. This provides an opportunity to create new and more effective alliances to defend fundamental freedoms and human rights, speaking to the concern many people have about disinformation and rejecting culture war discourse.

### **People are connecting from the local to global level and demanding bolder action**

We live on an increasingly interconnected planet. The threats we face – climate change, wars, economic inequality and disease – pay no heed to national borders. The global level has become a key sphere of action for people and organisations to claim rights and advance change.

Across the world, people are forging new platforms and forms of civic engagement that enable greater possibilities for action, collaboration and sustained opposition to systemic injustices. This is where the future of civil society lies, and where it can fulfil its historic role of promoting rights, defending democracy and asserting accountability. It is by demonstrating our

commitment and leadership on these most difficult global issues of our time that we will win and sustain the trust and partnership of people across the world.

This is the time to commit to bold and lasting ideas for dialogue and deliberation, including at the global level, such as calls to establish a directly elected world parliament or citizens' assembly. There is a need to develop these ideas and advocate for them, including by testing them at the local, regional and intergovernmental levels.

### **New forms of solidarity are helping change the way we resource, connect and communicate our efforts**

The most successful struggles of recent times involve a mix of local-level, spontaneous acts by citizens and organisational planning and commitment. When global agreements on peace and human rights are violated, acts of transnational solidarity are an important first step towards developing international influence and scrutiny. New technologies offer tools for organising and focusing citizen power in new and creative ways. Around the world, active citizens are ready to put themselves on the line for the sake of a cause.

To support this, we need new technologies that are secure, free from interference and subject to democratic oversight – that enable people to share views in real-time, make informed decisions and exercise accountability.

An empowered, networked and well-resourced civil society is a public good no country can do without. Countries with closed civic space do not offer any opportunity for dialogue, dissent or participation in decision-making. An enabling environment for civil society—including access to public information channels, the removal of regulatory barriers and the creation of long-term incentives for local giving and global solidarity—will be fundamental to the protection of civic freedoms. We must invest in an operating framework that supports a positive vision of civil society's contribution and expands opportunities for people, businesses and governments to partner actively with civil society for change.

As new and complex challenges make centralised approaches to leadership and decision-making redundant, we must do more to strengthen a wider ecosystem of solidarity and collective action. The present era of 'leader-full' movements shows how agency and leadership can thrive well beyond ascribed roles and traditional structures. Feminist leadership, with its emphasis on purpose, authenticity and collective engagement, is integral to our societies and workplaces.

### **Despite the setbacks, civil society is more relevant, more pervasive and more powerful than ever before**

Civil society continues to be the force sounding the alarm against all manner of threats facing humanity and the planet. To serve this end, we use every tactic available, from street protest and direct action to litigation and advocacy in national and global arenas. My time at CIVICUS saw something no one had expected: a pandemic that stopped normal life in its tracks. Civil society stepped up. Our 2020 report, [Solidarity in the Time of COVID-19](#), revealed how civil society organisations and networks were a vital source of resilience for communities around the world.

Pandemic-related emergency measures imposed in many countries saw a rising need for civil society, particularly for excluded groups and people left without their regular incomes. Civil society moved more quickly than states could. And while providing essential help, civil society also advocated for rights-oriented policies and accountability for state and market failures.

Around the world, civil society took responsibility, showed leadership and modelled responses that could be scaled up. This was not a case of doling out charity that positioned people as the recipients of aid, but of reaching out to communities who were struggling, hearing people's needs and working to meet them, in ways that upheld people's dignity and rights and recognised the challenges and histories of exclusion.

This is just one example of how civil society makes a difference. Civil society's value must be celebrated. To this end, there are calls for the adoption of a Civil Society Action Day as an occasion to affirm the UN's commitment to enabling civil society participation and drive meaningful debate on improvements. The UN has also been asked to appoint a Civil Society Envoy to drive best practices on civil society participation across the UN and proactively drive outreach to citizens and civil society groups across the world.

The moment is ripe for such innovations. As we organise for future challenges, we must keep investing in strategies to reinforce the relevance and resilience of civil society. CIVICUS will doubtless maintain the pressure for change and keep making the space for a free and enabled civil society.

**Lysa John** is the outgoing Secretary General of CIVICUS. She is presently the Executive Director of the Atlantic Institute. (Source CIVICUS MONITOR October 24.)

---

### 12 THINGS YOUR TEAM HATE (BUT WILL NEVER SAY TO YOUR FACE)



**Gordon Tredgold**  
THE LEADERS' LEADER

For more information contact: [gordon@gordontredgold.com](mailto:gordon@gordontredgold.com)

Issued by Mohammed Hassan Khan.

Voluntary Editor ICWS SEAP Regional Committee. (October 24.)