GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2021-2022

Digital futures for a post-pandemic world

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Documenting and navigating emerging trends for digital rights funding

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Introduction

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been widespread implications for every aspect of development.[1] The economic downturn has accelerated and global debt has surged,[2] hitting already poor and vulnerable people hard, while partly changing the profile of global poverty by creating millions of "new poor".[3] According to the *Poverty and Shared Prosperity Report 2020*, "COVID-19 and its associated economic crisis, compounded by the effects of armed conflict and climate change, are reversing hard-won gains in poverty reduction and shared prosperity."[4] The pandemic has also revealed and exacerbated the digital and gender divides as "power imbalances are made more evident and starker, disproportionately affecting groups that suffer multiple, intersectional forms of discrimination."[5]

The economic downturn because of COVID-19 – which came against the backdrop of already existing pressures to urgently address climate change, besides other ongoing regional and country conflicts, tensions and human rights abuses – has been made worse by the Russian war in Ukraine and political tensions between major players that have resulted from this. When the conflict in Ukraine began, the demands on funders to meet the humanitarian and refugee crisis overwhelmed aid budgets. However, unlike in the case of COVID-19, where an increase in overall contributions by donors in response to the pandemic came at the expense of other humanitarian needs,[6] high-income states were urged to not divert funds from existing programmes but to set aside additional funds for the conflict.[7] To what extent bilateral donors have been able to do this has varied, and competing aid priorities have in some cases led to funding being diverted or delayed to other programme areas, including funding for human rights and digital rights elsewhere.

While these global crises have stressed funding budgets, the pandemic has also created opportunities for civil society to build horizontal relationships with donors, opening the space for authentic and transparent conversations. Donors have shown a willingness to be caring, agile and innovative in their funding approach, and this transformational shift in the funder-grantee relationship dynamic is continuing well into the "post-shock" era of COVID-19.

Competing funding priorities and implications for human rights funding

Our interviews with representatives from the European Union (EU), the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), the UK Government's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) revealed that while these organisations have directed funding towards COVID-19 and the humanitarian crisis in Europe, this has not been at the cost of funding available for other human rights work. At a global

1   Blake, P., & Wadhwa, D. (2020, 14 December). 2020 year in review: The impact of COVID-19 in 12 charts. *World Bank Blogs*. https://blogs.worldbank.org/voices/2020-year-review-impact-covid-19-12-charts

2   Gold, S. (2022, 2 August). How the debt crisis imperils development – and why it's getting worse. *Devex*. https://www.devex.com/news/how-the-debt-crisis-imperils-development-and-why-it-s-getting-worse-103700

3   Nguyen, M. C., Yoshida, N., Wu, H., & Narayan, A. (2020). *Profiles of the new poor due to the COVID-19 pandemic*. World Bank. https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/767501596721696943-0090022020/original/ProfilesofthenewpoorduetotheCOVID19pandemic.pdf

4   World Bank. (2020). *Poverty and Shared Prosperity 2020: Reversals of Fortune*. https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/poverty-and-shared-prosperity

5   Association for Progressive Communications. (2020). *Closer than ever: Keeping our movements connected and inclusive – APC's response to the COVID-19 pandemic*. https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/closerthanever_pp.pdf

6   Igoe, M. (2021, 23 June). Devex Newswire: How COVID-19 broke humanitarian funding. *Devex*. https://www.devex.com/news/devex-newswire-how-covid-19-broke-humanitarian-funding-100206

7   Gold, S. (2022, 8 March). Devex Newswire: How Russia's war in Ukraine will affect the world's poorest. *Devex*. https://www.devex.com/news/devex-newswire-how-russia-s-war-in-ukraine-will-affect-the-world-s-poorest-102810

level, the EU has a separate envelope of funding to meet the needs of immediate crises, which is being used to provide assistance in Ukraine, and so there have not been any major cuts for human rights support elsewhere.[8] The situation is similar in the case of other bilateral funders we interviewed; however, even though the funding has not been permanently redirected from other human rights work, there have been delays in funding available due to the competing emergency priorities of the Ukrainian conflict and COVID-19. These delays have created a situation of uncertainty for civil society groups working in the digital rights space, particularly those in the global South who are heavily reliant on direct support from government donors or indirect support through international NGO subgranting programmes.

Funding of digital rights remains central to donor concerns

The pandemic has highlighted the importance of digital rights and access, and, among other issues, donors are prioritising working on issues of digital inclusion, literacy and security. This includes a new wave of funders who did not previously support digital rights initiatives as well as those who have increased and expanded their existing digital rights portfolios.[9] Oak Foundation, for instance, under its broader umbrella of the International Human Rights Programme, is in particular looking at human rights abuses online, such as digital surveillance, censorship and information controls.[10]

The pandemic has led to a common understanding among donors that equitable and affordable internet connectivity has been and is critical to access relevant information, health and education services, to sustain economies through virtual work, for civil society and social movements to sustain themselves, and for people to communicate and stay connected.[11] The role of digital technologies has also been central to many donors' response to the pandemic. For instance, the FCDO's Digital Development has relied on digital solutions for provision of emergency relief and services like health and education, in creating opportunities for work and learning online, and also to build long-term resilience to the pandemic and future crises.[12]

At the same time, the challenges of digital rights, exacerbated during COVID-19 as the "responses by some governments to the pandemic revealed fault lines that challenge the democratic foundations of societies,"[13] have remained a priority. According to an IDRC senior programme officer, "digital rights will only become more important because we don't have good fixes for the challenges we are facing like gender misinformation, cybersecurity surveillance, digital subversion, all of which are critically important issues and speak to the convergence of online and offline rights."[14] The IDRC invested a lot of funding in research from the global South around the short- and long-term impacts of COVID-19,[15] the results of which indicate how the digital rights agenda remains of critical importance to the organisation.

There is also a shift in the wider funder community to integrate the digital in all aspects of their programming in a more holistic and strategic manner that explores ways of supporting a diverse convening of civil society actors to come up with collective and innovative solutions to an increasingly complex digital landscape and ecosystem. Whether this means an increase in the amount of funding available for digital rights work is yet to be seen, but there is no doubt that there will be a continued commitment to this field, even if the funding has different emphases.

Moving towards embedding a politics of care in funding approaches

Adapting to working in the context of COVID-19 and extremely precarious economic and political situations across the globe has presented civil society organisations as well as donors with unprecedented challenges. Increased stress levels and online fatigue have been widely reported by organisations, and donors have undertaken various strategies to respond. Donors and their grantees have had to navigate shifting conditions together, such as transitioning activities and operations online, realigning project deliverables and adjusting timelines.

All donors we interviewed acknowledged the complications, trauma and burnout associated with working during the pandemic and implemented strategies aimed at minimising these stresses. Sida, for instance, has relied on open dialogues with its grantees to understand their challenges and provide support accordingly. For example, Sida found that grantees in the Middle East and North Africa experienced difficulties in transitioning their interventions

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8   Renuka Srinivasan, Senior Project Manager, Delegation of the European Union to India, personal communication, 14 July 2022.

9   Alberto Cerda Silva, Global Program Officer for Internet Rights and Access, Ford Foundation, personal communication, 13 July 2022.

10 Oak Foundation. (2022, 6 April). Digital space: The frontier of civic repression and activism. https://oakfnd.org/access-now-citizen-lab-digital-space-the-frontier-of-civic-repression-and-activism

11 Alessandra Lustrati, Head of Digital Development, UK Government's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), personal communication, 1 August 2022.

12 Ibid.

13 Association for Progressive Communications. (2020). Op. cit.

14 Ruhiya Seward, personal communication, 21 July 2022.

15 IDRC. (2022, 7 March). Two years into the COVID-19 pandemic: Insights from IDRC research partners. https://www.idrc.ca/en/research-in-action/two-years-covid-19-pandemic-insights-idrc-research-partners

online due to the complexity of their contextual environments and lack of viable connectivity and infrastructure support.[16] Sida provided these organisations more flexibility around altering their activities and providing extensions for project and reporting timelines.

Some donors have even gone a step further and have started providing financial support and set up well-being funds for civil society organisations to centre care in their practices. An example of this is the Care Fund that has been set up under Oak Foundation's Issues Affecting Women Programme,[17] which is specifically intended to support small, time-limited projects on self or collective care for its grantee partners. Other donors, such as Global Fund for Women, are taking into consideration the cost implications of remote work and participation in online convenings (such as increased data and connectivity costs, software and hardware costs, and costs of arranging for alternative family care).

Core, flexible funding prioritised to build resilience for future crises

During the pandemic, many donors switched to providing core funding to their grantees so that they had the flexibility and resources to adjust to the new realities they were faced with.[18] Others, like Ford Foundation, who were already implementing a general support grant-making approach,[19] did not have to adjust their strategies, but it became clear that it was precisely this kind of support that civil society organisations needed most. An evaluation report of the Ford Foundation's BUILD Programme[20] corroborated that, particularly in unpredictable and challenging contexts, "strengthening institutions and networks leads to improved programming and impact – that is, to an increased number of programs and/or improvements in their quality, strategic relevance and adaptability."

There is an effort on the part of funders like the Ford Foundation to do further advocacy in wider funding circles to encourage donors to move in the direction of flexible, general support grant making. This is necessary to ensure that social justice organisations can be more resilient and impactful so they can seize opportunities and take on further challenges.

Donors exploring the intersections of technology with human rights, gender and environmental justice in their programming

Donors funding human rights initiatives are now looking more closely at the interconnections of technology with the fields they fund. The importance of the digital as a cross-cutting theme, and as an enabler of all other rights, has become more apparent as a result of the pandemic. Technology has had a profound impact on international development and humanitarian aid programmes. The application of digital innovations and the responsible use of data were key to successful responses to COVID-19. We also saw how the impacts of the crisis were not uniform, and the challenges of the virus have exacerbated longstanding inequities and decades of discriminatory practices, leading to unequal trajectories.[21]

According to the Ford Foundation,[22] exploring the intersections of gender, human rights, civic engagement, racial justice, environmental sustainability and technology has become key to its programmes having meaningful impact. It commissioned research in collaboration with Ariadne and the Mozilla Foundation that APC was involved in, and which centred around the intersection of digital rights with environmental and climate justice.[23] The research's primary audiences are grant makers and practitioners working in or adjacent to the digital rights sector interested in understanding how to centre environmental and climate justice in their work, or environmental justice funders who want to integrate digital technologies in their work. Going forward, funders in the digital rights space, as well as those working on other human rights and social justice issues, are looking to craft grant-making strategies that advance work on issues that converge with digital rights and make more space for intersectional agendas.

Shifting modalities of how resources for digital rights are channelled

While having to navigate COVID-19, civil society groups have continued to have to face multiple other unrelated challenges. According to the *2022 State of*

16 Fredrik Westerholm, personal communication, 1 August 2022.

17 https://oakfnd.org/programmes/issues-affecting-women

18 Katarína Bartovicova, European Digital Rights initiative (EDRi), personal communication, 28 June 2022.

19 https://www.fordfoundation.org/work/our-grants/building -institutions-and-networks

20 Bisiaux, R., Dwyer-Voss, R., Bangser, M., Morales, S., Boateng, A., & Poli, F. (2022). *Final Report: BUILD Developmental Evaluation*. NIRAS. https://www.fordfoundation.org/media/7095/build-evaluation-final-report.pdf

21 UN Women. (2020, 1 July). Intersectional feminism: What it means and why it matters right now. https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/6/explainer-intersectional-feminism-what-it-means-and-why-it-matters

22 Alberto Cerda Silva, personal communication, 13 July 2022.

23 Kazansky, B., Karak, M., Perosa, T., Tsui, Q., Baker, S., & The Engine Room. (2022). *At the confluence of digital rights and climate & environmental justice: A landscape review*. https://engn.it/climatejusticedigitalrights; Association for Progressive Communications. (2022). *At the Interstice of digital rights and environmental justice: Four issue briefs to inform funding*. https://www.apc.org/en/node/38149

Civil Society Report from CIVICUS,[24] we are living in "a world characterised by crisis and volatility, where regressive forces are mobilising a fierce backlash, but where dogged civil society mobilisation is still winning vital battles." With anti-rights movements and repressive governments on the rise, the civic space for civil society, particularly groups that are working on human rights, is shrinking. States are passing legislation, such as the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA)[25] in India, which is targeting NGOs and giving government tighter control and scrutiny over the receipt and utilisation of foreign funds by NGOs.

Even the EU is finding it difficult to support grassroots organisations in the country as subgranting to smaller and informal groups has become impossible (the FCRA requires every person or NGO seeking to receive foreign donations to be registered under the Act and to not transfer the funds to another NGO).[26] This means that they no longer have the kind of outreach they had before, as they can only work through larger NGOs that have FCRA registration and the capacity to meet the eligibility requirements of the EU's funding calls. One way that the EU is planning to get around this situation is by channelling funding through international NGOs who do not face FCRA restrictions and can make subgrants. This funding strategy, however, defeats the donor's own ethos to build capacity and resourcing of local civil society groups. It also perpetuates the problematic power relations between civil society in the global North and global South. International NGOs are mostly headquartered in developed countries, and their agendas are not necessarily the same as those of NGOs from the global South. "The world of NGOs is not a network of equals but is based on a hierarchical power structure,"[27] and these problematic power relations are perpetuated when funding to civil society groups in the global South is channelled through NGOs from the global North.

In this context, the role of intermediaries with strong global South connections has become key.

The FCDO sees organisations like APC, with a wide membership network and ability to reach grassroots organisations, playing a crucial role as conduits of these funds.[28] A representative stated that the FCDO has a preference for working with such organisations as opposed to large contractors and consultancies that are from the global North, as this brings value for money and long-term sustainability to their programming. Sida added that it was necessary for funders to be innovative in how they disburse their funding so it can reach less visible players.[29] This includes exploring mini-grants, intermediaries and diverse funding platforms.

Going forward

Even though the pandemic has highlighted the significance of funding digital rights work, there is still a knowledge gap around these issues among donors, particularly those who are not directly supporting this field or have several other competing priorities. The lack of face-to-face meetings and convenings during the pandemic has also meant fewer spaces for donors to connect with and learn about the work of civil society groups working on digital rights. As the opportunities for in-person convenings increase, there is a need for digital rights organisations to keep the important role of the digital "simmering and alive"[30] in donor circles by continuing to raise awareness and influence the debate on digital development so that funding programmes reflect the needs and priorities on ground. The FCDO representative highlighted the key role of meeting and sharing resources and research with donors on the impact of digital technologies on important and emerging issues.[31] She said that the FCDO did not support community networks up until a few years ago, when they were made aware of community networks by APC at various international platforms. Now it is a key part of their programming.

Donors themselves also have a responsibility to share their knowledge and learnings with each other, as better donor coordination could go a long way in encouraging collaboration and streamlining efforts, providing the needed funding opportunities for the digital sector, which has multiple gaps and challenges and is evolving very quickly.

24 Firmin, A., Pousadela, I. M., & Tiwana, M. (2022). *2022 State of Civil Society Report*. CIVICUS. https://www.civicus.org/documents/reports-and-publications/SOCS/2022/CIVICUS2022SOCSReport.pdf

25 Tiwary, D. (2022, 14 July). Explained: What is FCRA, the law related to NGO funding? *The Indian Express*. https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/everyday-explainers/what-is-fcra-ngo-funding-mha-explained-8026895

26 Renuka Srinivasan, personal communication, 14 July 2022.

27 Sorj, B. (2015). *Civil Societies North South Relations: NGOs and Dependency*. The Edelstein Centre for Social Research. https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.521.7257&rep=rep1&type=pdf

28 Alessandra Lustrati, personal communication, 1 August 2022.

29 Fredrik Westerholm, personal communication, 1 August 2022.

30 Renuka Srinivasan, personal communication, 14 July 2022.

31 Alessandra Lustrati, personal communication, 1 August 2022.

DIGITAL FUTURES FOR A POST-PANDEMIC WORLD

Through the lens of the COVID-19 pandemic, this edition of Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch) highlights the different and complex ways in which democracy and human rights are at risk across the globe, and illustrates how fundamental meaningful internet access is to sustainable development.

It includes a series of thematic reports, dealing with, among others, emerging issues in advocacy for access, platformisation, tech colonisation and the dominance of the private sector, internet regulation and governance, privacy and data, new trends in funding internet advocacy, and building a post-pandemic feminist agenda. Alongside these, 36 country and regional reports, the majority from the global South, all offer some indication of how we can begin mapping a shifted terrain.

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