TOWARDS AN ENABLING DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

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PREFACE

Forus is a global civil society network of 68 National NGO Platforms (NPF) and 7 Regional Coalitions (RC) from across 5 continents. As a legitimate catalyst and representative of the voice of NGOs worldwide, Forus works to strengthen the capacities of civil society to ensure the effective and efficient participation of civil society actors in official negotiations.

Forus advocates for better resourcing of civil society and the defence of an enabling environment for civil society organisations so that they can work to influence public policy at the national, regional, and international levels.

In recent years Forus and its members have directly experienced the multiple ways in which the accelerating global process of digitalisation is rapidly transforming the 'operating space' of civil society everywhere.

On the positive side, many digital innovations are enhancing and strengthening civic space at different levels. But while digital technologies provide civil society with new ways to exercise their freedoms of association, assembly, and expression, they are simultaneously providing governments and others with new ways of restricting those rights, raising questions about how technological advances will affect an already shrinking civic space.

The purpose of this report, "Towards an enabling digital environment for civil society", is to highlight the impacts of digitalisation experienced by our civil society members; to explore risks and important opportunities; and to advocate for an inclusive, human-rights-based and democratic form of digitalisation that will empower and enable rather than restrict and repress.

FULL REPORT HERE

STUDY APPROACH

This report was developed with valuable guidance and expertise from TechSoup, the world's largest civil society digital capacity building NGO, which has supported the digital transformation of more than 1.4 million CSOs globally. Forus members from Taiwan to Slovenia, and other activists from around the world, contributed their stories, challenges and experiences of engaging with digitalisation to the report through interviews and participative workshops convened by Forus. We thank them all for their rich contribution to this report.

Civil society needs to develop important strategic partnerships with governments, international organisations, donors, private sector organisations, tech for good NGOs and others to promote cross-sectoral co-operation so that the collective benefits of digitalisation can be realized, and the risks minimised for all.

We anticipate that this Forus position paper will contribute to the growing public debate on digitalisation. We hope that its conclusions and recommendations will help to steer the work of our network, its members, partners, and allies from different sectors in this key area, and that it can contribute towards the eventual creation of a truly democratic, inclusive, and enabling digital future.

"There are some good developments, but in general in terms of freedom of expression or sharing opinions on social media for instance, our freedom is very much limited. - Indonesia

01 DIGITALISATION: MEGATREND AND DISRUPTOR

1.1 The current global process of digital transformation is a **'megatrend'**, influencing how people work, communicate, are governed, and ultimately shaping the cultures that they inhabit. It is driving rapid social and economic change and disruption, creating exciting new opportunities while confronting societies with a range of daunting challenges.[1]

1.2 Digital technologies have played a key role in international and national responses to the **COVID 19 pandemic**. Countries around the world embraced digitalisation in the battle against the Covid-19 virus.

1.3 As different digital technologies become sufficiently powerful and their use increasingly widespread, and as people progressively depend on digital technologies to manage their lives, the digital divide intensifies: stark **inequalities** continue to grow between those who can access and use digital technologies and those who cannot.

1.4 Half of the world's population is **not yet digitally connected** and, as a direct result, many people are likely to experience social and economic exclusion and marginalization.

02 DIGITALISATION AND CIVIC SPACE: THREAT AND OPPORTUNITY

2.1 Digitalisation has been rapidly **transforming the 'operating space'** of civil society. On the positive side, many digital innovations have enhanced and strengthened civic space.[2]

2.2 More worryingly, while digital technologies provide civil society with new ways to exercise their freedoms of association, assembly, and expression, they are simultaneously providing governments and others with new ways of **restricting those rights**, raising questions about how technological advances will affect an already shrinking civic space in the future.[3]

2.3 Digital technologies are rapidly proliferating, rendering it difficult to keep track of the changes or their implications. Much will depend on which technologies become dominant, **who controls them** and to what ends.[4]

2.4 The potential for digitalisation to **alter civic space** - the physical, virtual, and legal places where people associate, express themselves, and assemble – for better or worse is a key concern for civil society.

2.5 In the longer term, the lack of **adequate regulation and more democratic governance** of digitalisation around the globe will significantly undermine rather than advance civic space, human welfare, freedom, dignity, and justice everywhere.

2.6 As governments and societies increasingly embrace transformative digital technologies and key policy and decision-making processes move online, it is crucial that the process serves to **expand rather than shrink** the civic space necessary for CSOs to operate effectively. The guarantee of a well-regulated and democratic digital space is essential to promote the optimal functioning of a healthy civil society.

03 ENSURING A HUMAN RIGHTS-PROMOTING DIGITALISATION

3.1 The challenge for human rights activists is to learn how the power of technology can be used to **strengthen and reinforce human rights**, as well as how the repressive and inegalitarian dimensions of technology can be predicted, identified, and resisted. Human rights defenders' organizations and their allies, such as civil society umbrella networks, should work with tech companies to develop new tools and strategies for gathering, recording, and sharing information on human rights breaches, to fight misinformation, and to provide digital security for all.

3.2 The negative impacts of digitalisation must be mitigated by **adapting existing human rights frameworks to the digital age**. Cross-sectoral collaboration will be necessary to build the digital infrastructure necessary for communities to end digital poverty.

3.3 Without appropriate digital policies that reinforce existing commitments to human rights, digitalisation will deliver ever-diminishing social returns as increased usage leads to increased surveillance and the data mining of citizens. Governments, civil society, and business must **re-commit to human rights conventions in the digital era** and work together to implement and monitor the impact of digital policies, access to the internet, and to ensure progressive, rights-first digital usage.

04 DEVELOPING AN ENABLING DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

4.1 An enabling operating environment for civil society organisations both online and offline is a **necessary precondition for civil society to flourish**. This will be essential if CSOs are to fulfil a range of important public interest roles – from supporting governments in promoting social and economic recovery from the recent global COVID 19 pandemic to contributing to the monitoring and implementation of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDGs) agenda, amongst others.

4.2 Civil society needs to collectively mobilise to ensure that the impacts of digital transformation on its functioning are positive in the longer term. It must act to ensure the necessary **digital information and digital community architecture** are made available to enable it to respond effectively to the challenges and opportunities of digitalisation. A failure to do so will mean civil society remaining fragmented, siloed, and unable to respond adequately and collectively to the serious 'ecosystem threats' it faces.

4.3 Civil society must call on governments and the international community to act quickly to **ensure the digital inclusion of all**, and particularly of low income and socially excluded demographic groups, by providing fast, affordable, and equitable access to digital infrastructure and data for all.

4.4 Civil society must push for the **development of enabling legislative frameworks for digitalisation** which ensure respect for human rights and inclusiveness in technological advances and developments. It must press governments to introduce progressive policies on issues including cybersecurity, privacy, accessibility, inclusion, and data ownership.

4.5 Civil society must insist on the provision of **continuous digital capacity-building** for all to promote greater digital competency and to enable its members to keep apace of rapid developments in the digital sphere.

4.6 Governments must ensure **transparent, accountable, and inclusive governance** of the digital sphere. There is an urgent need for a fundamental shift away from the status quo where control lies in the hands of a number of large private tech companies and a move towards more multi-stakeholder models of governance in which civil society can play an integral role.

4.7 At an international level, the international community urgently needs to develop a **strategic framework** that will link closing civic space, including in the digital realm, to other key foreign policy challenges. This framework should articulate a positive vision of civic space globally, and offer tailored tactical guidance to governments, civil society actors and other interested stakeholders. Experts should be brought on board who understand the rapidly evolving digital landscape to make the connection to civic space issues, including to future threats.

05 THE CHALLENGES FACING CIVIL SOCIETY IN ENGAGING WITH DIGITALISATION
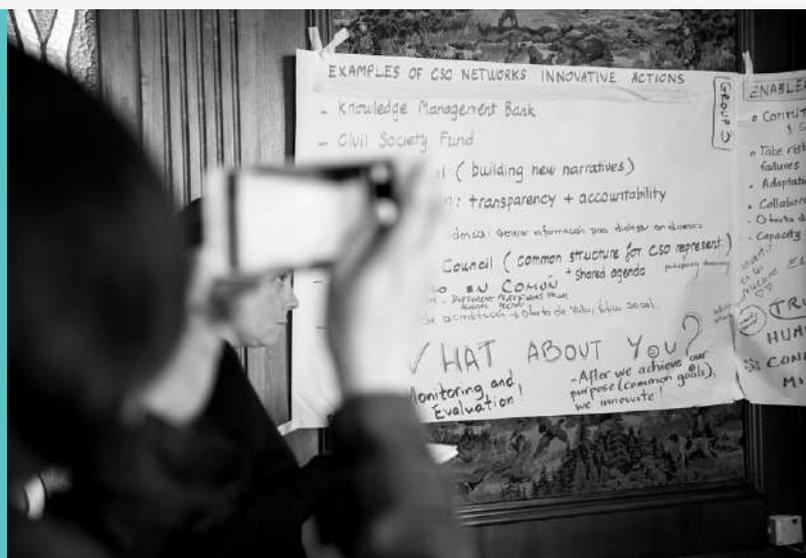
5.1 Organised civil society comprises more than **10 million organizations worldwide**. Civil society organisations have a critical role to play in ensuring the inclusive digitalisation of society in their capacity as witnesses, content providers, and important links to historically marginalized communities.

5.2 While many CSOs are beginning to leverage the **opportunities of digital transformation** for their work, from using drones and satellite technology to detect violations of human rights to the use of mobile phone data to inform humanitarian responses, many others have yet to explore its full potential.

5.3 According to a survey of over 12,000 respondents conducted in late 2020 by the tech NGO TechSoup and its partners (including hundreds of grant-making foundations) from 137 countries, **more than 70% of global CSOs saw services disrupted by the forced digital changes of the pandemic**[5]. Few of these CSOs had help navigating the challenges, with a full 81% never having received any digital support of any kind. And fewer than 25% of them had a digital strategy to guide them. The effect of the pandemic on the 25% with digital strategies in place was quite different – they found it much easier to deal with the challenges they faced.[6]

5.4 Current trends suggest that within five years or so, users of digital technologies will need to be **"in the cloud"** as the use of on-premises solutions will no longer be the norm. This is problematic because more than 95% of civil society organisations still use on-premises software for at least some of their daily operations[7]. More than 80% of CSOs have never had any IT support and many will require such support to migrate to the cloud.[8]

5.5   The pandemic has provided a **wake-up call** as a harbinger of what is to come, in terms of technology moving to the cloud. The on-premise software used by more than 95% of CSOs will cease to exist within the decade. At that point, CSOs who cannot make the shift due to lack of technical skills or connectivity will experience technological degradation and eventual collapse as the software they rely on becomes unsupported and begins to fail.[9]

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> Digitalization has enhanced participation and popular democracy through providing people with access to digital platforms to express their views and to connect with others locally and globally who share their interests and concerns.

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> New digital technologies can support CSOs to increase their transparency and accountability to government and the public at large, and to enhance CSO legitimacy and credibility.

06 SUPPORTING CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT WITH DIGITALISATION: CREATING A VIABLE INFRASTRUCTURE FOR INCLUSIVE DIGITALISATION

6.1 Considering that fewer than 20% of CSOs surveyed have **access to technology** support, and the high potential for service degradation or failure should they be unable to migrate to the cloud, it is critical for governments to include civil society in digitalisation strategies. Otherwise, they risk losing the critical services provided by CSOs upon which their most marginalized populations rely.

6.2 Full participation in the processes of digitalisation requires a combination of access to the internet, access to appropriate tools, access to learning communities and the creation of relevant digital policies. This combination – which can be referred to as the **'minimum viable digital infrastructure for inclusive digitalisation'** – is both fundamental to being able to deliver inclusive frontier technologies and is achievable through cross-sector collaboration between governments, businesses, and civil society.

6.3 Governments must provide for the **digital capacity-development** of their populations, with a particular focus on civil society as crucial intermediaries and service-providers. This is a shared development challenge which is particularly acute across less developed countries. The international community must provide financing and public programmes to increase public access to, and knowledge of digital technologies and tools from an early age and from a lifelong learning perspective. Capacity building needs to address the hard skills-gap between older and younger generations and enable older generations to become familiar with new digital technologies. International donors must support civil society everywhere to develop trustworthy digital tools for civic activism and political participation.

6.4 If the digital capacities of civil society are systematically developed and its access to minimum viable digital infrastructures ensured, CSOs will be in a stronger position to share their unique insights, data and intelligence with policy and decision-makers, with a view to ensuring more **inclusive and effective public policymaking and implementation.**

6.5 Creating such a viable digital infrastructure would benefit overall governance, particularly in relation to the monitoring and implementation of key public policy frameworks such as the SDGs or the Paris Climate Agreement. There is broad international consensus that these policy frameworks require a **whole-of-society approach** to monitoring and implementation, including the input of civil society, if their goals are to be successfully realised.

6.6 Civil society organisations need to continually review and assess their collective digital capacities, and to track their digital progress over time. This can be achieved through their participation in **digital learning communities**, to enable them to leverage available digital tools and data to continue working effectively with the constituencies and communities they serve.

6.7 As well as CSOs developing their own access to digital infrastructure and building their digital competencies, they must also **work with local communities** to ensure the ability of these communities, and particularly the most excluded or marginalised, to participate fully in the current process of digitalisation. This will require a combination of access to the internet, to appropriate tools, to learning communities and to relevant digital policies.

6.8 In this way, communities should be **facilitated to assume leadership** in working towards an inclusive digital future. They should be enabled to meet their needs today and their ambitions for tomorrow on their own terms, based on their own data.

07 THE IMPORTANCE OF PARTNERSHIPS AND CROSS-SECTORAL COLLABORATION ON DIGITALISATION

7.1 Governments must work with civil society and the corporate sector to create **flexible regulatory frameworks** which allow multiple types of actors to establish and run a variety of non-profit, not-for-profit and for-profit business organizations to access licenses, build upon existing knowledge, and compete to deliver internet access for all.

7.2 The absence of such regulatory systems which proactively promote **non-profit and not-for-profit alongside for-profit approaches** to the provision of digital access and services, will ultimately result in the data and voices of the unconnected – largely those groups who have historically experienced marginalization and disenfranchisement and who are most at risk of being left behind by digitalisation - remaining invisible in policy making and programme development, particularly in important public policy agendas such as the SDGs.

7.3 Civil society should partner with public and private **'Tech for Good' organisations**, to enable civil society to benefit from their technical expertise and to jointly push for a more enabling digital environment for all.

7.4 CSOs could **partner with a wide range of actors** on different aspects of Digitalisation, including partnerships related to Digital Connectivity, Digital Policies, Digital Tools, Continuous Digital Learning and Digital Resilience.

7.5 Governments, corporations and civil society must work together to develop the business models, supply chains, hardware resilience standards and e-waste recycling programs to **sustainably increase access to first digital devices**.

7.6 Governments, civil society, and business must collaborate to ensure **on-device and in-classroom education** and the implementation of curricular approaches at scale to ensure that digital adoption enables people to flourish as digital citizens, while minimizing risks of exposure to predation online .

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Many of the organizations which focus on using technology for good recognise that human rights must be protected even as technology innovation is accelerating, and that individuals should not be treated as commodities, or be deceived or controlled by technology.

Conclusions

This paper aims to highlight the main impacts of digitalisation on civil society organisations, to explore the associated risks and opportunities, and to advocate for an inclusive, human-rights-based and democratic form of digitalisation that will empower and enable not just civil society organisations around the world, but people everywhere.

A **range of recommendations for action are set out below**. They are directed at governments, international organisations, international donors, private tech companies, CSOs, tech for good NGOs, and other stakeholders who have a role to play in creating a more enabling digital environment- not just for the benefit of civil society - but for the benefit of the wider societies in which they operate.

The extremely accelerated pace of digitalisation has meant that societies worldwide have experienced it as an overwhelmingly powerful and largely uncontrollable force. This perception may have militated against the proper regulation of the digital sphere up to this point. But given the increasingly central role that it will play in the future of our societies, and the numerous benefits associated with digitalisation, there is no reason why the current process cannot be harnessed, democratised, and made more equitable.

Sufficient levels of **public and political will need to be mobilised**, as control will need to be wrested back from the few large tech companies who dominate the digital sphere at present. But the prize will be an internet and a process of digitalisation that will work in the interests of all and not just those of privileged social groups.

There is no room for complacency where the current process of digitalisation is concerned, given the many risks and dangers that accompany it. **Progressive governments and international institutions will need to play an important leadership role** in working to harness, regulate and democratise the digital sphere. This endeavour will require unprecedented levels of international co-operation at all levels. Civil society is a willing partner in this process, but it will need an enabling environment in which to operate if it is to be effective.

The recommendations below provide an **outline of the key actions required** in order to achieve a more enabling digital environment for civil society and for the wider public.

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They delete my social media posts, they're censoring us! They censor everything that happens in the territory, it is something we should not allow. The leaders come out to deny everything that has happened since 21 N in Colombia - Colombia

Recommendations for Action

Leadership by Governments, the International Community& Other Stakeholders

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▷ Progressive governments, international organisations and international donors need to act quickly to ensure **a well-regulated and democratic digital space**.

▷ They must ensure transparent, accountable, and inclusive governance of the digital sphere. There is an urgent need for a fundamental shift away from the status quo where control lies in the hands of a number of large private tech companies and a move **towards more multi-stakeholder models of governance** in which civil society can play an integral role.

▷ They should **re-commit to human rights conventions** in the digital era and work together to implement and monitor the impact of digital policies, access to the internet, and to ensure progressive, rights-first digital usage. The negative impacts of digitalisation should be mitigated by adapting existing human rights frameworks to the digital age.

▷ Governments, international institutions, donors, and other actors should **ensure the digital inclusion of all**, and particularly of low income and socially excluded demographic groups, by supporting the provision of fast, affordable, and equitable access to digital infrastructure and data for all.

▷ Governments should ensure that civil society is **included in the development of national and local digitalisation strategies**. This will also help to ensure that the needs and interests of the most marginalized populations will be addressed by these strategies.

▷ International, regional and national-level digital strategies should take into account the critical role that digitalisation plays in enabling civil society and other key stakeholders to effectively monitor and **implement key public policy frameworks** such as the SDGs or the Paris Climate Agreement. There is broad international consensus that these policy frameworks require a whole-of-society approach to monitoring and implementation, including the input of civil society, if their goals are to be successfully realised.

▷ The necessary digital community architecture and digital information should be made available to CSOs and local communities to enable them to respond effectively to the challenges and opportunities of digitalisation. This will require a combination of access to the internet, to appropriate digital tools, to learning communities and the creation of relevant digital policies. This combination – which can be referred to as the **'minimum viable digital infrastructure for inclusive digitalisation'** – is both fundamental to being able to deliver inclusive frontier technologies and is achievable through cross-sector collaboration between governments, business, and civil society.

▷ Governments must provide for the ongoing digital capacity-development of their populations, with a particular focus on civil society as crucial intermediaries and service-providers. This is a shared development challenge which is particularly acute across less developed countries. The **international community must provide financing and public programmes** to increase public access to, and knowledge of digital technologies and tools from an early age and from a lifelong learning perspective. Capacity building needs to address the hard skills-gap between older and younger generations and enable older generations to become familiar with new digital technologies.

▷ Governments, civil society, and businesses must collaborate to **ensure on-device and in-classroom education** and the implementation of curricular approaches at scale to ensure that digital adoption enables people to flourish as digital citizens, while minimizing risks of exposure to predation online

▷ Governments must work with civil society and the corporate sector to create **flexible regulatory frameworks** which allow multiple types of actors to establish and run a variety of non-profit, not-for-profit and for-profit business organizations to access licenses, build upon existing knowledge, and compete to deliver internet access for all.

▷ Governments, corporations, and civil society must work together to develop the business models, supply chains, hardware resilience standards and e-waste recycling programs to sustainably increase access to and use of first digital devices. **The ecological impacts of the process of digitalisation** need to be assessed ex-ante throughout the entire chain, limited and mitigated wherever possible. Measures which are adopted to advance digitalisation should adopt a «do no harm» approach, particularly with regard to ecological footprint and other negative impacts associated with the process. These impacts should be assessed, avoided and mitigated, and, as a last resort, compensation should be provided.

▷ International donors should support civil society tin developing trustworthy **digital tools for civic activism and political participation**.

▷ The international community urgently needs to **develop a strategic framework that will link closing civic space, including in the digital realm, to other key foreign policy challenges**. This framework should articulate a positive vision of civic space globally, and offer tailored tactical guidance to governments, civil society actors and other interested stakeholders. Experts should be brought on board who understand the rapidly evolving digital landscape to make the connection to civic space issues, including to future threats.

Civil Society Action Required

▷ Civil society must push for the development of **enabling legislative frameworks** for digitalisation which ensure respect for human rights and inclusiveness in technological advances and developments. It must press governments to introduce progressive policies on issues including cybersecurity, privacy, accessibility, inclusion, and data ownership.

▷ CSOs should leverage the **opportunities of digital transformation** in their work, from using drones and satellite technology to detect violations of human rights to the use of mobile phone data to inform humanitarian responses. Many CSOs still have yet to explore its full potential.

▷ CSOs need immediate access to **digital support** to assist them in migrating to the cloud, and to avoid technological degradation and eventual collapse as the on -premises software they rely on becomes unsupported and begins to fail.

▷ Civil society must advocate for the provision of **continuous digital capacity-building** for all to promote greater digital competency and to enable its members to keep apace of rapid developments in the digital sphere.

▷ CSOs need to continually review and assess their collective digital capacities, and to track their digital progress over time. This can be achieved though their participation in **digital learning communities**, to enable them to leverage available digital tools and data to continue working effectively with the constituencies and communities they serve.

▷ Human rights activists and their allies, such as civil society umbrella networks need to learn how the power of technology can be used to **strengthen and reinforce human rights**, as well as how the repressive and inegalitarian dimensions of technology can be predicted, identified, and resisted.

▷ Human rights defenders' organizations and their allies should work with tech companies to **develop new tools and strategies** for gathering, recording, and sharing information on human rights breaches, to fight misinformation, and to provide digital security for all.

▷ In addition to developing their own access to digital infrastructure and building their digital competencies, they must also **work with local communities** to ensure the ability of these communities, and particularly the most excluded or marginalised, to participate fully in the current process of digitalisation. This will require a combination of access to the internet, to appropriate tools, to learning communities and to relevant digital policies.

▷ CSO should work with local communities in a way which facilitates these communities to **assume leadership** in working towards an inclusive digital future. Local communities should be enabled to meet their needs today and their ambitions for tomorrow on their own terms, based on their own data.

▷ Civil society should partner with public and private **'Tech for Good' organisations**, to enable civil society to benefit from their technical expertise in areas such as Digital Connectivity, Digital Policies, Digital Tools, Continuous Digital Learning and Digital Resilience.

▷ Civil society has the potential not just to be a consumer or user of digital technologies but also to be **developers & co-owners of new digital technologies**, which can provide alternatives to mainstream digital technologies.

DISCOVER THE #LET'S TALK DIGITAL CAMPAIGN

#LET'S TALK DIGITAL

No civic space without digital space!

> "There are times in which the digital space can perpetuate the toxic cycle, or the cycle of discrimination it's trying to break - Nepal

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Forus, previously known as the International Forum of National NGO Platforms (IFP/FIP), is a member-led network of 68 National NGO Platforms and 7 Regional Coalitions from all continents representing over 22,000 NGOs active locally and internationally on development, human rights and environmental issues.

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