



STATE OF CIVIL SOCIETY REPORT --- 2020





Muslim women protest against India's revocation of the special status of Jammu and Kashmir. Credit: Yawar Nazir/Getty Images

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Cover photo: An Indigenous child holds a sign that reads ‘We are studying to save the world!’ during the Global Climate Strike in Manila, Philippines.

Credit: Ezra Acayan/Getty Images



An abortion rights activist protests against a restrictive bill proposed during the COVID-19 lockdown in Kraków, Poland. Credit: Omar Marques/Getty Images

ABOUT THIS REPORT

Since 2012, CIVICUS has published the annual State of Civil Society Report to analyse how contemporary events and trends are impacting on civil society, and how civil society is responding to the major issues and challenges of the day. This is the ninth edition of our report, focusing on civil society action and trends affecting civil society in 2019.

Our report is of, from and for civil society, drawing from 50 interviews with civil society activists, leaders and experts, and others close to the major stories of the day. Our 2020 report is also informed by CIVICUS's ongoing programme of research, analysis and advocacy, and the work of our

members, networks and partners. In particular, it presents findings from the **CIVICUS Monitor**, our online platform that tracks the conditions for civil society in 196 countries. Our report covers five key areas in which civil society was active in 2019:

- Civil society action climate crisis
- Collective action triggered by economic injustice
- Challenging exclusion and claiming rights
- The state of democratic freedoms
- Civil society at the international level



People in Paris, France, protest against Islamophobia in November 2019. Credit: Mustafa Yalcin/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

FOREWORD

LYSA JOHN, CIVICUS SECRETARY GENERAL

We've always known in civil society that change can come very quickly. We've always done our best to drive change and be ready for change when it comes.

But CIVICUS's annual report on key civil society actions and the major trends that affect civil society comes in a time of turmoil and turnaround. We've gone from mobilising in great numbers to locked down isolation. We've gone from asking the big questions about power and its distribution to scrambling to provide the best support we can to the hardest-hit communities. We've gone from the victories set out in this report's pages – winning great breakthroughs in challenging autocratic power, claiming rights and making the voices of the most excluded people heard – to facing a new wave of rights restrictions, many of them opportunistically imposed under the guise of pandemic response to claw back freedoms and consolidate ruling power.

As if there were ever any doubt, the crisis once again demonstrates the vital need for civil society. We are mobilising to respond to those most in need, whose existing economic, political and social exclusion makes them most vulnerable to the impacts of the crisis. We are working hard to shift our activism and coordination online. We are continuing to hold decision-makers to account, advocating for an effective crisis response that respects human rights and demanding that any emergency powers be reversed as quickly as possible.

In mobilising, we have drawn on the capacities we proved and honed in the many successful struggles of 2019, as outlined in this report's pages. We have mounted rapid collaborations and collective efforts. But there are also challenges that need to be acknowledged. Many organisations have had to renegotiate urgently with funders, highlighting issues of donor dependency and the emphasis placed by funders on delivering discrete, timebound

projects. There have been issues of competition, for positioning and recognition, and despite a tremendous information-sharing effort, there are still challenges of coordination. We recognise the immense pressure the crisis has placed on civil society workers, and are working to develop and encourage support for a civil society social security protocol. We are also calling attention to the need for systematic investment in local civil society and to have infrastructure that supports civil society to be relevant and resilient, particularly in the global south.



In civil society, we are leading the way in thinking through what kind of world might emerge from the crisis. As our report sets out, our world already faced tremendous challenges – limited human rights and democracy, economic failure, inequality, multilateral dysfunction and the climate crisis – before the virus struck. The challenge is not to get back to old ways, but to push forward to a new normal: a post-pandemic world that is fairer and more equal, and in which rights are widely recognised. We must commit to building a world that is fit for the people – many of them with the least power in society – who are putting into action the civil society values of empathy and compassion and placing their lives on the line to fight the virus.

In this report, you'll find a wealth of ideas that can help us make this better world, and a great diversity of civil society actions that are already trying to build it. Now is the time to accelerate those efforts, and unlock civil society's potential by ending the many restrictions placed on civic space. I hope you find the many stories of civic action told in our report inspiring, and will join with us in the struggle to build a socially just and rights-based recovery.

In solidarity,
Lysa John

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A SNAPSHOT OF A CHANGING WORLD

This is the ninth edition of our annual report tracking civil society action on the key issues of the day and the major trends that impact on civil society. It reviews and analyses leading events of 2019, exploring activism on the climate crisis; civic action to challenge exclusion; people's mobilisations prompted by economic hardship and inequality; the state of democratic freedoms; and civil society's engagement at the international level, focusing on the opportunities for renewal offered by the 75th anniversary of the United Nations (UN). It draws from the voices of many civil society activists, leaders and experts to present perspectives from and for civil society.

This report provides a snapshot of a world that might just have changed irrevocably. The COVID-19 pandemic swept the world as this report was being finalised, and its impacts are already far-reaching.

Civil society experienced those impacts. Around the world, societies were put under lockdown, bringing to a halt the many mass protests that were a hallmark of 2019 and continued into 2020. Much of civil society's regular work became a great deal harder, as crucial activities were put on hold and communities we serve became out of reach, leaving us trying to mobilise social solidarity while practising physical distancing. We worked to refocus our energies on emergency response, striving to serve the many people facing illness, hunger, penury and the denial of rights. We got to grips with taking our actions online, which demanded new skills and resources, challenged our usual ways of organising and exposed digital divides and online power imbalances between dominant voices and excluded groups, and between the global north and global south.

Mandatory lockdowns brought **restrictions** on personal freedoms. Many people understood the temporary need for these measures, consistent with states' duty to protect people's lives, but as they entailed additional constraints on **civic space**, they made it harder to scrutinise decision-makers

and hold them accountable. Economic activity slowed down, hurting the most vulnerable people and increasing demand for our essential services, but also constraining our resource bases. Lockdowns interrupted planned programmes, demanding urgent negotiation with **funders** and calling into question the resilience of many civil society organisations (CSOs). CSOs needed to find new ways of supporting their staff and looking after their physical and mental health.

But while the impacts of the pandemic were profound, none of the problems revealed were new. Crucial civic and democratic freedoms were already being denied: before the pandemic struck, the CIVICUS Monitor, which tracks civic space in 196 countries, revealed that only **three per cent** of the world's population lived in countries where the core civic freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression were widely respected, even though they are essential to the health and vitality of civil society. In a world riven by inequality, economic policies were already failing most people. Despite the protections enshrined in international law and national constitutions, people were already being excluded on the basis of their identities. International cooperation was already lacking and contested, with multilateral institutions undermined by the manoeuvring of powerful states, rogue leaders, anti-rights groups and large corporations. And the climate crisis had already revealed just how inadequate and unprepared existing structures were to respond to global emergencies. The pandemic exacerbated, accelerated and further exposed these vital economic, political and social challenges.

Throughout 2019, leaders in multiple contexts sought unconstrained power, refused to submit themselves to political competition and clamped down on dissenting voices. Even as the virus raged, repressive states strengthened the instruments of repression, seeking to consolidate ruling power, cynically seizing on the pandemic as an opportunity to introduce measures that imposed additional restrictions on civil society and political opposition.

Too often, governments and business leaders viewed civil society as an adversary rather than a valuable partner in responding to the crisis. Overreach in the emergency powers and restrictions introduced included



A volunteer prepares packages of food for low-income families during the COVID-19 pandemic in Hermosillo, Mexico. Credit: Israel Garnica/Norte Photo/Getty Images

ensorship, limitations on access to information and violations of the right to privacy, and threats, arrests and detentions of civil society activists, journalists, frontline workers and other concerned people who disclosed information about the pandemic, questioned their government's response, or exposed failings. In multiple cases, security forces used violence against people deemed to have violated lockdowns, while for human rights defenders **in detention**, the risks of infection were alarming. In too many contexts, a state power-grab appeared to be underway, raising the risk of a permanent institutionalisation of emergency measures that would roll back fundamental freedoms.

The pandemic further revealed both the persuasive power of disinformation, as harmful rumours were allowed to spread widely, and the cost of censorship, as the Chinese state's attempts to suppress early news of the virus to protect its interests unleashed disastrous global consequences. Many states modelled intrusive tracking and surveillance technologies, while also seeking to normalise internet restrictions. As a result, people struggled to access reliable information that could help protect them and their families, and many became inadvertent spreaders of disinformation.

The crisis also showed that political choices matter. Past editions of this report have tracked the resurgence of far-right populism and nationalism, and of macho, strongarm leaders who, even when they gain power by democratic means, go on to close down space for democratic accountability and dissent. The pandemic exposed many of these political leaders as lacking, as they indulged in grandstanding, fostered division, manipulated public opinion, manoeuvred for political gain and seized opportunities to further suppress struggles for justice and rights. The leadership styles that proved more effective were those that respected scientific advice, prioritised the needs of the most vulnerable, understood the need to communicate honestly and sought to preserve the best possible balance between public safety and hard-won constitutional freedoms.

People largely understood that crisis response involved complex decisions about public health protection and the likely impacts of lockdowns on people and economies, but people fared better when difficult compromises were made through processes that were clear and understandable, steered

by political leaders who enjoyed public trust. Among those rising to the challenge were several new women leaders and others taking a feminist perspective who put into political practice the values they share with civil society: compassion, empathy and humanitarian commitment.

Lockdown measures halted much economic activity, casting many more people into precarious living conditions. People lost their jobs or were furloughed, had to take pay cuts or saw their small enterprises, built up through years of striving and saving, shuttered. In some countries people who needed vital treatment faced ruinous healthcare bills. At the same time that many had to stay at home or saw their economic activities curtailed, others had never been busier, daily facing personal risk in their essential work to keep societies functioning. The virus laid bare the fact that people our societies most rely on – medical personnel, emergency responders, transport staff, people who sell and deliver food – are among the least rewarded, and many routinely experience lives of economic hardship and struggle. In contrast, the wealthiest had little to contribute to tackling the crisis. Apart from some cases of philanthropy that entailed negligible relative loss of wealth, most of the super-rich were content to ride out the crisis in luxurious isolation, even adding to their grotesque fortunes through financial speculation. Demands for big business bailouts fuelled public anger about corporate and elite tax avoidance. The pandemic revealed that what was at stake was too important to be left to the market. It further exposed a reality that motivated protests around the world in 2019, in which people demanded fundamental change of an economic system that makes small numbers of people very rich but leaves most people vulnerable to economic shocks and hamstrung by inequality.

While it was true that anyone could catch the virus, those most at risk of infection and most likely to be impacted on by it were impoverished and **excluded people**. People already living in economic hardship were vulnerable because their work most exposed them to danger, because they had least access to medical services and because their living circumstances made physical distancing and access to decent sanitation hardest. Among those most affected were migrants and people from ethnic minorities, who disproportionately have jobs that cannot be done in isolation, and informal workers, who frequently come from excluded groups and were often left

without incomes. Older people and those with compromised immune systems, including as a consequence of deprivation, faced the greatest danger from the virus. Women and children under lockdown experienced greater risk of violence and abuse, while many women were forced to take up the bulk of caregiving and education duties, reinforcing their subordination, and many children missed out on vital education. People with disabilities found their rights shredded by emergency rules. Religious and ethnic minorities, people from the Chinese diaspora and **LGBTQI+ people** were exposed to threats and violence as a result of disinformation that blamed them for spreading the virus, and were targeted by security forces during lockdowns. The pandemic therefore reinforced the patterns of exclusion that many in civil society have long worked to challenge.

The virus had no respect for borders, making clear how interconnected our world is. It underlined the need for international cooperation and coordination, but also the current dysfunction of global governance. Different states pursued varying paths in response, and some were slow to act on international-level advice, pursuing stridently nationalist approaches that worsened the crisis for the people with least power. The countries that fared best were those that followed the advice, and differential rates of success were proof of the value of global exchange of solutions and technology that are enabled by independent and responsive multilateral institutions. While many borders closed, raising the fear of longer-term restrictions on the flow of people and ideas, key international institutions continued to promote positive values and norms, coordinating debt relief, urging ceasefires and calling for human rights and gender justice to be respected in crisis response. But instead of reinforcing these institutions, prominent political leaders attacked them, continuing their recent practices of weakening them through vilification, withdrawal, defunding and undermining from within.

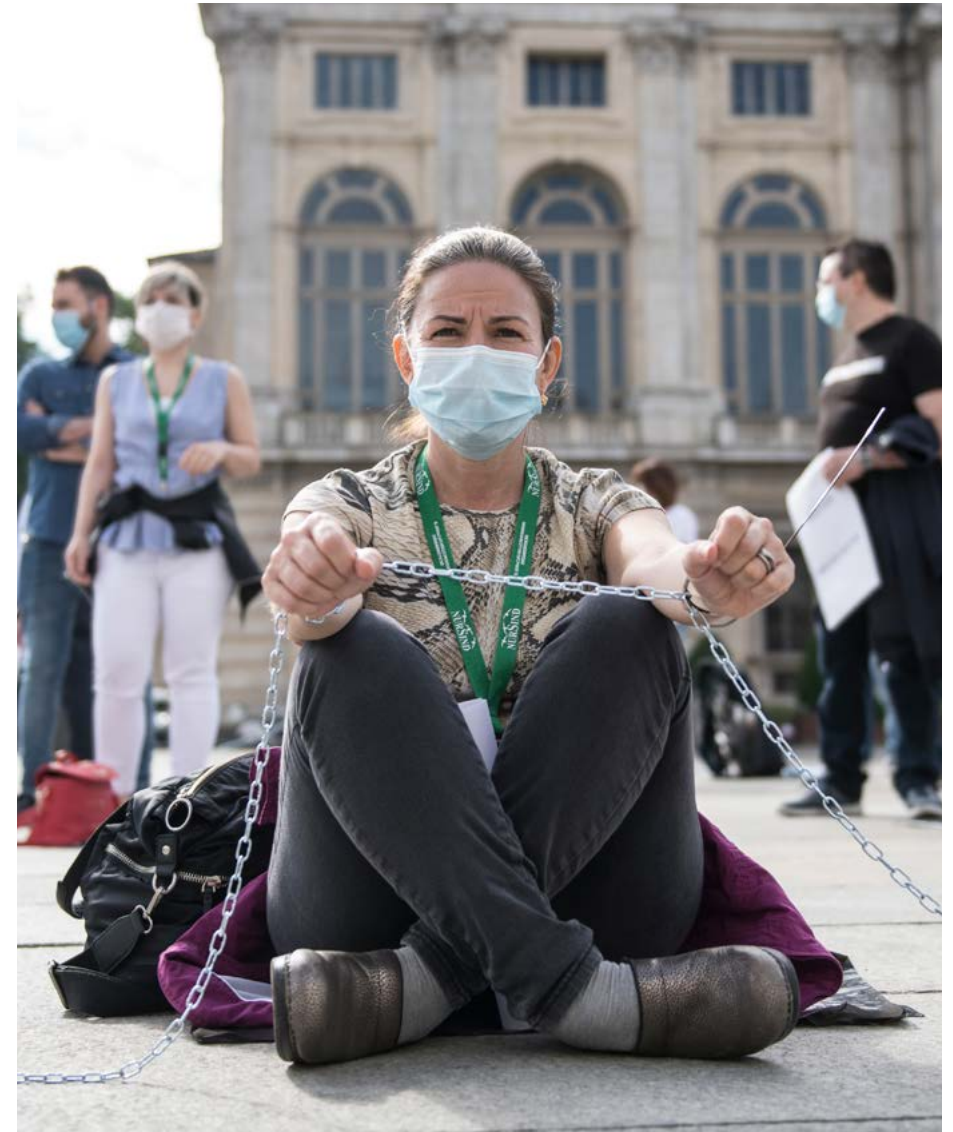
With many flights grounded, public transportation reduced and much industrial activity halted, the planet saw a temporary reprieve from some of the worst causes of climate harm. In normally polluted cities the air cleared. Awareness of the need for urgent action on climate change was already high, due to the widespread civic activism of 2019 and the wildfires, flooding and other extreme climate events that caused great damage from

the Amazon to Australia. The pandemic offered an opportunity to reflect on the climate impact of industrial economies and our everyday activities, and to question our current means of production and commerce. Those responsible for the bulk of consumption and air travel perhaps realised they could get by with less. In many countries, whole generations experienced for the first time what it is like to live under emergency conditions. If they were lucky, they saw their governments follow advice based on scientific consensus and coped better with the crisis as a result; if not, the harm they experienced was exacerbated by authoritarian and reckless leaders focused on the further consolidation of their power. Many of the governments and leaders that disregarded scientific advice on the pandemic, putting people at greater risk as a result, were also those that refuse to take the climate crisis seriously. On all fronts, the importance of acting on scientific consensus to protect people was clear.

Civil society's role was more vital than ever. CSOs, always on the frontline of crisis response, provided healthcare, food, shelter and other essentials to those in need. The kind of solidarity that civil society nurtures and mobilises, from the local to the global levels, proved critical in getting people through the crisis. Societies saw an overwhelming voluntary response as people came forward to help their neighbours, sustain their communities and reinforce the frontline. As many people became isolated, they came to appreciate the value of human interaction, community and solidarity, within and across borders: fundamental principles that animate civil society. CSOs also worked to model responses to the crisis that supported staff and families and upheld employment rights, including by developing a **social security protocol** for civil society workers. Civil society continued to work to hold governments to account, often in difficult conditions, asking probing questions about the quality of response, highlighting failings, insisting that rights be respected and any restriction of freedoms be temporary.

Civil society will continue to mobilise – on the key issues raised in 2019, in response to the pandemic, and after the immediate crisis has passed. The world will emerge changed by the virus, but it is up to us to try to make sure it changes for good. There should be no attempt to return to the pre-pandemic world marred by the profound problems that the crisis exposed and deepened, and that made its impacts so much worse. Civil society will

need to play an active role in the post-pandemic construction of a better world: one that justifies the sacrifices so many people made to fight the virus.



Nurses protest against the poor organisation of safety at work during the COVID-19 pandemic in Turin, Italy. Credit: Stefano Guidi/Getty Images



Protesters defy the army outside military headquarters in Khartoum, Sudan, in May 2019. Credit: David Degner/Getty Images

CIVIL SOCIETY IMPACT IN A YEAR OF ACTION

In shaping our responses to the virus and building a better post-pandemic world, we can draw valuable learning from the strategies we employed and successes we achieved in 2019. While the political, economic and social problems we confronted were vast, 2019 was a year when civic action achieved significant impacts in securing progressive change, advancing demands for civic rights and democratic freedoms, fairer economic policies, an end to inequality, action on the climate crisis and international reform. We pursued a range of strategies to achieve success, including collective and solitary protest, non-violent civil disobedience, civil society advocacy and campaigning, the creative use of social media and working through courts and parliaments.

In 2019 a great wave of protests broke across the world, from Colombia to Hong Kong. Many protests were nonpartisan; they targeted incumbent governments and leaders across the political spectrum, demanding they do better to meet people's needs or make way. Often people did not just want a rotation of elites, but change in the whole system of governance, as evidenced in Chile and Lebanon. These protests were a sign that existing governance systems were inadequate and unable to process people's demands. Protesters demanded that their voices be heard, their fundamental human rights respected and their lives improved.

Time and again, people expressed their wish for more and better democracy. They mobilised in a variety of contexts: where elections were held that were not free and fair, such as in Kazakhstan and Thailand; where incumbents seemed determined not to give up their grip on power and manipulated the rules in their favour, as happened in Bolivia and Guinea; and where people had long been denied the basic right to choose those who rule in their name, as was the case in Hong Kong and Sudan. All of these protests carried the conviction that democracy requires free and fair electoral competition, the availability of genuine alternatives, respect for minority and dissenting opinions and the opportunity to debate a range of viewpoints before reaching informed decisions.

Another major 2019 mobilisation trend saw people driven to protest by economic hardship and pressing financial concerns. Mass protests often had triggers that in isolation might have seemed relatively insignificant: an increase in fuel costs in Iran and Zimbabwe; a slight rise in transport fares in Chile; a new social media tax in Lebanon. What might have seemed minor tweaks to economic policies proved tipping points for people struggling to make ends meet. Many people facing hardship felt they had to make themselves heard by any means available. Revelations of corruption often played a part in sparking protests, notably in Colombia, Egypt and Haiti, as people saw themselves as the targets of policies that increased their hardship, while political elites remained secure in their dishonestly acquired wealth.

No matter how seemingly small their trigger, many of these protests laid bare massive underlying fractures of economic and political systems and years of rising discontent. Once past the tipping point, protesters would not be bought off with piecemeal reforms or the reversal of policies that triggered initial protests, and increasingly demanded radical change. People turned against neoliberal economics and its associated austerity policies that have caused vast inequality, and challenged the domestic political arrangements that had institutionalised failed economic policies and elite corruption.

Strikingly, in many protests, including in India, Iraq and Lebanon, people joined forces across a variety of longstanding divides – gender, age, social class, religion, ethnicity – understanding that what they shared was stronger than what set them apart. This was important because it prevented political leaders from appeasing and splitting off some groups from the mass of protesters, and communicated that protest demands came from across the population. And by coming together, people often achieved significant impact. In Sudan, protesters ejected a dictator and then resisted the imposition of military rule. In Ecuador, harsh austerity measures were reversed. In Hong Kong, the government was forced to backtrack on a plan to make it easier to extradite people to mainland China. In Chile, protesters won the promise of a new social contract that sought to guarantee gender justice and participation in processes to rewrite the constitution. Many protests continued after their immediate causes were addressed because

people began to demand deeper and longer-lasting change; the impacts they achieved offered a proof of concept, giving them encouragement to keep going.

2019 was also the year when civil society pushed climate change into the headlines and made it part of everyday conversation. Around the world, the youth-led global school strike movement, Extinction Rebellion and countless environmental and Indigenous movements demanded that decision-makers recognise and pay attention to the scale of the climate emergency and take action to prevent the worst impacts before it is too late. Civil society made clear that not acting on the reality of climate change was a political choice, and an extremely unwise and self-destructive one.

The climate movement achieved impacts, not least in the form of numerous declarations of climate emergency, as well as the cessation of some fossil fuel industry sponsorship. These were small steps that need to be built upon, but they were a crucial start, promoting recognition that the problem exists and action is needed. In 2019, the climate movement decisively won the argument. It turned a neglected topic into a front-page story, and a political non-issue into a core agenda item. Despite desperate attempts by climate deniers who spent billions promoting disinformation, the scale of the climate crisis is now widely recognised. Civil society will continue to mobilise to make sure decision-makers do not look the other way.

On climate action and on a range of other issues – such as gender-based violence and LGBTQI+ rights – **civil society made impact by simultaneously engaging on multiple fronts.** Action to build awareness, mobilise people and put pressure for change on decision-makers took place at every level, from the streets and sites of extractive damage to high-level international forums. Civil society used all institutional spaces available, but also employed the tactics of disruption. The year saw a wide embrace – particularly by the climate action movement – of non-violent direct action and civil disobedience as a means to express dissent, build support and start a dialogue. The medium was very much the message: disruption captured headlines and signalled that attempts to continue business as usual made no sense in the face of crisis. People showed time and again that they were willing to block, occupy and disrupt. They proved they were prepared to

break unjust laws that unduly restrict protests, even though they risked security force violence when doing so.

Protests and other civil society actions took place against a backdrop of continuing civic space restrictions and growing anti-rights backlash.

The resurgence of anti-rights discourse made harder the everyday lives of migrants, refugees, members of religious minorities, LGBTQI+ people, women and many others. Women and LGBTQI+ people in particular continued to be targeted by **anti-rights groups** linked to ultra-conservative faith communities that were well-resourced, strategically enmeshed with government structures and politically connected at the highest levels. Among many examples, anti-rights groups obstructed protests for women's and LGBTQI+ rights in Russia, mounted counter protests in Spain and, in Peru, sought to close down a Catholic feminist CSO.

The anti-rights backlash increasingly prioritised the international arena, and particularly UN human rights institutions, contesting international space with civil society. International institutions have been weakened by authoritarian states and regressive leaders, making it easier for anti-rights groups and politicians to gain access and influence, allowing them to dispute universal human rights. Meanwhile the search for alternative funding has led to the prioritisation of private sector partnerships, granting powerful business leaders privileged access and reinforcing rather than challenging economic power disparities. **In response, civil society urged the reform of international spaces to make them more open, democratic and inclusive.**

Even in a disheartening context of anti-rights advances and growing civic space restrictions, major victories were scored in challenging exclusion.

After extensive civil society advocacy, homosexuality was decriminalised in Botswana and LGBTQI+ people secured the right to marry in Taiwan. South Korean courts struck down a law that banned abortion, while laws were amended to raise the legal age of marriage in Indonesia and Mozambique.

Even though they faced harassment, threats and violence, brave women and LGBTQI+ human rights defenders fought to make the invisible visible, share the realities of their experiences and make themselves heard. The #MeToo

movement continued to spread around the world, in countries as diverse as Japan and Nigeria, through which women in a variety of circumstances put their concerns on the agenda, made progress in changing public attitudes and found some closure by holding perpetrators of sexual abuse to account. LGBTQI+ communities mobilised pride marches in the face of hostility in a range of countries, including Poland and Singapore. Women's marches demanded equality, sexual and reproductive rights and an end to gender-based violence on every inhabited continent, from Argentina to South Africa and from Australia to Mexico.

Civil society also mobilised against the trend of right-wing populism and nationalism that brings with it many attacks on civil society and excluded groups. 2019 offered vital evidence that the tide can be reversed: while right-wing populists and nationalists made gains in some countries, they encountered setbacks in others. In some contexts, including in city elections in Hungary and Turkey, successful broad alliances formed to resist such parties. The year also saw advances for green parties, including in Austria and Germany, capitalising on the rising awareness of climate crisis generated by civic action. The implication was that in many contexts politics remain highly volatile and fragmented, characterised by a rejection of established parties, but **there is more than one channel that political anger can follow**, and progressive and rights-oriented alternatives can be advanced.

New models of feminist leadership started to emerge. In contrast with the strongman, macho leadership style associated with right-wing populism and nationalism, several young female leaders, some with a history of civil society activism, rose to power in 2019, notably in Finland and Slovakia, embodying an approach to leadership that emphasises empathy, rationality, fairness, collaboration and the recognition of rights. This leadership style was on show in New Zealand in 2019, when Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern taught the world a lesson in strength, empathy and sanity in the way she dealt with the worst terrorist attack in her country's history, and again in 2020, when she was praised for showing transformational leadership in managing the pandemic.

Beyond formal politics and mobilisations for women's rights, **women**

played leading roles in 2019's mass protests. In many contexts, women's participation was crucial to the impact that mobilisations achieved. No longer prepared to be relegated to supporting roles, women forced their way onto the frontlines and became the public face of protests for **more and better democracy**, fairer economic and social policies and climate action. While doing so, in Algeria, India, Puerto Rico and many other countries, women insisted that protest agendas include demands for women's equal representation and rights, sexual and reproductive rights and an end to gender-based violence.

Many women protest leaders were young, a fact that pointed to **another prominent feature of 2019: the leading role of young people in movements for change.** On the climate crisis, many young people, taking action for the first time, organised with few resources but great efficiency, putting together a huge global movement. They confronted ageism and demanded to be heard in decision-making that affects their lives and futures. They gave a much-needed lesson to their elders, casting aside stereotypes to embody the voice of reason, embrace science and evidence-based decision-making and challenge disinformation. A new civic generation is rising, showing the power that can be unlocked through personal activism, creative engagement and decentralised coordination.

The actions described above are currently on pause, but they can be expected to surge back in the post-pandemic world. There has never been a more necessary time for the movements, struggles and actions outlined here than in the fight for a socially just and rights-based recovery.



Ecuadoran student protesters carry a sign that reads 'Let the corrupt pay for the crisis' in May 2020 in Quito. Credit: Xavier Caivinagua/Agencia Press South/Getty Images

LOOKING FORWARD: WHAT COULD A POST-PANDEMIC WORLD LOOK LIKE?

Civil society stands ready to play our part in building a better post-pandemic world that works for everyone. Based on this report's analysis of civil society actions, during 2019 and in response to the current crisis, five key areas are suggested for civil society engagement.

1. RESPECT CIVIC RIGHTS AND DEMOCRATIC FREEDOMS

Civic rights and democratic freedoms are needed now more than ever. Civil society needs to be unfettered, so we can play our proper role in pandemic response and scrutinising decisions taken in response to the crisis, help ensure the lessons are learned and become equal partners in post-pandemic reconstruction. In the immediate period of virus response, measures to protect public health should respect **human rights**. We need to challenge censorship, restrictions on **access to information** and infringements of personal privacy, and expose overreach by governments, such as illicit surveillance. We need to continue to advocate for people's right to express democratic dissent. We need to demand that all emergency measures stand the test of proportionality and necessity, in line with international law and the principles enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and are withdrawn as soon as possible. Looking ahead, we will need to promote new strategies to combat disinformation and new models of inclusive and accountable leadership. Civil society will keep pushing for open civic space, and will urge governments to adopt people-centred and partnership approaches to reconstruction that satisfy the demand for positive change. As part of this, economic stimulus packages prepared by states should recognise the need to enable the adequate resourcing of civil society and ensure the **sustainability** of organisations on the ground and in the global south.



Activists demonstrate for life, democracy and freedom amid the COVID-19 pandemic in Brasilia, Brazil. Credit: Andressa Anholete/Getty Images

2. RETHINK ECONOMIES

Now is the time to rethink how economies are structured. Any attempts to reassert harsh austerity policies or prioritise the needs of big business in recovery must be avoided, as the impacts would fall disproportionately on those who have already suffered the most. Rebalancing power and building solidarity between employers and workers, creditors and debtors, and property owners and tenants will be key. Civil society has long been at the forefront of critiquing and proposing alternatives to neoliberal policies and market fundamentalism, and now is the moment to bring our ideas to the table. The time has come to build on the emergency social safety nets many states offered by properly trialling the concept of universal basic income. The need to resource the recovery should lead to greater measures to end corporate and elite tax avoidance and the introduction of more redistributive tax policies. State provision of public goods and greater democratic oversight of essential services can help ensure these best serve recovery, along with intervention to regulate the prices of essentials and prevent profiteering and illicit financial speculation.

3. REACH EXCLUDED PEOPLE FIRST

The needs of the most excluded people should be placed front and centre. Reconstruction should adopt a human rights approach and reach the most disadvantaged first. Economic stimulus must be targeted towards those who are most vulnerable, including impoverished communities and excluded groups. Steps must be taken to safeguard the rights of women and the health and wellbeing of older people and children, and to prevent violence against them. Consistent with this, spending should be reallocated away from state machineries of repression and war towards universal healthcare and social services. Excluded groups can only be reached in partnership with civil society, including the many civil society initiatives that excluded groups have formed to make themselves visible, assert their rights and improve their lives.

4. RENEW INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

International cooperation remains vital. Responses to the pandemic must strengthen and uphold the autonomy of international institutions, and not only the World Health Organization but also the institutions that promote human rights, peace and sustainable development. We need to work towards ensuring that multilateral institutions are free of the influence of powerful states, self-serving leaders and the profit-driven motivations of big business. The next global crisis should be faced by international institutions that have the capacity and resources to function as crucial sources of advice, expertise and support. Action by states to pay the vast sums of money they owe the UN would be a vital first step, but beyond this, civil society needs to be involved in discussions about how UN institutions should change and allowed to play a proper role in holding them accountable. Civil society should also focus our advocacy on international financial institutions to ensure they prioritise action on debt relief for global south countries.

5. RESPOND TO THE CLIMATE CRISIS

There is now a golden opportunity to ramp up action on climate change. The healing of nature seen in so many places should be further nurtured. Protection of biodiversity should be prioritised. New ways of working introduced during the crisis that reduce carbon footprints should be continued where possible. The Paris Agreement must receive new life to ensure that greenhouse gas emissions are reduced and rises in global temperature are kept to a minimum. Transition efforts should focus on a green recovery, building on civil society's cutting-edge work in developing green new deal proposals to promote sustainable production, consumption and jobs. Reconstruction efforts that curb existing environmental commitments and rely on harmful fossil fuel extraction should be resisted at all costs.

As civil society, we must tell the stories of how our emergency response made a difference, the resilience and hope we shared, the innovation and creativity we drove and the solidarity we mobilised. We must make the case for civil society's role in reconstruction. As part of this, we need to get even better at networking and sharing resources, given that the crisis

exposed challenges of sustainability. An enabled, adequately resourced and strongly networked civil society, focusing on mutual solidarity rather than competition, is needed to match our ambition. We can and must play our full part in ensuring a recovery that does not try to go back to the old normal, but rather goes forward to a new better.



Youth climate activists protest outside the Mizuho Financial Group Inc. headquarters in Tokyo, Japan, in March 2020 to denounce its role in financing international coal projects. Credit: Kentaro Takahashi/Bloomberg via Getty Images

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