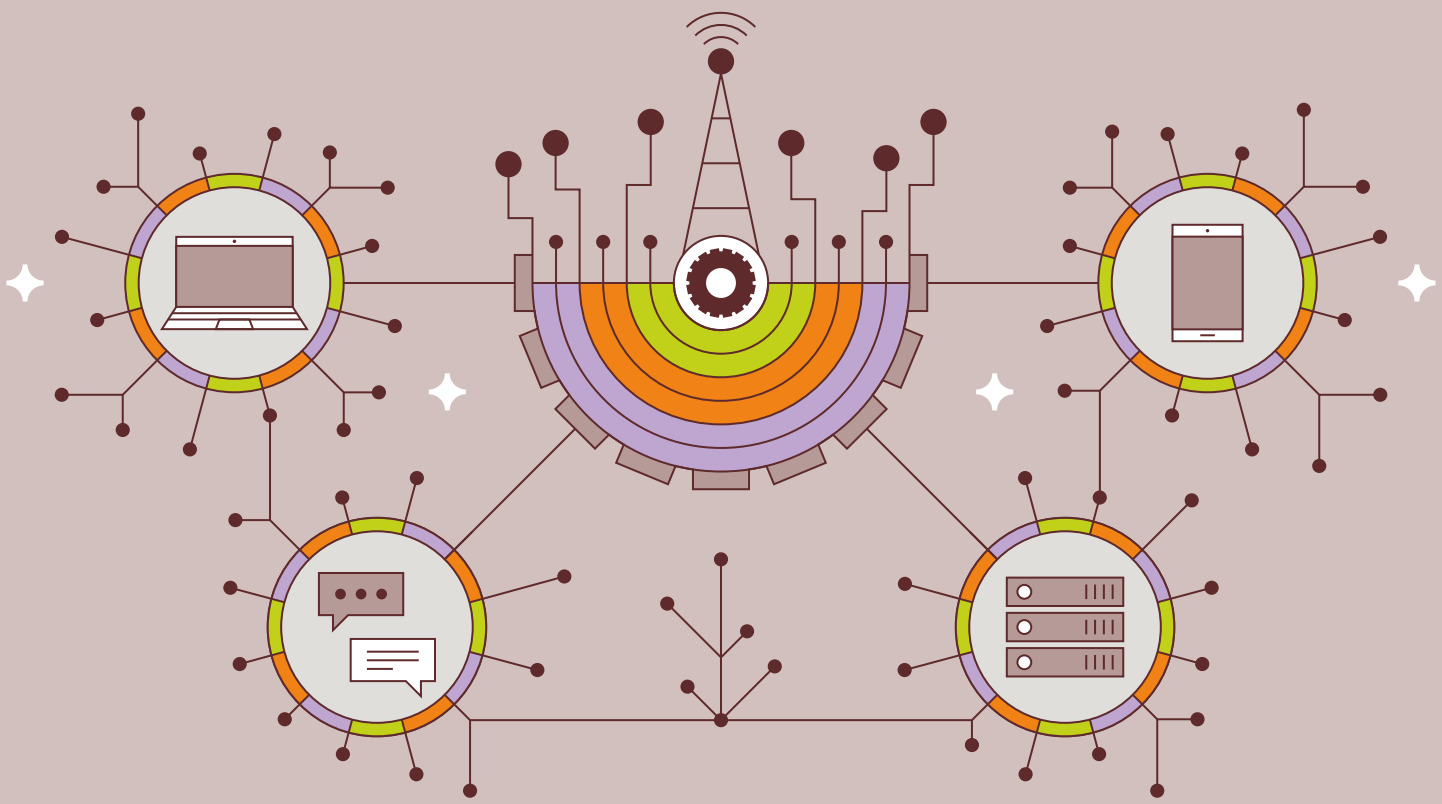
REFLECTIONS FROM COSTA RICA

The path to autonomy and collective strength for civil society



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THE PATH TO AUTONOMY AND COLLECTIVE STRENGTH FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

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The future of digital rights, and the ability of organizations and individuals to defend them, is being shaped by complex and intersecting forces. Geopolitical competition for influence, economic pressures from global markets, and the growing power of corporations seeking to expand consumption play a decisive role. In many cases, these dynamics operate without regard for their social or environmental impacts; in others, they deliberately exploit such impacts to consolidate power, extend influence, or maximize profit.

At Fundación Acceso, one of the central challenges that we have consistently encountered while collaborating with allies from the Global Majority at the Global Network for Social Justice and Digital Resilience (DRN) involves bridging the diverse needs of partner organizations with the specific risks present in their local environments, and translating these insights into coordinated actions at the network level. This process is inherently non-linear and often unpredictable. Furthermore, it requires integrating multiple perspectives: responding to immediate digital threats in different contexts, cultivating trust among collaborators with different organizational dynamics, and working within the structural constraint of limited resources in the Global South.

A report recently published by the DRN, titled Pulse 2025, The Trump Effect on Digital Resilience in the Global Majority, has offered an opportunity to reflect on possible strategies to address these forces, and anticipate some of the challenges that lie ahead.[1]

THE SOCIAL JUSTICE LANDSCAPE

Recent political developments in the United States illustrate how state power and corporate interests, particularly those of the technology sector, are becoming increasingly aligned. This alignment has manifested in attempts to dismantle or weaken regulatory frameworks, including those designed to protect privacy and digital rights, such as European, Brazilian, and other countries' data protection regimes.[2] It has also taken the form of influence operations aimed at reshaping political landscapes abroad, leaving entire regions vulnerable to decisions made in line with U.S. corporate and governmental interests.

Equally concerning is the reduction of civic space, especially for human rights organizations. This is not simply an unintended consequence of broader changes but, in many instances, the result of deliberate strategies to limit the scope of social justice movements, and weaken forms of resistance to authoritarian regimes. The sharp decline in international cooperation funding, including cuts by agencies such as USAID, often linked to U.S. pressure to expand military spending at the expense of development cooperation, has further undermined civil society's ability to operate. These trends have been accompanied by a "cultural war" narrative that seeks to delegitimize rights-based organizations, and restrict their role in proposing alternative futures.[3]

1. For information on these forces shaping digital rights, see: https://digitalresilience.network/new-drn-report-scanning-the-horizon-the-future-of-digital-rights-resilience-in-the-global-majority/

2. "Trump Vows Retaliation against Countries with Digital Rules Targeting US Tech." *AP News*, 26 Aug. 2025, https://apnews.com/article/trump-european-union-google-apple-meta-e5c432f29d2d470eff3504d6409d73ab

3. Human Rights Funders Network. (2025, September). *Funding at a crossroads: Foreign aid cuts and implications for global human rights*. Human Rights Funders Network. https://www.hrfn.org/foreign-aid-cuts/

Within this shifting landscape, some opportunities to strengthen resilience remain. While the pressures are significant, **Global South initiatives demonstrate that it is possible to anticipate risks, confront asymmetries, and adapt to domestic and international challenges**. The examples discussed in this article do not offer universal solutions; rather, they illustrate how organizations can implement strategies of collaboration and distributed infrastructure to sustain their work in an increasingly adverse environment.

STRATEGIES OF COLLABORATION

Our experience in laying the groundwork to strengthen digital and threat lab initiatives across Latin America has been instructive. These initiatives seek to enhance capabilities through coalitional work, each advancing at its own pace, and according to strategic priorities shaped by local contexts and operational capacities.

Below we share some important lessons learned:

- **A key issue in these efforts is the definition of success.** Often, proposals set ambitious expectations, such as transitioning a lab from inception to full operational capacity within one or two years. While understandable, this tends to underestimate the complexity and gradual nature of such development. Establishing a digital threats lab requires not only technical expertise, but also organizational stability, local legitimacy, and sustained collaboration with diverse actors. These prerequisites cannot be artificially accelerated without risking fragility or dependency.

- **A more pragmatic approach provides better support to laboratories.** Adaptive timelines allow recognizing that growth trajectories vary with context, risk environments, and strategic objectives. A lab in a restrictive civic space may prioritize discretion and peer-to-peer trust, while one in a more open environment might experiment with new infrastructure or regional collaborations. Both models strengthen the network, and should not be judged by a single standard.

- **A resilient ecosystem does not require every lab to do everything:** it thrives on diversity of roles that reinforce one another. This collaborative model, grounded in knowledge sharing and South-to-South exchange, redefines threat labs as differentiated spaces with complementary functions. Some may act as early-warning nodes, monitoring emergent threats and sharing alerts; others may focus on training and capacity building; still others may adapt or develop tools for local needs.

- **Governance and ownership are equally crucial.** If Global South organizations are positioned merely as implementers of external frameworks, these threat labs risk reproducing the very asymmetries they seek to address. To be impactful, organizations must shape methodologies, tools, and priorities from the outset. This means investing not only in technical infrastructure but also in participatory processes: collective agenda-setting, peer review, and robust accountability mechanisms. Although such approaches may appear slower, they provide the foundation for resilience and sustainability.

Through this model, strengthened laboratories can connect with global initiatives on digital security and attack response. By pooling complementary skills and capacities, local organizations can form a distributed force capable of reaching even remote areas to provide comprehensive protection without dependency on actors from lower-risk contexts.

RESILIENCE AS A PRACTICE

Despite these advances, the challenges remain significant.

- The first challenge is structural: Global South organizations operate with a fraction of the resources available to large corporations or to institutions in the Global North. This imbalance limits not only the scale at which we can operate but also the continuity of our work. Short-term project funding, often tied to rigid metrics, can leave labs vulnerable to cycles of expansion and contraction, undermining their ability to sustain long-term strategies.

- The second challenge concerns the broader political and economic context. As international cooperation funding declines, sometimes redirected toward military spending at the expense of development and civic initiatives, many organizations have been forced to reduce staff, close programs, or abandon promising pilot projects. For digital rights and human rights groups, this reduction is particularly acute because their work is often perceived as politically sensitive, and thus less likely to attract alternative funding streams. This creates a paradox: at the very moment when the threats to civic space are escalating, the resources to confront them are shrinking.

- A third challenge lies in coordination. Building networks across countries and regions requires navigating different languages, political contexts, cultures, and levels of technical expertise. Trust cannot be assumed; it must be built slowly, often in environments where surveillance and repression make open collaboration risky. Peer-to-peer accountability mechanisms, while essential, are difficult to maintain when organizations are stretched thin by immediate emergencies. This tension between urgent response and sustained collaboration is one we encounter constantly.

A further challenge concerns the unequal distribution of technological resources between the Global North and South. Working through networks of smaller or emerging labs offers one way to address this gap. By coordinating while maintaining their autonomy, these labs can respond collectively to incidents that affect any of their members, combining different perspectives and practices that strengthen the capacity of the whole network. This approach does not only create more independent infrastructures; it also allows Global South labs to collaborate with larger and better-resourced laboratories in the Global North. In such collaborations, smaller labs bring valuable local knowledge and context-specific practices, while larger labs contribute specialized expertise and advanced tools. When these exchanges occur on balanced terms, the result is not a reproduction of dependency but a reduction of asymmetries, where both sides benefit from the complementarity of their contributions.

Taken together, these challenges remind us that resilience is not a fixed state but a practice. It is shaped by uneven resources, shifting political conditions, and the contradictions of working inside systems we also seek to transform. Yet within these difficulties lies a possibility for innovation: by re-imagining timelines, differentiating roles, and insisting on inclusive governance, Global South organizations can continue to carve out spaces of autonomy and collective strength, even in the most adverse environments.

Resilience is not achieved through rapid expansion or uniform models, but through adaptive strategies that respond to local conditions while contributing to regional and global initiatives. By linking needs and risks to coordinated actions, and by confronting the structural imbalances that shape our work, Global South initiatives demonstrate that it is possible to carve out spaces of autonomy and collaboration even under restrictive conditions. These efforts do not resolve the asymmetries of the digital ecosystem, but they provide grounded examples of how to navigate and mitigate them in ways that strengthen our capacity to defend rights in an uncertain future.

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