GLOBAL NETWORK FOR
Social Justice &
Digital Resilience

FUNDING FOR DIGITALLY RESILIENT FUTURES IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

A position paper on systemic shifts, funding challenges and future opportunities for digital rights advocacy

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This position paper by the Global Network for Social Justice and Digital Resilience (DRN) is part of the DRN's forecasting and fundraising stream of work. It aims to explore current and future trends, and relevant issues facing the digital rights and digital resilience ecosystems in the Global South.

The paper was written by Amrita Sengupta, based on the views of DRN members: Co-Creation Hub (CcHUB), Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA), Derechos Digitales, Fundación Acceso, Núcleo de Pesquisas, Estudos e Formação (NUPEF), Social Media Exchange (SMEX), and Tecnología Digital e Información para fines Sociales (SocialTIC).

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CONTENT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Founded in 2021, the Global Network for Social Justice and Digital Resilience (henceforth referred to as the Digital Resilience Network, The Global Network or the DRN) has seven established members across Latin America, Africa, and the West Asia and North Africa (WANA) region, working collaboratively in the Global South in order to strengthen the digital resilience of the social justice ecosystem. This position paper aims to highlight the current challenges in the funding landscape for digital rights and digital resilience, and also –just as importantly– the actions that different stakeholders can take to build a resilient ecosystem for the future. This work builds on the prior work of the DRN's forecasting and fundraising working group that highlighted key trends that will shape digital rights and digital resilience activism in the future.

Set against the backdrop of the United States government funding cuts as well as the reduction of European international development funds, this paper highlights several challenges including the depletion of core funding, the rise of intermediaries, the role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in capturing the funders' attention, changing philanthropic priorities as well as competitive pressures that are creating certain first and second order effects for organizations in the ecosystem. This moment serves as an opportunity to reflect on learnings, and work towards a forward looking agenda for the future. While this paper is focused on the views of the Network members, the intention of bringing this out is to provide some approaches to both funders and other peers in the ecosystem for building a resilient digital future.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The contemporary field of internet rights, technology policy, and digital governance emerged alongside the public expansion of the internet in the 1990s, initially framed around access, connectivity, and concerns about the digital divide. The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), convened by the United Nations in 2003[1] and 2005[2] were critical moments in formalizing global dialogue about the Internet's future, affirming that access to information and communication technologies and respect for human rights online were essential components of building inclusive information societies.

The Internet Governance Forum (IGF), set up by WSIS, played a critical role in recognizing that governments, civil society, the private sector, technical experts, and academia all have roles in shaping Internet policy and governance frameworks. The IGF mirrored the evolution of digital governance concerns: early meetings focused on access, infrastructure, diversity, and development, while later forums increasingly addressed security, critical internet resources, privacy, human rights, trust, and emerging governance challenges as digital technologies became deeply embedded in social, political, and economic systems.[3] Civil society has played and continues to play a crucial role in promoting digital rights and participatory digital governance processes. Digital rights organizations, research institutes, investigative media, and grassroots networks have over the years, with support from various donors, built sophisticated programs that combine policy advocacy, capacity building, litigation, and narrative change.

The current AI race & investment in defence infrastructure,[4] geopolitical shifts, and changes in the space of digital rights and activism are leading to a profound calibration of power and resilience. As emerging technologies reshape economies and geopolitics; digital resilience, especially in the Global South, is gaining urgency. The DRN,[5] in its efforts within their forecasting and fundraising working group, has captured these precise shifts through two flagship reports: *Scanning the Horizon*[6] and *The Trump Effect on Digital Resilience in the Global Majority*.[7] These documents offer long-term foresights and a timely analysis of current trends in the digital rights funding space, situating digital rights challenges against a backdrop of shifting global power, technological consolidation and civil society uncertainties.

1. https://www.itu.int/net/wsis/docs/geneva/official/dop.html
2. https://www.itu.int/net/wsis/docs2/tunis/off/6rev1.pdf
3. https://cgi.br/media/docs/publicacoes/1/CadernoCGIbr_Forum_de_Governanca_da_Internet.pdf
4. https://www.techpolicy.press/booming-military-spending-on-ai-is-a-windfall-for-tech-and-a-blow-to-democracy/
5. https://digitalresilience.network/
6. Ortiz Freuler, J. (2024, March; updated February 2025). *Scanning the Horizon: The Future of Digital Rights & Resilience in the Global Majority*. Global Network for Social Justice & Digital Resilience. https://digitalresilience.network/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/DRN_Scanning_Horizon_250123.pdf
7. Ortiz Freuler, J. (2025, June). *Pulse 2025: The Trump Effect on Digital Resilience in the Global Majority*. Global Network for Social Justice & Digital Resilience. https://digitalresilience.network/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/DRN_Pulse_2025_250620.pdf

It is estimated that the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has terminated between 83-86% of its foreign aid programs[8] [9] with wide reaching impacts, including an estimation from Lancet's modeling, that suggests that *"a staggering number of avoidable deaths could occur by 2030"* as a result of these cuts. While it is difficult to predict exact impacts of the USAID funding reductions in the digital rights space, certain studies conducted in the past year show profound effects of these cuts.[10] A study by the Tech Global Institute found that 71% of organizations working on internet freedom had to scale back operations.[11] Another survey conducted by DRN member CIPESA in the African region found that over 90% of organizations were uncertain about their ability to maintain operations beyond two months.[12]

Human Rights Funders Network's analysis indicates that government funding for human rights advocacy is expected to drop by about $62 billion per year by 2026, representing a 28% decrease compared to 2023 levels. Reductions announced by twelve donor countries, particularly the United States, Germany, and the United Kingdom, are likely to have serious humanitarian impacts.[13] With a major focus on inward looking approaches, many countries in Europe are looking to or have already reduced funding for rights-based work. Major UK aid cuts have reduced funding to counter disinformation in the Western Balkans by about 40%, reallocating Official Development Assistance (ODA)[14] toward defence and security priorities.[15] Similar trends have been seen elsewhere as well. The Swedish Government announced that from 2026 the aid budget will be reduced from SEK 56 billion to SEK 53 billion.[16] This, in the backdrop of US funding cuts, can lead to profound negative impacts for digital rights organizations.

Building on its previous work, and the experience of various Network members, this position paper highlights **the challenges through shared experiences in the field, and offers insights for what future resilience in the digital rights space may look like, and the work that needs to be done to build it**. The Network is sharing it in the hope that it serves as a document for reflections and learning as well as something that others can build on in the future. It starts by highlighting some of the key challenges, followed by specific and concrete recommendations for the future.

8. https://tcf.org/content/report/the-foreign-aid-wipeout-a-shadow-revolution-in-americas-middle-east-policy/
9. https://www.devex.com/news/the-usaid-awards-the-trump-administration-killed-and-kept-109732#:~:text=The%20Trump%20administration%20has%20shared,money%20yet%20to%20be%20obligated
10. https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(25)01186-9/fulltext
11. https://techglobalinstitute.com/announcements/blog/the-impact-of-funding-freezes-on-internet-freedom-in-the-global-majority/
12. https://cipesa.org/2025/03/african-digital-rights-funding-crisis/
13. https://www.techpolicy.press/how-civil-society-is-fighting-to-protect-digital-rights-amid-global-crisis/
14. As per OECD, "Official development assistance (ODA) is the term used by Development Assistance Committee (DAC) members to refer to what most people would call aid. ODA includes activities carried out with the economic development and welfare of developing countries as their main objective. It is a measure of donor effort, including grants and grant equivalents of concessional loans." https://www.oecd.org/en/data/insights/data-explainers/2024/07/frequently-asked-questions-on-official-development-assistance-oda.html
15. The Guardian. (2025, December 20). UK aid cuts take 40% from funds to counter Russian threat in Western Balkans. https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2025/dec/20/uk-aid-cuts-take-40-from-funds-to-counter-russian-threat-in-western-balkans
16. https://www.development-today.com/archive/2024/dt-7--2024/swedish-government-pledges-further-aid-cuts-in-coming-years

DONOR TYPOLOGY

For the purposes of this paper, we are using some broad-based terms to refer to donors. Broadly we see two divisions: public and private funding organizations, and below we provide an overview of some of the types of organizations that we discuss in this report.

→ BILATERAL AND MULTILATERAL FUNDING

Bilateral and multilateral are technical terms used to classify flows of Official Development Assistance (ODA). According to the OECD, bilateral assistance refers to funding provided directly by a donor country to another country, such as USAID, UK (FCDO), Germany (GIZ), or Japan (JICA), as well as support channelled through NGOs and other development-related expenditures such as debt relief, administrative costs, and public awareness activities. Multilateral assistance, by contrast, is funding provided to international institutions whose mandates include development activities. In these cases, the contribution is pooled with the institution's overall resources, meaning the original donor cannot earmark, trace, or directly determine how the funds are ultimately used.[17] The Asian Development Bank, the World Bank and various UN agencies are examples of multilateral institutions.[18]

→ PRIVATE PHILANTHROPY

Private philanthropy for development encompasses funding from private or non-profit actors whose primary purpose is to advance economic development and social welfare in developing countries. These resources originate from foundations' own assets and revenue streams, including endowments, corporate or individual donations (such as crowdfunding), bequests, royalty income, investment returns (including government bonds), dividends, lotteries, and similar sources. It also includes support for basic or applied research that either directly serves developing countries or contributes indirectly by advancing global public goods that benefit them.[19] The Ford Foundation, The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation are examples of philanthropic organizations.

Corporate donors are also a growing source of funding through programs such as corporate social responsibility or funding specific programs. These may include funding from organizations such as Meta, Google and others.

17. https://media.odi.org/documents/10492.pdf
18. https://unfccc.int/topics/climate-finance/resources/multilateral-and-bilateral-funding-sources
19. https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/private-philanthropy-for-development-second-edition_cdf37f1e-en/full-report/overview-data-on-private-philanthropy-for-action_95989477.html#chapter-d1e1378

KEY CHALLENGES EMERGING IN THE FUNDING SPACE

Several challenges are emerging in the current funding landscape which create operational and, in certain cases, existential issues for several organizations. Certain key areas are particularly exacerbating challenges for digital rights organizations, as shared below.

→ DEPLETING CORE FUNDING

Historically, core funding has been a critical and structural requirement. While such resources have been scarce for CSOs based in the Global South, DRN members identify that there has been a decline for many of them. Not only is the decline in core funding impacting their work, but the double effect of programmatic and core funds being cut makes it an even more difficult environment for many digital rights organizations. While certain programmatic grants are still available, they often create pressure on organizations to move from program to program without having enough space to cover institutional development, risk reserves, or the time required for strategic reflection. This creates a paradox in the ecosystem, where on one end organizations are expected to demonstrate long term vision and sophisticated impact measurement, while often being funded for specific and short time deliverables. This challenge may not be a new one, but its impacts are felt more acutely in this moment where there is a systematic narrowing of the field and an increasing crunch in both capacities and resources.

→ ROLE OF INTERMEDIARIES, FISCAL SPONSORS

Intermediaries play a critical role in connecting funders with grassroots actors by, in some instances, providing context-specific support, building trust, managing risk, and ensuring resources reach communities in ways that enable long-term, locally led change.[20] Some DRN members in the African region point to new funding modalities which require organizations to work through accountability partners, often consultancy firms, without whom no resources are disbursed. This may be considered differently from traditional intermediaries, who have had a role to play in ensuring global funds reach grassroots organizations that may have previously not had access to such funds. In some cases, this means that a consulting firm is contracted to monitor programs or control disbursement, thereby strengthening these firms who may or may not add direct value to the work being done, and creating additional administrative overhead for small organizations. The result is a structural narrowing of who can survive in the field and who can grow. Further, this model does not necessarily encourage mutual learning or the development of trust bonds between donors and organizations promoting change in different parts of the world. Organizations with strong administrative departments and legal registration in multiple jurisdictions can meet compliance requirements. Smaller community based or informal networks may get excluded.

The fiscal sponsorship model, with Global North organizations playing the role of fiscal sponsors, has been a well established practice in the funding ecosystem. While it has created positive outcomes for smaller/grassroots organizations who may have struggled to receive funding from traditional philanthropy,[21] it has also created certain

20. https://www.alliancemagazine.org/analysis/intermediaries-not-just-philanthropy-middlemen/

21. https://www.socialimpactcommons.org/blog/fiscal-sponsorship-a-brief-history-and-possible-future

hierarchies, competition with Global South well established organizations, and a removal of local context. While Global North fiscal sponsors may be in a position to operate at scale, they may lose some of the context in which organizations operate. At the same time, DRN organizations observe that there is space for the Global South to play a role intermediating access to funding at regional or subregional levels, for instance. This model facilitates decentralization and a contextual approach to grantmaking that should be prioritized by larger funders.

→ ROLE OF AI IN STEERING FUNDING

As highlighted in the previous DRN reports, there is a definitive turn in increasing funds towards various AI related projects.[22] These span across AI for Good programs, AI policy and governance projects, critical AI research, and also in AI related capacity building projects. The AI funding turn is being seen as a mixture of panic, strategic positioning, and also a rush to meet and act swiftly on the next major policy field. Technology companies, philanthropies, and governments are all positioning themselves as actors in AI implementation, ethics, safety, and governance. This is also acting as a sign of how debates shift and priorities change, even for civil society organizations, on the basis of where funding is available. Even when AI is being viewed from a critical lens, it is still currently taking up a large share in the digital rights spaces.

However, the shift is taking place faster than the field can absorb it, and following the hype instead of having a deeper look on issues. Organizations are being encouraged to submit AI related proposals even when their core expertise lies in digital security, media freedom, or policy capacity building. Funding calls for AI are often deep in technical framing but disconnected from structural realities in countries where internet access, censorship, or basic cybersecurity remain unresolved.

In the recent cuts, programs that center expression rights have seen withdrawal of support, and there has been a reduction in diversity, equity and inclusion related work and funding. For instance, one of the most impacted initiatives is the now closed Civic Defenders Initiative, which was launched subsequent to Internews' Greater Internet Freedom Project,[23] a large global effort towards advancing internet freedom.[24] In a similar vein, Freedom House lost major funding on their Freedom of the Net (FOTN) project, making it difficult for them to produce annual FOTN reports at the same scale.[25] Other reports suggest that the USAID funding for journalism and free flow of information is set to disappear, with Latin America experiencing the hardest proportion.[26] This is especially stark when funding moves to developing technical

22. Ortiz Freuler, J. (2024, March; updated February 2025). Scanning the Horizon: The Future of Digital Rights & Resilience in the Global Majority. Global Network for Social Justice & Digital Resilience. https://digitalresilience.network/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/DRN_Scanning_Horizon_250123.pdf
23. https://www.techpolicy.press/100-days-of-trump-global-digital-rights-and-internet-freedom-advocacy-efforts-face-generational-crisis/
24. https://greaterinternetfreedom.org/
25. https://www.techpolicy.press/100-days-of-trump-global-digital-rights-and-internet-freedom-advocacy-efforts-face-generational-crisis/
26. https://www.alliancemagazine.org/blog/usaid-journalism-funds-to-disappear-in-2025-potentially-for-good-study-warns/

solutions for solving social problems (which increasingly now focus on AI), without actual evaluation of impact, resulting in many innovative digital tools disappearing once initial grants end, and leaving fragile, one-off prototypes which may not be ultimately useful.[27] Further, even as philanthropy pours resources into making AI more diverse and culturally attuned, it reinforces certain ideas by treating digital, scalable, and disruptive tools as the only innovations worthy of recognition.[28] All of these factors create challenges for work around digital rights and freedom of expression, but also for promotion of DEI within organizations, which often was a requirement from various donors globally.

→ COMPETITIVE PRESSURES AND POWER DYNAMICS

Funding brings into play unmissable power dynamics across different stakeholders. In recent years, "shifting power," or giving funding recipients greater control over resources, has become a central focus in progressive philanthropy, leading to strategies such as prioritizing local over international organizations, and participatory grantmaking that moves away from donors deciding funding allocations without necessary consultations. While these approaches can help reduce systemic power imbalances, they also raise important questions about whether localization still privileges capital-based organizations, and whether participatory panels dominated by highly educated elites create new forms of gatekeeping.[29]

Further, funding scarcity is reshaping relationships between organizations, with increasing competition and also some collaboration. There is a rise in consortium based proposals but this does not necessarily amount to increased trust between partners. While collaboration theoretically pools skills, it is sometimes imposed by donors who bundle unrelated themes into single calls. When consortiums are structured around lead organizations that do not work primarily on digital rights, funds become diluted and disconnected from field realities.

Organizational inequalities have also become more visible in this scenario. Large international NGOs have built reserves that allow them to weather short term cuts. Regional and local organizations often lack this cushion as a result of the structural challenges identified before. This produces a new form of hierarchization/fragmentation within civil society spaces. In some regions, organizations that once met as peers can no longer do so because one group can afford to attend international events while another cannot.

The competitive environment also alters movement culture. Global convenings are no longer primarily spaces of strategy and shared reflection. Instead, they are increasingly used for resource negotiations in which visibility and donor access become the priority, and such events risk becoming transactional, with little room for substantive agenda setting.

27. https://www.alliancemagazine.org/blog/stop-funding-digital-graveyards/
28. https://www.alliancemagazine.org/blog/the-fallacy-of-choice-technological-pluralism-as-a-path-to-real-equity/
29. https://www.openglobalrights.org/shifting-power-in-todays-philanthropy/

→ SHIFTING FUNDER PRIORITIES

Many global philanthropies are undergoing strategic rethinking owing to political pressures and internal restructuring, among other reasons. Some foundations are also going through long term inner reorganization, which is impacting the full ecosystem of organizations. Some funders have ended or plan to end flagship initiatives that have previously received stable support, and are venturing into newer and sometimes narrower areas such as public interest technology, AI policy, or global governance. This trend was also noted among government funders, with similar responses from Sweden, the Dutch as well as UK governments in the last few years.

In addition, oftentimes a network of global funders (both public and private), prioritize certain digital transformation areas, which may not be regionally suitable in that moment, especially for some regions in the Global South. This creates, once again, a shift in the funder priorities and therefore the priorities of organizations receiving these funds. This has recently been noted for digital public infrastructure (DPI), especially in the African region.

These cumulative shifts are creating exacerbated burdens on the digital rights ecosystem. There is also a need for a more coordinated donor strategy. Siloed and individualized donor strategies can mean increased strain on civil society, resulting in duplication of reporting systems, overlapping funding calls, and unpredictable eligibility standards.

APPROACHES FOR A RESILIENT DIGITAL RIGHTS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE ECOSYSTEM

There are definitive actions that civil society organizations and donors need to take to ensure a more resilient digital rights ecosystem. While we have previously mentioned how core funding is becoming scarce, and how different organizations currently need more core funding to stay afloat, we also want to highlight some other key priorities for funding bodies and organizations. Civil society organizations in the Global South, including members of this Network, can recognize this moment as one where developing deeper solidarities and support systems is essential. We list some recommendations to that effect below. We recognize that the DRN also occupies a position of privilege and relative power in this ecosystem, with organizations from Latin America, Africa and the West Asia and North Africa (WANA) that are large or have had some funding stability. We hope to collaborate and create spaces for facilitation of some of the recommendations made in this section.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUNDING ORGANIZATIONS

EVALUATE PRIORITIES, ESPECIALLY AI FUNDING AND ITS IMPACTS

Much of the current funding is focused on supporting AI related work, especially on foundational models (Large Language Models for instance). It will be useful for philanthropies to carefully evaluate the funding that is being allocated for AI work, and the outcomes it is shaping. Philanthropic work's focus on AI has an imperative to generate public value for the larger public good, which is markedly different from the socio-economic priorities of states or purely economic interests of the markets. In this case, over and above a holistic evaluation of their programs, it is essential that philanthropies evaluate the larger problems that their AI work is either solving or the impacts it is creating through discourse building. In our experience, a lot of AI for Good projects in our regions fund AI development and research, but many of the AI deployments don't necessarily function outside the lab environment, and don't move beyond the prototype stage, considering the amount of funds these require to have real world impact. Further, a lot of the AI for Good initiatives often frame problems through Global North epistemologies, overindex on technosolutionism and flatten out Global South realities, diversity, and needs.

Investing in research and development in an upcoming technology is important. However, it is necessary to consider the potential risks and losses of diverting funds away from important digital rights issues. The following list includes some helpful impact questions that philanthropies can consider when funding AI related work:

- What are the trade offs when AI funding divert resources from critical digital rights issues and civil society capacities?
- Are AI products that are getting built being deployed in real world environments? Is the funding supporting deployment and iterative processes to ensure funding is sustained beyond build phase?
- Are philanthropic investments in "responsible" AI genuinely grounded in context, ensuring buy-in and meaningful participation from affected communities, in alignment with existing frameworks (such as UNESCO's AI guidelines), and having the involvement of key local stakeholders from the earliest stages of design and implementation?

- Within certain regions, is AI solving a critical problem or is it exacerbating already existing inequalities? For instance, launching an AI chatbot in an environment with low digital literacy, in languages that may not be dominant in that region, may turn out to not serve its intended purpose.

- Do the AI projects being deployed, specifically in Global South contexts, build higher ownership and community participation, or do they continue to rely on external, Global North infrastructures?

SUPPORT GLOBAL SOUTH COALITIONS AND FISCAL SPONSORS

There are some merits to a coalition led approach. We can point out several useful strategies for developing networked advocacy, such as working on an approach of shared infrastructure, which includes pooling experts, and *"creating collaborative leadership development programs and mechanisms for sharing capacity"* on the human side; shared tech infrastructure where regionally possible, and decentralizing financial and resource administration models.[30] Particularly, on the point of financial resources, there is a need to distribute funds more equitably, and the urgency for more Global South organizations to take on the role of fiscal sponsors. It will be important in the years to come to find ways to reduce reliance on Global North intermediaries for coalition building. There are administrative and compliance related challenges that would need to be navigated for such an approach, something donor organizations can think and support with.

Additionally, during funding cuts, it is usually smaller and grassroots organizations that are most heavily impacted. Such coalition building could also help in sustaining and keeping them afloat in times of funding crises. While networked approaches have also tended to create power hierarchies, it is imperative that organizations that may possess such power (typically larger or older regional organizations with extensive administrative resources) approach movement building from a collective perspective rather than an individual one. Certain tools that provide meaningful ways of developing robust coalitions focus on: clear roles and relationships that build trust, transparent processes for sharing power through democratic governance, and feedback loops to facilitate real-time learning and flexibility.[31] Such tools may be tested for developing more intentional coalitions. While funders have a role to play in the construction of coalitions, it is also a point of reflection for civil society organizations working in this space to build more effective and trust-based partnerships towards shared goals and outcomes.

INVEST, AND REALLY INVEST, IN TRUST BUILDING

There are various trust deficits that exist in the ecosystem. Whether it is amongst civil society organizations within a region, between international and regional civil society organizations, or between funders and organizations; there is significant work that needs to be done in building trust amongst various actors. Given the power differentials that were mentioned above, and the hierarchy that they create among organizations, it is essential to think about trust as a critical ingredient for a more resilient ecosystem.

30. Ruiz, C. (2025, September 18). Networks over organizations: An infrastructural revolution for digital rights. OpenGlobalRights. https://www.openglobalrights.org/networks-over-organizations-an-infrastructural-revolution-for-digital-rights/
31. https://assets.nationbuilder.com/hahrie/pages/1229/attachments/original/1697823325/Coalition_Reflection_Guide_%28New_Coalitions%29.pdf?1697823325

This is especially critical among Global South organizations that sometimes work on similar issues, but end up working in silos. Building trust is a slow and intentional process, and requires time and effort. While reflecting on its own journey of becoming a coalition, the DRN has taken certain actions with support from the donor to build greater communication streams, facilitate open engagement, and build familiarity and solidarity between different Network members.

Donors have an essential role to play in this area. Building trust may mean supporting the development of necessary infrastructure and capabilities. For instance, in order for donors to have confidence in the ability of grassroots organizations to fulfill donor compliance requirements, it may be necessary to commit to the development of these capabilities and to provide multi-year support. For developing trust between organizations of different capacities and scales in a region, there is a need to create space for honest and frank dialogue, and build pathways for sustained conversations, that will also ultimately aid more coalition led work. Given the often intangible nature of trust building, donors may find it difficult to fund such work. However, for the longer term resilience of this space, this is both essential and urgent.

CO-DESIGN PRIORITIES AND ASSOCIATED FUNDING PLANS

We have pointed to the differential power dynamics, both between donor and grant receiving organizations, but also between organizations that operate at different scales. In this moment of reduced funding avenues, it is crucial that critical and urgent work is funded and prioritized. However, in many instances, donor and CSO priorities may be operating in tangential directions. Global South organizations that work in and are embedded in their local contexts have a better understanding of critical areas of work. Additionally, this may be due to communication gaps between funders and organizations, language or articulation barriers, and lack of clarity on impacts that are expected and impacts that may be realistically possible.

To make the most of available resources, it may be important to co-design agendas and priorities keeping the immediate term, the medium term and the long term in mind. Co-design as a solution is also increasingly important, considering that pre-determined solutions or ideas of deployment may not work in certain regions and contexts, especially given the fast paced shifts in geopolitics globally. Co-design and decentralization is also necessary for greater impact as pre-designed solutions may not work in certain regions, countries, topics, etc. While this process is being experimented with in silos, a broader acceptance of this mechanism may help in improved fund allocations and utilization. For instance, if AI work is being funded, it is essential that Global South actors are part of the conversation at the agenda building phase, instead of priorities being shared with them once finalized.

Co-design may happen across different levels:

- Between large global philanthropies.
- Between global and regional philanthropies.
- Amongst different government funders and civil society organizations in the Global South.
- Amongst different philanthropies and civil society organizations.

Some of the co-design strategies may also lead to the development of pooled funds (something that is already happening in some instances), that might cater to both a larger and wider scale of communities and people.

Participating in co-design approaches will also require civil society organizations in the Global South to articulate their vision and priorities in a way that can be integrated into funding plans, and also taking accountability for some of the decisions made.

CREATE SPACE FOR MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT AMONGST AND WITH GLOBAL SOUTH ORGANIZATIONS

In the future, funding scarcity may limit opportunities to hold global gatherings. Visa challenges have also often been a bottleneck for Global South actors to join global convenings in person. Further, the scarcity mindset is also creating stress in these convenings, where the main intention often becomes to secure more funding rather than to generate new ideas. It is imperative that these convenings focus on promoting meaningful dialogue and development of ideas. Apart from taking steps such as offering regional hybrid formats and participation funds, we recommend a few steps (some of which are already taking place in smaller ways), that could improve access to and participation in gatherings and convenings, both at global and smaller, more focused scales.

Meetings in smaller groups based on thematic areas or peer-learning cohorts could be promoted further to ensure that the dialogue on critical digital rights issues is sustained and advanced, especially in the Global South. Given language barriers, it may be essential for organizers to provide adequate language and other accessibility support to ensure active participation and fruitful discussions. These cohorts can rotate facilitation across regions and ensure that smaller, lesser-resourced groups have longstanding collaborative networks rather than one-off convening participation.

To ensure that donor conversations continue, and grantee organizations have meaningful access to funders, it would be important to create regional avenues for interactions with existing and potential donors. Larger, regional civil society organizations could be entrusted with making sure that smaller grassroots organizations that might have been previously left out of these meetings are included in global convenings. These actions may lead to the generation of more ideas on how convening spaces can be made truly meaningful and accessible to diverse actors.

Further, it is also important for donor organizations to invest in intentional learning in the spaces and regions where they operate. Creating spaces for dialogue that bring funders and Global South organizations together on equal footing can go a long way in resetting donor and grantee dynamics while also creating opportunities for mutual learning rather than one-way consultations.

Creating dedicated forums for pitching ideas and sharing emerging analyses from the Global South can surface more diverse insights, and challenge assumptions shaped by a narrow set of interlocutors. Expanding the range of voices donors engage with is critical to accessing the kinds of ideas and solutions current funding approaches often fail to uncover.

INPUTS AND REFLECTIONS FOR CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

TAP INTO LOCAL AND ALTERNATIVE FUNDING SOURCES

The over-reliance on Global North funding is evident and has created vulnerabilities, including shifts in foreign aid priorities, geopolitical pressures, and funding volatility that can undermine long-term planning and locally relevant agendas. The need to diversify funding sources is critical. Diversifying into regional government funds, domestic philanthropy, and private sector engagement could reduce these risks, deepen local ownership, and align resources with context-specific digital rights priorities. Some regions have government funds that should be tapped into, and others have private local philanthropy that is relatively unexplored. It might also be useful to identify medium and small enterprises that are more value aligned to the work of local organizations. There is a need to map this ecosystem. This requires a scoping exercise as well as active outreach and relationship building.

We acknowledge that these might come with certain challenges as diversification is not necessarily straightforward. Even in comparatively well-resourced countries like Brazil, many local funding sources depend on tax exemption and fiscal incentive models that channel corporate or private contributions to civil society organizations instead of direct public spending.[32] This trade-off underscores that while engaging local and regional funding sources is desirable, it must be pursued deliberately and with careful attention.

DEVELOP LEADERSHIP AND STRATEGIC FORESIGHT CAPABILITIES

The shifts in the funding landscape have made it amply clear that there needs to be greater investments in building funding pipelines, projecting trends, and understanding the larger geopolitical environment. For many Global South organizations that often operate in fairly resource-crunched conditions, there may not be enough time and space to build leadership and plan ahead. It is crucial that boards of CSOs, executive directors, and those in leadership capacity, focus on building foresight capabilities and leadership skills in the ecosystem, with support from funding organizations. It is in the interest of donors and CSOs to build these capacities to ensure resilience to funding shocks in the future.

EXPLORE REVENUE GENERATION

Where possible legally, civil society organizations could explore alternative modes of raising funds, including through consultancy and for profit work. Various organizations offer their expertise through teaching courses or sharing modules, capacity building, and litigation work among others. Civil society organizations should actively try to build revenue through various streams, and try different models to reduce reliance on traditional funding sources.

32. https://sinapse.gife.org.br/download/investimento-social-privado-e-gestao-publica-aprendizados-sobre-mudancas-sociais

RETHINK OVERLAPS AND CONSOLIDATE WORK

The funding crisis has highlighted the fact that there are several overlaps within the ecosystem. For instance, some Global North organizations with large employee bases have taken up space, while a lot of the work has then been sub-granted to Global South actors. Duplication of efforts can be seen within certain regions, with organizations developing similar work without a clear understanding of the gaps. Both donors and CSOs need to carefully consider these overlaps, and explore how work can be consolidated. There is an opening for regional organizations to step up and do the work that some international actors used to do, in a more meaningful context-specific way. There is also a need for strategic rethinks and pivots. For instance organizations with expertise in media capacity, data governance and privacy are reflecting on how that might look in the health and education sector. Where relevant, it may also be useful to have a digital public infrastructure lens to their work, which is considered especially important for the Global South.

BUILD ALLIANCES OUTSIDE DIGITAL RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS

It is clear that the funding cuts have impacted organizations across the board, and not just those working in digital rights. It is imperative to recognize that this is also an opportunity for solidarity and resource sharing, when feasible, to ease the burden on smaller organizations that might be having a hard time surviving. Many digital rights organizations already work with grassroots organizations across areas of gender, environment, health, education and others. It will be critical to build and further develop these relationships to increase opportunities for mutual learning and aid where necessary.

A CALL TO ACTION

We, members of the Global Network for Social Justice and Digital Resilience, believe that sustaining and strengthening digital resilience in the Global South requires a critical rethink and a shift in how this work is funded, governed and organized. Converging pressures define this moment. We are experiencing funding cuts and shifts in funding priorities amongst donors, driven by geopolitical and economic uncertainty. The growing dominance of artificial intelligence as a funding priority, and the intensification of competition and power asymmetries within the ecosystem are increasingly affecting our capacity to find resources. Even though civil society (predominantly Global North organizations) have played a role in shaping the digital rights and freedoms space, the current instability risks the rescinding of the progress made over the past many years.

This paper advances a set of recommendations and steps for funders and civil society organizations, that focus on recalibration, and more deliberate programming and work. Specifically for funders, we recommend **critically evaluating AI-driven funding agendas; supporting Global South-led coalitions, intermediaries, and fiscal sponsors; consciously investing in trust-building and long-term relationships; co-designing priorities and funding strategies with affected communities; and creating intentional spaces for meaningful engagement among Global South actors, and between civil society and donors**. Moving away from siloed and isolated project-based focus, these approaches privilege sustained collaboration, shared learning, and respect for contextual expertise.

It also calls on civil society organizations to adapt strategically by strengthening collective capacity. Tapping into local and alternative funding sources, exploring responsible revenue generation, investing in leadership and strategic foresight, and consolidating overlapping efforts are essential steps towards future resilience.

By sharing this paper, the DRN members hope to continue our explorations and reflections around resilience in the space of digital rights and social justice, and remain open to further conversations and ideas for a sustainable and just digital future.

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