MAKING TECH WORK FOR DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

LESSONS LEARNED FROM CIVIL SOCIETY EXPERIENCES IN THE TECH FOR DEMOCRACY INITIATIVE

Building upon the ambitious Danish multi-stakeholder Tech for Democracy initiative, this learning report points to civil society's lessons learned and experiences from engaging in it. Key learnings are drawn from the problem-oriented pilot projects and Action Coalitions implemented through the initiative which include: calling for a global response to joint digital issues and addressing local level needs; addressing the multiple and multi-facetted threats for already exposed individuals - online and offline; ensuring digital equity and connectivity as the baseline for working with tech and democracy, as well as utilizing digital tools to share knowledge and coordinate for the protection of human rights. Furthermore, the learning report presents broader lessons learned based on the framework of the initiative. Here, the value of civil society's perspective in the multi-stakeholder initiative, the need of producing technical and context-specific research and knowledge, ensuring synergies between actors and projects within and across the initiative, ensuring clear communication and transparency, as well as matching ambitions with adequate funding is highlighted. The last part of the learning report covers perspectives for the future and presents a list of recommendations based on the lessons learned.

CONTENT

INTRODUCTION

The ongoing and massive digital development brings both opportunities and challenges for human rights and democracy globally. While the internet and means of digital connectivity have given hundreds of millions access to information and communication, it has also provided pathways for anti-democratic measures to restrict and suppress democratic practices. The opponents of democracy and human rights, including many autocratic regimes, are successfully using digital technologies to control and manipulate the online information spaces while consolidating their own power through restrictions on the right to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly, and other fundamental human rights.

Mass surveillance, internet shutdowns, polarizing algorithms, as well as mis- and disinformation are just some of the digital tools actively working against democracy and human rights. With this, freedom rights are being restricted and online activities are criminalized. However, the internet and social media have also provided new tools for civil society, Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) and activists, serving as instruments for people to connect, mobilize, and organize around political struggles, form social movements, and broadcast the plight of their struggle to the world. One of the cross-cutting challenges in addressing the issues is, however, that many actors, including civil society itself, do not fully comprehend the digital sphere and the challenges it implies.

As a response to these many challenges, The Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) initiated Tech for Democracy in 2021. Through multistakeholder engagement, the initiative has aimed at discussing challenges and identifying solutions to make tech work for human rights and democracy. A conference in UN City Copenhagen in November 2021 marked the starting point of a year of action focused on translating ideas, intentions, and visions into concrete actions and solutions. Civil society actors across the world have played a key part in the initiative, facilitating joint global discussions in a series of seminars in the Days of Action leading up to the conference and proposing concrete and progressive action in the Action Programme *'Together for an Equal, Just and Democratic Digital World'*[1]. The Action Programme supplements *the Copenhagen Pledge*[2] which is the MFA-initiated pledge for making technology work for, not against, democracy and human rights. Furthermore, civil society actors have implemented pilot projects focused on testing solutions to tackle concrete challenges and leading some of the established Action Coalitions based on multi-stakeholder partnerships.

As a national platform for Danish organizations engaged in development cooperation, humanitarian affairs, and the green agenda, Global Focus took on a coordination role for civil society establishing both a Danish Working Group and an international Advisory Group to link synergies, exchange knowledge, facilitate learnings, and coordinate advocacy amongst civil society organizations, activists, and independent tech and democracy experts.

Building upon the ambitious multi-stakeholder initiative, this learning report points to civil society's learnings and experiences from it. This covers both civil society's experiences from implementing activities as well as from engaging strategically in the Tech for Democracy initiative. The learning report draws insights and learnings from the pilot projects and Action Coalitions led by civil society actors (pilot project and Action Coalition leads), as well as from Global Focus' experience of facilitating the civil society network engaged in Tech for Democracy.

METHOD

The learning report is based on eleven interviews with pilot project and Action Coalition leads conducted by Global Focus. The interviewees were both representatives of Danish civil society organizations and their implementing partners as well as international civil society actors engaged in the international Advisory Group who have led some of the established Action Coalitions.
It is from these interviews that the outlined trends and learnings have been identified. Furthermore, learnings from Global Focus' work on Tech for Democracy is included. However, only pilot project and Action Coalitions leads have been interviewed. The perspectives of a wide range of experts, human rights defenders, and civil society organization representatives who are members of the Advisory Group and have worked with the initiative in many ways have not been included in this learning report. Only the Action Coalitions led by civil society actors have been included as this learning report focuses on the perspectives of the civil society actors engaged in Tech for Democracy.

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1) https://globaltfokus.dk/images/TechForDemocracy/TFD_Action-Programme.pdf
2) https://techfordemocracy.dk/join-the-initiative/

The learning report is two-fold. Firstly, it focuses on key learnings from the problem-oriented pilot projects and Action Coalitions implemented through the initiative. Here, cross-cutting learnings from the project-oriented activities tackling challenges and offering solutions within the aim and scope of the initiative are outlined. Secondly, the learning report aims to unfold civil society's experience of taking part in the multi-stakeholder initiative. While the first part covers the unique insights from civil society activities linked to the Tech for Democracy initiative, the second part focuses on broader lessons learned based on the framework of the initiative. The last part of the learning report covers perspectives for the future and presents a list of recommendations based on the lessons learned. With this, the learning report is directed at actors engaged in the Tech for Democracy initiative but could also be relevant for actors engaging in similar thematic work or similar multi-stakeholder set-ups, to learn from and improve multi-stakeholder efforts on tech, democracy, and human rights going forward.

PILOT PROJECTS AND ACTION COALITIONS OVERVIEW

The figure provides an overview of activities under the Tech for Democracy-initiative led or co-led by civil society actors. In the nine pilot projects, Danish civil society organizations and their partners have implemented concrete activities to tackle some of the challenges within the tech-related sphere, while the six Action Coalitions have brought together stakeholders across sectors to focus on and engage in specific thematic solution-oriented discussions. Additionally, Action Coalitions and other activities under the Tech for Democracy initiative has been led by states and/or tech companies, which can be found on the Tech for Democracy website.

PILOT PROJECTS

Digital responsibility Danish Institute for Human Rights

Public interest infrastructures International Media Support

Digital resilience, mobilisation and engagement ActionAid Denmark, ActionAid Nigeria, YouthHubAfrica, Whispers

Improved HRD protection and response systems DanChurchAid Denmark, DanChurchAid Uganda and National Coalition of Human Rights Defenders Uganda

Hate speech and disinformation Danish Institute for Parties and Democracy

Technologies as tools for democratic inclusion of Miskito Indeginous Youth Forests of the World, Moskita Pawisa (MOPAWI)

Increasing digital resilience of Global South organisations in securely collecting data in the fight against torture International Rehabilitation Center for Torture Victims, TRC Palestine, ACTV Uganda

Digital security trainings for activists and journalists defending gender justice, freedom of speech and democracy in Egypt KVINFO and Motoon

Ensuring civil society perspectives on tech and democracy Nyt Europa

ACTION COALITIONS

Responsible Technology Danish Institute for Human Rights, UN Human Rights' B-Tech project, Global Network Initiative (GNI), Telia Company, BSR

National Human Rights Institutions as Digital Rights Watchdogs Danish Institute for Human Rights

Civic Engagement in AI Design European Center For Not-For-Profit Law Stichting (ECNL), Urvashi Aneja, Director, Digital Futures Lab, Hilary Sutcliffe, Director, SocietyInside, Mathew Mytka, Co-founder & Chief Vision Shaper, Tethix European Disability Forum, Prof Alessandro Mantelero (Associate Professor of Private Law and Law & Technology at the Polytechnic University of Turin – EC Jean Monnet Chair in Mediterranean Digital Societies and Law

Will for the Web Connect Humanity, FORUS, Tech Soup, CIVICUS, WINGS, NTEN

Content Moderation for Women Human Rights Defenders Danish Church Aid (DCA), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, National Democratic Institute (NDI), Zoom, KVINFO

Tech Solutions to #UNmute civil society Global Focus, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, The Government of Costa Rica

# 2. LESSONS LEARNED FROM CIVIL SOCIETY'S PROBLEM-ORIENTED ACTIVITIES

Across the Tech for Democracy pilot projects and Action Coalitions, challenges mentioned in the introduction have been sought to be identified, outlined, and resolved. Through problem-solving and bespoke activities, civil society has sought to fill gaps in the intersection between tech and democracy, and showcase unique local, national, regional, or global solutions to the challenges of the field. In the following, project- and problem-oriented themes in civil society's work of addressing the burning platform of the Tech for Democracy initiative will be outlined, highlighting examples from the concrete activities. These include the calling for a global response to joint digital issues and addressing local level needs; addressing the multiple and multi-facetted threats for already exposed individuals – online and offline; ensuring digital equity and connectivity as the baseline for working with tech and democracy, as well as utilizing digital tools to share knowledge and coordinate for human rights.

2.1 CALLING FOR A GLOBAL RESPONSE TO JOINT DIGITAL ISSUES WHILE ADDRESSING LOCAL LEVEL NEEDS

It is evident from the Tech for Democracy work in general, and from the pilot projects and Action Coalitions specifically, that the identified issues of the Tech for Democracy initiative resonate across different contexts in which the civil society actors engaged in the initiative are located. The scope of the pilot projects and Action Coalitions has varied from addressing issues at a global scale, such as the Action Coalition 'Civic Engagement in AI' led by European Center for Not-for-profit Law (ECNL) working to ensure civic engagement in Artificial Intelligence, to local level initiatives, such as the partners of ActionAid Nigeria, YouthHubAfrica and Whispers, using Whatsapp to spread awareness about digital rights. Despite local differences, the Tech for Democracy work has highlighted the global scale of the digital challenges at stake, such as the need for digital security at an individual and organizational level and the need for improved regulations to protect digital rights.

As the Danish Institute for Parties and Democracy (DIPD) points to: *"Of course, there are structural differences [depending, red.] on the country you operate in, but the fundamental problems are actually completely similar (...) In that way, there are some common denominators in it, which means that this is a very good platform because it is something that every country recognizes [translated, red.]."*DIPD has mapped out these common trends through online and physical events. The goal of DIPD's project on

hate speech and disinformation has been to foster increased dialogue between politicians and experts involved in Days of Action events. More specifically, the focus has been on ensuring increased awareness on necessary regulation and how to navigate in this area as a politician or political party as well as connecting with organizations that safeguard against disinformation, such as fact-checking networks.
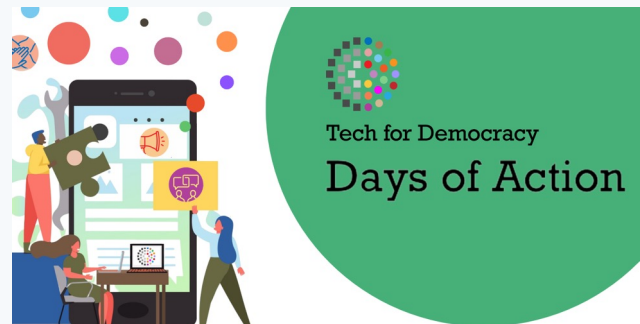
The international scale of the challenges calls for a unified response globally to ensure that digital technology works for human rights and democracy in every context and setting, whether it's in the Global North or Global South. One of the local partners interviewed highlighted the need for actors, especially civil society, to push back more rapidly on irresponsible regulations or and lack thereof. The need for improved regulation of digital technology has also been the conclusion of many discussions throughout the Tech for Democracy initiative. The Digital Services Act of the EU offers a path in this direction. Here, Nyt Europa's pilot project under Tech for Democracy has been instrumental in linking the Tech for Democracy initiative to the policy developments at EU-level, especially trough the negotiations of the Digital Services Act. Their project has aimed to link the Tech for Democracy initiative to the established civil society network in Europe with experience in the field of citizens' rights and/or digitalization. as well as advocating EU institutions to promote concrete civil society solutions in ensuring fundamental freedom rights in a time of increased digitalization. This includes the Digital Services Act that sets new standards for accountability of online platforms related to illegal and harmful content. A couple of the pilot project leads highlighted that this is not an area where Denmark is a frontrunner, and other countries have worked harder in trying to regulate digital technology. Therefore, Denmark should pay attention to the EU-level legislation in light of the Danish led Tech for Democracy initiative according to Nyt Europa: *"If it is the aim to make legislation and political initiatives globally to strengthen democracy online, it is important to look towards Brussels and understand what emerges from there as it can have an impact all around [translated, red.]."*

While the issues at stake have a global dimension, the Tech for Democracy pilot projects and Action Coalitions underlines the vital necessity of contextualized responses. For DanChurchAid in Uganda and the National Coalition of HRDs Uganda, building local structures of response has been necessary for the success of the pilot project. The pilot project has focused on strengthening the most at-risk civil society actors, in particular HRDs, with innovative protection and response mechanisms through a data reporting application. The involved actors have learned that efforts need to be decentralized, as national services for local level responses cannot be relied upon due to the differences in the challenges faced at a national level compared to those experienced by local communities. The power dynamics in rural communities are thus different from the bigger cities, also due to the close proximity of leaders to citizens and service delivery which influences the level of monitoring of the work.

Other examples of contextualized approaches have been used in the Action Coalition 'The Will for the Web', led by Connect Humanity in partnership with TechSoup, CIVICUS, FORUS, NTEN, and WINGS produced and translated a survey on the state of digital inequity into 26 different languages with support from local partners. The subsequent report is a mapping of barriers that CSOs and the people they serve face when it comes to digital equity. This global data can serve as a foundation for a dialogue about civil society's hopes and resources needed for their digital futures. The aim of the Will for the Web initiative is that this will lead to a large, engaged community of grassroots organizations providing regular feedback and guidance to those they can collaborate with towards common interests. Furthermore, in the pilot project implemented by International Rehabilitation Center for Torture Victims (IRCT) and their partners, TRC Palestine and ACTV Uganda, they have adapted a database for documentation of cases of torture. The objective of their pilot project has been to increase the digital resilience of organizations in the Global South in securely collecting data in the fight against torture and developed to also focus on center-tailored efforts on digital security. On the basis of a similar principle, in the Action Coalition on civic engagement in AI, ECNL put emphasis on involving people from the Global South, to make sure the knowledge generated in the process was not only based on input from western countries. This stresses the importance of designing interventions based on local needs and knowledge. The Action Coalition promotes a rights-based AI that benefit individuals and communities by developing frameworks for meaningful participation of civil society, affected communities and other external stakeholders in Human Rights Impact Assessments of AI systems. It seeks to improve the outreach to and quality of stakeholder engagement, with emphasis on groups most at-risk from use of technology.

YouthHubAfrica, located in Nigeria and the partner of ActionAid Nigeria, used the methodology of step-down trainings to ensure broader dissemination of courses in their pilot project. In their pilot project, they have carried out workshops for young people focused on digital security as well as the strategic use of technology in organizing, advocacy and governance work. Step-down trainings are used to disseminate learning from a training to a broader audience by inviting the participants in a training to pass on that learning to other groups. This ensures that the people trained in the first step can choose a topic relevant for their context and do a training in their communities. At the same time, the young people that are provided with resources to do the training in their communities develops their capacity, as YouthHubAfrica describes: "(...) we are giving that young person (...) the idea that you can do it, you can speak for your people (...) Beyond building the confidence and capacity of that young person (...) It's building the social and political capital of that young person within its local community.". This aligns with the main goal of their project of developing leaders from the local to the federal level in Nigeria.

2.2. ADDRESSING THE MULTIPLE AND MULTI-FACETTED THREATS FOR ALREADY EXPOSED INDIVIDUALS - ONLINE AND OFFLINE

Additional to the geographical dimension of the impact of digital technology for the protection of human rights, there is an important aspect of the digital threats focusing on already exposed individuals and targeted groups. As is the case in the offline world, women, LGBTIQ+, racialized groups, indigenous peoples, people with disabilities, children, youth, religious minorities, migrants, and others in risk of being targeted are also more exposed to violence and discrimination in the online sphere, as well as to lack of access to digital means in general[1]. A range of the Tech for Democracy pilot projects and Action Coalitions have worked to address some of these issues, specifically focusing on women, youth, and victims of torture. This section wis focus on the former.

Female politicians, HRDs, journalists, and activists working to promote human rights all face a wide range of complex online challenges, which can essentially lead to them withdrawing from the digital sphere entirely[2]. As DCA underlines, this poses a great democratic threat as it is *"(...) to a larger extent the political voices who withdraw [from engaging online, red.] than it is the violators [translated, red]"*. DCA led an Action Coalition on 'Content Moderation for Women Human Rights Defenders' with the purpose of investigating new approaches and partnerships to content moderation for women HRDs. As both KVINFO and DCA points to, the online discrimination and violence against women are not just coming from anti-feminist actors but also directly from state actors targeting women specifically. As further elaborated by DCA, there is a tendency that women are more targeted than men when engaging in public online debates, often times also risking a spill-over of threats into the offline world: *"There is a difference in threats against one's family and threats of sexual abuse - in that way, the online threats against women are more complex than the threats against men [translated, red.]"*. Furthermore, KVINFO's partner Motoon points out that digital security for targeted groups can be described as a black hole where new anti-democratic malware such as spyware or repressive algorithms are constantly being developed which leaves e.g., women online with the lower hand.

> **"** *There is a difference in threats against one's family and threats of sexual abuse - in that way, the online threats against women are more complex than the threats against men [translated, red.]"*.

For this, specific activities are needed to inform about digital security and resilience, which the Tech for Democracy pilot projects and Action Coalitions have initiated. With the Tech for Democracy initiative, KVINFO and Motoon have been able to develop online tools for digital security for journalists and activists. The project has focused on strengthening the community of actors working to promote human rights, gender justice, and freedom of the press in Egypt through secure use of digital tools and platforms.

However, besides the need for increased digital security and resilience for women and other targeted individuals to push back on the complex online threats, the lack of knowledge on the issue is clear according to DCA: *"We see very specific trends in relation to women HRDs which are inadequately reported and researched [translated, red.]"*. Therefore, DCA, KVINFO and their partners have sought to examine the digital challenges for women specifically, such as targeted mis-information campaigns, take-downs of online work, and doxing (publicly providing personal or sensitive information). While they have gathered a great deal of information, the gap is still obvious. This is the case for women's organizations working in autocratic states and women HRDs, as well as for female techies. In the former cases, there is a need to map and better understand the specific risks women face when engaging online as both DCA and Motoon point to. In the latter case, biases in the development of AI itself lead to increased suppression of female experiences online which better female representation in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) could be part of solving as KVINFO and Motoon highlights.

Another linked challenge is accessing digital tools in the first place, where YouthHubAfrica's earlier projects did not meet a satisfying gender balance. For the Tech for Democracy pilot project, they thus focused on getting women and youth engaged online to share learnings and knowledge with likeminded actors on fundamental rights: *"It was quite important that while we were doing this project, we also wanted to encourage women to have strong voices and to use their voice to be heard in different ways"*. Here, the implementing partners struggled with hiring women to facilitate their online learning platforms and engage in their work generally, e.g., due to cultural norms of women not necessarily engaging in (voluntary) work outside of the home.

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1) UN Secretary-General, 'Innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls', 2022.

2) OHCHR, 'UN experts urge States and companies to address online gender-based abuse but warn against censorship', 2017.

Whether implementing solutions or understanding the challenges for targeted groups, it is clear that there is much more work to be done in this area in order to safeguard human rights and paying particular attention to threats faced by already exposed individuals. Furthermore, much more needs to be done to ensure that no one is left behind in the digital revolution. An intersectional analysis can be a vital tool in addressing this. As IRCT suggests, looking at data and understanding how different social factors affect individuals is crucial: *"That itself tells you a lot of things because then you know yourself what comes with poverty in terms of health outcomes, educational outcomes and all these things"*.

2.3. ENSURING DIGITAL EQUITY AND CONNECTIVITY AS THE BASELINE

Individuals, especially those already at risk of being targeted, experience threats and attacks when already having access to digital devices and tools, while many others experience obstacles in accessing digital means in the first place. As technology expands and develops, this puts people without access in a disadvantage position and excludes them from access to information, policy processes and decision-making.

If we are to ensure that digital technology works for human rights and democracy, a fundamental task must therefore be to ensure that everyone has access to the technology that is becoming a larger part of societal and political developments. As the work within the Tech for Democracy initiative points to, this is not only important for ensuring that everyone has access to information and can influence the policies that impact their lives. It is also important to inform the decision-making that considers the needs of people on an equal basis, paying attention to the most marginalized as Connect Humanity points to *"Half of humanity is not online (...) We need to know what civil society knows right now in terms of what the impact of climate changes on the smallest communities around the world are, the most disenfranchised, the people who get hit the hardest, who are not online, who we care about in civil society, who cannot affectively raise their own voice in a digital era. We need to get them online, so we understand what they are going through so that we can make better policy decisions."*

Connectivity is therefore key, and actors working to promote human rights in a digital era should not forget about this as Connect Humanity underlines: *"Are we going to scale for the rich half of the world or are we going to scale for everybody? When we talk about democracy are we talking about democracy and tech for democracy, that's*

available to only half of the people or do we really mean for all of the people? If we really mean for all the people, then we have got to talk about digital equity, and we have to talk about what civil society's role is in ensuring that people connect on their terms, affordably, meaningfully, safely."

Connect Humanity, Tech Soup, CIVICUS, FORUS, WINGS, and NTEN have worked together on the Action Coalition focused on increasing knowledge support and a global community for digital equity. Through the Action Coalition, it has been documented that the communities they serve do not have the tools and infrastructure such as adequate devices and internet connectivity needed to take part in a digitalizing world.

The issue of connectivity was also evident in other projects and Action Coalitions. It was highlighted by DCA in Uganda that digital inclusion issues were a central part of promoting Tech for Democracy as the people most at risk and whom they want to support are offline, in particular women. In Nigeria, ActionAid Nigeria, YouthHubAfrica, and Whispers build on learnings from the Covid-19 pandemic offering trainings through WhatsApp as it requires very little bandwidth. They also provided small stipends for airtime to cover costs of data that people could not otherwise afford. For those that did not have access to the internet, they used radios: *"We call it low-tech for democracy in the sense that we were able to get to young people in local communities who had basic access to the internet, and there are some who don't even have access at all, they wouldn't be able to take part in the course, but we needed to spread the knowledge to them, so we used radio stations gathering a multi-stakeholder approach to it."*

A related element highlighted across pilot projects and Action Coalitions is the crucial role of civil society in the development of digital technology. In the Will for the Web Action Coalition, the inclusion of civil society *"to see themselves as part of the answers"* around digital technology is seen as important for avoiding misinformation and security risks. However, technology is a new area for many civil society actors which make many hesitant to engage in technology development processes. But based on the experience from ECNL's Action Coalition, it is not only about convincing policy makers and the tech industry that civil society should be included in AI development. If the topic is seen by civil society as only for the initiated and only for those who work specifically on the topic, it creates a barrier for participation of civil society in important technological developments that affects the lives of people. As Connect Humanity stresses: *"(...) most fundamentally the path to a rights based digital future runs through civil society. Period. Like the path to any other rights-based future runs through civil society."*

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2.4 UTILIZING DIGITAL TOOLS TO SHARE KNOWLEDGE AND COORDINATE FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

On local, national, regional, and global level, connectivity, and communication gaps between civil society actors pose a challenge for them to share information, knowledge, experiences, and learnings. While the pilot projects and Action Coalitions have addressed challenges of digital technology – and the access to digital technology – as the outlined examples illustrate, they have also had a solution-oriented approach, using the advantages of digital technology in their work. A cross-cutting element is the use of digital tools to share information, knowledge, learnings, and experiences among likeminded actors. By utilizing the advantage of digital tools for easy and fast information flows (for those who have access), the pilot projects and Action Coalition have been able to do capacity development activities, network building and documenting human rights violations for advocacy purposes.

> **„** *While the situation [for HRDs, red.] gets worse day by day, projects like this build resilience. When you start building networks then people have social networks they can use to support them"*

An example already mentioned is the pilot project implemented by ActionAid Denmark, ActionAid Nigeria, YouthHubAfrica, and Whispers in which they established training sessions on basic rights through WhatsApp for youth in Nigeria. This ended up providing a platform for the individuals to engage without the interference of the implementing organization: *"Interestingly, the engagement on WhatsApp was very intense sometimes in the middle of the night, young people are still buzzing and asking questions, and sometimes they were interacting amongst themselves. I also like the fact that we helped them to self-organize and see how they can do actions in their communities and submit projects."* Having these means of communication thereby offers the opportunity of organizing in a fast and dynamic way, making room for people to interact when suitable for them. As this shows, online platforms can provide a space for engaging that can lead to other actions.

Another example of the benefits of building networks online is the Action Coalition on 'National Human Rights Institutions as Digital Rights Watchdogs' led by the Danish Institute for Human Rights (DIHR). The Action Coalition has aimed at improving the capacity of National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) to fulfill their mandate as regards the intersection between tech and human rights. DIHR has done this through co-developing a reflection tool on the NHRI mandate areas in relation to digital rights. Here, lack of knowledge and capacity specifically on the role of NHRIs in relation to tech has been a challenge for the ability of the NHRIs to serve as watchdogs. As explained by DIHR: *"Now we have established an alliance and we see that our*

initial analysis was correct. The NHRIs lack knowledge and especially the possibility of networking and speaking with other NHRIs in similar contexts. Here, peer-learning is especially in demand [translated, red.]". Establishing a global network for 23 NHRIs not only improved their capacity, but also served as a network of support: *"It's the alliance that gives them the support to get started [on activities, red.] [translated, red.]".*

Establishing networks of support is also crucial when working with HRDs as the pilot project implemented by DCA Uganda and the National Coalition of HRDs Uganda shows. Apart from sharing information between HRDs, as well as with a national organization on e.g., the pitfalls of leaving digital footprints, the network also equipped actors to respond to these challenges: *"While the situation [for HRDs, red.] gets worse day by day, projects like this build resilience. When you start building networks then people have social networks they can use to support them".* Lastly, digital tools can also be used to document human rights violations (demanding a high security level). Beyond ensuring safe digital storage of medical records, IRCT's database served advocacy purposes through documentation of cases of torture: *"Because it's really, really valuable to have a picture of human rights abuses, and to have information that could help understand torture prevention, the consequences of torture and all these things".*

The cases from the pilot projects and Action Coalitions underlines that the use of digital tools can enhance the sustainability of their activities as the knowledge generated, the documentation stored, and the experiences shared essentially provides actors with tools to advocate for their rights. As civil society actors have entered the path of integrating digital tools into their work due to its advantages for human rights, it stresses the need to ensure that these digital tools ensure accessibility, usability, and security for all – protecting human rights rather than undermining them.

3. LESSONS LEARNED FROM CIVIL SOCIETY'S OVERALL ENGAGEMENT IN THE INITIATIVE

Lessons learned from the set-up, scope, funding, and methods of work of the initiative are important to understand to improve future work in the intersection between tech, democracy, and human rights. This section outlines lessons learned from civil society's experience of being part of Tech for Democracy, pointing towards future set-ups for similar multi-stakeholder initiatives with a strong civil society component, as well as for leveraging the work of the Tech for Democracy initiative in the existing set-up and beyond. This also includes Global Focus' lessons learned from coordinating the civil society network within the initiative. A comprehensive list of valuable lessons will not be presented here. The same goes for useful recommendations for future work. However, the scope of this learning report allows for key lessons learned cutting across both thematic and institutional reflections from civil society actors on the initiative. Besides pointing to the value of civil society's perspective in the multi-stakeholder initiative, the learnings point to the need of producing technical and context-specific research and knowledge, ensuring synergies between actors and projects within and across the initiative, ensuring clear communication and transparency, as well as matching ambitions with adequate funding.

3.1. DEVELOPING AND ENHANCING THEMATIC KNOWLEDGE

A key lesson, highlighted by almost all the civil society actors interviewed, was the lack of research within the field of tech, democracy, and human rights. This led to some of the pilot projects and Action Coalitions examining the quantity and quality of e.g., the challenges targeted groups meet, where there is still a long way to go to understand the full picture. For others, it led to gathering information to understand the knowledge gap for different actors on the theme and how to fill it. Developing and enhancing actors' thematic knowledge on tech and democracy is thus crucial to ensure the quality of operational activities, as well as to strengthen advocacy for civil society on the topic. On developing knowledge, in the case of the Will for the Web Action Coalition, the knowledge gap on digital connectivity concerned civil society itself as FORUS mentions: *"Most of civil society still doesn't realize that this is a problem. Most of global North civil society in particular"*. In other cases, the knowledge gap led to civil society facing difficulties when advocating within the field of tech and democracy as DCA Uganda points to: *"Tech is still not very easy to advocate for. Especially for human rights-based organizations. So many of them are kind of skeptical [when it comes to adoption of tech and utilization of data] because they don't know a lot about it"*.

However, this not only concerned civil society actors but also the political level as DIPD underlines: *"The technical knowledge on what kind of system this is [the digital system, red.] and how it works with algorithms and these things is concerningly low. Really concerningly low. So, when one talks about having the political level come in and regulate this system it requires a huge effort, one that is much bigger than what we and you have been able to do with this, in order to prepare them, because one does not know what is going on [translated, red.]"*. In addressing the challenges at stake, DIPD has identified the need for knowledge sharing on a global level: *"There is a big resonance all around. It is the same narratives coming from different places. This, I think, confirms the need for also having international experience and knowledge sharing within this field [translated, red.]"*. Speaking to this, Global Focus has sought to bring members of the Advisory Groups' knowledge, as well as outputs from pilot projects and Action Coalitions, into play at a wide range of events on national, regional, and international level. We have seen how our events e.g., at the Danish Peoples Meeting in 2021 on providing a technical platform for civil society's inclusive and meaningful participation at the UN as well as our event at RightsCon 2021 on accessibility and inclusivity of encrypted apps brought stakeholders together with great interest from participants.

The establishment of networks has proved to be particularly effective in improving the flow of information and enhancing the knowledge of civil society actors. As KVINFO points out, their partners have been able to network and learn through involvement in other Action Coalitions, which has challenged them to learn more about the multifaceted challenges working with tech and gender. And for Nyt Europa, everyone involved has increased their knowledge – from themselves to their partners across Europe. The same goes for International Media Support (IMS), who points to the fact that both themselves as an organization, Danish civil society, as well as the MFA *"has moved in a more progressive direction"* in terms of developing policy commitments on tech and democracy, e.g., through the Copenhagen Pledge, while working with the initiative. IMS has implemented a pilot project focused on reimagining our future digital infrastructures, i.e., platforms, apps, social media, search engines, internet cables, etc., to better serve democracy and human rights. This is done through a visionary report that maps out the building blocks for future digital infrastructures that serves the public interest in the Global South that respects human rights and limits negative externalities of current business models, such as disinformation. Furthermore, this has also led to IMS organizing a roundtable discussion of disinformation in

Ukraine in collaboration with the MFA. When the war started, IMS had already established contacts to tech companies and the MFA, making it possible to organize the virtual roundtable in one week.

3.2. ENSURING SYNERGIES AND LINKING ACTIVITIES ACROSS THE INITIATIVE

The importance of knowledge sharing and network building to create synergies and increase capacity among partners of the initiative was also highlighted. This both goes for creating links across actors of the initiative, as well as in relevant networks within the initiative such as for the civil society actors.

Many pointed to the successfulness of connecting partners in the early stages of the initiative. At these early stages, the MFA and Global Focus had a high communication and meeting frequency resulting in a confidential, two-way supporting, and close collaboration. However, it was also mentioned that this momentum was not kept. According to many civil society partners, declining resources for the initiative resulted in less facilitation and connecting the different projects and Action Coalitions by both the MFA and Global Focus. Here, the lack of touching base and gathering organizations in the same strategic direction was described by ECNL as a case where *"the right hand doesn't know what the left hand is doing and vice versa"*. Following this, FORUS also mentioned the importance of a support system facilitated by the MFA throughout all stages of the initiative which would have been appreciated: *"There isn't a sort of supportive ecosystem there. It seems as though there was a very concentrated focus by the Danish government in the early stages, but I'm not sure where we're at now (...) I suppose I would say maybe that we miss a little bit of the support and the activities that were sort of built into the process in the earlier stages"*.

The lost opportunity of cross fertilization between all actors involved in the initiative was highlighted as a key

learning. The need for greater linking between the global level challenges and issues in a Danish context was also highlighted in terms of this being a Danish-led initiative but not focusing on Denmark. Nyt Europa highlights that Denmark should fight for the same political struggles at home that it is demanding from governments and actors in the global South. At the same time, partners with more technical activities mentioned how they in some of the network meetings *"struggled to find the connection between the larger kind of macro politics and democracy topics"*, which might have led to less relevant cross-fertilization between activities.

Due to the global scale of the issues at stake, establishing an international network of civil society actors from more than 30 countries has been key for coming up with targeted, effective, and suitable responses to the challenges. Calling for international civil society advisors to the Tech for Democracy initiative have been highly valuable as it has widened the scope of the knowledge generated, included more diverse perspectives, and provided a more expanded list of solutions as illustrated by civil society's Action Programme. The lower level of coordination and activities by Global Focus in the later stages of the initiative (and the insecurity of the future of the initiative), has, however, affected motivation for some of the civil society actors involved. This stresses the need for an international network, and a focal point who is responsible for ensuring the connection between local and global struggles and advocacy agendas as well as for sustaining momentum. During the end of 2022, Global Focus experienced challenges in this area due to lack of funding, human resources, and political momentum (e.g., a Danish election for parliament and government negotiations).

The additional set-up of a Working Group of Danish CSOs without their partners has further been a frustration addressed during the initiative where it was requested to have just one shared space for everyone in the civil society network to learn from each other considering that it is a global agenda impacting everyone despite location. The

set-up of the Working Group of Danish CSOs is, however, also highlighted as beneficial for understanding Danish civil society's activities and is pointed out as a space to 'keep connected with the CSO landscape in Denmark'. From Global Focus' side, this is a key role as a platform for Danish CSOs.

3.3. CLEAR COMMUNICATION AND TRANSPARENCY

Another lesson identified is the necessity of communicating a clear direction for an initiative with many stakeholders involved from the inception of it, as well as the need for transparency and realistic information during the phase of implementation.

A civil society actor who is used to working with different donors highlights how being part of the initiative has been the closest and most transparent communication with a public institution experienced. This underlines how the importance of transparency and communication is vital for an initiative like Tech for Democracy, both working within a rather new thematic field and connecting multiple stakeholders in cross-cutting projects and coalitions at the same time.

In relation to this, DCA outlines how their experience of clear communication has been an asset for their engagement with the initiative: *"We are really impressed by the strength and strategic direction the MFA started off with, which has definitely provided us with a basis to put more energy into it [translated, red.]"*.
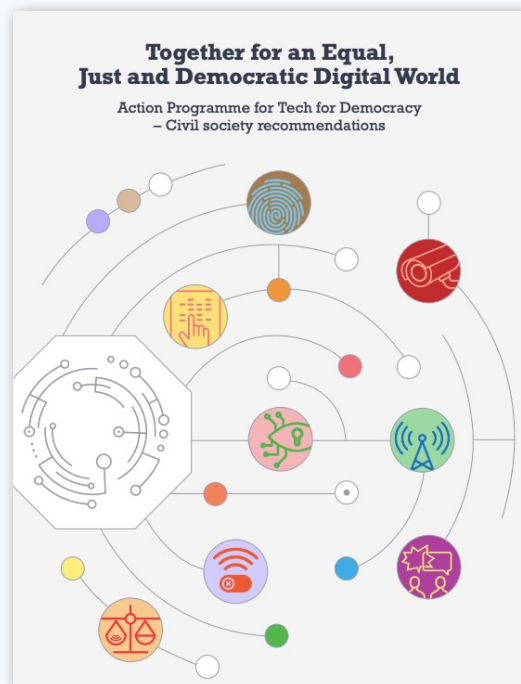
However, this was not the view by all partners, one pointing to the unclear framework and aim of the initiative which was seen as being developed while implemented. For some implementing partners, the mismatch between the ambitions communicated and the funding provided was especially challenging and has for some ended up blurring the effects of the initiative and the action of the year of action. The need for transparent and timely communication is echoed by ECNL: *"People ask us, and we say 'Well, we don't know what's happening because we don't know if the Action Coalition is continuing or stopping'"*. This point is echoed by Global Focus. Here, it proved challenging to keep the momentum of the initiative and facilitate joint discussions for civil society without holding adequate information about the future of the initiative - which in some cases led to

outstanding expectations. Nyt Europa also recognizes the limited information about the initiative: *"One had to work very fast on Tech for Democracy during summer 2021 with huge expectations about what would come which then ended up being changed [translated, red.]"*.

3.4. MATCHING AMBITIONS WITH FUNDING

Matching ambitions for the initiative and the adequate funding available for civil society to carry out the needed work has been a fundamental lesson derived from the Tech for Democracy initiative. Although funds have been allocated by the MFA for civil society coordination, joint activities and pilot projects, the extent of the issues at stake, the scope of the initiative and the scale of the network involved did not match the level of funding. At the same time, it is important to note that a wide range of civil society actors has been involved in the initiative without receiving funding from the Danish MFA. Their results and lessons from the initiative are not included here, and only cover civil society actors who have received funding for pilot projects or who have been leading Action Coalitions (with or without funding).

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This issue around funding was raised by the civil society actors involved in the initiative from the beginning, stressing that it was an interesting and good initiative but that it would require funding. This was especially the case for civil society actors with limited access to funding and who are already under pressure and do not have many resources to start working on new areas. It takes time and resources to engage into a new area of work, and for this to be sustainable. As DCA in Uganda highlights, the funds for the short-term project (6 months) have been good but in light of the challenges, there is a need for the work to be in the form of programs rather than projects, and it raises a question about what happens with the people receiving support when key interventions such as this come to an end. As pointed out by another pilot project lead, the small amount of funding for the pilot project has guided where they have put their efforts and have narrowed the scope of the work but there has been limits to what they could achieve with the small amount of funds.

One of the CSOs involved points out that the Danish MFA has been unrealistic in how many resources this initiative

required from civil society. Even for those organizations that have had other resources, these are bound by deliverables. Finding resources to participate in the many meetings has therefore also been challenging as no resources were allocated for this. The funding arrangements also affected Global Focus. Global Focus applied for additional funding to lead two Action Coalitions, plan Tech for Democracy-related events and advocacy, as well as continue coordination between civil society actors engaged in the initiative. As the request was denied, Global Focus had to re-organize resources internally, which led to an Action Coalition on Encrypted Apps being phased out, and the Action Coalition 'Tech Solutions to #UNmute Civil Society' being under-resourced. Furthermore, this was also reflected in Global Focus' declining resources to link civil society's work in the later stage of the initiative.

On a broader level, DCA in Uganda stresses the issue around decreasing funding for the tech and democracy area in general, pointing to one cause of this being the fact that governments are reluctant against donors supporting civil society actors within the governance realm. This is specifically worrying considering the need for civil society to be engaged in solutions to ensure they are based on peoples' needs and that digital technology respects human rights, and thus serves as a vital lesson learned moving forward.

## 3.5. MULTISTAKEHOLDER APPROACH FROM A CIVIL SOCIETY PERSPECTIVE

Throughout the Tech for Democracy initiative, collaboration between states, civil society, the tech industry, and multilateral institutions have been highlighted as key to achieve the overall goal of the initiative: to make technology work for – not against – democracy and human rights. From this, important lessons can be drawn.

One of the key take aways from the initiative is that working with the tech industry has required new ways of working for civil society. This has especially been tested in the established Action Coalitions. In the Action Coalition on Content Moderation for Women Human Rights Defenders led by DCA, they have engaged NGOs, legislators, and tech companies with the ambition to create a more inclusive joint dialogue about the issue and the need for improved content moderation and legislation. Here, it has been experienced as difficult to establish contact with the tech industry and creating the necessary trust for maximizing the opportunities of the Action Coalition. But after the contact was established, however, the tech companies engaged to a higher degree in the work. Here, it showed important, and sometimes challenging, to establish the right amount of trust for all partners to share their strengths as well as their challenges. In order to get there, in-person networking and using one's network and having the MFA assist in creating links was instrumental. For

civil society organizations already working with private companies, it proved easier to make the connection to the industry. As was the case with DCA, they have an existing entity working with private sector partnerships to secure e.g., due diligence.

As mentioned, in only one week, IMS succeeded in bringing a wide range of actors together for a roundtable on press coverage of the war in Ukraine and applauded the tech companies for engaging: *"It is not easy, but there are really interesting dynamics in the meeting – and it is the essence of Tech for Democracy [translated, red.]"*. This is also the experience of Global Focus, where a detailed technical discussion on providing a technical platform for civil society participation at the UN was enriched by the input from tech companies. Furthermore, the added value of bringing together a unique group of stakeholders was also noticeable. Although the tech industry is not the usual suspects for many civil society actors to partner up with, some pointed to the motivation of working with tech partners and combining digital knowledge with politics. Across all, the agreement that working on challenges within the field of tech, democracy, and human rights was much larger than actors singlehandedly could or should solve which is an important lesson learned about the multi-stakeholder ambition of the initiative. IMS, however, pointed to the need of being critical in the collaboration with tech companies as to when visions and values align and when they don't. Collaboration is therefore useful when there is a common ground or a shared purpose, such as fighting disinformation, but when visions and values clash, there is a need for finding good models for financing and intensifying alternative solutions that are not based on maximization of shareholder value. Along the same lines, the civil society actors engaged have pushed for real commitments to be made when signing the Copenhagen Pledge. Monitoring of these commitments is vital for assessing if the signatories to the pledge have worked towards achieving these commitments and therefore remains an important action point for all actors involved in the initiative.
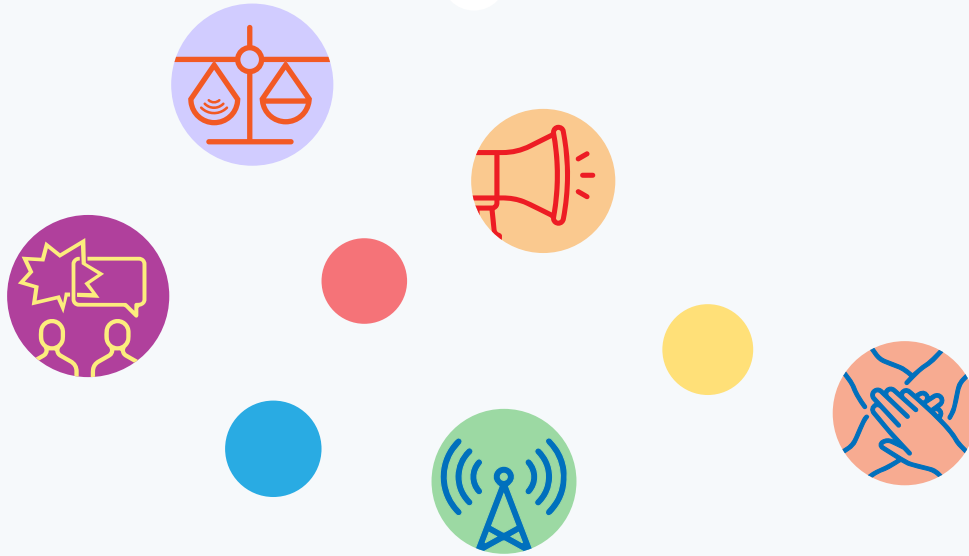
4. CIVIL SOCIETY PERSPECTIVES FOR THE FUTURE

From the learning report and the general collaboration in the civil society network around Tech for Democracy it is evident that the issues the initiative has been set out to address remains relevant after the end of the pilot projects and the year of action. Several of the civil society actors point out that their efforts within this area will continue, either linked to Tech for Democracy, or by seeking funding from elsewhere to continue the work, just as some of them already worked to address this issue before the initiative started. Some of the efforts pointed out to continue is the thematic work of addressing issues in the intersection between technology and human rights which is expected to inform partnerships and knowledge generation, continued collaboration among actors engaged in the issues, the necessity of creating links between civil society and policy makers, organizing events, contributing to policy processes, and preparing newly elected politicians on the issues at stake. This is partly taken up in the new Digital Democracy Initiative, launched by the MFA in March 2023. Over a four-year course, the initiative will focus on the protection and expansion of civic space through the improved use of digital technology by local civil society actors operating in restrictive contexts in the Global South as well as strengthened digital security and policies protecting digital rights. Global Focus is one of the partners in this initiative and aims to carry on learnings from the Tech for Democracy work in the new Digital Democracy Initiative.

❚❚ *There is a unique moment, but it will pass unless we get our acts together and start fighting for our rights."*

However, there is also a worry of losing the momentum for change that was created with the Tech for Democracy initiative, if the big possibility of scaling up the results that have been achieved through the initiative and the year of action is passed. As expressed by Connect Humanity:

"There is a unique moment, but it will pass unless we get our acts together and start fighting for our rights." With the long-term challenges at stake, we cannot tackle these in one *year of action but rather in years of action*. Real action and changes require continuous, sustainable, and ambitious efforts. Here, the Action Programme developed by civil society leads the way by suggesting concrete actions to be taken which needs to be backed up by commitment, funding, and collaboration.

The recommendations below build on this learning report and are thus based on the civil society experiences of implementing pilot projects and Action Coalitions and being part of the initiative, as well as Global Focus' experience of organizing the civil society network in the Tech for Democracy initiative. They are therefore not a full list of recommendations from civil society on tackling the challenges of promoting, protecting, and defending human rights and democracy in the digital era. These can be found in the Action Programme that still serves as an important reference document for the action needed. Rather, the recommendations below supplement the Action Programme by providing suggestions based on concrete civil society experiences with the Tech for Democracy initiative, focusing on efforts needed from relevant stakeholders.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE ENGAGEMENT IN THE INTERSECTION BETWEEN TECH, DEMOCRACY, AND HUMAN RIGHTS:

1. The Danish MFA should continue to focus on **creating synergies between actors from different sectors**, fostering cross-cutting collaboration and trust. This includes creating a space to operationalize the knowledge generated in the Action Coalitions, building on the learning event organized by the Danish MFA for Action Coalition leads.

2. Multilateral institutions should recognize the **added value of multistakeholder collaborations** and actively use the knowledge, data, and policy recommendations developed by the actors involved.

3. Tech companies should recognize the necessity of **trust-building when entering new partnerships** with civil society to ensure openness about strengths and weaknesses of different actors as well as commitment on the common goals.

4. Civil society should continue to **share experiences, knowledge, and strategies** to enhance civil society collaboration and coordination on digital mobilization and resilience.

5. Tech companies should **include civil society in the design of technology** and be open to engage civil society in human rights assessments of new technology.

6. States should be proactive and ambitious in future initiatives. This includes **applying a power analysis** of tech companies in terms of alignment between interests as well as alignment with human rights standards, democratic principles, and public interest.

7. The Danish MFA and civil society should **monitor the political commitments** of the Copenhagen Pledge.

8. States should work on a **global regulatory framework** for ensuring that technology protects human rights, using the EU's Digital Services Act as a steppingstone to hold tech companies to account.

9. Politicians should actively **seek out knowledge and networks to strengthen their capacity** to navigate in the area of tech, democracy and human rights, including engaging in legislative processes such as for the Digital Services Act.

10. Donors should **direct funding to civil society actors and activists**, especially in the Global South, for political, programmatic, and operational work on digital mobilization and resilience. This includes funding for engaging in multi-stakeholder initiatives and carry out activities related to the initiative.

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Danish development, environmental and
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Our aim is to strengthen and promote
a diverse civil society and their capacity
to promote a more just and sustainable world.