

# What are we doing to build an empowered citizenry?

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Danny Sriskandarajah and Francesc Badia i Dalmases

Young activists throughout Latin America are bored of institutional and ideological politics. They are trying to organize in ways that are outside the party structures. [Español](#) [Português](#)



Danny Sriskandarajah, Secretary General of the Civicus global civil society network. All rights reserved.

**Francesc: Thank you Danny for having us. So my first question – you would agree with me that we are nowadays witnessing what is being called a “democratic recession” around the world. In your opinion, which are the driving forces behind this recession?**

Danny Sriskandarajah: In design terms, I think that the democratic institutions that we have built are not fit for the 21st century. They're not fit to respond to a population that is increasingly thirsty for participation – especially a young generation who want instant action and direct communication. We built our democratic institutions as if holding an election every few years – with a remote connection to the leadership – is sufficient to be “democratic”. I think part of the issue is that we've got a sort of gap between what many people increasingly expect in terms of participatory democracy and formal institutions that might have felt relevant in the 1800s or 1900s but no longer do.

The second driver– which relates to civil society – is re-opening up of the debate on the settlement that every society needs to reach about what are acceptable forms of dissent and opposition, and what are the acceptable limits of what a government can do restrict this space. Things seem to be moving backwards for a variety of reasons –concerns about terrorism; political and economic forces colluding to silence dissent; and of course, states' desire to control the use of the Internet and mobile technologies. So I would argue that there's always got to be a settlement about the acceptable limits of power, but in recent years – because of the confluence of these factors – we've seen a regression in terms of the abuse of that power, and the people who are bearing the brunt of that are civil society activists who are involved in advocacy and campaigning, especially in environmental activism or anti-corruption activism.

**FB: This leads me to my second question. There is this kind of paradox: on the one hand you clearly see that civil society is stronger than ever, interconnected through campaigns and social media, but on the other hand, they feel increasingly weak due to the growing capacity of governments to crack down, not only in the streets but also through the Internet, surveillance, etc. So how do you see this paradox in terms of how civil society can deal with it?**

DS: In many ways. It's the best of times and the worst of times for civil society. It has never been easier for citizens to organize and mobilize. We can do it instantly, cheaply and globally. And yet, it's never been easier for states to spy on what we do, to interrupt or block how we organize. Even if you take something like resourcing for civil society – in many ways, things are pretty good. In the development sector, we've got large aid budgets and citizens are generally very generous when it comes to supporting civil society. The downside of that, however, is that parts of civil society find themselves in difficult, constrained environments because they can't find enough money - or because even having money, they can't do the things that they might otherwise want to do. So I do think that we live in a paradoxical period for civil society.

For me, part of the solution is going back to the roots of why civil society matters for democracy and for a good society. It's about active citizens – coming together voluntarily to address this or that problem in society, whether that's building communities, delivering services or holding someone to account. That's the essence of civil society, which in recent decades, has become professionalized and bureaucratized through civil society organizations. This has been really important to deliver services effectively and show accountability. But it's also left us vulnerable because states find it easier to delegitimize us, demonize us or professionally isolate us. It has left us vulnerable because the communities we claim to serve are not necessarily supportive. And it has left us vulnerable because new social movements and other informal formations of civil society question the role of organized civil society. Thus, we need to go back to the essence of what civil society is: promoting active involvement and engage citizens and communities.

**FB: This suggests me a short reflection. We have, on the one hand, the need of classical organizations, but on the other hand, we have now to take into account the individual aspects of participation through technology – and this leads to a sort of fragmentation. In other words, there are favorable conditions for traditional organizations to gather people together and grow, but it's sort of individualized because the empowerment of people through technology makes them increasingly focused on only one issue. Once the issue is tackled, or the action executed, the movement tends to vanish. To my opinion, there seems to be an increased weakening of the agenda setting capacity by traditional organizations. Now, it seems social movements are more action-oriented than before, but less agenda-oriented.**

**Anyhow, I wanted to ask you about Latin America. It has a vibrant civil society, which has been quite successful in many issues and fights. But there is a persistent problem of violence and cracking down of, for example, journalists in Mexico or environmentalist activists being killed in Honduras or elsewhere. So, how do you see the region nowadays?**

DS: We're really excited to be here in Colombia because it seems there is a resurgence of independent civil society, not just here but across the continent. And I see this partly because of this period of democratization of the official institutions coupled with (hopefully) a reduction of the deep violence that has affected many societies in the region. A new generation of people are mobilizing and organizing in different ways – outside political parties in a post-ideological way. There are also some examples of governments themselves trying in small ways to understand what participation means in the 21st century in Latin America. For example, last night I was in a dialogue with the Colombian vice interior minister who has a dialogue with civil society on how to promote participation. There aren't that many countries in the world that have a vice-minister who's interested in participation. So there are some really interesting things going on.

One of the challenges I think independent civil society in Latin America faces is how to move beyond ideological and political party structures. We're seeing it in Brazil as we speak - in terms of how civil society is dealing with the

impeachment process. We see it across the region. I think that a balance has to be struck between creating civil society formations that are outside party politics, but also encourage them to engage in politics. For me, an effective civil society has to be political, campaign on certain issues and push certain agendas. But ideally, not with too close a relationship with the former political institutions, including political parties. And I see that happening. The young activists I meet throughout Latin America are bored of institutional and ideological politics. They are trying to organize in ways that are outside the party structures.

**FB: Right. But there is also an issue that is influencing the political arena, particularly in Latin America: the media conglomerate and the monopoly of overall communication they enjoy. They clearly push for a certain political agenda while independent sources struggle to find a platform to effectively reach the people. How do you see this relationship between independent digital media outlets' struggle to spread more accurate information to citizens and mass media conglomerates pushing private agendas that are concentrated in a few hands?**

DS: I do worry about the consolidation of media ownership in many parts of the world. I also worry about the corporatization of the online media platforms that we've become so reliant on. For me, it's really worrying the tools that we use for citizen action like Twitter and Facebook, which are owned not just by corporate individuals but are also entirely funded by advertising. This is a very dangerous situation we're in. But I'm still optimistic because I think informed and engaged citizens will find it easier than ever before to find alternative viewpoints and different information. It was always a fallacy that governments can control information. I think those governments and business elites who think they can do it now are fooling themselves. But there is a responsibility on many of us - especially progressive civil society and independent journalists - to actively invest in independent sources of information and open platforms. We must also resist any incursions of these spaces - whether by corporate interest or state meddling.

One other thing that I'm very aware of at the moment is the cynical corporate buyout of information flows. You know, the sponsoring of YouTube videos behind the scenes by corporate interests - they peddle their products in the ads that you see between videos. They are designed in a way - with your interests and profile in mind - so that you consume more. We've seen the ability of the information age to curate information to personal preferences. This is taking us down a dangerous path.

**FB: One last question. This International Civil Society Week conference taking place in Bogotá, I'd like to ask which would be your recommendation to Latin American civil society organizations - one piece of advice that would encourage them to pursue their agendas.**

DS: The theme of this conference is "active citizens, accountable actions". For me, that is important because the ultimate purpose of what we - and the people in this conference - need is to empower active citizens in Latin America. That is the key. Informing and engaging active citizens are the keys of vibrant democracy, healthy civil society and accountable institutions. Those of us who are in professionalized civil society have a duty to think beyond our organizational interests and our strategic plans to think about what we are doing to build an empowered citizenry. That, to me, is particularly important given the political history of Latin America and where it's going. It's also important throughout the world, given the incursions of civic space and the attacks on the ability and freedoms of civil societies and citizens to organize.

***DemocraciaAbierta attended the International Civil Society Week 2016 in Bogotá (24-28 April), thanks to a Media Fellowship from CIVICUS. This piece belongs to a series of interviews to prominent civil society leaders who participated in the event.***