



The Crisis of Democracy and Civil Society: Challenges and Perspectives for the #ShiftThePower Movement

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This paper aims to analyze the current political and funding crisis facing civil society in the context of the far right's advance and mounting attacks on democracy.



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Starting Points

This paper aims to analyze the current political and funding crisis facing civil society in the context of the far right's advance and mounting attacks on democracy. It is the product of a long journey, shaped by my professional trajectory in the field of independent philanthropy – and by my academic background and years-long research on civil society, social movements, and their relationships with philanthropy.

Developed as an outcome of my participation as a #ShiftThePower Fellow, this work adopts a complexity approach – a philosophical and epistemological paradigm (associated with Edgar Morin, 2005) that conceives reality as an interconnected, non-linear, and uncertain system. Rather than focusing on isolated parts, this approach emphasizes understanding the relations and interactions among the components of a whole, acknowledging multiplicity, uncertainty, and emergent phenomena in dynamic systems. Non-linearity, one of Morin's guiding principles, recognizes that reality is chaotic and that outcomes do not follow simple cause-and-effect relations.

One of the core theses guiding this study is the central importance of civil society as a key actor in consolidating democracy. Although social organizations (civil society organizations – CSOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have faced reputational attacks, criminalization, and challenges to their political and financial sustainability in recent years, and especially in Brazil, they have shown historic resilience both in defending democracy and in seeking solutions to social emergencies, occupying a strategic place in responding to overlapping social and humanitarian crises.

We begin from the idea that, to understand democratic practice, it is essential to recognize the presence of a broad set of civil-society actors who represent diverse voices and political expressions. This recognition rests on the principle that, to be consolidated, democracy must be grounded in a set of values that are built and enacted through the everyday practices of the actors present in each society. This is what we seek to foreground in this study: the importance of civil society's dynamism within a democratic context, for without it there can be no formation of political cultures capable of strengthening the political-institutional arena. In our view, it is the presence of a multiple and diverse constellation of civil-society actors – movements, philanthropic organizations, funds, associations, NGOs – that safeguards democratic values. From this perspective, a society's democratic dynamics result not only from civic density and public-sphere strength, but also from the plurality of participatory forms that insert civil society into decision-making processes.

The conservative wave we are facing is certainly a reaction of power to the advance of rights agendas (socio-environmental, racial justice, gender and ethnicity) that have contested the dominant political system and the established social order. It is important to stress, as a starting point for this analysis, that the funding crisis affecting civil society does not have an economic origin and does not result from resource scarcity; it stems from deliberate political decisions designed to demobilize actors and social movements and to empty out strategic agendas for strengthening democracy. In this sense, attacking and criminalizing civil society is a key political

action within the broader advance of the far right, whose central strategy is to install regressive dynamics in the field of access to (hard-won) rights and to target political minorities.

According to Foucault (2000), wherever there is a relation of power, there is the possibility of resistance. Power and resistance confront one another through multiple and shifting tactics. According to Foucault, however, resistance comes first, insofar as power constitutes itself precisely by capturing the potency of transformation and movements. This is one of the lenses we bring to this study: an analysis of power dynamics and of civil society's role – both in acts of questioning and refusal, and in the construction of democracy, understood here not merely as a political regime but as a dynamic pursuit of equality in regard to accessing rights.

Power is, without a doubt, a central analytical axis in this work, and the #ShiftThePower movement is a fundamental reference for furthering this reflection. Understood as a mobilizing force, this movement promotes emerging ways of “deciding and acting” worldwide, guided by the understanding that civil society plays an essential role in building a more just society. Conceived as a force capable of fostering genuine change, the movement – born in Johannesburg in 2016 – has gained traction over time: a Manifesto was launched in 2019, and a second summit organized in Bogotá in 2023.

Broadly speaking, #ShiftThePower conceives community philanthropy as a new way to understand socially just and sustainable development. The essence of community philanthropy lies in the principle that development should be driven by local people rather than imposed from the outside, and that power should and can remain close to grassroots communities and territories, allowing people greater control over their own futures. Community philanthropy lies at the heart of the movement and, in advocating a transition away from a system “based on and organized around fund transfers,” proposes a social and political vision that “recognizes, respects, and values local resources and assets rather than ignoring, undermining, or replacing them.” As Jenny Hodgson and Eshban Kwesiga argue in “Light in Times of Darkness: Community Philanthropy Offers a Way Forward” (2025):

“[...] As we reflect on transformation, we must consider the future of civil society cannot be merely bankrolled from without. International organizations must follow where local organizations want to go [...] so that civil society can be co-owned, co-funded and less fragile.” (n.p.)

Today more than ever, expanding political and financial support for these agendas and local actors is essential to building new possibilities for the future. Faced with urgent circumstances, philanthropy – globally, regionally, and locally – must channel resources toward social and political movements, especially in the Global South, in order to help reverse ongoing trends of rights denial and democratic backsliding and to foster new political dynamics grounded in equality and the recognition of diversity.

As a #ShiftThePower Fellow (2025 cohort), I have sought throughout this work to analyze the connection between democracy and community philanthropy, understood here as a fundamental strategy for strengthening civil society – an agenda that becomes ever more urgent in light of the political and funding crisis we are facing.

Given that representative democracy and the post-war models of development and governance are entering a phase of exhaustion, strengthening civil society (communities and social movements) remains a strategic, foundational action for consolidating democracy and building a more equal, just, and inclusive society.

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1. The Crisis of Democracy and the Rise of the Far Right on the International Stage

When we speak about democracy, we usually associate it directly with a form of state organization or political regime based on the principles of freedom, of association and expression; protection of individual rights and of political minorities; free and periodic elections; peaceful handover of power; transparency and public accountability; institutional stability and balance among branches of power; and mechanisms of social oversight.

Analyzing the present landscape through the lens of the principles listed above, it is possible to affirm that democracy, understood as a political regime – that is, representative democracy grounded in the principles of liberalism – is undergoing a structural, planet-wide, crisis. This crisis is marked by a wave of authoritarianism and by the emergence of new forms of conflict that are not limited to wars between countries, but that mainly involve domestic groups with divergent political stances, in which polarization between opposing ways of thinking is one of its most recurrent manifestations.

According to various authors, the world is undergoing a “new Cold War”, driven by autocratic groups whose primary target is the very set of principles that sustain democratic systems. It is a “social war” (or anti-social) between ways of life, one that transcends borders and jeopardizes historically hard-won struggles and rights. Everything indicates that democracy – understood here both as a system of government and certain ways of life – is undergoing continuous processes of erosion, possibly leading to an unprecedented crisis. In the context of the advance of right-wing authoritarianism, the crisis – above all of representative democracy and of the international governance model based on multilateralism – has been exploited by these groups as an opportunity to build narratives that advocate for the urgency of installing a new global political order. Such narratives start from the premise that the current system is in its terminal phase and that, therefore, it is necessary to establish other socio-political dynamics.

Certainly, strong online presence and use of digital content have become hallmarks of the political right’s strategy – dynamics that enable these actors to operate at the margins of public regulation, evading imposed restrictions and acting in the shadows of democratic politics through the relentless dissemination of fake news and denialist narratives. It is important to stress, however, that the history of digital culture should not be understood solely as a strategy exclusive to autocratic groups. As Rodrigo Savazoni (2025) notes, since the web became popular in the early 1990s, different technologies have been used at different times.

As the author highlights:

“As early as 1994, the Zapatistas were pioneering technopolitics (...) In the late 1990s, the anti-globalization movement created Indymedia, and the same occurred in the World Social Forums. The Kathmandu uprising shows us that the history of free internet did not end at the evil dinner of Trump and his Silicon Valley henchmen last week (...) We cannot allow the far right to raise

the banner of freedom as it now seeks appropriate contestatory narratives as if cyber-activism had been their invention.” (n.p.)

Although the rise of the far right is not a new topic, what seems striking in recent years is the resurgence of this phenomenon in a context where many believed that democracy would be the key to attaining global stability and peace (Fukuyama, 2015). An important element in this analysis is that the political right’s discursive logic has not been oriented by a rejection of neoliberalism, but rather by identity agendas and the rights of political minorities – especially around race, gender, and sexual orientation. Unquestionably, these agendas represent significant and innovative advances that have given democracy a new vitality. Yet, at the same time, they have sparked profound questioning, as they have shaken the system by revealing the failures and limits of the rule of law – particularly its inability to ensure social well-being and to redress inequalities.

Despite the global rise of the far right, it is important to underscore the heterogeneity of this movement and the plurality of agendas involved, which are often even contradictory. On the one hand, the very debate over how to conceptualize this wave is crucial, since terms such as ultra-right, radical right, and far right – and their relationship to populism – must be clearly defined, as there are significant differences among these groups’ positions. Even so, it is undeniable that all of them share anti-democratic views and motivations, expressed both through attacks on the principles that sustain democracy and through distortions of its meanings. The notion of *freedom*, for instance, as appropriated today by the far right, is framed not in terms of freedom of expression but as an anti-censorship discourse that legitimizes indiscriminate attacks on difference.

In turn, the growing restriction of civic space, the criminalization of civil society and of resistance, as well as the rollback of fundamental freedoms and rights agendas through the implementation of restrictive legal frameworks, are among the trends that point to a reconfiguration of strategic agendas and actors. This topic has certainly fueled wide discussion, popularized, for example, by Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt’s 2018 best-seller “How Democracies Die”, in which the authors discuss several examples of how democratic regimes slid into authoritarianism.

The 2007 – 2008 financial crisis is generally regarded as a key turning point for understanding the current landscape and the growing prominence of anti-democratic groups whose point of departure was the defense of neoliberal agendas grounded in economic austerity and the reduction of the State’s role. It is also important to note that, in the context of this new crisis of capitalism, a wave of protests began to occupy the global political stage, contesting the system’s deep inequalities and concentration of wealth – trends that intensified in the following decades. Movements such as Occupy Wall Street in the United States, the *Indignados* in Spain, the Arab Spring (which emerged in 2011), and the 2013 protests in Brazil – just to name a few – were indeed strategic and significant, yet they were unable to alter the established dynamics of power.

Although this cycle of social protest between 2011 and 2013 – guided by a perspective of radical change – was emblematic within the broader wave of resistance, what followed was not the political strengthening of democracy but rather the opposite: it was the right (especially in its

more radical strands) that ended up capitalizing – albeit in a distorted way – on protest agendas centered on the effects of the crisis. With platforms such as anti-corruption, public security, reduction of public spending (a legacy of neoliberalism), and with constant attacks on the so-called *woke* agendas, especially waged in digital platforms, this often invisible right has managed to claim a more prominent place within the current political system, further radicalizing existing polarization.

Certainly, the impacts of this dynamic have deepened over recent decades, resulting in the establishment of a “culture war” sustained by post-truth, denialism, and attacks on civil society – expressed through the criminalization and delegitimization of NGOs, the restriction of civic spaces, and the weakening of rights agendas. This process has also reshaped thematic priorities and catalyzed the emergence of new political actors, challenging the foundational principles of democracy. Evidently, these dynamics found resonance in societies where democratic systems (representative democracy) were already in crisis, mostly due to the impacts of neoliberal agendas.

In the context of this culture war, the dynamics of globalization also came under attack and, with them, the entire multilateral system installed in the post-war period through the Bretton Woods agreements. In this scenario, the term “globalism” – pejorative in tone, as it conveys a sense of disruption and / or abnormality – has taken hold as a concept distinct from “globalization” and is framed as the “enemy” responsible for the world’s problems. The targets of these attacks are, without a doubt, international organizations (UN, WHO, and development agencies) but, above all, social movements and CSOs that have long fought to advance agendas defending diversity, climate action, gender and racial justice. For this reason, these organizations have been constantly targeted for criminalization.

What became evident from then on – culminating in Trump’s 2025 inauguration – was the emergence of a dysfunctional global order marked by military, territorial, economic, cultural, and technological dominance – criteria fundamentally at odds with a democratic order. As Marcos Nobre (2025) argues, “today, the logic of dispute is one of irreconcilable division between the field that self-identifies as progressive and the far right”, which he calls the “fearless right.” Nobre emphasizes that confronting this “unscrupulous right” requires not only acknowledging the limitations and deadlocks that have led democracy into an acute state of crisis, but, above all, overcoming stagnation, admitting past mistakes, and beginning to act toward building what is possible.

While confronting the “fearless right” is complex, it represents a crucial first step toward building a political project capable of effectively addressing the ongoing crisis and the urgent agendas linked to the environmental emergency and entrenched inequalities. Social and political movements certainly have – and will continue to have – a fundamental role in this process, since the possibility of a new cycle of social protest against the injustices of the so-called new world order may alter the current correlation of forces. Indeed, this is already taking place: demonstrations in Argentina defending public education and health, anti-fascist and anti-racist Pride parades, and protests against femicide; recent youth-led mobilizations in Nepal challenging the privileges of the political class; and Brazilian marches in defense of democracy and against amnesty for those responsible for the January 8 attacks – all stand as emblematic examples of a planet-wide resistance movement against established power.

In fact, a democratic path out of the ongoing erosion of democracy – anywhere in the world where processes of autocratization are underway – requires starting over from the bottom up, that is, from communities, territories, dissidences, and struggles. Without a doubt, this is the central perspective that guided the development of this work: to highlight community and decolonial philanthropies as strategic visions for imagining ways “out of the crisis” and for building possible futures.

2. The Crisis of International Funding and its Impacts on Civil Society

Donald Trump began his second term on January 20 2025, and just four days after his inauguration, he signed an executive order suspending funding and mandating an extensive review of all U.S. foreign assistance programmes to assess their alignment with so-called “American values.” This measure led to the shutdown of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) – the U.S. government’s primary international cooperation body and one of the most important in the world – and affected other multilateral bodies such as the WHO and UNFPA, which partially or fully halted or froze their operations. The crisis also triggered U.S. withdrawal from several international agreements/accords, including multilateral treaties such as the Paris Agreement (on climate change), among others. As we analyze below, the cuts to social and humanitarian aid placed civil society – especially in the Global South – in a critical situation that is without precedent, as many organizations were heavily dependent on funding from U.S. cooperation.

The suspension of U.S. international cooperation led to the closure of more than 60 USAID global offices and the discontinuation of thousands of humanitarian projects – with the cancellation of over 5,000 grants and contracts, in addition to mass layoffs – creating a vacuum in development aid across regions historically dependent on international funding, such as Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and Asia. According to CIVICUS (2025), the most affected areas include health, civic engagement, human rights, humanitarian aid, economic development, education, advocacy and governance, and gender equity – a pattern that clearly aligns with the far-right agendas discussed in the previous section.

It is important to note, however, that U.S. cooperation is not the only source in decline within this newly reshaped global funding landscape. Countries such as the Netherlands and Belgium – with long-standing records of support for the Global South, especially in human rights – are projected to reduce their contributions by 25% to 30%. The same trend is observed in the United Kingdom and Switzerland, which foresee retrenchments of around 33%. As we will see, this dynamic is already reverberating in the field of international philanthropy.

We do not yet know the precise impact of these measures on Brazil, Latin America, and the Global South, but funding for civil society will likely never be the same. Continued cuts have led to an overall reduction of nearly USD \$75 billion. In Latin America, countries such as Colombia (down USD \$705 million), Haiti (USD \$328 million), and Guatemala (USD \$251 million) are among the most affected, as they have been major recipients of international cooperation, particularly from USAID.

Global cuts to civil society funding will have immediate effects, abruptly halting projects and programmes and leading to the downsizing of technical teams and mass layoffs. In the medium term, heightened competition for increasingly scarce funds will compel civil society organizations to forcibly adapt their agendas and strategies. Over the long term, the outlook is far from encouraging: projections point to the widespread closure of local CSOs and NGOs –

especially community-based and small-to-medium organizations – further weakening the civic fabric, criminalizing critical voices, and concentrating power in governmental actors.

Building on this analysis, we draw on research by Fundación Avina and RACI (The Argentine Network for International Cooperation) involving 73 CSOs across 34 Latin American and Caribbean countries. Among the key findings: 78% of respondents expressed a pessimistic outlook on the current international cooperation landscape – 56% rated it as negative and 20% as very negative. Furthermore, 72% reported needing funding to sustain operations, and among these, two out of three had already made budget cuts. The outlook for the future is equally bleak: 45.2% foresee increasingly fragile operating conditions, and 11% anticipate possible closure or merger. The qualitative findings reveal a widespread perception that the environment for philanthropy and social investment will become more restrictive, with expectations of reduced resources, greater concentration of funding among a few – mainly large – organizations, and stricter legal and financial requirements for the civil society sector.

An article in Spain’s *El País* – “ONG, en Riesgo de Extinción Mundial” (2025)¹ – examines the adverse scenario faced by CSOs, marked not only by the funding crisis but also by the emergence of complex regulatory frameworks known as “anti-NGO laws.” Despite country-level variations, such legislation has emerged “in response to the purported need to protect national organizations from foreign interference and to ensure transparency”, while in practice restricting access to resources and curbing freedom of association and expression. These laws impose bureaucratic requirements and sanctions that smother organizations or render them “illegal.” According to the article, this regulatory movement began in Russia (2012) and this legal framework was quickly adopted by India, Egypt, and Hungary, then spread across Latin America, affecting El Salvador, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Paraguay, and Peru.

Evidently, these regulatory measures came hand-in-hand with narratives produced both within authoritarian governments and among radical right-wing groups, which accuse NGOs of being “corrupt, traitorous, even terrorist.” As we discuss later, such narratives permeate public opinion, undermining and delegitimizing NGOs’ work and long-standing trajectories. These attacks are particularly significant given that NGOs have historically played a central role in defending democracy and human rights, denouncing injustices, and exposing crimes committed by authoritarian regimes.

From the analysis presented, we can affirm that the funding crisis we are facing is not economic in nature – that is, it does not stem merely from productive or financial recession – but is rather the result of intentional political decisions aimed at demobilizing progressive actors and movements and dismantling strategic agendas for strengthening democracy. In this sense, the attack on and criminalization of civil society constitute central political strategies within the far right’s advance – strategies that, paradoxically, have long benefited from substantial financial support. Within this context, we can observe a well-structured funding ecosystem for far-right initiatives – such as the Heritage Foundation – that has consistently supported conservative agendas for decades, including those related to public security, opposition to “illegal”

¹ NGOs on the Brink of Global Extinction

immigration, restrictions on women's and LGBTQIA+ rights, and climate-change denialism, among others.

Furthermore, in their article "A Nova Cruzada Contra a Sociedade Civil" (2025)², published in *Le Monde Diplomatique Brasil*, Paula Raccanello Storto and Laís de Figueirêdo Lopes argue that the rhetoric of public security – when conflated with counter-terrorism – transforms legitimate actors of the democratic field into potential internal enemies. The article highlights the memorandum "Countering Domestic Terrorism and Organized Political Violence" (signed by President Donald Trump), which instructs U.S. federal agencies to "investigate and dismantle networks, entities, and organizations that incite political violence" and, if necessary, to "disrupt and eradicate them." By failing to clearly define its scope, the order effectively opens the door for CSOs – particularly community movements and international foundations – to be framed as suspects of domestic terrorism.

Evidently, cooperation cuts have hit CSOs hard, provoking what Carlos March (2025) calls an "ataxic paralysis." In increasingly complex scenarios, it is not enough for CSOs to rethink their action and positioning solely through a crisis-driven lens. For March, a crisis is indeed a traumatic situation that destabilizes a system, yet one that – given the right strategies – enables a return to baseline. It was through this crisis lens that Latin American civil society dealt with the withdrawal of cooperation in the early 2000s, with the 2008 global financial collapse, and with the 2020 pandemic, March argues. For the author,

"[...] many of the risks that civil society must face today no longer occur in times of crisis but in contexts of rupture, a scenario that has paralyzed social organizations due to their inability to adequately decipher the collapse context and how they were positioned to confront it." (p. 2)

Other surprising reactions in this scenario are denial and paralysis. Some sectors of civil society still struggle to recognize that this is not a conjunctural problem but a structural one. The absence of more systematic debate on the gravity of the crisis – and on the severe impacts it is likely to have on non-profits and philanthropy – is not only notable but alarming. We know how difficult it is to accept that the world we once knew is moving toward a terminal crisis, yet trying to rebuild a past grounded in erased patterns and obsolete dynamics is, without doubt, a losing battle.

Given this scenario, a few pressing questions arise: Why was civil society unable to foresee the crisis? And how are Global South civil society and philanthropy responding and positioning themselves?

Beyond denial and paralysis, what stands out is that the international funding cuts have managed to rally social organizations across the world to express broad condemnation. Looking deeper, however, if the crisis has destabilized structures, agendas, and dynamics, the problem lies not only in the cuts themselves but also in the state of civil society itself, which is part of this system.

² The New Crusade Against Civil Society

As a preliminary hypothesis, we argue that civil society is currently weakened and disarticulated, being unable to face a crisis of this magnitude. Philanthropy – particularly traditional philanthropy (or at least part of it) – and international cooperation agencies share responsibility for this fragility. Funding dynamics imposed by major donors have, albeit unintentionally, led to the depoliticization of CSOs. At the same time, these institutions have been unable to protect CSOs from criminalization, direct attacks, and widespread mistrust.

Indeed, it can be said that international funding has conditioned its support to / for CSOs on a set of strategies and operational models that impose external agendas – forcing organizations to align with donor portfolios rather than address their own demands. These agendas are coupled with technocratic management instruments imported from the corporate world and the neoliberal toolkit – logical frameworks, theories of change, resource-mobilization plans, strategic plans, and the endless production of technical reports – installing technocratic dynamics of so-called “institutional development.” Evidently, this growth-oriented model for CSOs – expanding teams, budgets, targets, and deliverables – has proven not only unsustainable but has also made them hostages of international funding and the perpetual chase for resources. As a result, the axis of action has shifted from the political and social sphere to the terrain of institutional and financial management.

In this sense, the institutional management model adopted by many CSOs – forced to play the perverse game of funding – has fostered fragile development dynamics. These are not only unsustainable but have also technocratized and depoliticized organizations, diverting their programmatic directions, positions, and strategies away from their missions and the broader processes of social transformation they seek to promote. The outcome is complex: in recent years, a large portion of CSOs have been more focused on mobilizing resources to sustain built-up structures and to meet international funders’ demands than on fulfilling the missions that originally inspired their creation. Perhaps the major misstep of organizations that managed to mobilize substantial resources was to assume that the international funding tailwind would last indefinitely, neglecting to prepare strategies to cushion the fall and minimize impacts once that support ceased.

The funding crisis has also raised doubts about the role of CSOs, prompting questions about their management capacities, particularly regarding financial stewardship and transparency. Paradoxically, questioning the very management capacity and fundraising efforts that organizations invested in to sustain their structures has handed the far right the ammunition it needed to launch new attacks on civil society.

At the same time, by imposing top-down agendas and operational modalities, international funding has failed to recognize the specific dynamics and cultures within different social contexts. Nor did it manage to understand and listen to local demands or to respect CSOs’ autonomy – leading to demobilization, the disarticulation of social fabrics, and, consequently, the hollowing out of struggle agendas.

Since this analysis concerns the funding landscape, it is evident that philanthropy occupies a central place, as it remains one of civil society’s main sources of resources. Contrary to initial expectations – that the philanthropic sector would step up to offset cuts in international cooperation – donations to Global South civil society have been declining significantly.

Following a domino effect, resources have become increasingly concentrated in a handful of beneficiaries, leaving out strategic actors truly capable of responding to the crisis. To finish painting the picture, the closure of progressive foundations and the reconfiguration of their portfolios – in areas such as democracy, gender, climate, and socio-environmental justice – illustrate the depth of the crisis that civil society is beginning to face.

Even though the scarcity of resources directed to the Global South has reached alarming levels today, this is hardly new. The Human Rights Funders Network report “The Trust Gap” (2022) reveals that only 12% of philanthropic resources for human rights originating in the Global North actually reach the Global South and East. Such practices have perpetuated the lack of access to resources in these regions, with visible negative consequences such as the shrinking of civic space, the weakening of CSOs' work to secure and expand rights, and the broader political repercussions that undermine democracies. Furthermore, most local philanthropy (especially in Latin America) does not allocate significant resources to civil society, socio-environmental justice, or rights-access agendas, further aggravating the funding landscape.

Still, the crisis is not only about shrinking funding flows. Philanthropic practices themselves – especially those rooted in traditional philanthropy – have contributed to the current scenario. By funding short-term, fragmented projects detached from genuine socio-political demands, and by excluding peripheral communities and grassroots organizations from access to resources, philanthropy has failed to recognize who the true strategic actors of social transformation are. In doing so, it has also fostered perverse dynamics of competition and inequality within civil society. As noted earlier, this colonizing philanthropic approach manifests in multiple forms.

According to the Alliance article “Is the Decolonization of Philanthropy Advancing?” (Silva & Hopstein, 2022), there is a stark disconnect between those who make funding decisions and those who receive donations. The authors highlight that:

“It is usually people living in countries and conditions far removed from those in which they are intervening who decide the agendas, appropriate budgets, and priorities for local movements, organizations, and communities. Generally speaking, these decision-makers neither represent nor reflect the communities they intend to support in terms of race, class, or gender.” (n.p.)

Another argument developed in the same article is that philanthropic coloniality is also extractivist, insofar as community leaders and local organizations are required to share their strategies, knowledge, and experiences, as well as to produce periodic reports. Meanwhile, there is often little transparency about who donors are, how much is donated, or what strategies and criteria are applied. Certainly, the perspective of colonial philanthropy dictates which local agendas matter, which movements deserve support, what solutions are deemed best, and how reporting should be done. Moreover, according to Silva and Hopstein:

“There is an incessant production of dualities and, consequently, of inequalities between funders and funded; between citizens of constitutional democratic states and those defending rights in developing countries or countries with

‘questionable democracies’; between those who know how to report results and those who ‘need better training.’” (n.p.)

Deepening the analysis, in “We Need to Let Go”, Barry Knight and Rebecca Handshaw (2025) assert that:

“Much of what passed for ‘decolonization’ was in fact superficial tinkering. Jobs were moved not power. People were showcased not supported. The sector adopted the language of transformation, but clung tightly to the purse strings, the risk registers, and the real decision-making levers.” (n.p.)

For the authors, a revolution in funding is needed:

“So that money is not simply channeled into the hands of middle-class professionals (...) the sector’s hierarchy, its emphasis on qualified professional staff, and its lack of attention to social injustices were powerful motivators behind the emergence of the #ShiftThePower movement.” (n.p.)

The movement has indeed had significant impacts in philanthropy and global civil society, not only transforming narratives and perspectives within the field but also raising awareness of the need to decolonize giving practices by placing greater value on community philanthropy and participatory approaches, thus enabling support for grassroots groups and collectives. As the authors note, for resources to be truly useful and transformative, philanthropy must relinquish power. Only then can the necessary funding revolution take place, one that entails positional shifts such as acknowledging failures and assuming responsibility. It is about relinquishing power dynamics and spaces, practicing letting go and seeing it as an opportunity and a source for hope rather than a loss. As bell hooks wrote in “Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope” (2003):

“For those of us who have had some degree of power, choosing to give up that power is not easy. It feels like a loss. Yet it is precisely in the moment of surrender that one can discover new possibilities, new ways of being.”

The question that follows is: What is philanthropy’s role in this scenario, and how should it reorient its actions amid crisis?

If we believe in philanthropy’s transformative potential, the field must critically examine its own trajectory – acknowledging its share of responsibility and reflecting on how its own choices brought us here. Retreat is not an option: philanthropy needs to act with urgency and purpose, funding flexibly, continuously, and with true commitment to strengthening civil society and democracy.

The analysis presented here allows us to affirm that the funding system is undergoing a structural crisis. The entire post-war governance architecture – from Bretton Woods and its cooperation agreements between the so-called “developed” and “developing” countries, now the Global North and Global South – must be urgently rethought. If we truly believe that socio-environmental justice, human rights, and democracy – intrinsically interconnected – are

priorities, then it is imperative to recenter civil society as a key actor in both the debate and the construction of new political models. We must overcome binary thinking, denialism, political polarization, and conservative / far-right agendas that threaten not only hard-won rights but also civil society's essential role in building a more just and democratic society.

3. The Trajectory and Impacts of the Funding Crisis on Brazilian Civil Society and the Role of Local Philanthropy

Brazilian Civil Society: From 1980s Protagonism to the Crisis of the 2000s

Civil society in Brazil, although originally shaped by traditions of charitable assistance, began to gain strength as a relevant political actor during the struggles against the military dictatorships. In this context, it played a fundamental role in resisting authoritarianism and, consequently, in articulating the country's democratization processes.

To speak of Brazilian civil society in the 1970s and 1980s is to refer to NGOs that played a strategic role in supporting popular social movements working toward redemocratization (Gohn, 1997). During this period, NGOs not only supported these movements but also created new spaces for civic participation, taking on a strategic role in the struggle to end the military regime and transition to democracy. These actors – both NGOs and social movements – helped reconstruct the very concept of civil society and innovated forms of social struggle, bringing political minorities into the public sphere as active and influential subjects.

In this sense, Brazilian civil society was central not only to redemocratization but also to the construction of a new ethical-political and cultural field that, through collective action and alternative spaces of citizenship, emphasized the importance of consolidating participatory mechanisms in decision-making processes.

The political effervescence of the 1980s, together with the active presence of NGOs and social movements, was decisive as the first major step toward transforming the State and establishing new rules of engagement between the “political” and “civil” spheres. The struggle then focused on installing more effective mechanisms for civil society oversight of public policy – both in its formulation and implementation. In this context, awareness grew of the need to democratize public management to ensure genuine societal participation in the design and monitoring of public policies.

As a result the dynamics driven by civil society, specific issues – such as gender, ethnicity and race, urban development, environment, democratic governance, and childhood/adolescence – gained prominence. Building on the accumulation of debates promoted by social movements and NGOs since the 1980s, these agendas gave rise to new dynamics that guided civil society's demands, creating arenas for dialogue and decision-making between the State and civil society, particularly around the recognition and protection of rights.

Despite decades of significant progress, Brazilian civil society entered the 21st century facing new challenges related not only to political and financial sustainability but also to reputational attacks on its work. This context led to the closure of a considerable number of non-profits that were unable to secure minimum operating conditions.

Given the “stability” achieved after years of democratic consolidation – with important political and social advances – international cooperation agencies and philanthropic foundations increasingly held the view that Brazilian society would be capable of sustaining its own financial needs endogenously. Whereas in the 1990s international funding accounted for roughly 80% of the resources managed by Brazilian CSOs, from the 2000s onward this share declined sharply as international cooperation and foundations began to prioritize other regions.

In retrospect, we believe that the withdrawal of international funding in the early 2000s was precipitate and irresponsible. The vacuum created by the withdrawal of international funding led to the closure of key reference institutions, the discontinuation of strategic programmes, and long-lasting impacts on Brazilian CSOs. In this context, local philanthropy – which had only begun to consolidate as a funding ecosystem at the end of the 20th century – proved unable, due to its still incipient trajectory, to respond to the crisis civil society faced amid growing scarcity.

Although private social investment (PSI) in Brazil has expanded significantly since the 1990s – especially through family and corporate philanthropy – and although it is today the sector that mobilizes the most private resources for public purposes, it currently mobilizes the largest share of private resources for public purposes, it is fair to say (as analyzed in the next section) that it has yet to establish solid and effective mechanisms for supporting CSOs and social movements with local resources. In this context, recognizing the emergence and growing relevance of independent philanthropy is essential, as it offers an effective alternative for funding civil society. Its capacity to back strategic causes, grasp local contexts, identify demands and priority agendas, and deliver agile responses—combined with strong territorial capillarity and reach—has represented, and continues to represent, an innovative strategy.

It is also important to note, for the purposes of this analysis, that reputational problems have been taking shape since 2006, with the installation of the Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry (PCI) into NGOs (in Portuguese, *CPI das ONGs*). The commission was created to investigate alleged misuse of public funds transferred to various organizations linked to the federal government during President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva’s second term. From the outset, this inquiry was criticized by experts as an attempt at broad criminalization of NGOs rather than a genuine effort to improve transparency in relations between the public sector, civil society, and its organizations. Many actors viewed the PCI as an effort to undermine and delegitimize NGOs work by associating them with corruption cases, thereby damaging their reputation and trajectory. The commission had severe repercussions for the work and role of CSOs. In public opinion – fueled by mainstream media – the perception took hold that NGOs were mere money-laundering fronts. This discourse fostered a climate of mistrust that inflicted long-lasting damage on both public confidence in CSOs and donors’ willingness to support them.

Seeking to improve transparency in NGO operations and in relations between the public sector and civil society, it must be recognized that, under President Dilma Rousseff, visible efforts were made to regulate NGO activity and its partnership with the State. The 2014 Civil Society Organizations Regulatory Framework (MROSC) established a new legal regime for partnerships, encouraging democratic public management and recognizing organizations as key allies in guaranteeing and advancing rights. Simplified reporting mechanisms, transparency in the use of public resources, and improved planning for project implementation were among the main

advances achieved through the MROSC. Assessments of its impacts vary: for some, it opened more transparent dialogue; for others, it led to significant distancing, especially because, with few exceptions, NGOs and social movements did not receive meaningful support.

In the current landscape – marked by regressive and conservative trends – the environment of criminalization facing civil society has intensified. The sector continues to be targeted by attacks that sow generic suspicions about its performance. Replaying the discredit seeded since 2005, in 2023 a new PCI was launched to investigate environmental NGOs in the Amazon, aiming to scrutinize both public funds transferred and those received from abroad. The investigation sought to delegitimize international funding by alleging that “the availability of external resources subverts these organizations’ commitment” and calls “national interests” into question.

As a result, we are witnessing a trend of shrinking civic space, especially in the field of rights defense. According to “Rethinking Civic Space in an Age of Intersectional Crises” (FICS, 2020), civic space has closed most sharply due to a wave of restrictive laws targeting NGOs, a phenomenon observed since 2010. Generally, these laws focus on regulating access to foreign funding. In many countries, as conservative and authoritarian regimes imposed restrictions on international philanthropic flows, segments of civil society believed that merely challenging such laws and practices would be enough to safeguard civic space. Contrary to these expectations, however, significant democratic backsliding has occurred since 2010, characterized by the rise of right-wing governments and alliances between State and religious institutions.

The question that arises for Brazil is: How is Brazilian civil society positioned to confront the current funding crisis?

While the exact impacts remain uncertain, a study by SITAWI estimates a funding gap exceeding USD \$200 million for CSOs. For the organizations participating in the study – which depend directly or indirectly on these resources – international cooperation represents 34% of their 2025 budgets. Smaller organizations are the most affected: over 50% of their annual budgets may be compromised, heightening the risk of closure, interrupting activities, and threatening the continuity of around 80% of their staff. Given the precarious conditions in which Brazilian CSOs have historically operated, the study reveals that only 23% were prepared for an abrupt funding cut, and nearly half (47%) have reserves for at most three months.

It is essential to emphasize, however, that the struggle for funding has long affected civil society, since many organizations – especially small and medium ones, both urban and rural – have survived with little to no financial resources. The PIPA Initiative’s study “Peripheries and Philanthropy” (2023) shows that among 607 organizations, 14.8% operate without any resources, 31% with less than BRL 3,000 per year, and 24.5% with budgets between BRL 5,000 and 25,000. Most have no paid staff (92.6%).

Returning to earlier analyses, it becomes evident that the institutional development model adopted by many CSOs – compelled to play the perverse funding game – has fostered unsustainable growth dynamics, leading to technocratization and depoliticization. The result is complex: in recent years, many CSOs – particularly large, long-standing organizations that once played key roles in democratization – have become more focused on fundraising to sustain the

structures created to meet international funders' demands than on the missions that originally animated them. In other words, many have drifted away from communities and territories, losing connection to the social fabric, and have ended up replicating business-management models that weakened their political action and erased one of the most significant features of their trajectories.

Undoubtedly, the funding crisis and the criminalization of civil society in Brazil have severely affected CSOs' political and financial sustainability. The outlook is even more concerning for community-based and grassroots organizations – particularly small and medium ones – and for those working in socio-environmental justice and human rights. It is a double challenge: CSOs must now confront both financial and reputational crises, given the attacks they have faced, including negative portrayals in mainstream media.

The Role of Philanthropy in Supporting Brazilian Civil Society

From the analysis conducted, the funding landscape for CSOs in Brazil is extremely challenging. Neither local philanthropy nor international foundations have broadly or democratically contributed to strengthening the sector.

Historically, although Brazilian philanthropy has a well-developed and diverse infrastructure, it has not been able to meet local civil society's funding needs. Even though corporate and family foundations invest significantly in the social field – BRL 4.8 billion in 2022, according to the GIFE Census – these resources are mostly allocated to their own programmes, with far less directed to supporting CSOs (around BRL 1.8 billion). Thus, “pass-through to third parties” – which had been showing a modest upward trend since 2016 – fell by BRL 1.1 billion compared to 2020, once again dropping below the amount invested in in-house initiatives (BRL 2.1 billion).

According to the GIFE Census (2023)³, the main thematic area remains education (71% of philanthropies), followed by productive inclusion/entrepreneurship/income generation (54%), and – among the top three – local, territorial, and community development (50%). There is a marked tendency to prioritize agendas aligned with market logics and/or perceived as lower risk. In contrast, areas such as rights defense, a culture of peace and democracy, and the institutional strengthening of CSOs and movements rank lower (38% and 36%, respectively). In terms of investment volume, the disparity is even more pronounced: in 2022, education received approximately BRL 2 billion, while rights, peace, and democracy received BRL 245 million, and institutional development of CSOs BRL 172 million.

³ Although the GIFE Census data were updated for the period 2024 – 2025, at the time of completing this paper (October 2025) the new data was not available, considering that the survey was launched in December 2026.

In territorial terms, the Census shows that environmental preservation areas (13%), *quilombola*⁴ communities (10%), Indigenous lands (7%), and *ribeirinho*⁵ (riverine) settlements (3%) remain at the bottom of PSI priorities – evidence of how distant much of national philanthropy remains from a political commitment to defending the rights of Indigenous and traditional peoples.

These data indicate that corporate and family philanthropy in Brazil does not prioritize financial support for civil society or for agendas focused on combating inequality and ensuring access to rights. These trends reveal a lack of trust by mainstream Brazilian philanthropy toward CSOs and, consequently, a failure to recognize their role in strengthening democracy.

As for international philanthropy, although it has never returned to pre-2000s levels, it remains active – mainly supporting medium and large organizations. When it funds civil-society initiatives, however, it often offers ready-made solutions, imposing agendas, strategies, and management models. This approach fails to recognize CSOs' autonomy to design their own responses and overlooks local demands and urgencies. Moreover, funding is conditioned on bureaucratic and managerial requirements that constrain organizations' action and raise access barriers for medium-sized and grassroots groups.

Because international philanthropy so often fails to reach community-based organizations – many led by historically-marginalized groups such as women, Indigenous peoples, *quilombola* communities, and LGBTQIA+ groups – the creation of community funds has become a strategy adopted by international foundations to support them. Yet this mechanism entails considerable risks: it requires complex management with movements and communities, many of which do not wish to act as fund managers, as this can depoliticize their struggles and generate internal conflict. Sustainability is also uncertain, as philanthropy often provides initial seed funding without long-term investment, endangering continuity. By imposing agendas and management modalities, international philanthropy fails to respect or acknowledge local dynamics and cultures, leading to demobilization, disarticulation, and the emptying of collective struggle agendas. This mode of operation should be understood as a control mechanism – a strategy to claim leadership by positioning philanthropy as the main agent of socio-environmental transformation. While financial resources are crucial, other elements are indispensable to transforming realities: local knowledge, multi-actor coordination, social mobilization, and collaborative arrangements in networks and alliances.

International philanthropy also often fails to recognize the existing local philanthropic infrastructure – such as independent funds that, for decades, have supported civil society and own a deep understanding of territorial dynamics and demands. Owing to their management capacity and agile reach, independent funds have proven effective and efficient in democratizing access to resources for local groups and movements.

⁴ *Quilombola* refers to Afro-Brazilian communities descended from enslaved Africans who resisted oppression and established autonomous settlements known as *quilombos*. These communities preserve distinct cultural, social, and territorial identities and are legally recognized in Brazil as traditional peoples with collective land rights.

⁵ *Ribeirinho* refers to traditional riverine populations living along the banks of rivers – especially in the Amazon region – whose livelihoods are closely tied to fishing, small-scale agriculture, and the sustainable use of aquatic and forest ecosystems.

Independent philanthropy thus represents not only an innovation within the local ecosystem but also a legitimate source of funding for community-based, territorial groups and collectives. For instance, by 2021, organizations in the Rede Comuá network had donated about BRL 470 million to CSOs and social movements and, between 2022 and 2023, nearly BRL 400 million to climate justice initiatives.

Having emerged more than two decades ago, independent thematic, community, and territorial funds have financed Brazilian civil-society initiatives working for rights recognition and access, socio-environmental justice, human rights, and community development. Rede Comuá's 2023 mapping provides revealing data: institutional strengthening of community-based organizations, movements, and informal collectives is a top priority for independent donors – 74% report funding this purpose. Moving beyond conventional project-based logic, institutional strengthening is understood as fundamental for ensuring the sustainability of civil-society action, particularly among those defending rights – and, therefore, democracy.

At the same time, the mapping shows that support is flexible, granting greater autonomy in decision-making, streamlining procedures, and broadening access to financial resources in a more democratized way. Priority agendas include gender, women's rights, and culture (48%); community development (42%); family and urban agriculture, agroecology, and agroforestry (39%); and Indigenous, *quilombola*, *ribeirinho*, and other traditional communities (35%). For most donors, support is provided through an explicitly intersectional approach. However, given the current scenario, we believe independent philanthropy will also feel the impacts of the funding crisis, compromising the flow and volume of donations transferred to CSOs and movements.

From this analysis of independent philanthropy in Brazil, it is possible to affirm that it aligns closely with community philanthropy practices. According to Rede Comuá's 2024 study – "Community Philanthropy in Brazil: Principles, Practices, and Experiences" – it is guided by principles such as:

"Recognition and appreciation of the supported organizations' assets: knowledge, skills, networks, people, experiences [...]; autonomy to design and define the project's direction and its management, in terms of both decision-making and resource management; investing, through donations (financial or otherwise), in the institutional strengthening of the supported organizations; prioritizing themes and audiences associated with historically minoritized groups, with a history of rights violations (black people, women, LGBTQIAPN+, indigenous and traditional peoples); adopting processes and mechanisms that facilitate broad access to financial resources and accountability by the supported organizations; and promoting diversity and the participation of representatives of the supported organizations in internal decision-making processes / instances within the Institute / Foundation (governance)." (p.9, 10 and 11)

In short, although Brazilian and international philanthropy play relevant roles within the broader funding ecosystem, their contribution remains limited given the complexity and magnitude of the challenges facing civil society. Independent and community philanthropy therefore emerge as

powerful alternatives – more democratic, flexible, and territorially grounded – yet they too are threatened by the global retrenchment of resources and the growing bureaucratization of giving. In light of this scenario, it becomes urgent to devise collective-strengthening strategies and new forms of solidarity and financing capable of ensuring civil society's continuity and political autonomy.

4. What Strategies and Actions Can Address the Crisis? What Are the Prospects for Civil Society's Future?

As analyzed throughout this work, it is evident that the crisis facing civil society is both structural and profound. In this scenario, a fundamental starting point lies in understanding the hostile environment in which it operates. Contextual readings and scenario analyses that identify social harms are essential to define strategies of action that go beyond mitigation and instead promote collective initiatives grounded in the defense of the commons.

One key to overcoming the crisis is to create collaborative spaces and articulations capable of fostering joint actions – initiatives that seek systemic change in social transformation processes, moving beyond outdated models, actors, and dynamics. Building alliances with strategic actors is therefore crucial. As Carlos March (2025) notes, the challenge is to place potency at the starting point, rather than lack – that is, to construct action from abundance, possibility, and shared strength. That is:

“To bring democracy into everyday life, design institutions that reduce power asymmetries, foster public-private partnerships that produce quality public goods, build collective spaces and narratives based on the struggle for rights, transform NGOs into factories of citizen power, promote adequate legal, fiscal, and labor structures for non-profits, and develop innovative formats.” (n.p.)

A scenario of structural crisis demands creative and bold solutions – both in the political sphere and within philanthropy and international cooperation. Creating new global articulation spaces – understood as permanent forums for dialogue that bring together global, regional, and local civil-society networks alongside international philanthropy – should be a strategic priority to design alternative funding models that foster CSO autonomy and collective impact. Initiatives such as *Possible Now* and *Stand With Civil Society* should be recognized as forms of collective resistance and policy advocacy, serving as calls to action. In this context, redefining narratives has become fundamental to countering attacks and repositioning civil society's role in public debate. In Latin America, several initiatives are also underway, such as *Red Colaborar* and *Reimagining the Future of Civil Society*, led by RACI, among others.

The global campaign *Stand With Civil Society*, promoted by Peace Direct, is a call for mobilization and for the creation of alternatives led by civil society itself – such as independent funds, mutual-aid and solidarity networks, community-philanthropy initiatives, regional funding mechanisms, and new forms of collaboration. Its goal is to engage these actors in collective actions capable of strengthening their resilience and reaffirming the strategic role of local civil society in defending democracy and rights. As the campaign underscores:

“We need to rethink the role of funders and intermediaries: not as gatekeepers but as facilitators of a fairer, co-created system, centered on those most affected

by global inequalities. Advance locally-led partnerships and collective financing mechanisms. See this moment also as an opportunity for radical transformation, strengthening participation in debates on the future of international cooperation and contributing to building new forms of financing.” (n.p.)

The strategic question raised in the campaign’s context is whether the global system will truly be capable of overcoming funder dependency and obsolete hierarchies, opening the way to a more equitable and sustainable structure – one guided by those on the front lines of challenges and solutions.

In turn, the RACI-led initiative *Reimagining the Future of Civil Society* originates in the Global South and seeks to promote collective action to confront the crisis currently affecting civil society. Its proposal is to create a reflective and articulating space that allows us to rethink the role of organizations as central actors in defending democracy and building fairer, more participatory futures. The initiative aims to mobilize and strengthen local and community networks that connect diverse actors; to construct a positive narrative that highlights civil society’s role in protecting rights and the common good; and to stimulate the creation of innovative and sustainable funding models capable of overcoming external dependency and reinforcing organizations’ autonomy as key agents of social transformation.

Amid the ongoing polycrisis, investing in community philanthropy constitutes a strategic path for strengthening democracy. Understood as “a force directed at developing talents, capacities, and trust, and as a way of transferring power closer to the grassroots”, community philanthropy values local knowledge and solutions, starting from the premise that communities and grassroots collectives are the protagonists in struggles for rights and social transformation.

Undoubtedly, this is a moment for philanthropy to assume a genuinely transformative role. Doing so will require engaging a multiplicity of actors – regardless of size, location, or field of action – in a collective effort that brings together philanthropic networks, consultants, support organizations, academic centers, and funders worldwide, with the goal of expanding reach and deepening impact.

Given the scale, complexity, and urgency of the crisis, however, the transformations philanthropy must undertake will not yield immediate results, as meaningful change is built over the medium and long-term. In its recent 2025 report, the Worldwide Initiatives for Grantmaker Support (WINGS) network outlines strategies for promoting effective transformation in how philanthropy thinks and acts. These strategies call for aligning discourse with practice, fostering coherence between values and actions, and co-constructing possible and sustainable futures. As WINGS emphasizes, “walking the talk” is a key message for the field, underscoring the need for consistency across all dimensions and fronts of philanthropic action.

Although this might appear contradictory at first glance, it marks a crucial point. It has become increasingly common in the philanthropic field to observe the diffusion of discourses – rather than grounded narratives – that advocate agendas such as decolonization, #ShiftThePower, and gender, race, and ethnicity, yet remain disconnected from the practices they claim to advance.

This gap between discourse and action risks emptying the political substance of these agendas, weakening civil society's role in defending rights and, consequently, in sustaining democracy.

Given the magnitude and urgency of the current crisis, incremental change – small, gradual improvements to existing systems – is no longer sufficient. Remaining bound to outdated dynamics and roles that reproduce power relations prevents us from advancing toward alternative futures. The challenge, therefore, is to build a living global movement capable of fostering transformation, redefining practices within both civil society and philanthropy, and improving all dimensions of life in pursuit of the common good.

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The GFCF works to strengthen, harness and demonstrate the value of community philanthropy as an essential element of community-led development and as a strategy for shifting power. Through small grants, technical support, peer exchange and evidence based learning, the GFCF helps to strengthen community philanthropy institutions around the world, so that they can fulfill their potential as vehicles for locally-led development, and as part of the larger global infrastructure for progressive social change.



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About the Author

Graciela Hopstein is a consultant, professor, and researcher from Brazil. She has spent her career focusing on socio-environmental and social justice issues, philanthropy, community development, and monitoring and evaluation. Graciela previously served as the Executive Director of Instituto Rio (2012 – 2016) and more recently as Executive Director of Rede Comuá (2017 – 2024). She is currently a board member of Iniciativa Pipa and FunBEA. She has written extensively on Brazilian public policies, social movements, democracy, and philanthropy. She was a 2024 / 2025 #ShiftThePower Fellow and is founder and member of Rede Rizomática (Rhizomatic Network).

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