

# **Webinar Report**

## **The Role of Civil Society in the Indo-Pacific Region**

**October 14, 2024**

This webinar, organised by CUTS International as part of the Indo-Pacific Civil Society Forum (IPCSF), addressed a wide array of topics, including the evolving concept of the Indo-Pacific, sustainable development, climate change, security, and the role of civil society organisations (CSOs) in the region.

### **Background and Context**

The Indo-Pacific region has emerged as a critical area in global geopolitics, with increasing cooperation among governments to address security, economic, and strategic challenges. Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) complement governmental efforts by fostering collaboration, advocating for marginalised voices, and facilitating social learning. As the region faces traditional and non-traditional security threats, CSOs are essential in bridging the gap between grassroots realities and high-level policy decisions. They also promote soft power diplomacy to prevent geopolitical rivalries from escalating into conflict.

CSOs are particularly important in addressing transboundary issues like climate change, maritime security, and sustainable trade, which are vital for the Indo-Pacific's future. With economic growth and infrastructure development increasing in the region, CSOs contribute to climate adaptation by promoting green energy solutions and sustainable financial models. Their involvement in maritime security ensures safe shipping routes and regional stability, while their advocacy for sustainable trade supports labour rights, MSMEs, and gender equity. In this context, CSOs must strengthen their networks and partnerships with governments and multilateral organisations to address the region's evolving challenges and opportunities.

### **Moderator**

**Dr Prudence Gordon**, Executive Director, Australian Chair for International Trade and Investment, and Distinguished Fellow, CUTS International Global Affairs

### **Panellists**

1. **Dr Seshadri Chari**, Centre For Indo-Pacific Studies, MAHE, Manipal
2. **Emmanuel Wa Kyendo**, Program Officer, International Trade and Development Programme, Institute of Economic Affairs, Kenya
3. **Dr. Sachin Tiwari**, Research Fellow, Kalinga Institute of Indo-Pacific Studies, New Delhi
4. **David Chiang**, Co-Head Asia Pacific, World Forum Offshore Wind EV
5. **Lukas Nagel**, PhD Candidate, School of Government International Relations, Griffith University

### **Key Takeaways**

The recent webinar brought together prominent experts and civil society leaders to discuss the evolving role of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in the Indo-Pacific region. With an emphasis on disaster management, climate change, technology, and youth engagement, the

discussions underscored the importance of a unified, collaborative approach among CSOs to address pressing challenges in the region. The speakers provided valuable insights into these issues, offering recommendations for strengthening the role of civil society across diverse sectors.

**Dr Prudence Gordon** highlighted the severe impact of climate-related disasters on smaller Pacific Island nations. She emphasised that disaster management is an area where CSOs can make substantial contributions, particularly in enhancing disaster resilience and response strategies. This issue is of utmost importance in the Indo-Pacific region, where climate change exacerbates the frequency and intensity of natural disasters. Dr Gordon called for increased collaboration between CSOs and governments to improve disaster preparedness and response mechanisms, focusing on vulnerable communities.

**Dr Seshadri Chari** provided a historical overview of the development of the Indo-Pacific concept, tracing its origins from the Asia-Pacific framework to its current form. He highlighted the importance of CSOs in bridging the gap between people, local governments, and international institutions, advocating for a collaborative approach. Dr Chari stressed the need for a unified Indo-Pacific Institutional Framework to support cooperation, especially in health and sustainable development. He reflected on the lessons learned during the pandemic, emphasising the importance of capacity building and the critical role CSOs play in addressing health-related challenges, which transcend political and geographical barriers.

**Emmanuel Wa Kyendo** brought attention to the need for a clear Indo-Pacific identity to rally civil society locally. He stressed the importance of recognising shared interests across the region while addressing economic disparities. Kyendo attributed slow regional growth to ineffective fiscal and monetary policies, advocating for better governance to improve economic outcomes. His insights pointed to the importance of fostering a sense of shared purpose among CSOs, which can drive more cohesive and effective regional cooperation.

**Dr Sachin Tiwari** focused on the role of civil society in adapting to and leveraging emerging technologies. He advocated for the use of open-source programmes, cost-effective educational tools like micro, and the application of AI and digital technologies to promote financial inclusion and provide legal assistance. Dr Tiwari acknowledged that while many CSOs have been hesitant to adopt new technologies, there is a growing shift towards embracing these tools. He emphasised the importance of workforce development in emerging technologies as a critical aspect of CSO capacity building.

**David Chiang** addressed the challenges and opportunities in the renewable energy sector, particularly offshore wind. He identified the need for better inter-governmental and inter-departmental communication, as well as more effective policy penetration to stakeholders and the general public. Chiang advocated for regional collaboration to avoid duplication of resources, urging CSOs to take an active role in promoting renewable energy initiatives. His call for improved coordination among governments and civil society highlights the importance of collective action in addressing the region's energy and environmental challenges.

**Lucas Nagel**, speaking on youth engagement, highlighted the increasing involvement of young people in shaping the political landscape of the Indo-Pacific. He cited the "milk tea alliance" as a powerful example of youth-led activism against authoritarianism in countries like Myanmar and Thailand. Nagel noted that young people are increasingly involved in both formal and informal political processes, advocating for future-oriented governance. He emphasised that youth engagement is crucial in addressing pressing issues such as climate

change, inequality, and racism and that CSOs should support and amplify the voices of young activists to create lasting change.

Several cross-cutting themes emerged from the discussions:

Health **was** recognised as a critical area for CSO involvement, especially in light of the recent global pandemic. Speakers underscored the importance of building capacity within the health sector to ensure better responses to future crises. Speakers emphasised the need to balance economic growth with environmental protection and social equity. CSOs were encouraged to focus on initiatives that promote both economic and environmental sustainability. Maritime Security **was** acknowledged as a crucial aspect of the Indo-Pacific framework, with opportunities for CSOs to contribute to early warning systems and disaster management in vulnerable coastal regions. The panel discussed how global events, such as conflicts in the Middle East and Europe, are impacting the work of CSOs in the Indo-Pacific. The role of civil society in mitigating these challenges and promoting peace and stability was emphasised.

The webinar also highlighted several challenges that CSOs face in the region including-securing funding for CSO activities remains a significant challenge, particularly in countries with restrictive regulations; a need for clear, jargon-free communication to engage stakeholders and the general public effectively was stressed as essential for the success of CSO initiatives; and that overcoming self-centred approaches to foster collaboration across the Indo-Pacific region remains a key obstacle for civil society.

Suggesting solutions, the panellists called for continued dialogue and collaboration among CSOs across the Indo-Pacific region. They identified several areas for future focus- Indian and Australian CSOs were encouraged to collaborate in supporting Pacific Island countries, particularly in improving disaster resilience and response. CSOs must embrace emerging technologies to enhance their impact and reach. Recognising and supporting young people's role in shaping the region's future was seen as essential for fostering a more inclusive and forward-looking Indo-Pacific. The capacity of CSOs to shape policy agendas and negotiate with the private sector was highlighted as a critical area for development.

In conclusion, the webinar underscored the pivotal role that civil society plays in addressing the complex challenges facing the Indo-Pacific region. With continued collaboration and a focus on capacity building, technology adoption, and youth engagement, CSOs are well-positioned to drive positive change in the region's future.