

May 2021 SWOT Scenarios

As CONCORD prepares its new four-year strategy, which will run from 2023-2026, we've been giving some thought as to how the world might look in 2026. And what that might mean for the role that the Confederation should play to push the world in the direction we want.

A certain number of trends have been playing out over the last couple of years. We shared two background documents on the trends: [The story of 2026 has not yet been written: we can write it; we can right it](#), a 6-page document which updates and complements the [external trends analysis](#) which was shared for the Mid-Term Review in 2019 and remains relevant today.

Some of the trends have therefore been visible for a number of years, while others became clearer or were heightened by the COVID-19 outbreak. In our SWOT workshops in April, members identified, for example: weak global governance; fragmentation between Member States' positions, which is then magnified in global fora and means the EU cannot speak with one voice (so the whole point of being an 'EU' is put into question); less (genuine) attention being paid to human rights, gender equality and the SDGs; greater challenges to democracy and rule of law (and therefore civil society space); national (and EU) interests trumping broader solidarity; the ever increasing role of multinational companies in politics, economics ... in governance in general; increasing cyber insecurity and use of social media for misinformation; shrinking civil society space.

On a more positive note, states are paying more attention to climate change and environmental degradation and acknowledge the links between human activity and its impacts, as well as putting in place some measures to address them. Policy-makers are also increasingly recognising the detrimental role that the rise in inequalities is having, while 'human development' has moved up the agenda owing to the COVID-19 pandemic. The EU is paying more attention to localising its programming, which might be accompanied by a greater shift of power to the local level.

Of course, to go from a position of observation of trends to one of creating scenarios is not easy. In the SWOT Workshop, we worked on three scenarios: worst case, most likely case (but which can be more or less optimistic, depending on how one combines the elements) and the best-case scenario. We have used those scenarios we envisioned together to propose the following three narratives:

Fragmentation and Disruption Abound

Major fragmentation has occurred between EU Member States, starting from old disagreements on migration and gender equality but now also overtly including the EU's climate policy and the 'just transition', and relations with neighbours such as Russia and Turkey. But this has spread to multilateral fora such as the UN, the G20 etc. where clear 'camps' have formed and very few new agreements are being put forward to deal with global challenges, so global governance is stymied. The competition between geopolitical rivals has extended to trade wars (eg. with China) and military posturing, while fragile states are more likely to fall into conflict, in part owing to the destabilising effect of numerous terrorist cells popping up, none of which have a particularly clear (and certainly not a common) agenda. There is notably greater disruption in many countries, including in the EU, with cyber security being a key concern and growing popular discontent (linked to ongoing reversals in gains in human development and the feeling of 'lack of control' over all spheres of life). This is accompanied by growing state control over their populations, but ironically not state power since this is increasingly in the hands of a few MNCs/TNCs (especially internet/platform giants). Since states relied on

technological innovations as the answer to global challenges, the role of the largest MNCs/TNCs has exploded - with states losing control over the tech giants. This is felt in every aspect of life, causing more unrest and even greater inequalities between people and countries. There is no easily usable, public space for civil society.

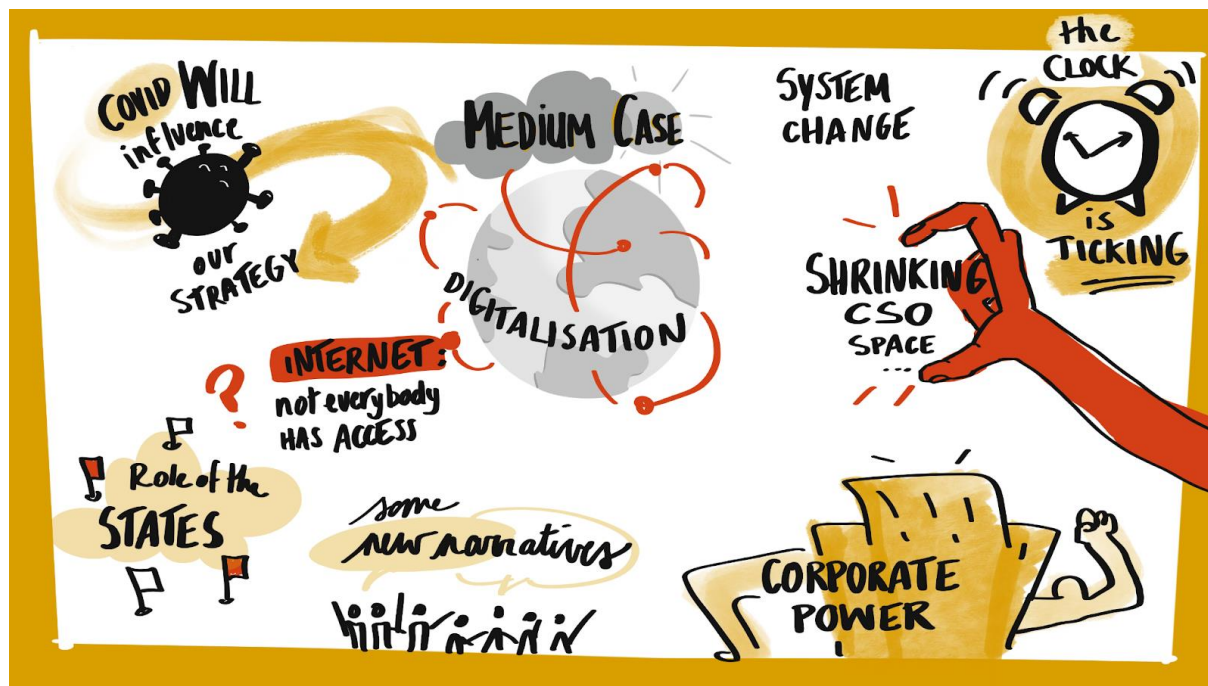


Realpolitik Wins the Day

After an uneasy period, the EU and China put aside their geopolitical differences, realising that they need to work together on key global challenges and are, in fact, 'natural' partners to align on the global stage and shape the new world order. Top of their common agenda is addressing climate change and encouraging smart, sustainable cities. A greater effort is made to transfer know-how and technology to poorer countries to aid the transition to low carbon and more circular economies. The EU puts aside its concerns regarding the state of human rights in China in the interest of the common agenda, as is its wont in all negotiations with partner countries these days. The objectives of 'development cooperation' have evolved even further towards meeting EU 'interests'. As a result of these trends, many parts of civil society are struggling to adapt as we maintain our calls for the respect of human rights and decent work conditions. While lip service is paid to civil society, pragmatism and realpolitik are winning the day in all spheres, resulting in large parts of civil society being, in reality, side-lined. The focus on realpolitik and the shift towards China also reflect the increasing frustration in the EU about how to tap into Africa's potential, as well as to reduce the instability on the continent which, despite years of effort, continues unabated.

Immediately after the COVID-19 pandemic, states continued to plough money into their economies to try to re-boost them. However, while most economies have just about pulled through, consumers in wealthy countries continue to prefer internet-based shopping and economic growth remains as elusive as ever. States were then faced with the impacts of considerable 'overspending' (or debt in the case of poorer countries) and have recently opted for austerity measures to get back on track. Efforts to 'build back better' ceased and the term has dropped out of use as it became clear that inequalities are continuing to rise. Owing to the discontent sown by austerity measures, governments maintain the greater control over people which had begun during the pandemic, by monitoring digital

exchanges between groups and individuals known to be pursuing systems change and gathering people's - especially activists' - geolocation. Government funding is primarily channelled to large corporations because they are seen as being the best way out of the economic crisis, as well as providing much-needed technological solutions to global challenges. The main focus is on large investments especially in infrastructure, energy and digitalisation. Thus, not only is civil society struggling from an intellectual and moral perspective but also from a financial one.



Harmony Restored to World Order

After the COVID-19 pandemic, states realised – or accepted – how interlinked and bound together every aspect of our lives and the planet is. While states have not entirely set aside their geopolitical rivalries, they have come together in multilateral fora to share ideas on how to ‘build back better’ and address global challenges, focusing particularly on reducing inequalities and strengthening both peoples’ and states’ resilience to crises and on how to decouple human activity from its impacts on the environment. All key stakeholders – states, the private sector, military etc - have acknowledged that the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement are the most useful frameworks on which to base common endeavours. International fora are nourished with ideas that come from many interested groups in the global population – giving a meaning to the term ‘global village’ – via the ever-increasing and ever-more-sophisticated means of communication. At a national level, human development is prioritised, while gender equality and ‘well-being for all’ have become part of everyday parlance. People are encouraged to support the general move towards a ‘just transition’ in any way they can and women are notable for their contributions. The role of sustainable and inclusive businesses has grown and even the largest multinationals are paying more attention to working conditions, equal pay and shorter supply chains. In this way, some states, especially in the EU, have moved beyond a singular focus on economic growth as the means to measure (economic) progress. Civil society is recognised as an important partner in change and played a major role in this transformation, having a seat at the table and space to influence key policy spheres.



