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Workshop on Strategies for Civil Society and Social Movements in a Transformed Global Order

10 June 2026

Co-hosted by the

Social Movements
and Civil Society
Research Group at
City St George's,
University of London

and the

International
Relations Specialist
Group of the Political
Studies Association

Workshop organizer
and report author:
Thomas Davies

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Overview

The workshop on **Strategies for Civil Society and Social Movements in a Transformed Global Order** took place at the Northampton Square campus of City St George's, University of London, on 10 June 2026.

The event constituted first practitioner workshop of the recently established International Relations Specialist Group of the Political Studies Association, and it was jointly organized with the Social Movements and Civil Society Research Group (SMCSRG) at City St George's, University of London, as one of SMCSRG's relaunch activities.

Funding for the workshop was provided by a grant from the Cluster Group fund of the Department of International Politics in the School of Policy and Global Affairs at City St George's, University of London.

Rationale

The aim of the workshop was to share insights among civil society and social movement practitioners and academic specialists in the field to address strategies in the increasingly challenging international context in which civil society and social movement groups operate in the third decade of the twenty first century.

The workshop addressed this topic with a focus on three principal themes:

- (i) unpacking the different challenges confronting social movements and NGOs, originating both from the changing international order and government policies, as well as changing international social and economic dynamics;
- (ii) sharing the strategies deployed to address these challenges among NGOs and social movements active across international borders; and
- (iii) reflecting on the contribution of diverse academic perspectives on the subject, and how these can be both applied and rethought in view of the discussion.

Participants

The workshop featured four invited speakers, comprising two academic specialists and two practitioners in the field:

- **Stasya Denisova**, Human Rights Education Lead for Europe and Central Asia at Amnesty International;
- **Dr Rob Macmillan**, Principal Research Fellow at the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, Sheffield Hallam University;
- **Oliver Robertson**, Head of Witness and Worship at Quakers in Britain; and
- **Professor Silke Roth**, Professor of Sociology at the University of Southampton.

Further in-person participants from the Social Movements and Civil Society Research Group at City St George's, University of London, included:

- **Dr Thomas Davies**, Reader in International Politics, who chaired proceedings and organized the event;
- **Dr Angela Ellis Paine**, Lecturer in Voluntary Sector Management at Bayes Business School;
- **Dr Leonie Fleischmann**, Senior Lecturer in International Politics and Human Rights and chair of the Social Movements and Civil Society Research Group; and
- **Dr Begum Zorlu**, Visiting Lecturer at City St George's, University of London.

Online participation from among the membership of the International Relations Specialist Group of the Political Studies Association was enabled through a dedicated Teams link.

Introduction – Thomas Davies

Dr Davies welcomed the participants and introduced the aims of the session as summarised in the rationale section of this report.

He emphasised the limitations in the contemporary context of some of the established academic approaches to the field, for instance:

- (i) The political process approach to the study of social movements has emphasised the importance of open political opportunity structures,¹ yet these appear to have diminished at both national and international levels in the twenty-first century, with growing restrictions in many countries on freedom of association, together with limitations on the right to protest and on international funding of associations.²
- (ii) In the study of international relations, the 'boomerang pattern' identified by Keck and Sikkink highlights the role of sympathetic external actors in facilitating the application of pressure on governments unresponsive to domestic social movement activity.³ However, these external political opportunities are now much reduced given the diminution in the number of democratic governments, and growing authoritarianism in states that have remained nominally democratic.⁴
- (iii) Studies of anti-authoritarian mobilizations from the 'people power' movements of the late 1980s through to the 'colour revolutions' of the early twenty-first century emphasised the role of non-violent discipline in successful outcomes.⁵ However, the subsequent 2011 uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa demonstrated several pathways challenging the expectations of this literature, with multiple examples of

¹ David S. Meyer, 'Protest and Political Opportunities', *Annual Review of Sociology* 30 (2004): 125-145.

² Suparna Chaudhry, 'The Assault on Civil Society: Explaining State Crackdown on NGOs', *International Organization* 76:3 (2002): 549-590.

³ Margaret E. Keck, and Kathryn Sikkink, 'Transnational Advocacy Networks in International and Regional Politics', *International Social Science Journal* 51:159 (1999): 89-101.

⁴ Larry Diamond, 'Democracy's Arc: From Resurgent to Imperiled', *Journal of Democracy* 33:1 (2022): 163-179.

⁵ With reference to a longer timespan, see Maria J. Stephan and Erica Chenoweth, 'Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict', *International Security* 33:1 (2008): 7-44.

successful violent repression of such mobilizations and in some instances descent into civil war.⁶

- (iv) The tidal wave of optimistic assessments of the contributions of social media to the activities of civil society and social movements of the early part of the twenty-first century⁷ has since been displaced by growing attention to the role of such media in the spread of disinformation and their utility in the service of autocrats and populists.⁸
- (v) Studies of the accountability and legitimacy of non-governmental organizations have analysed how these organizations have sought to navigate the tensions between upwards accountability to donors and downwards accountability to purported beneficiaries,⁹ but INGO accountability initiatives have been limited in the extent to which they have been able address broader challenges to their legitimacy from authoritarian and populist actors when oriented towards peer regulation.¹⁰

Whether reformist or revolutionary, a substantial proportion of social movement action has been oriented around achieving change by targeting states, intergovernmental bodies, or corporate actors. However, we perhaps need to pay greater attention to forms of action going beyond such orientations, as suggested for instance in the accumulating literature on the politics of prefiguration.¹¹ With state-oriented approaches seemingly increasingly imperilled, deeply rooted alternative practices that bypass rather than target established institutional structures may through mutual learning processes have the potential to facilitate transformative repercussions not only locally and regionally, but also ultimately in relation to the structures and processes of world order, as suggested in the work of pluriversal networks of Global South social movements such as the Global Tapestry of Alternatives.¹²

Stasya Denisova: Human Rights Education in the Context of Authoritarianism in Eurasia

Ms Denisova considered the context of the restrictions on civil society in post-Soviet Eurasia and the work of human rights educators in the region. She commenced by highlighting the potentially existential threat posed by efforts to dismiss human rights as a 'Western' concept, allegedly alien to local cultures, notably in Russia, Belarus and other regions of the post-Soviet space. She also highlighted the growing efforts to demonise civil society groups as foreign agents of external powers in the region, undermining some of the foundations of civil society in the post-Cold War order. Legislation targeting 'foreign agents' has impacted not only civil society organizations, but many others too including bloggers and teachers, and has been very successful in limiting civil society activities, with even an award or a fee from an external organization potentially being treated as a violation. She argued that given the Soviet-era legacies, civil society in the region had depended in large part on external support, and in the absence of such support the capacity

⁶ Thomas Davies, 'The Failure of Strategic Nonviolent Action in Bahrain, Egypt, Libya and Syria: "Political Ju-Jitsu" in Reverse', *Global Change, Peace and Security* 26:3 (2014): 299-313.

⁷ See, for instance, Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015).

⁸ Jennifer Earl, Thomas V. Maher, and Jennifer Pan, 'The Digital Repression of Social Movements, Protest, and Activism: A Synthetic Review', *Science Advances* 8:10 (2022): eabl8198.

⁹ John N. Walsh, Elaine Berkery, and John Lannon, 'Managing Upward and Downward Accountability Through Strategic Ambidexterity in an INGO Setting', *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* (2025), doi:10.1177/089976402513960.

¹⁰ On peer-orientation in respect of INGO accountability initiatives see Angela M. Crack, 'The Regulation of International NGOs: Assessing the Effectiveness of the INGO Accountability Charter', *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 29:2 (2018): 419-429.

¹¹ Lara Monticelli, *The Future Is Now: An Introduction to Prefigurative Politics* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2024).

¹² Thomas Davies, 'World Order Transformation from the Grassroots: Global South Social Movements and the Transcendence of Established Approaches to International Change', *International Political Sociology* 18:1 (2024): olad023.

of non-state actors to hold executive power accountable has been limited, including in respect of Russian aggression against Ukraine. However, she noted considerable variations in civil society responses to recent examples of foreign agents legislation, with considerable protest in Georgia, and relative acquiescence in Kyrgyzstan.

Ms Denisova proceeded to outline how human rights educators have sought to address this challenging context. She highlighted the importance of *localization* in human rights education courses – emphasising how what may be labelled ‘human rights’ may be interpreted to be locally rooted rather than an alien phenomenon, potentially evident for instance in long-standing proverbs. The use of historical examples from the local context has been significant, with historical cases of the speaking of truth to power being apparent across diverse regions: Ms Denisova highlighted for instance historical examples of Kyrgyz resistance to the Russian empire. Also important to human rights education work has been highlighting how violations of human rights have been evident in contexts traditionally associated with the origins of the term, such as in the United States and France, highlighting how challenging human rights abuses is a widespread concern rather than exclusively something the ‘West’ encourages in other regions. A further technique has been to consider local constitutional provisions for ‘justice’, ‘dignity’, ‘equality’ and other terminology resonant with human rights discourses.

In the subsequent discussion Dr Fleischmann considered the critiques of human rights in academic debates. The use of human rights discourses in the justification of armed interventions has helped legitimate efforts to limit civil society activities, notably through restrictions on foreign funding.

Oliver Robertson: Shrinking Civil Society Space and the Work of Quakers in Britain

Mr Robertson’s contribution turned attention to the challenges confronted by civil society actors in Great Britain and surrounding international organizations in Geneva, as well as considering the work of Quakers in Britain. He delineated the general diminution in civil society space, including in Great Britain, the United States, and in relation to international organizations, highlighting the downgrading of most Western European countries in the latest CIVICUS report, where Great Britain was lowest ranked in the region. He noted the lack of widespread shock at this situation. Provisions in 2022 Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act, the 2023 Public Order Act and the 2026 Crime and Policing Act have greatly restricted protest opportunities in the United Kingdom, and Mr Robertson noted the contrast between the permissibility of noise for commercial purposes and the constraints on noise from protest.

Besides restrictions on protest, Mr Robertson delineated financial aspects. He noted the repercussions of growing inequalities, reflected also in respect of the sources of charitable funding an increasing proportion of which is now from the wealthiest. At the same time, governmental humanitarian funding has been cut widely, including in the case of the USA, Great Britain and Germany. This has had considerable repercussions for staffing among international organizations in Geneva, with some organizations seeing their budgets cut in half. At the same time, the geopolitical context has seen wider repercussions such as prohibition of scientists in countries at war from engaging in intellectual cooperation.

Mr Robertson identified three features underlying these challenges: (i) a shifting boundary between what’s considered acceptable and unacceptable, reflected for instance in the new UK policing powers that now prohibit forms of protest activity that inconvenience people rather than harm them; (ii) reduction in the accountability of national authorities, while at the same time the legitimacy of technical experts and international organizations has been increasingly questioned; and (iii) growing challenges to the notion that some values such as human dignity are shared by

all, which previously could be more readily assumed to be widely accepted and not in need of defence.

On the other hand, Mr Robertson noted that past experience highlights that civil society groups have before encountered challenging periods where those elements able to persist have held steady until circumstances improve. Some repressive legislative proposals such as “extreme criminal protest group” designation in the UK failed to be taken forward, while some budgetary shortages among international organizations in Geneva have been addressed with adjustment funds from local government and private foundations. He also highlighted how small scale digitally mediated activities have in some cases had large scale repercussions, as in the Fridays for the Future movement.

Mr Robertson noted that as a faith group, Quakers have in some instances more freedom to speak publicly about values since it is expected of religious bodies, reflecting opportunities for free expression that may not be comparably open to wider civil society. Mr Robertson also noted the role of Quaker meeting houses as safe havens for refugees and civil society actors, although the limits to this were evident in the repeated police raids of the meeting house in Westminster in 2025-6.

Silke Roth: Challenges, Strategies, and Diverse Academic Perspectives

Professor Roth provided a wide-ranging presentation on the challenges and strategies of civil society actors together with reflections based on her academic expertise. She commenced by unpacking aspects of the ‘polycrisis’ encompassing climate change, war and conflict, far right politics, and poverty and inequality. She noted the repercussions of the rise of artificial intelligence including its environmental, social and political impacts, as well as the limitations of intergovernmental organizations as political opportunity structures for social justice movements, given for instance EHRC attacks on trans rights and EU border control policies. She also noted that the context has become more open for some forms of civil society activity, notably in respect of reactionary, antagonist, and right-wing movements. Professor Roth highlighted that the challenges depend significantly on positionality, and this varies considerably for instance in respect of feminism and trans rights issues, anti-Semitism and pro-Palestinian activism, and considerations of artificial intelligence ‘for good’.

With respect to civil society strategies, Professor Roth started by referring to various efforts towards cooperation, including *trans-movement coalitions* among diverse civil society actors, considering intersectional mobilization encompassing recruitment, representation, agenda, and practices,¹³ and noting the work on post-imperial solidarity of Regilme.¹⁴ Like Ms Denisova, she considered the role of localization, and emphasised the importance of *mutual listening*. She also noted that multiple techniques may be adopted simultaneously encompassing protest, advocacy, and service provision¹⁵ including mutual aid.¹⁶ She considered aspects of subversive humanitarianism,¹⁷ and how for instance educational activity may be both a service and a means of facilitating resistance. She further noted the role of positionality, highlighting the contrast between citizens’ and refugee opportunities for protest. She also highlighted dynamics of backfire,

¹³ Silke Roth, ‘Intersectionality and coalitions in social movement research – a survey and outlook’, *Sociology Compass* 15:7 (2021): doi:10.1111/soc4.12885.

¹⁴ Salvador S. Regilme, ‘Post-Humanitarian Militarism and the End of Development: Global Inequality, Security, and the Ethics of Post-Imperial Solidarity’, *Sociology Lens* (2026): doi:10.1111/johs.70060.

¹⁵ Silke Roth and Clare Saunders, *Organising for Change. Social Change Makers and Social Change Organisations* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2024).

¹⁶ Robin Skyer, Silke Roth, and Elizabeth Reed, ‘Mutual Aid as Prefigurative Politics—Beyond Anarchism’, *Sociology Compass* 19:2 (2025): doi:10.1111/soc4.70037.

¹⁷ Robin Vandevoordt, ‘Subversive humanitarianism: Rethinking refugee solidarity through grass-roots initiatives’, *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 38:3 (2019): 245-265.

citing the case of Standing Together that forged links among Israelis and Palestinians but was critiqued by some for accepting Israeli government funding. She stressed that there's always a back and forth between movements and counter-movements.

With respect to academic contributions, Professor Roth criticised siloing, and emphasised the multidisciplinary nature of her work bridging for instance NGO studies and social movement analysis. She noted in particular her work with Clare Saunders on social change organizations and social change makers that attempts to introduce broad categories bringing together scholarship from different disciplines including politics, sociology, humanitarian and development studies, gender studies, environmental studies, community studies, urban studies, human geography, and third sector studies.¹⁸ She further emphasised the importance of comparative perspectives embracing in particular contexts beyond Western Europe, and the need to overcome linguistic barriers.

In the subsequent discussion, Mr Robertson considered further the roles of multiple simultaneous strategies, noting the combined work of 'prophets' who speak truth to power and 'reconcilers' who bring people together, and the combination of Barbara Deming's 'two hands of nonviolence' encompassing both the hand stopping violence and the hand reaching out to bring people together.¹⁹ Ms Denisova cited the role of 'debate clubs' supported by the Open Society Foundations in stimulating polarization, and she emphasised Amnesty International's work in turning attention instead to *dialogue*. The problem of polarization and the role of efforts towards dialogue were further considered in remarks by Dr Zorlu, who highlighted the problem of siloing in the case of Turkish civil society mobilization, where groups mainly interact with like-minded organizations and have little engagement with those holding different political views. The further problem of movement fragmentation was mentioned by Dr Fleishmann with reference to her work on the Israeli peace movement, and she highlighted the difficulty of facilitating dialogue among actors with power asymmetries.

Rob Macmillan: Civil Society in the Omnicrisis - Hope, Despair and Doubt

Dr Macmillan turned attention from the 'polycrisis' to what he termed the 'omnicrisis'. However, his remarks commenced with a reference to Rebecca Solnit's claim that 'to hope is to give yourself to the future – and that commitment to the future is what makes the present inhabitable'.²⁰ Citing also the work of Colin Crouch, Dr Macmillan noted civil society's ongoing role as a sphere of values helping in awareness-raising, amplification, and holding authorities to account.²¹

However, he subsequently quoted the CIVICUS report *People Power under Attack 2025*, highlighting a chart in which civil society space is alleged by 2025 have become closed for 30.7% of the world's population, repressed for 42.3%, obstructed for 19.9%, narrowed for 3.8%, and open for just 3.4%.²² He noted concerns about the development of the 'nonprofit industrial complex' and civil society as a class project upholding the status quo, but also contrasting views of civil society's counter-hegemonic potential.

Dr Macmillan subsequently disaggregated seven areas of prospective reform of civil society, encompassing: (i) democracy and participation; (ii) the quality of governance and leadership; (iii) financial sustainability; (iv) the density and quality of network relationships; (v) outcomes and impact; (vi) campaigning, including independence, voice and advocacy; and (vii) equality, diversity

¹⁸ Roth and Saunders, *Organising for Change*.

¹⁹ Barbara Deming, *Revolution & Equilibrium* (New York: Grossman, 1971).

²⁰ Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2004), p. 5.

²¹ Colin Crouch, *The Strange Non-Death of Neo-Liberalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011).

²² CIVICUS, 'Global Summary: Civic Space Dynamics', December 2005, online at: https://monitor.civicus.org/globalfindings_2025/innumbers/, accessed 1 July 2026.

and inclusion. He concluded with a reference to the importance of perspective, and the need not to miss the significance of the '*activism of everyday life*' when considering the wide scope of the 'omnicrisis'.

In the subsequent discussion, Dr Fleischmann highlighted the need to disaggregate the various components of the 'omnicrisis' when identifying strategies to address them. Mr Robertson further noted that the most helpful advice tended to be very specific in nature, although this can be rare. Mr Robertson and Dr Ellis Paine both considered the potential of performance indicators and their adjustment. Ms Denisova highlighted that in Amnesty International's experience the resonance of hope-oriented discourses varied greatly by context, with hope sometimes viewed as a last resort and potentially taking away agency.



Figure 1: Workshop discussion following Rob Macmillan's presentation

Concluding Discussion

Dr Davies commenced the concluding discussion by noting that a number of common themes had developed during the discussion. With respect to strategies, a recurrent emphasis was upon the roles of *localization* and *dialogue*, as well as processes of *mutual learning*, the development of *solidarity networks*, and the potential for *everyday actions* to make a difference.

In the following discussion, Dr Ellis Paine emphasised the constraints of funding with respect to efforts towards dialogue, while Ms Denisova emphasised the need to consider the contrasting opportunities and constraints of democratic and non-democratic contexts. Dr Macmillan considered the role of rescaling to address changes in political opportunity structures.

Professor Roth asked Dr Davies what he thought had been omitted from the discussion, and his response emphasised the comparative lack of consideration of more transgressive and confrontational forms of activism. Subsequent contributions considered the limitations of transgressive methods and the historical contribution of some revolutionary processes to subsequent limitations on civic space.

Acknowledgements

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