
Guest editorial: Civil society and crises: co-creating societal value with or without the government

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537

Introduction

This special issue on *civil society and crises: co-creating societal value with or without the government* seeks to understand how civil society responds to and proactively tackles societal crises. We live in a diverse and ever-changing environment that creates opportunities for communities, organisations and individuals but also poses significant challenges, including natural disasters, pandemics, climate change, economic recessions, military conflicts and cyberattacks. Complex, transboundary crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, transcend geographic, time and functional boundaries (Boin, 2009; Smith and Fischbacher, 2009) and cause unpredictable societal changes (Boyne and Meier, 2009). Some crises are immediately visible due to their instant damage, whilst others develop gradually over years, causing huge cumulative damage due to insufficient social and political attention (Boin *et al.*, 2020). Here, the role of civil society is increasingly important, as governments seek collaborative ways to solve social problems in the face of economic and political pressures on welfare states (Kabataş and Vogel, 2025).

Civil society is a term commonly used by academics and practitioners, but as a concept, remains elastic and widely debated (Edwards, 2011). Civil society covers a diverse range of formally incorporated entities, such as nonprofits, charities, cooperatives, social enterprises, trade unions, as well as informal associations, such as community groups, online Facebook groups, sports clubs and so forth. In the most simplistic sense, the term could refer to the gathering of private individuals beyond pure familial or state relationships (Tester, 2014). While it is out of scope for this editorial to provide a thorough conceptualisation of civil society, Walzer's (1998) definition of civil society as "an uncoerced human association to undertake collective action independent of the state and market" stands as a suitable starting point. The dynamic, innovative and efficient characteristics of civil society are argued to make it a valuable resource during times of societal crisis (Saban, 2013). While we recognise that civil society theorisation differs from, for instance, social movement studies, our aim is to highlight their role and value in addressing societal crises – whether through strategic action or service provision – and their contribution to broader societal well-being and inclusion (Della Porta, 2020).

Civil society contributes to the creation of societal value on various levels of service ecosystems, operating far beyond service delivery, offering advocacy, service system improvement and community connection (Tuurnas *et al.*, 2025). Through their human-centered approaches, civil society organisations can be well placed to address the needs of disadvantaged citizens, helping them participate in value-creation (e.g. Arslan *et al.*, 2022; Eriksson, 2019; Dhungana, 2020; Haug, 2024; Trasciani *et al.*, 2026; Tuurnas *et al.*, 2023). Civil society organisations can act as community anchor institutions that bridge the needs and language of disparate stakeholders to facilitate co-creation and increase democratic legitimacy (Collell and Marques, 2025; Steiner and Farmer, 2018) and offer direct help in times of crisis (Garcia *et al.*, 2023). Civil society can also initiate and enact ecosystems of different actors from the public and private sectors to create and nurture social innovation and service co-production (Perikangas *et al.*, 2024), both preparing for and responding to different types of crises.

Overall, the strong role of civil society to lead or support in creating solutions to social problems can provide an alternative approach to government-led interventions, providing that such solutions are organically and collectively developed with the public



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(Brandsen *et al.*, 2017). It is not self-evident, though, to what extent civil society solutions are developed in collaboration with public organisations, and if they associate with or contradict existing policies or procedures (see, e.g. Trasciani *et al.*, 2026; Witkowski *et al.*, 2026). To exemplify, a study by Plaček *et al.* (2026) reveals a potential preparedness asymmetry between civil society (in this case social enterprises) and public organisations, as social enterprises were found to have offensive strategies to crises, while public organisations tended to have defensive strategies.

At its best, these different strategies complement each other. In this special issue, we seek to examine the role of civil society during times of societal crisis, especially emphasising the complex collaborative relationships between public organisations and civil society. For instance, as highlighted in the special issue contributions, civil society organisations often take adversarial positions when state policies or practices are perceived as exclusionary or inadequate (Trasciani *et al.*, 2026; Witkowski *et al.*, 2026). Their dual role that involves cooperation and contestation can underscore the complexity of their position within the public service ecosystem. This special issue seeks to bring together scholarly, policy and practitioner debate in this important area, as a means of shaping theoretical, political and practitioner discourse. It focuses on developing a stronger theoretical and empirical understanding of the practices, motives and conditions under which civil society addresses societal crises, with or without government collaboration. It also examines how civil society can fulfil its role as a unifying force, acting as the social glue that holds communities together in times of crisis.

Understanding crisis and the role of civil society

Crises can be broadly understood as disruptive events that threaten the stability of society. They can arise suddenly or develop gradually, and their impact can be immediate or long-term. 't Hart and Boin (2001) categorise four different types of crises by examining them through onset speed and closure speed: fast-burning, long-shadow, slow-burning and cathartic crises. “Fast-burning” crises have a fast onset and fast closure, and might include a hostage situation or terrorist attack. Alternatively, “long-shadow” crises usually have a fast onset but a slow closure and two papers in this special issue highlight such long-shadow crises. Kortessalmi *et al.*'s (2026) study focused on the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, which affected the whole world in a short period of time and had a prolonged impact on society as a whole. Witkowski *et al.*'s (2026) paper investigated the 2023 Maui Fires in Hawaii, which also began quickly and have had a profound and ongoing impact on a local community.

While fast-developing crises easily draw public attention, creeping crises tend to be less visible (Boin *et al.*, 2020). A “slow-burning” crisis has a slow onset and slow closure. Three studies in this Special Issue address this type of crisis. Trasciani *et al.* (2026) have explored the longstanding issue of migrant integration in Milan, Grimbirt *et al.* (2026) draw our attention to the ineffective involvement of citizens in policymaking processes in a provincial council in the Basque Country and Mangai *et al.* (2026) reveal persistent concerns over public safety in Cape Town. Finally, a “cathartic” crisis has a slow onset, but such small emergencies can accumulate over time and break out abruptly. Raisio *et al.*'s (2025) study on spontaneous volunteering for national defense is set in the background of the escalated warfare between Russia and Ukraine, and its impact on Finland's national defense. Collell and Marques have also probed a cathartic crisis but in the context of societal conflicts between stakeholders over cultural preservation in local-level decision-making in the Catalonia context.

Together, these contributions demonstrate that crises vary not only in their temporal dynamics but also in how they are perceived, governed and experienced by affected communities. This typology provides a useful lens for understanding the diverse nature of crises, but also why civil society actors become visible and influential in some crises while remaining marginal in others. This underscores the need to examine context-specific forms of civic engagement across different types of crises.

Civil society–government relations during crises

Crises can have a profound impact on the relationship between government and civil society. On the one hand, the onset of a crisis can weaken such relationships when the existing management and organisational structures of government do not align with existing contexts or realities (Lægreid and Rykkja, 2019). Boin and 't Hart (2003) identified that during crises, governments and public bodies can struggle to reform, as crisis management and effective reform are two very different approaches. Rather than reform, crisis management can lead to the centralisation of authority and an increased policy-focused control over civil society, which reduces the autonomy of civil society organisations and civic engagement more broadly (Howell and Lind, 2009). This can lead to tension with civil society actors, who may perceive the status quo as ill-suited for the specific crisis conditions and therefore view reforms as necessary. Past crises, such as the 2008 global economic crash, have led to a perceived reduction in the democratic engagement of civil society organisations. Most notably, civil society organisations have become more marketised as service delivery partners rather than as expressions of community voice (Della Porta, 2020; Eikenberry and Kluver, 2004). Shrinking funds (such as the sudden removal of funding from US Aid) and funding restrictions (especially regarding foreign funding of NGOs in developing countries, e.g. Dupuy *et al.*, 2016) have accelerated the marketisation of civil society organisations. Their increased marketisation can create funding instability and in turn limit their ability to build social capital and act as value guardians for communities (Eikenberry and Kluver, 2004). In an increasingly unstable and unpredictable global context, crisis has perhaps become a new norm for civil society and state actors. Governments seek communities and civil society organisations that are more resilient and so able to better cope with frequent crises (Hilhorst, 2018), even though this resilience may erode civil society's democratic functions and accountability.

On the other hand, crises can also lead to stronger relationships between civil society and government bodies. Putnam's (2000) seminal work demonstrated that high social capital and civic engagement can lead to more effective crisis response through better collective problem-solving, compliance and the building of trust. This represents the upside of the blurry collaborative public service arena. Here, success depends on strong collaborative governance frameworks, a difficult prospect given the fuzziness of the term (Batory and Svensson, 2019) and the lack of clear templates for what good collaborative governance might look like (Christensen *et al.*, 2016), especially if led by civil society organisations. This is contingent on politicised identity and affective feelings of injustice (Van Zomeren *et al.*, 2008); areas that civil society organisations have been historically strong in engendering and organising.

Crises can therefore offer both opportunities and challenges for effective relations between civil society and government bodies. Crises can magnify existing tensions and widen the gaps that exist between communities, civil society and governments, especially when there is a lack of trust, effective collaborative capacity and social capital across civil society. Conversely, where these elements are present, crises can enhance cooperation and sometimes lead to effective reform. As was noted earlier, governments need effective collaboration from a variety of actors to find sustainable solutions to societal problems, and civil society organisations can provide this, provided that solutions are collaboratively and organically developed with community actors (Brandson *et al.*, 2017). Collell and Marques' (2025) paper in this special issue demonstrates how the early and meaningful involvement of civil society during societal crises can be crucial to building trust and legitimacy, ultimately transforming conflict into constructive collaboration. Furthermore, Grimbert *et al.*'s (2026) paper puts forward Representative Deliberative Processes (RDPs) as a mechanism to cultivate trust and engage citizens in policy-making processes. Ultimately, the effectiveness of collaborative and democratic governance arrangements, and the quality of existing relationships between civil society and government bodies, are perhaps the best mediators of success or failure when dealing with crises.

Presentation/contribution of the articles of the special issue

The papers in this special issue provide a rich overview of civil society actors and organisational forms, reflecting the diversity of the role of civil society during crises. They highlight both formal and informal organisations, including established NGOs, community-based organisations, neighbourhood associations and faith-based groups, as well as more fluid and spontaneous formations such as grassroots networks, collectives and unaffiliated volunteers. In some contexts, like the co-creation of public services in Catalonia (see Collell and Marques in the special issue), community-based organisations, environmental advocates, youth groups and minority representatives collaborate with local government through structured mechanisms such as steering committees. In others, such as in the study by [Raisio et al. \(2025\)](#), spontaneous volunteers and NGOs interact with public authorities and military officials, with NGOs often serving as intermediaries that channel or legitimise informal civic engagement. They highlighted some of the inequalities in accessing and sharing information, a theme also highlighted by [Kortesalmi et al. \(2026\)](#) in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. [Kortesalmi et al. \(2026\)](#) demonstrate the importance of acquiring information during times of crisis, and the importance of collective sensemaking, particularly through social media outlets. [Mangai et al.'s \(2026\)](#) paper also highlights the important role of digital platforms in information sharing, with examples of how digitally empowered civil society organisations can enable the co-creation of policy strategies between citizens and governments.

[Witkowski et al.'s \(2026\)](#) study on the aftermath of the 2023 Maui fires illustrates how grassroots actors, including formal nonprofits and informal mutual aid groups, mobilise independently or in resistance to government efforts. This includes filling gaps left by bureaucratic inefficiencies and co-producing services with larger organisations. [Trasciani et al.'s \(2026\)](#) paper demonstrates how civil society organisations can offer alternatives to government-led interventions by providing bottom-up services and advocating for marginalised groups of migrants. They show how these local organisations act as facilitators within multi-actor governance, linking diverse stakeholders and sustaining migrants in times of structural uncertainty or crisis.

Alternatively, the study of [Grimbert et al. \(2026\)](#), from the Basque Country in Spain, suggests how Representative Deliberative Processes (RDPs) can be used to foster public participation and deliberation in policymaking. They are shown to be an effective way to catalyse multi-level governance and hold significant potential as governance instruments in responding to complex situations and navigating crisis-prone policy environments. Finally, [Mangai et al.'s \(2026\)](#) study explores the emergence of Cape Town as an example of how digital tools are used by civil society actors to co-create public safety solutions. These digitally empowered grassroots organisations can act as a social glue and work alongside the government to co-produce policy solutions.

Crises often expose the fragility of core societal values and the limitations of institutional, policy and leadership capacities ([Boin and Lodge, 2016](#)), prompting significant shifts in the delivery of public services ([Switzer et al., 2020](#)). Under such conditions, civil society faces two imperative tasks: addressing disruptions to essential services – particularly for vulnerable groups ([Wilke et al., 2020](#)) – and anticipating the evolving needs of service users and communities ([Petracca et al., 2020](#)). The seven papers in this issue provide rich empirical evidence of how civil society actors navigate public governance systems to fulfil these tasks across diverse crisis contexts.

Moreover, the papers in this special issue show that civil society is far from monolithic. It spans highly institutionalised organisations as well as ad hoc, self-organised groups, each assuming distinct – yet sometimes overlapping – roles in shaping public value, managing conflict and responding to societal challenges. Together, the contributions underscore the essential role of civil society in co-creating solutions during crises and demonstrate the wide range of crises to which civil society actors can contribute. They also convey an important message to public managers and policymakers: civil society, in its diverse forms, constitutes a

vital resource for conflict resolution, social inclusion, citizen co-creation and co-production and the provision of complementary services in times of disruption.

As a practical implication, the special issue calls for integrative public management approaches that formally recognise and incorporate civil society actors into crisis response and prevention strategies. In line with Torfing *et al.* (2026), the findings call for governments to put forward institutionalised, multi-level societal interaction to strengthen collaborative crisis governance.

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