



# Strategy

2020 - 2023

THE ENGINE ROOM

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# Our Mission

The Engine Room strengthens the fight for social justice by supporting civil society to use technology and data in strategic, effective and responsible ways.



# Our Vision

We want to live in a world where previously oppressed and excluded groups can thrive thanks to equitable social structures and inclusive institutions. This vision requires the impactful and collaborative work of intersecting social movements that are equipped with the resources and tools they need to achieve their missions.

For social movements, using technology and data is no longer a luxury, but a necessity – and we've seen through our work that using technology and data in a strategic way can increase impact, but can also bring new risks.

**Our vision is for social justice movements to use technology and data in safe, responsible and strategic ways, while actively mitigating the vulnerabilities created by digital systems.**


# The Context

Structural injustices are rampant across the world: from the unfair distribution of resources, privileges and opportunities, to the hegemony of certain social groups and narratives over others, to institutionalised xenophobia, racism and white supremacy. Authoritarian tendencies are on the rise too, resulting in growing social tensions, policies that only meet the needs of a privileged few, and more and more attacks on vulnerable communities.

Increasingly, digital technology is layered on top of existing unjust structures, exacerbating them in new and hard-to-see ways. Driven by economic and political motives, the development of technology has created new forms of knowledge asymmetries and unjust power accumulation. It has also allowed narratives to cross borders at scale, complicating previous understandings of politics, and while physical borders remain intact, digital ones are increasingly porous. The distinction between the online and offline worlds are blurrier than ever before, with inequalities experienced in one easily translating into inequalities in the other.



**“ In this climate, those fighting for justice need all the tools and support that they can get.**



The impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, both direct and indirect, have ripped open many of these existing inequities and injustices, making them harder to ignore and more urgent than ever to address. Research has already shown that the pandemic has increased digital inequalities, fuelled surveillance and accelerated the misuse of hard-fought rights. Simultaneously, the pandemic and the unfolding socio-political crisis have increased public attention on many of these injustices, highlighting opportunities for fundamental and widespread change from the ground up.

In this climate, those fighting for justice need all the tools and support that they can get. Through our work at The Engine Room we have seen how the strategic and effective use of technology can strengthen and increase the impact of diverse social justice movements. Over the past decade, we worked with over 500 groups working towards structural equity - human rights defenders, LGBTQI groups, feminist collectives, anti-corruption advocates, investigative journalists, environmental activists. Through this work we have witnessed how technology and data can enable under-resourced activists to recognise patterns that were not possible before, find relevant information in unexpected places, reduce the time and resources required to collect, analyse and share vital information with their allies, reveal stories in hard to reach areas, and make it easier to organise across borders.

**“ We at The Engine Room believe that the strategic use of technology and data has a crucial part to play in strengthening social justice work.**

We have also seen how the private sector has dominated our collective imaginations for how tech and data should be used – with exploitative data practices and intrusive digital systems. This has put those working towards equity and justice on the defensive, reacting to government or private sector activity instead of having the space to imagine and build the digital systems they want to see in the world. Through our work building the Responsible Data community over the past six years, we've seen how important it is to create diverse spaces where civil society can develop best practices and a collective vision for the use of data with human rights and justice at the core.

We think technology and data need to be reimaged to meet the needs, politics and principles of those working towards social justice, instead of functioning as a tool for the powerful to surveil, control and dominate. We at The Engine Room believe that the strategic use of technology and data has a crucial part to play in strengthening social justice work.

We join many others in seeking to develop a counter-narrative of technology and data that is rights-respecting and justice-oriented – from digital rights organisations, to feminist internet movement builders, to movement techies and responsible data advocates. As an international organisation we see our contributions as additive and collaborative to theirs.

# Our Definitions

## Social justice and equity

- We believe that a robust understanding of the historical evolution of oppression and exclusion is crucial for any attempt to move towards social justice. Analysing how power operates, which social groups hold power over others, and which groups have been harmed by that oppression should be at the centre of every initiative that focuses on justice. We believe that social justice is not just about redistribution of resources, but about recognition and redistribution of existing power imbalances too.
- In this framing, we understand equity as an explicit acknowledgement that oppressive structures have created disparities in access, needs and resources among different groups, and that additional measures and actions are needed to redistribute power in a fair way. We use the concept of equity because we believe that 'equality' (an equal distribution of resources for all, regardless of situation) is not sufficient to ensure fairness in outcomes, and that those who face additional barriers need additional support and opportunities to be able to 'close the gap'.





## Technology and data

Technology and data play a central role to our vision. We believe that for any organisation, understanding how their digital systems work is no longer a luxury but a necessity. Civil society groups must also integrate technology into their work if they want to thrive in an increasingly digital environment.

- In this context we understand technology as the tools, systems, methods and processes that capitalize on the computational power to manage, analyse and communicate information.
- We define data as information that needs to be processed, organised and structured for the sake of usability.

In our work we have seen that technology and data can strengthen the work of social justice activism through:

- **Creating robust infrastructures** that organisations need to effectively organise their daily work and operations,
- **Enabling safe and secure communication** with their allies and target communities,
- **Automating workflows** in their data processes, such as collecting, cleaning or processing, to cut costs and free up resources,
- **Incorporating new data sources** that are coming online every day to bolster the work and reduce workload of previously in-person data collection
- **Collecting evidence** and making visible issues that have previously been ignored, eg. by advocating for more inclusive data gathering structures,
- **Detecting patterns** in rights abuses or injustices, particularly where data hasn't previously been collected, or where access to this information has been restricted,
- **Using these patterns** to inform advocacy, movement building and organising strategies.

**“ We seek to partner with groups whose work confronts power imbalances, injustice and rights abuses in a given social context.**

## Civil society

As a support organisation working to strengthen the work of others, the most impactful structural decisions we can make are **who we support, how we prioritise our resources, and whose mission we choose to amplify**. Our criteria for which organisations we work with will always be deeply rooted in our values and politics.

We seek to partner with groups whose work:

- Confronts power imbalances, injustice and rights abuses in a given social context
- Addresses real-world challenges with tactics and methods that focus on real-world problems instead of technocratic solutions
- Reflects on how power is exhibited in order to challenge conclusions and structures that run counter to lived experiences and real needs
- Respects context and meets actual instead of perceived needs

**In this document, we refer to 'civil society' as shorthand for groups who meet these criteria.** We work with a wide array of organisations regardless of their legal status - associations, foundations, larger international organisations, small volunteer-based activist groups, umbrella organisations, movements and collectives.



# Our Approach

In order to strengthen the fight for social justice, The Engine Room supports civil society to use technology and data in strategic, effective and responsible ways. To achieve this mission, we engage in the following activities.

## 1. We build evidence.

- We identify common trends and challenges that civil society is facing when it comes to tech and data, and we conduct applied interdisciplinary research to determine possible approaches and solutions.
- We keep up to date with the fast-changing landscape of tech and data as it relates to social justice work with a critical but constructive lens.
- We share our own thoughts on how technology and data can be used in responsible and intentional ways by civil society.



## 2. We listen, share and connect.

- We actively listen in order to understand the specific needs and experiences of social justice activist communities, and we curate and amplify learnings from social movements, communities and researchers on a global level.
- We answer questions on how civil society can best use technology and data in their work, and share those answers in accessible ways publicly whenever possible.
- We make connections across diverse communities and facilitate online and offline convenings and spaces for knowledge exchange, so that these communities can create a shared vision for the role of technology and data in strengthening civil society's work.





### 3. We strengthen capacity

- We accompany our partners through the design, development and implementation of tech and data projects to ensure they're taking into account the lessons learned by others.
- We provide a trusted sounding board, rapid, on-demand advice and high level analysis to activists needing support on their tech and data ideas and strategy.
- We explore new methods to better support our partners, and facilitate learning and reflection to improve the design and development of tech-heavy projects.

# All of our work combines at least one element of the following pillars:



Cutting across these pillars is our **data and tech expertise** – through this, we ensure organisational security and responsible data approaches are built in from day 1, ensuring tech choices that match politics and resources

# Our Principles


## To achieve our mission, we are:

- **Rooted within the problems that we're trying to address** – we don't parachute in to do research, we have staff who are from many of the contexts we're working within, and we conduct participatory research together with the communities we're supporting.
- **Critical optimists** – we believe tech and data can increase impact and strengthen work, but we also see the potential problems that could arise and work to develop proactive ways of mitigating these challenges.
- **Trusted within many communities** – our team engages with a range of communities, not just the ones within which we play a key role.
- **Well-supported in our own institution** – we prioritise staff wellbeing, to ensure everyone has a firm foundation upon which to do this work.
- **Attentive to systemic injustices that shape the world around us** – we start our work by thinking about how power is operating on a macro and micro level.
- **Collaborative and open** – we share what we're doing openly and often, work to advance the work of our allies, and see our work as a contribution to the bigger movements we're rooted within.



## What we don't do:

- **We don't work in contexts we know nothing about**, nor do we enter spaces uninvited.
- **We don't assume we're the experts in everything.** We don't do work that we think others are better positioned to do.
- **We don't build software.** We may support partners in their efforts to build new tech products, but we are not tech service providers.
- **We don't work on projects that don't address crucial social justice issues.**
- **We don't work with groups who support violence, who are against the promotion of human rights, or who are explicitly or implicitly racist, homophobic, xenophobic** – even if they identify as social justice activists.
- **Our focus is on civil society;** we don't work with the private sector or directly with governments.



**“ We don't work in contexts we know nothing about, nor do we enter spaces uninvited.**





# Challenges we see, and how we're addressing them



## Hype versus skepticism in tech

### Challenges we see

Civil society swings between tech solutionism (where tech is seen as a silver bullet) and tech pessimism (where tech is blamed for our societal problems), instead of understanding the complexity that tech and data bring to societal and political problems.

### What we're doing

We coach civil society leaders to apply their already-existing critical thinking skills to the digital realm - developing their technical intuition, aptitude for navigating the nuances of working with tech, and ability to balance the opportunities and challenges tech brings.


### The impact we seek

Civil society organisations will be better equipped to use tech safely and effectively. Fewer resources will be invested in tech solutions that don't work, and there will be a decrease in resources dedicated to projects that lack a critical, systems-focused approach.

## Intrusive data practices



## Surveillance economies



### Challenges we see

The amount of data available about almost anything is growing, but if it's not collected, processed and used in thoughtful and critical ways, the data risks entrenching existing systemic biases instead of dismantling them.

Exploitative data practices and intrusive tech systems have become the norm in the private sector as well as in societies at large, meaning that civil society has to develop new systems and tools if it is to avoid making the same mistakes.

### What we're doing

We maintain the Responsible Data community to develop new ways of working with data that fit with civil society's mission and goals, taking a justice-oriented approach to working with data that takes power structures and their effects into account.

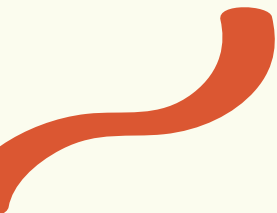
We work hand-in-hand with civil society organisations to design, implement and roll out responsible and sustainable tech and data projects that meet strategic and community goals, prioritising current problems alongside an understanding of the context and cultures they fit within.

### The impact we seek


There will be an increase in both the quantity and quality of responsible data management practices and technologies adopted by the civic sector at large, and less harm caused to those affected most by existing systemic biases and injustices.

We will see more nuanced and effective adaptation of functional tech tools by the sector, and an increase in the availability and use of sustainable alternatives, created within and by the communities they serve.

## The rise of authoritarianism and extremism



## Fast-changing digital systems, under-resourced activists



### Challenges we see

Pressure and abuse of power against civil society is on the rise, and so are authoritarian tendencies. Governments around the world are using technology to surveill and control, putting civil society on the defensive.

The tech and data landscape changes fast, and there is an abundance of information available. Resource-constrained activists cannot keep up with latest technological developments and the types and amount of new data that might be relevant for their work, leaving them lacking in confidence to act, feeling behind the curve, and unsure where to go for credible, trusted information.

### What we're doing

We work closely with civil society to use tech to increase their impact, to collect evidence in useful ways, while also proactively supporting them in building responsive organisational security practices from day one. We support the organisational security community with their efforts to strengthen their networks and skills.

We identify high-priority areas of knowledge for civil society (including, for instance automated decision-making, predictive models, open source investigation techniques, etc.), catalyse collective thinking through community building and engagement, and collaborate on timely actions. We keep up to date with emerging trends and work to distill those that are most applicable to social justice work.

### The impact we seek

We will see more robust, resilient and secure digital infrastructures, protocols and practices among civil society. Security will no longer be seen as an 'add-on' by the sector but as something that is integrated into everyone's work.

There will be a surge in trusted and low-resource ways for civil society to keep up with the tech and data landscape, including a body of new knowledge about the impact of digital technologies on social institutions, emerging forms of social injustices mitigated by digital technologies, and new ways of keeping track of rights abuses. Technical intuition among social justice leaders and activists will increase significantly.

## Siloed learning



### Challenges we see

As different parts of civil society begin to integrate data and tech more deeply into their work, they might not be aware that some of the problems and challenges they face have already been overcome by others.

### What we're doing

We work across communities and spaces to identify common challenges and trends, and share knowledge on how others can 'leapfrog' those challenges.

### The impact we seek

There will be stronger and more decentralised civic ecosystems where peer-to-peer learning and knowledge sharing on tech and data challenges are the default.

#### To summarise, we want to see organisations who can:

- Take advantage of the opportunities that technology and data offer
- Filter through the hype and identify what works and what doesn't when it comes to using technology and data
- Recognise and address social injustices within our digital systems
- Proactively defend themselves and their communities against vulnerabilities fueled by technology
- Make technology and data choices that match with their politics, instead of repeating exploitative practices
- Work across sectors and with diverse allies to address the complex problems that tech and data bring.

# Our priorities for 2020 - 2023

Amid the prolonged crises caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, and influenced by major geopolitical shifts, many of the issues at the forefront of social justice activism have become too big for society to continue ignoring. But civil society organisations have long been challenging underlying inequalities of power and resources, and there is no quick fix. Because of this, we believe it will be crucial for civil society to strike a balance between meeting immediate needs, and continuing to work on issues that cannot be fixed in a short period of time.

With that in mind, we have divided our 2020-23 strategic priorities into two sections. In the first part, we explain our priorities for the coming months, reflecting the immediate challenges facing social justice movements with regards to technology and data. In the second part, we describe the cross-cutting areas that will likely shape our work after the initial emergency responses to Covid-19 become more commonplace.



## Our immediate priorities (2020)

In the current climate, many social justice activists find themselves in situations where their country or state leaders are using the crisis as an excuse to remove or misuse hard-fought laws and rights, to distract from human rights violations and corruption, or to avoid accountability. Widespread surveillance techniques are being rolled out speedily, with such measures disproportionately affecting groups and individuals who are systematically marginalised or who are seeking to confront power.

Because of the lingering effects of the pandemic, civil society organisations forced to operate exclusively in digital spaces for the first time are facing a digital emergency – they need to develop new ways of working, reshape programmes, support staff and communities, all under unstable political conditions and severely lacking internal digital capacity and resources. At the same time, migrating to digital infrastructures increases activists' traceability and digital vulnerabilities – and moving at such a speed makes establishing and following digital security protocols harder than usual.

**With those challenges in mind, we will focus on helping activists balance their immediate technical needs with their core social justice work.**

**“ Widespread surveillance techniques are being rolled out speedily, with such measures disproportionately affecting groups and individuals who are systematically marginalised or who are seeking to confront power.**

In order to support social justice movements to survive and thrive in the coming months, we will prioritise the following activities:

- Supporting social justice groups to strengthen and defend their digital operations, in contexts where their work is sensitive or subject to scrutiny by state forces, and help them implement rapid response mechanisms in secure ways.
- Working with social justice groups who have to rapidly shift their service delivery, operations, and organising from offline to digital realms, in responsible, secure and mission-critical ways.
- Coaching individuals and organisations to build their technical intuition to allow them to make the most of the rapid digital transformation that is taking place.
- Encouraging responsible data practices by international agencies and nonprofits amid the pandemic and beyond.



## Our long-term priorities (2020-23)

There are multiple, intersecting crises happening in the world right now; the climate crisis, geopolitical shifts, conflicts and the Covid-19 pandemic. These intersecting crises have illuminated how powerful actors – governmental and corporate – around the world are able to use crisis as excuses to weaken transparency laws, push through unjust and unconsidered policies, and make economic & political moves that have the potential to harm both people and planet. Society's reliance on digital technologies has increased, in particular due to the pandemic, and as a result of all the above, many civil society funders are reenvisioning their own strategies.

These crises, though, have shown us that structures we took for granted can in fact change rapidly, when there really is political will, vision and collaboration. We believe we now have new opportunities to reimagine the contours of the societies we aspire to live in, creating both momentum and appetite for large-scale social and political reform. Achieving such reform will require consistent movement-building, collaboration, and attention to the power structures that are responsible for the current crisis.

We at The Engine Room will remain deeply committed to dismantling existing power imbalances and structural injustices. In the coming years, we will work to shape civil society's collective thinking around the role technology and data should play in our work, and help create a positive vision for the role of technology and data in strengthening the fight for social justice.

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As an agile and responsive organisation with a mixed business model of consultancies and grants, our projects, partner selection and research agenda over the coming years will be guided by the following priority themes.




- 1. Resilience:** Robust infrastructures will play an increasingly crucial role in the success and survival of the civic sector – this especially true for activist communities who are consistently under attack because of their work. In the coming years, we will seek opportunities to bolster the cultural practices that shape how social justice activists think about their infrastructure, and prioritise providing hands-on support for redesigning this infrastructure. We will help under-resourced activists optimise their increased workloads with responsible technology-enabled automation, streamlined processes and improved information management protocols. Whenever useful, we will also encourage the use of tech tools that foster adaptation and sustainable reuse, given that resources available for civil society will be more limited.
- 2. Distribution of power:** It will become increasingly important for civil society to be critically aware of the power dynamics at play within the world of tech and data, as well as for it to be able to distinguish between impactful and overhyped technologies. In the coming years, we will invest resources to find new and better ways of sharing our collective knowledge on which digital solutions truly

work for social justice movements, and to explore alternatives to platforms and tools that bolster surveillance capitalism. We will also work closely with activist communities to help them carefully choose what data they collect, especially when it comes to documenting rights abuses and inequitable social practices, what assumptions they make about the information they prioritise, and what stories they decide to tell with that data.

- 3. Accountability:** Social justice activists will need to develop a better understanding of how technology facilitates new forms of power abuse and gain more clarity on the decisions that influence how new and old technologies shape our lives. This will be especially important in a world where rapidly-made decisions will determine what our lives will look like for years to come. In order to help activist communities reaffirm the rights of the most vulnerable, and reimagine what comes after the pandemic, we will mobilise local social justice communities to work more effectively on issues connected to digital systems, and accompany activist communities in their efforts to make crucial data available and more accessible in responsible and privacy-respecting ways.

“ **Social justice activists will need to develop a better understanding of how technology facilitates new forms of power abuse...**



# Our Team

The Engine Room is an international organisation incorporated in the United States as a 501(c)3 not-for-profit. We are an entirely remote, multi-disciplinary team with staff based on four continents: South America, North America, Sub-Saharan Africa and Europe. Our staff is made up of activists from across the world with diverse backgrounds and skill sets. The Internet is our office.



# THE ENGINE ROOM

[www.theengineroom.org](http://www.theengineroom.org)