

**Social Justice Leaders on What Matters:  
Hilary Pennington & Poonam Joshi**

This video transcript captures a Zoom conversation between Poonam Joshi, director of the Funders' Initiative for Civil Society, and Hilary Pennington, executive vice president of programs at the Ford Foundation.

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**Transcript begins.**

[Poonam Joshi, a South Asian woman in her 50s with short black hair, wearing a dark blue button-down shirt, sits for a video interview with Hilary Pennington, a white woman with blonde hair, wearing a geometric-patterned shirt and acrylic earrings, sitting in an orange chair.]

**POONAM JOSHI:** What is the civic space that we want? So we know that digital civic space is going to be fundamentally a part of the future of civic space and democracy. So what are the things that we could be funding right now? What are the things that civil society may not even be thinking about that we need for the future?

[on-screen graphic: Social Justice Leaders on What Matters, Hilary Pennington with Poonam Joshi]

[on-screen text: Hilary Pennington, Executive Vice President of Programs, Ford Foundation]

**HILARY PENNINGTON:** Poonam Joshi has over 20 years of experience working on a range of very complex human rights issues. She currently serves as the director of the Funders Initiative for Civil Society, and you will hear in our conversation how this diverse range of experiences come together to make her one of the most astute analysts of the threats to civil society that I know. So Poonam so, uh, grateful to you for making the time for this conversation. Thank you.

[on-screen text: Poonam Joshi, Director, Funders' Initiative for Civil Society]

**POONAM:** Oh, thank you, Hilary. It's a real privilege, um, to be invited to participate in this series. I know Ford supports incredible social justice leaders around the world. At FICS, we don't do the work, but we keep the space open for those justice leaders. And I'm really pleased to be part of the conversation today.

**HILARY:** Well, thank you. And that's, that's actually such a great lead-in. What is the Funders Initiative for Civil Society—FICS? Could you explain, um, how this initiative came to be and just how you operate, how you do your work?

**POONAM:** Absolutely. So civic space is that essential place for democracy, where people come together to share ideas, to organize, to hold power to account. And what we've seen over the last decade is that space has come under attack at a scale that's unprecedented in modern history. And FICS was originally set up in 2016 to help funders think strategically about the phenomena of closing civic space. And I think, you know, many of us felt we had missed the

warning signs around populism, around polarization. So, in 2019 we led a review of the future of civic space—what happens when democratic blocks backsliding intersects with culture wars, intersects with economic inequality, intersects with climate and technological disruption. And what we found was a world that was rapidly changing and incredibly exciting opportunities to, to shape that. But what we were seeing, that progressive civic actors and movements had the ideas, had the solutions, but they were being held back. They were being targeted, and we wanted to understand what lay behind that.

**HILARY:** You know, you are describing a very critical function, I think, for all of us, for, for civil society actors and for foundations, which is to have some places we come together to really, um, get the perspective to understand like, what do they—what’s actually happening, and what does it actually mean? And I would love to hear, um, the results of that analysis, because I think you have some profound insights about how negative narratives about civil society spread.

**POONAM:** FICS has a dual function—to, to look around the corner for the trends and drivers but also to understand not just the threats but the opportunities for expanding civic space—creating the vehicles through which funders can come together and go, “Okay, we’ve got the analysis, now what do we do? And how do we do it at scale? Um, how do we support innovation? How do we take risks together?” So, so FICS’s current model has this hybrid function of a think tank to do that horizon-scanning piece, but then also the incubation function, um, recognizing that even when funders have this analysis, they’re, they’re firefighting on so many different fronts. How do you create that space to fund innovation? And that reality is the kind of scale that you need to get behind the game-changing ideas that are going to shift the drivers can’t be delivered by any one funder alone.

**HILARY:** And so let’s talk a little bit about the drivers and then I do think it would be really, really helpful to hear you talk about where you see the opportunity space, because that’s one of the things I love about the work of FICS. It’s not just focused on the problems, but you actually are, as you said, beginning to experiment with, “Well, then what do we do?”

**POONAM:** We interviewed over 150 activists and funders around the world, working on the issues that we thought were going to be most contested over the next decade—corporate power; environment; future of AI, tech, and media; intersectional inequality. And I think we were really surprised to find that there were three dominant drivers that touched each of those sectors and movements, albeit in different ways.

So, the one that we’d expected is that nearly all of our interviewees talked about the threats to their work from the far right, religious right, and illiberal populism. Um, and that took the form of attacks on rule of law, really kind of weakening checks and balances. It took the form of dismantling human rights protections. But it also took the form of these governments whose, whose shared goal was around gaining and holding onto power—at any cost, in some cases. It took the form of attacks on democratic pluralism and trying to push other ideas out of the marketplace.

The second driver was around concentration and abuse of economic power. What you’d seen over sort of recent decades was the sort of shift in the social contract, where that balance of power between state and private sector had expanded at the expense of civil society. And you saw the private sector having kind of unfettered access to government to advocate for their

interests. You saw, uh, erosion of democracy because citizens did not have the opportunity to have their voices heard in the same way that certain private interests did.

And then the third driver was around the use and abuse of counterterrorism and security laws and discourse. Governments were using counterterrorism legislation to target civil society. In a context of climate crisis, in a context of future crises and emergencies, this would be the driver that would become the dominant driver of closing civic space. And I think with the pandemic, sadly, we saw that was the case.

**HILARY:** You know, what do you see emerging as the political legacy of, of the COVID pandemic in relation to civic space? I think we all hoped, in the beginning, it would bring us together, right?

**POONAM:** It does have a dual legacy. I mean, I—I think in the early months of the pandemic, we learned a lot about ourselves and society. And I think this, this wonderful realization that in crisis people can be the very best of themselves. And there was generosity, there was solidarity, there were these mutual aid organizations that flourished around the world, and that was a real sort of source for hope. But, the other side of the pandemic, in the context of that flux and shock, we also saw that people and actors, governments, companies that were already very powerful saw the pandemic as an opportunity to consolidate that power. And I think what we saw, that trends that were already afoot, accelerated during that period.

I think for us at FICS, where we're trying to think about the game changers, if you look at technology and civic space, there are the wicked problems—surveillance, censorship, um, internet shutdowns, um—and there's, there's a critical body of work to do around holding the corporates to account that profit from that and preventing the export of those technologies to the governments that are going to use it to restrict civil society. But there's kind of bigger-picture work to think about: What is the civic space that we want? So we know that digital civic space is going to be fundamentally a part of the future of civic space and democracy. So what are the things that we could be funding right now? What are the things that civil society may not even be thinking about that we need for the future? How do we reform the law and get the definitions and the checks and balances that we need? And, simultaneously, what are the kind of innovative ways of making sure that, that the big tech, the big AI companies, um, have to think very carefully about the fact that they are stewarding a public good that's going to be necessary for everyone.

**HILARY:** I love that emphasis on innovation. I really do because—and I think that is where civil society excels. And I think, you know, too often funders, uh—you know, the dialogue can get stuck in the problems. And the function that you are playing—and both philanthropy can play and also civil society—of helping people create things they cannot yet imagine is so important.

You know, so I want to take us, uh, in our last few minutes, just into a bit of a different direction, which is more personal to you, um, uh, you know, kind of on two fronts. One is you have such a passion for this set of work—for human rights, for civic space, civil society. I'd love to hear a little bit more about how you, how you came to this work and then, you know, also just what keeps you going.

**POONAM:** So my parents were migrants from India in the 1960s, and I was brought up in a place called Coventry. It's an industrial city in the center of England. And at the time I was growing up, in the 70s and 80s, it had been hit very hard by recession. And it was one of the centers of the national front, which was the far right's racist movement in the UK at the time. And I saw my parents in particular, you know, face assault, face violence. We had bricks through our window. You know, I saw firsthand what bigotry does to people. Um, but then the other side of the story was a really remarkable one, which is both my parents were teachers who had this incredible sense of civic duty. And I was taught from a very early age that it's your duty to use whatever privilege you have to give back to the community and give back to society. And so in the days—in the daytime, they were teachers, but in the evening and the weekends, our house was effectively a community clinic, where anyone who had a problem around housing, immigration, education, um, came for help because my parents were in that unique position of having sufficient English to be able to help. And I, my job was making the cups of tea, bringing, you know, boxes of tissues, but also, over time, writing the letters or correcting the letters that were going off to these different, different authorities. But, you know, I look back and I can't think of any other trajectory my life could have taken.

Um, and in terms of what keeps me going, um, it's, it's the courage of, of the grantees that we work with around the world. Um, but often it's not, it's not the stories about individuals; it's the stories when community come together. It takes me back to that experience of growing up. You know, you can—absolutely, you can live in context of sort of fear and hostility, but when you come together, you have power.

**HILARY:** Well, I just want to thank you so much for making the time. I know how much is on your plate, how busy you are, but this has been just a really inspiring conversation. Thank you.

[on-screen text: What's your take? Join the conversation]

[on-screen graphic: Ford Foundation logo]

**Transcript ends.**