DIAGNOSIS

RESILIENCE TRAJECTORIES

Seven dynamic areas that impact the resilience of the climate action civil society ecosystem in India

FORUM FOR THE FUTURE

INTRODUCTION

In 2021, Forum for the Future, supported by the MacArthur Foundation, facilitated a participatory process that explored ways to build the resilience of climate action civil society organisations (CSOs) in India. This document is a playback of insights on the factors most materialy challenging the resilience of the CSOs and the climate action space in India that emerged through the process. The climate action CSOs are nested within the wider climate action space and the socio-political landscape. In this initiative, we looked at the system from the perspective of the innermost circle, recognising the interconnections and the factors that have ripple effects from and into the other circles.

The dynamic areas in this document have been arrived at through research using a mix of methodologies including interviews, facilitated discussions and a survey. They are not comprehensive, and are necessarily subjective. We welcome comments and debate that helps build on this perspective. For each of the dynamic areas, we provide a diagram that illustrates the different contributing factors and their causal relationships and high level implications, along with a short description. It must be acknowledged that for the purpose of this analysis we have focused on dynamics that have a negative impact on the resilience of the climate action system, to be able to identify areas for collective action. This is not to say that the climate action sector lacks examples of positive dynamics and reinforcing patterns. In fact, the sector has many strengths and success stories that enable it to continue creating impact despite the resisting dynamics. Following are some reflection questions that you might want to hold as you go through this document:

- How does this dynamic show up in my work?
- Where else have I experienced this dynamic if I think about the climate action change system at large?
- How does this dynamic impact the goal of the climate action change system?
- What kind of pressures are being created because of this dynamic within my organisation and my own ways of working? How is it impacting my organisational and individual resilience?
- How relevant are the identified strategies for breaking the pattern? Are there additional strategies that could be applied??

The seven dynamic areas that impact the resilience of climate action CSOs are identified as:

1. The monopoly of hero activists and hero leaders further concentrates power;
2. The projectification of climate action is driving CSOs into survival mode;
3. Depleted human capacity in CSOs is eroding personal resilience;
4. Trust diminishing is challenging the legitimacy of civil society;
5. A reactionary stance means CSOs are responding to, rather than shaping climate action   narratives;
6. Collaboration is not valued nor incentivised which furthers unhealthy competition;
7. Hampered information and knowledge flows limit opportunities to drive collective impact.
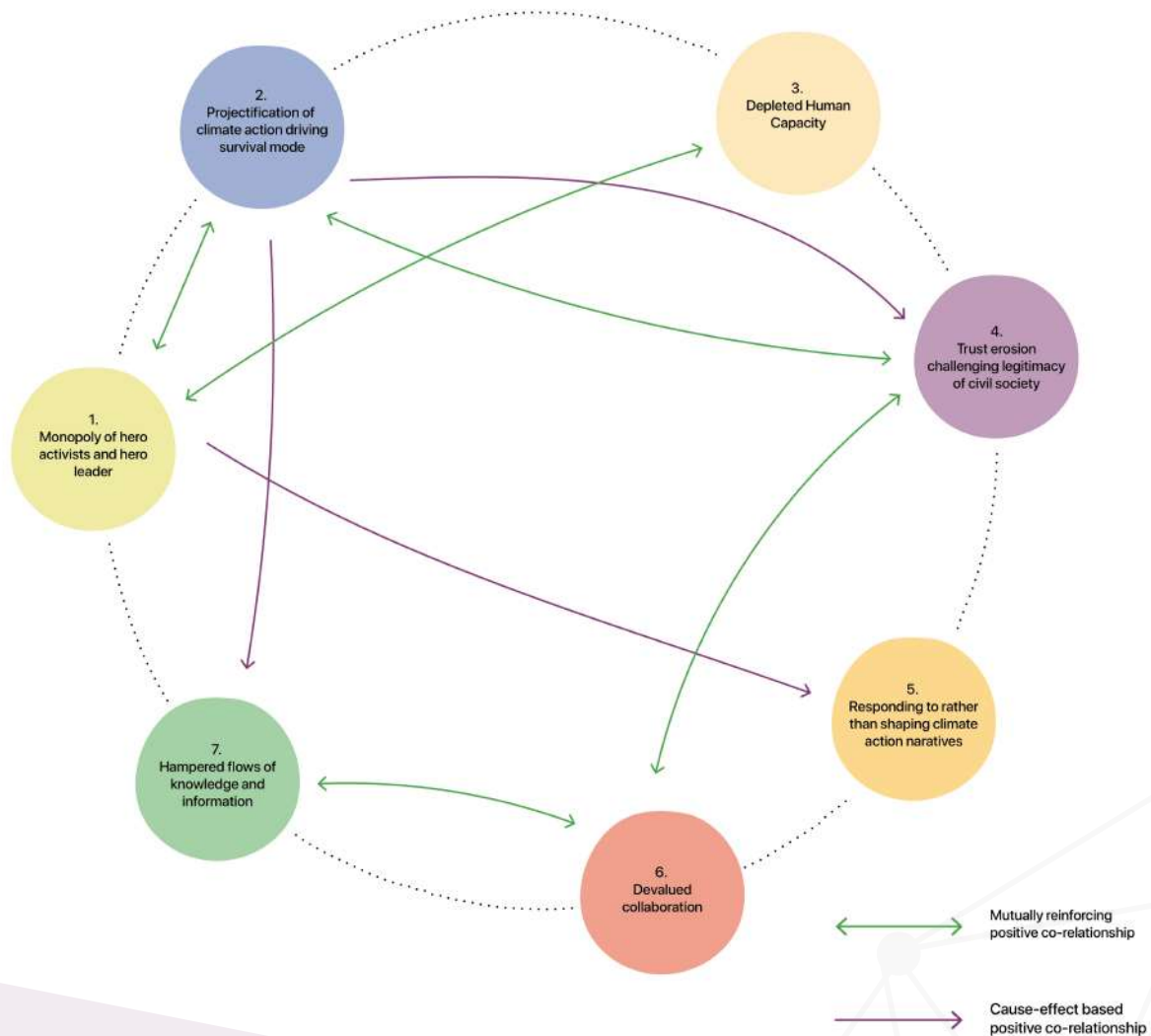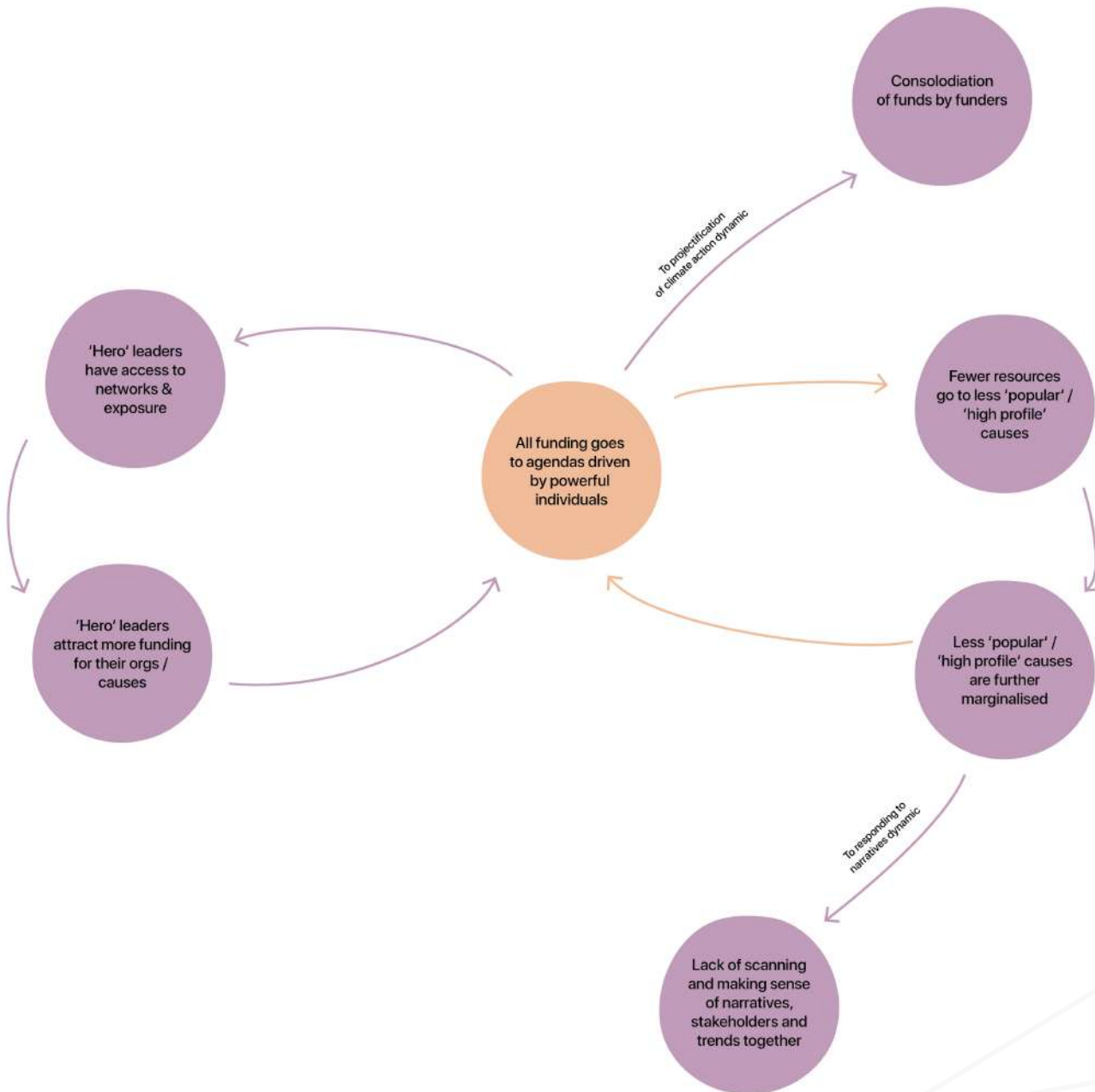

Taken together, these dynamics depict the conditions that limit our abilities to take a systemic approach to climate action

1. MONOPOLY OF HERO ACTIVISTS AND HERO LEADERS

Leadership is concentrated among few individuals

System archetype at play: success to the successful

"My greatest concern and hope are from the same trend, that resilience and impact is heavily dependent on passion and drive of individuals; no matter how passionate we are, we cannot tackle systemic challenges individually"

# 1. MONOPOLY OF HERO ACTIVISTS AND HERO LEADERS

The Dynamic: Historically, the Indian civil society (in general, and also within climate action) has evolved a culture of initiatives centred around a 'hero activist' - a passionate individual with a strong desire to manifest change and usually holding some amount of social-political and/or economic power. Over time these 'hero activists' evolve into 'hero leaders' with **access to networks and exposure.** They become crucial for attracting funding for their organisations or the causes they support. While beneficial for the immediate needs of their cause and organisation in the beginning, this trend ends up **skewing the overall funding** pattern to the detriment of causes or communities without the popular or high profile connections, further marginalising those other important agendas. As 'hero leaders' gain more exposure, they become **ubiquitous** in shaping thought leadership and **monopolise** air time on important platforms, thus hampering the emergence of a balanced collective narrative. Even when these 'hero leaders' talk about a collective voice, they often only connect among themselves, thus creating a concentrated **clique** of sorts - hard for anyone outside to break into. The successful in the space end up becoming more successful, inevitably fuelling the reinforcement of this dynamic and **depleting diversity and polyvocality** in the system. When this dynamic intersects with other dynamics around the consolidation of the funding landscape, it results in confounding effects for each.

Strategies for breaking this pattern: We are already seeing signs within the systems where organisations are increasingly addressing this dynamic by consciously focussing on creating a pipeline of leadership by building capabilities throughout and encouraging decentralised decision making at different levels. We are also seeing diverse sources of leadership emerging from the niche, as well as new ways of organising driven by the internet and social media (e.g. international youth solidarity movements on climate action getting increased share of airtime and presence in mainstream climate action discourse). We are also seeing an emergence of intersectional representation of traditionally excluded groups in climate action (e.g. acknowledging gaps in leadership along lines of race, caste, class and gender). Bringing in further diversity of perspectives to inform decisions and enabling even more adaptive, intergenerational and diverse leadership along with flexible governance models would strengthen resilience around this dynamic for CSOs

2. PROJECTIFICATION OF CLIMATE ACTION DRIVING SURVIVAL MODE

Lack of dependable sources of funding takes attention away from delivering systems level impact to fundraising for survival. COVID-19 exacerbates this further.

System archetypes at play: fixes that fail and shifting the burden
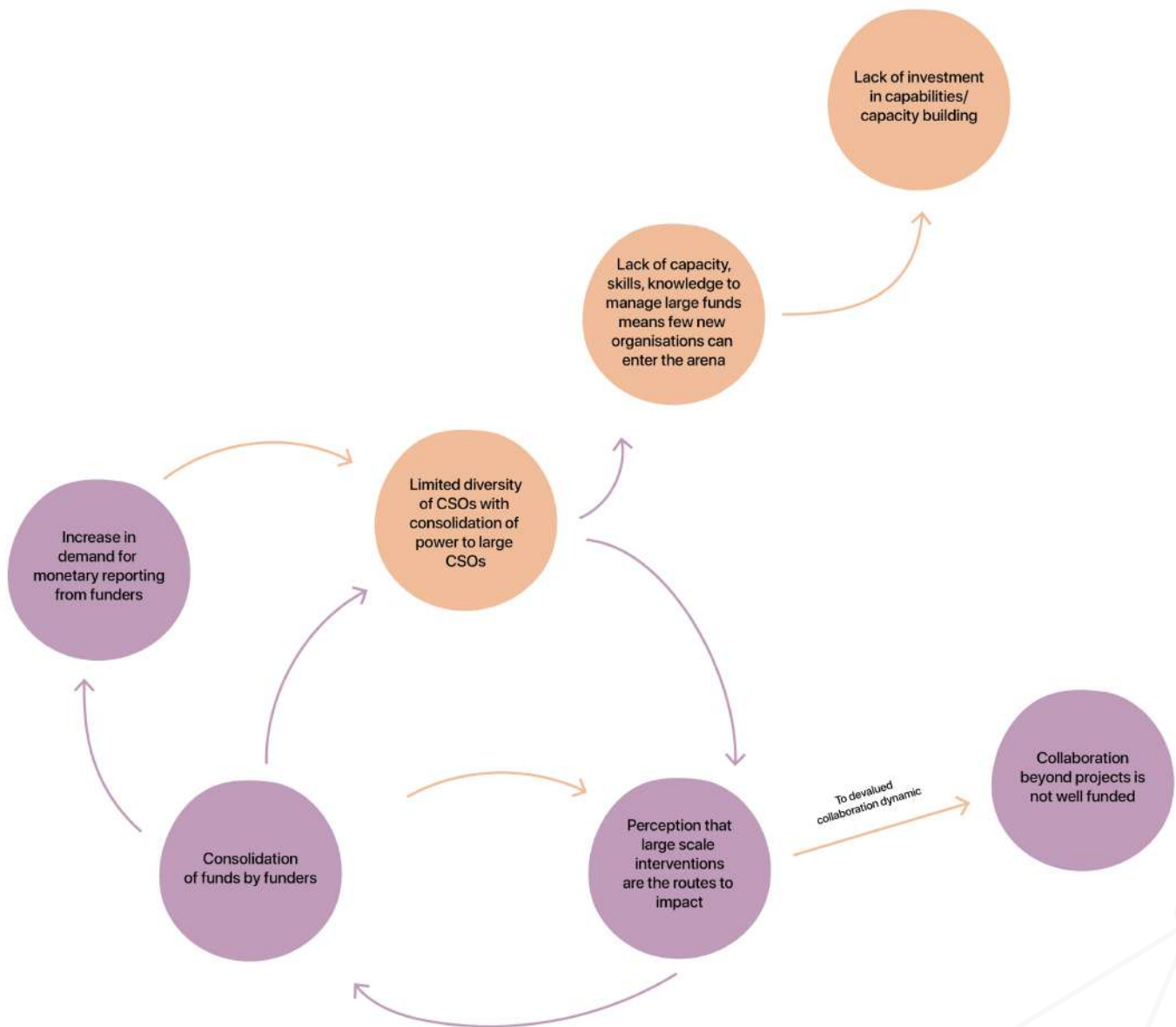
"Smaller, more niche organisations find it difficult to raise money for core support; most climate philanthropies are trying to consolidate funds with an aim to support large, complex programmes – large organisations have the systems and the capacity to run such programmes but small organisations find it difficult to prove their worth"

# 2. PROJECTIFICATION OF CLIMATE ACTION DRIVING SURVIVAL MODE

The Dynamic: Within the global landscape of climate action, there is a widely held belief that **large scale interventions** are a sure-fire route to systemic change (i.e. scale correlates with impact). The roots of this belief taking a stronghold within the funding community is most visible with the ongoing trend of **consolidation of funds** by funders. While such a move looks great on the surface, signalling availability of finance, the sheer scale of it makes it **exclusionary** because the consolidated money comes along with very specific requirements to obtain, manage and deliver projects, thus ensuring only already large, well-resourced organisations are able to access these funds. Apart from cornering out the diversity of NGOs in the space, there are other unintended consequences of this dynamic. For instance, **projects rather than long term programs** become the dominant mode of operationalising climate action. With very little focus on core funding, CSOs in general no longer drive the agenda of climate action, and the role gets taken over by philanthropies. This dynamic also leads to an **overt focus on the outcomes** of projects and defining impact around those outcomes, leaving little room for impact arising from iterative and emergent processes. The need for ease of managing the grant makes such projects compete with funding for collaborative or networked proposals from a collective of small and mid-sized organisations, putting further **pressure** on such organisations **to stay afloat** and financially resilient. This becomes particularly tricky when policy changes like the new FCRA regime (the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act, that regulates the flow of international funding into civil society) is already making it the context more challenging smaller organisations. Devaluing of collaboration also means that the funding landscape incentivises competitive behaviours. This dynamic also means that the learning and capacity building needs of the change system take a hit because of which there is a reduced capacity in the system for transformation. All of these unintended consequences also combine to ensure that few new organisations can enter the arena, which in turn sees a **consolidation of power** in large CSOs. This pushes smaller and/or more locally focused organisations to a **vendor or solution-provider** like role for these larger organisations, thus **shrinking the space for bottom-up critique or rights based conversations**. Projectification of climate action enables such reduced agency and diminished role for all but a dew CSOs in the system. This dynamic played out strongly against CSOs during the COVID-19 pandemic where organisational resilience became synonymous with the ability to stay afloat immediately, taking away the focus from transformational change.

Strategies for breaking this pattern: We are witnessing examples of philanthropies covering core costs and capacity building as a part of their grants. There are also instances where coaching and mentoring small organisations has been written into the grant agreements for large organisations. We have also seen examples of peer to peer mentoring during the pandemic. Another way of addressing this dynamic could be the CSO and the funding community coming together to explore these challenges from differing perspectives which can result in a comprehensive understanding of what needs to be done. For CSOs, diversified revenue streams and contingency planning with an awareness of internal vulnerabilities can enable resilience from the implications of this dynamic.

3. DEPLETED HUMAN CAPACITY

Underinvestment in human capacity rapidly depletes human capacity in civil society; COVID-19 exacerbates this further.

System archetype at play: limits to growth
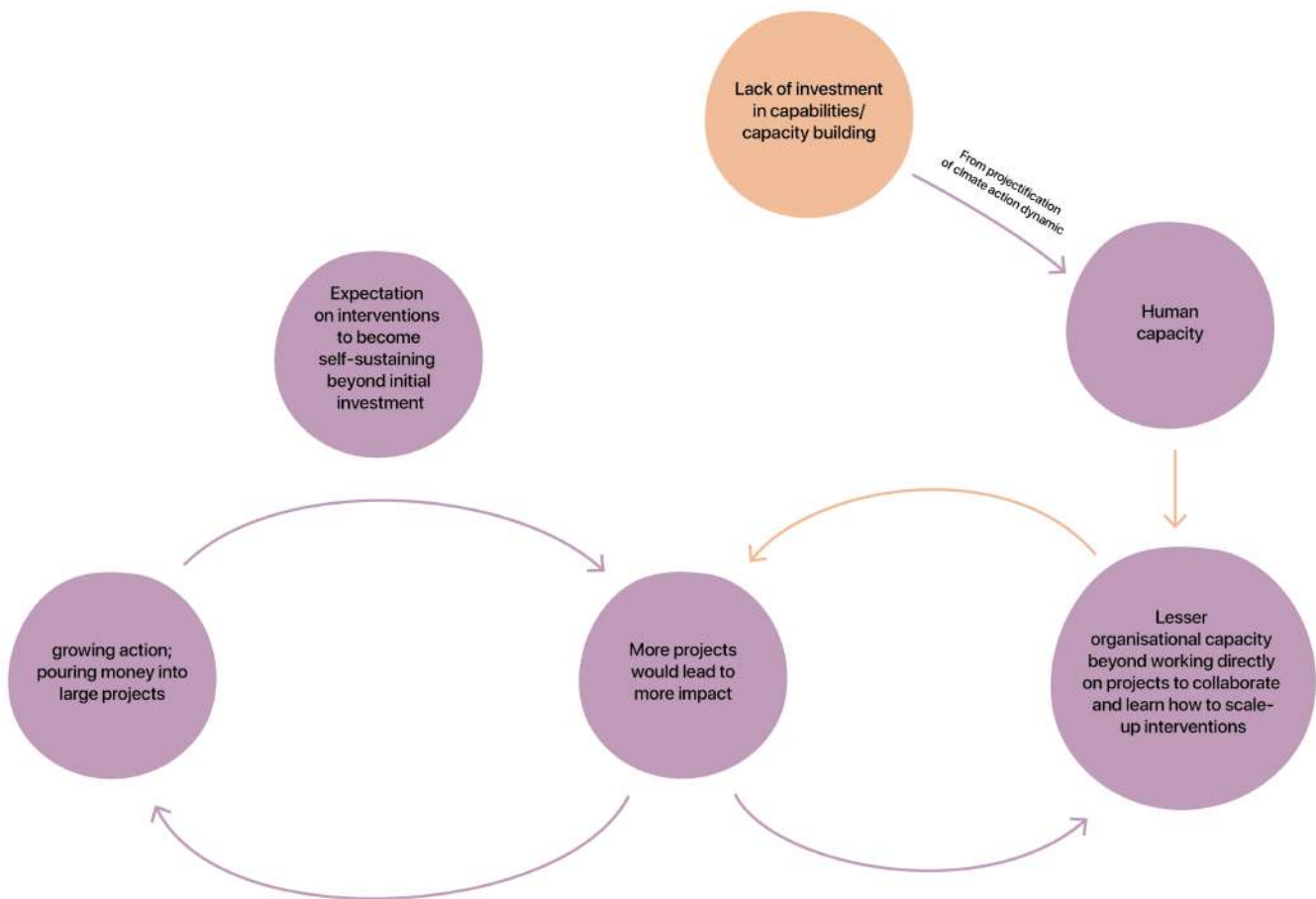
"Some government officials and decision makers think that people who work at nonprofits are in it for the greater good, and are happy to sacrifice their income; hence there is a perception that CSOs do not need a lot of money, which results in very little money allotted to CSOs for their time"

3. DEPLETED HUMAN CAPACITY

The Dynamic: Civil society, with its various constraints, already operates with a limited human capacity to effectively undertake its role and mandate and this dynamic adds further pressure on the capacity of CSOs. The prolonged COVID-19 crisis has rapidly depleted human capacity and the individual resilience of CSO professionals. An overt focus on large scale project delivery, further drives an underinvestment in human capacity. In absence of an explicit investment in human capacity, this dynamic **diminishes the returns** from additional funding in the system. The impacts of this dynamic are most visible in the **middle level** management roles - the layer that is already impacted by the first dynamic, i.e. the monopoly of the hero activist and leader. The funding patterns in the climate action space also impact skill development, with heavy dependence **on the job learning** over dedicated time for learning and training. The commonly held perception that **CSOs don't need money** (stemming from narratives that see earning money and working for greater good as antagonistic goals) also ensures that the sector does not attract talent in the way businesses and large organisations do. We also see this dynamic manifesting in the form of **higher attrition** rates for highly skilled staff in sub-sectors with greater potential for higher salaries. Private companies that work with consultancy business models in the social impact space often compete with and **crowd out CSOs** when it comes to hiring talent. The nature of employment itself is also changing from long term (because of shortage of programmatic funds) to contractual and this further impacts learning and skill development needs of the sector.
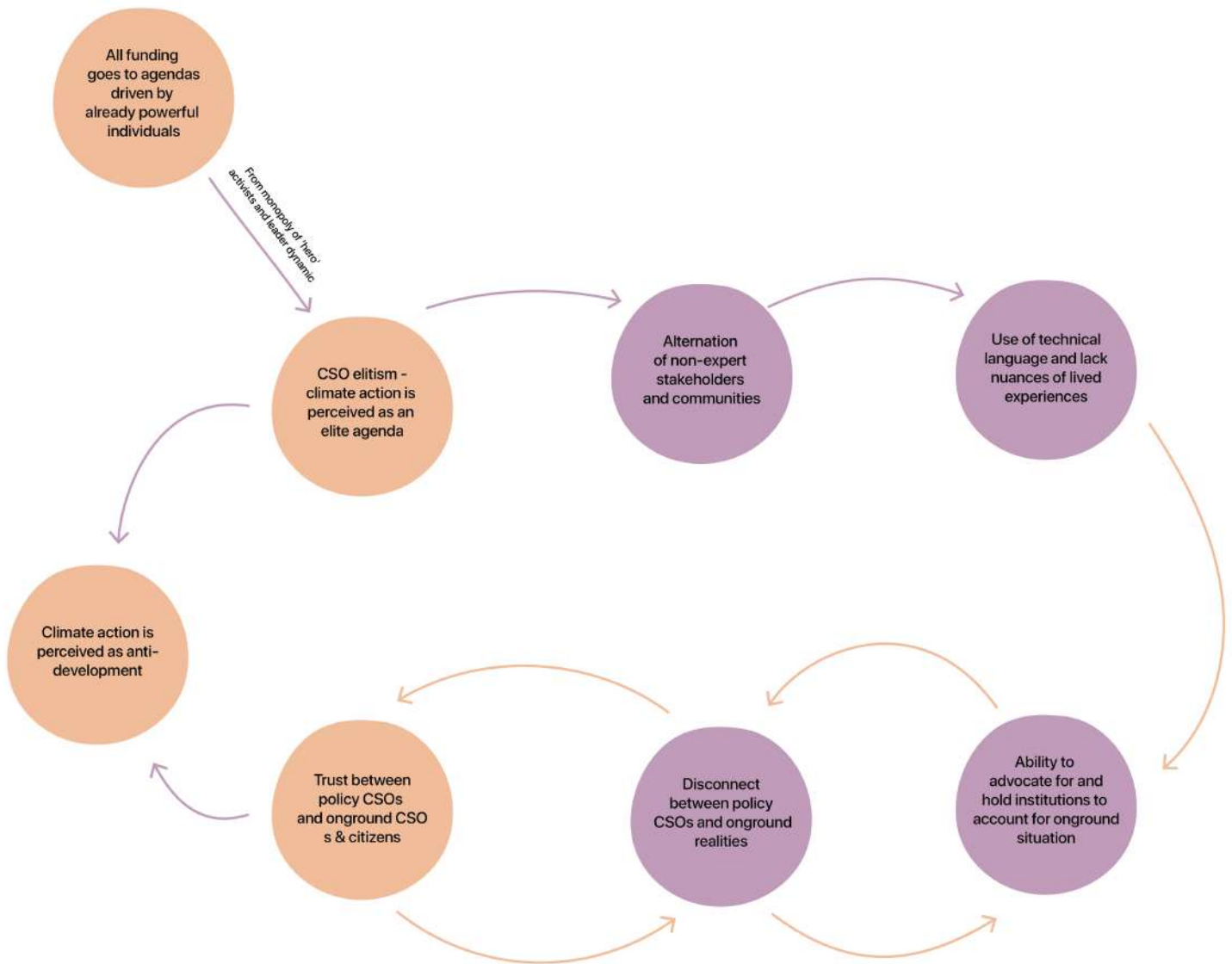
These forces in the landscape add pressure on people working within CSOs to constantly justify their economic choices and related **'sacrifices'** to themselves, meaning only individuals with some degree of privilege and social resilience continue to work in civil society. This further **hampers diversity** in the sector. The other dimension around human capacity that gets little attention is the constant state of **climate grief** that people in this space find themselves sitting with, because they understand the current reality and future possibility of climate change related impacts very well. This grief and the related **stress**, lead to either overwhelm or overdrive creating ideal conditions for burn-out, driving some human capacity to other sectors.

Strategies for breaking this pattern: We are witnessing that COVID-19 has opened up new opportunities for accessible digital learning. Some ways of addressing this dynamic include asking ourselves what is needed to drive adaptive capacity and emergent leadership, as well as observing and addressing the pressures building up within organisations because of the various aspects of this dynamic. Other ways around this dynamic include mutual and shared capability building among CSOs, as well as ability to tap into the capability and capacity of others when needed. A focus on staff readiness, well-being, financial preparedness and building a culture of resilience have served organisations well on this dynamic, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

4. TRUST EROSION CHALLENGING LEGITIMACY OF CIVIL SOCIETY

Eroded societal trust in CSOs combined with hampered trust among CSOs challenge the legitimacy of climate action CSOs, due to landscape factors like protectionist mindsets.

System archetype at play: limits to growth

All funding goes to agendas driven by already powerful individuals

From monopoly of 'hero' activists and leader dynamic

CSO elitism - climate action is perceived as an elite agenda

Alternation of non-expert stakeholders and communities

Use of technical language and lack nuances of lived experiences

Climate action is perceived as anti-development

Trust between policy CSOs and onground CSOs & citizens

Disconnect between policy CSOs and onground realities

Ability to advocate for and hold institutions to account for onground situation

"We speak in our own echo chambers, often disconnected from what is happening on ground, failing to represent the ones that need most voices"

4. TRUST EROSION CHALLENGING LEGITIMACY OF CIVIL SOCIETY

The Dynamic: The lack of societal trust in CSOs in general and climate action CSOs in particular, plays out in many ways. CSOs are often perceived as **coming in with a vested interest** by various stakeholders in the wider system. This perception snowballs into suspicion due to lack of diversity and the so called **'elite' demographics of CSO leadership** putting the legitimacy of their agenda into question. The prevalent technical language in the climate action system also feels **alienating to non-expert** stakeholders, especially when it lacks nuances of lived experiences of people, and that creates further room for mistrust. The **disconnect with communities** that are most at-risk from climate change, and a general absence of social justice elements in the climate agenda, particularly from the mitigation focused CSOs, only confirms this suspicion for certain stakeholders. The mitigation focused CSOs often view community resilience as an adaptation issue, creating further **polarisation across the mitigation-adaptation axis**, deepening existing tensions around scope, mandate and power dynamics. Climate action is also often perceived to be in **conflict with development** and growth goals, and that further impacts the legitimacy of their work among stakeholders with these primary interests like most governments and large businesses. The project mode of working also hampers **longevity and continuity of relationships** often translating into transactional relationships between CSOs and communities they work in.

The lack of trust among CSOs exists primarily because of a lack of consensus on how change happens due to differences in worldviews and background assumptions. We end up seeing our **theories of change as exclusionary and not complimentary**, creating a sense of false competition. With limited funding pools available to the sector, the competition increases and so does the **pressure to deliver bigger outcomes** out of projects. This leads to a **race-to-bottom** situation where demonstrating impact comes at the cost of shared resources and knowledge among CSOs, eventually **compromising on the quality of impact**. The competition itself becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy where expectations about behaviour of other CSOs makes **organisations act in ways that confirm their mistrust** in each other. In absence of informal spaces to build relationships outside of projects, there are very few avenues available to break this cycle of mistrust. This leads to a dominance of project based transactional relationships among CSOs over the deeper solidarity based trust relationships.

Strategies for breaking this pattern: This dynamic can be addressed by focusing on building blocks of trust like consistent and clear communication, enhancing credibility with constituents and prioritising accountability.

5. RESPONDING TO RATHER THAN SHAPING CLIMATE ACTION NARRATIVES

Reactionary stance to external change leads to a fractured collective voice, which means CSOs lack a unified front and are perceived as 'hard' to engage with.

System archetypes at play: shifting the burden
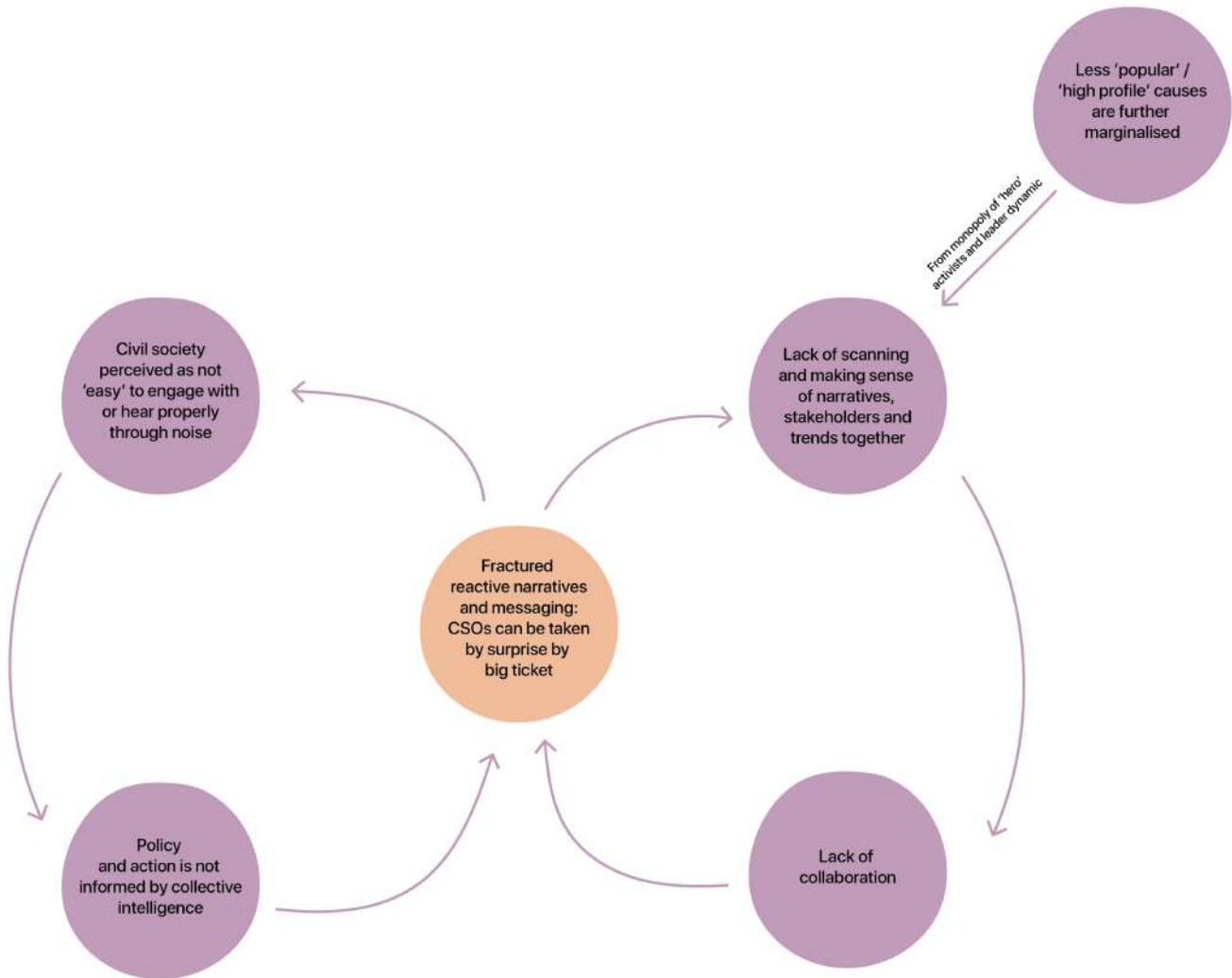
"The climate action civil society needs more independent, blue sky thought leadership in addition to being hyper-responsive to big ticket announcements such as Net Zero and INDCs"

5. RESPONDING TO RATHER THAN SHAPING CLIMATE ACTION NARRATIVES

The Dynamic: Every system is built upon fundamental narratives which serve as the deeply held aims of the system and is closely linked with the assumptions integral to the systems existence. Within the climate action space CSOs find themselves mostly **reacting to narratives** around climate action rather than actively shaping them. Some of the other identified dynamics reinforce this one. For instance, the projectification of climate action allows for disproportionate value to be placed in **new terms** that are popular among funders (e.g Just transitions, Regenerative) and CSOs need to **retrofit their existing work** to suit this language. As newer terms keep catching the **funder imagination,** CSOs spend significant energy in keeping up with these terms and trends to ensure funding does not run dry when a concept is **not 'in-vogue'** anymore. Also, thought leadership often comes from the **usual suspects** (hero activists and leaders) while any conversation on the vision for the sector happens in **exclusionary spaces** with little room for representation of the diversity of the sector. An overall lack of collaboration in the space also leads to **fractured and reactive narrative** and messaging from CSOs. A system wide perception of **civil society being a 'difficult'** stakeholder to engage with also reinforces this dynamic, e.g. when policy action and business announcements on climate action are not informed by the collective intelligence and vision of civil society. This leads to furthering the feeling of constantly being on the **'backfoot'** among CSOs.

The nature of the issue at hand also exacerbates this dynamic, as climate change is a global threat and narratives are often shaped on the **international stage** by powerful actors. Because of this, the government approaches climate change as a **foreign policy issue** and has less incentive to consult civil society on the matter. CSOs also spend significant time and energy **responding to international trends** and understanding how it impacts their work and geography, deprioritising local trends and the need to harmonise those with their vision. Wider landscape level trends, also observed globally, like **post-truth politics**, rise of **fake news and misinformation,** polarisation and hyper-nationalism also mean that this dynamic plays out against CSOs. These landscape trends create conditions for more popular rather than scientific basis for policy making, deepening the challenges for visible CSOs in this dynamic.

Strategies for breaking this pattern: The key to addressing this dynamic is leveraging strategic communications as a critical tool for trust building and countering disinformation. Climate action CSOs might also benefit from critically engaging with and challenging existing narratives, as well as being better prepared for crisis driven reactive communications.

6. DEVALUED COLLABORATION

Collaboration is not valued or resourced which leads to increased competition.

System archetypes at play: fixes that fail
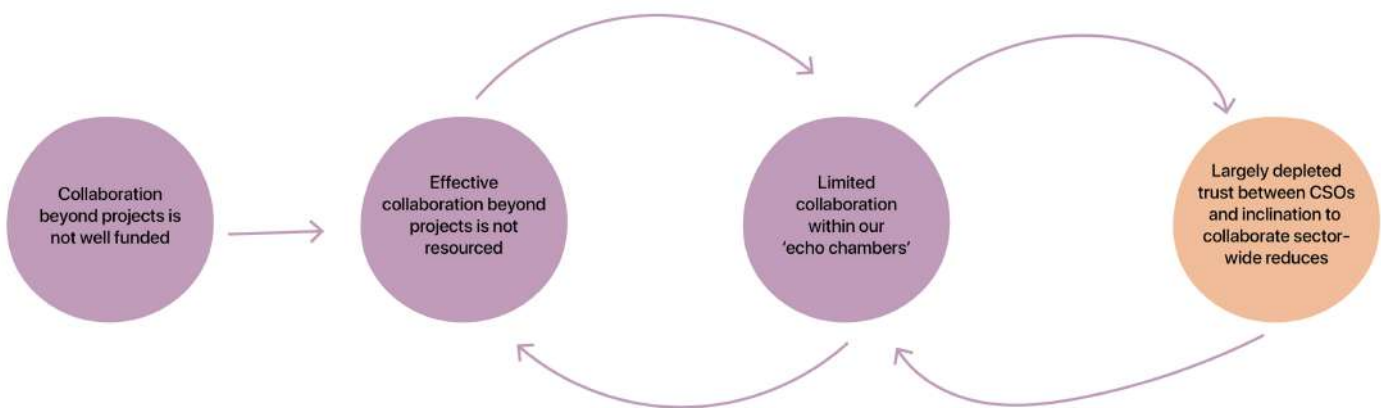
"All funders believe that collaborations work, yet very few of them fund truly-collaborative platforms; there is a (wrongly placed) belief that CSOs have enough resources to fund their own time in running and participating in such collaborations"

6. DEVALUED COLLABORATION

The Dynamic: Complex issues require collaborative efforts and yet it is often **difficult to make a case** for resourcing collaborations. Even when funding for collaboration is available, it often excludes time and resources for **critical soft-activities with intangible outcomes** like **trust building**, governance model development, creating the feeling of a team and establishing protocols for dealing with conflict. Even when CSOs come together to work on collaborative multi-year projects, often driven by the primary **motivation of coping** with the funding landscape, they seldom step out of the **bubble of similar worldviews**, reinforcing the **blind spots** that exist in their individual work. This dynamic interacts closely with and reinforces the dynamic on trust, as eroding trust among CSOs incentivises further **competition over collaboration**. An inability to look at market based approaches, often becomes a compounding factor to the competition for funding.

Strategies for breaking this pattern: We are witnessing an increasing recognition of the intersectionality of agendas which is driving the realisation that we need to collaborate across different agendas like mitigation, adaptation, livelihood, gender and social justice. COVID-19 has opened doors to new ways of collaborating on existing issues and there are examples of new networks emerging (e.g. the newly formed National Coalition for Natural Farming that is looking at intersecting agendas of agriculture and climate change). We are also observing greater ability to collaborate with subnational actors (local and state governments), corporates and businesses. There are also more intermediary CSOs and organisations who are bringing the climate action lens to other aspects of development such as health, education, agriculture and livelihoods, thus, expanding the network and discussions beyond the usual suspects.

7. HAMPERED FLOWS OF KNOWLEDGE AND INFORMATION

Structure of knowledge and information flows around climate action among different stakeholders in the climate action system does not facilitate opportunities to drive collective impact.

System archetype at play: limits to growth
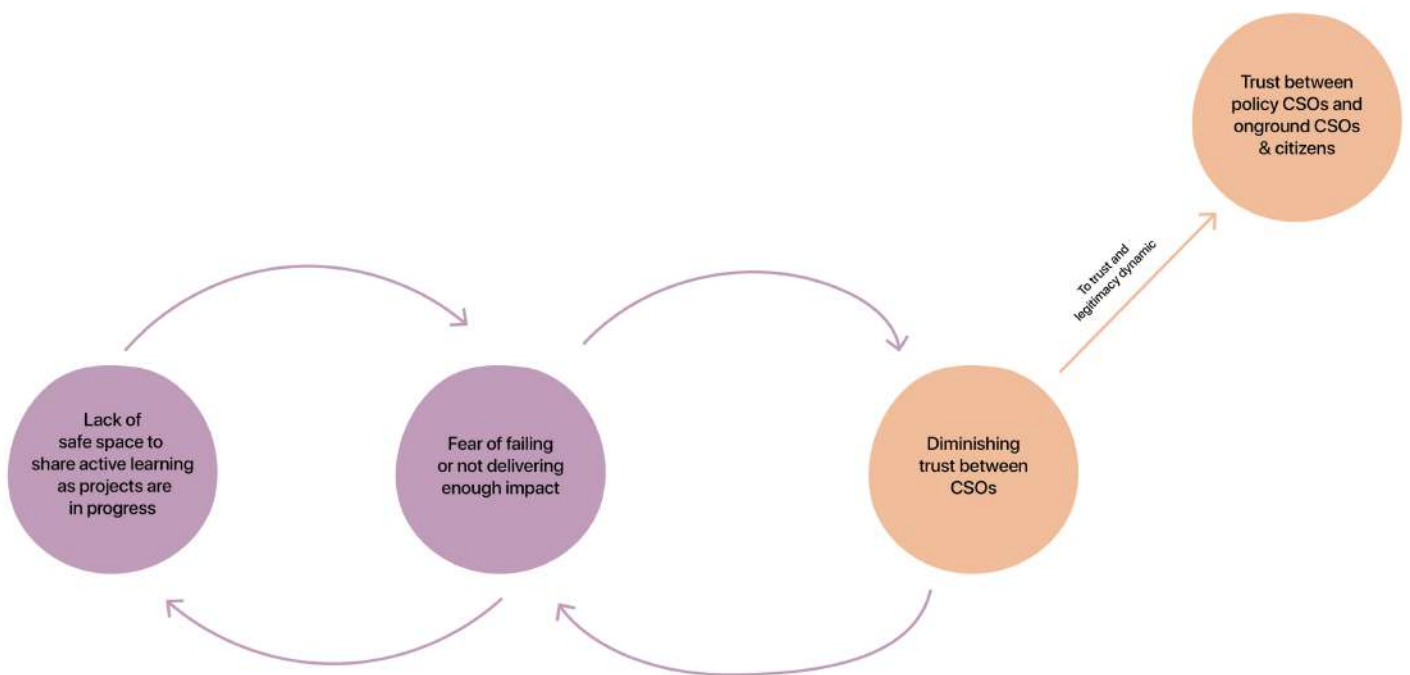
"There are many opportunities for us to share success stories and best practices, but we are very hesitant to share our failures and what we learnt from them; in my opinion, one learns a lot more from them"

7. HAMPERED FLOWS OF KNOWLEDGE AND INFORMATION

The Dynamic: The information flows in the climate action system play out on two axes - among CSOs and between CSOs and the wider system. Both kinds of information flows are **structured in ways that disincentive greater collective impact** on climate change.

When it comes to information flows among CSOs, as a result of some of the earlier discussed dynamics, there is **very little safe space** to share learnings from projects or programs that are in progress. We usually wait to share information in the form of a finished report, in a one-time event, rather than keeping **open live spaces** on projects for ongoing discussions. This is largely driven by **resource constraints** as well as a fear around failing early in public and ends up deteriorating trust among CSOs even more. These become missed opportunities for learning and reflections as projects are underway, especially around learning quickly from what does not work, and reduce applicability of 'best practices' while they are still relevant for the change system.

When it comes to information flows between CSOs and the wider system, there are no established channels of information flows between the grassroots levels of action and the national/sub-national scale where policies are framed. While we are witnessing examples of knowledge networks rooted in grassroots work (e.g. Vikalp Sangam) springing up in the system, they aren't necessarily backed with resources, which is disabling their potential for impact. Lack of publicly available and accessible open government data (e.g. nature and types of subsidies on energy, or public expenditure related to existing climate sensitive and relevant actions) also serves as a challenge for CSO program design. The technical nature of climate change discourse allows for stakeholders like businesses and governments to only consult domain experts for decision-making, without integrating local-traditional knowledge of the people often represented by grassroot civil society organisations. This is creating a class of experts who do not necessarily acknowledge work that has already been done by civil society without the label of 'climate action'. This also encourages more centralised decision-making on one hand, while creating a lock-in situation for grassroot organisation on the other hand, by further exclusion of different kinds of local-traditional knowledge systems from mainstream climate action discourse.

Strategies for breaking this pattern: Some effective ways around this dynamic are prioritising internal comms and learning, broadcasting and sharing learnings (especially from failure) in a timely post hoc manner as well as establishing bidirectional connectivity with constituents, stakeholders. Timely flows of knowledge and information between elements of the system (inc. policy influencers - grassroots) will have significant benefits.