

Synthesis

KOFF Roundtable, December 2021

“Against all odds: Making space for peace(building)”

Author: Chiara Lanfranchi, Intern KOFF/swisspeace



Academia is increasingly interested in the question of where peace takes place. Scholars have started to address the role of "space" in peacebuilding. How is peace shaped by space and vice versa? This "spatial turn in peacebuilding" moves away from the assumption of a linear development of transitions from war to peace. According to this understanding, peace and war are intertwined and often coexist.

However, this spatial turn in peacebuilding has mainly been discussed in academia. In the wake of this debate, we wanted to make space for a discussion about the relevance of "space" in practical peacebuilding and in what ways member organisations of the Swiss Platform for Peacebuilding KOFF are confronted with "space" in their daily peacebuilding work.

Over the past years, members of the KOFF Platform have experienced and examined what it means when the space for civil society shrinks. At the same time, many organizations and individuals around the world have adapted old and developed new strategies and approaches to continue their work for peace against all odds.

Against this background, the KOFF platform hosted a roundtable to highlight the creative, persistent, and innovative ways in which civil society «makes space» for peacebuilding.

Speakers

- **Una Hombrecher**, thematic advisor, [HEKS/EPER](#)
- **Stephanie Hofer**, Program Officer, [cfd – The feminist Peace Organization](#)
- **Gorana Radovanović**, Program Officer, [HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation in Serbia](#)
- **Claske Dijkema**, Senior Researcher, [swisspeace](#)
- **Kim-Mai Vu**, Advocacy Coordinator, [PBI Switzerland](#)

Moderator: Anna Leissing, Head of Policy & Platform at [swisspeace](#) and Head of [KOFF](#)

Facilitator: Chiara Lanfranchi & Andrea Grossenbacher, [swisspeace](#) and [KOFF](#)

Questions discussed

- What are the peacebuilding challenges related to shrinking space for civil society?
- In this context, how do KOFF member organizations make space for peace(building)?
- What support and strategies are needed to make and protect the space for peacebuilding (e.g., alliances, methods, approaches, and conditions)?

Summary

Part 1: Input about shrinking civic space

The first part of the roundtable focused on the phenomenon of shrinking space for civil society. Numerous studies indicate that this very space has been declining worldwide in the past few years. Several KOFF member organizations and their partners struggle with this phenomenon in different contexts, including Switzerland. In this context, the KOFF platform launched a Joint Learning Process on Civic Space for Action in Honduras, which showed how the political space is getting restricted and how this affects civil society's political, physical, mental, and emotional space.

Una Hombrecher presented the study "Development needs civil society" - produced jointly by HEKS/EPER and two Act Alliance partners - and illustrated how impactful restrictions on civic spaces are. Shrinking civic spaces hinder social & economic development due to their relevance to produce data, link and connect different stakeholders, and ensure the voices of vulnerable people are being heard. In other words, civic spaces are essential to reduce inequality and ensure inclusion.

Furthermore, the study showed that civic space is not shrinking equally. For example, while digital space offers new opportunities, marginalised groups are often more excluded from this expanding online space than others.

In general, the study examined how the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 1,5,8,10,15,16) are affected by constraints on civic spaces. Una explained that SDG 16 on promoting peace, justice and strong institutions is in danger when civil society space is restricted by intimidation, stigmatisation, criminalisation and delegitimation of marginalised groups. Civil society organisations (CSOs) are afraid to speak out and are constantly busy protecting and defending themselves. This threat consumes so much energy that they can no longer do their actual work in mitigating structural violence.

Una Hombrecher shortly explained ways how to expand civic space in a context of shrinking space: 1) strengthening data collection and capacity for advocacy, 2) building connections and alliances with other stakeholders, 3) organizing training to shape general discourse, also with local duty bearers.

Part 2: Fishbowl conversation on "making space for peace(building)"

In the second part of the roundtable, we went a step further and focused on the different approaches, strategies and projects that actually create "space for peace", against all odds. A wide variety of such approaches could be illustrated through the inputs of the conversation starters. The following summary of these inputs outlines how diverse the role of "space" can be in practical peacebuilding.

Claske Dijkema reported on a marginalised neighbourhood in Grenoble (France) that dealt with the aftermath of terrorist violence (attack on Charlie Hebdo in 2015). In this neighbourhood she conducted research for her doctoral thesis. Marginalised neighbourhoods in France have a higher concentration of immigrants than other parts of the city and are often racialised. After the terrorist attacks, in particular those considered Muslims were increasingly considered as a source of danger. Hence, their voices were silenced and their political space restricted. Muslims consequently retreated into private spaces. Another way of dealing with the lack of political space is to reclaim it by disturbing means, including violence. Against this background, Claske argues that conflict is inevitable and part of a healthy democracy. To avoid violence, we need to create space for constructive confrontation both symbolically, to be able to say certain things, and physically, to have access to safer spaces for group formation and to public space where messages can be made known to a broader audience.

Kim-Mai Vu explained how PBI accompanies human rights defenders worldwide to protect them from threats. This accompaniment creates 1) physical, 2) political, and 3) communicative space. Physical accompaniment means that the volunteers are physically present during the activities to put the aggressors in their place. Political accompaniment mainly involves lobbying at national and international levels, including local police, mayors, embassies, the UN and the Swiss government. The communicative accompaniment provides accurate information to sensitise the public and raise awareness about the human rights situation. Further, Kim-Mai mentioned Peace Brigades

International's psychosocial approach as part of their accompaniment to prevent burnout, promote self-care and mutual care for human rights defenders.

Stephanie Hofer highlighted that the feminist approach understands peace as an effort to achieve gender equality in private and public spheres, including society, culture, politics and the economy. Women's shelters are concrete examples of how cfd creates physical spaces to protect survivors of gender-based violence. However, Stephanie also points out that while these women's shelters provide a safe space, they are not sufficient for a transformative approach. Ideational spaces to ensure accountability and access to rights are essential as well, not only to provide a physical space of protection but also to enable marginalised people to speak out to authorities, communities, families, etc.

Gorana Radovanović briefly described the context in Serbia, how democratic governance is in decline, including media freedom and rule of law. The Space for civil society organisations (CSOs) is shrinking. It seems that there is an attempt to silence CSOs, especially those focused on transitional justice and war crimes against humanity. The mandate of the Act project (Helvetas - Swiss Intercooperation in Serbia) is capacity building and institutional development. It also seeks to strengthen links between CSOs and their grassroots, as most Serbian citizen know little about the work of civil society. Due to negative propaganda against CSOs, the reputation of these organisations is very bad. Therefore, CSOs try to form alliances to promote cohesion between different CSOs and work together to counter the negative image of CSOs.

After the inputs held by the conversation starter, a fruitful discussion among all participants arose. The key points of this conversation are summarized in the following section.

Key points

During the fishbowl discussion, two main issues were discussed extensively.

1) On the one hand, fundamental questions emerged early on, such as: **Who exactly is civil society? Whose space is being restricted? Which civil society is legitimated?**

Concerns were raised that the current civil society is too professionalised and disconnected from the general population. Serbia can serve as an example of this development: CSOs have a bad reputation and lost their connection to the electorate through their professionalisation. However, in other regions of the world, civil society is also increasingly losing support among the general population, leading to a delegitimisation of CSOs.

This development is somewhat contradictory to the general understanding of civil society as a collection of organisations and institutions that manifest the interests and will of the population. It is difficult to comprehend how CSOs which "bring citizens' concerns to Governments, monitor policies, and encourage political participation at the community level" (Excerpt from <https://www.un.org/en/civil-society/page/about-us>) can distance themselves so strongly from a broad population, or even be seen as delegitimised.

Furthermore, the link between civil society and social movements was discussed. In general, it became clear that formal and less formal civil society organisations should support each other and foster synergies to create space for peace(building). Civil society should be diverse and inclusive and therefore strengthen the link with grassroots movements.

2) On the other hand, we talked in depth about the **connection between physical space and ideational space.**

Spaces for peace can be physical but also ideational. They can have the purpose of allocating new meaning to a place, ensuring that people are safe from physical and emotional threats, or enabling dialogue and participation, among others. The conversations starters illustrated numerous examples of

space, including women's shelters to provide women and girls protection, people's university to provide a safe space to speak up and confront different ideas, physical accompaniment to protect human rights defenders or psychosocial support to find inner space for peace.

If we consider different approaches, strategies, and projects in peacebuilding, it becomes evident how intertwined physical and symbolic spaces are. Several participants pointed out that physical spaces such as safe spaces for marginalised groups (women's shelters, people's universities, physical accompaniment, etc.) only reach their full potential when complemented by symbolic/ political spaces and vice versa.

This consideration seems self-evident, and yet it is worth understanding the importance of both spaces and how they are interconnected.

Civil society needs space in its physical sense in order to be able to express itself at all. Physical space enables civil society to come together, organise and exchange ideas. Physical space makes statements visible and audible and gives them the necessary attention in the public sphere. Physical space is needed to build a power base and to be taken into account by more powerful actors.

However, the scope for action of civil society is equally dependent on the symbolic or political space. As Claske Dijkema illustrated with her example of Villeneuve, a physical space can be restricted as soon as a narrative changes in the media or the public sphere.

Last but not least, we referred to digital spaces, which are perceived as merely physical spaces. We discussed how they had expanded significantly through the COVID 19 pandemic. However, it was also emphasised that this space had expanded very unequally among civil society.

To conclude, we discussed different ways how organisations and individuals around the world have adapted and developed strategies and approaches to continue their work for peace, even though the space for civil society, whether physical or ideational, seems to be shrinking. The KOFF Platform will continue to promote this discourse in order to learn from the diverse experiences and knowledge available within the platform and beyond.