

Synthesis

KOFF Roundtable: Navigating Shrinking Space – Strengthening Civil Society



In April 2025, the Swiss Platform for Peacebuilding KOFF hosted the interactive Roundtable “Navigating Shrinking Space – Strengthening Civil Society” in light of the increasing obstacles for civil society all around the globe, which also affect conflict prevention and peacebuilding efforts. Participants exchanged and discussed experiences, approaches and challenges for strengthening civil society and their resilience.

Speakers:

- **Peterson Paul**, Advisor Governance and Civic Space, Helvetas
- **Una Hombreicher**, Advisor Civic Space and Conflict Transformation, HEKS/EPER
- **Sanna Vögeli**, Program Officer Mediation, swisspeace

Moderation:

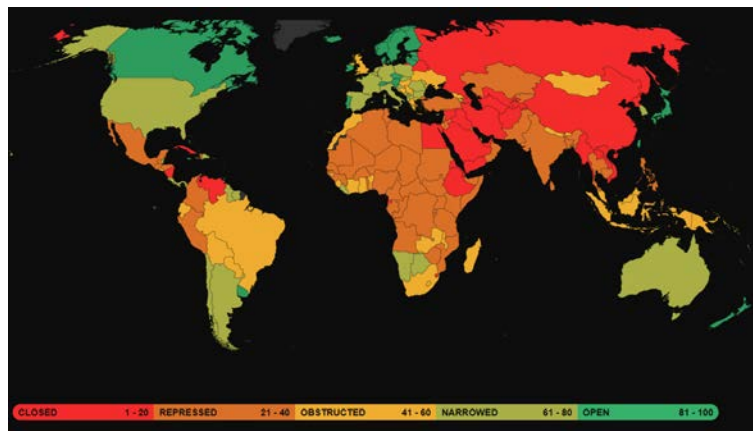
- **Cornelia Tobler**, Coordinator of the KOFF platform, KOFF/swisspeace

Organization:

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Summary

According to the 2024 State of Civil Society Report from CIVICUS, 118 countries have serious civic space restrictions with only 2.1 percent of the global population living in contexts with open civic space.¹ The type of civic space restriction varies across different world regions: While in many contexts in Asia and the Middle East for example, it can be understood as closed, civic space in most countries on the African continent is repressed or obstructed. Repressed civic space means civil society's action is significantly constrained, while obstructed civic space is characterized by being heavily contested by power holders.² The most common violations of civic space internationally are attacks, detention, prosecution or even killing of protesters, human rights defenders, and journalists, protest disruptions, use of excessive force, censorship, and criminal defamations.



Source: CIVICUS Monitor, monitor.civicus.org, accessed 28 April 2025

Considering this so-called shrinking space that is also affecting programs and projects of local and international non-governmental organizations, the KOFF Roundtable discussed the specific challenges civil societies are facing, organizational strategies to navigate this shrinking space, and approaches to strengthen civil society, on the example of a peacebuilding project in Cameroon. Moreover, the participants shared strategies to encounter the existing challenges in a solution-oriented exchange.

Key Points

Challenges for Civil Society

Three key challenges for strengthening civil society and promoting civic space are (a) the socio-political context, (b) the funding of civil society's work, and (c) the fragmentation among civil society:

(a) Socio-political context

Regarding the socio-political context, civil society is often confronted with censorship and state capture. Negative narratives on civil society organizations can hurt their standing in society. Particularly, the rise of authoritarianism is limiting space for citizens to express

¹ 2024 State of Civil Society Report, CIVICUS, March 2024, p. 8.

² "Ratings", CIVICUS Monitor, accessed 25 April 2025, <https://monitor.civicus.org/about/how-it-works/ratings/>.

their rights, including in democratic regimes where civil society is being repressed and obstructed, limiting its space for being a counter-power to government. Further, conflicts and humanitarian crises can undermine the protection and expansion of civic space such as in Haiti where the humanitarian emergency prevents civil society to express their rights. Lastly and linked to the funding challenges of civil society, the private sector can capture civil society organizations to benefit the private sector's aim. The private sector is also increasingly influencing and undermining the judiciary and promoting SLAPPs (strategic lawsuit against public participation), for example when civil society organizations or human rights defenders expose environmental pollution or human rights violations by powerful cooperations.

The Roundtable participants engaged in a solution-based exchange on possible strategies to face these socio-political challenges:

- In authoritarian contexts, a possibility is to explore what can nevertheless be done on the local level with local entities and governments for the protection and support of civil society and human rights actors.
- In countries where civil society is highly restricted by laws and bureaucratic obligations, INGOs can work with non-formal civil society and provide smaller grants to implement their activities.
- Strengthening sustainable leadership in civil society is a key element to counter the shrinking civic space. However, there is always the risk of civil society organizations being dependent on specific leaders, and in turn becoming significantly weakened once they leave the organization, at times joining government or private sector. Accordingly, a possible approach is to instead focus on organizational capacity building focusing on the structure rather than specific people. Further, it is essential to continuously analyze how capacity strengthening of organizations or individuals is influencing power dynamics within communities and civil society.
- An important dimension of building sustainable networks to counter the restriction of civic space is solidarity and support for each other. While there might be restrictions on joint actions, solidarity can still be shared across civil society actors.

(b) The funding of civil society's work

Civil society organizations and actors also face a challenging funding landscape with unflexible funding and subsidies, only hard-to-obtain core funding, and complex reporting and compliance mechanisms. Donors often work together with the same few civil society organizations, "donor-darlings", that they support. And in countries like Bosnia-Herzegovina or Georgia the government has imposed controls on funds of civil society organizations. Another alarming trend are so-called "GONGOs" - government-organized non-governmental organizations – that are created and managed by governments, and instrumentalized by them to gain access to communities and compete with common civil society organizations for funds and narratives. These developments often disadvantage especially local and small civil society organizations and lead to a formalization of civic space.

The Roundtable participants engaged in a solution-based exchange on possible strategies to face these funding challenges:

- To encounter the funding challenges of civil society, flexible funding is particularly important. As there is always a divergence between the need for flexible funding, strict donor requirements and accountability, INGOs can be an important interlocutor, engaging in trust-building with institutional donors and highlighting the importance and effectiveness of flexible funding towards donors. Further INGOs can provide a translation-function between the actions of smaller organizations and donor requirements, e.g. translating activities into required logics of intervention.
- Another possibility to confront the funding challenge is to promote funding partnerships between the local private sector and civil society organizations.

(c) The fragmentation among civil society

Lastly, when examining civic space in a certain context, a fragmentation of civil society can be observed with the absence of coalitions at the local, national or international level to reclaim civic space. In formal peace processes, for example, representation can be challenging, as some civil society groups may not feel represented by selected stakeholders. Furthermore, “GONGOS” can be a problem for uniting civil society as they often spy on actual civil society actors and report to the government, leading to further division among civil society actors. Linked to the increasing challenges in terms of funding and socio-political context, due to fragmentation, civil society organizations are in even stronger competition for funds, contributing to a lack of multi-sectoral mobilization and mutual learning, as well as self-sabotage.

The Roundtable participants engaged in a solution-based exchange on possibilities for countering the fragmentation of civil society:

- Fragmentation of civil society can be horizontal or vertical and is closely connected to other challenges like funding or the socio-political context with a multitude of factors causing fragmentation. Given the various context-specific factors linked to fragmentation, an analysis of the actor landscape is highly important, including its structure and power relations. Based on this analysis, trust- and network-building between actors can be facilitated and encouraged. Especially when cooperating with larger networks and platforms, an analysis of the civil society landscape can also be important to increase transparency, identify the interests of the members and potential “GONGOS”.
- Identifying shared elements like joint values, challenges and visions as a connector can counter fragmentation. Further, it is important for civil society actors to negotiate common values and a shared vision as it is often taken for granted that all civil society actors have the same principles and values, which might not be the case.
- International and regional frameworks like the Women, Peace and Security Agenda (WPS-Agenda) or human rights treaties can provide an important basis to advocate

for change in national systems for the protection of human rights. Further, they can support civil society actors in creating a common agenda.

- Yet, for all activities countering fragmentation and strengthening networks, safe spaces as a framework for dialogue and discussion are an essential precondition.

Strategies for Navigating the Shrinking Civic Space as INGO

Different INGOs, including HEKS/EPER, see themselves and their partners confronted with the outlined challenges in their work and projects. Based on extensive studies, field experience, and ongoing communities of practice, HEKS has developed a Guidance Note on Civic Space to translate its commitment to civil society into practice. It outlines promising approaches across six building blocks and ten action points, aiming to systematically embed civic space as a cross-cutting issue throughout its programs.

- HEKS/EPER works with civil society actors through (a) equitable partnership to achieve common goals and visions, (b) sharing skills and strengthening capabilities to promote civil society as independent actors, and (c) facilitating civil society platforms and networks to strengthen civil society's voice.³
- Six building blocks for translating the commitment to strengthening civil society into action: (1) promoting equitable partnerships and challenging colonial legacies, (2) strengthening capacities, collaboration and voices for justice, (3) ensuring supportive funding and support structures, (4) countering obstacles in public policy and discourse, (5) protecting civil society representatives, and (6) enhancing relationships through multistakeholder initiatives.⁴
- Besides these building blocks, HEKS/EPER has developed ten action points for strengthening civil society through their work: (1) analysis of civil society and civic space, (2) programmatic support for civil society and civic space, (3) diversified partnership approach including grass-root and self-determined groups, (4) strengthening civil society collaboration, (5) strengthening civil society capacities, (6) enabling funding models that prioritize flexibility and less administrative burden, (7) continuous civic space monitoring and protection, (8) local leaders for global civic rights policy, (9) dialogue and power-sharing, and (10) championing the strengthening of civil society.⁵

Peacebuilding in Cameroon: Strengthening the Role and Capacities of Civil Society

Prior to the armed conflict in the Anglophone regions in Cameroon, civil society actors were largely focused on service provisions, for example in various humanitarian crises, which

³ see HEKS/EPER (n.d.) Strengthening Civil Society and Civic Space. Guideline on HEKS/EPER's cross cutting commitment. Available at https://heks.sharepoint.com/:f/s/GC-MEAL/Euge5zqFg8IPtsVJZ2woE_IBrvNSxSfCXiFfKWplgY9Gtw?e=rkfEww.

⁴ Find more information on the building blocks in HEKS/EPER (n.d.). Strengthening Civil Society and Civic Space.

⁵ Find more information on the actions points in HEKS/EPER (n.d.). Strengthening Civil Society and Civic Space.

implied a lack of specific expertise in the fields of peacebuilding, dialogue and mediation. To plan a future peace process in an inclusive and participatory manner from the beginning, swisspeace was asked to contribute by strengthening the role and capacities of civil society in peacebuilding and advise the senior mediator on civil society inclusion and participation. In this context, swisspeace supported through the following activities:

- swisspeace provided (a) capacity-strengthening and tailor-made trainings based on requests and the actual needs, (b) space for peer-exchange within the conflict-context on the local and national level and with peace actors from other conflict-affected contexts outside Cameroon, and (c) advice and accompaniment through strategic partnerships with local civil society organizations, including core and flexible funding, trainings, and access to (international) networks.
- Fragmentation of civil society, competition over funding and leadership have led to a lot of distrust. Therefore, building bridges among different civil society actors and providing space for dialogue was essential. With this in mind, swisspeace tried to facilitate and allow dialogues as part of every activity, such as the trainings. swisspeace further created a “community of practice” in Cameroon, for regular exchange and dialogue among different community leaders, including religious leaders, women leaders, human rights actors and businesses that expanded over time with other key multipliers and still exists independently of swisspeace.