

Shrinking Spaces – How does it affect me and my work?

On 06.05.2022 some Alumni met to share what a ‘shrinking space’ means to them and how it affects their work individually and on organizational level?

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The alumni from Asia, Africa, Latin America, Mena Region and Europe shared similar understanding of the shrinking space, among them: bureaucratic hurdles, administrative and legal restrictions for NGO work, limited space for dissent and democratic participation, self-censorship due to intimidation and fear, or even smear campaigns directed towards the civil society and/or criminalization of solidarity. These different manifestations of shrinking spaces can affect civil society actors by either challenging their legitimacy in the eyes of the public or by draining resources and therefore limiting their efficacy. Shrinking spaces is therefore a deliberate attempt at excluding civil society actors from public spaces.

The shrinking space has affected the present Alumni in many ways. People felt always being watched, it reduced mobility and increased over-all feelings of powerlessness. Furthermore, it created uncertainties on how communication should be handled and managed, what information can be published, and fears that funding would be reduced. Often these things reinforce each other and create a chilling effect on civil society. Some believed that in their context, the space has not only shrunk but altogether closed.

The alumni also recognized that members of the civil society are affected by the shrinking space differently: local/international staff, by gender, or by the nature of work or by position. Especially INGOs have a particular role in that regard: they can be targeted by shrinking spaces or be a conduit for targeting their local partner organizations, but they can also be unintentionally complicit in the shrinking of spaces by being overly cautious for example and adding to the exclusion of certain actors. As they are usually comparatively less affected by shrinking spaces, INGOs can also benefit from shrinking spaces in that they can have preferential access to platforms and funds. Donor thus have an important role to play as well.

The exchange was ended on ways to look forward e.g.:

- Immediate response and protection strategies
- Strategies to “re-legitimize” civil society actors
- Strategies to proactively advance own narrative

Colleagues also looked at the possibility of changing the messaging, very concretely away from overly technical language, to more value-based communication that can resonate with audiences: instead of using direct words e.g. “corruption” rather describe the future that will not be realized (a kindergarten will not be built). Or rather than explaining what the measures are, focus on the changed condition when the project is successful in attaining its objectives.

There was the strong wish to get back together and exchange further. This will likely happen in the beginning of 2023. We will get in touch with the Alumni Network once a new X-Change on this will take place. However, if you wish to come together sooner, do not hesitate getting in touch with us.

Further reading material to download/webinars to watch:

Transnational Institute. (2017). *On “Shrinking Space”: A Framing Paper*. Amsterdam: TNI.

<https://www.tni.org/en/file/10293/download?token=LpKsCFlu>

X-Change by Alumni for Alumni: Academy for Conflict Transformation – 06.05.2022 – Shrinking Spaces- How does it affect me and my work?

Gomez, K. & Coombes, T. (Eds.) (2019). *Be The Narrative: How changing the narrative could revolutionize what it means to do human rights.*

https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5adfc952ec4eb743393ebbbd/t/5dd02977b9f8cf5cdf663572/1573923264828/BeTheNarrative_2019.pdf

Ong, J. C.; Tintiango, J. & Fallorina, R. (2021). *Human Rights in Survival Mode: Rebuilding Trust And Supporting Digital Workers in the Philippines.* The Asia Foundation.

<https://chr.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Human-Rights-in-Survival-Mode-Report.pdf>

Rodríguez-Garavito, C. & Gomez, K. (2018). *Rising to the Populist Challenge: A New Playbook for Human Rights Actors.* Dejusticia.

https://www.dejusticia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Rising-to-the-populist-challenge_1.pdf

Anat Shenker-Osorio, *Winning Progressive Victories in the Time of Right-Wing Populism*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d9QJSJGp8E>

Patrick Reinsborough, *Movement Building Through Narrative Strategy*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yB0j4q7pBa0>

Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation. (2020). *Responding to the Contested Space for Civil Society.*

<https://www.shareweb.ch/site/DDLGN/Documents/SDC%20Guidance%20sheet%20Civil%20Society%20Space.pdf> Page 4: among other recommendations: Use bilateral, multilateral or regional policy channels to engage with governments in favor of an enabling environment for civil society

- International advocacy on shrinking space towards donor (states)
As an important opportunity for INGOs to pressure donor countries to implement existing OECD-DAC recommendations.
 - The DAC-CSO Reference Group has formed the thematic working group on the DAC Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society on September 2021, to monitor ODA spending on enabling civil society and protecting civic space, the implementation of the DAC Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society, joined-up programming and the performance of implementing partners of the Enabling Civil Society Recommendation.
 - [DAC and Enabling Civil Society | DAC-CSO Reference Group](#)
- These recommendations can be used as a basis for dialogue with states and donor agencies: [21a29b_28465aa1649c4f35aa726fa18146e7d4.pdf \(usfiles.com\)](#) >> page
 - 6, PILLAR ONE: RESPECTING, PROTECTING AND PROMOTING CIVIC SPACE
- Report (so far only in Italian): LUISA CHIODI, FAZILA MAT, SERENA EPIS, *La società civile italiana: da bersaglio ad antidoto alla crisi della democrazia?*, OBCT/CILD

Funders' Initiative for Civil Society. (2020). *Rethinking Civic Space in an Age of Intersectional Crises: A Briefing for Funders.*

<http://www.fundersinitiativeforcivilsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/FICS-Rethinking-Civic-Space-Report-FINAL1.pdf>

A few of the links with further information that were being shared are:

Website of an organization in Kenya: www.hakiyetu.ke

Website of an organization advancing creative human rights narratives in the Philippines:

<https://dakila-dakila.nationbuilder.com/>

Websites of organizations advocating hope-based communications:

<https://www.hope-based.com/>

<https://wiseowl.ph/>

Guideline to hope-based communications: <https://www.openglobalrights.org/hope-guide/>

We thank everybody for the exchange, it is wonderful to have all your expertise from different places and to exchange on your thoughts and experiences. We invite our alumni to our X-Changes on different topics around once a month. If you have a question for the alumni community, a project you would like to present, or any sort of doubt (at your work) that you would like to discuss, you can always contact us via: academy@forumZFD.de, we are grateful to hear from you!