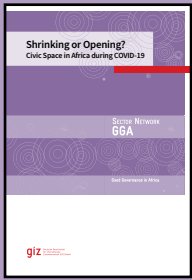




Shrinking or Opening?

Civic Space in Africa during COVID-19

HANDBOOK FOR CIVIL SOCIETY
ORGANISATIONS IN AFRICA



Over the last 15 years, the world has experienced a decline in democratic freedom. In 2021, almost 89% of the global population lived in countries with severe restrictions on civic rights, including limitations on the freedoms of expression, association and peaceful assembly.

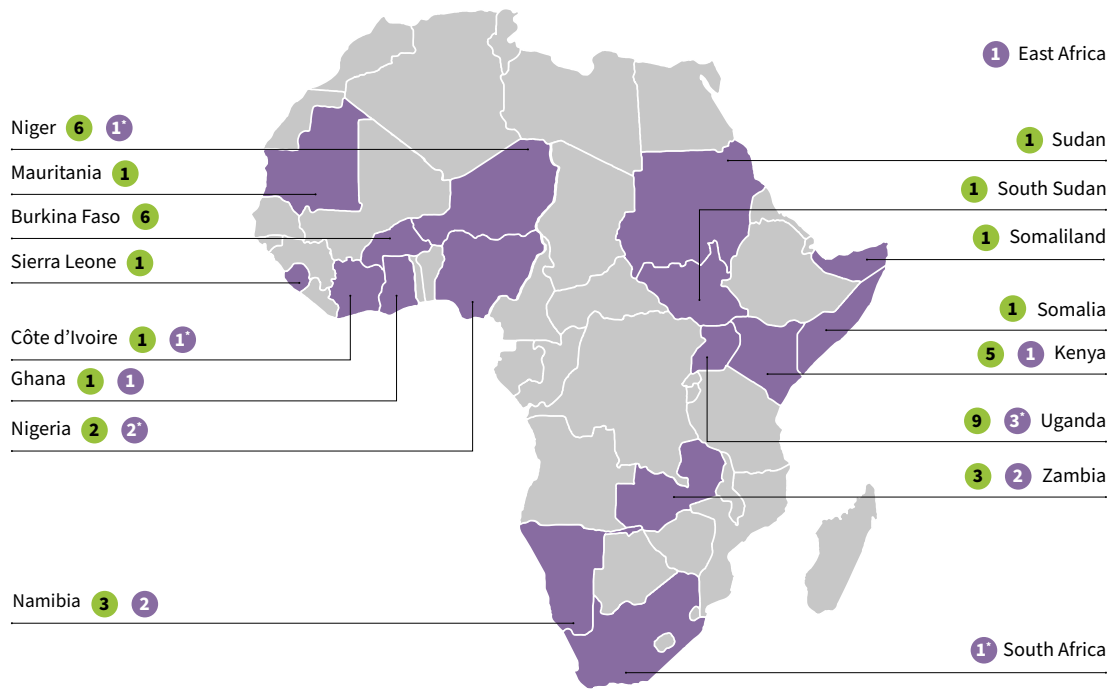
Although many of the issues surrounding the question of shrinking civic space existed prior to the pandemic, recent reports indicate that the way the health emergency has been governed has exacerbated the trend of closing civic space in Africa.

Against the background of shrinking space, this handbook shows how civic space in Africa has been affected by the COVID pandemic. The information has been taken from the GIZ publication *Shrinking or Opening? Civic Space in Africa during COVID-19*.

To investigate the question of shrinking civic space, two approaches were adopted. First, a survey was conducted through a structured questionnaire. Then academics and practitioners were invited to contribute chapters to the book.

This handbook distils insights gained from the survey of 41 CSOs in 14 countries across Africa as well as from ten chapter contributions from the book, *Shrinking or Opening? Civic Space in Africa during COVID-19*.

Figure 1: Countries and regions covered by the survey and the book



* Covered in brief in Chapter 1 of *Shrinking or Opening? Civic Space in Africa during COVID-19*. Two CSOs asked for the country in which they operate to remain anonymous.

CSOs throughout Africa have used their extensive experience in managing limited resources and dealing with often adverse governments to connect, find new modes of communication and operation, and to develop strategies to maintain the delivery of support to their communities.

CSOs proved their invaluable role in providing essential services and support to communities, countries and societies at large through the relentless continuation of their operations under trying conditions.

CHANGING CIVIC SPACE

It was possible for a CSO to report both change and no change if, for example, they felt that civic space was changing at one level of governance but not at another.

Figure 2: Changing civic space in sub-Saharan Africa

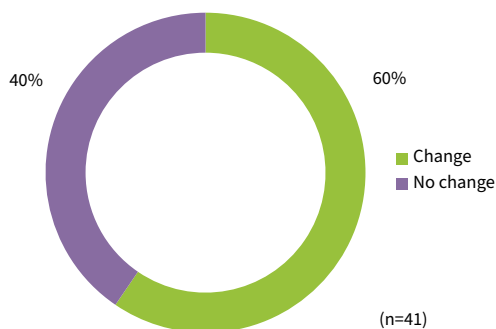
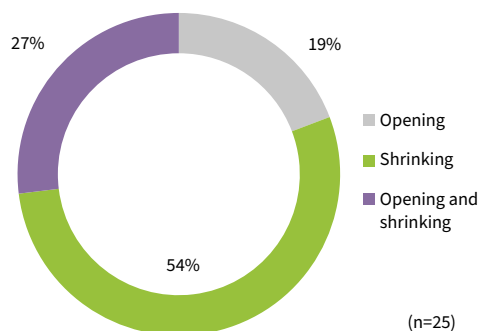


Figure 3: Opening or shrinking civic space in sub-Saharan Africa



CIVIC SPACE IS OFTEN SIMULTANEOUSLY OPENING AND CLOSING

Despite government regulations introduced to control the spread of COVID-19, as well as the abuse of those regulations for political purposes in some countries, civic space should be regarded as one that is fluid.

As was to be expected, all CSOs, without exception, reported curtailment, and at times cessation, of their activities due to restrictions imposed by their respective governments in efforts to slow the spread of the virus and to protect health services.

Despite the operational challenges faced by all CSOs as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, several CSOs reported no change in civic space. However, there was evidence that conditions worsened for those CSOs operating in countries in which civic space was already under threat prior to the pandemic.

There is no obvious pattern to be detected from the survey with regard to the opening or closing of civic space in the 14 countries in Africa from which responses were received. Factors impacting on the closing and opening of civic space are unpacked in more detail on the next page.



Basic services sector

In countries where governments rely to a much greater degree on CSOs to provide basic services to citizens, the relationship between the government and CSOs is relatively productive, and civic space has expanded as governments became stretched during the crisis brought about by COVID-19. Examples include Burkina Faso, Niger and South Sudan.



Governance sector

In some countries, the relationship between CSOs and government is more politicised and more adversarial, particularly with CSOs working in the governance sector. As a result, pre-COVID shrinking civic space has shrunk further during the pandemic in countries such as Uganda and Zambia.



Level of governance

Civic space may contract at the national level but expand at the local level, or vice versa. This is more likely to occur in countries that have successfully transitioned to devolved modes of governance (e.g. the devolution of governance to the county level in Kenya).



Effects of digitisation

Lockdowns and restrictions on gatherings and movement do not automatically imply a closing of civic space, especially as new modes of digital communication and engagement were normalised during the pandemic. Digital communication makes possible a continuance of interaction despite limitations placed on physical space.

Most CSOs acknowledged the importance and value of digital communication technologies and saw the need to incorporate platforms such as Zoom to maintain operations, to engage with stakeholders and to deliver services to communities.

However, those who have neither the means or the skills to participate in digital communication networks did not receive the benefits made possible by digital communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this sense, civic space has closed.



Resilience and agency

CSOs have shown resilience due to increasing levels of professionalisation in the sector. CSOs and citizens responded to and resisted the closure of civic space through new and innovative approaches to protecting civil rights in the face of the COVID-19 restrictions. See examples in the 'Lessons learnt' section.





CLOSING CIVIC SPACE

As reported in several countries, COVID-19 restrictions had negative effects that resulted in the closing of civic space. For example:

- In countries where the pandemic coincided with national elections, various CSOs report that the pandemic was used to impose additional restrictions on their activities and movement as a ploy to restrict electioneering on the part of opposition parties.
 - In one country, campaigns advocating for quotas of female representation in government lost support because of lack of funds.
- A frequently occurring issue was that of who qualifies as an essential worker. In many cases, because CSO staff were not classified as essential workers by their governments, the delivery of services was severely curtailed during the pandemic. For example:
 - CSO staff offering services for women facing gender-based violence were not seen as essential workers and could not assist women in need.
 - Those working with persons with disabilities (PWDs) were also not treated as essential workers, which meant that only very limited services could reach PWDs.



WHAT DETERMINED WHETHER CIVIC SPACE OPENED OR SHRANK DURING COVID-19?

1. How national governments defined 'essential services';
2. The extent to which a government depended on CSOs for the delivery of essential services;
3. What sector CSOs work in, with health often more open than governance;
4. Whether an initiative was in progress and had to be halted; and
5. Whether an initiative could be mobilised because of the changing conditions brought about by the pandemic.



LESSONS LEARNT

LESS RELIANCE ON DONOR FUNDING

Some CSOs saw the challenging environment to secure donor funding during the pandemic as a learning opportunity to:

- Rely less on international technical and financial partners for support and funding;
- Introduce new, self-funded programme activities to contribute to the COVID-19 response;
- Develop alternative strategies for mobilising resources by, for example, working more closely with local government;
- Set up alternative models of financing such as community saving schemes; and
- Put aside contingency funds for unexpected future crises.

BETTER USE OF TECHNOLOGY

Given the challenges of in-person communication during the national lockdowns, CSOs adapted their approach by:

- Communicating with colleagues and clients through online platforms, such as Zoom, and instant messaging services, such as WhatsApp; and
- Using community talk radio as an effective substitute for larger gatherings; and
- Resorting to telephone calls and meeting in safe open spaces such as gardens.

PROJECT ADAPTABILITY

In the face of reduced funding, CSOs learnt that diversification, flexibility, adaptation and innovation are critical for their work in the future, for example by:

- Dividing their activities into smaller groups of no more than ten participants and two facilitators;
- Finding new niches for advocacy;
- Conducting audits and surveys of their clients' real needs; and
- Finding opportunities for new community projects, such as farming to increase food security.

IMPROVED ADMINISTRATION

Some CSOs reported that the pandemic helped them sharpen their administrative procedures by:

- Developing broader risk-management plans; and
- Strengthening their organisational and governance structures.

NETWORKS AND COLLABORATION

Several CSOs reported on the importance of developing broader alliances, associations and networks between national and regional CSOs to better engage governments and regional economic bodies with maximum influence, and to find solutions for common problems.

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GIZ Head Offices:

Friedrich-Ebert-Allee 36 + 40
53113 Bonn, Deutschland

Dag-Hammarskjöld-Weg 1–5
65760 Eschborn, Deutschland

T +49 228 44 60-0

T +49 61 96 79-0

F +49 228 44 60-17 66

F +49 61 96 79-11 15

E info@giz.de

I www.giz.de

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