CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Civil Society Responses to Changing Civic Spaces

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1 Introduction

We are currently in the middle of multiple global crises that leave us with a different outlook than the optimism that characterized the decades of the 1990s and early 2000s. The belief in continuous global democratic and developmental progress has been replaced by concerns for irreversible climate change, global geopolitical instability, democratic decline, new manifestations of authoritarian populism, and a reversal of developmental gains in human rights, health, education, and welfare (CIVICUS, 2021;

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IDEA, 2021; UNDP, 2022). While the contribution of civil society for democratization and development is seen as more important than ever, civil society actors promoting inclusion and diversity are experiencing increasing pressure and constraints on their space of action. Additionally, the sphere of public action, mobilizing, and organizing is increasingly, or at least more visibly, occupied by civil society actors and citizens that advocate for nationalism and exclusion, supporting neopopulist authoritarian leaders, and harassing those defending inclusive democracy. Such groups are vocal in social media platforms and use diverse strategies to re-interpret principles such as freedom of speech.

Increasing constraints on the democratic sectors of civil society have been described as and analysed through the notion of *shrinking civic space*. The term civic space can be traced back to legal and human rights discourses and is often defined based on the realization of certain civic freedoms such as the right of association, assembly, and expression (Buyse, 2018). Sometimes, civic space has been used interchangeable with the notion of civil society (Popplewell, 2018), but in most cases it resonates more with the notion of 'enabling environments' for civil society used in development policy discourses in reference to the conditions to which civil society operates. Therefore, the general starting point of the book is to understand civic spaces as societal spaces where diverse practices by a variety of civil society actors occurs and where a multiplicity of civil society responses to institutional and informal constraints in different contexts appear. This point of departure is premised on a need to nuance our conceptual and analytical understanding about the dynamics between civic space and civil society actors and practices.

This book is a result of several conference panels coordinated by the editors in their role of conveners of the Citizenship and Civil Society in Development working group in the European Association of Development Research and Training Institutions (EADI) since the pre-pandemic year 2019 until 2021. It offers a timely contribution to debates concerning democracy and its decline, changing civic spaces, and civil society action by providing theoretically based and empirically embedded analyses of different civil society actors' responses to changes in civic spaces in various contexts. From the outset, each author was requested to specify the characteristics of civil society actors, settings constraining and enabling their action, and analyse the various responses performed in the context the chapter discusses. The outcome was a rich variety of theoretical definitions and empirical insights drawing not only from development

studies but also from academic fields such as studies on democracy and civil society. Before introducing the individual chapters, this Introduction provides a brief review on recent debates to underscore the relevance of the topic of the book.

2 Civic Spaces and Civil Society Responses: Global Trends and Debates

Several global trends have intensified the need to engage with debates on civic space in development discourses. For the purposes of this book, we focus on three interrelated tendencies and discussions: the decline of democracy; the introduction of the civic space concept in development policies and practices along with that of civil society; and the monitoring and measurement of changes in democracy and civic space, which is informed by (and inform) contemporary global debates concerning liberal democracy and international development.

The global belief in democratization strengthened after the dismantling of authoritarian communist systems in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and the intensified spread of ideas and institutions of liberal democracy. These historical moments were seen as part of a 'third wave of democratization' (Huntington, 1991) and nothing less than 'the end of history' (Fukuyama, 1992). Integral in these shifts was a firm belief in the emergence and maintenance of vibrant civil societies within the new spaces created by the adoption of principles of liberal democracy, which subsequently shaped international development agendas at the time. Framed by the optimistic outlook of democratic and developmental progress, donors allocated a wealth of aid budgets for democratization in the global South, combined with conditionalities related to institutional and political reforms (Hermes & Lensink, 2001; Stokke, 1995). Gradually, support for civil society rather than the state was considered a more effective way to enhance democracy, and increased funding was channelled to civil society organizations (CSOs) in the countries of collaboration (Banks & Bukenya, 2022; Jennings, 2013). International development agendas for 'good governance' emphasized advocacy and lobbying activities, and the human rights-based approach stressed the support for mobilizing and strengthening citizens engagement for the realization of human rights (Hickey & Mitlin, 2009).

Since the early 2000s, however, evidence also pointed towards reversing transitions; from democracy to non-democratic regimes in what

Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) describe as a 'third wave of autocratization'. New movements demanding democratic reforms, such as those emerging during the so-called Arab spring in early 2010s, were partly defeated, co-opted, or violently repressed by regimes (Glasius & Pleyers, 2013; Lesch, 2011), and some electoral democracies re-adapted autocratic features (Becker, 2021; Pospieszna & Pietrzyk-Reeves, 2022). The weakening of democratic institutions and changes from democratic towards hybrid and authoritarian regimes were initially seen to be prevalent in young democracies and low-income countries (Erdmann, 2011). Recently, we have also witnessed attacks against democratic principles and institutions in countries traditionally identified as harbingers of democracy, such as the United States (Arvanitopoulos, 2022). Nationalistic and populist political parties have meanwhile gained increasing support across Europe with messages against inclusive societies (Pauwels, 2014). Russia is a striking case of a decline of an incipient democracy back to authoritarianism, violent silencing of dissent, controlling the media, and most recently, justifying military invasion of its neighbours. The COVID-19 pandemic was also used as a pretext by many states to impose special restrictions on meetings and rallies of civil society groups and political opposition (CIVICUS, 2021; Pleyers, 2020). While this book mainly focuses on development discourses and global South contexts, the examples above show that challenges to democracy are a global concern and not specific to the global South (Strachwitz & Toepler, 2022).

A second trend we observe is how civic space has become central in global development discourses alongside the emphasis on civil society. In 2021, the OECD/DAC adopted a *Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society in Development Co-operation and Humanitarian Assistance*[1] where the objective is to support 'DAC members and other development cooperation and humanitarian assistance providers to enhance how they address civic space and work with civil society actors'. This international standard uses both the notions 'enabling civil society' and stresses the importance of 'respecting, protecting, and promoting civic space in line with rights to the freedoms of peaceful assembly, association, and expression'.

So far, however, international development actors seem to have had an ambiguous influence on the enabling environments for civil societies and

[1] See: https://legalinstruments.oecd.org/Instrument%20s/instruments/OECD-LEGAL-5021.

civic spaces. They may have been potential enablers and encouragers of practices related to human rights and good governance, and thus, facilitated an extension of civic space in authoritarian contexts (e.g. Mutua, 2009). But Jennings (2013) argues that although the above-mentioned emphasis on good governance and support to progressive civil society actors may have opened up space for human rights and advocacy, it also meant that regimes became more interested in restricting their actions. Subsequently, global funding flows have become a central concern in contemporary debates about shrinking civic space, to the extent that political regimes seek to regulate and sometimes restrict funding of CSOs. Bromley et al. (2020) show that regulating and restricting international funding for CSOs has become a widespread tool for authoritarian regimes to restrict civil society actors, especially those engaged with democracy and rights, doomed as 'too politically intrusive' (Carothers, 2016: 358).

Scholars have pointed to the ambivalent responses by donor countries to these and other restrictive measures. Brechenmacher and Carothers (2019: 13) argue that even if donor countries are concerned with the legal, bureaucratic, and rhetoric means to restrict civic space in the countries of collaboration, they have only selectively addressed these challenges, perhaps due to other geopolitical or business interests in countries with (semi-)authoritarian regimes.

Donor-recipient power relations and the imposition of donor agendas thus remain problematic, and not only in the eyes of political elites critical towards international funding of dissenting voices. Evidence also suggests that local mobilization and networks have been more decisive in civil society actors' successful resistance to proposed regulatory restrictions, while international actors have played varied, and not necessarily important roles (Berger-Kern et al., 2021; Brechenmacher & Carothers, 2019). Donor agendas and funding regulatory frameworks can themselves be constraining and interact with national restrictions in different ways. Sander (2023: 14), for instance, argues in the context of Jordanian women NGOs, that donor practices such as imposing Western gender agendas, introducing administrative restrictions, and enhancing competition between CSOs, can 'reinforce the mechanisms put in place by the state to narrow the civic space'. By imposing Western ideas of women rights for their partner strategies, donors jeopardize their partners' aims to be identified as authentic Jordanian NGO to avoid restrictions, and with the short-term project approaches the donors push NGOs to charity

rather than advocacy, in alignment of the state aspirations related to 'acceptable' civil society practices.

It is important to keep these histories and geographies of democratization and development in mind when considering the third tendency and discussion we address: the global monitoring of the state of democracy and of 'shrinking' civic spaces. Global monitoring frameworks seek to capture general trends, as well as categorizing countries in terms of different levels or forms of democracy and civic space. Although the institutions use slightly different indicators and methodologies, they largely focus on the state of and changes in political regimes, which in turn inform the space of civic action. Freedom House, for instance,[2] places countries in three categories of realized freedoms: not free, partly free, and free, and in five regime categories from consolidated authoritarian regimes to consolidated democracy. Varieties of democracy initiatives[3] assess countries against five high-level democratic principles: electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian.[4] An intergovernmental organization, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) has established global state of democracy indices, which are based on 28 aspects of democracy, based on five core attributes of democracy: representative government, fundamental rights, checks on government, impartial administration, and participatory engagement.[5] It categorizes countries in democratic, hybrid, and authoritarian regimes, which are further divided in more nuanced groups. A global alliance of civil society organizations, CIVICUS, has reported on the state of civic space since 2012 and developed a monitoring tool,[6] which categorizes civic spaces as closed, repressed, obstructed, narrowed, or open. Although the focus is on the manoeuvring space for civil society, the categorization is based on a definition of civic space as the extent of state protections of the rights to associate, assemble, and express views and opinions. Similarly,

[2] See: https://freedomhouse.org/.

[3] See: https://www.v-dem.net/.

[4] According to their *Democracy Report 2022*, the liberal democracies that peaked in 2012 are now in lowest level in over 25 years and closed autocracies are in rise (26% of world's population), while the electoral autocracy remains most common regime covering 44% of world's population.

[5] See: https://south.euneighbours.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/the-global-state-of-democracy-2021_1-1.pdf.

[6] See: https://www.civicus.org/index.php/what-we-do/innovate/civicus-monitor.

the OECD[7] defines civic space as a 'set of legal, policy, institutional, and practical conditions necessary for non-governmental actors to access information, express themselves, associate, organize, and participate in public life, and has introduced a *Civic Space Scan* with four fundamental aspects of civic space ranging from civic freedoms to civic participation in policy.[8]

Global monitoring provides important knowledge on democratic trends and challenges that raise concerns about democratic decline and shrinking civic spaces (CIVICUS, 2021; IDEA, 2021). Yet, there are limits to monitoring frameworks both in what is being measured and the discourses underpinning them. The policies and strategies that continue to shape international development agendas and subsequently what is being monitored and how reflect continuities rather than changes in how we perceive democracy, civil society, and civic space, and their importance for development. For instance, when it comes to the broader discourses, scholars have criticized the emphasis on formal institutions of liberal democracy such as elections, rather than democratization as a relationally produced political space (Stokke, 2018) and the need to pay attention to the politics of development and democratization (Hickey & Mohan, 2004; Stokke & Törnquist, 2013; Törnquist et al., 2009).

There is also a more fundamental decolonial critique of eurocentric theories and concepts of development and democratization, with implications for how we conceptualize and analyse civic space and civil society in various locations in the global South (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2012; Escobar, 2020; Lewis, 2002; Obadare, 2013). Scholars argue that a liberal perspective on civil society as a sphere of 'free' and 'autonomous' actors operating between the state and the market is problematic. Especially, in contexts where political and economic relations are intertwined in governance systems labelled with terms such as clientelism (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2012), and neo-patrimonialism (Kelsall, 2012), civil society actors are embedded in rather than external to such networks. Moreover, Howell and Pearce (2001: 39) argue that the belief in associations as schools of democracy exemplified an 'Americanized' view on democratization in development. However, this ignores contexts characterized by exploitation and poverty; a view also held by Encarnación (2000) as it

[7] See: https://www.oecd.org/gov/open-government/civic-space.htm.

[8] See: https://www.oecd.org/gov/open-government/oecd-civic-space-scan-brochure.pdf.

proved to be more of a 'myth' than a reality. In this book, we suggest taking these critiques seriously; but rather than abandoning the notions of democracy, civil society, and civic space, we propose to explore them in a more nuanced and less normative way.

3 Conceptualizing Civil Society and Civic Space

The book discusses civil society responses to changing civic spaces. Here, as we will argue, civil society is understood to be constituted of people organizing outside government and immediate family to address joint issues and to mobilize for joint claim-making. Hence, we prefer to speak of civil society actors and practices rather than civil society as a clearly demarcated sector. Accordingly, as we will establish below, civic space is understood broadly as the legal, bureaucratic, and political environment, which enables, constrains, controls, and guides the kinds of civil society actors functioning and practices taking place within the civic space. Further, we hold that civic spaces are shaped by the political regimes and the political histories of nations. In so doing, civic space overlaps with the notion of political society, occupied by political parties and interest groups with aim to influence the government agendas. Civic space in this understanding is closer to how scholarship on the politics of democratization and development has conceptualized 'political space' of civil society actors as relationally (re)produced involving state and non-state actors, as a dynamic space continuously shaped in diverse relationships. We also see increasing mobilization of and widening spaces for illiberal populist forces, challenging a generalized narrative of 'shrinking' civic space, and guiding the discussion towards changing forms and contents of civic space.

3.1 Civil Society: From NGOs to Civil Society Actors and Practices

The notion of civil society is extensively discussed in political philosophy (for reviews see Chambers & Kymlicka, 2002; Ehrenberg, 1999; Kaviraj & Khilnani, 2001; Keane, 1998). Here, we scrutinize selected critical debates concerning civil society in development discourses and practices. In development discourse and practices, as Howell and Pearce (2001) elaborated, there has been a tension between defining civil society based on theoretical traditions emphasizing the role of people's associations in democracy (de Tocqueville, 2003) versus critical traditions focusing on civil society as a potential space for counter-hegemonic

action (Gramsci, 1971, 1978). Underlying differences in defining civil society is evident in development practices supporting, on the one hand, associations, and organizations, and on the other hand, critical social movements. In the 1960s and 1970s, the solidarity movements in the global North often supported political movements struggling for independence (Saunders, 2009) or against apartheid (Thörn, 2009) in Africa or resisting anti-democratic regimes (Kelly, 2013). From the 1990s onwards, however, the civil society support in Africa, Asia and Latin America has focused predominantly on supporting formal organizations such as NGOs.

Such NGOization of civil society has been criticized (Banks et al., 2015; Choudry & Kapoor, 2013) as it means channelling support to formal, 'professional' organizations, able to fulfil the managerial demands of the development aid system and to align their actions with their collaborators in the global North, rather than with the needs and grievances experienced in the society. Professional NGOs, often situated in urban centres and run by well-educated staff fluent in English, have been able to adopt the international human rights agendas and, most recently, also connect their work with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). They align with certain characteristics of a 'modern organization' (Meyer & Bromley, 2013), able to build strategies, plans, and monitoring and evaluation frameworks. Hence, the focus on such a restricted definition of civil society as equal to NGOs excludes other kinds of organizing and mobilizing. Therefore, the development vocabulary has adapted the term civil society organization (CSO), which captures a wider array of actors and practices, but still emphasizes their formal, organizational nature.

The negligible attention given to critical approaches on civil society in development discourses has influenced the kinds of changes support for civil society is expected to bring about. Mitlin et al. (2007) argue for a focus on transformative rather than incremental change, drawing on the Gramscian definition of civil society. Transformation here refers to the ways in which people within civil society organize, mobilize, and build alliances to contest hegemonic power, to advocate for progressive changes, to claim rights, to resist authoritarianism, and to perform a watchdog role to keep the power holders accountable. Analytically, however, the Gramscian idea does not only refer to civil society as a potential space for anti-hegemonic struggles, but at the same time, the very arena where consent to hegemony is produced (Gramsci, 1971: 12–13).

It facilitates understanding of the cultural embeddedness of hegemonies, taken-for-granted in people's 'common sense' (ibid.: 15–16) and thus, the difficulty of promoting transformative change. Authoritarian regimes do not always resort to coercion but can maintain in power through producing consent by 'softer' cultural means that secure support, as well as mobilize growing support for authoritarian populism, as Scoones et al. (2018) discuss in rural contexts.

The opportunities for transformative claims within civil society are related to the degree of democracy, state capacities, and political regimes, that can repress the transformative initiatives with varying exercises of power (van der Borgh & Terwindt, 2014). Here the dynamics between civil and political society becomes relevant. Political society is often understood to be comprised of political parties, interparty alliances, and elected leaders (Keane, 1998: 48), whom civil society actors can support, contest, monitor, or influence through advocacy. In democratic societies, there are usually well-defined channels for civil society actors to influence the agendas of political parties and decision-makers. However, in authoritarian contexts, not only civil society but also political society is restricted. For instance, opposition parties may not be tolerated, or they are weakened through a variety of measures. Accordingly, one of the justifications for restricting civil society actors is to label them as opposition party supporters, in contexts where opposition is not seen as democratic contestants but as an enemy to be crushed (Cheeseman, 2018). In authoritarian and hybrid regimes the strategies of civil society actors and citizens can thus be less visible and more 'unruly', hidden from the authorities and practised outside formal structures of political participation (Gaventa, 2022).

Most definitions of civil society are normative as they portray civil society as equal to a 'good society'. It is often understood as a 'civilized society' inclusive of organizations and groups with democratic and progressive aims and means, pursued by peaceful means, and with 'good manners' (Kaviraj & Khilnani, 2001: 20). In contrast, notions such as uncivil society (Glasius, 2010; Keane, 1998: 114–156) refer to non-state actors such as gangs, militia, extremists of various kinds, which use violent and coercive means to forward their agenda as well as exclusive and involuntary mobilization of members. Development policies promoting 'good forms' of organizing in civil society often exclude the contextual logics of organizing along kinships, ethnicities, and mutual help initiatives from the agendas for support to civil society, democratization, and

good governance, where the focus often has been to establish new and 'proper' civil society organizations (Kelsall, 2008, 2012). Approaching civil society as inherently good along liberal values and norms does not capture the complex politics of actually existing civil societies. This politics includes illiberal forces and modes of 'uncivic activism' (Alvarez, 2017 in Hossain et al., 2018) or 'unruly protests' of protest movements and struggles emerging 'in response to elite civil society' that diverge from the 'civic modes of NGO and CSO organisation' (Hossain et al., 2018: 23).[9] These dimensions also suggest that restrictions on civic space for progressive actors may also 'come from within civil society' (Pousadela & Perera, 2021: 41). This politics of civil society is deeply contextual and embedded in longer trajectories of political regimes and state-society relations (van der Borgh & Terwindt, 2014), which are also partly captured in the notion of civic space we discuss next.

3.2 Civic Space: Towards Relational Conceptualization

The initial research agenda on civic space seems to have been informed by the human rights and democracy discourses and global policy debates noted above, focusing on various regimes' attempts to limit CSOs' space of action, i.e. the shrinking of civic space. However, there is no agreed definition on the concept of civic space in the literature. In a recent review, Dupuy et al. (2021: 5) distinguish three main approaches used in research. First, there is an approach based on the realization of civic freedoms that defines civic space as the extent to which these are respected in policy and legislation, and how these are protected by states (CIVICUS, 2021; Malena, 2015). Second, civic space has been analysed in relation to the restrictive measures on the autonomy of civil society organizations (Brechenmacher & Carothers, 2019), where scrutiny is on the legal, bureaucratic, regulatory, rhetoric, and violent strategies states use

[9] When we speak of 'civil society actors' in a theoretical sense, we should be including civic as well as uncivic actors. After all, there is (always) conflict of interest within civil society. 'Civicness' is clearly becoming a very important normative notion. For example, the civil society actors that violently occupied the Capital building in Washington DC on 6 January 2021 started as concerned civil society actors (such as the Proud boys) even though they may not have been embracing progressive nor democratic norms. However, the moment they violently entered the Capital their civicness immediately ended and they became uncivic actors, trying to stage a coup d'état in favour of outgoing (and outvoted) President Trump.

to control their practices. Third, civic space is defined more broadly as the manoeuvring space for both civil society organizations and citizens (Buyse, 2018).

Each of the three intertwined approaches to civic space is relevant for development research and discourses. The overall focus on civic freedoms resonates with the international development agendas concerning democracy and human rights and provides attention not only for freedoms as guaranteed in legislation, but also as protected and implemented freedoms. As noted above, these agendas emphasize liberal democracy as a direction of development, by giving attention to issues such as freedom of press, space for political contestations and opposition parties, and the overall realization of universal human rights (Hossain et al., 2018). The development relevance of the second approach, where civic space is understood within the scope or autonomy of CSOs, has been extensively discussed in relation to funding. Constrained civic spaces denote changing funding regimes of CSOs, where an increasing unease of the role of CSOs among the political elites leads them to influence and design funding conditionalities and requirements that may 'impinge' on the autonomy of CSOs (Verbrugge & Huyse, 2020: 760). Regulatory restrictions may also involve discursive struggles through which powerful interests can 'label and frame' (Buyse, 2018: 969) civil society actors in ways that may de-legitimize their work. Such discursive and regulatory strategies may affect national and global funding policies (Buyse, 2018; CIVICUS, 2021; Verbrugge & Huyse, 2020) with 'far-reaching consequences for CSOs', who, in the contexts of increased restrictions, are afraid of 'becoming nothing more than implementers of government policies' (Verbrugge & Huyse, 2020: 761). The understanding of civic space as a broad manoeuvring space (Buyse, 2018), on its part, is relevant for development discourses as it guides attention also to shaping citizens' actions beyond institutional manifestations such as media and CSOs. Here, rather than the legislation or restrictions, the starting point for the analysis is the variety of actions and practices undertaken by citizens, and how they are either enabled or constrained by governmental actors.

Moreover, recent scholarship has argued that 'shrinking' civic space is not a unified phenomenon, and that we see shifting or changing rather than shrinking civic spaces (Dupuy et al., 2021; Hossain et al., 2019; Roggeband & Krizsan, 2021; Sogge, 2020; Toepler et al., 2020). Straightforward connections between authoritarianism and the increase in

restrictions on civil society actors have also been challenged and nuanced (Dupuy et al., 2021; Toepler et al., 2020). Civic space can be expansive in some elements while closing in others (Anheier et al., 2019; McMahon & Niparko, 2022), and governments can use many mechanisms to 'reconfigure' civic space rather than closing it (Roggeband & Krizsan, 2021: 23). Deliberate government strategies of inclusion and exclusion of certain actors open opportunities for some, most likely those who are seen to be ideologically and/or politically aligned with the political regime and elite, while imposing legal restriction as well as using extra-legal strategies exclude others (Roggeband & Krizsan, 2021; Toepler et al., 2020). The types of restricting legislations, burdensome bureaucratic procedures, and de-legitimizing rhetoric used are globally circulated. For example, restricting civil society actors by claiming them to be 'foreign agents', or arresting activists with charges related to terrorism, are used in many countries around the world (Buyse, 2018).

Recent policy and research agendas have also shifted towards exploring the multitude of impacts and responses to civic space constraints that inform relations between differently positioned CSOs and the government (Dupuy et al., 2021; Taka & Northey, 2020; Toepler et al., 2020). CSOs that challenge the vested interested of elites (van der Borgh & Terwindt, 2014) and aim to contribute to the 'public sphere' (Lewis, 2013) or engage in claim-making (Toepler et al., 2020) experience increasingly restrictive measures. On the other hand, CSOs engaged in service provision or self-organization are encouraged and supported. While independent CSOs may face restrictions, organizations that legitimize the governing regime as its allies enjoy more freedoms to act (Toepler et al., 2020). In constrained settings, there is, therefore, a division between what the political regime considers 'political' and 'non-political' activities, which is most problematic for those CSOs engaged in rights and citizenship issues. This can be perceived as illegitimate and as a threat to the regime, while 'service-providing organisations' are more often deemed useful (Buyse, 2018: 970). However, engaging with service provision through collaborations with a regime may also be a strategy to enable some level of influence, advocacy, and support for democracy under difficult conditions (Aasland et al., 2020; Braathen et al., 2018; Herrold & AbouAssi, 2023; Toepler et al., 2020).

Although research agendas have moved from debates on 'shrinking' to 'changing' civic spaces, most scholarship and debates focus on the regulative and restrictive actions on 'formal and collective manifestations' of civil

society (Buyse, 2018). Less is known about how such legal and extra-legal measures impact on other kinds of practices, and how differently positioned civil society actors seek to mitigate, adapt to, or resist constraints. There are vast differences in capacities to respond to changing regulations and constraints between larger CSOs with international connections and smaller organizations and groups with limited capacities and power (Buyse, 2018; Hossain et al., 2018). In a Nepali context, for instance, Uprety (2020) shows that Indigenous People's Organisations are not as visible as 'universalistic CSOs' in advocacy against attempts to limit civic space through legislation and registration, and that this limited visibility is a result both of the state's 'reluctance towards the rights of indigenous people as well as non-representation through other and more visible CSOs' (Uprety, 2020: 259). Moving beyond formal organizations, less formal actors such as informal associations and community-based organizations may be more vulnerable to extra-legal measures and actions of regime actors as well as non-state groups working as allies of the regime, even if they have relations to more formal networks and CSOs.

Furthermore, changing civic spaces are not one-sided impacts of state action. Civil society actors themselves may inform civic spaces in different ways, as they respond to, adapt, mitigate to, or resist different kinds of restrictive measures (Buyse, 2018: 969; Vertes et al., 2021; Zihnioğlu, 2023). Such responses may not be spectacular or formal, but also located in everyday politics. A recent study from Poland highlights the importance of 'uneventful protests, the formation of agency … and the enabling role of informality in collective action in adverse contexts' (Jacobsson & Korolczuk, 2020: 125). In the context of Vietnam, Vu and Le (2022: 1) argue that there are intricate dynamics of state-society relations even within autocracies that might be obscured by the shrinking space rhetoric, and that the Covid-19 pandemic also opened opportunities for 'ideological struggles and legitimacy building between these [state and civil society] actors'. Case studies from hybrid regimes in the Middle East also make visible the interrelations between particularities of political regimes, different forms of sectarianism and informal spaces of state-civil society interactions (Hafidh & Fibiger, 2019). In Lebanon, Vertes et al. (2021) refer to the multiple formal and informal interactions between the state and civil society as 'instances of negotiations' to 'convey that delineating civic space is not a one-way street of government pressures, as associations and other citizen groups have a capacity to respond to pressures (Baldus et al., 2019)' (Vertes et al., 2021: 257).

This brief review of current scholarship suggests moving beyond the institutionalist and static concepts of civic space that focus primarily on restrictions of certain civic freedoms or constraints to formal civil society organizations, which is prevalent in global policies. We need to pay more attention to how the relational dynamics of civic space play out in different contexts, and in what ways states, regimes, and civil society actors continuously shape civic space in their different relationships (Dupuy et al., 2021). Current dynamics discussed above make visible the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic struggles that play out in and through state-society relations, between what Gramsci (1971) would describe as political and civil society. In this contested field, civil society actors may both serve the elite and legitimize their power, but also contest, mitigate, and resist powerful interests seeking to restrict their space of action. Some civil society actors can vocally promote their own freedoms while advocating restrictions for the freedoms of others, adding to the current dynamics of civic space. In the emphasis on changing civic space, even if we acknowledge that we see conscious attempts by regimes to include and exclude certain kinds of civil society actors, we tend to pay less attention to how civil society actors—progressive or not—have *agency* and to varying extent capacities, to *shape* civic space (Buyse, 2018; Dupuy et al., 2021).

4 Towards Contextual Analysis of Civic Space: The Chapter Contributions

The chapters of this book add to this emerging research agenda that nuances and challenges the state-centric focus on civic space. The aim is to better understand the multiple and contextual dynamics of state-civil society relations and the diversity of civil society experiences, strategies, and practices responding to changing spaces of action. Rather than drawing on universal indicators and definitions, the chapters offer contextualized analyses of the dynamics of civic space, defined in a variety of ways; civil society practices, taking multiple manifestation; and the interactions and negotiations between state and society in shaping civic space. Additionally, the chapters also discuss the capacities of civil society actors, which also present restrictions for the kinds of practices in the civic space. The capacities do not refer to managerial skills required by the aid system, but to the implications of situations such as poverty and hunger for the scope and volume of civil society practices (Kabeer, 2006; Hossain &

Oosterom, 2021). While civil society practices are restricted by authoritarian politics, they nevertheless are also constrained by a need to focus on daily survival and ensuring basic livelihoods (Buyse, 2018). The volume offers conceptual insights and empirical analyses on how civil society groups and initiatives that experience limited room of manoeuvre to organize and/or mobilize can still be empowered agents for change in their daily lives. The examples underline the ways in which the practice of civil society actors is restricted, how they try to deal with this, and how they find ways to function despite the constraints.

The first section 'Conceptualizing civil society and civic space' introduces contemporary debates on civil society, civic space, and civic action. The Introduction is followed by two chapters that discuss theoretical and general ideas. Chapter 2, *Interrogating Civic Space: Applying a Civic-Driven Change Perspective* by Kees Biekart and Alan Fowler, continues and deepens the conceptual discussion on the understanding of civil society, civic space, and civic agency. Embedded in a critical discussion of dominant discourses of civil society and civic space in development, they propose the concept and analytical framework of *civic-driven change* in which they emphasize the explicitly 'political dimensions of civic agency', and how it is influenced by historical latency. In Chapter 3, *Repertoires of the Possible: Citizen Action in Challenging Settings*, Colin Anderson and John Gaventa draw out findings from an extensive research programme *Action for Empowerment and Accountability*. Based on detailed case studies in four countries characterized by closing civic space and authoritarian histories, they offer an analysis of both visible and hidden citizens' action that takes place in such contexts.

The second section 'Contextual dynamics of civic space' includes six chapters with case studies on civic space and civil society practices from different parts of world. The chapters illustrate extremely well the contextual differences and particular characteristics that occur despite some general commonalities. In Chapter 4, *Philanthropy During Covid-19 Emergency: Towards a Postcolonial Perspective?*, Patricia Maria Mendonca, Cassio Aoqui, and Leticia Cardoso focus on diverse forms of philanthropy that emerged in Brazil during the COVID-19 pandemic and show how, in that situation, diverse forms of community philanthropy disrupted the traditional, colonial, and market-oriented ones. Chapter 5, *Sandwiched? Sri Lankan Civil Society Between a Repressive Regime and a Pandemic* by Udan Fernando, analyses how two contextual changes—a new political regime and the Covid-19 pandemic—impacted upon and restricted

advocacy- and human rights-oriented civil society actors in Sri Lanka. Some established CSOs did challenge the subtle and not so subtle tactics from the state to restrict their space of action. However, regional and local actors had limited capacity to withstand these pressures, using different coping mechanisms ranging from adapting and compromising, to self-censoring and laying low to survive under an increasingly constrained setting.

Chapter 6, *Negotiating CSO-Legitimacy in Tanzanian Civic Space* by Tiina Kontinen and Ajali M. Nguyahambi, scrutinizes the kinds of legitimacy negotiations CSOs engage with in Tanzania especially during the time of President John Magufuli, a time allegedly characterized by 'shrinking civic space'. They discuss experiences of both urban professional NGOs and small self-help organizations in rural areas and locate the specific period within the overall evolvement of the politics in the country. In Chapter 7, *Spaces for Peace in Mitrovica, Kosovo: Women's Voices for Change*, Cíntia Silva Huxter explores and develops the notion of *spaces for peace* in the context of women's cooperation in post-conflict Mitrovica. The chapter argues that understanding women's cooperative activities as spaces for peace highlights their voices and agency in a context constrained by both ethnic boundaries and prevalent patriarchy.

In Chapter 8, *The Algerian Hirak: Civil Society and the Role of Artists in a Civic Space Under Pressure*, René Spitz presents and discusses artists as actors of change and culture as a domain and instrument to enhance civic space in the context of the Hirak (movement) for political reform in Algeria from 2019 onwards. The chapter shows how artists expressed their support to the aims of the Hirak, and how they actively contributed to this process with their songs, poems, pictures, and other forms of creativity. In Chapter 9, C*onstrained Humanitarian Space in Rohingya Response: Views from Bangladeshi NGOs*, Abdul Kadir Khan introduces the concept of *humanitarian space* as an arena of social negotiations among multiple humanitarian actors and their access to the affected communities, explores the views of Bangladeshi NGOs on how this space is constrained in the context of local responses to the protracted Rohingya crisis.

The third section 'Global connections and civic space' continues with contextualized analyses but scrutinizes on the relationships between local and global actors and processes. Four chapters discuss not only the local civil society practices, but also how these can be potentially influenced

by international interaction, including development partners with intentions to support civil society and civic action. In Chapter 10, *Advocacy in Constrained Settings: Rethinking Contextuality*, Margit van Wessel argues for a broader understanding of contextuality in advocacy in development context in an attempt to reflect on basic assumptions, such as a presence of a liberal state that has authority, and competences to make and enforce policy decisions. She provides a set of considerations for advocacy in authoritarian, hybrid, and fragile contexts.

Chapter 11, *The Changing Amazonian Civic Space: Where Soy Meets Resistance*, is written by Lee Pegler, Juliana Rodrigues de Senna, Katiuscia Moreno Galhera, Solange Maria Gayoso da Costa, and Marcel Theodoor Hazeu. They describe how communities in the Amazon are affected by and resisting the soy Global Value Chain in recent years and analyse how different community groups are damaged by capital and state in the regions of the Lower Tapajós and the Lower Tocantins in Brazil. While investigating the role the Convention 169 of the International Labour Organization in resistance, the chapter argues how building international coalitions can help the struggles of traditional communities to guarantee their lands, identities, and rights. Chapter 12, *Local Civil Society Initiatives for Peacebuilding in North-East Congo* by Niamh Gaynor, explores the successes and limits of local peacebuilding in a context of a long-term violent conflict in Ituri province in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). She argues that local actions need to be accompanied and supported by national and global actions in establishing interventions which engage in resource extraction, as well as include greater cooperation with local actors in land reform, service provision, and resource management.

In the concluding chapter, *Conclusions: Spaces of Hope and Despair?* by Kees Biekart, Tiina Kontinen and Marianne Millstein, the findings of the chapters are brought together and analysed through the initial questions concerning diverse definitions of civic space, the contextual characteristics of civic space as well as the variety of civil society responses emerging from the chapters. Additionally, the chapter discusses the limitations of the book and identifies new research agendas to make sense of the current global situation where spaces of hope and despair intertwine in the changing civic spaces where state-citizen relations are reshaped in multiple ways.

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