

Input Thomas Schwarz, 15 June 2021

Civic space and civil society participation in the WHO's governing bodies and at the WHO: Where are we?

## Part 1: Space of civil society at WHO governing bodies

Where are we regarding the space of civil society at the WHO and its governing bodies? ...well, here we are:



A key space of global health governance: Committee A of the World Health Assembly, the decision-making body of WHO at the Palais des Nations in Geneva.

WHO was established as a specialised UN agency with the authority to adopt and approve normative instruments in global health.

### “Their space”



From a civil society perspective, this is not our space, “but theirs”.

A space owned and regulated by WHO member states and moderated by the Secretariat and the meeting chairs.

A difficult space, with the WHO governing bodies struggling themselves with their relevance and effectiveness.

A formal, highly regulated and at times overregulated space, ...and therefore mostly rather a boring place to be, listening to mostly pre-fabricated statements, with no proper interaction taking place.

A contested space, in-between science based global health leadership and geopolitics (Covid-19 and the US announcement to withdraw from the WHO).

A public space

- transparency improved with live webstreams of all sessions
- delegates also know that they are watched from home.

Nevertheless a democratic space:

- all countries have the right to speak and have one vote
- depending on their capacity to participate
- so still waiting to be decolonized

Sometimes not the most relevant space of debate and negotiations during the World Health Assembly

- drafting groups (closed sessions)
- informal meetings

A space in time

- Policy shaping and making throughout the year
- Negotiations in-between EB in January and WHA

## Our space



The formal space of civil society participation in WHO governance

- based on constitutional right
- reconfirmed and not challenged as such by WHO and MS

At the margin of the Assembly

- limited space/room
- difficult working conditions

A regulated space

...that considerably changed over time

...and changing again in times of Zoom multilateralism

- to watch deliberations you don't need to be there anymore
- active participation is further restricted by new modalities

## Who is there?

Non-state actors in official relations with WHO

- status agreed by the Executive Board
- based on technical cooperation with WHO

Those who can make it there

- Travel, accommodation
- Time investment

Institutionally and politically diverse  
with issues of power and representation

## How to provide input?



Via formal statements

- individual statements read at end of the debate
- constituency statements (pilot 2021)

Via lobbying the delegations during the WHA, in the lobbies and corridors of the Palais des Nations, in the cafeteria, or at one of the many side events in town.

By providing advocacy briefings for delegations (inviting them to policy dialogues or sending policy briefs to the missions)

Most recently, by engaging in an informal meeting convened by WHO Secretariat ahead of the WHA (pilot in 2021)

Upstream: Consultations during the shaping of the policies and strategies submitted to the WHA for adoption

Upstream at home: Formal briefings on the WHA agenda with Ministry or national delegation

Participation as civil society / youth representatives within the MS delegation

## A blurred and confusing space



Blurred space: With FENSA, the right to participation was transferred from NGOs to “non-state actors”, including business associations and philanthropic foundations

While we defend the participation of civil society, we oppose the formal involvement of the lobby organizations of the private sector in the space where global health policies, norms and regulation are shaped and adopted

Relevance of participation at global level: What is decided there in Geneva that is relevant for my country, for our struggle for health? Would it not be better to oppose the power from outside than engaging and getting co-opted?

Talking so long about “space” let me conclude this part of my introduction by quoting a colleague as follows:



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