

“Are You a Rafiki?”

Report on the Workshop ‘The Role of Civil Society in Cultural Relations’ by the Academic Council for Culture and Foreign Policy (WIKA) at the Institute for International Cultural Relations (ifa),
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In 2004, the Institute for International Cultural Relations (*Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen/ifa*) in Stuttgart (Germany) founded the Academic Council on Culture and Foreign Policy (*Wissenschaftlicher Initiativkreis Kultur und Außenpolitik/WIKA*). WIKA addresses both theoretical and practical issues of international cultural exchange. Its aim is to scientifically support the international structure of Germany’s Foreign Cultural and Educational Policy, to develop concepts, and to more strongly anchor foreign cultural and educational policy issues in research and practice.

Scholars, students, and private individuals as well as institutes, research facilities, think tanks, and intermediary organizations, which deal with foreign cultural and educational policy in theoretical or practical terms can become members of WIKA. Since 2005, numerous WIKA workshops addressing foreign cultural and educational policy issues have been organized in cooperation with universities and research facilities. These workshops located at the interface of cultural and foreign policy are intended as a forum for dialogue between scientists from various disciplines and practitioners. The results of the WIKA workshops are summarized in the WIKA report.¹

On 26 September 2019, the ifa and Caroline Y. Robertson-von Trotha, Chairwoman of WIKA, Centre for Cultural and General Studies (ZAK) at the *Karlsruhe Institute of Technology* (KIT), hosted the annual WIKA workshop in Stuttgart. The WIKA workshop 2019 was titled *The Role of Civil Society in Cultural Relations* and introduced as follows:

1 <<https://publikationen.ifa.de/Zeitschriften-und-Editionen/WIKA-Report/>>.

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Civil society actors are gaining influence and are becoming political change makers. Their local embedding and engagement at the grassroots level and the strength of internationally-focused NGOs, which use their cross-border cooperation as a means of empowerment, make them attractive partners for state involved actors. The workshop reflected on interdisciplinary topics such as cultural cooperation and shrinking spaces, youth as civil society actors and civil society and statehood in order to relate them directly to fields of action of cultural relations and education policy.

The three sub-foci were presented in three slots with two to three presenters and were each followed by questions for plenary discussions. I chaired the first “atelier” on cultural cooperation and shrinking spaces and will report in particular on these presentations and discussions.

Kevin Mwachiro, a writer, journalist, podcaster, and queer activist, finished his talk with the words: “We came out loud and proud!” This statement was the final result of the Out Film Festival (OFF) in Nairobi, the first LGBTQI* film festival in East Africa. Since 2011, the film festival has offered a platform for the LGBTQI* community in the region. From its first year to the present, the festival has played to full audiences with film screenings sold out. But the festival is not only about watching the movies. The festival also offers a public, and at the same time, safe space, where the community can meet and talk. It is a space where people can express themselves and are heard and seen. Consequently, Kevin Mwachiro stated: “Cultural spaces have a role to play for civil society!” The conversations and panels during the festival cover a broad spectrum of topics that are of importance to the LGBTQI* community: censorship, intersex, identity, and women’s rights are just a few.

Freedom of expression for civil society demands boldness from the organizers. Kevin acknowledged the fear that the film festival, its organizers, or guests would be attacked by the police. State regulations make the organization of the festival more difficult, e.g. a film tax was imposed, which only allowed the screener to continue showing the films with foreign financial support. The film “Rafiki,” which shows the love story of two women in Kenya, was censored. However, due to a special seven-day exception to the Kenyan government’s censorship, the film festival had the opportunity to show the film twice at the Goethe Institute Nairobi in 2019. The film transformed the LGBTQI* community in Kenya. Kevin described this transformation as follows: “Rafiki gave us an identity. We could ask each other if we are ‘Rafiki.’ Rafiki puts us out to be a community.”

As the workshop revealed, civil society involvement in culture and other fields demands bravery in countries such as Kenya. If you have the courage, like Kevin and his colleagues do, civil society involvement can have an enormous impact and relevance, even on the political level. Civil society engagement can be enhanced, visualized, and protected among others by and through the art. Through the film festival, the LGBTQI* community in Kenya changed from being invisible to being visible in civic space. Kevin emphasized a preference for civic engagement in art: Art is “easy” and “safe,” below the radar of the government. Hence, the government does not get involved.

This assessment, however, also shows that the political impact of cultural activities can be underestimated. The same holds true for the diversity of artistic expressions, which shape politics and contribute to political discussions. All of this could be one major reason why their civil society organizations do not benefit – or benefit only to a small extent – from external funding. External funding focuses on a) consolidated civil society organizations and b) political activism such as election observations. This results in the organizations being close to the funders and the government, but not close to society, as Ukraine and culture expert Susann Worschech from the *European University Viadrina Frankfurt (Oder)* explained. Conversely, donors for cultural activities are few and often part of the civil society sector themselves. They operate in a niche of bottom-up democratization initiatives. Thus, they are very progressive and innovative. In the final analysis, a comprehensive evaluation and monitoring of these activities would be necessary to make effective use of funding. Michael Canares, Former Senior Research Manager at the World Wide Web Foundation from Indonesia, added: “Funders should be open to experimental projects where goals are clear but getting there needs adaptive approaches [according to individual context].”

Examples from Libya, Egypt, Syria, and Indonesia were presented during the workshop to illustrate that civil society organizations are not shrinking in numbers. The opposite is the case: They are growing, particularly under non-liberal conditions exercised by authoritarian regimes and hybrid states. The most impressive example was cited by Jelnar Ahmad from Syria, Monitoring and Evaluation Manager at IMPACT – Civil Society Research and Development e.V.: Before Syria’s uprising in 2011, no civil society organizations existed in the country. Today, around 500 civil society organizations, mainly for humanitarian action, are known in Syria. Hence, civic space is growing. But their fields of action and,

consequently, their activities are restricted. Pluralism is diminished and critical potential of civil society organizations declines.

Annette Zimmer, Director of the *Institute of Political Science, University of Münster* and Rupert Graf Strachwitz, Director of the *Maece-nata Institute for Philanthropy and Civil Society*, Berlin, explained the main tools and measures of restricting and controlling civil society, not only within the cultural sector:

1. The government controls the resources for civil society organizations.
2. The government puts legal restrictions in place, for example, the obligation to register in an expensive and exclusive process.
3. The government sets up ideological regulations, for example in terms of religion.
4. The government prosecutes civil society organizations, for example, by claiming that they pose a danger for national security.

An important question arises: Why do governments put pressure on the space of (un-)organized civil society? Not because of control and security, according to Strachwitz. The reality is rather the fear of civil society's growing power, especially in countries with shrinking civic spaces such as the ones mentioned above. It is the same reason why artistic and cultural expression is censored. Civil society organizations are a voice for the public; artistic or cultural expression often aims at a social transformation process, as could be observed in Egypt's 2011 uprising. It shows how cultural expression was the driving force of the revolutionary change in power and authority and how artists and artistic and cultural initiatives have played an integral role in the transformation of Egypt's public sphere since the fall of Mubarak.

A second crucial question therefore arises: How are arts and citizenship as societal and political agents of change best empowered and supported by the state, its cultural, and educational policy and institutes? Strachwitz gave three answers:

1. Governmental foreign policy should introduce civil society as a standing feature, since civic action has become a permanent feature worldwide. Furthermore, a universal culture of civic action seems to have emerged and become part of the cultural frame of society.
2. Cultural policy should remember the political thrust of culture. Civil society in general can prepare the ground for, and herald

the arrival of, transition. Throughout the WIKA workshop presentations, we were able to witness the political power of arts and education. In his presentation, Burak Yusmak, alumnus of the "Young Mediterranean Voices Leadership" – a seminar organized by the Anna Lindh Foundation² – stressed: the importance of youth civic action in solving Mediterranean cross-border problems such as migration, radicalization, climate change, education, and mobility. They organized a platform to raise their voices in front of senior decision makers and diplomats.

3. Cultural intermediaries provide an ideal base for introducing civil society to cultural cooperations (and cultural relations), and cultural policy to civil society. Cultural intermediaries such as the ifa and the Goethe-Institutes deal with civic space in its global scope in four dimensions: First, civil society can be enhanced, visualized, and protected by art as we have seen at the Out Film Festival (OFF) in Nairobi. Second, cultural intermediaries are in close contact with local civil societies and frequently collaborate with them. Third, advanced cooperative structures exist in civil society as well as cultural cooperations that can create stable and sustainable synergy. Fourth, cultural institutions that cooperate with civil society shape politics by contributing to political discussions.

These answers, as well as further findings and conclusions of the workshop will contribute to the work of the Foreign Office's working group 'Civil Society.' The group is one of eight groups that take part in the Strategic Process 2020 of German Foreign Cultural Policy and review the concept of the Federal Foreign Cultural and Educational Policy. A policy paper will be published by the Foreign Office in mid-2020.

The next WIKA workshop is currently being planned and will be held in November 2020 in Stuttgart at the ifa. The topic will be "Europe," not least because of the German EU Council Presidency from July 2020 onwards.

² The Anna Lindh Foundation is an international organization based in Alexandria, Egypt. Its objectives are to promote intercultural and civil society dialogue in the face of growing mistrust and polarization <<https://www.annalindhfoundation.org/>>.