**Shrinking Civil Society Space**  
Colin Allen Presentation

High Level Side event – 12th July, 1.15 – 2.45 pm

Conference room 5.

* In 2015 we celebrated the adoption of the 2030 Agenda. For persons with disabilities—a population of one billion, 80% of which live in developing countries, the 2030 Agenda was a crucial step towards a more inclusive society. For the first time, a global development framework was adopted in which persons with disabilities were explicitly recognized.
* The 2030 Agenda is considered “of the people, by the people and for the people”. Persons with disabilities took this seriously and we undertook an intensive advocacy campaign to ensure that our one billion-strong population would not be left behind.
* The results of our work can be seen in the achievement of seven Goals and Targets referencing persons with disabilities, and our inclusion under the banner of “vulnerable groups”. **We would not have achieved this result had the process been left to Member States alone.**
* The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was adopted ten years ago, following a unique drafting process in which organisations of persons with disabilities were directly involved. The result is a Convention that recognizes, for the first time in history, that the people the Convention refers to must be consulted, and work in partnership with Member States in the decision-making processes, policies and programmes that impact our lives—Article 4.3, which is the practical and meaningful application of the disability community’s motto: “Nothing about us, without us”. **And yet, despite these tried and tested processes that promote the inclusion of civil society representatives, we are witnessing a steadily-shrinking space for civil society within the workings of the UN.**
* I would like to share with you the disability community’s experience and the impact of this shrinking space, through the lens of the **UN Conference of States Parties to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities:**
  + Occurs annually, three days per year
  + Opportunity for the 165 States Parties to the Convention, NHRIs and DPOs to share best practices, challenges and lessons-learned regarding implementation of the CRPD
  + Over the past ten years, DPOs and other civil society actors working to promote the rights of persons with disabilities have been actively involved in the Conference—approximately 1000 civil society representatives register for the COSP each year
* We have worked closely with the Conference of States Parties Bureau (the five Member States elected by their regional groups to organize the Conference) to develop conference themes, background papers, propose and recommend speakers, speak at the opening session and co-chair the informal panel. Our engagement is supported by Article 4.3 of the Convention and the underlying principle of “Nothing about us, without us”.
* **However, opportunities to engage with the Bureau over the past few years have significantly decreased, despite our best efforts. This year, the reduction of space for DPOs to meaningfully engage had significant consequences:**
  + A round table on the promotion of the rights of persons with mental and intellectual disabilities went ahead, despite strong warnings from civil society that discussion on this issue should be done in close consultation with the relevant disability constituencies.
    - **The background paper prepared for this round table promoted the medical rather than social model of disability**, **an outdated concept that directly contradicts the principles of the Convention.** (After significant efforts by the disability community, the original paper was withdrawn and a revised paper developed by a self-organised group of persons with psychosocial disabilities was shared the week before the Conference; )
    - **The panel included a psychiatrist—a medical professional in what should have been a discussion on human rights**;
    - **Civil society was not given the floor** following the round table; **as a result, persons with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities were not able to respond to the medical approach posited by many on the panel and in the room.**
  + The controversy that came with this particular round table led to many persons with psychosocial disabilities taking the decision not to attend the Conference, as they viewed it as an unsafe space.
  + The process of proposing and nominating panelists was completely closed to civil society, despite our many requests for information on nomination procedure and willingness to work with the Bureau to provide informative and expert speakers. Our engagement was limited to speaking at the opening session, and after much pressure, to co-chair one of the round tables.
* **The end result of this shrinking civil society space meant that in 2016, on the 10th anniversary of the adoption of the CRPD, we, people with disabilities, had to fight for a respected voice in the Conference that exists to monitor and implement the Convention we worked with Member States to build**. We have to fight for a space to be heard, to be recognized as equal partners.
* We should be involved in the processes relevant to us because we have the knowledge and expertise to inform inclusive and accessible approaches that will ensure equality for persons with disabilities. Member States hold the decision-making power, the power for change. But civil society is on the ground and knows what practical steps need to be taken.
* The lesson from the disability community is relevant to all civil society. It is clear that when civil society is engaged from the beginning, the end result takes a holistic and people-centered approach. We must demand the space for civil society to ensure that decisions, planning and processes are developed in the right way, the first time round.