An Overview of Civil Society in Egypt

Civil Society Index Report for the Arab Republic of Egypt

Cairo 2005
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the course of 2004 and 2005, the CIVICUS Civil Society Index (CSI) project collected information and input from a broad range of civil society representatives, citizens, experts and researchers on the state of civil society in Egypt.

Using a comprehensive framework of 74 indicators and drawing on extensive data collected by the project team, the project’s National Advisory Group (NAG) assessed the overall state of civil society in the country, which can be summarized in a visual graph, Egypt’s Civil Society Diamond (see figure 1). The diamond addresses four critical dimensions of civil society: its structure, environment, values and impact. It indicates that on the whole, there is still considerable room for building a stronger civil society in Egypt. Though the Egyptian diamond is rather well-balanced, it reveals that civil society is quite small and underdeveloped. The diamond reflects civil society's poor structure characterized by limited citizen participation and resources, its relatively disabling environment rife with political restrictions, rather insignificant impact on government and, to a lesser extent, society, and a limited promotion of positive values despite more favourable internal practice of these values.

FIGURE 1: Egypt’s Civil Society Diamond

One major challenge facing the NAG was determining the make up of civil society in Egypt. Who to include and who to exclude? How should the concept of civil society be applied in Egypt and on what basis? Generally, it was decided that political parties would be excluded from the analysis since their primary objective is to seize political power, and therefore they could not be considered non-partisan. Apart from this, there were no other notable exclusions in the conceptualization of whom and what constitutes civil society in Egypt. Despite the fact that civil society has sometimes been seen as synonymous with NGOs registered under the non-governmental law, the CSI sought to adopt a broader concept of civil society. The research therefore included organizations such as, service-providing NGOs, human rights organizations, business organizations, professional associations, youth clubs and centres and religious organizations, in addition to churches and mosques. Naturally, it was difficult to give each type of organization equal weight. First, there were significant disparities in available data. For example, there was a lack of up to date research on the state and conditions of trade unions, youth centres and youth clubs and co-operatives. Second, there was a variation in the role and position of different civil society actors to the specific issues covered in this study. The level of heterogeneity in Egyptian civil society is striking. Civil society organizations (CSOs) are diverse in their structure, objectives, size, membership composition, values and nature of their relationship to other organizations and the government. For every general comment that is made
about civil society in this report, the reader will be able to list at least one or two exceptions to the rule.

An in-depth examination of civil society’s structure in Egypt shows that there is a high level of institutionalization of civil activity, characterized by the thousands of CSOs. Some have been noted as inactive, with almost half of the NGOs registered with the Ministry of Social Affairs thought to exist only ‘on paper’. However, it is difficult to deny the proliferation of a wide range of CSOs. This study also highlights that Egyptians, driven primarily by religious motives, make significant monetary and in-kind contributions, particularly for charitable purposes. However, the membership of citizens in CSOs and their participation in collective community action is somewhat limited. Moreover, CSOs’ membership and leadership indicate that there are many groups of Egyptians who are marginalized and do not participate in CSOs. Another weakness in civil society’s structure is the low extent to which CSOs are organised in federations and the latter’s ineffectiveness, which leaves plenty of room for improvement. As for communication between CSOs, it tends to take place within the same sector rather than being cross-sectoral, although there are cases of strong cooperation, such as between religious associations and places of worship. There is a plethora of funding sources for CSOs, although the source and size of funding among and within different categories of organizations varies dramatically. Most CSOs felt they were not only short of financial resources, but also of human and technical resources.

In light of the wider political changes currently gripping the country, it is difficult to give a definitive view on how conducive the environment is to civil society’s growth. In the past, the environment has not been very conducive, due to the legal and political restrictions on CSOs’ autonomy and freedom to engage in advocacy activities. Moreover, socio-economic problems also constrain civic engagement, further exacerbated by the generally low levels of public trust and public spiritedness observed in society.

The study found that there is a need to expand, multiply and improve the channels of dialogue between the government and CSOs, whose relations are based on unequal power. The level of cooperation between civil society and business remains fairly weak, with a few exceptions. Until the late 1940s most development efforts were initiated by the business sector, however, this situation gradually ceased to exist by the early 1970s. In the last decade, the relationship between the private sector and civil society has slowly regained some of its previous strength. Most recently, corporate social responsibility (CSR) is being used to revive the relationship between the business sector and the corresponding social development efforts. CSR is still a new concept for the business sector in Egypt; hence its limited contribution to date. Businesses also face difficulties in identifying CSOs that they can create relationships with.

An assessment of civil society’s values suggests that CSOs’ perception of their role in society remains narrowly defined. While there are regulatory provisions in the laws governing most CSOs to ensure that the election of boards are undertaken democratically, this may not be enough to ensure internal democratic governance. Moreover, civil society’s actions to promote democracy in wider society are limited and inconspicuous due to a series of external constraints (mainly legal inhibitions in partaking of such activities) as well as internal challenges, such as the absence of a strong pro-democratic culture. It is possible however, that in the wake of the
upcoming elections, CSOs will play a greater role in raising the awareness of citizens on the importance of political participation.

The research undertaken for this report also revealed the dearth of information available on the level of transparency and accountability in CSOs. Corruption in CSOs continues to be a taboo subject, making it difficult to draw conclusions on how widespread corruption is within civil society. CSOs have yet to play a prominent or influential role in promoting the values of tolerance and non-violence in society, an area where it would be very much needed. Moreover, most CSOs do not espouse the promotion of transparency and accountability of either the state or the private sector as crucial, which is reflected in the absence of efforts to influence public policy-making.

As for civil society’s impact on society at large, it is difficult to overlook the scope of non-governmental organizations’ (NGOs’) engagement in service delivery, or their work in providing social benefits and handouts to the needy. The impact of such activities, in terms of enhancing the quality of life for individuals or individual empowerment, is however, rather modest, possibly due to the continued dominance of the ‘charity approach’ to community work. There is evidence that new CSOs are adopting a development and/or human rights approach and existing CSOs are incorporating new approaches in their work, seeking to move more towards sustainable development activities. As examined in this report, the impact of civil society on public policy-making remains negligible, due to the restrictions in the environment in which CSOs’ function, as well as, due to internal factors relating to the role and function that CSOs’ envision for themselves in the community.

The CSI project has raised as many questions as it has sought to provide answers for on the state of civil society in Egypt. The study helped bring to light the gaps in our knowledge of CSOs and on areas in need of particular exploration. Many assumptions that have been taken for granted as fact need further empirical probing. For instance, it has been taken for granted that CSOs’ play an instrumental role in poverty alleviation in Egypt; however, the extent to which this applies to a highly heterogeneous sector needs further research, as well as the extent to which poverty reduction efforts are actually fruitful and effective in bringing about long term change. The study highlighted the relative strengths of civil society in Egypt, which lie in the heterogeneity of the types of organizations that exist, their size and scope of membership. It also revealed its weaknesses, which partly stem from an inhibiting environment, but also from CSOs’ narrow definition of their raison d’etre, their scope of work and their focus on one role (i.e. provision of services) at the expense of possible other roles (i.e. state and corporate watchdog, rights advocate and facilitator of people’s empowerment).

From the National Workshop, as well as the continued deliberations among the National Index Team, it was possible to arrive at a series of recommendations on ways to promote the strengthening of civil society in Egypt. One prerequisite for effectively engaging in civil society building is the need to promote further research, of a comprehensive and systematic nature, to help fill the gaps in existing knowledge and offer more in-depth information on various aspects of this arena. Moreover, despite the vast number of CSOs registered in Egypt, and the emergence of nascent social groups such as newly created political opposition groups like “kefai”, there is a need to promote greater citizen participation in civil society. Achieving greater coordination and
organization among CSOs would certainly strengthen the mobilising capacity of CSOs as well as their impact. A key recommendation, for which there was much support among CSI participants, was the need to promote a greater role for CSOs in public policy, in order to address some of the key issues affecting the well being of people living in Egypt. The process of producing a national civil society report has encouraged civil society actors from various backgrounds, fields and interests to engage in a dialogue on the current state and future path of civil society. These deliberations have sparked an interest in further collaboration to share ideas, approaches and experiences on how to further strengthen civil society.