Civil Society in Northern Ireland:
A new beginning?

CIVICUS Civil Society Index Report for Northern Ireland

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CIVICUS Civil Society Index
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the course of 2004, the CIVICUS Civil Society Index project (CSI) collected information and input from a broad range of civil society representatives, citizens, experts and researchers on the state of civil society in Northern Ireland. CIVICUS uses a broad definition of civil society, which states that civil society is the arena, between family, government and market, where people voluntarily associate to advance common interests. Using a comprehensive framework of 74 indicators and drawing on extensive data collected by the project team, the project’s National Advisory Group assessed the overall state of civil society in the country, which can be summarized in a visual graph (see figure 1), the Civil Society Diamond for Northern Ireland. The diamond which emerged is well balanced in its four dimensions: civil society’s structure, environment, values and impact.

This is the first time an assessment of civil society in Northern Ireland has been attempted and the research has painted a very vivid, and in some respects challenging, view of the state of the civil society. Not surprisingly, given the past 30 years of conflict in Northern Ireland, society is still relatively divided along religious boundaries. This division pervades almost every sphere of public and private life in Northern Ireland and is reflected in the view of the role civil society plays in Northern Ireland. Throughout this report the legacy of the conflict continues to show itself in the many different areas that this research is attempting to measure. That is not to say everything is negative, in fact the research has shown quite the opposite, with many strengths of civil society in Northern Ireland becoming very apparent. For a society emerging from conflict and without a clear resolution about its future, civil society has a role to play and this report highlights where that role has been integral to the creation of a less divided society and where things may be improved or developed to help enhance this role in the future.

The Structure Dimension describes and analyses the overall size, strength and vibrancy of civil society in human, organisational, and economic terms. The score for the Structure Dimension is 1.8, indicating a medium-sized civil society. Within the Structure Dimension, six subdimensions were measured which included: the extent of citizen participation; depth of citizen participation; diversity of civil society participants; level of organisation; inter-relations and civil society resources.

The analysis of the Structure Dimension indicates that various elements of civil society’s structure in Northern Ireland are well established, but there are several specific areas where more progress, or development, is required. The indicator receiving the highest score within this
dimension was the amount of time donated by individuals to volunteer activities. The summary data indicate that the average individual who volunteers donates more than eight hours per month to their voluntary activity. Unfortunately, the proportion of those volunteering on a regular basis does not receive the same high score. The results indicate that volunteering is also concentrated in a narrow range of activities, with involvement in religious or church organisations benefiting the most from this support.

One area that is identified as a weakness in Northern Ireland’s civil society is collective community and political actions. Both indicators received relatively low scores in the analysis of the Structure Dimension. It is likely that the ongoing conflict over the past 30 years has prevented the emergence of collective community and non-political actions, since there has not been any sense of ‘one’ community. Such actions are usually expressed by one or the other community, and have often been used as rallying calls and expressions of defiance. The ongoing disputes over parades are symptomatic of this type of inter-community protest and expression. More recently some cross-community expressions of support for campaigns against the Iraq war and against sectarian attacks on public services workers have taken place and may indicate a slight improvement in this area.

The Environment Dimension describes and analyses the overall political, social, economic, cultural and legal environment in which civil society exists and functions. The score for the Environment Dimension is 2.4, indicating that the environment for civil society in Northern Ireland is supportive. The main area where there is poor support is in relation to the private sector and corporate social responsibility.

The score for the Environment Dimension (2.4) indicates that the general environment in Northern Ireland is fairly conducive to civil society. Many indicators emerged in this Dimension with a final score of 3, which have been taken to mean that they can be considered strengths of civil society. Political rights and press freedoms are both rated quite highly and the assessment is that corruption among holders of state and political positions is negligible. The wider socio-economic context indicators are all rated highly, although the data demonstrate that Northern Ireland lags behind the rest of the UK in this context. Despite the continued non-functioning of a local political assembly, the quality of party-political competition is assessed as quite high. This is also true of the rule of law, although there are continued breaches of ceasefires by the various paramilitary groupings, such as racketeering and instances of vigilante policing in some communities. One other indicator that scored slightly lower in this Dimension was trust in political institutions. The former refers to the continued existence of the local political assembly, despite its non-functioning status and the greater impact of local government and public service bodies resulting from its establishment. The latter is a sign that the majority of the population of Northern Ireland largely trusts the main political, administrative, legal, law enforcement and civil justice institutions.

An area considered to be a current weakness, was tolerance within society. The data collected indicate that relations between the two main communities in Northern Ireland have deteriorated since the paramilitary ceasefires, and levels of trust are very low. There are ongoing sectarian attacks and divisions in many local communities and attitudinal data highlight a sense of unfair treatment felt by the Protestant community after the Good Friday Agreement. Attacks on and
discrimination against members of other minority ethnic communities have increased at alarming rates and the incarceration of asylum seekers in prison facilities indicates a lack of tolerance for perceived ‘outsiders’. This is an area in which civil society organizations (CSOs) can play a key role, but the evidence shows that very little progress has been made so far.

The **Values Dimension** describes and analyses the values promoted and practised by civil society in Northern Ireland. The score for the **Values Dimension is 2.1**, reflecting an overall positive value basis of civil society in Northern Ireland. The score for the democratic practices subdimension is the only problematic area in the Values Dimension.

Corruption within the civil society arena was ranked as very low, as was violence. Financial transparency is clearly not an issue in the civil society arena. CSOs were seen as positively attempting to promote non-violence and peace and there are some very high profile organisations in Northern Ireland involved in promoting cross-community activities. Actions to eradicate poverty were also assessed as positive, as was the existence of gender equitable practices within CSOs.

Gender equity, within the civil society arena, also received a relatively low score, which seemed to reflect data on the low number of female chief executive officers in CSOs, compared to their overall proportion in the workforce. Several organisations and campaigns focused on equal pay, for example, but they emanated from government departments or agencies and in only one or two cases from trade unions. Overall, the scores achieved for the Impact Dimension reveal that civil society’s values are quite strong within the sector, but practices and campaigns to promote these values are somewhat lacking.

The **Impact Dimension** describes and analyses the extent to which civil society is active and successful in fulfilling several essential functions within Northern Ireland’s society. The score for the **Impact Dimension is 2.1**. This reflects a slightly better than average level of impact for civil society in Northern Ireland. Analysis under this Dimension indicated that areas of weakness in civil society in Northern Ireland relate to impact on the national budgeting process and holding both the state and private corporations accountable.

The score achieved for the Impact dimension indicates that CSOs are moderately successful in these areas. Building capacity for collective action achieved the highest score for this Dimension, recognising the impact of CSOs supporting communities during periods when there was no effective government or state apparatus in existence. This impact is reflected in a high score for empowering marginalised people and empowering women. Not surprisingly, these indicators add up to recognition of the positive impact of CSOs in building social capital in Northern Ireland. A slightly lower, but still respectable, score is given for CSOs’ attempts to meet pressing social needs and the needs of marginalised people.

The greatest weakness in the Impact dimension is the impact CSOs have on the national budgeting process. This is a finding common throughout Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, despite the widespread existence of institutionalised dialogue between government and civil society in these countries. A similar weakness is evident in holding the state accountable. This may be indicative of a fear of ‘biting
the hand that feeds’, since in Northern Ireland, and the UK in general, government is the single largest donor for CSOs. The same fear does not exist with private corporations, as they are not a major sponsor of the sector, but this area is still a weakness for CSOs in Northern Ireland. The research was unable to find any evidence of an organisation or campaign based in Northern Ireland, which was not part of a wider UK-based effort attempting to monitor or critique the practices of private corporations. This may be partly due to the relatively small size of the private sector in Northern Ireland (the economy is dominated by the public sector) and the fact that the majority of companies in Northern Ireland are UK wide companies and have their headquarters in Great Britain. Overall, the analysis for the Impact Dimension reveals that CSOs in Northern Ireland are having some positive impact in many of the areas examined. This, however, should not lead to complacency as, given the level of resources, skills and the generally conducive environmental factors; it appears that the impact of CSOs should be somewhat greater than it currently is.

It is perhaps inevitable in Northern Ireland, despite the significant political achievements of the last decade, that the view of civil society and its role very much reflects the fragmented nature of society as a whole. There is no clear, unifying agenda that underlines what civil society can hope to achieve but it is incumbent upon all organisations operating in this arena to promote the values and principles that underpin civil society in Northern Ireland.