



**CIVICUS**

World Alliance for Citizen Participation



## **Bridging the gaps: Citizens, organisations and dissociation**

*Civil Society Index summary report: 2008-2011*

Civil society is undergoing its most significant crisis and change for a generation. Many established civil society organisations (CSOs) are struggling under the weight of multiple economic and political challenges, but are also shown to be disconnected from many citizens, and particularly from new and informal forms of participation and activism.

This is the key finding of CIVICUS' Civil Society Index (CSI), a three year civil society self-assessment and research project conducted in 35 countries in Latin America, Europe, Middle East and North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa and Central and East Asia between 2008 and 2011.

***“Many CSOs are disconnected from new and informal forms of participation and activism.”***

This comprehensive analysis of civil society strengths and weaknesses is summarised in the CSI overview report, published by CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation,

in September 2011. The report, *Bridging the Gaps: Citizens, organisations and dissociation*, paints a picture of multiple disconnects for civil society: disconnects between CSOs, governments and the private sector, with relationships tending to be piecemeal, volatile and characterised by limitations on what can be raised; disconnects between CSOs and other organisations within civil society, such as trade unions and faith groups, and between advocacy-oriented CSOs and service delivery-oriented CSOs; and disconnects between CSOs and the citizens they are assumed to represent and serve. It concludes that the rise of informal activity, such as the people's movements of the Arab Spring, offers a new challenge and opportunity to CSOs: they must embrace such movements to connect better with the public and renew themselves in order to survive.

The CSI research shows that there are low levels of people's involvement in CSO activities, as expressed by low levels

of membership of and volunteering in CSOs, particularly when it comes to more politically-oriented CSOs. However, the study also offers strong evidence of vibrant civic involvement

outside the formal CSO arena. In almost every country, informal participation, whether it is community voluntary work, involvement in group activities or acts of individual political activism, outstrips membership of formal CSOs.

The report suggests that both new forms of online activism, and traditional forms of participation, for example in community, cultural and faith structures, have not been given sufficient attention and need to be better understood. The implication of this, and of the recent events that have seen civic activism burgeon in countries where CSOs are habitually suppressed and CSO membership is at its lowest, is that people's understanding of what civil society is, and how to support people's participation, has to change. Donors, governments, private sector and CSOs themselves need to stop using CSOs as a proxy for broader civil society. Rather, the report suggests there is a need to accept and support multiple pathways of participation and routes into activism.

The response the report proposes is to invest in processes that allow the development of loose, broad-based coalitions between people participating in traditional, community-oriented ways, new informal associations of interest on the internet and established CSOs as brokers, convenors and shapers of activism. Working as hub organisations, CSOs need to be both challenged and supported to improve their outreach, refresh their participation bases and help join together a disconnected civil society to achieve greater impact.

***“CSOs must embrace people's movements to connect better with the public and renew themselves in order to survive.”***

***Bridging the Gaps is available at [www.civicus.org](http://www.civicus.org).***

**[www.civicus.org](http://www.civicus.org)**



@CIVICUSalliance



[www.facebook.com/CIVICUS](http://www.facebook.com/CIVICUS)



[www.youtube.com/civiciusworldalliance](http://www.youtube.com/civiciusworldalliance)