



CIVICUS Civil Society Index  
Rapid Assessment

Armenian Civil Society: Consolidated but Detached from  
the Broader Public

Policy Action Brief  
Prepared by Yevgenya Jenny Paturyan

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### **National Implementation Team**

Gayane Martirosyan, national coordinator

Lusine Hakobyan, CS expert

Mane Tadevosyan, researcher



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## I. BACKGROUND

The Civil Society Index – Rapid Assessment (CSI-RA) is a participatory action-oriented research project assessing the state of civil society in countries around the world. The CSI-RA is initiated and implemented by, and for, civil society organisations at the country level, in partnership with CIVICUS World Alliance for Citizen Participation.<sup>1</sup> Counterpart International Armenia (referred to as ‘Counterpart’ in the rest of the brief) is the local implementing partner of the CSI-RA. The study was conducted in January – May 2014. The full CSI-RA report is available online on the website of Counterpart International.<sup>2</sup>

The report focuses on **civic participation and activism** as the currently most visible and fast-changing facet of Armenian civil society. CSI-RA in Armenia utilised both quantitative and qualitative methods of assessment. Quantitative data were collected mostly through a nationwide representative population survey (1579 respondents), although additional secondary data were added to the analysis to provide a broader perspective. Qualitative data were generated through focus group discussions and expert interviews.

## II. NATIONAL CONTEXT

Armenia is a tiny (29,000 sq. km) landlocked country in the South Caucasus, with a population of about three million people. Geographically belonging to Asia, Armenians usually think of themselves as being “at the crossroads” of Europe and Asia. Ethnically homogenous (97% ethnic Armenians) the Armenian society is a mix of modern and patriarchal elements. A seven million strong Diaspora spread throughout the world is an important component of the current social and political reality. Armenia is characterized by the World Bank as a “lower middle income” country, with GDP of about \$10 billion and about one-third of the population below the official poverty line (The World Bank 2014).

Previously one of the 15 Soviet Republics, Armenia gained independence in 1991. Freedom House has characterised Armenia as “partially free” since 1991 with slight variations in the scores but no major changes in either direction (Freedom House 2013).

In addition to a struggling economy and widespread poverty, corruption is a serious problem that undermines state capacity, and hinders development in almost all aspects of life (Stefes 2006). The Corruption Perception Index by Transparency International ranks Armenia as 94<sup>th</sup> out of 177 countries, with a score of 36 on a scale from zero (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean) (Transparency International 2013).

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<sup>1</sup> More information on the CSI-RA is available online at <http://civicus.org/index.php/en/what-we-do-126/2014-04-25-03-26-23/csi-ra>

<sup>2</sup> [http://program.counterpart.org/Armenia/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Civicus-Report\\_August-2014\\_FFfinal.pdf](http://program.counterpart.org/Armenia/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Civicus-Report_August-2014_FFfinal.pdf).

### **III. CIVIL SOCIETY IN ARMENIA: THE PROBLEM OF DETACHMENT**

In the Soviet Union and other countries of the socialist block civil society was severely curtailed: the state controlled most of social life and even made inroads into private life. At the same time a plethora of officially controlled and organized associations existed in the Soviet Union. People were encouraged and at times even forced into those organisations. The legacy of forced membership and “pseudo-volunteering” of the Soviet times had important implications later on, as outlined in this paper.

In the late 1980s a gradual opening of the Soviet Union and the disintegration of the communist bloc created new opportunities for associational activities. In the late 1980s and early 1990s first civil society organisations (CSOs) were established in Armenia, driven by local needs, as well as stimulated by examples of foreign organizations. While 1990s were a period of rapid growth of CSOs in Armenia, some authors (see for example Ishkanian 2008) argue that extensive Western donor support had an unintended negative externality, because it created constituency-detached, donor-driven CSOs that crowded out endogenous forms of civic association and collective action. This argument is particularly relevant for this policy paper, as it discusses current implications of the gap between CSOs and the larger public.

Armenian civil society is a fairly typical case of a “post-communist” civil society. Problems of post-communist civil society can be divided into two broad categories. The first category is about individual attitudes and behaviour of citizens: disdain towards volunteering, distrust towards associations, and low membership in associations (Howard 2003). These are mostly a legacy of communism, under which people were forced to join organisations and “volunteer” on a regular basis. The second category of problems of post-communist civil society has to do with a rapid donor-driven development of the CSOs in these countries after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Manifold challenges of regime transitions, often accompanied with an economic collapse, created the demand for social action, while generous international donor support boosted the supply. This led to mushrooming of CSOs heavily dependent on external donors (Ishkanian 2008). While this helped to establish a seemingly vibrant CSO sector, it created a set of constraints that CSOs currently struggle with. The organizational sustainability of most CSOs in case of withdrawal of international developmental aid is questionable. More importantly, the legitimacy of civil society organisations to represent local voices is often disputed on the grounds that many CSOs are funded from abroad. Armenian civil society exemplifies both types of problems that most other post-communist civil societies face.

An important new development in Armenia is the recent rise of a new type of activities called ‘civic initiatives.’ These are various issue-oriented, horizontally structured groups of individual activists united around a common, often very specific, cause (prevention of construction in a public park, preservation of an architecturally valuable building, protests against a new mine and so on). These new forms of civic participation have emerged in 2008 and a number of victories has been registered since (Ishkanian et al. 2013). By now they have become an important

element of Armenian civil society. The core activists are usually young educated people; they use social media extensively to organize and spread information regarding their activities.

Overall the organisational sector of civil society can be described as fairly institutionalized but detached from the broader public. Trust towards CSOs is low (Paturyan and Gevorgyan 2014). On the other hand there is a visible rise in civic activism, particularly among the youth, which is not channelled through formal organisations but is often spontaneous, horizontally structured and short-term. The new and old elements of civil society are currently in the process of adapting to each other's presence and testing out cooperation strategies.

Thus, Armenian civil society is faced with a challenge of re-connecting to the broader public. The CSOs-public rift is exacerbated by communist legacy of mistrust and disengagement on the public's side and CSOs' history of adjustment to donor expectations on the CSOs' side. As activism in the community is on the rise, CSOs have an opportunity to harness the new energy. To be able to do that efficiently, CSOs need to be aware of the realities of the rift and take them seriously. They should also have as much information as possible on the new trends and changing patterns of civic involvement. This paper aims at highlighting the scope of the detachment and mapping some of the changes in public perceptions and involvement with civil society.

#### **IV. SUMMARY OF THE RAPID ASSESSMENT RESULTS**

*Note: this section is a very succinct summary of some of the policy relevant findings of the CSI-RA report. For more detailed information please refer to the full report available online.<sup>3</sup>*

Political participation in Armenia is low but on the rise as compared to 2009. Petition is the most common type of political action, reported by one fifth of the respondents in 2014. A troubling finding is that the potential for political participation remains low as well: for all the types of political activities asked in the survey (petitions, demonstrations, etc.) the percentage of respondents saying they would never do it, is consistently higher than the percentage of people saying they might do it, or have done it in the past. The 'refuses' are more numerous than the 'doers' and the 'might doers'.

Two thirds of the respondents of the survey say that they do not participate in civil society or community activities. Overall, three quarters of survey respondents are not members of any organisation. Unpaid voluntary work for organisations is even less common: only 14% of the respondents report doing unpaid voluntary work for at least one organisation.

The most common reason for becoming a member of a voluntary association is an expectation of improved career possibilities, followed by a feeling of self-fulfilment. The most commonly mentioned reason for not joining organisations is lack of time followed by a lack of interest.

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<sup>3</sup> [http://program.counterpart.org/Armenia/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Civicus-Report\\_August-2014\\_FFfinal.pdf](http://program.counterpart.org/Armenia/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Civicus-Report_August-2014_FFfinal.pdf).

Most people in Armenia are sceptical about the impact of civil society. The majority of the respondents (54%) are of the opinion that civil society has either limited or no impact in addressing social issues. People are even more sceptical about civil society's impact on policy making: 58% of the respondents think that civil society has limited or no impact on policy making. According to experts interviewed, the agenda of civil society in Armenia is heavily influenced by the priorities of international development organizations. On the policy level the impact of the civil society sector has been negligible. The potential of the sector has been mostly directed at the elimination of consequences rather than tackling root causes.

Although overall trust towards NGOs in Armenia is declining, charitable and humanitarian organisations and environmental organisations enjoy the confidence of the majority of the population. Moreover, levels of confidence have slightly increased as compared to 2009. Seemingly, while the overall trust is on the decline, specific organisations are achieving successes, and are improving their public image.

A large group of respondents (44%) do not use new technology to actively participate in society. The second largest group (41%) uses social networks such as Facebook and its Russian counterpart Odnoklassniki. According to the experts and focus group participants alike there is a considerable growth in the use of new technologies by civil society in recent years. Young people are particularly adept at using these, and are a good target group for online activities by civil society aimed at mobilisation. However there is a need for training CSOs and civic groups in using these tools more effectively. New social media has drawbacks as well: there is a tendency of transferring the real struggle from offline to online platforms.

## **V. ANALYSIS OF THE SITUATION**

Armenian civil society has undergone several phases of development since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The CSO sector (institutionalised civil society organisations) of civil society is consolidated and fairly well developed, possessing the expertise and harnessing loyalty and commitment of its staff, members and volunteers. However CSOs continue to operate in an unfavourable broader political culture. Levels of trust towards the CSO sector are low and declining further. Levels of participation and volunteering are very low. People are sceptical of civil society's ability to solve problems and impact policy. Levels of political activism are also low, but there is a sign of increase in some types of activities, such as signing petitions, participating in peaceful demonstrations and joining boycotts. As political activism seem to be on the increase in Armenia, civil society should be prepared to take advantage of that.

An important nuance of public attitude towards CSOs is that while general trust towards CSOs is on decline, specific types of organisations such as women's organisations, charitable organisations and environmental organisations enjoy higher levels of public confidence and have even registered some progress in recent years. This should give organisations some food for thought in how they position themselves and how they promote their activities and their public image. CSOs should not count on getting credit for simply being part of civil society: that in

itself does not carry a positive image in the public's eye. They should strive to show who they are and what they do, gaining credibility through their own names and actions, rather than being a part of a larger anonymous whole.

New social media is rapidly becoming a part of Armenian daily life and an important tool for civil society to use. It holds potential, and CSOs are well aware of that. Social media matters, is actively being used, and should be used more by CSOs to promote their activities. Two additional points have to be highlighted in addition to this fairly straightforward argument: a) CSOs would benefit from training on how to use social media more efficiently, b) social media is a two-edged sword: while it can boost civil society's outreach and capacities, it also holds a risk of diffusing and undermining real activism by transferring the activities to the online world and platforms, which is not the world we live in and need to act in.

## VI. RECOMMENDATIONS AND PROPOSED ACTIONS<sup>4</sup>

In this section we made a conscious effort to avoid those recommendations that are often voiced in policy papers aimed at assisting CSOs and donors (such, as for example, diversify income sources to reduce donor dependency, operate in a more transparent and accountable way, etc.). We believe there is already an abundance of such recommendations, crucially important as they are. Instead we tried to formulate specific recommendations, driven by the attempt to “think out of the box”. Though we do acknowledge that some of them might even sound provocative, it is our hope that they will stimulate some creative thinking on behalf of CSOs and donors.

### Better Public Relations: Building a Positive Image

The promotion of a **positive image** for CSOs has to be **as specific as possible**: focusing on concrete organisations and their tangible work. As the study at the basis of this policy paper shows, abstract “NGOs” are losing public trust, while more thematic types of associations (such as women's associations or environmental associations) are able to gradually gain more public confidence. CSOs need to build their images in non-abstract ways, through symbols and actions that common people can relate to.

- CSOs should consider recruiting **charismatic popular figures** to pioneer their causes. Western practice has abundant examples of movie stars and popular singers publicly backing civic campaigns on environmentalism, gender-based violence, human rights and so on. This resource is under-utilised in Armenia. CSOs should actively approach Armenian celebrities and offer cooperation, rather than passively expect them to become interested and involved.

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<sup>4</sup> Note: some of the recommendations and proposed actions are derived from a brainstorm discussion with graduate students of the American University of Armenia and the staff of the Turpanjian Center for Policy Analysis. I am very grateful for their help (J.P.)

- Public opinion surveys demonstrate that the **church** is among the most trusted institutions in Armenia. It is also an organisation that maintains countrywide presence and has access to most impoverished and troubled households. Historically the church has been the most natural ally of civil society in many countries. Armenian CSOs should consider cooperating with the church whenever appropriate, particularly on the local level of individual priests and parishes. In this way CSOs can benefit from the positive image enjoyed by the church in overcoming public mistrust. They can also get access and insider information regarding many troubled households.
- There is empirical evidence that CSOs are more trusted in Armenian regions, as compared to Yerevan. **CSOs should consider re-locating their offices to the regions.** For many Yerevan-based CSOs this would be a bold and difficult step, but it could pay off in the long run because they will be able to combine high standards of performance with nuanced knowledge of the region. They will also benefit from working within a more supportive community.

### Smarter Strategies: More Diversity and Better Targeting

CSOs and international organisations in Armenia should explore the potential of **hotlines**. The survey shows that calling a hotline is a type of activity many are willing to do. Donors could encourage the use of hotlines by earmarking the funding and including explicit requirements in their requests for proposals.

**Career-oriented motivations** are clearly important for people who consider volunteering or joining organisations. CSOs should be aware of that and use these motivations to their advantage. They can advertise themselves as good platforms for young people to gain job-relevant skills and experience. CSOs, however, should be realistic about involving more members and volunteers: it takes time and effort to match volunteers to the tasks. Management of volunteers is a skill CSOs need to learn.

In addition to specific mission-driven activities, CSOs should consider engaging in **“light,” less-formal, non-political activities**, aimed at creating a positive image and visibility in their community. A fun movie screening, excursions for school children, getting the elderly together for a knitting session are examples of such activities. Donors could be flexible in allowing CSOs to engage in those activities seemingly unrelated to their project, because it would allow CSOs to re-connect to the people around them, not just their specific deprived and disempowered constituencies. In order to survive in the long term, CSOs need the support of the broader public.

### Donors are the Drivers: More Responsible Guiding

While both CSOs and those who work with them might lament being too much donor-driven, this is a fact of reality, unlikely to wither away any time soon. Donors have a great impact on how CSOs operate in Armenia. Thus, it is imperative to use this impact to a best possible outcome.

**Civic education** in universities and schools should be high on donors' agenda. They should fund civic education classes and keep a tight control of the quality of textbooks, and teaching staff. Educational programs lend themselves nicely to impact measurements, which must be incorporated into teaching. Pre- and post- exposure tests can help demonstrate how taking a civic education course changes a student's attitude towards civic engagement. Tracking the future careers of those who took civic education at school and at university will show whether they become more involved citizens. Donors can specifically **fund chairs of civic education and research** at universities, placing qualified specialists in the position where they can influence young citizens, and generate valuable research in crucial aspect of Armenian political culture

Donors should **fund regions**. Not just projects by Yerevan based CSOs that include a regional based office, or that propose activities in the regions. Fund projects by region-based CSOs. This entails a risk of working with less qualified and experienced organisations. It will require more efforts on the donors' side in terms of training and supervising. But it will pay off in the long run by spreading the expertise more evenly and by activating the regions.

Donors could encourage **more training and experience sharing on the use of internet and social media**. Though this is a cliché, CSO participants expressed their interest and need, thus this point is included in the donor recommendations. Keep funding these activities.

**Activist groups** are obviously on the rise in Armenia; they have a great potential to revitalise the Armenian public sphere, but they are wary of international donors because they want to avoid dependency on donors priorities and the negative public perceptions associated with 'being funded from abroad.' **International donors should be very careful not to undermine this endogenous form of mobilisation**. Both formal organizations and informal groups can think of coming together in any forms like coalitions or networks to reinforce each other.

### **Better Knowledge Base: More Experience Sharing Research**

A series of discussions, brainstorming, experience sharing, and similar activities should be organised to explore **how formal CSOs can effectively cooperate with informal activist groups** to combine strengths and compensate for each other's weaknesses.

Sharing experiences sharing can also help with **efficient use of social media** for promotion and mobilisation. CSOs should organise experience-sharing sessions, BarCamps and so on.

**More research** is needed on the impact of social media on online and offline activism. Gathering of systematic evidence through case studies **is something that CSOs themselves could undertake** with some guidance from the academic community. How is social media used for social and political activism? To what extent and under which circumstances do online calls for action translate into real actions? What kind of strategies are efficient? Answering these questions empirically, based on accumulated systematic experience, can help CSOs strengthen their outreach strategies. CSOs themselves are perfectly positioned to collect necessary data to answer those questions.

While some research can be accomplished by CSOs, **more academic and policy research** of activism and civic participation in Armenia is needed. Donors can create powerful incentives for such research by earmarking funds for that.

**A link between the CSOs and research community** needs strengthening. This can be accomplished by **a) CSOs commissioning policy papers** for the topics of their interest and **b) CSOs working with universities and research centres to establish internship programs**. Both are trickier than they sound. Policy research in Armenia is under-developed. Scholars need extra training to understand how to shift from academic relevance to practical relevance when producing policy papers. Internships at CSOs will not give the desired results unless CSOs learn how to work with interns efficiently. They need to be willing to invest time in guiding and instructing their interns, so that the outcome of the internship is a research project relevant for CSO goals.

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