ASSESSING AND STRENGTHENING CIVIL SOCIETY WORLDWIDE

**A Project Description of
the CIVICUS Civil Society Index:
A Participatory Needs Assessment &
Action-Planning Tool for Civil Society**

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Introduction

The CIVICUS Civil Society Index (CSI) is a participatory action-research project assessing the state of civil society in countries around the world. The project links this assessment with a reflection and action-planning process by civil society stakeholders, aiming to strengthen civil society in those areas where weaknesses or challenges are detected. By seeking to combine valid assessment, broad-based reflection and joint action, the CSI attempts to make a contribution to the perennial debate on how research can inform policy and practice.

This paper introduces the conceptual and methodological building blocks of the CSI. It does so against a backdrop of the current state of research and practice on civil society and civil society strengthening, as outlined in this introductory chapter, and against the CSI's historical development from 1998 to the present, which can be found in Section 2. Section 3 provides basic information on the CSI, including its goals, implementation process and expected outcomes. The following section is devoted to an in-depth discussion of the CSI's conceptual foundations, including the definition of civil society and the project's analytical and operational framework, and also discusses the challenges faced by the task of conceptualising civil society. Section 5 introduces the specific research methodology developed for the CSI and Section 6 outlines the rationale and steps involved in linking research with action within the project. The paper concludes with a discussion on the broader relevance of the CSI initiative for global civil society research and practice. Whereas this paper focuses on the technical design features of the CSI, subsequent papers will provide insights into applications of the CSI in countries around the world.

A paper focusing on the assessment and strengthening of civil society must necessarily provide a perspective on what civil society is and why it is deemed relevant as a topic of inquiry and action. Civil society, broadly defined as the sphere of voluntary action between the market and the state, is one of today's most frequently encountered social science and public policy buzzwords. Over the past two decades, the number of civil society actors at local, national and global levels has grown significantly, as has their influence in public life. Many scholars and policy-makers now see civil society as an important factor in consolidating and sustaining democracy, fostering pro-poor development policies, achieving gender equality and fighting corruption. Consequently, the interest in the topic is burgeoning. Interestingly, civil society is praised by proponents of very different ideologies, ranging from neo-liberal thinkers to radical democrats, communitarians, and neo-marxists (Cohen/Arato 1992; Chandhoke 1995; Etzioni 1995; Gellner 1994; Putnam 2000).

Despite this 'civil society hype', the understanding of civil society – especially in countries of the global South – is still limited. There has certainly been a growth in descriptive studies of specific components and actors within civil society, as well as some groundbreaking research on related topics such as social capital and the non-profit sector (Putnam 1993; Salamon 1999). However, empirical information on civil society as a whole is still scarce. A major reason for this lack of empirical knowledge is the inherent difficulty in conceptualising and operationalising civil society for empirical research. Here, the elusiveness of the civil society concept, misused as an 'analytical hat-stand' (van Rooy 1998:6) for widely diverging ideologies and policy agendas, has proved to be as challenging as the greatly differing manifestations of civil society around the world. It is indicative that from the immense body of research that has been conducted on the topic, no widely used conceptual framework for analysing civil society has emerged.

However, some authors contend that the civil society concept cannot, and should not, be subjected to empirical measurement at all. They argue that civil society is primarily a theoretical, normative and abstract idea without any clear, distinct and measurable empirical manifestations in social life (Tester 1992:124). Yet, there are convincing analytical and policy-related reasons for a desired and actual measurability of the concept.

Firstly, the civil society concept clearly denotes a distinct social reality which is not captured by any other analytical concept. In a nutshell, this distinct social reality can be defined as the particular space in society where collective citizen action takes place. Concepts such as social movements, social participation, social capital or voluntary organisations, while related, are not able to fully and validly describe this important social space. The term 'civil society' has thus emerged to represent the space for collective action and can therefore, if appropriately conceptualised, serve as a useful analytical category in the inventory of empirical social science (Howard 2003: 48).

Secondly, many authors postulate the relevance of collective citizen action – civil society – for many crucial aspects of social and political life, such as good governance, people-centred development and the fight against corruption (e.g. Putnam 1993; Galtung 2000; Burbidge 1997; Edwards/Gaventa 2001; Lewis/Wallace 2000). Yet, as empirically grounded studies of civil society and its contribution to human development are rare, and the findings of the few existing studies tend to be disputed, the jury is still out as to whether civil society is the 'magic bullet' ensuring sustainable human progress or yet another grand idea which fails miserably in practice (Edwards 2004). In fact, if anything, one notices a growing realism – or even disillusionment – in development and democracy circles regarding civil society's progressive potential. Arguably, this is both a consequence of a more realistic appreciation of social change and civil society' role within it, as well as of a limited understanding of what constitutes civil society, how it works and what it can offer.

It is now increasingly recognised that the scientific and practitioner communities know little about the strength, shape and development of civil society around the world, let alone the factors fostering or inhibiting a strong civil society (Anheier 2004: 11; Edwards 2004:108; Knight/Chigudu et al. 2002:54). Similarly, many of the international agencies and institutions that support civil society have come to realise that limited knowledge hampers effective support and that a contextual analysis of civil society in a given country is an essential precondition for successful programmatic activity on strengthening civil society (SIDA 2003; Dutch Foreign Ministry 2003, NORAD 2002:2).

The lack of an overall understanding of civil society's empirical manifestations has thus hampered both the advancement of scientific knowledge on the subject, as well as an appreciation by practitioners and the development community of civil society's actual role in governance and development (Uphoff/Krishna 2001; Howell/Pearce 2002). These are clearly relevant practical and scientific reasons for improving the understanding of civil society through empirical measurement and analysis. In fact, and at the risk of sounding alarmist, time might slowly be running out for civil society. If advocates of civil society do not provide sound arguments and practical evidence supporting its crucial relevance for today's societies, the concept is in danger of reverting to the same level of obscurity in which it has existed for the greater part of its historical trajectory before re-emerging in the course of the democratisation processes of the 1980s.

Similarly, the record of turning civil society into an "operational reality" in terms of discourse, engagement, or even joint actions by its diverse members, is mixed. In many countries, civil society is increasingly used in the discourse of policy-makers and donor agencies and also by Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) themselves. However, it is rarely brought to life by bringing various civil society actors together at a public forum, let alone behind a common goal. Yet, where such engagements are taking place, the immense collective power of civil society is evident (Knight/Chigudu et al. 2002: 56). What comes to mind here is not only the crucial role of broad civil society movements in the dramatic overthrow of the Apartheid regime in South Africa and in other instances of democratic revolutions, but also the more mundane and more commonly encountered advocacy coalitions of CSOs at national and local level.

Even if collective actions are often impossible due to fundamental differences in values and interests among diverse civil society actors, dialogue and exchange are essential for the cohesiveness and sustainability of the civil society arena: "For a civil society to develop, then, it is necessary to establish arenas in which civil organizations can meet, negotiate and cooperate. Such arenas serve as fora for dialogue, understanding and compromise, and they provide a means for the coordination of relations between civil society and the state" (Hadenius/Uggla 1996: 28).

CIVICUS' own experience shows that for such fora to have impact beyond simply ad-hoc networking, they require a carefully and realistically structured agenda and a consultative process, both before and after. There are also clear benefits form declaring certain highly contentious issues as 'off-limits' and focusing on shared concerns, such as the protection or enlargement of common civic space. Yet, in reality, spaces for such engagement among the broad ambit of civil society actors are extremely rare.

This brief review of the current state of civil society research and action has identified two gaps: (a) a contextual and valid tool to assess the state of civil society at country level; and (b) a framework and forum for civil society actors to engage and co-ordinate at national level. Together, these two contributions are likely to address some aspects of the current impasse surrounding civil society. In a bold attempt, the international civil society network *CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation* has initiated the CIVICUS Civil Society Index (CSI), a programme seeking to address both of these needs simultaneously.