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Improving the Understanding and Strength of Civil Society

The contribution of the *CIVICUS Civil Society Index* to civil society strengthening programmes

This document presents the CIVICUS Civil Society Index initiative as a useful and innovative tool for the current programme initiatives of donor agencies and other grant-making institutions engaged in civil society support.

Over the last decade, civil society has become a focal point for international donor work in development and democracy aid. Based on their reflections and evaluations of previous civil society support, donors have in the last few years developed a more sophisticated and deeper understanding of how best to support civil society in recipient countries:

- (1) *Growing Realism*: Whereas the first years of civil society support were marked by an exaggerated expectation of the important roles of civil society in social and political change, donors now acknowledge the complexities of these socio-political processes and the deeply entrenched structures of power within society. Consequently, they neither deny the relevance of civil society for broader social change nor develop inflated views of civil society's potential to bring about such change. As the new DFID guidelines of working with civil society state: "Given that social change takes time and that the redistribution of power and wealth rarely goes unchallenged, it is essential to be realistic about how much can be achieved within the limited time-frames of donor interventions". What is missing, however, is a tool to identify and track civil society's contribution to these crucial processes.
- (2) *Civil society is more than just NGOs*: Although most donor policy documents stress that in order to strengthen civil society, one has to go beyond formal NGOs, the implementation of these policies is confronted with major difficulties in identifying and then reaching those places where the intrinsic indigenous "civic energy" (Alan Fowler, President of the International Society for Third Sector Research) is located within a particular civil society.
- (3) *Indigenous Agenda*: Donors increasingly recognise that civil society organisations "cannot and should not be seen as agents of government or donor policies" (Dutch Ministry for Foreign Affairs, www.minbuza.nl). Successful civil society support programs have to place local civil society in the driver's seat and respond to the priorities identified by local civil society rather than seeking to set them externally. As a recent NORAD position paper states, "the support should try to capture and strengthen the streams of interventions that are rooted in civil society itself" (NORAD, *Direct Support to Civil Society*, p.4).

- (4) *Increased understanding*: Linked to the former point, international development assistance providers have been and still are struggling to gain a comprehensive and accurate understanding of the many complexities and dynamics of civil society. Now that the pitfall of exporting the specific configurations and models of civil society in the donor's home country to the aid recipient's country is generally avoided, the challenge is to develop "contextualised social and political analyses that can better inform donor interventions" (Jude Howell & Jenny Pearce, *Civil Society and Development: A Critical Exploration*, 2001).
- (5) *Arena not 'sum of CSOs'*: Whereas in the past donors mostly supported a more or less carefully selected range of individual CSOs, we note a growing recognition of the need for more concerted and systematic civil society strengthening efforts. Donors are increasingly shifting their emphasis from individual CSOs to supporting an enabling environment for, as well as the infrastructure of, civil society itself. This is captured by thinking about civil society as an *arena* rather than as the simple sum of individual CSOs, which also requires a more contextualised and embedded understanding of the civil society arena within the wider social and political context.

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. In addition, they enable different autonomous organizations to express their views and grievances publicly (Axel Hadenius & Fredrik Ugglå, Making Civil Society Work, 1996)

CIVICUS Civil Society Index

When donors were reviewing their approach to civil society support in the late 1990s, CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation was developing and pilot-testing a tool to assess and build the capacity of civil society, the CIVICUS Civil Society Index (CSI). The CSI is an action-research project that assesses the state of civil society in countries around the world, with a view to creating a knowledge base and an impetus for civil society enhancement initiatives. The CSI is initiated and implemented by, and for, civil society organisations. However, it also actively involves and disseminates its findings to a broad range of stakeholders including governments, media, donors, academics and the public at large. A primary goal of the participatory CSI approach is to empower stakeholders through the promotion of dialogue, collective learning and network-building. Here, a national workshop bringing together various civil society actors and stakeholders is a key event. An equally important objective of the CSI is to assist civil society in identifying and addressing its strengths, weaknesses and priorities for action.

Such a locally-driven assessment of civil society's situation has a lot to offer for the work of the donor community, ranging from (1) an increased understanding of the civil society arena, (2) information about civil society's contribution to broader social change, (3) the generation of an indigenous civil society action agenda, to (4) increased capacity, ownership and readiness to carry out specific interventions by indigenous civil society actors.

More specifically, the CSI will deliver the following outputs:

- ? A comprehensive, yet accessible report on the state of civil society in the particular country along civil society's main dimensions, namely its **structure**, external **environment**, **values** and **impact**;
- ? **Specific strengths** and **weaknesses** of civil society in each of the four dimensions;
- ? **Key priority areas** for civil society intervention, as commonly agreed by a broad range of civil society stakeholders;
- ? **A meeting ground** for civil society stakeholders to come together, share their views and discuss crucial issues and developments;
- ? A **visual map** of civil society, with a focus on the relationships among civil society actors as well as between them and external stakeholders in the state and business sectors;
- ? **Cross-country comparisons** of the state of civil society through the application of a common analytical tool;
- ? Sharing of **successful civil society strengthening initiatives** among participating countries;
- ? An **international network** of civil society practitioners and researchers trained and engaged in action-research aiming at strengthening civil society;

"To implement the CIVICUS Civil Society Index in Uruguay was a most rewarding and worthwhile experience. It allowed a fruitful interaction among the different actors of the Uruguayan Society. We treasure this useful and valuable tool!!" (Anabel Cruz, CSI Partner in Uruguay)

"As one of the few funders that has a sustained focus on enhancing citizen organizations for public benefit -- of strengthening the citizen sector per se -- AKF supports the CIVICUS Civil Society Index, among other reasons, in order to raise awareness in the community of donors about the significance of this kind of work." (David Bonbright, Aga Khan Foundation)

"To adequately implement SIDA's co-financing program with Swedish NGOs on civil society, we constantly need to deepen our understanding of civil society in a particular context. Therefore, the CIVICUS CSI is of interest to us. It combines research and compilation of existing data with a participatory approach in which actors in civil society are invited to make a self assessment of the civil society arena and, if possible, identify a common agenda. SIDA has decided to contribute to the development of the CSI and will follow the next phase with interest." (Malin Stawe, Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency)

CIVICUS is currently inviting statements of interests for national partners to participate in its Civil Society Index 2003-04 and is also seeking support from donors for the CSI initiative. If you would like to receive further information on the CIVICUS Civil Society Index, please contact CSI Project Manager, Finn Heinrich, at finn@civicus.org.