

**ISTR Eight International Conference – Panel Presenter Information**

**Proposed Panel Title:**           **Assessing the State of Civil Societies Worldwide.  
Global Findings of the CIVICUS Civil Society Index  
Project**

**Panel Coordinators:**           **Jacob M. Mati** (primary contact)  
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Additional panelists:

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Major conference theme the panel addresses (*please check one*):

- Evaluating the performance and accountability of the Third Sector
- Social economy and solidarity-based economy
- Management and governance of the Third Sector
- Gender and the Third Sector
- Global civil society and democratic cultures
- Conflict resolution and the Third Sector
- Government regulation, counter-terrorism, foreign aid, and other constraints
- The Welfare State, liberalization, neo-liberal policies and the Third Sector
- Volunteering and social capital
- Philanthropy and the Third Sector
- Other dimensions: **X - International comparative analysis of civil society**

## PANEL ABSTRACT

### **Assessing the State of Civil Societies Worldwide. Comparative perspectives on the findings from the CIVICUS Civil Society Index Project**

Civil society is playing an increasingly important role in governance and development around the world. In most countries, however, knowledge about the state and shape of civil society is limited, and there are few opportunities for civil society stakeholders to come together to discuss and reflect on the current state of civil society and the challenges it is facing. The CIVICUS Civil Society Index (CSI) is a participatory needs assessment and action planning tool for civil society around the world, with the aim of creating a knowledge base and momentum for civil society strengthening initiatives.

A few months after the publication of the *CIVICUS Global Survey of the State of Civil Society, Volume 2: Comparative Perspectives* (Kumarian Press, 2008), this panel presents the key cross-cutting findings of the CSI project in more than 50 countries around the world. The panel looks at how social change can be promoted through research projects such as the CSI and critically examines the current state of civic activism from various angles, including the internal constraints of the third sector and its relationship with the state, business and the international community. Due to its global and comparative nature, its innovative methodology and strong policy orientation, the CSI is of interest to a broad audience of practitioners and researchers alike.

The panel will be made up of the editors and some contributors of the Global Survey, under the coordination of international NGO *CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation*. The panellists will address the following issues:

- What does 'real' civil society look like? What are the specific differences and the overarching similarities of civil societies in different parts of the world?
- What are the main challenges civil society faces in a world characterized by global security concerns, democratic deficits and new forms of participation?
- Is it possible to promote social change through knowledge generation and self-assessment?
- What is the state of relations between civil society and other key sectors, such as the state, the private sector and the international community?
- How can civic activism truly promote social development, citizen participation and accountability?

The papers presented at the panel will include:

1. The Current State of Civil Society: Institutionalization, Accountability and Participation, by Jacob M. Mati and Lorenzo Fioramonti.
2. A New Challenge for Civil Society Infrastructure: The Imperative of Downward Accountability, by David Bonbright and Natalia Kiryttopoulou.
3. A Regional Perspective: the State of Civil Society in sub-Saharan Africa, by Paul Opoku Mensah.
4. Strengthening Civil Society through Aid: Different Models and Goals, by Alan Fowler.

**The Current State of Civil Society: Institutionalization, Accountability and Participation**  
**(Jacob M. Mati Lorenzo Fioramonti)**

This presentation will serve to set the scene for the panel by presenting the overall findings of the CIVICUS Civil Society Index (CSI), a project coordinated by the international NGO *CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation* and implemented by local organizations in more than 50 countries.

The CSI has generated a fascinating picture of the current state of civic activism around the world. However, one must recognize that vast differences in political, social and cultural contexts across the world affect the specific forms of civic activism and make it difficult (if not impossible) to identify global patterns. As the second volume of the CIVICUS Global Survey attests to, the national specificities and particularities of civil society's forms and functions are possibly the most striking feature of the comparative analysis. Yet, despite the fact that civil society comes in all kinds of shapes and forms, there are some interesting similarities across countries which can help us identify some common challenges:

- *CSO Accountability*: The issue of strengthening the transparency and accountability of CSOs in order to maintain and/or increase civil society's public legitimacy emerges as the most common challenge, identified by as many as two out of three participating countries. The fact that accountability tops the 'usual concerns' about financial sustainability, human resources and sectoral capacity attests to the reflective and introspective mood of civil society stakeholders. In terms of policy recommendations, the CSI's comparative analysis finds that 'first generation' efforts to tackle the accountability challenge, such as voluntary codes of ethics, have yielded limited results and recommends the adoption of new innovative approaches and tools, with more 'teeth' in terms of regulation and enforcement.
- *Professionalization vs. Self-Organisation*: An underlying theme of the CSI country reports and comparative analyses relates to the tension between greater professionalization of the sector and its civic-driven nature. A number of country studies (especially those about donor-dependent civil societies in post-Communist Europe and sub-Saharan Africa) note the challenge of marrying CSOs' function as the voice of citizens (particularly marginalized groups) with the greater professionalization required by donors and governments. More generally, the issue of how CSOs can build stronger linkages with the citizens has emerged as a key challenge. Since the CSI looked 'beyond NGOs' to analyze all different forms of civil society, it picked up on the vibrancy of social movements in Latin America and Asia, which might provide interesting lessons for the more professionalized NGO-driven civil societies of Eastern Europe and Africa.
- *Effective Democratic Governance*: If we were to single out the most critical condition identified by the CSI for civil society to be able to flourish, it would probably be the existence of an effective and democratic state. Put simply, the CSI has found that civil society as a sector is more vibrant, better-resourced,

more stable and well-organized in those countries where the rule of law is respected by both citizens and the state, the government is receptive to external input and the state is strong enough to meet the basic needs of the people. While this might sound like stating the obvious, it is clear that policies of the international aid community do not paid enough attention to the symbiotic link between a vibrant civil society and an effective state. While in the past civil society has often been strengthened against the state, future policy trends, such as the Paris Agenda, point towards the danger of turning this strategy on its head by focusing solely on the state at the expense of civil society.

**A New Challenge for Civil Society Infrastructure:  
The Imperative of Downward Accountability  
(Natalia Kiryttopoulou)**

This presentation focuses on civil society's infrastructure and investigates a number of key issues, such as civil society's legal environment, its relations to the state and business sector and, most importantly, its practice of transparency and accountability (or the lack thereof).

The paper defines civil society infrastructure as the set of institutions that create the conditions in which efficient and effective citizen organisation can flourish. These are often referred to as 'enabling conditions' and there is no universal model of what an ideal infrastructure for civil society should look like. Specific forms of local and national infrastructure vary tremendously according to unique contexts. There are however, certain common features found in civil society across the world, which are explored in this paper, such as

- the regulatory system and self-regulation
- sufficient and sustainable financial resource base
- Information and knowledge
- Capacity

The paper then analyses the extent to which these common features of civil society infrastructure are present in different countries. The analysis makes use of the quantitative and qualitative CSI findings and thereby provides a comprehensive overview into the current state of civil society infrastructure around the world.

The authors identify downward accountability as the key condition for ensuring the effectiveness of civil society infrastructure and discuss specific best practices and models on how civil societies around the world can improve their accountability.

**A Regional Perspective: The State of Civil Society in Sub-Saharan Africa  
(Paul Opoku-Mensah)**

Since the late 1980s, civil society has emerged as one of the leading concepts in African development, expected to both reconstitute the state and contribute to development and democratization objectives. This expectation is based on the potential of civil society to provide the missing key, at both theoretical and policy levels, to sustained political

reform, legitimate states and governments, viable state-society and state-economy relationships, and to prevent the kind of political decay that had undermined African development in the past. Yet nearly two decades after it emerged as a central object of theoretical and policy analysis, the shape of civil society and its contribution to African development and governance remain little known, in part because of a lack of systematic comparative analysis.

The CSI exercise in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) indicates that civil society has (re)emerged as a significant autonomous space and institutional actor, engaged in a web of crosscutting relations, and contributing in varying ways to the continent's development. To be sure, and as the CSI studies indicate, SSA is diverse, with varying political and socioeconomic contexts. This diversity has become more accentuated and should be reflected in the understanding of, and strategies for, civil society development. While the overall assessment of civil society in SSA shows increased strength and relevance, like the overall African political and socioeconomic context in which civil society exists and is part of, civil society itself still remains fragile, and its sustained development must be constantly nurtured and facilitated.

The future of civil society in SSA will depend on two distinct but interconnected processes, namely

- i) improvements in the external environment in which it operates—in particular the political context, and
- ii) most importantly, the extent to which civil society in Africa itself manages the internal challenges facing it.

Given the importance of civil society to the future of the continent, these are questions that ought to be answered not by civil society alone, but should be of interest to all stakeholders with an interest in the development of civil society, and the continent in general. Indeed an adequate response to these questions might well enable civil society to emerge as a critical arena whose actors make significant contributions to the search for a new beginning for Africa, a search dubbed the “the African Renaissance” and reflected by a desire for a continent characterized by democracy, peace and stability, sustainable development and ultimately a better life for all Africans.

### **Strengthening Civil Society through Aid: Different Models and Goals (Alan Fowler)**

This paper examines an operational issue crucial for any development intervention that often remains unexplored: the relationship between project stakeholders and the donor community. It looks at the following key questions: Why, how and which donor agencies have financed the CIVICUS Civil Society Index (CSI)? And, more generally, why does the official aid system support capacity development and enabling conditions for civil society at all?

Locating the CSI experience of engaging donors in the project within the larger issue of international aid for strengthening of civil society, the author discusses the challenging funding environment for what he calls ‘inside-out’ approaches to civil society strengthening, which are driven by local stakeholders and their needs, but do not necessarily align with current donor priorities.

More specifically, the paper reflects on two features of the CSI experience. One is that aid for civil society strengthening is highly variable across donors. For some, this assistance is a strategic part of their profile which seems to correspond with a larger proportion of their assistance being allocated through multilateral channels. For others, civil society support is significantly context-dependent as regards combinations of recipient and donor country and the donor's policy towards CSOs. The second reflection is that the CSI has provided an important innovation to help funders shift their perspective on, and approach to, civil society strengthening. In crude terms, the CSI promotes an 'inside-out' approach to advancing civil society. This is a necessary complement to mainstream 'outside-in' practices that rely heavily on technical assistance which most donors understand and finance in ways that retain their influence.

Thus, based on the case-study approach of the CSI project's experience with donors, the paper sheds light on the important conditions set by donors, and here particularly the aid system, on civil society strengthening programmes.