

Managing Trade-offs
Challenges faced in designing the implementation approach of the
CIVICUS Civil Society Index

Paper presented at the ISTR conference, Cape Town, 6-10 July 2002

Volkhart Finn Heinrich

Project Manager, CIVICUS Civil Society Index

CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation

finn@civicus.org

Abstract

The paper describes and explains the choices made by CIVICUS in the design of the CIVICUS Civil Society Index's pilot phase. It focuses on conceptual and methodological issues that are of general relevance for cross-country research initiatives on civil society. Its main argument is to reject rigid and stream-lined universal tools and to leave ample space for in-country adaptations of methodology and project approach. Such a priority entails, however, certain trade-offs, which project designers and researchers have to be aware of.

INTRODUCTION

What is the state of civil society in countries around the world? What can we learn from comparing the state of civil society across countries? What actions can be taken by civil society stakeholders to improve the state of civil society in their country? These were some of the guiding questions for the CIVICUS Civil Society Index. The *Index* project has been implemented in its pilot phase in 2000/01 in fourteen countries around the world.

The paper seeks to examine the lessons that can be drawn for cross-country civil society research and/or strengthening projects from the choices made in the pilot phase of the CIVICUS Civil Society Index. To do so, it provides an overview of the project's pilot phase and then proceeds to present some of the many trade-off decisions that had to be made in designing an effective research approach.

THE PILOT PHASE OF THE CIVICUS CIVIL SOCIETY INDEX

The *Index* project can be described as a research-action initiative on civil society with the following three main goals:

- (1) to assess the health of civil society on a country-by-country basis
- (2) to build links and networks among civil society stakeholders
- (3) to provide a reflection and goal-setting tool that can be used to design initiatives to strengthen civil society.

The *Index* project is carried out by CIVICUS in co-operation with partners at the national level, so-called National Lead Organisations (NLOs). A guiding principle of the *Index* is local ownership and participation to ensure that the project is controlled by local civil society stakeholders. The NLOs are selected through an open process: CIVICUS issues a request for statements of interest for civil society organisations to partner with CIVICUS in implementing the *Index* project in their country. During its pilot phase in 2000/01, the *Index* project was implemented in the following countries: Belarus, Canada, Croatia, Estonia , Ghana, Indonesia, Mexico, New Zealand, Pakistan, Romania, South Africa, Ukraine, Uruguay and Wales.

After having finalised a memorandum of understanding with CIVICUS, the first substantive task for the NLOs in the pilot phase was to compile an overview report on the state of civil society in their country, based on existing information and data sources. On the logistical side, NLOs were asked to build support for the project among civil society stakeholders through the establishment of advisory or steering committees, the publication of information about the project and, most importantly, through the search for financial support for the project implementation.

The next major step in the project was to prepare and carry out a stakeholder survey gauging the perceptions of the current state of civil society along a variety of issues. The survey became the primary means of data collection as, in almost all countries, there was little secondary data available on civil society. NLOs first conducted a focus group meeting to select the relevant indicators used in the survey and to add country-specific ones, if necessary. Then, a survey sample of individuals with knowledge on civil society as a whole ('knowledge-bearers') was established, information on the upcoming survey was disseminated and the

survey was administered. For the analysis of the state of civil society, the stakeholder survey data was supplemented with existing secondary data on civil society as well as the information gathered in the overview report.

The most important step in the implementation process is the National Goal and Agenda Setting Workshop. It aims to present the research findings so that participants might discuss and validate them and, ultimately, use the research findings to set goals and a joint action agenda for the future development of civil society. To be able to effectively create and implement the joint agenda of action, the workshop needs to bring together a wide variety of stakeholders, civil society organisations as well as representatives from government, business, media and the academy, who establish task forces to work on specific issues.

Many of the organisations that fall into the *Index's* definition of civil society, such as faith-based organisations or trade unions, do not usually regard themselves as a part of civil society. In this respect, the workshop had the potential to show that there are common concerns and issues for all these organisations, and thus to broaden the actors' base of civil society well beyond the 'usual suspects' of NGOs. The workshop can also assist in raising the public awareness surrounding civil society's activities and of the burning issues it is currently facing. After the workshop, a project report is prepared by the NLO that includes the research findings as well as the proceedings and outcomes of the national workshop.

MANAGING TRADE-OFFS

The design of an international project focusing on such a complex phenomenon as civil society inevitably involves many challenges and trade-offs. In fact, from a social science perspective, the *Index* could well serve as a showcase example having faced every serious challenge cross-national research projects can possibly encounter.

First, it had to come to terms with the contested and rather vague concept of civil society by finding an appropriate way to define and operationalise it. Second, as the project aims at measuring the health of civil society, it had to provide some normative standards on how a 'healthy civil society' should look like. Third, due to its cross-national design, the project necessarily encountered problems with regard to the comparability of the results on the one hand, and the country-specific applicability of the design and concepts, on the other. Last, the

Index is driven by an ambitious goal, which is to bridge the gap between research on the health of civil society and action by civil society stakeholders to improve that health. For CIVICUS, the latter is the most crucial indicator of success of the project, as it gives an immediate answer to the perennial question posed to scientific research: For what?

Let us now examine each of these challenges in more depth.

Who's In and Who's Out? – Defining and Operationalising Civil Society

A project aiming to measure and assess civil society necessarily has to establish an operational definition of the concept; however, defining the concept of civil society is no small feat when one considers the ambiguity surrounding it. As the German sociologist Ulrich Beck puts it, “The most precise statement one can make about civil society is that it is an extraordinarily vague idea” (Beck 2001: 15). The concept’s vagueness has partially been a consequence of its great appeal to so many different ideological and political proponents, from communitarians focusing on the bonds associations of civil society create in communities (Etzioni 1995), to conservatives interpreting civil society as a remedy to the over-regulating nanny state (Tanner 1996), and radical democrats interested in the role of civil society as an important component of the utopian project of an associative democracy (Hirst 1994, Cohen/Rogers 1995).

Leaving the different normative horizons of the concept aside, an operational definition still must take a stand on certain conceptual issues, mostly related to its empirical boundaries. The *Index* project defines civil society as:

The sphere of institutions, organisations, and individuals located between the family, the state and the market, in which people associate voluntarily to advance common interests.

This, on first sight, is a rather straightforward definition, but in reality it rests on some critical choices. Generally, CIVICUS’ approach can be characterised as inclusive rather than exclusive. The first choice is the use of the term ‘sphere,’ which better indicates the fuzzy boundaries of the phenomenon (see Fowler 2001) than alternative terms such as ‘sector’ that implies a clear-cut delimitation. Due to the strong ‘embeddedness’ of civil society in its specific socio-cultural context and its dynamic nature, responding to the ever-changing needs and aspirations of people, a rigid definitional framework is deemed inappropriate. At the same

time, however, an operational definition needs to provide some guidance on *who's in* and *who's out*, who constitutes civil society and who does not.

The definition employed for the *Index* project delineates civil society from the family, market and state. There are, of course, borderline cases with regard to all three boundaries, for example associations based on larger family ties, co-operatives and political parties. How to deal with these and other borderline cases is essentially left up to our national partners, as we recognise that the 'civil society nature' of each of these organisational types varies from country context to country context¹.

The Political System as the major reference point

The definition includes a mentioning of the activities taking place in the civil society sphere, i.e. 'advancing interests'. This serves to highlight the fundamental political nature of the concept, as opposed to similar concepts such as third or non-profit sector. Crudely put, civil society is about citizens collectively engaging in governance issues and not about the main socio-economic activities of a certain sector of society that are the focus of non-profit studies (see also Fowler 2001; Naidoo/Tandon 1999: 8; Morris 2000: 40; van Rooy 1998b: 16). Therefore, the attitude and ideological outlook of the state (and not of the given economic system) is most crucial in determining the space, characteristics and role of civil society in a given country. An assessment of the health of civil society has to use the political system as a major point of reference.

Uncivil Society

A problem every definition of civil society is confronted with relates to the question: What to do with the phenomenon of *uncivil society*. In other words, does civil society only refer to those civil organisations and actions that do not violate a certain predefined norm of civility, for example non-violence or the Universal Declaration of Human Rights? Or should civil society refer to all associational and other forms of citizen engagement regardless of their civil or uncivil nature? Whereas in an earlier publication (Naidoo/Tandon 1999) CIVICUS opted for the normative, 'civil' position on this issue, we came to the conclusion that for the purpose of assessing the health of civil society, its dark sides must also be taken into account. An important indicator for the health of civil society actually is the ratio between civil and uncivil society. In countries in which uncivil modes of citizen action (e.g. ethnic strife, racial

intolerance, religious fundamentalism) prevail, civil society is in a poor state. By simply defining the uncivil sides of civil society out, one would automatically come up with a rosy picture of civil society that is completely non-violent and tolerant of all. However, the health of civil society is strongly determined by the extent of its 'civil' components in comparison to its 'uncivil' counterparts.

Ethno-Centrism

Aside from the many challenges related to the question of who's in and who's out, there is a much more fundamental challenge to the operational definition of civil society, that is potential ethno-centrism. The concept of civil society has its roots in Western philosophy and strong links to Western concepts such as the nation-state. Thus, there is a mode of theorising about civil society which questions its applicability to non-western contexts (e.g. Kasfir 1998; Blaney/Pasha 1993; Hann/Dunn 1996). CIVICUS agrees with those who argue for a stronger account of informal manifestations of civil society prevalent in the South (Fowler 2001; Kasfir 1998). CIVICUS, however, also holds the view that collective citizen action to engage in public life is a feature of any kind of society and that there is enough commonality among these various forms of citizen action to render an international project on this topic possible.

The Dimensionality of a Healthy Civil Society

The next conceptual decision that had to be made was to establish an analytical framework for the project. In contemplating about such a framework, CIVICUS soon realised that aiming to measure the *health of civil society* involves more considerations than a mere attempt to measure *civil society*. That is, more factors and dimensions have to be taken into account, as the health of civil society is not only dependent on its internal characteristics, but can also be indicated by its external pre-conditions and influences, such as democracy or a culture of volunteering (National Commission on Civic Renewal 1994) as well as by the quantity and quality of civil society's activities.

To get an accurate picture of the health of civil society, one has to employ a holistic approach, examining the various dimensions relating to the state of civil society. This is a consequence of its internal heterogeneity and its location in the midst of the multiple spheres of influence of the state, market and family. A holistic approach of assessing civil society's health should take into account how it looks (its structure), what it does (its values and impact) and what

¹ See, for example, the specific type of social movement unionism in South Africa (Adler/Webster 1995)

factors act upon it (its space). With these guidelines in mind, Professor Helmut Anheier from the London School of Economics has developed the Diamond Tool that disaggregates civil society into four basic dimensions²:

- (1) the *structure* of civil society with regard to its basic components, their size and relationship and the resources they command;
- (2) the legal, political and socio-cultural *space* that civil society occupies within the larger political, legal and social environment;
- (3) the *values* that civil society represents and advocates; and,
- (4) the *impact* of civil society on societal well-being and the policy process.

Aggregation & Presentation Issues

This four-dimensional approach replaced the original idea of an additive index using a small number of indicators along the lines of the Human Development Index (HDI) (Anand/Sen 1993). As it is the case with many other social science concepts, the concept of civil society, more so the concept of the health of civil society, cannot be measured through a single indicator or a limited number of indicators, due to its abstract and broad character covering a range of diverse phenomena.

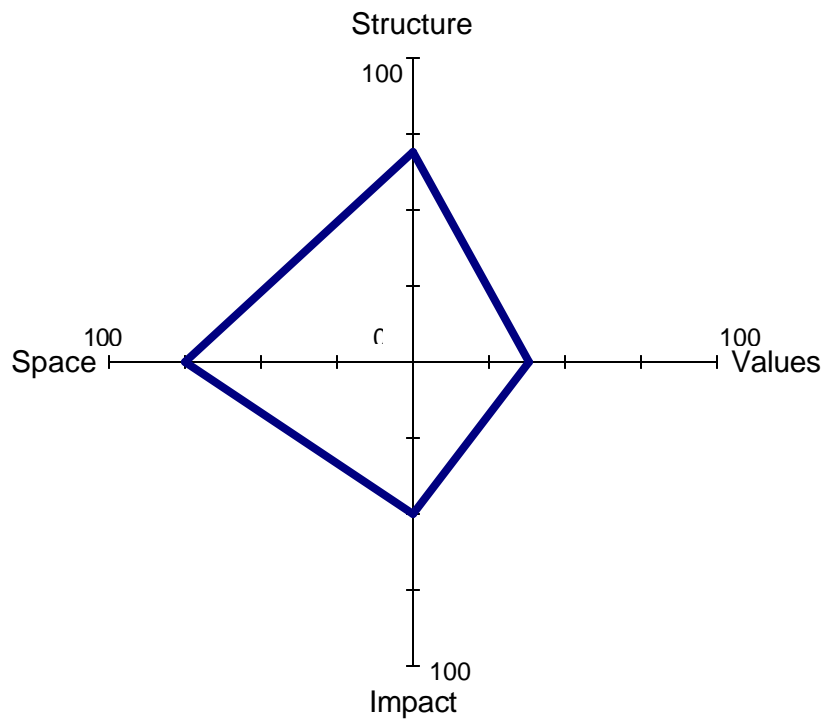
CIVICUS believes that only a multi-dimensional approach is able to detect the various kinds of interplay between the dimensions and the specific strengths and weaknesses of civil society. A World Bank study on governance came to a similar conclusion stating that “aggregate indicators [...] are a powerful tool for drawing attention to relevant issues. They are also indispensable for cross-country research into the causes and consequences of governance. But they are a blunt tool to use in formulating policy advice” (Kaufman/Kraay et al. 2000: 4). CIVICUS is aware of the inherent trade-off – the first one in a long series of trade-offs in the project design – between the conflicting goals of receiving media attention on the *Index*, which would require a simple and straight-forward message of the project – ideally a ranking of countries – and the aim to use the *Index* as an assessment and policy tool for civil society stakeholders, requiring an in-depth and contextualised analysis and presentation of the research findings. For the pilot phase, CIVICUS consciously took the decision to trade-off high media attention for an increased diagnostic value of the project for civil society practitioners and their partners.

² For more information on the Diamond Tool, see Anheier, Helmut K., 2001. *The Civil Society Diamond: A Primer*, CIVICUS Civil Society Index Occasional Papers No. 2 and the forthcoming book by Helmut Anheier,

The four dimensions of the *Index* can be graphically represented in the form of a Diamond (see Figure 1)³. In our view, the four-dimensional Diamond Tool successfully balances the goals of creating an easy way to understand the project results with the need to pay attention to the complexities and nuances of civil society.

Figure 1: The CIVICUS Civil Society Diamond

The CIVICUS Civil Society Diamond



Postulating Standards of a Healthy Civil Society

Since the ultimate aim of the *Index* project is to assess civil society's health, i.e. to identify civil society's strengths and weaknesses, CIVICUS had to 'bite the bullet' and postulate some normative standards with respect to what defines a healthy civil society. The *Index*'s Project Advisory Group was divided on this issue: some argued that the time was ripe for such

Civil Society: Measurement and Policy Dialogue, London: Earthscan.

³The Diamond tool is inspired by the Equity Diamond developed by Social Watch 2000.

standards and CIVICUS is well-positioned to take up this job. Others expressed their concerns about putting Western standards on contexts in which these standards do not fit. Take the issue of CSO umbrella bodies, for example. In the context of stable liberal democracies, where CSOs can exert their influence through well-established channels of interest representation, the existence of functioning umbrella bodies can indicate a healthy civil society. In the context of authoritarian regimes, however, they are likely to be used to co-opt and control a civil society that is striving for greater independence and autonomy, and are therefore not an appropriate indicator for a healthy civil society. This discussion essentially boiled down to the question of whether or not it would be possible and desirable to come up with universal standards of a healthy civil society.

As is the case with most complex issues, we found that the answer to this question is neither an unconditional yes nor a clear no. CIVICUS, with the assistance of the Project Advisory Group and drawing upon existing research (e.g. Bothwell 1998; USAID 2000), generated a list of indicators that describe, for most contexts, how a healthy civil society should look. Of course, establishing this list was easier for some dimensions (e.g. structure, space) than for others (e.g. values, impact). For example, regarding the values dimension, which is always a potential minefield in global debates, documents and guidelines on which there is (almost) universal consent, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, are employed. Based on this approach, the following set of values was identified as normative standards for civil society's activities: tolerance, human rights, gender equity, sustainable development, social justice, democracy and transparency, among others.

Before applying the list to their particular empirical context, however, our national partners were asked to convene a focus group of civil society stakeholders to discuss and decide upon the applicability of each indicator to their country context. They were also encouraged to amend the list with country-specific items that indicate the health of civil society. The original CIVICUS list of indicators proved to be widely applicable in its content and rather exhaustive in its scope. Since the termination of the pilot phase, the indicators were subjected to close scrutiny with regards to their validity and reliability. Concerning the challenges of setting standards of a healthy civil society, CIVICUS took a mid-way position, providing certain guidelines without imposing them on diverse country contexts.

Cross-National Comparability vs. Contextual Validity

In the social sciences comparisons are regarded as one of the most powerful approaches to arrange information from different sources, to generate new insights and to test existing patterns of knowledge (Teune 1990). In the introduction to their seminal work on comparative social science, Mattei Dogan and Dominique Pelassy state, “knowledge of the self is gained through knowledge of others” (Dogan/Pelassy 1990: 5). We require information about comparable phenomena to more deeply understand the particular characteristics of the phenomenon in which we are interested. Further, comparisons can assist us in detecting common patterns among comparable cases and in determining the causes and consequences of these patterns, which might even put us in a position to change these phenomena. Consider for example, the important work done by political scientists in debating and advising the constitutional design of new democracies (see for example, Sartori 1994; Lijphart 1991), which drew heavily on lessons learned from cross-country comparisons.

The benefits of comparative research also hold true when looking at civil society. To fully understand the specific features of civil society and its determining factors in a given country, identifying commonalities and differences with civil societies in other countries is essential. Over the last decade, research conducted on civil society has increased exponentially, but much of this research has focused on civil society in a specific country (James 1997). Rarely have research projects been comparative in nature, although the few examples that exist have contributed significantly to build an international knowledge base on civil society. Here, the Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project (Salamon/Anheier 1999), the Civil Society and Governance project co-ordinated by the University of Sussex and the Commonwealth Foundation’s Civil Society in the New Millennium Project are most noteworthy.

One of the main reasons for the low number of international projects on civil society is the severe challenges such projects face; most significantly, the challenge to marry contextual validity with comparability of the findings. How has the *Index* project attempted to come to grips with this trade-off decision?

One Size Does Not Fit All – The issue of contextual validity

The notion of contextual validity refers to the scientific requirement that the concepts applied and the findings gained measure what one intends to measure. In cross-national research, where the employed concepts have to ‘travel’ well across societies (Sartori 1970), achieving validity in each context is not an easy task. The question of whether the concept of civil society is applicable to non-Western contexts is a case in point. The trade-off between contextual validity and cross-national comparability is that the more countries one would like to cover in one’s research, the more abstract the concepts have to be to avoid the danger of non-applicability to certain contexts. However, abstract concepts have a low number of defining attributes and are thus very hard to operationalise. From this it follows that the trade-off described here is greatest in projects that attempt to cover the globe, such as the *Index* project.

To make things more complicated, the concept of civil society might well be one of the most challenging social phenomena to be conceptualised, operationalised and measured on a global scale. Why is this the case? Precisely because the characteristics of civil society are bound to the social context from which it emerges. As the citizen (with her or his specific needs, interests and values) is the building block of civil society, the manifestations of civil society differ widely across countries, cultures and other settings. Furthermore, various actors and institutions act upon civil society, foremost the state, and these different institutions will shape different forms of civil society. For example, in a totalitarian regime, civil society manifests itself mainly through informal associations and ephemeral alliances of citizens, whereas in a democratic setting civil society can assert a visible place in the system of governance. In the context of the *Index* project, civil society is conceptualised as a sphere in which people associate voluntarily. Thus, to account for these country-specific variations of civil society, a cross-national concept has to be broad, involving the trade-offs mentioned above. The flexibility of the notion of a sphere renders it possible to account for the tremendous country-specific variations of civil society. But at the same time, this rather abstract definition of civil society used by the *Index* project tends to transfer the problem of how to establish contextual validity to the level of operationalisation and measurement.

When operationalising and measuring the concept of the health of civil society, the *Index* project follows the guidelines and solutions offered by the literature dealing with the challenge of the comparability-validity trade-off (see for example Peters 1998; Landman

2000; Sartori 1970). One potential solution is to disaggregate the given concept (Verba 1969: 83; Heinrich 2001: 13). The *Index* achieved this by using the four-dimensional approach of the Diamond Tool. The complexity of the health of civil society is dissected into its four main components (structure, space, values and impact), thereby rendering the concept of civil society more specific without losing its contextual validity, as each of the four dimensions is a defining feature of every civil society everywhere.

Second, the project recognises that the use of *identical* indicators across countries might not yield valid results, as their applicability is context specific. Consider, for example, the use of the indicator 'voter turnout' as a measure of the extent of political participation. This indicator might be valid for most democracies, but certainly not for authoritarian regimes or democracies that legally require their citizens to go to the polls. What is recommended instead is to search for indicators with an *equivalent* meaning (Przeworski/Teune 1970; van Deth 1998). Equivalence must always be established in relation to the underlying concept being measured, in our case the structure, space, values or impact of civil society. In applying the *Index*, users therefore combine a set of universal indicators proposed by CIVICUS along with indicators that are of relevance to their context only, but still measure the respective underlying dimension. This ensures a reasonable balance between contextual validity and comparability of the findings. This approach echoes the conclusions drawn by Nancy Thede in an excellent survey of quantitative research on human rights. She states that human rights practitioners “emphasise a participatory approach not only to the application but also to the design of indicators, an approach that includes first and foremost the local community. They also underline the importance of the contextualisation of indicators, in application as well as in interpretation” (Thede 2000: 13). Again, the *Index* project opts for balancing universal guidelines with a considerable degree of freedom to adapt these guidelines to country-specific circumstances.

Comparability ensured?

Did these measures lead to ensuring both cross-country comparability as well as contextual validity of the results? Whereas an examination of the issue of validity is beyond the scope of this paper (for an analysis, please refer to Heinrich/Naidoo 2001), questions around comparability are addressed below.

Comparisons using data gathered through the *Index* project can take place in two distinct areas: (a) in comparing research *findings* and (b) in comparing the research *processes*. Users of the *Index* project are obviously strongly interested in comparing the aggregate findings of the research on a country-by-country basis by looking at the size of the overall country Diamond. They simply want to know how a specific country compares to others. However, the potential for cross-country comparisons of the absolute scores of the Diamond and its dimensions is limited due to the particular data collection approach employed by the project. As the *Index* relies heavily on local stakeholder assessments, the findings are subject to a certain bias: those stakeholder assessments cannot be easily compared, as it cannot be assumed that stakeholders in different countries use the same ‘mental yardstick’ when assessing civil society⁴. This problem is exacerbated because many of the survey questions employ rather abstract categories and questions, so that there is ample room for different interpretations by stakeholders.

This problem is very common in cross-country perception-based research projects. Transparency International’s Corruption Perception Index, for example, correct for this potential bias by balancing surveys conducted with local people, with data gathered by surveying foreign experts and using a large number of different data sources. Unfortunately, as these remedies were not available in the case of the *Index* project’s pilot phase, CIVICUS had to rely strongly on assessments of local experts, supplemented by the small number of foreign knowledge-bearers on a particular civil society (e.g. representatives of donor or international organisations).

Whereas comparisons of *absolute* scores are limited for the current phase of the project, interesting insights through comparing *relative* scores are still possible using “second-order comparisons” (Rokkan cited in Verba 1969: 93). These do not compare single variable scores across countries, but look at cross-country patterns of relationships between variables within a country. As the potential bias induced by relying heavily on local stakeholder assessments likely affects all indicators equally, it does not affect the relations between the indicators within the same country. If there is a bias caused by country-specific standards, it only distorts the absolute size of the indicators, but not their relative sizes in comparison to each other. Thus, valid comparisons can be drawn with regard to the ranking of the four

⁴ Even on an individual level, among survey respondents in the same country, it is not clear that the same standards in assessing a certain indicator are used. However, such an assumption can be made with a greater confidence and a better rationale than regarding cross-country comparisons.

dimensions and individual indicators across countries. One can explore cross-national patterns concerning which indicators and dimensions were regarded as most positive or negative or regarding certain indicator correlations. Interesting insights are gained by comparing the selected indicator-sets across countries, which vary based on the appropriateness of the indicators for the particular country context. However, there is no doubt that the limitations in comparing the health of civil society across countries restrict the usefulness of the knowledge generated by the *Index* project.

The Challenge of Linking Research and Action

While the discussions in previous sections have focused on the *research* components of the *Index* project, the *Index* is an action research initiative that aims to provide civil society stakeholders with a diagnostic tool to identify the burning issues civil society faces and to use this knowledge to devise appropriate actions to strengthen the sector. If the *Index* seeks to successfully bridge the gap between research and action, it has to focus on the specific needs of local civil society actors and has to draw on the local knowledge on civil society. Only such an approach can ensure sustainable capacity building of civil society (van Rooy 1998a : 217).

Local Ownership

In our consultations on the project design, many people, especially in the global South, noted what somebody called the 'Western colonisation' of research projects in the South, referring to the tendency of shifting Western concepts and methods into Southern contexts where they might be inapplicable. The particular notion of civil society, due to its roots in Western philosophy and its linkage to the modern European history, could potentially be a case in point. However, as described earlier, the *Index* methodology takes into account country-specific circumstances thereby seeking to avoid the trap of ethno-centrism.

This sensitivity of the project to varying needs and contexts continues on the level of the implementation design. It is not conceptualised as a huge, centralised research project, but as a flexible assessment tool for civil society practitioners around the world. As outlined earlier, CIVICUS co-operated with National Lead Organisations (NLOs) in implementing the project, which, in turn, worked together with a broad range of local stakeholders. The implementation of the project was solely based on the expression of interest and on willing local civil society organisations to invest intellectual, human and financial resources to carry out the project.

Thus, the selection of pilot phase countries was not led by the rationale of the project design, but by the benefits local civil society sees in carrying out the project in their country. Due to this needs-based approach, the sample of 14 pilot phase countries happened to include five Central & Eastern European countries. Apparently, a project that links 'research on' with 'action by' civil society was regarded as a useful and timely initiative in these countries.

The ownership of the implementation process and of the project results were in the hands of local stakeholders, ensuring that the project meets the particular needs of local civil society. This approach placed the NLO in the driver's seat, so to speak, with respect to implementing the project in its own country as it was empowered to adjust the general project framework to fit its country specific contexts.

One should not forget to mention the compromises involved in this approach, namely a reduction in the comparability of the findings, a restriction of CIVICUS' role to a coordinative one and the dropping of a universal time frame for the implementation for all countries, originally envisioned to coincide with the biennial CIVICUS World Assemblies. However, CIVICUS strongly believes that the benefits of placing a premium of importance on local needs and circumstances far outweighs the downsides of a less streamlined project approach.

Participatory Approach

The question of the social utility of scientific research tends to slip off the researcher's agenda far too often. Many existing research projects, especially the ones based on the positivist traditions of Western social science, fall short of meeting the needs of practitioners, let alone those groups that are in the direst need of empowerment. Noting the great challenge of marrying rigorous research with action-oriented information, CIVICUS nevertheless seeks to make a contribution to social transformation through its *Index* project.

Informed by theories and approaches of participatory action research (e.g. Fals-Borda/Rahman 1991; Whyte 1991) and participatory monitoring and evaluation (Estrella 2000), the *Index* places civil society stakeholders at the heart of the project. As shown in the preceding section, the project is implemented by national partners who in turn draw more actors into the process, for example as members of the steering committee or national advisory group, as research agencies or as communication channels for disseminating

information on the project to wider civil society and its partners. An even larger group of stakeholders becomes part of the process as respondents to the stakeholder survey and as participants of the National Goal and Agenda Setting Workshop. In all of this, the *Index* resonates with the participatory action research principles of stakeholder involvement and empowerment. The most crucial component of the project design in this regard is undoubtedly the National Goal and Agenda Setting Workshop. This is where representatives of relevant civil society stakeholders and interlocutors in government, business, the media and the research community are gathered to jointly assess the health of civil society by reflecting on the research findings. Following the assessment, the stakeholders set common goals and a common agenda for the future development of the sector, again informed by the research. Similar to the concept of “collective reflections” (Brown 1993), these workshops “integrate diverse perspectives to generate new understanding; they mobilise diverse resources for new action; they create new relationships among actors who can do things together that they cannot accomplish alone” (Brown 1993:19).

For CIVICUS it is clear that the project must be embraced and owned by local civil society in order to successfully bridge the gap between research and action. The results of the pilot phase are promising in this regard. There are many examples of collective activities by civil society stakeholders that have been triggered through the project. What was missing, however, were more systematic guidelines on how to identify, implement and monitor specific civil society strengthening activities resulting from the *Index* project.

CONCLUSION

If a single overall lesson can be drawn from the pilot phase of the CIVICUS Civil Society Index, it is that ‘one size does not fit all’. As the initial implementation round of the *Index* was consciously designed as a pilot phase, CIVICUS explicitly invited its national partners to test out different designs with regard to the implementation process and methodology. In fact, it turned out that a great flexibility in the implementation design was absolutely necessary to accommodate the vastly different situations of civil society and research on civil society in the pilot countries. This resulted in an ideal laboratory-like design for a pilot phase as different approaches were used concerning data collection and dissemination methods as well as regarding the overall implementation strategy and team structure of our national partners. This often drew other individuals and organisations with complementary skills into the

project. These differences in the country project designs assist CIVICUS in the current re-design phase of the project.

As should have become apparent from the discussion on the project's conceptual challenges, CIVICUS always attempts to keep the golden mean and carefully balance divergent needs and interests: the need of a common definition and an analytical framework vs. the recognition of the contextual particularities of civil society; the push towards a universal normative standard vs. the rationale for 'relative' standards per region/country; the incentives for cross-country comparisons vs. the requirements of in-country relevance of the information; the benefits of a common project approach vs. the attention to country-specific constellations. In most cases, this approach results in a 'mid-way position' between two pure, ideal-type extremes. How far this approach has led to a successful management of the trade-offs will be put under scrutiny by the other presentations on the panel.

References

- Adler, Glenn/Webster, Eddie (1995): "Challenging Transition Theory: The Labor Movement, Radical Reform, and Transition to Democracy in South Africa", in: *Politics & Society* 23, 75-106.
- Anand, S./Sen, A. (1993): Human Development Index: Methodology and Measurement. UNDP Occasional Papers No.8.
- Beck, Ulrich (2001): "Zivilgesellschaft light?", in: *Süddeutsche Zeitung* 23-24 June, 15.
- Blaney, David L./Pasha, Mustapha Kamal (1993): "Civil Society and Democracy in the Third World: Ambiguities and Historical Possibilities", in: *Studies in Comparative International Development* 28, 1, 3-24.
- Bothwell, Bob (1998): "Indicators of a Healthy Civil Society" in: Burbidge, John (ed.), *Beyond Prince and Merchant. Citizen Participation and the Rise of Civil Society*, New York: Pact, 249-62.
- Brown, L. David (1993): Social Change Through Collective Reflections With Asian Nongovernmental Development Organizations. IDR Report 10,4, Boston: Institute for Development Research.
- Brown, L. David (1994): Institutional Development for Strengthening Civil Society. IDR Report 11, 9, Boston: Institute for Development Research.
- Cohen, J/Rogers, Joel (1995): *Associations and Democracy*, London: Verso.
- Dogan, Mattei/Pelassy, Dominique (1990): *How to Compare Nations: Strategies in Comparative Politics*, Chatham: Chatham House.
- Estrella, Maurice et al. (ed.) (2000): *Learning From Change. Issues and Experiences in Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation*, Ottawa: Intermediate Technology Publications.
- Etzioni, A (1995): *Rights and the Common Good: The Communitarian Perspective*, New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Fals-Borda, Orlando/Rahman, Muhammad Anisur (ed.) (1991): *Action and Knowledge. Breaking the Monopoly with Participatory Action-Research*, New York: The Apex Press.
- Fowler, Alan. (2001): Social Economy in the South: A Civil Society Perspective. Paper presented at a seminar on Social Economy in the South, University of Leuven, 28-30 March, 2001.
- Hann, Chris/Dunn, Elizabeth (eds.) (1996): *Civil Society. Challenging Western Models*, London/New York: Routledge.
- Heinrich, Volkhart (2001): *Demokratische Konsolidierung in Südafrika. Die Rolle der NGOs*, Hamburg: Institut für Afrika-Kunde.
- Heinrich, Volkhart/Naidoo, Kumi (2001): From Impossibility to Reality. A Reflection and Position Paper on the CIVICUS Civil Society Index 1999-2001, Washington, DC:

CIVICUS.

- Hirst, Paul (1994): *Associative Democracy - New Forms of Economic and Social Governance*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- James, Estelle (1997): "Whither the Third Sector? Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow", in: *Voluntas* 8, 1-10.
- Kasfir, Nelson (1998): "The Conventional Notion of Civil Society: A Critique", in: *The Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* 36, 2, 1-20.
- Kaufman, Daniel/Kraay, Aart/Zoido-Lobatón, Pablo (2000): "Governance Matters: From Measurement to Action", in: *Finance & Development* 37, 2.
- Landman, Todd (2000): *Issues and Methods in Comparative Politics. An Introduction*, London/New York: Routledge.
- Lijphart, Arend (1991): "Constitutional Choices for New Democracies", in: *Journal of Democracy* 2, 1, 72-84.
- Morris, Susannah (2000): "Defining the Nonprofit Sector: Some Lessons from History", in: *Voluntas* 11, 25-43.
- Naidoo, Kumi/Tandon, Rajesh (1999): "Civil Society at the Millennium" in: CIVICUS, *Civil Society at the Millennium*, West Hartford: Kumarian, 193-206.
- National Commission on Civic Renewal: *The Index of National Civic Health*, College Park, MD: National Commission on Civic Renewal.
- Peters, B. Guy (1998): *Comparative Politics. Theory and Methods*, New York: New York University Press.
- Przeworski, Adam/Teune, Henry (1970): *The Logic of Comparative Social Inquiry*, New York: Wiley.
- Salamon, Lester M./Anheier, Helmut (1999): "The Third World's Third Sector in Comparative Perspective" in: Lewis, David (ed.), *International Perspectives on Voluntary Action: Reshaping the Third Sector*, London: Earthscan, 60-93.
- Sartori, Giovanni (1970): "Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics", in: *American Political Science Review* 64, 1033-53.
- Sartori, Giovanni (1994): *Comparative Constitutional Engineering: An Inquiry into Structures, Incentives, and Outcomes*, London: Macmillan.
- Social Watch (2000): *Social Watch Report No.4*, Montevideo: Instituto del Tercer Mundo.
- Tanner, Michael (1996): *The End of Welfare. Fighting Poverty in the Civil Society*, Washington: Cato Institute.
- Teune, Henry (1990): "Comparing Countries: Lessons Learned" in: Oyen, E. (ed.), *Comparative Methodology: Theory and Practice in International Social Research*, London: Sage, 38-62.

Thede, Nancy (2000): Human Rights and Statistics - Some Reflections on the NoMan's Land between Concept and Indicator. Paper presented at XXX Montreux, 4-8 September 2000.

USAID (2000): *The 1999 NGO Sustainability Index*.

van Deth, Jan W. (1998): "Equivalence in Comparative Political Research" in: van Deth, Jan W. (ed.), *Comparative Politics. The Problem of Equivalence*, London/New York: Routledge, 1-19.

van Rooy, Alison (ed.) (1998a): *Civil Society and the Aid Industry. The Politics and Promise*, London: Earthscan.

van Rooy, Alison (1998b): "Civil Society as Idea: An Analytical Hatstand?" in: van Rooy, Alison (ed.), *Civil Society and the Aid Industry*, London: Earthscan, 6-30.

Verba, Sidney (1969): "The Uses of Survey Research in the Study of Comparative Politics: Issues and Strategies" in: Rokkan, S. et al., *Comparative Survey Analysis*, The Hague/Paris: Mouton, 56-106.

Whyte, William F. (1991): *Participatory Action Research*, Newbury Park, CA: Sage.