



# **CIVICUS CIVIL SOCIETY INDEX IN CROATIA**

## **POLICY ACTION BRIEF**

Authors:

Gojko Bežovan and Jelena Matančević

Zagreb, January 2011

CERANEEO – Centre for Development of Nonprofit Organisations

CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation



The CIVICUS Civil Society Index in Croatia was supported by:  
National Foundation for Civil Society Development, Ministry of  
Science, Education and Sports and the City of Zagreb.

## **1. Executive Summary**

This Policy Action Brief serves as a guiding document to government, key constituencies and civil society to take the actions necessary to strengthen civil society and address weaknesses identified in the 2008-2011 Civil Society Index (CSI) project.

The CSI research shows that the key action areas for government, civil society and other stakeholders are to increase the levels of civic engagement, encourage civil society to promote its values and demonstrate its impact further, and enable civil society to play its full role in the economic crisis. Key policy recommendations, centred around promoting volunteerism and strengthening media–civil society dialogue and relations, are presented in this policy action brief and should serve as a basis for strengthening civil society in the near future.

## **2. About the CSI**

The Civil Society Index (CSI) is a participatory action-research project assessing the state of civil society in countries around the world. The CSI is initiated and implemented by, and for, civil society organisations at the country level, in partnership with CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation (CIVICUS). The CSI implementation actively involves and disseminates its findings to a broad range of stakeholders including civil society, government, the media, donors, academics and the public at large.

The CSI project approach marries assessment and evidence with reflections and action. As such, the CSI does not produce knowledge for its own sake but instead seeks to directly apply the knowledge generated to stimulate strategies that enhance the effectiveness and role of civil society.

The major tools and elements of the CSI implementation at the national level include multiple surveys for civil society organisations and external stakeholders, a citizens' survey based on the data from the European Values Study 2008, regional and thematic focus groups with civil society representatives and other stakeholders, case studies and discussion of the findings and creation of recommendations at a national workshop. The CSI methodology uses a combination of participatory and scientific research methods to generate a comprehensive overall assessment of the state of civil society at the national level.

The CSI measures civil society along the following core dimensions:

- (1) Civic Engagement
- (2) Level of Organisation
- (3) Practice of Values
- (4) Perceived Impact
- (5) External Environment

These dimensions are illustrated visually through the Civil Society Diamond (see Figure 1 below), which is one of the most essential and well-known components of the CSI project. To form the Civil Society Diamond, 67 quantitative indicators are aggregated into 28 sub-dimensions which are then assembled into the five final dimensions along a 0-100 percentage scale. The Diamond's size seeks to portray an empirical picture of the state of civil society, the conditions that support or inhibit civil society's development, as well as the consequences of civil society's activities for society at large. The context or environment is represented visually by a circle around the axes of the Civil Society Diamond, and is not

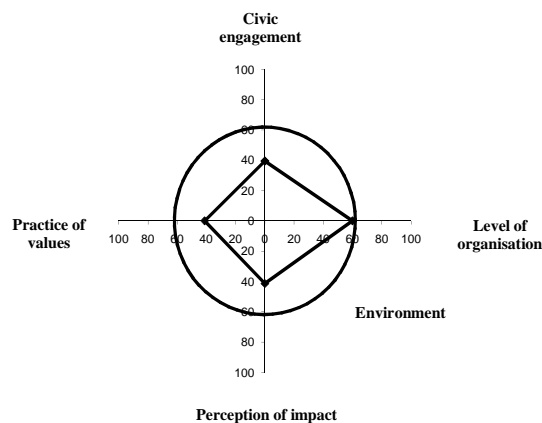
regarded as part of the state of civil society but rather as something external that still remains a crucial element for its wellbeing.

### 3. The Civil Society Index in Croatia

A third global phase of CSI research, in which 41 countries in the world participated, was completed in 2011. Croatia has now implemented the CSI study three times: in a pilot phase 2001-2001, in the first full global phase from 2003 to 2005, and in the most recent global phase from 2008 to 2011.

In Croatia, in all three phases, the implementation of the Civil Society Index was coordinated by **CERANEO – Centre for Development of Nonprofit Organisations**.

### 4. The Croatian civil society diamond



### 5. The state of civil society in Croatia: five key findings

#### 1. A civil society without citizens?

The extent of civic engagement, measured through membership in organisations and the level of volunteering, is shown to be the weakest aspect of civil society in Croatia. Only around 17% of citizens are members of a civil society organisation. The problem of weak membership basis was recognised. New organisations are often registered with only a minimum number of members needed for registration, which can undermine their legitimacy.

The level of volunteering was assessed as particularly low; on average, fewer than 7% of the population do voluntary, unpaid work. Volunteering did not seem to be widely recognised as

a virtue in society at large. In local communities, but also in society in general, there tend to be the same, few individuals who are recognised as active and engaged citizens.

Civil society organisations rarely have the necessary capacity to develop high quality, sustainable programmes for volunteers. At the same time, the CSI study found that many public institutions, including those in the health, social and local government sectors, were closed to including volunteers in their work. Looking forward, Croatia needs to promote volunteering as a civic virtue by teaching it in curricula at schools and universities, and providing greater impetus to practise it in public institutions.

***Key opportunity:*** 2011 is the European Year of the Volunteer, as well as the International Year of the Volunteer +10, providing a landmark opportunity for renewed momentum.

## **2. Diverse sources of finances exist, but employment in civil society organisations is a persistent problem**

The CSI study found that stable human resources are a key problem inhibiting the sustainable development of civil society organisations, including those which are already well-developed. Greater investments in educating existing human resources and recruiting young, skilful and motivated professionals are surely among the key development priorities for civil society in Croatia. A key recommendation is for different funders to develop joint programmes to finance employment in the civil society sector. Without stable human resources, civil society organisations will struggle to realise their full potential as partners to the state.

Relatively high scores on internal management, infrastructure, sectoral communication and stable financial resources are characteristic of better developed organisations. Civil society organisations in Croatia are financed from various sources. Cities and different ministries are the main providers of financial support to civil society organisations. The programmes of financing on a multi-annual basis, introduced by the National Foundation for Civil Society Development, and in recent times from the Ministry of Health and Social Care, are recognised as an important contribution to the financial sustainability of organisations. Foreign donors, most notably the EU pre-accession funds, are a very important income source. For organisations able to access the EU pre-accession funds, those funds constitute highly significant financial support.

In the context of Croatia's accession to the European Union, when it comes to the international linkages of civil society organisations, we testify about poor capacities of organisations. Participation of Croatian civil society organisations in European civil society should be stressed as a developmental priority.

***Key opportunity:*** Croatia's accession to the European Union represents an unparalleled opportunity for improving the international linkages of civil society organisations. Some Croatian CSOs are able to participate in these opportunities, but others need to have their capacity built to fully realise this opportunity.

## **3. Civil society is recognised as a leader in promoting and practising values, but the public can still be distrustful**

Practice and advocating for core civic values is central to the civil society sector. However, the CSI study showed that civil society organisations can tend to orient themselves towards external stakeholders and project activities, neglecting to pay full attention to their own

internal management. For example, most organisations usually do not have a code of conduct or other written rules on the process for making decisions.

The CSI study also suggested that civil society organisations are key vehicles for promoting civic values such as non-violence, tolerance, the protection of human rights (including those of minorities and vulnerable groups), solidarity, challenging corruption and the protection of the environment. In these fields, civil society organisations in Croatia have accomplished numerous achievements. However, these achievements are rarely visible. A consistent and visible promotion in the media of the activities, values and mission of CSOs would increase their reputation and public trust in their work. It would also contribute to changing the reputation of civil society organisations as opaque or non-transparent in their work. Examples of corruption and misuse of funds in civil society were seen as rare, but the external perception from outside the civil society sector is that they are more frequent. Where examples of misuse of funds do exist they can irreparably damage civil society's reputation.

**Key opportunity:** *There should be a real opportunity for better civil society–media working relationships, promoting the visibility of the everyday activities, vision and mission of CSOs – and not just rare corruption scandals.*

#### **4. Some civil society organisations achieve impact better than others in combating social concerns, making policy and increasing trust and tolerance**

Stakeholders external to civil society still perceive the impact of civil society – defined as responsiveness to society's concerns, impact on addressing these and impact on influencing policies – to be rather low.

The policy impact of civil society is a rather new area of development in Croatia. Good practice introduced with the European Union's Open Method of Coordination, which is based on the involvement of different stakeholders in the process of drafting, delivery and implementation of policies and programmes, notable in the EU and Croatia Join Inclusion Memorandum (JIM), has not been replicated yet in other policy areas. Reforms, when undertaken, are still derived from instructions from above. The quality and frequency of public debate is still poor. Such circumstances encourage civil society organisations to continue to take reactive stances, limiting the impact that they achieve.

The CSI study suggested that the social impact of organisations is significantly greater than the policy impact, particularly in the area of marginalised groups and people with disabilities, but that it could be greater still through increased partnership between the state and civil society.

The CSI study also found that civil society has only limited impact on strengthening social capital in Croatian society and that there are no significant differences between members of CSOs and the rest of the population concerning the level of trust, tolerance or public spiritedness. Civil society representatives did note that it is not sufficient to cherish those virtues within civil society only, but that there is a need to articulate the same values better within the public arena.

**Key opportunity:** *The European Union's Open Method of Coordination offers a strong example of good practice which could be replicated across different policy areas, improving opportunities for civil society to influence public policy processes.*

#### **5. The external environment is generally conducive to a strong civil society, but the economic crisis could be as much an obstacle as an opportunity**

The socio-economic, political and cultural environment seems to be generally favourable for civil society development in Croatia, and the CSI study scored the “External Environment” dimension higher than all others.

However, during the period of research the economic crisis took on new dimensions and loomed large. It is likely that impoverishment of the middle class and a rise in youth unemployment, especially among highly educated citizens, will negatively affect civility and civil society in Croatia. The current economic crisis can therefore be seen as a key threat to the development of civil society in Croatia.

At the same time, the economic crisis may turn out to be an unparalleled impetus for change towards a socially just society, as well as a driver of greater solidarity. During periods of uncertainty, change and crisis, vacuums can exist for new societies, inspired by new sets of civic values, to emerge. In this unique historical moment, civil society organisations bear a great responsibility to play their full role in re-shaping Croatian civil society.

**Key opportunity:** *The economic crisis and the changes it will bring about across Croatian society represent an opportunity for civil society to promote its values and approach.*

## 6. Strengths and weaknesses of civil society in Croatia

To encourage the further development of CSOs and civil society, Croatia should build on existing **strengths and opportunities for civil society:**

- A recently **strengthened network of volunteers’ centres** in larger cities, which can act as an institutional support to citizens interested in volunteering;
- Availability of **diverse sources of finances for CSOs**, including a regional dimension;
- Availability of **programmes of multi-annual financing of CSOs**, which contribute to the sustainability of organisations;
- Emerging **European programmes supporting the role of civil society** as an essential stakeholder in the development of contemporary societies, which also present opportunities for Croatian CSOs to become established as regional leaders;
- Civil society has **decent existing relations with media, local authorities and business.**

To encourage the further development of CSOs and civil society, Croatia must address existing **weaknesses and threats for civil society:**

- Among citizens, a **low level of membership in CSOs**;
- **Low levels of volunteerism** among citizens;
- **Civic culture is not fully embedded** in local communities;
- The **economic crisis** could contribute to passivity, prioritisation of survival over civic activism and decreased levels of trust among citizens;
- A **certain degree of distrust** still exists among the public towards civil society organisations;
- **Few organisations actively promote their core values** in the public domain;

- Civil society organisations still tend to **struggle to demonstrate impact**;
- Although there is some coverage and decent relations, **the media are not always sympathetic or understanding** towards the mission or activities of civil society.

## **7. Policy recommendations: action agenda**

Bearing in mind these key strengths and weaknesses, as well as the overall state of civil society in Croatia, there are a number of policy recommendations for strengthening civil society.

### **GOVERNMENT SHOULD:**

- Promote greater involvement of volunteers in social and health institutions or public benefit companies;
- Consider state subsidies for volunteer programmes;
- Promote civic virtue within the education system from an early age and encourage universities to teach students about the meaning, role and accomplishments of civil society;
- Promote a greater role for civil society organisations in EU policies and strengthen dialogue with development agencies;
- Develop further the mechanisms for involving civil society representatives in decision- and policy-making processes at the local levels, and strengthen the professional capacity for civil society cooperation among local and regional self-government;
- Develop policies of financing civil society organisations at regional and local levels, which correspond to agreed development priorities, and which would contain transparent criteria for allocating funds;
- Evaluate the state's existing financial support programmes for CSOs;
- Introduce the practice of public calls for membership of boards of directors within public institutions.

### **CIVIL SOCIETY, AND CSOS IN PARTICULAR, SHOULD:**

- Increase efforts to strengthen their dialogue with media;
- Present their work, mission and vision more proactively in public, participate in public debates and build dialogue with the public;
- Work with the media to develop induction programmes for media representatives about civil society themes and work;
- Train their staff in public and media relations;
- Develop local philanthropy programmes through community foundations to give an additional impetus to strengthening civil society at the community level;
- Encourage networking and cooperation among smaller organisations working on similar issues in order to strengthen their professional and financial capacities and achieve greater impact.

- Develop mentoring relationships and networks between well-developed organisations with access to technological, financial and human resources and those organisations with weaker capacity, but whose work is well rooted in communities;
- Put greater effort into developing sustainable and efficient volunteer programmes;
- Pilot programmes, in conjunction with donors, for the employment of junior professionals in the civil society sector.