
By Jacob M. Mati  
Civil Society Index Research Officer, CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation

Introduction:
In the last two decades, many research initiatives have emerged that are aimed towards better understanding and measurement of civil society in its heterogeneity and of the dynamics of actors occupying its terrain.\(^1\) As a result of such initiatives, the contributions of civil society to the daily lives of people, actions, ideas, development and governance around the world have been widely recognised and documented. At times, these have also been celebrated by scholars and policymakers of different ideological persuasions. Despite an immense body of work and the advances it has led to, knowledge on some aspects of civil society ‘especially in countries of the global South is still limited’ (Heinrich, 2004).

This is in part, due to the scepticism directed at the dominant Eurocentric theoretical frameworks used in the study of civil society (Opoku-Mensah, 2008). Some scholars of civil society have questioned whether conceptions intellectually rooted in social, political, and economic transformations in eighteenth century western European and North American societies can be sound theoretical tools for the study of contemporary civil society and its manifestations in other parts of the world (see for example Ngunyi, 1996; Mutunga, 1999, Mamdani 1996; 1995). Secondly, there has continued to be an inherent difficulty in conceptualising and operationalising civil society for the purposes of empirical research, not least, because of its multifaceted and therefore elusive nature (van Rooy, 1998). This presents challenges especially in comparative studies due to the greatly differing manifestations of civil society around the world, as no universally widely accepted conceptual framework for analysing civil society has emerged (Heinrich, 2004). In this context, some commentators, have argued that ‘in countries of the global South, where information is often scarce, or even non-existent […] research on civil society issues is truly an exploration into a ‘no man’s land’ (Heinrich, 2004:25).

The contradiction posed by this scenario is that while the growing efforts to understand civil society have resulted in an empirically grounded realisation that civil society has ‘diverse historical roots, as well as widely varying current usages, interpretations and perspectives’ (Heinrich, 2005:212) the term has remained conceptually fuzzy, extremely complex and contested (See for example Mati, 2009; 2008; Heinrich, 2005; Keane, 2004 cited in Munk, 2006). As such, it is empirically hard to capture as across nations of the globe, it reflects an underlying social and political reality that manifests itself with actors of various political, social, and economic persuasions who are not of one homogenous ideology, interest, group, or purpose.

The CIVICUS Civil Society Index (CSI), first designed in 1999, sought to address some challenges in the understanding and measurement of civil society by providing a participatory needs assessment and action-planning tool aimed not only at knowledge generation but also at civil society strengthening. The CSI provides nuanced assessment of the state of civil society at country level based on a wealth of both quantitative and qualitative information and also on a consultative

\(^{1}\) Examples of institutions running such initiatives include, but are not limited to: CIVICUS Civil society Index (CSI), Centre for Civil Society, London School of Economics, UK; Centre for Civil Society, UCLA, USA; Centre for Democracy and Civil Society, Georgetown University, USA; Centre for Civil Society, Humboldt University, Germany; Centre for Social Investment, University of Heidelberg, Germany; Hauser Center for Nonprofit Organisations, Harvard University, USA; International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), Stockholm, Sweden; Third Sector Centre, Catholic University of Buenos Aires; Civil Society Centre, University of Pacific; Third Sector Centre, University of Sao Paolo.

approach among stakeholders, which generates policy-oriented analysis, dialogue and recommendations. The CSI was conceived with an explicit theory of change in mind, which assumes that knowledge coupled with participation is likely to lead to action (Schall-Emden, 2008). As such, the primary goals of the CSI are: 1) to enhance the strength and sustainability of civil society, and 2) to strengthen civil society’s contribution to positive social change. As such, CSI differs with many other civil society research initiatives, in that its principal aim is to generate information that is of practical use to civil society practitioners and other primary stakeholders. Therefore, CSI seeks to identify aspects of civil society that can be changed, and generate information and knowledge relevant to action-oriented goals. In addition, unlike many other civil society assessment tools, CSI is implemented by, and for, civil society organisations at the country level, and actively involves, and disseminates its findings, to a broad range of stakeholders including governments, donors, academia, media and the public at large. The CSI approach therefore emphasises putting civil society at the centre of the generation of knowledge about its status and the subsequent actions for its own development.

The year 2010 marks a decade since CSI published its first eleven country reports, on the assessment of the status of civil society in countries that piloted the CSI tool. Since then, CSI’s contribution to the understanding of civil society and its strengthening, has been documented in multiple publications that include country reports, working papers, conference papers, and comparative volumes. This paper offers a snapshot of the reflections from CSI’s journey and experiences in its quest to meet the dual objectives of knowledge generation and actions to strengthen civil society. Specifically, it deals with how CSI has operationalised the tenets of participatory action-research in an effort to contribute to the strengthening of civil society and its contribution to positive social change. It also offers insights into the empirical strengths as well as challenges of the CSI’s approach and lessons from the same. The paper proceeds as below: the first part of the paper deals with CSI’s methodological approaches, the experiences in the implementation including achievements and challenges as well as how the challenges have been overcome over the years. The later part of the paper reflects on CSI’s key experiences of bridging research and action over the years.

CSI approach: Definition and operationalisation

CIVICUS (2008:13) notes that the ‘task of defining and operationalising the concept, identifying civil society’s essential features and designing a strategy to assess its state is, in itself, an intricate and potentially controversial process.’ While it is not the intention of this paper to deal in depth with the conceptual and definitional contestations, which are dealt with exhaustively elsewhere (see for example Mati 2009; 2008, Heinrich, 2005; 2004, CIVICUS CSI 2003; 2008 etc), there is nevertheless, a need to highlight the key points that informed CSI’s conception of civil society as this has, over the years, been particularly significant in setting about operationalising the concept.

The CSI defines civil society as ‘the arena, outside of the family, the state, and the market, which is created by individual and collective actions, organisations and institutions to advance shared interests.’ Imperatives of value neutrality and the need for objectivity have informed and shaped this definition. CSI recognises that civil society is complex and variegated and that the tool must ‘capture’ its many hues, shades and functions observed across different societies, cultures and

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2 These countries included: Belarus, Canada, Croatia, Estonia, Mexico, New Zealand, Pakistan, Romania, South Africa, Ukraine, and Uruguay

3 This definition is a slight improvement to CSI’s earlier conception of civil society as ‘the arena, outside of the family, the state, and the market where people associate to advance common interests.’ The ‘improvement’ is empirically grounded from the 2003-2006 CSI implementation phase as it emerged that our a priori assumption of civil society existence did not reflect realities. Of note here is that, driven by a desire to remain responsive and relevant to understanding the ever changing dynamics in civil society, as well as to build civil society’s capacity to play a stronger role in governance and development processes worldwide, CSI has undergone two major methodological redesigns since its 1999 inception (i.e. 2002 and 2008).

countries. At the same time, the tool should yield data that allows robust empirical comparability between countries, as well as providing civil society stakeholders with practical knowledge and mechanisms for its strengthening. As such, the CSI consciously avoided giving a 'categorical' definition. However, the CSI also recognises that there is a major dispute about civil society’s normative content, with some arguing that in order to belong to civil society, actors have to be democratic (e.g. Diamond, 1994), oriented towards the public good (Knight and Hartnell, 2001), or at least adhering to basic civil manners (Shils, 1991). For CSI, such conceptions are useful in defining civil society as an ideal, but are less useful in seeking to understand and assess its reality across the globe.

From the foregoing, CSI takes the view that civil society comprises both what some have called violent ‘irresponsible nihilists’ that may obstruct social progress, as well as peaceful progressive forces with possibilities for reforming current governance system to be more beneficial to all (Ballard Habib and Valodia, 2006; Evans, 2005; Held and McGrew, 2003; Welch and Nuru, 2006 as cited in Mati 2009:26). It also acknowledges that civil society, being heterogeneous, is comprised of diverse values and interests. At the same time, being an action-research project, the CSI makes ‘makes normative judgments as to what the defining features of civil society are, what functions it should serve, and the progressive values it should embrace. These values flow directly from CIVICUS’ vision into its work: accountability and transparency, democracy, inclusiveness, non-violence and peace, participation, and tolerance’ (see www.civicus.org/csi).

Using the above conception, the findings of the CSI have challenged some of the popular orthodoxy that civil society is only possible within ‘Western type’ democracies. On the contrary, as Malena (2008:187) attests:

...there is broad agreement about the importance and validity of the concept of civil society. Without exception, stakeholders in every CSI country were able to agree to disagree about definitional issues without questioning the relevance of the concept of civil society per se. Despite lack of common usage and understanding, an overwhelming majority of [CSI] survey respondents (95.2 percent) judged civil society to be a “valid and useful” concept in their country context. …. There appears to be broad, tacit agreement that, especially for a global project of this type, some level of conceptual flexibility, read ambiguity, is necessary and desirable to allow the concept to be “adapted” to diverse contexts. Some country teams, such as those in Vietnam and China acknowledged that the open and neutral nature of the CSI definition allowed them to participate in the project. Conceptual divergences and adaptations appear to be broadly perceived as enriching rather than detracting from the value of the concept.

In the 2003-2006 implementation phase there were, however, challenges in operationalising the definition. This emanated principally because despite CSI’s placement of citizens (as opposed to organisations) as the basic unit of civil society and including non-organised forms of citizen action, most CSI country teams were unable to go beyond the organisations. However, as Malena (2008:187-8) continues to observe, the CSI conception ‘stimulated much debate about the composition of the organizational components of civil society and provides some insights as to what extent there is a common empirical understanding of [civil society organisations] in and among CSI countries.’ It is worth noting here, that this particular weakness of the tool – that the CSI team was unable to go beyond organisations – guided the revision of the CSI tool in 2008. This principal element in the revision was undertaken by disaggregating what the CSI originally had incorporated in the ‘structure’ dimension into two distinct dimensions: ‘civic engagement’ and ‘level of organisation’. Separate data collection tools have been developed to capture these dimensions.

To ensure that CSI generates knowledge that is contextually rich, captures the immense variety of social, cultural and political contexts of civil society across the world, and therefore useful in a
specific country setting, yet simultaneously meets its global comparability needs, the multi-layered methodology of the CSI identifies a set of core or generally applicable indicators used in the assessment. As such CSI does not strive for identical, but equivalent assessments (van Deth, 1998; Przeworski and Teune, 1966-1967). The indicators are then aggregated into sub-dimensions and later into five thematic dimensions (civic engagement, level of organisation, practice of values, perception of impact and the external environment) which are graphically represented in what is called the CSI Diamond (as seen below).

CSI Dimensions of Civil Society:

1. Civic Engagement: This is the hub of civil society and therefore, one of the core components of the CSI’s definition of civil society. Civic engagement includes formal and informal activities and participation undertaken by individuals to advance shared interests at different levels in society. CSI measures participation within civil society in its multi-faceted form that encompasses both social and political type of engagements. Socially based engagement refers to those activities of citizens that include exchange within the public sphere to advance shared interests of a generally social or recreational nature. Examples range from participating in food kitchens to running sport clubs or cultural centres and spending time with friends or families. The CSI considers these activities extremely important for civil society as they promote mutual care and help build social capital. On the other hand, politically based engagement refers to those activities through which individuals try to advance shared interests of some political nature. These activities might include, for example, participating in demonstrations or boycotts, or signing petitions. They are often dependent on the country’s context. As a defining factor, these activities aim at impacting policies and/or bringing about social change.

2. Level of Organisation: CSI assesses the organisational development, complexity and sophistication of civil society by looking at the relationships among the institutional and organisational actors within the civil society arena. The dimension also looks at features of the infrastructure for civil society, its financial, technological and human resource stability, capacity for collective action, internal governance, and self-regulation.

3. Practice of Values: Since CSI does not assume that civil society is by definition made up of progressive groups, nor does it take for granted that civil society is able to practice what it preaches, it is paramount for this programme to treat the practice of values as an empirical question that must be tested. This dimension, therefore, focuses both on the internal, measurable praxis of values as well as the values that civil society, within its diversity, portrays and represents as a whole towards society at large and decision-making governance practices; labour regulations; code of conduct and transparency; environmental standards; and a perception of values practices by civil society.

4. Perception of Impact: The fourth important measure of the state of civil society is the impact civil society actors have on politics and society as a whole. From a theoretical perspective, CSI is interested with consequences of collective action because we believe they matter. That is, we study actors such as NGOs, movements, advocacy networks, citizens groups, in part because of their ability to bring about significant changes. From a more pragmatic perspective, the issue of ‘impact’ links to monitoring and evaluation mechanisms that donors and practitioners use when assessing the
performances of CSOs in the areas of governance and development. Specifically, CSI assesses the responsiveness of civil society to important social and political concerns within the country. CSI takes the view that if civil society's positions and priorities mirror the grievances and aspirations of the population at large, this is an indicator of civil society's 'grounding' in society. Secondly, the dimension looks at the social and policy impacts of civil society on society in general. Lastly, it looks at civil society’s impact on people’s attitudes (includes trust, public spiritedness and tolerance). In doing so, the sub-dimensions reflect a set of universally accepted social and political norms, drawn, for example, from sources such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Worth noting here is that CSI analyses ‘civil society impact’ from a perception perspective as recounted by both actors within civil society (internal) as well as external stakeholders from the state, private sector, media, academia, international governmental organisations, or donor organisations. This is because it is usually extremely problematic to measure actual cause of impact on a social or political issue due to the fact that change in these areas is often a result of a multiplicity of factors which might span across several years. To determine which particular factor was the driving force of change amongst the many is often impossible (Roche, 2005; Kelly, 2002; Chapman and Wameyo, 2001). It is also noteworthy that examining perceptions does not diminish the results. Rather, this is conscious on the part of CSI as it believes that perceptions can have stronger power than realities and it is such that drives many political decisions. For instance, if civil society is perceived as a powerful actor by policy actor, it is probable that this will increase its chances for an effective impact.

5. External Environment: In assessing the state of civil society, CSI gives consideration to the social, political and economic environment in which civil society exists. This is because the environment both directly and indirectly affects civil society. Some features of the environment may enable the growth of civil society – for example, the prevalence of social values such as trust and tolerance among the general population may foster associational activity. Conversely, other features of the environment hamper the development of civil society – for example, restrictions on freedom of association, legal framework, but also socio-economic factors such as an economic depression might impact civil society negatively.

Multi-stakeholder Participation: The defining feature of CSI
As already mentioned, CSI’s ultimate aim is to create a knowledge base and momentum for civil society strengthening initiatives. Therefore, CSI links the assessment tool with a reflection and action-planning process to strengthen civil society on areas where weaknesses or challenges are detected. By seeking to combine valid assessment, broad-based reflection and joint action, the CSI’s contribution is twofold: it moves from rhetorical commitment (associated with researcher academics) towards practical action (associated with policy practitioners). To ensure this, the CSI embraces the concept of knowledge co-production among the key civil society stakeholders (civil society leaders, citizens, governments, media, donors, private sector and the academia) as well as in devising and implementing strategies aimed at strengthening civil society. This is premised on the CSI’s firm belief that research is produced and injected into policy choices, and recognises that it is the connections and feedbacks between knowledge and choices that ultimately inform actions.

The CSI therefore brings together, in an appropriate space, different actors with possibly quite different expectations, agendas, and preconceptions into the process. Their encounters establish innovative policy processes that generate debates, mediations, agreements, common commitment, and appropriately designed mechanisms to improve civil society. In so doing, CSI’s approach ensures that its implementation is done in a participatory manner and therefore addresses the
perennial questions of ownership both of the process of knowledge generation, as well as the actions resulting from this knowledge.

The figure below represents a model for the relationships between the different actors in the CSI implementation.

By co-generating knowledge and actions, the CSI has contributed to new and innovative modes of governance of knowledge and development that generate what UNESCO (2007) calls appropriate knowledge for accountable policies. Perhaps most importantly, the CSI’s action-research orientation has enabled the identification of ways in which civil society as a social actor can reflect on and improve its own realities. Schall-Emden (2008), observes that ‘in this sense, self-knowledge, reflection and the creation of linkages through participation and consultation strengthens the potential for civil society to contribute positively to society in general.’

CSI has also demonstrated that research (participatory assessment and reflection) and action need not be two completely distinct phenomena (Schall-Emden, 2008).

As already mentioned, the CSI’s approach has also re-affirmed that policy making is neither linear nor rational and that evidence does not always feed into actions that may lead to some predetermined outcomes. For example, despite the fact that all 54 countries who completed the CSI project in 2003-2006 had an action agenda as part of a template for implementation, not all have implemented the follow-up activities. Indeed, there can sometimes even be something approaching inertia. Much of this inertia, where it exists, is of course attributable to multiple factors. For the CSI, there is a need to ensure that there is a symbiotic dynamic and relationship between producing knowledge and using it. The two should not be seen as detached stages in a project or policy process. When this symbiosis exists, it is a major factor in success. For example, Macedonian civil society has been able to use CSI findings to successfully lobby the state to pass a law that requires 1% of the national budget to go directly to funding of civil society. Similar success stories emerge from elsewhere, including in Mozambique where several donor organisations led by the UNDP and the state have built on the findings of the national CSI project to now set aside funds to strengthen civil society.

This is not to suggest that the different actors who make use of spaces created by the CSI for interaction have always operated together seamlessly. As is usually the case, there are tensions between project design and implementation. While the CSI design seems to have worked well in

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5 For a detailed discussion of such relationships, see UNESCO (2007) ‘From Research to Policy to Action.’
many countries, there are those countries in which sections of society do not always see eye to eye. CSI implementation can in fact sometimes be the first face-to-face encounter between these different actors and in such situations, mutual suspicions can exist. Nevertheless, CSI implementation in some of these cases has served as an icebreaker (as for example the case of Sierra Leone, Russia).

A key finding of the CSI in the last implementation phase was that spaces are needed for different stakeholders in civil society to come together and reflect on the state of civil society. This need has been amplified by the emergence of an increasing body of work questioning or even disillusioned by the civil society’s assumed progressive role in development and democratisation processes (see for example Liston, 2003; 2009; Heinrich, 2004). CSI research revealed that there are many challenges surrounding civil society, key among them being its own accountability and ambivalence to its own internal democracy (Heinrich, Mati, & Brown, 2008; Bonbright and Kirytopolou, 2009, Mati, 2009). As such, one of the key findings from CSI in the 2003-2006 implementation phase was that transparency and accountability issues top the list of challenges preventing civil society from effectively performing its functions in governance and development. Some commentators have argued that these challenges are wiping away the naivety of the 1990s’ ‘magic’ phase, which assumed that civil society is composed of the do-gooders (see for example Taylor and Naidoo, 2004). In its place, there is a new realism dictating that civil society needs to address these challenges (see Mati, 2009; 2008; Mati and Anderson 2009). Despite the pessimism, CSI research attests to the fact that civil society’s role in development and governance is not in doubt. As such, efforts are still required in understanding as well as developing innovative ways for civil society strengthening in order for it to play an effective progressive role in social change. The traditional codes of conducts, which in many instances are nonbinding and do not have the instruments to compel compliance, will not help civil society address its legitimacy, transparency and accountability deficits (Heinrich, Mati & Brown, 2008).

**CSI’s implementation process:**
In order to establish this link between knowledge and action, the CSI implementation cycle uses various quantitative and qualitative research tools throughout its methodology, which will embed civil society and citizens at the heart of both the generating of knowledge and in the action parts of the project. For want of space, I summarise the life cycle of CSI implementation process in the figure below:

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67% of the participating countries in CSI implementation (2003-2006) mentioned this as the top most challenge (Heinrich, Mati & Brown, 2008:333).

**Is CSI contributing to change?**

As already pointed out, the CSI has registered both successes and challenges. CSI has helped demonstrate that it is possible for policy-makers and academics and civil society and many other social actors to constructively work together. As such, it offers critical perspectives on the relevance and usefulness of development partnerships. Many signs of positive changes especially on state-civil society relations have been recorded in a broad range of countries from the last phase. CSI partners have successfully used CSI as a stimulus for their and their partners’ programmatic development while some development partners have adopted the CSI tool and approach to inform their work on civil society, development and governance. The leading examples here include UNDP and SIDA. Actual examples range from the use of CSI findings on the challenges of CS leadership in Fiji to establish a ‘Social Leadership Training Institute’ by bringing civil society stakeholders, to the development of a system for addressing Legitimacy, Transparency, and Accountability (LTA) issues within civil society.

The examples above do not suggest that everything has been rosy everywhere. The continued passing of laws deemed to be counterproductive for the development of civil society in countries like Venezuela, Ethiopia, Zambia, Russia, as well as several of the post-Soviet Central Asian countries, means that discomforts between the state and civil society have not been broken. The elusive harmony between social actors like civil society and the state is highlighted in many other initiatives. UNESCO (2007:27) for example argues:

> Achieving participation and democratic scrutiny in practice is undoubtedly harder than simply getting academics and policy-makers [and social actors] talking to each other. In particular, the institutions of representative government, while indispensable, are not enough. …In addition, experts and laypeople cannot interact productively if they do not talk the same language (literally and metaphorically) and do not have the same information. Finally, individuals as individuals generally lack the time, resources and competence to participate in policy processes.

But all is not lost especially if successes of initiatives like the CSI are replicated in other countries and situations.

**Conclusion**

The CSI experience demonstrates that the role of civil society as knowledge producers in their own right should not be underestimated. CSI experience has also demonstrated that it is possible for social science research by actors outside of the state, to inform policy and actions without necessarily having to go through the bureaucratic rigours of the state or the international system. But more than anything else, CSI has demonstrated that it is possible for social research to become relevant without losing its rigour. I submit that arguably, these have been possible because of knowledge co-production and co-governance of policy and actions that CSI approach has applied. As the paper has outlined, collaboration between civil society and other actors, in this case through the CIVICUS Civil Society Index, can offer a unique pooling of key competencies, roles and expertise, and can therefore serve as a remarkable resource in attempts to strengthen civil society and its role in good governance and development. Besides, emerging partnerships because of the CSI are an affirmation that CSI has contributed to the building of trust across different social actors in the governance and development process.

We however note that despite these modest gains, there are still challenges. Ten years after the first CSI results were published, we still do not have a clear picture of the state of civil society in all the different countries of the world despite the robust initiatives of initiatives spread across the globe. We deduce that this is the case because of the disconnections between the different initiatives and more so, given that a majority of initiatives are academic and whose desire might be knowledge for knowledge sake. Our recommendation would be for different social actors to channel efforts at the level of programming and funding to enhance the policy relevance of the type of action research that CSI engages in as well as the usage of the research findings. The key point for discussion
should therefore be the nature of the institutional mechanisms that can facilitate such appropriate processes and the steps required to bring them into being.

**References**


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