BUILDING ON KNOWLEDGE IN STRENGTHENING CIVIL SOCIETY AROUND THE WORLD

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PANEL ABSTRACT

The understanding of civil society and its role in development and governance has been expanding in many countries over the past decades. This has been made possible by the abundance of both academic and practitioner studies aimed at comprehending civil society in its various manifestations. However, a large number of these studies have also been limited to mere knowledge generation exercises and have rarely presented the opportunity for civil society stakeholders themselves to come together to discuss and reflect on the state of civil society, its challenges, and agree upon action plan to redress identified challenges. The CIVICUS Civil Society Index (CSI), a project of CIVICUS World Alliance for Citizen Participation, provides this important element by allowing civil society stakeholders reflection throughout data gathering and implementation process. Indeed, the CSI was specifically designed to be a participatory needs assessment and action planning tool for civil society that attempts to bridge knowledge and action with an aim of strengthening civil society in various parts of the world.

Conceived in 1999, CSI has been successfully implemented in over 90 countries over the last decade. The current implementation phase that kicked off in 2008 covers 56 countries. The CIVICUS CSI initiative has been relevant not only as a country level and cross-national programming tool, but also as catalyst for mobilization of donor/financial support for civil society programming and national policy dialogues regarding the role of civil society in development. Importantly, it has also been very useful in creating enabling environments for civic participation. As such, due to its global and comparative nature, its innovative methodology, and strong policy orientation, the CSI is of interest to a broad audience of practitioners and researchers alike.

The proposed panel, made up of CSI staff members and partners, presents three papers covering a critical analysis of methodological issues of the current phase, the preliminary findings and reflections of the current phase implementation, and lastly, a reflective paper on the impacts of the CSI from the past implementation phases. The panel showcases civil society strengthening initiatives that have built on the knowledge generated by CSI over the last decade of its implementation. Specifically, the papers to be presented at the panel will include:

1. Comparing the Old and New Methodology of the CIVICUS Civil Society Index: Many Improvements and Some New Problems by Dr. Michael Hoelscher

2. The imperatives for innovations in civil society: Reflections on experiences in the implementation of CSI (2008-2009). By Jacob M. Mati

3. Do action-research projects have impacts? Insights from the CIVICUS Civil Society Index Programme impact assessment. By Bilal Aurangzeb
1) Comparing the Old and New Methodology of the CIVICUS Civil Society Index: Many Improvements and Some New Problems

Abstract:

The CIVICUS Civil Society Index (CSI) is a participatory needs assessment and action planning tool for civil society around the world that attempts to bridge knowledge and action with an aim of strengthening civil society in various parts of the world. Conceived in 1999, CSI has been successfully implemented in over 90 countries over the last decade. The ongoing implementation phase that kicked off in 2008 covers 56 countries. The CIVICUS CSI initiative has been relevant not only at country level (Heinrich, 2007), but also for cross-national comparisons (Heinrich & Fioramonti, 2008). As such, due to its global and comparative nature, its innovative methodology and strong policy orientation, the CSI is of interest to a broad audience of practitioners and researchers alike.

In 2008, an interdisciplinary team of civil society experts, methodologically experienced researchers and CSI practitioners redesigned the original methodology of the CSI (Anheier, 2004), based on the results of various evaluations and comments of stakeholders and experts. While the action-research-component of the project still was highly important, as one central goal of the CSI is the strengthening of Civil Society, the aim was to develop a tool that was better suited for reliable and valid cross-country comparisons.

The revised methodology is now implemented in the second phase of the CSI (2009) in 56 countries all over the world (for more information see http://civilsocietyindex.wordpress.com/ and http://www.civicus.org/csi). First experiences and data are available. The question is now if these changes had a positive impact on the comparability of the data, without diminishing the action-research component of the tool. This paper will first introduce the CSI methodology in general, discussing it in the light of ongoing methodological discussions (e.g. the debate in the Journal of Civil Society, 1, 3, 2005; Salamon et al., 2004). In a second step, the old and new methodology will be compared with regard to their strengths and weaknesses. Especially the changes in the dimensions, the use of different methods and the change in the rating system will be discussed. Third, on the basis of the available evidence from recent experiences, some conclusions will be drawn with regard to the achieved improvements and whether further adaptations are necessary.

One first important result already available is that the streamlining of the methodology made it easier for many actors to apply the CSI in their respective country. Other results are not yet at hand, as data collection is still ongoing, but will be available well before the conference.

By discussing the methodological changes of the CSI, we first want to inform practitioners and researchers alike, about the usefulness of the tool, and, second, we hope to get some good feedback on how to further improve this important project. This paper will lay grounds for the more detailed discussions of certain advances and problems by the other papers of the panel.

Sources:


Abstract:

The CIVICUS Civil Society Index (CSI) has, over the years, been one of the major research projects utilised in both academic and practitioner cycles in deepening the understanding of civil society and its role in society over the last decade. Despite the wealth of information that initiatives like CSI have gathered, there are still dynamics of the realities in society generic and in the phenomenon that is civil society in particular, that challenge our own understanding of the same. This is precisely why the CSI methodology has over the last two phases of implementations undergone adaptations aimed at ensuring that it responds to the dynamic realities facing civil society, while remaining true to its progenitor’s vision of being a participatory needs assessment and action-planning tool aimed at creating a knowledge base and an impetus for civil society strengthening initiatives.

This paper will reflect on the experiences of the implementation of the CSI 2008-2009 phase and its preliminary findings. Since the piloting of the CSI methodology in 2000, the CSI has been successfully utilised in researching the state of civil society in over different 90 countries in the world. Currently, the CSI is being implemented in 56 countries, some of which are re-implementing. Each of the CSI implementation phases has yielded interesting findings on challenges and have offered strategies and activities for the strengthening civil society and its role in national and international governance and development. Preliminary analysis of data from 10 of the participating countries in the current phase, as well as general reflections on all the participating countries, point to new realities and challenges facing civil society that are related to the ongoing multiple crises (financial, food, and climate change). The effects of these crises on civil society include changes in levels of civic engagement, and most importantly, reduction in acts of giving and volunteering, both of which are meant to have great impact on the vibrancy of civil society.

Therefore, the critical question that this paper seeks to address is: how adaptive has civil society been, in the face of the two most prominent crises (climate change and global financial crisis) facing the world today? The subsidiary questions thereof that the paper shall attempt to answer include: How are civil society organisations (CSOs) adaptively re-orienting their work and activities to address the challenges facing humanity today? How easy is it to raise funds and other resources for knowledge generation and action projects such as CSI? Are the multiple crises creating opportunities for CSOs to be innovative in their actions and strategies in meeting the challenges facing humanity? Are we witnessing new forms of adaptation? What types of CSOs have been less affected by the financial crisis and why? How are CSOs reconciling their more traditional development priorities – services, relief, and emergency - with the new dominant buzzword of climate change?

With regard to the global financial crisis impact, CSI’s preliminary analysis and reflections indicate that over the last year, developed countries have been adjusting their share of development aid. This means that a majority of CSOs in developing countries that have been traditionally dependent on external sources of funding have conversely had a cut in their budgets which consequently has implications on their ability to deliver their programmes and projects. For example, 10 of our own CSI implementing partners have been unable to raise funds to implement CSI in their respective countries and have therefore either been forced to drop the project entirely, or have encountered a stalemate of inactivity while searching for funding. Examples here include Swaziland, South Africa, Fiji, Ethiopia and Congo. With regard to the impact of climate change, the CSI’s preliminary analysis and reflections indicate
that CSOs have actively taken the issues of climate change and advocacy on the same has been on the rise. But are civil society organisations internally adjusting their operating ways and priorities in trying to cut on carbon emissions and if so, in what ways? Are the effects and adaptations to the different crises a ‘universal’ phenomenon to all civil society forms and types?

We have noted country peculiarities on, for example, civic engagement which are fundamentally altering our hypothesis that civic engagement has been on a decline over the years and would be dire especially in the face of the ongoing financial crisis. In Zambia for instance, levels of citizen engagement in civil society still remains quite high (80% of those interviewed).¹ Are people and communities for example, resorting to direct engagement with each other and in a way, re-energise civil society?² This and many other variables make a comparative analysis interesting and especially so, given that more data is streaming in from the different countries participating in the current phase of CSI implementation.

CSI methodology uses an indicator system that triangulates both the data collection tools (using both quantitative and qualitative tools) as well data sources. This paper shall analyse and utilise data from specific CSI indicators looking at civic engagement, environmental standards and CSO’s contributions on the same as well as on the question of resources and their sources, available to civil society.

Sources:


¹ From preliminary analysis of population survey data for Zambia

² Note that 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’ (CIVICUS, CSI toolkit 2008, p.14).
3). Do action-research projects have impacts? Insights from Civil Society Index Programme’s Impact Assessment

Abstract:

Between 2003 and 2006 the Civil Society Index (CSI) Programme of CIVICUS - a participatory needs assessment and action planning tool for civil society around the world, with the aim of creating a knowledge base and momentum for civil society strengthening initiatives- was implemented in more than 50 countries around the world. CIVICUS has commissioned a study to assess its impacts over the last couple of years since its first implementation. One of the key preliminary finding of this study reveals that a variety of civil society organizations, academia, multilateral organizations and governments are utilising CSI findings and the tool to inform some of their decisions and programming. For example: in Georgia, the USAID country office has used CSI data and findings to inform their strategic planning process; the European Commission has used CSI findings to inform their framework for the European integration process; Macedonian government has used the CSI findings as a basis for its strategy for cooperation with the civil sector; and in Indonesia, the Civil Society Alliance for Democracy (Yappika), has applied CSI at a district level. The research also reveals that as a result of CSI findings, 130 civil society organisations in Montenegro signed a Code of Conduct designed to encourage greater levels of accountability, and 93 CSOs made their financial reports publicly available.

These changes suggest some key crucial questions with regard to the link between action and research, which are the core of the CSI approach. Often, the question of impact especially of social interventions has been dismissed with the argument that it is too slippery since it is subject to a number of highly interlinked variables (such as multiple actors involved, other intervening factors, etc.) that are difficult to sever and control for analysis. To say that it is difficult is, however, not to say that it is an impossible task. The object of this paper is to assess the relevance, in terms of their impact, of follow up actions promoted by CSI partners. By ‘assessing’ is not meant a descriptive list of the result gained but, more importantly, a specification of the series of causal conditions through which those results were made possible. Changes will cover positive and negative, expected and unintended impacts.

This paper approaches change/impact from cyclical (non-linear) perspective based on the theory of change which takes a wide view of a desired change, carefully probing the assumptions behind each step in what may be a long and complex process with multi-causality (different cause(s) producing different/same effects) and/or equifinality (same cause(s) producing different/same effects). Articulating a theory of change entails thinking through all the steps along a path toward a desired change, identifying the preconditions that enabled (and possibly inhibited) each step, listing the activities that produced those conditions, and explaining why those activities are likely to the project. In this paper, the role of the external environment is also considered as affecting the potential impacts, which means that causal mechanisms and pathways through which CSI has produced change, are examined.

The paper addresses following key questions:

- Has CSI produced any change? If so, for whom?
- What is the scale and nature of this change e.g. intended or not? Positive or negative? How significant is the change?
- What key processes led to that change?
• What factors impede or enhance the change?
• How sustainable is this change?

The analysis of the results of actions taken to strengthen civil society following CSI implementation will help in developing a set of best practices and recommendations for the most effective use of findings of action-research projects in order to improve the action side of such projects. The study used in this paper is qualitative and participatory: it has been carried out in close consultation with project stakeholders. Since it is an impact assessment in order to ensure the validity of the results, various methods of information collection (Interviews, phone focus groups, analysis of written materials) and analysis are used. The triangulation of these methods and of sources of information allowed getting a more comprehensive and accurate assessment.

Sources:

4. The Japanese Civil Society at a Crossroad: Findings from CIVICUS CSI Project

Abstract:

The concept of ‘civil society’ is becoming widely known and it is gaining the recognition not only from academia, but also from practitioners and policy makers as a sector to play an important role for the progressive democracy and to provide public goods. In Japan, the public are gradually becoming more familiar with such civil society related words as ‘volunteer’, ‘NPO’, ‘NGO’ and so on. Further, although various types of civil organisations have existed since pre-modern times, it is quite a new phenomenon for civil society to gain legal status and recognize themselves as one of the most influential sectors in society.

In 2009, Japan has joined the CIVICUS Civil Society Index (CSI) project for the first time. This paper will present findings of the research and experiences of the implementation. This will be consisted of two parts; the first part will reflect on challenges of adaptation of CSI methodology, and the latter part will focus on project findings including topics ongoing economic crisis. In November 2009, we will be presenting the overview and the findings from part of on going CSI project in Japan. The proposed paper, will present the result of the project.

The greatest challenge for CSI project is to define civil society to apply for the survey. The definition of civil society varies depending on the time and place. CIVICUS 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” (CIVICUS 2008). This is a very inclusive idea which gives each country opportunity to reflect their civil society in their own context. However, it also causes difficulties for the international comparison. To begin with, the CSI project requires each country to consider and modify its definition of civil society in accordance to the country’s context. In discussing the definition of civil society, the difficulties of the international comparative survey became apparent. In Japan, specialists argued that the definition is too vague to be able to make useful comparisons. Without any rigid boundary, it is very difficult to define civil society objectively. Also, the part of the definition stating ‘shared interest’ was addressed to be inappropriate. Being able to define civil society from local perspective will helps local civil society organisations (CSOs) to regard themselves as the member of civil society. Nevertheless, there is always a risk to fail making international comparison, as well as causing challenges for the interpretation of the result of each country.

The uniqueness of CSI project is its diamond and action orientation. CSI diamond enables us to see the strength and weakness of the civil society. With the case studies and interpretation of the meaning of index, the project will be given more usefulness for the policy implication. As for the impact of economic crisis in Japan, it seems to come out on philanthropy activities and employment market, which increases the expectation for CSOs to play greater role in the society. Japanese philanthropy activities are reported to be small. Unlike the U.S. and U.K., corporate donation is remarkably larger than individual donation. As for individual donation, the impact of economic crisis seems marginal. Yet, the corporate giving appears to be declining significantly. Despite the boomed Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) for the past couple of years, corporations has forced to make large number of redundant as well as to decrease the corporate giving (Planning Workshop on the Impact of the Economic Crisis on the Nonprofit Sector and Philanthropy in the Asia Pacific Region). The expectation for CSOs to support those newly unemployed workers is hiking as well as many other activities which the government failed to provide. Therefore, under the economic crisis, Japanese Civil Society is now standing on the cross road. Declining corporate giving might hinder the CSOs activity, yet the growing needs in the society may lead to the development of civil society.
Although CSI project is still undergoing, it helps us to see Japanese civil society from holistic view despite its criticism for the definition. As mentioned above, the expectation for civil society is becoming greater and greater today compounded by economic crisis. This paper therefore will address the question as follows:

What does CSI diamond imply?

How can we interpret the diamond?

What is the policy implication in order to develop civil society?

In addition, the greatest and the most important challenges will be discussed as well as follow up actions after the CSI project implementation.

Sources:


Planning Workshop on the Impact of the Economic Crisis on the Nonprofit Sector and Philanthropy in the Asia Pacific Region (27-28 July 2009 in Osaka University)