EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research report encapsulates issues relating to civil society in Liberia, as recorded through the CIVICUS Civil Society Index (CSI) Programme implementation. To present a holistic picture of the sector, we begin with a detailed narrative of the methodology used in conducting the exercises, which commenced in 2009. The research methodology examines civil society from five dimensions, using both qualitative and quantitative data sources. The qualitative data came from case studies, regional focus groups, a national civil society meeting, and meetings of the advisory committee. Insightful data also came from in-depth key informants’ interviews. The quantitative data emanated from the field use of three questionnaires: an external perception survey, an organisational survey, and a population survey (used in the absence of World Values Survey data for Liberia).

Following the presentation of the research methodology is an overview of civil society in Liberia. Here we discuss the concept of the term ‘civil society’ from the Liberian perspective by examining a historical snapshot of the forces and influences acting on and within civil society in Liberia.

The main findings of this research are presented in the third segment of the report. Here we provide in-depth analysis of the quantitative data, using the CIVICUS CSI matrix as a guide to present the five dimensions: Civic Engagement, Perception of Impact, Level of Organization, Practice of Values, and External Environment. In examining the quantitative data, we critique each score, not simply accepting the findings or the numbers at face value. Rather, we move toward a more sophisticated appreciation of the issues beyond the numbers. In the end, the reader may make the final interpretation.

Nevertheless, this report is not intended as criticism for its own sake, and so it closes by examining not only the strengths and weaknesses of civil society at an aggregate level, but also by providing a set of recommendations that could assist in improving the sector. The conclusions and recommendations are all based on insights drawn from qualitative data inputs derived from regional focus groups, key informants interviews, a review of existing literature produced by and about civil society, the advisory committee meetings and a national workshop involving key stakeholders.

Figure 1 illustrates the Civil Society Index Diamond for Liberia, which was derived from the findings of the five dimensions, plotted in the graph shown below:

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1 The research methodology is a redesigned and updated CIVICUS CSI methodology, designed by CIVICUS.
As shown in Figure 1, Civic Engagement recorded a score of 55.9%, indicating a high level of citizen engagement in political and social affairs in Liberia. Next is the Practice of Values dimension, which scored 53.7%. As shown later in this report, this score has been highly debated and contested. The Advisory Committee (AC), the National Workshop and the Regional Focus groups doubted this score, stating it was too high. Analysts point to the lack of democratic decision-making as a contributing factor to the lack of practice of values in the civil society community, because a lack of accountable decision-making means the vertical accountability chain is broken. Transparency and accountability, primarily in financial governance, and poor labour rights practices undermine this score and should drive it downward. The Perception of Impact dimension is rated third, scoring 53.1%. Here, analysts and experts concurred with the score, but expected this score should have been higher due to civil society’s high impact on public policy, something that has been stressed by observers, including public officials. Fourth is the contextual dimension, the External Environment, rated at 52.4%. Again, there was debate over this score, with arguments that the economic context, corruption, and lack of state effectiveness, ought to have pulled the score downwards.

Lastly, the Level of Organisation scored 50.5%. This is the weakest link within the matrix. Civil society organisations (CSOs) face the greatest challenges, which manifest in the form of poor human, technological and financial resources. This is a troubling phenomenon.
Despite civil society’s strong impact on the Liberian policy community, the work itself is not sustainable due to the debilitating lack of capacity that permeates civil society. Because of the perpetual scramble for the few available resources, civil society has been unable to cooperate and coordinate effectively, even though peer-to-peer communication is reported at 68.5%. Another key finding is the lack of international linkages and connections for civil society. This is estimated at 2.7% and is found to be especially weak with actors and organisations based outside the capital, Monrovia. CSOs outside of the capital are in dire need of connections to other CSOs, particularly internationally-based ones. The alarming disparities between civil society in Monrovia and civil society outside of the capital suggest an urgent need to resolve this issue.