CIVIL SOCIETY IN AZERBAIJAN: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN TRANSITION

CIVICUS Civil Society Index Report for Azerbaijan
An international action-research project coordinated by CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This section presents the main findings, observations and implications of the CIVICUS Civil Society Index (CSI) project in Azerbaijan, which was implemented by ICSR.

The CSI project was coordinated by CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation. The CSI is a comprehensive needs assessment and action-planning tool for civil society actors at country level, and has been implemented in more than 50 countries around the world.

As the National Coordinating Organisation (NCO), the ICSR collected comprehensive information and input from a broad range of civil society representatives, civil society organisations (CSOs), ordinary citizens, experts and researchers on the current state of civil society in Azerbaijan during 2002-2006.

The CSI project brought to light many new ideas and also the impression of civil society in Azerbaijan. In doing so, it was also able to identify key strengths and weaknesses of civil society in Azerbaijan. The main highlights are summarised below.

At the core of the CSI project is the concept of civil society, which is defined as “the arena, outside of the family, the state, and the market where people associate to advance common interests.”¹ This definition encompasses a large number of diverse organisations, including voluntary organisations, professional bodies, trade unions, and local informal and formal community.

Having this definition as the starting point, the CSI team in Azerbaijan tried to collect further information to evaluate the state of civil society. The CSI used a mix of qualitative and quantitative research methods, including the Community Survey, Regional Stakeholder Consultations, Policy Impact Case Studies, a Media Review, and interviews with key informants.

**FIGURE I: Civil Society Diamond for Azerbaijan**

The project’s National Advisory Group (NAG) scored 74 indicators, which are grouped under four CSI dimensions: Structure, Environment, Values and Impact. The indicators are scored on a scale from 0 (the lowest score) to 3 (the highest). The scores are assessed by the NAG and are then averaged to give an overall score between 0 and 3 for the four key dimensions. These four scores are then plotted in the Azerbaijan Civil Society Diamond, which gives a visual representation of the current state of civil society in Azerbaijan (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 demonstrates that civil society in Azerbaijan is well balanced among its four dimensions (structure, environment, values and impact), although its dimensions are rather limited. The scores for each dimension are low, being within the limits of 0.8-1.2 on a scale from 0 up to 3. It is clear from this diagram that the Impact Dimension is perhaps slightly weaker, while the other three dimensions yielded relatively more positive results.

The Structure Dimension of civil society in Azerbaijan reveals that this dimension is currently below average, confirming the existing opinion that apathy and a lack of civic engagement is widespread among citizens. Some of the factors contributing to the low assessment of this dimension are discussed briefly below.

Citizen participation in CSOs is quite limited because of a limited and ineffective outreach by CSOs to the general population. In addition, there is not enough diversity in the Azerbaijani civil society. The types of CSOs with the largest membership are trade unions, followed by educational organisations and groups. Overall membership in other types of CSO is not very significant. Furthermore, the distribution of CSOs is not even across the country, with most CSOs concentrated in the capital, Baku, or in other large cities. According to the CSI study, while many social groups of the population are represented in CSOs’ membership, many of them are underrepresented among CSOs’ leadership.

The CSI assessment also revealed that CSO umbrella bodies are often seen as a problematic feature of civil society’s structure. For the most part, the Regional Stakeholder Survey (RSC) respondents viewed them as inefficient in achieving their purposes, particularly in increasing their members’ access to financial resources and in providing technical and informational support of their activities. Perhaps one of the most serious challenges facing Azerbaijani civil society is the extremely low level of cooperation between CSOs and among CSOs in different sectors, as well as their weak international linkages.

The CSI process showed that the Environment in which civil society operates in Azerbaijan is quite unsupportive of the development of civil society. This is inconsistent and contradictory in terms of the environment’s contribution to the long-term sustainability of Azerbaijani CS. Many of these problems stem back to the negative consequences of the Soviet totalitarian system. Indeed, many social-political and legal factors inhibit the development of civil society in Azerbaijan. Additionally, civil society has not developed strong and cooperative relationships with the government or the private/business sector.

As for the socio-cultural context, the CSI findings also demonstrate relatively low levels of interpersonal trust and public spiritedness, representing significant socio-cultural and psychological barriers to the development of a vibrant civil society. However, it can also be assumed that in the long run, strengthening civil society will also contribute to improving the socio-cultural environment in the country.

This optimistic perspective is supported by the fact that the levels of interpersonal trust, public spiritedness, and tolerance are greater among CSOs members than among non-members. In general, the considerable improvement in both the social and economic situation in the country in recent years can be seen as positive factors in the development and strengthening of civil society.

The CSI assessed civil society's Values Dimension as slightly higher than others with a score of 1.2. This positive picture is connected to a relatively high level of attention to issues of gender equity, non-violence and tolerance within the civil society arena. Despite this fact, one of the basic weaknesses of this dimension is the lack of concrete activities and initiatives to promote
values such as democracy, transparency, gender equity, non-violence, tolerance, poverty eradication and environmental sustainability within the larger civil society. This weakness is closely connected with the fact that civil society in Azerbaijan, in general, is not very influential within the ongoing public processes in the country. Mostly, it acts more as a passive observer than as an active participant in influencing these social processes. At the same time, the limited character of democratic practices, as well as the lack of internal transparency and accountability within CSOs, contributes to a general low score for the Values Dimension.

The Impact Dimension received the lowest score among the four CSI dimensions. This indicates that civil society is still not an influential actor in the policy-making arena in Azerbaijan, and that its overall impact on current policy and society is relatively weak. Therefore, one can assume that civil society’s current actions in the field of public policy do not necessarily lead to greater impact on society at large and on the wellbeing of citizens. In particular, CSOs have not been successful at holding private corporations accountable, lobbying for state service provision for the population, and empowering citizens in terms of building their capacity for collective action and supporting livelihoods.

Unfortunately, the success of CSO activities such as holding the state accountable, promoting freedom of the press, influencing public policy in social support of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), promoting transparency of oil incomes, informing and educating citizens and delivering services to marginalised groups, is not much better either. It signals that after the long period of Soviet rule, civil society in Azerbaijan has not yet established and generated effective mechanisms of real influence on the public life as a whole. Nevertheless, as indicated by the 2005 Community Survey, it is expected that over time, the positive influence of CSOs will steadily increase, and there is a belief that civil society in Azerbaijan possesses significant potential for building more social capital.

The CSI project is the first comprehensive and participatory assessment of civil society carried out in Azerbaijan. Its findings will be able to contribute considerably to both forming and shaping the way for civil society progress in the short and long term. As the CSI study has found, the continuing development of civil society in Azerbaijan will require strong commitment and intensive work “in all directions” and in all aspects of the state and development of civil society.

Therefore, priority needs to be given to the task of strengthening the ability of civil society to positively affect the society at large. This means that activities in improving the structural characteristics (particularly civic participation, the strengthening of networking, cooperation, communication and self-regulation within civil society) of civil society, the external environment in which it operates (in particular, state-civil society and private sector-civil society relations), and the internal value system of CS should be undertaken concurrently and in coordination with an increase in social efficiency and influential capacity, thus increasing the influence of civil society in Azerbaijan.

This project provides civil society in Azerbaijan with a collectively created and generated model, a scheme for civil society’s future development. It is hoped that the participatory and knowledge-based nature of the CSI project has laid a solid groundwork for civil society and other stakeholders to act upon the goal of making civil society even stronger and more sustainable in the future.