CIVICUS Civil Society Index
A Summary of the China CSI Project Evaluation

Background: Purpose and Objective

This evaluation provides CIVICUS and the NGO Research Centre (NGORC), Tsinghua University, the CSI country partner in China with an assessment of the implementation of the Civil Society Index project. It is hoped that the evaluation will be used to generate lessons that will inform current and future phases of the project as well as the final global evaluation undertaken by CIVICUS. It is also expected that NGORC will gain out of this evaluation through the process of self reflection as well as gauging any important lessons learned. The evaluation might also help to develop strategies for future civil society strengthening initiatives.

The evaluation attempted to assess the outputs and outcomes of the project as developed by NGORC and CIVICUS. Besides, it also assessed the project against other key criteria, such as relevance, validity, participation, capacity building, CIVICUS assistance, and sustainability, effective use of project resources, unintended changes and early impacts.

The evaluation included a mix of self-assessment surveys by the project partners as well as their evaluation of the outputs and outcomes of the project. The report was shared with the country partner and a final phone call was organised to discuss the evaluation and next steps. This document presents a brief summary of the key findings.

Key Findings

Project Outputs

A body of knowledge on the state of civil society and civil society strengthening practices at national level.

This output, the first priority for the NGORC, has been mostly achieved because the set of CSI indicators is quite new for China, and thus, were useful in generating important knowledge on the state of the Chinese civil society.

Overall, the evaluation revealed that CIVICUS was between somewhat and not very satisfied with the quality of the country report. On the other hand, NGORC was satisfied with the overall quality of the country report.

Both NGORC and CIVICUS evaluated the country report as between fairly to completely able to provide comprehensive information on the state of civil society in China. NGORC noted that “there were some other important indicators that would have been relevant for China but were not included in the CSI.” CIVICUS noted “the significant challenges in translating the Chinese report into English that left the report not very comprehensive in giving a nuanced assessment of the state of CS in China.”

The Chinese CSI NIT noted that the resulting diamond from the NAG scoring meeting strongly reflects the actual state of civil society in China. CIVICUS noted “political sensitivities and certain misunderstandings of indicators and the methodology that led to the information for a number of indicators to be not fully accurate.”
The country report was found to somewhat or mostly (for both CIVICUS and NGORC) provide relevant information for organisations working to strengthen civil society. “The CSI methodology and indicators were new and comprehensive in the context of China” (NGORC). The country report was also very relevant to organisations working in strengthening civil society because it was able to generate a new way to rethink civil society through the comprehensive indicators.

**Shared understanding of the state of civil society among a broad range of stakeholders**

This output was assessed by NGORC as mostly achieved. During the discussions in the workshops, new ideas on civil society were accepted by many people who never thought of it in this way before.

**A set of strategies for strengthening civil society**

The evaluation reveals this output as fairly achieved. However, NGORC notes that ‘the most serious problems facing the civil society can’t be changed overnight as many are related to the political environment.’ As part of plans for follow-up of the action-agenda developed in the National Workshop, NGORC will publish the report in Chinese so as to reach out to a wider audience.

**Forums for sharing knowledge on civil society**

According to NGORC, this output has been mostly achieved. NGORC indicated that the local stakeholders think the CSI was a helpful forum for sharing knowledge on civil society. The project activities (stakeholder consultation, National workshop, NAG meetings etc.) mostly helped to provide a space for civil society and other stakeholders to debate and share information on issues concerning the civil society in China. This was because many people from civil society, government, and other sectors came together in these forums. However, it is difficult to attribute continued consultations and cooperation between stakeholders beyond the CSI project to the CSI alone because ‘consultations among the stakeholders have always been there, but we can’t tell which resulted directly from the CSI.’

**Outcomes**

**Increase in knowledge based actions by civil society stakeholders**

This outcome (the first in priority for NGORC) was completely achieved. NGORC indicated that this was the case because the “indicators were comprehensive.” The NGO networks, the network for the disabled, and other organisations are using the indicators and the report in redesigning their work. The action agenda agreed and identified in the CSI National Workshop has been mostly taken up for implementation.

**Increased collective voice of civil society in governance and development**

The CSI project fairly achieved this outcome in China. However, NGORC states that “there are not many follow-up activities taken by the stakeholders after the workshop.”
Increased receptivity of civil society by external stakeholders

NGORC assessed this outcome as mostly achieved. According to the NCO, “government officials at local level donors, business community, realized more dimensions of civil society.” The government is showing greater willingness to listen to civil society organisations. Government officials who attended the national conference are also interested in the report and outcomes of the project. The media is also paying greater attention to issues of participation and values as reported by NGORC.

Project Relevance

How relevant is the project for NAG, civil society, the NGORC and other stakeholders in the country?

The project was seen as relevant by all the stakeholders. The NGORC assessed the CSI implementation as mostly relevant to their work because one of NGORC’s working areas is on civil society research. The NAG members, local stakeholders, CSOs who attended the national workshop also gave a positive evaluation to the project and held that it was relevant to the strengthening of civil society in China. The academics, donors and the media are paying a greater interest to the government’s attitude towards the project has been positive too.

The NAG members provided the following recommendations:

? Make connotations more clearly especially in Chinese context. For example, does the term voluntary include activities mobilized by the government?

? Conduct wider research.

? Endeavor to have more government officials and various NGOs involved.

Project Validity

a) Secondary data review. All the NIT members evaluated this methodology as mostly able to generate data/information on the state of the civil society in China.

b) Social Forces Analysis at 1st NAG meeting was evaluated by both CIVICUS and NCO as having been mostly to fairly able to generate data/information on the state of the civil society in China.

c) Regional Stakeholder Questionnaire & Consultations were evaluated by both the NCO and CIVICUS as fairly to mostly able to generate data/information about the state of the civil society in China. However, the NGORC pointed out that the RSC is “very subjective.”

d) Community Survey was evaluated as completely and mostly (both NCO and CIVICUS) able to generate data/information about the state of the civil society in China.

e) Media review was evaluated as mostly and fairly (NCO and CIVICUS) able to generate data/information about the state of the civil society in China.

f) Fact finding studies (policy impact, corporate social responsibility). All parties interviewed evaluated this methodology as fairly able to generate data/information about the state of the civil society in China.

g) NAG scoring exercise. This methodology was evaluated as between mostly and somewhat (NCO and CIVICUS) able to generate data/information about the state of the civil society in China.

h) National Workshop was evaluated as completely and mostly (NGORC), and fairly (CIVICUS) able to generate data/information about the state of the civil society in China.
**Project Participation**

According to the NGORC, a wide range of participatory methods were used during the CSI implementation process which included discussions, feedbacks from NAG, RSC, and SWOT analysis exercises during the NAG meeting and national workshop. NGORC commented that all the participatory methodologies worked well as planned.

**Capacity Building**

The NCO reported that their project implementation team gained capacities in research as well as in the training and facilitation, convening and networking skills. Specifically, the evaluation reveals that the Chinese CSI team was able to gain from the secondary data gathering because they got exposed to various world data sources that they had not previously been privy to. They also gained from the experience of having to work with a combination of various methodologies. The evaluation also points out that the ICSI was an important avenue for networking for the NGORC team.

**Evaluation of CIVICUS Assistance and overall implementation**

NGORC is completely satisfied with the overall support provided by CIVICUS because by and large, CIVICUS provided mostly adequate support to them. Specifically, the support provided by CSP was appreciated. Of special mention were the regular calls, emails and the tool kit. As such, NGORC is completely satisfied with the systems and procedures put in place for the assistance of NCOs in the implementation of the project. The NCO was also fairly satisfied with the support provided by CIVICUS with regard to their fundraising activities.

The Evaluation reveals that CIVICUS is somewhat satisfied with the overall implementation undertaken by the NGORC. The systems and procedures put in place by NGORC to implement the project were also assessed as mostly satisfactory. CIVICUS further assessed the collective efforts of the CSI team in helping in the Chinese report as commendable. However, it also noted that there might not have been sufficient close monitoring of the NCO’s progress until the end. It seems that China was put on a ‘back-burner’, which resulted in long periods of time where nothing was produced or improved.

Fundraising, the community survey, NAG, and the ‘revision of the texts and scores for the indicators were noted as activities well undertaken by the NCO.

**Recommendations:**

- Participants should be informed beforehand of the working language of the project (NGORC)
- CIVICUS should provide consistent assistance and there should be levelling of expectations at the beginning of the project rather than trying to fix things at the very end.

**Sustainability/Replicability**

All five NAG members who participated in the evaluation were of the view that the project should be implemented again in the future. This view is not shared by the NCO which held that CSI implementation was a complicated project and cost a lot in terms of time, financial and human resources and should not be implemented in future. However, NGORC held that if the toolkit is simplified and funding is available, they would be willing to re-implement the project.
Project Resources

Financial Resources

According to NGORC, the financial resources to undertake the project were mostly adequate as the NCO was able to get funding from the Ford Foundation. The project stayed within the budget.

Human Resources

The NGORC felt that its human resources were mostly adequate for the project implementation. NGORC is mostly satisfied with the work of both the Participatory Researcher and CSE because they “worked very hard and despite the fact that they are very busy people, they gave a lot of support to the project.”

CIVICUS on the other hand felt that there were fairly to somewhat adequate human resources with the NCO to successfully implement the project. CIVICUS noted that “although the NCO had qualified and intelligent individuals, this was often not reflected in the quality of the reports. It is difficult to tell if this was primarily a language problem or not.” CIVICUS further notes that perhaps the project coordinator was overburdened with too many projects and tasks and therefore could not dedicate enough time to the complex CSI project. Over and above this, it seemed that it was one individual who combined all the roles of the coordinator, PR and CSE. CIVICUS felt that a good translator would have been a valuable asset for the project. As such CIVICUS was somewhat disappointed with the quality and quantity of the country report, given the fact that the NGO research centre at Tsinghua University is one of the leading institutions on CS in China.

Time

NGORC felt that the time allocated was mostly sufficient for the implementation of the project. They did their field work mostly in summer holidays and as a result the whole process went on rather smoothly.

CIVICUS felt that there was somewhat sufficient time available to the NCO to implement the project. CIVICUS noted that “although the NCO was able to progress through the CSI implementation, the task it faced was monumental given the size, population and geographic diversity of China. This issue was compounded with the language difficulties and poor quality of the drafts. Although China appeared on task, in terms of their progress relative to other NCOs, in reality, the quality of the pre-NAG and initial final reports were so low that the work put into editing and re-writing required much longer time.”

Short/Long Term Impact

Unintended changes

According to NGORC, no unintended changes have been observed in China. The only recorded change has been on the NCO and their partner organisations in getting to know more about the civil society. However, it is worth noting that the government, the academia and the media have shown greater interest in civil society in China. It would be interesting to monitor what this growing interest may translate to for the Chinese civil society.

Conclusion

The implementation of the CSI in China had critical challenges for both CIVICUS and the NCO. Language consistently came up from both CIVICUS and the NCO to explain the various deficiencies and challenges experienced in the course of the CSI implementation. Furthermore,
the NCO, perhaps out of undergoing a rather ‘frustrating’ experience feels that the CSI should not be implemented again in China due to the amount of resources (time, financial and human) that went into it. This stance is quite different from the NAG’s one who feels it should be implemented in the future. However, during the evaluation call, the NCO indicated that what need redress are the critical language difficulties to improve the implementation process and outputs and products (e.g. reports) of CSI implementation in countries where the command of English language is not advanced.