FIJI CIVIL SOCIETY INDEX REPORT

A CIVIL SOCIETY IN TRANSITION

CIVICUS Civil Society Index Report for Fiji

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the course of 2004 and 2005, the CIVICUS Civil Society Index (CSI) project collected information and input from a broad range of civil society representatives, citizens, experts and researchers on the state of civil society in the Fiji Islands. Using a comprehensive framework of 74 indicators and drawing on extensive data collected by the project team, the project’s National Advisory Group (NAG) assessed the overall state of civil society in the country, which was summarized in a visual graph (see Figure 1), the Civil Society Diamond. The diamond graph shows moderate development of all four dimensions, i.e., civil society’s structure, environment, values and impact with the latter attaining the highest score of 2.1

The CSI exercise stimulated deeper thinking of the situation and role of civil society organisations in Fiji. It raised questions of relevance and efficiency that challenged actors within civil society to re-examine the way they work both individually and together. The main findings of the assessment are briefly summarized below.

The CSI assessment of civil society’s structure in the Fiji Islands showed that citizens are predominantly active in faith-based organisations and as volunteers for civic activities. Their involvement in social organisations for self-benefit such as sports, trade unions and women’s groups is also significant. Participation in non-partisan political action remains weak, despite the restoration of democratic rule in 2000 following three political coups in the country since 1987. There appears to be a correlation between income and membership of CSOs as the poorer and less educated members of society tend to be left out. In the last year over 80% of citizens made a material or financial donation to CSOs, of which a significant proportion are faith-based organisations. A slightly higher percentage of citizens are members of at least one CSO. Notably, more than half of these participate in more than one organisation.

Between 50% and 60% of citizens take part in civic and social activities in their communities. The CSO types with the largest membership are religious organisations, followed by trade unions, educational groups and sports organisations. Apart from these organisation-types with large memberships, there are also active and influential not-for-profit organisations that do not have significant membership. These are active in matters concerning drug prevention, environmental protection, human rights education, governance and integrity, monitoring, and advocacy and consumer issues, amongst others.
Apart from religious organisations and large trade unions, CSOs in Fiji struggle for resources and technical expertise and have a weak to moderately developed infrastructure. Nevertheless, they seem to be satisfied with the achievements they make using the resources they have. They tend to be understaffed with heavy reliance on volunteers. Although many have rules and regulations for self-governance, there is little effort to monitor and ensure compliance. Umbrella organisations exist and are appreciated, although they often lack the capacity to provide technical support to members. Despite adequate communication infrastructure, communications between CSOs are limited. However, cooperation over specific issues is evident in the formation of alliances or coalitions. CSOs reflect the society in which they are situated. Fiji’s CSOs are a rich diversity ranging from local ethnic based to national coalitions to chapters of international organisations. They represent a wide range of organisational arrangements and accountability rules. Generalisations made here must be viewed in this context.

Civil society’s environment in the Fiji Islands is assessed as moderately enabling to the long-term development and sustainability of civil society. The legal environment is considered fair as far as the registration of CSOs is concerned, although an outdated act (currently under review) governs the activities of most CSOs. Although this is the case, some legal restrictions exist and are considered inhibitive to CSOs’ ability to criticise government’s activities and/or policies. Government’s attempts to consult with CSOs are mostly ineffective not because of the lack of trying, but rather because of bureaucratic processes that are not conducive to civil society’s engagement. The political context is assessed as unfriendly both in terms of meaningful participation of individual citizens in elections and in the government’s acceptance of dissent by CSOs over contentious political issues. The study found that private companies are generally supportive of civil society and that cooperation between business and CSOs is substantial. However, limited incentives exist to encourage philanthropic activities by private individuals and institutions.

The socio-cultural context is of concern. More than 79% of citizens do not trust fellow citizens and this might represent a barrier to the development of a strong civil society. Strengthening civil society will need to include addressing the need to raise levels of trust in society at large. This will be a difficult but urgent task given the significant proportions of the two major racial groups, who identify first and foremost as members of separate groups rather than as common nationals of Fiji.

In terms of values, the CSI found that, although CSOs practice democracy within their organisations, most of them make little effort to promote democracy within the wider society. The few CSOs that do so have a high profile have wide support. Corruption within civil society is considered to be widespread and CSOs do not assist the situation as only a minority (38%) make their financial accounts publicly available. Representatives of CSOs speak of the relatively common misuse of an organisation’s influence for its own benefit and at the expense of other organisations, rather than of ‘corruption’ per se. This worrisome tendency is probably exacerbated by the fierce competition among CSOs for scarce resources and by the constantly changing rules for grant schemes and financing of CSOs.
The work of CSOs to promote transparency both in government and in the private sector is relatively well known and assessed as moderately favourable. Tolerance within the Fiji society is not high with only 31% of regional stakeholders stating the absence of explicitly racist, discriminatory and intolerant forces. Further, only a minority of CSOs (23%) actively promote tolerance.

In the aftermath of three political coups, violence is an ever-present factor in Fiji’s society. Some 11% of stakeholders stated the presence of mass groups that use violence to express their interests. Significant attempts are being made by CSOs to address violence and to promote non-violence. Notable amongst these are women’s organisations that also address domestic and sexual violence.

Gender equity has yet to be achieved both in CSOs and in society at large. Only 21% of CSOs are reported to have gender policies although a larger proportion of them are known to have dedicated programmes to promote gender equity. CSOs’ involvement in poverty eradication is well known. Most of the CSOs working towards poverty eradication are faith-based organisations with limited resources. Similarly, many CSOs are involved in activities for environmental protection and sustainability. Their role in this area is assessed to be moderate.

Despite the relatively weak structure, the moderately constraining environment and the relative lack of strong values, the impact of CSOs is rather significant. At the national level, CSOs have significant impact on human rights issues and national policies, although influence on national budget remains very limited. There is a general belief that CSOs are very active and successful in the areas of environment and social services. Civil society in general is moderately active on holding the state and the private corporations accountable. A significant number of stakeholders consider CSOs quite successful in responding to social interests such as the promotion of human rights, the rights of children, women, the fight against HIV/AIDS and drugs.

Civil society’s weaknesses

For the first time in Fiji, a comprehensive and participatory assessment of civil society has been carried out through the CSI project. Its findings reveal several weaknesses in Fiji’s civil society that pose a challenge for the CSOs to address urgently. A matter of particular concern is the lack of trust in society, especially amongst the different races. The continuing existence of violence in society (especially following the three coups that have taken place since 1987), the relative absence of the poorer and less literate members of society in CSO, and the weak involvement of civil society in non-partisan political action that could address these weaknesses, are other challenges that have to be given priority. The CSI exercise (if used well) can contribute to charting the way for civil society’s progress in the years to come, particularly in addressing these deeply rooted issues. Some means of addressing weaknesses that emerged from the CSI findings include a focus on structural features, particularly the strengthening of networking, cooperation, communication and self-regulation within civil society. Another issue of concern is the common perception of widespread corruption in society and the relative lack of attention by civil society groups as watchdogs of both the public and corporate sectors with regard to this issue. Very few CSOs currently act in this area and will need support and cooperation from a wider segment of civil society to bring about needed
urgent changes. Corruption is a scourge that robs countries of needed development resources that would meet the needs of the poor, who constitute a rapidly rising population in Fiji.

The CSI project has been a useful exercise for Fiji civil society. Its participatory nature has enabled quite a substantial segment of the CSO leadership to examine the way they work together and the impact they have on issues of national interest. Both the process followed and the results thereof have provided a useful learning experience for those involved. The onus is now on CIVICUS International, and FCOSS as the national NCO, to facilitate widespread discussions within Fiji of the findings of the exercise and to encourage relevant action for addressing the weaknesses it revealed.