CIVIL SOCIETY
IN A CHANGING GHANA

AN ASSESSMENT OF THE CURRENT STATE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN GHANA

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is the outcome of a research project to assess the current state of civil society in Ghana. The study evolved out of the crucial lack of a body of knowledge about the characteristics, roles and impact of civil society regarding positive social change and poverty reduction. The CIVICUS Civil Society Index (CSI), as the worldwide research is known, is an innovative action research approach initiated and implemented by, and for, civil society organisations. It actively involved a broad range of stakeholders including governments, academics and the community at large, in all phases of the project.

The CSI project collected information from a wide range of civil society stakeholders: citizens, civil society organisations (CSOs), experts and researchers. The main data sources are secondary data, a population survey, a regional stakeholder survey, policy case studies, interviews with key informants and a media analysis. Using a comprehensive framework of 74 indicators and four dimensions, as well as a wide range of data, the National Advisory Group assessed the overall state of civil society in the country, which is visually presented in the Civil Society Diamond (see Figure 1 below).

On the Civil Society Diamond, the score for STRUCTURE is 1.3, for ENVIRONMENT 1.5, VALUES 2.0 and IMPACT 2.0. As indicated by the Diamond, civil society has weak structures and operates within a somewhat disabling environment, but has rather strong impact on policy and especially on the lives of Ghanaians.

Figure 1: Civil Society Diamond for Ghana

(Scores range from a low of 0 through a high of 3)
The following are the main issues in Ghanaian civil society:

**Structure**

Ghanaian civil society presents a structure characterised by widespread citizen participation at the community level, although non-partisan political involvement is sporadic. Financial resources are limited and heavily dependent on foreign funding, while most CSOs are concentrated in urban areas, mainly due to infrastructural needs.

The CSI found a significant degree of citizen involvement in civil society activities in Ghana. For instance, slightly more than half the respondents to the community survey (51%) are members of CSOs and 80% of them have participated in community activities or meetings. Additionally, 57% of respondents carried out voluntary work for their communities (especially in faith-based organisations or associations) during the year preceding the survey.

By contrast, Ghanaian CSOs have not been very active in non-partisan political action, since only 15% of CSO members have engaged in some form of non-partisan political action. In a context marked by widespread poverty, it is not surprising that contributions to charitable giving average only $0.50 (about 0.05% of the average annual income).

The CSI found that most CSOs in Ghana are based in urban areas, and the organisations that possess the highest level of technological and financial resources are operating in the main cities. In general, CSOs tend to gravitate around urban settlements in order to access basic facilities, such as electricity and telephone lines. Additionally, women and the rural population are under-represented in the membership of most CSOs and almost completely excluded from leadership roles.

Given the lack of a strong infrastructure for civil society, it is not surprising that the level of organisation is possibly the area where Ghanaian CSOs are most vulnerable. First, only a minority of CSOs belong to umbrella organisations and the regional stakeholders involved in the CSI assessment specifically pointed out that the adage of “united we stand, divided we fall” has not taken root in Ghanaian civil society.

Among the weaknesses of CSOs in Ghana, the CSI highlighted the low level of financial and technological resources. The stakeholders involved in the CSI assessment mentioned that financial and technological resources are inadequate for most CSOs operating in the country. As a consequence, the CSO sector is marked by a significant dependence on foreign donors and many organisations spend most of their time applying for additional funding or renewing current grants, rather than focusing more effectively on activities at the grassroots. Interestingly, the lack of technological and financial resources does seem to affect the human resources of CSOs, which by contrast are an asset of Ghanaian civil society, mainly through volunteers.
In short, Ghanaian civil society is characterised by a significant level of human resources (mainly volunteers) that work for CSOs operating at different levels, in both urban and rural settings. While community activism is significant, non-partisan political action is rather low and the lack of financial and technological resources make many CSOs dependent on foreign funding, which in turn favours organisations operating in the main cities.

Environment

The environment within which Ghanaian CSOs operate is somewhat disabling, mainly due to poverty and illiteracy, socio-economic problems (such as poor health care and lack of service delivery) as well as corruption in public institutions and an ineffective decentralised system of governance.

Despite the government’s claim to be a champion of civil liberties, there are several examples of official and unofficial acts that call into question its true commitment to these freedoms.

Ghanaians enjoy a wide range of political rights, with no noticeable restrictions on participation in political activities such as the right to vote and be voted for. Although the government generally upholds freedom of the press, the CSI registered some instances of state control and harassment. As far as the legal environment is concerned, the CSI stakeholders agree that the registration procedures for CSOs are undermined by inconsistencies that make the whole process cumbersome, time-consuming and drain the already limited financial resources of most organisations.

In general, macro indicators in Ghana point to a rather difficult socio-economic situation, in spite of the fact that Ghana has been one of the most stable countries on the continent. Opinion surveys (Afrobarometer 2002) indicate that basic necessities such as food and medical care are not secure for all Ghanaians (for instance, 40% of citizens reported having gone without food at least once), while poverty and illiteracy are still very widespread, with peaks in rural communities that create a further divide between the urban and rural population.

The limited resources available to state institutions and the private sector reduces the opportunities for CSOs to receive financial support from public sources or business. At the same time, the stakeholders involved in the CSI maintained that both the state and the private sector have a limited understanding and appreciation of the contributions that civil society can make towards social and economic development.

The relationship between CSOs and government has evolved from limited interaction and discord during the early days of the 1992 Constitution to increasing engagement (through the insistence of the World Bank) over the past decade. Although CSOs enjoy autonomy under the law, certain remarks voiced by state authorities still undermine this autonomy in practice. Indeed, a reasonably large number (44%) of RSS respondents were of the view that the state sometimes interfered with CSOs.
Finally, the relationship between CSOs and private business is generally marked by indifference. The majority (71%) of RSS respondents saw relations with the private sector as either indifferent or suspicious, a situation informed by low levels of perception about corporate responsibility.

Corruption is a major problem in Ghana. In a report on political party financing released in September 2004, the CDD found that 42 percent of those surveyed cited kickbacks as the strongest manifestation of political corruption, followed by political appointments and extortion.

**Values**

In Ghana, the score for the values promoted and practised by civil society is quite high and encouraging overall. Particularly significant is the practice of internal democracy within CSOs and the commitment to eradicate poverty. Although non-violence is widely promoted, some groups still resort to violent means to pursue their agendas and gender equity is yet to take root in the practices of many CSOs.

In general, decision-making processes in Ghanaian CSOs are characterised by a significant level of democratic participation and contribution from members. The stakeholders interviewed for the CSI assessment maintained that members had a substantial influence on the agenda of their CSOs, although they admitted that internal democratic practices were much less common for the selection of CSO leaders.

Civil society’s activities to eradicate poverty in Ghana enjoy broad-based support and are carried out throughout the country. Local NGOs have joined forces with international organisations (i.e. Oxfam) in areas such as fair trade and have conducted campaigns to support local peasants and their products vis-à-vis the competition of agricultural products imported from abroad. In some cases, CSOs’ activities have complemented government’s policies aimed at reducing poverty and many CSOs have been quite active in the most poverty-stricken areas of the country.

As far as non-violence is concerned, the stakeholders involved in the CSI admitted that violent actions (e.g. damage to property or people) are relatively frequent within civil society, especially among the youth leagues of the main political parties, even though most CSOs are very quick to condemn acts of violence.

Gender equity and transparency are scarcely practiced by Ghanaian CSOs. Many organisations do not have internal policies on gender equity, even though they implement numerous activities to promote gender equity in society. At the same time, financial information pertaining to CSO donations and investments are rarely made public and are only shared with senior management within the organisations themselves. Such a lack of transparency aggravates the perception that CSOs (and particularly NGOs) are ‘rich’, as several stakeholders pointed out. Due to excessive spending on hotels, meals, transport allowances and per diems, many local communities see CSOs as money-making entities
and ‘Santa Clauses’. This perception greatly affects the impact of CSO activities and the extent of community involvement.

Although the values dimension was assessed by the CSI as the most developed, CSI stakeholders admitted that the sector is seriously challenged by issues around transparency and accountability. According to some of them, while there is nothing wrong with the establishment of NGOs to assist the state to secure better living conditions for the people, the lack of a regulatory framework for CSOs’ conduct is not conducive for the healthy and qualitative growth of the sector.

Impact

The impact section presents the results of the CSI assessment regarding civil society’s influence on governance and society at large. The CSI findings show that civil society in Ghana has contributed towards women’s empowerment and provided basic services to local communities, while its impact on policy and state or private sector accountability has been very limited.

In the view of many community residents, CSOs have been generally more effective than the state in assisting marginalised groups such as women, children and the disabled. For example, civil society in Ghana has significantly contributed to the economic and social empowerment of women. Moreover, CSOs have been successful in providing rural communities with basic services such as education, water and health care, especially, in the fight against the guinea worm infection.

Ghanaian civil society has been particularly active and successful in providing a range of services to marginalised groups, but not as successful in lobbying activities and influencing policies in general. According to the CSI stakeholders, the overall policy impact of Ghanaian civil society is limited. In spite of the formally conducive political environment created by the 1992 constitution, active policy engagement by CSOs is limited. The advent of democratic government has created new channels for CSOs to influence policy through mechanisms established by law, such as advocacy in the media, parliamentary lobbying or stakeholder sensitisation. However, civil society is yet to take advantage of this new opportunity and mainly resorts to confrontational strategies.

Nevertheless, the CSI noted some signs of success in specific policy sectors. For instance, in 2004, a coalition of CSOs strongly opposed a water privatisation programme implemented by government (and endorsed by the World Bank) and succeeded in modifying the state’s approach to the matter. Similarly, in 2005, human rights NGOs formed a coalition to educate citizens about domestic violence and organised seminars and marches that eventually led to the development of a bill by the organisations themselves.

In general, civil society has not been particularly successful in holding private corporations accountable, although there are exceptions. The CSI registered some cases in which environmental organisations were capable of holding foreign corporations
accountable, especially in the mining sector, and advocated for the rights of local communities and villages affected by the extraction of natural resources.

**Recommendations**

The following recommendations were discussed in a CSI national workshop held on the 19\textsuperscript{th} and 20\textsuperscript{th} of April 2006 at the Coconut Grove Regency Hotel in Accra. The theme for the workshop was: “

\textit{Civil Society in a changing Socio-Economic and Political Context}”

and was attended by more than 140 participants from civil society, government, academia, business, the donor community and the media.

- **Capacity building and infrastructure**: Many of the structural deficiencies of civil society relate to limited capacity within the whole sector. In order to address this problem, CSOs should improve their financial management and reporting, strengthen the role of umbrella organisations and improve networking and information exchange among CSOs and with other sectors, such as the media.

- **Clarify registration and reporting procedures**: It is important that the registration process be decentralised and made simpler. In addition, the reporting procedures and channels must be made simple, clearly defined and devoid of ambiguities to encourage civil society to regularly report on its activities, projects and programmes.

- **Resource mobilisation**: Ghanaian CSOs must adopt innovative methods of fund-raising and resource mobilisation to supplement what they receive from their traditional donors.

- **Self-regulation and code of ethics for civil society**: It is important for civil society as a group to self-regulate and develop a code of conduct which clearly spells out methods of sanction for those who do not comply. This will enhance their image (and the perception that NGOs are ‘rich’) and prevent the public from viewing all CSOs as bad.

- **Advocacy and policy impact**: CSOs should improve their capacity to make use of existing institutional channels to influence policy-making and hold government accountable. Stronger advocacy commitment can help CSOs succeed in convincing government that civil society’s involvement is crucial to ensure equitable development.