

Greek Civil Society: The Long Road to Maturity (2005)

CIVICUS CIVIL SOCIETY INDEX SHORTENED ASSESSMENT TOOL
REPORT FOR THE CASE OF GREECE

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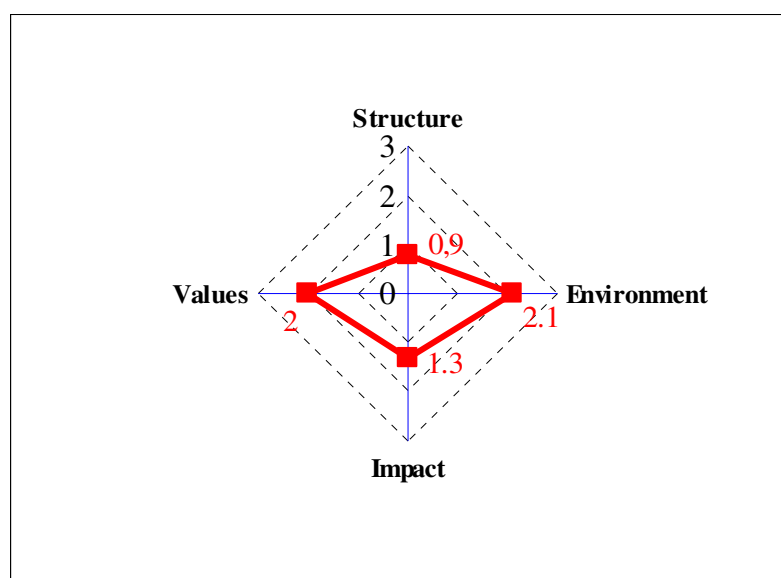
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CIVICUS Civil Society Index Short Assessment Tool (CSI-SAT)
An international action-research project coordinated by CIVICUS:
World Alliance for Citizen Participation

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the course of 2005, the CIVICUS Civil Society Index Shortened Assessment Tool (CSI-SAT) collected secondary data and input from a broad range of civil society representatives, citizens, experts and researchers on the state of civil society in Greece. Drawing on this existing data and using a comprehensive framework of 74 indicators, the project's Stakeholder Assessment Group (SAG) assessed the overall state of civil society in Greece, which is summarised in the Civil Society Diamond (see figure 1). The Civil Society Diamond is a visual tool developed by CIVICUS and Helmut Anheier, Director of the Center for Civil Society at the University of California, Los Angeles, which presents the overall findings of the CSI study in the form of a diamond-shaped graph.

FIGURE 1: The Civil Society Index Diamond for Greece



The Civil Society Diamond which emerged for Greece is not well balanced in the four dimensions, i.e. structure, environment, values and impact, and is of a small size overall. The four dimension scores are between 0.9 and 2.1, indicating a relatively underdeveloped civil society with a very weak structure and a limited impact on society at large, but existing in a relatively enabling environment with rather positive values. The CSI-SAT findings in Greece brought forth many new insights about Greek civil society, and at times even

challenged existing wisdom. The highlights of the project are briefly summarised below:

The CSI-SAT project findings underlined the relatively underdeveloped and poorly organised nature of civil society in Greece, as well as the existence of a dominant central government. In particular, the findings show that large institutionalised civil society organisations (CSOs) are few and are not influential in Greece. Most formal CSOs do not attract a significant number of members or a significant amount of funds. However, the importance of informal groups, which play a significant role in the functioning of Greek society, was also observed and highlighted by the SAG.

While indicators which focus on membership and other forms of formal participation show that Greek civil society is comparatively weak, various informal civic activities, which are difficult to measure, exist and even flourish at the local level. In various towns throughout Greece informal gatherings of citizens have grown to local social movements which intervene to help protect the environment, demand higher subsidies for specific agricultural products and to support non-partisan candidates in local government elections (Sotiropoulos 2004). Informal civic activities have also started to appear in various policy areas, such as social services and information and

communication technologies (ICT). Such initiatives, which include self-help groups, groups of volunteers offering services to people in need and networks of computer users are substitutes for state organisations which are not developed enough to deliver various kinds of services to the people (i.e. social services, training, technical support).

However, this does not mean that civil society is strong in Greece. The state, the political parties and the family remain the strongest institutions within Greek society. Some of the aforementioned informal civic initiatives are no more than fifteen years old, while formal CSOs, such as labour unions, cultural associations and the student movement, have been either heavily influenced by the central government or have been dependent on the major political parties for a long time. Not surprisingly, Greek civil society is still influenced by the legacy of strong political party competition and a polarised political culture, which followed the fall of dictatorship. This legacy is manifested in the widespread social mistrust and the dependence of collective action on the state. Such action is also partly impeded by the fact that much of Greek social life revolves around family relations and Greeks rarely participate in formal organisations.

The study of civil society's **structure** revealed widespread apathy and a lack of civic engagement among Greek citizens. The majority of Greeks do not participate in non-partisan political activities, nor engage in any voluntary work, with the exception of the Olympic Games in 2004. The depth of citizens' commitment is not at all encouraging, in terms of the amount of time and investment that the average individual is prepared to make. However, certain groups, such as sport and labour associations are rather strong. In general, the poor, socially marginalised and young people are less engaged in civil society activities than would be hoped for. Also, the geographical distribution of CSOs is quite unevenly spread throughout the regions of Greece and there is a markedly urban character to these organisations. The absence of effective umbrella bodies and the low organisational capacities and financial resources were important concerns raised by SAG members. Here, environmental CSOs, which have managed to attract the interest and financial support from the state are an exception. However, in general, CSOs have been unable to gather resources to monitor the state and corporate sector, and they are often dependent on state funds and occasional outbursts of volunteering. Cooperation and collaboration between CSOs, although mainly issue based (e.g. anti-poverty alliances, environmental, anti-trafficking and minority issues), rather than cross-cutting, is quite satisfactory. The number of international linkages is also increasing, due to the development of European CSO networks during the past few years.

The external **environment** for Greek civil society is positive and relatively enabling. No major political or legal factors inhibit the development of civil society. The Greek Constitution of 1975 fully guarantees basic rights and freedoms. The Greek Republic respects freedom of speech, and citizens have the right to congregate, associate and submit petitions. Trade unions and professional associations are also free.

Despite these positive conditions, there is also room for improvement. The relationship between civil society and the private sector requires significant improvement. The CSI-SAT study showed that the concept of corporate social responsibility is in an early stage of development in Greece. This is also true for the concept of corporate philanthropy. While some private companies have funded cultural and sporting activities organised by CSOs the relationship

between civil society and the private sector, in general, leaves a lot to be desired. A low score awarded for civil society's socio-cultural environment indicates that the societal basis for a strong civil society is not yet in place. Trust and other forms of social capital are not very widespread in Greek society, which, in cultural terms, has retained a focus on family units and a particular sort of individualism, as elaborated in the conclusion of this report.

Finally, relations between civil society and the government also leave much to be desired. Although no major political or legal factors inhibit the development of civil society, the domination of political and social interaction by political party interests, in the form of favouritism, plutocracy and intermeshed interests, have permeated Greek civil society and influenced the degree of support from the state. At the national level, with regard to labour relations, income and social security policies, institutionalised dialogue between CSO representatives and the state frequently takes place. At the regional level things are different; here, the dialogue is uneven and depends on the region in question.

The CSI-SAT assessed Greek civil society's **values** as rather positive. Greek CSOs practise and promote positive values, such as tolerance and non-violence. However, further efforts to improve accountability and transparency within CSOs and to promote gender equity are necessary. Although at the programmatic level, gender equity is professed by all institutions, SAG members stressed the need for more coordinated state action, with the involvement of the private sector and CSOs, to improve the status of women and to enable their advancement in all areas of political, economic and social life, as well as the strengthening of the existing institutional framework.

The same can be said about transparency. Greece has been categorised among the most corrupt countries in Western Europe. This worrisome tendency does not mean that Greek CSOs themselves are corrupt, but that citizens mistrust collective activities and institutions in general. Members of the SAG suggested updating the legal framework and developing a financial accountability system which would allow for de-facto transparency for CSOs (i.e. templates with clear instructions, and well known models of what and how to publish).

Looking at civil society's **impact**, Greek civil society does not appear to have a particularly strong role, neither in the area of service delivery and lobbying functions, nor as a watchdog of the state and private sector. Certain advocacy activities can be detected in the above areas, concerning environment, human rights or consumer protection, but their impact is limited. Similar to the values dimension, accountability does not feature strongly on civil society's agenda.

The lack of social norms conducive for civil society is mirrored by low trust of citizens in most types of CSOs, probably the result of a long tradition of authoritarian political regimes. However not all CSOs share an equally low public trust. Civil service and public sector unions, as well as trade unions, have shown important activity over the years. Strikes in the public sector have been frequent and public sector trade unions have been able to resist reforms of labour relations and the social security system.

Civil society also plays a limited role in empowering citizens and in service delivery, which is dominated by the central state, followed by the municipalities and local authorities and then the

church (Makrydemetris 1999, Koliopoulos and Veremis 2002). It is only recently that a few CSOs have begun to take part in what used to be exclusively in the hands of central government officials. Positive examples include The Greek Council for Refugees, the Management Authorities of the National Parks, the National Centre for the Book and the Organisation against Drugs.

For the first time in Greek civil society, a comprehensive and participatory assessment of civil society has been carried out through the CSI-SAT project. Its findings seek to contribute to charting the way forward for civil society's progress in the years to come. The CSI-SAT study has found that further development of civil society in Greece will require a focus on increasing citizen's support and involvement in civil society, improving the relations between the central government and CSOs, training of CSO activists, improving communication and networking among CSOs and strengthening the engagement of the corporate sector in charities, local development and support of the arts. In addition, CSOs need to monitor the state and the corporate sector more systematically, if they wish to become effective and win the trust of the wider public.

Thus, this project provides Greek civil society with a roadmap for the future. It is hoped that the knowledge-based nature of the CSI-SAT project has laid the groundwork for civil society and other stakeholders to act upon the goal of making Greek civil society stronger and more sustainable in the future.