Transcending the Creation of Possible Worlds

GUATEMALA CIVIL SOCIETY INDEX

AN ASSESSMENT OF GUATEMALAN CIVIL SOCIETY

CIVICUS CIVIL SOCIETY INDEX REPORT FOR GUATEMALA

A report written by:

The Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA) with assistance from the Civil Society and Social Movement Program at the Latin American College of Social Sciences (FLASCO)\(^1\)

---

\(^1\) Note to readers: ICA and FLASCO were unable to finalise the CSI processes for CSI implementation. This report was therefore finalised by CIVICUS CSI team without the recommendations from the national workshop which is a vital component in all other reports and CSI methodology outputs. As such, this report format is somewhat different from others.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Between October 2004 and June 2006, the Civil Society Index (CSI) team in Guatemala surveyed and revealed information from a wide range of representatives from civil society, including citizens, experts, academics, private companies, government offices, the press and international organisations, all with the objective of evaluating civil society in Guatemala.

The CSI National Index team (NIT) was in charge of the analysis of data derived from the 74 indicators that make up the CSI. This information was provided to the National Advisory Group (NAG), which was tasked with evaluating the state of civil society in Guatemala. The result is summarised graphically in the Civil Society Diamond (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1. Civil Society Diamond in Guatemala

The resulting diamond suggests an unbalanced civil society context, with an environment favourable in theory, but severely constrained in practice. Its young, diverse and weak organisational structure has repercussions on the capacity to substantially impact public policy. Its values, although widely promoted, are still developing.

The CSI helped us explore and identify major strengths and weaknesses of this civil society. A summary of some of the main findings is presented as follows.

Guatemalan civil society is characterised by its diversity and heterogeneity, with so many organisations comprising civil society in Guatemala that it is difficult to cover them all.

The internal structure of Guatemalan civil society shows some weaknesses, even though it scored the highest of all the dimensions. The weaknesses are observed in the exclusion of some segments of society from mainstream participation, as well as shortfalls in the level of organisation of CSO activities. Generally, there is an under-representation of the traditionally marginalised groups in leadership and membership. Resources at the disposal of CSOs are also limited. This is compounded by the competition for funding caused by regulatory constraints on acceptable CSO activities, which are sometimes at variance with civil society’s perceptions of priority needs. As a result, many organisations appear only temporarily, absorb funds and resources in these permissible categories, and then disappear, creating a considerable dispersion and decline in the funding pool. Human resources (ever more capable and committed) are a structural strength for mobilisation, as well as the scope of action in areas where the state and market have limited intervention or are inefficient.
Guatemalan civil society does not boast of a favourable external environment for the development of its actions. The current construct of social systems is based largely on the forced implementation of an exogenous model that, despite its democratic and protective validity at the formal level, does not systematically have the required consensus and acceptance at the informal level. The net result has been tension, created when this foreign system has had contact with endogenous values and cultural principles. The rule of law and basic freedoms are guaranteed by the Constitution, but practices of exclusion and discrimination limit their full effect. A state of fear exists in civil society. There is widespread distrust among members of society. Many distrust state institutions, especially those in charge of providing security, such as the police and armed forces. It is known that fear works as an inhibitor of the socialisation process and the exercise of basic rights and freedoms. There are limits to the full exercise of rights that are both structural and political in nature. Guatemala is a socially conservative, weak and fragmented state that is rather intolerant of diversity. Unequal property ownership and distribution is attributable to racial and ethnic discrimination. This gives a socio-economic and socio-cultural environment that, despite the existence of natural resources, does not offer the harmony necessary to make it a potential element for development. The legal environment is conducive to the existence and operations of CSOs. This is seen in favourable legislation that enables development initiatives, such as civic participation in the Urban and Rural Development Councils (CDUR). Civil society actions are mainly framed around the demands for state services. Even when there is no consensus with respect to the model of the political systems, the democratic model is predominant. The level of consciousness and organisation is growing, but citizen social responsibility is still incipient, as are actions for environmental sustainability and demand for company responsibility towards society.

Regarding values, civil society organisations promote democratic and non-violent principles. However, intolerance, gender inequality and eradication of poverty are challenges that must be noted. Although positive values are present, CSOs are not very active in the promotion of them. This could indicate that civil society, in general terms, sees itself or is perceived by other sectors as positive and strong regarding its values, but these values are not actively externalised.

CSOs commonly promote transparency in the public sector. Transparency, as an intrinsic value, is strong, and cases of corrupt behaviour are not usual. However, only a minority of CSOs publicly present or publish their audited accounts. Interestingly enough, cases of corruption, when discovered, are not usually denounced by the majority of CSOs.

Environmental conservation is not a priority issue for CSOs, although this has been a topical issue in the last few years. The engagement of CSOs has mainly been in relation to concessions for mineral and petroleum exploration and exploitation. Nonetheless, in the framework of CSO programs and priorities, of the 11 issues of the greatest priority, natural resources (environment) comes in at number 10 in importance.

CSO impact has the second highest score of the four dimensions. Most of the actions of civil society are within the structure of engagement with the government, social protests and consulting for foundations. Urban and Rural Development Councils are seen as principal opportunities for civic involvement. Findings of this study indicate that only a few actions to improve accountability in State agencies and private companies can be
cited, with companies exhibiting the least accountability. The perception of the effectiveness of these actions is very low and there are practically no examples of monitoring mechanisms for these purposes. With respect to the business sector’s involvement with CSOs, the attitude is of ambivalence or indifference. Another weak aspect is the low incidence and influence on public policies and the national budget. One of the greatest weaknesses and, probably the most critical of CSO shortfalls, is their inability to strategise. Short-term outlooks continue to take priority and receive efforts, leaving “necessary” agendas aside that would be more meaningful in the long term. Although this is the case, civil society organisations are seen as very strong in direct response to social needs.\textsuperscript{2} Research findings reveal that civil society organisations are perceived as “good” to “very good” in terms of impact levels in the rendering of services.

Guatemala is a fragmented country where “divide and rule” has endured for years as political instrument. The prevailing situation is far from the idealistic and formal edifice that is visible on the surface. Unification of society is of urgent priority. Consolidating the spheres of influence in the social environment is a constant challenge for civil society. Promotion of actions and consolidation of the gains already achieved in the establishment of permanent mechanisms for monitoring, evaluation, enforcement and re-evaluation of public policies in general are steps in the right direction. It is hoped that this study, which has been based on wide participation, serves as a tool for civil society as a whole and stakeholders to meet the goal of attaining a strong, socially relevant and sustainable civil society over time.

\textsuperscript{2} Direct response or rendering of social services (e.g. health, education, welfare provisions)