



CIVICUS Civil Society Index

**ITALIAN CIVIL SOCIETY
FACING NEW CHALLENGES**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

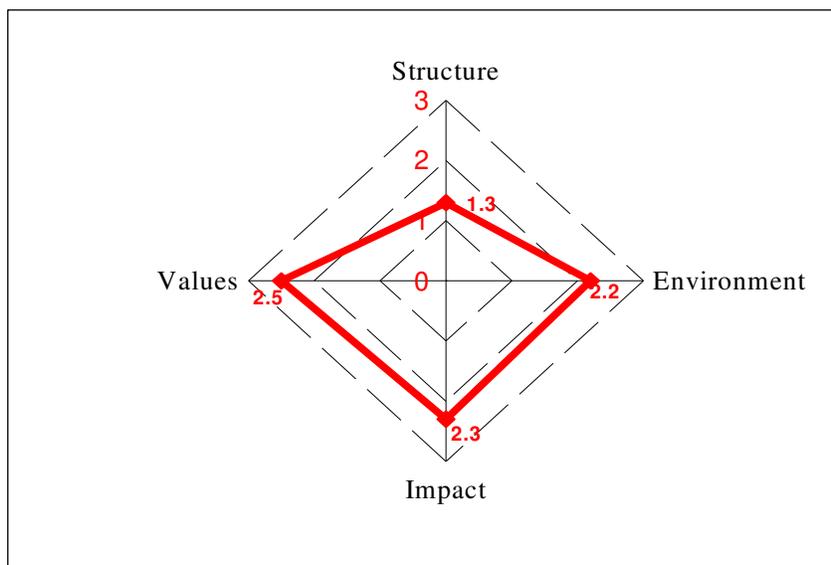
This section presents the main findings, observations and implications of the CIVICUS Civil Society Index (CSI) project in Italy, which was carried out by Cittadinanzattiva with the scientific support of Active Citizenship Foundation (FONDACA).

The project began in early 2003 and ended in June 2006. The first phase, from 2003 to October 2005, involved the collection of relevant materials about Italian civil society; consultations, involving scholars and key persons, to establish the research implementation and the National Advisor Group (NAG), composed of different representatives of civil society organisations (CSOs), scholars, media and public sector, to define a map of civil society in Italy; the gathering of data through secondary sources; regional focus groups and the monitoring of national mass-media.

It must be mentioned that, during this phase, the research team faced a relevant problem of data available on CSOs. Most of the sources refer either to nonprofit organisations (NPOs, in total 221,412, an entity that is definitely different from the CSI definition of civil society, though includes the main part of CSOs – an estimated number of 86,000), or to specific kinds of CSOs, such as voluntary organisations or social cooperatives. Such data have been used, but this situation has been taken into account.

During the second phase, from October 2005 to May 2006, a first report, including all of the information collected, was drafted. It was debated before in the NAG at the scoring meeting, where the 74 indicators were evaluated, and later at a larger workshop. Then, according to participants' comments and suggestions, the report was modified.

FIGURE 1: Civil Society Diamond for Italy



The state of Italian civil society is visually depicted in Italy's Civil Society Diamond (see figure 1). The diamond indicates that the structure of Italian civil society is the weakest dimension, while the sector's operating environment, impact and values are well developed and quite well-balanced. The **structure** of Italian civil society is slightly weak. This is primarily due to weak participation and scant inter-relations among

civil society actors. The **environment** is relatively enabling and supported by a favourable political and socioeconomic context. Civil society practices and promotes positive **values** to a significant extent, but needs to improve internal democratic practices and transparency. The

impact of civil society is significant, especially in regard to meeting societal needs and empowering citizens. However the sector's ability to hold the state accountable and affect policy making still needs to be fully developed. The following section summarises the main findings of the CSI assessment in Italy.

Structure

The analysis of civil society's structure reveals that it is the least developed among the four CSI dimensions.

As for strengths, CSOs represent the diversity of civil society, both in terms of social groups (i.e. disadvantaged people and immigrants) and geographical distribution (CSOs are present even in the most isolate places and regions of the country). Nevertheless, some social groups remain under-represented and are absent from leadership roles, particularly women, and CSOs are still more diffused in the North (51.1% of them, with 44 institutions per 10,000 inhabitants) than in the South, the least developed area of Italy (27.7%). A relevant part of the population is engaged in charitable giving, though the percentage of personal income donated is less than 1%. On average, people volunteer for 28 hours per month, which is a significant amount of time, and effective and expanding support structures exist. In terms of resources, CSOs have adequate human and technical resources to achieve their objectives, although financial resources appear to be insufficient.

As for weaknesses, only a minority of people (though relevant in quantitative terms) carry out non-partisan political actions, belong to CSOs, volunteer on a regular basis or have participated in a collective action during the last year. Nevertheless, there are significant examples of citizens' involvement, such as the high number of participants at the Rome march against the Iraq war in 2003 (around 2.5 million people) and the growing phenomenon of citizens volunteering for civil defence. The national defence system currently includes about 2,500 CSOs operating at community level and gathering more than 1,300,000 permanent volunteers. In general, CSOs in Italy tend to under-represent some social groups in their membership and, even more so, in their leadership. The most significant example is women, who represent 50.8% of those active in voluntary organisations, but only hold leading positions in three organisations out of 10. Of the associations that belong to the umbrella organisation, the *Forum del Terzo Settore*, only 33 of the 157 leading roles (21%) are filled by women.

The majority of CSOs belong to an umbrella organisation or federation, but these structures are not usually very effective. At the same time, there exist a very limited number of self-regulation norms shared by CSOs. Only a few CSOs have international linkages, though CSOs' networking with CSOs from other European Union countries is rapidly growing. Communication and cooperation between civil society actors is limited and there are few examples of cross-sectoral coalitions.

In spite of these structural deficiencies, it must be noted that Italian civil society is under going a dramatic development that is epitomised by the growth rate of voluntary organisations during

1996-2000. During this period the national average was 119%, with a surprising peak in the south where voluntary organisations grew in number at a pace of +200%.

Environment

Italian CSOs live in a relatively safe and favourable environment, in legal, political and socio-economic terms.

Political rights are fully implemented, civil liberties are respected and access to information is guaranteed, though a recent law has partially restricted this right. Around 15% of the national budget is devolved to decentralised institutions, and several public services (such as health care, transport and school services) are directly managed by regional and local administrations. The socio-economic situation is not a barrier to the development of civil society, though Italy is witnessing a dramatic decrease in expenditure for social development, as is also the case in other European Union member states. The process of registration of CSOs is sufficiently fair and quick and CSOs' autonomy and freedom to criticise the government are guaranteed. However, especially at local level it can create problems for CSOs. A supportive fiscal legislation for CSOs and tax benefits for donors are guaranteed (individuals and companies can directly deduct up to 10% of their taxable income and no more than 70,000 € donated to CSOs). A relevant amount of public resources are invested in CSOs: the public sector is still the main funder of CSOs. Of the funds for nonprofit organisations operating in health care, 70.5% are public, while in the sectors of economic development, social cohesion, social welfare, environment protection, education and research, over 40% of the funds are public funds. Forty-two percent of voluntary organisations are dependent on public funds and 59% of social cooperatives' funds come from the public sector. Private enterprises show a growing attention both to dialogue with and financial support to CSOs. About 70% of companies in Italy make donations to CSOs and many companies are concerned with the social and environmental consequences of their activities.

As far as the environment dimension is concerned, one aspect that raises concern is the fragmentation of the multi-party system, characterised by two coalitions that are not particularly stable or clearly differentiated, and which are currently fragmented into 42 different parties represented in parliament. Linked to the weakness of the political leadership is the substantial level of mistrust and perceived corruption in the public sector. In 2005, Transparency International ranked Italy as 40th on its Corruption Perception Index. The low level of public spiritedness is reflected in the frequent violations of the law by citizens, and even by the state bureaucracy, and the low number of citizens that believe the State is able to enforce the rule of law. This situation is definitely not enabling for CSOs, since it gives place to lack of responsibility and accountability of the public sector. Frequent violations of the freedom of the press are noteworthy, mainly due to the oligopoly in the media system, with a dominant role played by the former Prime Minister, Mr. Silvio Berlusconi.

Both the public and private sectors' attitudes towards CSOs have improved. For example, the main Italian bank, Banca Intesa, signed an agreement in 2003 to create specific bank services for social enterprises, while some CSOs have created their own banking networks, such as Banca Etica. Finally, those citizens that are aware of the existence of fiscal benefits for philanthropy are likely to donate much more than those who are not aware of these incentives (on average 212 € per year as opposed to 92 €).

All in all, what made Italian civil society's operative environment rather conducive is the activity of CSOs themselves. For example, during the 2001 reform of the Italian Constitution, CSOs proposed the introduction of the principle of the constitutional value of citizens' engagement in general interest activities, and an article based on their proposal was approved by Parliament, the principle of "horizontal subsidiarity", article 118.). This event is a milestone in the history of civil society in Italy.

Values

Values prove to be the most developed dimension in the Italian civil society.

As for the strengths, indicators regarding CSOs' democratic, tolerant and non-violent attitudes and actions present the highest scores, as do those regarding the protection of the environment and the struggle against poverty. As for the practice of these values, civil society emerges as a driving force in the promotion of democracy on a daily basis. Intolerant groups are an isolated minority and while violent groups do exist they are largely stigmatised. CSOs are committed to combating intolerance and discrimination, especially with regard to immigrants, people living with HIV-AIDS, the mentally ill, gays and lesbians and the disabled. Civil society also has a leadership role in the fight against poverty, for example through organisations like Caritas, which manages 60 observatories on poverties, 2,000 centres, social canteens and shelters that respectively host about 13,000 and 2,000 people each year and are supported by about 200,000 volunteers, as well as in the protection of the environment, where CSOs enjoy large support and visibility. Democratic practices and procedures inside CSOs are guaranteed, though they do not seem to be characterizing the day-to-day management of CSOs. On the other hand, while traditional practices associated with membership are decreasing, other forms of participation are increasing. For example, only 4.5% of the 500,000 members of Coop Nord Est participated in 2005 assemblies on the discussion of the annual balance, but 16.5% of them donated 1.7 million € to support cooperative international aid programs. Relevant actions of CSOs to promote transparency, in both the public sector and in private enterprises, are regularly carried out by a number of CSOs, particularly consumers' organisations. .

In terms of weaknesses, the two most concerning issues regard CSOs' financial transparency and gender equity. Although the approval of regular financial reports is mandatory by law, few CSOs publish them (along with the list of their financial partners) onto their websites. It also seems that Italian civil society has not wholeheartedly embraced the value of gender equity, since gender equitable practices within CSOs are much less developed than any other value practiced and promoted by civil society. Although some women's networks are particularly active in Italian society, the fact that scant information is available on the current actions to promote gender equity by CSOs in general is a further indication that gender issues are not given the prominence they deserve in civil society at large, thus reflecting a general attitude of the Italian public sphere.

Impact

Italian CSOs' impact on people and situations affecting their needs and rights appears to be quite high.

The most relevant impact can be detected when CSOs are active in society directly, with the aim of protecting rights, delivering services, meeting people's needs, informing and empowering citizens and holding the state (less) and the private sector (more) accountable and transparent. CSOs have also been successful in informing and educating citizens, in supporting their ability to self-organise, for example around issues of fair trade, in empowering marginalised groups, in contributing to the building of social capital and in supporting livelihoods of the poor. This is reflected in the level of people's trust in CSOs. Associations and organisations are the most trusted entities in Italy, with higher levels of trust than the commonly most trusted actors, such as the President of Republic and the Carabinieri, the special police forces.

Civil society's impact is less relevant when it comes to holding the state accountable on issues such as the promotion of human rights or social policy, particularly regarding welfare services. Of special concern is CSOs' limited influence on national budget, with the exception of trade unions and business organisations, which are officially recognised as counterparts by government, and some consumers' organisations that have demonstrated a certain capacity to influence specific budget policies.

Finally, as mentioned in the section on civil society's values, the overall attention to gender equality, and hence impact on gender issues, is particularly limited in the case of Italian CSOs, whereas there remain specific social needs, such as those of the Roma population and underemployed workers, in need of further commitment by CSOs.

All in all, it must be stressed that Italian CSOs, especially in the last three decades, have deeply influenced public life and successfully addressed a number of problems of general interest, most of which have not been sufficiently or addressed at all by the state.

Recommendations and conclusions

According to the main weaknesses detected by the CSI analysis, the following recommendations were discussed during the workshop held in Rome on 24 May 2006:

- New forms of civic participation and of membership in CSOs are necessary, in order not to lose the link with the youth.
- It is necessary to encourage a shift in attitudes and practices within CSOs, to give women and marginalised groups (especially immigrants) equal opportunities to lead CSOs.
- CSOs need to develop a code of conduct and criteria and procedures to monitor the work of CSOs in policy making, to strengthen CSOs transparency and accountability towards their constituencies and the general public.
- Political leadership should develop a strategic and positive attitude towards CSOs, and consider them as an additional resource, rather than as a threat.
- Public administration, at all levels, from the EU to the local government, should explore avenues to support CSOs and encourage forms of cooperation, by respecting the

independence of CSOs and by expecting CSOs to fulfil their responsibilities towards the public at large (e.g. transparency and accountability).

- The media's negative attitude towards CSOs should be overcome, so as to give CSOs a space that is duly proportional to their significant role in society.
- It is necessary to strengthen civil society's structure by: increasing information, communication and cooperation among organisations; by changing their cultural patterns that favour isolation; by improving umbrella organisations, whose operational models must be deeply reviewed, and by increasing the use of information technologies.

Civil society in Italy went through different phases and, in this current form, is now undergoing a process of consolidation. The results of the CSI in Italy show that civil society has become mature, as shown mainly in its ability to mobilize resources aimed at facing the most relevant problems affecting the country. This ability is of crucial importance, since social and economic inequalities, as well as environmental concerns, are rapidly growing in Italy. To fully develop this new role, CSOs must improve their structure to face these new challenges. However, they must also be better supported by their interlocutors, such as the political powers and the media system, in order to overcome the paradoxical situation highlighted by the NAG, during its social forces mapping exercise. The situation that they highlighted is the inverse proportion between the high level of public trust of some CSOs and their low weight in Italian public realm.