

# CIVIL SOCIETY INDEX: LEBANON

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The devastating events of 2005 and 2006 marked a historical period within Lebanon, leading to changes which could be described as acute.<sup>1</sup> It embodied major implications that were felt in both public and personal lives.

The tense political situation and the unstable state of security obstructed the progress made on the CIVICUS Civil Society Index (CSI) project, not to mention making certain findings and conclusions that were being constructed throughout 2004 outdated. Led by the International Management and Training Institute (IMTI) the project team worked energetically to gather information and collect outputs from civil society stakeholders through secondary research, case studies, a community survey, a regional stakeholder survey and regional stakeholder consultations.

Notwithstanding these challenges, the general context in which Lebanese civil society functions continues to be rather fertile. Without a doubt, the arena of civil society in Lebanon is wide, large and dynamic, and has its roots in history going back as far as the sixteenth century, the era of the Princedom of Mount Lebanon. The development of Lebanese civil society can be divided into five phases, each marked with noteworthy characteristics: the Ottoman Empire and French Mandate, the early years of independence, the pre-war years, the civil war and the aftermath of the war. The main features that have shaped Lebanese civil society are the country's political system, which is based on consociational democracy. The fluctuating economy and the alarming debt and ramifications of the civil war are the embodiment of confessionalism and corruption<sup>2</sup>.

The pool of stakeholders that participated in the CSI were carefully selected to include citizens, experts, researchers and representatives from the civil society itself in order to cover an array of issues and subjects that fall within the CIVICUS CSI framework. In the initial stages of the project, the project's National Advisory Group (NAG) deliberated over CIVICUS' concept of civil society, recognizing it as an intermediary between the individual and the state. With around 5,000 diverse civil society organisations (CSOs) officially registered in the country, it was agreed, for the purposes of this report, to limit the span of civil society. Political parties, labour unions and cooperatives were excluded for methodological and contextual reasons.

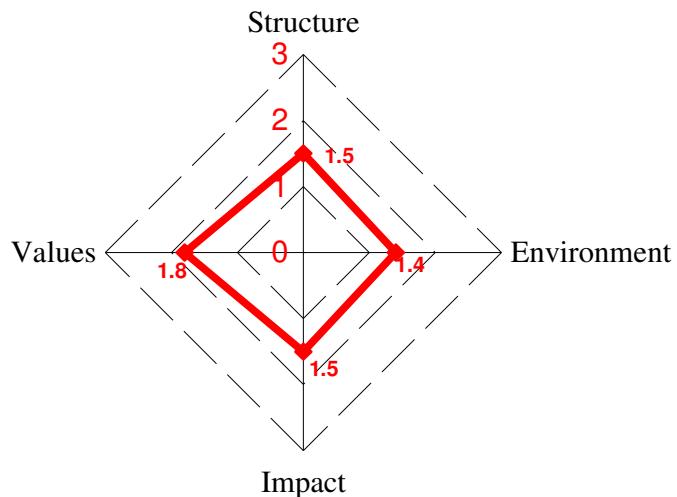
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<sup>1</sup> Former Prime Minister Hariri was assassinated on February 14, 2005. Then, Lebanon witnessed a series of assassinations and explosions all year long. The Year 2005 also witnessed the withdrawal of the Syrian Army from Lebanon after 30 years of presence. In addition, the two biggest demonstrations in the history of the country were organized on 8 and 14 March. In 2006, Lebanon was repeatedly bombed by Israeli forces during the Israeli military campaign against Hezbollah.

<sup>2</sup> The Lebanese society is composed of 17 recognized religious groups, each with a certain autonomy regarding the personal status issues. The political system is designed to reflect this mosaic in the society, in such a way that no single religious group could dominate the others but rather divide political power and public posts proportionally among these confessional groups. Major decisions in the government are taken in consociation rather than by voting in order not to exclude any faction.

The NAG sketched a map of civil society with fuzzy and loose boundaries, including other participants such as the media, municipalities and family. The NAG also ascertained CSOs' three spheres of power: closeness to the political decision making authorities, deep roots in the confessional political and social system and level of interaction with funding agencies. Adding civil society's credibility, values and human resources enables a better position to grasp the NAG's assessment of the overall state of civil society in the country, which is visually summarised in Lebanon's Civil Society Diamond.

**FIGURE I: Civil Society Diamond for Lebanon**



An in-depth analysis of Lebanon's Civil Society Diamond, as displayed in Figure 1, draws attention to some of the inferences, and sheds some critical doubt on common perceptions and observations about civil society in Lebanon. The values promoted by civil society emerged as the strongest asset. This validates conclusions previously drawn by the NAG and empowers civil society to have a relatively noticeable impact in light of other considerations, whereas civil society's structure, which was perceived differently, can barely be described as conducive to the environment in which its manoeuvres turned out to be the weakest link.

The analysis of civil society's structure raises serious concerns about the depth and meaning of citizen participation in civil society, which is even more startling than the individual activism of citizens. The results of the community survey showed that the Lebanese are not motivated to join CSOs. Citizens' civic engagement (either through non-partisan political actions or collective community actions) is another structural weakness. Nonetheless, the *diversity* of participants in civil society was not highlighted as a significant problem. The under-representation of certain social groups, such as the

impoverished, was offset by acceptable levels of representation of women, whether in CSOs' membership (70.7%) or leadership. Of the respondents to the regional stakeholder consultations, 91% were satisfied with the representation of women. However civil society's organisational infrastructure fell below average with an unclear stand on membership in umbrella bodies, and even lower in their effectiveness. Less than 70% of respondents questioned the effectiveness and enforceability of self-regulatory mechanisms. Only 12.2% of respondents were satisfied with communication among civil society actors. However this was countered by frequent forms of cooperation, which should transcend sectors and local boundaries to become more productive. Adequate human, financial and technological resources, which are utilized by CSOs to achieve their goals, continue to be insufficient, albeit unofficial figures can go as high as a billion dollar a year and human professionalism and capabilities were behind the survival of the sector.

The external environment is multifaceted. The socioeconomic conditions in Lebanon represent a barrier to the effective functioning of civil society, with increasing national debt, class stratification and high levels of unemployment. However the country is not at risk of any severe ethnic or religious conflict or social crisis and retains a well-endowed education system and a promising IT industry. The sociocultural norms and attitudes are not conducive to creating a vibrant civil society. Of Lebanese citizens, 86% do not trust fellow citizens and nearly half have serious reservations about certain groups, such as foreign workers and people living with HIV/AIDS. The level of perceived corruption (97 out of 146 countries on Corruption Perception Index) is shocking. The depleted confidence in and frequent violations of the law by citizens and the state, and the limited capacity of the state bureaucracy are also surprising. Whereas political competition and a shadow democracy strive to endure, the 'partly free' press and the 'limited but expanding' access to public information balance the gloomy political situation and frequent violations of civil liberties. The nature and quality of the relationship between civil society and the private sector could be described as negative and indifferent. Nevertheless, many private businesses are trying to adopt corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives and private financial support amounts to about 10% of CSOs' annual revenues. The civil society-state relationship is characterized by frequent unwarranted interferences in CSOs' activities and limited dialogue. As such, CSOs try to manoeuvre in a legal environment where CSO registration, and tax and benefit systems, are not very supportive. In addition, there remain vague and outdated or contradictory laws and manipulative and time-consuming procedures. Surprising for such a context, CSOs are active and engaged in advocacy and in criticizing the government without encountering constraints.

Civil society's values surfaced as its fervent benchmark. Civil society promotes non-violence among its members and in its activities. Acts of violence by civil society actors are extremely rare and usually strongly denounced by the rest of civil society. The fight against poverty eradication and the promotion of environmental sustainability were assessed as rather positive. A number of activities in these two areas can be detected, although broad-based support is still to be generated. Around 60% of the general public perceives CSOs work in environmental protection to be average or above average. While

the extent to which civil society practices and promotes gender equity and tolerance was assessed as moderate, the lack of democratic practices, financial transparency and the spread of corruption within CSOs clearly constitute problematic areas. The results of the regional stakeholder consultations show that more than two-thirds of stakeholders see a certain degree of corruption within the sector.

In examining civil society's impact, it becomes apparent that CSOs are quite effective in meeting societal needs and empowering citizens. The ratio of citizens who believe that CSOs are more helpful in providing services than government agencies is quite strong (10:1). More than half of CSO representatives were positive about civil society's success in informing and educating citizens on public issues. However, while 38% of the population trust religious institutions, only 17% trust civil society actors, which is likely to reflect the strong impact of confessionalism on society. However the indiscernible impact of civil society on the state and private corporations' accountability did not come out of the blue. For various political and financial reasons, more than half of civil society stakeholders consider these initiatives to be hesitant, unsuccessful and usually renounced. Civil society is alienated from the national budgeting process, and does not have any influence or detected impact. Some civil society initiatives have been successful in influencing public policy in the areas of human rights and social policy, yet it is assumed that the political moment, foreign pressures and international standards, rather than civil society's internal capacity, are the main stimuli for any successes.

The media review examined how the media portrays Lebanese civil society. Due to several shortcomings that should be addressed in future reports, it is argued that this image remains imprecise. Lebanese media, whether printed or audiovisual, focuses more on the political and economical issues and religious and political groups. The matrix of the CSI's four dimensions and their indicators covered by the Lebanese media mainly includes: CSOs' structural self-regulation and cooperation; an external environment of public spiritedness and dialogue with state institutions; civil society promotes values, such as protecting the environment and addressing the spread corruption; and finally the applauded impact in empowering citizens and meeting societal needs of marginalized groups.

Civil society in Lebanon faces serious challenges since its outputs do not equal its inputs. The weaknesses of civil society prevail over its strengths. Its structural confinements and external surroundings drain its human capacities and values and civil society needs to establish a plan to reinforce its public image. New blood should be injected, specialization in the sector should be pursued and good governance should be fostered internally. As individual CSOs revise their visions, work should be done to strengthen trust between stakeholders and networking and coordination should be highlighted. Civil society stakeholders should come together to take a firm stand against interference by the government and for improved interactions with the government and the private sector.

Civil society is urged to screen itself and drop any extra weight, in order to expedite its performance and seize the opportunity for a transitional period that could be marked with favourable changes.