CIVIL SOCIETY IN NEPAL: SEARCHING FOR A VIABLE ROLE

CIVICUS CIVIL SOCIETY INDEX

REPORT FOR NEPAL

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This part of the report presents the findings, observations and implications of the CIVICUS Civil Society Index (CSI) project in Nepal. The report aims to provide evidence-based information on civil society in Nepal in order to build a healthy and vibrant civil society in the country. The report helps in assessing Nepalese civil society and its strengths and weaknesses, which can then be compared to other civil societies globally.

This work is part of an international project coordinated by CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation and aimed at assessing civil societies in more than 50 countries, . In Nepal, this work was carried out by Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA), a national organisation dedicated to the promotion and development of CSOs in Nepal.

CIVICUS has defined civil society as the arena, outside of the family, the state and the market where people associate to advance common interests. In the Nepalese context, CSOs include a large number of organisations such as voluntary organisations, consumer groups, advocacy groups, human rights organisations, peace movements, and religious organisations.

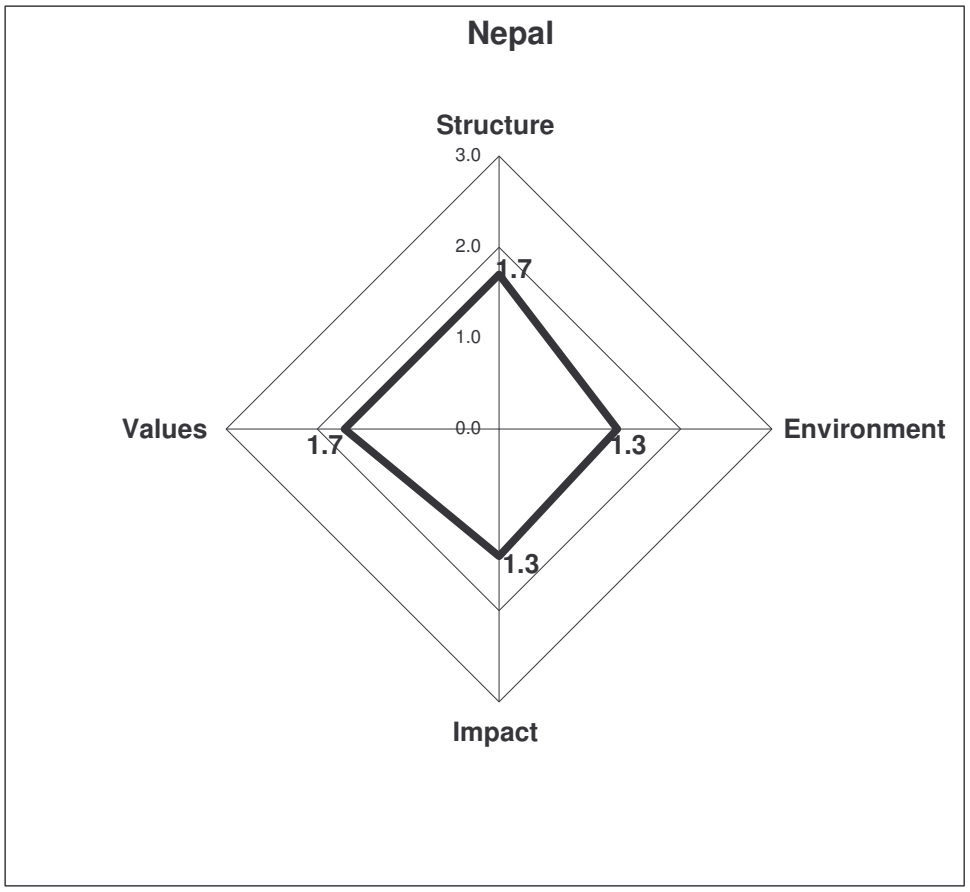
In Nepal, the project formally started on 23 January 2006 when the first National Advisory Group (NAG) meeting took place. It was formally completed on May 12, 2006 when the National Workshop was convened. During this period a series of activities such as regional stakeholder surveys and workshops, population survey, and media review were conducted.

The CSI uses 74 indicators under four dimensions: structure, environment, values and impacts. The indicators are based on a mix of qualitative and quantitative data and are scored between 0 and 3. Based on the information collected and analysed by the research team, the NAG members assessed the overall state of civil society in the country and scored for each of the dimensions. By plotting the scores, a Civil Society Diamond for Nepal was developed, and is presented below.

THE FINDINGS:

The diagram of the Civil Society Diamond for Nepal shows that it is rather well-balanced and of medium size. The figure shows that the structure and values are in slightly better condition than the environment and impact. The scores vary from 1.3 to 1.7 indicating that the status of civil society in Nepal is almost at the middle and needs much improvement in all dimensions almost equally.

FIGURE 1: Civil Society Diamond for Nepal



A brief summary of each dimension

Structure: Nepalese CSOs have demonstrated their strength in participating in non-partisan political activities by also participating in the recent movement to reinstate democracy. Participation of Nepalese people in global CSOs is nominal; CSOs in Nepal have very limited communication facilities and also have inadequate numbers of capable human resources. However, CSOs in Nepal are quite diverse and reflect the social, economic and political plurality of the country. CSOs are more urban-based and representation of different ethnic groups is unequal. Various other indicators such as 'existence of umbrella bodies', 'support infrastructure', 'international linkages', 'cooperation between CSOs' also show rather low scores. Financial and structural facilities for CSOs are nominal, and many CSOs do not even have their own office. This indicates that many CSOs in Nepal are working in a very difficult setting with nominal resources and physical facilities. The score of structure i.e., 1.7 indicates that there is a need for massive intervention to improve this aspect of the CSI Diamond. Despite the lower scoring in most of the indicators, Nepalese CSOs see promising and conducive socio-political conditions in future. During the NAG meeting, the members reiterated that

the Structure of Nepalese civil society will be improved in the future as a result of the revival of democracy in the country in April, 2006.

Environment: The Environment dimension of the CSI diamond in Nepal is in a state of change. The analysis of the indicators produces a rather poor score for the environment dimension. One of the major disabling factors was the country's volatile political environment. The political rights of citizens were violated, CSOs were threatened and the state was almost on the verge of collapse. In the last few years, the political system of the country was changed several times which, in turn, directly affected the functioning of CSOs. Although in all political systems in the past, the regime emphasized full rights to people, in practice the respect and promotion of these rights varied drastically. In April 2006, after three weeks of mobilisations and riots, the autocratic regime of King Gyanendra was ousted and a parliament reinstated.

In the last few years, because of the conflict, the country was in a chaotic situation. CSOs were threatened in rural areas. All the subdimensions such as political context, basic freedoms, socio-economic and socio-cultural context, legal environment, state-CS relations and private sector-CS relations showed a problematic stage. The overall situation in the last years was so negative that the regime lost control over about half of the country, corruption became rampant, press freedom was curtailed and the public lost hope. Despite such a harsh political environment, people did not lose trust, which enabled many CSOs to operate even in such a difficult period of history. Some CSOs tried their best to reach the most needy people and to create space for activism and to encourage respect for human rights, even between warring factions. The score for environment was low (1.3), indicating that CSOs went through a very difficult period.

Values: Nepalese civil society promotes and practices positive values only to a certain extent. The score for values dimension is 1.7. The study revealed that civil society is dedicated to practice of democratic norms not only within the organisations but also in society at large, with a view to supporting the democratization of the Nepalese society. It is also active in promoting transparency, non-violence, gender equity and environmental sustainability.

Nepalese civil society is weak in tackling corruption and financial transparency issues, it remains unable to instil a gender equity-friendly value system within organisations, and the role of CSOs in poverty eradication is still not very impressive. Ordinary citizens do not believe that CSOs were established mainly for fighting poverty, since CSOs have not yet been able to include this as one of their major values.

CSOs have played a central role in the restoration of democracy and peace. Although non-partisan political actions are dominated by men and only few CSOs are led by women, women’s participation in community forestry and environmental improvement activities is increasing.

Impact: Nepalese CSOs have not been very successful in influencing public policies and exerting pressure on government and other decision-makers. This is reflected in the rather

low score for the impact dimension (1.4). CSOs have partially contributed to empowering marginalized communities and getting basic services closer to the people. More specifically, CSOs have been working hard to support minorities, women and children. Moreover, CSOs role in supporting livelihoods has been rather significant and has made many people more interested in the role played by CSOs in social and economic development. In all the consultations, participants felt that without the participation of CSOs, the country will not achieve the Millennium Development Goals set by the UNDP and supported also by the government of Nepal.

The impact of CSOs in the promotion of human rights, drafting of social policies, and lobbying the state is not very strong. CSOs in Nepal are not very active in holding the state or private sector accountable. Nevertheless, the public trust in CSOs is quite high and this helps them to implement their activities in local communities in spite of numerous limitations.

Some key recommendations:

- Broaden awareness of citizens: CSOs should educate citizens about the changing nature of the national and local political environment, to continue promoting the values of democracy, peace, social justice and progress.
- Enhance internal capacity: CSOs should focus on developing internal capacity to carry out activities with greater impact. CSOs should promote professionalism and invest in training.
- Improve transparency: CSOs should improve internal transparency so that information is accessible to all citizens, not just direct stakeholders. More transparency will benefit their legitimacy, public ownership and participation.
- Government support: CSOs should lobby to get government support. At the same time government should establish a mechanism to work with CSOs. With the democratization of the state, political parties and public institutions, a more conducive environment will be created for civil society-state-market synergy.
- More cooperation within civil society: CSOs should collaborate and cooperate so as to maximize the impact of their work. They should identify areas where they have competitive advantages and expertise.
- Capacity-building and local ownership: International donors should focus on building the capacity of local and national CSOs in Nepal. INGOs should work through local partners rather than run their activities independently. This would increase knowledge and expertise for local CSOs to address the causes of poverty, inequality, and conflict. Local people should be given preference during recruitment of the staff, setting of goals and priorities, implementation, evaluation and feedback for further reforms.

Conclusion:

The CSI study emphasizes the important role of CSOs in the overall development of the country. As this study is the first comprehensive analysis of civil society in Nepal, it will most probably start a phase of more in-depth analysis of the role that CSOs play in Nepalese society.

To this end, the findings of this study will be publicised widely. We believe that not only CSOs, but also government, the private sector and the international community may benefit from the recommendations that this study has identified. We hope that this report will also be useful as a reference text for civil society students. The findings of this report will also have a global relevance, as they are part of the CSI project, and can be used to analyse the status of Nepalese in light of an international perspective.

ICA Nepal is also committed to putting the recommendations into practice and facilitating the participation of other organisations in this endeavour.