

CIVICUS Civil Society Index

A Summary of the Northern Ireland CSI Project Evaluation

Background: Purpose and Objective

This evaluation provides CIVICUS and the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA), the CSI country partner in Northern Ireland with an assessment of the implementation of the Civil Society Index project. It is hoped that the evaluation will be used to generate lessons that will inform current and future phases of the project as well as the final global evaluation undertaken by CIVICUS. It is also expected that NICVA will gain out of this evaluation through the process of self reflection as well as gauging any important lessons learned. The evaluation might also help to develop strategies for future civil society strengthening initiatives.

The evaluation attempted to assess the outputs and outcomes of the project as developed by NICVA and CIVICUS. Besides, it also assessed the project against other key criteria, such as relevance, validity, participation, capacity building, CIVICUS assistance, and sustainability, effective use of project resources, unintended changes and early impacts.

The evaluation included a mix of self-assessment surveys by the project partners as well as their evaluation of the outputs and outcomes of the project. The report was shared with the country partner and a final phone call was organised to discuss the evaluation and next steps. This document presents a brief summary of the key findings.

Key Findings

Project Outputs

A body of knowledge on the state of civil society and civil society strengthening practices at national level.

This output, the first in priority for the NICVA was assessed as mostly achieved because the country report mostly provides comprehensive and accurate information on the state of civil society in Northern Ireland. NICVA held that besides that fact that this is the first time the state of civil society in Northern Ireland, has been assessed, the CSI allowed NICVA to develop a much more comprehensive picture of civil society than was previously possible.

NICVA also pointed out that the information on the CS in Northern Ireland generated by CSI is accurate to a certain extent because of the issues of the lack of representation from trade unions and other sections of civil society leaves the report focused only on the voluntary and community sector.

Shared understanding of the state of civil society among a broad range of stakeholders

Based on the fact that there were difficulties in engaging with the other key actors in civil society i.e. those not part of the voluntary and community sector, this output was evaluated as somewhat achieved.

A set of strategies for strengthening civil society

NICVA evaluated this output as somewhat achieved because the CSI report produced a number of recommendations that the civil society in Northern Ireland as a whole should endeavour to implement. However, NICVA noted that in the absence of a co-ordinating body or structure it is unclear as to how these recommendations may be implemented. NICVA is currently reviewing future strategies in order to implement some of them.

Forums for sharing knowledge on civil society

This output was assessed as somewhat achieved. The reason for this rating is that “other than the information circulated in the country report, no other attempt has been made to develop forums or share information” (NICVA). Moreover, consultative and participatory activities within the project (stakeholder consultation, National workshop, NAG meetings etc.) were said to be limited and as a consequence, the CSI project did not provide much space for civil society and stakeholders to debate and share information on issues concerning civil society. As a result of the limited involvement in the consultations, cooperation between stakeholders beyond the CSI project did not happen.

Outcomes

Increase in knowledge based actions by civil society stakeholders

This outcome was somewhat achieved. NICVA held that it is difficult to assess how various stakeholders have used the information presented in the country report and as such, there are no known examples that show that stakeholders (governments, donors, researchers, media etc.) are making use of the CSI findings in order to acquire information on civil society. Nor are there any known examples of actors referring to the CSI report in justifying policies and actions.

The action agenda agreed at the National Workshop were incorporated into the recommendations in the country report but the implementation is dependent upon a single organisation taking responsibility or a group of stakeholders forming an implementation panel to instigate the process of strengthening civil society.

Increased collective voice of civil society in governance and development

NICVA assessed this outcome as somewhat achieved and added that it's difficult to suggest any increased collective voice of civil society. However, at the very least there has been a better understanding of what it means and perhaps greater cognisance of where particular organisations and actions sit within the concept of civil society. So far, there are no available examples to show how the CSI project contributed to an (increased) voice of CSOs in governance and development.

Increased receptivity of civil society by external stakeholders

This outcome was evaluated as somewhat achieved. NICVA pointed that a difficulty surrounding the concept of civil society itself may have precluded greater openness or acceptance of the project amongst wider stakeholders. Nonetheless a degree of interest in discussing the concept in relation to government programmes existed. There are no specific examples to show that the CSI project contributed to greater willingness of the

government to listen to CSOs though. Neither are there any examples that show that the CSI project contributed to increased media coverage on the activities of CSOs.

Project Relevance

How relevant is the project for NAG, civil society, the NICVA and other stakeholders in the country?

The project was seen as mostly relevant to all stakeholders in so far as it provided the guidance and framework through which to access a much wider body of information that the stakeholders had otherwise not been privy to. It also provided a very important perspective on how civil society operates in Northern Ireland which has given NICVA the basis to tailor future work and developments in terms of support and guidance in its civil society strengthening initiatives.

Project Validity

- a) **Secondary data review** was evaluated as completely (NICVA) and mostly (CIVICUS) able to generate data/information on the state of the civil society in Northern Ireland.
- b) **Social Forces Analysis at 1st NAG meeting** was assessed as having been mostly (CIVICUS) and fairly (NICVA) able to generate data/information on the state of the civil society in Northern Ireland.
- c) **Regional Stakeholder Questionnaire & Consultations** were evaluated as somewhat (CIVICUS), and not at all (NICVA) able to generate data/ information about the state of the civil society in Northern Ireland.
- d) **Community Survey** was evaluated as mostly (NICVA), and fairly (CIVICUS) able to generate data/information about the state of the civil society in Northern Ireland.
- e) **Media review:** there was unanimity on the assessment of the media review by both CIVICUS and NICVA as mostly able to generate data/ information about the state of the civil society in Northern Ireland.
- f) **Fact finding studies (policy impact, corporate social responsibility)** were assessed as fairly (CIVICUS) able to generate data/ information about the state of the civil society in Northern Ireland.
- g) **NAG scoring exercise** was seen as mostly (CIVICUS) or fairly (NICVA) able generate data/ information about the state of the civil society in Northern Ireland.
- h) **National Workshop:** there was unanimity on the assessment of the media review by both CIVICUS and NICVA as mostly able to generate data/ information about the state of the civil society in Northern Ireland.
- i) **Country Report:** CIVICUS evaluated the country report as mostly having been able to generate data and information about the state of the civil society in Northern Ireland.

Project Participation

According to NICVA, there were no exceptions for the standard methods in the toolkit used in conducting focus groups. The NAG meetings worked really well. While the regional stakeholder consultations did not work out well.

Capacity Building

NICVA held that on the whole, the research team did not necessary gain any new research skills as a result of taking part in the implementation of the CSI because the ‘majority of these were already in place. However, they pointed out that they gained skills in training and facilitation (e.g. training of NIT, NAG meetings, National Workshop).

Evaluation of CIVICUS Assistance and overall implementation

According to NICVA, CIVICUS by and large provided complete and adequate support in the entire project implementation process through phone calls and emails. NICVA is completely satisfied by the systems and procedures (including the CSP support) put in place for the assistance of NCOs in the implementation of the project. The tool kit also mostly offered valuable guidance

Sustainability/Replicability

NICVA is not planning to implement the CSI again in the future unless funding is guaranteed. CSI project has informed current NICVA programme activities by identifying the existing gaps in their data. It has also provided them with a base from which issues such as governance and transparency amongst voluntary and community organisations can be developed. Programmes are being put in place to assist voluntary and community organisations to improve in this area.

Project Resources

Financial Resources

According to NICVA they mostly had sufficient financial resources to successfully implement the project and they stayed within the budget.

Human Resources

Both NICVA and CIVICUS assessed NICVA human resources as being mostly sufficient to successfully implement the project. The NICVA research team was able to complete the majority of the primary research in good time. Generally, CIVICUS assessed the work done by the project coordinator and the participatory researcher as mostly satisfactory. There were problems associated with the retirement and access to civil society expert which forced NICVA to have the final country report to be assessed by personnel from the Institute of Governance, Queen’s University Belfast.

Time

Both CIVICUS and NICVA evaluated the time allocated for the project as mostly sufficient.

Short/Long Term Impact

Changes within the NCO

Within the NICVA, there has been a greater acceptance and understanding of the term civil society.

No known changes have been reported within partner organisation, the media or the government.

Conclusion

In general, the findings of the evaluation are largely somewhat achieved in respect to most aspects. There doesn't seem to be any specifically striking lessons or experiences by NICVA as a result of implementing CSI in Northern Ireland. However, the project was relevant to their work and they were able to access information and data that they would not have been privy to. The absence of representation from all civil society sectors was noted as an area raises the question of its meaningfulness to the wider Northern Ireland civil society context.