THE CHALLENGE OF SOLIDARITY

CIVICUS Civil Society Index Report
for Poland

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This section summarizes the results of the CIVICUS Civil Society Index (CSI) project in Poland conducted by the Klon/Jawor Association in 2005. It discusses the major findings, points out strengths, weaknesses and recommendations for Polish civil society, as well as shares some ideas about the potential future direction of the CIVICUS CSI project.

The CSI project collected extensive factual material, as well as opinions about civil society from numerous sources. This report gathers research from public opinion research centres (above all CBOS), research on NGOs conducted by the Klon/Jawor Association and statistics on and analyses of different types of civil society organizations (CSOs). Important sources of knowledge about civil society are the opinions of experts, leaders and researchers which were gathered through this project. Among these, the most important are the opinions of the almost 300 civil society leaders that participated in the panel survey “Situation of Civil Society in 2005” and the interpretations and assessments by the National Advisory Group (NAG) of the gathered material. The NAG evaluated the current condition of civil society in Poland by means of 72 indicators that form four dimensions: structure, environment, values and impact. The results of the work of the NAG are depicted in the Polish Civil Society Diamond.

**Figure 1: Civil Society Diamond for Poland**

![Civil Society Diamond](image)

The diamond shows that the greatest strength of civil society in Poland is the area of values, with regards to both, civil society’s internal practice and the promotion of positive values in society as a whole. A significant exception is the lack of concern about transparency, both within CSOs and in public life in general. The external environment for civil society activities was assessed as relatively conducive. High scores were given above all to the legal regulatory domain; while social attitudes favouring the activities of the CSOs, such as trust, public spiritedness and tolerance, received considerably lower scores. The NAG’s rating of the impact of civil society’s work, such as the social importance of civil society initiatives, was similar to that of the environment, reflecting civil society’s moderate overall impact. At the same time, this area
combines both a positive assessment of the willingness of civil society to respond to social needs, and a considerably less optimistic assessment of civil society’s effectiveness in influencing the activities of the state and private sector. The lowest score was given to the structure of civil society, particularly to the level of citizen’s engagement in supporting CSOs’ activities and, more generally, their limited engagement in any kind of public activity.

The assessment of the CSI’s values dimension came up with an additional interesting result. The high scores in the values dimension for civil society do not translate into equally high scores for the overall socio-cultural environment in society at large: the indicators scores for values such as trust, public spiritedness and engagement in non-partisan political actions (which are located in other dimensions of the Diamond) are low. In other words, civil society’s strong practice and promotion of positive values does not lead to a general prevalence of these values in Polish society overall. This weakens the prospects for creating a strong and sustainable civil society in Poland.

The shape of the Polish Civil Society Diamond is similar to the shape of diamonds in other Central and Eastern European countries in which the project was conducted, such as Bulgaria, Croatia the Czech Republic, Romania and Ukraine. In all of them, the strongest dimension is values. The shape of the diamond in countries outside Central and Eastern Europe (particularly countries where the non-governmental sector has developed for a long time) is characterized by significantly “longer” vectors of structure and impact.

A distinct strength of civil society, revealed by the CSI, is the relatively favourable and improving legal environment for civil society. The last years has brought about significant changes in this area, including the public benefit act that defines the rules of cooperation with the public administration; the creation of the Public Benefit Works Council. Nevertheless the Act on Public Benefit and Volunteer Work requires some amendments and the division of work between the state and NGOs remains the central issue for the non-governmental sector. What is even more important, is the need to initiate an effective mechanism for monitoring changes in the law and how these changes affect the work of CSOs.

Diversity, good internal organization and a fairly good infrastructure of the third sector are other strengths. Nevertheless, it is necessary to further develop the support infrastructure for the non-governmental sector and continue to work on effective mechanisms for the representation of the sector’s interests. It is also necessary to educate NGO leaders.

Civil society holds a strong position in defending its essential values, such as democracy, transparency, tolerance, non-violence, gender equity and poverty eradication. On the other hand, among the most prominent weaknesses of civil society are the low engagement of citizens in public affairs, such as involvement in non-partisan political actions and membership of organisations and low public spiritedness (relatively high corruption and low level of trust in others). These negative tendencies, which have strong implications for the third sector, need to be overcome. With regards to breadth of citizen participation in non-partisan political action, suggested activities to be undertaken on the national level can take the form of voter turnout campaigns, monitoring of election promises or proposals of change the election statutes, so as to stimulate voter participation. The role of CSOs in the area of enhancing local community activity is vital.
From this perspective, activities aimed at mobilizing local communities and building social capital are especially important. Even if such activities have a mainly local character, they require external support from nationwide organizations as well as the national and regional government.

A further weakness is the insufficient engagement of members in CSOs. The organizations need to increase their involvement in building genuine engagement among their members and anchor their activities in the local communities. It is necessary to continue the development of an infrastructure that promotes volunteering and matches individuals and organisations interested in volunteering with appropriate opportunities in the respective communities.

Also, the cooperation of CSOs with the public administration is characterized by a number of weak spots. At present, since the basic legal framework for cooperation already exists, the most important task is to create a mechanism to promote good practices and to exert more effective pressure in cases where the public administration disregards its statutory obligations. The second recommendation refers to the insufficient activity of watchdog organizations, whose role should be strengthened. CSOs carry out more and more public tasks, which have led to a change in their income structure. Similarly to other EU countries, the percentage of public funds in organisational budgets is likely to increase in the coming years. One can expect this tendency to be followed by a significant growth of employment in the sector and higher formal standards of work. However, it can also cause the third sector to become excessively similar to other sectors, which will lead to a reduction of its unique features and the marginalisation of organizations that are not “in demand” by the government. Hence, it is necessary to protect the specific, unique features of NGOs in the division of work between the public, private and third sector.

With regards to the relationship with the private sector, corporate social responsibility and non-financial forms of cooperation are becoming increasingly popular. Still, the pace of these changes is unsatisfactory, partially since it seems the infrastructure of the organizations that mediate between the non-governmental community and the business environment is too weak. Another issue is the new ‘social economy’ paradigm, which entails a serious challenge for the third sector: in order not to become another redistribution mechanism, it needs to develop innovative economic activities with the purpose of reducing social exclusion.

The most frequently mentioned problem for the work of CSOs remains the lack of financial resources. It is necessary to create an appropriate financial infrastructure for the non-governmental sector. Access to public funds, particularly from the EU, is of utmost importance. The procedures for programming, accessing and accounting for these financial resources should be adjusted to the specific character of the non-governmental sector.

Finally, it is necessary to continue to work on issues of self-regulation within the non-governmental sector. This issue is obviously related to the public image of CSOs, an image that, although having improved in the last years, still seems to reflect the Poles’ general dislike of institutions.
On many important social issues NGOs are able to generate interesting solutions and prove that these solutions are possible. However, the key challenge today for almost all of these areas is how to scale up these good practices.

The participants of the CSI project appreciated the “organizing power” of the project, which is a good tool to channel dispersed facts, data and opinions to develop a clear picture of the condition of civil society in Poland. We believe that, in the end, the 72 CSI indicators may fulfil an organizing function for a kind of general repository of data on different aspects of civil society.¹

¹ The Polish report serves as the architecture for such a repository. Each indicator is supplemented with links to the data, reports or publications cited in the text. Visitors are welcome to comment on the data or the analyses of the report and send updated or new sources on a given topic. The report (in its Polish version) is available at www.badania.ngo.pl.