

DIALOGUE FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

Report on the state of civil society in Romania 2005

Civil Society Development Foundation (CSDF)

CIVICUS Civil Society Index

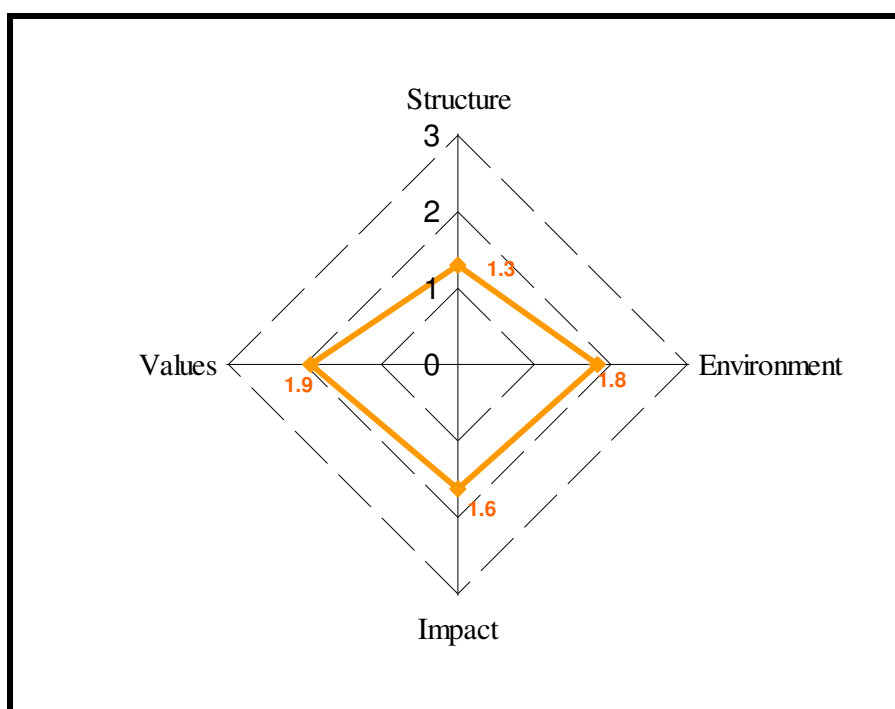
An international action-research project coordinated by CIVICUS:
World Alliance for Citizen Participation

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During 2003 and 2005, the Civil Society Development Foundation (CSDF), as the CIVICUS Civil Society Index's (CSI) implementing partner in Romania, collected information and input from a broad range of civil society representatives, citizens, experts and researchers on the state of civil society in Romania. Using a comprehensive framework of 74 indicators and drawing on extensive data collected by the project team, the project's National Advisory Group (NAG) assessed the overall state of civil society in the country, which can be summarized in a visual graph (see figure 1), the Civil Society Diamond.

The Civil Society Diamond for Romania is rather well-balanced among its four dimensions (structure, environment, values and impact) and is of moderate size. Whereas civil society's structure is considered slightly weak, the assessment for the other dimensions yielded somewhat more positive results. Civil society's values received the highest score (1.9) indicating that Romanian CSOs practice and promote positive values to a relatively significant extent.

FIGURE 1: Civil society diamond



The CSI project brought to light many new insights, some of which challenge existing wisdom on civil society in Romania. These highlights are briefly summarized below.

The examination of civil society's **structure** in Romania reveals that it remains the weakest of the four dimensions. Low citizen participation, together with a poor level of organization and limited inter-relations among civil society organizations (CSOs), represent obstacles for the development of a strong civil society sector. Although on the organisational level civil society is relatively diverse and thriving, it is affected by the lack of financial resources and qualified personnel. Since individual charitable giving, state funds and private companies' contributions

remain limited, Romanian CSOs continue to rely heavily on foreign financial support. The CSI assessment revealed that CSO umbrella bodies are often seen as incapable of effectively voicing and addressing civil society's common interests and concerns. As a result, and due to reasons ranging from financial issues to personal mistrust, informal types of cooperation are preferred to formal coalitions.

Sixteen years after the fall of communism, Romanian civil society is still coping with the negative legacy of the totalitarian regime. However, civil society's **environment** in Romania has been improving over the last few years and can be regarded as relatively enabling to civil society operations and conducive to long-term sustainability. Among all political, legal, or socio-economic factors, corruption has the most negative influence on the development of civil society. The level of cooperation between civil society and the government, business sector and public at large remains low. The CSI assessment found that private companies are mostly seen as indifferent towards civil society. As for the general public, 90% of the Romania's population do not trust other citizens. This clearly inhibits the development of a mass-based civil society. Corruption is another serious issue affecting all levels of Romanian society.

Romanian civil society promotes and practices positive **values** to a relatively significant extent. The CSI assessed that although CSOs are active in promoting transparency in public affairs, the existence of genuine internal transparency and accountability within CSOs remains limited. This situation could possibly be related to the overall level of mistrust and corruption within Romanian society, as well as the dependence of CSOs on foreign donors, rather than on local constituencies. While CSOs generally comply with all transparency requirements towards international donors, they are less interested in opening themselves to public scrutiny domestically.

Democracy and tolerance are values that Romanian CSOs have traditionally promoted, as made apparent by the fact that since the fall of the totalitarian regime in 1989 civil society actors have been actively involved in rebuilding the Romanian society on the basis of democratic institutions and inter-ethnic tolerance. Environmental sustainability and, particularly, gender equity are not regarded as "traditional" or indigenous values by most of Romanian society, and are embraced by only a limited number of social actors. However, the CSI revealed that CSOs active in promoting these values have become essential partners (if not indispensable, as in the case of environmental NGOs) for the Government and foreign donors, and that they are catalysts for social change. A large number of Romanian CSOs are engaged in projects aimed at eradicating poverty, either by directly supporting the poor or by creating opportunities for disadvantaged or marginalized categories of people.

Donors and CSO representatives alike consider the **impact** of civil society initiatives on Romanian society to be crucial. The CSI assessed the overall impact of civil society in Romania to be moderate. There are some areas where the impact is more visible and others where it remains rather limited. More specifically, CSO representatives identified a particularly strong role played by civil society in meeting societal needs directly. However, on the whole, civil society has a rather negative public image. This is reflected in the fact that CSOs' activities continue to remain invisible to the majority of the population, and CSOs are more oriented to the donors' priorities and unable to build local constituencies. CSOs have been more successful

informing and educating citizens and empowering marginalized people, than in building capacity for collective action, resolving common problems or empowering women.

Finding instruments to influence public policy has been an area of focus for Romanian civil society. Over the last few years important steps have been taken, particularly through the adoption of legislation on the freedom of access to public information and on public participation in the process of decision-making. As a result, CSOs have become more involved in influencing public policy. Due to the specific structure of the Romanian economy, with a very large public sector and state owned companies, CSOs' efforts have focused more on holding the state accountable and less on holding private companies accountable. After the communist experience, the state management of the economy was discredited and was perceived as very inefficient, while new models of private ownership and management were generally seen as a positive alternative.

Since 1989, Romanian civil society has developed a series of positive features. During the CSI consultation process, several strengths were identified and are considered significant achievements worthy of building on further. First, the majority of stakeholders believe that civil society in Romania has reached a visible level of maturity. It is diverse and in many fields there is a good level of CSO specialization and professionalism. Where genuine partnerships and cooperation among CSOs are developed they have proved to be efficient and successful. Romanian civil society managed to become a credible partner for foreign donors and therefore has benefited from their support. This support has been vital for the existence and development of Romanian civil society.

At the same time, many enduring structural weaknesses remain. There is limited involvement of citizens in associational life. This not only endangers CSOs' financial sustainability, but also raises questions about the broader legitimacy of civil society advocacy activities. Because many CSOs lack real constituencies, they have become oriented towards foreign and institutional donors. In general, Romanian civil society still suffers from a lack of sufficient financial resources. Poor relations between civil society and the business sector exist, and the state offers only limited support. Dependence on foreign donors, which are gradually pulling out of the region, complicates the situation even further. A sense of competition for scarce resources, and mutual mistrust, results in cooperation among CSOs remaining weak. Moreover, Romanian civil society has not managed to develop a common identity. Its role in society is, for the most part, ignored by the public and its public image remains marked by negative stereotypes.

At the end of the CSI consultation process, and based on the overall results of the CSI, a series of general recommendations were formulated. These recommendations suggest finding ways to and putting more effort into improving citizen participation, building bridges between civil society and the business sector and strengthening cooperation among CSOs. In terms of future priorities for civil society actions, the strengthening of civil society's "watchdog" role, improving the advocacy capacity of CSOs and building capacity for influencing the national budgeting process were identified. A final recommendation concerned the need to improve the public image of the sector.

The overall CSI process is regarded as a positive and is seen as an important contribution by participating stakeholders. They acknowledge the effort made to map and create an image of civil society in Romania, which attempts to include not only NGOs, as it had been previously done, but also other important civil society actors, such as trade unions. However, knowledge is still limited about other types of actors, such as informal civil society actors.

The CSI project tried to assess the overall state of Romanian civil society over the past four years. Its findings seek to contribute to charting the way forward for civil society's development. As the CSI study found, further development of Romanian civil society will require a focus on finding ways to involve more citizens in civil society initiatives, empowering people for collective action, resolving joint problems of the local communities and building local constituencies for civil society's advocacy work. Regarding the structural features of civil society, particular attention needs to be paid to the strengthening of networks, cooperation, communication and self-regulation within civil society, but also increasing the impact of civil society actions on government and society at large.

Thus, this project provides Romanian civil society with a collectively owned and generated roadmap for the future. It is hoped that the participatory and knowledge-based nature of the CSI project has laid the groundwork for civil society and other stakeholders to act upon the goals set forth in this report, to strengthen Romanian civil society and make it more sustainable.