

## **CIVICUS Civil Society Index**

### **A Summary of the Serbia CSI Project Evaluation**

#### **Background: Purpose and Objective**

This evaluation provides CIVICUS and the ARGUMENT, the CSI country partner in Serbia 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 ARGUMENT will gain out of this evaluation through a 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 ARGUMENT 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 ARGUMENT, was evaluated by both CIVICUS and ARGUMENT as completely achieved. Both CIVICUS and ARGUMENT were very satisfied with the overall quality of the CSI country report in Serbia as the country report provides completely comprehensive and accurate information on the state of civil society in Serbia. According to the NCO the “CSI is the first holistic and empirical survey on civil society in Serbia”. Regarding the relevance of the CSI in Serbia for organizations aiming at strengthening civil society, ARGUMENT was of the view that the study has been very relevant.

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

This output was assessed by ARGUMENT as somewhat achieved, based on the fact that stakeholders were “divided between those who had positive and negative opinions on civil society”. In general, the role of civil society in Serbia is not yet recognized and acknowledged as an important and capable social actor. This is why it looks like civil society holds an inferior position both in the eyes of broader environment as well as among majority of civil society actors. Besides, there are several indications that civil

society in Serbia is currently in a pat position: unable to move forward due to the environmental constrains mentioned above and linked to internal limiting factors such as a high turn-over of staff and the increasing discouragement of the majority of civil society activists as a result of fatigue from long-term intensive endeavour on one hand and dissatisfaction with moderate impact and unrecognized efforts on the other, not to mention occasional mud slinging in the media and above all the lack of sustainable financial resources faced by the majority of NGOs. The interest of local entrepreneurs and local government to cooperate with civil society initiatives is generally blocked by the lack of a conducive legislative and fiscal framework as well as by inverse (inherited) habits that favour informal connections over formalized cooperation. In general, according to the CSI findings, further sustainable development of civil society in Serbia is currently under threat and in need of significant attention from state representatives and civil society participants and stakeholders, even though some small number of core CSOs are making increasing progress. Moreover, civil society is, after sixteen years of endeavour, still at the beginning of the process of building partnership with other stakeholders in the country.

#### A set of strategies for strengthening civil society

ARGUMENT evaluated this output as somewhat achieved. The rational behind this rating according to the NCO is that “stakeholders do not have the lowest common denominator on the state of civil society strategies for the strengthening of civil society”. In order to address this challenge, a series of round table discussions bringing together stakeholders are planned around the country.

#### Forums for sharing knowledge on civil society

This output was assessed as not achieved at all by ARGUMENT. The reason for this is that the country report is yet to be completed. Once the report is published a series of roundtable discussions as mentioned above will be conducted. However, the CSI reveals that “space for civil society is still missing in Serbia due to lack of political will, public political competitiveness and negative CS propaganda, particularly regarding NGOs”. These challenges are further destabilized by the low levels of trust in the county, particularly between and among CSOs.

### **Outcomes**

#### Increase in knowledge based actions by civil society stakeholders

ARGUMENT is of the view that this outcome has been fairly achieved. Event though it is still early to assess early signs of impact, a moderate increase of interest has been identified by the NCO. Furthermore, guidelines for future actions are yet to be implemented. The NCO also stated that the success of these actions will greatly depend on the funds that the organizations will be able to raise in the future.

#### Increased collective voice of civil society in governance and development

As mentioned earlier ARGUMENT is of the view that space for civil society is still missing in Serbia due to lack of political support, negative propaganda, and financial competitiveness between CSOs. This outcome hasn't been achieved at all due to the

position of civil society elaborated above. However it is expected that the published CSI study will strongly contribute to it.

#### Increased receptivity of civil society by external stakeholders

This outcome was evaluated as not achieved at all, due to reasons mentioned above.

### **Project Relevance**

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

The project was evaluated by ARGUMENT as completely relevant to their work. ARGUMENT supported their assessment by the following statement; “The CSI has circled our experience and the data collected during a period of 16 years on civil society in Serbia. Moreover it has increased our knowledge and skills by measuring its current status and progress”.

According to the NAG members the project was assessed between completely and mostly relevant. A member of the NAG stated that “the CSI helped me to better understand the needs and viewpoints of CSOs as we are mostly focused on development of non-state social service providers”. Another member stated that “working in a grant making organization, the membership in the NAG gave me additional but comprehensive input in the situation of CS in Serbia”.

The CSI is the first empirical study of civil society in Serbia, it was therefore assessed as completely relevant to all stakeholders aiming to strengthen civil society. The findings according to the NCO, will however obviously be more utilised after the report has been published. A member of the NAG stated that the study “envisaged the goals that NGOs should follow and try to reach in the forthcoming period/years”. Another member raised concerns about the CIVICUS regional conference that took place in East Europe. The member was of the view that the representation of CS in both the CSI study and the conference was inadequate, as both focused on newly established NGOs especially those focusing on human rights and democracy rather than looking at the broad spectra.

The project was perceived by the NCO as mostly relevant to other stakeholders particularly donors and academics, while government and media were still reluctant to cooperate with civil society.

### **Project Validity**

- a) **Secondary data review** was evaluated as between completely and mostly able to generate accurate data/information on the state of the civil society in Serbia by ARGUMENT. CIVICUS on their part evaluated the secondary data review for Serbia as fairly able to generate data and information on the state of the civil society in Serbia. According to a member of the NIT, the team did not encounter any methodological problems during the research.

- b) **Social Forces Analysis at 1<sup>st</sup> NAG meeting** was assessed by ARGUMENT as having been completely able to generate accurate assessment on the state of the civil society in Serbia. This was also supported by CIVICUS who assessed it as between completely to mostly able to generate an accurate assessment.
- c) **Regional Stakeholder Questionnaire & Consultations** were evaluated as completely (ARGUMENT) able to generate accurate data/ information about the state on the civil society in Serbia. CIVICUS was also of the view that this methodology was between completely and mostly able to generate accurate data and information.
- d) **Community Survey** was also evaluated as completely able to generate accurate data/information about the state of the civil society in Serbia by both ARGUMENT and CIVICUS.
- e) **Media review:** This was also evaluated by both ARGUMENT and CIVICUS as being between completely and mostly able to generate an accurate assessment on the state of civil society.
- f) **NAG scoring exercise** was seen as completely to mostly (ARGUMENT) and between completely to mostly (CIVICUS) able to generate accurate data/ information about the state of the civil society in Serbia.
- g) **National Workshop:** This was assessed by ARGUMENT between completely and mostly able to generate accurate data/ information about the state on the civil society in Serbia, while CIVICUS was of the view that it had been fairly successful.
- h) **Country Report:** ARGUMENT evaluated the country report as completely able to generate accurate data and information about the state of civil society in Serbia. CIVICUS was also of the same view rating it between completely and somewhat. The rationale behind the rating of “somewhat” is according to a member of CIVICUS that the current draft of the country report is a bit too comprehensive and that the “report tends to suffer from information overload”.

### **Capacity Building**

The evaluation assessed whether any specific skills were gained by the team members of NCO as a result of or in the course of implementing the CSI project. Despite the fact that the CSI team in Serbia was a group of well experienced researcher, ARGUMENT stated that “the whole NCO team improved their skills in all areas as a result of taking part in the implementation of the CSI”. Skills were built on all aspects including secondary data gathering, participatory research methods, quantitative survey research methods, data analysis and interpretation, report writing, training and facilitation skills as well as convening and networking capacities.

### **Evaluation of CIVICUS Assistance and overall implementation**

ARGUMENT is completely satisfied with the overall support provided to it by CIVICUS. ARGUMENT is also completely satisfied by the systems and procedures put in place for the assistance of NCOs in the implementation of the project. Furthermore, ARGUMENT is completely satisfied with the guidance received from the CSI toolkit.

ARGUMENT assessed CIVICUS support with regards to fundraising as mostly satisfied. The areas of support that were found to be particularly helpful included the monthly calls. NCO suggests that CIVICUS in the future, at least once during the project, visits the NCO team.

## **Sustainability/Replicability**

ARGUMENT is planning to implement the CSI again in the future. The NCO suggests implementation in three years time. According to Argument the CSI has informed current programme activities in many ways, e.g. the creation of a database on civil society issues. The NAG members were also positive to the idea of implementing the CSI in Serbia again. They suggested that the CSI be implemented every 2-3 years as this would provide them with data for comparison.

## **Project Resources**

### Financial Resources

According to ARGUMENT the financial resources were assessed as being fairly sufficient in order to implement the project. The NCO stated that “the funding came in trenches and that it affected the dynamic of the CSI activities in terms of postponements and delays”. However, the project managed to stay within budget, even though the budget was very tight.

### Human Resources

Both ARGUMENT and CIVICUS assessed ARGUMENT’s human resources as being mostly sufficient to successfully implement the project. ARGUMENT stated that “the enthusiasm of the PR contributed to great extent to the implementation of the CSI”, CIVICUS agree with the above statement.

### Time

Furthermore the time allocated for the project according to the NCO was assessed as mostly sufficient by the NCO. CIVICUS was of the view that the time was completely sufficient for the team to implement the CSI. However, according to CIVICUS the finalization of the country report did drag on for a while.

## **Short/Long Term Impact**

### Unintended changes

- No unintended changes were recorded in the course of CSI implementation in Serbia.

### Changes within the NCO

- Capacity building: project management skills as well as research and networking capacities.

### Changes within partner organisation

- Enhanced interaction between different CSOs who were involved in the process.

### Changes within Donors/ Funders

- Attracted the attention of donor agencies and academics.

### Changes within the Media

- Today there is a big gap between CS and media. The CSI revealed many challenges facing Serbian CS, particularly the negative media coverage on CS. Initiatives are planned to address media.

**Conclusion:**

In general, the findings of the evaluation are largely positive with respect to most aspects. According to both CIVICUS and ARGUMENT, the country report provided completely comprehensive information. There are strong recommendations to continue implementing the CSI in Serbia as a way to monitor anticipated changes informed by the current findings. Even though it is still early to assess early signs of impact, increased interest on civil society has been identified by the NCO, particularly among researchers and donors in Serbia. Furthermore, despite the fact that the CSI team in Serbia was a group of well experienced researchers, ARGUMENT was of the view that the whole NCO team improved their skills in several areas as a result of taking part in the implementation of the CSI. Furthermore guidelines for future actions are currently being developed and are expected to guide the future implementation.