

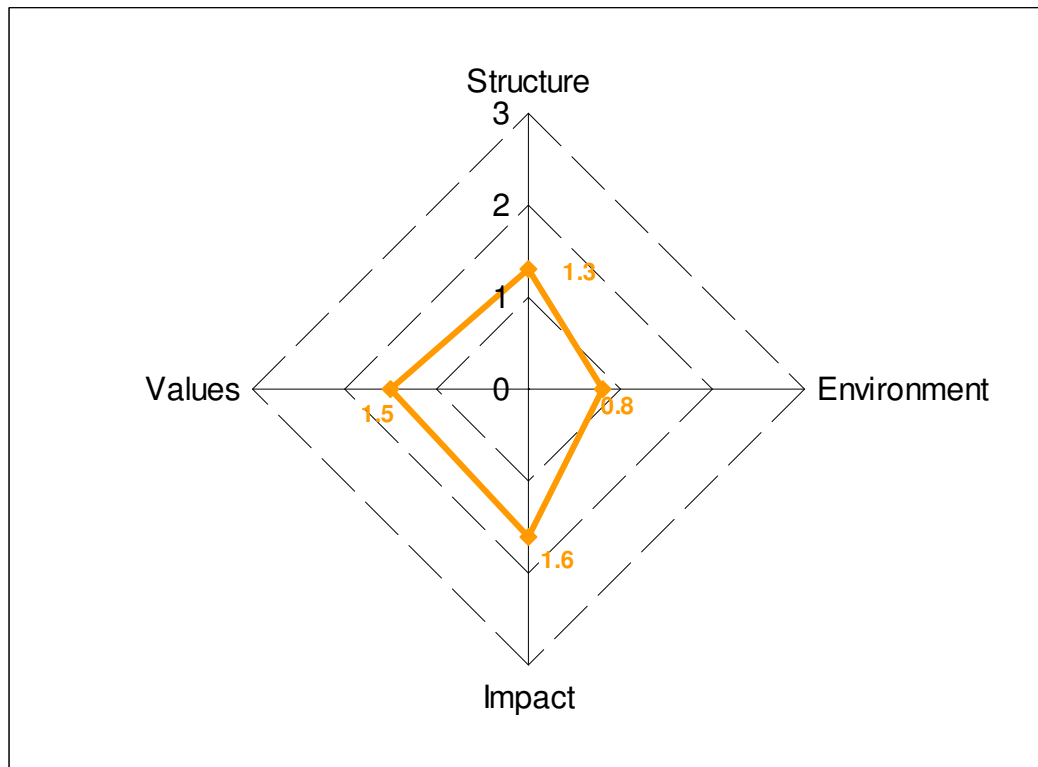
CIVICUS CIVIL SOCIETY INDEX REPORT FOR THE REPUBLIC OF SIERRA LEONE

A CRITICAL TIME FOR CIVIL SOCIETY IN SIERRA LEONE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During the CIVICUS Civil Society index (CSI) project in Sierra Leone from 2004 to 2006, a huge amount of information was collected regarding the state of civil society. With the use of the 74 indicators that constituted a comprehensive framework, extensive data was collected by the National Index Team (NIT). Following this, the project's National Advisory Group (NAG) was able to assess the overall state of Civil Society in Sierra Leone. This is manifested in the visual graph of the Sierra Leonean Civil Society Diamond.

FIGURE 1: Civil Society Diamond for Sierra Leone



The Civil Society Index project brought to light the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of civil society in Sierra Leone against the backdrop of a relative democratic state. The diamond that emerged demonstrates a civil society facing structural challenges characterised by weak organisation and poor resources.

The structure of civil society in Sierra Leone reveals that citizens are engaged in various activities in their respective communities, either by attending meetings or participating in community activities, such as cleaning of wells and roads. Additionally, Community Based Organisations (CBOs) have the highest membership rates, such as cooperatives with 24%, Farmer/Fishermen Associations with 16% and Local Business Associations with 10%.

The CSI assessment revealed that there are other popular types of CSOs, such as the Professionals Association with 13%, youth groups with 10%, trade unions with 6%, religious organisations with 6% and women's groups with 6%.

Civil Society in Sierra Leone faces structural problems centred on the fragmentation between urban based professional civic associations and community based forms of civil society organisations (CSOs). Civil society's environment in Sierra Leone constitutes the weakest dimension. This is characterised by, among other things, low social trust, with two-thirds of the respondents not trusting fellow citizens. The levels of social tolerance, particularly towards people living with HIV/AIDS, homosexuals and people of a different race remain low.

The environment of CSOs is made further hampered because of rampant poverty. Large parts of the rural population remain in abject poverty. This is against the backdrop that the government has made modest gains in the area of human rights through the creation of structures and institutions to ensure the protection of human rights. Sierra Leone is now enjoying a decentralisation scenario where the rural population has been empowered to participate in local governance issues in their respective Local Councils.

There are, however, challenges confronted by the state in terms of its limited ability and resources to ensure that laws are implemented. Government is also limited in its ability to provide basic amenities to its people, such as electricity, good roads and employment, particularly for the youth population. The lack of resources or their misuse has affected the effectiveness of government institutions. This is against the background of widespread patronage and corruption in the public sector.

However, CSOs enjoy freedom of association, which is guaranteed by the 1991 Constitution of Sierra Leone. Therefore, CSOs are able to operate freely. This environment is also conducive to their registration.

The CSI assessment reveals that civil society values are poor in Sierra Leone. CSOs do not practice good governance and gender equity. CSOs are characterised by a culture of secrecy and corruption. Widespread corruption has been reported within CSOs. Most CSOs lack internal democracy, accountability and transparency, and their leadership, for most, is in the hands of their respective founders. Sometimes the CSO is even set up as a family organisations aimed at attracting donor funding.

The impact dimension of CSOs in Sierra Leone revealed that CSOs are active in meeting key social needs of the population. Eighty-seven percent of community survey respondents view CSOs as providing better services than the state.

The CSI project is the very first attempt to prepare a comprehensive and participatory assessment of civil society in Sierra Leone. No doubt, its findings will contribute largely to efforts to establish order in the CSO landscape of Sierra Leone. In particular, it has helped us find that CSOs in Sierra Leone is highly fragmented between different components that tend to weaken the overall efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability of civil society. Dependency on donors, good will, and support is also a crucial factor that came out in the report. The need to build CSOs from the bottom up and the need to empower marginalised groups, particularly women and youth, has also been emphasised. Additionally, it has been discovered that there is need for CSO to strengthen its position vis-à-vis the state, by challenging it on key national issues on the other.