

**CIVICUS CIVIL SOCIETY INDEX
SUMMARY EVALUATION
IMPLEMENTATION PHASE 2003-2006**

A. INTRODUCTION

This document provides a concise summary evaluation of the CIVICUS CSI implementation phase 2003-2006 that informed the discussions at the CIVICUS Board meeting in May/June 2007. The document draws on the findings from the various monitoring and evaluation activities undertaken by the CSI, such as the external evaluation study by INTRAC¹, participatory CSI country evaluations conducted from March 2006 to March 2007 of 43 of the 53 participating countries ('NCO evaluations'), internal M&E reports, a strategic reflection survey conducted in March/April 2007 and other policy and project documents.

The document begins with a section evaluating the overall success of the project against its planned outputs, outcomes, objectives and goals. The next section examines a set of specific issues, which were raised by the CIVICUS board and staff at the beginning of the current implementation phase as well as throughout.

Based on the Board's feedback at the November 2006 Board meeting and the overall success of the project, the CSI team infers that an overall continuation of the project is preferred. However, there are high-level policy questions about the basic parameters of a future CSI. While this document lays out future directions of the project, it does not entail specific recommendations for the Board's consideration. These are provided in a 'recommendations document' which has been shared in its draft form with the members of the Programme Committee. The current document serves as a background document to this recommendations paper. Since the directions contained here are mostly dependent on the three strategic policy issues (1) project scale, (2) project objectives, (3) institutional setup, CIVICUS decided to clarify these three strategic issues first, but also provide the Board with an overall evaluation of the current implementation phase and with a description of its thinking for the future direction of the project. It is envisioned that in preparation for the Board meeting in November 2007, a more detailed policy paper will be developed, which makes specific recommendations on these lower-level policy issues, in the light of the Board's decision regarding the continuation of the project, its objectives and institutional setup.

B. BACKGROUND

Apart from the World Assembly, the CSI is the longest and, by now, most comprehensive programme of CIVICUS. The CSI started its design phase in 1999, was piloted in 2000/01 and redesigned in 2002 for its first full implementation phase, which lasted from 2003 to 2006, covering 53 countries. The total budget for the years 2003-2006 was US\$ 1,602,534.00, which included 76% of international coordination costs and 24% of grants to country partners. Due to its high level of complexity, scope and ambition, there have been a number of intense debates on approach, objectives, focus and scale, which cannot be fully covered in this evaluation.² However, it is important to highlight the key policy decisions by the Board, which informed the 2003-2006 implementation phase and any adaptations which had to be made by staff:

¹ While the external evaluation was expected to answer many of the questions addressed in this document and particularly offer recommendations for the future, it has fallen substantively short of these goals, as argued in CIVICUS' management response to the evaluation report. Consequently, a number of evaluations and recommendations in this document are backed up by less information than we would have wished.

² See relevant Board documents as well as Heinrich, V.F., Managing Trade-offs. Challenges faced in designing the implementation approach of the CIVICUS Civil Society Index. Paper presented at the ISTR conference, Cape Town, 6-10 July 2002.

1. **Scale & time line:** It was envisioned to have a two-phased approach over 4-6 years, with 20-30 countries in each phase and to revisit the programme's fit to CIVICUS overall work in relation to the new strategic plan³. Due to the large interest by potential partners and the rather strong traction the project developed with donors and the global civil society community, CIVICUS, in consultation with the board, decided not to restrict its first phase to 30 countries. This had the effect of extending the first phase both in terms of countries (53) and time (3 years). However, staff divided this phase in separate 'rounds', making learning and certain adaptations of the approach from one round to the other possible.
2. **Approach & Goals:** The CSI was tasked to generate an accurate description of civil society, if possible with an internationally comparative tool. However, the focus was clearly put on the validity of the country level assessment of the state of civil society. Secondly, the CSI was tasked to track any follow up activities to the assessment at country level, and, where a fit between these activities and CIVICUS work would exist, to selectively support such activities. For its planned second phase, cross country comparability needed to be ensured and the data from the first phase were expected to be 'mined' for policy-relevant information on civil society.

The extension of phase 1 has led to a blurring of these distinctions. However, by and large, these goals are applicable to the current implementation phase (2003-06) and the next sections will evaluate to what extent these and other project goals were achieved.

C. OVERALL EVALUATION: How did the CSI fare in this phase and should it be continued (list achievements and recommendation)

CSI's level of achievement: objectives, outputs, outcomes and goals

The CSI general objectives are twofold. The first is to "generate and share relevant knowledge on the state of civil society" whereas the second is to "increase the capacity and commitment of civil society stakeholders to strengthen civil society and its role in governance", both of these centred on being achieved in the participating countries. The two objectives are unpacked more specifically in the CSI project outputs, outcomes and goals⁴:

Outputs	→	Outcomes	→	Goals
1. A body of knowledge on the state of civil society at national level		1. Increase in knowledge based actions by civil society stakeholders		1. Enhance the strength and sustainability of civil society
2. Forums for sharing knowledge on civil society within participating countries as well as cross-nationally		2. Increased collective voice of civil society in governance and development		2. Strengthen civil society's contribution to positive social change
3. Shared understanding of		3. Increased openness of civil society by external		

³ Since the Board opted to extend the strategic plan up to now, the fit between the CSI and CIVICUS' overall work did not need to be re-evaluated so far. However, with the new strategic plan currently being drafted, this will be an important task for the near future.

⁴ See Annex 1.

the state of civil society among a broad range of stakeholders		stakeholders		
4. A set of strategies for strengthening civil society				

This section examines the extent to which the CSI has been able to achieve the project outputs, and to what extent it has started having an impact on the set outcomes and goals, which are clearly more long term and therefore difficult to assess at this stage. Finally we will also explore if, given the level of achievement of the project, it should be continued in the future and if so, what some general recommendations for the project framework are.

The degree of achievement of all four outputs, adding completely and mostly categories is slightly more than 50%. That is, in all participating countries, the majority of respondents considered the outputs between completely and mostly achieved. Furthermore only in the case of one particular output, 'forums for sharing knowledge' was the 'not at all' achieved category even present (indicated by 9% of respondents). In general terms we can thus conclude that, according to the CSI partners, the project was rather successful.

In comparing the outputs against one another in terms of degree of achievement, the CSI has clearly been most successful in generating a comprehensive and complete body of knowledge on the state of civil society in the countries implementing the project. The track record in this regard is impressive: all evaluations conducted (INTRAC, NCO evaluations, CSI Survey) conclude unanimously that this objective and output was between completely and mostly achieved. The NCO evaluations and the CSI survey note that to close to 90% of the respondents see this particular outcome/objective to have been between completely and mostly achieved. The INTRAC evaluation also asserted that "The project has uniquely succeeded in generating and sharing knowledge on a very large scale" (pg 11), although the sharing aspect was evaluated as achieved more modestly, with room for improvement around cross-country sharing and of the knowledge management systems. This track record was a bit weaker in countries where primary research was only partially or not at all conducted; in those cases the CSI has been able to highlight specifically the gaps in knowledge and all respondents in this case have indicated the interest of implementing the full CSI methodology in the future. In this sense, the assessment of civil society was the best accomplished, and most immediate as well as tangible output of the CSI's implementation phase 2003 – 2006.

Not surprisingly, the CSI was relatively the least successful, at this stage, in generating a set of actionable strategies for strengthening civil society, although still just over half of the respondents of the NCO evaluation considered this to be completely to mostly achieved. On a higher level, the degree of achievement of the outcome of an increase in knowledge-based actions, into which the aforementioned output would translate, is just over 40% (completely and mostly achieved). Although still modestly achieved, it is by far presently the best achieved of the outcomes. The CSI survey, assessing the project's end goal of strengthening civil society's contribution to positive social change is assessed by close to 40% of respondents as having done so strongly to mostly, whereas most respondents (44%) consider that this has only somewhat occurred. Of the goals and objectives this was however the one assessed least positively by the survey respondents. The INTRAC evaluation is also rather critical regarding the 'action' element of the project and the ambition to strengthen civil society. It considered that the CIVICUS CSI team, in having made a conscious decision for the project's remit to end after the National Workshop and therefore although monitoring follow-up activities, not getting involved in them actively is reducing the project's potential regarding its 'action' element. The decision was taken

in part to enhance the local ownership of the project findings as the local actors would decide on what the most appropriate and relevant issues are and need to be addressed. Nonetheless, the external evaluators consider that “[t]o say the least this is confusing, especially since the CSI describes itself as “a participatory needs assessment and **action planning tool** for civil society”. (p13)

That said, although there are likely to be a number of follow-up activities that the CSI team might not be aware of, CSI has been able to monitor an important number of what is coined ‘signs of impact’, as full-level impact can only be observed and assessed after a significant time has passed after the completion of the project. Although the CSI registers some high-level impacts (i.e. government/donor policies), it is in fact the micro (i.e. organizational level) to meso-level (i.e. groups of organizations) impacts that have been most widespread. Almost all CSI partners (over 80%) and many of their partners (65%) use the CSI findings for their own strategic planning and interventions. More importantly, most organizations use it to direct a critical lens on their own activities. In this regard, they have further progressed from self-knowledge to self-improvement, which is exactly what is postulated by the interconnection between research and action: action does not begin when research ends and new research and self-reflection can stem from various actions, triggering new and unpredictable initiatives.

Finally, the process itself has been noted to be of most value to the participating actors in country, as highlighted by both the NCO and INTRAC evaluations. Overall, the project implementation engaged close to 7,000 stakeholders directly at the country level. The process of consultation and sharing was specifically highlighted of most importance in participating countries falling within the category of non-democracies (even non-democracies in this case are still regimes that allow a minimal measure of engagement and convening of civil society); as noted by the current Project Manager and leader of the project’s M&E work in her contribution to the forthcoming CSI book CIVICUS Global Survey on the Status of Civil Society Volume 2: *Comparative Perspectives*, “for countries in which citizen participation and a common identity as civil society is a novelty and often still contested by the state, convening and sharing knowledge with different stakeholders becomes an end in itself, far more important than the compilation of the assessment into a comprehensive report.”

The finding, that the greatest impact of the project is registered with the immediate participants, is not surprising at this stage (since other impact takes time and is harder to detect for CIVICUS). While it is expected that impact among the wider group of stakeholders will increase, this finding suggests that CIVICUS should review its ‘theory of change’ and expected chain of impact for the future.

Conclusion and way forward

Overall, the various evaluation studies indicate that the project has been overall quite successful. This also ties in the Board’s own assessment, as expressed verbally at the last board meeting and external perceptions. Based on the project’s success and continued interest from stakeholders, a continuation of the CSI project makes sense. The following sections examines in some detail, a number of specific parameters of the project, which require attention in the context of a continuation of the CSI.

D. SPECIFIC ISSUES

This section looks at the key strategic, methodological and operational challenges, confronted by the CSI in its current implementation phase and offers an overall evaluation on the extent to which the project has been able to respond to these challenges effectively.

1. **STRATEGIC ISSUES:**

1.1. ***Scope and 'weight' of the CSI: Was the CSI implementation in its 'heavy' version successful or should the possibilities of having CSI 'medium'/'light' be re-examined?***

The CSI was implemented in over 50 countries with rather substantial support from CIVICUS' side (see 1.3 'Institutional Setup' for details), while the research components and the final output produced by the NCO were held to rather high standards. The large number of participating countries implied a number of challenges and downsides for the project, such as extended timeframe (and consequential negotiations with donors for further support to the international coordination), and extremely high workload and pressure on CSI team with certain negative implications for quality, particularly due to the 'test nature' of the current phase regarding project approach and methodology. However, the positive implications were related to economies of scale and the potential for meaningful and widespread engagement and comparisons across participating countries.

The question of the optimal scope of the CSI in the future is one around different stakeholders are in disagreement with one another. The external evaluation by INTRAC argued that "although the CSI has achieved a great deal, an option for future phases could be a more modest approach (not 54 countries at one time) and provide less central support, developing regional support centres based around NCOs that have already completed the process. A second option, possibly favoured by the CSI team, might be a significant increase in the number of CSI staff. The evaluators caution against any such increase, especially at central level, before CSI tools, processes and systems are comprehensively streamlined" (p.37). The CSI team's assessment concurs with external experts that the CSI does at this point in time still need a centralized team in coordinating it if the project is to keep and enhance its relevance at an international level.

Based on the fact that a large number of key lessons for a streamlining of the project design and methodology were learned in this phase and that the implementation of the CSI in a number of African countries in early 2008 can provide a further testing of the refined project approach, the CSI team suggests to aim for a similar number of countries in the next project phase (45-60), if levels of interest and funding align.

1.2. ***Dual objectives: How well did the approach of coupling a research-based assessment with participatory action-oriented process work? Should this be continued in the future?***

The dual objectives of (a) knowledge-generation and (b) strengthening commitments and capacities of stakeholders to strengthen civil society is at the heart of the CSI and has been much discussed and criticized.⁵ Interestingly, the external evaluation examines the appropriateness of

⁵ As early as 2000, Michael Edwards from the Ford Foundation notes in a response to the early project design: "If the purpose of the index is to promote dialogue within civil society - as a tool for self-reflection - then do we really need such a lengthy and complex design? If, on the other hand, the purpose is to enable rigorous comparative research, then I think we may need a design which is even more lengthy and complex than the one you have. As I read the latest description, it seemed as though these two purposes were intertwined, with the attendant danger that neither will be properly satisfied." In his contribution to a discussion about the CSI and other civil society assessment tools in the Journal of Civil Society, Helmut Anheier (who was critically involved in the development of the initial methodology) noted: "Given that the CIVICUS Index has purposes that are significantly broader and more policy-oriented than the Johns Hopkins, US-AID or Howard approaches, it reduces the potential of meaningful comparisons. At the same time, compared to the other indicators, the CIVICUS index is also meant to be explicitly multi-tasking, serving the needs of researchers, practitioners and policymakers alike. Serving multiple needs presents a

the project in achieving both objectives to a very limited extent, but rather focuses mostly on the extent to which each objective has been achieved. It does however note that “[i]n combination the dual objectives of knowledge generation and reflection/action amount to a participatory action research project: “creating a knowledge base for CSS initiatives” (p.11). The 2001 evaluation endorsed the relevance and validity of this approach. INTRAC has doubts around the feasibility of achieving the links between research and action in the case of the CSI, considering the way the project has been implemented (choice of NCOs etc⁶) and the scale of its adoption” (p.11). More specifically, the external evaluators are sceptical as to the possibility of achieving the ‘action’ element within the dual objectives (see Overall Evaluation section). The CSI team, however, felt that the tension and potential of the dual objectives needed to be explored into further depth, and therefore included questions about them in its strategic reflection survey conducted in April 2007. The survey findings were rather unequivocal as a vast majority of respondents stated that the combination of the two objectives is what makes the CSI unique, attractive (but also complex) and voted for continuing to seek to combine knowledge with action. Based on the results of NCO evaluations, it has however become clear that countries differ in their emphasis they place on the objectives, with a significant number of countries focusing mainly on the knowledge-generation component, while others see the main potential of the CSI in its participation, consultation and action components. Overall, as noted in the overall evaluation section, the CSI has been better able to generate knowledge than to stimulate CS strengthening activities, although it is definitely too early to pass a final judgment on these processes, which are likely to get under way only after the completion of the CSI at country level.

Based on these findings, we can conclude the following:

1. The dual objectives of knowledge-generation and CS strengthening are seen as worthwhile and ‘achievable’, even though the CSI’s track record was somewhat uneven with overall greater success on the knowledge component.
2. Given the fact that this link between knowledge and action is what defines the project, CIVICUS should continue to publicize the CSI as a tool to achieve both objectives at the same time. The link between both components needs to be strengthened in conceptual and operational terms based on the insights gathered from this phase. In addition, the project should explore the option of having different components contributing to either the knowledge or the CS strengthening objective, e.g. creating an internationally comparable index and a specific methodology for using the CSI assessment as a springboard for action. In other words: distinguish more between the purpose of different CSI components without losing overall coherence and appeal. The project needs to also allow country partners to opt for one or the other objective only, depending on their country context.

The INTRAC evaluation recommends that “objectives are revised in order to be more realistic and measurable. Developing a single hierarchy of objectives (Log Frame) in a participatory fashion with multiple stakeholders would make it far easier for all participants to measure what has been achieved and know what is expected of them.” (p.28) The CSI team concurs that perhaps the ‘action’ element would need to be revised within the objectives for the coming phase, with a

challenge for the Index, and the special tensions that arise from the ‘multi-purpose, multi-tasking’ characteristic in applying the CIVICUS Index relative to the others, would have deserved more attention in Heinrich’s paper. It is both a strength as well as a weakness of the CIVICUS approach.”

⁶ Greater attention to action would also have implications for potential partners, as the process of selection and legitimising national implementation teams also affects the ability to strategise. It is not possible to combine a research process with action planning in the context where the NCO lacks the legitimacy or mandate to do so, or where the methodology is absent for linking recommendations to those who can take them forward (INTRAC, p.19)..

greater emphasis on self-improvement of civil society, considering that at this stage this seems to be the specific niche of the project.

Furthermore, as recommended by the current Project Manager in her contribution in the forthcoming, CIVICUS Global Survey on the Status of Civil Society Volume 2: *Comparative Perspectives*, more emphasis needs to be placed on tailoring the CSI to specific country objectives: "This does not mean that the methodology will need to change from country to country, but rather that different emphasis is placed on different project activities depending on the ultimate short-term goal, unpacked in project-specific outputs and outcomes. For instance, participation by stakeholders not only on the regional but perhaps sectoral level (e.g. unions, NGOs, religious organizations) can be included in the study; this element would promote action in certain areas, without actually detracting from the international comparability of the project". The examples where this has occurred have all been particularly successful (Cyprus, Turkey, Italy).

These issues are also taken up in greater detail in the separate recommendations paper.

1.3. ***Institutional Setup: What is the most appropriate and feasible set of roles for CIVICUS and potential other actors?***

This phase and particularly the external evaluation have thrown up questions about the appropriate set of roles for CIVICUS in implementing the CSI. Currently, the roles comprise:

- Development/refinement of project approach and methodology
- Fundraising for international coordination and to support country implementation, where appropriate/needed
- Selection, training and continuous assistance to country partners in the implementation of the project activities
- Quality control of outputs, including the country report
- Communicating/disseminating project progress and results to partners and interested public
- Monitoring and evaluation of the project, including periodic follow-up regarding signs of impact of the project at country level.

It is clear that such a wide range of roles requires a large project team with high and diverse skills set in terms of research, civil society strengthening, languages, inter-personal skills, M&E expertise, writing/editing etc. However, particularly the external evaluation raised questions about whether such a large set of roles is required at all. Based on an assessment that the CSI is no longer as relevant to donors and CSOs as it has been in the past, the evaluation proposed to make the CSI available as a public tool with minimal assistance from CIVICUS for those who want to apply it. However, project stakeholders, including the NCOs, and the project team were almost unanimous in their rejection of this proposal, since they argued that the comprehensiveness and length of the CSI require an international coordination, that the methodology requires further testing and refinement and that an internationally coordinated project implies a number of benefits (exchange, comparability, public profile) which would be lost. In addition, stakeholders feared that simply putting out a publicly available resource would not lead to much take-up by CSOs.

However, questions about the appropriateness of CIVICUS and feasibility of a single institution covering all these roles remained and were explored in a strategic reflection survey.

Apart from these two large policy issues (objectives and institutional setup), which are explored further in the recommendations paper, which asks the CIVICUS Board to decide on a way forward, there are some other strategic issues, which need to be evaluated.

1.4 ***Programmatic Integration: How well was the CSI integrated with other programmes? What are the implications of the CSI team's suggestion in the options paper with regard to the different possible outcomes of the strategic framework exercise?***

The beginning of the current CSI phase coincided with a retreat by the Board's Programme Committee, which sought to make headway on integrating the various CIVICUS programmes conceptually and eventually also operationally. The assessment by the CSI project team and former Assistant Secretary General Programmes (ASG-P) is that, while a conceptual linkage as been achieved (with the CSI providing information, networks, and follow up projects to the other programmes), this was not translated into practice. The main reasons, which have been shared by the former ASG-P at several board meetings, were:

- Other CIVICUS programmes did not have the capacity to make effective use of CSI information, networks and projects. As dedicated staff for the other programmes was recruited in 2006, this started to change, as can be witnessed by Participatory Governance (PG) and Civil Society Watch (CSW) programmes making increasing use of CSI contacts for their work.
- Other CIVICUS programmes are not conceived as 'responsive' programmes, but as proactive programmes in their own right, e.g. CSW-Zimbabwe. Thus, any uptake by these programmes of emerging CSI results would have potentially endangered meeting their own deliverables and objectives.
- CIVICUS did not succeed in getting any programme-wide grants, which would have made integrated programmatic activities possible
- Exchange within CIVICUS programme staff was low, which did not permit utilizing each others' contacts and information. The PG and CSW examples above indicate that this has been changing over the last year.

Thus, the experience of the current CSI phase proved that programmatic integration is exceedingly difficult, particularly given the current funding and programmatic model of CIVICUS with distinct programmes. However, incremental progress has been made on the day-to-day cooperation across programmes.

A key question for the new strategic and implementation plan for CIVICUS should be whether and, if yes, how it is feasible to better integrate CIVICUS' programmatic activities in practice? Looking at the experiences of other organizations with a similar funding model, it is likely to a close integration will remain a challenge and that CIVICUS needs to be more realistic of what can be achieved in the current setup. While the currently discussed options are still rather vague, it is clear that the preferred option of CIVICUS focusing on civil society rights and responsibilities would allow and potentially even demand a closer integration of at least CSW, PG and the Legitimacy Transparency and Accountability (LTA) Programmes. The role of the CSI, in particular in ensuring that existing knowledge and new learning about civil society existence, expression and engagement is captured, analyzed and made available to members and other partners could remain central to the organization. In this regard, the CSI would in a more targeted way contribute to the knowledge to be disseminated and shared more widely to CIVICUS' networks and partners. However, there would be tensions between the current CSI objective of an overall 360-degree assessment on the state of civil society and CIVICUS' specific information needs on issues of civil rights and responsibilities. Thus, the link between CSI data and the information requirements by CIVICUS for its work on rights and responsibilities should not be overestimated and the tensions between current CSI scope and CIVICUS needs need to be taken into account. Furthermore, the recommendation put forth by the CSI team in the recommendation paper of

cooperating with a research institution on implementing the CSI would moreover assure that "CIVICUS is known and respected for the quality of its information and analysis", as suggested in the strategic directions document draft of the Strategic Framework exercise." Thus, while there is a lot of potential for linking the CSI to the future strategic direction of the entire organization, the practicalities of such a link entail certain challenges that would need to be further explored.

1.5 ***Project title: Should the name "Civil Society Index" be revisited?***

The evaluation report on the CSI's pilot phase recommended renaming the project to "Civil Society Assessment Project". However, the Board decided to keep the original name of "Civil Society Index" due to its track record. While the evaluation of the current phase did not raise this issue, it was discussed at the international CSI workshop. There, it seemed that critics did not take so much exception with the name, but with the underlying approach of a comparative assessment of civil society, which will be discussed below. However, the use of the word 'Index', which is methodologically speaking a misnomer, still evokes debate particularly among academics.⁷

Since certain revisions of the project methodology and a potential distinction between key project products (e.g. an internationally comparable Index and a country-level assessment) are envisioned for the project, it is recommended to keep the name for now, but to revisit it in the light of the refined project methodology, which might require a change or additions to the name of the project.

1.6 ***Ownership of the CSI implementation process***

The question of ownership of the project, its processes and products, has been an underlying challenge throughout the current implementation phase. Ownership issues have arisen at several levels:

1) Civil society vs. external stakeholders: While for CIVICUS, the project was clearly 'by and for civil society'; the external evaluation felt that the project was, to a large extent, responding to donors needs. Even if this was not the intention of CIVICUS and even if CIVICUS strongly disagrees with such an interpretation⁸, such a perception needs to be taken note of and addressed actively in the future.

⁷ Anheier 2005 states: "To begin, the label of the CIVICUS Index is somewhat misleading. When I developed the basics of what is now called the CIVICUS Index, I opted for the descriptive term CIVICUS Diamond (Anheier, 2004) in reference to the Equity Diamond introduced by Social Watch (www.socialwatch.org). The term CIVICUS Diamond provided a non-technical label for what is essentially a weakly integrated indicator system with the four dimensions of 'Structure,' 'Values,' 'Space' and 'Impact,' each with an elaborate set of indices and sub-indices. The idea was that the measurement of civil society, as a multifaceted, multi-dimensional term, required multiple sets of indices. These sets would then combine to form an indicator system. However, given current empirical knowledge, I stayed away from suggesting that the various indicators for 'Structure,' 'Values,' 'Space' and 'Impact,' would be combined into an overall single indicator or number. Indeed, taking measures of different facets or civil society dimensions, comparing and analyzing their relationships rather than combining them seemed a more fruitful approach. Hence, what is now called the CIVICUS Index is no index at all, methodologically speaking. It is an indicator system with multiple indices. Whereas an index is basically a single numerical expression of the phenomenon measured, indicators combine indices in systematic ways, and typically measure more complex phenomena that require measurement of multiple dimensions. Why is this distinction important? It is important because misnaming it is at odds with conventional social science methodology and can easily create misunderstandings."

⁸ For more details see "CIVICUS Management Response to INTRAC's Evaluation of the CSI"

2) CIVICUS vs. NCOs: While a Memorandum of Understanding detailed the respective rights and responsibilities of the two partners, and did not prove to be difficult to adhere to in practice, a number of more implicit and operational issues, gave rise to questions of ownership:

* funding: There were different expectations about CIVICUS' role as a funder of country level CSI implementations and different views on how this would affect ownership. See section on funding. The external evaluation report states: "The involvement of the CSI team in fundraising has, we believe, adversely affected the ownership of the process. This has been further complicated by the time imperative placed on some of the participating NCOs (those finished in a short time period), who felt they were being pressed by the CSI team in order to complete the project, rather than ensuring a full participatory processes and ownership at country level." (p.36)

* Assistance and quality control: The external evaluation report states that "Whilst this would seem necessary input from the CSI team in order to ensure high quality outputs and the ability to compare across countries, it also reduced the perceived ownership of the process by the NCOs." (p. 32)

* Indicator scoring: CIVICUS got more involved in verifying the accuracy of indicator scores due to high levels of inaccuracy and subjectivity in a number of countries, which implications for the ownership of this project product. See more on this under comparability.

While such tensions are part and parcel of every international project and, comparatively speaking, CIVICUS role and focus on local ownership, was praised and seen as very helpful, some lessons can be learned. Again, it seems important to achieve absolute clarity about roles and responsibilities from the outset and to be more specific about CIVICUS' quality control role of the CSI, which is seen as essential by all stakeholders.

2. METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

While there is a wide range of methodological issues and challenges for any comparative assessment project, such as the CSI, two of them have received attention by the CIVICUS board in the past. First, the Board decided to continue with the CSI's approach of 'value neutral' assessment, i.e. to assess civil society across the board and include 'uncivil' forms of civic organizing in its assessment in order to come up with an honest and accurate assessment of civil society's strengths and weaknesses. Secondly, as explained above, the Board decided that the CSI should move towards cross country comparability of its findings, which, for its first full phase, should however take a backseat in comparison to generating an accurate assessment of civil society at country level. These two issues are evaluated below.

2.1 *Value neutrality (mapping CS 'warts and all'): Did this approach work and should it be continued?*

The CSI methodology was explicit in its position regarding the value neutrality by including indicators of the extent of civil society's democracy, tolerance and non-violence (i.e. not defining CS as only the tolerant, democratic and peaceful actors, but posing the extent of tolerance etc. in CS as an empirical question). Carmen Malena has reviewed the CSI country studies in their success of sticking to this value-neutral definition. She concludes that: "While CSI practitioners understood the analytical rationale behind this decision - namely to assess all aspects of civil society (including its dark sides) to be able to make a statement about its values - they nevertheless faced vigorous resistance to this "warts and all" definition of civil society.... In the vast majority of CSI countries, the concept of civil society is clearly linked with positive values and ideals. In practice, "uncivil" elements were not normally considered part of civil society".

Thus, the outcome is mixed and depends on the country context. What is important is that one of the partners explicitly objected to the value neutral definition (even though some did in practice). The CSI is certainly among the 'avant-garde' of a more self-critical and sober perspective on civil society⁹ (with the value neutral definition being a central component of it). While this is appreciated by country partners, civil society actors have deeply engrained beliefs in civil society being only the 'good guys', which are difficult to overcome.

We can therefore conclude that the value neutral definition is seen as accurate and useful and accepted in theory, but less so in practice. Future CSI applications should pay more attention to ensuring that the definition is applied in practice.

2.2 Comparability: How well did the CSI do with regard to international comparability and what is the suggestion for the next phase?

The question of comparability of the CSI's findings is probably the most debated aspect of the project.¹⁰ Before we delve into an evaluation of the current phase, some preliminary remarks have to be made. Most importantly, the CSI always pointed to the various potential for comparing the project results, beyond the quantitative indicator scores, such as the strengths, weaknesses, recommendations and the relations among the indicators.¹¹ All of these comparisons are possible and are utilized for the second volume of the Global Survey on the State of Civil Society, currently in preparation.

However, the debate usually centres on the comparability of the quantitative indicator scores and resulting Civil Society Diamond, since here statements about which civil society is stronger/weaker than the other can be made. As the project team was aware, the project methodology which relied heavily in country stakeholders to assign scores to the indicators, included certain challenges and trade-offs between country ownership and cross country comparability. As the external evaluation notes: "The main issue is that the indicators were not "objectively" verified or standardised and so like was not compared with like" (p.12). Still, it seems that a certain level of comparability across countries has been achieved, since most of the contributions for CSI vol. 2 make use of the quantitative indicator scores, which are, however, usually combined with a thorough analysis of the qualitative data. Furthermore, it was also recognized by the external evaluators that this element is of value and importance to CSI partners as they note that "the comparison of CSI findings in one country with those in other countries is of great importance to CSI's partners – especially so to the experts who voluntarily take part in scoring the 74 indicators of which the assessment consists" (p.12)..The downside of the comparison in INTRAC's estimation was in the estimation of other partners (it was not noted who these other partners are), "were less happy about comparisons as they felt that they might

⁹ Other empirical research on civil society is also moving towards a value-neutral position, while theoretical and philosophical approaches continue to advocate that in order to belong to civil society, one has to be tolerant, democratic and peaceful (Heinrich 2005).

¹⁰ See discussion in Journal of Civil Society 2005 and 2006 and debates at international CSI workshop, for example.

¹¹ The reflection paper on the pilot phase stated: " Whereas the comparisons of *absolute* scores are limited for the current phase of the project, interesting insights through comparing *relative* scores are still possible using "second-order comparisons" which do not compare single variable scores across countries, but look at cross-country patterns of relationships between variables within a country. As the potential bias induced by relying heavily on local stakeholder assessments likely affects all indicators equally, it does not affect the relations between the indicators within the same country... Thus, valid comparisons can be drawn with regard to the ranking of the four dimensions and individual indicators across countries. One can explore cross-national patterns regarding questions concerning which indicators and dimensions were regarded as most positive or negative or concerning certain indicator correlations. Interesting insights are gained through comparing the selected indicator sets across countries, which varied based on the appropriateness of the indicators for the particular country context"

be scored and found wanting by external agents such as governments and donors” (p.12).. The evaluators themselves however question the value of international comparability at a later stage in the document, noting that “the evaluators would argue that whereas the methodology may be of merit at the country level it is questionable at the global level, particularly when trying to compare one assessment with another” (p.25).

In their review of the application of the CSI scoring methodology, the designers of the methodology provided an overall evaluation as well as specific recommendations, which this evaluation explicitly endorses:

The procedure of assigning scores on the basis of available information, and not letting the judges’ own personal perceptions and experiences unduly influence their assessment, proved to be difficult for many NAG members. While CIVICUS sought to address this concern by establishing clear guidelines and communicating them to the NAG, by institutionalizing a briefing session for the facilitator and by providing the NCO with its own scores as a validity check, it became clear that in a number of countries some specific indicators were assessed in a manner that did not respect the agreed benchmarks and guidelines. In those cases, where there was a clear discrepancy between available information and the assigned score, CIVICUS asked the NCO to justify or change the score, which addressed most of the concerns. In one case (Vietnam), the scoring exercise had to be repeated since the scoring guidelines were not followed appropriately. In the end, these measures seem to have dealt with any systematic and widespread validity problems, but were probably not able to address them entirely, and furthermore raised questions of ownership of project results.

As argued elsewhere¹², a thorough review and refinement of the indicator scoring process is therefore necessary. A potential solution would be to split those indicators which will be used for international comparison from those which will be utilized only for the country-level assessment. The process’s transparency and its resultant potential for replicability, which is clearly its main strength as compared to other measurement approaches, though, has to remain intact... As mentioned above, the translation of primary data into indicator scores needs to be strengthened by refining indicator benchmarks, including a strong role for an international review committee in the scoring process, and/or potentially creating a sub-set of indicators, which can be used for cross-country comparisons. In addition, the information gathered from the current implementation phase should be used to review the aggregation rules from indicators to subdimensions and dimensions, which currently rely on un-weighted averages.¹³

From the above discussion and the strong public attention to the issue of cross country comparability of the CSI indicator scores it is clear that this issue needs to be resolved. While important steps have been made in the current phase, the next phase needs to be absolutely explicit about which results of the CSI can be compared and which cannot. It should, by all means, attempt to achieve comparability of the indicator scores, even if this would mean adjusting the control of the country partner over this component of the project. It is important to note, that, if such trade offs are made, achieving full cross country comparability is deemed possible as the discussion above indicates.

3. OPERATIONAL ISSUES:

¹² See Heinrich 2005 and discussion in Journal of Civil Society.

¹³ In the forthcoming ‘CIVICUS Global Survey on the Status of Civil Society Volume 2: *Comparative Perspectives*’.

Last, but not least, there are a number of operational issues, which were seen as critical for the project's success.

3.1 ***Funding model: Did the funding model at national level work?***

The CSI's funding model at country level requested the country partner to fundraise for the project, while CIVICUS also sought to raise a pool of funds to support CSI implementations in those contexts, where local fundraising proved to be difficult. This approach was based on the principles of ensuring local ownership over the process. In reality, CIVICUS became more involved in supporting country partners, than originally anticipated. CIVICUS provided partial support to 27 out of the 53 partners, which totalled 385,102.00 US\$. However, we disagree with the assessment in the external evaluation study that this meant that CIVICUS acted as a main funder and/or compromised local ownership, since CIVICUS funding was mostly either matching or supplementary to existing funds. In fact, the evaluators themselves assess that "[i]nterestingly, the NCO survey revealed that local fundraising (with no involvement by CIVICUS) did not increase the level of ownership of the project at the country level" (p.36). Exceptions were the cases of Ghana and Sierra Leone, where CIVICUS acted as a conduit for funding from the World Bank. The reasons for CIVICUS involvement in country level funding were:

- CIVICUS comparative advantage with regard to country partners with a set of key international donors
- Greater efficiency since CIVICUS was able to raise resources for a group of countries simultaneously
- Short timeframe for project implementation made country level fundraising efforts difficult
- Risk of countries to drop out if matching funding was not provided

Comparing those countries with CIVICUS support with those without CIVICUS support, no apparent differences with regard to local ownership or quality become apparent. However, looking at those countries with close to full support from CIVICUS, the challenges of such a model become apparent. Here, the Sierra Leonean case, where the first CSI partner proved to be a 'briefcase NGO' and CIVICUS then needed to proactively find a new partner (rather than responding to an application), is telling. The 2nd partner, while widely recommended, mainly saw the CSI as a consultancy without the commitment which is required to make such a participatory and consultative project work. Thus, it seems that full funding from CIVICUS and a proactive search for country partners (incl. the offer of substantive funding) can compromise the project's principle of local ownership and commitment. This conclusion will be further tested in the implementation of the CSI in 4-5 African countries, which will be selected by CIVICUS and the UNDP and where UNDP provides substantive (but not full) funding. In addition, it needs to be noted that there are strong and widespread expectations of the NCOs that CIVICUS should increase its funding to country partners, which, in the view of many external stakeholders and the project team, clashes with issues of local ownership. To quote the INTRAC evaluation: "The MoU between CSI and the partners stated that CIVICUS would seek to raise a pool for funds to support those NCOs, which for various reasons, would find it hard to fundraise. This was reported to be the case by many partner NCOs interviewed at the CSI workshop in June 2006. However this does bring into question the issue of who owns the process. Whilst this would seem necessary input from the CSI team in order to ensure high quality outputs and the ability to compare across countries, it also reduced the perceived ownership of the process by the NCOs" (p.32).

While it is clear that not all external expectations can be met, it is of crucial importance for CIVICUS to be clear from the outset about its approach and capacity in providing financial

assistance to country partners and to refrain from becoming a full-fledged donor of the CSI at country level.

Examining the intense efforts by CIVICUS and the country partners to raise the necessary resources for the project, such efforts cannot be seen as sustainable in the long term. In the case of the CSI, rather than anticipate or hope for greater donor coherence towards CSOs, an opposite 'niche-seeking' strategy towards a deeper engagement with a small group of funders seems more appropriate. Looking ahead, of mutual value would be ways of reducing transaction costs by, for example, negotiating a pooling arrangement or a global fund. Such a secured resource could assist in periodic CSI-based assessments, where the change-tracking potential of the CSI could demonstrate the returns and results of substantial long-term donor investment in CSO strengthening".¹⁴

Based on these findings, it is suggested to (a) attempt to develop a pool of funding to support country partners, (b) refrain from providing substantive funding to partners (even though this is preferred by NCOs and even though this might lead to the project not being implemented in a number of countries, (c) use this pool as matching funding or to support the final stages of the project. Such an approach seems to be able to balance the needs for CIVICUS involvement in country level fundraising with the requirements of local ownership of the project.

3.2 ***Human resource model: Were the human resources available to the project adequate?***

Within CIVICUS, the CSI project team – at least during its most intense phase in late 2005/early 2006 – was often seen as very well resourced and staffed. However, in the assessment of the former ASG-P, the demands on CSI team members in terms of time and expertise were substantially higher than across the organization. This is echoed by the external evaluation, which concluded: "The CSI team has worked extremely hard under what has shown to be extremely difficult circumstances - each member of the team having multiple tasks that all have high demands and require considerable effort.... It is also important to note here that staff found that at times the expectations of what they were able to achieve were 'over ambitious', deadlines were often unrealistic and there was not only a shortage of staff but members were also always struggling to complete their 'to do list'" (p.23).

Thus, we need to evaluate whether the human resources were both quantitatively and qualitatively sufficient to meet the project's objectives. The implicit model pursued by the project's leadership, given financial, organizational and location constraints, was to build a team of highly committed and bright young professionals. While there were certain key gaps in important skills within the team (particularly in terms of research, writing, CS knowledge) – which were also identified by the external evaluation study -, overall this approach was probably the best one among the available options. A key challenge proved to be the recruitment of the project leadership, as the former leader moved to the position of ASGP. As three comprehensive attempts to recruit a highly qualified Project Manager for the CSI (which all failed) suggest, managing the CSI requires a rather unique combination of skills, which are not available at the conditions offered by CIVICUS (location and salary being the most crucial downsides).

Going forward, the external evaluation mentions the danger of losing institutional memory with the entire key staff having left/leaving the organization. This is a key challenge which is likely to

¹⁴ Such a model is also endorsed by the external evaluation, which, however, sees a fundamental mismatch between CIVICUS' role as a funder and its role as a membership organization, which staff, at least on their experience with the current phase, does not agree to. From staff's perspective CIVICUS' setup as a membership organization did not fundamentally compromise its role in providing funding to CSI partners.

have substantive implications for the success of the project. CIVICUS has so far failed to put the project on a sustainable human resource base. While the potential of cooperation with an external institution is likely to bring in lacking skills in the fields of research and policy, the gap in terms of project leadership will remain. Here, it is proposed to address this gap creatively by starting a head-hunting process and by being flexible in terms of working conditions, particularly around location, so that a suitable project leader can be found.

3.3 ***Selection of partners: Did we select suitable partners? How can this be improved?***

The selection of country partners took place via an open call for statements of interests. Applicants then underwent a desk and a peer review, before they were selected or rejected by CIVICUS. Since the external evaluation did not offer any assessment on the overall suitability of CSI partners, this section relies heavily on an assessment by key CSI staff.

The quality of the country partners in terms of their standing within civil society, research expertise, and links with the development community in their country, and convening abilities varied tremendously across countries. In a number of cases, partnerships between CS networks and research institutions/consultants were formed which generally proved to be the most successful model. In a number of cases, CIVICUS did select partners which proved to be not capable (or not committed enough) to successfully implement the project. The key lessons learned are:

- Include stronger verification of capacity and commitment into selection process
- Put substantively more focus on the review process of applications and do not shy away from rejecting unsuitable partners
- Emphasize diversity of competencies required for CSI and encourage partnerships
- Work with partners at the beginning to hone project to their country-specific circumstances and organizational needs/strengths

3.4 ***Follow-up at national level: Did CIVICUS commit itself to any follow up actions at national level or not? How did this work? To what extent does CIVICUS track country-level follow-up activities?***

As explained at the outset, the Board tasked CIVICUS to explore its involvement and support to those follow-up activities emerging from the CSI, which were in line with CIVICUS' own priorities. It is fair to say that this has not taken place. The main reasons are:

- Generally small number of follow up activities overall
- Ongoing process in many countries of identifying follow up activities
- CIVICUS has rarely been approached to get involved in follow up. Where it has and where a fit with CIVICUS' own work was detected, lack of human and financial resources on the part of CIVICUS made any significant involvement difficult, such as in the case of a regional project on strengthening civil society's transparency, in which a large number of CSI partners are involved and which draws on the CSI findings. However, since CIVICUS has neither a process/project nor any dedicated staff or funding to support such initiatives, its involvement was limited to discussions and advice by the former ASG-P.

If CIVICUS would like to continue exploring the use of the CSI as a springboard for other actions, substantive changes in programmatic structure, setup, funding and sequencing are required. Obviously, such questions should be addressed in conjunction with the new strategic plan. However, the experience from the current CSI phase shows that a involvement by CIVICUS in

follow up activities requires a similar financial and human 'war chest' as might be required by CSW if it is to get involved in human rights crisis situations.

The question about CIVICUS tracking follow-up activities is quite different and has been a focus of the CSI's M&E team. While an impressive number of 'signs of impact' of the project could be tracked and collated¹⁵, it is also clear that there is a substantive number of follow up activities, which are missed by the CSI team, since they are not reported by the country partner. Since these follow up activities are important indications of the project's success in meeting its objective of strengthening civil society, it is recommended that the revisions of the project's M&E system focus on developing an effective, but not onerous tracking system.

E. Conclusion

This document sought to provide a concise evaluation of the project's overall achievement and of a number of critical policy issues. The findings can be summarized as follows:

1. It is recommended to continue the CSI project in the future since the CSI project phase 2003-2006 was overall successful in achieving its outputs, outcomes and objectives, which are still seen as relevant.
2. A comparatively weaker performance can be noticed with regard to its CS strengthening objective. It is too early to assess the project's contribution to the overall goals.
3. It is recommended to keep the scale of the project to mid-to-large (45-60 countries) for the next implementation phase, which should be shortened in length (2008/2009).
4. It is recommended to address concerns about the viability of the current institutional setup and human resources as a matter of urgency (as proposed in the attached options paper)

Once these strategic issues have been addressed, it is suggested to act upon the remaining methodological and operational recommendations.

¹⁵ See Signs of Impact Document (available upon request)