

CIVICUS Civil Society Index Project

CIVIL SOCIETY IN UGANDA:

AT THE CROSSROADS?

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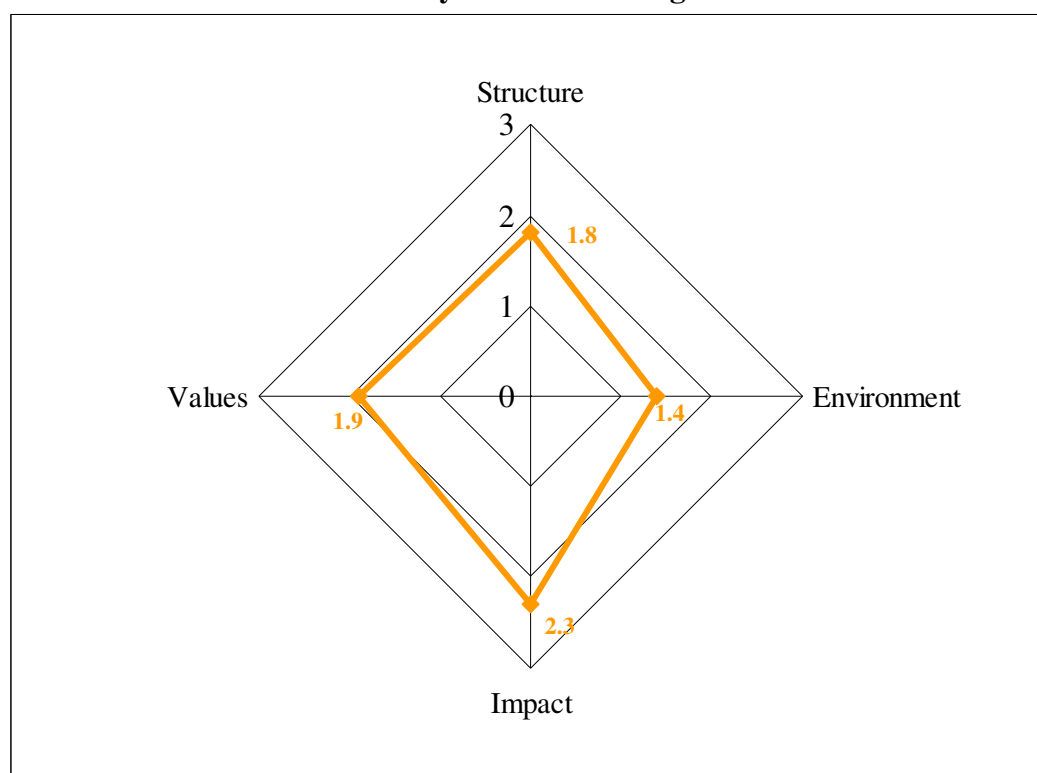
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This document was prepared by the Development Network of Indigenous Voluntary Associations (DENIVA), as part of an international initiative, the Civil Society Index (CSI) project, coordinated by CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation. The CSI assesses the state of civil society in more than 50 countries around the world, in order to “*enhance the strength and sustainability of civil society, and its contribution to positive social change*”.

For the purposes of this study, civil society was defined as *the space between family/households, state and the private sector, and is characterised by its emphasis/focus on the common good of the society*”.

The report analyses 75 indicators, relevant for understanding Uganda’s civil society. The scores are classified under four main dimensions: structure, environment, values and impact. These dimensions are then visually presented in the Civil Society Diamond, which summarises the strengths and weaknesses of civil society.

FIGURE I: CIVICUS Civil Society Diamond for Uganda



Within the **structure** dimension, the size, strength and vibrancy of civil society are analysed, in terms of human resources, organisational and economic features, extent and depth of citizen participation, diversity of civil society participants, level of organisation, inter-relations and civil society resources. The score for this dimension is **1.8**, indicating a ‘rather strong’ structure for Uganda’s civil society.

When examining the structure of Uganda's civil society, a mixed picture emerges. On the one hand, citizen participation in CSOs appears to be very extensive. To a great extent this is because rural life, in this largely agrarian country, is often accompanied by membership in various forms of community and other mutual help groups, which are rather socially inclusive, and to which church-linked organisations can be added. Thus, volunteering and other forms of community action appear to be prevalent. However, for reasons often linked to the country's history of civil strife and repressive regimes, such participation does not necessarily mean an 'activist' political involvement. This was highlighted as a 'weakness' of Uganda's civil society at a National Workshop, which was held to discuss the research results at the conclusion of the CSI project.

Super-imposed upon this large number of community groups are other, often more recent, forms of CSOs. These include 'NGOs' and their many networks and coalitions, trade unions and other forms of mostly urban-based forms of collaborative undertakings, such as professional associations. These appear to often be a donor-dependent part of civil society, with staff, vehicles, projects and agendas that ordinary people do not always associate with, or feel close to. It is a somewhat fragmented and competitive sector that is often governed by suspicion, and where accountability to donors often takes precedence over accountability to the local population. Nevertheless, there is evidence that it is gradually re-structuring itself, for example through networks, and by attempting to regulate itself. National Workshop participants voiced their desire that efforts in both these directions be amplified and sustained.

When analysing the overall political, social, economic, cultural and legal environment within which civil society exists and functions, the score for the **environment** dimension is **1.4**. This indicates an environment that is somewhat more "disabling" than "enabling" for civil society.

This is partly explained by the analysis of the political and socio-economic contexts, which are seen as rather disabling for civil society. While enshrined in the Constitution, political and civil rights, information rights and press freedom are not always respected and the opening of political competition is still recent and seen as pregnant with uncertainties. Insurgency continues in the northern part of the country at considerable human and economic cost.

Uganda remains an extremely poor country, although less poor than 20 years ago, with a growing gap between the rich and the poor. Corruption is rampant, although the effectiveness of state services has improved significantly in the last two decades. Connected to these deficiencies, the CSI also found moderate levels of interpersonal trust, tolerance and public spiritedness among Ugandans.

The legal environment for civil society is also judged to be not as enabling as it could be. This is due to the cumbersome registration procedures for CSOs, which, to the dismay of National Workshop participants, may soon be tightened even further, the poor tax environment and the Government's ambivalent attitude on what constitutes allowable advocacy activities for CSOs, especially when they 'stray' into what it considers the political arena.

The latter point highlights a relationship between the state and civil society where, overall, both parties see their role as one of collaboration, rather than confrontation. This echoes the low degree of 'political activism' within civil society, and the historical role of CSOs in Uganda,

which focuses on service delivery. Nevertheless, this relationship is changing on several fronts. Both parties are increasingly seeing advocacy work as a legitimate area of work for CSOs to engage in. It is also one that donors support, and government is opening avenues for, especially at the district level, where CSOs are being contracted for service delivery. The tendency is increasing and replacing the rather weak State apparatus. NGOs must now temper their accountability role and may even adopt more business-like attitudes, which are both positive and negative.

Less important at the present time is the relationship with the private sector. CSOs do not feel especially concerned with this relationship, since they currently do not benefit much from funding from the private sector, except in a few high-profile cases.

However, are CSOs themselves increasingly turning into private businesses? This question is a symptom of a broader one, linked to a profoundly changing operating environment, as the boundaries between the state, the private sector and civil society become increasingly blurred. It is a question that underlines a growing challenge for CSOs wishing to retain autonomy, which cannot be nurtured without a strong sense of identity. Can civil society hold the state accountable to the people, without a strong sense of values to effectively perform their ‘fourth estate’ role?

The analysis then turned to civil society’s **value base**. Overall, Uganda’s civil society was rated to practice and promote positive social values to a “moderate extent”, with a score of **1.9** for this dimension.

Having noted the changing context within which CSOs operate and how their positioning with regard to “democracy” has shifted with time, and recalling their important role in the fight for independence and their subsequent intimidation by the neo-colonial state, it was found that some CSOs continue to struggle with living and promoting values that are frequently associated with the ‘voluntary sector’. This is especially true of CSOs grappling with internal democracy and transparency and the promotion of democracy, but it also applies to other values, such as ‘tolerance’, ‘non-violence’ and ‘gender equity’. In all such cases, there seems to be a hiatus between rhetoric and practice, which, in the case of NGOs, reflects the social desirability and material benefits associated with “NGO work”. This can lead to disillusionment among other stakeholders, such as donors, who then question the legitimacy of CSOs in representing the poor.

CSOs appear more comfortable with ‘poverty eradication’ as a value, and, to some extent, ‘environmental sustainability’. This corresponds with their historical role and the way most of them define their current primary role in Uganda’s civil society. It is apparent that this also comes through when examining the ‘impact’ of civil society.

The **impact** dimension describes the extent to which civil society is active and successful in fulfilling several essential functions in Ugandan society and politics. The score for Impact is a rather high **2.3**.

The overall picture that emerges is one of intense CSO activity, including that of faith-based organisations, in service delivery and citizens’ economic and social empowerment, rather than other forms of engagement, such as policy advocacy work or holding Government and private corporations accountable. The direct provision of social and economic services is also where one

finds the most substantial traces of impact. There are several reasons for this. The strengths of civil society in these areas of work include: proximity to beneficiaries, the diversity of its skills and competences and civil society's commitment. However, one can add the weight of history and tradition; the large number of community organisations, specifically set up to meet members' livelihood needs; the rather donor-driven nature of advocacy work and the limited credibility of CSOs in this area. Another important issue is the desire, on the part of CSOs, to complement the work of Government, rather than question it, either because it corresponds to their worldview and social make-up or because they find a measure of benefit in this positioning, such as contracts for service delivery work.

In spite of these obstacles, noticeable change is taking place. NGOs are increasingly involved in trilateral meetings with donors and government on major policy priorities. The voice of civil society is beginning to be heard more loudly on issues, including human rights, basic needs and people's marginalisation.

Some networks and coalitions are proving to be effective in this respect, providing members with fora through which the collective consensus of organisations can be expressed to policy makers and others. Efforts are also being made to develop skills, and to enhance citizen participation in local governance. Taking a medium-term perspective, there is some evidence that opportunities for influencing Government are growing.

While further efforts were considered desirable by National Workshop participants, it was recognised that this will require better collaboration among CSOs, more autonomy from Government and enhanced credibility in the eyes of all stakeholders. This, however, can only be realised if suspicions among CSOs are allayed, sub-contracting from government is controlled and an emerging 'NGO Quality Assurance Mechanism' is implemented.

This is a significant agenda item for CSOs in Uganda to move ahead with. In a sense, Uganda's civil society is at a crossroads. Will it confine itself to a somewhat docile role, focusing on service delivery and sub-contracting from government? Or will it further develop its capacity to question the socio-political make-up of Uganda, striving to augment its autonomy, its sense of independent identity, its cohesion and its local ownership?