



Methodological note on the CIVICUS' Civil Society Enabling Environment Index (EE Index)

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Introduction

Since the 1990s, there have been attempts at measuring and assessing civil society. Some have focused almost exclusively on 'counting' nonprofit organisations, assuming that the number and resources (both financial and human) mobilised by registered voluntary organisations were the best (and possibly most relevant) representation of the civil society world. Others, by using public opinion surveys, have assessed civil society by analysing the type and scale of membership in civic organisations. For some, measuring civil society was part of a broader strategy to support non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in new democracies (especially in the former Soviet Union and in Africa); for others it was an opportunity for civil society organisations (CSOs) to look at themselves and identify their own strengths and weaknesses.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, there was a strong interest in civil society per se, as phenomena of mass participation led to important changes in political and social life. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, civil society came to be seen as the 'magic bullet' to address all types of challenges, from democratic governance to development. This was an era in which conventional NGOs dominated the civil society space. More recently the public discourse and reflection on civil society have become more nuanced. There is a growing realisation that there is a plurality of civil *societies*, with actors that may have different features and objectives, including contrasting internal dynamics. Moreover, there is a general agreement that voluntary organisations (especially the nonprofits and NGOs) are just a small group within a much larger environment: as a consequence, they can no longer be treated as key proxies for the whole civil society universe. Civil society is increasingly regarded as a 'sphere' or an 'arena' of participation. This has rendered many conventional methodologies of simply surveying NGOs, the nonprofit and/or the voluntary sector rather obsolete for those truly interested in capturing the diversity of civil society and how it ultimately contributes to democracy and development.

At the policy level, similar changes have taken place. Aid agencies and most Western donors have for a long time adopted a very narrow approach to civil society aid. They have

limited their programmes to supporting NGOs and non-profit organisations, leaving out the manifold manifestations of civic activism, especially social movements, indigenous organisations and, of course, the numerous forms of individual (unorganised) activism. Yet, when it came to promoting participation, these ‘alternative’ forms of civic action turned out to be as equally powerful and decisive as (if not more powerful and decisive than) the spate of NGOs and nonprofits funded by international aid. The wave of uprisings that has been spanning the Arab World since early 2011 (which is usually referred to as the Arab Spring) has been a powerful reality check for analysts and policy makers alike, who could not fathom how such a strong civic reaction could be possible in countries where NGOs and nonprofits had been traditionally weak. For donors, this was also an important wake-up call, which should possibly lead to a profound redesign of their democracy assistance programmes.

Civil Society – CSI’s approach

The Civil Society Index (CSI), created and implemented by *CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation* for which I have played a part in its re-design and implementation, was designed to overcome the shortcomings of the organisational focus adopted by most civil society assessments. The CSI defines civil society as “the arena, outside of the family, the state, and the market, which is created by individual and collective actions, organisations and institutions to advance shared interests.” By endorsing a spatial definition of civil society as an ‘arena’ populated by groups, individuals and organisations, rather than a collective noun describing certain types of organisations, the CSI aimed to shift the focus from the ‘list’ of NGOs or nonprofits to the space for collective action.

This ‘arena’ approach allowed for a more flexible (and continuously evolving) understanding of who belongs to civil society and under what circumstances. The concept of an arena (or a sphere) highlights the fact that civil society’s contours are not set in stone: to the contrary, they are fluctuating and adapt to changing contexts. While conventional understandings tend to be rather static (that is, who is *in* and *out* of civil society is decided once and for all based on the specific characteristics of each organisation), the CSI’s approach allows for a more dynamic analysis of civil society’s internal differences and its continuous evolution. Whether a NGO, a social movement, a liberation movement or even a business association, what defines its belonging to civil society is the function it performs at a given point in time. Thus, any of these actors would be entering the civil society arena when advancing common or shared interests and leaving it when pursuing private goals.

The CSI’s ultimate aim was to promote a self-reflection among civil society stakeholders as to the state of civic activism around the world. As an action-research project, it used data to encourage advocacy in defence of civil society rights and obligations. Nevertheless, like any attempt to encapsulate civil society into a definitional framework, the CSI’s spatial approach also revealed a number of limitations. It turned out almost impossible to condense the plurality and diversity of civil society expressions across all continents of the world. As NGOs (being the leading groups among CIVICUS’ partners) were leading the research efforts at the national level, this inevitably resulted in a conceptual bias against ‘other’

forms of civic activism. In some countries, political parties were included in the assessments, while in others they were excluded. In a few cases, trade unions were left out. In others, social movements and other more ‘political’ forms of participation were given only a marginal weight.

Despite operational limitations, spatial approaches to civil society have attempted to fill a critical gap in social and political research. By providing more fluid definitions than those adopted by organisational studies, they have opened up new possibilities to rethink civil society as an arena of participation, through which individuals and/or groups promote their interests, voice their grievances or simply build social capital. Whether animated by progressive or regressive values, liberal or conservative principles, lay or religiously inspired visions of society, this arena of participation is a fundamental component of any society capable of articulating its needs and demands.

If the existence of such an arena is therefore undisputed, then what becomes more interesting from an analytical point of view is not who is part of it and who is not (the essential question of organisational approaches). Rather the key question becomes: *what conditions make individuals capable of participating in such an arena to fulfill their social goals*. This is also a relevant question from a policy point of view. What are the enabling conditions that make it possible for individuals and groups to unite in different forms and capacities (regardless of culture, religion, language and values) to become active citizens?

Measuring the ‘enabling environment’ of civil society: a capability approach

There is undeniable complexity in defining what constitutes an enabling environment for civil society. One approach would be to equate civil society with society at large and argue that higher socio-economic development is the best indication of an enabling civil society. An opposite approach, informed by legalistic considerations, would consider civil society’s environment as consisting merely of legal or regulatory frameworks. There is truth in both approaches. As civil society is the arena of participation, it evidently is affected by both socio-economic factors as well as political and legal factors.

In order to combine analytical clarity and operationability, with a view to striking a balance between comprehensiveness and relevance for policy action, we define civil society’s enabling environment as “a set of conditions that impact on the capacity of citizens (whether individually or in an organised fashion) to participate and engage in the civil society arena in a sustained and voluntary manner.” As such, this approach recognises that the enabling environment includes not only legal, regulatory and policy frameworks but also specific political/governmental, economic and socio-cultural factors. This formulation is consistent with what has been endorsed and used by various civil society groups and multilateral/multi-stakeholder groups, including the World Bank and OECD.

We believe that the widely used model of *capability approach* holds significant potential in the assessment of civil society’s environment, just as it serves as an analytical tool to understand the human development of society as a whole. Initially conceived in the 1980s

as an approach to welfare economics, the capability approach is a broad normative framework for the evaluation and assessment of individual wellbeing and social arrangements, the design of policies, and proposals about societal change. It has now grown into a highly influential assessment model in human development theories, and has led to the creation of the HDI (Human Development Index), IHDI (Inequality-adjusted HDI) and GII (Gender Inequality Index) and their uses among international organisations such as the UN and others.

In welfare economics, the capability approach emphasises the underlying conditions that make individuals ‘capable’ of fulfilling their own goals. Unlike conventional assessments based on utility maximisation, the capability approach rethinks the concept of development by shifting the attention away from output-based dimensions such as income and GDP. Moreover, by focusing on the underlying conditions that make individuals capable of achieving their goals, this approach presents a non-prescriptive recipe for comparative assessments. Various experiences have also demonstrated that this model can be used as a framework to develop and evaluate policies, ranging from welfare state design to development of policies by governments and CSOs.

As discussed above, most conventional research on civil society has focused on measuring the scale of the organisational sector (e.g. nonprofit). In so doing, it has looked at parameters such as the income generated, the financial and human resources employed and the funding received by civil society organisations. In many regards, this approach resembles the traditional way of measuring social development in terms of GDP as it is fundamentally based on ‘outputs’. By applying the capability lens to the assessment of civil society, the attention shifts from what civil society ‘produces’ to the underlying conditions that make individuals able to promote collective action. This way of reasoning is not prescriptive (e.g. collective action can take place with or without organisations and can assume many different forms) and suitable for a deeper assessment of the enabling conditions that allow for civic action.

To be able to participate in the civil society arena, individuals have to possess a number of capabilities. When these capabilities are either not present or significantly underprovided, then participation (should it take place at all) becomes a ‘last resort’ act of resistance, a form of ultimate survival. A capability approach emphasises civic participation as a fundamental ingredient of a healthy society, not as a form extreme resistance out of despair. While it is true that forms of mobilisation can be prompted by extreme deprivation, long-term civic engagement is only possible with a certain degree of empowerment. At the policy level, it would make little sense to argue that harsh social and human conditions are good for civil society just because, from time to time, they elicit some type of bottom-up reaction. Thus, it is fair to argue that an enabling environment for regular and systematic civic participation can only be achieved when a certain set of factors are present, at least in some degree.

The EE Index’s Methodology

As is always the case in quantitative comparative research, the choice of capabilities or core underlying factors is determined, as much as possible, by a focus on what is measurable. Moreover, from a policy perspective, the emphasis should be placed on what is ‘actionable’, that is, what can be altered through individual or collective agency. In composing a matrix of indicators, it is necessary to strike a balance between comprehensiveness and accessibility. Long and exhaustive lists are not necessarily better: often they are too ‘heavy’ for users to digest and their complexity may become a disadvantage in stimulating dialogue and action. Given these considerations, and consistent with the above working definition of enabling environment, we have identified 3 main dimensions.

1. **Socio-economic environment:** it provides a series of assessments of factors such as education, equity, gender equality and, quite importantly to support civic participation in the age of the digital revolution, the development of communication technologies;
2. **Socio-cultural environment:** it examines cultural factors reinforcing the capacity of citizens to get involved in the civil society arena, such as inter-personal trust and tolerance, inclination to join collective action and solidarity;
3. **Governance environment:** it includes fundamental capabilities that create the minimum preconditions, or lack thereof, for social and political engagement. These include the overall state effectiveness, rule of law, policy dialogue, corruption, associational rights and political liberties. It also covers a series of personal rights, guarantees against unduly interference from state agencies or private actors, freedom of speech, media freedom and, importantly, it assesses the regulatory frameworks for NGOs.

Each dimension is subdivided into various sub-dimensions, which are in turn made up of a number of indicators collected from existing sources (some of which are official statistics and others produced by reputable international data agencies). All indicators have been rescaled between 0 (lowest level of capability) and 1 (highest level of capability), following a conventional approach in comparative measurements across the world (see for instance the UNDP Human Development Index).

Key considerations about the methodology

As the team designing the methodology needed to rely on existing data sources, key decisions as to how to aggregate them were in order. One of our main objectives was to be able to cover the largest possible number of countries. As some data sources have similar or identical information (but different coverage) we complemented them whenever possible. Ultimately, we ended up with 71 data sources (existing data), which were aggregated into 17 indicators and then re-aggregated into the 3 dimensions mentioned above (socio-economic environment has 4 indicators, socio-cultural environment has 4 indicators, governance environment has 9). The list of sub-dimensions is reproduced in Table 1 below. Refer to the Dimensions and Indicators Table for further details.

Table 1: Dimensions and Sub-dimensions

Dimensions	Sub-dimensions
Socio-economic environment	Education
	Communications
	Equity
	Gender equality
Socio-cultural environment	Propensity to participate
	Tolerance
	Trust
	Solidarity
Governance Environment	Civil society infrastructure
	Policy dialogue
	Corruption
	Political rights and freedoms
	Associational and organisational rights
	Rule of law
	Personal rights
	NGO legal framework
Media Freedom	

The Dimensions and Indicators table show what indicators are used for each of the sub-dimensions. The score for each sub-dimension has been computed by using a simple average of indicator scores (whenever necessary, each indicator has been re-scaled to 1 = most enabling to 0 = most disabling). Then, the same procedure for aggregating sub-dimensions into a dimension score has been used. The governance dimension is 50% of the final EEI score, while the socio-economic and the socio-cultural dimensions are each 25% of the EEI score.

One of the issues we had to deal with was data standardisation. As above, we selected the HDI approach for data aggregation, i.e. original scores had to be rescaled between 0 and 1, where 1 is the maximum (most enabling) and 0 is the minimum (most disabling).

Another problem we faced was the number of countries covered by each data source. There is no single country that is covered by all 71 data sources. However, by aggregating the various data sources into the actual dimensions, we have identified two groups of countries: 109 countries (refer to Group A in the excel sheet available on CIVICUS' website with data for all 223 countries and territories) with data for at least 14 sub-dimensions (28 countries that have the scores for all 17 sub-dimensions, 8 countries with 16 scores, 49 with 15 scores and 24 with 14 scores); all other countries (referred to as Group B), which have scores for less than 14 sub-dimensions. This cut-off was established by a rule of thumb, in order to have an acceptable degree of information (14 out of 17) for a considerable number of countries (109), amounting to roughly 90% of all sub-dimensions.