CIVICUS CIVIL SOCIETY INDEX SLOVENIA
Policy Action Brief

Tatjana Rakar, Senka Š. Vrbica, Tomaž Deželan, Zinka Kolarič, Andreja Črnak-Meglič, Mateja Nagode, Ana Matoz Ravnik

Ljubljana, February 2011

In partnership with CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation and the Republic of Slovenia
Ministry of Public Administration
1. Executive summary

This Policy Action Brief serves as a guiding document to government, key constituencies and civil society to take the actions necessary to strengthen civil society and address weaknesses identified in the 2008-2011 Civil Society Index (CSI) project.

The CSI research shows that the area that needs most improvement is the low perception of impact of CSO activities on important areas of social life. The main course of action suggested to improve this is establishing or enhancing dialogue between CSOs and decision makers. Emphasis should also be given to increasing the public funding for CSOs through establishing an NGO fund. These two actions are needed in order for civil society in Slovenia to reach a stage of maturity and breakthrough.

2. Introduction

The CIVICUS CSI is an international action-research project that comprehensively assesses the state of civil society in various countries. CSI began in 2000. Slovenia has now successfully implemented the CSI twice, between 2003 and 2006 and now from 2008 to 2011. The Slovenian implementation team included the Legal and Information Centre for NGOs (LIC) in Ljubljana and the Social Protection Institute of the Republic of Slovenia, under the auspices of the Ministry of Public Administration. The main aim of CSI is to provide a space for civil society to reflect on its strengths and weaknesses and make recommendations for action to strengthen the sector. The Slovenia CSI results, articulated through this policy brief, will subsequently constitute the basis for collaboration with stakeholders and constituencies for change.

The state of civil society is assessed through four main dimensions of the CSI Diamond as seen below: Civic Engagement, Level of Organisation, Practice of Values, and Perceived Impact. These are then analysed within the context of the fifth dimension, the External Environment in which civil society operates. The Civil Society Diamond below visualises the CSI findings in Slovenia:

The Slovenian Civil Society Diamond
3. Main findings

Civic Engagement: Slovenian people quite readily engage as members of CSOs and volunteers. While the contribution of volunteering to social welfare by enabling fast and efficient responses to social needs is readily recognised, voluntary work still lacks the social affirmation that would result from systemic government support. Harnessing the energy of volunteers entails good organisation, protection of volunteers and expert guidance. A law on voluntary work, which should address these issues, and which CSOs drafted in 2004, was passed by the Parliament in February 2011. This law needs to be applied to its full extent. Compared to high levels of volunteering, only a tiny share of the population is actively engaged in political parties; this is largely due to a lack of trust.

Level of Organisation: There have been no significant positive recent changes in financing of and employment in the civil society sector. While the number of CSOs grew over twofold between 1996 and 2008, CSOs total income increased only from 1.92% to 1.99% as a percentage of GDP. At the same time, the number of employees in civil society relative to the total number of employees in Slovenia remained essentially unchanged at a low 0.7%. The Slovenian civil society landscape is marked by a lack of substantial government funding and modest support from other sources, coupled with the constant struggle for grants awarded at public tenders, and the need to meet demanding eligibility criteria, all of which greatly reduce CSOs’ autonomy and independence.

Practice of Values: CSOs generally adhere to an ethos of democratic decision-making, good treatment of staff, transparency and concern for the environment. However, they do not feel an explicit need to emphasise and promote these values and standards on their own accord. Increasingly, practice has seen these values tested, especially regarding labour standards. The reason for this is the general shortage of labour and finance in the sector. Financial survival often demands that CSOs sacrifice their values.

Perception of Impact: This is the lowest scoring area, which offers the most telling sign of the state of civil society in Slovenia. There is a clear discrepancy between the activity of civil society and its impact on society and on the government. The government refuses to recognise civil society as a relevant actor and partner. Consultation is often formal and civil society neutralised, although there are a few positive exceptions (such as the drafting of the volunteerism Act). At the same time the public is passive, showing low confidence that its representatives can really make a change.
4. Government-civil society cooperation

Since 2005, when the first CIVICUS CSI report was published on the state of civil society in Slovenia, cooperation between CSOs and government has been at a standstill. At that time, two documents were being drafted in collaboration between the government and CSOs, The Strategy of the Systemic Development of NGOs in Slovenia in 2003–2008 and The Cooperation Agreement between NGOs and the Government of the Republic of Slovenia 2005–2008. Although cooperation efforts date back eight years, little has been achieved other than compiling this agreement, which has never been applied in practice. After CSOs had drafted a version, government effectively put the initiative on hold.

While there have been no major efforts since to establish a framework to facilitate the development of civil society, the Ministry of Public Administration at least provided for the funding of CSO networks from EU structural funds. More recently, after the 2008 elections dialogue between Government and CSOs was re-launched, when CSOs successfully appealed to the prime minister and the new coalition to include provisions regarding the development of CSOs.

In 2009, CSOs submitted a memorandum detailing their potential role in overcoming the economic crisis and expressing their expectations regarding the development of civil society. The memorandum is a new joint venture based on open discussions for the development of civil society in Slovenia. In response, government appointed an inter-departmental working group responsible for coordinating responses to the memorandum, designing a government strategy for collaboration with CSOs between 2009 and 2012, and monitoring and coordinating its implementation. While any results from this process remain to be seen, this is an important step for the future development of Slovenian civil society and governmental relationships.

Procedures are underway to improve government’s role in civil dialogue. In November 2009, the National Assembly passed a Resolution on Legislative Regulation that established guidelines for improved regulations and minimum standards of public participation in drafting legislation. It will be important to ensure that these are adhered to.

Governments’ rules of procedure have also been amended to aid public participation. At the European level, good practices of public participation in the legislative process are contained in the 2009 Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation in the Decision-Making Process. This contains a list of European principles and guidelines for CSO participation in decision-making that will be implemented by Council of Europe members at local and national levels. It is essential that these be correctly applied in Slovenia.
5. Strengths and weaknesses of civil society

To encourage further development of CSOs, Slovenia should use the identified strengths of CSOs, which include:

⇒ There are many active CSOs that know their areas of work very well; are flexible and locally active; and their level of motivation and engagement is high;

⇒ CSOs are well organised, and have good regional structures, with well-established regional CSO hubs;

⇒ Promotion of positive values is intrinsic to the civil society sector; the public is sensitised through CSOs; social welfare is the daily work of civil society;

⇒ CSOs are familiar with social needs and are in close contact with the local environment; they respond quickly to violation of human rights and natural disasters; they generally practice participatory and democratic governance; they wish to participate in civil dialogue and have the necessary expertise to advance policies.

Through these strengths above, we can deal with the main weaknesses which are:

⇒ a low standard of living prevents people from engaging more in civil society activities; young people are not sufficiently educated on democratic forms of governance;

⇒ current financing schemes do not facilitate development of CSOs; there is no practice of philanthropy; there are no uniform criteria on the work of CSOs in the public interest; grants from state and local budget allocated through calls for funding do not enable CSOs to maintain or upgrade their infrastructure and decrease the autonomy of CSOs; unstable financing causes high staff turnover and prevents long-term employee stability.

⇒ the government is unresponsive to initiatives and proposals from civil society; although civil society is actively engaged in putting forward proposals and initiatives, there is no real effect, since the government is not required to adopt them.

⇒ dependence on state sources of financing weakens CSOs’ advocacy for fear of consequences; CSOs are not familiar enough with the concept of civil dialogue; marketing and lobbying for achieving goals are weak.

⇒ the culture of silence as a consequence of previous socialism practices is still highly present in Slovenian mentality.
6. Policy recommendations: action agenda

The CSI research has identified that increasing financial sustainability and professionalism are the two chief factors that could ensure the growth of civil society in Slovenia.

TO IMPROVE THE SITUATION THE GOVERNMENT SHOULD:

⇒ **Establish uniform criteria for the work of CSOs in the public interest.** This basic condition, which government needs to ensure, would be an essential contribution to strengthening the social responsibility of CSOs and enable distribution of public funds to socially useful areas. Organisations working in the public interest currently have a range of statuses, which significantly decreases recognition of CSOs’ role.

⇒ **Establish an NGO fund** to ensure co-financing in cases when it is necessary to raise additional funds for project implementation. It is very difficult for CSOs to cope with the current project-based financing system which increases instability. A CSO fund would provide continued liquidity, as well as enhance the public legitimacy to CSOs.

⇒ **Replace short-term financing of CSOs with long-term programme-based financing.** Long-term core-funding rather than project-based funding would provide funds ahead of projects, rather than by subsequent compensation.

⇒ **Increase donations by amending the Foundations Act and corresponding tax legislation.** The lack of donations has weakened CSOs and rendered them more dependent on public finance.

⇒ **Amend the Institutes Act and separate institutes from public institutes.** Many CSOs in Slovenia are currently registered as institutes. The many regulations and restrictions imposed on institutes often hinder organisations to implement their planned activities freely.

⇒ **Increase employment opportunities in CSOs** through continuous financing, but also by promotion and financial support for employment.

In order to facilitate the implementation of the above-suggested changes, both the government and civil society must jointly develop a clear strategy on supporting measures for the development of CSOs together with clear action plan on how to achieve these measures.

CSOs SHOULD:

⇒ **Strengthen links within the sector** for better cooperation among organisations and greater strength in civil dialogue.

⇒ Increase the number of **partnerships between CSOs and companies** in order to increase Social Corporate Responsibility (CSR) practices. Strong, constructive and healthy connections between CSOs and companies are vital in developing social responsibility on both sides.

⇒ **Increase their activities at the local level**, through establishing local hubs that provide necessary services, experience, and knowledge.
⇒ **Strengthen transparency and responsibility within civil society**, by exposing all their activities and actions to the public.

⇒ **Overcome the political deficit**, as the number of people engaged in political parties is currently very low, through offering alternative forms of democratic engagement.

⇒ **Attract experts**, and increase links to national and international academia. Experts, academics, and intellectuals have an in-depth understanding of society, and can contribute a great deal to the constructive creation of strong and well-informed civil society.

⇒ **Promote social justice values through their own actions**, and raise awareness among CSOs about the importance of their organisational and personal social responsibility. CSOs serve as important examples to the wider public, and this should be one of the strategic orientations of the sector.

⇒ **Continue the implementation of the quality assurance system in CSOs**. The introduction of the quality assurance system has proved effective in streamlining operations within CSOs, and this practice now needs further promotion.

**THE ABSOLUTE PRIORITY: STRENGTHENING CIVIL DIALOGUE**

Only if civil society strengthens its networks, and establishes more effective communication channels, will the government be compelled to interact and develop more favourable policies. Only then can a strong and robust civil society mobilise the otherwise somewhat indifferent public.

**THEREFORE, CSOs MUST:**

⇒ **Acquire political will and raise civil servants’ awareness of the importance of civil dialogue**. Civil servants are generally not familiar enough with the civil society sector and its participatory role; their awareness needs to be raised through campaigns.

⇒ **Increase civil society’s influence during pre-election periods** to advocate for the most appropriate candidates. During pre-election periods, CSOs should counter the public ignorance of politics by encouraging political candidacy at the local and national levels.

⇒ **Improve communication methods** with a view to attaining objectives, especially through lobbying.

⇒ **Respond promptly to current issues**. There is a need for continuous and professional responses to, and participation in, policy and decision-making processes.

⇒ **Increase vigorous campaigns for civil dialogue** through NGO strikes or civil disobedience. The importance of civil society should be demonstrated in the face of government’s ignorance; for example, all volunteers could go on strike.

⇒ **Demand that the government establishes appropriate mechanisms for civil dialogue**. Even if the law stipulates public participation, for example in environmental issues, the government often meets the requirements only formally.
⇒ **Expand democracy in practice**, beyond parliamentary democracy, into participatory and deliberative democracy. Citizens are not aware that democracy should not be limited to parliamentary elections and that also other forms of democracy exist.

⇒ **Improve the promotion of the civil society sector** through examples of good practice in the media. Currently, civil society’s media image is not favourable, and civil society has not invested efforts to improve this.

⇒ **Encourage further civic activism.** The recent *Let’s Clean up Slovenia* campaign showed that large-scale activism has a synergetic effect, so similar campaigns should become regular actions.

⇒ **Increase civic education on civic responsibility and rights**, because the principle reason for a relatively passive public is their limited knowledge of rights and responsibilities. Individuals are not sufficiently aware of their co-responsibilities in society.

⇒ **Increase the number of well-planned long-term campaigns** in order to make sustained change. Currently, due to poor financial opportunities, ideas are developed and implemented only for short periods of time and, consequently, fail to achieve the desired effect. CSOs should draw up long-term strategic plans, acknowledge this problem, and pursue their goals in the long term.

| CSOs, and particularly their networks, should include the above-mentioned activities in their respective long-term strategic plans and consistently implement them in order to improve the state of civil society in Slovenia. |