

From Impossibility to Reality:

A REFLECTION AND POSITION PAPER ON THE
CIVICUS INDEX ON CIVIL SOCIETY PROJECT
1999-2001

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¹ For a list of project advisory group members, refer to Appendix 2.

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Part I

Introduction

The last two decades undoubtedly have witnessed an unprecedented rise in citizen engagement in public life. From local farmers' associations in South Asian villages, to the popular pro-democracy movements in various authoritarian and totalitarian regimes and the global movement against neo-liberal globalisation strongly visible since the 1999 protests in Seattle, citizens are now vividly, and often successfully, voicing their interests at all levels of governance, from the local to the national and global.²

Increasingly, the many different forms and expressions of citizen participation are brought together under the conceptual and theoretical roof of "civil society." Rooted in various traditions of Western philosophy (see Cohen and Arato, 1992, Tocqueville, 1956, Ferguson, 1995, Gramsci, 1971, Hegel, 1945), the term civil society has become increasingly detached from its Western origins and is now aimed at becoming universally applicable as an analytic and positive concept, encompassing the various associational forms of citizen action around the world (see Hann and Dunn, 1996, Salamon and Anheier, 1999). An alternative application, often linked to the former, promotes civil society as a normatively loaded ideal type of democratic, liberal, participatory and progressive society. In both usages, civil society is commonly defined in contrast to the two other main sectors of society, viz. the state and the market, and is therefore often referred to as the third sector.

However, the term civil society has not yet fully succeeded in serving as a unifying framework for practitioners and researchers interested in promoting and understanding the joint actions of people. There are many reasons for its ambivalent record in tackling its most fundamental challenge, that is to transcend the ivory tower debates of the academy without becoming an empty slogan meaning everything to all people. Prominent amongst these are the huge conceptual ambiguities surrounding the term and the absence of an established international information system assembling relevant data with regards to civil society around the world. These difficulties will be reviewed in greater detail in subsequent sections.

The resulting status of the civil society concept has proved to be rather negative for the activities of civil society practitioners. What is most obviously lacking is a crucial body of knowledge on the characteristics, causes and consequences of civil society's activities around the world, a shared perspective among all potential stakeholders as being a part of civil society, a framework and meeting ground for dialogue and debate and a common action agenda for civil society actors to jointly promote positive social change.

In recognising and reflecting upon this need, CIVICUS designed the *CIVICUS Index on Civil Society* project (hereafter referred to as the *Index*) as a diagnostic tool for civil society practitioners and policy-makers that aims to fill these voids, strengthening civil society through a threefold process:

² In fact, the creation of CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation is also a consequence of this growth process as leaders of various civic groups around the world recognised the need for an effective international co-operation and information sharing on the various issues surrounding civic engagement.

- By increasing the knowledge and understanding of civil society through reflecting on and assessing the health and nature of the sector
- By empowering civil society stakeholders through promoting dialogue, alliances and networks
- By providing stakeholders with a tool for developing a vision of civil society in the future, and an agenda to achieve this vision

The project design and implementation plan was tested in a pilot phase in 2000/2001 at a national level in thirteen countries around the world.³ During this process, the project faced challenges and questions, forcing CIVICUS to delve more deeply into the issues surrounding the analysis and strengthening of civil society. Following are some initial reflections on the pilot phase still under way, to communicate to the public the project's rationale and the critical choices made by CIVICUS in designing and implementing the *Index*. In this manner, we hope to catalyse open debate over the successes and challenges facing the project as well as larger issues relating to the analysis and the strengthening of civil society.

The remainder of the paper briefly describes the development of the project up to August 2001 (Section 2), the basic framework for the project implementation (Section 3), the various challenges faced and solutions adopted in the project design (Section 4) and some of the preliminary findings of the pilot implementation phase (Section 5). The conclusion offers a first evaluation of the project's success and discusses potential ways forward (Section 6).

³For a list of pilot phase NLOs, see Appendix 1

Part II

“An Exercise in Madness?” A Brief History of the CIVICUS Index on Civil Society⁴

From its inception, CIVICUS was expected to contribute significantly to recording the rise of civil society around the world and to building the knowledge base regarding civil society related issues. Towards fulfilling this mission, CIVICUS compiled a series of civil society profiles of 60 countries around the world in the *New Civic Atlas*, published in 1997. The *New Civic Atlas* provided concise and current information on the basic features and co-ordinates of the sector, though it lacked a certain consistency of the issues covered. When the question of an updated version of the *New Civic Atlas* was put on the CIVICUS agenda in early 1998, some members voiced their preference for a more rigid comparative framework of analysis that would allow valuable lessons to be drawn across countries. Picking up on this feedback the Secretary General and CEO of CIVICUS, Kumi Naidoo, presented a proposal to the CIVICUS Board to undertake an exploratory consultative process for the development of an *Index on Civil Society* project. With financial assistance from the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the Netherlands Organisation for International Development Cooperation (Novib), and the Commonwealth Foundation CIVICUS thus began to explore the option of designing an Index on Civil Society, similar to UNDP’s Human Development Index (HDI).

Leslie Fox, a prominent civil society thinker, wrote the initial framework for the project in April 1999, and the first consultative meeting surrounding this draft was held in London on 26 May 1999. CIVICUS distributed the paper to its members and partners for feedback in June 1999, and over the next three months, several consultations and focus groups were conducted around the world in order to increase the number of voices heard in the development of the project. In one of these consultations, a participant described the project as “an exercise in madness”, highlighting the contextual nature of civil society, the lack of data on the topic that exists in many countries and the absence of a widely agreed-upon definition of civil society. Others said that the time was right for an exercise like this, notwithstanding the numerous challenges and potential flaws of the project design.

The criticisms raised in these consultations focused on two general issues. The first concerned the one-dimensional ranking of countries in an HDI-approach. It was widely believed that this approach would potentially result in policy-makers and civil society organisations (CSOs) in the countries ranked at the top becoming complacent about the apparently good state of civil society, while those in countries at the bottom of the ranking would end up criticising the findings on methodological grounds. The second criticism, which was especially prevalent among individuals from the global South, concerned the need for balancing the incentives of a comparative framework with the need to maintain country-specific circumstances and manifestations of civil society. These criticisms and suggestions were presented to a technical team that met in London on 17 August 1999. Following this meeting, CIVICUS engaged Dr. Helmut Anheier, the director of the Centre for Civil Society at the London School of Economics, to develop a basic methodological approach for the *CIVICUS Index on Civil Society* project.

⁴ This section draw heavily on the chapter “Conceptual Development of Civil Society Diamond within CIVICUS”, by Volkhart Finn Heinrich and Kumi Naidoo, in: Anheier, Helmut: *Civil Society. Measurement and Policy Dialogue*, London: Earthscan, forthcoming.

At the CIVICUS World Assembly in Manila in late September 1999, Kumi Naidoo presented the Diamond Tool as the preliminary methodological design for the *Index* project, for acceptance by CIVICUS members and partners. This methodological approach incorporated much of the feedback gathered in the consultations, and bore little resemblance to the initial one-dimensional ranking based thinking. Even though the four-dimensional approach of the Diamond Tool does not provide an Index in a strict technical sense of a single additive score, we decided to interpret the term “Index” in its broader sense of a systematic measurement of a phenomenon and to consequently keep the project’s name of CIVICUS *Index* on Civil Society. In the months that followed, CIVICUS engaged with its members and partners to discuss and debate the Diamond Approach further, gathering their inputs and criticisms.

The Diamond Tool also underwent its first applications during this time. Nilda Bullain from the Civil Society Development Foundation in Hungary had attended the *Index* session in Manila and, upon her return to Hungary, began to successfully use the Diamond Tool in regional workshops in Hungary and Bosnia. As she states in an email to Kumi Naidoo in December 1999,

We did an exercise of people having to describe the civil sector of their own country, from their own perspectives based on the four dimensions and creatively visualise it all in a presentation. It was a real success both times. I wish we had done photos so that you could see the outputs. Nothing too scientific there but it proved to be a good training tool to make people at the grassroots level understand the bigger picture a little better. I have to thank you and CIVICUS for that!

In January 2000, CIVICUS engaged Volkhart ‘Finn’ Heinrich to be the Project Coordinator of the *CIVICUS Index on Civil Society* project. His main task was to drive forward the project design and implementation plan, and to build further support for the project among CIVICUS’ members and partners. The global co-ordination of the pilot implementation phase received financial support from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the Commonwealth Foundation, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, as well as continuing support from Novib.

In the design and implementation of the *Index* pilot phase, two key groups of people are involved, the global Project Advisory Group (PAG) which provides overall guidance to the project design and the National Lead Organisation (NLOs), organisations in a country empowered to implement the project at a national level. On 6 March 2000, CIVICUS issued a request for statements of interest for those individuals interested in participation in the global project advisory group, and for those organisations interested in becoming an NLO for the initial phase. By July 2001, the Project Advisory Group had more than 40 distinguished members, civil society practitioners as well as researchers, bringing a variety of professional and regional backgrounds to the project. Over the course of the pilot implementation phase, the members of the advisory group have provided valuable feedback on the basic design and methodology of the *CIVICUS Index on Civil Society*, thereby assisting in shaping the project as it moved towards its pilot implementation.

To further refine and test the methodology, CIVICUS and Helmut Anheier decided to conduct three pre-pilot tests in England, Hungary and South Africa in May and June 2000. These countries not only had the potential for in-country collaboration with partners, but they also cover vastly different circumstances for the project implementation with regard to their historical background and current social, cultural, and economic situations. Thus, they provided a critical test of the feasibility of the project design and methodology, especially its global application. The results of the pre-pilot tests demanded a closer look at issues of data availability, normative assessments of data and a potential Western bias in the underlying concepts, which fed directly into the revision of the

methodology and the development of a supplementary method of data collection, namely a stakeholder survey.

During 2000, CIVICUS gathered further insights into the application of the Diamond Tool in several workshops. At the CIVICUS Asia-Pacific Regional Meeting in November 2000, Kumi Naidoo and Richard Holloway, currently with UNDP in Indonesia, facilitated two exercises employing the Diamond Tool as a means of assessing the current state of civil society in Indonesia and other Asian countries. This experience was used to generate a user-friendly toolkit on the Diamond Tool for civil society practitioners available at the CIVICUS World Assembly 2001 in Vancouver Canada.⁵

The pilot implementation phase commenced in October 2000 in thirteen countries around the world where organisations had been accepted to be NLOs in order to carry out the project in partnership with CIVICUS. A guiding principle of the *Index* is that of local ownership and participation to ensure that the project is in the control of the local civil society stakeholders. Thus the NLOs are (and were) expected to provide the main share of the human and financial resources necessary to effectively implement the project at a national level. There are numerous potential benefits for the NLOs including the availability of a mobilising tool that facilitates their networking and relationships with other organisations in the country, the means to gather and compile data that could assist in efforts to strengthen the enabling environment for civil society in their country, exposure to a methodology that can be used to establish and pursue targets and finally, becoming a part of an international network that encourages and facilitates sharing of information on the health and impact of civil society.

From 9-11 February 2001, a workshop was held for the national partners of the pilot implementation countries in Mainz, Germany. This workshop offered a forum for CIVICUS and the NLOs to clarify, discuss and refine the methodological approach of the *Index*, to plan the remaining steps for its implementation and to discuss how to present the project findings at the CIVICUS World Assembly in Vancouver in August 2001.

From February to August 2001, the national partners intensified their work on the project, completing the data collection and analysis. Many have already conducted a national workshop to present the research findings and discuss their implications for strengthening civil society. As it will become apparent throughout this report, these national workshops are the flagship event of the *Index* project, transforming a research project into a research-action initiative aimed at strengthening civil society.

Since July of 2001, country reports are being prepared, a practitioners' handbook on how to use the *Index* as a self-assessment tool is being compiled and an interactive website on the project is being designed for release at the CIVICUS World Assembly. Although the World Assembly 2001 is the initial forum for the presentation and dissemination of the *Index* findings, the project will continue well beyond August 2001 with many national partners holding their national workshop and initiating the follow-up activities identified as important for civil society development through the *Index* project. CIVICUS will also continue its work on the project, most importantly through conducting an in-depth evaluation study on the pilot phase. Thus, what you will find in the following pages is only a snapshot of a project that is still very much evolving.

⁵ Holloway, R., 2001. *Using the Civil Society Index: Assessing the Health of Civil Society. A Handbook for using the CIVICUS Index on Civil Society as a Self-Assessment Tool*. CIVICUS.

Part III

Outline of the Implementation Schedule

For an understanding of the strengths and challenges of the Index, it is important to know about the specific steps involved in implementing the project in the pilot countries. These are outlined below.⁶

Overview Report

After having finalised a memorandum of understanding with CIVICUS, the first substantive task for the NLOs was to compile an overview report on the state of civil society in their country, based on existing information and data sources. On the logistical side, NLOs were asked to build support for the project among civil society stakeholders through the establishment of advisory or steering committees, the publication of information about the project and, most importantly, through the search for financial support for the project implementation, especially for the national workshop.

Stakeholder Survey

The next major step in the project was related to the stakeholder survey. Here, NLOs first conducted a focus group meeting to select the relevant indicators used in the survey and to add country-specific ones, if necessary. Then, a survey sample of individuals with knowledge on civil society as a whole ('knowledge-bearers') was established, information on the upcoming survey was disseminated and the survey was administered. CIVICUS offered technical assistance in analysing the survey data of which most NLOs gratefully took advantage.

For the construction of the *Index*, and the Civil Society Diamonds, survey data was supplemented with existing secondary data on civil society, compiled by other projects and institutions such as Freedom House or the World Value Survey. The results of the analysis were synthesised with the information gathered in the overview report, and are published in the *CIVICUS Index on Civil Society* Occasional Paper Series, available at the 2001 CIVICUS World Assembly in Vancouver.

National Goal and Agenda-Setting Workshop

The most important step in the implementation process is the National Goal and Agenda Setting Workshop, which aims to present the research findings so that participants might discuss and validate them and, ultimately, use the research findings to set goals and a joint action agenda for the future development of civil society. More specifically, workshop participants are asked to visualise their goals of where civil society should be in two years using the Diamond Tool, and to identify the concrete steps that need to be taken to achieve these goals. To be able to effectively create and implement the joint agenda of action, the workshop needs to bring together a wide variety of stakeholders, civil society organisations as well as representatives from government, business, media and the academy, who establish task forces to work on specific issues. Many of these organisations that fall into our definition of civil society, such as faith-based organisations or trade unions, do not usually regard themselves as a part of civil society. In this respect, the workshop has the potential to

⁶ The following implementation schedule was proposed by CIVICUS, but due to special circumstances in some pilot countries, slight variations of the schedule were used by some NLOs.

show that there are common concerns and issues for all these organisations, and thus to broaden the actors' base of civil society well beyond the usual suspects of NGOs. The workshop also assists in raising the public awareness surrounding civil society's activities and of the burning issues it is currently facing.

As a follow-up to the workshop, task forces design and implement their action plans. These will be documented by the NLO and reported to CIVICUS. Thus, the project can initiate a variety of joint civil society, bi- and tri-sectoral activities with the ultimate aim of fostering positive social change.

Eventually, we envision implementing the Index in a two-year cycle of research, reflection and action. Thus, in 2003 the NLOs plan to conduct an update of the *Index* to determine whether civil society stakeholders succeeded in meeting the goals they have set for themselves two years before and to identify the new challenges that are likely to have arisen on civil society's agenda. Thus, the *Index* has the potential to become an iterative research, reflection and action tool for civil society stakeholders to strengthen their performance in working for the public good of their societies.

Part IV

Lessons Learned From Designing an International Action Research Initiative on Civil Society

The design of an international project focusing on such a complex entity such as civil society inevitably involves many challenges and trade-offs. In fact, from a social science perspective, the *Index* could well serve as a showcase example having faced every serious challenge cross-national research projects can possibly encounter. First, it has had to come to terms with the contested and rather vague concept of civil society by finding an appropriate way to operationalise it. Second, due to its cross-national design, the project necessarily encounters problems with regard to the comparability of the results on the one hand, and the country-specific applicability of the design and concepts, on the other. Third, by attempting to break new ground on an aspect of social life that has been discovered by empirical research only recently, the project faces limited data availability and the need to generate this information. Last, the *Index* is driven by an ambitious goal, which is to bridge the gap between research on the health of civil society and action by civil society stakeholders to improve that health. For CIVICUS, the latter is the most crucial indicator of success of the project, as it gives an immediate answer to the perennial question posed to scientific research: For what?

Before dealing with each of these challenges in detail, a word of caution is appropriate here. Although the *Index* is definitely committed to certain standards of scientific research, the project — at least in its current form - does not aim to compete with the various existing research projects in the field. It rather aims to build upon the critical knowledge gained through existing research on civil society, add newly generated data to this knowledge, and to promote this knowledge for reflection and usage by civil society practitioners and their partners in planning the further development of the sector in their countries. How far we succeeded in this is subject to a preliminary assessment undertaken in section four. Now, let us look at the critical choices that had to be made in the design of the *Index*.

Who's In and Who's Out?

A project aiming to measure and assess civil society necessarily has to establish an operational definition of the concept; however, defining the concept of civil society is no small feat when one considers the ambiguity surrounding it. As the German sociologist Ulrich Beck puts it, “The most precise statement one can make about civil society is that it is an extraordinarily vague idea” (Beck, 2001: 15). The concept’s vagueness has partially been a consequence of its great appeal to so many different ideological and political proponents, from communitarians focusing on the bonds associations of civil society create in communities (Etzioni, 1995), to conservatives interpreting civil society as a remedy to the over-regulating nanny state (Tanner, 1996), and radical democrats interested in the role of civil society as an important component of the utopian project of an associative democracy (Hirst, 1994, Cohen and Rogers, 1995).

Leaving the different normative horizons of the concept aside, an operational definition still must take a stand on certain conceptual issues, mostly related to its empirical boundaries. For the

purpose of the *Index* project, which aims at assessing the *health* of civil society, civil society is defined as:

The sphere of institutions, organisations, and individuals located between the family, the state and the market, in which people associate voluntarily to advance common interests.

This, on first sight, is a rather straightforward definition, but in reality it rests on some critical choices. The first is the use of the term ‘sphere,’ which better indicates the fuzzy boundaries of the phenomenon (see Fowler, 2001) than alternative terms such as ‘sector’ that implies a clear-cut delimitation. Due to the strong ‘embeddedness’ of civil society in its specific socio-cultural context and its dynamic nature, responding to the ever-changing needs and aspirations of people, a rigid definitional framework was deemed inappropriate. At the same time, however, an operational definition needs to provide some guidance on *who’s in* and *who’s out*, who constitutes civil society and who does not. The definition employed for the *Index* project delineates civil society from the family, market and state. There are, of course, borderline cases with regards to all three boundaries, for example associations based on larger family ties, co-operatives and political parties. How to deal with these and other borderline cases was essentially up to our national partners, as we recognised that the ‘civil society nature’ of each of these organisational types varied from country context to country context.⁷

Another contested issue concerns the inclusion of individuals in the definition, which builds on previous work by CIVICUS that regards citizens⁸ “as the building blocks of civil society” (Naidoo and Tandon, 1999: 7-8). Additionally, the project recognises that there are various individual forms of citizen participation outside the associational arena which contribute to the health of civil society, such as letters to the editors of newspapers by citizens, demonstrations and petitions. Christoph Welzel calls this form of participation *unbound engagement* as compared to *bound engagement* in associations and explains that this form of engagement “reflects the usage of the right of free assembly and therefore is also an essential part of civil society.” (Welzel, 1999: 213).

Here, the fundamental political nature of the concept, as opposed to similar concepts such as third or non-profit sector, also becomes clear. Crudely put, civil society is about citizens collectively engaging in governance issues and not about the main socio-economic activities of a certain sector of society that are the focus of non-profit studies (see also Fowler 2001; Naidoo and Tandon, 1999: 8; Morris, 2000: 40; Van Rooy 1998a: 16). Thus, an assessment of the health of civil society has to use the political system as a major point of reference.

A problem every definition of civil society is confronted with relates to the question: What to do with the phenomenon of *uncivil* society. In other words, does civil society only refer to those civil organisations and actions that do not violate a certain predefined norm of civility, for example non-violence or the Universal Declaration of Human Rights? Or should civil society refer to all associational and other forms of citizen engagement regardless of their civil or uncivil nature? Whereas in an earlier publication (Naidoo and Tandon, 1999) CIVICUS opted for the normative, ‘civil’ position on this issue, we came to the conclusion that for the purpose of assessing the health of civil society, its dark sides must be taken into account. An important indicator for the health of civil society is actually the ratio between civil and uncivil society. In countries in which uncivil modes of citizen action (e.g. ethnic strife, racial intolerance, religious fundamentalism) prevail, civil society is in a poor state. By simply defining the uncivil sides of civil society out, one would

⁷ See, for example, the specific type of social movement unionism in South Africa (Adler and Webster, 1995).

⁸ We do not use “citizen” strictly in its formal, legalistic context. For us, the word “citizen” encompasses all individual human beings and highlights that they are at the centre of any collective civic action. Thus, by entering into the public sphere, an individual is transformed into a citizen, no matter what her/his legal status is.

automatically come up with a rosy picture of civil society that is completely non-violent and tolerant of all. However, the health of civil society is strongly determined by the extent of its 'civil' components in comparison to its 'uncivil' counterparts.

Aside from the many challenges related to the question of who's in and who's out, there is a much more fundamental challenge to the operational definition of civil society, that is potential ethnocentrism. The concept of civil society has its roots in Western philosophy and strong links to Western concepts such as the nation-state, thus there is a mode of theorising about civil society which questions its applicability to non-western contexts (e.g. Kasfir, 1998; Blaney and Pasha, 1993; Hann and Dunn, 1996). We agree with those who argue for a stronger account of informal manifestations of civil society prevalent in the South (Fowler 2001; Kasfir, 1998). We, however, also hold the view that collective citizen action to engage in public life is a feature of any kind of society and that there is enough commonality among these various forms of citizen action to render an international project on this topic possible.

Lastly, we would like to end the discussion on the operational definition with a word of caution. Civil society is an ever-evolving, ever-changing manifestation of social life. Thus, a rigid definition set in stone would not be appropriate. As elaborated by Helmut Anheier in the comprehensive report on the methodology employed by the *Index*:

Ultimately, it may not be possible to develop a standard definition of civil society that would apply equally well to different settings. By contrast, an approach that views any conceptual definition as part, and indeed the outcome, of continuous attempts to understand civil society more fully appears as the more fruitful strategy. In this sense, any definition of civil society will evolve over time, and can neither be regarded as given nor imposed as such (Anheier forthcoming).

The Health of Civil Society: A Complex and Multi-faceted Concept

Establishing an operational definition of civil society, however, is only the first step in a series of steps that have to be taken in order to generate a conceptual framework for an analysis of the health of civil society. Aiming to measure the health of civil society involved more considerations than a mere attempt to measure civil society. First, more factors and dimensions have to be taken into account, as the health of civil society is not only dependent on its internal characteristics, but also on external pre-conditions and influences, such as democracy or a culture of volunteering (Brown & Tandon 1994; National Commission on Civic Renewal). Second, the notion of health involves a strong normative judgment. The aim is not simply to measure the state of civil society, but also to assess whether the actual state is considered good or bad. Hence, an additional task was to take explicit stands on how a healthy civil society should look. Here, we fortunately could draw on existing work done by Bob Bothwell (1998) who generated a list of indicators of a healthy civil society. Finally, we were confronted with the task of how to arrange the indicators identified so that civil society stakeholders could make best use of the research.

The Dimensionality of a Healthy Civil Society

To get an accurate picture of the health of civil society, one has to employ a holistic approach, examining the various dimensions affecting the state of civil society. This is a consequence of its internal heterogeneity and its location in the midst of the multiple spheres of influence of the state, market and family. A holistic approach of assessing civil society's health should take into account how

it looks (its structure), what it does (its values and impact) and what factors act upon it (its space). With these guidelines in mind, Helmut Anheier has developed the Diamond Tool that disaggregates civil society into four basic dimensions:⁹

- (1) the **structure** of civil society with regard to its basic components, their size and relationship and the resources they command
- (2) the legal, political and socio-cultural **space** that civil society occupies within the larger regulatory, legal and social environment;
- (3) the **values** that civil society represents and advocates; and,
- (4) the **impact** of civil society on societal well-being and the policy process.

This four-dimensional approach has replaced the original idea of an additive index using a small number of indicators along the lines of the Human Development Index (HDI) (Anand and Sen, 1993). As it is the case with many other social science concepts (Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias, 1992: 429), the concept of civil society, more so the concept of the health of civil society, cannot be measured through a single indicator or a limited number of indicators, due to its abstract and broad character covering a range of phenomena.

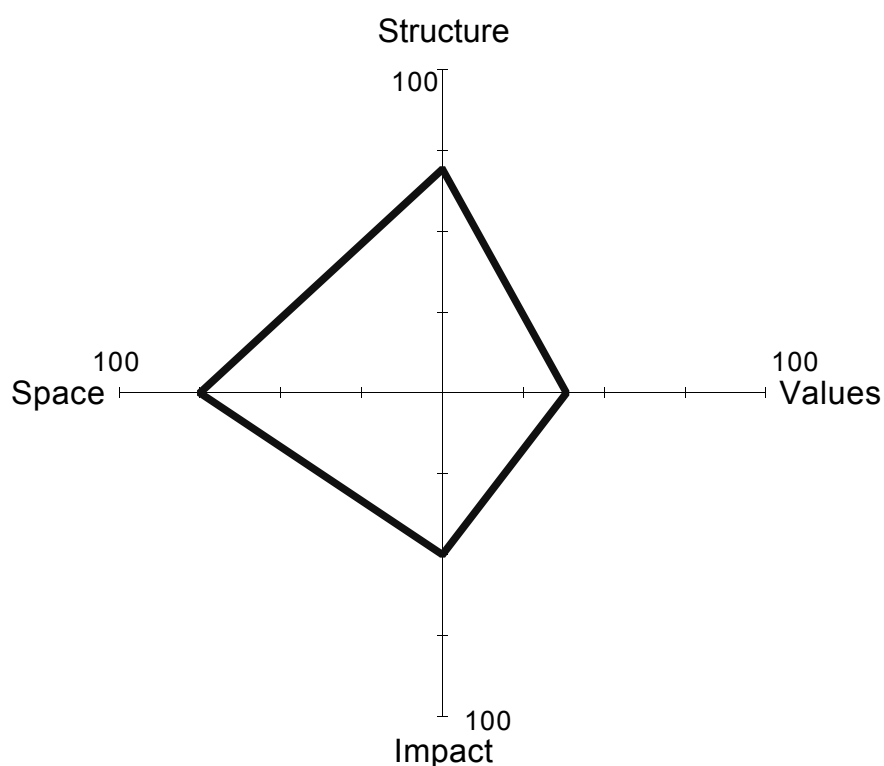
Whereas an HDI-like approach might be useful in creating public visibility for the project, it would not serve our goal of strengthening civil society; such an approach would have only limited diagnostic value with regards to identifying key areas of action for civil society development. We believe that only a multi-dimensional approach is able to detect the various kinds of interplay between the dimensions and the specific strengths and weaknesses of civil society. A recent World Bank study on governance came to a similar conclusion stating that “aggregate indicators [...] are a powerful tool for drawing attention to relevant issues. They are also indispensable for cross-country research into the causes and consequences of governance. But they are a blunt tool to use in formulating policy advice” (Kaufman et al. 2000: 4). CIVICUS is aware of the inherent trade-off — the first one in a long series of trade-offs in the project design — between the conflicting goals of receiving media attention on the Index, which would require a simple and straight-forward message of the project — ideally a ranking of countries — and the aim to use the *Index* as an assessment and policy tool for civil society stakeholders, requiring in-depth and contextualised analysis and presentation of the research findings. For the pilot phase, we consciously took the decision to trade-off high media attention for an increased diagnostic value of the project for civil society practitioners and their partners.

The four dimensions of the *Index* can be graphically represented in the form of a Diamond (hence, the Diamond Tool), the shape of which lends itself to useful interpretations of the health of civil society as a whole and to the relationship between the health of each of its dimensions (*see Figure 1*).¹⁰ In our view, the four-dimensional Diamond Tool successfully balances the goals of creating an easy way to understand the projects results with the need to pay attention to the complexities and nuances of civil society.

⁹ For more information on the Diamond Tool, see Anheier, Helmut K., 2001. *The Civil Society Diamond: A Primer*, CIVICUS Occasional Paper No. 2 and the forthcoming book by Helmut Anheier, *Civil Society: Measurement and Policy Dialogue*, London: Earthscan.

¹⁰The Diamond tool is inspired by the Equity Diamond developed by Social Watch.

Figure 1: The CIVICUS Civil Society Diamond



Postulating Standards of a Healthy Civil Society

Since the ultimate aim of the *Index* project is to identify civil society's strengths and weaknesses, CIVICUS had to 'bite the bullet' and postulate some normative standards with respect to what defines a healthy civil society. The *Index's* Project Advisory Group was divided on this issue: some argued that the time is ripe for such standards and CIVICUS is well-positioned to take up this job, whereas others expressed their concerns about putting Western standards on contexts in which these standards do not fit. Take the issue of CSO umbrella bodies, for example. In the context of stable liberal democracies, where CSOs can exert their influence through well-established channels of interest representation, the existence of functioning umbrella bodies can indicate a healthy civil society. In the context of authoritarian regimes, however, they are likely to be used to co-opt and control a civil society that is striving for greater independence and autonomy, and are therefore not an appropriate indicator for a healthy civil society. This discussion essentially boiled down to the question of whether it would be possible to come up with some universal standards of a healthy civil society.

As is the case with most complex issues of universal applicability versus cultural relativism, the most appropriate answer is neither an unconditional yes nor a clear no. CIVICUS, with the assistance of the Project Advisory Group and drawing upon existing research (e.g. Bothwell, 1998; United States Agency for International Development, 2000), generated a list of indicators that describe, for most contexts, how a healthy civil society should look. Of course, establishing this list was easier for some dimensions (e.g. structure, space) than for others (e.g. values, impact). For example, regarding the values dimension, always a potential minefield in global debates, documents and guidelines on which there is (almost) universal consent, such as the Universal Declaration of

Human Rights, were employed. Based on this approach, the following set of values was identified as normative standards for civil society's activities: tolerance, human rights, gender equity, sustainable development, social justice, democracy and transparency, among others.

Before applying the list to their particular empirical context, however, our national partners were asked to convene a focus group of civil society stakeholders to discuss and decide upon the applicability of each indicator to their country context. They were also encouraged to amend the list with country-specific items that indicate the health of civil society. The original CIVICUS list of indicators proved to be widely applicable in its content and rather exhaustive in its scope. Of course the indicators will have to subject to close scrutiny with regards to their validity and reliability during the evaluation of the pilot phase and some will definitely have to be re-conceptualised. That said, we would like to emphasise here that one important product generated by the *Index* project in its pilot phase, is a preliminary list of indicators defining a healthy civil society.

“Knowledge of Self is Gained Through Knowledge of Others.” The Issue of Cross-National Comparability

As mentioned earlier, the initiation of the *Index* project was sparked by reflections on the *New Civic Atlas* (1997), which, as pointed out by stakeholders consulted by CIVICUS, lacked a certain level of comparability between country studies. Thus, to enhance the comparability of the country-by-country results, and to consequently be able to draw lessons from these comparisons, was an important guideline for the conceptual development of the *Index*.

In the sciences comparisons are regarded as one of the most powerful approaches to arrange information from different sources, to generate new insights and to test existing patterns of knowledge (Teune, 1990). In the introduction to their seminal work on comparative social science, Mattei Dogan and Dominique Pelassy state, “knowledge of the self is gained through knowledge of others” (Dogan and Pelassy, 1990: 5). We require information about comparable phenomena to more deeply understand the particular characteristics of the phenomenon in which we are interested. Further, comparisons can assist us in detecting common patterns among comparable cases and in determining the causes and consequences of these patterns, which might even put us in a position to change these phenomena. Consider for example, the important work done by political scientists in debating and advising the constitutional design of new democracies (see for example, Sartori, 1994; Lijphart, 1991), which drew heavily on lessons learned from cross-country comparisons.

The benefits of comparative research also hold true when looking at civil society. To fully understand the specific features of civil society and its determining factors in a given country, identifying commonalities and differences with civil societies in other countries is essential. Over the last decade, research conducted on civil society has increased exponentially, but much of this research has focused on civil society in a specific country (James, 1997). Rarely have research projects been comparative in nature, although the few examples that exist have contributed significantly to building an international knowledge base on civil society. Here, the Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project (Salamon and Anheier, 1999), the Civil Society and Governance project co-ordinated by the University of Sussex and the Commonwealth Foundation's Civil Society in the New Millennium Project are most noteworthy.

One of the main reasons for the low number of international projects on civil society is the severe challenges such projects face; most significantly, the challenge to marry contextual validity with comparability of the findings. In the next section, we will describe how the *Index* project attempted to come to grips with this trade-off decision before returning to the various ways in which the findings of the *Index* can be used for comparisons of different sorts.

One Size Does Not Fit All — The Issue of Contextual Validity

The notion of contextual validity refers to the scientific requirement that the concepts applied and the findings gained measure what one intended to measure. In cross-national research, where the employed concepts have to ‘travel’ well across societies (Sartori, 1970), achieving validity in each applied context is not an easy task. The question of whether the concept of civil society is applicable to non-Western contexts is a case in point. The trade-off between contextual validity and cross-national comparability is that the more countries one would like to cover in one’s research, the more abstract the concepts have to be to avoid the danger of non-applicability to certain contexts. However, abstract concepts have a low number of defining attributes and are thus very hard to operationalise. From this it follows that the trade-off described here is greatest in projects that attempt to cover the globe, such as the *Index* project.

To make things more complicated, the concept of civil society might well be one of the most challenging social phenomena to be conceptualised, operationalised and measured on a global scale. Why is this the case? Precisely because the characteristics of civil society are bound to the social context from which it emerges. As the citizen (with her or his specific needs, interests and values) is the building block of civil society, the manifestations of civil society differ widely across countries, cultures and other settings. Furthermore, various actors and institutions act upon civil society, foremost the state, and these different institutions will shape different forms of civil society. For example, in a totalitarian regime, civil society manifests itself mainly through informal associations and ephemeral alliances of citizens, whereas in a democratic setting civil society is enabled to assert a visible place in the system of governance. In the context of the *Index* project, civil society is conceptualised as a sphere in which people associate voluntarily. Thus, to account for these country-specific variations of civil society, a cross-national concept has to be broad, involving the trade-offs mentioned above. The flexibility of the notion of a sphere renders it possible to account for the tremendous country-specific variations of civil society. But at the same time, this element of abstraction found in the definition of civil society used by the *Index* project tends to transfer the problem of how to establish contextual validity to the level of operationalisation and measurement.

When operationalising and measuring the concept of the health of civil society, the *Index* project follows the guidelines and solutions offered by the literature dealing with the challenge of comparability-validity (see for example Peters, 1998; Landman, 2000; Sartori, 1970). One potential solution is to disaggregate the given concept (Verba, 1969: 83; Heinrich, 2001: 13). This is achieved by using the four-dimensional approach of the Diamond Tool that dissects the complexity of the health of civil society into its four main components (structure, space, values and impact), thereby rendering the concept more specific without losing its contextual validity, as each of the four dimensions is a defining feature of every civil society everywhere.

Second, the project recognises that the use of *identical* indicators across countries might not yield valid results, as their applicability is context specific. Consider, for example, the use of the indicator ‘voter turnout’ as a measure of the extent of political participation. This indicator might be valid for most democracies, but certainly not for authoritarian regimes or democracies that force their citizens to go to the polls. What is recommended instead is to search for indicators with an *equivalent* meaning (Przeworski and Teune, 1970; van Deth, 1998).

Equivalence must always be established in relation to the underlying concept being measured, in our case the structure, space, values or impact of civil society. In applying the *Index*, users therefore combine a set of universal indicators proposed by CIVICUS¹¹ along with indicators that are of relevance to their context only, but still measure the respective underlying dimension. This ensures

¹¹ See Appendix 3.

a reasonable balance between contextual validity and comparability of the findings. This approach echoes the conclusions drawn by Nancy Thede in an excellent survey of quantitative research on human rights, as she states, human rights practitioners “emphasise a participatory approach not only to the application but also to the design of indicators, an approach that includes first and foremost the local community. They also underline the importance of the contextualisation of indicators, in application as well as in interpretation” (Thede, 2000: 13).

The Index’s Potential for Comparisons

Comparisons using data gathered through the Index project could take place in two distinct areas: (a) in comparing research *findings* and (b) in comparing the research *processes*.

Users of the *Index* project are strongly interested in comparing the aggregate findings of the research on a country-by-country basis by looking at the size of the overall country Diamond. They simply want to know how a specific country compares to other. However, the potential for cross-country comparisons of absolute scores of the Diamond and its dimensions is limited due to the particular data collection approach described in subsequent sections. Briefly, as the *Index* relies heavily on local stakeholder assessments on various indicators of a healthy civil society, the findings are subject to a certain bias that is explained concisely by Johann Graf Lambsdorff with regards to Transparency International’s Corruption Perception Index (CPI):

Imagine that being asked to assess the level of corruption, a local estimates a high level of corruption in the country of residence. Such an assessment would be a valid contribution to the CPI only if the respondent makes the assessment as a result of comparisons with the levels of corruption perceived in other countries. But this is not necessarily the viewpoint taken by the respondent. A respondent may also assign high levels by comparing corruption to other (potentially less pressing) problems facing the country, or by evaluating it according to a high ethical standard. In the case of such an outlook, a high degree of observed corruption may reflect a high standard of ethics rather than a high degree of real misbehaviour. (Lambsdorff, 2000: 7-8)

Transparency International corrected for this potential bias by balancing surveys conducted with local people, with data gathered by surveying foreign experts and using a large number of different data sources. Unfortunately, as these remedies are currently not available in the case of the *Index* project, we had to rely strongly on assessments of local experts, supplemented by the small number of foreign knowledge-bearers on a particular civil society (e.g. representatives of donor or international organisations). We want to be clear that the accuracy of these assessments for the specific country context is not called into question here, but because of the country-specific standards employed by respondents, the cross-national comparability of the findings is limited, at least on the level of comparing absolute scores. CIVICUS recognises this weakness and is committed to taking appropriate steps to improve the comparability of the results for the next implementation phase of the project, e.g. to balance the number of local and foreign survey respondents.

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” (Rokkan cited in Verba, 1969: 93) 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. If there is a bias caused by country-specific standards, it only distorts the absolute size of the

indicators, but not their relative sizes in comparison to each other. 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. Additionally, one can compare outcomes of the national agenda setting workshop, for instance contrasting the size of the Vision Diamond set by civil society stakeholders to the size of the Status Diamond: How much confidence do stakeholders have in their ability to improve the health of civil society? Which dimensions did stakeholders agree to focus upon? What specific agenda items did stakeholders identify for their action plan?

As the initial implementation round of the *Index* was consciously designed as a pilot phase, CIVICUS explicitly invited its national partners to test out different designs with regards to the implementation process and methodology. In fact, it turned out that a great flexibility in the implementation design was absolutely necessary to accommodate the vastly different situations of civil society and research on civil society in the pilot countries. This resulted in an ideal laboratory-like design for a pilot phase as different approaches were used concerning data collection and dissemination methods as well as the overall implementation strategy and working structure of our national partners, which often drew other individuals and organisations with complementary skills into the project. These various project designs are a good pre-condition for a insightful evaluation and consequent re-design of the project for 2002/3.

Explorations in a No ‘Man’s’ Land — The Challenge of Data Availability

Undoubtedly, the biggest challenge the *Index* project encounters is the lack of appropriate data available on civil society. Unlike the case with other important social phenomena, there exist no national or even international institutions collecting data on civil society. In his report on the methodological foundations of the Diamond Tool, Helmut Anheier concludes that “the task ahead is clear: the social sciences need to develop a measurement and reporting system for civil society—a system that can put in place, at least initially, a systematic mechanism for data collection, analysis and dissemination” (Anheier, forthcoming).¹² While CIVICUS will play a supportive role in achieving this long-term task, CIVICUS, through its *Index* project, also takes the risk of assessing civil society without this comprehensive data and information pool being available as a resource. In this sense, the *Index* project is a pioneering effort in the field of civil society research.

To understand the challenges faced by the *Index* regarding the data availability issue, one has to look at the reasons for the scarcity of data sources on civil society. First, we have to recognise that the term of civil society (but not its manifestations in social reality!) is a rather recent re-invention that came into vogue in the 1990s after it had fallen silent for centuries. Thus, the concept has not had the time needed to make inroads into the complex systems of data collection via national and international surveys and census. Second, to once again quote Ulrich Beck, civil society is a vague and contested concept with fuzzy boundaries, which presents an almost insurmountable obstacle for measurement. Third, as discussed earlier, the manifestations of civil society are extremely country-specific, causing problems for cross-national operationalisation and measurement. Fourth, CSOs, as the main phenomena of interest, are rather ephemeral in their existence, making data collection time and cost-intensive. Fifth, and related to the latter two points, in many countries of the global South, civil society includes a considerable amount of informal forms of associations,

¹² In the book, Anheier provides interesting background information why such a reporting system has not been put in place thus far and advocates for mainstreaming civil society statistics in the reporting systems of the relevant international institutions.

posing a severe challenge to the established data collection methods of positivist Western social research. Lastly, in the case of civil society research, qualitative expert assessments on civil society, often used for complex and insufficiently documented phenomena,¹³ are confronted with the problem that civil society is still an abstract catch-all concept for a range of diverse forms of citizen behaviour, rendering an assessment on this aggregate level most difficult.

How does the *CIVICUS Index on Civil Society* project tackle these myriad challenges? At least for its pilot phase, the *Index* project follows the pragmatic approach of using all available data sources on civil society that meet the scientific standards of validity and reliability, coupled with primary data collected through a stakeholder survey. This decision is based on the belief that the four-dimensional Diamond Tool offers a unique way of organising and systematising the increasing data and information on civil society issues. Thus, we would like to emphasise that CIVICUS regards the overview reports on civil society compiled by the NLOs, which synthesises existing information, as an important and extremely useful product. These reports assist tremendously in making sense of disparate research findings on civil society and integrating them in a common framework.

In the following, we would like to expound the rationale behind supplementing existing information with data from a stakeholder survey, as the latter method has become a focal point of discussions on the *Index* methodology.

CIVICUS and its national partners in non-OECD countries realised early on that the existing data on civil society in these countries does not form a sufficient basis for the construction of an informed, nuanced, valid and reliable index along the lines envisioned by the project design.¹⁴ Consequently, CIVICUS was presented with the choice to either restrict the implementation to OECD countries in which these specific kinds of data on civil society were readily available, or to enter the no ‘man’s’ land of civil society research in the rest of the world.¹⁵ After consulting with the project advisory group and its board of directors, CIVICUS opted for the latter approach as a sign of its commitment to designing its programmes in a manner that can be implemented on a global scale; more importantly, CIVICUS also regards it as its mission to attempt to equalise the global imbalances in knowledge and information on civil society issues. Opting to restrict the project’s implementation to a certain Western sub-set of countries would have only reinforced this status quo. Thus, the universal applicability of the *Index* had highest priority.

Aside from the political and ethical reasons, there are also a number of methodological advantages and benefits to conducting a stakeholder survey that deserve mention. As the *Index* project is the first attempt to assess the health of civil society in its entirety on a global scale, it breaks new ground and consequently has to test new and innovative methods. The stakeholder survey approach allows us to tap into important issues concerning civil society’s strengths and weaknesses, which have thus far not been researched and in fact cannot be researched using only secondary data sources. Additionally, the normative underpinning of the health concept renders assessments and interpretations of facts necessary, which should ideally be undertaken by the stakeholders involved (Beetham and Weir, 2000; Kaufman et al. 1999). To offer an example, does it really matter much to the health of civil society whether there are 20.000 or 25.000 civil society organisations active in a given country? Not particularly. Instead, what we need to understand if we want to move towards strengthening civil society is whether civil society stakeholders assess the current activity rate of

¹³ Most democracy indices, for example, rely on subjective expert assessments (e.g. Marshall and Jaggers, 1999; Freedom House, 1999).

¹⁴ This insight was borne out of the results of the pre-pilot tests in England, Hungary and South Africa and of first discussions with National Partners before the official start of the project, e.g. at the ISTR meeting in Dublin in July 2000.

¹⁵ CIVICUS, of course, is aware of the vast and ever-increasing number of research projects and studies on civil society in non-OECD countries and, in fact, draws heavily on this information in the *Index* project. However, compared to the institutionalised systems of gathering data on civil society in the West (e.g. through government statistical offices, regular public opinion polls, the Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project and other research), there is a lack of systematic information on civil society in its entirety in countries of the Global South.

civil society as sufficient, even if they do not know the exact number of CSOs.

The stakeholder survey design used in the *Index* follows the approach of the Delphi technique (Häder and Häder, 2000; Williams and Webb, 1994) which uses several rounds of expert assessments on complex and un-documented issues to gain new insights and/or foresight. The health of civil society clearly falls into this category. Based on useful feedback gained from the Civil Society in the Millennium Task Force of the Commonwealth Foundation and from consultative sessions at the International Society for Third Sector Research conference in Dublin in July 2000, the CIVICUS Secretary General suggested that we explore developing a primary survey that would complement existing data sources in pilot countries. Subsequently, CIVICUS project coordinator Volkhart Finn Heinrich, in consultation with a specialist on the Delphi technique at the Centre for Survey Research and Methodology (ZUMA) in Mannheim, Germany, designed the stakeholder survey approach. As the survey questionnaire is only the first step in the generation of findings, the *Index's* stakeholder survey employs a Delphi technique. These preliminary results are then used as a basis for further discussion during the National Goal and Agenda Setting workshop, where participants — in the main a sub-group of the survey respondents — are asked to change those indicators that they deemed incorrect, and to attempt to arrive at a consensual decision on the final score of the indicators. This approach, utilising several waves of data collection, is an innovative and useful way to fully access those remaining parts of a person's knowledge that have not been used in the first round, and synthesise it together with the feedback on the group results in the consecutive round(s). The goal here is to improve the quality of the assessment. Part V will report some initial validation tests of the survey results in this respect.

As the *Index* project is currently in its pilot phase, testing alternative approaches in data collection is most reasonable, if not the most appropriate step to take, as it will generate important insights concerning the merits and limitations of different methods. These insights will help us tremendously to design a revised approach for the first full round of implementation of the *Index* project starting in early 2002.

Lastly, and most importantly, the stakeholder survey is a necessary and effective means to achieve the goal of the project, that is to get a diagnosis on the health of civil society along various dimensions. This goal cannot be achieved if one falls into the reductionist trap of using a small number of variables from existing data sources. Instead, the *Index* aims to be a diagnostic tool, similar to the Democratic Audit (Beetham, 1993) or the tools on corruption issues designed by the World Bank (Kaufman et al. 1998), with the ability to provide a holistic and comprehensive picture of the state of civil society in the respective country. Additionally, if one aims at identifying and then tackling the burning issues for civil society, as the *Index* does, diagnostic surveys and an overall participatory approach are indispensable (see Gonzalez de Asis, 2000).

However, the stakeholder survey approach has its limitations. Most importantly, stakeholder assessments involve a high level of subjectivity (e.g. Lambsdorff, 2000; Bertrand and Mullainathan, 2001). The *Index* seeks to limit this subjectivity by careful survey sample construction, sampling only knowledge-bearers on civil society issues. Additionally, in filling out the survey, respondents were explicitly asked to assess civil society as a whole, or to assess a certain sub-sector, and were asked not to assess their own organisation.¹⁶ To what extent these precautions succeeded in limiting the tendency of respondents to provide biased answers remains to be seen. In Part V, we will provide some initial tests on the subjectivity of survey findings.

¹⁶ A different method was used in Estonia, where respondents were asked to provide information on their organisations. A comparison of these results with findings from other countries will assist in identifying the specific strengths and weaknesses of the 'organisational survey' and 'expert survey' approaches respectively.

Asking stakeholders about their assessment of civil society also involves the danger of cementing the existing information or even the predominant myths about civil society, as their assessments are not just based on hands-on experience, but are also influenced by the discourse among the often narrow elite of people dealing with civil society. Cross-checking the accuracy of survey results by comparing them with existing data on the respective issues will help to identify whether this potential danger became real in the surveys (Kabber, 1999:30-1).

Finally, as mentioned in the previous section, relying on predominantly local stakeholders causes severe problems for the cross-national comparability of survey findings. This is a problem most cross-national studies involving public opinion, expert or stakeholder surveys are faced with and to which they have found different answers with varying success (see Beetham and Weir, 2000: 75; Lambsdorff, 2000: 10-16; Inglehart, 1999; Kaufman et al. 1999: 4-6). Admittedly, the *Index* project finds itself on a steep learning curve in this regard. In revising the project design, project staff will consult with experts in the field and draw on their experience. CIVICUS is confident that it will find an appropriate solution that will neither compromise the participatory approach of the project nor the potential to draw lessons from the results across countries.

Placing Local Civil Society in the Driver's Seat is Key to Strengthening Civil Society

While the discussions in previous sections have focused on the research components of the *Index* project as a whole, the *Index* is an action research initiative that aims to provide civil society stakeholders with a diagnostic tool to identify the burning issues civil society faces and to use this knowledge to devise appropriate actions to strengthen the sector. If the project wants to successfully bridge the gap between research and action, the project has to focus on the specific needs of local civil society and has to draw on the local knowledge on civil society. Only this approach can ensure sustainable capacity building of civil society (van Rooy 1998b: 217).

In our consultations on the project design, many people, especially in the global South, noted what somebody called the 'Western colonisation' research projects in the South, referring to the tendency of shifting Western concepts and methods into Southern contexts where they might be inapplicable. This particular notion of civil society, due to its roots in Western philosophy and its linkage to the modern European history, could potentially be a case in point. However, as described earlier, the *Index* methodology takes into account country-specific circumstances avoiding the trap of ethno-centrism.

This sensitivity of the project to varying needs and contexts continues on the level of the implementation design. It is not conceptualised as a huge, centralised research project, but as a flexible assessment tool for civil society practitioners around the world. CIVICUS co-operates with National Lead Organisations (NLOs) in implementing the project, which, in turn, worked together with a broad range of local stakeholders. The implementation of the project is solely based on the expression of interest and on willing local civil society organisations to invest intellectual, human and financial resources to carry out the project. Thus, the selection of pilot countries is not led by the rationale of the project design, but by the benefits local civil society sees in carrying out the project in their country. Due to this needs-based approach, the sample of 13 pilot phase countries happened to include five Central & Eastern European countries. Apparently, a project that links 'research on' with 'action by' civil society is regarded as a useful and timely initiative in these countries.

The ownership of the implementation process and of the project results are in the hands of local stakeholders, ensuring that the project meets the particular needs of local civil society. This approach places the NLO in the driver's seat, so to speak, with respect to implementing the project

in their country as they are empowered to adjust the general project framework to fit their country specific contexts.

One should not forget to mention the compromises involved in this approach, namely a reduction in the comparability of the findings, a restriction of CIVICUS' role to a co-ordinative one and the dropping of a universal time frame for the implementation for all countries, originally envisioned to coincide with the biennial CIVICUS World Assemblies. However, CIVICUS strongly believes that the benefits of placing a premium of importance on local needs and circumstances far outweighs the downsides of a less streamlined project approach.

The Challenge of Linking Research and Action

The question of the social utility of scientific research tends to slip off the researcher's agenda far too often. Many existing research projects, especially the ones based in the positivist traditions of Western social science, fall short of meeting the needs of practitioners, let alone those groups that are in the direst need of empowerment. Noting the great challenge of marrying rigorous research with action-oriented information, CIVICUS nevertheless seeks to make a contribution to social transformation through its *Index* project.

Informed by theories and approaches of participatory action research (e.g. Fals-Borda and Rahman, 1991; Whyte, 1991) and participatory monitoring and evaluation (Estrella, 2000), the *Index* places civil society stakeholders at the heart of the project. As shown in the preceding section, the project is implemented by national partners who in turn draw more actors into the process, for example as members of the steering committee or national advisory group, as research agencies or as communication channels for disseminating information on the project to wider civil society and its partners. An even larger group of stakeholders becomes part of the process as respondents to the stakeholder survey and as participants of the National Goal and Agenda Setting Workshop. In all of this, the *Index* resonates with the participatory action research principles of stakeholder involvement and empowerment. The most crucial component of the project design in this regard is undoubtedly the National Goal and Agenda Setting Workshop, gathering representatives of relevant civil society stakeholders and interlocutors in government, business, the media and the research community to jointly assess the health of civil society by reflecting on the research findings. Following the assessment, the stakeholders will set common goals and a common agenda for the future development of the sector, again informed by the research. Similar to the concept of "collective reflections" (Brown, 1993), these workshops "integrate diverse perspectives to generate new understanding; they mobilise diverse resources for new action; they create new relationships among actors who can do things together that they cannot accomplish alone" (Brown, 1993:19).¹⁷

For CIVICUS it was clear that the project must be embraced and owned by local civil society in order to successfully bridge the gap between research and action. Whether the project managed to initiate new activities tackling the burning issues facing civil society will not be determined for some time to come. Some initial reflections of the successes and failures of the critical national workshops in pilot countries where they have already taken place, will be provided in Part V.

¹⁷ CIVICUS is partnering with the Hauser Center for Nonprofit Organisations at Harvard University in such a collective reflection among civil society practitioners and researchers. A report on this initiative can be ordered via the CIVICUS website www.civicus.org.

Part V

Initial Findings from the Pilot Implementation Phase

In this section, we would like to report some initial findings of the pilot implementation phase of the *Index*. As in most countries the pilot phase is still ongoing and research results became available only recently, the following treatise cannot go into detail here. However, we will attempt to present some tentative conclusions on the strengths and weaknesses of the project's approach. The first sub-section will deal with the methodological issues of validity and reliability of the data collection method. The next sub-sections will highlight the different approaches chosen by the NLOs to implement the project in their country and look at the funding support received by NLOs as an indicator of the project's relevance for civil society strengthening agendas. The following sub-section 4 will deal with some of the substantive research results, before we will assess some of the emerging successes and challenges of the *Index* with regard to its goal to be a research-action initiative that aims at empowering civil society.

How Accurate are the Research Findings? Issues of Validity and Reliability

In the complex areas of cross-national social and political index construction, issues of validity and reliability are rarely addressed. Indexes such as the Freedom House Democracy Index are widely used by researchers and policy-makers without recognising its difficult methodological foundations. In recent years, however, its validity is increasingly called into question (see Bollen, 1990: 9; Bollen and Paxton, 2000). As specified earlier, validity refers to the fact that one measures the concept one wants to measure. The reliability of a measure is high if the outcome of a research process can be replicated in subsequent research. These two concepts are the most common scientific standards of empirical social research and will in the following be used to assess the methodological rigour of the *CIVICUS Index on Civil Society*.

Construct Validity

As the *Index* project is pioneering work in the area of studying the health of civil society on a country-by-country basis, assessing its validity is rather difficult. We simply do not know the 'true value', that is the reality of civil society regarding its structure, space, values and impact to be able to determine whether we are actually measuring the health of civil society and not something else. At this stage assessing validity depends on cross-checking the survey results with data from existing studies on the topic.

The initial check consists of a comparison of the *Index* indicators on the public profile of CSOs with the public image dimension of USAID's NGO Sustainability Index. This brought positive results confirming the validity of the indicators (see *Table 1*). The stakeholder survey scores are in line with the scores of the USAID Index. However, one has to be aware that the USAID Index relies on the same kind of data collection method, namely stakeholder assessments and thus provides only a limited validity check. A comparison of the two stages of the assessment process in Romania (stakeholder survey and National Workshop) shows that the revisions made to the public profile indicators by participants of the National Workshop did not move the score closer to the

USAID Index score, but slightly further away. This raises some doubts about the success of the multi-staged Delphi technique, as at consecutive stages of assessment (here, the National Workshop) the scores should be closer to the “true value” and not further away. We will review the revisions made by participants of National Workshops in other pilot countries to be able to judge the usefulness of the Delphi technique in the context of the *Index* based on a broader range of information.

Table 1. Cross-checking validity of ‘public image’ sub-dimension

	CIVICUS Index sub dimension	NGO Sustainability Index Dimension*
Croatia	45	50
Ukraine	59.1	50
Romania	52.5 (46.6**)	50
Estonia	65.5	75.5

* The USAID Index is not a discrete Index, but has 14 categories on a 1-100 scale.

** In brackets, the revised score at the National Workshop

Cross-checking the *Index* data with data from different kinds of data sources would provide a stronger check of its validity, but in most countries this data does not exist. Pakistan is an exception here, as there exists a variety of data on civil society issues, collected through initiatives of the Aga Khan Foundation (Aga Khan Development Network, 2000), which can be used to test the validity of the survey indicators in the Pakistani context (*see table 2*).

Table 2. Cross-checking various survey indicators in the Pakistani context

	CIVICUS Index indicator	Other Indicators
Active Membership in CSOs / AKF community engagement	45.5	36
State environment / Freedom House Civil Rights Index	40	34
Public Spiritedness / AKF Spirit of Voluntarism	53	71
Business environment for CSOs / Corporate Support to Citizen Organisations	23	36

* In column 1, the first item refers to the *CIVICUS Index* indicator and the second item to the external data indicator.

Here, the discrepancies between the indicators are larger than with the USAID study, but are still in a reasonable range, leading us to assume a satisfactory validity. However, the validity issue requires more extensive and in-depth explorations to be conducted during the evaluation of the project’s pilot phase.

Reliability

As the stakeholder survey aimed to solicit the assessments of knowledge-bearers, a central issue with regard to the reliability of the survey is the appropriate selection of these knowledge-bearers. If knowledge-bearers strongly disagree on the accurate score of the indicator, we might conclude that they either provided strongly subjective opinions, rather than ‘objective’ assessments, or that the questions were worded ambiguously. In either case, the accuracy of the assessments would be called into question. To determine the range of disagreement on an indicator, one can use the standard deviation measure which provides the average difference of the respondents’ scores from the mean. However, this statistic does not provide standards to indicate whether a standard deviation is within a reasonable range.¹⁸ In table 3, you find the mean standard deviation for those countries on which the survey data was available.

Table 3. Standard deviation of survey indicators

Country	Standard Deviation	Number of problematic indicators*
Mexico	0.94	0
Uruguay	1.02	4
Pakistan	1.08	4
Croatia	1.08	6
Romania	1.12	3
Ukraine	1.12	5
Ghana	1.12	16

* Defined as indicators that have a standard deviation higher than 1.3. The total number of indicators ranges between 50 and 63 depending on the country.

The indicators were scored on a 5-point scale, and the standard deviation, which in all countries is approximately one, indicates that stakeholders did not disagree strongly on their assessments. In the third column of table 3, we provide the number of indicators with a standard deviation higher than 1.3, a rather arbitrary cut-off point we used to determine indicators on which there is strong disagreement. Here, the findings from the Ghanaian survey raise some concerns about the reliability of several indicators which we will have to probe more deeply. Interestingly enough, the problematic indicators were often the same among countries, including tax environment, umbrella bodies, political participation of CSOs, calling for a careful re-wording of these questions for the next phase.

The stakeholder survey itself provided questions through which we could further probe the quality of the responses. In most survey questionnaires, the respondents were asked at the beginning of each section (corresponding to each dimension) to indicate how competent they feel answering questions on that aspect of civil society, following its description. The last question of the survey asked them to evaluate how easy or hard they found answering the questions. Table 4 reports the findings for the dimensional average on the competence question (before answering the questions) and the general evaluation of the difficulty to fill out the survey. Whereas we definitely have to take

¹⁸ The tools of statistical test theory (e.g. confidence intervals, t-test) cannot be used here, as the stakeholder survey sample is not a random sample.

into account social desirability effects with regards to the competence question as the respondents might have been reluctant to report their incompetence, the data still shows that many respondents did not feel competent to assess civil society's health or evaluated the task of completing the questionnaire as not easy. Further analysis of the data will show whether limited competence or a negative survey evaluation is correlated with ratings that strongly deviate from the mean.

Table 4: Self-assessed competence and survey evaluation

	Competence Average Across Dimensions ¹	Survey Evaluation ²
Ghana	85.0	72.6
Croatia	50.6	40.5
Uruguay	49.7	59.7
Mexico	16.7	
Pakistan	52.6	--- ³
Romania	13.1	35.6
Ukraine	42.0	40.2

¹ Share of respondents who felt competent or very competent to answer the questions

² Share of respondents who found filling out the survey easy or very easy

³ This question was not included in the questionnaire

When looking at first tests of the validity and reliability of the main data source of the *Index*, namely a stakeholder survey, we find mixed results. The quality of several individual indicators must be called into question and will be subject to further scrutiny. On the whole, the validity tests brought satisfactory results, but again we will critically review whether the stakeholder assessment survey method is the most suitable for such a complex topic as civil society. Focus groups on the relevant assessment issues, supplemented by additional innovative primary data collection efforts and valid secondary data, might be better suited to come to terms with the most challenging task of assessing the health of civil society. Focus groups would allow us to probe deeper into these issues, unveiling information that might otherwise be overlooked.

There are Many Roads to Happiness – The Various Approaches Taken by NLOs in Implementing the Index

The Index project is designed as a flexible tool lending itself to adaptations to country-specific needs and circumstances. Many NLOs took advantage of this, tailoring their approaches appropriately, with regard to various tasks and aspects of the project used, making the pilot phase a true test phase for the project approach.

- (a) *Local Project Team*: NLOs differed in their decision on how to set up the basic project team, especially with regard to ensuring methodological expertise on the research part of the project. In some cases, such as South Africa, New Zealand and Mexico, NLOs partnered with external research agencies. In other cases, NLOs established local project advisory boards or included external individuals in their research teams (e.g. Ukraine, Croatia and Belarus) or had the appropriate in-house research capacity to carry out the project on their own (e.g. in Canada, Romania and Uruguay).

- (b) *Level of Analysis*: In some countries, the national partners decided to disaggregate civil society in its sub-sectors due to the complexity and heterogeneity of civil society as a whole. Here, stakeholders were asked to assess the health of a certain sub-sector only (e.g. in Belarus and partially in Pakistan). In most cases, however, the unit of analysis was civil society as a whole. As the heterogeneity of civil society represents one of the major challenges for the project design, the respective lessons from Belarus and Pakistan will assist us tremendously in reviewing the design of the project.
- (c) *Survey Method*: As stated previously, most NLOs used the proposed stakeholder survey approach, asking knowledge-bearers to assess civil society as a whole or to assess a certain sub-sector. In the Estonian case, the NLO utilised an organisational survey, which asked questions about the respondents' organisation. In South Africa, a complex multi-pronged approach was used; the survey questionnaire entailed questions on the respective organisation as well as assessment question on civil society generally. Additionally, provincial workshops and focus groups were conducted to involve as many stakeholders as possible. Again, these different data collection approaches will be thoroughly reviewed during the evaluation phase of the project.
- (d) *Stakeholder Engagement*: A crucial aspect of the project is to engage civil society stakeholders, providing them with the findings of the research. This is done mostly at a National Goal and Agenda-Setting Workshop. However, in Ukraine, South Africa and Croatia, regional workshops were conducted reflecting the need for a regional-specific analysis and discussion of civil society's strengths and weaknesses. In Estonia, the NLO piggy-backed on an existing representative structure of civil society, namely the Board of the Estonian Non-Profit Associations Roundtable to debate the research findings and outline the way forward. The Belarusian NLO made extensive use of its website to inform stakeholders about the project implementation and results and co-operated with the local UNDP office to conduct a workshop with key stakeholders. Here, we see how the flexibility of the project allows the NLO to address the specific circumstances for civil society in their country, in particular to account for regional variations and to draw on existing civil society structures.
- (e) *Project Goals*: Most importantly, NLOs successfully adapted the general project goals to their specific circumstances by supplementing the three main goals with country-specific aims, thereby increasing the *Index's* contribution to strengthening civil society. In New Zealand, for example, the *Index* was used on the one hand, to engage the government's Statistical Office on the issue of collecting data on 'collective well-being' and, on the other hand, as a general framework for the existing government-civil society dialogue. The preliminary New Zealand country report on the *Index* thus concludes that "it is important to contextualise the *Index* project with other current research on community issues and government-community relations in New Zealand." A similar focus, in a completely different environment, however, was chosen by our Belarusian partner. Here, the *Index* project also served to increase and systematise dialogue between civil society and those parts of government that are open to engaging civil society. Yury Zagoumenov, project coordinator in Belarus, reviews that "the *Index* project managed to bring together those civil society stakeholders whom, due to the existing political and social divisions present in the country, had never collaborated before." It should be emphasised here that the *Index* project has proven to be an effective and adaptive tool in initiating government-civil society discussions and dialogues, in such different contexts as the liberal democracy of New Zealand and the authoritarian Belarus.

In Romania, the *Index* project, and especially the National Workshop, were closely connected to the activities of the National NGO Forum and its Executive Group for the Implementations of Forum Resolutions (GIR), which is committed to acting on the recommendations and agenda developed at the workshop. This approach and the involvement and backing of GIR, a well-respected and

powerful group, has the potential to ensure widespread ownership of the emerging civil society strengthening agenda and effective follow-up actions. In Scotland, the *Index* project is running parallel to the research being undertaken by the Scottish Civic Forum into the impact of the first two years of a Scottish Parliament. The index is being used as a method for identifying ways in which the Civic Forum members are aware of progress that has been achieved and other areas in which concerted action is required, focusing on increasing the activity of civic society throughout all parts of Scotland. Lastly, in the case of Pakistan, the *Index* aims to shed light on a sub-section of civil society, namely informal associations, that hitherto has not received much public attention.

These examples are just a small excerpt of a much longer list that also will continue to grow as the project implementation in many countries will only reach the important stage of stakeholder engagement and agenda-setting in the next months.

Funding Support for the Project Implementation. An Indicator of Relevance

A large number of NLOs received external funding for the project indicating success with regards to the timeliness and relevance of the project to the pilot countries. Both, Croatia and New Zealand, received government funding; in Croatia this funding was specifically dedicated to the National Goal and Agenda-Setting Workshop. In Ukraine, Freedom House provided financial support for this crucial part of the project. The large South African project with a focus on comparisons of the nine provinces was funded by USAID South Africa. The project implementation in Pakistan was made possible through generous support from the Aga Khan Foundation. In Mexico, the Manuel Arango Foundation provided funding for the project. The national partner in Canada received financial support from government. Lastly, the Belarusian NLO received logistical and technical support from the local UNDP office in Minsk. However, we would like to emphasise here that the realisation of the project would not have been possible without the high amount of dedicated voluntary work put in by all the national partners.

The Health of Civil Society in the Pilot Countries

The research aspects of the *Index* project have been completed in most pilot countries. The following highlights some of the crucial findings emerging from the research.

We refrain from comparing the overall shapes and sizes of the civil society Diamonds, as we stated previously, their comparability is limited due to the country-specific standards employed (*see Table 5 for the scores*).

Table 5: Diamond scores for pilot countries

	Structure	Values	Impact	Space
Belarus	55	68	61	43
Canada	55	67	68	55
Croatia	54	61	48	35
Estonia*	38	88	39	43
Ghana	61	71	63	52
Mexico	56	60	61	52
New Zealand	66	58	56	53
Pakistan	52	50	41	43
Romania	54	61	51	37
South Africa	65	53	50	56
Ukraine	55	59	53	41
Uruguay	51	58	60	50

* In Estonia, significant changes to the survey results reported here were made by participants of the National Workshop.

However, common and country- or region-specific challenges to a healthy civil society were identified by the *Index*. A first glance at the results shows a substantial number of burning issues for civil society common to almost all the pilot countries:

- The problem of CSO concentration in some, mostly urban areas, of the country (structure)
- The lack of support from the business sector for CSOs and individual volunteering of employees (space)
- The absence of widespread accountability and transparency mechanisms among CSOs (values)
- A low impact of civil society on government policy-drafting and policy-making processes (impact)

Examining the relative size of the four dimensions, we notice that in most countries the space dimension, which looks at the legal, political, socio-cultural and business environment for civil society received the lowest rating. Interestingly enough, the gap between the space score and the other dimensional scores was largest in the former totalitarian countries of Eastern Europe, Estonia being an exception. Compared to their structure, values and impact, Eastern European civil societies apparently still operate in a relatively disabling environment. Here, there is a complete absence of corporate social responsibility and a negative state attitude towards civil society; however, there are not many restrictive laws and fiscal regulations relating to CSO activities, that inhibit the development of civil society. Also, these countries can be singled out on the grounds of their low impact score which results from their very limited influence on the policy process. This first look at the findings shows that, at least for the Eastern European pilot countries, the (donor's) focus on an enabling environment has to take more factors into account than merely the laws and regulations specifically dealing with CSOs; in a small sub-set of these countries the call today is to democratise the authoritarian political regime, in all of them there is a need to change the attitudes of government, public administration and business towards a more positive engagement with civil

society. Another problem civil societies in this region face are the insufficient, sometimes even non-existent, roots of CSOs in local communities which has negative implications for their financial and organisational sustainability as well as political clout (see also Kuti, 1999: 55-56; Howard, 2000).

In the context of the two OECD countries, Canada and New Zealand, it is striking that civil society's influence on government policies is seen as very limited, despite the institutionalised dialogue between government and civil society on pertinent. The findings suggest that the critical issue of policy-making might have been neglected in these dialogues which rather focused on issues of service delivery partnerships, contracting and government funding.

In Uruguay and South Africa — both countries, which are currently undergoing the long-term process of consolidating their democracy - civil society has managed to turn away from the oppositional mode towards government inherited from the past and to establish a co-operative relationship with the democratic government. In South Africa, an extraordinarily large number of CSOs are involved in interest representation and lobbying activities towards the government, although with limited success (see also CORE and CASE, 1999; Heinrich, 2001: 118-121). This finding reflects the politicised character of South African civil society, as well as the gap South African NGOs filled in the immediate post-apartheid era with regard to developing policy proposals and conducting policy-related research for the African National Congress (ANC), now the ruling party in South Africa.

Mexican and Ghanaian civil societies are currently in the very transitional phase that civil societies in Uruguay and South Africa have gone through over the past 15 and 10 years respectively. Both have to find their appropriate place in a democratising system of governance and to consolidate co-operative relationships with government, even though for both countries, their highest priorities still are to limit the negative affects of the sustained economic crises on the living conditions of ordinary people.

Lastly, the Pakistani case is unique in several respects. First, it is the only Islamic country in the pilot phase providing an interesting comparison to the socio-cultural space and values of civil society in the Christian or post-socialist countries of the pilot phase.¹⁹ On the one hand, the strong roots of indigenous philanthropy in Islam bode well for establishing a financially sustainable civil society, on the other hand, the influence of the religious factors might be apparent in the low score CSOs receive for promoting greater gender equity. Second, its political environment is different from the other pilot countries in that Pakistan is ruled by a military regime, which does, however, repeatedly state its commitment to install a democratic civilian rule. Similar to many other pilot countries, the Pakistani government is relatively supportive of the service delivery role of civil society, but rather critical and sometimes even oppressive towards those CSOs advocating for policies that are contrary to the government's position.

As we can see from these few highlights, some initial findings from the pilot countries provide insights into new information assembled, and existing information systematically arranged, by the *Index's* Diamond Tool. However, generating fresh and accurate research-related findings are only part of the project's goals. In the next sub-section, we look at the first signs of the project's success in engaging civil society actors using the information obtained through the project's research and triggered by the project's action-oriented tools.

¹⁹ It is interesting to note that in many of the former socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, one can notice an upsurge of religious beliefs and activities, also among the youth. CSOs in these countries might therefore be able to build on these value changes, if these values will not be restricted to mere spirituality but also encompass such critical values for civil society as compassion, trust and empathy.

Closing the Gap Between Research and Action is Difficult, But Essential

Whether or not the *Index* successfully contributed to closing the gap between research and action will prove itself over the coming months and years. In many countries, the activities aimed at engaging civil society stakeholders through research are still ongoing or will only begin in late 2001. In others, they have already taken place.

Broadening the Actor Base of Civil Society

Generally speaking, the *Index* successfully brought together various stakeholders to engage in a systematic assessment and reflection process on the contours of civil society and its current challenges. In many cases, the project managed to broaden the stakeholder base and reach actors who are usually not involved in the civil society discourse (see Van Rooy 1998b: 213). In Romania, for example, a representative of a national nursing association actively participated in the National Workshop and expressed her gratitude for including her organisation in discussions on the future of associative forms of citizen action in Romania. In New Zealand, the *Index* closely looked at the role of organisations of indigenous people (Maori) in civil society as one of several country-specific aspects of the project. Its preliminary conclusions are that Maori organisations are still very isolated from other CSOs, an issue that might be addressed as a result of implementing of the *Index*. At this early stage, we already recognise the many difficulties in broadening the actor base of civil society beyond NGOs. The inclusion of trade unions into the definition of civil society, for example, was highly controversial. In an Eastern European context, many of the trade unions have been inherited from the past communist regime where unions were part of the state apparatus and not part of the emerging civil society (Mishler and Rose, 1995: 6). In many other countries, there are still state-controlled or employer unions, excluding them from the sphere of civil society. Nevertheless, we hold the position that by and large, trade unions should be included in the set of civil society actors. Leaving them out, would weaken civil society's ability in many respects, from its advocacy work on economic and social issues and international linkages to its reach beyond the middle classes and rural poor (see also Spooner, 2000).

In terms of the inclusion of informal types of associations, the preferred method of data collection, the stakeholder survey, requiring a postal address contact, and the focus on a national workshop, were the main obstacles to an appropriate engagement of informal associations in the study. Nonetheless, the *Index* represents a truly pioneering effort to take account of the mostly localised forms of folk associations on an international comparative basis. This goal will become a major focus of the project review phase, where we will definitely be on a steep learning curve.

Despite the challenges of analysing informal associations and trade unions in certain contexts, the focus groups and National Workshops conducted at this point prove the great potential of the *Index* to function as a tool that puts the broad theoretical list of civil society actors into practice and sharpens the common self-understanding of civil society organisations.

Providing Space for Networking and Alliance-building

Providing a space for networking and alliance-building is, of course, a long-term goal. However, even at this early stage, there already are first signs of success. In Belarus, the focus on civil society sub-sectors led to the first ever meetings of ethnic associations and to the decision to institutionalise and extend co-operation into the long-term future. In the words of Bjorn Halvarsson from UNDP, "Even if the *Index* would have only initiated the collaborations of ethnic associations as its sole tangible result in Belarus, it would have been a worthwhile project." The large participation of civil society actors and government representatives in the national workshops in

South Africa, Croatia and Romania indicates the strong interest in the project and in a strengthened collaboration between government and civil society. Through the strong participatory design of many project implementations, for example through a series of regional workshops in South Africa and Ukraine, a large number of stakeholders not only engaged with the project, but were also able to build relationships with other CSOs beyond their narrow field of interest. This has also carried over to the NLOs themselves, some of whom provided support to one another in carrying out the project, others are now engaging in other joint activities.

Developing an Action Agenda

As seen from those country reports that already include the proceedings of a National Workshop (for example Romania, Ukraine, New Zealand, Croatia, South Africa), the *Index* research provided a most useful tool to trigger the joint thinking of civil society stakeholders on the pressing issues facing civil society and, based on this, to develop a joint agenda of actions. In some cases, the agenda is very focused and concentrates on specific issues, whereas, in other cases, the agenda has more the character of a menu of challenges which stakeholders are going to reduce to the most burning issues in further consultations. For instance:

- In Belarus, stakeholders agreed to intensify their activities in reaching out to ordinary citizens, especially in the countryside, with the aim of establishing a stronger indigenously-run and community-based sector. This recommendation came up in several other Eastern European pilot countries, reflecting the weakness of civil society within local communities. Whereas we have to recognise that there will be no easy solutions to this challenge, recent research proves that citizens' trust in public institutions of post-communist Europe can be built more swiftly than previously thought (Mishler and Rose, 2001).
- During the Romanian workshop, the issue of a code of conduct for CSOs, which has been debated several times over the past years, resurfaced. It was decided that international experiences in this regard should be reviewed and that the National Forum of NGOs should play a co-ordinative role in taking the process further.
- In South Africa, the research revealed the widespread lack of impact evaluations of civil society's activities. Consequently, the action agenda included the need to develop effective and widely used systems of impact measurement and evaluation.
- In Ghana, workshop participants noted the relatively complex and rather unsupportive legal environment for CSOs. It was agreed to initiate a dialogue with government on drafting simplified laws affecting CSOs, a process to be led by the Ghana Bar Association.
- Based on the research findings on regional-specific features and challenges for CSOs in Ukraine, workshop participants recommended the design of regional-specific civil society development programmes not only at an international level, but also at a country level, as in Ukraine it appears that one size does not fit all.
- Strengthening civil society umbrella organisations as a crucial means to exert greater influence on public policy emerged as an important agenda item in New Zealand. In Romania, the first step was to better organise civil society through establishing appropriate networks and alliances. Here, stakeholders favour the approach of membership-based and horizontally structured 'federations'.

These examples suggest that the *Index* has indeed managed to bridge the gap between research and action. Even in those cases where the agenda items are not closely related to the research findings of the project, the *Index* provided the physical (workshop) and conceptual (Diamond Tool) space for civil society stakeholders to engage in a systematic and constructive debate on the current state of civil society. However, there surely is room for improvement in the project design. For example, the process of putting the agenda into action, keeping track and monitoring the various activities

sparked by the *Index* will need to be spelt out in greater detail. There is also a need to involve a much broader range of actors than just the NLOs to make them sustainable. The in-depth evaluation reports, which we will receive from the NLOs together with an externally commissioned evaluation study of the pilot phase, will form an effective basis on which to revise the project design.

Part VI

Conclusion: An International Research-Action Initiative on Civil Society – an Impossible Task?

The *CIVICUS Index on Civil Society* project, undoubtedly, is an ambitious and complex endeavour. We hope that, in this paper, we have been able to communicate the goals, background, history, project design choices and implementation successes and challenges of the *Index* to stimulate open debate on these issues among researchers and practitioners alike from which the project only can benefit. What are some initial lessons that can be drawn from the project thus far?

Strengthening Civil Society

The enthusiasm of our national partners and civil society stakeholders at national workshops about the project as well as the feedback received by CIVICUS members, partners and the project advisory group proves to us that the overarching goals of the project are most timely and worthwhile. In many countries around the world, civil society is in dire need of systematic assessment, joint critical (self-) reflection and common visions and actions. The *Index* provides a flexible framework and process to meet these needs as it pays close attention to the specific conditions of civil society in the respective country. ‘One size does not fit all’ has actually become the mantra of the project over the last 18 months.

Initial findings from the pilot phase show that local civil society stakeholders accept and utilise the project design as an effective tool for assessment, reflection and action, while appreciating the flexibility which allows them to tailor it appropriately (see also van Rooy 1998b: 217). Those national workshops, in which we could participate, were well attended and received a strikingly high amount of media attention with reports on the workshops being screened on Romanian and Belarusian television. Looking at civil society internally, the project surely succeeded in placing the thinking about broader issues, that go beyond one’s own organisation and that are generic to civil society, on the agenda. The challenges lie in making this process sustainable and institutionalised without investing too many resources that are more needed for the actual work CSOs carried out to improve their societies.

Project Design Trade-Offs

If “one size does not fit all” is one of the mantras of the *Index*, then balancing trade-offs appropriately surely is the other. Cross-country comparability of results versus their accuracy in the specific country context, easy media play versus in-depth diagnosis of civil society’s health, participatory approach versus straightforward and simple project design, tapping into local knowledge versus international standards were only some of the many issues where no easy solution was possible. In the previous sections, those issues as well as the decisions taken by CIVICUS on how to tackle them were laid open. In reviewing those decisions, we hope to also benefit from the input of readers of this report.

At this point, it is already clear that a stronger emphasis will have to be put on the cross-national comparability of the results; not so much for reasons of ranking and comparing specific countries,

but as local civil society stakeholders, especially in countries that are rather isolated from the global civil society discourse, voiced their strong need for international standards against which to compare their current state and which could be used for advocacy purposes and policy advice.

We will also review the means of collecting the relevant data, which for the pilot phase strongly relied on the stakeholder survey method. Whereas we hold the position, that the involvement of stakeholders in assessing the health of civil society has to be a central ingredient in the research, we will explore additional options of data collection (e.g. public opinion surveys, qualitative case studies) and improvements of the stakeholder survey method itself.

Initial Project Results

In reviewing the preliminary country reports on the pilot phase and listening to the feedback from various stakeholders, we can identify the following added value of the *Index*:

- (1) The Diamond Tool presents an innovative and most useful means to organise and systematise the various existing research studies and data sources on civil society, which, thus far, did not speak to each other.
- (2) By using the Diamond Tool, civil society stakeholders systematically think about the state of civil society and are supplied with a common framework for debate within as well as across countries.
- (3) The list of indicators of a healthy civil society generated through the project provide a useful basis for debate on how a healthy civil society should look.
- (4) Specific goals and aspects of the *Index* can be designed in each country, as the flexibility of the approach renders the *Index* adaptive to vastly differing circumstances, needs and states of civil society around the world.
- (5) The participatory approach of the project places the ownership of the project in the hands of local civil society, ensuring that local needs are being met and local particularities accounted for in the project implementation.
- (6) The *Index* provides an effective framework for assessment, reflection and action by civil society stakeholders, thereby successfully bridging the gap between research and action.
- (7) The project's focus on accounting for the full range of civil society organisations has contributed to broadening the actors' base of civil society beyond NGOs and making CSOs aware of the common concerns and interests of the sector.
- (8) The *Index* has sparked stimulating discussions among stakeholders on the state of civil society and, most importantly, joint visions and action agendas on how to strengthen civil society in the future.

The initial results of the pilot phase tend to lead us to the conclusion, that the project's goals of assessing and strengthening civil society are an ambitious, yet not impossible task. However, there is still much room for improvement and we invite your comments and feedback on the *Index*. In such complex international endeavours as this, trial and error is an inherent characteristic of the project process as Mattei Dogan and Dominique Pelassy note: "Like any scientific discipline, international comparison will progress by correcting a series of errors progressively revealed" (Dogan & Pelassy 1990: 13). CIVICUS with input from members, partners and the public is committed to limit these errors and multiply the progress made. July 2001.

Appendix 1

List of National Lead Organizations

Uruguay	Institute for Communication and Development (ICD)
Ukraine	Counterpart Creative Centre Et League of the Regional Resource Centers for NGOs
Belarus	Support Center for Associations and Foundations (SCAF)
Estonia	Open Estonia Foundation
New Zealand	Association of NGOs in Aotearoa (ANGOA)
Romania	Civil Society Development Foundation
Canada	Canadian Centre for Philanthropy
Croatia	CERANEO - Centre for Development of Non-Profit Organisations
Ghana	Institute for Cultural Affairs (ICA)
South Africa	South African National NGO Coalition (SANGOCO)
Pakistan	NGO Resource Centre
Scotland	Scottish Council for Voluntary Organizations (SCVO)
Mexico	Centro Mexicano para la Filantropia (CEMEFI)

Appendix 2

List of Project Advisory Group Members

Alan Fowler	Jasminka Ledic	Oana Tiganescu
Anabel Cruz	Johan Saravanamutthu	Phiroshaw Camay
Anita Gulati	Julie Fisher	Pierre Chekem
Atilla Oner	Ken Phillips	Prabir Majumdar
Bill Potapchuk	Leslie Fox	Ran Greenstein
Bob Bothwell	Lester Salamon	Reinhard Pollak
David Bonbright	Mamadou Mane	Richard Holloway
David Brown	Marina Ajdukovic	Salama Saidi
David Robinson	Mark Lyons	Salma Shawa
Douglas Wolfe	Mark Ritchie	Sarah C. Lindemann
Ed Crane	Marlene Roefs	Sinisa Zrinscak
Elba Luna	Martti Muukkonen	Svetlana Kuts
Faustino Jerome Babate	Mikko Lagerspets	Umut Korkut
Fernando Aldaba	Nchafatso Sello	Xing Quan Zhang
Jan van Deth	Nilda Bullain	Zaharah Alatas

Appendix 3: Proposed Indicators

A. Secondary Data Indicators

Structure

1. Paid employment in CSOs (as share of total employment) (EMPLOYMENT)
2. Volunteering in CSOs (as a percent of total adult population) (VOLUNTEERING)
3. Sum of memberships in CSOs (as a percent of total adult population) (MEMBERSHIP)
4. Employment in advocacy CSOs relative to employment in service-providing CSOs (ADV-SERVICE)
5. Number of CSO umbrella organizations (per 1.000 CSOs) (UMBRELLA ORGS)
6. Index of philanthropic giving: (a) Estimates of giving and in-kind donations to CSOs, (b) government social spending (PHILANTHROPY)
7. Inflows of spendable resources received by CSOs from public sector payments (GOV FUNDING)
8. Individual giving (as a percent of personal income) (IND GIVING)

Space

1. Freedom House Civil Rights Index (CIVIL RIGHTS)
2. Freedom House Press Freedom Index (PRESS FREEDOM)
3. Johns Hopkins Nonprofit Law Index (LEGAL JH)
4. Legal Environment Indicator (part of USAID's NGO Sustainability Index) (LEGAL USAID)
5. Corruption Perception Index (Transparency International) (CPI)

Values

1. Trust in people (among CSO members) (TRUST)
2. Tolerance of people (among CSO members) (TOLERANCE)
3. Increase in number of CSOs with explicit Code of Conduct/Ethics over previous year (CODE)

Impact

1. Media Coverage of CSOs (MEDIA)
2. USAID NGO Sustainability Index (NGO USAID)
3. CSOs share of total output in health, education, social services, housing, and culture and arts (OUTPUT)

B. Stakeholder Survey Indicators

Structure

1. Civil Society Organizations have an active membership base (MEMBERSHIP).
2. Civil Society Organizations are spread in a balanced way across the regions of the country. (DISTRIBUTION)
3. Civil Society Organizations are present even in the remotest areas of the country. (URBAN-RURAL-DIVIDE)
4. There is at least one networking or umbrella body of Civil Society Organizations. (UMBRELLABODY1)
5. This umbrella body encourages membership and participation (UMBRELLABODY2)
6. This body is able to promote the common interests of the sector (UMBRELLABODY3)
7. Civil Society Organizations do not co-operate with each other on issues of common concern due to conflicts among them. (COOPERATION)
8. Civil Society Organizations do join alliances with other Civil Society Organizations to further citizens' interests. (ALLIANCES)
9. Civil Society Organizations work closely together with local grassroots organizations. (LINKS)
10. Civil Society Organizations co-operate with the private sector. (COOP BUSINESS)
11. Civil Society Organizations have a culturally diverse support base. (INTERNAL CULT DIVERSITY)
12. Civil Society Organizations contact political party officials to express their interests in the public sphere. (POL PART1)
13. Civil Society Organizations use non-violent demonstrations or boycotts to express their interests in the public sphere. (POL PART2)
14. Civil Society Organizations use violent means of participation, such as damage to property or personal violence, to express their interests in the public sphere. (POL PART3)
15. Civil Society Organizations had to close down during the last year due to lack of funding. (FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY)
16. Civil Society Organization are dependent on indigenous public funding only. (PUBLIC FUNDING)
17. Civil Society Organizations are dependent on indigenous private funding (i.e. foundations, individuals, business) only. (PRIVATE FUNDING)
18. Civil Society Organizations are dependent on foreign funding only. (FOREIGN FUNDING)

Space

- 1a. Government regulations for registering Civil Society Organizations exist. (REGISTRATION)
- 1b. How many weeks does it usually take to register a Civil Society Organization? (REGISTRATION TIME)

Please judge on a five point scale how problematic are the following three different regulatory areas for the activities of Civil Society Organizations.

- 2a. registering a Civil Society Organization (REGULATION)
- 2b. tax legislation in terms of receiving tax exemption on moneys and membership dues. (TAX1)
- 2c. tax legislation regarding donations from individuals and business entities to Civil Society Organizations. (TAX2)
3. Civil Society Organizations are not pressured to join or endorse political groupings. (POLIT PRESSURE)
4. Civil Society Organizations are requested by local and national government to be involved in policy formulation. (POLICY INVOLVEMENT)
5. Civil Society Organizations have good access to the legislature to put their point of view. (LEGISLATIVE ACCESS)
6. The state has in place ways of recognizing people who have shown great public service in Civil Society. (STATE RECOGNITION)
7. All in all, for doing the work of Civil Society Organizations the state is very helpful (GENERAL STATE ATTITUDE)
8. A citizen who joins a Civil Society Organization is respected for this action. (SOCIAL RECOGNITION)
9. Public spiritedness is an admired character trait in this society. (PUBLIC SPIRITEDNESS)
10. Businesses support their employees' role as activists in Civil Society Organizations. (BUSINESS RECOGNITION)
11. Businesses are actively engaged in philanthropic programmes supporting Civil Society Organizations (BUSINESS PHILANTHROPY)

Values

1. Civil Society Organizations are active in initiatives promoting harmonious relationships between different political, cultural, religious, and ethnic groups in society (TOLERANCE1)
2. Civil Society Organizations are successful in promoting good relations between different groups in society. (TOLERANCE2)
3. Civil Society Organizations promote conflicts between members of different religious or cultural groups (SOCIAL CONFLICT)
4. Civil Society Organizations respect fundamental human rights such as human dignity or the rights to liberty and security (HUMAN RIGHTS1)
5. Civil Society Organizations are active in initiatives promoting human rights (HUMAN RIGHTS2)
6. The cultural diversity of our country is mirrored in civil society. All major cultural groups of society are actively and peacefully promoting their interests in civil society without promoting intolerance towards other cultural groups. (CULTURAL DIVERSITY)
7. Civil Society Organizations condone racism (RACISM)
8. Civil Society Organizations promote gender equity within their own ranks (GENDER EQUITY1)
9. Civil Society Organizations promote gender equity within broader society, business and the state? (GENDER EQUITY2)
10. Civil Society Organizations promote the sustainable use of natural resources (SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT)
11. Civil Society Organizations make information about their general activities publicly available (PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY)
12. Civil Society Organizations makes their financial accounts publicly available (TRANSPARENCY)
13. Civil Society Organizations encountered a case of corruption or self-interest regarding their internal management within the last two years (CORRUPTION)
14. Civil Society Organizations involve their members and/or stakeholders in their activities (INTERNAL DEMOCRACY1)
15. Civil Society Organizations use elections to select their leadership (INTERNAL DEMOCRACY2)

Impact

1. Civil Society Organizations are successful in representing the interests of their constituents and putting them on the public policy agenda. (POLICY AGENDA)
2. Civil Society Organization representatives are regularly invited to participate in the generation and discussion of legislation. (POLICY DRAFTING)
3. Civil Society Organizations successfully influence government policy in favour of its constituents. (POLICY MAKING)
4. Civil Society Organizations successfully cooperate with government on implementing policies. (POLICY IMPLEMENTATION)
5. Civil Society Organizations are able to provide their services in a manner, which would not be possible for the state or businesses. (COMPARATIVE ADVANTAGE)
6. Civil Society Organizations are successful in keeping track of/monitoring government commitments and policies. (POLICY MONITORING)
7. Civil Society Organizations are generally portrayed positively in the media (MEDIA IMAGE)
8. Civil Society Organizations are able to attract the attention of the media to report about their cause. (MEDIA ATTENTION)
9. Civil Society Organizations have a positive public profile (PUBLIC PROFILE)
10. Civil Society Organizations play a prominent role in resolving conflicts in society. (CONFLICT RESOLUTION)
11. The goods and services Civil Society Organizations produce reflect the needs and priorities of their constituents and communities. (RESPONSIVENESS)
12. Civil Society Organizations are successful in mobilizing the disadvantaged groups in society to take part in public life. (MOBILIZATION of MARGINALIZED)
13. People believe that the actions of Civil Society Organizations are in line with their opinions (POPULATION SUPPORT)
14. Civil Society Organizations improve the lives of the people they are working with? (SERVICE IMPACT)
15. Civil Society Organizations succeed in benefiting the public good (PUBLIC GOOD)

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