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Measuring Civil Society Globally with the CSI

Michael Hoelscher and Thomas Laux

Introduction

The general quality of an index can be measured by the new insights gained through it (Anheier 2005: 242). The CSI, as a participatory, action-oriented research project, tries to generate new insights on two levels. The research component of the project aims at assessing the strengths and weaknesses of civil society in many countries around the world in a comparative way. The action component seeks to strengthen civil society locally through enabling it to identify its support needs. However, there might occur a tension between these two aims. While the action component calls for a strong local adaptability of the project, thereby guaranteeing that it serves the needs of local civil society partners, global comparisons need to be grounded in rigorous scientific research aiming at the highest level of equivalence of assessment.

This chapter focuses on this latter research aspect and introduces the methodology used during the second full phase (2008–2011) of the CSI project, thereby providing context to the CSI with the aim of encouraging researchers to do their own analyses with the rich data source the CSI offers (Appendix 4 lists data of the dimensions and sub-dimensions for all countries for which this data is available at the time of writing). The methodology adopted for the 2008–2011 CSI, as will become clear, combines the two aims of the CSI by having a core of comparable items and tools, along with additional features that can be adjusted to the specific country context. This makes the CSI a very flexible, although also quite complex, instrument for the assessment of civil society.

The first part of the chapter gives a broad overview of the theoretical CSI approach to measuring civil society, introducing its different dimensions and the Civil Society Diamond.¹ The second part presents the data structure in more detail. The implementation process and the different data sources produced are also explained. A third part sets out some of the main outputs of the CSI, mainly the International Indicator Database and the Analytical Country Reports. The chapter closes with the discussion of some methodological issues

and an outlook on how the CSI could be used to improve our knowledge of civil society on a global scale.

The CSI approach to measuring civil society

The concept of civil society is one that gained extraordinary prominence during the last two decades. After an initial phase of celebration of the concept by many scholars and policymakers of different ideological persuasions, recently its usefulness has also been heavily debated (Mati 2009; Putnam 2000; Chandhoke 1995; Etzioni 1995; Gellner 1994; Cohen & Arato 1992). One of the reasons for this is the missing empirical evidence, especially in a comparative perspective, as 'knowledge on civil society in many countries is still limited' (Mati, Silva & Anderson 2010: 8). Based on the insight that there is still a lack of adequate ways for measuring civil society (Anheier 2005: 241), the CSI is one attempt to examine the phenomenon of civil society in a different, and hopefully fruitful, empirical way.

The CSI approach was developed on the basis of an extensive reading of the relevant theoretical and empirical literature and in collaboration with well-known experts in the field. This chapter, however, does not provide the space to delve into these intricacies of civil society theory in more detail, but will only outline the rough ideas behind the CSI concepts and point the interested reader towards further relevant literature. As one of the aims of the comparative aspect of the CSI is to contribute to further development of civil society theory through substantial methodological synergies, some important issues with regard to the measurement of civil society will be discussed at the end of the chapter.

One of the main advantages of the empirical work of the CSI project is to move 'from the realm of ideological discourse to the area of real-world experiences' (Heinrich & Fioramonti 2008b: xxx). Civil society is defined in this context as 'the arena, outside of the family, the state, and the market, which is created by individual and collective actions, organizations and institutions to advance shared interests' (Mati, Silva & Anderson 2010: 17). This conceptualization integrates de Tocqueville's liberal conception of associational life as well as Gramsci's (1992) notion of civil society as the site of struggle for hegemony (Heinrich 2005: 219; see also Howell & Pearce 2002). Considering the difficulties of measuring civil society cross-nationally and the variety of theoretical approaches, the CSI uses a functional definition that seeks to exclude normative biases as far as possible from the empirical view, also allowing, as Chapter 1 describes, the inclusion of the 'dark side of civil society' (e.g. Rethemeyer & Nagar 2007) in the analysis.² The functional aspect of civil society focuses on the arena where 'shared interests' are pursued. The specific forms or associations in which people articulate their interests are

multifaceted. Thus the term ‘civil society’ in the CSI includes individual action, demonstrations, social movements and other unorganized forms as well as non-profit organizations, charitable trusts and other organizations. A notable weakness within this definition is the unspecific use of the term ‘interest’, which is not clearly defined and needs more clarification (Heinrich 2005: 217). Apart from this, such a functional approach for assessing and defining civil society seems appropriate in order to capture the diversity of and within civil society.

On this basis, the CSI aims at painting a comprehensive picture of civil society globally.³ Comprehensiveness is sought in three dimensions. First, conceptually, civil society internally is measured in four different, inter-related dimensions, with a fifth assessing the external context for civil society. With this, civil society is assessed in a much broader sense than most other approaches offer, which often limit their analysis to ‘social capital’ in the form of trust and associational membership (e.g. Fukuyama 2001; Hooghe & Stolle 2003; Putnam 2000), or to the organized third sector.⁴ Second, the CSI spans time, having now concluded its second full phase (2008–2011), preceded by CIVICUS’s *New Civic Atlas* (Poinier 1997) in 1997, a pilot phase in 2001, a full first round in 2003–2006 (Heinrich 2007; Heinrich & Fioramonti 2008a), and an additional African regional phase (2008–2011). This allows for comparisons over time and analysis of trends, although changes in methodology to some extent limit the ability to do this. Third, with regard to a spatial dimension, a large number of countries have taken part in the project. Overall, seventy-four countries or localities have been involved in different phases so far. Besides the twenty-five countries of the 2008–2011 phase which provided the core dataset for this book (with an additional nine national partners subsequently providing data or in the process of doing so at the time of writing), six countries participated only in the pilot phase, four countries completed the African phase, and fifty-two countries took part in the 2003–2006 phase, of which twenty-two took also part in the 2008–2011 phase (see Appendix 1).

Supplementing the CSI’s comprehensiveness in conceptual breadth, time span and geographical spread is the application of a mix of quantitative and qualitative elements in its research design.

The 2008–2011 CSI comprised four internal dimensions, assessed by fifty-three indicators measuring twenty-four sub-dimensions (see Appendix 3 for a complete description of dimensions, sub-dimensions, and indicators). The dimensions are as follows.

Civic Engagement: Describes the formal and informal activities undertaken by individuals to advance shared interests at different levels, distinguishing between social engagement (interests of a generally social or recreational nature) and political engagement (interests of a more political or advocacy nature). Each of these is assessed in the three aspects of extent, depth and diversity of engagement within a country.⁵

Level of Organization: Looks at the organizational development and degree of institutionalization of civil society as a whole. In order to do so, it assesses the level of complexity and sophistication in a sample of CSOs. Sub-dimensions are internal governance; infrastructure; sectoral communication; human resources; financial and technological resources; and international linkages.

Practice of Values: A specific aspect which the CSI addresses and which distinguishes it from other efforts is the assessment of the internal practice of values within the civil society arena. Since the CSI does not assume that civil society is by definition made up of progressive groups, nor does it take for granted that civil society is able to practise what it preaches, it is paramount for this project to treat the practice of values as an empirical question that must be tested. Analyzed for the extent to which they apply within organizations are the aspects of democratic decisionmaking; labour regulations; codes of conduct and transparency; environmental standards; and the perception of the adherence to such values as non-violence and tolerance within civil society as a whole.

Perception of Impact: The level of impact that civil society has on policy and social issues as well as on attitudes within society as a whole is analyzed from the perspective of perceived impact, measured by both observers within civil society as well as external stakeholders belonging to the state, private sector, media, academia, international governmental organizations or donor organizations. Sub-dimensions are responsiveness; social impact; policy impact (each of these three measured both internally and externally); and the impact of civil society on the attitudes of people who are engaged in the sector.

Additionally, the CSI takes into account as a fifth dimension (made up of three sub-dimensions and twelve indicators) the national external context for civil society.

External Environment: In assessing the state of civil society it is crucial to give consideration to the social, political and economic environment in which it exists. Some features of this environment may enable the growth of civil society. For example, the prevalence of social values such as trust and tolerance among the general population may foster associational activity. Conversely, some features of the environment might hamper the development of civil society, such as restrictions on freedom of association and the legal framework, but also socio-economic factors such as an economic depression might impact on civil society negatively. Although it is close to impossible to provide an all-encompassing explanation of how the environment relates to each feature of the state of civil society, the CSI regards the inclusion of the general state of the external environment in which civil society operates as essential for understanding the complexity of challenges and opportunities facing civil society. The external environment is assessed in the fields of socio-economic context; socio-political context; and socio-cultural context.

Figure 2.1 Model Civil Society Diamond

Source: CIVICUS

Instead of combining all the information into a single figure, as is done for example by the UN Human Development Index, the CSI displays its different dimensions separately. This feature makes, as Anheier (2005: 242) notes, the CSI an indicator system rather than an index, even though its title suggests otherwise. To depict the full information in an easily accessible way, the so-called Civil Society Diamond was developed by Anheier (2004) and later adapted in 2008 to account for changes in the methodology between phases one and two of the CSI (Figure 2.1). Each of the four main dimensions builds one of the radiances of the diamond, displaying the scores for each on a scale from 0 to 100. This allows easy comparison across countries and the detection of relationships between dimensions by inspection of the diamond.

Represented visually by a circle centred around the axes of the CSI diamond, the external environment is not regarded as part of the state of civil society, but a crucial element for its development. Broadly speaking, the larger the circle, the more conducive the external environment is considered to the health of civil society. Care should be taken not to over-interpret the details of its size and shape, however. Although the diameter of the circle gives a broad indication of the state of the external environment, no particular meaning should be attributed to whether the points of the diamond fall within or outside of it; the circle and diamond are simply two graphics, one superimposed on the other. Note also that the external environment measure is always circular,

never elliptical. Although conceptually it is plausible that the environment may foster or restrain different dimensions of civil society differently, it is simply too complex to capture this with empirically valid summary variables.

Data structure of the CSI

To measure these different dimensions of civil society, the CSI uses a multi-level, multi-method approach, based on a variety of data sources. On the micro-level, information on individuals is collected through a Population Survey. The meso-level of CSOs is tackled by a separate Organizational Survey of CSO representatives. And the macro-level of the national situation and context is assessed by an External Perceptions Survey of experts, and data from international databases such as those of Freedom House and Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index. Information from these different data sources is integrated in the CSI International Indicator Database, which is the heart of the quantitative comparative CSI and can be used relatively easily by all kinds of researchers. However, the raw data of the three surveys provide a rich source of additional material for advanced analyses. These quantitative data are complemented on the country level by a variety of qualitative data such as case studies, focus groups and interviews. The Analytical Country Reports of the national partners add additional expertise and local literature to this picture, providing a broad description of the state of civil society in each nation or territory. The following sections first explain the implementation process and introduce the different data sources in more detail.

The implementation of the CSI

To ensure the comparability of the data gained in each country, the implementation of the CSI is guided by a detailed CSI Toolkit provided by CIVICUS (2008). By combining objective measures (e.g. the percentage of the population active in CSOs) as well as more subjective ones (e.g. impact evaluation from the External Perceptions Survey, case studies and focus groups), a broad and inclusive picture of civil society, its empirical manifestations and its role in a society is ensured and a more differentiated understanding of civil society can be gained. Regarding the action-orientation of the CSI, the research's 'subjective measures' serve as a reflection on civil society's own role, its accountability and its existing ambivalences (Mati, Silva & Anderson 2010: 10).

The summary of the CSI implementation process can be found in Figure 2.2. The implementation of the CSI in a country is demand-driven and is thus initiated

Figure 2.2 The CSI implementation process

Source: Mati, Silva & Anderson 2010: 32.

by an expression of interest by the National Coordinating Organization (NCO). Before the NCOs are designated by CIVICUS, several preliminary steps have to be undertaken. These preliminary steps include the identification of already existing secondary data sources for a country, the definition of country-specific facets, the development of a work plan, the draft of a budget defining the available financial and human resources and the setting up of a local resource mobilization and communication strategy. When all this is completed to satisfaction, CIVICUS accepts the partner and assists it through the project. The most important means for this is the extensive CSI Toolkit, which contains the master questionnaires for the surveys as well as suggestions for sampling, notes on how to apply for funding, proposed public relations strategies etc. Additionally, CIVICUS provides a help desk prepared to deal with more country-specific problems and offers continual advice for the implementation and the process of adaptation of the Toolkit. Last but not least, the Centre for Social Investment, CIVICUS's academic partner at the

University of Heidelberg in Germany, has been available for more general questions on scientific rigour.

After committing to the partnership, the NCO recruits a National Implementation Team (NIT), which conducts a social forces analysis about the relevant actors and power relations within society as a whole and then within civil society, and provides a first overview based on the available secondary data.

After the first three steps set out in Figure 2.2, training workshops for the NCO are organized by CIVICUS to make the participants familiar with the methodology and to secure a high research standard. Accordingly, the NCO trains the NIT in their country.

While the process up to this point is roughly similar to other cross-national studies, such as the World Values Survey, the European Social Survey or the Johns Hopkins project, some of the following steps set the CSI apart. In particular, the strong inclusion of different stakeholders, including asking them to validate and interpret findings, identify strengths and weaknesses and develop an action plan, is a unique feature. This inclusion not only contributes to the action component of the project, but also helps to improve the validity and reliability of the results overall.

In a sixth step, therefore, an Advisory Committee (AC) is set up, consisting of twelve to twenty civil society representatives and other stakeholders, who assist the NIT to implement the CSI. This process consists of the data collection through conduct of the Population Survey, Organizational Survey and External Perceptions Survey, and around five case studies. After that, different regional focus groups discuss and explore the main strengths and weaknesses of the picture of national civil society, using as the basis for its discussion the collected data. Following this, the AC meets to discuss the results and to plan a National Workshop. The National Workshop assembles seventy-five to 200 people and is the final meeting within the CSI implementation process of different civil society actors and stakeholders for discussing and developing an action plan to strengthen civil society. The results of the data collection and deliberations are combined to shape the Analytical Country Report and Policy Action Brief, as described in more detail below. As becomes clear, the CSI project generates a wide range of data sources and outputs, which are described in more detail in the next few paragraphs.

Data collection methods

Population Survey

The Population Survey assesses the strengths and weaknesses of civil society on the individual level. More than 45,000 people were surveyed for the 2008–2011

phase (see Appendix 2). The main dimensions this survey generates data for are Civic Engagement and Practice of Values, and to a lesser extent the Perception of Impact and External Environment. The survey asks for membership and active participation in different associations and organizations; for time spent volunteering and spent with friends and family; for political protest behaviour; trust and tolerance; public spiritedness; and some socio-demographic data. In some of the countries it is the first time that data on these issues are available in such breadth.

While it would have been ideal to have an even more extensive Population Survey to gather data on engagement in more detail, the range of questions posed was limited due to pragmatic reasons. By narrowing the range of questions, it was ensured that countries not able to secure funding or lacking the infrastructure for a full representative population survey could use data from the World Values Survey 2005 instead (if available for their country).⁶ In the event, some countries, for different reasons, also sometimes used other data sources (such as the European Values Study 2008 or some Barometers), complementing them with some items they surveyed on their own.⁷ This led to a situation where in ten countries the Population Survey consists of different samples, each contributing only a subset of indicators towards the national scores. This imposes limitations on cross-national comparability, and also inhibits some analyses on the sub-national level in these cases (see discussion below).

Organizational Survey

The Organizational Survey seeks the input of the main actors within civil society. The survey consists of questions concerning internal governance, resources and organizational practices within CSOs as well as civil society's own perception of its impact and its legal environment. Therefore, two different perspectives are captured: one addresses the organizations as such and the other focuses on information about civil society as viewed by actors involved in this sphere.

The information about the organizations concerns their internal structure, formal aspects and institutionalized practices, and their connections to other CSOs. Insights are also gained into the financial resources and the financial situation of these organizations. The representatives of CSOs also report about the perceived social and political impact of civil society as a whole and of their own organization.

Besides this, the CSO representatives report on common practices observed or experienced within civil society as a whole in order to examine the normative aspects often associated with civil society. The CSI seeks to enable a more realistic view on civil society, and therefore the views on the incidence of violence and corruption within civil society, for example, are highly interesting.

For the Organizational Survey 4,117 CSO representatives were interviewed in all the twenty-five countries that form the dataset for this volume; the numbers for the specific countries can be found in Appendix 2.

External Perceptions Survey

The External Perceptions Survey mainly examines the perceived impact of civil society action on social and political concerns (see Appendix 3). Whereas the Organizational Survey focuses on the perceived impact assessed by persons within civil society, this survey stresses the external perspective of civil society stakeholders. By comparing the two surveys, discrepancies between internal and external perceptions may become evident or, if the results are similar, civil society representatives' estimates of their impact can be confirmed as likely to be accurate. Different stakeholders are interviewed to give their evaluation of the most promising fields for civil society activity, its perceived impact and outcome so far.

The sampling of the External Perceptions Survey resembles the one of the Organizational Survey in securing regional coverage of the interviewed stakeholders (urban vs. rural, centre vs. periphery) and their diversity, regarding gender, age and ethnicity. Sample size differs between the countries; the smallest one is Japan with twenty-seven interviewed stakeholders and the biggest is Russia with 136 cases (see Appendix 2).

The interviewed stakeholders occupy different positions. The largest group consists of people in the executive branch of government, closely followed by people working in academia and in the private sector. The other respondents belong to the legislative or the judicial branch and some of them work in the media, in international governmental organizations or donor organizations. This wide range of different perspectives on civil society may enable a differentiated view on civil society action and its impact in a country.

Other data sources

The three surveys are complemented by information drawn from large international databases to complete the CSI diamond. The additional data sources are used to describe the socio-economic context, the socio-political context (with some data also drawn from the Organizational Survey) and the international linkages of civil society (see Appendix 3). Therefore different existing high-quality indices were drawn from in order to get a broad description of the situation in the analyzed countries. Data from Social Watch, Transparency International and the World Bank were used to examine the socio-economic context of civil society (inequality, corruption, economic context and basic capabilities, respectively). The socio-political environment

is largely observed through data from the World Bank and Freedom House, mainly focusing on political rights and freedoms, the rule of law and state effectiveness. To evaluate the international linkages of a national civil society, data were drawn from the Union of International Associations, one of the key sources for data about international governmental organizations and non-governmental organizations.

As already mentioned, a number of research outputs based on a qualitative approach, i.e. case studies, focus groups and expert interviews, complement and refine the information which has been gathered through the quantitative surveys. These represent a more qualitative perspective on the state of civil society, giving more in-depth insight on specific issues and problems for civil society in a specific country. They provide important information for understanding the state of civil society in a country as well as giving information to civil society actors about ways and methods to shape political and social processes (Keck & Sikkink 1998). These qualitative parts of the data collection process are also very important for the project's action-orientation by providing direct and intensive contact between civil society actors and stakeholders.

The focus of the case studies is to respond to specific problems or issues in each country and therefore to complement the comparative information provided by the different surveys. One major goal is to comprehend why or why not civil society has a certain social and political impact. Another goal is to complement the findings in the CSI diamond by adding an in-depth perspective. Therefore each case study is orientated on one of the five dimensions of the CSI diamond, and many countries commission one case study per dimension.

Regional focus groups and expert interviews allow a discussion of the quantitative results in more depth and a seeking of explanations and interpretations. Through this they all serve as triangulation for the findings in each country and give a broader insight into the complex phenomenon of civil society.

These qualitative components of the CSI are more than just an annex to the quantitative data. They offer in-depth insights about the implementation process and the particular situation in a country and, combined with the quantitative findings, complete the broad picture given about the state of civil society.

Dissemination of results

The CSI aims to distribute its data and results in the most accessible way, so that not only country partners, but all kinds of civil society stakeholders,

as well as researchers and the interested public, can gain from the project's output.

To make the data from the aforementioned four quantitative data sources and from all countries easily accessible for comparative analyses, the scores of all indicators and of the aggregated sub-dimensions and dimensions are collected in a central International Indicator Database.

From the raw data of the surveys, indicators for all sub-dimensions and dimensions are calculated on a standardized scale ranging from 0 to 100.⁸ The sub-dimensions and therefore dimensions are calculated by averaging the respective indicators, as no theoretical or empirical justification for any kind of weighting is applied. The CIVICUS Research Unit re-checks the indicators from all countries and combines them into a single dataset. The resulting International Indicator Database (current summary in Appendix 4) will be made fully available online and gives easy access to the most important findings for all surveyed countries and allows for their comparison, as well as serving as the basis for the construction of the country diamonds. In addition to the aggregated data of this database, the raw data from the surveys will also be made available to researchers and practitioners alike.

The cross-fertilizing integration of the qualitative and quantitative results collected through the CSI, as well as further results from desk research and a thorough review of available research on civil society in each country, is undertaken in the National Workshop and finally in the Analytical Country Reports.

The purpose of the National Workshop is twofold. First, it brings together civil society actors and stakeholders to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of a country's civil society, aiming to develop strategies for improving its situation and impact (the action component). Second, the (quantitative) research outputs are discussed to put them in context and assess their reliability and validity (the research component).

The NCO and NIT draw on the qualitative sources, as well as the quantitative data, to produce two main outputs of the CSI: an Analytical Country Report (ACR) and a Policy Action Brief (PAB). The ACRs, addressed mainly to civil society stakeholders, can be seen as the main output of the CSI on the country level. They summarise the entire CSI implementation process and synthesise the findings – both quantitative and qualitative – in an analytical manner. The documentation of the implementation process may reinforce the research standards, helps to evaluate the outcomes and secures a higher degree of transparency. The ACRs also encompass the outcomes and suggestions made in the national workshop. As they are written by experts from the respective countries, they add in-depth knowledge to the more comparative data from the surveys and help to interpret the quantitative findings. They serve as a

state-of-the-art report about the situation, the problems and the issues of civil society in a country. An overview about the available ACRs is given in Appendix 5.⁹

The Policy Action Briefs, addressed primarily to policymakers, particularly in national governments, outline the main CSI findings and highlight the action agenda and policy recommendations to try to rectify a national civil society's weaknesses and promote its strengths.

Besides these two main outputs on the country level, CIVICUS and its partners also aim to disseminate results in different forms, such as in the overview reports published in 2011¹⁰ and through the development of thematic publications which use the data, such as this volume. CIVICUS also uses the CSI data as the starting point for further pieces of research analysis and publication, such as research projects on civil society funding, CSO gender mainstreaming and volunteering and civic activism, initiated in 2011.

Methodological issues

As has become clear in the last few pages, the CSI is an extremely rich source of data for the comparative analysis of civil society. With data on different levels (micro, meso and macro) and from different sources, it enables researchers not only to describe and compare civil society in different countries, but also to test for more complex hypotheses in cross-national settings, thereby contributing to the advancement of civil society theory. Nevertheless, there are some tricky issues that researchers have to keep in mind to take full advantage of the CSI data. While the redesign of the CSI methodology and framework has taken into account many of the issues raised in a debate in the *Journal of Civil Society* on this topic (Anheier 2005; Heinrich 2005 & 2006; Howard 2005 & 2006; Salamon & Sokolowski 2006; Sokolowski & Salamon 2005), some could not or have not been solved yet in a fully satisfying way. The most important of these are discussed in the following paragraphs.

The most important problems concern the Population Survey. First, some countries used data stemming from multiple surveys instead of conducting their own. Where possible, similar questions were merged into a single variable in the international dataset. While this is not visible in the International Indicator Database, with the individual data aggregated on the country level, which poses no direct challenge as long as analyses keep to the country level (however, see below), it inhibits many analyses on the individual level in these countries. For the dataset used in this volume, this is the case in Argentina, Bulgaria, Georgia, Italy, Japan, Jordan, the Philippines, Slovenia, South Korea and Turkey.¹¹ Luckily, in eight of these countries one of the datasets comprises at least the

core variables together with some socio-demographics of respondents. Only Bulgaria and Georgia face larger problems (and to a lesser extent, Japan), as important variables are split between the datasets in a way that inhibits most analyses on the individual level.

A second problem, related to the first, is that those countries which do not undertake their own Population Survey (those countries mentioned above, plus Chile and Croatia) rely on data from different years, drawing mainly from the World Values Survey 2005, but also the WVS 2000 and the European Values Study 2008, or even EVS 1999. In relatively stable countries this might not be too big a problem. However, many surveyed countries are experiencing rapid change, and using older data probably introduces a bias. This poses an indirect challenge to the comparability of indicators even on the country level.

Third, some countries did not keep to the original coding scheme for all questions, or even dropped items (e.g. some missed data on some socio-demographic characteristics). Some of the deviations are justified adaptations of the CSI Toolkit to the specific country context (e.g. when some specific organizations, such as burial societies, were added to the list of voluntary organizations for membership on request), but some are not (e.g. when Russia did not differentiate between inactive or active membership).

Other problems relate to more or less all CSI surveys, and are also well-known from other cross-cultural surveys (Harkness, *et al.* 2010; Hoffmeyer-Zlotnik & Wolf 2003; Jowell, Robert, Fitzgerald & Gillian 2007). A possible bias, for example, is introduced by improper forms of sampling and by non-response. The CSI Toolkit contains general sampling criteria and procedures for all three surveys. These give some hints on how to secure a (close to) representative coverage (for example with regard to regional representation: urban vs. rural, centre vs. periphery, affluent vs. poorer parts). However, the criteria are not always applicable, or not applicable in the same way. Therefore, the method of sampling varies between the countries in order to take into account the local availability of information. For example, in some countries sampling of organizations was done by drawing a random sample from a registration list. In some others, however, no such lists exist, or existing lists are not reliable. In such cases, snowball sampling was often used. Sampling for the External Perceptions Survey is probably the most problematic with regard to being representative. Nevertheless, as respondents are seen as 'experts', in principle they should hold similar views (based on shared knowledge), and the question of a representative sample becomes less important. With regard to the population surveys, country partners were asked to use an established survey organization, so that appropriate sampling could be expected. Nevertheless, within the CSI framework, it would be beneficial to have more detailed documentation about sampling than is currently available.¹² The same problem holds true for the question of missing data. For some variables there are huge

numbers of missing responses in some countries. Proper analyses on whether these missing responses were random or not have yet to be done.

Potential bias can also stem from translations of the English master questionnaires into other languages (Harkness 2003). Different means can be taken to reach the highest comparability of the instrument possible, but most of them are resource-intensive. Again, documentation about the translation process is missing for most countries. More generally, issues of equivalence of measures (Deth 1998; Przeworski & Teune 1966) and of data quality in different countries persist.

There is another issue relating to the question of translation, but this time the other way round: some responses in the surveys contain string variables, for example the names of organizations others have networks with (from the Organizational Survey). These were kept in their original language and writing, which guarantees the best transfer of the original data, but might result in some extra effort to analyze them cross-nationally.

Apart from issues of data collection, there are other operational issues. One is certainly the aggregation of the empirical data into the theoretically derived sub-dimensions. The overall structure of the manifest indicators measuring the latent constructs of the different dimensions has not yet been thoroughly tested.¹³ Another problem is that some variables are used in the construction of multiple indicators. For example, the aspects of depth, breadth and diversity of participation are constructed in parallel ways for political and social engagement, all based on two single measures (one for political, one for social engagement). As a result, some aggregated indicators are not fully statistically independent. Therefore, researchers are advised to carefully examine the CIVICUS paper explaining the construction of the indicators in more detail.¹⁴ A third issue is the standardization applied in scaling the indicators from 0 to 100. This standardization is straightforward in most cases, for example when looking at the percentage of people that engage in some associations. However, some calculations are more difficult, especially when there is no upper limit or the theoretical limit is far from being reached in praxis (e.g. 'hours of voluntary work'). As now becomes obvious with the available data, the scale is utilized to quite different extents by different indicators. Some nearly use the full range, while others use only a small section of it.¹⁵

Besides these more or less technical problems, there is a general debate on how to measure civil society cross-nationally and whether this is feasible at all. One of the main questions is how to combine global generalizability and locally adapted approaches. While the perspective of comparative research stresses the need for generalizability, the action component emphasizes more the local context. As an action-research project the CSI aims to involve different actors in the research, and puts a strong emphasis on actors' specific perspectives and country contexts. Nevertheless, the CSI tries to combine this with scientific rigour. As an international comparative research project, it aims for comparability of results across countries.

How are these somewhat contradictory aims reached? The most important mechanism is the use of a multi-level, multi-method approach. First, civil society is, as already explained, addressed on three levels: the individual, the organization and the country. This allows a balance to be struck between generalizability and local adaptation for each level separately. While, for example, at least the quantitative aspects of the context on the country level are assessed in a general comparative manner, the issues by which civil society impact is assessed are adapted to country-specific conditions. Second, the CSI is based on a wide variety of methods, reaching from desk research over expert interviews and case studies to the Organizational and Population Surveys. While the latter lend themselves better to comparative research, the former can be more adapted to the local contexts. A third feature to reach both aims of specificity and generalizability is the use of a two-step procedure. There is a standardized comparable core (represented mainly in the International Indicator Database), which is fleshed out by additional indicators and methods which take more account of the specific national contexts. For example, countries are encouraged to add their own types of organizations to the central selection when asking for organizational membership.

This was indeed one of the biggest challenges when redesigning the current tool. The old CSI consisted of two sequential steps: first, a national research team collected all the available data, and then in a second step the National Advisory Group (NAG) rated these available data on a scale from 0 to 3 for each indicator. The more objective data of the surveys were therefore only the input for a more subjective assessment as to whether a certain value meant a strength (3) or a weakness (0) or something in between (1 or 2).

In the new CSI Toolkit, the two steps are not constructed as a sequence, but rather as two complementary parts of the assessment. As experience has shown the unreliability of the rating done in the first round of the CSI for some countries, and as this 'subjective' measurement raised legitimate critique (Sokolowski & Salamon 2005: 239), the use of such subjective measures was reduced in this latest phase. Now, the raw data is kept for the international comparisons, but a more qualitative interpretation and discussion of the data by the Advisory Committee is included as part of the ACRs. By this, the indicator scores in the international database become more comparable, but the perhaps sometimes even more adequate national subjective interpretation is still available to researchers and practitioners.

Conclusions

To summarize, there are at least three major advantages of the CSI. First, the mix of different methods allows for cross-checking the results of the different approaches.

Second, the project design allows the incorporation of excellent field knowledge through the cooperation with civil society actors. Additionally, the CSI offers a large number and heterogeneity of participating countries. However, there are also some tensions. The first is the broader theoretical question of whether contextualized action-research goes together with comparability. The second tension arises from some methodological issues with regard to data quality and comparability.

For a possible future re-design of the research approach, the research could benefit especially from three changes. First, an element of triangulation at the level of indicators and sub-dimensions could be built in systematically. The use of different data sources, qualitative as well as quantitative, and collection of data on different levels (individuals, organizations, and the national level) would easily allow for this. Corresponding questions could be used in all three surveys in order to compare and thus control the various perspectives. As a second proposal, the integration of questions regarding the presence of and connectedness with international civil society would bring benefits. At the moment, countries focus on their national civil society, and only a very limited number of indicators enquire into international or transnational networks and their impact within countries. Innovative measures for assessing the inclusion of domestic civil society into transnational networks still have to be developed and should become part of the CSI.¹⁶ The biggest improvement, however, would be the implementation of a full Population Survey in all participating countries, even though this is very resource-intensive.

Nevertheless, we are convinced that the CSI is one of the most ambitious approaches to measuring civil society in a comparative way and offers many opportunities for substantive methodological synergies. The data, which will be made available to the academic community, will help to develop further theoretical hypotheses which, in turn, will, it is hoped, inform future rounds of the CSI. Therefore, while the CSI is by no means a perfect research tool, we think it is already good, and it definitely aims to improve further.

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