



AN ACTION AGENDA FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

The path to increased impact and
civic engagement

**POLICY
BRIEF**
**CIVIL
SOCIETY
INDEX FOR
ALBANIA**



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Civil Society Index for Albania: Needs & Process

In the past two decades Albanian civil society has made great strides in terms of its internal development and its contribution to addressing societal challenges of the post-communist Albania. Looking back at the road walked during the transition period from the perspective of civil society development, as well as identifying the present and upcoming challenges to better respond to societal needs and expectations from the third sector was imposed as a necessity in the recent years. The CIVIL SOCIETY INDEX (CSI) – an action oriented assessment tool implemented worldwide by civil society organisations (CSOs) with the guidance and support of CIVICUS (Johannesburg, South Africa) – offers the most comprehensive assessment of the Albanian civil society thus far by analysing the key factors and components of the third sector's existence throughout five core dimensions: CIVIC ENGAGEMENT, LEVEL OF ORGANIZATION, IMPACT, VALUES and the socio economic and political ENVIRONMENT.

The CSI in Albania was implemented by the Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM) in the period between June 2009 – June 2010, with the financial support of UNDP Albania and in close collaboration with CIVICUS. This process involved more than 200 civil society organizations at national level, approximately 150 other public and private stakeholders (state institutions, donors, media, academia, private sector etc.) and approximately 1.150 citizens that participated in a complex framework of research, assessments and consultations such as the CSI Advisory Committee meetings, surveys, regional focus groups, structured interviews, case studies and a national workshop. The findings, conclusions, and recommendations drawn in the course of the CSI project implementation are articulated through the two main products – the Analytical Country Report and this Policy Action Brief – and they originate from the valuable contributions and participation of civil society and other important actors.

IDM, July 2010

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Civil society is becoming an increasingly important actor in the democratic governance systems worldwide. Defined as the “arena outside the family, the state and the market, which is created by individual and collective actions, organizations and institutions to advance shared interests”, civil society unavoidably interacts with all societal segments of a given polity by obtaining and delivering inputs to various processes and stakeholders. From an impact perspective, civil society in a democratic state is situated in a complex relationship with its environment (polity), where actors and processes have a dual function – target of civil society’s desired impact and influential factors for the structure of third sector’s actions and shape.

The analysis of this complex reality in Albania provides evidence that recognizes the important contribution of the civil society in informing and influencing reforms and processes. Despite the moderately developed Albanian third sector – characterized by highly skilled human resources, expertise and efficient internal structures – the CSI Analytical Country Report reveals some serious concerns related to civil society’s links with the local environment and the levels of civic engagement, impact, sustainability, the socio-political environment where it operates, good governance and accountability values. The root causes of these concerns cannot be isolated to a single cause, nor can they be merely linked to civil society actors. As a consequence, the CSI country report and Policy Brief suggest that recommendations designed in this course by civil society and other stakeholders must form part of a more complex and inclusive framework of interventions that require the commitment for positive change of all key stakeholders – civil society, donor community, state, private sector, citizens and other societal actors.

II. CIVIL SOCIETY IN ALBANIA: IN SEARCH OF CITIZENS AND IMPACT

II.1. Context and challenges

Almost two decades after the collapse of communism, Albanian civil society displays the features of a moderately developed sector that operates in a relatively enabling environment, and is dedicated to democratic values and principles, with functional internal structures, networking potential and highly knowledgeable human resources. Yet, major concerns related to internal aspects of civil society and external socio-political factors have led to a third sector that is detached from the local context, citizens' priorities and that is struggling to cope with its missing impact. Citizens' widespread indifference towards civil society or state actors' pro-forma approaches to involve the third sector are not the only reasons for the low impact. Rather, a complex set of interdependent factors that originate from the approach and attitudes of a variety of actors, including CSOs, have blurred the role and the potential of civil society.

A largely donor-driven civil society, with predominantly project-based CSOs that only cover thematic and geographical areas for which and for as long as funding is available, and most significantly – a civil society that appears to be “an efficient actor in promoting democratic decision-making, transparency and accountability of governance, but which is still half way to fully practicing it internally” – represent some of the most important and pertinent concerns for civil society in Albania today. Other issues that significantly influence civil society's impact include the moderate levels of dialogue, interactions and exchange with policy and decision making structures, the gap between CSOs and citizens or interest groups, and the third sector's inability to impose genuinely local agendas. Last but not least, the socio-political environment – where the positive change of the prolonged anticorruption, good governance, rule of law and other development reforms is still pending – has led not only to low level of public trust in state institutions but also to scepticism towards participatory approaches of governance and towards the role and inputs originating from non-state actors, including civil society.

II.2. Five key concerns of Civil Society in Albania

Increasing trends of a self-critical stance among civil society actors, higher expectations from the role of civil society, as well as the shift in the public discourse from “what donors want” to “what local actors expect from civil society” represent important signs of maturity in the attitudes of key societal actors. Growing initiatives aiming to provide new impetus to interactions between civil society and citizens, the donor community, private sector and the state too, enable a promising development in this regard. Yet, as the below analysis reveals, the root causes and effects of identified concerns are not isolated within a single context and their impact often extends to a broader set of processes and actors. Hence, any solutions to the five key concerns for civil society (CS) would not be complete if they fail to address the spectrum of causes and effects as a whole.

CITIZENS' ACTIVISM AND ENGAGEMENT

in civil society initiatives and organisations in Albania is characterized by high levels of indifference. In contrast to the strong idealism and optimism of the 1990s with mass civic involvement, movements of students, labour unions and citizens, today personal interest or at least expectations for various benefits constitute a stronger motivation for civic activism for a considerable part of citizens. This explains the slight differences between the levels of socially-based and political

engagement of citizens. Yet, widespread apathy towards political parties and distrust in state institutions are the principal reason why even the political activism remains an option for less than 30% of the Albanian population (see Fact Sheet 1). The impact of such perceptions is much more complex and extends to citizens' lack of trust in the governance system and to a general belief that activism will not bring along any positive change.

Nevertheless, the third sector cannot justify its failure by blaming the “indifferent citizens” or the “corrupt state actors”. Citizens and especially external actors – representatives of policy and

FACT SHEET 1

- 18.4% of citizens are active members of social org.
- 18.1% do voluntary work for at least 1 social org.
- 27.3% of citizens are active members of political org.
- 29.9% do voluntary work for political org.
- 28.2% have taken part in political actions (petition, boycott, demonstration etc.)
- Citizens' main motivation to join CS activities: shared values (44%) & personal interest (31%)
- 66% of citizens trust civil society & 34% don't
- 56% of external actors believe that most CSOs lack transparency
- 81.3% of external actors believe that CSOs are able to work in public's interest only “to a certain extent
- Political parties and labour unions enjoy least trust by the citizens

decision makers, media, donors, and academia – that are more aware and informed of civil society developments are sceptical towards some core values and principles of good governance within the third sector. In addition to a 34% of citizens who do not trust civil society, the majority of external actors (56%) believe that most CSOs lack transparency. Surprisingly, as the following section of the analysis shows, a considerable number of CSO representatives themselves are (self)critical in this respect.

FACT SHEET 2

- *Decisions in CSOs are taken by appointed leader (27.6%), elected board (27.6%) or appointed board (19.5%)*
- *In only 8% of CSOs decisions are taken by members (6.9%) or the staff (1.1%)*
- *42.1% of CSOs refuse to reveal a publicly available source for their financial information*
- *More than 75% of CSOs do not deny the existence of instances of corruption within CS*
- *Cases of corruption within civil society are frequent (26.7%) or very frequent (11.6%) according to CSOs*
- *Most frequent corruptive practice includes mismanagement of funds (48.2%)*
- *CS's strongest values: equal opportunities for men and women, non-violence and peace*
- *No differences between CS members & non-members on the (lack of) tolerance towards certain minority groups like homosexuals, people with HIV/AIDS, Roma.*

VALUES: Transparency and accountability, key principles of good governance practice, are the most concerning issues of the current civil society structures. The CSI analytical country report also identifies another important concern – the equally high level of intolerance towards certain social groups such as homosexuals, people with HIV/AIDS and Roma among civil society members and non-members. A civil society that appears to

be an efficient actor in promoting democracy and good governance on a national level, but which fails to fully practice these values internally, is one of the most striking findings of the CSI project in Albania. The predominance of non-membership based CSOs seems that has weakened somehow the practicing of inclusive decision-making within civil society structures while steering committees or boards appear to be formal bodies with no significant role in the quest for accountability and transparency of the third sector. See Fact Sheet 2.

Being accountable and transparent to the donor and the state (tax) authorities appears to dominate the understanding of CSO representatives' on good governance when it comes to civil society. However, the growing sense of self-criticism and the intensified public discourse on the legitimacy of civil society, accountability towards the citizens and on the need

for a civil society that is deeply rooted in the local context (instead of donors' agenda) represent favourable incentives towards change. While recognizing the contribution of recent governmental actions in this regard, such as the civil society charter, representatives of the third sector and other stakeholders have emphasized the need for an open and inclusive process to design specific legislative acts that regulate the financial and tax related issues in civil society.

Financial and tax related legislation represent only one aspect (quite important to ensure independence) of the complex **"STATE-CIVIL SOCIETY"** relationship. In addition to being one of the main targets of civil society's activity, the state's approach and openness towards civil society is a conditioning factor for civil society's impact on and relations with other societal actors and more broadly, with the environment where it operates. As shown at Fact Sheet 3, the dialogue and exchange between these two actors remain at low levels according

to both CSOs and external actors. Despite the prevalent opinion that the legal framework on civil society is generally enabling, all key actors agree that adjustments of the existing or even new legislation is needed to regulate state-civil society interactions in a way to make effective and absorbable inputs originating from civic initiatives. Yet, legal improvements alone can not provide a firm and final solution. Illegal restrictions or interferences from the state in civil society actions, the missing dialogue, exchange and cooperative attitudes in key state institutions or pro-forma approaches to consultations with and involvement of civil society

FACT SHEET 3

External Actors

- CS has effective dealings with local gov. (76.7%), EU institutions (63%) & central gov. (53.6%)
- CS has ineffective dealings with Judiciary (55.6%), Business sector (44.4%) & Parliament (40.7%)
- Dialogue with citizens (16.6%) & partnering with international institutions (15.6%) are the top two factors for ensuring CSO legitimacy.

CS organisations

- Top two factors for legitimacy are "representing social / interest groups" (17.2%) and "Advocacy for specific rights/policies" (15.6%). Dialogue with citizens and partnering with international institutions stand at 7% and 3.3% respectively
- 53% say legal framework on CS is fully or moderately enabling. 38.8% say it is quite limiting
- 24.1% of CSOs have faced illegitimate restriction / attack by central or local government
- Cases of interferences from the state in CS activities / initiatives have taken place sometimes (50.6%) or often (12.6%) & never happened according to 5.7%
- "State-Civil Society" dialogue & exchange is non-existent (4.7%) or limited (55.8%). 5.8% say it is well-developed & dynamic

actors are some of the sensitive issues whose solution relies on the change of (institutional representatives') mindsets more than on new laws. Establishing a partnering, instead of a subordinate or submissive relationship is the first step that needs to be considered by both actors.

Elements that make sure a strong basis for the **SUSTAINABILITY** of the third sector, its actions and impact represent also essential factors that enable a solid ground to efforts of civil society organisations in building firm position towards any pressuring forces that strive to downplay the role or interfere in civil society actions. The CSI study confirms the often-repeated concern that civil society remains a largely donor-driven sector while their activities are predominantly project-

dependent. Such an approach (by CSOs) has led to a fragmented civil society in terms of thematic but also geographical areas covered. Namely, in addition to the discrepancies between Tirana based and CSOs in other cities and towns, the third sector is almost inexistent in remote and rural areas (see Fact Sheet 4). Further, considering the CSOs' perceived importance of donors' priorities and the detachment from the citizens and local priorities, civil society activities are mostly focused on issues / areas where funding is available. Also, the underdeveloped philanthropic culture in the country, lack of CSOs' attention to diversified funding and the prevalence of short-term funding have led to serious doubts over civil society's sustainability of human resources and also impact. As many civil society leaders in the working groups have pointed out (National Workshop, July 2010), the main concern for many CSOs at the end of a project's implementation is not always the assessment of impact but funding for future projects. Furthermore, being fully dependent on project-based fund-

FACT SHEET 4

- Only 16.1% of CSOs have a strong human resource base
- Two most isolated and under-represented communities (with CSOs) are the rural communities & marginalised groups according to respectively 70% and 47% of CSOs
- Main financial supporters in the next 5 years according to CSOs: foreign non-EU donors (57%), Government (17.8%), corporations (10%), EU programs (7.8%). Less than 7% of CSOs list alternative sources – membership fee, own services & individual donations.
- 75.3% of CSOs consider donors' priorities very important for their agenda. Less than half consider important the priorities & needs of "interest groups" (48.8%) or "marginalised groups" (41.2%)
- For 72% of CSO civil society has been "somewhat successful" in influencing foreign donors' priorities
- Lack of alternative funding resources & limited timeframe of existing funding resources is negatively reflected on the sustainability & impact of CSOs

ing and with an average of projects duration of less than a year, it is difficult to streamline CSOs towards a result and impact oriented approach.

The IMPACT of civil society remains thematically and geographically fragmented and also limited in its scope, according to both CSOs and external actors. Actions to enhance transparency of governance— one of the main well coordinated and resourced priorities of foreign donors – appears to be an issue on which civil society's impact has been significant and tangible. Different from CSOs representatives, external actors see small impact of the civil society

on social issues and also on the policy making processes (see Fact Sheet 5). The above analyzed concerns – related to CITIZENS ENGAGEMENT, VALUES, SUSTAINABILITY and STATE-CIVIL SOCIETY relations – logically lead to a low profile of civil society's impact in Albania. On the other hand, considering the low level of exchange and consultations with other societal actors, one may question even the achieved impact of civil society in these years particularly from the following perspective. Namely, in a socio-political environment where key actors, including civil society, agree on the relevance of concerns related to a donor-driven civil society, detached from the local context and interest groups, able to channel support for a democratic and inclusive governance but still half way to practice it inter-

FACT SHEET 5

External Actors

- 90.6% believe that Albania has a civil society with limited impact
- 74% say CS impact on economic development & poverty reduction is very limited or fully missing
- Round 65% say CS has some tangible (61.3%) or high level impact (3.2%) on anticorruption & transparent government
- 45% believe social development & supporting poor / marginalized groups are the top two areas where CS has been most active and for 59% CS impact in these areas has been tangible or high level
- CS impact on the social context is small (37.5%) or missing (53.1%)
- CS policy impact has been most present on issues related to social policies, gender, human rights, local / good governance, EU integration and various sectoral policies (education, environment etc.)
- Yet, CS impact on policy making is limited (65.6%) or completely missing (3.1%)

CS organisations

- Round 50% believe that social development & supporting poor / marginalized groups are the top two areas where CS has been most active and for round 70% of them CS impact in these fields has been tangible or high level
- CS has a tangible or high level impact (86%) on policy making
- CSOs' impact on transparent governance is medium or high level (56.3%) while the impact on corruption is limited or missing (58.2%)
- Business community participates rarely (49.4%) or never (11.5%) in CS activities according to CSOs.

nally, the impact of the third sector appears to add a value to “externally-imposed” priorities but not necessarily to a genuine local agenda. Local stakeholders’ involvement in planning and delivering actions, their commitment to absorb inputs and to advance achieved results represent key ingredients for a far-reaching, shared and sustainable impact.

Unlike the 1990s and the early 2000s when the need for economic and political stabilisation and development may have justified the approach employed by donors and civil society, the emergence of the above mentioned concerns, the intensified quest for higher impact of civil society actions, clearly illustrate that these processes and actors have reached a level of maturity that requires a new approach towards and within civil society. This approach, however, cannot bring a positive change if it fails to address these concerns in a comprehensive way. As the following section points out, an Action Agenda involves challenges for all societal actors and requires the commitment of all stakeholders for concrete actions that cannot be limited to the internal structures of civil society only.

III. AN ACTION AGENDA FOR POSITIVE CHANGE

The CSI Analytical Country Report for Albania draws a comprehensive framework of concrete recommendations based on a critical analysis. All three working groups of the National Workshop (5 July 2010) – with representatives of civil society, state, donors, academia, media, private sector etc. – shared the understanding that the responsibility to act on identified challenges does not lie only within civil society and hence, all stakeholders must assume their obligations and take the relevant actions. The National Workshop fully endorsed the recommendations of the CSI country report and additionally provided concrete advice on how to embark on concrete measures. While considering the CSI report’s recommendations and the working groups’ contribution a far-reaching **ACTION AGENDA FOR CHANGE** on which civil society, state actors, private sector, donors and other societal actors must vow commitment and resources the National Workshop warns that a fragmented approach on any of these aspects would seriously limit the success of this endeavour.

ADVICE OF WORKING GROUP I “CIVIC ENGAGEMENT”

While citizens’ participation and activism is significantly influenced by a number of factors – e.g. civil society values, accountability, and socio-political environment – the citizens’ involvement and interaction with civil society remains a crucial element. Further, citizens’

empowerment and a proactive attitude towards third sector is a condition sine qua non for an active citizenry that is confident in its capacities for change and in civil society as a tool towards that change. Hence, the following recommendations need to be adequately addressed in order to reach higher level of civic engagement:

- CSOs must rely on and engage citizens as stakeholders more actively, rather than perceiving them as merely final beneficiaries. In addition to involving citizens in planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of activities and impact, a boost of membership-based CSOs with functional internal structures and governance procedures will improve civic activism and will strengthen incentives for volunteerism.

- A well defined focus in all civil society activities reflecting the interests and priorities of target groups will likely improve credibility of CSOs, level of public trust and will bring them closer to the citizens.

- The establishment of dynamic CSO networks should not be limited to be an end in itself but should rather be used as a powerful tool to reach a greater extent of citizen activism and engagement.

CSI Analytical Country Report-Albania Recommendations for CIVIL SOCIETY

- *Design and initiate actions to expand and deepen citizens' participation in civil society actions and structures, including initiatives that aim to increase public confidence in civil society activities;*

- *Initiate and implement actions that strive to broaden the motivation and degree of involvement of citizens not only in politically-oriented organisations but also in other civil society structures;*

- *Increase communication and outreach capacities towards citizens, communities, interest groups and towards advocacy efforts with governmental actors and donor community;*

- *Diversify the focus areas of work and generate ideas and strategies to become (self)sustainable;*

- *Improve policy making capacities and build strategies for effective advocacy and networking;*

- *Increase internal transparency, accountability and democratic decision-making. Establish an applicable set of standards (e.g. Code) and encourage civil society actors to endorse and implement them internally;*

- *Initiate actions to promote and strengthen civil society and qualitative inputs from remote and rural areas*

- *Undertake campaigns and other actions to promote democratic values of non-discrimination, tolerance, understanding and support for various minority groups, in particular for Roma, sexual minorities, gender equality, people with disabilities & HIV/AIDS;*

- *Improve the quality of services & promote established benchmarks as a reference for quality and objectivity with national, regional and European institutions;*

- *Intensify cooperation with regional and European centres and networks as an opportunity to upgrade capacities, and integrate with EU-based civil society.*

ADVICE OF WORKING GROUP II “THE INTERNAL ORGANISATION, TRANSPARENCY, GOOD GOVERNANCE AND VALUES OF THE ALBANIAN THIRD SECTOR”

Transparency, accountability, and other key principles of good governance and values of civil society are areas in which the CSI project identifies disturbing trends. National stakeholders fully endorsed and further developed an intense debate at the National Workshop, aiming to find solutions to these concerns. Based on these discussions as well as the findings CSI country report, participants of the Working Group II agreed that the following key points will support the objectives and long term vision of the CSI recommendations:

- CSO transparency and accountability remains a challenge for civil society actors and also a sensitive issue for other key stakeholders – citizens, donors, interest groups, and the state. Yet, it is not necessarily a matter of the extent to which these aspects are regulated by the existing legislation. Accountability and transparency in the third sector must be perceived and applied by civil society as values and principles that form integral part of the relationship with their members, citizens, social or interest groups, donors, and the state;
- Concrete measures by the state to improve tax and other financial legislations related to civil society must be designed in consultations with civil society;
- A donor coordination forum with active involvement of local CSOs would serve to overcome not only concerns over a thematically and geographically fragmented third sector, but also issues related to CSOs capacities, sustainability, relations with state actors, impact

CSI Analytical Country Report - Albania Recommendations for STATE ACTORS

- *Increase transparency, access to information, dialogue & co-operation with CSOs. Enable a friendly-environment for civil society monitoring & advocacy actions;*
- *Discontinue the formal approach of civil society involvement in the policy-making process and adopt mechanisms that absorb external inputs in the policy shaping stage, throughout the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of impact to better meet the objectives of the National Strategy for Development and Integration, as well as other national strategies;*
- *Improve the current tax & financial reporting legislation through a separate framework for the third sector;*
- *Enact measures and adopt legislation that encourages the private sector and the citizens at large to support civic initiatives and/or expand the use of voluntary services;*
- *Take appropriate measures to implement the recently developed “Charter of Civil Society” with active involvement of civil society actors;*
- *Develop cross-sector support schemes for civil society at the local and rural areas.*

and concerns over complex and varying administrative or financial procedures of donors.

ADVICE OF WORKING GROUP III “CHALLENGES TO CIVIL SOCIETY’S IMPACT”

Civil society impact remains largely dependent on civil society – its public support, governance and values, capacities, approach to networking and advocacy, linkages with interest or social groups etc. – but still, significantly conditioned by the relationship with the state and the latter’s approach towards civil society initiatives. Accordingly, prospects of increased impact of civil society are likely to be conditioned by actions that target both axes as well

CSI Analytical Country Report - Albania Recommendations OTHER STAKEHOLDERS (Private sector, Media, Academia etc.)

- Engage in joint consultations with civil society and governmental actors to explore opportunities for “civic-private” partnerships;
- Build cooperation and inter-linkages with CSOs (typically, think tanks), universities and the existing or recently established research and academic centres;
- Identify converging interests amongst influential actors – CSOs / business / Media / Academia and the State – and initiate partnerships based on shared resources, interactions and active involvement to advance common priorities.

CSI Analytical Country Report -Albania Recommendations for DONOR COMMUNITY

- Diversify focus in terms of thematic areas, type and geographical coverage of civil society structures as eligible applicants (e.g. community based organisations), based on wide and continuous consultations with civil society and other stakeholders;
- Increase the cooperation and coordination among donors in the country, and ensure the active participation of local civil society. A genuine, non-formal structure of consultations among donor, civil society and the public sector could function at the national and local level to prioritize real needs and challenges based on the local context;
- Design medium term programs with flexible time-spans and funding that enable civil society actors to deliver sustainable results, monitoring and evaluation of impact;
- Adjust the complexity and requirements of formal application procedures to the extend, scope and targeted impact and encourage capacity building for CSOs to meet the criteria of application procedures;
- Encourage support and capacity building for membership-based CSOs and particularly to key partners of the social dialogue framework such as labour unions, various professional associations etc;
- Encourage initiatives aiming to increase transparency, good governance and accountability practices within civil society at large

**CSI Analytical Country Report for Albania
Recommendations on SHARED CHALLENGES**

- *Improve institution building, rule of law and accountability of public authorities at all levels as a prerequisite for an active citizenry and civil society;*
- *Engage in developing and supporting civic platforms in remote and/or rural areas that target key socio-economic concerns, governance, human resources and other fundamental factors for an active community, social cohesion and a citizen-oriented governance;*
- *Promote a more active role of civic actors in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policy frameworks and measures in the areas of social and economic development, and particularly in the context of EU integration;*
- *Develop a more transparent and comprehensive framework of shared responsibilities among public and private actors for the country's sustainable development and European Integration.*

as by progress in relation to the other key concerns described in this policy brief.

In addition to the recommendations outlined in the CSI Albania analytical country report, participants at Working Group III call for adequate attention and actions on the following issues:

- A long term strategy to improve relations between state actors and interest groups, as well as to increase third sector's impact must be considered by civil society actors at both, gen-

eral and sector-specific level;

- Actions to improve the public image, to build a reliable profile and citizens-oriented approach of civil society through practicing internally democratic values and principles of good governance must continuously remain at the heart of the third sector's activities;
- Proactive advocacy-based networks of civil society organisations and structures represent a tool which civil society must dedicate more efforts to, in order to enhance the potentials for increased impact on policy making.