

**CIVICUS Civil Society Index Report for
The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, PRC
'A VIBRANT BUT LOOSELY ORGANISED CIVIL SOCIETY'**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Civil Society Index (CSI) is a programme designed by CIVICUS, an international alliance of civil society organisations established in 1993. CSI is a participatory action-research project aiming to assess the state of civil society in countries around the world. This Executive Summary presents the main findings and highlights important implications of the CIVICUS Civil Society Index (CSI) project that was carried out between 2004 and 2005 in Hong Kong.

The project was a collaborative effort among the Hong Kong Council of Social Service, The University of Hong Kong, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University and The Chinese University of Hong Kong. The main objective of the CSI is to identify the strengths and weaknesses of a country's civil society and to suggest the kinds of action needed to further strengthen civil society and its contribution to social change.

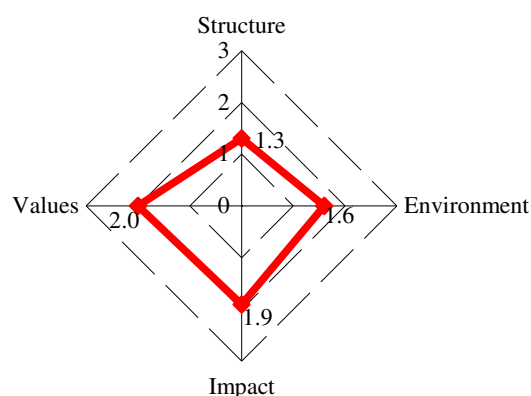
It is hoped that by carrying out the CSI project, interaction and networking among civil society stakeholders can be strengthened, a common understanding of the state of civil society can be reached, and the research ability of supporting organisations can be enhanced. Furthermore, the submission of the Hong Kong Civil Society Index Report to CIVICUS makes it publicly accessible to interested parties around the globe, thereby raising international understanding of the state of civil society in Hong Kong.

Following the CIVICUS definition, civil society is defined as "the arena, outside of the family, the government and the market, where people associate to advance common interests." CSI examines civil society from four dimensions: STRUCTURE, ENVIRONMENT, VALUES and IMPACT. The STRUCTURE dimension is concerned with the internal structure of civil society. The ENVIRONMENT dimension evaluates the political, socio-economic, socio-cultural and legal surroundings in which civil society exists and functions. The VALUES dimension analyses the extent to which civil society practices and promotes values conducive to the growth of civil society. The IMPACT dimension weighs up how energetic and influential civil society is with regard to governance and meeting social needs. Together these four dimensions make up the Civil Society Diamond.

To gauge the four dimensions, the CSI research team in Hong Kong engaged in both primary and secondary research. The following studies have been carried out: a civil society organisation questionnaire survey of over 800 organisations; 28 stakeholder consultations with individuals from fourteen sectors; a media review of two newspapers and one TV news programme; 3 policy impact case studies; and a corporate social responsibility study involving the ten largest listed companies in Hong Kong. The CSI also drew on the results of two territory-wide population surveys.

On the bases of the research results, twelve advisors gathered on 25 March 2006 to score the four dimensions, which can be depicted graphically in the form of a Diamond. The shape of the Civil Society Diamond is depicted in the following figure:

FIGURE 1: Civil Society Diamond for Hong Kong



Major Findings:

Of the four dimensions of the Civil Society Diamond, VALUES (2.0) and IMPACT (1.9) received higher scores than STRUCTURE (1.3) and ENVIRONMENT (1.6).

STRUCTURE is the weakest of the four dimensions of the Hong Kong Civil Society Diamond. Not many citizens join organisations, volunteer in social services or take part in collective community action. At the organisational level, civil society organisations (CSOs) are rather unstructured and many are inadequately resourced.

Overall, the ENVIRONMENT within which civil society exists and functions is neutral with respect to the development of civil society. The socio-economic context and the legal environment rather encourage the growth and operation of civil society. The political context is quite favourable save the restrictions placed on citizens' political rights and the low degree of decentralisation. However, the levels of trust, tolerance and public spiritedness are rather low among members of civil society. Furthermore, civil society's relationship with both the private sector and the government is either aloof or unreceptive. Basic rights and freedom are not too favourable to civil society for information rights are not guaranteed by law and self censorship appears to be threatening press freedom.

The VALUES dimension is an important aspect of Hong Kong civil society. It shows that Hong Kong civil society moderately practices and promotes positive social values. Basically, the values of non-violence, tolerance, poverty eradication, environmental sustainability and gender equity are upheld. Instances of corruption within civil society are rare. However, democratic practices within CSOs, financial transparency of CSOs, as well as action to promote transparency need to be encouraged.

The IMPACT dimension is also considered a stronger feature of Hong Kong civil society. Civil society has been effective in meeting societal needs, particularly those of marginalised groups. It has also done well in responding to social interests, setting public agenda and challenging public policy. Such a positive impact is compromised by civil society's limited effort and ineffectiveness in holding private corporations accountable. In addition, the degree of influence that CSOs have on social policy and the public budget varies, depending on the types of CSOs as well as the nature of the issue.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Hong Kong Civil Society:

The strengths of Hong Kong civil society lie in its

- Enthusiasm in advocating ideas and values
- Ability to shape public agenda and challenge public policy, and
- Robustness in responding to societal needs and providing services

Major weaknesses of Hong Kong's civil society can be summed up as follows:

1. Internal to CSOs:

- Low level of donation and volunteering
- Low level of participation in CSOs
- Under-developed institutional structure such as internal democracy and transparency
- Insufficient resources including human, financial, technical and infrastructural

2. Inter-relations among CSOs:

- Few federations or umbrella organisations representing individual CSOs
- Few platforms to promote dialogue among CSOs
- Few civil society support organisations

3. External to CSOs:

- Limited dialogue with the government and erratic participation of CSOs in policy-making
- Financial dependency of some CSOs on the government
- Very limited dialogue or cooperation with the business sector
- Society in general and the business sector in particular lacks a strong sense of corporate social responsibility
- Lack of an up-to-date set of non-profit or charity laws

Overall, Hong Kong civil society can be described as **vibrant but loosely organised**. It is loosely organised because of the low levels of structure as well as communication among CSOs. It is vibrant because it actively strives to respond to social needs and empower minority groups and in the process it enjoys various degrees of success. In addition, it is fairly committed in promoting important social values.

Looking ahead, the near future does not seem to be very promising for it appears that various factors would restrain the further development of civil society. At the individual level, the depth of participation is worrying. At the organisational level, there is a low level of internal democracy, over-dependence on public funding, and inter-organisational cooperation is

infrequent. At the sectoral level, mistrust between CSOs on the one hand, and the government as well as the business sector on the other hand, is prevalent. Also, there is a lack of an up-to-date set of non-profit laws. It is possible to address all of the above inhibiting factors, but it will take time and deliberate effort to cultivate an ambience and nurture a habit that enables civil society to grow.

Recommendations:

On 29 April 2006, over sixty civil society actors took part in the Hong Kong Civil Society Workshop. Many suggestions and recommendations were made in the Workshop; they basically centred around five areas:

- *Resources:* Finding funding resources other than the government
- *Common platform:* Establishment and maintenance of dialogue among CSOs
- *Training and retaining CS actors:* Identification of ways to train and motivate CS actors
- *Research and Advocacy:* Strengthening research capacity and formation of advocacy alliances
- *Civic education:* Cultivation of an enabling socio-cultural environment for effective functioning of civil society

The CSI project is arguably the most comprehensive study of the present day civil society in Hong Kong. It affords us a thorough view of the current state of civil society. Hopefully, the Civil Society Workshop represents a first step to engage civil society actors in a common platform and many more dialogues both within the civil society and between the civil society and other sectors will follow.