



## Press Statement

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### **Reinvent or face irrelevance: CIVICUS report warns civil society organisation**

**2 September 2011. Johannesburg.** Civil society - the sphere of people's associations and organisations - is undergoing its most significant crisis and change for a generation. Many established civil society organisations (CSOs) are struggling under the weight of multiple economic and political challenges, but are also disconnected from citizens, particularly from new, informal modes of participation and activism.

This is the key finding of a new report on the state of civil society published by CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation. The report, [Bridging the Gaps: Citizens, organisations and dissociation](#), concludes that the rise of informal activity, such as the peoples movements of the Arab Spring, offers a new challenge and opportunity to CSOs: they must embrace such movements to connect better with the public and renew themselves in order to survive.

The report, the result of an extensive three-year research project, the CIVICUS Civil Society Index (CSI), offers a comprehensive self-analysis by civil society of its strengths and weaknesses in 35 countries in Latin America, Europe, Middle East and North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa and Central and East Asia between 2008 and 2011.

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"The findings show that CSOs face multiple challenges including limited and tense relations with governments, declining financial and human resources and low levels of public involvement in their activities," said Andrew Firmin, compiler of the report and Research Consultant with CIVICUS. "However, more positively, there is also strong evidence of vibrant civic involvement outside the formal CSO arena. In almost every country, informal participation, whether it is community voluntary work, involvement in group activities or acts of individual political activism, outstrips membership of formal CSOs."

"What this means is that our understanding of what civil society is and how to support people's participation has to change to become more fluid in response to these changing times," he added. "Donors, governments, the private sector and CSOs themselves need to stop making CSOs a proxy for broader civil society, as doing so means that we will not sufficiently understand the sources and motivations of participation and activism, and miss opportunities to support the efforts of citizens to improve their lives and societies."

While during the period of research, CIVICUS also recorded threats to CSOs - usually from governments - in over 90 countries, 2011 has seen many citizens finding new ways of mobilising themselves; for example in the Middle East and North Africa, but also in a wave of protests in Europe, Asia and the Americas. This suggests that there are a range of different platforms for participation and activism, and that formal CSOs are only one of the participation routes open to people. When CSOs are stymied, it also tells us that dissent can find alternate paths. For example, the Middle East and North Africa region reported the lowest rates of membership in and volunteering for CSOs, but this did not accurately predict the potential for people's activism.

The implications of this for those who support the civil society sector, and CSOs themselves, is that they need to find ways to make connections with new groups of activists and people in overlooked forms of associational life. This includes cultural, religious and sporting groups and those connecting through technology and social networking in new and powerful communities of online activists, CIVICUS said. Methods also need to be found to bring together the different parts of civil society, such as CSOs,

trade unions, faith organisations and informal groups, which are currently disconnected.

"We need to recognise that there are multiple platforms for participation and multiple routes into activism. CSOs need to be both challenged and supported to improve their outreach, refresh their participation bases and help join together a disconnected civil society," said Ingrid Srinath, Secretary General of CIVICUS. "The prize that is on offer is the enabling of more effective participation that achieves impact in improving development outcomes, expanding participatory democracy and redressing social ills and injustices. If these disconnects are not addressed traditional CSOs risk sliding into irrelevance and possible extinction," she added.

*CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation is a global movement of civil society dedicated to strengthening citizen action and civil society across the world*

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