

Improvements and future challenges for the research: infrastructure in the field of civil society

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Improvements and Future Challenges
for the Research:
Infrastructure in the Field of Civil Society

Mareike Alscher and Eckhard Priller

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Improvements and Future Challenges for the Research: Infrastructure in the Field of Civil Society

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Abstract

Despite the obvious existence of civil society organizations (CSOs) and forms of civic engagement, the data available for this sector remains inadequate. This expert report provides a comprehensive view of the current data situation, reveals existing gaps, and offers suggestions on how these gaps might be closed.

The empirical material currently provided by existing data sources - the Federal Statistical Office, statistics from the CSOs themselves, as well as special data and surveys - only register this area separately and to a limited extent, and even then not in a consistent manner. With respect to both civil society organizations and forms of individual engagement there is an inadequate data situation. Questions that have arisen around whether CSOs will remain oriented toward civil society in a context of increased economic pressure on organizations cannot be answered. Similarly, it is nearly impossible to analyze whether civic engagement belies an increased tendency towards monetarization.

Since civil society will undoubtedly continue to gain in political and social importance, the long-term task will be to set up a meaningful and a predominantly self-contained system of data collection and provision. This goal can be reached by following up on the existing surveys and databases described in this paper.

Keywords: civil society; civil society organizations; civic engagement; Volunteers Survey; Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project; Handbook on Nonprofit Institutions in the System of National Accounts

1. Introduction

The term “civil society” attracts a range of paraphrases and definitions. One of the most common definitions is action-oriented and focuses on four distinct attributes (Kocka 2003; Gosewinkel et al. 2004, 11). These attributes include (1) qualities of self-organization and independence; (2) an emphasis on actions taken in the public domain nurturing exchange, discourse, and understanding but also conflict; (3) the acknowledgement that conflicts and protests are included in this concept of civil society but they are associated with peaceful, non-violent, and non-military actions; and (4) a course of action that considers the common good above and beyond individual, specific, and particular interests.

This paper conceives of civil society in accordance with the logic of this field. As such, civil society can be perceived especially as characterized by (a) the self-organization of citizens and (b) their voluntary engagement in a number of organizational forms, such as clubs, associations, initiatives, or foundations. These organizations are generally regarded as the institutional core or infrastructure of civil society and are often collectively referred to as the “third” or “nonprofit” sector as a way of separating them from state and market sectors (Anheier et al. 2000). Civil society organizations (CSOs) thus constitute that area of society located between the boundaries of market, state, and family, and are characterized by their formal structures, organizational independence from state control, autonomous administration, non-profit approach, and voluntary engagement. Engagement in civil society organizations includes both unpaid voluntary work in traditional membership-based organizations and nonprofit-oriented activities in unconventional forms of organization.

CSOs can be found in a variety of areas and perform diverse roles. Whether in recreational or cultural spheres, as part of social service facilities, or as other types of local, professional, and political advocacy groups (e.g., clubs, associations, foundations, not-for-profit PLCs, cooperatives, etc.), they have collectively become an essential part of society’s workings.

As contemporary forms of civic self-organization and self-responsibility, CSOs possesses considerable abilities with regard to the concentration, expression, and representation of interests. They are assigned responsibility for implementing important tasks in promoting the development of democracy, providing welfare state services, as well as integrating citizens into coherent collectivities and thereby ensuring social cohesion.

A number of factors have led to the increased importance of this sector of society in recent years. On the one hand, citizens have progressively taken greater charge of their own skills.

On the other hand, social change has led to changes in social roles and functions, resulting in an increasingly stark division of tasks between state, market, and civil society. The growing significance of CSOs has manifest itself through increases in the number of CSOs, in the number people working in them, and in the services they offer. At the same time, the number of voluntary workers also continues to grow.

Despite the obvious existence of CSOs and forms of civic engagement, the data available for this sector remains inadequate. Due to the relatively late development of this social sector as an independent scientific discipline, the empirical information available on this constantly evolving sector is incomplete. Even official statistics and other data-providing information systems only mark this area separately to a limited extent, even then not in a consistent manner. For instance, CSOs and their services are often subsumed within the categories of state and economy, with data gathered from disparate surveys seldom taking their autonomous forms of organization into account.

CSOs tend to point out the fact that they break down the classic dichotomy of state and citizen, replacing it with the three social spheres of state, market, and civil society. In the past, however, the autonomy of this sector did not prevent the use of CSOs for political ends in order to carry out those inconvenient tasks for which no one was - or considered themselves to be - responsible. With this in mind, some social actors view CSOs as simply a form of cheap “repair service,” a way of balancing out the social deficits caused by the failure of the market, state, or family sectors.

Generally speaking, the growing demand for data on civil society can be explained by the increasingly autonomous significance of civil society in economic, social, and cultural life. Yet the current data situation is extremely complicated, not least because civil society has its own particular logic of action, and possesses unique functions and organizational structures, all of which have until now received only a modicum of direct attention and consideration. Data is lacking on the size of this sector, the extent of the services it offers, and its degree of socio-political integration. Current yet differentiated information is needed in order to more accurately define the significance of civil society, its development, and its contribution to providing solutions for current and future social challenges.

This expert report provides a comprehensive view of the current data situation, reveals existing gaps, and offers suggestions on how these gaps might be closed. Whereas in Germany relatively little data on civil society is available, other countries, such as the USA, Australia, Italy, Belgium, and even Hungary, have progressed much further with regard to

data collection and the long-term observation of civil society. Corresponding data is already an important component of these countries' official statistics.

2. The Current Data Situation in the Civil Society Sector

Empirical research on civil society can be divided into investigations aimed at three distinct levels. At the macro level, CSOs are collectively analyzed as a field or sector. At the meso level, research focuses on the CSOs, their specific tasks, and the way they function. Finally, at the micro level, public activity in and for these organizations is investigated, with the key words in this context being membership, volunteering and donation behavior.

A considerable step toward improving the relatively awkward data situation in the past took place with the Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project,¹ a large-scale, internationally comparative project with a scope spanning more than thirty countries. Under the coordination of the Johns Hopkins University Institute for Policy Studies (Baltimore, USA), this project provided the results of data collected in Germany for the 1990 and 1995 reporting periods. The project was launched in 1990, and encompassed a group of seven industrialized and five developing countries. In the meantime, the number of countries taking part has increased significantly. During the second phase (1995–1999), countries in North and South America, as well as both Western and Eastern Europe were heavily represented. Existing gaps in Africa and Asia have also been closed in more recent years thanks to the provision of additional country reports. Germany has been involved in the project from its inception.

The project collects quantitative data at national level on the structural dimensions of the nonprofit sector, and investigates qualitatively how the sector is embedded within national structures. During the second phase, the German component of the project was located at the Social Science Research Center Berlin (WZB: *Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung*) and the Westphalia Wilhelm University of Münster's Institute for Political Science.

It was agreed that during the course of this international comparative project, empirical data on the CSOs would be collected according to the following targeted items:

¹ The project included formally structured, state-independent, and nonprofit-oriented organizations. These organizations were also administered autonomously, funded to a certain extent by voluntary contributions, and could not be in any sense be called an "administrative union" (Anheier et al. 1997, 15).

- Number of CSOs
- Number of staff, based on number of hours worked (paid and voluntary staff)
- Financial volume
- Proportion of different funding sources within financial volume
- Expenditures
- Fields of activity
- Services provided

The well-established International Classification of Nonprofit Organizations (ICNPO) also formed part of the uniform research design. The nonprofit sector was then divided according to activity into twelve distinct fields, thereby allowing for an investigation into the internal structure of the sector. The ICNPO lists the following fields:

- Culture and Recreation
- Representation of Civic and Consumer Interests
- Education and Research
- Philanthropic Intermediaries and Voluntarism Promotion
- Health
- International
- Social services
- Business and Professional associations, Unions
- Environment and Nature Conservation
- Religion
- Housing and (Local) Economic Development
- Not elsewhere classified

The Johns Hopkins Project also developed a corresponding methodology, thereby establishing the essential groundwork for and facilitating the establishment of a long-term observation. In collaboration with the Johns Hopkins University Center for Civil Society Studies, the United Nations Statistics Division produced the *Handbook on Nonprofit Institutions in the System of National Accounts*. This publication offers recommendations and guidelines for setting up national information systems. A host of countries (including Belgium, Italy, and France, among other European countries) have already adopted this approach. In Germany, however, no similar administrative decisions and practical steps have been taken. Nevertheless, the implementation of this methodology is both conceivable and indeed can be achieved, thanks to the close cooperation between the research community, the Federal Statistical Office, and

the CSOs.

In order to establish a long-term and sustained observation of civil society in Germany, data from official statistics as well as additional data stocks from CSOs, federal ministries, and other institutions and associations - including the research community - must be integrated. Despite endeavours to secure the continuous generation of reliable data on the social impact and performance of civil society in Germany, up to this point only partial and very basic data have been made available. And yet, it would be possible to draw from these diverse sources - official statistics, information from the CSOs and, above all, data from scientific surveys. It is critical that the current data situation be fundamentally reshaped and improved; this must be set as a goal for the future. Greater coordination will be required in order to coordinate the amalgamation of the various data stocks. Moreover, scientific research, especially with regard to CSOs, must be undertaken. The current situation for the individual fields is as follows:

2.1 The Federal Statistical Office

The Federal Statistical Office provides diverse statistics, although they do not fully conform to the methodology laid out in the *Handbook on Nonprofit Institutions in the System of National Accounts*. The information gathered from this source during the investigation referred to the number of CSOs, the number of staff, the CSO's financial volume, as well as the services offered, results, and capacities. These data do not, however, offer a full picture of the CSOs. Some of the surveys used to collect data are based on the 2003 German Classification of Economic Activities (WZ03) and use a type of business entity classifications that are not consistent with the typical fields of activity and type of business entity classification developed by the Johns Hopkins project. Thus, the significance of these data is, generally speaking, limited. The following summarizes the individual data and data sources pertaining to CSOs within official statistics:

a) Economic accounts

- Data on gross value added and staff

b) Business register

- Data on turnover, number, and staff

Income tax statistics

- Data on financial volume (income) acquired through donations from private households

- c) *Corporation tax statistics*
 - Data on finance volume (income acquired through donations and the expenditure of donations; profit and loss information)
- d) *Survey on private schools (no current data available—last surveyed in 1995)*
 - Data on the number, income, and expenditure of private schools
- e) *University statistics (manual allocation of type of business entity necessary)*
 - Data on the number of universities, their staff, expenditure, income, and services provided
- f) *Research statistics of non-university research institutions*
 - Data on the number of institutions, their staff, expenditure and income
- g) *Child and youth services statistics*
 - Data on the number of institutions, results, and income
- h) *Health service statistics*
 - Data on the number of institutions, their staff, services provided, and capacities
- i) *Continuous household budget surveys*
 - Data financial volume (obtained through information on income, donations, and membership fees)
- j) *Income and consumer sample*
 - Data on financial volume (obtained through information on income, donations, and membership fees)
- k) *Time use survey (no current data available—last collected in 2002)*
 - Data on the engagement/volume of voluntary work

2.2 *Statistics from Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)*

Data received from umbrella organizations represent another important source of information for statistical analyses. However, the material provided from these sources is marked by certain gaps and irregularities. These gaps are caused by a number of factors. On the one hand, transparency is not particularly well developed in civil service organizations; the corresponding tax legislation means that only limited support is received from the state. On the other hand, the member organizations of these umbrella organizations - or even their regional branches at the level of the *Länder* - are themselves autonomous and independent legal entities and thus not obliged to provide data. Finally, incapability and noncompliance inevitably lead to gaps and loss of information.

At this point, it is useful to make the following observation: when one considers the combined statistics available within all non-statutory welfare services in Germany (i.e., the voluntary welfare organizations of *Caritas*, *Diakonie*, the *German Red Cross*, *Paratätische*, and the *Central Welfare Office of Jews in Germany*), the combined statistical data in all the museums in Germany, and the database of the German Association of Foundations (*Bundesverband Deutscher Stiftungen*), it is very clear that CSOs could play a much larger role as potential suppliers of data in the future. The information gathered during the individual surveys of the CSOs refers to the number of CSOs, the services offered and capacities, as well as the number of staff.

a) *Overall statistics of the non-statutory welfare service sector*

- Data on the number of institutions, staff, capacities

b) *Overall statistical data for museums in Germany*

- Data on the number of institutions, services provided, and number of staff

c) *German Association of Foundations database*

- Data on the number of foundations, their assets, and outputs

2.3 *Special Data and Surveys Focusing a Micro Level*

a) *The Volunteers Survey*

The German Volunteers Survey consists of a representative data collection in which around 15,000 German citizens over the age of 14 are queried about their level of civic engagement. To date, the survey has been carried out twice - in 1999 and 2004 respectively. The next survey is planned for 2009. The survey's data - which have been scientifically verified - provides a number of opportunities for carrying out extensive analysis on the orientation, extent, and potential of civic engagement in Germany. At the same time, the survey provides information on the willingness of individuals to participate in civic activities (cf. Gensicke et al. 2006). Furthermore, the survey offers insight into the motives behind civic engagement and the social structure of volunteerism. The data was collected differentially according to socio-structural criteria.

b) *The German Socio-Economic Panel*

By focusing on "social participation and time use," the German Socio-Economic Panel represents another crucial source of data in the combined statistical measurement of engagement in civil society. Data from this source focuses on the types of engagement associated with certain forms of CSOs. At the same time, activities that fall within the

purview of informal personal and community networks are also taken into account. Although the data gathered is not differentiated by specific fields of engagement, it is well-suited to the illustration of general trends and developments over time, and can also be used to implement time series analyses and analyses on socio-structural factors.

c) The IAB Establishment Panel Survey

Data from the IAB Establishment Panel is primarily evaluated at the Institute for Employment Research (IAB: *Institut für Arbeitsmarkt- und Berufsforschung*). The survey gathers data from organizations that have at least one staff member subject to social insurance contributions. Therefore, the sample only contains those CSOs with paid staff. The survey thus provides information relating to staff and the CSOs. However, because it concentrates on economically active establishments, the broader spectrum of CSOs remains poorly represented.

d) European Social Survey

The European Social Survey (ESS) is a representative social survey established at the suggestion of the European Science Foundation (ESF) and carried out for the first time in 2002/2003. In the first round, twenty-two countries participated (Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Finland, France, Great Britain, Greece, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Luxemburg, the Netherlands, Norway, Austria, Poland, Portugal, Sweden, Switzerland, Slovenia, Spain, the Czech Republic, and Hungary). With the exception of Switzerland and the Czech Republic, data on engagement in civil society was provided for the remaining twenty countries. The long-term goal of the ESS is to investigate the interaction among political and economic institutions in transition, as well as the attitudes, convictions, and behavioral patterns of each country's population. The first round focused on the themes, "Citizenship, Involvement, Democracy." The 2002/2003 survey uses a four-step approach to gather data on civic engagement, including: (a) being a member of a CSO, (b) working for a CSO, (c) donation behavior, and (d) civic engagement within a CSO. He likens civil society within ten European countries (cf. Deth et al. 2007).

3. Gaps, Progress, Developments, and Tendencies of the Current Data Situation

This portrayal of the current data situation makes it abundantly clear that a comprehensive and developed information system on civil society simply does not exist at this point. While individual engagement can be analyzed through different scientific surveys other areas show distinct deficits. Data gaps exist particularly where it concerns CSOs and their concrete fields

of activity. To date, the current picture - including over 600,000 associations, more than 14,000 foundations, around 8,000 registered cooperatives, and numerous other organizations - is more than a little hazy. Information on newly established or disbanded CSOs can, as a rule, only be found by searching through special registers existing for different forms of organizations. One particularly significant gap are broader scientific surveys covering all different organizational forms of CSO.; other countries (e.g., Austria) have already embraced this approach in recent years as part of their federal statistics. These offer insight into the dynamic changes in the orientation and activities of different CSOs. In view of the increased economic pressure on organizations, which then tend to react by improving management or by tapping into additional financial resources (e.g., donations), this has become a necessary step. This simultaneously raises the question of whether CSOs intend to remain oriented toward civil society. A change in this direction could lead CSOs to regard the engagement of the population in civil society as less important. Economic factors can therefore lead to the neglect of civic engagement and volunteerism on the part of the CSOs.

Moreover, irrespective of all that might be done at the organizational level, many questions that concern the civic engagement sector at the individual level remain unanswered: either no data are available or existing data cannot come up with adequate answers. As a consequence, it is almost impossible to analyze whether civic engagement belies an increased tendency towards monetarization. This would confirm theories which talk of increased tendencies towards a dissolution of boundaries vis-à-vis gainful activity. Research is also needed to ascertain whether an element of value change is taking place relative to civic engagement and whether forms of a stronger, non-organized engagement, one which requires no concrete membership, are becoming increasingly prevalent.

Alongside these obviously significant gaps in the data, however, some developments and tendencies can be detected that point to improved data collection and analysis.

a) Civil Society Data Collection Project

Due to the grossly inadequate data situation that exists with regard to civil society, several foundations have decided to sponsor a new intervention. The aim of this project, which will run until 2010, is to establish a reporting system based predominantly on the Federal Statistical Office's data stocks. The reports will focus on providing an economic balance sheet and social service profile for CSOs. The project is located at the *Stifterverband Wissenschaftsstatistik GmbH*, the research and development branch of the Donors' Association for Promotion of Science and the Humanities in Germany, and will provide basic data for further investigations. Based on the concepts and methods of the Johns Hopkins

Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project, with existing international standards that have developed in the meantime, the midterm goal of the project is to establish a national accounting satellite system.

b) Report on Donation Behavior

So far there have been a number of investigations that deal with donation behavior. Among these we find the “Donations Survey” (*Spendenmonitor*) by EMNID and the “GfK Charity*Scope” survey of the GfK Group, an international market research company.

Amidst calls for greater transparency in the donation sector and increasing competition among nonprofit organizations, plans are underway to publish a national report on donation behavior. The Social Science Research Center Berlin (WZB: *Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung*) has developed the report methodology which contains, among others, information on donation volume, donors, purposes, and motives. The project can be implemented by the German Central Institute for Social Issues (DZI: *Deutsches Zentralinstitut für soziale Fragen*).

4. Future Requirements and Perspectives for Civil Society Data

Civil society will undoubtedly continue to gain in political and social importance as we move into the future. It is highly likely therefore that the demand for data and analyses will also increase. The long-term task, as it has been in many other areas of society, will be to set up a meaningful and predominantly self-contained data collection and provision system. This goal can be reached by using the existing surveys and databases that have been described in this paper. Along with more substantial and better methods of coordination, the criteria and categories for civil society must be integrated into other data collection activities. Considerable progress could be made by ensuring that the type of business entity represented by CSOs, or their nonprofit orientation, is considered as a specific criterion throughout. The basis for subsequent analysis can also be strengthened by integrating questions about civic engagement into other specific large-scale surveys (e.g., the annual microcensus). The experience in Austria has shown that using this approach significantly improves the availability and quality of data.

More effort must be directed toward carrying out larger surveys on CSOs. The impact of research in this field and the evaluation of particular structures and practices will have increasing significance.

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