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ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT   *The debate about the usefulness of the civil society concept for social analysis has reached a critical stage and calls for its abandonment are mounting. To prove its relevance for policy, practice and research, better operational concepts and more rigorous empirical research on civil society are required. This article examines the possibilities and pitfalls of cross-national civil society research as a crucial area of empirical civil society studies. It explores the definition, conceptualization, operationalization and measurement of civil society through a critical examination of existing international efforts at comparative civil society analysis. A functional approach to defining civil society and a two-dimensional operational concept of civil society, according to its (1) structural and (2) cultural features, are proposed as suitable tools to study the phenomenon cross-nationally. The article also reviews the Civicus Civil Society Index as an innovative tool to assess the state of civil society and discusses the insights and challenges emerging from its current application in more than 50 countries. The paper concludes that international comparative civil society studies are both possible and necessary, but cautions that more attention needs to be paid to the development of appropriate operational concepts and measurement models.*

KEY WORDS: Civil society; comparative research; conceptualization; operationalization; measurement

Introduction

> The most precise statement one can make about civil society is that it is an extraordinarily vague idea. (Beck, 2001, p. 15, my translation)

The last decade has witnessed an extraordinary increase in the use of the civil society concept by academics, policy-makers, the international aid system and civil society practitioners alike, which suggests that the concept has the potential to make an important mark on the twenty-first century. Yet civil society, both as a normative ideal and as empirical reality, has not been able to live up to the great expectations it provokes. Due to its diverse historical roots, as well as widely varying current usages, interpretations and perspectives on the term, civil society has remained conceptually fuzzy and empirically hard to capture. Thus, as a growing number of observers remark, the term civil society is facing a severe crisis (see Chandhoke, 2001; Knight *et al.*, 2002, p. 54; Lewis, 2002, p. 582; Edwards, 2004; Hann, 2004). In fact, the term's recent vogue might soon be over if the concept does not succeed in proving its usefulness for policy, practice and research—through conceptually sound empirical analysis of civil society and of its contributions to development and governance. This article seeks to examine whether—and if yes, how –these two crucial goals—better conceptualization and more rigorous empirical research—can be attained.

This exploration will proceed in four steps. First, the different usages of the civil society term—normative versus analytical and property versus object—will be discussed in order to clarify the focus of current empirical civil society research. The second section introduces important international studies measuring civil society which will serve as reference points for the examination of operational issues presented in the third section. The operational issues relate, on the one hand, to specifying the breadth of the civil society concept (extension), and, on the other hand, to identifying its defining features (intension). Drawing on the author's work for the Civicus Civil Society Index Project, the section provides recommendations for an appropriate operational civil society concept and its main dimensions. The fourth section reviews the current state of measuring civil society, including its key challenges, and considers the potential of the Civicus Civil Society Index as a tool for capturing this multi-faceted and complex phenomenon. The conclusion section queries whether studying civil society cross-nationally is possible and fruitful, and suggests focus areas for further research.

What is Civil Society?

Due to various historical legacies and ideological framings, as well as to its location at the macro-level of social systems, civil society is an extremely complex and contested concept. However, based on a review of existing conceptualizations, I will argue that there is more consensus—albeit implicit—among empirically oriented research around defining and conceptualizing civil society than the talk about civil society's conceptual crisis suggests.

At the broadest level, one can distinguish between normative and empirical–analytical approaches and studies which treat civil society as a societal property versus a social arena (see Table 1).

Table 1. Civil society concepts

	Normative–theoretical	Empirical–analytical
Societal property		
Social arena/sector		

Studies treating civil society as synonymous with a virtuous or good society regard the concept as a *property of*, rather than as a distinct sphere within, society at large. Such work also falls largely under the normative–theoretical rubric, postulating what a civil society should look like, rather than examining the extent to which existing societies live up to this normative ideal.[1] Whereas civil society conceptualizations following such a perspective were prominent in the 1990s, they play a minor role in more recent studies.

Most current work either conceptualizes civil society as an *arena* in society, distinct from the state, market and usually the family, where collective action in associations and through other forms of engagement takes place (see Linz & Stepan, 1996, p. 7; Deakin, 2001, p. 7; Elliott, 2003, p. 7) or, more rigidly, as the *sector* composed of voluntary non-profit organizations (Salamon *et al.*, 1999). As they are interested in the description and explanation of existing civil societies, they follow an empirical–analytical approach.

Normative–theoretical and empirical–analytical conceptions of civil society differ substantially on the issue of defining civil society's normative boundaries. A review of the literature has found that, as a general rule, the more normative-oriented the study, the narrower the definition of civil society. To put it differently: whereas empirical accounts of civil society tend to use an inclusive concept of civil society, normative–theoretical work, which aims to advance what civil society should look like, conceptualizes civil society as an *ideal type*, carrying a certain set of values and norms, such as civility (Shils, 1991), public good orientation (Knight & Hartnell, 2001), or internal democracy (Diamond, 1994).

Whereas normative–theoretical treatises, and their narrow definitions, dominated the literature in the 1980s and 1990s, with the emergence of a growing number of empirical research studies on civil society, broader definitions have come to the forefront. This is a result of the recognition that strongly normative definitions have not been able to provide appropriate operational criteria, and lack conceptual coherence, since they treat the same association differently depending on space and time. They also do not reflect empirical reality as they miss out on a substantive subsection of civic engagement (Kopecky & Mudde, 2003). Thus, with the current growth of empirical work on civil society, a trend towards broad and inclusive definitions can be witnessed within the field.

As the bulk of current work falls into the lower right-hand box in Table 1 (i.e., conducting empirical–analytical studies on civil society, conceptualized as a distinct arena within larger society), the remainder of this article will limit its analysis to these studies.

Empirical studies all face one common concern, namely the extent of civil society's 'travelling capacity', or its ability to appropriately capture the empirical phenomena of voluntary action in different parts of the world. This is widely disputed, mainly due to the roots of the term in Western philosophy and socio-political history (see Blaney & Pasha, 1993; Hann & Dunn, 1996; Kasfir, 1998; Lewis, 2002). However, the bulk of empirical studies, including the ones reviewed here, regard the civil society concept as embodying a universal notion of collective voluntary action and therefore advocate using it as a heuristic device, devoid of any ideological or socio-historical baggage (see Norton, 1995, p. 10; Lauth, 2002; Edwards, 2004, p. 32).[2] As will be discussed later, this is not to say that such a global concept is easy to establish, however, what is important for now is that it is deemed possible. Let us now look at the existing empirical work on civil society in greater detail.

Current Empirical Research on Civil Society

Until recently, most empirical studies on civil society have provided descriptive accounts, mainly of civil society's features in a certain country, without reference to a coherent conceptual and/or methodological framework. [3] As in any field of social research, comparative empirical studies require by default more careful attention to operational and methodological issues, and thus are the most likely advancers of methodologies and operational concepts. In recent years, a number of comparative studies on civil society and related concepts have been implemented and merit critical appraisal (see Table 2). [4]

The Johns Hopkins Comparative Non-profit Sector Project (CNP) is the most longstanding and widely recognized research initiative in the field. Over the last decade it has analysed the economic dimensions of the non-profit sector in more than 40 countries and has been instrumental in raising public awareness of this sector of society which had hitherto been relatively neglected (Salamon *et al.*, 1999). Some years after the inception of the CNP and to guide its programmatic work in post-Communist Europe and Eurasia, the United States Agency for International Development (US-AID) began to generate an annual measurement of the sustainability of the non-governmental sector in post-communist societies—an effort aimed at facilitating US-AID's programmatic strategies, and, to a lesser extent, by the local NGO sector. [5] As a consequence of the growing interest in good governance measurements, the World Governance Assessment (WGA) implemented by the United Nations University has begun to assess six key governance dimensions, including civil society, in 16 developing and transitioning countries (Hyden *et al.*, 2004). As an example of the large number of studies that draw upon population surveys in order to measure civil society's strength [6], the table includes Marc Howard's 2003 study on the weakness of civil society in post-communist Europe. Its cross-national section is based on organizational membership data from the World Values Survey in 31 countries from multiple world regions, while its in-depth investigation into the causes behind civil society's weakness in Russia and East Germany makes use of innovative primary data (Howard, 2003).

Table 2. Overview of comparative civil society research projects

	CNP	US-AID	WGA	Howard	CSI
Theoretical reference	Social policy/ Economics	Democratization	Governance	Democratization	Democracy and Development
Objectives	Description Explanation	Assessment Policy and Action	Assessment Policy and Action	Description Explanation	Assessment Policy and Action
Background concept	Non-profit sector/ Civil Society	NGO sector	Civil Society	Civil Society	Civil Society
No of countries	34*	29	16	31	Approximately 50

*CNP's Global Civil Society Index includes 34 countries, whereas the project has generated results for 36 countries.

These and many other research projects have been revisited and evaluated in the design of the Civicus Civil Society Index (CSI), which seeks to generate an assessment of the state of civil society, its external environment and its contributions to democracy and development. Different from the other projects and in line with its focus on civil society practice, the CSI aims to utilize the resulting assessment as a springboard for specific actions to improve the state of civil society. Drawing on the initial project design and first results from the CSI's pilot phase, a comprehensive policy-oriented guide on the project's approach, measurement tools and indicators has been published (Anheier, 2004). Since its pilot-phase in 2001, the CSI has been substantially revised and is currently being implemented in more than 50 countries, focusing on Africa, Latin America, Asia and post-Communist Europe and Eurasia (Heinrich, 2004).

An examination of the key features of these comparative research projects reveals a variety of different theoretical reference points, ranging from economic to political perspectives, and distinct overall objectives, including key academic aims such as description and explanation, as well as policy- and action-oriented objectives. As a consequence, the studies make use of different background concepts, such as the non-profit sector, NGO sector and civil society. However, since there are also strong overlaps and sufficient similarities among their key features, a more in-depth evaluation to identify lessons for future research is possible.

Specifying the Civil Society Concept in Empirical Research

The task of concept specification entails two distinct challenges with regard to civil society. First, clarity needs to be reached with regard to the boundaries of civil society (i.e., its extension). Second, key operational attributes of the concept need to be specified with regard to defining its intension (Sartori, 1984). Table 3 provides an overview of how the five comparative research projects have tackled these issues. The following exploration will focus on CNP's, Howard's and CSI's operational definitions, as neither WGA nor US-AID provide an explicit operationalization of the phenomenon under study.

Civil Society's Extension: Forms vs. Function

Given civil society's location at the centre of the confluence between the state, the family and the market, establishing clear rules for which entities and actions belong to civil society is a delicate task. Furthermore, the specific shapes and forms of civil society and its associations vary extensively across cultures and regions, making the postulation of universally applicable boundaries an impossible task, and rendering clear operational guidelines for context-specific boundary setting necessary (Manor *et al.*, 1999, p. 4). Existing cross-country research has tackled this challenge through either a focus on organizational forms or on the key functions ascribed to civil society - both of which involve certain trade-offs and challenges.

The most widely known approach employing an organizational perspective is CNP's structural–operational definition (Salamon & Anheier, 1997, pp. 29–50). It focuses on non-profit organizations (NPOs), regarding organizations as the core expression of the civil society phenomenon. To qualify as a NPO, an association has to be organized, private, non-profit distributing, self-governing and voluntary. This definition has been widely field-tested and found applicable in diverging contexts (Salamon *et al.*, 2004, p. 10). Two main

Table 3. Operational features of comparative civil society research projects

	CNP	US-AID	WGA*	Howard	CSI
Operational definition (Extension)	Organizational form	—	—	Organizational form	Function
Main dimensions (Intension)	Capacity Sustainability Impact	Legal environment Organizational capacity Financial viability Advocacy Service provision Infrastructure Public image	Freedom of expression Freedom of assembly Freedom from discrimination Input into policy-making Respect for rules	% of organizational membership	Structure Environment Values Impact

*The terms listed for WGA in the Dimensions row are individual measurable indicators, as WGA does not specify any dimensions for civil society.

concerns have been raised regarding this approach. First, its travelling capacity outside of the US context is seen as limited, as its focus on non-profit and formal characteristics results in the exclusion of important types of voluntary organizations, such as the social economy (Evers & Laville, 2004), housing associations (Morris, 2000), grassroots associations (Horton Smith, 1997), informal associations (Lyons, 1996, p. 10) and many forms of associational life found in developing countries (Fowler, 2002, p. 290). Second, the CNP's decision to operationalize civil society solely through its organizational manifestations omits key characteristics of the concept, such as collective citizen action outside of organizations, which thereby calls into question its conceptual validity.[7] The same problem is encountered by other operationalizations, such as Howard's, which use the share of membership in voluntary organizations as their sole empirically observable manifestation of the underlying concept.[8]

To avoid these pitfalls, a functional perspective was adopted by the CSI.[9] By defining civil society as the arena in society between the state, market, and family where citizens advance their interests, it focuses on the nature of activities undertaken by various actors. Different from the CNP, the CSI's operational definition also explicitly includes individual citizen participation, demonstrations, social movements and other unorganized forms of civic engagement. Additionally, by focusing on the broad notion of citizens advancing their *interests* beyond the market, family and state, it renders its definition applicable in widely different contexts. Yet, its corresponding problem lies in the under-specification of the operational concept, particularly in relation to the key term 'interests', which makes it difficult to establish clear guidelines for the identification of empirical referents, boundaries and cut-off points. For example, it is not specified whether the activities of co-operatives should be seen as motivated primarily by economic interest (and therefore excluded from civil society, since they belong to the market) or by civic interest.

How well do organizational and functional definitions of civil society travel? First, both approaches explicitly reach for broad and inclusive operational concepts, acknowledging the travelling problem and the fact that knowledge about civil society is still in its infancy (Anheier, 2001, p. 224). Since CNP's definition and approach (initially meant to describe the non-profit sector) was derived in a specific (Anglo-Saxon) context, its application in other contexts proved to be challenging. It seems that with the definitional shift from the non-profit sector to civil society in the late 1990s the CNP Project sought to tackle this problem by moving up the ladder of abstraction (Sartori, 1970), towards the more abstract and encompassing concept of civil society. However, as argued above, civil society is not only a more encompassing, but also a substantially different concept which requires certain epistemological changes and adaptations, which have yet to be undertaken by CNP. More specifically, it would require a shift from the economically focused and clear-cut tri-sectoral model of Western societies to a political–theoretical approach, which underpins the concept of civil society (Fowler, 2002, p. 290).

Whereas functional definitions might be widely applicable, they often remain at the level of abstract background concepts and therefore suffer from insufficient specification, as in the case of the CSI, which operationalizes civil society as "the arena, outside of the family, the state, and the market, where people associate to advance common interests" (Heinrich, 2004, p. 13). Thus, further refinements of the functional definition of civil society should seek to yield a higher degree of operational specificity, however ideally without losing universal reach or stretching the concept. Whether a civil society concept focusing on forms or on functions (or even a potential combination of both

approaches) is most suitable for empirical civil society research cannot be determined at this point, but should be based on the usefulness of the respective conceptualizations in tackling the operational and measurement issues discussed below.

Civil Society's Intension: Structure and Culture

How can one determine the main attributes of a concept as complex and contested as civil society? Here, the interplay between concept specification and theory is crucial, as "proper concepts are needed to formulate a good theory, but we need a good theory to arrive at the proper concepts" (Kaplan, 1964, p. 53). However, different from more established concepts such as democracy,[10] civil society lacks both a shared and uncontested core concept, as well as a developed body of theorizing. Thus, the approach adopted here is to work 'bottom-up' by examining existing conceptualizations and seeking to identify common attributes among them (Van Deth, 2003, p. 81).

Existing operationalizations[11] almost unanimously treat civil society as a multi-dimensional concept, ruling out the reduction of civil society to a single indicator.[12] Following the bottom-up approach, there is a need to assess whether there is agreement, or at least a certain amount of overlap, among these operational concepts relating to civil society's core dimensions. While a relatively large set of different core aspects is proposed in the literature, the operational concepts show a considerable degree of overlap on two particular components of civil society, which can be defined as *structural* and *cultural* features (see Bratton, 1994; Fowler, 1996; Fox & Woodward, 1997; Anheier, 2001, 2004; Deakin, 2001, p. 7; Knight *et al.*, 2002, p. 60).[13]

Structural features seek to describe the make-up of collective citizen action in terms of its extent (quantity) and quality. They refer, on the one hand, to the extent and forms of collective citizen action performed in civil society, such as organizational membership, volunteering, or attending a demonstration, and, on the other hand, to aspects of civil society's infrastructure, such as the existence of networks, quality of co-operation among organizations and their resource base. Such measures feature strongly in comparative research projects, except for the WGA, which conceptualizes civil society largely through the existence of legal provisions relating to civil liberties.

Cultural features form the second main dimension, identifying civil society as the public space where a plurality of social norms are nurtured, practiced and promoted. The inclusion of such features acknowledges the fact that the characteristics of civil society are not solely defined by its overall size and vibrancy (structure), but also by the specific motivations and norms guiding the actions of its members (culture). Thus, for example, there is a substantive difference between the structurally rather similar civil societies of present-day Nordic societies and Weimar Germany, which relates to the strikingly different norms and values espoused by its actors: violence and conflict in 1920s Germany (Berman, 1997) and co-operation and democracy in today's Scandinavia (see Lundström & Wijkström, 1997, p. 242; Sivesind *et al.*, 2004, pp. 265–267). This crucial difference would not be detected by an approach which is limited to measuring civil society's structure.

Thus, civil society's norms relate to a society's underlying principles of public life, such as tolerance, social justice or equity. Approaches, including a cultural dimension of civil society, empirically investigate the *extent* to which specific norms and interests are present in civil society, rather than—as is the case with most normative–theoretical work—employing these norms as criteria for defining civil society's boundaries, which, for

example, would lead to excluding *a priori* any intolerant practices from the realm of civil society.

However, compared to the numerous attempts to empirically examine civil society's structural component, there exist only a few attempts to operationalize and measure civil society's cultural features (see Anheier, 2001, p. 226; 2004; Heinrich, 2004). Here, functional perspectives on civil society seem better suited to take these features into account than organizational approaches, which are predominantly interested in the forms of collective citizen action as compared to the content of their actions. Only in the CSI and WGA are cultural features addressed—in the CSI, as a separate dimension named Values, and in the WGA as an indicator relating to citizens' respect for rules. The CSI's Values dimension makes use of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights and other key international documents to postulate a list of values (for example, gender equity, tolerance, democracy and transparency). The study then examines the extent to which civil society actually practices these values internally and promotes them externally. However, this operationalization of civil society's values lacks firm grounding in normative civil society theory. Further conceptual efforts are therefore required to develop operational concepts of civil society's values and norms, which, by drawing on the work by the theoretical-normative school of civil society, could also improve the nexus between empirical and theoretical strands of civil society research.

The CNP Project, informed as it is by non-profit theory rather than civil society theory, does not include a cultural dimension, but focuses only on structural aspects such as capacity and sustainability. However, the CNP's interchangeable use of the terms 'non-profit sector' and 'civil society' has been criticized as conceptually unsound, as the two terms denote quite different phenomena and use different perspectives, with the non-profit sector being grounded in economic and social policy debates, and civil society being rooted in democratic political and social theory (Lyons, 1996; Morris, 2000, p. 27; Fowler, 2002, p. 290; Howell & Pearce, 2002, p. 70). The fact that the CNP does not feature a cultural dimension of civil society further supports the conclusion about the inherent differences between the concepts of the non-profit sector and civil society.

The two-dimensional operationalization of civil society into structural and cultural components does not only capture the essence of most existing conceptualizations of civil society, but also passes the test of theoretical grounding and resonance in the broader field of empirical political sociology. It can be argued that such a concept successfully integrates the two current contending schools of civil society theory, namely de Tocqueville's liberal conception of associational life in the structural dimension, and Gramsci's notion of civil society as the site of struggle for cultural hegemony in its cultural dimension (Howell & Pearce, 2002). It also corresponds closely to the orthodox operationalization of social capital through its two main dimensions—structural and cultural (Van Deth, 2003)—thereby strengthening its conceptual grounding in the field and rendering cross-fertilization of research on these two closely related subjects of political sociology possible.

Measuring Civil Society

This section will review and evaluate the methods and tools employed in measuring the operational concepts of civil society, with the aim of identifying best practices and recommendations.

Table 4. Measurement tools and indicators of comparative civil society research projects

|	CNP	USAID	WGA	Howard	CSI
Data sources	National statistics, Organizational surveys, Population survey, Expert assessment	Expert assessment	Expert assessment	Population survey	Expert assessment on basis of secondary data, population survey, focus groups, media review, desk studies
Data type	Mainly objective	Subjective	Subjective	Objective	Mainly subjective
# Structural indicators	7	3[a]	0	1	21
Examples	Extent of paid employment, Extent of volunteer employment, Amount of charitable contributions, Distribution of non-profit workforce among different fields of activity	Organizational capacity, Financial viability, Infrastructure		Average number of organizational memberships per person	% of individual citizen participation, % of CSO membership, % of volunteering, Density of CSO membership, Average hours of volunteering per individual, Geographical distribution of CSOs, Effectiveness of CSO umbrella bodies, Adequacy of support infrastructure, Adequacy of financial resources
# Cultural indicators	0	0	1	0	14
Examples			Citizen's respect for the rule of law		Democratic practices within CSOs, Civil society actions to promote democracy, Corruption within civil society, Civil society actions to promote transparency, Non-violence within the civil society arena, Civil society actions to promote non-violence

[a]These are actually dimensions, since US-AID does not specify individual indicators.

Although the structural indicators employed in the five comparative projects cover a wide range of measures, a common core set of indicators can still be identified. These measure two distinct structural features of civil society: (a) the various forms of citizen participation (included by CSI, CNP and Howard); and (b) the organizational infrastructure of civil society (included by CSI and US-AID).[14] Together, these aspects cover the two distinct forms of civic action—*individual* (e.g., through volunteering, giving, joining a demonstration or organization) and *organizational* (e.g., organizational activities, networks, and resources) (Anheier, 2001, p. 227; 2004, p. 25). However, none of these studies makes these two dimensions explicit, let alone theoretically justifies them[15], thus resulting in a wide gap that needs to be closed between the broad operational concept and the specific indicators (Thede, 2001).

The cultural indicators seek to measure civil society's norms and values. Indicators under the CSI's Values dimension cover the internal practice of certain values derived from universal documents, as well as the external promotion of these very values in society, thereby giving credit to civil society's dual role as a school of democracy and other norms for its members, and as an agent of value promotion in society. Again, the concept–indicator gap emerges: no sufficient justification is provided for why this specific indicator set can serve as an apt measure of the underlying dimension.

Figure 1 summarizes the two-dimensional measurement model for civil society, proposed here.

Civil society indicators also differ with regard to the type of data upon which they draw. Whereas the CNP indicators rely on objective and/or quantitative data, US-AID's indicators are based on expert assessments of qualitative information.[16] Both types of indicators have their own specific challenges. Quantitative indicators are characterized by a strict and transparent measurement process, often relying on externally generated data, which does not allow the researcher to shape the measurement of these indicators. This can cause problems for content validity (e.g., the indicators do not measure the underlying concept, as is the case with some of CNP's economic indicators). Qualitative indicators frequently fall short of reliability, and thereby comparability standards, since they cannot escape the subjectivity of their measurement process, which in the cases of US-AID and WGA manifests itself in judges assigning indicator scores based on their knowledge of the subject. The CSI attempts to limits the subjectivity by requiring the judges to
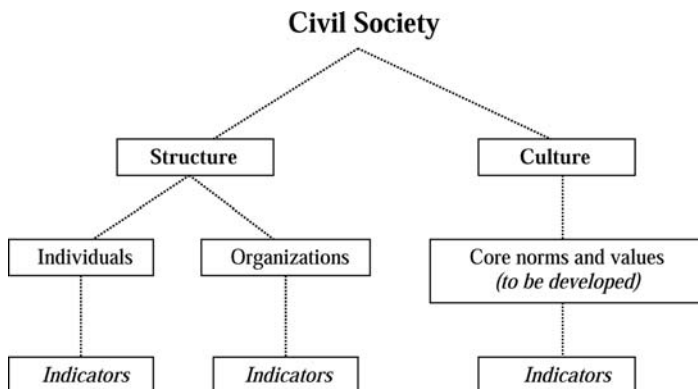
Figure 1. Measurement model for civil society

base their assessment on the results of a range of primary and secondary data for each indicator. However, additional measures to triangulate this qualitative data are required and could draw on, for example, population survey data comparing value dispositions of civil society organization (CSO) members and non-members.

The flip-side of the comparability standard is the challenge of capturing correctly the context-specificity of civil society. As civil society's features are highly determined by specific social, cultural, political and economic factors, universally applicable indicators are difficult, if not impossible, to generate, thus requiring the researcher to establish equivalent, rather than identical, measurements (Adcock & Collier, 2001, p. 535). However, almost all existing civil society indicators do not discuss, let alone attempt to tackle, issues of context specificity or equivalence.[17] The most obvious cases in point are studies which operationalize civil society through the single indicator of organizational membership. The survey items that list specific organizational types, of which the respondent might be a member, are usually not adapted to include country-specific types, thereby casting doubt on the validity of cross-country comparisons (Morales Diez de Ulzurrun, 2002). This points to the inherent weakness of definitions focusing on organizational forms for establishing equivalence. Particularly when developed on the basis of a country-specific form of the phenomenon, such a focus renders the identification of equivalent forms in other contexts extremely difficult (Elliott, 2003, p. 11). Due to its focus on general functions rather than specific forms, a functional approach to conceptualizing civil society is more flexible in dealing with context specificity and is thereby better able to establish equivalent measures.

The Way Forward

As the discussion of existing measurement efforts has shown, attempts to generate contextually valid, reliable and comparable indicators of civil society are still in their infancy. Besides advocating for greater attention to these methodological issues and greater transparency of methodological procedures, a key recommendation is to move towards multi-method, multi-level studies (Van Deth, 2003, p. 89) employing a multiplicity of indicators (Anheier, 2004, p. 34). Such approaches recognize and seek to transcend the limitations of each distinct methodological approach and data collection method. They show sensitivity to the complex and multi-faceted nature of civil society, which is embedded in a multiplicity of social, political, cultural and economic context factors at individual, community, national and international levels. Albeit resource-intensive and operationally challenging, they also correspond to current best practices in the field, because they allow for the use of multiple indicators (UNDP & Eurostat, 2004, p. 17; Munck & Verkuilen, 2002, p. 15), the triangulation of different data sources for the same indicator (Kapoor, 1996), and for balancing the respective downsides of objective and subjective measurement approaches (Bollen & Paxton, 2000, p. 79).

Without being able to claim victory on all of these fronts, the CSI took these recommendations into account in the design of its methodology. To be clear, due to its focus on local capacity-building and empowerment of civil society, the CSI's first and foremost goal is to achieve valid and relevant results in the specific country context; comparability of the scores across countries is only a secondary objective, which, if necessary, must be traded off against the demand of contextual validity. This tension is further exacerbated by the CSI's evaluative character as a comprehensive civil society assessment tool, closely mirroring the

approach taken by the Democratic Audit in the field of assessing democracy (Beetham, 2004). Thus, different from most other expert assessment approaches, the CSI's indicator scores are generated by local stakeholders to ensure local ownership and context validity, rather than by a common group of international experts, which could guarantee the comparability of scores. The lessons learned from its current empirical application in a wide range of contexts will help to answer whether the trade-off between contextual validity and cross-national comparability has been managed successfully. Early indications point towards the need for a stronger role of the international project co-ordination in the scoring process to ensure consistency across countries.

The CSI's core indicator set for the structure and values dimensions boasts a large number of 35 indicators, which was deemed necessary to capture civil society's main structural and cultural features comprehensively. Depending on the specific country context, these indicators can be adapted and further indicators added. For example, in post-conflict countries, the extent to which civil society practices and promotes peaceful conflict resolution is likely to be an important additional cultural indicator. For most indicators, multiple data sources (e.g., focus groups, population survey, media analysis, desk review, and secondary data) are employed to allow for triangulation and validity checks. To generate indicator scores, the CSI uses an adaptation of the citizen jury approach (Jefferson Center, 2002), in which the indicator scores are assigned by a group of predominantly local experts on the basis of extensive data for each indicator drawn from the data sources mentioned above. To limit the risk of subjective interpretation of the provided data, each potential indicator value is labeled (either in quantitative or qualitative terms).[18] The resulting indicator scores are then aggregated into scores for the 27 sub-dimensions and four dimensions (structure, values, environment and impact). The four dimensions are depicted graphically in form of the Civil Society Diamond (Anheier, 2004). Finally, the results are scrutinized and interpreted at a broad-based consultative meeting by representatives from civil society, government, and the private sector, the donor community, and academy who seek to utilize them as a knowledge-base for policy recommendations and actions to strengthen civil society. The CSI is conceptualized as an iterative tool to be applied at country level every two to five years to track civil society's progress or regression over time.

The CSI's two-step approach to measurement, in which first secondary and primary data is collected, which is then used by experts to score the indicators, seeks to make use of multiple data sources and indicators, and to combine the strengths of objective and subjective measurements, while minimizing their respective weaknesses. Its current application in more than 50 countries has already identified a number of challenges in project design and implementation. Design defects include a range of ambiguous indicator score descriptions and a lack of effective validity checks for the local expert scoring group. Implementation problems are mainly related to poor quality data and the lack of analytical capacity at country level, as well as politically-biased expert scores. While it is therefore already clear that the current CSI methodology is far from a perfect tool to assess civil society, it nonetheless pushes the methodological boundaries of civil society research by basing its approach on an assessment of current work in the field and on best practices in comparative social research, and by opting for a flexible and transparent, and thereby replicable, measurement process which also seeks to strengthen civil society on the ground. The planned evaluation of the current implementation phase and further increased engagement with other empirical civil society studies will assist in developing solutions to these emerging methodological and operational problems.

Conclusion

Empirical research on civil society has increased and improved over the last decade. At a time when the civil society concept is in danger of being discredited as a useful tool for socio-political analysis, such advances are crucial. Yet, compared to the progress made in conceptualizing and measuring related concepts, such as governance, democracy, human rights and social capital, empirical civil society research still lags far behind in conceptual clarity and operational rigour.

On the conceptual side, the debate over the distinctiveness versus sameness of non-profit sector and civil society terminologies is still unresolved, and too much emphasis is placed on the discussion of civil society's normative and empirical boundaries, while the development and testing of operational civil society concepts remains rare. These problems impact the quality of civil society measurement, which suffers, amongst others, from the immense gap between the abstract civil society concept and measurable indicators, and from a failure to acknowledge the strong contextual nature of civil society and its corresponding challenges for context validity.

This article has tried to chart some viable paths for tackling these conceptual and empirical challenges by examining the strengths and weaknesses of current research in the field. It has identified a trend towards inclusive definitions which regard the set of norms espoused by civic actors as a question for empirical inquiry, not as a criterion for in-/exclusion from the civil society sphere. Additionally, a convergence in the literature around a two-dimensional operational concept of civil society, framed around its structural and cultural aspects, has been detected. More work is required to ground these dimensions theoretically and develop them further conceptually.

This article suggests that a functional definition of civil society is the most appropriate approach for generating a widely applicable and contextually valid operational concept. Yet, despite promising attempts, a fully operationalized functional definition still needs to be developed and scrutinized through empirical application.

With regard to measurement issues, approaches using multiple indicators, data sources and data collection methods are likely to contribute the most to methodological advances. Whereas the implementation of such approaches faces serious resource and manageability challenges, their operational flexibility and methodological richness seems to make them the most suitable for depicting the complexity of the civil society arena.

The ultimate goal of comparative civil society research is the development of a widely tested, theoretically grounded, fully operationalized measurement model for civil society, which provides valid and reliable data and practically useful insights into the ways in which today's civil societies function. Thus, generating better operational concepts and indicators based on sound theoretical models should become a focus area for future empirical research in this field. If further progress is made on these fronts, the concept might well be saved as a useful analytical tool to advance knowledge on collective action in public life in today's societies.

Notes

1. See Barber (1998), Keane (1998), Seligman (1997), Madison (1998), Shils (1991). An exception is Putnam's concept of a civic community (Putnam, 1993).

2. See also Beetham (2004, p. 12) for a similar argument regarding democracy's universal applicability.

3. See the contributions to the following edited volumes: Alagappa (2004), Zimmer & Priller (2004), Merkel (2000), McCarthy *et al.* (1992), Yamamoto (2001), Civicus (1997), van Rooy (1998), Norton (1995).

4. Due to its focus on global civil society, the London School of Economics' major annual study on global civil society falls outside the review of empirical work, but should be mentioned here as an innovative approach to analyzing civil society at the transnational level (Anheier, 2001). Other comparative studies on civil society, which, however, do not generate operational concepts and measures, are the Commonwealth Foundation's Citizen and Governance Programme (Knight *et al.*, 2002) and the Civil Society and Governance Project co-ordinated by the Institute for Development Studies at Sussex University (Manor *et al.*, 1999).

5. See: http://www.usaid.gov/locations/europe_eurasia/dem_gov/ngoindex/

6. Most of these studies either rely on the World Value Survey or Global Barometer Surveys. Further examples are Dekker and van den Broek (1998), Welzel (1999), Mansfeldova (2004).

7. CNP Project leaders counter this criticism by arguing that organisations form the core of the civil society concept and that an operational and measurable concept cannot encompass all features of the phenomenon which is sought to be measured (Salamon & Sokolowski, 2004, p. 10).

8. It has to be said that Howard is fully aware of the limitations of such an approach and therefore supplements his cross-national analysis with a more detailed quantitative survey as well as in-depth interviews for his two case studies of Russia and East Germany.

9. See also Merkel and Lauth (1998), Edwards and Foley (2001), Uphoff and Krishna (2004).

10. Even though there are still several competing definitions of democracy, Dahl's conceptualisation (Dahl, 1971) disaggregating democracy into two major dimensions, namely contestation and participation, has become a widely shared starting-point for any further specifications of the concept.

11. See Uphoff and Krishna (2004), Dekker and van den Broek (1998), Croissant *et al.* (2000), Bratton (1994), Bothwell (1998).

12. Exceptions are efforts, which rely on the single indicator of the percentage of individuals, holding a membership in at least one voluntary organisation. Yet, such a minimalist operational concept of civil society comes at the cost of limited conceptual validity as it does not capture the multi-dimensional and complex nature of civil society (see Salamon & Sokolowski, 2004, p. 67; Weber, 1924, p. 442, cited in Berman, 1997, p. 407).

13. CNP, US-AID, WGA and CSI include additional dimensions, such as environment and impact. However, they are not operationalisations of civil society itself, but of external factors relevant to civil society. Environment denotes external context factors, which influence civil society, such as legal provisions and socio-economic variables; impact describes the effects of civil society's activities on society at large. Whereas these factors should be part of a larger measurement model of the state of civil society, these dependent and independent variables should not be conflated with the core concept of civil society itself, as this would render empirical research on the causes and consequences of civil society futile.

14. Apart from this core set it is particularly the CNP indicators, with their focus on economic features (e.g., NPO share of workforce, share of self-generated income), which stand out, as they do not correspond to existing indicator sets. This lends further support to the argument that civil society and non-profit sector concepts are substantially distinct from each other, and must be measured differently (Lyons, 1996, p. 11). However, to be clear, the CNP indicators are valid indicators to measure the concept of the non-profit sector.

15. In his conceptual chapter on civil society, Howard identifies two contending theoretical schools, led by Putnam and Skocpol respectively, which mirror the distinction in individual and organizational aspects advocated here. However, he does not employ this distinction in his choice for an operational concept of civil society, which solely relies on the indicator of multiple memberships in associations.

16. The use of the terms 'objective' and 'subjective' in this article simplifies the distinction between both approaches to a certain extent, as it has been rightly pointed out that objective methods also involve a range of inherently subjective choices (Munck & Verkuilen, 2002; Kaufman, 2005, p. 34; Foweraker & Krznaric, 2001, p. 768).

17. An exception is the CSI, which explicitly requests country-level Project leaders to check the need for adapting certain indicators to establish equivalence (Heinrich, 2004, p. 12). As the Project is still in the field, it is too early to judge to what extent the demand for equivalent measures has been met.
18. See Heinrich (2004) for a list of CSI indicators and score descriptions.

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