



The Voice of Civil Society in Iraq

An Assessment: January 2011

Executive Summary

The emerging civil society of Iraq is composed of a wide variety of actors, facing significant obstacles, including a political environment unaccustomed to and skeptical of independent advocates. Civil society organizations (CSOs)¹ are the principal vehicle for civil society activity in Iraq. Thousands of CSOs currently operate, with varying levels of expertise, resources, and subject-matter focus. While some CSOs have developed a degree of sophistication and credibility in a particular field (e.g., human rights advocacy), many others lack clear direction. Throughout the civil society sector, there are persistent concerns and shared notions of what is needed for this crucial sector to thrive.

The National Democratic Institute (NDI or the Institute) has worked with CSOs and civil society actors in Iraq since 2003. During the last quarter of 2010, NDI used its extensive network of partners and contacts throughout the country to interview some of the most active, experienced, and well-respected CSOs in each province. Representatives from each organization were asked dozens of questions about perceived institutional strengths and weaknesses, activities and accomplishments, and the nature of the environment in which they operate. This report summarizes the findings of this survey, providing some insight into the challenges and opportunities that CSOs in Iraq face on a day-to-day basis.

Significant findings include:

- In general, CSOs view themselves more as trainers and educators than direct issue advocates, while declaring ambitious but often vague goals that their organizations seek to achieve. Significantly, the sector shares a self-described common purpose of increasing the role of the community in the decision-making process.
- CSOs estimate that they are free to operate and gather people together for projects, but are hesitant to criticize certain public officials or the government's policy on certain issues. While generally ambitious, CSOs are pessimistic regarding their ability to affect the actions or behavior of government or political parties.
- Almost all CSOs report that they employ diverse and continuous outreach and communication strategies. However, groups do not exhibit the ability to assess whether

¹ Civil society organizations (CSOs) are networks, associations, and organizations composed of members that advocate their common interests through collective action. CSOs include volunteer and charity groups, sports clubs, arts and culture groups, faith-based groups, trade unions, community-based and non-governmental organizations, and issues-based activist groups.

these strategies have had any impact, and they require continued technical assistance to enhance the targeting and effectiveness of their public outreach efforts.

- CSOs report that they have worked with a wide segment of Iraqi society, which has benefitted from the activities of CSOs and which includes an increasing level of interaction with government institutions. However, civil society itself believes that it suffers from a “credibility gap,” and organizations appear to want assistance in creating strategies to improve their standing among Iraqi citizens.
- Despite some success in engaging local governmental bodies, CSOs experience difficulty accessing central government officials, particularly elected representatives. However, most CSOs appear to lack a clear understanding of effective strategies to generate stronger cooperation.
- CSOs identify a disconnect between citizens’ interests and priorities and those of decision-makers, but do not articulate a clear strategy to play a role in reconciling these differences.

This report summarizes the major challenges faced by CSOs, as perceived by the actors themselves; reviews their previous successful efforts; and analyzes the environment in which they operate. It should be noted that the interviews on which this assessment is based occurred during the protracted government negotiations that delayed the formation of a central government for nine months after the March 2010 national parliamentary elections. As a consequence, many responses reflect the popular frustration with elected leaders.

Methodology

NDI has operated in Iraq since 2003, working with political parties, governing institutions, and civil society. Starting in April 2010, the Institute interviewed “key informants” (NDI partners from different sectors, including national and local governments, political parties, the media, and civic society) in order to identify shared strengths and limiting factors in Iraq’s civil society. Through these interviews, NDI identified numerous challenges facing CSOs that seek to serve as a bridge between Iraqi citizens and the government. These challenges included: a dismissive, and occasionally hostile, political class; lack of internal focus and structure; and organizational connections to political parties, damaging the sector’s desired reputation for independence. The findings from these conversations helped inform the design of the CSO interview questionnaire.²

In order to build upon these initial findings, NDI selected “premier” Iraqi CSOs based on their reputations, levels of development, and past activities. NDI staff based in each province met with representatives from each premier CSO to conduct a detailed interview about its mission, scope, methods, and challenges. These active and relatively sophisticated premier CSOs were selected in order to offer a snapshot of the potential of civil society in Iraq, while identifying actors who could play an immediate, or medium-term, role in the development of Iraq’s democracy. Since this survey focuses on these CSOs, it should not be considered representative of the entire civil society sector, but instead as an informed assessment of the environment in which civil society operates today. In addition, the report is subject to individual interpretation of the questions, delivered by 18 separate individuals and a slight discrepancy in the number of CSOs selected from each province (e.g., there were 11 interviews in Thi-Qar, but only seven in Karbala).

² See Appendix II for the interview questionnaire.

NDI interviewed 188 premier CSOs: approximately 10 CSOs from each of 17 provinces, as well as 20 CSOs from Baghdad province. Analysis was conducted along two separate methods of categorization. First, the 188 CSOs were viewed as a whole to broadly identify shared strengths, weaknesses, or other characteristics among most of Iraq’s premier CSOs. Second, CSOs were divided by geographic region to identify thriving (or challenging) pockets of civil society activity within the country. The regions are:

- North**: Dohuk, Erbil, and Sulaymaniyah
- West**: Anbar, Salahaddin, Kirkuk, Diyala, and Ninewa
- Baghdad**: city and province
- South Central**: Najaf, Karbala, Babil, Qadissiyah, and Wasit
- South**: Basra, Muthanna, Missan, and Thi-Qar

Analysis

I. Overview

Major Finding: In general, CSOs view themselves more as trainers and educators than direct issue advocates, while declaring ambitious but often vague goals that their organizations seek to achieve. Significantly, the sector shares a self-described common purpose of increasing the role of the community in the decision-making process.

The vast majority of CSOs in Iraq view themselves more as trainers and educators than advocates. Almost nine out of every 10 CSOs interviewed stated that skills-building, training, and educating citizens were their main activities. Approximately half of all those interviewed also identified advocacy and monitoring of government as principal activities. However, the focus of CSO activity is not uniform throughout the country, as different regions showcased particular activities. In the West, for example, barely one-quarter of CSOs interviewed actively push for changes in policies or laws, while more than three-quarters provide services to people – a sign that CSOs in the West see themselves, and not the government, as principal actors in their communities. In Baghdad the converse is true: while 30 percent of CSOs provide services (the lowest among the regions), almost two-thirds seek policy change through their work – signaling that CSOs in Baghdad believe that the government, and not civil society, is the principal implementer of policy. The South Central region is home to a more active, and assertive, civil society, as it tops the list in percentage of organizations that prioritize pushing for change, monitoring government, and educating citizens.

<i>What are the main activities of your organization?</i>						
	North	West	Baghdad	South	South Central	<u>National Total</u>
Pushing for change of policies and/or laws	55%	26%	60%	37%	65%	46%
Gathering information/Producing studies	76%	3%	50%	17%	61%	44%
Monitoring government or policy implementation at the national, provincial, or local level	48%	38%	50%	49%	76%	53%
Educating citizens	86%	78%	80%	90%	94%	86%
Training/Skills-building	93%	88%	85%	90%	85%	88%
Providing services to select groups of citizens	59%	76%	30%	66%	65%	63%

Despite the diversity and ambition within Iraq's civil society, even the most active organizations often have difficulty articulating objectives and defining indicators of success. When asked what CSOs sought to achieve and how they would know if they had achieved it, several CSOs offered broad intentions to help Iraqis become better citizens, to build democracy, or to build a society that respects human rights. Others saw success as necessarily contingent on external factors, such as a reduction in violence or an undefined "social harmony." A few respondents saw the development of civil society as the chief objective, while others listed specific issues without a consistent theme – for instance, one CSO from the South Central region sought to improve farm production, fight for prisoner rights, and address immigration issues, a broad range of disparate goals. Almost half responded by detailing activities (beyond the ubiquitous "raising awareness"), and 14 percent of CSOs, including nearly one-third of organizations in the North, detailed a self-evaluation process, demonstrating a recognition that monitoring outcomes is as important as establishing goals.

When defining their activities and goals, two-thirds of the CSOs interviewed cited citizens as an integral focus of their work (though it ranged widely from only 50 percent in Baghdad to 83 percent in the South). Only 30 percent of all respondents referenced a law or policy change or changed behavior of a government entity as part of their ideal achievement. One area in which Iraqi CSOs could continue to benefit from outside assistance is identifying avenues for citizens and government to cooperate, as only 11 percent defined their work as including both the government and citizens. It is evident that CSOs feel more comfortable with the grassroots and continue to have trepidations about approaching authorities.

A lack of a clear, shared understanding of the role of civil society is apparent among members of this sector – particularly when asked to articulate what civil society should be able to accomplish in Iraq. While some organizations simply repeated their own activities, or claimed that civil society alone could achieve massive cultural shifts, such as eradicating corruption or encouraging citizens to embrace secular democracy, others were pessimistic and offered the caveat that society must first change before they could be effective. A few were introspective, viewing the development of civil society as an end unto itself, noting the vital role civil society plays in a democracy and indicating that, by "building awareness" on their issues, they were building something greater by helping citizens and government understand and accept the role of CSOs in this nascent democracy. Significantly, nearly 40 percent of all respondents, spanning all regions, stated, in one way or another, that they could increase the role of the community in decision-making.

II. Operating Environment

Major Finding: CSOs estimate that they are free to operate and gather people together for projects, but are hesitant to criticize certain public officials or the government's policy on certain issues. While generally ambitious, CSOs are pessimistic regarding their ability to affect the actions or behavior of government or political parties.

In general, CSO representatives expressed the belief that they have sufficient ability to operate freely. Almost all respondents said they were able to travel throughout their province, with only a handful (mostly from Baghdad and the West) citing safety concerns that prohibit free movement. As for public gatherings, more than 90 percent of all organizations judged that citizens could gather in groups to discuss issues without fear. But, more than one-quarter (including 75 percent of all Baghdad-based respondents) strictly qualified their response about their willingness to organize public gatherings – mostly citing security concerns and indicating that their decision to organize a public gathering would be influenced by the specific location and subjects discussed. Among the "forbidden subjects" of discussion enumerated were political parties (in the South), disputed territories (in the North and the West), and national security (everywhere). Other CSOs expressed

skepticism about the potential to organize public gatherings, not because of security concerns, but because of pessimism about the willingness of governing institutions to consider the views expressed during such events. Still, others throughout most regions noted the difficulty in obtaining government permits to assemble as a primary limiting factor.

Civil society actors felt even less comfortable promoting dissenting opinions or challenging public officials, with only half of respondents holding the opinion that one can dissent without fear in Iraq. This sentiment was shared among groups in each region, with CSOs in the North, West, and South Central regions among the most wary. A few groups connected this fear, in sweeping values-laden answers, to the lack of freedom of press and expression. Others placed the burden on citizens, noting that the public needs to learn how to criticize effectively and persuasively. One even used the question as an opportunity to opine on the need for a national reconciliation process.³ But for the most part, answers were qualified based on the issue and the focus of the criticism. There was a widespread view that the more powerful a public official, the more likely a dissenter would fear punishment for negative statements. CSOs generally focused on political leaders, but groups from the South and South Central regions and a large number from Baghdad noted that criticism of religious figures is even more taboo than criticism of political figures.

When asked to name issues, unprompted by suggestions, which they believe civil society would most likely be able to affect, organizations offered a variety of answers. While no single item garnered a majority of responses, CSOs most frequently responded that supporting democracy by monitoring government and including the community in the decision-making process were the areas in which Iraq's emerging civil society could effect change. Human rights (a wide topic encompassing civil rights and support for prisoners), women, youth, and elections were the next most common responses. Interestingly, a significant number suggested that civil society itself was a likely beneficiary, e.g., as the sector thrives, it will play an increasingly important role in Iraq's democracy. While a few respondents, particularly in the South and South Central regions, focused on localized issues, such as water and displaced persons, there were other issues evident in every region, such as security, reconciling sectarian divisions, and unemployment.

Conversely, CSOs were asked to identify the area in which, in their opinion, the sector would have the least impact. CSOs have little confidence in their ability to impact government, in general, and human rights. Exposing a rift within civil society on some of the most pressing issues facing Iraqis today, corruption and security were additional issues that scored among the most popular responses for areas in which CSOs were most likely *and* least likely to effect change. However, when discussing the "least likely" question, respondents talked about the central government and specific issues such as the budget and MP salaries. Meanwhile, outside Baghdad, CSOs believed that their efforts would be most likely to effect change in local government bodies. Many respondents from border provinces lamented their inability to have an impact on the behavior of international actors. Also, almost 15 percent cited issues rooted in religion or tradition as equally intractable. Not surprisingly, given public cynicism of the political elite's intentions, political parties ranked second in terms of entities that CSOs felt they had the worst chance of affecting.

As the Iraqi government becomes less dependent on international support, a real question exists as to whether the same can be said about civil society. Eight in 10 CSOs interviewed (83 percent) currently receive funding from international organizations. Only 4 percent of respondents reported receiving support from the Iraqi government – though the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) supports 43 percent of the CSOs interviewed in the North. A positive finding is that one-third of CSOs

³ One CSO from Babylon noted that, "As long as the process of national reconciliation had not been implemented correctly...so as to ensure justice, equality, and non-marginalization... all the political classes are vulnerable for criticism."

nationwide claim citizen donations, and almost half reported the practice of collecting membership fees. Interestingly, no CSO outside of Baghdad claimed to receive money from a political party.

III. Public Outreach and Communication

Major Finding: Almost all CSOs report that they employ diverse and continuous outreach and communication strategies. However, groups do not exhibit the ability to assess whether these strategies have had any impact and require continued technical assistance to enhance the targeting and effectiveness of their public outreach efforts.

Nearly every CSO interviewed stated that they reach out to Iraqi citizens to identify public concerns or solicit advice when identifying solutions to common problems. Much of this outreach is community-based; overwhelming majorities use community forums, as well as friends and families, to reach out to citizens. Far fewer organizations reported using religious institutions (16.1 percent) or political parties (11.3 percent) in order to contact citizens, which could be viewed as a sign of independence by some or a lost opportunity by others.

Methods range widely among the regions. For instance, in the North, community forums are a less popular option, while CSOs there use religious institutions at almost twice the rate of the national average. Religious institutions are a less popular option in the West and in Baghdad. No CSOs in Baghdad reported contact with mosques and churches as part of their outreach activities – perhaps opting to communicate electronically, as nearly two-thirds use e-mail lists compared with the national average of 50 percent. Organizations in Baghdad, as well as the South, eschew political parties as a tool for outreach. The South Central region appears to house some of the more ambitious organizations in terms of outreach, with the largest percentage among Iraq’s regions claiming to use social networking sites, professional unions, and the media to contact supporters. The South Central region was also a close second to Baghdad in using e-mail lists. In line with evidence of a small, but technically proficient, group of emerging CSOs, a handful reported using surveys and questionnaires to collect and aggregate citizen interests.

<i>How do you reach out to citizens?</i>						
	North	West	Baghdad	South	South Central	<u>National Total</u>
Community Forums/Gatherings	54%	74%	94%	98%	96%	83%
Meetings at Mosques or Churches	30%	8%	---	19%	19%	16%
Meeting citizens at markets or other public places	57%	36%	22%	39%	55%	44%
Meeting students at universities	57%	52%	6%	54%	60%	51%
Online social networking sites	30%	20%	28%	20%	43%	28%
Email lists	47%	48%	67%	34%	60%	50%
Through family, friends, or members of the community	57%	74%	28%	85%	87%	73%
Through professional unions	33%	34%	6%	22%	75%	39%
Through political parties	27%	8%	---	2%	17%	11%
Mukhtar/local leader	23%	38%	---	27%	53%	33%
Through the media	70%	58%	56%	32%	75%	58%

Nearly all CSOs interviewed said they cooperate with other organizations in their work. While some groups view “CSO cooperation” as working with international NGOs, many viewed cooperation itself as a domestic development goal, as building civil society is a secondary or tertiary target of most Iraqi CSOs. The groups recognize the value of partnering with other organizations with

complementary skills and assets, placing a premium on adding numbers to their cause. However, these partnerships appear to be mostly ad hoc or limited to a small group of like-minded NGOs that band together.

Almost every CSO interviewed uses media, in one form or another, to reach target audiences (only 10 of the 188 interviewed do not use media). A majority of CSOs use newsletters, newspapers, television, and radio to reach their target audiences, with street billboards cited as the most popular option (at 76 percent). The type of medium employed possibly reflects the literacy rate of each region; newspapers are a popular option among only one-third of organizations in the rural West and a dominant option in the more developed North and South (77 and 79 percent, respectively). Nearly every Baghdad-based organization uses television, though only a minority uses this technique in the West and South. All in all, CSOs describe a multi-prong approach to get their message across to the public.

Emerging technologies are a popular form of communication, with a majority of the CSOs reporting that they use SMS and websites to communicate with the public or decision-makers. While not very popular in Baghdad, SMS is used by an overwhelming majority in the South. Social networking websites are also growing in popularity, including Facebook, which is used by almost 40 percent of all organizations interviewed (and by a majority in Baghdad and in the South).⁴ Other sites, such as YouTube and Twitter, are not as commonly utilized, but are employed by at least a handful of the premier CSOs in each region. Fewer than 10 percent stated that they avoid using these technologies altogether.

<i>Does your organization use any of these emerging communication tools to communicate with the public or decision-makers?</i>						
	North	West	Baghdad	South	South Central	<u>National Total</u>
Mobile phone text messaging or SMS	36%	67%	15%	81%	62%	58%
Websites	79%	67%	95%	71%	85%	77%
Facebook	61%	27%	30%	51%	34%	40%
Other social networking sites	14%	17%	55%	15%	47%	28%
YouTube	21%	2%	15%	7%	4%	8%
Twitter	11%	6%	10%	---	4%	5%
No	7%	8%	---	5%	11%	7%

The verdict on the effective use of media is not yet decisive. While one-third of all CSOs interviewed claimed their media strategy to be “very successful” (Baghdad being the only region in which a majority answered “very successful”), and nearly 60 percent stated that it is “somewhat successful,” a closer look is not as convincing. When asked to explain their answers, most organizations opted to rate (and rank) the mediums they use instead of explaining or describing why they consider each medium a success (or not). Many of their answers focused on the initial delivery of their message and the number of potential people reached. Other CSOs used the interview question as an opportunity to decry the limitations of funding, the lack of public trust in the media, or poor Internet quality as reasons for the limited success of their information dissemination efforts.

⁴ Public opinion surveys conducted in fall 2010 by the research firm Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, in partnership with NDI, found that only 12 percent of Iraqis have regular access to the Internet, while 85 percent own a mobile phone.

However, some CSOs (in Baghdad and the West) indicated that their organization could benefit from learning how to better use these media tools, recognizing the credibility they bring and acknowledging the role they play in convening like-minded organizations for collaboration. A few CSOs, including a significant number in the South, did cite targets and examples of their success, observing that media can be used to bring the public and the government closer to each other. One group in Basra referenced a project “to involve young people in the political process,” saying that “through ads on local channels of television, we had a great response through letters or... the phone, [spreading] news of our project until it reached the simplest man” – all before the Basra provincial council was aware of the event. Another group in Diyala reported that use of media led “many CSOs to ask for our joint cooperation.” These responses, and the potential they indicate, show that CSOs would welcome and benefit from strategic media training.

IV. Beneficiaries of Civil Society

Major Finding: CSOs report that they have worked with a wide segment of Iraqi society, which has benefitted from the activities of CSOs and which includes an increasing level of interaction with government institutions. However, civil society itself believes that it suffers from a “credibility gap,” and organizations appear to want assistance in creating strategies to improve their standing among Iraqi citizens.

At least in the opinion of its advocates and representatives, the work of civil society benefits a wide swath of Iraqi society. An overwhelming majority feels that youth and women benefit from its work. A majority of CSOs also identified voters as a group that gains from their activities; though in Baghdad, this number drops to a mere 10 percent. Approximately half of CSOs interviewed identified rural communities and/or urban communities as beneficiaries of their work, with some focusing on both. Other beneficiaries, in smaller but consistent numbers (across almost all regions), include employees, religious groups (with the sole exception of the South), and journalists. A handful of respondents viewed civil society itself, and CSOs in general, as beneficiaries.

Noticeable regional differences in responses suggest varying priorities in specific areas of the country. For example, CSOs in the South Central region seem to have a greater focus on social justice issues – with the highest percentage of respondents nationwide identifying victims of injustice (55 percent), employees and labor unions (30 percent), and the unemployed and poor (68 percent) as beneficiaries of their work.

CSOs reported a relatively high level of cooperation with various governmental and other organizations. Half of respondents have successfully cooperated with various government ministries (including two-thirds of CSOs in Baghdad). Only 36 percent reported cooperation with the Council of Representatives (CoR) – ranging from more than half of CSOs in the South Central region to 16 percent in the West. In the North, 23 percent reported cooperation with the CoR and 60 percent with the Kurdistan Parliament of Iraq (KPI). Provincial and municipal councils appear to communicate and cooperate with civil society in greater numbers, with 74 and 60 percent, respectively, of CSOs reporting activity with each.

Other popular cooperating partners included the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC), the media, and tribes – all of which cooperated with a majority of respondents. Political parties had partnered with only 27 percent of respondents, though the figure increases to 57 percent in the North. The South Central region houses some of the more active and successful CSOs in this regard, with the highest percentages cooperating with tribes, Integrity Commissions, IHEC, and the security sector. Groups in each region reported successful partnerships with other CSOs, and one-third of the 188 interviewed reported having worked with religious organizations at one point. When asked to

detail this cooperation, CSOs described workshops, joint trainings, and consultations on a wide variety of issues, occasionally as part of ongoing partnerships designed to educate and promote citizen and community involvement in the decision-making process.

When asked who they sought to influence and presented with a list of potential targets, CSOs responded by selecting a broad cross-section of Iraqi society. More than 75 percent said that, in their efforts, they were trying to influence the general public and the media. More than 80 percent said that their efforts sought to influence provincial governments, women, and youth (as opposed to municipal governments, men, and the elderly, who scored 46, 60, and 29 percent, respectively). CSOs seeking to influence rural populations outweighed those targeting urban populations, as did those seeking to influence the educated over those targeting the illiterate (albeit barely). Target audiences with lower rates of responses might be associated with a feeling of futility with less than 40 percent seeking to influence the security sector (despite its dominance as a concern), only 29 percent targeting political parties, and 24 percent the judiciary. More than three-quarters (77 percent) of CSOs identified ministry directorates as bodies they sought to influence through their activities.

Between regions, the differences are small, but significant. The North is more institutionally focused, with 83 percent of CSOs targeting the KPI and the KRG (and one-third also targeting the CoR); the region boasts the largest proportion of CSOs seeking to influence political parties and the judiciary, and the lowest percentage targeting tribes (56 percent) and voters (63 percent). The West is characterized by its relative lack of applied ambition, with the lowest percentage of CSOs identifying the security sector (18 percent), the educated (40 percent), and the general public (60 percent) as targets of influence. Outside Kurdistan, the West also claims the lowest percentage of groups targeting the CoR and ties the North for lowest percentage focusing on municipal councils. CSOs in Baghdad reflect the sophisticated advocacy skills often found in organizations in a capital city, with 60 percent identifying the CoR (second only to the South) and 85 percent targeting ministries (the largest percentage by far) as entities they seek to influence. The South has the lowest proportion nationally of CSOs seeking to influence political parties (14.6 percent), and the region claims the largest differential between women (78 percent) and men (44 percent), and youth (85 percent) and the elderly (17 percent). Finally, reflective of other findings, the South Central region is among the most active and committed to social issues, proportionally leading all regions in its effort to influence the illiterate and a close second in its work on behalf of the underprivileged. The region also leads the country in trying to influence the security sector, independent agencies, and tribal and religious leaders, suggesting that organizations in the South have been more creative (or successful) in finding access points to engage society.

<i>Through your activities, do you try to influence any of the following entities?</i>						
	North	West	Baghdad	South	South Central	<u>National Total</u>
Municipal Government	30%	30%	65%	56%	57%	46%
Provincial Government	73%	76%	85%	95%	98%	86%
Kurdistan Regional Government	83%	2%	25%	---	2%	17%
Council of Representatives	33%	36%	60%	61%	60%	50%
Kurdistan Parliament of Iraq	83%	2%	30%	---	---	17%
Ministries	33%	30%	85%	34%	57%	44%
Ministry Directorates	77%	66%	70%	81%	83%	76%
Security Sector	50%	18%	50%	29%	62%	40%
Judicial Sector	40%	4%	35%	17%	38%	25%
Political Parties	60%	22%	40%	15%	26%	29%
Independent Agencies	67%	62%	55%	61%	79%	66%

Tribal or Religious Leaders	40%	50%	60%	61%	66%	56%
Media	83%	62%	90%	76%	81%	76%
General Public	73%	60%	90%	88%	81%	77%
Underprivileged	47%	36%	85%	61%	64%	55%
Voters	63%	74%	95%	68%	81%	75%
Women	83%	80%	90%	78%	87%	83%
Men	57%	48%	90%	44%	79%	61%
Youth	77%	76%	95%	85%	77%	80%
Elderly	30%	20%	50%	17%	40%	29%
Rural	60%	44%	80%	61%	79%	63%
Urban	47%	24%	100%	27%	72%	48%
Educated	57%	40%	100%	71%	81%	66%
Illiterate	67%	52%	75%	54%	77%	63%

CSOs report equal diversity in their methods of influence. Overall, a majority of CSOs attempt to convene stakeholders (86 percent), build capacity through training programs (72 percent), appeal directly to local government officials (68 percent), embark on public education endeavors (65 percent), or launch media campaigns (63 percent). Many respondents view petitions and protests as an effective method. Other common tactics identified by CSOs include issuing research reports (43 percent), monitoring the government (45 percent), or directly appealing to central government officials (49 percent). Print media is the most popular medium through which to convey a message, although billboards and television are close seconds.

Again, differences among regions inform the various approaches within civil society. In the North, organizations are less likely to convene stakeholders but more likely than CSOs in other regions to use petitions, arts, and technology to influence decision-makers. Not surprisingly, Baghdad organizations are most likely to go directly to Iraqi government officials while, surprisingly, least likely to embark on a media campaign. The South Central region, consistent with other findings of an active and grassroots-oriented sector, leads the country in monitoring government, organizing petitions, conducting media campaigns, and making direct appeals to local officials. Nearly every CSO in the South Central region also reported that it convenes stakeholders.

In general, CSOs positively relate their experience in attempting to influence government behavior, despite some negative sentiments expressed elsewhere in the interviews. When asked to describe the government's response to their entreaties, less than 20 percent stated that the government at one point either ignored or rejected them. This number increased to 50 percent in the North, which had the greatest percentage of both successful attempts and unsuccessful attempts, indicating that many organizations have had both good and bad experiences at different times. More than 75 percent of CSOs reported at least one instance in which the government either supported them by implementing their recommendations or by partly following through with their suggestions. With the exception of Baghdad, CSOs from all regions reported a positive experience with the government in direct attempts at advocacy.

However, individual successes are diminished if the general public perceives CSOs as dependent on political parties or government institutions and therefore lacking the objectivity so valuable to successful advocacy efforts. When asked to assess the civil society sector's credibility in the eyes of citizens, 75 percent of respondents held the opinion that the public does not perceive them as independent, with little variance among the regions. The South holds the most positive outlook with 37 percent suggesting that civil society is viewed as independent, while the West is most pessimistic with only 18 percent viewing civil society as independent. Thus, CSOs recognize that they suffer from a severe and persistent credibility issue.

CSOs that identify a credibility gap rarely have clear or coherent ideas about how to address the issue. Often, responses were defensive or defiant. When asked to consider ways to improve the credibility of civil society, respondents provided generic suggestions, including “they need to be independent,” “they need to get closer to citizens,” or “they need to show integrity and humility.” Some CSOs suggested offering more services, and some thought that increased government monitoring is the answer. Some simply thought that people need to be better educated about the role of civil society.

In general, however, most CSOs interviewed identified avenues to improve their stature in the eyes of the public. These techniques, while not comprehensive strategies, can be placed into one of five overlapping categories:

- *Transparency*: A significant proportion of CSOs views internal transparency as the solution. By putting their budgets and work plans forward for public scrutiny, CSOs could show the public that they have nothing to hide. One organization even advocated for the adoption of a CSO code of conduct.
- *Communication*: Organizations should communicate their results, as well as their failures, to the public. Through the Internet and traditional media, CSOs can highlight their successes, but they should conduct evaluations of their efforts as well.
- *Prevention*: If the concern is that CSOs are too close to political parties, then CSOs should take all steps available to prevent political interference, including being neutral during election campaigns and excluding party members from their ranks. However, some CSOs also suggested ending communication with political parties, a step that actually is more likely to hinder civil society development in Iraq.
- *Inclusiveness*: Some CSOs did not define the problem as CSO dependence on political parties per se, but rather as CSOs being too close to a single entity. As a result, they believed that CSOs should branch out, expand their efforts, and work with as many groups and parties as possible.
- *Activity*: Finally, the simplest and most popular solution was to let the work of CSOs speak for itself. CSOs believe they need to express a commitment to including citizens in their work, taking their messages to the government, and ensuring that the activities of the civil society sector reflect the needs of the people.

All of these recommendations reflect a certain degree of knowledge and self-awareness. However, these approaches remain somewhat vague, and any CSO serious about pursuing one or more such course of action would benefit from an internal assessment.

V. Government Cooperation & Engagement

Major finding: Despite some success in engaging local governmental bodies, CSOs experience difficulty accessing central government officials, particularly elected representatives. However, most CSOs appear to lack a clear understanding of effective strategies to generate stronger cooperation.

Various government bodies in Iraq are perceived to be ambivalent about civil society’s role in the policymaking process. When asked to name formal mechanisms through which CSOs communicate with the provincial government, almost one-fifth of respondents said there were none. An additional one-fifth noted that special offices or a designated official exists but has mixed performance records (with particularly negative reviews in Baghdad). Still, more than one-third of CSOs claimed to participate in issue-specific ad hoc meetings (23 percent) or regular meetings (11 percent) with some government body or legislators. Others showed initiative by using conferences and seminars to build ties, though many lamented the lack of government invitations to participate in decision-making

beyond CSO-initiated events (with 20 percent citing the importance of these invitations). Aside from updates through the media and informal communication (SMS was particularly popular in the South), regular and/or formal communication with government entities was reported as minimal. District or local councils were seen as the better avenue in the South Central and Western regions. Opportunities such as special visit days, “hotlines,” and complaint boxes were noted as important ways to engage in the policymaking process, but they were also dismissed as insufficient. Finally, for 5 percent of the CSOs interviewed, their formal NGO registration with the Iraqi government was the most interaction they had with public officials. A large majority of responses from throughout the country reflect that the relationship between CSOs and government entities is “one way.”

When asked which mechanisms for communication they would like to see in place, CSO representatives were verbose, but short on specifics. While the general consensus was for more meetings, an increased use of media (including debates and talk shows), and formal workshops and seminars to discuss issues, most answers offered vague aspirations for better cooperation. Some even suggested that it was only the government that needed to change by educating itself on the role of civil society and learning from the experiences of other countries. However, some ideas, such as activating local councils, setting aside a day for constituency meetings, and opening a civil society office, are concrete ambitions within the reach of CSOs and shared across all regions in Iraq. Some respondents also saw the need for increased monitoring, tandem field visits by CSOs and public officials, and other joint programs. In general, most CSOs want to be taken seriously – expressing frustration with public officials who, in their minds, do not listen to them.

When asked the same question about potential mechanisms to connect the central government with civil society, responses reflected an even more dire situation. While some CSOs discussed informal relationships and occasional conversations with Baghdad-based officials, more than half stated that there were minimal to no connections between civil society and the central government. Almost 20 percent noted the existence of a local relations office or had experience with a parliamentary committee, but even among those respondents, the consensus was that these mechanisms were poor and, in some cases, currently closed. Such mechanisms were better known in some regions, such as the South Central region, than others. In Baghdad, where proximity would have one assume that relations are better, most respondents took time to explain why that was not the case – detailing the attempts made to establish that connection.

Many stressed that personal relations are essential to interacting with the government. One Baghdad CSO argued that there “must be a free platform to connect with people and activate field visits for the purpose of engaging the government on citizen issues.” Another stated that the first step was for “the government to show its interest in communicating with people or organizations.”

CSO suggestions for addressing the challenge of communicating with the central government were similar to suggestions for local governments – meetings, seminars, public events, and respecting the message of civil society. Respondents also encouraged the central government to better communicate its message and policies, to reach out to all of society (including tribal and religious leaders), and to establish concrete partnerships with civil society on particular issues and legislation.

CSOs interviewed believe that the disconnect between civil society and government impacts the public’s access to information. For instance, 71 percent of all CSOs interviewed said that they either have no access or inconsistent access to draft laws or budgets. Of the 29 percent that have regular access, one-quarter relied on personal relationships to get the desired information. The process for requesting information from the government was criticized by respondents for being inefficient and occasionally a dead-end. CSOs that had some success relied on the CoR website, the media, or formal requests. A significant number of CSOs stated that they received their information through

international NGOs. It is clear that the formal process for requesting information is either not known, not respected, or not the preferred channel for seeking involvement in policymaking processes.

Civil society still serves as part of the decision-making process in some areas. Half of the groups responded that they had been invited to participate in political decision-making at one point, including budget negotiations and consultations on draft laws. However, the responses were not uniform across regions. While three-quarters of CSOs in the North and South Central regions had such an experience, civil society had less luck in the South (36 percent) and the West (24 percent). In Baghdad, where one would expect the more connected and active CSOs to reside, only 60 percent had participated at one point in political decision-making processes.

Of those CSOs invited to participate in government decision-making processes, some were asked to discuss (or in rare cases, help draft) a bill before the provincial councils (40 percent), the CoR (28 percent), or the KPI (14 percent). Just under one-third of all respondents were asked to assist specifically on laws and policies pertaining to civil society, with the national reconciliation plan among the most frequently mentioned topic. Two of 10 respondents (20 percent) had been invited by non-legislative actors in the government, including the Ministry of Civil Society, political parties, and other executive officials, to discuss policy. A few CSOs recognized international NGOs for their help in connecting them with public officials.

VI. Societal Interests and Priorities

Major Finding: CSOs identify a disconnect between citizens' interests and priorities and those of decision-makers, but do not articulate a clear strategy to play a role in reconciling these differences.

In the opinion of CSOs, there is a significant divide between issues perceived to be most important to citizens and issues perceived to be most important to decision-makers. CSO interviewees each listed a range of issues they felt were considered priorities by Iraqi citizens. Topping the list were services, including electricity and water (listed by 78 percent of all organizations); economic issues, including investment and unemployment (69 percent); and security, cited by half as a top concern. While several CSOs also offered general issues, such as a strong government, culture, efficiency, and accountability; others listed specific concerns, such as education/illiteracy, corruption, and health. Several noted that a functioning democracy was itself a concern, and 20 percent suggested that concern for human rights was a top issue. Nearly 10 percent cited social justice, a broad category almost always followed by a definition that implies the importance of non-discrimination and non-sectarianism.

On the other hand, respondents viewed the priorities of decision-makers negatively. The only "issue" that a majority of CSOs cited as important to decision-makers was personal interest and professional advancement or some variation on that theme (60 percent of respondents). Financial gain and political party concerns tied for second at 20 percent. However, civil society's view of politicians and public officials was not entirely grim. Services, security, and the economy were also mentioned by more than 10 percent of respondents. Approximately 19 percent defined top concerns of politicians as fulfilling a general representative role by connecting with people, identifying their concerns, displaying concern, and communicating a response.

If organizations do see differences between the priorities of decision-makers and the priorities of citizens, they lack any unanimity in how to reconcile those differences. Many of the recommendations offered echoed the work the respondent organization was already doing – and much of that was only focused on a single government institution. Many stated that one side or the

other needed “awareness” or “education” about their respective roles. Some CSOs suggested programs, seminars, and meetings without any context as to how those outlets would facilitate reconciliation. Others would like to pursue a more aggressive course of action, using media campaigns to advertise the government’s failings and organizing protests. Importantly, some CSOs acknowledged that both sides must be part of any reconciliation, recommending a convergence of views or a convening of advocates and legislators – but without any concrete direction as to how they would be implemented. A few CSOs, and only a few, offered cornerstone activities that would bring both groups together, including conducting empirical studies based on surveys, publishing parliamentary agendas and work plans while soliciting feedback, and developing joint policy programs to set agendas on broad topics, such as education.

Moving Forward

The findings from this assessment could help inform future civil society assistance efforts. The CSOs interviewed offered a few ideas on how to boost the sector’s performance and increase its impact. There was a persistent theme of general enhancement – that is, doing what they do now, but only better. Some organizations simply said they needed to do a better job, without any indication of what that meant. Others felt that education and heightened awareness would increase their chances of successfully fulfilling their missions. Finally, others identified solutions as enhancing trust, building capacity, maintaining focus, and remaining an independent voice. Answers along these lines gave little indication that CSOs view themselves as the change factor, but rather indicated that they see the environment in which they work as the focus of needed change.

However, a significant number of CSOs addressed real opportunities for development, many of which can be placed in one of the following categories:

- *Strategic Planning*: CSOs would benefit from assistance in identifying projects and matching those projects with clearly defined targets. By creatively designing their programs, evaluating their practices, and continuously adjusting their approaches, CSOs could create their own successes from within their organizations, rather than blaming external factors that they are incapable of influencing.
- *Public Relations*: CSOs are having a difficult time getting their message out, recruiting supporters, and attracting public attention. Improvements in these areas would necessitate increased transparency and an effective media strategy. Developing mechanisms to incorporate public opinion into planning would be beneficial in the long term.
- *Partnerships*: Many suggested that new and improved CSO networks would allow civil society to leverage its own talents, especially when goals overlap. Related mechanisms would be to regularly speak to issue-specific experts and academics and involve beneficiaries in their work. Also, CSOs believed that they should try to work with public officials and government bodies more often, through specific joint projects, coordination of efforts, and regular communication with provincial councilors and other bodies.
- *Homework*: Finally, many CSOs noted that they need to do their homework. Each problem they address must be studied realistically. Referendums, surveys, studies, and other data gathering tools must be employed to bridge the divide between proposals and needed solutions. It was recognized that such an approach might require specialized personnel on staff and staff development opportunities to identify and promote the relevant issues.

As suggested throughout this assessment, external help is both welcome and needed. Many CSOs measure their own success against international best practices. So, what can international organizations do to help civil society become more successful and influential?

Most Iraqi organizations seek more training, as well as partnerships with international organizations. In addition, they seek financial support and technical support in areas including reporting, strategic planning, and communication. While a few CSOs requested that international organizations offer specific programs (e.g., support for the poor), most saw international organizations as vehicles through which they could develop themselves.

This assessment identifies key areas in which the international community can focus its resources, including:

- *Organizational Development*: Ensuring that CSOs are structured in ways that enable them to achieve their goals.
- *Professionalizing the CSO Community*: Helping CSOs to specialize and focus on developing a reputation as a credible partner in Iraq's democracy through additional capacity building, enhancing their understanding of their role in society, and developing systems to effectively monitor and evaluate their own work.
- *Developing a Financially Sustainable Civil Society*: Assisting CSOs to develop a revenue generating culture inside and outside their organizations.
- *Encouraging Public Access to Information*: Supporting civil society and governmental initiatives to formalize mechanisms for accessing information, as a means of involving citizens and CSOs in policymaking processes.

Appendix I

Regional Breakdown of CSOs Interviewed

North (30 CSOs interviewed)

Provinces (# of CSOs):

- Dohuk (10)
- Erbil (10)
- Sulaymaniyah (10)

West (50 CSOs interviewed)

Provinces (# of CSOs):

- Anbar (10)
- Salahaddin (10)
- Kirkuk (10)
- Diyala (10)
- Ninewa (10)

South (41 CSOs interviewed)

Provinces (# of CSOs):

- Basra (10)
- Muthanna (10)
- Missan (10)
- Thi-Qar (11)

South Central (47 CSOs interviewed)

Provinces (# of CSOs):

- Najaf (10)
- Karbala (7)
- Babil (10)
- Qadissiyah (10)
- Wasit (10)

Baghdad (20 CSOs interviewed)

Provinces (# of CSOs):

- Baghdad (20)

Appendix II

Interview Questionnaire

1) What are the main activities of your organization?

- Pushing for change of policies and/or laws
- Gathering information/Producing studies
- Monitoring government or policy implementation at the national, provincial, or local level
- Educating citizens
- Training/Skills-building
- Providing services to select groups of citizens
- Other (please specify) _____

2) What does your organization seek to achieve, and how will you know when you accomplish that goal?

3) From which of the following groups does your organization receive financial support?

- Self-financed
- International organizations/NGOs
- Provincial Government
- Central Government
- Private companies
- Political Parties
- Foreign governments
- Membership Fees
- Citizen donations
- Other (Please specify) _____

4) Are you able to travel to all areas of the province or region that you work in?

- Yes
 - No
 - Security concerns
 - The roads are too bad
 - We don't have enough money to travel to those areas
 - No because of another reason (Please specify)
- _____

5) In your opinion, can citizens freely gather in groups and meetings to discuss issues without fear of an attack or harassment?

- Yes
- No (*Please explain*)
- Not always (*Please explain*)

6) In your opinion, can organizations and citizens challenge public figures or voice a dissenting opinion without fear of being targeted?

- Yes
- No (*Please explain*)
- Not always (*Please explain*)

7) In your opinion, who benefits from your work?

8) Has your organization successfully cooperated with any of the entities that I will now read to you on a project or to address an issue?

9) Through your activities, are you trying to influence any of the following entities?

- Municipal government
- Provincial government
- Regional government (KRG)
- Council of Representatives (CoR)
- Kurdistan Parliament of Iraq
- Ministry (central-level)
- Ministry Directorate
- Security sector (police or military)
- Judicial sector (judges)
- Political parties (*specify if possible*) _____
- Independent agencies
- Tribal or religious leaders
- Media
- General Public
- Underprivileged citizens
- Voters
- Women
- Men
- Youth
- Elderly
- Rural people
- Urban people
- Educated
- Illiterate
- Other (*please specify*) _____

10) What activities do you undertake to influence the entities listed in question 9?

11) If your organization has been engaged in trying to influence government behavior, what, in general, was the response you got from the government?

- 12) In your opinion, on what issues do you think civil society organizations are most likely to be able to effect change?
- 13) In your opinion, on what issues do you think civil society organizations are least likely to be able to effect change?
- 14) Does your organization reach out to citizens to ask about their concerns or ask their advice about solutions to common problems?
- Yes
 - No (*Skip to question 16*)
- 15) How do you reach out to citizens? (*Do not read the list, just tick all that they refer to in their discussion.*)
- 16) Does your organization use media to reach target audiences?
- Yes -- If yes, what kind of media do you use?
 - Newsletters (print or electronic) that are sent to a targeted group of people
 - Newspapers
 - Television
 - Radio
 - Street billboards/flex
 - Other (please specify) _____
 - No (*move to Q17*)
- 17) Does your organization use any of these emerging communications tools to communicate with the public or decision-makers?
- Mobile phone text messaging or SMS
 - Websites
 - Facebook
 - Other social networking sites
 - YouTube
 - Twitter
 - No
- 18) In using media or alternate technologies, how successful have you been? Do you think you have been: very successful, somewhat successful, not very successful, or not successful at all – (*Please explain*)
- Very successful
 - Somewhat successful
 - Not very successful
 - Not successful at all

- 19) Has your organization ever been invited to participate in political decision-making?
- Yes
 - No
- 20) If yes, please explain who invited you, what you were invited to consult on or participate in, and what happened.
- 21) What mechanisms does your Provincial government have in place to interact with citizens or organizations such as yours?
- 22) What kinds of mechanism do you think should be put in place, if any, to create and encourage regular dialogue between citizens or CSOs and the Provincial government?
- 23) What mechanisms does the Central government (CoR or Ministries) have in place to interact with citizens or organizations such as yours?
- 24) What kinds of mechanisms, if any, do you think should be put in place to create and encourage regular dialogue between citizens or CSOs and the Central government?
- 25) Does your organization have access to public information, such as copies of draft legislation or budgets under negotiation, before they are passed or approved (either at the Provincial or Central level)?
- Yes
 - No
- 26) If you answered yes, what was it, and where and how did you obtain it?
- 27) In your opinion, what should civil society be able to accomplish in Iraq?
- 28) In your opinion, what issues are most important to citizens?
- 29) What issues do you think are most important to decision-makers (government officials, members of parliament, or provincial councils, etc)?
- 30) If the priority issues of citizens and decision-makers are different, what can CSOs do to help them coincide?
- 31) What do you think can be done to get decision-makers to cooperate more readily with civil society?
- 32) Does your organization cooperate with other civil society organizations?
- Yes (*please describe why below*)
 - No (*please describe why not*)

33) Does your organization have citizen volunteers or members who help advance the mission or activities of the organization without a paid salary?

- Yes
- No (*Go to question 36*)

34) How many volunteers and/or unpaid members do you have?

- 1-5
- 5-10
- 10-20
- 20-50
- 50-100
- 100+

35) How do you recruit volunteers or members?

36) Do you think citizens believe that most civil society organizations are independent from political parties and government?

- Yes
- No

37) What can civil society organizations do to improve their credibility with the public?

38) What can civil society do to improve its prospects for success?

39) What can international organizations do to help civil society become more successful and influential?