

Policy Brief

National Integrity System Assessment Bangladesh

CIVIL SOCIETY



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BANGLADESH

Social movement against corruption

Civil Society

Civil society signifies organisations and institutions outside of the family, the state and the business sector, formed by individual or collective action to advance shared goals and objectives. Bangladesh has a reasonably vibrant civil society that comprises both organised and autonomous groups. The various components of civil society include NGOs (non-governmental organisations), CSOs (civil society organisations) and CBOs (community-based organisations), research institutions and think-tanks. Varyingly referred to as the voluntary sector, the non-profit sector or the third sector, the civil society has over the years experienced vigorous growth and has become an important powerhouse engaging in activities that range from basic service delivery (health care, informal education, etc.), to rule of law and democratic governance.

The civil society is known for its significant contributions to the establishment of a sound democratic system by exerting pressure on actors in governance and political parties to conform to democratic norms and practice and more importantly, ethics of fair play. Financial sustainability has been a persistent problem for civil society organisations CSOs as most organisations lack explicit strategies and directions for achieving financial independence and as such, are dependent on external grants for survival and continuity. The combination of 'flexibility' and 'control' in the laws guiding the formation and registration of CSOs creates opportunities for the government to control the activities of the CSOs. Transparency and accountability measures in law and practice are inadequate and inconsistent.

Strengths

- Vibrant agent for advocacy for law/ policy/ governance reforms.
- Pressure group demanding transparency and challenging state priorities, processes, practices.
- Pro-poor/marginalised communities issues rank high on CSO agenda.
- Strategic issue- based alliances with other CSOs and the media.

Weaknesses

- Absence of financial sustainability and dependence on external grants.
- High turnover of staff (project based, inadequate pay structures, limited career development opportunities)
- Independence subverted by restrictive/ambiguous legal/procedural measures and/or government control of resources, intolerance and harassment of CSO personnel/activists.
- Absence of proactive disclosure of sources of funds, internal governance.
- Anomalies in tax returns, audit reports and procurement.
- Accountability compromised by weak boards and strong founder/ successor executives.
- Inadequate self regulation.

Recommendations

- The regulatory framework for CSOs should be reviewed and harmonised to enhance the space needed for the sector's independent functioning, to avoid unnecessary duplication, overlapping, and ambiguities and incorporate standardised, simplified and flexible measures for their formation, registration and management.
- CSOs must ensure greater accountability and transparency in respect of their activities and finances.
- Self regulation should be introduced through the development of a sound governance body, efficient management system, effective supervision and monitoring and internal control.
- CSOs must adopt a policy of proactive disclosure about their operations and fund utilisation. Accordingly, audited financial reports and activity reports should be made available to the public at large.

About Policy Brief Series

One of the key strategic areas of TIB's research has always been the institutions of democracy and specialized pillars of governance and accountability, which constitute the National Integrity System (NIS), a collective of institutions and practices that are crucial to maintaining integrity and accountability in government, non-government and private sector. The NIS in Bangladesh broadly consists of the following institutions: Parliament, Executive, Judiciary, Public Administration (bureaucracy), Local Government, Police (law enforcement agency), Comptroller and Auditor General (supreme audit institution), Election Commission, Anti-Corruption Commission, National Human Rights Commission, Information Commission, Political Parties, Civil Society, Media, and Business.

TIB has conducted a series of research, surveys and diagnostic studies on many such institutions, by which it has not only created demand, but also catalysed a number of significant legal, institutional and policy changes. Against this background, this policy brief series attempts to diagnose and analyse the strengths and weaknesses of the NIS in Bangladesh and recommend implementable measures to strengthen these institutions.

This policy brief draws on *National Integrity System Assessment Bangladesh 2014* available at: <http://ti-bangladesh.org/nicsa/2014/en/>

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