The prominence of civil society as a major player in governance and development at both the global and the national level has been growing over the last few decades. Despite contributions of civil society in development and governance, some critics have cast aspersions on the legitimacy of civil society organisations (CSOs) which have strong advocacy agenda. This is driven, in part, by the growing influence of CSOs and the professionalisation of the sector while at the same time finding that the sector still exhibits ambivalence in its transparency and accountability standards. Moreover, many CSOs are often faced a number of unrealistic expectations from various quarters. All these combined have resulted in serious questioning of the credibility of civil society. The basic questions relating to the issues of legitimacy, accountability and transparency of civil society have been: 1) what right do these organisations have to contribute to the shaping of the governance agenda? 2) Whom do they represent? 3) How and to whom are they accountable? These lines of questioning have resulted in challenges for civil society’s existence, legitimacy and development.

In recognition of such challenges to civil society, and the need to address them so as to strengthen civil society’s role in governance and development, the CIVICUS Civil Society Index (CSI) methodology has incorporated indicators to assess the state of accountability in civil societies around the world. The CIVICUS Civil Society Index (CSI) is a participatory needs assessment and action planning tool for civil society around the world, with the aim of creating a knowledge base and momentum for civil society strengthening initiatives.

The presenter will discuss a paper written by two colleagues at CIVICUS (Jacob M. Mati and Tracy Anderson) which draws on data on civil society legitimacy, transparency, and accountability collected from the Asia Pacific countries that took part in this first phase of the CSI between 2003 and 2006, namely: China, Fiji, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Mongolia, Nepal, Orissa (India), South Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam. Using indicators such as democratic practices, internal transparency and incidences of corruption as proxies for transparency and accountability in civil society, an analysis of data from this CSI phase for over 50 countries participating in the 2003-06 phase found that the issue of transparency and accountability is one of the most common challenges to civil society in the world. The same is true of civil society in the Asia Pacific region. However, the region also boasts of some of the most effective and innovative mechanisms of addressing the legitimacy, transparency and accountability challenges in the world with examples in India and Philippines.