



## WEBSITE REVIEW

### **Civil Society International**

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**Name of Site:** Civil Society International

**Author:** Holt Ruffin, Executive Director

**URL:** <http://www.civilsoc.org>

**Type of site:** NGO

**Housed at:** Civil Society International, Seattle, Washington, USA

**Status on 27th January 2003:** live

Based in Seattle, Washington, Civil Society International works to promote the activities of nongovernmental organizations throughout the world and to provide those interested in civil society with the resources they need to do their work. Holt Ruffin, the founder of Civil Society International, brings to the task years of experience in economics and policy analysis. The stated mission of the group, with advisors such as Elena Bonner of the Andrei Sakharov Foundation and S. Frederick Starr of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute at Johns Hopkins University, is 'to strengthen and assist citizen organizations worldwide working for democratic institutions, clean environments, and liberal, open economic systems that promote personal responsibility and the spirit of enterprise within social networks that reflect human solidarity and the imperative of compassion for those less favored by life circumstances.'

Visitors to the site benefit greatly from comprehensive coverage of job openings, funding opportunities, links to organizations worldwide, links to other research centers, and documents relevant to the field. The site is easy to navigate and the various sections are clearly marked. The 'Opportunities' section of the site lists events and conferences, funding resources, grants and scholarships, study abroad, volunteer, and exchange programs, and jobs and internships. 'International Organizations' lists select nongovernmental organizations in many different categories, including agriculture, religion, security and peace, social welfare, women, and youth. The site provides brief overviews of the activities of the organizations listed in a few sentences. These listings very helpfully link directly to the websites of the organizations mentioned and described. Under 'Documents,' one can find material related to the rights of lawyers in Azerbaijan or information on restrictions on Belarussian NGOs.

All the regions of the world are listed under 'Regions and Nations,' but the only active links are for 'Eastern Europe including Baltic Countries' and 'Eurasia'. A full range of specific NGOs is listed for each country, though it is clear that the listings are not complete. Unfortunately, the links here are simply descriptions of the organizations, where the contact information and website link are given. Viewing many of the descriptions of the various organizations, I was disappointed to find that many of them had not been updated for three or four years. This is especially unfortunate, since smaller organizations frequently move, merge with other groups, or simply dissolve. The listings offer an idea of the range of the activities undertaken in a given country but, because so many have not been updated, are not reliable.

Generally speaking, the site promises more than it delivers. There are several categories that remain undeveloped and no indication of current plans for when the information on these topics will be accessible. Unfortunately, other sections of the site are also often outdated. Announcements for fellowship programs or study abroad opportunities, for example, may be one or two years old. The job openings listed are more current, though they also reflect the limited offerings of the other sections.

The most useful feature of the website is the opportunity to subscribe to the Civil Society International e-mail discussion board. Providing a way for professionals in nongovernmental organizations worldwide to contact each other, the discussion list facilitates networking more than it does lengthy discussion. Recent postings have concerned the upcoming elections in Armenia and constitutional changes in Kyrgyzstan. Specific requests from individuals make the list as well. These are rather diverse, from individuals seeking information about where to turn for HIV treatment in Bosnia or from volunteers at a Russian school trying to raise money to purchase athletic equipment.

Civil Society International is an important resource for activists, academics, lawyers, and human rights professionals. Because only some of the information can be counted on to be current, its usefulness is limited. Like other sites of its kind, Civil Society International focuses solely on institutions currently a part of civil society throughout the world. Resources for scholars wishing to study the development of civil society throughout history or to examine such issues as the relationship between civil society and government will not find these concerns presented here. This is unfortunate, because as one of the few websites with comprehensive coverage of civil society, Civil Society International could also serve effectively as a resource center for academic study. One hopes the site will grow into what it could be, a reliable resource that not only provides information about specific organizations but that also acts as a link between the worlds of nongovernmental organizations, human rights professionals, and academia.