

## ***Putting Civil Society on the Economic Map of the World***

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### **Abstract**

The past twenty-five years have witnessed a spectacular expansion of philanthropy, volunteering, and civil society organizations throughout the world. Indeed, we seem to be in the midst of a “global associational revolution,” a worldwide upsurge of organized private voluntary activity.

Despite the promise that this development holds, however, the nonprofit or civil society sector remains the invisible subcontinent on the social landscape of most countries, poorly understood by policymakers and the public at large, often encumbered by legal limitations, and inadequately utilized as a mechanism for addressing public problems.

One reason the nonprofit sector has been neglected is the lack of basic information on its scope, structure, financing, and contributions in most parts of the world. This lack of information, in turn, is due in part to the way nonprofit institutions and volunteering are treated in the prevailing System of National Accounts (SNA). Under 1993 SNA standards, only a small fraction of all nonprofit activity is visible and volunteer effort is completely ignored, grossly undervaluing the contributions of civil society organizations.

To improve measurement of the nonprofit sector in the SNA, in 2003 the United Nations issued a new *Handbook on Nonprofit Institutions in the System of National Accounts*, formulated jointly by the United Nations Statistics Division and the Johns Hopkins Center for Civil Society Studies.

This paper examines the features of SNA 1993 that obscured the full scale of the NPI sector, reviews the recommendations that the *Handbook* made to overcome the resulting problems, and reports on the progress countries have made in implementing this *Handbook* and the results they have generated. Against this backdrop the paper then assesses the implications for our understanding of the economic role of NPIs resulting from the recent changes introduced by SNA 2008 and from the anticipated issuance by the International Labour Organization of a *Manual on the Measurement of Volunteer Work*.

**Keywords:** Nonprofit institutions, informal labour, volunteering, national accounts, mapping