

NGOs in Kyrgyzstan

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Introduction

The concept of civil society emerged in Kyrgyzstan in the early 1990s as a result of donor activities. Under the banner of civil society building, donors have exclusively promoted non-governmental organizations (NGOs) by considering their growth as an indicator of the development of civil society (Howell and Pearce 2002, Roy 2002). Democracy promotion and restraining dominating tendencies of the state have been an ultimate goal of the NGO promotion rhetoric (DFID recourse). This is exactly why NGOs can be considered as a liberal component of Kyrgyz civil society since a liberal understanding of civil society¹ implies that associations and institutions of citizens operating between the state and an individual should be created exclusively on a voluntary basis with a main aim of checking on the state in order to prevent its monopoly.

As a result of intense donor activities on the NGO promotion, there has been a proliferation of NGOs in Kyrgyzstan since the early 1990s. In 2006, there were over 8000 NGOs (ACSSC survey 2006:8); while 10 years ago their number was just 800 (Kazybekov 1998). Kyrgyzstan has become a country with the highest NGO density in Central Asia (Garbutt and Heap 2002). This could be regarded as a considerable achievement for Kyrgyzstan, especially taking into consideration a fact that there was not a civic culture after the demise of the Soviet Union (Petrova 2007, Aksartova 2006, Roy 2002, Carothers 1999). However, only 514 NGOs are active at present. This is 6% of the whole number of NGOs registered as public associations, public funds and associations of legal entities (ACSSC survey 2006:8). The rest of NGOs ceased functioning most likely because of a fierce competition for donor funding since a huge array of NGOs came into existence as a result of the hunt for donor funding (Giffen et al. 2005, Petric 2005, Roy 2004, Connery 2000, Kazakhina 1999, Adamson 1998).

¹ My previous paper, which has discussed civil society from the liberal and communitarian perspectives, was published on a web site of the Social Research Centre (<http://src.auca.kg/>) in November 2007.

The functioning NGOs have experienced three main challenges. The first challenge is that they are not sustainable. The second one is that they do not have support from the public, especially at a grassroots level. The third one is that they still cannot influence and work with the state. This paper will discuss these challenges of NGOs with a special stress on why they are occurring. For better setting forth the above challenges, it will also make some comparison between Kyrgyz NGOs and Scottish voluntary organisations² (VOs), which are praised for their strength (Ruchir 2006:7). This paper is based on the findings of my research on civil society in Kyrgyzstan and Scotland³ as well as the secondary literature.

Lack of sustainability

A major problem that most NGOs encounter in Kyrgyzstan is a lack of sustainability. Donor funding is a prevailing source of funding for NGOs. In 2006, 64% of NGOs' funding came from donors (ACSSC survey 2006:43). My research has indicated that even well-established and institutionally better organized NGOs tend to pass from donor to donor and do not have other sources of funding. Nevertheless, the ACSSC survey (2006:44) has refuted a pervasive assumption that NGOs depend on donor funding by revealing other sources of funding of NGOs. The figure 1 below shows these sources with the percentage of funding NGOs received from them in 2006. However, these statistics require further clarification since they bring up a host of questions such as: How do NGOs self-generate funding? What kind of activities does it involve? How much is a membership fee? and other questions.

Figure 1: ACSSC survey

Source of funding	% of funding received by NGOs in 2005
Grants (international)	64%
Private donations	9%
Self-generated	8%
Membership fees	8%
Local grants	4%
Business sector donations	3%
State subsidies/grants	2%
Other	2%

² NGOs are called voluntary organizations in Scotland.

³ The paper is mainly based on the findings of my research on civil society in Kyrgyzstan and Scotland, which I conducted in 2005. It also incorporates some of the initial findings of my ongoing research on an approach of donors to development of civil society in Kyrgyzstan.

The unsustainability of Kyrgyz NGOs becomes obvious when their sources of funding are compared to those of Scottish VOs. In 2006, the Scottish VOs generated 50% of their funding themselves by trading, renting, and investing. The rest of their funding came: 39% from the public sector (the state and institutions affiliated to it), 7.6% from voluntary income, which includes donations from the general public (4.3%), grants from trusts (4.0%) and private sector sponsorship (0.3%). And 50% of funding Scottish VOs generated themselves by trading, renting and investing (SCVO statistics 2007). My research has indicated that it is very important for VOs in Scotland to self-generate funding because it allows them to stay independent, which is a very important factor.

It is clear that Kyrgyz NGOs and Scottish VOs have a number of identical sources of funding. They are illustrated on the figure 2. The percentage of the public sector and self-generated funding is much more in Scotland than in Kyrgyzstan. Nevertheless, Kyrgyz NGOs received more funding from donations and a private sector than their Scottish counterparts. However, it should be noted that this data is for 469 Kyrgyz NGOs (ACSSC survey 2006:8) and for over 45000 Scottish VOs (SCVO statistics 2007).

Figure 2: Comparison of sources of funding of NGOs in Kyrgyzstan and Scotland

Source of funding	% of funding received by NGOs	
	Kyrgyzstan (2006)	Scotland (2006)
Public sector (the state and institutions affiliated to it)	2 %	39 %
Donations from the general public (private donations)	9%	4.3%
Private sector sponsorship	3%	0.3%
Self-generated	8%	50%

My research has shown that, on the one hand, the state is weak to support NGOs in Kyrgyzstan. On the other hand, it either is not interested in supporting NGOs or does not know how to support them or does not have information about them. Further, there is no appropriate legislation that would allow the state to support NGOs. It has been noted by my interviewees that these factors also impede a private sector - NGO collaboration. As regards self-generating funds, the above has indicated that there is need for more research on how NGOs from the ACSSC survey self-generated funding to diffuse their successful experience to other NGOs. Further, Kyrgyz NGOs might want to consider a Scottish way of self-generating funding - trading, renting, and investing.

Although the percentage of the public donations is high in Kyrgyzstan, there is no data on how much money exactly was donated and who donated. In Scotland, during 2004 – 2006, a

Scottish household donated £6.30 (441 soms⁴) each week (SCVO statistics 2007). The percentage of funding from the private sector is also high in Kyrgyzstan. Yet again, there is no data on what exactly the private sector sponsorship involved. Nevertheless, the relatively high percentage of funding from the private sector has revealed that there is collaboration between the private sector and NGOs at present; although my research has indicated that NGOs tend not to consider the private sector as a potential source of funding since they think that it is just developing and not interested in supporting NGOs. For this reason, the above statistics on the private sector funding from the ACSSC survey need qualitative data on what exactly it included in order to promote more collaboration between NGOs and the private sector.

Lack of public support

The next common problem that Kyrgyz NGOs have is a lack of support from the public. Few NGOs have extensive membership. 38.1% of 469 NGOs have up to 10 members. Only more than 16.3% have members over 100 (ACSSC survey 2006:39). As regards volunteering for NGOs, the available data on this indicates that a sense of volunteering is low in Kyrgyzstan. The ASCCS survey has revealed that 62 % of 469 NGOs involve volunteers. However, 65.3% of their volunteers are students and schoolchildren (ACSSC survey 2006:40-41). Unfortunately, there is no data in numbers. The IFES survey has shown that the actual experience of its respondents with NGOs (membership in NGOs, awareness of NGOs in the community and effect of NGOs on respondents' lives) is very low (see figure 3). It has also revealed that 74% of its respondents said that they would not volunteer for NGOs (Pototskii and Sharma 2001:55). Meanwhile, volunteering is an important factor in the development of civil society in Scotland. 38% of adults (1.2 million people) formally volunteered in Scotland in 2006 (SCVO statistics 2007).

Figure 3: IFES survey

Have you been a member of any NGO?	
Yes	2%
No, but have heard about them	51%
No, have not heard	43%
Don't know	3%
Have you been affected by NGOs?	
Yes, positively	7%
Yes, negatively	1%
Both positive and negative	3%

⁴ The approximate calculation is made by the author.

No	85%
Are you aware of any non-government organizations that are active in your community (your city, town)?	
Yes	14%
No	53%
Don't know	32%

My research has revealed that NGOs lack the public support because they tend to be city based and to have highly educated staff. The ACSSC survey has indicated that 74% of NGOs' staff has high education and 2% have a scientific degree (ACSSC survey 2006:38). The survey has also shown that 106 NGOs out of 514 are based in Bishkek (ACSSC survey 2006:27). It means every fifth NGO is based in the capital. This has a number of consequences. It is difficult for NGOs to convey their ideas to lay people, especially at the rural level. NGOs too much rely on their knowledge and assume that they know a situation in rural areas. Furthermore, in some cases, projects of NGOs are developed on the basis of donor priorities rather than local problems.

Other work has also noted these issues. Roy (2002:141-142) and Petric (2005:322-323) claim that NGOs' lavish funding attracts intellectuals and professionals mainly from the public sector and has triggered an internal brain drain. The highly educated urban-based personnel of NGOs have become alien to a target group of the donor programmes, the rural-based poor (Earle 2005, Petric 2005, Roy 2002). To have success with donors, NGOs have acquired specific skills such as speaking a 'donor' language, behaving and operating in a 'donor' way, which they cannot use outside the donor-NGO context. As a result, they seem strange and unfamiliar to their own society (Aksartova 2005:236).

State – NGO relationship

The third main problem that NGOs face is that the relationship between the state and NGOs is precarious. Aksartova (2005) has argued that Kyrgyz NGOs do not hold any legitimacy before the state. Instead they derive their legitimacy from donors. Donors have become a connecting link between the state and NGOs in Kyrgyzstan. There has been very active participation of NGOs in politics lately; however, as one of my interviewees has aptly noted, it does not go further than shouting. A number of research participants have noted that there is no real impact made by NGOs on the state. Participation of NGOs in politics seems more as a fight for power rather than advocacy for better life; while the role of NGOs should be advocating not fighting for power. Here it is apt to quote one of my interviewees from a Scottish VO with regard to their relationship with the state:

“The government cannot exist without the voluntary sector. The sector does what the government should do.

However, it does not aim to replace the government. It aims to be there in order to influence the government (from an interview with Jessica Jenison⁵, lines 58, 61-63, 1 July 2005)".

Nevertheless, NGOs in Kyrgyzstan are more active and capable to criticize the state than NGOs in other countries of Central Asia.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the current situation on NGOs in Kyrgyzstan. Notwithstanding the fact that Kyrgyzstan is a country with the most vibrant NGO sector in Central Asia, it has been shown that there are three main challenges that Kyrgyz NGOs encounter at present. The first challenge is that NGOs lack sustainability. The donor funding is the predominant source of funding for Kyrgyz NGOs. Nevertheless, it has been revealed that NGOs have other sources of funding such the public donations, the private sector sponsorships and others. However, the percentages of funding coming from these sources are little. Nonetheless, they turned out to be higher than those of Scottish voluntary organizations. However, that there is need for more information on these sources of funding especially on the public donations, the self-generated funding, and the private sector sponsorships. This data would be very helpful to other NGOs in their fundraising. It has been also highlighted that the state and the private sector are weak to support NGOs. They also do not know how to work with NGOs and do not have information about them. Furthermore, there is no legislation conducive to an effective collaboration of NGOs with the state and the private sector.

The second problem is that NGOs lack support from the public. It has been shown that few NGOs have extensive membership. Furthermore, the sense of volunteering and the actual experience of people with NGOs are very low. It has been indicated that NGOs have little support from the public because they tend to be based in cities and have high educated staff. Sometimes NGOs are donor driven. The third problem is that the relationship between the state and NGOs is precarious. It has been stated that NGOs still cannot influence the state. The recent participation of NGOs in politics has been characterized as a fight for power rather than advocacy. Nevertheless, NGOs are more active and capable to criticize the state in Kyrgyzstan than in other Central Asian states.

⁵ A pseudonym is used for ethic issues.

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