



ENC ANALYSIS

Changing donor-NGO relations in Tajikistan

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Summary

This ENC analysis will outline the changing donor-NGO relations in Tajikistan. The Tajik NGO sector started to grow in the 1990s, during the country's civil war (1992-1997). Despite clear differences in donors' and local NGOs' views on the meaning of NGO activism, the period until the mid-2000s was the best in terms of relations between the two. NGOs not only received generous funding from donors for humanitarian aid and the provision of services to vulnerable groups of the population, but also enjoyed a great deal of freedom in project implementation. This changed because of gradually decreasing international funding for local NGOs and a steep increase in growth of managerialism in aid delivery mechanisms. As a result, the positive donor-NGO relations transformed into asymmetric power relations characterised by subordination of NGOs to donors, exploitation of NGOs by donors and mistrust between the two. This process has significantly limited the agency of local NGOs in the development work.

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Introduction

Since the first days of its independence in 1991, Tajikistan has been undergoing political and economic transformations, curbed by its tragic civil war (1992-1997). In these circumstances, the country began to receive aid from international donors – mainly from Western international organisations (IOs), national development agencies and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs). In 1995, the annual volume of foreign aid to the country reached 65 million USD, by 2005 it increased to 252 million USD and in 2010 it reached its peak of 433 million USD.ⁱ In this context, starting from the 1990s, donor-supported local non-governmental organisations (NGOs)ⁱⁱ began to flourish in Tajikistan. In the absence of a fully-functioning state, local NGOs were able to take over core state functions of service delivery. In other words, they provided the population with services in nearly all fields of life, from the distribution of humanitarian aid to the provision of health and legal services. In this way, the NGO sector became a new space for civic engagement. More specifically, at that time, it was the only available tool through which citizens could positively influence development of their home country. For donors, newly-founded NGOs became a means of fostering the country's transformation in the image of Western liberal democracies. There was little recognition and appreciation for the role of local agency in this model. Soon, however local activists started working to increase the recognition of the NGO sector's contribution: for them, it became a constructive means to change the world around them, although it remained embedded in neoliberal global governance structures.

NGO growth in Tajikistan

After the Soviet collapse, Western donors started providing generous support to NGOs across the post-communist space. In this context, NGOs represented a new model of civil society, with citizens organising themselves on a voluntary basis to express their liberal values and beliefs. This had been previously absent in the Soviet Union, and it can be argued that its arrival was meant to symbolically dismantle the Soviet past. In the eyes of the donors, scholars of the democratic theory (Putnam, 1993) and practitioners alike, NGOs in countries in transition were supposed to become intermediaries in the process towards democratization. Carothers (1999-2000) observes that this romanticised view of NGOs in the post-communist context was strengthened by the fact that Eastern European dissidents, like Vaclav Havel in the former Czechoslovakia or Adam Michnik in Poland, 'wrapped themselves in the banner of civil society' (p. 19). NGOs were thus supposed to resist the non-democratic post-communist political developments and challenge them from below. They were also expected to support structural reforms by facilitating the growth of the market economy. NGOs could make a particular contribution to democratisation and the free market by promoting liberalisation on the ground: by encouraging private entrepreneurship, and in this way preventing the newly emerging states from monopolising the economy (Carothers 1999-2000, p. 24).

The initial trajectory of NGOs in Tajikistan differed from other post-Soviet countries. In the context of the large-scale violence and destruction accompanying the civil war, newly founded NGOs focused mainly on distributing humanitarian aid and providing services to the population, rather than advocating for democratisation. Notably, in the early 1990s, the NGO model of civic activism was very far from the established forms of communal life already present in Tajikistan. The most prominent of these already present forms were *choyhona* (teahouse, where community problems can be resolved), *hashar* (voluntary community labour) or *mahalla* (self-governing territorial units). Donors, however, did not consider these forms of activism to be a 'right' civil society because their underlying values included obedience and subordination according to age hierarchies, as well as gender divisions. Furthermore, as Mullojonov (2001, p. 61) has argued, many traditional local solidarity networks and spaces of civic activism were paralysed during the war, as they were captured by fighting political groups which used them to mobilise recruits and find support amongst the population. This power vacuum, however, created particularly favourable conditions for the NGO sector to flourish.

Tajik NGOs remained outside of the peace process and the drafting of the 1997 General Agreement, which officially ended the Tajik civil war. In the meantime, they expanded their activities to the welfare system, thus partially substituting the state in fulfilment of its traditional functions. Freizer (2005, p. 227) provides data from the International Centre for Non-For-Profit Law which indicate that the number of registered NGOs in Tajikistan rose from 33 in 1993 to 1,241 in 2002. With the official end of the conflict in 1997, the priorities of the country shifted from the provision of humanitarian assistance to post-conflict stabilisation. The experience of civil war influenced the long-term goals of donors' democracy-promotion programmes, which followed in this new phase – almost a decade later than in other Central Asian countries. In the context of post-conflict stabilisation, donors focused more on specific dimensions of democratisation, such as micro-economic stabilisation and liberalisation, rather than on electoral reforms and justice (Nakaya, 2009, p. 260). Also, as part of post-conflict stabilisation, in the early 2000s the NGOs sector continued to grow and provide different services to vulnerable sections of the population - women, labour migrants, children, and rural populations in general (Fond Razvitiya Tadzhiqistana, 2008, p. 7; Karimov, 2008, p. 122; Musoeva, 2015, p. 76).

In this context, from the beginning, two features distinguished Tajik NGOs from NGOs in other Central Asian countries and the broader post-communist space. In the first place, Tajik NGOs did not interact directly with the political forces in the country. Second, rather than acting in a centralised manner and in this way influencing policy-makers in the centre, NGOs in Tajikistan were largely located in rural areas, which suffered the most during the war and thus were places where the NGO's services were needed the most by the population. Paradoxically perhaps, the 1990s, the decade when the country was the most vulnerable, are described by many NGO leaders as the 'golden times' of Tajik NGOs, considering the broad space for their activism and availability of funding. At the same time, this strong position of Tajik NGOs was not a result of a natural evolution, where the state

would have made space for more and more visible civic activists to act. Instead, it was the outcome of the weakness of the state during the war and then of newly formed state institutions after the war. In this respect, NGOs were temporarily used to, at least partially, substitute the state.

NGO 'reappropriation' by local activists

Who were the first NGO workers in Tajikistan? In the first place, NGOs attracted the scientific and artistic *intelligentsia* of the country. As argued by Abdullaev (2006), the NGO sector allowed literally thousands of citizens, who were otherwise not able to find jobs in their field, to survive. NGOs offered them sufficient income in the uncertain times of transition and conflict: 'In this regard, western intervention proved to be an *ambulance* which allowed the Tajik intelligentsia to survive from hunger and poverty in a country destroyed by the war.' Mullojonov (2017) concludes that: 'It is no exaggeration to say that the Tajik intelligentsia is indebted to NGOs and the third sector for ensuring its position as an active social group' (p. 70).

Initially, the NGO sector was dominated by active individuals between their mid-twenties and fifties, who received their education and gained work experience in the institutions of the Soviet state. More importantly, they had rarely been part of traditional Tajik civil society institutions. Prior to joining NGOs, however, many of them had been part of the Soviet civil society: trade unions, voluntary associations and cooperatives, or youth organisations such as the Komsomol. According to the logic underlying these institutions, their contribution to society was based on ideas of social justice, solidarity with others, equal distribution of goods and services, as well as fostering development understood as providing favourable conditions of study and work to all people. These ideas were accompanied by a commitment to infrastructure development as a base of social life (according to the Marxist-Leninist theory), which manifested itself in youth movements' support to livelihoods and maintenance of infrastructure and built environment (for example schools and playgrounds). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, as noted by Buxton (2011, p. 8), for these dedicated intellectuals, the idea of a transition from socialism to democracy and capitalism was not entirely straightforward. In Marxist theory, socialism follows capitalism, but not the other way around. Thus, despite the fact that donors ideally saw newly created NGOs as democratisation activists, the NGO sector did not grow in a vacuum. In practice, it became an extension of NGO leaders' former experiences of civic activism, a space where they could act for the benefit of the state and society, and where to use their previously acquired leadership and organisational skills. For them, challenging the state was not an option. The Soviet legacies implied that civil society works along with the state, rather than challenging it. Moreover, after the civil war, a possibility of a transition based on an opposition to the state was automatically associated with the war itself, and more specifically, with violence and anarchy. Therefore, such ideas were (and still are) negatively perceived by the state, the broader population and NGO workers themselves (Karimov, 2006, p. 25). In this respect, the liberal outlook of Tajik NGOs was

merely a 'side effect' (Abdullaev, 2006) of the NGO work, which was dependent on international funding.

Younger NGO workers, who were born in the final years of Soviet Tajikistan and grew up in independent Tajikistan, represented a different group of NGO workers than the *intelligentsia*. Many had decided to join NGOs because it was the only available way to enter the public sector in Tajikistan. Others joined NGOs because they had come back to Tajikistan with university degrees from abroad and were looking for prestigious jobs with decent salaries (NGOs pay more than state structures), which at the same time would be useful for society. Overall, in the 1990s and early 2000s the NGO sector in Tajikistan provided a space for action to different social groups, who were driven by different motivations. These motivations, however, were far from unanimous support for neoliberal ideas underlying democratisation and free market promotion programmes, such as cult of individualism and market values.

Despite these clear differences in how the two sides, donors and local NGO leaders, framed the NGO activism, the period until the mid-2000s was the best for relations between the two. As mentioned above, NGOs not only used to receive generous funding from donors, but also enjoyed a great deal of freedom in implementation of rigid project frameworks. Perhaps paradoxically, it was the endemic abundance of funding for NGOs in the post-communist space (Carothers, 2011), combined with donors' lack of understanding about the diversity of local realities on the ground, that allowed the recognition for the NGOs' work to be positively 'reappropriated' by local activists and 'translated' into local contexts the way they deemed suitable for local communities.

Shifts in donor funding

The gradual transformation of the NGO sector in Tajikistan had two central causes. In the first place, this was an effect of a gradual decrease in funding for Tajik NGOs starting in the late 2000s. Two decades had passed since the end of the Tajik civil war in 1997 and donors started shifting their geographic and security priorities from Afghanistan to other 'hot spots' (currently Ukraine, Colombia, Syria and Iraq). As argued by Karimov (2008, p. 134), in the absence of state funding for NGOs and no mechanisms for internal funding, the most acute problem faced by Tajik NGOs concerned their financial condition. The challenge of securing funding is a common topic at the majority of roundtables, trainings and seminars that involve the participation of Tajik NGOs. It is mentioned much more frequently than the complex legal base regulating the work of NGOs in Tajikistan (e.g. registration, taxes). Currently, only a few donors provide funding which would allow Tajik NGOs to survive financially for a year or two without the necessity of looking for additional funding. These include: The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United States Embassy in Dushanbe, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the European Commission (EC).

Apart from the change in geopolitical priorities worldwide, another reason for the shortage of funding also lies in donors' changing modalities of providing support to NGOs. In recent years, several donor agencies have moved from providing a large number of small country-specific grants for local NGOs (between 5,000 – 20,000 USD) to launching global calls to NGOs for proposals for big grants (starting at 200,000 USD). This shift has automatically reduced the chances for many local NGOs to compete for grants. First, in worldwide calls for proposals, Tajikistan is not a priority region for donors, who prefer to allocate funds to conflict zones. Second, Tajik NGOs are not able to compete for such big grants because of the lack of native or near-native level proficiency in English and the ability to prepare overcomplicated and competitive project proposals – a task that in other countries is assigned to professional grant writers. Third, small Tajik NGOs are unable to compete for these grants because they lack financial experience administering large-scale grants, which is now required by donors. As a result, the only organisations operating in Tajikistan that have a chance to receive funding in such conditions are international NGOs, such as Acted or Oxfam. Finally, big donors such as the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), all of which allocate funds for NGOs in Tajikistan, have started to channel their funding through Project Management Centres (*Tsentry upravleniya proektami*) in government structures, which then allocate it to NGOs. This move on the part of donors is aimed at strengthening local ownership of aid in the country. However, in practice, this funding is then often distributed among government-organised NGOs (GONGOs), thus excluding other well-established local NGOs.

The shifts in funding have had an impact on the local NGO sector and significantly reshaped the nature of civic activism within it. As a result of decreasing funding, as stated by Mullojonov (2017), 'the social partnership between various sectors of civil society remains at a relatively low level, which affects the quality of many civic initiatives' (p. 70). Since the mid-2000s, instead of cooperating, NGOs have instead been *de facto* forced to compete with each other more for decreasing funding.

Managerialism shaping NGO activism

In addition to the absence of sufficient finances and the lack of funding alternatives, the second external process which significantly reshaped the NGO sector in Tajikistan has been related to the expansion of managerial principles within Western development aid, which led to a domination of NGOs by donors. More specifically, this domination was allowed because of an expansion of the bureaucratic apparatus of administering funding. While the increase of managerialism was aimed at limiting informal practices worldwide (such as corruption within the NGO sector), the growth of paperwork, bureaucratic controls and oversight of NGOs led to an exclusion of the latter from funding and even their alienation from grassroots development work. This, in turn, gave more power to donors and by that, unexpectedly, allowed informal practices and corruption to further flourish. Tajik NGOs were affected by these global trends in three different ways.

First, for more than two decades, funds allocated by Western donor agencies have been the only source of income for local NGOs. As mentioned above, in a country of mass labour emigration, few jobs and low salaries in the domestic job market, employment in the NGO sector could guarantee a relatively stable salary.ⁱⁱⁱ This has been even more the case in rural areas of the country, which are characterised by an even more acute shortage of well-paid highly-skilled jobs. This financial dependency on donors paved a way for the latter to increase their leverage and dictate conditions to local NGOs. Thus, since the mid-2000s, the relationship between donors and NGOs has remained one of asymmetric power relations, in which local NGOs are subordinated to the donors' will. As a result, new informal mechanisms developed between NGOs and donors. This new tendency is well described in this quote from the head of a respected local NGO working with women: 'I observed that particularly between 2007-2008 cooperation between local NGOs and donor agencies declined for the simple reason that donors have already chosen *their* NGOs and continued working with them on a regular basis. This automatically excluded other NGOs from competition.'^{iv} Corruption also became widespread in the NGO sector, and it is important to point out that it is not rare that such practices are initiated by employees of donor agencies themselves. In other words, in exchange for grants, NGOs are commonly asked to pay bribes to staff members of donor agencies and IOs based in Dushanbe (including the most prestigious ones), which can amount to up to 50% of the total grant amount. This practice is common knowledge in the development sector in Tajikistan and NGOs greatly suffer from it.

The second global managerial trend in development work, contributing to shifting NGO-donor relations, refers to evolving funding modalities for NGOs. More and more often, when announcing calls for proposals for NGOs, donors not only determine specific topics, but also provide ready lists of activities for NGOs to implement. Thus, rather than proposing their own initiatives, NGOs are asked to implement projects that have been already written in the regional offices and headquarters of their donor agencies, which contradicts the principle of local ownership of aid (Kluczewska, 2017). To compete for funding, NGOs need to provide donors with project proposals which not only meet the technical requirements of donors, but which also demonstrate the NGOs' compliance with the vision of donors. In other words, project proposals need to please donors rather than challenge their approaches and ideas or propose alternatives. In this way, the rhetoric about the importance of local NGOs and the repeated imperative of giving maximal local ownership of development aid to local actors (OECD, 2008) is faced with a small number of one-size-fits-old dominant policy-making paradigms coming from the donors, which shapes funding for NGOs worldwide. These dogmatic paradigms include good governance, women empowerment and the migration and development agenda. In order to survive financially, NGOs in Tajikistan need to play by the rules of the aid system, and act as de facto service providers for donors.

The third managerial feature refers to the project framework. Because, as described above, donor funding is provided mostly for implementation of specific projects, NGOs had to learn how to operate according to the logic of project inputs, activities, outputs,

outcomes and impact. The increasing complexity of project frameworks, which in theory was aimed at increasing the effectiveness of donor funding, has led to an exponential growth of micro-management in the NGO sector. Micro-management has also come at the expense of any consideration for the aims and meaning of NGO work: often, busy with pleasing donors and fulfilling their overcomplicated reporting requirements, NGO employees do not have time anymore to reflect on the actual impact of these projects beyond what is stated in the projects' log-frame compiled for donors, where any NGO intervention appears to be a success story (on paper). The actual impact refers to the interplay between NGO activities and the lived dynamics in local communities. To explain these dynamics, I will provide an example from my own field research. Several times, in conversations with employees of NGOs from different parts of Tajikistan working for women's rights, I asked whether they believed that western-inspired ideas of women empowerment, that were imposed by donors and built into their projects, could really transform the traditional structure of a Tajik family and society more broadly. Interestingly, when answering, my interlocutors immediately tend to focus on the micro-managerial elements of their women-related projects. They would, for example, explain that their NGOs were implementing every single point from their project documents, reaching indicators and providing all outlined outputs. This suggests that in many cases NGO activism has been transformed into the technical implementation of pre-established log-frames. Put differently, NGO activities are often performed in a mechanic way, without a deeper reflection on whether the ideas they communicate to local communities are suitable for them or not. Local NGO leaders are not the ones to be blamed for that though: they all have the knowledge and experience to assess local needs and find proper solutions, but donors rarely ask for their opinion.

There is a great value in the work done by many individuals who have dedicated their lives to the NGO sector in Tajikistan and to improving living standards of the local population. Despite optimism and dedication to their cause, however, the consequence of the shortage of funding and domination of NGOs by donors has been that the majority of local NGOs is forced to largely justify their existence to donors and adjust their ideas to fit the rigid funding requirements (Abdullaev, 2006; Mullojonov, 2017). These tendencies are combined with the lack of support from the state and a complex legal base regulating the work of NGOs in the country. Once state institutions became stronger after the war finished, the space for NGOs, which had expanded during the vacuum of power in the 1990s, started to shrink. In 2007, after the adoption of the Law on Public Associations, which required Tajik NGOs to re-register with the Ministry of Justice, their number fell from 3,700 to 1,700 (Fischer, 2013, p. 133). Over a decade later, there are about 2,500 officially registered NGOs, out of which 1,700 remain active due to financial instability. In 2018, these organisations received donor grants amounting to 750 million TJS (about 80 million USD) – which is substantially lower than grants received in 2017, amounting to 854 million USD (about 100 million USD) (Asia Plus 2019).

Final remarks

This ENC analysis has described the developments in donor-NGO relations in Tajikistan and showed how they have been influencing the character of the local NGO sector over years. The growth of the NGO sector ought to be seen in the context of donors' democratisation and neo-liberal agenda for the post-communist space. In the eyes of donors, NGOs were supposed to promote the ideas of individual development, individual responsibility for one's life and private entrepreneurship as a way of political, economic and social reconstruction after the war. At the same time, by retaining their own ideas and experience, local activists 'reappropriated' NGOs by bringing their own concepts and understanding of social work to this sector. In this way, NGO leaders reinterpreted the role of NGOs from agents of neo-liberalism to something associated with the previous, Soviet model of civil society working hand in hand with the state (and not against it) for the benefit of society, based on ideas such as solidarity, social justice and distribution of goods and services according to one's needs. After fifteen years of relative freedom, however, the local NGO sector reached its own limits. Both the shortage of funding and the domination of NGOs by donors through managerial practices in the mid-2000s reshaped civic activism within the NGO sector into a project-based framework. NGO leaders had to learn how to please donors in order to survive financially. Thus, while international donors first allowed civic activism to flourish by supporting NGOs in Tajikistan, they then contributed to its stagnation by standardising and neutralising this activism. The aim of creating sophisticated systems of aid delivery worldwide has been to facilitate a more effective distribution of resources among local partners. However, as the case of Tajikistan shows, the growth of bureaucracy which gave more power to donors, combined with a general shortage of international funding for NGOs and poor socio-economic conditions on the ground, has resulted in the reshaping of civic activism within the NGO sector. Notably, the transformative power that the bureaucratic apparatus of development aid exercises over civic activism is visible not only in Tajikistan. As critical academic literature has well documented, it has taken various forms across the globe, often leading to one result: deradicalization of civic activism and the reshaping of its initial claims, ultimately silencing them.

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ⁱ World Bank's data on net overseas development assistance, available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/DT.ODA.ALLD.CD?locations=TJ>

ⁱⁱ In the Tajik legislation, NGOs are described as *tashkiloti jamiyati*, which corresponds to *public organisations* in English. In this analysis, the commonly used acronym NGO is used for simplicity.

ⁱⁱⁱ Currently, NGO workers receive a salary ranging between 1,000 – 4,000 TJS (100 – 400 USD), in contrast to 500 – 1,500 TJS (50 – 150 USD) earned by local government officials.

^{iv} Interview with the head of a women's NGO based in Dushanbe, August 2014.

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