



around the
CASPIAN

Subordinated Local Ownership: How do Donor Agencies View Civil Society Organisations in Tajikistan?

Karolina Kluczewska

University of St. Andrews

POLICY PAPER – 2017, 2

CASPIAN is funded by the European Commission's Horizon 2020 programme

Downloadable at <http://caspianet.eu/>



Subordinated Local Ownership:

How do Donor Agencies View Civil Society Organisations in Tajikistan?

Executive Summary

This policy brief analyses relations between donor agencies and local civil society organisations in Tajikistan, from the perspective of the latter. Its main conclusion is that despite the rhetoric of local ownership of development aid and the importance of engaging with civil society organisations, the relations between donors and recipients resembles a subordinated local ownership. Donor agencies increasingly treat civil society organisations like procurement companies, leaving them very limited space for proposing their own ideas. This has important implications for development aid, its structures and modalities of its delivery, and relationships between donors and recipients which it creates.

Introduction

In the mid-2000s, a so-called *Great Aid Debate* occurred among donor agencies and international organisations. The debate recognised the fact that there is a hierarchy between donors and recipients of development aid. Following the debate, the Rome Declaration for Harmonisation of Aid 2003, the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness 2005 and the Accra Agenda for Action 2008 were adopted. These documents, endorsed by more than one hundred signatories, created a new aid alignment, by giving greater ownership to aid recipients, namely governments, civil society organisations and local communities. In particular, point 9 of the Paris Declaration refers to creating more effective partnerships between donors and recipients by increasing the contribution of local civil society organisations.¹

This paper asks whether these declarations find reflection on a practical level. It describes what local ownership of aid looks like in practice in Tajikistan, from the perspective of local civil society organisations. It briefly situates the relationship between donor agencies and local organisations in the historical context of independent Tajikistan, and points out arising contradictions of this relationship: the rhetoric of local ownership of aid and importance of local partners in delivering aid on the one hand, and an instrumental treatment of civil society organisations by donors on the other.²

The brief is based on my experiences of working in the development aid sector in Tajikistan since 2013, as well as my PhD research which I am currently conducting on development aid practices in Tajikistan. In particular it draws on my activist research

¹ OECD (2008) The Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness and the Accra Agenda for Action. www.oecd.org/dac/effectiveness/34428351.pdf

² Thus, I am not concerned with any specific areas of development assistance, like democratisation, pluralism, reform or conflict resolution.

during a non-academic secondment in one of the biggest local civil society organisations in Tajikistan, the Eurasia Foundation of Central Asia (EFCA) – Tajikistan.³ In 2016, I spent six months working in this organisation. During that time, I was involved in fundraising, conducting research for future projects and developing project proposals.

Civil society organisations in Tajikistan

Civil society organisations flourished in Tajikistan after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, facilitated by the influx of foreign aid following the outbreak of the Tajik civil war (1992-97). Initially, donor agencies and international organisations arriving in Tajikistan with the aim of providing humanitarian aid to the population, relied on local civil society organisations led by Soviet-era intellectuals. Civil society organisations were mainly occupied with providing relief to internally displaced persons, women and children. In the late-1990s, the number of these organisations increased from 1,700 to more than 3,400.⁴ These figures suggest that in 1990s a greater level of understanding between donors and civil society organisations developed, in terms of access to funding and its amount. In the mid-2000s, however, this trust disappeared, visible in the decreasing number of registered civil society organisations. In 2014, there were 2,788 officially registered organisations, yet, no more than 1,000 remained active due to financial instability.⁵

This paper grapples with the following questions: What is a civil society organisation in Tajikistan now, twenty years since the end of the civil war? Is it a philanthropic organisation? A civil society in western terms – with a potential for political influence? A quasi-commercial organisation, making rational choices as to which projects are worth implementing? Merely an implementer of donor agencies' strategies? A simplified answer to these questions is that due to the lack of alternative funding available, a civil society organisation in Tajikistan is exactly what existing donor agencies and IOs providing funds have turned it into.

Subordinated local ownership

Engagement with local civil society organisations is one of the priorities of many different international organisations present in Tajikistan, including the European Union (EU)⁶. In January 2017, the Head of the EU Delegation to Tajikistan, Hidaet

³ EFCA-Tajikistan, previously a branch of the Eurasia Foundation based in Washington, was established as a local organisation in Tajikistan in 2009. It has extensive experience in promoting good governance in Tajikistan, fostering entrepreneurship among the youth and legislative advocacy. The annual revenue of the organisation in 2006 reached 717,963 USD.

⁴ Fischer J. (2013) *Importing Democracy. The Role of NGOs in South Africa, Tajikistan and Argentina*. Kettering Foundation Press. P. 131

⁵ USAID (2016) *CSO Sustainability Index for Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia*. P. 221, https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1863/EuropeEurasia_FY2014_CSOSI_Report.pdf

⁶ EU (2016) EU – Tajikistan Relations. Factsheets. 3 October. https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/4078/EU-Tajikistan%20relations; EU (2014) Multiannual Indicative Programme. Regional Central Asia 2014-2020. <https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/sites/devco/files/mip-2014-2020-central-asia-regional-20140812-en.pdf>

Biscevich, wrote about the importance of civil society organisations: ‘The civil society plays a double role in the process of conducting reforms, consolidating societies and developing democracy and pluralism. First, (...) it is an observer which points out gaps and deficiencies in the law, governance and state administration. (...) [Second], non-governmental organisations play an important role in mediating and supporting the resolution of all possible conflicts’ (my translation).⁷ However, how do practices concerning engagement with civil society organisations match the rhetoric of donor agencies?

My activist research in EFCA-Tajikistan provides some insights into the practical side of donor agencies’ engagement with civil society organisations. During the six months which I spent working in this organisation, our small team prepared 21 project proposals for donors. As of January 2017, out of 21 proposals, only two projects were awarded grants. One of them started almost immediately and the second one was awarded the grant in September 2016. However, for the latter the final approval from the donor agency was still missing after five months. Two other projects won grants, but were cancelled by the donors soon after being awarded funding without any explanation. Seven other project proposals were not awarded a grant – and received an official notification from the donor agency, although, in most cases, the civil society organisation staff sent an email to follow up the proposal. Twelve project proposals are still pending, and have not yet received any positive or negative reactions from donor agencies. These numbers are highly revealing of the attitudes of donor agencies towards local civil society organisations. They clearly indicate unequal power relations between the side providing grants and the side asking for them, as well as a worrying lack of transparency and accountability.

During my activist research, while fundraising and interacting with other civil society organisations in Dushanbe, I have made several observations related to grants for civil society organisations in Tajikistan.

Firstly, despite the aforementioned narrative among donor agencies about the importance of engaging with Tajik society through support for civil society organisations, the actual funding for civil society organisations is decreasing steadily. Currently only a handful of organisations remain which are providing funding allowing for the financial survival of a civil society organisation. These include the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United States Embassy in Dushanbe, United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the European Commission (EC).

Secondly, several trends can be observed in relation to donor agencies which engage

⁷ Biscevich, H. (2017) Grazhdanskoe obshestvo – blizhayshiy partner razvitiya gosudarstva v processe osutshestvleniya reform. *Asia Plus*. 12

January. <https://news.tj/ru/news/tajikistan/society/20170112/grazhdanskoe-obtshestvo-blizhaishii-partner-gosudarstva-v-protssesse-osutshestvleniya-reform>

with civil society organisations, and their modalities of engagement.

- The first category consists of international organisations which have country offices in Tajikistan. Only a few international organisations continue working periodically with civil society organisations, e.g. UN Women, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the Open Society Institute (OSI). They provide relatively modest funding to implement elements of their own projects, usually in rural areas outside of the capital city, and thus do not give civil society organisations much freedom to design their own project activities. Some of these donors continue working with the same civil society organisations for several years, despite launching calls for proposals which are open for all interested organisations.
- Another category of donor agencies are embassies. They provide modest funding for civil society organisations (usually around 10-40 thousand USD), although they usually allow a greater level of freedom concerning the choice of the field and in designing project activities. For example, these donors include the Canadian Embassy or the New Zealand Embassy.
- For donor organisations lacking field offices in Central Asia, but which provide funding for creative and multidisciplinary projects, like the Global Innovation Fund, Canada Challenge Fund or Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Tajikistan is definitely not among the priority countries for grants.
- Finally, the biggest donors for civil society organisations are the aforementioned UNDP or USAID, which provide larger grants above 100 thousand USD, and allow local organisations to continue operating for another year or two. However, the calls for proposals from these donors rarely allow civil society organisations to propose their own ideas. Rather, the activities are already enlisted by these organisations, and often the grant application process is a copy-and-paste exercise from these donors' mandates, country strategies or action plans (e.g. in the area of HIV prevention and treatment, or legal reform).

Civil society organisations as procurement companies

My research indicates that civil society organisations have increasingly started to resemble procurement companies for donor agencies and international organisations. International organisations in particular use civil society organisations for providing goods and services to the population, and in this way, they outsource activities which are included in their own mandates for Tajikistan. There is little or no space left for civil society organisations to propose their own activities, based on their previous experiences and ideas of their employees. As in the case of selection of procurement companies, civil society organisations are selected via a competitive process. The aspects which are taken into consideration during this process are the lowest prices that a civil society organisation asks for services, the highest possible quantitative indicators, and the number of years of professional experience in a certain field, which automatically makes younger organisations unable to compete.

The pre-requisite skill for applying for grants from donor agencies and international organisations is fluency in English. This is an absolute necessity for filling out dozens of tables and sections in application forms for grants. It is of little importance that proficiency in English is not actually very useful in implementing projects among the population, the majority of which speak Tajik and to a lesser extent Russian, not English. An average application is 50 pages long, and requires a description of the local context and statements on the urgency of the project. It must outline the sustainability and innovation of the project and, thus, requires applicants to justify the need for project activities which the donors themselves have already outlined. It must include items such as project organigrams; timelines; logic frames; detailed budgets with budget narratives. Furthermore, civil society organisations are required to provide letters from government authorities stating support for project activities, even though logically, donor agencies should take up the task of seeking the government's approval. Recommendation letters from previous donors and copies of previous audits must also figure in one application. Moreover, applying for grants requires civil society organisations' ability to construct complicated logic frames with needs, inputs, outputs, outcomes and impacts. As a result, the process of grant application itself reveals more about the grant writing skills acquired by the organisation, than about its actual capacities and the dedication of its staff to work with local communities. Ideas for projects that the civil society organisation may have are the last aspect taken into consideration.

The Future of Civil Society Organisations in Tajikistan

My findings suggest that fulfilling all of these conditions is likely to be highly challenging for a civil society organisation which may be hardworking, determined and dedicated, but is however too specialised in one single field, has a small staff and lacks an understanding of the principles of fundraising. In such a constrained environment, in the absence of alternative funding, only those civil society organisations which adapt to the rules of the game, set up by donor agencies and international organisations, will be able to survive. What will these organisations look like? Below I outline some implications that current funding regime holds for the future of civil society organisations.

Organisational/Professional Capacity

Firstly, they would need to hire staff who are proficient in English, preferably holding degrees from European or American universities, or rely upon the work of unpaid interns who are native English speakers. Employees of civil society organisations would preferably have a strong academic and professional background in business and marketing. They would need to know how to make pragmatic choices in applying for grants, taking into account mainly the available amount of money. The space for passionate and professional specialists such as social workers or psychologists will progressively decrease. For a successful civil society organisation, it will eventually be more important to employ people who can write project proposals simultaneously and

in multiple fields, such as construction, medical treatment, women's rights, to name a few.

Resources

At the same time, since preparing one project proposal requires weeks of work, civil society organisations must be prepared to dedicate a significant amount of their own resources to hire competent staff who will develop project proposals. They should be aware that, besides being shortlisted once or twice, most proposals will be rejected, without even receiving a notification from the donor agency. In the face of decreasing funding opportunities and, consequently the growing competition among local civil society organisations, a possibility exists that they may be tempted to pay a bribe amounting up to 50% of the grant amount to the key personnel from donor agencies in order to receive a grant – a widespread practice which is well known in development aid in Tajikistan.⁸ A question, then, arises: how much of a recognisable civil society organisation will be left in this scenario?

Implications for policy makers

The tendencies described above, concerning the relations between donor agencies and local civil society organisations in Tajikistan, indicate that there is a contradiction between the rhetoric of local ownership of aid and the importance of civil society organisations for donors, and the practices which are taking place on the ground. The progressive 'squeezing' out of civil society organisations raises questions about modalities in the delivery of development aid – who is distributing aid, and how. Instead of mutual accountability between donors and aid recipients, and reliance on the expertise and ideas of local organisations concerning delivering aid to the populations, relationship between donors and local organisations are now taking the form of subordination. This hierarchy raises an important question: How can civil society organisations play a role in indicating deficiencies in governance and participating in conflict resolution among their communities, if donor agencies provide only a limited space for their inputs and ideas in the development of projects? At the same time, advocating for increasing funding for civil society organisations would not address the problems with local ownership, because it would not address much deeper structural constraints of development aid and the power differentials shaping donors' relations with civil society organisations. Thus, this brief invites donor agencies and international organisations which are offering funding for civil society organisations, to re-evaluate what they actually mean by a civil society organisation – what are its benefits, if any, both for donor agencies and for the society in which it works- and to reconsider how they could engage more critically with civil society in practice.

⁸ This information has been repeated in numerous conversations I have had with employees of civil society organisations in Tajikistan between 2013 and the present day (2017).