

## **Management Issues for Improving NGO Sustainability in Kazakhstan**

Francis Amagoh\* and Aliya Kabdiyeva\*\*

*The growth of the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) sector is a global phenomenon, and this is particularly relevant for developing and transitional countries. In Kazakhstan, a country undergoing transition since its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, the NGO sector has grown significantly since the early years of independence. Since volunteerism is still a relatively new phenomenon in Kazakhstan, the NGO sector needs to enhance its management capacity in order to facilitate its long-term development. This qualitative study examines the role of the NGO sector in Kazakhstan since its independence, and identifies some management issues relevant to enhancing the long-term development of the sector in the country.*

**JEL Codes:** L30, L31, L33

### **1. Introduction**

In the last few decades, non-profit organizations (NGOs) have gained prominence globally as essential segments of civil society. This prominence has been helped by the unparalleled accelerations of globalization, which has created new opportunities for NGOs in their quest for sustainable development around the globe (Stohl and Stohl, 2010). NGOs represent a vital component in the majority of the world economies, and in many countries they are increasingly essential in providing vital services that would not otherwise be provided by the public or private sectors (Randle and Dolnicar, 2011). In fact, NGOs are regarded as a key setting in which commitments to the common good for all citizens can ferment and grow (Edgar and Lock, 2010). The prevalence of NGOs has been particularly noteworthy in Kazakhstan, a central Asian country, which gained its independence from the former Soviet Union in 1991. Since its independence, Kazakhstan has been undergoing political and economic transition, amongst which is the growth in the number of NGOs. From an estimated number of about 200 in the early 1990s, there are currently about 8,000 NGOs in Kazakhstan, out of which 2000 are active (Makhmutova and Akhmetova, 2011).

According to United Nations, an NGO is any non-profit, voluntary citizens' group which is organized on a local, national or international level, task-oriented and driven by people with a common interest (UNDP 2002). They comprise the sector of society that attempts to hold business and other institutions accountable for their social responsibility (Weidenbaum 2009).

Gray and Bebbington (2006) describe NGOs as autonomous, non-profit-making, self-governing and campaigning organizations with a focus on the well-being of

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\*Francis Amagoh, KIMEP University, Almaty, Kazakhstan, [famagoh@yahoo.com](mailto:famagoh@yahoo.com), [famagoh@Kimep.Kz](mailto:famagoh@Kimep.Kz)

\*\*Aliya Kabdiyeva, KIMEP University, Almaty, Kazakhstan, [alia@kimep.kz](mailto:alia@kimep.kz)

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others. O'Dwyer and Unerman (2007) states that NGOs can be broadly distinguished by their essential organizational attributes, comprising their orientation (the types of activities they engage in) and their level of operation (at international, national or local community level). O'Dwyer and Unerman further identify six categories of NGOs: welfare, development, development education, networking, research, and advocacy. Salamon and Anheier (1999) identify five key characteristics of NGOs as follows: NGOs are organized and as a consequence possess some degree of internal organizational structure and organizational boundaries; they are private and thus are institutionally separate from government; they are self-governing and able to control and manage their own affairs; NGOs are non-profit making; and finally, NGOs involve some degree of voluntary participation in the conduct or management of the organization.

Volunteerism was a relatively new phenomenon in Kazakhstan at the very beginning of the transition period, and there was a lack of understanding of the role of NGOs in the development of society. This role is particularly important because numerous Soviet-era institutions which took care of many needs of the population were dismantled by the government without establishing adequate social assistance networks (Nowicki 2000), thereby leaving many people jobless and unprotected (Makhmutova and Akhmetova, 2011). With the relatively new emergence of volunteerism and NGOs, along with the natural "teething" problems with regards to the sector's development, it is imperative to explore areas that would help facilitate the capacity of the NGO sector. Thus, this paper is motivated by the need to add to the body of knowledge on enhancing the development and management of the NGO sector in Kazakhstan. Consequently, the objective of this paper is to examine some of the obstacles to sustainable development of the NGO sector in Kazakhstan. It is hoped that this study would contribute to development of management capacity of the NGO sector in Kazakhstan and thus facilitate the sector's effectiveness and long-term sustainability. The remaining of this paper is organized as follows: Section 2 presents a review of the literature. Section 3 is the methodology of the study. In section 4, the roles of NGOs in Kazakhstan are discussed. Section 5 discusses NGO sustainability. In section 6, factors relevant for enhancing NGO development are discussed, while section 7 is the conclusion.

### **2. Literature Review**

Various studies have examined the roles and functions of NGOs in contemporary society. A number of these studies have also tried to identify factors that would enhance NGOs' efficiency and effectiveness. Greatbanks et al (2010) investigated the issue of performance management and reporting in nonprofit organizations. The study examined the nature of performance criteria demanded of NGOs by funding bodies, which in some cases do not align with the values and goals of the NGOs. Results of the study suggest that a number of reporting criteria required by funding bodies provide little or no value to the NGOs. The findings also indicate that anecdotal performance reporting tend to be more aligned with NGOs' values and goals, since it allows the organization's achievements to be presented in a more contextual and comprehensive basis.

On the issue of funding, Silverman and Patterson (2011) investigated the perceptions of NGOs' executive directors regarding the correlation between access to funding and their programmatic and advocacy activities. Data was collected from a survey of NGOs' directors in the United States. The study found that several factors are associated with how NGOs balance their programmatic and advocacy activities. These include dependence on public funding, nature of the constituencies served, and perception of funders. The results indicate that advocacy activities tend to be more sustainable in

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NGOs with a strong individual donor base, suggesting that a stable source of grassroots funding can counter institutional pressures to reduce advocacy.

There has been greater call for accountability and transparency in the third sector in recent years (Gilberman and Gelman, 2004). O'Dwyer and Unerman (2007) analyzed the nature of accountability in Irish NGOs. The study used data from in-depth interviews with senior level managers of the NGO sector in Ireland, in conjunction with analysis of comprehensive secondary sources. The study found lack of real accountability among the NGOs. Lack of resources, organizational commitment, guidance and expertise from the funders contributed to skepticism towards adoption of the core tenets of social accountability to beneficiaries. Young and Merschrod (2009) examined the role of NGOs in children's healthcare in Peru. The study found that the number of NGOs in Peru is related to measures of child health across the provinces of Peru, and as such are important dimension of these administrative units. While the study did not control for aggregated individual characteristics, it makes the case that NGOs reflect a true structural dimension, one that is systemic and structural rather than aggregated. It measures political pluralism and a fundamental dimension of civic society. The study found that in Peru, the proliferation of NGOs is an indication of structural pluralism, and correlates with measures of population health for infants and children. Furthermore, the health of the children was generally improved because structural pluralism is a type of problem-solving capacity and participation of children in this type of problem solving optimizes molar biological functions such as body weight, muscle tone, etc., which in turn improved the children's overall health.

Phillips (2005) examined the role of Counterpart International, Inc. (a global partnership organization) in introducing the concept of social enterprise to NGOs in Ukraine by looking at its effects on women NGOs in the country. Results of the study found that the program ended after the pilot phase, suggesting that there were flaws in the development strategy used by Counterpart, and that there are lessons to be learnt from such failure. Finally, Makhmutova and Akhmetova (2011) conducted a study on the state of civil society in Kazakhstan. The study was funded by CIVICUS (World Alliance for Citizen Participation). Results of the study indicate that Kazakhstan scored below 50 percent in all the five dimensions (civic engagement, level of organization, practices of values, perception of impact, and external environment) of development studied. It is evident from the above review of literature that not much has been relatively written on how to enhance the development of management capacity of NGOs in Kazakhstan. Thus, it is imperative that efforts be made to fill this gap of knowledge in scientific inquiry.

### 3. Methodology

This paper used qualitative research methodology. Relevant information used in this study was collected from secondary sources. The sources reviewed comprise of government documents, reports, and policy documents published by international organizations on Kazakhstan, and published articles in academic journals.

The secondary sources consulted for this study include the following:

- ADB (Asian Development Bank) 2007, *Overview of NGOs/Civil Society: Kazakhstan*;
- (The) World Bank 2009, *Kazakhstan: Data and Statistics*;
- UNDP (United Nations Development Program) 1997, *Governance for a*

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### *Sustainable Development;*

- UNDP (United Nations Development Program) 2010, *“The Real Wealth of Nations: Pathways to Human Development;*
- UNDP (United Nations Development Program) 2002, *Non-Governmental Organizations of Kazakhstan: Past, Present, Future;*
- USAID (United States Agency for International Development) 2010, *NGO Sustainability Index, “Kazakhstan”.*

Furthermore, websites of various organizations were consulted. Such websites include:

- Agency of Statistics of Kazakhstan ([www.stat.kz](http://www.stat.kz));
- UNDP website ([www.undp.org](http://www.undp.org));
- United Nations Mission (Kazakhstan) (<http://missions.itu.int/~kazaks>);
- Ministry of Internal Affairs of Republic of Kazakhstan ([www.mvd.kz](http://www.mvd.kz));
- Asian Development Bank ([www.adb.org](http://www.adb.org));
- Regional Environmental Center for Central Asia ([www.carec.kz](http://www.carec.kz));
- Central Asian Project ([www.cap.online.kz](http://www.cap.online.kz))

## 4. The Role of NGOs in Kazakhstan

Questions have been raised about the relevance of NGOs, and whether some of these organizations are engaged in promoting their self-interest rather than pursuing their stated missions. While there are some instances of corruption and misappropriation of funds by some organizations in the non-profit sector, a lot of good are performed by NGOs in addressing issues of concerns to citizens. According to Gray and Bebbington (2006), NGOs perform a variety of functions, especially for local populations who depend on them for their well-being in several parts of the world. They do this by engaging governments and sometimes the private sector in solving societal problems. The two most notable areas of NGOs’ activities are advocacy and service provision. Salazar (2010) state that NGOs engage in policy advocacy as a means to bring desired changes to society, most notably through changing mindsets. The purpose of advocacy is to influence government’s policies, ideas and practices. Advocacy assists in the maintenance of a healthy, deliberative democracy.

Edgar and Lockie (2010) goes further by stating that as actors in the policy-making process, NGO advocacy provides an extra-parliamentary form of representation to communities and individuals, and thus provides communities a chance to influence the shape of initiatives aimed at them. This function is especially important since many groups within the community may lack the influence and/or means to speak for themselves (Salamon and Anheier, 1999). The involvement of NGOs in the development of policy can also ensure that policy is more effective because it is assumed that NGOs have a better understanding of how these issues affect citizens. According to Diachenko (2008), Kazakhstan’s NGOs are engaged in a wide range of activities, with the main emphasis being on resolving social problems, mostly in areas of issue advocacy and service provision. Their ability to create, share, communicate and use their knowledge is critical for the effectiveness of their policy advocacy because it strengthens their credibility and legitimacy, not only with the government but also with the citizenry at large (Arenas et al, 2009).

Advocacy activities of Kazakhstan’s NGOs include bringing citizens' concerns to the government, monitoring policies and encouraging political participation (Diachenko

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2008). In addition to policy advocacy, a majority of NGOs in Kazakhstan focus their efforts on issues relating to the environment, education, health, etc. Environmental NGOs try to place environmental issues on the policy agenda, and to encourage the government to promulgate environmental protection legislations. Examples of such groups include Green Salvation in Almaty, Ecocenter in Karaganda, Central Asian Sustainable Development and Information Network's Centre (CASDIN), and Greenspace in Temirtau. These NGOs make efforts to increase citizens' awareness about industrial pollution and other environmental issues. Other NGOs offer variety of services including expert analysis, education, health, training on certain social issues, and others (Nowicki 2000; Alymkulova and Seipulnik, 2005). A number of successes have been achieved due to this policy advocacy. For example, in 2003 the Diabetic Association of the Republic of Kazakhstan (DARK) persuaded the government to start providing free insulin to all diabetics in the country (Alymkulova and Seipulnik, 2005).

In Kazakhstan, it is estimated that approximately 42 percent of the NGOs offer services in the social sphere (education, public health, and culture), 24 percent protect the interests of socially vulnerable groups, while 34 percent concentrate on issues of human rights act, the environment, and gender policy (USAID 2010). More than two hundred thousand people are employed in the NGO sector, and roughly two million citizens enjoy the services of Kazakhstan's NGOs (Diachenko 2008). A survey of 271 NGOs in 2009 found that half of the NGOs consider the end users of their services as urban residents, while the remaining 50 percent include rural residents, local state bodies, local businesses, the national government, and international organizations (Makhmutova and Akhmetova, 2011).

Kazakhstan's NGOs also make efforts to help promote good governance. The United Nations describes governance as the exercise of political, economic and administrative authority in the management of the affairs of a country at all levels (Gray and Bebbington, 2006). Good governance, in general terms, means a broad array of practices that maximize the common good. According to UNDP (2002), some of the attributes of good governance include: participation (expecting all citizens to have a say in decision-making, either directly or through the legitimate intermediate institutions representing their interests); rule of law (the extent to which legal frameworks are fair and impartially enforced, especially the laws on human rights); transparency (free flow of information); and accountability (the quest for decision-makers in government, the private sector and the civil society to be broadly accountable to the general public, as well as institutional stakeholders). NGOs in Kazakhstan help promote some of the features of good governance with support from USAID and other Western NGOs.

### **5. NGO Sustainability**

NGO sustainability refers to the capacity of the NGO sector to effectively function and be viable in the long-term. The issue of NGO sustainability for Kazakhstan is important because it is the basis on which to understand the sector's level of development. USAID developed the NGO Sustainability Index to assess the level of a country's NGO development. The index uses a 7-point scale (ranging from 1.0 to 7.0); with 7.0 indicating poor level of development, and 1.0 indicating a very advanced NGO sector. The sustainability index is made up of a composite of 7 indicators (legal environment, organizational capacity, financial viability, advocacy, service provision, infrastructure, and public image). A trajectory of Kazakhstan's NGO sustainability from 2000 to 2009 is shown in Table 1. The composite NGO sustainability index for 2009 was 4.0 indicating a medium level of development (USAID, 2010). This suggests that there is a great need

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for improvement in all the categories that constitute the index. In order to improve NGO scores in all relevant areas of development, management capacity in the following areas transparency and accountability, financing, governance and management structure, and human resources) need to be enhanced.

**Table 1: Trajectory of Kazakhstan’s NGO Sustainability Indicators**

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
NGO Sustainability	4.7	4.3	4.1	3.9	4.1	4.1	4.1	4.0	4.0	4.0
Legal Environment	4.5	4.5	4.2	4.0	4.2	4.2	4.2	3.9	3.9	3.8
Organizational Capacity	5.0	4.2	4.0	3.8	3.8	4.1	4.1	4.1	4.1	4.1
Financial Viability	5.5	5.0	4.8	4.7	5.0	4.9	4.8	4.6	4.6	4.6
Advocacy	4.5	4.3	4.0	3.6	3.6	3.8	3.8	3.7	3.8	3.8
Service Provision	4.7	4.0	4.0	3.9	4.1	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.0
Infrastructure	4.5	4.1	3.9	3.6	3.6	3.5	3.5	3.6	3.7	3.7
Public Image	4.5	4.1	3.9	3.9	4.2	4.2	4.2	4.1	4.1	4.1

Source: adapted from USAID (2010). “Kazakhstan”, (available at: [www.usaid.gov/locations/europe\\_eurasia/dem\\_gov/ngoindex/2009/kazakhstan.pdf](http://www.usaid.gov/locations/europe_eurasia/dem_gov/ngoindex/2009/kazakhstan.pdf))

## 6. Factors to Enhance NGO Development

### 6.1 Transparency and Accountability

One of the challenges facing NGOs in Kazakhstan is the lack of public trust (Prugsamatz 2010). Many NGOs are dependent on major bodies, such as government agencies for their funding, and this resource dependency has significant implications for the forms of accountability promoted and practiced within the sector (Kelly and Lewis, 2010). Kazakhstan’s NGOs are plagued with the problem of lack of transparency in their activities. The average citizen regards NGOs as merely a source of accruing personal wealth for their founders. Most NGOs do not disclose their sources of income nor their spending activities. Thus, a starting point to enhance public trust and generate financial support from citizens is public disclosure of financial activities. An ideal scenario would be a combination of local watchdog agencies, government oversight, and code of ethics. However, since the third sector is still in its stage of infancy in Kazakhstan, these measures are needed in the long-term to adequately address the issues of transparency and accountability of the sector.

### 6.2 Financing

One of the greatest challenges facing NGOs in Kazakhstan is the issue of funding and financial viability. In Kazakhstan, the major source of funding for NGOs’ activities is through social contracting with the government. These social contracts tend to be short-term, and do not help NGOs to implement long-term programs. Only a small number of NGOs in 2009 receive state funding and the process is not transparent (Makhmutova and Akhmetova, 2011). For example, in 2009, NGOs were able to receive funding from five government ministries and local governments, most of which lasted between 3 months to 1 year duration. Currently, representatives of NGOs, state bodies and the parliament have formed a working group to develop regulations that would ensure the

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social contracts system facilitate the long-term viability and sustainability the country's NGOs.

Kazakhstan's NGOs also receive funding from international organizations, mostly in the form of providing grants for the implementation of social projects. Examples include Mercy Corps International, Counterpart International, Voluntary Service Overseas, the Soros Foundation, the Eurasia Foundation and USAID. More specifically, USAID funds projects at different levels and to different organizations, such as, Farmer to Farmer (to teach farmers how to organize and manage a profitable private farm), and the National Democratic Institute to assist with elections (Brudney and Nezhina, 2005). To improve the diversification of funding sources, Counterpart International began implementing a three-year Civil Society Initiative Support Program in Kazakhstan in 2003. The program uses the concept of social enterprise to develop capabilities of NGOs in areas of business idea generation, feasibility analysis and business planning. It is necessary that more examples of Counterpart International's initiatives be replicated in various parts of Kazakhstan if local NGOs should have any chance of being financially viable.

It is vital that the public be fully engaged in NGO funding. While such philanthropic tradition is not yet fully developed as in the West, it would greatly reduce the dependency of NGOs on the government and international donors as sources of funding (Alymkulova and Seipulnik, 2005). The government should encourage charitable contributions by making changes to the tax code. While Kazakhstan's tax code of January 1, 2009 expands the category of organizations to which corporate donors may make tax deductible contributions to include private social institutions such as school, hospitals, libraries, museums and amateur sports facilities, NGOs were excluded from such categories. Long-term sustainability and financial autonomy of NGOs depend on their ability to generate funds internally, and to negotiate long-term contracts at the national and international level.

### **6.3 Governance and Management Structure**

Governance is defined as the relationship among various participants in determining the direction and performance of organizations (Diochin 2010). It constitutes an organization's board of directors and the senior management team. According to Stid and Bradach (2009), sound organizational governance and management practices are essential if nonprofits are to improve their impacts over time. A board of directors constitutes the policymaking body of any organization, its members assume fiduciary responsibility (Peterson 2010), and help in developing a coherent and long-term strategy. Effective board of directors thus has an impact on organizational performance, and plays a role in establishing performance standards (Greatbanks et al, 2010). The question of NGO governance, especially, the reasons for creating a board of directors, is not yet fully understood among NGO leaders in Kazakhstan. Founders of NGOs have the perception that boards of directors play the role of direct supervision, which they consider very intrusive. It is estimated that only 31 percent of NGOs in Kazakhstan have boards of directors (Makhmutova and Akhmetova, 2011), and those with boards of directors NGOs do so merely to meet the requirements of international donors (USAID 2007). Such boards appear only on paper and lack decision-making authority. Thus, it is important that Kazakh NGOs have in place active boards of directors that engage in developing effective strategies for long-term sustainability. This view is shared by a majority of the population who view the lack of effective boards as one of the reasons why Kazakhstan's NGOs are not capable of dealing with complex social issues. A survey of Almaty residents indicates that 78 percent of respondents consider effective

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boards as necessary for enhancing organizational performance (Makhmutova and Akhmetova, 2011). Competent boards, working in conjunction with the senior management would help the NGOs develop the vision and strategies that creates the innovation needed for long-term viability and sustainability in the sector (Sarros et al, 2011).

### 6.4 Human Resources

A viable and coherent human resources policy is essential for NGOs efficiency and effectiveness. It is argued that the ability to attract and retain human resources is an indicator of NGO's credibility and their ability to produce tangible results. NGOs in Kazakhstan have underdeveloped organizational systems in the areas of human resources (USAID 2010). A major challenge is the lack of professional and skilled managers, and qualified staff and volunteers. A survey of the country's NGOs found that 25 percent indicated lack of qualified and professional staff as the key factor leading to poor development and inefficiency, while 31 percent view lack of a tradition of volunteerism as one of the causes of poor NGO development in the country. A weak human resources base partly explains the ineffectiveness of most NGOs in country. Only 14 percent of civil society organizations in Kazakhstan have sustainable human resources base, mostly due o lack of funding (Diachenko 2008).

Human resources management could be improved through formal training programs for key staff members. Training on various aspects of organizational development, strategic planning, proposal writing, assistance in organizing events and creating partnerships with other sectors need to be further developed (Arenas et al, 2009). While international organizations have been providing training programs and technical assistance in such areas as planning and management, much of the training is based on Western standards, and in some cases is not relevant to local tradition and culture. The formation of NGO Institutes to provide training in managerial, goal setting, fund raising and implementation skills is highly desirable in the NGO sector (Peterson 2010).

## 7. Conclusion

NGOs play a major role in the societal development of developing and transitional countries. This paper discussed some management issues relevant for the development and sustainability of NGOs in Kazakhstan. The citizens of Kazakhstan, with the help of the government and international NGOs are making gradual strides in developing a viable and sustainable NGO sector. As NGOs are a viable means of developing civil society, the development of NGOs in Kazakhstan has had the positive results of elevating some issues of societal concerns to the public discourse, and persuading the government to take positive actions. NGOs in Kazakhstan are in a nascent state, and thus need improvement in a number of areas. It is hoped that the management issues discussed here should in the long-run contribute to the effectiveness, efficiency and capacity of NGOs in Kazakhstan.

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