

Civil society and peacebuilding

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There are many definitions of 'civil society' but most are based on the concept of a public space between the individual and the state where a variety of actors seek to mediate relations between citizens and state authorities. It is a space for communication that creates opportunities for broad public involvement and therefore has a potentially important role in preventing and resolving conflict and making post-conflict reconciliation more sustainable. A peace process that involves only elite decision-makers can be disrupted by political events, leaders' pursuit of self-interest, or external interference. It is therefore important to assess the contribution of civil society actors to the Tajik peace process and to the process of reconciliation.

Since the General Agreement was signed in June 1997 the government has promoted post-conflict confidence building and national reconciliation and international agencies have provided funding for conflict resolution activities. This combination of political conditions and financial resources has stimulated the growth of conflict resolution and confidence building activities in civil society.

Traditional civil society and the new NGOs

In Tajikistan today, civil society actors range from informal grassroots associations (community councils, neighbourhood associations, etc) to the more formal, officially registered non-governmental civic associations or NGOs. Tajik society has historically had a well-developed civic network at local level. Tajik communities in both rural and urban areas have traditionally been self-organized through councils of citizens, or *mahalla* councils. They organized community events and provided a space where male heads of households could discuss and address local problems and conflicts. Other fora included the traditional shared dinner in the local mosque, where community members could discuss common concerns.

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During the Soviet period, these civic institutions were eroded. The authorities created state-sanctioned professional associations to serve the needs of the Soviet state and inhibited the development of independent social institutions and networks. As tensions grew in the early 1990s, this weakened civic network was unable to mediate conflict or to help stabilize the country. Paradoxically, with the virtual paralysis of these state-sanctioned institutions, residual local community networks became an important channel for different political groups fighting for power and were mobilized to disseminate political messages, obtain recruits, and generate financial support.

The emergence of officially registered NGOs is a new phenomenon in Tajikistan that originated in the political and social changes during the 1980s. NGOs began to form in the early 1990s and the sector has grown quickly: 300 NGOs had registered by 1997 and 625 by March 2000, including approximately forty-five women's organizations. These groups are developing into 'boundary spanning' organizations, connecting different parts of civic space.

Top-level initiatives

The 1997 General Agreement was prepared and concluded exclusively at the level of decision-making leaders. The only direct contribution of local civic society

to the official negotiations was the participation of Tajik NGOs in the Public Accord Agreement, signed in 1996 by almost all officially registered local political parties, public movements and prominent NGOs. But sceptics saw it as a government initiative to show the unity of Tajik society on the eve of a new round of talks. Some representatives of Tajik NGOs participated in the official and non-official peace process. Some participants in the official process formed their own NGOs. Representatives of a few Tajik NGOs participated in the 'second track' non-official Inter-Tajik Dialogue.

It might be argued that public opinion – which is shaped partly through the activities of NGOs, public associations, mass media and influential intellectuals – had an indirect influence on decision-makers. Yet although public opinion in Tajikistan consistently opposed the civil war, fighting continued for six years. It seems that the peace treaty was concluded as the result of political or geopolitical factors, unaffected by public opinion or local civil society. Thus the public was not able to influence the terms and conditions of the General Agreement – in part because of the weakened and fragmented nature of civil society.

Regaining strength

Since the General Agreement, the focus of conflict resolution activities has gradually shifted from the top

level to the middle and lower levels of society: the level of local communities and ordinary citizens.

During the civil war, the growing power of local field commanders undermined the standing of village councils and elders. Once the war ended, military influence waned and the traditional civic network began to regain its authority. Its role has increased gradually. Local governments cannot afford to provide local communities with basic services such as water and gas supply or reconstruction and repair of sewage systems. They therefore rely on community-based organizations. The central government has now instituted a programme to include the traditional civic institutions in its local administrative infrastructure by creating a network of *jamoats* – semi-official institutions located between the *mahalla* councils and local governments. The influence of traditional grassroots organizations on local government activities has increased considerably as a result.

Civic groups are also developing their capacity to represent local interests and organize their communities, sometimes with external encouragement. In an effort to reduce tensions arising from the repatriation of Tajik refugees from Afghanistan in 1995-96, international agencies – including the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) – turned to the traditional civic network. At the time, refugees returning to their home villages were coming into conflict with members of other ethnic or regional groups. There were incidents of harassment, employment discrimination, use of refugees as forced labour, physical attacks and even murders of refugees. International agency staff and government officials drew on the authority of the elders and *mahalla* councillors. They invited the most respected representatives from different groups to dialogue meetings, which helped to open communication between different ethnic and regional communities. Local council members helped to smooth relationships and reduce tensions between communities, thus helping to prevent new conflicts. These activities were intensive in southern regions where the fighting had been the most intense and large numbers of people had been displaced. Their efforts seem to have had a cumulative effect. In 1997, when the last wave of returnees from Afghanistan arrived in Tajikistan, the hostile atmosphere and the scale of problems they encountered were reduced in comparison with previous years.

Dialogue and education

Civic groups have also shouldered the responsibility of implementing conflict resolution, dialogue and education programmes. Their initiatives are gradually changing the political, social and even psychological atmosphere in the country.

Most NGOs conduct their conflict resolution work at community level, working directly with the population in urban, suburban or rural areas. Projects include training workshops and discussion-based activities for representatives of local village and elders' councils, different ethnic and regional groups, and local officials. Conflict resolution seminars are intended to help participants understand the different types of conflicts and methods to prevent and resolve them. Some NGOs concentrate on drawing *mahallas* and village councils into conflict resolution projects.

NGOs are proliferating in rural areas and are increasingly engaged in conflict resolution. This trend is particularly prevalent in Khatlon province, where military confrontation was intense and where serious inter-ethnic and inter-regional tension remains. Some programmes aim to rehabilitate refugee communities and reintegrate returnees to a peaceful life.

In 1999, civil society projects started to develop a more regional approach to conflict prevention. As the focus of military and political tension shifted to the north of the country, to the Ferghana valley, so the attention of both domestic and international NGOs turned to this area. A few international conflict resolution projects involve NGOs from both Tajikistan and the Kyrgyz Republic; one of the largest is sponsored by the Swiss Development Agency and run by the Centre for Youth Initiative from Khujand city.

International agencies based in Dushanbe began to promote community-level conflict resolution programmes in 1996. They encouraged local NGOs willing to conduct such programmes in areas where different ethnic groups and regional communities co-exist. The OSCE Mission in Tajikistan has initiated a training programme for local moderators and conducted 320 training seminars. It aims to train about 12,000 local women as moderators for civic, gender and human rights programmes. The Counterpart Consortium, has supported the creation of a network of thirteen Tajik NGOs engaged in conflict resolution. Ten years later, the members are developing a general strategy for the network's future activity.

Civic groups also interact with other political forces. With the support of international agencies, Tajikistan's NGOs have been able to conduct some conflict resolution programmes with mid-level actors in the peace process – political parties, public movements and civic organisations. Most civic initiatives at this level are implemented by larger NGOs based in big cities and most include research on conflict prevention and resolution. There are far fewer activities at this level than there are in community-based projects, partly because the former are more expensive and complicated to implement.

Gender and peacemaking

Women have played an important role in Tajikistan's civil society and women's groups have taken a lead in civil society conflict resolution efforts. Although Tajikistani women are not yet widely represented in government structures, they have been more successful in the voluntary sector: more than 35 per cent of Tajik NGOs are headed by women.

The leaders of many women's NGOs consider that the civil war was caused mainly by economic decline and low living standards, especially in rural areas where women do not traditionally work for money outside the home and are therefore dependent on the wages of adult males. Many males were killed during the war, which increased pressure on women to provide for themselves and their dependents. The status of women in Tajikistan's society remains extremely low and their capacity for conflict prevention is under-utilized. Many women's movement leaders argue that the participation of women in political, economic and social life would help consolidate the peace process but only if the traditional mentality can be transformed. Consequently, most projects conducted by women's organizations aim to raise women's social status. Their strategies range from political lobbying to social development to addressing conflict on the family and community levels.

Over the past several years, Tajik women's organizations, with support from international organizations, have been highly successful in implementing civic education and women's rights projects at the community level. They aim to prepare women to participate in political processes. For example, in 1999 the organizations Women's Voices, Orzu (Hope) and Oshtii Milly worked with the OSCE to arrange seminars on civic education subjects including rights, gender and culture, the role of political parties in democratizing society, and the role of local government. Open Asia held a series of seminars on violence against women in Tajikistan, a roundtable discussion on women and elections, and has developed three training modules on human rights. Traditions and Modernity conducted advocacy training workshops for the leaders of women's and human rights NGOs in August 1998. It also initiated a project called 'The women's school on political leadership' and ran training seminars in different regions for local NGO leaders, journalists and high school and university teachers. It arranged special training for women running for parliamentary elections and for election observers.

Women in different sectors of civil society – traditional networks, government-supported NGOs and those with foreign funding – have developed common platforms and taken on a new lobbying role. They successfully lobbied the president to re-introduce a quota for women

in elected bodies. The government has also adopted a 'National Plan of Action to Increase the Status and Role of Women 1998-2005' that will involve women's NGOs as implementing partners.

Alla Kuvatova, head of Traditions and Modernity, says that the main task of women- and gender-related organizations in conflict resolution is the same as that of other NGOs: to promote the participation of communities and ordinary people in the peace process. Part of this goal can be achieved by ensuring the active participation of Tajik women in social and political life. Therefore women's NGOs have their own place in Tajik civil society and could play a special role in conflict resolution and prevention. Their numbers and influence are increasing, in part because of support from international agencies.

Constraints and challenges

After the conclusion of the peace treaty in 1997, new conditions were created in Tajikistan that are conducive to conflict resolution projects. Thirteen NGOs specialise in conflict resolution. The conflict resolution capacity of Tajik NGOs, however, has been constrained by several factors. Although the number of NGOs increases every day, only a dozen are fully established with secure grants, good relations with donors, and professional teams.

International organizations have helped with training needs and, more importantly, they are the source of financial support for Tajik NGOs. The continued financial, political and technical support of international organizations is important to expand the conflict resolution capacity of Tajikistan's civic organizations and their ability to engender dialogue, political participation and protection of rights.

Despite the rapid spread of conflict resolution activities among civic organizations, their impact on national reconciliation is inadequate, largely because of the disparity between the main elements of Tajik civic infrastructure: the European-influenced NGO sector and the traditional civic network. It is important to establish cooperation between the two and to revive the conflict prevention capacity of the traditional councils. This would help to adapt conventional conflict resolution methods to the demands of modern Tajik society. But this process is only beginning. By 2000, only a few Tajik NGOs operated conflict resolution projects at community level and only a few of their staff had working relations with community councils. Although creative competition may be a necessary part of civil society development, the future effectiveness of this sector's efforts at conflict resolution is likely to be linked to the integration of the NGO sector with grassroots civic networks.