The Professionalization of NGOs: A New Stage of NGO Development in Kyrgyzstan?

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The Kyrgyz non-governmental sector is known as the most vibrant, pluralistic, and numerous in Central Asia and has been one of the key indicators of nascent democracy in Kyrgyzstan. Over the last three years it has encountered a number of challenges due to changes in a political situation and donor activities. Since 2005 Kyrgyzstan has experienced political turmoil having gone through a revolution, with the replacement of the government and a constitutional reform. This political instability has drawn NGOs into the political domain to advocate for reforms.

This paper argues that NGOs in Kyrgyzstan have had to professionalize and formalize. This occurred for a number of reasons. Donors started supporting NGOs in an advocacy role because of their new focus on government capacity building, simultaneously the provision of budget support under the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, adopted in 2005, had financial implications. In brief, these changes meant NGOs in Kyrgyzstan had: 1) more interaction with the government; 2) more involvement in advocacy; and 3) less donor funding.

Professionalization is a turning point for Kyrgyz NGOs suggesting that they have entered a new development stage. Until the early 2000s NGOs were just emergent. Most came into being to take an advantage of lavish donor funding, and did not have either an organizational structure or an issue based agenda. The situation is now different. It is argued that NGOs have professionalized individually through formalization and institutionalization. Most NGOs are now registered entities with a) an organizational structure and rules, b) a technically equipped office, c) stringent financial procedures, and d) qualified staff.

Two main factors are behind this: 1) the effective interaction of NGOs with the government requires that NGOs have adequate expertise in their particular field, and have adequate organizational management in terms of transparency and accountability; and 2) NGOs are required to meet the eligibility criteria of donor grants, the main source of NGO funding source, which are themselves being reduced because of budget cuts. Finally, the paper argues that a potential pitfall of NGO professionalization can be the dominance of the NGO sector by institutionally strong NGOs with qualified staff, which work as professional organizations rather than civic voluntary institutions. The research has indicated that NGO professionalization concerns large, city based NGOs, which have gained great experience and strong professional and technical capacity. Meanwhile, small and new NGOs, particularly in the regions, face the reverse situation. Since they lack the necessary capacity and skills to secure donor funding, many have ceased functioning.

The paper is based on data from 81 interviews with 46 local NGOs and 19 development agencies conducted within doctoral research from September 2007 to May 2008.