



**OVERVIEW AND ANALYSIS OF
REGIONAL NON-GOVERNMENTAL INITIATIVES
IN CENTRAL ASIA**

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DEFINITIONS

Conflict sensitivity (as PN service): A service offered by PeaceNexus to support civil society, governmental institutions and businesses with a high impact in fragile and conflict-affected contexts to improve their practices, so their actions do not fuel violence and contribute to peaceful change where possible.

Organizational Development (as PN service): A service offered by PeaceNexus to civil society organizations, governmental and multilateral institutions that have peacebuilding at the core of their mandate. It aims to address internal challenges and strengthen core capacities, so that their interventions are delivered more effectively and they achieve relevant, inclusive and sustainable contributions to peacebuilding.

Business Engagement (as PN service): A service offered by PeaceNexus that supports dialogue between affected communities, civil society organizations, companies, and local governments. PeaceNexus aims to improve the quality of the dialogue process and the capacity of participants involved. This creates conditions for them to co-develop sustainable solutions.

Social Cohesion (as objective of PN): to address the challenges of polarisation and prejudice, our partners build connections and trust between different groups within society.

Inclusive governance (as objective of PN): To build accountable, democratic and inclusive governance, our partners engage in constructive collaboration between civil society and state institutions.

Responsible Business (as objective of PN): To support conflict-sensitive business operations and improve social and environmental impacts, our partners engage in dialogue between the state, local communities and business.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The present research, conducted by a team of researchers from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, aims to provide an overview and analysis of existing non-governmental initiatives in Central Asia for the upcoming Collective Learning and Reflection Platform Meeting in June 2024. This study intends to contribute to reflection sessions of civil society representatives and experts on social cohesion issues at the Central Asia level and the development of joint initiatives to promote regional unity with a focus on public discourse.

The primary tasks of this research include a thorough examination and assessment of past efforts to enhance collaboration and coordination among non-governmental actors in Central Asia, as well as offering practical recommendations to civil society in the region on how to advance future efforts. The research addresses questions about the strategies employed by NGOs to foster collaboration and unity among experts in the region, the key actors driving these initiatives, the success and failure factors of these initiatives, and recommendations to boost regional cooperation among non-governmental actors.

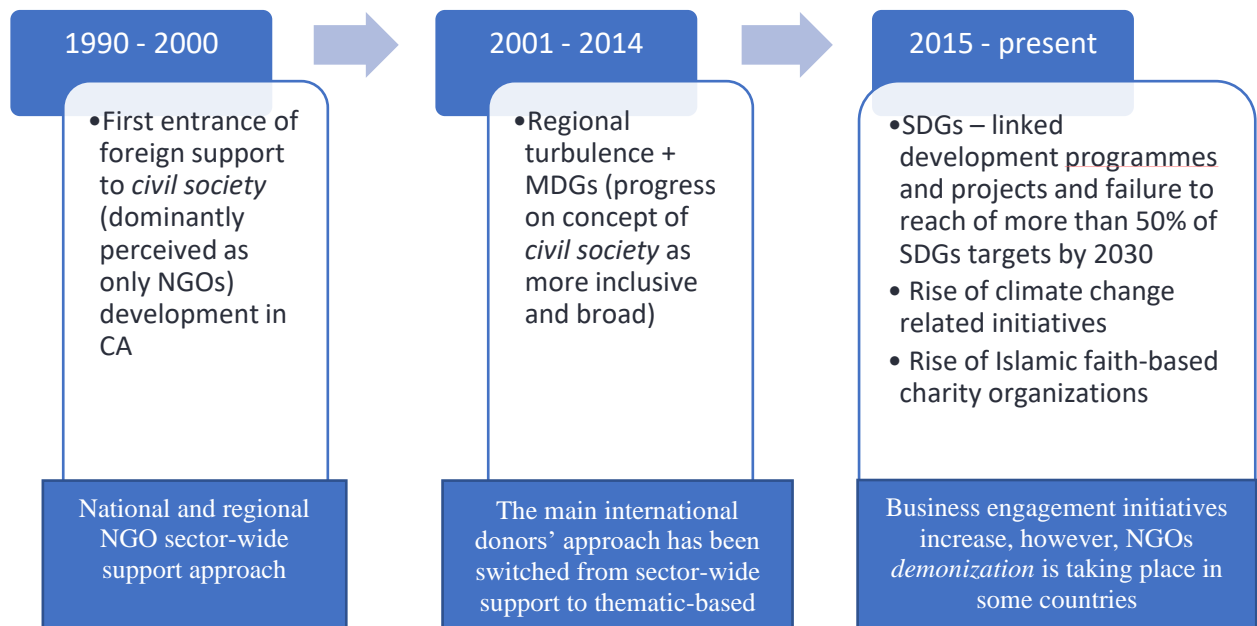
The methodology involves a desk-based approach supplemented by key informant interviews (KIIs) to provide a comprehensive analysis. The study categorizes regional initiatives into defined timeframes (since 1990s till now) and thematic clusters, which include:

- environmental challenges (climate-related issues and water management),
- economic development (regional business and infrastructure),
- security efforts (illegal migration, human, drug, and weapon trafficking) and
- socio-humanitarian aspects (culture, sport, identity, religion, gender, and media).

Among the limitations it is worth to mention that the study did not cover China-led initiatives due to their primary involvement of state officials and lack of available information. Additionally, no cooperation among non-state actors on drug or weapon trafficking was found, as confirmed by a UNODC informant.

The retrospective overview demonstrates the national and global challenges of civil society development in Central Asia as well as the approach that donor organizations and states have implemented towards their activities and support programmes over the last 30 years. Initially, the donors' interventions were focused on NGOs' sector-wide support, including training, technical assistance, and small grants. From 2000 to 2010, the focus of international donors shifted from sector-wide to thematic-based support in line with the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). This period also saw a broader definition of *civil society* to include trade unions, faith-based organizations, and other groups. However, significant political challenges, such as the Andijan events in Uzbekistan and the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan, negatively impacted civil society at both national and regional levels. The introduction of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 further redirected donor strategies towards climate-based initiatives and broader development cooperation. Despite efforts to align activities with SDGs, progress remains insufficient in key

areas like poverty, hunger, and climate action, thus pushing states and relevant agencies to speed up their efforts particularly on above-mentioned areas.



However, increased donor expectations regarding financial and organizational protocols, combined with reduced institutional support, have posed challenges for civil society actors. Political *demonization* of NGOs in some countries in the region further aggravates their conditions. Recent regional expert meetings emphasize the need for a common plan for confidence-building, including political dialogue, peace education, grassroots initiatives, and neutral platforms for information exchange and donor feedback. The civil society sector in its majority remains donor-driven and dependent on external financial assistance.

Among other challenges impacting the development of regional networking among non-governmental actors in Central Asia were:

- Ambiguous regional perception by donors: Central Asia is viewed inconsistently by donors, either narrowly (focusing on a few states) or broadly (including regions like Eastern Europe, Central Asia + Afghanistan, etc.). Nationalistic tendencies impede the formation of a unified regional identity;
- Civil society dependence on external funding (in most cases);
- A significant gap in establishing sustainable horizontal ties (within civil society and between civil society and business) and vertical ties (between civil society and the state structures);
- The "overlapping" of program activities due to multiple donors aiming to create similar networks led to conflicts of interest and community division. This redundancy did not effectively address the needs and caused fragmentation.

The analysis of cases and Book Club experts and civil society discussion in June, 2024 reveals that initiatives directly impacting individuals' lives and addressing shared vulnerabilities and/or beliefs tend to be more sustainable. These include:

- Transborder projects between Central Asian states, such as: water and land management, human trafficking (mostly donor-driven). Implementing transborder projects can foster collaboration among neighboring countries.
- Among the areas that can bring the regional cohesion the issues of climate change have been identified as common for the region, thus, having a potential for region to unite over this challenge (donor/community- driven).
- Fundraising initiatives for humanitarian purposes (community-driven).
- Projects targeting children, people with disabilities, or the elders (donor/community-driven).
- Faith-based organizations most often supported by either foreign aid, or public and/or business donations in socio-humanitarian areas (donor/community- driven).
- Successful cooperation cases have so far been in areas where there is no political sensitivity. If one looks at seminars or conferences on history, literature, cinema or other culture days those are always in demand, easy to organize, and apart from some historical sensitivities.

In addition, there is a number of factors that contribute to the regional unity:

- Support from International Organizations: organizational, technical, and financial.
- Regular Meetings and Knowledge Sharing within the region and above. For instance, the exchange of policy formulations to solve domestic problems with local experts, students or academics, exchanging ideas and views, positions on specific problems of their own state to look for suggestions or comparison with the neighbouring countries.
- Voluntary support post-funding. After the end of funding, initiatives like "Partnership in Action" relied on voluntary support, which might not be sustainable in the long term and still need support from donors and/or governments.
- Established partnerships with relevant service providers.
- Credibility and trust with and within the communities.
- Efficient communication channels and access to them.
- Developed mechanisms to have a dialogue and influence on government agencies
- Networks that have members representing various civil society groups (from gender to art activists) demonstrates the sustainability and actively use the opportunities to impact on decision-making processes in local, regional and global levels on cross-sectoral thematic areas (ex., FemAgora network).

Summing up, it worth mentioning that the donor international organizations and donor countries have significantly contributed to the development of the civil society in the region, particularly having in mind the contribution of civil society towards social services that governments were unable to cover in some periods of time. The donor community is still learning on how to support the sustainability of the actions they are taking in the region together with civil society, private sector and governments. There is a need for a comprehensive approach to regional development in Central Asia. Key areas of focus include strengthening civil society, modernizing traditional locally based institutions, engaging different actors (faith-based organizations) and developing effective communication strategies between government, business communities, civil society and people. Emphasizing the importance of leveraging civil society's flexibility and expertise, actively engaging with donors, and creating new platforms will be crucial for enhancing regional cooperation and ensuring resilience and cohesion.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

For civil society in Central Asia:

- For regional network development civil society can contribute to the creation of a centralized hub/secretariat for sharing the responsibility with its members in coordination, information exchange, resource allocation and strategy development of the network (cases of regional networks such as “Partnership for Action”, “AgeNet”). Enhancing regional representation globally will foster more partnerships with other regional actors. It is advised to focus on diverse thematic areas (ex., climate, gender, and advocacy), and to engage various groups in implementing initiatives, including young people and experts/academia, tailored to the specific initiatives.
- As capacity building support has decreased during last years to civil society sector, it is recommended for civil society to strengthen the institutional capacities of those who are in need for such technical support. Book Club can be a platform for organization of peer-to-peer learning and communication in this particular area.
- Involve community members in the activities or data collection and research to share the responsibility and ownership of future changes. This is already successfully happening in air pollution monitoring, traffic monitoring (for example, illegal parking). This can be relevant for civil society monitoring of transborder transport and infrastructure projects.
- Civil society in Central Asia should explore forming partnerships with diverse representatives within the sector to develop inclusive and innovative solutions to shared challenges. They may include urban activists, art, business and IT representatives. Exploring solutions from various perspectives and involving diverse stakeholders can generate sustainable synergies. Collaboration with other platforms and community spaces to establish innovation hubs where CSOs, startups, experts, businessmen and activists can co-create solutions for regional challenges. These hubs can further offer co-working spaces, resources, mentorships, and become a platform for funding opportunities.
- To ensure the sustainability of civil society activities, it is crucial to define and implement effective motivation strategies for volunteers of all ages and occupations. This can be achieved through regular recognition and appreciation, such as personalized thank-you notes and public acknowledgments, as well as offering skill development workshops and career advancement opportunities. Meaningful engagement can be fostered by clearly defining roles, allowing project ownership, and providing flexible and remote volunteering options. Building a strong community through social events and support networks, offering incentives and benefits, maintaining transparent communication, and ensuring an inclusive environment are also essential.
- For civil society and its partners in the region to focus on smaller, more precise actions/targeted efforts rather than launching overly ambitious programs or large-

scale campaigns can yield better results. In addition, while funding is crucial, effective progress can be achieved with a dedicated team of volunteers or people with goodwill. Smaller, well-managed budgets can also make significant impacts.

- In collaborative planning of the program for Central Asia regional initiatives, civil society can go beyond the physical borders of five Central Asian states, and starts considering the *Central Asian diaspora representatives* as agents of peace or contributors to constructing the common regional identity (having in mind their significant contribution to humanitarian and development sectors) and become the equal partners for regional initiatives.
- The issue of AI safety as well as countering misinformation and disinformation would be an area where both governments and civil society of Central Asian countries could come together and work on a new sphere for integration processes of Central Asia.

For international organizations and other development partners in the region:

- International organizations and other development partners can encourage and support the initiatives that promote partnerships between NGOs, businesses and governmental agencies. In practice, this already works well in trans-border cooperation initiatives (such sectors as human trafficking and safe migration, climate change and water management). This requires periodic meetings between authorities, NGOs, and academics to establish a common roadmap, enhancing the effectiveness of efforts and fostering mutual understanding and cooperation. By establishing and maintaining sustained dialogue within countries, development partners can play a crucial role in building trust, promoting social cohesion, and fostering a more collaborative and inclusive approach to development. This strategy not only benefits individual countries but also contributes to regional stability and prosperity.
- To conduct a more thorough mapping and needs assessment at the intervention design stage, and to involve potential regional partners in the process of project co-design. Depending on the needs the partnership can be developed with the other non-governmental actors such as representatives of business community, charity and local communities' organizations, IT sector representatives, and other groups.
- It is recommended to take into account the flexibility in funding to provide more flexible options that will allow civil society and other non-governmental actors and organizations to address locally identified priorities in addition to development partners' agenda.

By addressing these challenges and implementing the recommendations, the civil society and development partners can significantly contribute to the development and sustainability of a robust regional network among non-governmental actors in Central Asia.

INTRODUCTION

The present research was conducted by the team of researchers representing three Central Asian states: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. The primary objective of this paper is to offer an overview and analysis of current non-governmental initiatives in Central Asia, aiming to enrich discussions among Book Club experts and civil society on regional strategies that could foster cohesion and sustainability in Central Asia.

Tasks:

1. Conduct a thorough examination and assessment of past endeavors aimed at advancing collaboration and coordination between non-governmental actors in Central Asia.
2. Provide the discussion outputs from participants of regional Book club conducted in June 2024 in Kyrgyzstan.
3. Offer practical recommendations to PN to advance future efforts.

Research questions:

- (1) What strategies have been employed by non-governmental organizations to foster collaboration and unity among experts within the Central Asia region?
- (2) What actors serve(d) as driving forces for such initiatives?
- (3) Which initiatives worked in a long-term period, and which did not, and what are the contributing factors (like, if it depends on the sphere/topic)?
- (4) What can be done/recommended to boost regional cooperation/initiatives of non-governmental actors?

METHODOLOGY

The regional research team adopted a primarily desk-based approach for this research, supplemented by key informant interviews (KIIs) to provide a comprehensive analysis. The study focused on regional initiatives, categorizing them into defined timeframes and thematic clusters.

Table 1. Thematic Domains and Target Groups

Target groups	Clusters	Description
<i>Youth, Women, Business community, Journalists, Academic community, People with disabilities, Elders, and others</i>	<i>Environmental challenges</i>	Initiatives addressing climate-related challenges, including policies and programs related to water management and conservation, agriculture initiatives
	<i>Economic development</i>	Development of regional business, infrastructure and transport initiatives
	<i>Security efforts</i>	Efforts to combat human, drug, and weapon trafficking

	<i>Socio-humanitarian aspects</i>	Migration, Culture and Sport, Identity, Religion, Gender, and Media
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Data Collection and Analysis

To facilitate a structured analysis, the team developed matrices that align with the thematic domains and clusters. This approach allowed for a systematic examination of regional initiatives.

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)

The research incorporated key informant interviews with local and international stakeholders from various sectors, including those who were engaged in civil society development in Central Asian states, or studied this particular area.

LIMITATIONS

The researchers of the present study did not conduct a thorough research on the China-led initiatives that are directed to develop the regional network due to following factors:

- Usually the Chinese initiatives on developing the regional networks are based on involvement primarily the state officials;
- Due to the lack of information and time constraints for this research.

In addition, no information was found on the cooperation of non-state actors in Central Asia on issues of drug or weapon trafficking. An informant from UNODC also confirmed that there weren't any activities to shape regional networks on that topic.

DESK RESEARCH ANALYSIS

Retrospective overview of the civil society development in Central Asia *(Elnura Omurkulova-Ozierska, Kyrgyzstan)*

When the five Central Asian Republics gained independence in early 1990s, the government-organized NGOs (GONGOs) that initially provided a social security for vulnerable groups soon collapsed. Various professional and academic associations were also dissipated without "central" support. The early emerging grassroots NGOs in each country were viewed as oppositional by governments of new independent states.¹ Moreover, they were lacking the skills on how to operationalize and sustain their organizations in new circumstances. At this particular time a number of international actors entered the region with the development programs for states as well as civil society support, even though the *civil society* as a concept

¹ It is worth mentioning the cases of Kazakhstan's "Baspana" and Kyrgyzstan's "Arysh" civil society movements who were struggling for the rights of internal migrants and those who lost their houses after the collapse of USSR. Another example is the case of entire civil society perception by Tajikistan government, that claimed the civil society being one of the initiators of Civil War in 1992-1997 (SaferWorld, 2020, <https://www.saferworld-global.org/resources/news-and-analysis/post/861-the-evolving-role-of-civil-society-in-peace-and-security-in-tajikistan-challenges-and-opportunities>).

was unfamiliar for people in the region. Among the latest it is worth mentioning USAID, Swiss Development Cooperation, Counterpart International, INTRAC, Aga Khan Foundation, GIZ, Soros Foundation/Open Society Foundation. While some countries' leaders were demonstrating various level of openness for such interventions in the early 1990s (as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan), Tajikistan was suffering from the civil war taking place at this period. Those initiatives were mainly based on national and regional NGO sector-wide support approach²: provision of trainings, technical assistance, small grants opportunities, communication services to strengthen NGOs; in addition, Tajikistan was supported by humanitarian related assistance for refugees and IDPs.

The next period from 2000 till 2010 was overwhelmed by domestic political challenges within context of post-9/11 foreign engagement in the region as well as the adoption of 8 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by the United Nations on a global level. The main international donors' approach has been switched from sector-wide support to thematic-based. In terms of policy, it was also evident that international donors have progressed from their initial view of *civil society predominantly seeing as NGOs*, and adopted a broader and more inclusive interpretation of the concept now including other associational forms, like trade unions, traditional groups, faith-based organizations and others.³ At the same time international donors started supporting the participation of Central Asian civil society actors in *global civil society*⁴ programmes, initiatives and conferences. According to evidence collected by Ch. Buxton in the region⁵, the Central Asian NGOs enjoyed the knowledge received and experience shared by representatives of other regions during global events, and for some of them it was and remains until recent days the only opportunity to learn and network with other similar organizations and activists.⁶

While international donor community was rearranging its policies and approach, significant political challenges took place in the region that further negatively affected the civil society on national and regional levels: the Andijan events in Uzbekistan led to the complete closure of international and local NGOs in 2004-2005 in the country; Tulip revolution in Kyrgyzstan in 2005, and ethnic conflict and revolution in 2010; Janaozen tragic events in Kazakhstan in 2011.

² Ч. Бакстон, *Гражданское общество в Центральной Азии: преодолевая кризисы пост-советского периода*, Бишкек, 2017

³ Griffin, Janice and Ruth Judge, *Civil Society Policy and Practice in Donor Agencies*, Governance and Social Development Resource Center, February 2010, available at: https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/donor_policy_and_practice_final_report_for_ext_circulation_mar_20101.pdf

⁴ According to Griffin, Janice and Ruth Judge, *global civil society is* transnational civil society alliances created to advocate or campaign at regional and international levels. Available at: https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/donor_policy_and_practice_final_report_for_ext_circulation_mar_20101.pdf

⁵ Чарльз Бакстон, *Гражданское общество в Центральной Азии: преодолевая кризисы пост-советского периода*, Бишкек, 2017, p. 247

⁶ This is related to LGBTQ community in Central Asia

The 8 MDGs were further replaced by ambitious agenda of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015. With the IPCC's fifth assessment report⁷ and the SDGs the issue of *climate change* gained the global attention, thus, increasing the funding for development of regional climate-based initiatives. The current research⁸ demonstrates that a number of donor countries (majority are the EU countries; the US is less using the SDGs in its domestic or international development policies and programs) build their development cooperation and link their activities in line with SDGs. However, the *Special Edition Sustainable Development Goals Report*⁹ states that "...progress on more than 50 per cent of targets of the SDGs is weak and insufficient; on 30 per cent, it has stalled or gone into reverse. These include key targets on poverty, hunger and climate." Based on matrix that researchers developed within this study it is clear that the donor organizations speed up their efforts in creating partnerships to achieve the SDGs by 2030, engaging various actors into the dialogue and in line with national programs of the countries where they provide aid/grants/technical or financial support (See Appendix 1).

In addition, the recent agendas of international donors highlight their commitment to supporting vulnerable groups, such as women and youth, in developing skills necessary for employment following their participation in various programs and employment opportunities at the end of the initiatives. This support is crucial given the high levels of unemployment in many Central Asian states, which often leads to significant migration outflows from these countries (EU DARYA project, see Appendix 1). With the development of informational technologies, one can also observe the development of various interactive tools and platforms for knowledge sharing and communications between non-governmental actors and other stakeholders. Organization of conferences and workshops with state and non-state actors on national and regional levels remains of high importance and relevance in the region. Among national events it is noteworthy to highlight the Yntymak Week that took place for the first time in 2023 in Bishkek and was organized by members of Peacebuilding Hub that have a high potential to act on entire Central Asian region. On the other side, there is a rising popularity of organizing the pre-paid networking events mostly for business representatives from entire region and beyond. They may range from traditional venue-based gatherings such as the CAMCA Forum, to retreat camp-based forums or festivals that incorporate digital detox, music, food, and various art activities, exemplified by events like the Shamal Networking Forum.

However, the heightened expectations from strategic donors regarding internal financial and organizational protocols have surged, while the provision of institutional support has markedly declined. Consequently, it is challenging for the civil society actors that lacks internally devised strategic frameworks and financial protocols. The recent research conducted by #ShiftThePower movement demonstrates that from 2009 and up to 2021 more

⁷ "On 27 September, the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) published its fifth assessment report saying that scientists are 95% certain that humans are the "dominant cause" of global warming since the 1950s.", available at: https://www.thepfs.org/media/4983630/policy_briefing_ipcc_fifth_report_nov2013.pdf

⁸ Ingram G., H. Hlavaty, *Donor Engagement with Agenda 2030: How government agencies encompass the Sustainable Development Goals*, Center for Sustainable Development, Brookings, July 2021, available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Donor-engagement-Agenda-2030.pdf>

⁹ *Sustainable Development Goals Report: Special Edition*, 2023, available at: <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2023/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2023.pdf>

only 10% (except Switzerland, it is 16,5%) of bilateral Official Development Assistance provided to CSOs goes directly to Global South CSOs, the rest is provided through donors' domestic CSOs or other Global North CSOs. Thus, the typology of "donor-driven CSO" was relevant not only for Central Asia, but mainly for entire Global South.¹⁰ Some donor countries have reconsidered their policies on funding local civil society.¹¹

"Recent developments in the region demonstrate the density of public debate is decreasing", - gender analyst, Kyrgyzstan

In addition, the *political demonization* of NGOs in some Central Asian countries further aggravates their conditions.

From the other side, the current regional meetings of experts underline the necessity of developing a common plan or vision for confidence-building. This includes reinforcing political dialogue and sectoral engagement, providing formal and informal peace education, expanding grassroots initiatives, and establishing regional and neutral platforms. These platforms should facilitate information exchanges, build confidence, and serve as a mechanism to provide feedback to donors.¹²

The following part of this research is dedicated to clusters over which certain regional initiatives have been implemented with non-governmental actors.

Climate Change and Water Challenges (Alouddin Komilov, Uzbekistan)

From 1991 to 2010, the partnership landscape among NGOs in Central Asia was in its infancy, characterized by initial efforts to foster environmental preservation and address pressing issues such as the Aral Sea crisis. During this period, global NGOs, particularly the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), played a pivotal role in initiating dialogues and projects that significantly contributed to building the capacity of local NGOs. One of the most notable milestones was the establishment of the Central Asia Regional Environmental Center (CAREC) in 2001. CAREC emerged as a central hub for discussions and partnerships among regional NGOs, governmental bodies, and international entities, focusing on promoting sustainable development and addressing environmental concerns, including water resource management.

¹⁰ *Too Southern To Be Funded*, #ShiftThePower Movement, 2024, available at: <https://globalfundcommunityfoundations.org/resources/too-southern-to-be-funded/>

¹¹ "German development policy is guided by the BMZ 2030 Reform Strategy (2020), where it engages in discussion with civil society and other donors to find possible ways of linking up with their engagement, including, in some cases, by directly handing over projects to CSOs.", - *Too Southern To Be Funded*, #ShiftThePower Movement, 2024

¹² Civil Society and Confidence Building in Central Asia, Caucasus and Eastern Europe: Best Practices and Outstanding Needs, DCAF Webinar, Geneva, 2020, available at: <https://www.dcaf.ch/sites/default/files/publications/documents/CivilSocietyConfidenceBuildingCentralAsia.pdf>

The establishment of CAREC was a critical success in improving cooperation among civil society organizations (CSOs). By creating a platform for regional NGOs to collaborate, share knowledge, and build networks, CAREC facilitated a more cohesive and united approach to tackling environmental challenges. Furthermore, CAREC's involvement of governmental bodies fostered better cooperation and dialogue between NGOs and governments, enhancing the overall effectiveness of these efforts. However, the period was not without challenges. Political instability, financial limitations, and varying degrees of national commitment posed significant hurdles, often impeding the consistency and impact of collaborative efforts.

Between 2010 and 2023, the political and economic stabilization in Central Asia created an environment more conducive to enhanced NGO collaboration. This period also saw heightened awareness of the impact of climate change, with more frequent and severe droughts and floods emphasizing the pressing need for effective water management. CAREC's role expanded significantly during this time, notably through initiatives like the USAID-funded Smart Waters project (2015-2020). This project aimed to build the capacity of water management institutions and promote regional cooperation through training and the creation of shared water management tools. The Smart Waters project successfully fostered collaboration among various NGOs in the region and was highly appreciated by local communities for its relevance in addressing critical water management issues directly impacting their lives.

Another significant development was the establishment of the Central Asian Water Future Forum and Expo in 2017. This annual event became a crucial platform for NGOs, government officials, and global experts to exchange best practices, discuss policy frameworks, and collaborate on water management and climate resilience projects. The forum effectively facilitated dialogue and cooperation between different stakeholders, including government bodies, thereby strengthening partnerships between NGOs and governments. Its focus on practical solutions and policy discussions relevant to the local context was highly appreciated by community members, underscoring its success and relevance.

Successful cross-border initiatives during this period further exemplified the potential of effective NGO involvement. The Chu-Talas Commission, formed through a bilateral agreement between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, stands out as a prime example. NGOs played a vital role in facilitating discussions and supporting the implementation of joint water management strategies, resulting in improved water resource management that directly benefited local communities. The success of the Chu-Talas Commission is evidenced by the positive feedback from local communities, who reported improved water availability and management.

Similarly, the Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) Fergana Valley initiative, led by a consortium of NGOs, promoted integrated water management practices across Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. This initiative fostered a collaborative approach among NGOs in the region and significantly improved water usage efficiency, reducing conflicts over water resources. Community feedback underscored the project's success, highlighting its positive impact on local life and security.

However, sustaining long-term engagement and securing continuous funding for these initiatives remained challenging. The level of government support varied, sometimes hindering the implementation and success of projects. Despite these challenges, initiatives that actively involved local communities in decision-making processes proved more sustainable and better received by the communities. Additionally, projects focusing on capacity building and providing training were more successful in creating long-term impacts.

In conclusion, the evolution of NGO collaboration on climate change and water issues in Central Asia from 1991 to 2023 underscores the critical role of regional cooperation in addressing complex environmental challenges. While early efforts laid the foundation, the period from 2010 onwards saw significant progress in collaboration and impact. Strengthening these collaborative frameworks and continuing to engage local communities will be essential for enhancing regional resilience to climate change and ensuring sustainable water management in Central Asia. The successes and challenges experienced highlight the importance of fostering robust partnerships, involving local stakeholders, and ensuring sustained support for long-term initiatives.

Media Evolution and Challenges in Central Asia (*Alouddin Komilov, Uzbekistan*)

The post-Soviet period from 1990 to 2010 presented significant challenges for independent media in Central Asia. State control over the media persisted, a vestige of the stringent oversight during the Soviet era. Governments maintained significant influence over the press, stifling the emergence of a free and independent media. The absence of robust legal frameworks and institutional support further hindered progress, and independent media organizations struggled with limited resources and infrastructure.

In response to these challenges, global organizations like the Open Society Foundations and Internews stepped in, providing crucial training and capacity-building programs. These initiatives aimed to elevate journalistic standards and foster an environment conducive to media freedom. One notable project was the formation of the Central Asian Journalists' Network, which facilitated collaboration and information exchange among journalists across the region. NGOs such as the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR) also played a pivotal role, advocating for media law reforms and offering legal assistance to journalists facing persecution.

Evaluating these initiatives through specific criteria provides a clearer picture of their successes and shortcomings. Firstly, in terms of improving cooperation among civil society organizations (CSOs), the Central Asian Journalists' Network significantly enhanced cross-border collaboration and joint initiatives. However, the reach and sustainability of this network were limited by its heavy reliance on foreign funding. Secondly, while advocacy efforts by IWPR led to some progress in media law reforms, fostering modest improvements in dialogue between governments and NGOs, persistent government resistance often resulted in severe crackdowns, undermining these partnerships.

From a community impact perspective, capacity-building programs did improve the quality of journalism, which indirectly benefited communities through more reliable information. However, the overall impact on community security and livelihoods was limited due to

ongoing governmental suppression of independent media. Lastly, while training programs were highly relevant and appreciated by local journalists who benefited from enhanced skills and knowledge, broader community appreciation was constrained by the limited visibility and persistent challenges faced by independent media.

Moving into the period from 2010 to 2023, the digital revolution brought both new opportunities and challenges to the media landscape in Central Asia. Digital platforms introduced innovative avenues for information sharing and collaboration but also brought increased state regulation over both digital and traditional media. Authoritarian trends saw governments intensifying control over the media, further complicating the environment for independent journalism.

NGOs adapted to these changes with a focus on supporting online journalism and citizen reporting. Initiatives like Kloop in Kyrgyzstan empowered young journalists to use digital tools for investigative reporting. Efforts such as the Central Asian Media Partnership facilitated collaborative investigative projects and addressed transnational issues like disinformation and censorship. Safety and security training for journalists became a priority, with organizations like Reporters Without Borders (RSF) providing crucial support.

In terms of enhancing cooperation among CSOs, digital initiatives like the Central Asian Media Partnership significantly strengthened regional cooperation, enabling joint investigative projects and combating transnational issues. However, varying levels of government repression across countries often hindered these collaborative efforts. While there were isolated instances of improved cooperation between governments and NGOs, particularly in countries with more open political environments, overall governmental hostility towards independent media remained a significant barrier.

The impact on communities was mixed. Digital platforms allowed for more effective community reporting, giving voice to marginalized groups and exposing local issues. However, the safety and security of journalists remained a major concern, limiting the overall impact on community well-being. Digital initiatives were highly relevant to the changing media landscape and were well-received by younger journalists and tech-savvy audiences. Nonetheless, broader community engagement was challenging due to the digital divide and ongoing censorship.

In conclusion, the transformation of media partnerships among Central Asian NGOs from 1990 to 2023 reveals significant progress in areas such as journalistic standards and regional cooperation. However, ongoing challenges, particularly government resistance and financial limitations, underscore the need for continued support and creative strategies. Future efforts should focus on strengthening digital resilience, securing sustainable financial backing, and enhancing advocacy to push for media freedom and protect journalists' rights. Continued support and innovative approaches are essential for advancing media freedom and collaboration in Central Asia, ensuring that independent journalism can thrive amidst ongoing challenges.

Identity in Central Asia: The Role of NGOs (*Alouddin Komilov, Uzbekistan*)

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked the beginning of a transformative period for the Central Asian states, as they embarked on the journey of establishing national identities amidst newfound independence. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) played a pivotal role in fostering a sense of shared identity among the region's diverse ethnic and cultural groups. Evaluating the success of these initiatives involves assessing their impact on cooperation among Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), partnerships between governments and NGOs, improvements in community life and security, and their relevance to local contexts.

During the 1990s, NGOs concentrated on cultural preservation and education, launching programs aimed at revitalizing traditional arts, languages, and customs. The Soros Foundation and the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) were notable contributors in this early phase. The Soros Foundation supported arts and education programs that emphasized cultural initiatives. These programs were well-received by local communities and played a crucial role in preserving cultural heritage. However, their impact on improving life and security was limited due to short-term funding. Similarly, AKDN's initiatives in promoting cultural heritage and regional cooperation were successful in enhancing cooperation among CSOs and were highly appreciated by local communities for their cultural relevance. Despite these successes, building sustainable partnerships with government entities proved challenging.

One of the significant challenges during this period was the limited funding and sustainability of projects. Many initiatives had short-lived impacts due to insufficient funding. Additionally, government restrictions often hindered broader cooperation and the sustainability of NGO efforts. Nonetheless, these early endeavors were crucial in laying the groundwork for future initiatives by creating initial networks of collaboration among NGOs across the region.

The period from 2010 to 2023 saw a shift towards more sophisticated and sustainable approaches to fostering regional identity. NGOs began leveraging technology, cross-border collaborations, and integrated programs to address evolving identity challenges in Central Asia. Technological integration played a crucial role during this period. The Central Asian Youth Network (CAYN) utilized online platforms for virtual exchanges, allowing young people from different countries to share their experiences and cultural practices. This initiative significantly improved cooperation among CSOs and was highly appreciated by the youth for fostering a shared regional identity. However, its direct impact on life and security was more subtle and long-term.

Integrated approaches also became more prevalent during this period. The "Crossroads of Cultures" project, funded by the European Union, aimed to promote regional identity through cultural tourism. By involving local communities in tourism development, the project preserved cultural heritage while providing economic benefits, ensuring its sustainability. This initiative was praised for its relevance and for directly improving the life and security of local communities, although it occasionally faced resistance from local authorities.

International organizations like UNESCO and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) played significant roles in this transition. Their support enabled local NGOs to implement larger and more impactful projects, fostering significant improvements in cooperation among CSOs and partnerships with governments. These projects were often well-received by local communities for their comprehensive approach to development.

The initiatives from 2010 to 2023 have demonstrated more sustained success than those of the earlier period. The integration of technology and holistic approaches has enhanced the impact of NGO efforts. Projects like CAYN have created lasting connections among the youth, fostering a sense of regional identity that transcends national boundaries. Enhanced cooperation among CSOs and improved partnerships with governments have been key success factors during this period. Additionally, projects that integrated cultural preservation with economic development directly improved the life and security of local communities.

Despite these successes, challenges remain. Political resistance from local governments can hinder NGO operations and effectiveness. Continuous funding is another significant challenge, as many projects require long-term financial support to maintain their effectiveness. Nonetheless, the progress made in promoting a regional identity through these initiatives highlights the importance of cross-border collaboration, technological integration, and holistic approaches.

Over the past three decades, NGOs in Central Asia have made significant strides in promoting a regional identity through various initiatives. Early efforts laid the foundation, while the period from 2010 to 2023 saw the adoption of more sophisticated and sustainable strategies. The success of these initiatives underscores the importance of continued cross-border collaboration, technological integration, and holistic approaches. By addressing ongoing challenges and capitalizing on the lessons learned, NGOs can contribute significantly to developing a cohesive and unified Central Asian identity.

Drug/Weapon trafficking (*Anastassiya Reshetnyak, Kazakhstan*)

No information was found on the cooperation of non-state actors in Central Asia on issues of drug or weapon trafficking. An informant from UNODC also confirmed that there weren't any activities to shape regional networks on that topic¹³.

Migration / human trafficking (*Anastassiya Reshetnyak, Kazakhstan*)

In the 1990s, there was virtually no cooperation in the area of (illegal) migration and human trafficking. This is explained both by the fact that the non-governmental sector was in its infancy and by the policies of individual states in the region. For example, the problem of human trafficking was not taken seriously in Uzbekistan under the presidency of Islam Karimov; in Turkmenistan, even today, the country's leadership denies the existence of such cases among its citizens¹⁴.

¹³ KII 3, 29.05.2024

¹⁴ KII 2, 28.05.2024

NGO networks working in this area emerged in the early 2000s with the support of international donors – mainly IOM, but also the US Embassy and USAID. The most useful activities, according to informants, are networking at the regional level, as well as providing grants for operational activities (KII 2).

In 2000-2020, there were several initiatives led by international actors to institutionalize regional cooperation of NGOs working in the field. There are several of them:

- Association of NGOs against Trafficking in Persons in Central Asia (**AATIPCA**) was formed in July 2008 by three Kazakhstani NGOs (with financial support of the US and Swiss embassies in Kazakhstan). By 2012, 11 Kazakhstani NGOs were members of the Association, and 3 NGOs in Tajikistan, 8 in Uzbekistan and 1 in Kazakhstan were its partners¹⁵ [currently inactive].
- In 2010, in Kyrgyzstan, a website www.traffikunet.kg has been created under assistance of the IOM. The main aim was to gather NGOs working in the field, and to encourage them for the exchange of information and best practices. Also, there was information about shelters, hotlines, information campaigns, as well as a list of practicing ¹⁶NGOs [currently unavailable].
- Since 2019, Winrock International implements a 5-year project “Safe Migration in Central Asia that aims to use “evidence-based practices and cross-border connections to strengthen the mutual accountability and effectiveness of governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and the private sector to prevent trafficking in persons (TIP), protect survivors, and promote safe migration”¹⁷. As a result, regional NGOs contribute to collecting data on human trafficking (e.g., 8 NGOs took part in mapping of migration journeys¹⁸); participate in region-wise activities¹⁹.

A key challenge in situations where international donors are involved in building and supporting networks is the lack of sustainability after projects are completed. For example, NGO informants were not aware of the existence of AATIPCA; recipients in Kyrgyzstan were not likely to be able to ensure that the network would be sustainable after the project was completed.

¹⁵ НПО против торговли людьми, Ситуация в Казахстане, ОО Центр поддержки женщин, 2012, available at: <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/e/7/94414.pdf>

¹⁶ Программа МОМ по борьбе с торговлей людьми в Центральной Азии, 2010, available at: https://www.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl486/files/jahia/webdav/shared/shared/mainsite/published_docs/periodicals_and_newsletters/Newsletter_december_ru.pdf

¹⁷ *Safe Migration in Central Asia*, Factsheet, Winrock International, USAID, 2024. https://winrock.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/SMICA-ENG_FACT_SHEET_SMICA-June-2024-_final.docx.pdf

¹⁸ *Regional mapping of trafficking and vulnerable migrants' routes: Collective CSO data on migration journeys in Central Asia*, Winrock International, Freedom Collaborative, USAID, 2023, available at: <https://winrock.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/CentralAsiaRegionalMappingofTraffickingandVulnerableMigrantsRoutes.pdf>

¹⁹ *Safe Migration in Central Asia Factsheet*, USAID, 2021, available at: https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2022-05/02112022_Safe_Migration_in_Central_Asia_Fact_Sheet.pdf

Case study: “Partnership in Action”

The most striking example of regional cooperation in the field of safe migration and countering human trafficking is the activity of an Uzbek NGO "ISTIQBOLLI AVLOD" that, with the support of the Eurasia Foundation, succeeded in institutionalization in 2018 of a formerly informal network of NGOs from all Central Asian states as "Partnership in Action". It brings together state bodies of Uzbekistan, international organizations, NGOs from Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan (since 2018), Kyrgyzstan (since 2020), Tajikistan and Turkmenistan (since 2021). The main activities of the network include combating human trafficking and forced labor, building capacity of state bodies in preventing human trafficking; working with media and volunteers on this topic.²⁰

This has become possible due to the specifics of the grant, which was aimed at increasing cross-country collaboration²¹. The Network has a website; a database of documents (in particular, the Network's Statute, Code of Ethics, Strategic Plan; protocols and practical guidelines); and annual meetings of partners were organized during the 5-year grant. After the end of the funding, the initiative is supported on a voluntary basis by ISTIQBOLLI AVLOD representatives and other NGO partners of the Network. The members of the Network regularly organize webinars to share best practices and knowledge among their colleagues.

The fact that there is close and effective interaction between specialized NGOs is explained by the specifics of their activities. Assistance to victims of human trafficking requires a speed of transnational action that official agencies lack. Therefore, informal interaction is much more effective:

"For example, parents of a migrant from Uzbekistan report that he is in labor slavery in Kazakhstan. We contact our colleagues from Kazakhstan, they use their own channels to involve law enforcement agencies and travel to check this information. And then, of course, they act within their capabilities: if there is a grant or a project, they can provide assistance, place him in a shelter, provide other services" (KII 2).

All NGOs working in this area established partnership relations with the relevant services (police, migration police, consular divisions of foreign embassies, etc.), that allows them to act more quickly because they are not bound by the need to go through all the bureaucratic hurdles. In addition, civil society has closer ties with the families of migrants and victims of trafficking (including through hotlines), which increases their credibility; NGOs try to respect the confidentiality of those who contact them, unless this is contrary to the law. In fact, in many cases,

"NGOs replace the functions of law enforcement agencies and ministries of foreign affairs: lawyers travel to a neighboring country and participate in the initiation of criminal trafficking cases" (KII 2).

Regional NGOs have chat rooms on WhatsApp and Telegram to quickly communicate with each other. According to informants, these chat rooms are very useful and allow for quick

²⁰ International network *Partnership in Action*, (Ru: Международная сеть «Партнерство в действии»), available at: <https://istiqbolliavlod.uz/partners#partn-d>

²¹ KII 2

assistance. The difficulty arises in contacting colleagues from Turkmenistan as they have limited access to messengers (KII 1).

The fact that NGOs in this area are organized into a regional network ("Partnership in Action") increases their subjectivity and allows them to *"have a stronger influence on our governments"* (KII 2): government agencies are familiar with the Network's activities and sometimes even refer citizens to the relevant NGOs for faster resolution of their cases. Networking also provides an opportunity to respond to cases of misinformation:

"...one Kazakhstani media outlet incorrectly covered issues related to a case of human trafficking in Uzbekistan; we discussed it in a chat room, gave a legal assessment and contacted the media outlet – the article was corrected" (KII 1).

Among the factors that contributed to the regional cohesion is worth mentioning the following:

- NGO networks built with the support of international donors facilitated regional cooperation and were instrumental in addressing migration and human trafficking issues.
- Regional initiatives promoted data collection, cross-border collaboration, and regional activities among NGOs.
- The network's focus on capacity building for state bodies, collaboration with media, and volunteer involvement was highly effective. Informal interactions among NGOs, bypassing bureaucratic hurdles, enabled swift actions to assist trafficking victims.
- Regional NGOs effectively used WhatsApp and Telegram chat rooms for quick communication and coordination, enhancing their ability to provide rapid assistance and share best practices.
- NGOs established strong partnerships with police, migration authorities, and consular services, allowing for faster response and action. Their close ties with the families of migrants and trafficking victims also increased their credibility and effectiveness.

The challenges that civil society faced are:

- A significant issue was the lack of sustainability of networks and initiatives once international funding ended.
- The restricted access to messengers in Turkmenistan posed challenges for seamless communication among regional NGOs, hindering their ability to assist trafficking victims promptly.
- The "overlapping" of program activities due to multiple donors aiming to create similar networks led to conflicts of interest and community division. This redundancy did not effectively address the needs and caused fragmentation.
- After the end of funding, initiatives like "Partnership in Action" relied on voluntary support, which might not be sustainable in the long term and still need support from donors and/or governments.

Initiatives on Religion matters (*Hamza Boltaev, Uzbekistan*)

1991-2000: Establishing Foundations

Following independence in 1991, Uzbekistan began establishing its legal framework to regulate religious activities. The 1998 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations was a significant step in protecting religious freedoms while also setting limits to prevent extremism. The early post-Soviet years saw a revival of Islamic education and culture. Efforts were made to restore religious sites and reintroduce religious education in a controlled manner to prevent the spread of radical ideologies.

Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SADUM), established during the Soviet era, played a crucial role in shaping religious policies and fostering regional integration in Central Asia. There are currently no relations between the Spiritual Administrations of the five Central Asian countries.

2001-2010: Countering Extremism and Promoting Tolerance

Post-9/11, Uzbekistan intensified its efforts to combat religious extremism. The government increased surveillance and regulation of religious groups to prevent the infiltration of extremist ideologies. Uzbekistan began hosting international conferences aimed at fostering interfaith dialogue. These efforts were part of broader attempts to position Uzbekistan as a leader in promoting religious tolerance in the region. Skeptics note critically that following the 9/11 terror attacks in the US, Russia and China in particular sought to use the SCO to reassert some of their influence in Central Asia and to constitute a counterweight to the US, which had set up military bases in, among other places, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Uzbekistan, a country involved in most of the open border disputes, was in turn reported to be more interested in bilateral agreement in which it could bring its demographic weight to bear in talks with its smaller neighbors and to view the multilateral option merely as a kind of reinsurance against terrorist activities should the US withdraw from the region.

2011-2016: Strengthening Institutions and Regional Cooperation

Institutions like the Imam Bukhari International Research Center were established to promote Islamic scholarship and counter extremist narratives through research and education also for Central Asian scholars. During this period, Uzbekistan strengthened its cooperation with neighboring countries in Central Asia to address common religious and security challenges. Joint initiatives were launched to enhance regional stability and cooperation.

2017-2023: Modernization and Global Engagement

The religious policy innovations that Uzbekistan's President Mirziyoyev has initiated in the name of liberalisation and reform continue the policies of his predecessor in key aspects. Under the motto "enlightenment against ignorance", state influence over the religious knowledge taught in educational and research institutions has been strengthened. The country's Islamic heritage is proactively used for representative purposes and held up as an integral part of national culture. The religious policy measures that amount to a "secularization" of Islam through identification and musealization do not reach large sections of society. For the ordinary believer, Islam is not a science but a matter of belief, a system of rules and convictions that guides the way they live. The liberalization of the media landscape

means that religious advice is available in abundance. It often includes propaganda transporting illiberal ideas, but the state intervenes only selectively.

The government worked on revising laws to better protect religious freedoms while maintaining security. Religious tolerance and the history of world religions were integrated into the national education curriculum to promote a better understanding among the youth.

Particular attention is paid to the joint efforts of the Central Asian states aimed at promoting the peace process and socio-economic development in Afghanistan due to the concerns of religious extremism. The importance of the Tashkent Conference on Afghanistan “Peace process, security cooperation and regional connectivity”, held in March 2018, to achieve peace and reconciliation in this country is emphasized.

NGOs have worked to raise awareness about religious freedom issues among the public, government officials, and religious leaders. This involved providing education and training on human rights principles, religious tolerance, and the importance of respecting diverse religious beliefs. Initiatives like the Forum of Culture and Arts of Uzbekistan have organized interfaith dialogue events bringing together leaders and representatives from different religious communities. These events aim to foster understanding, respect, and cooperation among people of diverse religious backgrounds.

Organisations such as the Legal Clinic for the Protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief provide training and capacity-building programs for lawyers, activists, and civil society organisations working on religious freedom issues. These programs equip participants with the knowledge and skills necessary to advocate for religious freedom and defend the rights of religious minorities.

NGOs conducted²² research and documented cases²³ of religious discrimination and persecution in Uzbekistan which can be mostly seen in the publication by the US State Department. By gathering evidence and information, they seek to raise awareness about human rights violations and advocate for accountability and justice.

Support for Islamic Heritage

The government invested heavily in the restoration and preservation of Islamic heritage sites, turning cities like Samarkand and Bukhara into cultural and religious tourism hubs. Uzbekistan hosted numerous international conferences on interfaith dialogue, engaging with global entities such as the United Nations and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation to promote religious tolerance on a global scale. With the aim of studying the rich heritage of these great personalities and deeply exploring the humanistic essence of Islam, an initiative has been put forward at the 78th Session of UN GA by the Uzbek President to hold an international conference in Uzbekistan in 2024 on the theme of “Islam: Religion of Peace and Goodness.” Enhanced cultural exchanges with various religious communities and international organizations helped build bridges of understanding and cooperation.

In summary, while religious issues in Central Asia are predominantly coordinated and managed by state authorities, some of the collaborative efforts of both the government and

²² https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2021-10/2021%2520Uzbekistan%2520Report_0.pdf

²³ <https://acca.media/en/2325/in-uzbekistan-special-services-organized-the-persecution-of-christians/>

NGOs have significantly enhanced regional cohesion, safeguarded religious freedoms, and advanced cultural and religious understanding.

Business initiatives (*Hamza Boltaev, Uzbekistan*)

The impetus for the integration processes of the Central Asian newly independent Republics was substantial in the wake of the former Soviet Union's demise. Several reasons contributed crucially for this. **First:** the feeling of belongingness, at least at the leadership's personal level not to mention the general public, to the former Soviet Union remained strong despite becoming independent. **Second:** Critically important infrastructures such as energy, hydro, irrigation and transportation systems were so deeply intertwined that the immediate separation and complete independence of which was unimaginable at the moment. **Third:** The inheritance of an existing governing methods and methodologies to the newly independent republics' political systems.

More than 22% of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Uzbekistan operates in order to develop entrepreneurship and local business. It is mostly done by the opening Business Support Centres to provide training, consulting, and mentoring services to local entrepreneurs. These centres aim to improve business knowledge and skills, offer guidance on legal and regulatory matters, and help entrepreneurs access financing options.

NGOs and international organisations have collaborated to develop entrepreneurship development programs in Uzbekistan. These programs focus on providing training, capacity building, and mentorship to aspiring and existing entrepreneurs. They often include topics such as business planning, marketing, financial management, and technological advancements. These efforts by NGOs also contributed to the initiative of holding an annual dialogue with the President. On August 20, 2021, during the first²⁴ open dialogue with entrepreneurs, a large number of issues were raised in the sphere of taxation, land use, business facilitation, support for exports and other issues of concern to entrepreneurs. At that time, more than 15,000 appeals, questions and proposals from businesses were received in such areas as financing and crediting of business, taxation, allocation of land, accessibility of infrastructure, and obtaining licenses and permits

NGOs have introduced business incubation and acceleration programs to support startups and early-stage businesses. These programs offer workspace, mentorship, networking opportunities, and access to resources like funding, legal advice, and market research. Recently, several such events were held in Urgench, Bukhara and Nukus. Deputies of local Councils, businesses, representatives of NGOs and youth participated at the events. During the discussions, the participants considered issues on raising role of MPs and deputies of local councils on supporting small businesses and entrepreneurs, creating favourable conditions. They also analysed problems in places, which hinder to stable development of the businesses.

NGO and international collaboration in Uzbekistan, through initiatives like entrepreneurship training, business support centers, and mentorship programs, significantly contributes to regional cohesion and sustainability. These efforts strengthen economic ties across Central Asia by enhancing cross-border trade and investment, building local capacity to engage in regional markets, and sharing global best practices. They foster networking opportunities for

²⁴ https://www.eureporter.co/world/uzbekistan/2022/04/21/support-for-entrepreneurs-increases-and-the-burden-on-business-is-reduced-in-uzbekistan/#google_vignette

entrepreneurs and investors, promote sustainable business practices, and create platforms for regional dialogue, aligning policies and addressing common challenges. This collaborative approach supports a more integrated, resilient, and sustainable regional economy.

Sports (*Hamza Boltaev, Uzbekistan*)

Uzbekistan pays great attention to the development and promotion of sports and physical culture. Over the years of independence, the country has established an effective system of training of professional athletes, coaches and referees. The implementation of these objectives in every way contributes to promotion of a healthy life-style, education of harmoniously developed young people, and further development of physical culture and sports in the country. Non-governmental institutions in Uzbekistan have proposed various initiatives related to culture and sports to promote social inclusion, community engagement, and youth development. NGOs like the Uzbekistan Youth Union²⁵ organize cultural exchange programs that bring together young people from different regions of Central Asia to learn about each other's cultures, traditions, and languages.

From 1991 to 2023, the Uzbek government has undertaken numerous initiatives to facilitate and promote sports within Uzbekistan and across Central Asia. Efforts were made to revive and promote traditional Central Asian sports like Kurash and Buzkashi. "A deep study of common history as well as joint programs in the field of culture, education, sports and tourism is necessary for further rapprochement of the fraternal nations of the region", – stated Uzbekistan's President in the Fourth Consultative Meeting of the Heads of Central Asian States.

In the *2010s*, Uzbekistan hosted major sports events like the Asian Championships, boosting regional sports development. New facilities, including the Central Asian Judo Center and Taekwondo Sports Complex, were established. Programs were introduced to improve athlete and coach training, often with international collaboration. The Uzbek State Institute of Physical Culture trains about 2,000 students annually, offering scholarships to Central Asian students and supporting women's sports through various initiatives. A Central Asian Young Talents Forum is proposed for 2024.

Since *2020s*, Uzbekistan enhanced cooperation with international sports bodies and neighboring Central Asian countries, emphasizing joint training and competitions. Initiatives for sports inclusivity, including programs for people with disabilities, were launched. Uzbekistan hosted the Central Asian Athletics Championship with 1,000 young athletes and will start the annual Central Asian Open Championship in weightlifting and para powerlifting in 2024. The country also revealed the draw for the first World Futsal Championship in Central Asia. New sports education and research institutions were established to develop future professionals and advance sports science. These efforts highlight Uzbekistan's commitment to strengthening its sports culture and regional influence.

²⁵ <https://mfa.uz/en/press/news/2017/test---28387>

"In early 90s, there were some "initiatives based on travelling together" exerts the experts. 1993-94, the "trip undertaken by activists from Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan crossing all Central Asian countries apart from Turkmenistan" says the expert. It was very important as "for the first time, in early 90s, the identity of the region, as a sense of togetherness were somehow being created". However, such initiatives "involving movements, trips and crossing borders were progressively suspended. But, other initiatives about the integration issues such as joint publications, exchanges of students discussions on cultures like cinema, art and history. These initiatives also lost importance in early 2000s though, now they are taking traction" recalls the expert." – *KII 2, Uzbekistan*

As per the experts involved in this project, the majority of actors that have been mostly interested in promoting integration and cooperation projects in Central Asia have been external actors such as international organisations like the World Bank or the OSCE and regional or quasi-federal organisations like the European Union. These actors sponsored many projects for students, experts, academics, and people working in between academia and policy to work together to foster an idea of unity in the region.

Civil society organizations use sports as a tool for social change by organizing programs that address social issues such as gender equality, disability rights, and social inclusion. For example, organisations run sports programs like Tashkent International Marathon²⁶ for girls to promote gender equality in sports or provide sports opportunities for children with disabilities to promote inclusion and accessibility.

Many successful cooperation cases have so far been in areas where there is no political sensitivity. If one looks at seminars or conferences on history, literature, cinema or other culture days those are always in demand, easy to organize, and apart from some historical sensitivities. With respect to sports, after a long delay there is now the Central Asian Championship of Athletics. There is a renewed regional competition with participation also of some outside region states.

Regarding areas with less success, challenges primarily relate to politics and security. However, there have been notable advancements in terrorism prevention despite these difficulties. And this is mostly because of the control of the government and executive power, but also because lack of funding, lack of trust, and the fact that the communities on the ground are not often engaged.

Gender issues (*Elnura Omurkulova-Ozierska, Kyrgyzstan*)

In the context of post-Soviet nationalisms in Central Asia, the development of national unity, authenticity, and identity encompassed the idea of a "return to tradition," where the role of women and men were hierarchically determined based on "ancestral traditions" (primacy of men and masculine over women and the feminine).²⁷ At the same time this period coincides with the high activity in the field of gender and development on a global agenda that was marked by the creation of two important documents: the 1993 UN Declaration on the

²⁶ <https://worldathletics.org/competition/calendar-results/results/7207366>

²⁷ <https://www.caa-network.org/archives/7509>

Elimination of Violence against Women and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, which resulted from the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995.

“Right after Beijing, meetings and gatherings started, and then a gender bureau at the UN – UNIFEM- appeared, they organized regional interactions, we met colleagues from Azerbaijan and other Caucasus and Central Asian countries. But we could not all work together, the regions had their own problems – like conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia,” – Gender analyst, Kyrgyzstan

Since the adoption of Beijing Platform for Action by Central Asian states as a framework for developing their national programmes, the number of women-led NGOs working on the issues related to gender equality and VAW started growing with the support from international donors.

Since 2000 and up until now women’s NGOs in Central Asia were strengthening their connections with the international women’s movement, primarily through the framework of the Beijing Platform for Action and, increasingly, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and later within Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These organizations, frequently in collaboration with the government (financial state support in a form of State Order “Государственный Заказ”) and with support from donor organizations, have started to engage in regional cooperation on shared gender issues, including violence against women, human trafficking, HIV/AIDS, gender and governance, and the ongoing and potential resurgence of patriarchal traditions and customs.

Among the regional and global programmes where Central Asian civil society participates are the following:

- UniTE initiative with annual event on 16 days of activism in fighting violence against women and girls on annual basis unites the state, international and non-state organizations and communities to stand against all forms of violence against girls and women;
- Central Asian Network of Women with disabilities was initiated during the regional Hackathon within the Partnership for Innovation Programme that was implemented by regional Association ARGO in 2019. Noteworthy, this regional association is an example on donor’s evidence when donor organizations and states have shifted their approach to financing, now directing funds towards regional NGO instead of their own agencies, thus allowing regional NGO to issue calls for grants to other organizaions in the region;
- FemAgora – regional feminist network that collaborate with diverse civil society representatives and international organizations in the region. It is working on various thematic areas: peace and security, pandemic response, sustainable development, youth leadership through locally initiated and intersectional practices and strategies across all thematic commitments in Central Asia.
- Central Asia Alliance to End GBV that was launched by the Spotlight Initiative in 2023;
- TalpynUp programme (2024, USAID) aims to develop business skills among the women participants from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan and to create an eco-system of networking, to jointly scale business initiatives.

- CyberSafe for Women (2024) aims to train a group of women trainers, who will teach women in Central Asia on cyber security.
- Be Woman Asia – the largest Central Asian Women’s Forum.

The success of regional networks in this area lies in establishing partnerships with diverse civil society representatives (business, art activists, feminists’ movements and other groups) across different thematic areas such as GBV, peace and security, urban activism, climate change, youth and other topics.

Youth (*Elnura Omurkulova-Ozierska, Kyrgyzstan*)

The historical development of regional youth NGOs in Central Asia reflects the evolving socio-political landscape of the region since the 1990s. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Central Asian countries experienced significant transitions, marked by political upheavals, economic reforms, and social transformations. Amid these changes, young people emerged as a dynamic force for social change, seeking to address the diverse challenges facing their societies.

In the early years, youth NGOs focused on providing platforms for young people to voice their concerns, engage in civic activities, and access resources and opportunities for personal and professional development. These organizations often operated at the grassroots level, organizing community-based initiatives and advocating for youth-friendly policies at the local and national levels.

As the 2000s unfolded, regional youth NGOs underwent a process of institutionalization and professionalization, enhancing their organizational capacities, expanding their focus areas, and building regional networks of collaboration. This period saw the establishment of formal structures and mechanisms for youth engagement, including regional networks, coalitions, and forums. These platforms provided young activists with opportunities to share experiences, exchange ideas, and coordinate their efforts on issues of common interest, such as education, employment, human rights, and environmental sustainability. Among them were Central Asian Youth Network (CAYN) that was established in 2004 in Uzbekistan with the support of OSCE, that was actively involved in organizing conferences, workshops and advocacy campaigns to address youth-related issues in the region.

The global UNFPA youth initiative Y-PEER was established during this period of time in Eastern Europe and Central Asia as a response to the rise of HIV/AIDS among young people. Comparatively, while the Y-PEER in each country of Central Asia was in a form of youth movement, in Kyrgyzstan it took a form of registered youth NGO. However, after the certain budget cuts from donor organization and leadership changes the Y-PEER Youth Network in Kyrgyzstan has been closed as organization.

In recent development the donors engage youth as a separate category in their programmes and networks development. Moreover, one can observe the development of self-sustaining mechanisms among youth organizations: for instance, IDEA Central Asia is practicing the training for business communities and the profit generated is going straight to the youth initiatives, thus, diversifying their sources of funding (See Appendix 1).

“...when shifts in donor priorities occurred, and the core management team left the organization, Y-PEER ceased its operations in Kyrgyzstan.” – *former participant of Y-PEER youth NGO, Kyrgyzstan*

Summing up, among the main challenges that youth organizations face on local and regional level is limited funding, human resources issues (one significant challenge faced by youth organizations is the over-reliance on a single leader, and if this leader leaves, the entire organization often struggles to continue its operations, highlighting a critical vulnerability in the organization's sustainability and resilience), societal attitudes and social norms that undervalue the role of youth in decision-making process.

What works is if youth organizations diversify their funding sources, they can significantly enhance their sustainability and reduce dependence on any single source of financial support.

Urban activism (*Elnura Omurkulova-Ozierska, Kyrgyzstan*)

According to the recent findings from the *Central Asia Resilient and Low-carbon Cities*²⁸ study (CARL-cities), over the last 30 years, the population within the largest urban areas in the region on average grew by 48 percent, consuming 538 sq km of land (World Bank). Almost all of the urban areas are estimated to have very low access to urban services and amenities such as health and education facilities, public spaces, sports, and cultural venues. The rise of urbanization in Central Asia results in widespread issues such as environmental degradation, infrastructure deterioration in cities, and poor-quality utilities. These challenges are common across most expanding metropolitan areas in the region that led to the rise of urban activism in Central Asian states.

Urban activism in Central Asia is a recent phenomenon and interrelated with infrastructure degradation, air pollution, lack of comfort spaces for citizens and children, and other issues. It has a high potential in mobilization of citizens and civil society organizations as it is directly related to their everyday life. Although urban activism has typically been regarded as primarily focused on local concerns, however, due to the escalating global competition among cities and the international exchange of people, capital, and policies, the local issues tackled by urban movements are becoming increasingly interconnected with broader global concerns.

BOOK CLUB PLATFORM: CENTRAL ASIAN LOCAL ACTORS MEETING

PeaceNexus Foundation has organized the experts and civil society meeting on “” in Kyrgyzstan from ___ June, 2024. The meeting was geared to ___

The meeting was part of ongoing efforts that PN

²⁸ *Central Asia Resilient and Low-carbon Cities*, World Bank, 2024, available at: <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/09a6e5c1e53c4d9be5739c02266cb4ba-0080012023/original/Fact-Sheet-CARL-Cities-2023-en.pdf>

The event was divided into a number of sessions. Right after the presentation of the present research study results the participants was divided into three groups to discuss three main questions:

1. *Factors affecting resilience and cohesion in the region and recommendations on how to enhance regional cohesion and resilience?*
2. *Which regional initiatives have the greatest potential for sustainability and civil society engagement in the region?*
3. *What does the civil society do effectively and how might it influence the donor agenda in the future?*

“We have common pains and problems and we can solve them together. Regional identity is difficult but important, there is a room to strive in this direction and position ourselves as one Central Asian region” – participant of Book Club, June, 2024

Among the *factors affecting resilience and cohesion* in the region the participants emphasized the lack of trust between the state and civil society. The mistrust is deepened by the state's monopolistic control and its close connections with businesses, which are seen as obstacles to the effective operation of civil society and a reduction in social responsibility. However, business community representatives at this event have disputed this view, arguing that the business sector is evolving and increasingly taking on social responsibility within the region. To address these issues, participants highlighted the need to develop a middle class, which would, in turn, foster the growth of small and medium-sized businesses, thereby reducing the region's reliance on state monopolies. To mitigate the challenge of lack of trust, it is essential to establish strong communication channels between the state, business community, civil society, and the population. Building trust and cooperation hinges on a clear understanding of identities and improving methods of interaction among these stakeholders.

To *enhance regional resilience and cohesion*, it is essential to prioritize *cross-border cooperation* and increase awareness through mass media and social networks. Implementing cross border projects can foster collaboration and connectivity among neighboring countries and their people, while promoting the right to private property, decentralization, and local self-governance are critical steps toward achieving long-term sustainability. These measures not only build stronger ties between nations but also empower local communities, contributing to a more stable and united region.

*“We need to cooperate and then we will learn more about each other”
– participant of Book Club, June, 2024*

Strengthening traditional institutions, such as the mahalla, courts of elders, and other local forms of self-governance, is essential for building social capital and preserving cultural heritage. These institutions play a key role in preserving cultural heritage, ensuring that the rich traditions of the region are maintained. At the same time, they must adapt to modern realities *with a strong emphasis on upholding human rights*, ensuring that their practices are relevant and beneficial in today's context, and the government should not control those institutions.

“The state should not interfere in the work of the mahallas, but at the moment they are completely controlled by the state.” – *participant of Book Club, June, 2024*

Alongside these traditional institutions, religious societies are becoming increasingly significant in Central Asia, as the population grows more religious. *Faith-based organizations* can be *powerful agents for integration and sustainability* in the region, offering solutions to societal challenges through the use of spiritual heritage. However, this must be balanced with efforts to address the issues of radicalization that sometimes arise within religious communities. Together, these traditional and religious institutions can provide a strong foundation for social cohesion and regional stability.

Regional *initiatives with the greatest potential for sustainability* and civil society engagement in Central Asia revolve around addressing shared vulnerabilities and leveraging collective strengths. Climate change being a global issue, is a common threat across the region, and presents an opportunity for integration and cooperation. Key adaptation measures include managing migration routes for livestock and utilizing traditional institutions and religious practices for charitable efforts, both of which can serve as unifying factors. Additionally, regional cooperation on energy, infrastructure, trade, and business unification—especially in light of the growing emphasis on social responsibility and ESG principles—holds significant promise. High technology also offers potential; though Central Asian countries currently lack visibility in this field, collaboration could enhance their influence and visibility on the global stage.

“Central Asia is an indivisible region in which each country has a role to play, and it will be a standing point through which to unite”
– *participant of Book Club, June, 2024*

To strengthen civil society in the region, several *key recommendations* have been identified. Firstly, the creation of regular discussion platforms is essential for addressing regional issues and fostering dialogue between various stakeholders. This can help form a unified regional voice on the global stage, providing smaller states with greater influence. Secondly, there is a need to enhance the integration of civil society organizations at the regional level, as civil society integration currently lags behind political and economic alliances. Developing a common platform for civil society, which could serve as a database for collaboration with global players and funding projects, is crucial, alongside the development of regional tourism and social media. Thirdly, successful adaptation to climate change requires a region-wide commitment, with local governments being given the budget and responsibility for implementing adaptation measures, along with necessary digitalization to build trust. Fourthly, effective communication with all stakeholders, including local communities, government agencies, and local governments, is necessary to prevent rumors and conflicts. Communication bridges can address issues at local and regional levels. Lastly, the creation of a single regional organization to represent Central Asia at the global level is recommended. This organization could be either virtual or have a physical office and work within the region and with external partners.

In regards to the *effectiveness of civil society* it worth mentioning that it has proven to be highly effective through several strategies. Its use of social media enables it to raise

awareness on critical issues, thereby enhancing public involvement in decision-making and influencing legislative changes. Civil society organizations also excel in rapid mobilization, quickly rallying the population around pressing concerns. Their expertise in specialized areas such as the environment, education, and social sectors allows them to channel donor resources effectively towards priority issues. Additionally, their deep understanding of local contexts enhances their efficacy in local decision-making, while their inherent flexibility enables swift responses to changing circumstances.

Looking ahead, civil society's influence on the donor agenda is likely to increase. Donors are increasingly seeking projects that offer sustainability, high-quality outcomes, and a clear vision backed by a robust financial model. To engage successfully with donors, civil society must demonstrate not only the potential of their projects but also their sustainability and financial viability.

To enhance regional cooperation and attract more funding, several *key recommendations* were proposed by the participants. First, the creation of thematic platforms and hubs, such as a Central Asian Hub (or IT-hub), would allow projects to be organized by topic rather than by country. This approach facilitates the discovery of innovative projects and draws in donors. Additionally, diversifying donors and pursuing joint applications for large projects can bolster regional cooperation and increase funding opportunities. Second, each country should annually identify priority themes to focus efforts on the most urgent issues, directing civil society's actions where they are most needed. Third, integrating civil society into intergovernmental structures can foster collaboration on transborder projects, thereby strengthening regional ties and ensuring more sustainable development. These recommendations underscore the importance of leveraging civil society's flexibility and expertise, actively engaging with donors, and creating new platforms to enhance regional cooperation.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The analysis of civil society development in Central Asia highlights the national and global challenges faced by civil society in the region and the evolving strategies of donor organizations over the past 30 years. Initially, donor interventions focused on sector-wide support for NGOs through training, technical assistance, and small grants. From 2000 to 2010, support shifted to thematic-based initiatives aligned with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and a broader definition of civil society. Despite this, significant political events, such as the Andijan events in Uzbekistan and the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan, negatively impacted civil society. The introduction of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 further redirected donor strategies towards climate-based initiatives. However, progress remains insufficient in key areas like poverty, hunger, and climate action, requiring accelerated efforts from states and relevant agencies. Increased donor expectations regarding financial and organizational protocols, combined with reduced institutional support, have posed challenges for civil society actors. Political demonization of NGOs in some countries further aggravates their conditions. The civil society sector in its majority remains donor-driven and dependent on external financial support (either from state or donor organization/country).

The matrix²⁹ prepared by the authors of this study shows that Central Asia as a region has often been viewed ambiguously by donors: in practice, one can witness either a narrower understanding (in terms of only a few CA states) or a broader one, such as Eastern Europe and Central Asia (EECA), Central Asia + Afghanistan, Central Asia + Mongolia, Central Asia as part of Asia and Pacific, etc. Nationalistic tendencies (cultural aspect, formation of national identities) in Central Asia states continue play a negative role in developing the common Central Asia identity and the region still remains in a protracted stage of self-determination. Moreover, Central Asian civil society lacks a unified representation on the global stage.

From 1991 to 2023, NGOs in Central Asia have significantly advanced regional cooperation and sustainability across various domains. Their efforts in environmental issues, such as climate change and water management, have evolved from foundational work to more impactful collaborations, with an emphasis on strengthening frameworks and engaging local communities. In media, NGOs have progressed journalistic standards and regional cooperation despite facing government resistance and financial constraints, highlighting the need for continued support and innovative strategies. Regional identity initiatives have evolved, reflecting more sophisticated strategies and emphasizing cross-border collaboration. Efforts to safeguard religious freedoms and promote cultural understanding have been bolstered by both state and NGO cooperation. Economic development through entrepreneurship programs and mentorship has strengthened regional ties and sustainability. Social change has been driven through sports programs addressing gender equality and disability rights, while urban activism has gained traction, linking local issues with broader global concerns. Challenges faced by youth organizations, including limited funding and reliance on single leaders, underscore the need for diversified support and sustainable practices.

Today and as previously, the civil society organizations are still dependent on external funding that based on global action plans. As a result, they still have to focus on the projects and agenda that donors propose; to some extent, however, certain mechanisms have been developed to influence the agenda in the region (alternative reports to UN Committees that national NGOs participate in preparation).

A significant gap remains in establishing sustainable horizontal ties (within civil society and between civil society and business) and vertical ties (between civil society and the state structures), however, certain regional programmes are initiated to close those gaps and engage different civil society representatives.

There is an "overlapping" of program activities due to multiple donors aiming to create similar networks led to conflicts of interest and community division. This redundancy did not effectively address the needs and caused fragmentation.

The analysis of cases and Book Club experts and civil society discussion in June, 2024 reveals that initiatives directly impacting individuals' lives and addressing shared vulnerabilities and/or beliefs tend to be more sustainable. These include:

²⁹ See Appendix 1

- Transborder projects between Central Asian states, such as: water and land management, human trafficking (mostly donor-driven). Implementing transborder projects can foster collaboration among neighboring countries.
- Among the areas that can bring the regional cohesion the issues of climate change have been identified as common for the region, thus, having a potential for region to unite over this challenge (donor/community- driven).
- Fundraising initiatives for humanitarian purposes (community-driven).
- Projects targeting children, people with disabilities, or the elders (donor/community- driven).
- Faith-based organizations most often supported by either foreign aid, or public and/or business donations in socio-humanitarian areas (donor/community-driven).
- Successful cooperation cases have so far been in areas where there is no political sensitivity. If one looks at seminars or conferences on history, literature, cinema or other culture days those are always in demand, easy to organize, and apart from some historical sensitivities.

In addition, there is a number of factors that contribute to the regional unity:

- Support from International Organizations: organizational, technical, and financial.
- Regular Meetings and Knowledge Sharing within the region and above. For instance, the exchange of policy formulations to solve domestic problems with local experts, students or academics, exchanging ideas and views, positions on specific problems of their own state to look for suggestions or comparison with the neighbouring countries.
- Voluntary support post-funding. After the end of funding, initiatives like "Partnership in Action" relied on voluntary support, which might not be sustainable in the long term and still need support from donors and/or governments.
- Established partnerships with relevant service providers.
- Credibility and trust with and within the communities.
- Efficient communication channels and access to them.
- Developed mechanisms to have a dialogue and influence on government agencies
- Networks that have members representing various civil society groups (from gender to art activists) demonstrates the sustainability and actively use the opportunities to impact on decision-making processes in local, regional and global levels on cross-sectoral thematic areas (ex., FemAgora network).

Summing up, it worth mentioning that the donor international organizations and donor countries have significantly contributed to the development of the civil society in the region, particularly having in mind the contribution of civil society towards social services that governments were unable to cover in some periods of time. The donor community is still learning on how to support the sustainability of the actions they are taking in the region together with civil society, private sector and governments. There is a need for a comprehensive approach to regional development in Central Asia. Key areas of focus include strengthening civil society, modernizing traditional locally based institutions, engaging different actors (faith-based organizations) and developing effective communication

strategies between government, business communities, civil society and people. Emphasizing the importance of leveraging civil society's flexibility and expertise, actively engaging with donors, and creating new platforms will be crucial for enhancing regional cooperation and ensuring resilience and cohesion.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

For civil society in Central Asia:

- For regional network development civil society can contribute to the creation of a centralized hub/secretariat for sharing the responsibility with its members in coordination, information exchange, resource allocation and strategy development of the network (cases of regional networks such as "Partnership for Action", "AgeNet"). Enhancing regional representation globally will foster more partnerships with other regional actors. It is advised to focus on diverse thematic areas (ex., climate, gender, and advocacy), and to engage various groups in implementing initiatives, including young people and experts/academia, tailored to the specific initiatives.
- As capacity building support has decreased during last years to civil society sector, it is recommended for civil society to strengthen the institutional capacities of those who are in need for such technical support. Book Club can be a platform for organization of peer-to-peer learning and communication in this particular area.
- Involve community members in the activities or data collection and research to share the responsibility and ownership of future changes. This is already successfully happening in air pollution monitoring, traffic monitoring (for example, illegal parking). This can be relevant for civil society monitoring of transborder transport and infrastructure projects.
- Civil society in Central Asia should explore forming partnerships with diverse representatives within the sector to develop inclusive and innovative solutions to shared challenges. They may include urban activists, art, business and IT representatives. Exploring solutions from various perspectives and involving diverse stakeholders can generate sustainable synergies. Collaboration with other platforms and community spaces to establish innovation hubs where CSOs, startups, experts, businessmen and activists can co-create solutions for regional challenges. These hubs can further offer co-working spaces, resources, mentorships, and become a platform for funding opportunities.
- To ensure the sustainability of civil society activities, it is crucial to define and implement effective motivation strategies for volunteers of all ages and occupations. This can be achieved through regular recognition and appreciation, such as personalized thank-you notes and public acknowledgments, as well as offering skill development workshops and career advancement opportunities. Meaningful engagement can be fostered by clearly defining roles, allowing project ownership, and providing flexible and remote volunteering options. Building a strong community through social events and support networks, offering incentives and benefits,

maintaining transparent communication, and ensuring an inclusive environment are also essential.

- For civil society and its partners in the region to focus on smaller, more precise actions/targeted efforts rather than launching overly ambitious programs or large-scale campaigns can yield better results. In addition, while funding is crucial, effective progress can be achieved with a dedicated team of volunteers or people with goodwill. Smaller, well-managed budgets can also make significant impacts.
- In collaborative planning of the program for Central Asia regional initiatives, civil society can go beyond the physical borders of five Central Asian states, and starts considering the *Central Asian diaspora representatives* as agents of peace or contributors to constructing the common regional identity (having in mind their significant contribution to humanitarian and development sectors) and become the equal partners for regional initiatives.
- The issue of AI safety as well as countering misinformation and disinformation would be an area where both governments and civil society of Central Asian countries could come together and work on a new sphere for integration processes of Central Asia.

For international organizations and other development partners in the region:

- International organizations and other development partners can encourage and support the initiatives that promote partnerships between NGOs, businesses and governmental agencies. In practice, this already works well in trans-border cooperation initiatives (such sectors as human trafficking and safe migration, climate change and water management). This requires periodic meetings between authorities, NGOs, and academics to establish a common roadmap, enhancing the effectiveness of efforts and fostering mutual understanding and cooperation. By establishing and maintaining sustained dialogue within countries, development partners can play a crucial role in building trust, promoting social cohesion, and fostering a more collaborative and inclusive approach to development. This strategy not only benefits individual countries but also contributes to regional stability and prosperity.
- To conduct a more thorough mapping and needs assessment at the intervention design stage, and to involve potential regional partners in the process of project co-design. Depending on the needs the partnership can be developed with the other non-governmental actors such as representatives of business community, charity and local communities' organizations, IT sector representatives, and other groups.
- It is recommended to take into account the flexibility in funding to provide more flexible options that will allow civil society and other non-governmental actors and organizations to address locally identified priorities in addition to development partners' agenda.

Appendix 1. MATRIX OF CENTRAL ASIA INITIATIVES OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ACTORS

Name of initiative	Time period	Region covered	Target Group	Clusters covered by regional initiative				Source of funding	Initiator (non-governmental, governmental, international actor)	Comments
				Environmental	Economic development	Security issues	Socio-humanitarian			
INTRAC	1994-2018	Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan (earlier included Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan)	All active NGOs					UK	DFID (governmental)	
Counterpart Consortium NGO Support Initiative for Central Asia ³⁰	1994-2010	Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan	All active NGOs, women, youth					USA	USAID	Provided a comprehensive, integrated package of training, technical assistance, small grant support and facilitated communication services to the NGO sector
Open Society Foundation – Soros Foundation	1993 – 2024 In 2024 transformed to CAPS UNLOCK	Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan (+Azerbaijan)						Soros Foundation	Soros Foundation	Limited representation of Turkmenistan in Board

³⁰ https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/Pdabt099.pdf

	(Kazakhstan)									
Aga Khan Humanities Project ³¹	1997 present	– Academic institutions in Kazakhstan (34), Kyrgyzstan (12), Tajikistan (18)	Academic community					Aga Khan Foundation	University of Central Asia	Culture, Knowledge sharing, Academic development, museums, Youth
Y-PEER	2000 present	– Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Eastern Europe	Youth					UNFPA	UNFPA	Initiated as a response to the rise of HIV among young people. Does not exist in Kyrgyzstan since 2016-2017
The Voluntary Association of Mountain Villages (Альянс горных общин Центральной Азии) ³²	2003 present	– Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan						Various donor organizations	Territorial local self-governing bodies in mountainous villages	It was established to unite their efforts to achieve sustainable development of mountainous regions of Central Asia and improve the living standards of the local population
OSCE Central Asia Youth Network	2004 present?	– Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan	Youth					OSCE	OSCE	The last updates on its FB pages are done in 2021, most probably the network is not active anymore
ARGO Civil Society	2004 present	– Established in Kazakhstan, and for last decade	All NGOs					USAID, and other donors		Partnership for Innovation

³¹ *Promoting cultural heritage and humanities in Central Asia*, University of Central Asia, available at: <https://ucentralasia.org/media/zgkfanlz/promoting-cultural-heritage-and-humanities-in-central-asia-rus-web.pdf>

³² <https://www.facebook.com/groups/731605880232899>

Development Association ³³		working on regional level (with other CA states + other countries)								
AgeNet International Network ³⁴	2005 – present	Kyrgyzstan, Russian Federation, Kazakhstan, Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Belarus	Elders						Non-governmental, as a successful case of INTRAC engagement to NGO development in the region	The success of this network can be based on the leadership of these organizations as most of them share the common heritage of once being the part of USSR.
UniTE – 16 days of activism against VAWG	2008-present	Global	Women						UN Secretary General	
Central Asia Data-Gathering and Analysis Team (CADGAT)	2009 – present							Norway	OSCE Academy NUPI	The purpose of CADGAT is to produce new cross-regional data on Central Asia that can be freely used by researchers, journalists, NGOs and government employees inside and outside the region.
WiLAT Central Asia (Women in Logistics)	2010-present	Global, incl. Central Asia (5 CA)	Women					USAID	The Chartered Institute of	Professional and support network of women

³³ <https://argonet.org/>

³⁴ <https://agenet.org.kg/>

and Transport) ³⁵		states+Azerbaijan)							Logistics and Transport (UK)	
IDEA CA ³⁶	2012-present	Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan	Youth, Business							Recent development of education package for business audience helps the non-commercial organization to sustain itself to cover their youth initiatives and programmes in the region.
Club of friends of Gorchakov Foundation		Russia, Serbia, Moldova + CA states						Russian Federation	Russian Federation	“Central Asia School” as an annual event in the region
Central Asian Network of Academic Societies (NAS)	2013-present		Academic					USAID, SDC, GIZ, EU, World Bank	CAREC	Community of practitioners (2022 – present)
Central Asian Network on Statelessness	2015 present	– Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan	NGOs						UNHCR	UNHCR
Regional Civil Society and Community Support, Coordination and Communication	2015-present	Eastern Europe and Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan						The Global Fund	Global Fund within its Community, Rights and Gender Special Initiative (CRG-SI)	

³⁵ <https://www.wilat.org/>

³⁶ <https://ideaca.today/business/business-debates>

n Platform – EECA ³⁷										
Civil Society Initiative (CSI) ³⁸	2017-present	Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan	NGOs					Government of Canada	University of Central Asia/Aga Khan Foundation	Gender equality, knowledge sharing направлена на создание сетей обучения по ключевым темам управления, здравоохранения, образования, верховенства закона и окружающей среды
Regional Knowledge Network on Sustainable Infrastructure in Central Asia ³⁹		Kazakhstan, Mongolia, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan (part of Central and South Asia Program run by OECD)	State and research institutes, Academic Community					Government of Germany	University of Central Asia/ Aga Khan Foundation	
Central Asia Knowledge Network ⁴⁰	2016 – present	Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan							World Bank (initiative is a part of CAWEP)	Including Central Asia Youth Forum on Water

³⁷ <https://eecaplatform.org/o-platforme/>

³⁸ <https://ucentralasia.org/ru/shkoly/vysshaya-shkola-razvitiya/inifiativa-grazhdanskogo-obshestva>

³⁹ <https://sipa-centralasia.org/>

⁴⁰ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/eca/brief/central-asia-knowledge-network-building-partnerships-for-regional-cooperation-on-water-and-energy>

Network by Consensus ⁴¹	2017 present	- Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan	Youth					OSCE	Initiated by Young people during the OSCE-supported events	
Public foundation FemAgora ⁴²	2018 present	- Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan	Women, LGBTQ, Youth							FemAgora is committed to working on peace and security, pandemic response, sustainable development, youth leadership through locally initiated and intersectional practices and strategies across all thematic commitments in Central Asia.
Евразийцы – новая волна	2012 present	-	Youth					Russian Federation	Russian Federation	
Social Innovations in Central Asia	2019-2024	Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan	Youth					USAID	Eurasia Foundation, USAID	Exchange network grants between NGOs to peer-learning
“Mediamost” Kyrgyz-Tajik Media Network ⁴³		Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan	Journalists						By journalists during the Deutsche Welle Academy	“Positive journalism”
Stem4All Platform ⁴⁴	2021-present	Europe and Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan,	Women and girls, private						UNICEF and UNDP	

⁴¹ <https://www.facebook.com/networkbyconsensus/>

⁴² <https://femagora.org/>

⁴³ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/943583959010286/>

⁴⁴ Stem4All Platform, available at: <https://stem4alleurasia.org/o-nas/o-stem4all>

		Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan	sector engagement							
Cross-Border and Cross - Sector Dialogue for Tolerance and Peace in Central Asia	2020-2023	Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan	Youth, teachers, local self-governing bodies, media					EU	Konrad Adenauer Foundation let consortium in partnership with three national partners: The Ecological Movement «BIOM» (Kyrgyzstan), the National Movement «Yuksalish» (Uzbekistan) and the Public Organization “Gender and Development” (Tajikistan) for a period of 36 months, from 2020 to 2023.	Youth, capacity-building (blogging, small grants)
Central Asia Mountain Observatories Network	2021-present		Academic community, state agencies					Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation	Mountain Research Initiative	aims to boost the resilience and adaptation of mountain communities in the face of climate change.
Open Central Asia Archives ⁴⁵	2021-present	Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan,	Academic					N/A	Consortium of following institutions:	

⁴⁵ <https://ca-photoarchives.net/>

		Tajikistan, Turkmenistan							CNRS-Sorbonne Université, France; Université de Genève; Ghent University; Gerda Henkel Stiftung; Alerte Héritage	
Academy of Local Governance of Central Asia	2021-2022	Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan	Women,					Government of Switzerland	Union of Local Self-Governments of the Kyrgyz Republic and the Institute for Development Policy	project Soft Gender: Regional Model of Women Involvement in Local Development and Governance in Central Asia to increase opportunities for women's participation in local development and governance in Central Asian countries
Regional Network of Youth Organizations	2021-2025	Central Asia (5)	Youth					Russian Federation	UNODC ROCA	
DARYA - Dialogue and action for resourceful youth in Central Asia ⁴⁶	2022-2027	Central Asia (5) + Afghanistan	Youth					EU	EU	European Training Foundation. It is the first ever European Union regional project aimed at supporting young people in Central Asia through measures that promote inclusion and skills development in the labor market.

⁴⁶ <https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/what-we-do/darya-dialogue-and-action-resourceful-youth-central-asia>

Central Asia Alliance to End GBV	2023-present	Central Asia and Afghanistan	Women					EU		Within Spotlight Initiative for Central Asia and Afghanistan
Central Asian Network of Women with Disabilities	2019 present	- Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan	Women with disabilities					USAID, Finland		Launched as a result of regional Hackathon PeerHub under the Partnership for Innovation (P4I) programme implemented by ARGO.
Central Asian Climate Education Alliance ⁴⁷	2023	Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan								goal is to work together regionally to secure national commitments to, and begin essential preparation for, the effective implementation of compulsory education for climate change and human security across the education sectors in four Central Asian countries – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan – by COP30 in Belém, Brazil, in 2025.
MediaLab	2024-present	Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan						USAID	Internews in Kazakhstan	The aim of the Lab is to develop regional cooperation between independent authors of Central Asia, as well as to create quality

⁴⁷ <https://tsako.capsunlock.org/>

										content about events and phenomena surrounded by unreliable data.
TalpynUp ⁴⁸	2024	Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan	Women					USAID		To develop as individuals and to create an eco-system of networking, to jointly scale business initiatives

⁴⁸ <https://forumofwomenngos.kg/2024/02/talpynup/>

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