

## **Contested Alliances: International NGOs and Authoritarian Governments in the Era of Globalization**

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The NGO boom of the 1990s was matched by mounting literature on the influence of NGOs on world politics. The 1998 inaugural issue of *CICE - Are NGOs Overrated?* - brought these debates into the very center of international and comparative education. The journal issue inspired a fascinating conversation about the powers and limits of NGOs in the area of education by highlighting the variety of types, qualities, and functions of NGOs, as well as discussing various NGO roles vis-à-vis the state. Some articles emphasized the virtues of NGOs in promoting educational change, while others criticized NGOs for imposing a neoliberal agenda and maintaining systemic inequity. As Michael Edwards concluded in 1998, there was only one possible answer to the question whether NGOs were overrated or not: "It all depends on the NGOs concerned, the type of work that they do, and the contexts they work in" (p. 55).

A decade after the initial debate, the reality is that there is still no clear answer to the question *CICE* editors originally posed. What a decade of intellectual debate and research has brought, however, is a realization that NGOs are obscure organizations, whose impact is often impossible to predict. NGOs forge contested alliances with governments, international organizations, and local communities (often contested from within and without); and, notwithstanding their success or failure in reaching their officially proclaimed goals, NGOs are capable of altering larger political, economic, and social processes in unpredictable ways. In the words of William deMars (2005), NGOs are "wild cards in world politics:" "their impact is up for grabs, and they attract local and global actors who compete, and sometimes cooperate, to play, capture, and or neutralize them" (p. 4).

The status of NGOs as obscure organizations is most evident in the context of authoritarian or centralist states. My own experience of researching (and participating in) the work of international NGOs in the former Soviet republics of Central Asia and the Caucasus for over a decade offers some interesting examples. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, NGOs have had a profound impact on political processes in the region, but their impact has been highly variable. NGOs have contributed to overthrowing authoritarian governments (for example, in Georgia and Kyrgyzstan), but they have also inadvertently helped to legitimize some of the most authoritarian regimes in the world (for example, in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan). In this context, the role of NGOs is far more complex than much of the literature would suggest (Mercer, 2002). This paper argues that we should look beyond the officially proclaimed goals of NGOs in assessing their impact. Instead, we should examine the political contexts within which NGOs forge contested alliances with international organizations, authoritarian regimes, and local actors to better understand the hidden agendas inherent in the very nature of these organizations and the inadvertent consequences resulting from these complex interactions.

### **NGOs and Authoritarian Governments**

While the presence of NGOs is usually associated with democratic or democratizing states (Diamond, 1994; 1997), NGOs have been increasingly successful in finding their way into some of the most authoritarian regimes. For example, despite the fact that the North Korean government has created a virtual "NGO-free zone" by excluding all but a few NGOs and UN observers, it still

accepts their food aid (deMars 2005, p. 164). Similarly, NGOs have also emerged in two of the most authoritarian republics of the former Soviet Central Asia – Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Even in these hostile environments, however, a few NGOs have found innovative strategies to provide education support through their activities inside and outside the country. The point is that NGOs manage to penetrate some of the most authoritarian states, which remain beyond the reach of other governments and international organizations. Once there, NGOs have proved able to devise innovative strategies and tactics for maintaining whatever level of engagement the security situation, the donor generosity, or the government control would allow (deMars, 2005).

Of particular interest is how NGOs forge contested alliances with authoritarian states and international organizations in order to ensure government “recognition” and “support” for their activities on the one hand and international funding on the other. In authoritarian states, NGOs find themselves torn between two extremes that are both vital to their existence. On the one hand, they need to acquire international funding, which is generally reserved for democratization projects, and are therefore compelled to forge alliances with international agencies. On the other hand, they often get involved with the increasingly non-democratic institutions at home in an attempt to avoid persecution or closure by coercive governments. More often than not, however, NGOs play both sides simultaneously, devising innovative maneuvering tactics and unique survival strategies to achieve their goals. In Kyrgyzstan, for example, NGOs teamed up with elites (and oligarchs) to initiate the November 2006 protests, which resulted in a constitutional reform and made Kyrgyzstan the first predominantly parliamentary government in Central Asia. As Doten (2007) observed, the NGO alliance “provided bridges between the bonded regional patronage networks of businessmen and parliamentary deputies” unifying “organizational ability, money and supporters into formations that have the power to reshape their nations” (p. 6).

Given contended realities of both international pressure for democratization and the domestic push for increasing governmental control in the post-Soviet context, NGOs fluctuate between the two poles in unpredictable ways, making processes of NGO alliance formation more complex. In a new edited volume, *How NGOs React: Globalization and Education Reform in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Mongolia* (Silova & Steiner-Khamsi, 2008), we examine the remarkable repertoire of strategies used by NGOs to cope with a governance environment that is centralist and, for the most part, donor dependent. Based on the in-depth examination of one of the largest NGOs in the region—the network of Open Society Institute/Soros Foundations—we propose the following three terms to distinguish the roles of NGOs: complementary, cooperative, and surrogate (see the concluding chapter by Steiner-Khamsi in Silova & Steiner-Khamsi, 2008). While these terms do not help us predict the outcomes of NGO-led activities, they are certainly important in understanding the political contexts within which NGOs operate.

### **The Complementary Role of NGOs**

The most common strategy for dealing with a centralist government is to present a corrective to ongoing reforms that is in line with the mission of the NGO. In practice, this means that NGOs initiate, design, and implement a pilot project on the assumption that the project will then be scaled up by the government or donors. The complementary or corrective function of NGOs is closely associated with the structural adjustment reforms (SAPs) initiated by international financial institutions. The decentralization of finance, creation of an open textbook market, privatization of preschools and higher education—to name just a few reforms initiated by international financial institutions—target a reduction of public expenditure and an increase of market forces in education. Several national foundations of the Soros Network attempted to counter these reforms by building local capacity and enhancing civic participation. Two of the case studies (the chapters

on Armenia and Georgia), best represent how OSI has attempted to broaden decentralization reforms. In particular, governments and development banks narrowly define the decentralization of finance as the ultimate goal, thus reducing the role of the community to simply paying fees and generating additional income for under-funded schools. In contrast, the national foundations have supported community participation, community schools, community newsletters, and a series of other projects that emphasize the other aspect of decentralization: civic participation. Their goal is ultimately more transparency and more social accountability of governments, seen as prerequisites for an open society.

In centralist states, however, NGOs playing the corrective role are not always successful. While the case of Armenia explains how NGOs succeeded in broadening the meaning of decentralization reform (see the chapter by Armenuhi Tadevosyan in Silova & Steiner-Khamsi, 2008), the case of Georgia documents factors that curbed NGO impact. In Georgia (see the chapter by Anna Matiashvili in Silova & Steiner-Khamsi, 2008), the government issued the Decentralization Decree in 1999, and a year later signed a cooperation agreement with the Open Society Georgia Foundation (OSGF) to pilot several models of administrative decentralization in the education sector. However, two unexpected events occurred that annulled the agreement. First, a much bigger donor (the World Bank) stepped forward with a US\$60 million credit, provided that the Government of Georgia give financial autonomy to schools. As part of the program, per-capita financing was introduced and vouchers issued, both for public and private schools. The project was very narrowly defined in that it provided training for school administrators and educational authorities, mostly in the domain of educational finance. The second key event was the peaceful Rose Revolution of 2003, in the wake of which former agreements with NGOs were discontinued and replaced. OSGF was not exempt from this general approach, even though the Soros Network has been credited for having been closely associated with political events leading up to the revolution. The new government and the World Bank brought in their own stakeholders and experts, displacing the local capacity built in the previous period. As Steiner-Khamsi (2008) observes, "the distancing posture and the institutional amnesia have more to do with legitimacy issues surrounding large loans and credits than with the actual outcomes of similar projects already in existence" (p. 269). More importantly, this case study highlights the political context within which the complex alliances between NGOs, centralist governments, and international donors may abruptly change.

### **The Cooperative Role of NGOs**

In addition to counter-balancing reforms, some NGOs choose to cooperate with centralist governments by selectively strengthening governance capacity in areas that comply with the NGO's own mission. More often than not, cooperation with centralist governments may result in legitimizing authoritarian regimes. Dailey and Silova (2008), for example, examine how a close collaboration between UNICEF and the Turkmenistan's government has allowed UNICEF to implement its "global education" program[1] on a country-wide scale, yet it has involved complex politics and required many compromises in program development and implementation. In particular, the concept of "school-community interaction" was skillfully re-cast by government officials to increase state control over families and communities by requiring students to report on their parents' and grandparents' knowledge of and respect toward the *Ruhnama* (the compulsory and almost exclusive textbook written by President Niyazov). Instead of reaching the original goal of "enriching and diversifying the range of learning/teaching methods employed in schools" (UNICEF, 2003), the project has, apart from some positive effects, inadvertently resulted in providing the state with a wider variety of educational tools for ideological indoctrination of students and tighter policing of families and communities (Dailey & Silova, 2008).

However, there are some interesting exceptions. In particular, the Soros Foundation Kyrgyzstan and the Foundation for Support of Educational Initiatives (a Kyrgyz NGO) assisted the regional Department of Education in implementing a voucher system for teacher training. The integration of the pilot into existing government structures was a key feature of the project. The regional department of education agreed to de-monopolize in-service teacher training and permitted NGOs and other organizations to serve as training providers. Furthermore, the training facilities were provided for free, and the transportation cost for teachers were to be covered by government funds. There was also a hand-over planned with regard to financing the project. The original agreement was that the Department of Education would not need to contribute any funds in 2005, pay forty percent of the project cost in 2006, and fully cover all costs in 2007. The Tulip Revolution and other political changes in 2005 ended with a replacement of senior government officials throughout the country, and previous agreements were annulled. Regional education authorities only agreed to honor and fund the popular voucher pilot in 2007 after massive public pressure. As the authors of the case study (Alexandr Ivanov and Valentin Deichman) explain, the voucher financing mechanism was demanding from a management perspective. It required that the centralist government, represented at the regional level, coordinate, facilitate and negotiate. None of these practices were familiar to Kyrgyz government officials. Even though the pilot project was financed in the end with government funds, for the time being management of the pilot, both in the Issyk-Kul region and possibly in new regions as well, relied on support from NGOs.

### **The Surrogate Role of NGOs**

The case studies on Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan represent NGO strategies under regimes that are not only centralist, but also authoritarian. In these two countries, the initiatives substitute for reforms that have either been annulled (Uzbekistan) or never targeted (Turkmenistan). In particular, the Soros Network has never been granted entry into Turkmenistan and the office in Uzbekistan was closed down in 2004. The authors of the Turkmenistan case study (Erika Dailey and Iveta Silova) analyze how some NGOs operate in absentia. For example, OSI provides scholarships for Turkmen citizens to study abroad, including in the neighboring country Kyrgyzstan, and sponsors national initiatives that promote open society values, such as youth seminars, from afar.

In Uzbekistan, Jacqueline Ashrafi documents how the Open Society Institute Assistance Foundation-Uzbekistan (OSIAF) implemented textbook reform by devising innovative strategies in order to comply with two divergent objectives. On the one hand, OSIAF needed to encourage critical thinking and raise awareness of human rights. On the other hand, the textbook had to strictly follow the rules of the Ministry of Education by reflecting political ideology of the state.

Even though the strategies used in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan represent an extreme of how NGOs must operate under a centralist, authoritarian government, their methods for coping reflect legacies from the communist past (Steiner-Khamsi, 2008; Silova, 2004). Interestingly, residents of post-socialist countries with a centralist and authoritarian governments have become skilful in dealing with an over-controlling center. They have learned “the politics of duplicity” (Kligman, 1998), which allowed them to manipulate “the system” in subtle and creative ways in attempt to reach their goals. Used as a typical survival mechanism during the communist regimes, “duplicity”[2] refers to the consciously differentiated nature of public and private actions, discourses, and behaviors. For example, Kligman (1998) describes “a public self that engaged in public displays of conformity in speech and behavior, and a private self that may have retreated to

the innermost depths of the mind to preserve a kernel of individual thought" (p. 15). This careful distinction between the public and the private has been used as powerful survival mechanism, allowing people to manipulate "the system" during the communist period. Interestingly, these unique coping strategies have been successfully transferred to post-Soviet contexts, providing useful tools for NGOs to deal with the "reverse side" of an over-controlling center. As the case studies of Turkmenistan (Dailey and Silova, 2008) and Uzbekistan (Ashrafi, 2008) reveal, NGOs identify niches that are beyond strict government control by supporting progressive national initiatives from outside the country, or by carefully undermining rules and regulations within the country. Arguably, the outcomes of these manipulations remain highly unpredictable, depending on the specific political contexts within which NGOs are embedded.

### Contested Alliances

Undoubtedly, NGOs have had a profound impact on political, economic, and social processes in centralist and authoritarian states of the Caucasus and Central Asia. Notwithstanding various NGO roles – complementary, supportive, or surrogate – education initiatives implemented by NGOs have produced complex alliances between international donors, authoritarian states, and NGOs. These alliances are far more powerful than much of the NGO research would suggest. In particular, a close collaboration between NGOs and centralist or authoritarian governments could lead to selective implementation of educational initiatives and inadvertently result in legitimizing the authoritarian regime itself. At the same time, the alternative strategies of "correcting" or opposing the existing regimes may involve not only practical limitations of program implementation (such as limited outreach to program participants), but also personal risks to local program participants. In this complex environment, some NGOs may have imperiled their participants, failed to make an impact on a large scale, or failed to achieve their own missions altogether (Dailey and Silova, 2008). Yet to varying degrees all have contributed to the larger processes of post-Soviet transformation by expanding the limits of innovation, manipulation, and dissent in authoritarian states.

### Notes

- [1]. UNICEF and the Ministry of Education jointly initiated a Global Education Program in 2002 to introduce the "child-friendly learning approach" in Turkmenistan's schools. The concept of Global Education is to educate the 'whole person' by addressing the intellectual, emotional, physical, moral and spiritual dimensions of the learner in a comprehensive approach.
- [2]. Kligman (1998) defines duplicity as "a deceitful behavior... 'speaking or acting in two different ways concerning the same matter with the intent to deceive'... it involves willful, conscious behavior in which social actors are aware of their intentions" (p. 14).

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