

Article

Public attitudes toward non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the Republic of Georgia

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The growth of civil societies depends on many factors; a key component is the development of a robust variety of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to provide programs and services that a government cannot, will not or should not provide. NGOs also hold government and corporations accountable through efforts to increase transparency. But, NGOs can only sustain their efforts and succeed with public support. This descriptive research project gauges levels of public support for NGOs in different sectors of Georgian society. In 2012, using the chain-referral (or snowball) methodology, 961 respondents completed an online questionnaire to assess these attitudes. Key results indicate strong support (69%) for NGOs that are “helping people in Georgia live in a free country” by focusing on such issues as “voting, freedom for the press, television and individual rights.” This contrasts with the generally negative opinion (55%) that shows respondents perceive NGOs as “not effective” or ‘somewhat effective’ in the broad mission of “meeting people’s needs.” In addition, 56% of the respondents reflected these negative views when asked about “NGOs helping people in Georgia with basic needs (food, housing, health services, clothing).” Noting the research limitations, the article concludes with suggestions for NGOs, the government and corporations, the three key components in developing civil societies.

Key words: Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Georgia, Republic of Georgia, civil society, public attitudes.

INTRODUCTION

The Republic of Georgia is located in the Caucasus on the Black Sea sharing borders with Russia, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Turkey. Georgia achieved independence in 1991 when the former Soviet Union collapsed. With an estimated 2012 population of 4.5 million, it is an emerging democracy, most recently evidenced by the elections on October 1, 2012 which resulted in the first peaceful, post-independence governmental transition from a ruling party to the opposition. The next day, one analyst wrote that “Georgia moved from one government to another without a coup or a revolution but through Democratic processes that 95% of Georgians believe were largely fair and transparent. ... no protesters on the streets, no men with

guns, no extra-judicial arrests, no take-over of TV stations. In fact if you were apolitical you would not realize that anything unusual happened yesterday at all (Megobrebs, 2012).”

Strengthening the civil society

One of the hallmarks of emerging democracies is the development of civil societies and the organizations that support them. ‘Civil society’ is a broad term that focuses on the structures and processes in society that lies outside government and business. U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton (2009) believes that “Civil society activists and organizations work to improve the quality of people’s lives and protect their rights, hold leaders accountable to their constituents, shine light on

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abuses in both the public and private sectors, and advance the rule of law and social justice.”

What are these structures and organizations? The World Bank's (2012) definition is one of the more inclusive of both the formal and informal: “the wide array of non-governmental and not-for-profit organizations that have a presence in public life, expressing the interests and values of their members or others, based on ethical, cultural, political, scientific, religious or philanthropic considerations, [including such diverse systems as]: community groups, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), labor unions, indigenous groups, charitable organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, and foundations.”

Siegel and Yancey (1992) define the important work that an independent NGO movement can accomplish in civil societies:

- (i) increasing governmental and corporate accountability
- (ii) empowering citizens to become involved in decisions that impact their lives
- (iii) advocating for specific causes
- (iv) moving away from the old mentality that the state will, must and should provide services and programs to meet emerging needs
- (v) legitimizing the diversity of a nation's culture and heritage.

The number of NGOs in Georgia has grown since independence to “more than 5000” (Kharatiani et al., 2004) and now approximately 10,000 (Transparency International Georgia, 2011); there is no central registry so the precise number is unknown. Banks and Hume (2012) note that “NGOs have played an increasingly prominent role in the development sector, widely praised for their strengths as innovative and grassroots-driven organisations (sic) with the desire and capacity to pursue participatory and people-centred forms of development and to fill gaps left by the failure of states across the developing world in meeting the needs of their poorest citizens.” They present a cogent rationale for the development of NGOs. “Where states cannot provide sufficient goods, services or enabling environments that help citizens in securing livelihoods, or where disadvantaged groups are excluded from existing state institutions, alternative channels of service provision and/or holding governments to account must be found. It is into this gap that NGOs have neatly fitted.”

Concerns about non-governmental organizations (NGOs)

When combined with effective governmental programs, NGOs can form an important part of the social safety net for those in need. They also advocate for institutional openness and transparency. This aspiration is not fully realized in Georgia. Not only does the legacy of suspicion

from the Soviet era endure, but “Nowadays there are many NGOs in Georgia, but most of them are ineffective and in some cases have no functions (Yerevan Blog, 2011).”

The East West Management Institute (EWMI) G-PAC (2011) survey tapped a major concern that the “formal NGO sector is disconnected from society in its failure to explain what it is and does and in the issues it selects that do not resonate with the population.” This sentiment also arose in responses to the question that asked “What is the main motivation of Georgian NGOs?” While 30% noted that NGOs help the people of Georgia solve their problems, the second most frequent reply (19%) was that NGOs exist to keep getting money and keep themselves employed. This result was clearly reflected in a response to an open-ended question in our survey: “NGOs in Georgia are taking the funds for personal gain and not for the good of the people at large. They behave like a private sector entity with a charity garb.” At its most cynical, one respondent's comment summarizes a general antipathy toward NGOs: “NGOs are often an umbrella scam for getting funding from outside donors and [often] do nothing aside from just paying yourself and your family.”

Major impediments to civic engagement and NGOs in Georgia include:

- (i) The general population may not understand what NGOs are and are not (EWMI, 2011).
- (ii) Contemporary NGOs are fighting a legacy of time-limited, one-and-done projects that start programs or offer services...and suddenly close (Abdusalyamova, 2002). This history is reflected in responses in the present study.
- (iii) “NGOs remain dependent on Western funding, and many of them have only weak domestic support...[and are] “guided by considerations having little to do with the needs and characteristics of receiving societies (Aksartova, 2006).”
- (iv) Georgia's Orthodox church and culture reinforce traditions that family members, especially women, are the main providers when relatives need help (Corso, 2010).
- (v) The economy and the high unemployment rate create more people-in-need than NGOs can possibly serve.
- (vi) While most NGOs are located in Tbilisi and other large cities, the needs of the rural population for basic necessities are often overlooked (Modebadze, 2012).

A consequence of the perspective that NGOs are self-serving organizations is that it undercuts popular support for developing new systems and programs to meet current and emerging needs (Hough, 2012). A possible reason for this pessimism is rooted in the following summary of Georgian culture: “There are thousands of non-governmental organizations, but few of them are active and successful. ... However, as virtually all NGOs are funded by western sources, they have to adapt to the

preferences and style of foreign funders, which often have only a vague understanding of the real needs of the country (www.everyculture.com, 2012)."

Two elements of NGOs' success in many countries are the contributions of individuals and corporations. Neither demonstrates active involvement and support of NGOs on a wide-scale basis in Georgia. While it has only been two decades since the 75-year domination of the former Soviet Union, "in comparison with developed democratic countries there are far fewer people involved in volunteerism in Georgia. Volunteer work does not currently receive the social acknowledgement and prestige that it receives abroad, and at the present time the demand for volunteers far outweighs the supply (Kechaqmadze, 2004)." In many developing countries, the process of increasing the number and effectiveness of civil society institutions involves NGO-business partnerships. This too is not yet the case in Georgia; for the most part, corporate philanthropy is rare (Taylor, 2008). As one business manager commented, "We are a business, not a charity (Ritvo, 2012)."

Objectives of the study

The present research is designed to:

1. Document current attitudes toward NGOs in Georgia.
2. Assess which NGO missions receive strong and weak support.
3. Examine if there are different views of NGOs by age cohorts.
4. Examine if there are different views of NGOs by gender.

METHODOLOGY

The survey was made available through the Survey Monkey online website (www.surveymonkey.com) to residents of Georgia from mid-October to mid-December 2012. Using the chain-referral or snowball sampling method, the authors requested people they knew to complete the survey and then pass the web-link on to their friends, family, colleagues, organizational email lists, Facebook followers and others. While this approach will not create a random sample of the Georgian population, it does have the potential to increase the response rate since people are being asked by a known source to participate. This can cause an additional concern in that the final sample is heavily influenced by the initial respondents since they are asking their network which then asks the people in their network.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The survey consisted of 8 closed end questions and three open ended questions. The major results are presented in this part of the article. Data on age and gender show that the responses to this survey are both younger than the average age of Georgia's population but matches very closely the gender percentages of the

population.

Age

Question 6 collected data on the age range of the respondents: The median age of the Georgian population is 39.1 (CIA, 2009). If one assumes that respondents in the 20 to 30 age range are evenly distributed by birth year, then the median age for the respondents in this survey is 25.8 years old. Thus, it is a much younger sample than the general population, which could be the result of several factors:

- (i) The sampling method started with university-age students. Using their networks in all likelihood increased the number of under-30 year old respondents.
- (ii) As an online survey, the general assumption is that older residents in Georgia are less comfortable on computers, Smartphones or tablets than the younger generation which has grown up with technology in their hands at an early age and in school.

Gender

Question 7 focused on gender: Georgia as a country has 91 males per 100 females (CIA, 2009); this means that 47.6% of the population is male; 52.4% is female. The respondents in this survey almost exactly reflect this ratio: males = 47.3%, women = 52.7%.

Question 1 asks "How important are NGOs to Georgia's future growth, development and stability?": A strong majority (62%) answered that NGOs are "very" and "mostly" important, while a small minority (16%) responded only "somewhat" or "not at all" important. Thus, there is strong support for the hypothetical role that NGOs can play in developing and strengthening civil society in Georgia. The 1-in-6 who believes that NGOs are not important in the future might not trust them. Our survey showed a noticeable number of people who accuse NGOs of wasting the funds they receive and are too focused on their own interests. Also as noted in the Introduction, there are thousands of NGOs in Georgia but most people report that they are not informed about their work. These reasons may contribute to the negative perceptions. Overall, this quote serves to summarize the positive perspective of NGOs role: "NGOS are like woodpeckers: they help the tree somehow to cope with problems such as pests and contribute toward positive changes in society, but they cannot solve our serious problems because of their limited authority."

In the responses to this question, there is a noticeable difference in how those respondents under 30 years old view the role of NGOs as compared to those over 30. 65% of those under 30 replied "Mostly" or "Very

Important,” while only 17% of those over age 40 feel the same way.

Question 2 explored “How important are NGOs in helping people in Georgia live in a free country (voting, press, television, individual rights)?”: People in Georgia see the importance of NGOs in helping them live in a free country. By saying free country we mean voting in fair and transparent elections, freedom of the press, no state control of radio and television, and procedures to support individual rights. Again, almost 56.9% believe that NGOs are “Very” and “Mostly Important.” Only 4.2% don’t see the importance of NGOs in helping people in Georgia live in a free country. It is important that people should feel themselves free that they have individual rights and they can tell what they think without be afraid of being punished.

These results held across all age groups, especially among the older respondents. 56% of those under 20 years old see the role of NGOs in this sphere of activity as being Mostly or Very Important; 56 and, 57% of those in the 21 to 30 and 31 to 40 age category concur. Strongest support for the role of NGOs in helping people live in a free society is in the two oldest age groups: 73% of the 41 to 50 year olds and 74% of those over 50 years of age value this role of NGOs.

Question 3 asked “How important are NGOs in helping people in Georgia enjoy life (theater, museums)?”: From a mission and focus perspective, the respondents believe that the cultural and performing arts are not very important. A majority (52.2%) believes that the role of NGOs in cultural development is “Not important at all” or “Somewhat important.” On the other hand, only 24.5% think that non-governmental organizations are “Mostly important” and “Very important” in helping people enjoy culture. The results were expected in some measure; the current socio-economic and political conditions in Georgia dictate more significant issues to be resolved. These include ensuring that people can meet basic needs and striving to build a more democratic, civil society. However, because of Georgian mentality and traditions, NGOs are not expected to help people with basic needs (Question 4), while political and democratic advances (Question 2) are rated as more important.

One additional possibility to explain this low level of support for the arts-in-general could be that the sample is younger than the general population. This is not generally a group that goes to theater, symphony, museums and special exhibitions.

Question 4: How important are NGOs in helping people in Georgia with basic needs (food, housing, health services, and clothing)?: Despite the continuing problems connected with satisfying these basic needs today in Georgia, the majority of the respondents believe that it’s only NGOs’ partial area of concern. As the results

indicate, the respondents assume NGOs have no significant role in helping people in Georgia with these basic needs. 56% of the answers suggest that NGOs are “Somewhat” or “Not Important” at all in this field.

However, the responses to the question vary greatly by gender. While 26.7% of women in the survey responded that NGOs have a Very or Mostly important role to play in helping people with these basic needs, only 17.4% of male respondents concurred. This could be a reflection of the traditional role of women in the family as the major decision-maker regarding basic needs including food, health service and clothing. In addition, the responses vary widely according to the extent of NGOs’ perceived importance in this field, meaning the respondents have no clear position on the issue. This might be a result of domestic NGOs little experience in satisfying people’s basic needs as well as the tradition of “informal insurance” by family and friends mentioned in the EWMI G-PAC survey results.

Question 5 attempts to understand the general attitude toward NGO work by asking ‘Overall, how effective do you think NGOs are in meeting people’s needs?: There is clearly concern on the part of the respondents in this survey; slightly over 44% believe that NGOs are only slightly effective or not effective at all in meeting people’s needs. This reflects the results of a study by Transparency International Georgia (2008) which found that “nearly half of Georgians are pessimistic about the use of aid money, thinking that most of it will not be well spent.” “Not well spent” could include funds that are stolen, used for corrupt activities or misapplied. This reflects the problem noted earlier that international donor funds may not be used in the most efficient or effective manner. As one person wrote: NGOs are like “pigs..doing nothing but eating”... in this case devouring public trust, and philanthropic grants and gifts.

Question 8 was both humorous and provocative: “If you had to describe NGOs as an animal, what animal would you choose. And what does it mean to you?” This question was answered by more than half of the respondents. According to the results, five most popular animals are: Dogs (cited by 20%), Cats (9%), Foxes (4%), Horses (4%) and Tigers (4%) (Table 1).

Cats

One respondent remarked: “Nowadays NGOs look like cats, you know why!” Actually, it is not obvious; opinions split into two directions. One group perceives cats in a positive way, while others associate them with the negative characteristics. The majority of those mentioning NGOs-as-cats consider them as lazy, sleepy, unpredictable, useless, and egotistical, with goals that are not really congruent with country’s development.

Table 1. Quick view of all results: Percentages of respondents answering each category.

Question	Very Important	Mostly Important	Generally Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important
How important are NGOs to Georgia's future growth, development and stability? (n = 941)	36	24	22	14	3
How important are NGOs in helping people in Georgia live in a free country (voting, press, television, individual rights)? (n = 939)	32	28	20	17	4
How important are NGOs in helping people in Georgia enjoy culture (theater, museums)? (n = 934)	12	13	23	33	19
How important are NGOs in helping people in Georgia with basic needs (food, housing, health services, clothing)? (n = 934)	9	13	22	36	19
Overall, how effective do you think NGOs are in meeting people's needs? (n = 937)	4	12	29	44	11

Values may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

According to those pessimistic responses, NGOs just pretend to be interested in real problems and act so that they could get financed over again: "Lazy Cat, that ostentatiously chase mice, just to get reward from their masters."

Only about 10% of those mentioning cats describe them as clever, flexible, independent and useful with a duty is to protect the society from "rats" and "diseases" by using effective and deft maneuvers to reach this aim:

(i) "Cats can be very nice but they sleep most of the day time while awake during the night and hunting. NGOs must do the same, be awake when almost everyone is sleeping, be a part of the community and serve their need and keep the rats away."

(ii) "Today the situation is much better than it was a couple of years ago. But...today [NGOs] are like cats in [the movie] *Shrek*. They try to make [changes] but they can't. They have to learn a lot and grow up."

Foxes

Of the 4% which mentioned foxes, half did not specify why they actually chose this animal. One remarked: "Fox and it's obvious, why." (Actually, to this research team, it is not obvious!) Another half, which decided to describe those common habits and characteristics mostly perceive foxes in a negative way: "sly, sneaky and cunning" animals "taking advantage of a situation" and "caring for their tails only." And there is only one positive response, which draws attention to the foxes' flexibility. Such a negative perception of the Georgian NGOs is also reflected in the Question 5, where more than 50% noted

that NGOs are somewhat or not effective at all in meeting people's needs.

Horses

Another 4% of the respondents selected a horse. Unlike foxes, horses are generally perceived as an important, noble, devoted, clever, useful and strong animal. The bad thing about those answers is the impression that most of them refer to "how NGOs *should* exist", "always in action." Only several responses make parallels with the current situation in the country and those do not really think that NGOs are that important; most of those who responded suggest that NGOs are effective only in selected circumstances.

Question 9 asked respondents to "share at least one thing that you would like NGOs to do that could help you, your family and friends":

A plurality of 26% notes that they want NGOs to support the active involvement of citizens into community life by sharing information, promoting volunteering and internship opportunities. A sizable number of respondents stress the employment issue, highlighting that they need NGOs to help them and their families to acquire relevant knowledge to succeed in the job market. Unemployment still remains one of the challenging issues in Georgia; 2011 estimates place the rate as high as 18% (CIA, 2010) and the economic situation has not improved dramatically in 2012. Given that the average age of the respondents in this survey, job opportunities and educational issues would definitely be on their minds, it is alarming that 21% of responses highlight that NGOs are totally ineffective in meeting the

needs of Georgian population. They mention clearly that the NGOs currently operating in Georgia can do absolutely nothing for our respondents. Additionally, 16% draw attention to the role of NGOs in advancing non-formal and formal education in the country; specific suggestions envision NGOs helping with free books, training and scholarship opportunities for Georgian citizens. Some of the other responses included the problem of stray dogs, urban planning in Tbilisi, small business, homeless children, and violence toward women.

Question 10 provided an opportunity for the respondents to note “any other comments about NGOs”:

While there are thousands of NGOs in Georgia, responses to this question reinforced the EWMI study that people do not know much about them, what they are doing, who they are and whom are they helping. Approximately 50% of responses advise the NGOs to be more active and intensify their work in terms of advertising to increase public awareness of their activities. Furthermore, a noticeable number of people accuse NGOs of wasting the grant funds they receive. As 12% of respondents declare, NGOs are self-serving, focused on the interests of donors more than the problems of community. They are concerned about the fact that NGOs are under the influence of Government. 9% of responses believe that NGOs are not independent which undermines their effective commitment to the Georgian citizens. Despite the approximately 35% that think NGOs are very important in the sustainable development of Georgia (as stated in the Q1) and 16% of comments in Q10 concur with this assessment, a majority of the responses to Q10 note with regret that NGOs are not very ineffective.

Alternatively, if we divide responses according positive and negative perspectives toward NGOs, we can see that more than 95% of responses are negative perceptions. The remaining 5% of the comments demand that NGOs be more effective, active and dedicated to help people. In other words, the respondents want NGOs to succeed, but, as a group, they are not there yet! As noted by one respondent, NGOs are like “the snake Robin Hood. It repeats everything the sheriff (government) says and adds a bit of criticism. But they do not have the wisdom as the snake.”

LIMITATIONS

As in any research study, there are several limitations that should be considered when reflecting on the findings and implications of this project:

1. The sample is not representative of general population. Thus, one should exercise caution in reaching sweeping conclusions.

2. The sample includes people who are residents of Georgia, not just citizens. Thus, international ‘ex-pats’ living or working in Georgia could fill out the survey.

3. Not all NGOs are the same. While the survey uses the broad term “NGO,” it may not be fair to lump all NGOs in one category. There are large, long-established, well-funded NGOs as well as small, new ones trying to survive. Some NGOs are in-country affiliates of larger international NGOs; others may have grown over the years but do not have these global connections.

4. This survey did not give enough attention to commercial, trade and business-oriented NGOs like the Chamber of Commerce.

IMPLICATION FOR POLICY

1. One of the hallmarks of a developing civil society is the increasing pressure on both governments and corporations for increased transparency. How are decisions made? Does the public have input into those decisions that impact their lives (location of a new road, building a new school, increased expenditures for military, raising government salaries, etc.) The public’s strong support for NGOs which serve to enhance transparency bodes well for the future of civil society even if it increases pressure on policymakers to increase their openness and accountability.

IMPLICATIONS FOR NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS (NGOs)

1. The responses to Questions 9 and 10 present two very important messages to NGOs in Georgia. First, they need to be more active in order to increase the awareness of society about them. On the other hand, it is more important for NGOs to concentrate on the needs of society than to fulfill their own needs.

2. NGOs rely on public support for both their existence and success. The strong differences of support for non-human rights NGOs, and the resulting low levels of support for human rights NGOs, may help them, but that implies that NGOs whose focus and missions are in the world of arts, culture and performing arts will have a harder time gaining support. .

3. Successful NGOs recruit, train and find appropriate non-monetary ways to reward volunteers. As noted, the relatively low participation rates in Georgia mean that this will be challenging. But, there are successful models throughout developing democracies to emulate.

4. As noted in Question 2, the responses vary by age cohort. Because of this generational split, NGOs may be able to increase the support and active participation of younger adults, especially if they find ways to connect before these individuals get too involved in other pursuits such as family and work. Perhaps a key way to increase

this involvement is by stressing the NGO's mission and values to targeted groups. It is a finding with action implications.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CORPORATIONS

1. The values of corporate social responsibility are slowly emerging in Georgia. These need to be expanded beyond the larger multi-national corporations and major domestic firms. NGOs benefit with partnerships that support mutual interests. Research has documented that corporate philanthropy is good business, that customers value companies that show that making money is not all they do.

2. Georgian tax laws allow corporations to avoid paying taxes on up to 8% of their income.¹ As such, there is not an impediment to expanding partnerships and donations to causes that a company believes are worthy. It is less a monetary decision than one of corporate values.

CONCLUDING THOUGHT

One post-election analysis of Georgia's circumstances wryly noted that "civil society cannot cope with Georgia's major problems, for which so far the new government offers no solutions (Rayfield, 2012)." That gap is exactly why NGOs are important now and in the future to the development of democratic ideals, structures, programs and services.

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¹ Since none of the authors are tax advisors or lawyers, this should be verified.