

Local Actors' Capacity Strengthening Needs in KYRGYZSTAN



Introduction

In line with the [Asia Religious and Ethnic Freedom \(REF\)](#) program's learning agenda, this brief aims to provide valuable insights into the institutional and staff capacity needs, strengths, and challenges faced by local partners in the context of promoting religious and ethnic freedoms in the Asia region. This learning brief focuses on answering learning questions to enhance our understanding of the capacity building needs and strengths of local partners. By analyzing their experiences, the Asia REF team aims to identify information gaps, technical capacity needs, and the factors that hinder or facilitate effective work in promoting religious freedom. This knowledge will guide the team in developing targeted interventions and strategies to strengthen the capacity of local Asia REF partners to promote religious and ethnic freedoms in Asia.

The data was collected during the Local REF perspectives workshop on March 13–15, 2023 with civil society representatives (CSOs) who are working in the field of promoting freedom of religion in the Kyrgyz Republic. Participants were representatives of organizations that conduct research in the field, provide legal assistance, monitor the implementation of the right to freedom of religion, participate in the development of legislative acts, work directly in communities, and address gender inequality issues, hate speech, and media literacy. In total, 15 people participated in the meeting, including 11 women and 4 men. The discussion focused on the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and risks (SWOT) local NGOs face in implementing internationally funded religious freedom projects, as well as their assessment of the benefits and limitations of cooperation with donor organizations.

Institutional & Staff Capacity of NGOs in Kyrgyzstan

Strengths

- Specialized expertise in fields such as advocacy, media, and technical aspects related to religious freedom projects.
- Access to dedicated human resources, including committed employees and volunteers who are passionate about their work and their country.
- Possess technical resources, equipment, and community trust, which includes religious groups, partners, and donors.
- Consist of competent individuals with relevant experience, expertise, and higher education.
- Collaborate with other organizations and engage local communities and partners to address local issues.
- Have a deep understanding of local legislation and processes for registering religious organizations.
- Effectively mobilize and engage with various stakeholders, including government agencies and informal associations.

Weaknesses

- Lack of operational resources, such as funding, equipment, software, reliable internet, and transportation, hinders effective implementation of religious freedom projects.
- Difficulty in collecting data, communicating with local partners and stakeholders, and documenting incidents of religious persecution due to resource limitations.
- Limited expertise and narrow specialization of staff members can restrict the scope and impact of an NGO's work on religious freedom issues.
- Challenges in addressing the intersection between gender and religious freedom or navigating unique challenges faced by religious minorities in a specific region.
- Potential difficulties in staff retention and securing funding due to the inability to produce high-quality content, effectively communicate with donors and the public, and attract skilled personnel.

Opportunities

- Kyrgyzstan's legislation and constitution align with international norms, providing a legal basis for NGOs to implement projects related to religious freedom.
- Donors have a sustained interest in funding projects promoting religious freedom, interfaith harmony, and the rule of law.
- Partnerships with the government and religious organizations, including joint project development and public hearings.
- Access to justice and education are crucial areas for NGOs to focus on in their efforts to promote religious freedom.
- Participation in capacity-building programs recommended to enhance NGOs' effectiveness.
- Establishment of a trade union can help mitigate the impact of legislative changes that have limited civil society's work.

Risks

- Legislative initiatives imitating Russian practices and tightening requirements for NGOs.
- Competition for funding leading to a lack of coordination and unity within the sector.
- Political instability both domestically and globally, making planning difficult.
- Decision makers' personal beliefs and biases affecting promotion of religious freedom initiatives.
- Low levels of education, economic instability, and corruption
- Proposed law on NGOs and foreign agents potentially reducing the number of NGOs and limiting their ability to address religious freedom issues.
- Political instability and leadership changes promoting religious agendas instead of secular ones.

NGO & Donor/INGOs Cooperation

Strengths

- Technical support provided by donors is highly valued by NGOs working on religious freedom projects.
- Donors offer assistance in various areas, including project management, monitoring and evaluation, fundraising, and communication.
- Technical support helps NGOs improve their knowledge, skills, and abilities in implementing programs effectively.
- Donors provide opportunities for capacity building through training programs, workshops, and conferences on topics including advocacy and lobbying, human rights law, conflict resolution, and interfaith dialogue.
- Participating in capacity building programs helps NGOs gain knowledge and skills, build networks, and increase visibility and credibility.
- These factors contribute to fundraising efforts and the establishment of stronger partnerships within the donor community.

Weaknesses

- Lack of understanding of the local context by donors can lead to miscommunication and misunderstandings.
- Bureaucratic procedures for funding applications can be time-consuming and challenging for local NGOs to meet, creating a perception of unequal treatment.
- Unequal treatment of local and international NGO employees in terms of salaries and benefits.
- Short-term project funding can lead to financial instability for NGOs.
- Changing conditions between project approval and implementation.
- Financial stability and retention of qualified staff between donor-funded projects.
- Insufficient funding for administrative expenses increases pressure on coordinators and can lead to burnout and loss of institutional memory.
- Lack of budgeting for monitoring and evaluation (M&E) experts puts additional stress on coordinators and may result in inefficiencies.

- These issues impact project execution, create a negative view of donors in the local community, and contribute to staff turnover and burnout. Addressing these challenges requires open communication, equitable treatment, and clear guidelines for project funding and execution.

Risks

- Negative reputational impact and reduction in the number of local NGOs due to the law on 'foreign agents'.
- Negative attitudes towards working with foreign organizations, making it challenging to operate in such an environment.
- Difficulties in implementing sensitive religious freedom projects, especially regarding demands from donors to include their logos in project materials.
- Competition for funding leading to NGOs focusing on topics outside their expertise, potentially causing harm.
- Lack of diversity and innovation in the sector due to donor organizations favoring certain NGOs repeatedly.
- Importance of local NGOs maintaining integrity, independence, and avoiding bias or promotion of specific ideologies while working with donors.

Expectations

The focus of the SWOT analysis was changed to include expectations and recommendations instead of opportunities from participants regarding their collaboration with the donor community. This shift allowed for more specific insights into donor partnerships and desired improvements. The participants were asked to share what kind of expectations they have from future cooperation with donors and INGOs.

- Assist in building networks and exchange visits within the country and between countries to learn best practices. This would enable NGOs to learn from each other and build partnerships.
- Provide long-term projects that would help in building capacity and sustainability. For instance, donors should avoid short-term projects that expect real change and sustainability without the time to achieve it.
- Ensure transparency in local partner selection process to avoid favoritism and promote fair competition.
- Conduct research or mapping on the potential of NGOs in the local area to ensure that the selected NGOs have the capacity and expertise to implement the project effectively.
- Reduce the criteria for selecting NGOs and to simplify the application process also contributing to the capacity building.

Conclusion

The workshop allowed participants to consider their own opportunities and needs when implementing the project on religious and ethnic freedoms. It became clear that, in addition to the external challenges, organizations have personal ones that are dictated by the lack of practical and implementable organizational policies or the inability to defend them before donors. This is related to a perceived opinion by local NGOs that inflated bureaucratic

requirements from donors and perceived arrogant attitudes towards local organizations do not take into account local contexts, experience, and an acknowledged desire for more capacity training and other support. However, this also suggests that if donors and INGOs are willing to increase locally led initiatives, they need to consider increasing the potential of local organizations in implementing projects financed by international organizations, providing constant advisory support, and simplifying reporting requirements.

Recommendations

Below are recommendations for donors to consider and contribute to strengthening the capacity of local NGOs and support their efforts to promote religious freedom in Asia.

Provide operational support

Within their respective programs, donors/international organizations may consider providing support in the form of funding or resources to address the lack of operational resources that local NGOs face. This could include providing equipment, software, Internet access, and vehicles to facilitate data collection, communication, documentation, and reporting of cases of religious persecution. Meanwhile, this support should not only include the allocation of funds but also assistance planning, managing, identification of needs, and the most effective strategy for allocating funds to meet these needs.

Streamline and simplify funding processes

Simplify bureaucratic procedures and make funding applications more accessible and simplified for local NGOs. This includes providing clear funding guidelines and criteria, reducing unnecessary paperwork, and supporting the application process. Simplifying the funding process will save time and resources for both donors and NGOs, facilitating more effective collaboration.

Offer capacity-strengthening initiatives

International organizations can organize capacity-building programs to enhance the qualifications and skills of local NGO staff. On one hand, these initiatives should aim to expand their knowledge beyond narrow specializations and develop a broader understanding of the intersectionality between religious freedom and various social issues, such as gender, legal issues, and the unique experiences of religious minorities in specific communities. On the other hand, this may include providing training programs on project and finance management, MEL cycle, organizational development, and advocacy strategies.

Provide monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) support

Allocate budgetary resources specifically for MEL experts to ensure effective project monitoring, evaluation, and training. Having dedicated MEL staff can reduce the workload of coordinators, allowing them to focus more effectively on project management and coordination.

Recommendations (continued)

Promote long-term sustainability

International organizations should prioritize efforts to enhance the long-term sustainability of local NGOs. This can include providing mentoring, guidance, and resources to strengthen organizational management, leadership development, and strategic planning. Building resilient and sustainable NGOs will ensure their continued influence and ability to effectively address religious freedom issues. Prioritizing support for long-term and sustainable projects instead of focusing solely on short-term initiatives will contribute to the financial stability and sustainability of local NGOs. In addition, INGOs should recognize the importance of administrative costs and allocate sufficient funds to administrative functions. This will reduce the workload of coordinators, prevent burnout, and ensure that institutional memory is preserved in NGOs, and increase the efficiency and overall quality of project implementation.

Advocate for supportive legislation

International organizations can participate in advocacy efforts to promote legislation that protects the rights and activities of CSOs, including those working in the area of religious freedom. This can include monitoring legislative initiatives and working with local partners to respond to bills and laws that may hinder the work of civil society or impose restrictive requirements.

Support networking and collaboration

Encourage the creation and strengthening of networks among local actors working on religious freedom or related issues. International organizations can facilitate platforms for knowledge sharing, collaboration, and partnerships among local NGOs, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders. This can foster synergy, improve coordination, and increase collective capacity to address religious freedom issues in the country, and also mitigate the risk of competition for funding.

Assist with fundraising and communication with donors

International organizations can provide local organizations with guidance and support in effectively communicating their messages to donors and the public. This includes assistance in developing high-quality content, such as compelling and impactful stories that demonstrate the importance and impact of their work. In addition, helping to develop effective fundraising strategies can help local NGOs secure needed funding for projects and support their work.

This resource is made possible by the support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The contents are the sole responsibility of Search for Common Ground and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.