

Local Actors' Capacity Strengthening Needs in KAZAKHSTAN



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 with the support of the local organization PaperLab during the Local REF perspectives workshop with civil society representatives (CSOs), experts, and researchers who are working in the field of promoting freedom of religion in the Republic of Kazakhstan on May 15–17, 2023. In total, 17 people participated in the meeting, including 10 females and 7 males. 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 Kazakhstan

Strengths

- NGOs in Kazakhstan have a history of successful collaboration with the government. This cooperation provides them with access to resources, networks, and potentially increased visibility for their projects.
- The participants highlighted the “deep knowledge” of local contexts possessed by these NGOs. This understanding of cultural, social, and political dynamics enables them to design projects that are contextually relevant and effective.
- NGOs, known as GONGOs (government-organized non-governmental organizations), have established positive relationships with the government, while others maintain strong ties with international partners and donors. This diversity of partnerships allows for a broad spectrum of resources, support, and expertise.
- NGOs with international connections benefit from direct access to “best practices” and contemporary approaches. This exposure to global knowledge and innovative methodologies enhances their capacity to design and execute impactful projects.
- NGOs in Kazakhstan have shown the ability to adapt to changing circumstances and navigate complex regulatory environments.

Weaknesses

- Financial instability remains the main challenge for NGOs, both working with government and international donors, as the vast majority of the projects do not last more than one year. This constraint hampers their ability to plan and execute long-term initiatives, limiting their impact on promoting religious freedom.
- Due to the need to secure projects for funding, some NGOs may take on initiatives without having sufficient relevant knowledge and experience. This compromises the quality and effectiveness of their projects.
- The diversity of NGOs' viewpoints and the struggle for resources can lead to conflicting messages being conveyed to beneficiaries. This can contribute to confusion and mistrust among beneficiaries, undermining the credibility of NGOs' efforts.
- Factors like information warfare and skepticism toward NGOs funded by western sources can erode the trust of beneficiaries. This mistrust may impede collaboration and hinder the successful implementation of projects.
- The lack of sustained interaction and collaboration among NGOs hinders the development of long-term strategies and coordinated actions. This limits the overall sustainability of their projects and initiatives.

Opportunities

- The participants believe that Kazakhstani NGOs have the opportunity to work in different spheres, and a strong problem-solving capability.
- Existing mechanisms allow for collaboration and consolidated cooperation among NGOs. This foundation offers the potential to pool resources, share best practices, and collectively address common objectives related to religious freedom.
- With increased government involvement, local NGOs could establish effective dialogue platforms for knowledge and practice exchange. Collaborating with the government could enhance the visibility and impact of projects related to religious freedom.
- NGOs have the potential to play a leading role in advancing expert knowledge on religious freedom. By leveraging their capacity to promote awareness and understanding, they can shape public discourse and policy discussions in the field.
- Local NGOs hold the capacity to collaboratively contribute to the development of new draft laws related to freedom of religion. This opportunity positions them as key stakeholders in shaping legal frameworks that safeguard religious freedom rights.

Risks

- There is a risk of NGOs encountering excessive state regulation (e.g. “tax attack”), which can hinder their operational autonomy. The possibility of increased state interference, such as stringent regulatory measures or unexpected audits, poses challenges to their work.
- NGOs may face the risk of having their state funding terminated, potentially due to the nature of their work in promoting freedom of religion. This financial vulnerability can impact their sustainability and ability to carry out projects effectively.
- Open criticism of state policies related to religious freedom may be deemed inappropriate in Kazakhstan. NGOs could face constraints in openly discussing and challenging certain policies, limiting their ability to advocate for change.
- Addressing topics that explore the intersection between religion and feminism may be challenging in Kazakhstan due to cultural and societal sensitivities. These sensitive intersections could limit the scope of projects and hinder open dialogue.
- NGOs encounter political and social pressure that influences their operational decisions. Balancing the need to address critical issues with potential backlash becomes a risk for their advocacy efforts.

NGO & Donor/INGOs Cooperation

Strengths

- Collaboration provides local actors with the resources, expertise, and guidance necessary to successfully execute projects aimed at promoting religious freedom. Donors and INGOs offer financial support, technical expertise, and valuable networks, boosting the capabilities of local actors.
- NGOs view cooperation with donors and INGOs as an opportunity to contribute positively to society. By working together, they can address critical issues related to religious freedom and foster societal development through targeted projects.
- Through collaboration, local NGOs gain access to a broader understanding of societal dynamics. This enables them to “see the real picture” of societal development, which in turn informs their strategies for promoting religious freedom within a larger context.
- Donors and INGOs actively support the capacity building of local NGOs. This includes developing new agendas and providing training sessions that enhance the skills and knowledge of local actors, empowering them to carry out their initiatives more effectively.
- The cooperation with international donors contributes to the overall strengthening of civil society in Kazakhstan. As local NGOs work in collaboration with INGOs, they collectively contribute to the development of a more active and engaged civil society.

Weaknesses

- The main challenge is the mistrust towards international donors on the part of local stakeholders. This alertness may result in the refusal to support particular projects and initiatives.
- The involvement of local NGOs with the state (Government NGOs or GONGOs) creates challenges. International donors may be hesitant to work with NGOs affiliated with the government, potentially hindering funding opportunities due to perceived dependence on a state perspective.
- Misunderstanding of the local context by international funds and organizations creates challenges. Insufficient localization of projects based on regional nuances can lead to inefficiencies and limited impact on religious freedom initiatives.
- The tendency of NGOs to artificially align with the agendas of donors poses a risk. This approach may divert attention from the organic growth of grassroots initiatives and inhibit the development of a truly independent and diverse civil society.
- Dependence on external funding sources can weaken the autonomy of local NGOs. This financial reliance might limit their ability to pursue projects that align with the authentic needs of the local religious freedom context.

Risks

- One of the primary risks is the potential overreliance on external funding. Projects that are financially dependent on donors may become unsustainable once the funding ends, affecting the continuity of efforts in promoting religious freedom: “when the money runs out, then religious freedom ends”
- Local NGOs face the risk of being stigmatized or labeled as “foreign agents” due to their collaboration with international donors and INGOs. This can lead to legal restrictions and hinder their ability to operate effectively.
- Overreliance on external support may lead to a loss of local autonomy and decision-making power. NGOs could find themselves adapting to the priorities and agendas of donors, potentially compromising their intended objectives.
- There is a risk that projects developed in collaboration with donors and INGOs may not be adequately localized to address the unique cultural, social, and political context of Kazakhstan, leading to ineffective outcomes.
- Donor priorities can change over time, potentially causing projects to be discontinued or refocused abruptly. This risk may disrupt ongoing initiatives and require local actors to adapt quickly.

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.

- Embrace a flexible approach that allows for adjustments during the project's implementation phase. This ensures responsiveness to changing environments and evolving needs on the ground.
- Encourage the establishment of strong relationships between donors and governmental bodies. This collaboration can enhance project effectiveness and sustainability by aligning efforts with local priorities and regulations.
- Advocate for projects that are tailored to local contexts. This involves considering local languages, regional nuances, and engaging local experts to ensure cultural relevance and effectiveness.
- Encourage the development of projects that prioritize the promotion of freedom of religion within communities, especially in rural areas. This approach ensures that the projects directly impact the lives of local residents.
- Support the spread of specific methodological tools within Central Asia, while emphasizing the importance of adapting these tools to suit the unique needs and indicators of the local context.
- Foster the launch of impactful projects that allow local NGOs to witness the tangible results of their efforts. Such projects empower organizations to continue their work with a sense of accomplishment and motivation.

Conclusion

The SWOT exercise conducted for local organizations promoting religious freedom in Kazakhstan highlights several key insights. These organizations possess a strong problem-solving capability and deep local knowledge, which, when combined with collaboration with donors, offer potential for significant impact. However, financial instability and a lack of sustained interaction within NGOs hinder long-term planning and quality project execution. Opportunities lie in focusing on rural communities, creating impact projects, and building collaborative platforms for knowledge exchange. Nonetheless, there are risks including mistrust towards donors, potential loss of autonomy due to alignment with donor agendas, and legal or political pressures inhibiting open criticism.

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.

Balancing Government Affiliations

Be sensitive to government affiliations of local NGOs. While some NGOs may have connections with the government (GONGOs), consider strategies to ensure their independence and capacity strengthening. Strengthening the independence of local NGOs will lead to their ability to better promote local agenda and to prioritize the interests and needs of local communities and target groups.

Localized Project Design

Prioritize thorough understanding of the local context and regional nuances when designing projects. Tailor initiatives to address specific religious freedom challenges in Kazakhstan, ensuring their effectiveness and relevance. This entails offering local partners some discretion on the level of project design, according to their knowledge and understanding of local needs. The involvement of beneficiary groups to the projects at all stages may promote local ownership and ensure sustainability of the results.

Coordination & Collaboration

Encourage coordinated efforts and information-sharing among NGOs. Facilitate platforms for collaboration to minimize conflicting messages, enhance knowledge sharing, and promote a more unified approach. On the other hand, promote platforms for open dialogue between NGOs, government bodies, and other stakeholders.

Capacity Strengthening & Local Empowerment

Accompany local partners to self-identify barriers they face, recognize the existing resources and power, and offer targeted capacity-strengthening programs that equip NGOs with the necessary knowledge and skills before embarking on projects. The NGOs are especially interested in enhancing their capacities in project design, monitoring and evaluation, and advocacy. This can help ensure higher project quality and effectiveness. Training and sharing best practices from other states and regions should be an essential part of each initiative, in order to promote the quality of the NGO sphere as a whole.

Sustainable Funding & Long-Term Planning

Maintain long-term engagement with local NGOs, recognizing the need for ongoing commitment and support. Providing funding with a longer project timeframe will allow NGOs to plan and implement more sustainable initiatives that have a lasting impact on advancing religious freedom. In addition, supporting local NGOs to develop sustainability plans for projects will provide input into their continuity beyond the end of the funding period. This will help prevent abrupt termination of initiatives and maintain the progress made in promoting FORB. The increased specialization of NGOs in the sphere of FORB will be an additional advantage here, as they will be able to participate in the projects in their thematic areas, if it will stop being an existential issue.