

The Next Step in the Development of Armenian Civil Society

This research derives from the premise that civil society actors establish and organise around shared ideas and commitment.

The units of analysis are civil society two main actors: formal (civil society organisations or NGOs: legal entities registered in Armenia) and informal (activists, civic activist campaigns/initiatives). This research considers the interaction and impact of the two actors, aiming to define the Armenian civil society anew. The specific objectives are to identify mutual differences, perceptions, channels of cooperation, and impact as a result of partnership of the two actors. Using the qualitative in-depth expert interviews' data, analysis of primary data collected by author in 2015, and secondary data analysis, the research confirms the importance of strength of groups concealed in unified agenda and coordination.

Key Findings

- Armenia has gone through various stages of its societal development to find itself in crisis, defined as lack of internal cohesion and low levels of public trust. Although institutionalised, the Armenian formal civil society is fragmented, with only a few so-called *advocacy-oriented* NGOs working for impact. Formal civil society sector or NGOs are usually *aliens* to the marginalised groups of population, and characterised by distorted perceptions and detachment from the public. The reasons include lack of: accountability to public, clarity in organisational missions, public understanding of organisational goals, and intra-organisational solidarity. The formal sector does not associate itself with problems of the marginalised, have weak ties to media and fails to attract the interest of Armenian public in their cause.
- Formal actors' engagement with informal actors is one way to improve, as civic activists and initiatives are trusted by public. However, there is a lack of mutual acceptance between the formal and informal actors. The main differences between the two are mode of operation; life experiences; reasons for advocacy (mandatory vs. voluntary involvement), and fairness issue (informal actors provide the link to public by pointing attention to concerns, followed by informal actors getting resources to address those). Formal actors are usually arrogant in their attitudes towards informal actors, whereas cooperation between the two is usually limited to the cases when civic activists happen to also be staff members of NGOs.
- The demand for cooperation among societal groups has matured. There is a latent environment of mistrust in society necessitating a shift in societal relationships not to let similar developments stabilise. There is a need for new relationships in the society aimed at consolidating the potential available to promote agenda in unity, not in confrontation (which will solely benefit public institutions). Without introduction of new methods in the relationship of the two, both actors will face continued stagnation.
- To speak to the public, formal and informal actors should join forces and find issues of common concern. Both actors should develop their agenda to address social issues of the marginalised in the first place. Both actors should start addressing social issues in order to attract attention of the marginalised. Civil society actors should limit the general, abstract political democratic claims, but concentrate on the promotion of social justice issues by orienting their potential towards advocacy and being a part in policy making.

Recommendations

Increasing membership bases for NGOs

The levels of social capital in Armenia are low. NGOs have to seek for societal support in form of membership, by introducing self-assessment mechanisms, revising their missions and creating inviting spaces for their communities. NGOs should aim to take out potential from among latent, marginalised groups of population. NGOs should unite with civic activists. Formal actors should take the leadership of inviting and mobilising active individuals' interests. NGOs should build membership bases by preserving diversity and pluralism.

Creating umbrella NGOs

Armenia needs umbrella civil society organisations to attempt solutions at a collective level. Independent, experienced and trusted by public NGOs should take the lead of establishing umbrella organisations, to become comprehensive institutional structures including other NGOs and rural populations. The main characteristics of umbrella organisations should be responsibility of taking leadership to coordinate the network – without limiting authority of each constituent. The Armenian civil society should start collecting members under one united front, to represent collective voice on issues to the government and international actors.

▪ Networking

Armenian society needs new functioning tendencies. Networking events will be a precondition in establishing certain community norms and developing organisational culture, not to mention increasing the levels of social capital. Formal actors of Armenian society should periodically organise networking events. To pool human resources, NGOs should identify and develop lists of available entities with similar issue-based missions. There has to be a constant exchange of information between NGOs working in the same field and available informal actors. Expanding ties abroad, with international NGOs, similar sphere-specific groups in regional countries will similarly be essential.

▪ Media-targeted work

Civil society actors need media to gain allies and improve their standing. Both actors should promote agenda through carefully planned cooperation with media. While the primary aim of centralised media control is self-sustaining of the ruling regime, it does also do harm to the same regime, as it helps governmental forces to remain ignorant about the realities and actual dynamics of the marginalised. Thus limited information prevents decision making bodies from interpreting the reality. This is why formal and informal actors should aim targeting media, by at the same time providing information linkage between government and the marginalised.

▪ Protection of workers' rights

There is a lack of functioning space for civil society, limited by political and legal constraints. The effective participation of civil society is rooted in effective mechanisms regulating this very participation. The unprotected nature of workers' rights makes voluntary participation a fundamental problem. One of the root causes for the lack of public participation is the lack of strong mechanisms to protect the rights of workers. Armenia needs improved mechanisms to protect workers' rights, as a part of the solution. Powerful and independent institutions (strong enough to confront issues, not be compliant to state control) are needed. It might be effective that civil society actors initiate a program on development of labour unions.

▪ Systematic monitoring of public institutions' performance

Civil society actors should become effective monitors of governmental performance. Formal and informal actors should join in observation and collection of facts through constant monitoring of public institutions' performance. There is a tangible lack of formal (organisations) and informal (individual researchers) actors initiating monitoring practices, while the areas necessitating improvement of governmental performance are many.

▪ Social messages as communication channels

The formal and informal actors should put accountability to population as a priority, and target the marginalised with social messages. Their missions, strategies and objectives should prioritise the benefit of marginalised population. The actors should organise joint visits to Armenian marzes and build the advocacy narrative based on addressing social concerns. The content of social messages should be oriented towards explanations on how various issues (constitutional rights, gender equality, fair elections etc.) are related to social welfare. All seemingly abstract for public issues advocated by NGOs so far should be providing explanatory depth of linkage to issues of social justice.

▪ Alternative channels of education

New and alternative sources of education should be developed to access the marginalised. The formal and informal actors should orient resources to develop alternative educational platforms, such as discussion and debate clubs, online forums etc. The important agents of socialisation are educational institutions, whereas the existing Armenia's educational system suffers from state control, and politicised. The more there are informal, alternative channels of education, the higher the probability will be of enhancing socio-economic awareness through introduction of issues to the marginalised.

▪ Political will

There is a lack of political will to engage in meaningful (not artificial) dialogue with civil society. The Armenian public authorities and institutions necessitate self-assessment upon starting to treat civil society actors as an equal partner in policy making. As a result of civil society consultative engagement with government, their recommendations usually remain disregarded when it comes to the final decision making. The Armenian government should deliver on civil society recommendations and create inviting spaces for both actors to present concerns. Civil society actors should also understand that cooperation from the government towards them would come from certain individuals from within that government, not generally from it as a whole. NGOs should identify individuals in governmental agencies, who actors can work. Identifying individuals who they can work with in promoting agenda might be of potential impact.

▪ Evidence-based research

All public policies necessitate objective research and analysis. Armenian civil society actors should employ the evidence-based research on practice. Academic institutions, think tanks and individual researchers should maximise impact of their research by communicating their findings to the marginalised and policy and decision making bodies via formal and informal actors.

