CIVIL SOCIETY BRIEF

UZBEKISTAN

Civil Society Overview

The concept of civil society in Central Asian countries, including Uzbekistan, is often a dilemma for researchers, as are the definition and classification of indigenous forms of social organizations. Studies suggest that applying a western, neoliberal definition of civil society to understand the nature of Uzbek civil society is problematic.¹ Associational life in the west, predominantly in Europe, was historically based on individual interests and motivations. Yet a different pattern existed in Central Asia, where the foundations of organizations and associations tended to be grounded in kinship and traditional arrangements.²

Understanding civil society in Uzbekistan thus requires a more nuanced view of the social structures and relations, institutions, and practices that have built up in the country with the interaction of local culture, traditions, and political systems. Traditional forms of association based on tribal and clan identities that revolve around strong extended family links have historically been a form of social organization for the Uzbek people and have served as social safety nets.³ Seventy years under the former Soviet Union did not diminish these tribal groupings and clan affiliations, and these remain current among the Uzbek people. After independence,

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Country Context

The Republic of Uzbekistan sits in the middle of Central Asia. It borders five landlocked countries: Kazakhstan to the north, the Kyrgyz Republic to the northwest, Turkmenistan to the southwest, Tajikistan to the southeast, and Afghanistan to the south. Uzbekistan's total border is 6,621 kilometers. The Republic of Uzbekistan gained independence from the former Soviet Union on 1 September 1991. Uzbekistan's population totaled approximately 33.9 million in January 2020.^a As of October 2019, 50.5% of the population resided in urban areas and 49.5% in rural areas. The average population density is a low 75.1 persons per square kilometer,^b which puts the country in 132nd place globally.^c

^a The State Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Statistics. Population of Uzbekistan. <https://stat.uz/en/press-center/news-of-committee/7165-on-the-minimum-and-maximum-prices-for-certain-types-of-food-products-in-the-central-dehkan-markets-of-the-regions-of-the-republic-of-uzbekistan-3> (accessed 17 February 2020).

^b The State Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Statistics. Demography. <https://data.gov.uz/uz/datasets/9213> (accessed 17 February 2020).

^c Invest in Uzbekistan. Major Cities. <http://invest-in-uzbekistan.org/en/krupnye-goroda/>.

Uzbekistan is headed by a President who is elected every 5 years. The last presidential elections took place on 4 December 2016 after the death of Islam Karimov, the first President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, who served from 1989 until his death. Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who had served as Prime Minister of Uzbekistan from 2003, won the 2016 election to become President.^d With this change of power, a new era began for Uzbekistan. With the election came sweeping political reforms, including monetary and economic liberalization, privatization, anti-monopoly measures, modernization of capital markets, elimination of forced labor, and the abolition of exit visas.^e

Uzbekistan's *Oliy Majlis* (Parliament) exercises legislative power and is the government's supreme representative body. Its two chambers are the Legislative Chamber (the lower house) and the Senate (the upper house). The Legislative Chamber comprises 120 elected deputies and the Senate, 100 senators. There are 5 political parties and 13 committees within the Parliament of Uzbekistan. The fifth, the Ecology Party of Uzbekistan, the so-called green political party, was established on 22 January 2019, whereas the remainder were established shortly after independence.^f

Uzbekistan is a fast-growing country. Since 2017, the government's new leadership has aspired to modernize the country to enable better living conditions for its citizens, create a more vibrant and inclusive market economy, and transform the state's role through better public administration and public service delivery. The government's strategic objective is to achieve upper middle-income status by 2030.

Uzbekistan's significant reforms are reflected in improvements in the nation's international rankings. According to the Worldwide Governance Indicators of 2018, Uzbekistan, on average, scored higher in all six categories than its peers in the lower middle-income country grouping and in European and Central Asian countries. These indicators are accountability and voice, corruption control, government effectiveness, political stability and absence of violence, regulatory quality, and rule of law.^g Uzbekistan's economic indicators in the Doing Business rankings have also improved.^h

Agriculture, industry, and services contribute about one-third of Uzbekistan's gross domestic product. Gold, natural gas, and services dominate the country's exports. Manufacturing is developing through a state-led industrial policy mainly focused on the production of automobiles, chemicals, and food products. Services are dominated by retail trade and transportation. Uzbekistan's main imports are machinery and equipment (42.5% of total), chemical products (13%), and ferrous metals (8%). Uzbekistan's gold reserves are fourth largest in the world; the country is the seventh in gold mining. Uzbekistan ranks seventh globally in uranium reserves, eighth in natural gas production, and tenth in copper reserves.ⁱ

▲ **Chorsu Bazaar.** This is a traditional bazaar located in the center of the old town of Tashkent, the capital city of Uzbekistan (photo from Asian Development Bank).

^d *Gazeta*. 2016. Shavkat Mirziyoyev won the presidential elections. 5 December. <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2016/12/05/winner/>.

^e K. Mallinson. 2019. Can Uzbekistan's President Meet Raised Expectations? *Chatham House*. 11 December. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/can-uzbekistan-s-president-meet-raised-expectations>.

^f Ecological Party of Uzbekistan. On the creation and activities of the Ecological Party of Uzbekistan. <https://ecouz.uz>.

^g World Bank. The Worldwide Governance Indicators 2018. <http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/> (accessed 24 April 2020).

^h The World Bank Group Doing Business Project 2020. *Economy Profile of Uzbekistan: Doing Business 2020*. <https://www.doingbusiness.org/content/dam/doingBusiness/country/u/uzbekistan/USB.pdf>.

ⁱ U. Kamaletdinov and N. Zufarova 2016. *Cost of doing business in Uzbekistan: practical guide*. Tashkent: Baktria Press.

they became the basis for the social organization of citizens. A good representation of these kinds of social organizations, which are distinct from party or state organizations, were *mahalla*.

Until February 2020, *mahallas* were defined as government-organized nongovernment structures with the responsibility to distribute targeted social benefits provided by the government.⁴ The government controls the appointment of chairs—who serve as leaders of particular territorial divisions called *mahallas*—and their salaries are paid from the state budget. Nevertheless, cooperation and community assistance are the foundations of *mahallas*. This is a well-developed practice among Uzbeks known as *hashar*. Drawing on *hashar*, the *mahalla* chairs and its members encourage residents to undertake communal work, for instance, cleaning streets and gutters, or readying their *mahallas* for celebrations and holidays.⁵ Development actors have used this kind of participatory approach widely to strengthen the engagement and sustainability of different development initiatives. *Mahallas* also organize and oversee other types of public activities that include the voluntary involvement of citizens, such as the preparation of family events, provision of care for orphans and widows, mediation of internal conflicts, and oversight of property succession.

Former President Karimov considered *mahallas* to be an indigenous self-organization system, which could be a good foundation for civil society.⁶ Their importance is underlined in the constitution of Uzbekistan, which states that “mahallas in cities, towns, settlements and villages shall decide all local matters at general meetings.”⁷ To expand the *mahalla* institution and create modern civil society, a government-organized nongovernment organization (GONGO), the Mahalla Foundation, was created in 1993. This organization intended to unify *mahallas* and encourage better coordination between the government and these structures.⁸

From the late 1990s onward, driven by pro-poor policy making, some development agencies reoriented their support mechanisms in Uzbekistan toward more grassroots-level, community development initiatives. The Counterpart Consortium was one such initiative, in which three-way partnerships among *mahalla* committees, nongovernment organizations (NGOs), and community groups were encouraged to lead to more grassroots-level development programs.⁹ It was presumed that a *mahalla* would have a better understanding of local needs “as an indigenous, grass-roots, and long standing association of citizens,” in contrast to the NGOs that mushroomed after independence, which lacked accountability and representation among the local population.¹⁰

▲ **Other social organizations.** *Mahallas* organize and oversee other types of public activities that include the voluntary involvement of citizens (photo from Tashkent Province Water Supply Development Project, Project Implementation Unit).

The concept of civil society in the western, neoliberal understanding emerged in Uzbekistan soon after the country’s independence, mostly as a result of donor activities. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID), in particular, promoted civil society development within its broader strategy of civil society strengthening and democracy promotion.¹¹ Donors promoted NGO support in the country, considering NGO development as an important indicator of Uzbek civil society’s evolution. The 1999 Law on Nongovernment Noncommercial Organizations (Article 2) stated that an NGO is a self-governing organization created on a voluntary basis by individuals and/or legal entities, not pursuing profit as the main goal of its activity and not sharing the profit between its members.¹²

However, inside Uzbekistan, NGOs were increasingly viewed with suspicion, as some sort of anti-government “Trojan horse.”¹³ This attitude was reinforced by the “color revolutions” occurring in other members of the former Soviet Union, in which NGOs and social movements allegedly played an essential role as instigators. The government feared these kinds of developments as potentially destabilizing.¹⁴ As a consequence, a large number of international NGOs that had run development programs in Uzbekistan during the 1990s and early 2000s closed down or were expelled.

Besides *mahallas*, GONGOs, which typically have offices across the country, operate in Uzbekistan. Government regulations established many GONGOs; the national budget provides their funding. Uzbekistan’s largest GONGOs include the Mahalla Foundation, the

Red Crescent Society of Uzbekistan, the Society of Disabled People of Uzbekistan, the Women's Committee of Uzbekistan, and the Youth Union of Uzbekistan. Collectively, these organizations have more than 1,000 branches throughout the country.

The restrictive legislative trends under former President Karimov limited NGO activities.¹⁵ Aside from the small amounts of financial assistance provided predominantly by the UN agencies operating in the country, the most important local funding source for civil society organizations has been a special public fund established under the President in 2008. Since its establishment, the public fund has mainly provided financial assistance to GONGOs and those activities that were in line with the government's socioeconomic development agenda.¹⁶ Through this and other sources, the government provided considerable administrative and financial support to GONGOs and remained unaccommodating to independent civil society organizations (CSOs).¹⁷

This restrictive environment continued until the new government came to power in 2016. The new President initiated a number of legislative amendments that enabled civil society development in the country. Presidential orders No. 4947 of 7 February 2017¹⁸ and No. 5430 of 4 May 2018¹⁹ now allow NGOs and interested groups to receive funding from diverse sources, including the private sector and international organizations. Although some restrictions apply to the amount of foreign financing for NGOs—as established by the Decree of the Cabinet of Ministers of October 2019²⁰—these legislative acts are a step forward for diversifying funding sources for NGOs in the country. In addition to this legislative amendment,

a Law on Public Control (effective 13 April 2018) established a legal framework for the public oversight of government institutions and officials. The law enables citizens, citizens' self-government bodies, the media, and noncommercial organizations to exercise oversight through full access to meetings of state bodies, relevant documents, and audits; monitoring; public discussions; and hearings. These activities then contribute to preventing and fighting corruption, enhancing accountability, and the transparency of governance.²¹

Following the Decree on Measures to Fundamentally Enhance the Role of Civil Society Institutions in the Process of Democratic Renewal of the Country, signed on 4 May 2018, the Ministry of Justice introduced an order on 1 June 2018 establishing the Regulation on the Procedure for Informing about Planned Activities of Non-governmental Non-commercial Organizations.²² The latter clarified that NGOs do not need to seek Ministry of Justice approval to hold events, but they must inform the ministry about such planned events. The minimum period for such notification was reduced to 10 days prior to an event without foreigners and 20 days in advance of events including foreigners.²³

In addition, an old rule that restricted NGO projects from receiving grants was cancelled in 2018. Any NGO can now directly receive grants from foreign or international sources without special permission. Since 1 January 2020, the cost to register an NGO has fallen significantly. In addition, the Ministry of Justice now hosts an online NGO portal; since the end of November 2019, NGOs have been able to upload their foundation documents while the ministry tests the system.²⁴

Besides these changes, a special consultative council was created under the President to support civil society development. This council facilitates communication between the government and civil society; it will also be responsible for developing suggestions for the strategic direction of Uzbek civil society development.²⁵

According to official sources, as of 2018, there were 9,235 organizations in Uzbekistan defined as NGOs. However, this includes all political party subdivisions, regional branches, and trade unions. Besides this, the regional branches of an NGO are considered as separate NGOs in this count. For instance, each of the 150 branches of the Society of Disabled People of Uzbekistan is considered one NGO.²⁶ Considering this kind of multiplier effect, the number of NGOs appears to increase annually, but this is often resulting from the creation of new branches of particular NGOs rather than of new NGOs per se.

▲ **A legal framework for public oversight.** The law enables citizens, citizens' self-government bodies, the media, and noncommercial organizations to exercise oversight (photo from Center of Development and Support Initiatives NIHOL).

According to recent observations, more than 6,000 NGOs (about 65% of the country's total) could be categorized as GONGOs, whereas around 3,000 are "self-initiated NGOs" created through bottom-up bases and which operate locally and do not have branches across Uzbekistan.²⁷ In terms of the distribution of CSOs according to their field of activity, the top five areas in 2018 were as follows: (i) enterprise and farm development (around 2,000 NGOs working in this field), (ii) sports development (over 1,250 NGOs), (iii) subdivisions of political parties (over 830 NGOs), (iv) development of democratic institutions (around 830 NGOs), and (v) youth development (around 600 NGOs).²⁸ As for the distribution of NGOs in the country, the majority are registered in the Ferghana region and Tashkent city, while there are few CSOs in the Navoi region; other regions have a moderately equal distribution of CSOs.²⁹

Given the characteristics of Uzbekistan civil society, NGOs can be grouped into four large categories: (i) grassroots CSOs, (ii) GONGOs, (iii) research organizations and think tanks, and (iv) professional associations.

In Uzbekistan, civic participation in public life tends to manifest itself in the form of mobilized, top-down actions. The most important feature of civil society—pluralism—is still limited. Nevertheless, some NGOs and individuals demonstrate enthusiasm about advancing public interest and voicing specific social needs. For instance, environmentalists and youth organizations are gradually occupying a visible niche in civil society. Civil society traditions are slowly taking root and emerging in the country.

Grassroots Civil Society Organizations

Grassroots CSOs developed after the independence of Uzbekistan as a part of activities led by international organizations have played a crucial role in shaping civil society and addressing issues using a bottom-up approach. However, due to restrictive policies and a limited enabling environment, they tended to function either on a small scale or as nonregistered initiative groups until the 2016 presidential election. Since 2018, President Mirziyoyev has implemented more progressive policies to develop the civil society sector in Uzbekistan.³⁰

Below is a list of some of the highest-impact and long-standing grassroots CSOs. Strong civil society activists commonly head these organizations that usually work on a grant-basis provided by national and (more

▲ Distribution of civil society organizations in the country.

The majority are registered in the Ferghana region and Tashkent city, while there are few CSOs in the Navoi region (photo from Yuksalish).

commonly) international organizations. A few of them have their own websites or social media pages.

- **Barqaror Hayot** is a well-established NGO supporting human trafficking victims and former prisoners. Barqaror Hayot's work focuses on the rehabilitation and re-integration of its target population and includes efforts to stop human trafficking.
- **Bukhara Center for Humanitarian and Legal Assistance** is one of the oldest NGOs in Uzbekistan working on human rights, particularly on labor issues and political rights. Since the early 2000s, the center has been monitoring child and forced labor in the country and is a part of the third-party monitoring project led by the International Labour Organization (ILO) since 2015.³¹ The organization has also actively advocated the right for adequate housing in the country³² and is a representative of Uzbekistan in the first Central Asian network on the Right of Adequate Housing.
- **Center Hayot** was created in September 1999 on the initiative of a group of women with disabilities. *Hayot* is translated from Uzbek language as "life." The organization works toward integrating children with disabilities into society, protecting their rights, and promoting the idea of inclusive education in the country.
- **Center of Development and Support Initiatives NIHOL** protects the interests and rights of women and girls, especially migrant women, victims of human

trafficking, and women with disabilities. They advocate involving more women in sustainable water management and decision-making processes through capacity building.

- **The Rahimdillik Center** was established in 2000 and seeks to provide comprehensive social services (e.g., shelter provision) and protect the legal interests of women and children with disabilities, as well as low-income families in the Samarkand region.
- **Ecoforum**, which was established in 2007, works to unite the efforts of civil society around a national nature conservation strategy. Their area of expertise includes integrated water and land resource management, ecotourism, and renewable energy. The organization also supports the development of an environmental journalists' network.
- **INTILISH** was established in 2001 and operates nationwide, is focused on social protection and public health initiatives.
- **Istiqbolli Avlod** provides training and education to youth and teenagers to help them become more socially integrated and active citizens. They work with vulnerable populations, including migrant women, victims of trafficking, sex workers, youth aged 15–25 with drug use problems, and those infected with HIV/AIDS.
- **Institute of Democracy and Human Rights** was established in 2015.³³ The organization has branches in four regions of Uzbekistan. Its mandate is to

contribute to democratization, encourage public–private partnerships, and promote human rights. The institute works closely with both GONGOs and other grassroots NGOs and/or initiative groups. It is a part of the Civil Society Development Advisory Council of the Uzbek President.

- **Khorezm Rural Advisory Support Service** is an independent NGO comprising practitioners, researchers, and other specialists who share common ideas and work together to improve rural livelihoods, alleviate poverty, and increase food security and environmental sustainability in rural Uzbekistan.
- **Uzbekistan Society for the Protection of Birds** was established in 2006 and works toward the conservation and rehabilitation of the gene pools of birds that permanently and temporarily inhabit the territory of Uzbekistan.

Government-Organized Nongovernment Organizations

The government first established umbrella CSOs in the mid-1990s.³⁴ In Uzbekistan, these GONGOs have an extensive network of branches. The government finances them to undertake different social initiatives through its public fund grant competitions.³⁵ Today, these organizations have developed organizational structures, usually have a central secretariat, national and regional branches, as well as local representatives covering all districts of the country. Each GONGO has its own sector of responsibility. Some of the GONGOs' representatives used to have the status of vice-*khokim* (deputy mayor of the local authority) on specific issues, which provided them with political power as well. For example, until establishment of the Ministry for support of Makhalla and Family in February 2020, the Women's Committee of Uzbekistan (WCUz) representative in a district had the status of vice-*khokim* on women's affairs. Some of the government supported CSOs in the country are as follows:

- **The Association of People with Disabilities** unites 25 NGOs into the largest network working on the rights of persons with disabilities. The association was registered at the beginning of 2018.³⁶ It used to operate as the Society of People with Disabilities that closely worked with international and national organizations in promoting the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.
- **The Ministry of Justice established Madad**, a legal advisory bureau, at the end of 2019.³⁷ The center has offices in almost all regions of Uzbekistan and

▲ **Improving rural livelihoods.** Khorezm Rural Advisory Support Service works to improve rural livelihoods, alleviate poverty, and increase food security and environmental sustainability in rural Uzbekistan (photo from Khorezm Rural Advisory Support Service).

operates the online portal Advice.uz that lists the legal services it provides. The center is registered as an NGO; however, it is considered as a GONGO since the Ministry of Justice oversees it.³⁸ Madad is a prototype of the United Kingdom Citizens Advice and is mostly financed by the United Kingdom (UK) Embassy in Tashkent.³⁹ More branches are scheduled to open by 2021.

- **National Association of NGOs of Uzbekistan** consolidates the organizational and intellectual resources of NGOs on the implementation of state priorities and encompasses 150 registered NGOs in the country.⁴⁰ Operating since 2005, the organization has significant government support and has two newspapers covering all aspects of social life. The association also provides capacity building support, thus playing a critical role in the NGO sector's sustainable development.
- **National Association of Microfinance Institutions** unites a network of 22 credit unions and 21 microfinance institutions and provides knowledge management, policy advocacy, research, and technical services.
- **Youth Union** serves as the main body shaping youth policy in the country.⁴¹ The organization consists of a central apparatus, regional branches, local divisions, and other organizations. The union originates from Kamalot, the first youth organization in independent Uzbekistan. However, Kamalot's mandate to support youth and shape youth policy has been questioned as the chairperson of the union is the youngest senator in Parliament.
- The nationwide movement **Yuksalish** was established in early 2019 and has branches in every region of Uzbekistan.⁴² The movement aims to gather volunteers, diaspora, and NGOs to assist in the implementation of planned reforms and promote citizens' participation in governance. The heads of the Yuksalish movement in the central administration are selected among the deputies of the *Oliy Majlis*, local *kengashes* (local level of deputies), and *khokims* (mayors). Having members of Parliament on board, the movement plays a key role in citizens' engagement and public oversight policy making.⁴³
- **Women's Committee of Uzbekistan**, formed in 1991, enhances women's role in the public and private spheres. The WCUz's chair is eligible to be a deputy prime minister; the Women's Committee of the Republic of Karakalpakstan's chair is likewise entitled

▲ **Nationwide movement Yuksalish.** Established in early 2019 and with branches in every region of Uzbekistan, Yuksalish assists in the implementation of planned reforms and promotes citizens' participation in governance, such as when presenting the results of its State and Problems of Civil Society in Uzbekistan report (photo from Yuksalish).

to be a deputy chairperson, Council of Ministers in the Republic of Karakalpakstan. The WCUz's work is elaborated further below.

Professional Associations and Other Professional Organizations

Professional associations and organizations include both self-organized and state-initiated associations of the same professions and businesses. The new edition of the Law on Professional Unions of Uzbekistan, which entered into force on 8 March 2020, provides more opportunities for social partnership and representation of members and protection of their rights, as well as ensures the independence of unions.⁴⁴ There are over 50 professional associations and unions in the country for various professions. A list of some major associations working in the country follows:

- Established in 1991, the **Federation of Trade Unions** is the oldest professional association in Uzbekistan, with representation in all regions of the country. The federation has 6.1 million members and provides support to them by inspecting labor regulations, investigating violations within member organizations, conducting negotiations, filing cases with the Ministry of Labor and Employment Relations for legal action and sanctions if necessary, and representing its members in national courts.⁴⁵ The federation played a crucial role in advocating the ratification of ILO

core conventions on the eradication of child and forced labor in Uzbekistan.⁴⁶ ILO has included the federation as a partner for monitoring labor practices in Uzbekistan's cotton harvest.

- **Water consumer associations** work on water resource management issues in the country. Farms or other legal entities typically established these associations to improve the effective use of irrigation resources by farmers, *mahalla*, and other rural citizens. Water consumer associations are in charge of operating and maintaining irrigation and drainage systems, assisting farmers in getting access to equipment, seeds, and other inputs, and resolving conflicts related to water usage among farmers. Although more than 1,500 associations are currently active in Uzbekistan, their management capacity and performances are uneven and often low.⁴⁷

Research Organizations and Think Tanks

Dedicated research organizations in Uzbekistan are few and the general capacity for research is low. Almost all receive some portion of support from the state budget. Some organizations with a research mandate include the following:

- **Association for Engineering Education of Tashkent City** is a unique public association in the field of technical, scientific, and engineering education.
- **Center for the Development of Civil Society** precedes the Independent Institute for Monitoring the Formation of Civil Society that was established in 2003 and dissolved at the end of 2019.⁴⁸ Its research and monitoring of civil society development in the country have shaped the government's policy on civil society.⁴⁹
- **Center for Economic Research** was established in 1999 with the support of the United Nations Development Programme. Currently, the center conducts research and analysis on issues such as urbanization, the green economy, alternative energy sources, transport, food security, social protection, and human capital.
- **Center for Social Research** is a multifunctional research organization conducting research on culture and education. It provides expert and consultative support to NGOs, government, and international organizations.
- **Development Strategy Center** is a think tank established in February 2017.⁵⁰ The center has an

explicit mandate to track the National Development Strategy's implementation, facilitate the drafting of an annual state program based on policy research, oversee public discussions, and conduct surveys.

- **Interstate Commission for Water Coordination of Central Asia** is an organization established in 1992 that analyzes and prepares development approaches for improving water management and the country's ecology.
- **Scientific Research Center *Oila* (family)** was established under the Cabinet of Ministers in 2018 to strengthen the family as an institution in 2018.⁵¹ The center serves as a research institution on family-related issues and has representations in each region of the country. The center publishes a biannual journal on family issues.

Women's Civil Society Organizations in Uzbekistan

In Uzbekistan, the formation of women's NGOs emerged from the long-standing institutional tradition of women's organizations instigated by the former Soviet Union.⁵² Women have played a critical role in the growing influence and presence of CSOs in society that have been focusing on issues central to the social-political-economic status of women, including human rights, literacy, health and vocational training programs, and assistance to women with disabilities. For instance, according to the 2002 country report for Uzbekistan from the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against

▲ **Protecting reproductive health.** Women have played a critical role in the growing influence and presence of civil society organizations focusing on health (photo from Asian Development Bank).

▲ **Improving women's livelihoods.** Several civil society organizations in Uzbekistan currently work on women's economic empowerment, gender equality, and enhancing women's rights (photo from Asian Development Bank).

Women, approximately 70% of the over 2,000 national and local NGOs were headed by women and were focused on addressing various social, economic, cultural, and political development issues.⁵³ Although the quantity and quality of NGO work considerably diminished during the transition period when many CSOs were closed down, the predominant presence of women in the civil society sector remained significant in the country and has been revived following the progressive reforms undertaken by President Mirziyoyev in recent years. The current government prioritizes gender equality and women's empowerment in its social development policy.

Throughout civil society's development in Uzbekistan, women's CSOs and grassroots NGOs have been highly active, especially in recent years, working on family issues, the protection of mothers, children's well-being, and addressing domestic violence. The WCUz was one of the first and largest GONGOs registered in Uzbekistan that operated from 1991 until 2020.⁵⁴ The WCUz shaped gender policy in the country and advocated for the adoption of two important laws in 2019: (i) on guarantees of equal rights and opportunities for women and men and (ii) on the protection of women from harassment and violence. These regulations provided a legal basis for the creation of shelters to support victims of gender-based violence in Uzbekistan. A total of 191 state-supported shelters operated under the WCUz throughout the country. In February 2020, the WCUz became part of the Ministry of Mahalla and Family Affairs, and the deputy minister in charge of women's issues leads its work.

Several civil society organizations in Uzbekistan currently work on women's economic empowerment, gender

equality, and enhancing women's rights. The following list includes some of them:

- **Business Women's Association Tadbirkor Ayol** is a network comprising 12 organizations operating as a loose association. Shortly after independence, the association opened offices in Tashkent and Samarkand. As the organization expanded, it opened other branches later on. Its offices originally opened to support entrepreneurship and female leadership in business through capacity building, support for business registration, and tax information.⁵⁵ Their organizational mandate later extended to health and ecology, and incorporated social dimensions including civic, youth, and humanitarian issues; human rights; and women's empowerment. The association has been leading communication with state authorities on women's empowerment, particularly in their economic rights.
- **Center for Legal and Civic Initiatives** was established in 2004 with a head office in Tashkent and three branches in the Andijan, Ferghana, and Tashkent regions.⁵⁶ The center mostly conducts legal analysis on gender equality and women's political rights. It is a member of the Civil Society Development Advisory Council under the President. The organization has been part of the Beijing Platform for Action since 2014 and has conducted various training events for different interest groups.⁵⁷
- **Civic Initiatives Support Center** was created in 2004 and works on gender equality issues; women's reproductive health; Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women implementation, monitoring, and reporting; protection of reproductive health and childhood; strengthening families; improving sex-disaggregated statistics; and gender analysis.
- **National Center for Socioeconomic Development Sabr** was initially established in 1996 to support women and children in crisis situations in the Samarkand region, but has extended its reach countrywide since then. The organization now works on developing entrepreneurship in the country through piloting microfinance programs for low-income families, and providing business consultation and training in vocational education and financial literacy among women. The center carries out a wide range of research and provides financial and in-kind assistance to women and children in crisis, including providing shelter to victims of domestic violence.⁵⁸

- **Oydin Nur** is one of the first and oldest shelters in the country that also provides legal, psychological, and vocational training assistance to women victims of domestic violence.
- **NGO Mehrjon** was founded in 2007 in Fergana city and provides women and children with social and legal support against all forms of discrimination. The organization implements programs on legal literacy, health, and the prevention of gender-based violence.

Government–Civil Society Collaboration Mechanisms

Presidential decrees adopted in 2017⁵⁹ and 2018 set new rules for interaction between government organizations and CSOs.⁶⁰ Besides these regulations, the Government of Uzbekistan launched several tools and mechanisms to engage with people and CSOs to lead to more participatory policy making in the country. Some mechanisms aimed at leading to better public oversight to tackle high-level corruption in the country have come into force, creating special anticorruption measures in the country.⁶¹ Other mechanisms that have been established since 2016 in these directions include the following:

The Virtual Reception of the President of Uzbekistan was established in 2016 and includes online and offline channels of the citizen's grievance redress mechanism.⁶² Virtual reception is one of the most trusted channels for citizen's engagement in the state-building process. It is a good tool to quickly (generally within 10 working days) and effectively address citizens' complaints in a transparent manner without much bureaucratic burden. This is also an open source for CSOs to reach the central government.

The People's Reception of the President of Uzbekistan was established at the beginning of 2017 to file people's complaints and provide oversight activities.⁶³ Each people's reception is headed by a manager who is selected from among law enforcement or judicial officials and who is accountable directly to the administration of the President. Control over the progress and the quality of the resolution of citizens' appeals is carried out by inspectors of the administration of the President.⁶⁴ The tool is effective in regions with low internet coverage and helps local CSOs to push their agenda bottom-up and/or resolve bureaucratic issues they may face.

The Public Chamber under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan was established in April 2020 to encourage dialogue among citizens, the state, and civil

society institutions. The chamber could be considered as a successor of the Advisory Council on the Development of Civil Society under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, which existed for less than 2 years, and the Center for the Development of Civil Society, which existed for less than 6 months. Broadening the mandates of the abolished institutions, the new chamber intends to (i) accelerate development in the country by facilitating systemic and effective dialogue between government, citizens, and civil society; (ii) encourage cooperation of civil society institutions in achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals; and (iii) encourage public examination of draft normative legal acts on different socioeconomic spheres of public life and conduct consultations and public hearings on them and then using feedback from society to implement reforms based on citizens' trust and support.⁶⁵ The Public Chamber is a state-financed institution with 50 members, 18 of whom the President appoints, while the rest comprise representatives of principal NGOs and individual experts on CSO development.

▲ **Public discussion of draft laws.** The Law on Non-government Non-profit Organizations (1999) and other legal acts have developed a unified system to support NGOs and the development of civil society in the country (photo from Yuksalish).

Social partnership⁶⁶ is a formal way of establishing interaction between state bodies and NGOs and other CSOs in developing and implementing programs for the nation's social and economic development, including sector and geographic initiatives and decisions affecting the people of Uzbekistan.⁶⁷ In this regard, state programs are the frameworks of such partnerships for promoting public monitoring and oversight. As an example, Obod Qishloq,⁶⁸ Obod Mahalla,⁶⁹ and Every Family is

an Entrepreneur⁷⁰ all recently adopted state program frameworks for government–civil society cooperation.

Online portal. Lastly, the government has utilized technology to improve its engagement with civil society in Uzbekistan. In November 2019, the state NGO registration body under the Ministry of Justice launched a portal for registered NGOs to provide e-services. Providing information on upcoming events, NGO registration, renewal, NGO foreign employee accreditation, and submission of periodic reports are all possible through this portal.⁷¹

Legal and Regulatory Frameworks

Since independence, more than 200 legislative acts have aimed to enhance the role and participation of CSOs in addressing pressing socioeconomic problems of citizens. The Law on Public Associations (1991),⁷² Law on Nongovernment Noncommercial Organizations (1999),⁷³ the Law on Guarantees of the Activities of Non-government Non-profit Organizations (2007),⁷⁴ Law on Charity (2007),⁷⁵ the Law on Social Partnerships (2014),⁷⁶ and other legal acts have developed a unified system to support NGOs and the development of civil society in the country.

The Uzbekistan Civil Code defines the legal status of noncommercial organizations, including public associations, public funds, institutions, legal entity associations (societies and unions), and self-governance bodies for citizens. NGOs can also form associations or unions to coordinate their activities and represent and advocate common interests. Following are the kinds of noncommercial organizations according to Uzbek legislation: (i) A **public association** is voluntarily created by citizens to pursue common interests.⁷⁷ (ii) A **public fund** is an organization without members funded through voluntary contributions, and supports charitable cultural, educational, social, or other purposes that benefit others.⁷⁸ (iii) An **institution** is an organization for nonprofit social or cultural activities;⁷⁹ however, due to the lack of procedures to establish and register such kinds of organizations, virtually no institutions exist. (iv) An **association (union)** of NGOs has members that are NGOs who owe a secondary allegiance to the main association. (v) A **citizens' self-governance body** (or *mahalla*).⁸⁰

Despite improving the enabling legislative environment for CSOs, multiple legal and regulatory barriers affect CSO formation, registration, and operation. According

to the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, registration requirements for CSOs are more demanding than for commercial organizations.⁸¹ For registering a national-level public association, a sum of SUM1,900,000 (approximately \$187) is required as of 21 May 2020, whereas for a local public association the fee is SUM950,000 (approximately \$93) as of 21 May 2020.⁸² The fees are halved for CSOs representing disabled persons, veterans, women, and youth. In addition to the fees, highly detailed documentation requirements, excessive time delays in reviewing the registration applications, and sometimes vague grounds being cited for the denial of registration are among those factors discouraging the establishment of CSOs.⁸³

In terms of the functioning of CSOs, some major barriers include tedious and unclear reporting requirements, the requirement of government access to organizational activities, prior approval for some initiatives, and sanctions in case of infraction of applicable laws.⁸⁴ The principal law regulating the NGO sector prohibits the activities of any nonregistered initiative groups.⁸⁵ The sanctions that apply to such kinds of activities include a large fine (Article 239 of the Administrative Code). Furthermore, joining unregistered organizations could result in a fine and detention or imprisonment (Article 216 of the Criminal Code). In spite of legal constraints, Uzbek young people have always been engaged in volunteerism. There are a few NGOs working specifically with volunteers, mostly in

▲ **Active youth in Uzbekistan.** Uzbek young people have always been engaged in volunteerism (photo from United Nations Population Fund, Uzbekistan).

the spheres of healthcare, social work, human trafficking, and the protection of animals.

Even though the government involves a number of GONGOs and independent CSOs in government-organized conferences and workshops convened to discuss critical concerns like access to information, human trafficking, social service development, and public oversight of the government, it remains difficult for CSOs to carry out advocacy activities in Uzbekistan.⁸⁶

Capacity of Civil Society Organizations

A major barrier limiting CSOs' activities is the small number of funding sources for independent CSOs and the limited capacity of CSOs to raise funds for their work. Although some restrictions to the provision of direct funding from international donors to local CSOs have recently been lifted, international organizations and agencies still face some bureaucratic hurdles when offering such funding. Lack of funding for the sector, in turn, slows development of Uzbekistan's civic sector.⁸⁷ However, the government finances local CSOs to undertake different social initiatives through its public fund grant competitions. In 2018, the public fund awarded approximately 96 grants (out of 316 applications submitted) valued at approximately \$271,483 (SUM2.75 billion),⁸⁸ and in 2020, the public fund announced a call for applications for grants with a value of approximately \$3.57 million (around SUM38,033,900).⁸⁹ The majority of these funds go to GONGOs, such as the National Association of Non-Governmental Non-Profit Organizations of Uzbekistan, the Independent Institute for Monitoring the Formation of Civil Society, and the Ecological Movement.⁹⁰

Despite the government's efforts to further improve the enabling environment for CSOs in the country, low levels of participation among the wider public in CSO activities is still quite apparent. This can be partly explained by the limited involvement of CSOs in systematically analyzing and addressing the issues that concern the general public, such as supporting vulnerable groups of society (including women) in challenging financial and social situations, preventing crime, fighting corruption, and others.⁹¹ The low capacity for effective communication with the general public as well as underdeveloped policy advocacy and monitoring skills remain as weak points for Uzbekistan's CSOs.

Cooperation with Other Development Organizations

Since Uzbekistan's independence, ADB, Agence Française de Développement, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit, Japan International Cooperation Agency, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, the United Nations, USAID, and the World Bank have established a significant presence in the country. These organizations have been providing loans and technical and advisory assistance to the Government of Uzbekistan to help it achieve short- and medium-term priorities for the nation's socioeconomic development. Beyond this, international development assistance programs introduced the western civil society model and fostered the growth of NGOs as development actors.

CSOs actively cooperate with development partners and donors and are involved in the implementation and monitoring of different projects. For instance, they are involved in United Nations Development Programme-supported projects directed toward poverty alleviation, environmental management and energy consumption, and management of democratization processes, including the development of civil society and democratic institutions. From 2018 to 2020, the European Union supported CSO development through the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights⁹² and civil society and/or local authorities instruments,⁹³ and allocated around €2,500,000 (\$2,889,499) for

▲ **Building civil society capacity and increasing cooperation.** CSOs actively cooperate with development partners and donors and are involved in the implementation and monitoring of different projects (photo from Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development).

the effort. The Government of the United Kingdom also provides substantial support to civil society development valued at around £1,500,000 (\$1,096,331). This accounts for 25.21% of the organization's total country support during 2018–2020, besides other development projects, including education, in Uzbekistan. Over the same period of time, USAID expanded its development projects and supported civil society development projects for a total amount of \$12.7 million during 2018–2020.

Besides these, CSOs are also involved in projects implemented by other development organizations: in United Nations Children's Fund-supported interventions

for promoting the well-being of the population and protection of motherhood and childhood in the county; in Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations-assisted projects to increase productivity of agriculture, animal husbandry, and development of forestry and fishery; and in World Bank-supported initiatives to encourage the robust socioeconomic performance of the country. Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development, a French NGO, has been working exclusively on domestic violence and has supported grassroots NGOs working on women's issues since 2017.

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