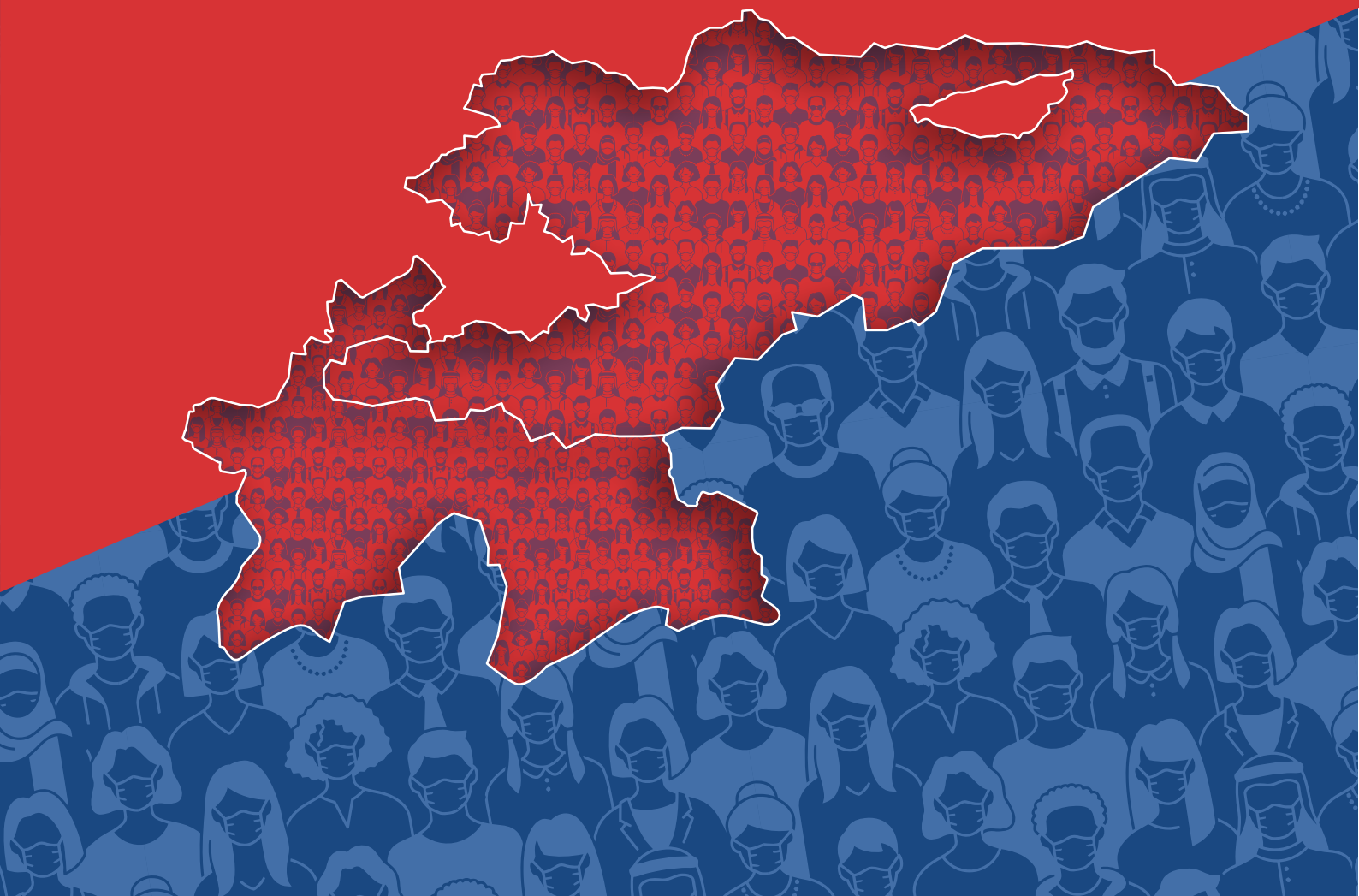




**CIVIL SOCIETY  
AND THE COVID-19 GOVERNANCE CRISIS  
IN KYRGYZSTAN AND TAJIKISTAN**



# **CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE COVID-19 GOVERNANCE CRISIS IN KYRGYZSTAN AND TAJIKISTAN**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This policy paper analyzes mobilisation strategies of civil society organisations (CSOs) in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan during the COVID-19 pandemic. The text consists of three parts: background, analysis of the interviews with CSOs and international organisations, and recommendations. Rapid mobilisation of CSOs to provide assistance to communities in need in both countries, extensive use of crowdfunding outside and inside the countries, emergence of multiple volunteer groups not affiliated with specific organisations, and constant and unimpeded co-operation between CSOs and state bodies are among the key findings of this policy paper. Moreover, some volunteer groups decided to institutionalise their movements and establish NGOs, while others ran and got elected to local legislative bodies.

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## INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Central Asian states adopted different response mechanisms. However, being the most economically disadvantaged, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan found it extremely difficult to tackle the consequences of the COVID-19 crisis. Before officially admitting the spread of COVID-19 in Tajikistan, its government continuously neglected the rising numbers of pneumonia cases and did not impose lockdown, which only exacerbated the following crisis. While the Kyrgyz government acknowledged the existence of the COVID-19 and rapidly introduced strict lockdown measures, skyrocketing pneumonia cases initially were not considered as part of the official “corona” statistics fuelling public grievances and mistrust. Regardless of varying approaches between the two governments to deal with the pandemic, there are shared commonalities:

- ▶ lack of adequate response, insufficient information campaign at the beginning of the pandemic, and scarce provision of hospitals, doctors, and infected patients with the necessary equipment and medication by public authorities;
- ▶ dubious data by state agencies regarding the number of COVID-19 cases resulted in unprecedented skepticism about the official information;
- ▶ activation of non-state actors in addressing the needs of communities at risk and bridging the newly emerged gap, caused by ineffective state crisis management.

Civil society organisations (CSOs) entered the scene. Various non-governmental organisations (NGOs), minority communities, volunteer groups mobilised swiftly and took over some roles governments were expected to perform. For example, the Pamiri community of Tajikistan, an unrecognised ethnic minority living mainly in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO), started multiple fund-raising initiatives to support local doctors and patients. The community used different platforms and social networks to appeal to its kins and everyone else willing to support. The campaign turned out to be successful and some local hospitals received the necessary equipment and medication. Unlike the Tajik government, the Pamiri community did not need official approval by decision-makers, which enabled them to self-organise and quickly react to COVID-19 implications.

The governance crisis in Kyrgyzstan has become evident too. The country ranked among the lowest at the World Bank’s Worldwide Governance Indicators, and later when the country’s major cities were hit devastatingly with thousands of COVID-19 cases daily in June and July, CSOs and business communities had to jointly take charge, start mass mobilisation and fundraising. Prior to an important parliamentary elections campaign and being afraid of losing its legitimacy over mismanagement of the COVID-19 crisis, the Kyrgyz government was reluctant to cooperate with the third sector downplaying

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its efforts and earlier hampering the functioning of NGOs by proposing, inter alia, a new restrictive bill that was put on hold for the time being. The crisis boosted the credibility of civil society and empowered the local communities.

*With this project, we want to analyse how different civil society actors reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic and which roles they assumed to assist local populations throughout the crisis. Hence, the key questions are: How did CSOs fill the governance vacuum caused by the COVID-19 crisis in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan? What strategies did they use?*

## METHODOLOGY

As this study consists of two main parts – background and analysis – different methodological tools were used for these two parts.

In order to provide sufficient background on the government policies concerning COVID-19 in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan as well as to outline the civil society development in both countries, this study has used secondary sources, content and discourse analysis.

Secondary sources such as interviews, media texts, and reports by international organisations were used in order to detail how both governments handled the situation with the emerging pandemic and the spread of coronavirus in the period of March 2020 – January 2021. Content analysis was used to provide in-depth analysis on how government officials considered the COVID-19 situation and what measures they intended to take. Secondary sources were also used to provide an overview on how civil society was developing in both countries and in what state it finds itself now, when the pandemic is still raging.

For the analysis, the team developed two questionnaires and conducted 19 semi-structured interviews with NGO representatives, volunteers, minority communities, and representatives of international organisations (9 for Kyrgyzstan and 10 for Tajikistan):

Under “NGO representatives” we categorised individuals working for local non-governmental organisations and who provided assistance during the pandemic under the auspices of those organisations, while volunteers interviewed for this study were not affiliated with a specific organisation. International organisations are those, which are present at the territory of Kyrgyzstan or Tajikistan on the basis of bilateral agreements and each working under an agreed mandate. Minority communities were defined as communities, representatives of which differ from the majority of the population culturally, linguistically, or religiously and most importantly as far as self-identify as a minority.

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An initial list of interviewees was designed based on background research on what organisations, groups or individuals were active during the pandemic and were providing any type of assistance to local populations. Interviews mostly took place online with some exceptions, when the interviewee and the interviewer managed to meet and talk in person.

Kyrgyzstan			
IOs	NGOs	Volunteers	Total
3	2	4	9
Tajikistan			
IOs	NGOs	Volunteers	Total
3	2	5	10

## DEFINITIONS

**Civil society organizations** are a complex of non-state actors (both formalized and non-formalized), such as registered non-governmental organisations (NGOs), unregistered volunteer groups and ad hoc movements, socially responsible businesses.

**Governance crisis** is the inability of the state to carry out its functions to regulate and manage emergency situations.

**Mobilization** is a process of mobilizing resources by civil society organizations to assist communities in need during the governance crisis.

**Third sector** is an umbrella term that incorporates neither public nor private organisations, and consists of ‘not-for-profit’ entities, such as NGOs, registered charity and social organisations.

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## STATE RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN KYRGYZSTAN

The coronavirus pandemic threw off balance the whole planet. China, where the outbreak started, notified the World Health Organisation (WHO) about the spread of the deadly disease only by the end of December 2019, which was one of the factors for the proliferation of the virus within the country and outside of it. The COVID-19 outbreak received the status of a global pandemic only in the first decade of March. The Kyrgyz Republic, as many countries of the world, faced the COVID pandemic with multiple drawbacks being unprepared for the rapidly expanding multi-level crisis. Despite close proximity to China, Kyrgyzstan was comparatively slow to acknowledge the first cases. The first three cases were registered only on March 18, 2020. On April 2, the authorities registered the first COVID-induced death (Executive staff on COVID-19, 2020).

The government strengthened sanitary and quarantine control at the border checkpoints as well as established an Emergency Operations Center. Since January 23, 2020, all types of transportation modes with China were terminated. On January 25, the Republican Operational Headquarters for the Fight against Coronavirus was established. The government declared a state of emergency on March 25, with curfews introduced in the major cities and the capital city of Bishkek.

Harsh lockdown measures swiftly introduced by the government halted the spread of the virus considerably during the first two months. However, in terms of building up an already dilapidated healthcare sector that became even more vulnerable in the face of pandemic, the Kyrgyz government did not prove ready. Kyrgyz doctors have been particularly hard hit by the coronavirus: since the beginning of the pandemic, according to official data, almost 3,000 health workers (about 21% of doctors in the country) have fallen ill, more than 70 have died (BBC, 2020). Pharmacies were not fully equipped with the required medicines, which caused a significant rise of prices and made vital medications inaccessible.

The Interdepartmental Commission of Inquiry on the “Black July” (In July 2020 the mortality rate in Kyrgyzstan was the highest during the entire time period analysed) directly pointed out violations in the use of international aid, the distribution of humanitarian aid and corruption among the country’s top leadership. According to its findings, the third treatment protocol that was ready in mid-May 2020, was deliberately put on hold to ensure that several pharmaceutical companies that have direct links to high-ranking officials were able to get rid of the purchased drugs, primarily huge volumes of antibiotics (AKIpress, 2020).

Despite having a considerable shortage of hospital beds in the country, not a single hospital was built in Kyrgyzstan during the quarantine (BBC, 2020). The government started the construction of additional hospitals only in July after the peak of infections



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was slowly subsiding. As part of social protection of the citizens and medical professionals, the government pledged to allocate financial compensations for the sick and the families of the infected medics. However, later the state formed a special commission that scrutinised every payment on a case-by-case basis. The decision to create the governing body was driven by the fact that, according to the authorities, many doctors themselves did not comply with safety rules and misused personal protective equipment (PPE). In reality, many medical professionals who worked in the ‘red zones’ did not get proper PPEs in the first place and eventually many of them did not receive any compensation or pay raises.

The unprecedented crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic brought massive impoverishment and economic recession to the country that the government failed to regulate. According to the World Bank, Kyrgyzstan’s real GDP fell by 8.6%, bringing the country to the biggest economic decline in Central Asia (World Bank, 2021). Despite signing the law on April 3, 2020 to introduce temporary measures that included allowances for businesses to postpone tax returns until 2021, no other major support initiatives were taken. Lack of state supporting mechanisms for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs), that account for more than 40% of the country’s GDP (National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2019), was one of the main challenges for the country’s economy. One of the Bishkek entrepreneurs who was an active volunteer and provided meals and financial support to the citizenry said:

*‘I have never had illusions in relation to our state. For me, it is like a sand-bag, a hindrance, or an irritant that does not help small and medium-sized businesses, but rather drags us back.’ (24.KG, 2020)*

One of the main criticisms of the authorities was lack of transparency in allocating the funding received by the country from the international donor organisations. The Kyrgyz ruling elites were systematically accused of appropriating scarce financial resources of the country including international assistance in the past (The Diplomat, 2017). Kyrgyz authorities requested nearly 1 billion USD and received around 400 million USD throughout 2020 (Economist.KG, 2021). Public spendings of the amount was deemed not transparent by many civil society organisations and activists. In the absence of a system for monitoring and evaluating foreign aid, Kyrgyzstan is unlikely to be able to build an effective system of public administration and tackle the economic recession effectively, as well as gain the trust of citizens and donors.

The former ruling regime was not accountable to its citizens about the scale of the problem. Ex-president Sooronbay Jeenbekov refused to wear a mask during his public trips and official visits. The initial denial to include pneumonia cases into the general COVID statistics demonstrated a key problem of crisis mismanagement - purposefully diminishing of COVID cases in the country. On July 22, a while after the government’s decision enforced by the citizens to combine pneumonia and COVID cases, New York

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Times analyzed statistics for the previous week and reported that Kyrgyzstan ranked first in the world in mortality rate from coronavirus (24.KG, 2020). Later in August, the government excluded more than 400 people from the coronavirus statistics explaining their death by reasons not connected with COVID. These fluctuations and the inconsistent position of the state showcases lack of a clear accounting mechanism and possible manipulations with the numbers.

The government did not effectively inform citizens during the crisis. The state capacities were low in providing fair and up-to-date information about the hospital beds or proven protocols for treating patients. Additionally, the government violated citizens' freedom of information by clamping down media outlets and hushing bloggers for spreading alleged misinformation about the virus. These tactics only exacerbated the information void of open, reliable, and accessible information on the topic. This led to spreading numerous 'fake news', such as usage of dog blood to cure the COVID-19, that caused a massive shoot-off of stray dogs across and beyond Bishkek and many others.

The former Kyrgyz ruling regime demonstrated a critical lack of leadership that eventually led to power void during the corona crisis. The lack of coordination and unified front among the power triumvirate - the presidential administration, the parliament and the government - lead to a 'vacuum of leadership' (Omelicheva, Markowitz, 2021) and subsequent reluctance to take responsibility. That coupled with massive impoverishment largely led to the October events after the rigged parliamentary elections of October 2020. Under those conditions, non-state actors had to weigh in and assume some of the crucial roles of the state and bridge the existing gaps in providing key public services.

## **STATE RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN TAJIKISTAN**

Numerous cases of people getting sick with symptoms typical of COVID-19 were known in Tajikistan since March 2020. However, the Tajik Government did not officially confirm the existence of the novel coronavirus on its territory and rather explained that people are getting sick with pneumonia, despite the fact that all neighboring countries were officially fighting COVID-19. Pneumonia was used as an official diagnosis for patients who demonstrated COVID-19 related symptoms.

In March, the country started receiving international assistance in protective equipment, medication and financial aid from donors to prepare for the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, quarantine and other restrictions were not implemented in an effective manner. The borders were closed and people returning from abroad were forced under quarantine, while the overall information campaign around the potential threat of COVID-19 was handled quite poorly, only adding to general suspicion and unrest.

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Practical measures introduced by the Government lacked consistency. For example, mosques were closed in March, reopened by the end of the month and again shut on 18 April. The Minister of Healthcare referred to the country's dry climate in explaining why there is no need for quarantine. The World Health Organization (WHO) country representative Galina Perfilyeva reported no cases of COVID-19 in the country (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

Despite the emerging global pandemic, lockdowns and recommendations to avoid mass gatherings by the WHO, mass celebrations of Navruz (Persian New Year) took place in the northern Sughd region, where President Emomali Rahmon and other public officials participated in ceremonial openings of enterprises, concerts and meetings (Official Website of the President of Tajikistan, 2020).

Meanwhile, public distrust and anxiety were simmering. Media outlets continued reporting on suspicious deaths of doctors and patients, particularly in the Sughd region, where recently mass celebrations took place. Thus, by early April it became known that an old-aged patient died in one of the hospitals in Sughd and thirteen doctors were isolated, which urged the public to start asking questions. The regional Healthcare Department shared that the patient died because of pneumonia and that doctors were isolated because of the seasonal flu, not COVID-19. The healthcare officials also shared that despite the absence of COVID-19 cases, they have prepared local hospitals, while they blamed the population for not being able to tell the difference between the seasonal flu and COVID-19 (Cabar Asia, 2020).

On 16 April, during his address to the Government, the President stressed the importance of the threat of the coronavirus pandemic and its negative impact on socio-economic development around the world. He decreed to develop a plan of measures to prevent and mitigate the risks caused by COVID-19 and to establish a responsible permanent headquarters. President Rahmon particularly called to provide tax benefits to businesses, prevent price increases, as well as to increase the awareness of the population of the pandemic and the importance of keeping houses clean and observing personal hygiene rules (Official Website of the President of Tajikistan, 2020).

On 17 April, delivering his speech to the Parliament, President **Rahmon called on members of parliament and other state structures to enhance their co-operation with the Government and non-state actors to prevent the spread of COVID-19.** The President stressed that Tajiks “as an ancient nation with rich civilization must be sympathetic to the peoples of the world, especially our immediate neighbors, and provide them with help and support within our capabilities” and called to not fall into panic and confusion (Official Website of the President of Tajikistan, 2020).

Civil society, non-state activists and volunteer groups started acting. They not only sought ways to raise funds to assist doctors and families in need but called for openness concerning COVID-19. For example, Zebuniso Solieva launched a campaign in

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Sughd to provide doctors with protective equipment and costumes. In her social media posts she asked everyone to come together, not look for culprits, and the government to be honest and open about the threat COVID-19 might pose (Asia-Plus, 2020). Activists primarily targeted doctors, as some of the healthcare workers confidentially shared they were forced to buy protective gear and other necessary equipment, despite multiple international assistance programmes. For example, the European Union provided 52.2 million euros, while the World Bank, the United States, China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Switzerland, and the Asian Development Bank supported Tajikistan with logistical guidance, protective equipment, funds, and food (EurasiaNet, 2020).

Finally, on 30 April, the authorities registered the first 15 COVID-19 cases in the country. The official registration of cases came right before the arrival of the WHO mission to Tajikistan on 1 May. Fighting coronavirus was considered an immense threat for the underdeveloped and underfunded healthcare system of the country. Citizens were ordered to wear facemasks when outdoors (EurasiaNet, 2020). On 1 May, the President allocated 12,4 million somoni (ca. 89,630 euros) for payment of one monthly official salary to the current salaries of health and social protection workers directly involved in the diagnosis and treatment of COVID-19 in medical and quarantine facilities for three months. Additionally, the President transferred his monthly salary (the amount of which is unknown) to a special account opened for the financing of measures to prevent and combat the COVID-19 pandemic (Official Website of the President of Tajikistan, 2020).

However, the situation concerning access to information and to medical services did not change even after the official recognition of COVID-19 cases. The Ministry of Healthcare tried to monopolise the information concerning COVID-19. The authorities called to rely on and spread only official data. Only in four days, the official number of cases went from 15 to 230. However, unofficial numbers were much higher. For example, as of 11 May, according to official data, 21 persons died because of the virus. An internet portal (<https://kvtj.info/>) set up by volunteers to publish alternative lists of people who died of COVID-19 listed 140 deceased for the same period. Contributors of the website shared that the official numbers were much lower than the number of real cases. The portal was swiftly shut down and its contributors were warned of responsibility for “misinformation and creating panic around the coronavirus” (Radio Ozodi, 2020). Nevertheless, there were some positive examples too. The local government of the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region, where the non-recognised minority community of Pamiris live, frequently reported on money spent on fighting COVID-19, on its sources, on the number of patients as well as thanked everyone including local entrepreneurs, civil society organisations, and volunteers for co-operation and support (Asia-Plus, 2020).

Patients were turned away from hospitals despite being in critical condition and healthcare institutions insisted to perform home treatments. Some doctors shared in confi-

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dence that they were not allowed to disclose information about patients with COVID-19 since mid-March 2020 and that the State Committee for National Security was keeping an eye on them. Allegedly, the information concerning the spread of coronavirus was not supposed to become public at least by 17 April, when President Emomali Rahmon's son Rustami Emomali, the mayor of Tajikistan's capital Dushanbe, was appointed Chairman of the Parliament's upper house (EurasiaNet, 2020). An online portal on COVID-19 was established and the Ministry of Healthcare published videos regarding safety and hygiene rules during COVID-19<sup>1</sup>. However, its effectiveness and impact is difficult to assess as internet availability in Tajikistan is low, particularly in rural areas.

Civil society actors continued calling the authorities for a greater openness. On 20 April, some 18 NGOs and activists addressed the Ministry of Healthcare asking it to share information about the COVID-19 situation. NGOs wrote another letter to the WHO to express their concern about how the official number of cases might be much lower than the real ones. Local experts praised the activism by NGOs, however, did not have high hopes about the strengthening co-operation between the state and non-state actors once the pandemic is over (Radio Ozodi, 2020).

On 26 January 2021, the President addressed the Parliament. In his speech, he positively appraised the measures taken by the Tajik Government, in particular, assistance to the healthcare sector and tax benefits for entrepreneurs. Emomali Rahmon shared that the overall situation in the country has improved in 2020 and thanked doctors and the population for showing resilience. He once again called to be vigilant, even though there were no new cases since the beginning of January (Official Website of the President of Tajikistan, 2021).

This overall positive assessment by the President, however, raises some questions. Continuous denial of COVID-19 cases, suspiciously low numbers of infected, monopolisation of information campaign concerning the novel virus and its poor management most likely have contributed to the worsening of the situation in the country on multiple levels. Secrecy surrounding COVID-19 added to public anxiety and reinforced mistrust between the state and the population. Ironically, in this crisis situation, when the government was struggling to fulfill some of its roles, a space for civil society actors emerged.

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://covid.tj/>, <https://bit.ly/2NwKPkt> and [http://moh.tj/?page\\_id=16885&lang=ru](http://moh.tj/?page_id=16885&lang=ru)

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## STATE V CIVIL SOCIETY: DEMOCRACY SURVIVAL IN KYRGYZSTAN

To understand the dynamics of how the state was trying to curb the governance crisis caused by the pandemic in the country, we need to analyze the general context of state-NGO relations and the milieu of CSOs in Kyrgyzstan.

Kyrgyzstan among the region's neighbours is the most active and advanced in terms of democratic developments and work of the third sector. Through the period from gaining independence until 2005, NGOs were quite active and even supported by the Kyrgyz government at the first stages. The country was then famously called 'an island of democracy' in the region. The main paradigm during that time was that both international donors and local NGOs saw themselves as 'an independent force countervailing the previously dominant state' (Buxton, 2015, p. 225). That period is generally characterised by widespread and swift reforms across different spectra. Notable was the fact that the first president Askar Akaev included various representatives of social organizations and political groups in his government and requested their policy analysis (Luong, 2002, p. 111). In the 1990s Kyrgyzstan was perceived as the regional model for building democracy (Engval, 2013).

Institutional development of civil society organisations during the first years of independence was revolving around three main domains (Buxton, 2019, p. 123):

- ▶ The opinion of leaders of organisations that supported different political forces in the country was contrasted;
- ▶ Intention to stay neutral in relation to the state;
- ▶ Leading human rights organisations were committed to the international human rights agenda in their advocacy work.

None of these factors were present in other Central Asian countries. Kyrgyzstan's NGOs were successful in advocating some of the key initiatives in the 90's, such as incorporating progressive at the time gender analyses during the adoption of the new Labor and Family Codes, and other important laws at the time. Another NGO's significant contribution was the Comprehensive Development Framework, for which they developed important recommendations.

However, closer to the end of the 90's, Akaev's regime started tightening control over the civil society sector. By means of fast and uncontrolled privatisation of state-owned enterprises, the then-incumbent regime practically sold out and bought the entire country's economy, most of which became owned by Akaev's family members and people close to them (Omeliicheva, 2015, p.17). The 2005 rigged elections resulted in the first revolution and meant the end of Akaev's regime and the rise of Kurmanbek Bakiev, the country's second president.

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After the Tulip revolution in 2005 the overall trend of democratic development in the country continued to go downward, especially during 2007-2010 (Sharshenova, 2018). After assuming office, the second president Bakiev started consolidating power and the country's civil society met intimidations, independent media was silenced and the overall situation with political freedoms and civil liberties considerably deteriorated until 2010, when rising corruption levels and constant repression coupled with authoritarian rule resulted in the second revolution, bloody and violent this time.

In 2010, after the second revolution to overthrow Bakiev's regime, the constitutional reform created the necessary precursors for establishing a semi-parliamentary system in Central Asia. International observation missions acknowledged the October 2010 parliamentary elections to be the first free and fair elections in the country's history (Evgvall, 2015). The level of political and social mobilization in Kyrgyzstan during this time was high, civil society organisations are quite active and readily protest against political injustices, environmental issues.

Coming to 2021 current democratic developments in the country are hampered by a number of authoritarian developments, namely the constitutional re-design to renounce the semi-parliamentary system initiated by Sadyr Japarov's rule. According to Freedom House's 'Nations in Transit' Kyrgyzstan currently is a consolidated authoritarian regime with the civil society being the '[country's] healthiest democratic institution' (Freedom House, 2020). Up to date, Kyrgyzstan has about 30,000 not-for-profit registered organizations. One of the main challenges in their work is the sector's heavy dependence on international assistance from donor organizations and foreign governments on the one hand, and on the other, the influence of nationalist-minded reactionary groups that expands further and considerably complicates the work of the civil society (Ibid.).

Among the recent specific examples of state-induced hindrances was an attempt to tighten the legislation on NGOs' activity to coerce the latter to increase the transparency of donor funding and 'protect the statehood from external meddling' (CABAR.asia, 2020). This specific proposal was put forward in the middle of 'Black July' during the pandemic, when the wave of new infections reached thousands of people daily, hundreds of dead, and when CSOs were particularly active in reducing the effects of governance mismanagement.

The governance crisis and the lack of state capacities to curb its consequences on the one hand, tightening the legislation and in some cases stymie the NGO efforts to actively take the lead in resolving the problems lead us to analyzing how and why established civil society organisations, grass-root movements and active citizen groups mobilized during 2020.

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## CHALLENGES FOR THE CIVIL SOCIETY IN TAJIKISTAN

The civil society in Tajikistan is relatively less influential and often facing various impediments for its interventions. Given the authoritative character of Tajikistan's rulership, CSOs represent a force that promotes democratization, stresses the country's social problematique and fosters critical approach towards existing policies. Despite the constitutionally affirmed democratic basis, respect for human rights and prioritization of public interest, the government fails to protect these values or sometimes virtually neglects the guaranteed freedoms. In that respect, civil society organizations seek to fill the established democratic vacuum and provide services and knowledge for vulnerable communities. Due to the lack of resources and limited access to these communities, CSOs are confined to realize programmes and activities only via close coordination with state agencies. The government established legal rules for CSOs as authoritarianism employs a close top-down oversight of non-state initiatives concerning either commercial or non-commercial entities.

### **The NGO-related paranoia**

In the case of Tajikistan, the government is usually utterly doubtful towards the CSOs. Such antagonism is typical for the majority of post-soviet spaces as NGOs receive funds and support mostly from international donors or foreign governments and/or serve as local partners for bigger international NGOs. Their programmes are designed in accordance with international democratic standards. Moreover, in order to receive funding, NGOs have to devise projects that correspond to the agenda or required direction set by donor organizations. However, the authorities usually cooperate with international organizations and donors directly, local NGOs' relationship with foreign funders is regarded as dubious. The government is uncertain whether NGOs genuinely strive to facilitate local communities or simply use it as a façade to hide actions aimed at destabilization orchestrated by the west.

This notion unfolded into full-fledged paranoia that defines the relationship between the state and civil society in Tajikistan. This conspiracy-like way of thinking developed around the post-soviet space. In the mid-2000s after numerous protest movements in Ukraine, Georgia, Russia and Kyrgyzstan, NGOs became an object of criticism as the major drivers of such movements. The critique builds a nexus between NGOs and embassies of foreign countries with little or unclear evidences provided. This led to the term "inostrannyi agent" (foreign agent), which referred to any entity that receives funding from abroad, particularly from western countries. Explicit negative connotations are the key element of this term to become quite popular among authoritative post-soviet policy-makers. Immediately the doubt evolved into the fear of control deficiency, which leads authoritarian governments to impose new regulations and restrictions for NGOs or tighten the existing legislation.



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## **The history behind CSOs in Tajikistan**

NGOs in Tajikistan have come through lengthy development processes throughout history. It previously existed as forms of neighborhood unions both under the rule of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. These small quasi-institutionalized entities provided help and assistance for the communities they resided in under voluntary basis, which established the principles on which today's CSO operate. Further, given the Soviet education policy the unions or Mahallas started to become more sophisticated in their structure yet having little influence or whatsoever on local policies, predominantly concentrating on solving small disputes in neighborhoods and generally serving as focal points between state and local communities in Tajikistan. During the civil war, which coincided with the collapse of the Soviet Union, civil unions developed into two separate kinds of organizations. The first segment consisted of politicized organizations such as Rastohez or Laili Badakhshon that aimed at promoting new political direction for newly emerged independent Tajikistan. The second type consisted of the remnants of old neighbor unions or entities reminiscent of such. The crisis brought by mob violence and military actions led into mobilization of the people finding themselves on the brink of famine and disease. As a result, officially registered NGOs started emerging in the 90s and by 1997 the number of NGOs was around 300 and grew to 625 in 2000 (Mullojanov, 2001). International NGOs and donor organizations were at the origins of institutionalization of civil unions in Tajikistan providing financial and administrative assistance for emerging modern types of civil society (ADB, 2011).

The Civil War in Tajikistan was a complete overhaul of all political, economic and social mechanisms in the country. Overall thinking faced challenges concerning the identity and the perceptions of the independent government. Policy-makers had to pave the way for independent Tajikistan launching the democratization process. Civil society that represented mostly people who chose not to engage in military action on either warring side became the major, if not the only driver of democratization and as it became evident, the counter-balance for the country's fall into the authoritarian pit. International organizations and donors saw the potential in emerging NGOs in Tajikistan, thus making efforts in empowering non-state entities to use this potential in order to ensure abidance with democratic norms. On the other hand, CSOs do not explicitly connect their mission with full-fledged ideology shifts that would legitimately threaten the fragility of the country's authoritarian ruling. Each NGO has its own agenda be it human rights or women empowerment, but generally it falls into the understanding of civil society in general as the alternative force providing alternative point of view to the action and policies of incumbent political establishment.

## **Authorities Imposing legal boundaries**

The current legislation regulating the affairs of NGOs is concentrated in the law "On Public Associations" accepted in 2007. The first design of the law set basics of the reg-

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istration process and emphasized main types of entities falling under the legal norms – public organizations, public movements and non-official unions (Tajikistan’s Law on Public Unions, 2007). Compared to the current state of the law, initially the norms were rather a facilitating effort to recognize NGOs and independent groups as institutions taking an important part in social processes. However, with further amendments it became evident that the government is rapidly moving towards strict regulation of the civil society. It is important to note that anti-NGO sentiments thrived in these times, cultivated by proponents of post-soviet regimes through the media and academia.

Interesting that these ideas started to emerge after revolutionary movements in Georgia, Ukraine in Kyrgyzstan emerged throughout the early and mid-2000s. The critics built a “crystal clear” connection between western governments and local NGOs using nicknames such as “demons of revolution” for the latter (Novaya Gazeta, 2007). Until today, Russian academia is full of political scientific works dedicated to “the role of NGOs in color revolutions” (Naumov, 2018; Tofan, 2016; Eldiib, 2019). Key arguments used in such works can be reduced in the notion that foreign funds are instrumentalized to cultivate critical views towards local governments, bring up and empower social and political activists and “independent media”. While some may perceive these developments as good for democratization, others see and present them as indirect interference into the internal affairs of the state. Negative representation of NGOs perfectly resonates with obsolete post-civil war demonization of the west as expansionist force encroaching at the footsteps of the former Soviet Union.

Policy makers around the post-soviet space started using the term “foreign agent” in relation to organizations that receive financial support from abroad. Even though the term was used around the world, including the US and EU, in the post-soviet political landscape it became popular after in 2021 Russia accepted the amendments to the law “on Non-commercial organizations” that banned any NGO that engage in “political activities” and receive funds and equipment from international donors. Later Russian authorities forbade “foreign agents” to participate in election campaigns, including monitoring activities (lenta.ru, 2014).

Tajikistan’s law-making is highly influenced by trends of legislation in Russia. Also in 2015 the first amendments were introduced into Tajik law on public associations obligating local NGOs to regularly report to the Tajik Ministry of Justice on funds received, making them accountable to the state (dialog.tj, 2016). Key justification was the government’s waving over possible connections of NGOs and radical movements, so tracking the financial trails would minimize such risk (Institute for War and Peace Reporting, 2015). This was the first instance when fear of foreign interference affected the status of NGOs in Tajikistan. However, Dushanbe’s policy makers retain close ties with international donors when it comes to direct investments and credits. The fear therefore only concerns the non-state actors, whose activities are a priori dubious, as they are not regulated by the state. Thus, the amendments were designated to fill the

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“control vacuum” of Tajikistan’s third sector but it was only the beginning. In 2019 the Tajik authorities introduced new requirements for NGOs to post all financial data on their website for permanent accessibility of the information regarding expenditures and tax payments and also keep all financial documents, including receipts, invoices and banking checks (Amendments to Tajikistan’s Law on Public Unions, 2018). Ironically, the Tajik government seeks to ensure transparency of NGOs, while itself failing to comply with it.

### **Overcoming the pressure**

However, the impedances for the CSOs do not solely come from restrictive legislation. In fact, the legislation is only an expression of the government’s distrust towards civil society; therefore, the putting limits beyond the legal frameworks take place as well within NGO-state interactions. During their interventions NGOs have to coordinate with the state agencies in order to “avoid unnecessary problems”, which is not required by the law. However, the civil society accepts the authoritative style of state management in Tajikistan and tends to mitigate the risk of being forced to stop their activities. Government holds all information, data and contacts that sometimes may be of key importance for the NGO projects. Overall, restrictive sentiments of non-disclosure of any kind of information is the major reason why the Tajik government is unwilling to increase transparency. In that case, NGOs have to adapt. Such conditions force them to approach state agencies, hold personal talks with state representatives and convince them to give permission or share useful contacts or information or generally provide help. Not to mention, NGOs have to provide any required document that confirms the main purpose of the project, the plans and financial implications of its realisation. Such requirements are not legally standardized, so they may vary depending on the city or region where NGOs plan to implement their programmes. Thus, NGOs always have to improvise, mobilize their personal connections, and find ways simply to do their work and report to the donors.

Government’s lack of trust towards CSOs negatively influenced public views towards NGOs (Saferworld, 2020). The paranoia over the fact of foreign funds to be the key resource for the longevity of local NGOs, the population tends to draw the same conclusions as the state. It is more critical for NGOs as local communities are the main beneficiaries of projects they realize and the services they provide. However, the public NGO-related paranoia is connected with the feeling of threat to their personal safety. Local population witnesses the creation of “bad” reputation of NGOs, so they themselves avoid interacting with them to any extent in order to avoid “having problems” with the state and not to be associated with “Foreign agents”, which is quite a strong stigma.

At the same time, CSOs are key partners for the projects involving both state and international donors. International organizations are the main advocates for the close

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involvement of the civil society in state policies propagated for civil oversight of ongoing reforms. Within the last three years, government agencies grew more tolerant to civil contribution through working groups. For example, the international NGO Saferworld is a key partner for the police reform that managed to mobilize civil groups in discussion of the reform, emphasizing public interest and multilateral dialogue. Civil society keeps appealing to the government in terms of facilitating existing legislation as well, however with little result. Nonetheless, NGOs robustly express their disagreement with the status quo, at the same time help smaller organizations to develop the necessary fundraising skills, use of contemporary digital tools, financial reporting and basics of the registration process for NGOs.

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## ANALYSIS OF THE CSOs' ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVES AND MOBILIZATION STRATEGIES IN KYRGYZSTAN

The Kyrgyz civil society thrived during 2020. The country has seen yet another boost in grass-root activism, social mobilisation initiatives and the creation of multiple solidarity networks across the country. As the crisis affected practically every household, people from all strata came to rescue and took some key public functions upon themselves. Volunteer groups started spontaneously forming self-help unions in the capital city at first, as the impact of the pandemic was the most devastating in Bishkek. The groups included established NGOs, active citizenry, youth representatives, students, entrepreneurs, even celebrity figures to attract more attention to the scale of the problem. Many medical students stood up and volunteered to work in the 'red zones' and in providing medical services to thousands of ill across the country.

The unprecedented surge of civic activism and mutual assistance among the citizens had once again resurfaced during the third 'non-revolution' in the Kyrgyz capital later that year, when massive electoral violations in October 2020 caused the popular demand for re-elections and the rise of Sadyr Japarov. Because of the state of uncertainty and yet another power vacuum, many organised criminal groups and gang members began seizing private businesses and even large state enterprises (Deutsche Welle, 2020). Not only did that paralyze the organization, but it could disrupt the preparations of the heating systems for the winter season). In these circumstances, Kyrgyz citizens had to take the lead once more. Many vigilante groups, or so-called 'druzhinniki', scattered across the city to protect the main buildings, headquarters and businesses. This lasted for almost a month until the situation became more or less stable. This is another vivid example of how grass-root and non-state initiatives are active in the country, which signifies a considerable potential for their growth and further development.

In the course of this project we talked with 6 not-for-profit organizations that represent various levels of engagement during the pandemic crisis. Some worked on the capital city level, some spread their activity across the entire country, some targeted the region(s).

### **City-level volunteer group formed during the lockdown (Bishkek)**

#### ***Main activities/mobilisation strategies***

Following the start of the lockdown in March of 2020 initiated by one of many entrepreneurs, whose businesses had to be closed for several months, a socially responsible individual registered a group via Telegram messenger and started attracting people using various social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, messengers). In the first several days more than 1'000 people entered the group, of which 15-20 persons formed the core of the regulating committee. The group contacted a former Vice Prime Minister of Kyrgyzstan who was also the head of the Headquarters against COVID-19

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at the time, Altynai Omurbekova, and immediately started assisting the authorities on a number of activities, which mainly included information support. Initial work of the group included two key components:

- ▶ vigilante groups who spread the information about the importance of protection measures and the novelty of the virus;
- ▶ translating and disseminating proven information online (from WHO and similar sources) on how to protect oneself from the deadly virus.

Further activities of the groups included assistance to the economically disadvantaged social groups by providing food rations (more than 3'000 across the whole country) and purchasing vital medicine, helping medics by purchasing PPEs (more than 20'000), protective glasses, disinfectants, masks, etc.

### ***Fundraising***

The main strategy to raise money was through crowdfunding (GoFundme, e-wallets, bank accounts). The group attracted business representatives, and Kyrgyz diasporas from abroad (mainly from the US, the EU, South Korea, and the United Arab Emirates).

### **Nationwide established not-for-profit organisation (Bishkek and the regions)**

#### ***Main activities***

As this was an established NGO functioning for almost 15 years at the time when the pandemic hit, the organisation had all necessary infrastructure across the entire country and donor support. The first key activity of the organization was to target the destitute workers of the Dordoi bazaar, one of the country's key employment providers. More than 7000 meal packets were provided to more than 1'000 families that were rigorously selected among the poorest areas.

The organization provided substantial material aid to the medical workers: more than 10'000 hot meals, 4'000 PPEs, 60 oxygen generators and necessary medicine and more than 500 pulse oximeters spread across all 7 regions of the country. The NGO also provided information support to the regional hospitals on how to operate the new equipment and together with the Bishkek medics helped to communicate the treatment protocols.

#### ***Fundraising***

The main financial support came from business associations and Kyrgyz diasporas outside the country. Notably, the NGO was successful in attracting celebrity figures to raise awareness and crowdfunding.

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### *Interaction with the state*

Key grievance with the state was lack of proactive stance on the part of the latter and heavy fines to the volunteers who occasionally violated the traffic regulation rules out of necessity during the state of emergency. The NGO also noted the state's poor coordination of free hospital beds and provision of the necessary items to the hospitals in need that could be otherwise furnished by the NGOs or volunteer groups.

### **Regional volunteer movement (Issyk-Kul region)**

The regions of Kyrgyzstan have suffered the most compared to the capital city where some capacities were present. Therefore, this regional volunteer initiative was established and coordinated at the first stages by a local social entrepreneur.

### *Main activities*

During its work, the movement had several areas of activity:

1. purchase and distribution of the necessary aid;
2. collecting and organizing information about the epidemiological situation and the needs of hospitals;
3. interruption of the chain of infection. To this end, the movement notified the population about the situation in the hospitals (e.g. number of available hospital beds).
4. increasing the medical competence of the population and doctors. The movement produced short videos with competent doctors who explained what measures should be taken during the illness.
5. reducing the risk of corruption after the transfer of humanitarian aid. The movement created tactical strategies and protocols for the transfer of humanitarian aid to medical facilities in order to reduce the risk of corruption. This protocol was made public for other organizations to follow.
6. ongoing operational assistance. Redistribution of humanitarian aid to other movements.
7. tackling specific problems on the ground. Many problems were not visible at the regional level. Therefore, when the movement faced certain problems, they made them heard by the public and the media.

### *Mobilisation strategies*

As many organisations of such type, this movement attracted some influential public figures from the private sector, sport, famous social activists, media influencers, and student community representatives.

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## ***Fundraising***

The funding was mainly attracted through crowdfunding sources, private and public donations from citizenry and entrepreneurs. The movement produced accountability reports every day or week detailing all the expenses and the work done.

### **Established advocacy organisation (Batken, Osh, Jalal-Abad)**

## ***Main activities***

Apart from the main work that the organisation continued to carry out that contributes to peacekeeping in the region and providing capacity-building, gender-, and conflict-sensitivity training, they devised a COVID relief strategy which concentrated in several key areas:

- ▶ Providing PPEs to law enforcement;
- ▶ Spreading information leaflets and work guides on how to work during the pandemic among the Crime Prevention Centers, Aksakal Councils (Councils of Elders), local civic activists and juvenile inspectors, and district police inspectors.

## ***Funding***

The funding mainly came from the donor support of local communities expenditures.

## ***Interaction with the state***

As the organisation has a positive history cooperating with law enforcement, the latter were actively engaging in joint initiatives and assisted in dispersing the materials across the mentioned local organisations. The NGO did not experience major barriers or hindrances from the state, but rather built partnerships and more trust-based relations.

## ***NGO image after the pandemic***

According to our respondent, mutual work with the law enforcement has contributed to the enhancement of how the NGO is perceived by the local authorities.

### **Community based volunteer group (Jalal-Abad region, provincial center)**

## ***Main activities/Mobilisation strategies***

The interviewee was one of the initiators of a self-help group who started mobilising her friends and acquaintances by creating a WhatsApp group and spreading the word among her networks. Overnight the group achieved its capacity for the number of members - more than 200. The regulating core of the group contacted a local medical superintendent and asked about the hospital's needs. The request was to provide two



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disinfectant tunnels and to replace a Soviet-era X-ray machine, as the hospital served 7 nearest localities with over 50'000 people. The volunteer group also purchased PPEs, elbow dispensers, masks, a concentrator, and dropper systems.

### ***Funding***

The main financial flows came from crowdfunding and Kyrgyz diasporas outside the country, as well as from friends and acquaintances of the group network. The funds raised were about USD 12'000.

### ***Interaction with the state***

Regional state entities created impediments in the form of an 'auditing commission' - when the X-ray machine was already purchased the commission initiated examination procedure of the item. Additionally, the commission resumed its work and concluded that the hospital was over-equipped and self-sufficient and that no additional medicine or else was necessary. The reality, of course, was drastically different. Some of the volunteer group's members were intimidated and pressured, as their parents were employed by the hospital.

On July 24, an order signed by the regional leadership of the Mandatory Insurance Fund under the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic appeared, banning hospitals from receiving assistance from volunteers in the Jalal-Abad region in southern Kyrgyzstan. Later the order was dismissed and claimed as 'not relating to the state entities' (BBC, 2020).

## **Established city-level volunteer organisation (Bishkek)**

### ***Main activities/Mobilisation strategies***

At the start of the lockdown the organisation already had about 200 volunteers across the country and two branches in Moscow and Saint Petersburg, so the functioning infrastructure was there. The initial focus in the spring of 2020 was on distribution of food packets to the urban poor and providing transport for the health workers during the lockdown. After the lockdown, when the number of infected people reached thousands, they trained volunteers and organised them into groups of three to five people (1 driver, 1 medical professional, 1-3 volunteer(s) to provide oxygen). Overall more than 40 oxygen generators were purchased.

They mainly used social media platforms as the main means of spreading the news. From there a 'word of mouth' strategy continued working on its own and people started contributing financially or otherwise to the organisation. 80% of all donations were done by the ordinary people from Bishkek. There was a specific case that the interviewee wanted to share:

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*'One day, early in the morning, when we were all asleep after another hard night, we heard someone rustling in the street, it turned out someone was sweeping our front yard. It was a close relative of the man whom we managed to save the day before. The man said that he could not financially help the organization, but wanted to thank for the help somehow. It touched us deeply.'*

### ***Fundraising***

Crowdfunding was the main strategy to raise money.

### ***Interaction with the state***

Traffic enforcement created favorable conditions for the work of the organisation and deducted all fines for the period of work during the lockdown.

## **ANALYSIS OF THE NON-FOR-PROFIT SECTOR'S ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVES AND MOBILISATION STRATEGIES IN TAJIKISTAN**

The activism during the pandemic in Tajikistan had various forms depending on the actor. We have managed to collect data via interviews with representatives of NGOs, international organizations along with volunteers and entrepreneurs. All actors demonstrated a high level of mobilisation. The following analysis will be divided into sections with focus on each monitored case.

### **Respondent 1 – NGO director**

#### ***Mobilisation strategies***

NGOs with established institutional structure were able to ensure a wide scale of their activities during the pandemic. One of the respondents is director of a Dushanbe-based NGO that works mainly on youth affairs, including education, vocational training and employment. Humanitarian aid was not a priority in the organization's interventions. Nonetheless, observing the deteriorating crisis in the country, they managed to temporarily divert their focus to the provision of food and PPEs for people at risk during the pandemic. However, the board of trustees of the given NGO that consists of entrepreneurs and individual donors primarily decided to concentrate on humanitarian endeavors. The NGO mostly relies on individual donations, which can explain how quickly they have managed to mobilize and redistribute the funds avoiding lengthy bureaucratic procedures. Motives for battling the crisis derived from realization of their role in abruptly changing socio-economic conditions, as described by the respondent:

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*‘Charity is not the main objective that we seek, but during the pandemic we decided on acting as an active part of civil society. It was clear that the population needed assistance. Many migrants came back from abroad, some people lost their jobs, infected could not afford medication and doctors were unable to fully operate without items for personal protection.’*

### ***Funding***

As the respondent said, the NGO received funds from over 2000 individual donors through money transfer systems and electronic wallet. Eventually the NGO managed to collect 41 278 EUR from such donations and additionally the same amount from permanent donors from the board of trustees. The team took steps in financial reporting, organizing weekly online-event where they publicized expenditures data. As a part of civil society, the NGO needed to ensure the transparency of their funds.

### ***Main activities***

NGOs that work on a permanent basis see the need to step forward as civil society per se. In Tajikistan, their role is to provide for local communities and use resources, contacts and administrative resources in their possession to fulfill their role. The respondent mentioned an online platform that was established long before the pandemic erupted. The platform is designed for the people in need to apply for aid. Afterwards that platform has become a database of most vulnerable families and groups, which can be used for further activities of the NGO. However, the platform did not attract a lot of attention from the beneficiaries, given low internet connection and overall accessibility. The NGO had to regularly cooperate with state bodies responsible for social provisions and those that could grant access to the list of people in need in much bigger numbers. For that, the NGO had to provide all required documentation, stating the purpose of their activities. Hence, the NGOs adjusted the timelines for their projects, as the screening procedures of such documentation took a very long time.

### ***Interaction with the state***

During the pandemic, the situation changed drastically and in a positive manner. The NGO started to receive many more applications for aid via the online platform. Moreover, the organization team opened a hotline so the people with no connection to the internet could apply as well. State bodies grew more open, providing lists of vulnerable people, requiring no documentation, which made it much easier and time-efficient for the NGO to mobilize in crisis conditions.

*‘The pandemic has changed everyone in terms of their values and attitudes. We were glad that civil society could provide such a big support. Today people are approaching us more often – both volunteers and partner organizations.’*

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Along with state bodies, local private companies offered their contribution to the activities of the NGO. One company provided trucks for transportation of food and equipment. Also a local mobile network provider handed out sim-cards with prepaid minutes for the NGO team to ensure permanent communication with partners and beneficiaries. It allowed them to distribute aid to over 5'000 people in Dushanbe, Districts of Republican Subordination and Gorno-Badakhshsan Autonomous Region.

## **Respondent 2 – Volunteer group leader**

### ***Main activities***

There is a wide network of volunteers around Tajikistan, operating with permanent support from foreign governmental agencies. Taking the form of “interest clubs”, they organize events, discussions, roundtables, training and seminars on education, personal development and soft skills in 8 cities, including Dushanbe, Khujand and Bokhtar. Enhancing the knowledge in technology is another direction, which they took up recently. In their office, they had 3-d printers in their possession that were further used within their anti-COVID activities.

Volunteers started the production of medical face shields for doctors. Overall, 100 face shields were produced that were distributed in clinics of Dushanbe and in its near vicinity. Moreover, a volunteer team in Khujand managed to print 30 pairs of protective glasses. Volunteers in Bokhtar helped doctors, providing them food, sanitizers and PPEs. Other than these activities, volunteers also ran information campaigns on personal protection and hygiene.

### ***Mobilisation strategies***

The volunteer group mostly consist of school and university students and are very restrained in terms of number of people capable of running bigger campaigns. They mobilized 6 people in Dushanbe, 3 in Khujand and 8 in Bokhtar. Nonetheless, volunteers demonstrated strong self-sufficiency when it came to production of face shields that implies effective maintenance of equipment and collection of materials for printing in local markets.

However, they were limited in self-mobilisation, so they relied on one of local NGOs in terms of distribution of aid. They needed support in gaining access to hospitals and connections with state agencies.

### ***Interaction with the state***

The respondent noted that they did not cooperate with state, referring to existing inter-governmental partnerships:

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*'Our group rarely collaborates with state agencies. There was a Memorandum of Understanding signed between the government of Tajikistan and the embassy that supports us. There are many young people who are involved in our activities during the pandemic, but, as before, no state institution took part in them.'*

The fact that foreign government supports the volunteer group can explain that the government did not impede their activism. Partnering NGO, as was added by the respondent, possesses formidable ties with state bodies, which benefited the volunteer group. Instead of directly approaching the government, the respondent's team used intra-civil society cooperation, relying on more experienced counterparts.

### **Respondent 3 – Entrepreneur**

#### ***Main activities***

Khujand-based hotel owner started with donating 200 USD to one of her acquaintances, who worked in a local hospital, to purchase a batch of PPEs, such as masks and suits. According to the respondent, the situation was uncertain, as there was little or zero information available about COVID-19. In the early period, there was indeed lack of official information about the pandemic, as the government was reluctant to acknowledge the COVID cases in Tajikistan. All available information was distributed unofficially from one person to another. Realizing the complexity and danger of such a situation, the respondent published a post on social network, calling for immediate actions:

*'I decided to post it as it is not the time to blame each other, yet it is time to unite efforts in helping our doctors and not letting them die. I was surprised that all of my friends and followers supported this post.'*

#### ***Funding***

After this, the respondent and her team received donations, which were used to order more PPEs for local doctors. They collected funds from many countries: € 12'826 from Tajikistan, € 8'913 from the USA, € 2'565 from Russia, overall amounted to € 24'304. In order to display the conscientious spending of received funds 20 financial reports were prepared and made available online for the public and donors.

#### ***Mobilisation Strategies***

The respondent managed to gather the team of her friends and acquaintances who worked on a voluntary basis. They organized logistics using their personal transport, coordination of funds allocated by international donors and communication with hospitals, where they had focal points who would inform the team on the needs of the

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hospital staff on a regular basis. The employees of the hotel owned by the respondent were involved as dispatchers that received calls from hospital with the hotel itself becoming a sort of headquarters for operations run by the volunteer team. Distribution of the resources was in the centre of the respondent's activities during the pandemic. As an entrepreneur, she decided to use business assets at her disposal, disregarding the financial losses, especially given the negative consequence the pandemic had on the economy, including the hotel business. However, this was an important advantage for managing the aid distribution and managing the crisis on a smaller scale.

### ***Interaction with the state***

Not less important, the respondent combined field operations with activism on online platforms. She continued stressing the issue of hiding the information from the people, and the negligence of the state in managing the crisis. Of course, her activism could not be unnoticed by the state agencies.

*'When I announced the collection of donations, I appealed to doctors and hospital officials to apply to our team for aid, depending on what they need. I am aware that many doctors were threatened. The State Committee for National Security even approached some of them... I also made the same announcement in an interview for local media on 29 April. I even received a call from the State Prosecutor's Office. They suggested they would take care of distribution of funds received by us or there would be problems. I refused, saying that I collect funds for doctors and that we keep records of our spendings.'*

Cooperation with local authorities of Khujand was a fairly positive experience. The mayor's office provided the respondent's team with contacts in the state committee that coordinates allocation of aid for hospitals in Khujand. The respondent emphasized that there was no confrontation from the government side during their activities. She added that local authorities shared positive feedback about their work.

Afterwards the respondent and her team established a charitable organization that will promote healthy nutrition and lifestyle. Donors from abroad have expressed interest in supporting such endeavors, given the fact that members of the organization possess substantial experience in providing aid.

### **Respondent 4 – IO manager**

Respondent 4 is representing an international organization that works primarily on issues related to women's rights. Therefore, during the pandemic their activities were mainly aimed at mitigating risks for women. According to the respondent, women were the most vulnerable, which is true as many experts and human rights activists were raising the issues of increased number of domestic violence cases, during COVID.

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Given the pandemic the IO's activities were adjusted with the specific conditions that concerned the conditions for women's safety in a crisis and gender-based violence.

*'We approached the COVID-related issues not in terms of health, and organized consultations with public partners that already formulated their priorities, which helped us adapt our interventions.'*

Therefore, the IO could not work outside their mandate that is usually confirmed multilaterally and implies rigorous compliance. Thus, the IO did not provide any kind of humanitarian aid. Instead, their COVID-related activities were rather conventional and included vocational training, provision of policy recommendations and fieldwork. However, the IO had to build new partnerships. It decided to focus on organizations that had a flexible agenda, in order to effectively and quickly adapt to the newly emerged crisis conditions.

*'We realized that the circle of our partners is not wide enough. Therefore, we started looking for new partners with no limits in their mandates and those who could work in cases of emergency... We signed agreements with them, according to which their volunteers attended courses and training and later organized awareness campaigns for local communities and registered cases of domestic violence. Our office took responsibility for organizing training and providing them necessary knowledge about gender-based violence.'*

From the beginning, the IO decided to work closely with state bodies as the majority of their key activities are realized through coordination with the government, which is typical for international entities in Tajikistan. Namely, their major partner is the State Committee on Women Affairs, which is implied within their mandate. The IOs and their partners worked on policy recommendations for the government designated to improve management of the crisis with focus on women's vulnerabilities. Other partners who were involved during the pandemic are international NGOs. This choice derives from the notion that internationally supported entities have more resources and are in general more capable than local NGOs.

For their future interventions in times of crises, the IO will still have to consider the specific conditions and the nature of such crises. The respondent stated that previously established partnerships, mandates of their partners and good will play important roles in cooperation during emergencies. It clearly demonstrates that IOs as entities with formidable structures have less opportunities for maneuvering and have to rely on experience of their operations inside the country. State agencies in that respect will remain key partners for them, given the same reasons.

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## Respondent 5 – IO country representative

Another respondent that represents an IO stated that they did supply local communities with humanitarian aid, however in a specific format. The IO allocated € 200'000 for purchasing PPEs and medical equipment for local doctors. Later the aid was distributed by a network of NGOs established as part of the general activity of the organisation in many countries where the IO operates. These NGOs are represented in 7 cities in Tajikistan, including big administrative centers Dushanbe, Khujand, Bokhtar and Khorog. The aid was distributed with close coordination from local authorities in each region.

PPEs were handed to people with low income, while medical supplies went to the local hospitals. The respondent told that there was no reporting or monitoring of how the aid was distributed. In this case, as well, charity or provision of humanitarian help is not included in the mandate of the organization. However, it decided to provide additional funds for that purpose. The organization stopped its main activities following the official notice issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA).

Regarding the cooperation with CSOs, the respondent said that the organization has long established partnership with civil society realized through partnership platforms. However, such partnerships depend on the direction in which future partners specialize. The mandate puts regulations in which the organisation carries out its work, which also concerns the choice of local partners for its future projects.

## ANALYSIS OF THE PAMIRI COMMUNITY'S INITIATIVES AND MOBILISATION STRATEGIES IN TAJIKISTAN

### *Background*

The Pamiri community is the non-recognised ethnic community residing in the eastern part of Tajikistan – the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO), also known as Pamir. Over 230'000 people or 2.5% of Tajikistan's population live in Pamir. The highly mountainous region of Pamir is located a great distance from Dushanbe. The Pamiri community has a distinct identity including Pamiri languages, Ismaili branch of Shi'a religious affiliation, putting them apart from the majority, however the authorities consider Pamiris to be Tajiks. The Imamatus of Aga Khan and its several institutions which embody the Ismaili leadership play a very important role in the political and cultural life of Pamir as well as contribute to the development of the region and its people (Berdiqulov, 2018). Additionally, the community enjoys high level of social cohesion, which often manifests itself in communal activities, including volunteer groups, provision of assistance and fund-raising. This particularly became evident during the pandemic in 2020, that did not avoid Pamir.

The civil society in Pamir is traditionally more active compared to the rest of Tajikistan. Various NGOs, both local and international are present throughout the GBAO, numer-



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ous volunteer groups and ad hoc movements cooperate with the local government, businesses and communities. For our project, we have interviewed four respondents who identify as Pamiris and tried to analyse the reasons why the Pamiri community mobilised so quickly, while there are no other similar cases among other minorities in Tajikistan.

### **Pamiri Volunteer – Respondent 1**

#### ***Main activities***

Respondent 1 has been already active before the start of the pandemic and has been involved in multiple initiatives aimed at strengthening exchange among local entrepreneurs. Due to these initiatives, several volunteer groups and networks were established and were actively assisting locals before the pandemic. Respondent 1 was managing two volunteer groups on delivering flour and providing the medical staff of local hospitals with personal protective equipment (PPE) and other necessary medical equipment.

#### ***Fundraising***

The group managed to collect over € 57'820. Funds were used to import flour. Volunteer groups cooperated with border and customs services to facilitate delivery. Money was also used to buy protecting and oxygen-generating equipment for local doctors and patients.

#### **Interaction with the state**

According to Respondent 1, local officials did not oppose any of their actions, but cooperated and actively exchanged information. Respondent 1 attributed that to the fact that the current head of the GBAO is a Pamiri and is experienced in working with international organisations.

#### ***Mobilisation strategies***

Respondent 1 also explained high mobility and activism among the Pamiri population by the “mentality”, saying that it is a fact that volunteer groups and whoever is able will always provide assistance, if there is need.

Volunteer groups communicated via online messengers to coordinate their activities and get in touch with Pamiris living abroad. Each volunteer group had its own online channel based in the area it was working on: healthcare, food, etc. Facebook was used to provide frequent public updates on activities, expenditures and needs.

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## Pamiri Volunteer – Respondent 2

### *Main activities*

Respondent 2 was leading the volunteer group working on the provision of food for healthcare workers and patients.

### *Fundraising*

As Respondent 2 shared, Pamiris living abroad got in touch with volunteers in the GBAO. They provided funds as well as necessary equipment and other goods, including heating devices and microwaves. The group decided not to collect more funds than needed, and overall € 800 was raised.

### *Interaction with the state*

The group was in constant touch with the local administration and official bodies, which facilitated the delivery of food and other goods to those in need. The group was coordinating with the administration of the GBAO, the Aga Khan Foundation and healthcare workers to find out which type of assistance was needed.

*‘I think the Pamiri community mobilised so quickly because the tradition of volunteering is well established and has worked effectively for a long time in the region. During the pandemic volunteers were working within the already framework, although the context has changed. I know about similar initiatives in Dushanbe and Bishkek, where our Pamiri volunteers were helping too.’*

*Pamiri Volunteer – Respondent 2*

### *Mobilisation strategies*

The group has been using Viber and other messengers for communication. It was also done in order to avoid doubling assistance, as several volunteer groups were ready to provide help and ad hoc initiatives were not properly coordinated at the beginning, leading to excessive provision of food, for example. It was decided to establish a centralised headquarter to efficiently provide assistance.

### *Follow-up*

The volunteer group of Respondent 2 is still active. The communication is conducted via Viber. Some of the volunteers have offered local city administrations to establish local vigilantes groups in order to decrease the presence of military troops in the region and facilitate trust-building.

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## Pamiri Volunteer – Respondent 3

### *Main activities*

The volunteer group run by Respondent 3 was established outside of Tajikistan. From the beginning of the pandemic, the group was implementing two initiatives – first aimed at assisting migrant Pamiri women working in Russia, while the second initiative was designed for Tajikistan.

### *Fundraising*

Within six months, the group has managed to raise over € 58’500. Respondent 3 learned that the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) was supporting similar initiatives in Uzbekistan together with UNESCO and approached it with the request to support them too. The EBRD has doubled the funds and the group in the end had € 117’000.

*‘We just finished our first fund raising campaign and were wondering if our group could run the second one right after just finishing the first. But we still went for it. We collected money to help the hospital in Khorog (administrative capital of Pamir) to purchase an oxygen generator, which costs over € 100’000. We applied for support to the EBRD and they agreed to support us.’*

*Pamiri Volunteer – Respondent 3*

### *Interaction with the state*

The group got in touch with Tajik Embassies to share about their initiatives. The Embassy in Paris replied with a positive appraisal, although Respondent 3 was not sure if the Embassies contributed to fund-raising as it was anonymous. There were no barriers or challenges imposed by the Tajik authorities or Embassies to the group’s initiatives.

### *Mobilisation strategies*

The group extensively used social media to run various campaigns and attract funds for its initiative, and the Facebook page created during the pandemic has been particularly popular and useful. The group was particularly concerned with the situation in Tajikistan, as the official numbers of infected people seemed suspiciously low.

Respondent 3 has shared that the group’s main task was to assist their peers in Pamir, however, their initiatives were not limited by the ethnic factor. Thus, they provided assistance to communities in Rasht district and Khatlon region.

### *Follow-up*

The group has planned to conduct a public presentation once the oxygen generator is delivered to the hospital in Khorog. Currently, the group is planning to establish an

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NGO, which would not only focus on Pamir, but on the whole country and would encompass the diverse experience of its founders.

### **Pamiri Volunteer – Respondent 4**

#### ***Main activities***

Respondent 4 got sick with COVID-19 and did not manage to find a medical worker in Khorog to receive the necessary treatment. This served as the primary factor to start acting. The respondent's former classmates and other acquaintances living abroad got in touch saying they have collected some funds and needed someone to distribute it among the local population in Khorog. Together with friends, Respondent 4 started looking for medical workers who would be visiting patients at their houses. The group learned that medical workers need PPE, while patients were in need of medicine. Regional hospitals started getting in touch with the group to inform them about their needs.

#### ***Fundraising***

The group managed to collect over € 25'500 and started purchasing the necessary equipment and food and distributing it throughout the region of Pamir.

*'I have been contacted by Pamiris living in the USA, Canada, and the UK. They told us they collected money and needed someone who would coordinate its distribution in Pamir. There are lots of volunteers in Pamir who are active for several years, they have vast networks and access to local administration. Most of the volunteers are involved in entrepreneurship; however, they do not necessarily have enough funds to support all initiatives. I acted as a link between those who send us money from abroad and volunteers in the GBAO.'*

*Pamiri Volunteer – Respondent 4*

#### ***Mobilisation strategies***

Respondent 4 and the group managed to mobilise healthcare workers via a Facebook page. They also approached local district heads to learn about exact numbers of people who needed assistance. Other healthcare workers were providing expert support on which types of equipment were needed as well as on the WHO guidelines.

#### ***Interaction with the state***

The local and regional administration was open to initiatives of the group. Respondent 4 shared that local bodies understood there was no one else able to help but volunteers. Cooperation happened on various initiatives. Volunteers created videos on safety regulations during the pandemic, which were aired on local television. Additionally, volunteers requested the city administration to impose masks for everyone in shops and

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shut down the central bazaar, which was done. However, when the meeting between civil society representatives and city administration took place in Khorog in October, volunteers were not invited.

***Follow-up***

In December 2020, Respondent 4 and other members of the group established their NGO. The NGO will primarily focus on preventing natural disasters, which often took place in Pamir.

*‘The process of registration was challenging, but we managed to get a registration certificate. The local administration realises that they cannot do without volunteers and they need to involve civil society and volunteers in the future.’*

*Pamiri Volunteer – Respondent 4*

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## CONCLUSION

The main trends common to all the organisations that we interviewed:

- 1. The organisations' financial transparency.** Every fundraising activity and spending were extensively documented and every organisation drafted financial reports either every day or once a week/month and posted them on all social media platforms.
- 2. Well-established rapport and division of duties.** Despite the rapid and unprecedented amount of workload and time pressure, the organizations effectively handled the responsibilities inside and even coordinated the efforts with others.
- 3. Taking advantage of digital technologies.** All organizations actively used social media channels and fundraising platforms to raise money for their needs.
- 4. Cooperating with the state entities where possible.** Many organizations chose to cooperate and complement the state activities in halting the crisis. State bodies demonstrated high levels of cooperativity, in most cases abstaining from impeding the activities of CSOs.
- 5. International organisations' contribution to crisis management was limited by their mandates.** For IOs cooperation with civil society is a key priority as they are more flexible in terms of spectre of their activities. However, all respondents representing IOs expressed cautious attitudes towards future cooperation with CSOs highlighting the importance of specific direction in which they operate or previously established partnerships.
- 6. Follow-up activity after the end of the acute phase of the crisis.** Some newly formed NGOs and volunteer groups did not formalize their activities by undergoing the official state registration.

In Kyrgyzstan exclusively, people engaged in volunteer movements eventually went into politics by running for seats in the local councils. Some volunteer groups either formed a political party or joined existing ones (two of our interviewees were candidates for the city council, one of which became a deputy).

### Pamiri community in Tajikistan

- ▶ The level of trust between civil society organisations, volunteer groups and government bodies in Pamir is higher. This can be attributed to the fact that the majority of local government representatives including the head of the GBAO are of Pamiri origin as well as to the long tradition of cooperation with volunteers. Additionally, the Aga Khan-related organisations are long present in Pamir and implementing various projects. Those initiatives often

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target cooperation between CSOs, state bodies and involve volunteer groups, and the status of the latter has been normalised via multiple projects and activities. The Aga Khan organisations also enjoy a high level of trust because of the religious affiliation, as those organisations represent the Ismaili Imamate - the religious branch professed by the majority of Pamiris.

- ▶ Reforming experience and expertise – three out of four respondents shared that they would like to expand their area of activities after the pandemic and institutionalise their movements.
- ▶ All respondents share a common understanding that there is a positive atmosphere for volunteering in Pamir, which might have allowed a quick mobilisation of people during the pandemic.
- ▶ Considerable amounts of funds were raised abroad, which was possible because of effective exchange between Pamiris abroad and the local communities in Tajikistan. Although initiatives mainly covered the Pamiri communities, some volunteer groups assisted communities living elsewhere in Tajikistan.

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

### CIVIL SOCIETY ACTORS:

1. Initiate peer-to-peer training among CSOs and meaningful exchange, financial awareness, mobilization strategies in crises and emergency situations;
2. Diversify fundraising strategies to decrease dependency on grants by international donors and to foster self-sustainability.

### INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS:

1. Build capacities involving multi-actor participation in various partnership initiatives. Based on how local entrepreneurial and community leaders and volunteers successfully cooperated more opportunities need to be identified by the NGOs;
2. Strengthen NGOs' efforts to further assist and cooperate with law enforcement agencies in the areas of community policing as it proved effective during the pandemic;
3. Enhance policy dialogue, exchange and coordination between a wide array of stakeholders, particularly including newly emerged non-registered volunteer groups, activists and active grass-root level initiatives;
4. Support CSOs and independent media outlets focusing on budget, financial transparency and accountability;
5. Develop training programmes for CSOs to enhance their monitoring and oversight competencies to ensure transparency of state budgetary spendings.

### STATE ENTITIES:

1. Permanently include CSOs in bodies responsible for crisis management to benefit from their experience, networks and knowledge;
2. Simplify the procedure to register CSOs;
3. Formally recognise contribution by the CSOs to motivate and encourage better performance and cooperation;
4. Facilitate access to high-speed internet connection to enable civil society actors better interact with each other and with state entities during crisis situations, especially in remote areas;
5. Create digital platforms for joint coordination with CSOs during emergencies;
6. Grant access for CSOs to state databases of vulnerable groups for time-efficient targeted delivery of humanitarian aid;
7. Develop legal regulations on customs for simplified importing of humanitarian assistance by CSOs during the state of emergency;
8. Develop clear legal norms regulating volunteer activity in Kyrgyzstan.



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