



BRIEFING | JULY 2020

Uniting civil society Improving joint responses for security and peace

Civil society organisations (CSOs) face a multitude of challenges in highly centralised contexts like Tajikistan. Better coordination and improved cooperation between those working on peace and security could help overcome some of these obstacles and create a more conducive environment for addressing the concerns of communities across the country, especially when advocating at the national level. This briefing highlights some of these concerns, as well as opportunities to tackle them collectively.

Like many of its post-Soviet allies, Tajikistan is still struggling to establish democratic norms and a free environment in which civil society can operate. CSOs began to appear during the civil war that lasted from 1992 to 1997,¹ with around 300 non-governmental organisations registered by 1997.² At first they largely sought to address people's humanitarian needs, and then expanded into human rights and peacebuilding in the war's aftermath. At the time, the high-level political focus on power-sharing arrangements between the ruling party and the United Tajik Opposition meant centralised state power was limited, giving CSOs more space to address security issues and people's concerns across the country.

But with the government's consolidation of power in the early 2000s, CSOs found their roles dramatically reduced and began to face increasing suspicion from the state.³ Seeing civil society services as no longer necessary, those at the top did not want an alternative non-state security provider challenging the authority of the state – despite civil society's close relationships with communities and the trust they had built with those they worked with.

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Civil society platform members take part in a training on advocacy and writing, July 2019.
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A triple dose of dependency

One of the main challenges CSOs face in Tajikistan is their triple dependence on the state, donors and the population – all three determine the environment in which CSOs must operate. Apart from the government’s obvious role in defining operating conditions, international donors and public sentiment can also have significant effects on how CSOs function. Without support from even one of these groups, CSOs face an incredibly difficult task of working in the country.

Civil society in Tajikistan faces a number of restrictions that have been put in place since the 2000s. They must register and be approved by the Ministry of Justice, giving the government full control over which organisations can and cannot work. Since 2019, the Ministry of Justice has required CSOs to submit financial reports twice a year (in addition to ad-hoc reporting on all incoming funds from abroad),⁴ which can be challenging for some smaller organisations and can give the government greater control over which activities they choose to support and which they do not. As a result, many CSOs cannot survive in Tajikistan and regularly face obstacles in obtaining permission to work. Some CSOs proactively censor themselves or avoid working on political and security issues to keep from coming up against the state.

Before the government’s consolidation of power, international donors and institutions were not just a source of financing, but also of solidarity and global advocacy for CSOs. Whenever civil society space was threatened or the government overstepped, they played an important role in highlighting deviation from democratic norms or abuses of human rights. International donors and institutions also raised the voices of civil society in the international arena and encouraged collective action in the face of restrictive measures. But over time, as the government has gained control over all aspects of life in Tajikistan, international donors have begun to cultivate closer relationships with the increasingly powerful state. To form positive relationships, donors are more and more frequently funding government initiatives directly, including police reform efforts headed up by the government, and often credit the government for keeping people safe – even when it is the government’s own actions that worsen insecurity for some. Where donors support civil society – especially on security

issues – everything is done in partnership with government institutions and with their approval, which limits the scope for genuine challenge of the government’s approach and keeps civil society working within a restrictive framework.

Public disillusionment in the government’s monopoly on security provision – itself often responsible for human rights violations – has led to a loss of trust in CSOs, who are seen as ineffective and failing to act against abuses. When they receive foreign funding, CSOs also face suspicion – mostly from the government, but also from citizens who do not trust their motives. In the worst cases, the grievances against the state and lack of viable alternatives can create significant tensions with law enforcement agencies and may lead people to support criminal or violent groups (who they may see as more legitimate or the only available option for security or livelihoods), as well as lead to out-migration, mainly for economic reasons.

The hostile and limited funding environment forces CSOs to compete against each other for donor grants, further damaging their reputation in the eyes of the public. While competition can be healthy, it also precludes unity and cooperation. Although there are some encouraging exceptions – such as the Civil Society Coalition against Torture and Impunity (see page 3) – the atmosphere of competition has made it harder for CSOs to come together to advocate for change nationally and internationally, hampering their ability to effectively build public trust in civil society as an alternative to the current state monopoly on community security.

The case for uniting civil society in a post-COVID-19 Tajikistan

In late April 2020, after a long period of denial, deflection and mysterious deaths, the government finally acknowledged that cases of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) were present in Tajikistan. With cases rising rapidly, civil society stepped in to fill the gaps in the state response, especially where it was slow to react – distributing humanitarian supplies, monitoring how foreign aid is spent, working with communities to assess and address security concerns that have been worsened by the pandemic, sharing information on the epidemiological situation, expressing solidarity, and providing services for those directly and indirectly affected by the virus. According to many of Saferworld’s partners and communities,⁵ civil society has never been as active as it has been during the pandemic. Conversely, since the end of the civil war, the government has not been forced to rely on CSO service provision as much as it has during the crisis.

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It is in this moment of renewed activism that further unity between CSOs would be not only an important step forward but an opportunity for the survival and evolution of civil society in Tajikistan. While civil society has significant connections and impact locally, without a united voice it has little ability to influence policy change at the national level.

There are positive examples to look to. The Civil Society Coalition against Torture and Impunity in Tajikistan brings together over 80 human rights activists and CSO representatives across the country to jointly advocate against the use of torture. Although its work is highly sensitive, the platform has become sustainable because of a strategic vision, strong leadership, well-coordinated joint efforts and the leverage of international mechanisms in service of its cause. As a result, the coalition has been able to prevent many cases of abuse, and has advocated for the government to hold offenders to account. Most importantly, in 2012 it successfully lobbied to include the prohibition of torture in Tajikistan’s Criminal Code.⁶

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To galvanise the efforts of civil society and create a collective advocacy platform, in late 2018 Saferworld’s team in Tajikistan established the Civil Society Platform (CSP), comprising 30 CSOs from across the country, with a focus on addressing community security issues. The platform is intended to complement the existing Community Policing Partnership Teams and Public Councils, which operate under the auspices of the Ministry of Internal Affairs.⁷ The CSP aims to unite CSOs, build knowledge and skills to enable them to work on peace and security, provide financial support and mentorship for carrying out activities, and lobby national and international governments and experts to provide a conducive environment for policy debate. Unlike other existing platforms, the CSP does not focus on one specific issue but looks at community security as a whole, taking into account the variety of specific concerns that affect the different regions and communities across Tajikistan.

With the emphasis on working as a network, Saferworld designed a ‘phased’ approach to advocacy and capacity building that starts from the local and moves to the national level, following a step-by-step learning process. The aim is to showcase civil society’s effectiveness in order to help the government understand the important role that civil society can play in security provision. Our engagement is not limited to financial and technical support – we maintain regular contact with the CSP and member CSOs, and conduct consultations on advocacy, different kinds of awareness-raising activities, working with the media, writing analytical pieces for decision makers and advising on effective activities, while sharing results and lessons with local authorities. This collective effort enhances civil society’s work at the national level so that government representatives can better understand the usefulness of civil society and the importance of joint cooperation on issues of shared interest.

Civil society efforts and security concerns by region

While there are community security-related issues that can be tackled at the national level and which affect all of Tajikistan, others are specific to certain regions of the country – all of which have different histories, cultures and political orientations. The CSP conducts in-depth analysis of these local concerns and consults with communities on ideas to address them. These priorities – on security and civil society action – are outlined below by region, as shared by members of the CSP.

The **Sughd region** in the north has historically been the country's most developed, including in terms of economy and industry. CSP members in Sughd have concluded that the region has huge economic opportunities, but that its potential is hampered by corruption, which has led to a deep mistrust between the population and local authorities and law enforcement. As a result of this mistrust, crimes go unreported and unaddressed, with a perception that the police are 'apart' from communities – a view that can be exacerbated by the fact that they are brought in from outside regions, or by reports of cases of police corruption or abuse. Civil society partners in Sughd – as well as in **Kulob** in **Khatlon region**⁸ – also have limited access to working with the Ministry of Internal Affairs on these areas of concern, so it has been important to build trust with police who are on the ground working with communities. There has been some successful cooperation on addressing issues of corruption and mistrust, including by showing the importance of neighbourhood police officers' work for society and creating communication platforms for the police and the population to jointly address security issues. Despite this, CSP partners in Sughd and Kulob want to see more transparent local divisions of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (departments at the district level and a directorate at the regional level) that share information openly with civil society partners, increase the legal knowledge of the population, work more with neighbourhood police officers on communication with communities and regularly provide public reports to the people. CSP partners believe that with political will at the national level, such changes are possible.

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[Local authorities] often place the blame on young people for conflict, criminality or instability, and . . . limit their participation in any kind of civic life.
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The mountainous **Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region** comprises the eastern part of the country, occupying nearly half of Tajikistan's land mass but with a population of only around three per cent of the country's total. The region's people are for the most part linguistically, religiously and culturally distinct from the majority of the population in Tajikistan. Despite its 'autonomous' status, most decisions relating to the region, such as land swaps with China, are still made by the central government – often ignoring the specifics of the region and triggering local unrest. Unsurprisingly, CSP members focused on tensions between law enforcement agencies and communities, and more specifically prioritised the concerns of young people being ignored by local authorities – who often place the blame on young people for conflict, criminality or instability, and who limit their participation in any kind of civic life. Following awareness-raising and advocacy campaigns, CSP partners have made recommendations to the local authorities on how to improve relations with the region's population. These include improving regular communications with young women and men to understand their concerns and involving them in discussions on youth-related issues.⁹ They also focused on the huge issue of unemployment affecting over half of young women and men, and provided entertainment and exchange opportunities for youth to broaden their horizons.



Women take part in a 'Youth for Safer World' camp to acquire new skills on how to develop effective action plans for advocacy, July 2019.

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A similar approach to centralised decision-making has been taken by the government towards **Rasht**, an area that makes up a large part of the Districts of Republican Subordination (DRS) and which has historically been a base for those with opposing views to the government. Political differences between the authorities and the public have led to strained relations. The main concern of the CSP was the lack of access to quality education resources, which has resulted in entrenched gender norms for women and girls and has prevented the region from reaching its development potential. This lack of education and development makes it harder to question alternative narratives or manipulations from violent groups, especially for the many migrants who are forced to go abroad due to scant employment opportunities back home. Labour migrants are often targeted by recruiters in Russia and elsewhere, who are fully aware that migrants will face increased discrimination and alienation in their new environments, as well as disillusionment with the situation back in Tajikistan. After several successful initiatives involving the government, authorities, civil society and communities, recommendations were developed for decision-makers to provide improved and up-to-date educational resources, as well as to grant greater access to international organisations and CSOs to supply school materials and to strengthen the capacity of and incentives for teachers (including addressing the issue of low salaries).

In the **DRS** and the **Bokhtar zone** of Khatlon Region, the CSP identified gender-based violence as a priority issue to be addressed. The DRS consists of 13 central districts (including Rasht) that are located around Dushanbe and which are directly under central administration – yet they face many hardships including low standards of living, unemployment, a lack of trust between communities and the government, and massive out-migration to Russia for work. Bokhtar is located in the west of the Khatlon Region, in the heart of a rich oasis in the Vakhsh river valley, and despite relatively good economic opportunities it still faces many of the challenges communities face in the rest of the country. As in all parts of the country, sexual and gender-based violence, predominantly against women, is widespread. Poor socio-economic conditions and a lack of development have exacerbated patriarchal attitudes in traditional communities. Partners from DRS found that the involvement of third parties (such as in-laws) can worsen household dynamics and expectations of entrenched gender norms. In Bokhtar, partners have largely focused on conducting awareness-raising activities for young women and men to challenge gender stereotypes and violence towards women. Partners recommended that the local government should provide them with space to promote the rights of vulnerable people, strengthen accountability and recognition of abuse, and advocate against gender-based violence and for women's rights to be at the top of the government's agenda. In both locations, these initiatives were delivered jointly with local government.

CSP partners have repeatedly proven the effectiveness of their work at the local level, but still lack the coordination and capacity to advocate at the national level, where all decisions are made. To make lasting changes, these local concerns and efforts must be taken nationally and put to those who can change things for the better.

The path ahead

There are several ways that international organisations and donors can support civil society in Tajikistan to play a more effective role in peace and security, as well as actions that people (including authorities) within the country can take to help improve the situation. First, international organisations, donors and government agencies should focus on strengthening the capacity of local civil society – including exchange visits for civil society inside and outside of the country, as well as trainings, mentoring and accompaniment – so that they build the knowledge and skills they need to advocate for increased space, and so that they can more effectively collaborate with government representatives, authorities or other senior actors. Second, the public and civil society should be encouraged to come together, with the support of international organisations, to create civil society platforms to jointly address community security concerns and to minimise counterproductive competition. Third, international donors should balance their funding for government and civil society (spread across a diverse range of CSOs), and ensure that funds are used transparently and in a conflict-sensitive way, so that people do not feel that foreign donors are fuelling corruption or opaque deals.

From the government's side, there should be greater efforts to include civil society in decision-making processes – especially those related to the safety and security of their communities – and more willingness to cooperate on sensitive issues or to respond to feedback. Following the increased action of civil society during the COVID-19 pandemic, the government should acknowledge CSOs' crucial role in providing services and also in addressing people's security needs. As such, greater cooperation will be necessary to address issues of mutual concern. The government could also provide more support for

CSOs to create and legalise public councils under all governmental institutions and departments, providing increased accountability, independence and citizen input.

More workshops and collaborative platforms between civil society and the government will go a long way to building trust and ensuring cooperation – as will involvement of CSOs at different stages of decision-making processes. CSOs should build on the momentum and goodwill of the public resulting from civil society's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, to ensure public funding for CSOs continues. Lessons from successful collaboration under the remit of community policing, as well as during the COVID-19 crisis, can help inform approaches with different government ministries.

As evidenced through the work of CSP members, civil society has been one of the most effective sectors in bridging the gap between the government and the population. But despite their effectiveness and strong relationships with communities, CSOs have faced increasing suspicion from the government. This also has legal implications – for example, many CSOs have found themselves on a list of suspicious non-state actors, which has had a seriously negative impact on the support they can provide. At a time when CSOs need to come together and unite on various fronts, competition and an increasingly inhospitable environment instead get in the way. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown what a united and active civil society is capable of doing, and has restored a degree of government-CSO cooperation, as well as public trust. It is crucial that out of the tragedy of the global pandemic, civil society – in Tajikistan and beyond – emerges more unified and committed than ever, and that the government embraces opportunities to jointly and collaboratively work for peace and security with CSOs.



Civil society representatives discuss progress in preventing domestic violence, Dushanbe, 2019.
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A young panellist runs through her speech before a debate on how to prevent domestic violence.

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Notes

- 1 Sobiri B (2017), 'The long echo of Tajikistan's civil war', *Open Democracy*, 23 June (<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/long-echo-of-tajikistan-s-civil-war/>)
- 2 Mullojanov P (2001), 'Politics of compromise: The Tajikistan peace process', Conciliation Resources, April (<https://www.c-r.org/accord/tajikistan/civil-society-and-peacebuilding>)
- 3 Bakhtaliev O (2020), 'The evolving role of civil society in peace and security in Tajikistan: challenges and opportunities', Saferworld, 17 March (<https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/news-and-analysis/post/861-the-evolving-role-of-civil-society-in-peace-and-security-in-tajikistan-challenges-and-opportunities>)
- 4 Civil Society Development Association (2019), 'Tajik NGOs would like to propose amendments to the law of the republic of Tajikistan "On Public Associations"', 18 January (<http://en.cso-central.asia/tajik-ngos-would-like-to-propose-amendments-to-the-law-of-the-republic-of-tajikistan-on-public-associations/>)
- 5 In May 2020, Saferworld held informal consultations with select CSOs to get a better idea of civil society responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 6 NGO Coalition against Torture in Tajikistan, Polish Helsinki Federation for Human Rights and International Partnership for Human Rights (2017), 'Tajikistan: Committee against Torture', June (https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CAT/Shared%20Documents/TJK/INT_CAT_ICO_TJK_27939_E.pdf)
- 7 See Tajikistan Police Reform: <http://police-reform.tj/index.php/en/bonus-page/vzaimodejstvie-obshchestva-i-millitsii>
- 8 These parts of the country were grouped together due to similarities in the issues they identified and recommendations they provided, rather than on any geographic or other basis.
- 9 According to government policy, 'youth' are defined as being between the ages of 14 and 30.



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About Saferworld

Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. We work with people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. Our priority is people – we believe in a world where everyone can lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from fear and insecurity. We are a not-for-profit organisation working in 12 countries and territories across Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

Cover photo – Young activists select topics to discuss at Tajik Republican Debate championship, Dushanbe, 2019.

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