

The role of NGOs in conflict management and resolution in post-conflict Osh, Kyrgyzstan

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Abstract: The aim of this policy-oriented paper is to provide advice for the conflict resolution and reconciliation component of the work of NGOs. More specifically, this paper will focus on training NGOs, and document conversations with trainees and trainers on conflict management and resolution in post-conflict Osh, Kyrgyzstan. The authors had the opportunity to witness preparation for a two day training event held on 10-12 December 2010, as well as the final training evaluation in Osh. The training covered a variety of themes from the conflict itself to conflict resolution. This training gave us a complete overview and served as a representative sample of the content of the taught component of the training event. Moreover, we were able to critically evaluate the training and as such we provide recommendations for improvements at the end of this report.

Keywords: *conflict resolution, Kyrgyzstan, NGOs, training, methodologies*

¹ The authors would like to express their gratitude to Kimairis Toogood-Luehrs, Matthew Lucas, Nazira Satyvaldiyeva, Mirgul Karimova, and Julie Brethfeld in Osh.

Introduction

One of the authors lived in Osh for two weeks (10-23 December 2010), worked as a volunteer at the Eurasia Foundation of Central Asia (EFCA) in Osh, participated in the training organized by the EFCA for other NGOs in the region, and talked to local people. The author also participated in general staff meetings and staff training seminars. Apart from working with the EFCA, the authors conducted their own research among local people, Kyrgyz and Uzbek in the city of Osh, and also in a neighboring region, Ak-Tilek. However, methodologically it was very hard to conduct fieldwork in Osh because people were quite suspicious and skeptical toward answering questions during interviews from unknown researchers. Researcher ethnicity also presented problems. Ethnic Kyrgyz researchers had problems conducting open discussions with ethnic Uzbek respondents. It was also very difficult to take photographs, as people did not like the idea of having pictures taken of them or their city. This report is based mostly on participant observation and also on in-depth interviews with local people, scholars, and NGO representatives.

Contents

This present report covers the general background of the region, including the political situation. Moreover, it addresses a selection of special NGO problems from the overall research findings. These problems include:

- Documentation, monitoring, and assessment
- Training and qualifications
- The effectiveness of training
- Methodologies
- Local conflict mechanisms

Political background

Since 2005, the small Central Asian republic of Kyrgyzstan has attracted international attention due to political turmoil and ethnic rioting. One aspect of the violence has certainly been the struggle for power and control in the post-Soviet period. Kyrgyzstan experienced its first 'Tulip Revolution' on the 24 March 2005, which was generally peaceful, despite some violence and looting in the capital city, Bishkek. During this Revolution, President Askar Akaev and his government were ousted from power by public protest. Immediately after the Tulip Revolution, a presidential election was held in July 2005, upon which Kurmanbek Bakiev, one of the opposition leaders, became President. Bakiev was ousted from power on 7

April 2010 by public protest over his family's rule and corruption. A referendum saw Roza Otunbaeva become the head of an interim government as a prelude to fresh presidential elections. In December 2011, Almazbek Atambaev was elected the new President of Kyrgyzstan. Of the 5 post-Soviet Central Asian republics, Kyrgyzstan is the only one to have experienced several changes in its high-level political leadership.

Analysts draw parallels between these high-level political events and the clashes that were part of the worst ethnic violence to hit southern Kyrgyzstan since 1990 – a time when several hundred people were killed (Tishkov 1995). In June 2010, hundreds of Uzbek and Kyrgyz inhabitants of the Kyrgyzstani city of Osh were killed in inter-communal violence. Many thousands of people were displaced, not to mention the wide-scale damage to property, most of which was Uzbek-owned (KIC 2011). The Kyrgyz interim government claimed that it had lost control of Osh, the country's second largest city, and had asked Russia for help to quell the violence. An independent commission estimated that two thirds of the 470 people killed during the violence had been shot and of the 1,930 injured, half had suffered gunshot wounds (KIC 2011). The KIC found the Uzbek minority to have been disproportionately victimized in the conflict. The KIC established that 74 percent of victims were ethnic Uzbek and 25 percent Kyrgyz, leading to the conclusion that the Uzbek community suffered significantly more than their Kyrgyz neighbors.

The conflict in Osh and Jalal-Abad has been sparingly reported in international mass media, depicted as a 'centuries-old ethnic conflict' with vague political motivations. For several centuries, the Fergana valley has been populated by both Turkic and Farsi speaking peoples. During the Stalin period, ethnic identity was emphasized, meaning that the Stalinist regime produced/reified ethnicity. As a result of Soviet definitions of ethnic identity, Fergana valley was divided between three national republics; Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan (Abashin 2004). However, in pre-Soviet times, being a native of Bokhara, Osh or Jalal-Abad was more important than being Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Uyghur or Tajik. Up until that time, Russian was the language of international communication, whereas the ethnic component was cultural, but not a political phenomenon. Ethnic identity could also be taken as evidence of membership to a certain economic segment – for example, Uzbeks were famous traders in southern Kyrgyzstan – but these divisions were not obstacles to inter- marriage and cohabitation (Roche & Ismailbekova 2010).

Kyrgyz and Uzbek communities have a centuries-long history of peaceful coexistence, whereby each stressed their different cultures and modes of life. The discussion or debate surrounding the recent dramatic events in Kyrgyzstan nevertheless present a serious problem rising from a deep-seated ethnic hatred – but missing, for example, the fact that most residents of Osh and Jalal Abad are bilingual, even trilingual, speaking Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Russian (Megoran 2002) and the knowledge of 2-3 languages or more is common. There is also a great deal of inter-marriage in these cities and villages. Therefore, one can see an integrated community that has been living in this region for many centuries, producing the region-specific common cultural space (Reeves 2010, Roberts 2010). But at the same time, there are also many segregated neighborhoods and many Kyrgyz and Uzbeks communicate with each other using their own native languages, as they tend to be mutually comprehensible.

Osh city

The author arrived in Osh at 13:15 on 10 December 2010. The author immediately felt the strong presence of international organizations in the city, obvious from the many vehicles registered to the organizations and carrying their logos. The first thing that caught the eye was the sign ‘Intercultural tolerance’ visible everywhere in the city, which called on people to embrace peace and tolerance. On the way to the city from the airport, the author saw burnt houses, restaurants, and shops as well as broken glass. The empty burnt buildings were secured with padlocks. According to our informants, the big shops and restaurants were owned by Uzbek businesspeople, but after the conflict, the Uzbek names on the properties were changed to Kyrgyz in order to protect them. There was no sign of house numbers.



Picture 1: The sign ‘Kyrgyzstan – this is us’

What the author first experienced in Osh was mistrust between the two ethnic groups, where plenty of Uzbeks did not have a single good thing to say about Kyrgyz people. The same story could be found with those Kyrgyz who did not have a good thing to say about Uzbeks. But there were also some Uzbek and Kyrgyz individuals who did say that it was not the two ethnic groups that were belligerent and that the conflict was caused by politicians or criminal leaders. Nevertheless, it was hard to think objectively in a post-violence situation with people blaming each other. There is usually no single answer that is common in any post-conflict context. Also, there was some feeling of grievance among people blaming each other for causing the conflict. They were tired of various rumors circulating the city, because any discussion among these people tended to be based on these rumors. One of the author's close friends suggested not going outside after 17:00, not to speak Uzbek, and not to walk alone on the streets. This illustrates that people were quite skeptical of strangers. On one occasion, the author was having dinner in a local Uzbek café when the owner asked to look inside the author's bag – suspicious because the author was ethnically Kyrgyz.



Picture 2: A burnt out Uzbek-owned café

Among the Kyrgyz, the author observed that, more than before, they talked about patriotism and related issues, showing solidarity in times of need, regardless of whether people knew each other or not. At various events, there were discussions on how the Kyrgyz should be united and one obvious indicator of rising patriotism was the increasing usage of the traditional white *kalpak* hats. However, some Uzbeks expressed their discontent at this, saying that no one was trying to take away the *kalpak* from the Kyrgyz. Nevertheless, people kept emphasizing these ethnic markers in their everyday interactions. There were even Kyrgyz Republic flags attached to some cars.



Picture 3: Kyrgyz men wearing traditional white hats ‘Ak Kalpak’
(Osh, 13 December, 2010)

The Eurasia Foundation of Central Asia (EFCA)

The Eurasia Foundation of Central Asia opened its office in Osh, Kyrgyzstan, on July 1, 2006. In Osh, EFCA runs programs focused on engaging youth; supporting local and regional independent media; protecting the rights of migrants; the institutional development of civil society; supporting vulnerable groups and developing student leadership. EFCA works with radio stations, newspapers and television stations to form partnerships, allowing media outlets to easily share information. These bridges allow for cooperation on issues that face each country in the region, including water usage, trade, and transportation (Eurasia Foundation of Central Asia 2011). The author was involved in one EFCA project supporting civil society organizations in post-violence situations in Osh and Jalal-Abad oblasts. The EFCA offers technical support for NGOs and other representatives of Civil Society Organizations (CSO). In the aftermath of June 2010, NGOs in Osh and Jalal Abad are facing difficult new challenges.

The EFCA prepared a support program for civil society organizations with the aim of strengthening knowledge and skills in working on conflict prevention and peace building, and assisting them in responding effectively and confidently in this new and difficult context. These activities are intended to be practically relevant to their respected organizations’ work. The EFCA has invited experienced specialists from around the world to provide CSO representatives with various kinds of training, expert consultancy and guidance, engaging with the CSOs to elicit the kind of support they want. Participation is free of charge, although members of the organizations have to commit their time and effort to make their participation

worthwhile. The EFCA also encourages government officials and journalists to join their training workshops to develop their skills and build relations with civil society.

In November and December 2010, the EFCA offered the following training events:

- Training workshop-Applied conflict analysis
- Training workshop-Participatory community assessment (14/15 December 2010)
- Strategic planning consultations for individual CSOs
- Consultation for individual CSOs on designing and planning effective projects for conflict environments

On Monday 13 December 2010, the author introduced himself as a volunteer at the EFCA. The EFCA staff was very cooperative and welcomed any advice on how to improve their programs, which made the author's research very smooth and easy. They welcomed any and all criticism and solicited advice from the author with the aim of improving their projects by showing interest in learning about various research approaches and methodologies. The author spent two days on the Conflict Analysis Workshop organized by the EFCA. Apart from this, the author worked for one week at their office, helping them to organize their training and sharing ideas. First, the author learned in detail about the EFCA program from their flyers and brochures. The first day was preparation for the subsequent training (13-14 December 2010). Julie Brethfeld² was invited as a trainer from the Saferworld Organization in London³ to train local NGO trainers in Osh and in neighboring districts. When she arrived in Osh, the EFCA staff closely worked with her, discussing the format and the content of the training. Her training was based on learning more about:

- how to define goals
- conducting research
- methodological techniques
- analysis

² Julie Brethfeld is the Team Leader for the Europe Programme. She has several years' experience in peace-building, conflict prevention, small arms control and disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (GDR), and has spent 3 years in Sudan and Ethiopia managing and advising projects (available at <http://www.saferworld.org.uk/smartweb/about/europe-programme>. Accessed 7 January 2011).

³ Saferworld works to prevent violent conflict and promote security and justice. Saferworld is working with the EFCA to increase the capacity of local civil society organizations in the South of Kyrgyzstan to respond to the post-violence crisis in an effective, coordinated and conflict sensitive manner (<http://www.saferworld.org.uk/smartweb/where/central-asia>. Accessed 7 January 2011).

- facilitation
- the application of methodologies in practice
- presenting research results
- assessment

On the first day, the EFCA staff and Julie Brethfeld outlined how to engage participants in a lively discussion and make sure the training went smoothly and was interesting. One of the EFCA members suggested that it would be much better if the participants did not discuss or talk about the conflict, because the participants were tired of this ‘word’ (conflict). The EFCA member gave an example from a previous training session when Kyrgyz and Uzbek representatives clashed while discussing Kyrgyz and Uzbek relations in the post-conflict situation. One NGO representative, for example, recalled a situation when Uzbek and Kyrgyz participants in a focus group discussion became involved in a physical fight. After this event, the NGO representative was afraid of engaging people in any ‘conflict issue’ discussions. It was suggested that other approaches, aside from focus groups, could be more fruitful in dealing with sensitive issues, such as conflict. The EFCA was interested in learning more about other techniques with less potential to offend the representatives of ethnic groups. In the end, there were several changes made to the format of the training program because it had been based on Julie Brethfeld’s experiences in Kosovo, but it was necessary to frame these experiences within the Osh context. However, the EFCA was open and flexible to changes to the program, contextualizing it according to the needs of southern Kyrgyzstan and the respective cultural backgrounds of the people involved.



Picture 4: The training process

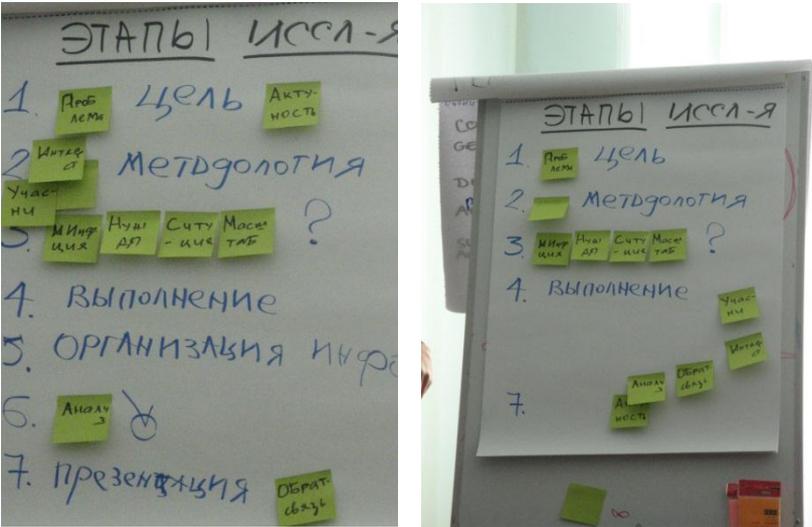
There were ten participants from NGOs and CSOs operating in Osh and Jalal-Abad oblast. As one of the EFCA staff said, around 15 or 16 people had confirmed, but only 10 people showed up on the first day. According to their schedule, training was supposed to start around 09:30, but only three participants had arrived by then. By 10:00, there were four more participants present. One Uzbek woman asked the organizer to start the training as soon as possible, and so it commenced at around 10:45. Each participant had to introduce him/herself and the activities of his/her respective NGO. One of the EFCA program managers started to worry about the absence of people and their irresponsibly in not informing the EFCA in advance of any absence. The reason for this concern was that usually less than 30% of participants were absent.

The EFCA started to telephone the absentee participants, and it transpired that many had difficulties finding the EFCA office. Another comment that the author would like to make is that several participants changed their minds on the day of the training itself. The reasons given included trips to the market or other unforeseeable business meaning they could not notify the organizers of the training in advance. An EFCA volunteer had to collect and call other participants so that they could arrive on time and let the training begin, but by 11:00, only 10 participants had arrived.

The first day of training was productive, and participants were encouraged to engage in a lively discussion. Each time the word conflict was discussed, both Julie and the EFCA staff would lead the discussion in a new direction, such as discussing the current socio-economic problems of the region and their negative consequences in more detail. Since the aim of this training was to teach NGOs how to conduct research in post-conflict areas, the main issue that came out of the various questions was how to deal with the sensitive topic of 'Kyrgyz and Uzbek relations'. Let us give one example. A discussion on the Mayor of Osh city raised several interesting points of analysis. Both Kyrgyz and Uzbek participants were engaged in the discussion. An Uzbek woman expressed her opinion that the Mayor of Osh city was 'nationalist', because he only supports Kyrgyz groups without taking into account the needs of Uzbeks in the city. However, the majority of the Kyrgyz participants did not accept this idea. Rather, Kyrgyz participants started to defend the Mayor without listening to her arguments. As the Uzbek woman complained to the author after the workshop, it was hard for her to express her thoughts to a 'Kyrgyz' person, because the Kyrgyz would support other Kyrgyz persons, even if their views were 'nationalist' or discriminatory against Uzbeks.

At lunch time, 12:30, some older participants went to a café with transport arranged by the EFCA, but many of us walked to the café, which was approximately 15 minutes by foot. On the way, the author talked to participants (NGO representatives) from Jalal-Abat oblast. One of them said that ‘lots of NGOs are located in the cities, which is a pity, because NGOs don’t spend much time in the villages. No one knows whether NGOs are working or not, because they don’t share their activities with people or communicate the progress of their work. Usually, training is held in the cities, which are far away and difficult to reach. If NGOs were present in rural areas, it would be much better’. The author interviewed the local NGO representatives from Osh oblast about their opinions on the training. According to the participants, previous training was usually very theoretical with fewer practical issues discussed. However, this training was a mixture of practical and theoretical issues. But many NGO representatives expressed their concern that they needed this kind of training to apply theory to practice.

The author found it surprising that during the training event, many NGO members spoke freely and frequently on their cell phones. In order to stop this, the author asked the NGO representatives to switch off their phones. However, they asked permission to set their cell phones to ‘vibration’. After lunch, several participants disappeared, wondering off without informing the organizers of the workshop, while some of the trainers did not come back to the training event on time. In the afternoon, two CSO representatives asked permission to leave early because they had appointments elsewhere in the city. However, those who remained in the office continued to focus on the role of NGOs for the communities, as well as engage in general discussion. Every detail of the event was documented on flip charts.



The picture 5: The flip charts
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On the second day, training started at around 09:30. The participants were not that motivated by the training, as they thought it would be the same as usual. However, the training offered by Julie Brethfeld was interesting and challenging, as several participants told the author. Julie Brethfeld asked the participants to complete practical tasks, which were very useful for their everyday work. Slowly, the training became very interesting for the participants because they themselves started to be engaged in the discussion by asking further questions concerning methodology, giving their own examples, and asking for advice, such as what to do in certain situations. There was a question on what to do if Kyrgyz and Uzbeks were together during training, how the facilitator should behave and how the moderator should lead the discussion without involving the two sides in a conflict. During a role playing game, it emerged that many NGO members did not know how to be facilitators, because they could not lead the group properly – they themselves were involved in the discussion, rather than leading the discussion. Overall, the participants found the training useful.



Picture 6: Day 2 of the training

The language used for the training was English, with Russian translation provided. But many of the NGO representatives had poor levels of Russian and so had difficulty in expressing their thoughts, which kept them from becoming fully engaged. The training was also held in a very small room and was quite noisy. The training was not recorded nor minutes taken for further assessment of the effectiveness of the training provided, but instead, information was drawn up only on flip charts. Two days of training was also a little short, even though the NGOs were very grateful for it.

Recommendations

Documenting the training

While, in our opinion, the training organized by the EFCA was helpful for the local NGOs, it was not recorded or documented by the organizers. Without this kind of information, one cannot assess the effectiveness of the training. However, the organizers did conduct a small survey to assess whether the training was helpful, asking the participants a number of questions, some of which the participants did not fully understand. The authors of this paper were not able to acquire any further information on previous training events, because again, there was no written record and so it was very hard to compare and contrast this training with previous events.

It is essential that every NGO activity is documented properly and recorded. Recorded data must be collected for future assessment and for the purpose of comparison with other projects. Even if training events are unsuccessful, their content must be documented so that the same mistakes are not repeated in the future. The main means of recording information was the flip charts, used in the workshops and round tables and they need to be evaluated before participants forget the meaning of the listed catchwords. However, it must be kept in mind that the flip charts are good instruments for remembering the content of previous training events. If recording is not possible, due to problems with participant permission or a lack of technology, then the content of the meeting should at least be noted down before the organizers lose recollection. There is enormous room for improvement with recording information as without proper documentation of the early stages of a project it is not possible to monitor progress and to assess its impact at the village or community level.

The effectiveness of training

If NGOs were responsible and serious about the workshops and training, they would have arrived one time or at least informed the organizers in advance if they could not attend. What does this show us? On the one hand, this shows that many NGOs are tired of endless training; therefore, they decided not to come because they did not expect the training to be helpful. On the other hand, as one NGO representative told us, this training – to his surprise – was quite helpful. Overall, we would suggest to the EFCA to initiate competition for attending training events. Here we mean giving some kind of reward for those NGOs that attend training. If the trainer comes to Osh from a remote region, the NGOs should have at least some benefit. In

order to increase the effectiveness of the NGOs actively participating in training events it is important to spark their interest and provide them with incentives, thus competition.

Donors should also take into account the fact that, if NGOs participate in training events, then their chances of funding are higher. Moreover, it would be practical if the EFCA gave recommendations for very active NGOs as to how to get funding. There should be a 'checks and balances' system between donors, the regional EFCA, and NGOs. After one year, the same NGO representatives should be invited to the EFCA in Osh to assess whether the knowledge gained from the various workshops and training events has been implemented and to what extent, and if yes, what the effects have been. This would give local NGOs more responsibility, and thus confer seriousness to the training. The idea of training local NGOs a good one, but continuing along the same lines can only be recommended if there is a longer-term perspective. The inexperience of NGO members was obvious from their questions and their desire to continue this project in the future.

Language priority

Language issues also pose a problem. The training should be divided into two groups: Kyrgyz speaking and Russian speaking. It is expected that the local trainers should be fluent in Russian, Kyrgyz and, of course, Uzbek. It is therefore suggested that they consider language learning and teaching. This can be done through a teacher, either Kyrgyz or Uzbek, able to instruct both Kyrgyz and Uzbek (hired from the private sector, but paid for by the NGOs).

Methodology

Many participants at the training event asked questions related to research methods, which implies that they did not have sufficient research skills. Once NGO representatives collect enough data in their research, resources are then mapped and social problems are depicted as they are perceived. This information has to be complemented with other methods as well. In addition to the focus group technique that NGOs frequently employ, research should also include individual conversations with local people, carefully taking into account their gender, age, and status. Information collected from individuals and groups must be kept anonymous (life circumstances, names, and their history). Moreover, the participant observation method is also crucial to compare what people say, on the one hand, and what they do, on the other. This information is essential for a wide range of project activities because in-depth knowledge is required. Research using a 'mix of methods' (group interviews, individual interviews,

participant observation of everyday activities accompanied by informal talks, village history, and biographical narratives) is also crucial, since only open and explorative methods provide in-depth information. However, one should bear in mind that research on sensitive issues like 'interethnic conflict' might be counterproductive. Therefore, sensitive topics should at best be avoided in conversations, e.g. discussing the conflict between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks.

Local conflict management

NGO researchers should give voice to people and identify the needs of people from their own perspectives and understanding. The needs of every community have to be identified. This can be done by discussing with villagers what they think of new projects introduced by NGOs, if they think they will create any problems or controversies. NGOs have to discover whether there are any existing rules or customs that project officers may be unaware of. Here, the authors would like to highlight some local institutions that facilitate the peaceful interaction of people. If NGOs focus more on these aspects and create mechanisms for dealing with local institutions, this kind of approach would strengthen the relationship between NGOs and local people.

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