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Scholarly Studies of Civil Society in Tajikistan

Nargis Kuchakshoeva

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125/1 Toktogul Street, 720001, Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic

Tel.: +996 (312) 621 979

E-mail: csi@ucentralasia.org



Working Paper No. 7

Scholarly Studies of Civil Society in Tajikistan

Nargis Kuchakshoeva

Research Fellow

Civil Society Initiative, Graduate School of Development, University of Central Asia

Abstract

The paper using the systematic literature review methodology analysed the several academic literature databases (Google Scholar, Cyberleninka, and JSTOR) as well as the websites of international organizations. After filtering for duplications and checking for eligibility criteria 18 texts were analysed. In its analysis, the paper discusses the forms and roles of civil society, and it was partnering with the government and donors. Among the findings is that publications were made basically after 2004 and there were few based on empirical research. The research agenda based on the analysed texts should include more focus on studying traditional institutions of civil society and how partnership among various actors in the changing environment should be developed.

The findings, interpretations and conclusions expressed in this paper are entirely those of the author and do not necessary represent the views of the University of Central Asia. The text and sources of the article should be referenced in this format: Kuchakshoeva, N. (2024). Scholarly Studies of Civil Society in Tajikistan. The Civil Society Initiative of UCA, Working Paper #7, 22 p.

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1. Introduction

There are lots of debates on the definition of ‘civil society’; however, none of these arguments provides a specific definition for this concept. It has been given multiple interpretations, including being associated with political society by Aristotle, who describes it as merely validated institutions that form a self-governing social sphere (Edwards, 2013). Providing a clearer definition, Manor, Robinson & White (1999:4) identify ‘civil society’ as ‘an intermediate realm situated between state and household, populated by organized groups or associations that are separate from the state, enjoy some autonomy in relations with the state, and are formed voluntarily by members of society to protect or extend their interests, values, or identities.’ Nevertheless, many scholars argue that ‘civil society’ is key to promoting social welfare and democracy under liberal constitutionalism (Young, 2000). Consequently, the role and concept of civil society continue to be questionable among scholars from the social, political, and academic realms.

Being historically related to Western history and political philosophy, the concept of ‘civil society’ is distinctly understood in an Eastern context, including Central Asian countries like Tajikistan. In Tajikistan, the idea of civil society became popular after the disintegration of the Soviet Union; however, no significant work has been done yet to explore it in this context. Although the concept has had a linguistic verdict for decades, it is still uncertain to many Tajik academics because it has not been significantly researched by Tajik historians, political scientists, or philosophers. Few Tajik philosophers identify ‘civil society’ as a space where public associations based on common interests are formed and function, aimed at solving urgent problems. They argue that these interests may change depending on the problems’ alternations and the personal interests of citizens, each of whom joins the associations based on voluntary initiatives (AKHP, 2015).

As an active pioneer of civil society, AKDN¹ refers to civil society as a variety of actors and organizations in a society that are (i) non-governmental and (ii) not-for-profit and have diverse goals, purposes, and forms aimed at improving the quality of life of citizens in the countries where they operate (AKDN, 2009). As in many other contexts in Tajikistan today, civil society is also regarded as non-profit organizations (NPOs), such as registered charities, development non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or public organizations (PO), women’s organizations, community groups, faith-based organizations, social movements, self-help groups, advocacy groups, and coalitions (Bagno et al., 2010). Hence, the diverse interpretation of ‘civil society’ depends on the context and the issues that certain social groups and state institutions solve (ibid.). To sum up, “definitions are changing as civil society is recognized as encompassing far more than a mere ‘sector’ dominated by the NGO community: civil society today includes an ever wider and more vibrant range of organized and unorganized groups, as new civil society actors blur the boundaries between sectors and experiment with new organisational forms, both online and off” (World Economic Forum, 2013, p. 5). Considering the above arguments, one may conclude that the ‘civil society’ interpretation is always in constant evolution throughout historical time and space.

In general, supported by western organizations, civil society activities today in Tajikistan are found to be fully focused on humanitarian, social, economic, and environmental services (Freizer, 2004;

1 The Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) is dedicated to improving the quality of life of those in need, mainly in Asia and Africa, irrespective of their origin, faith, or gender. Its multifaceted development approach aims to help communities and individuals become self-reliant. <https://www.the.akdn/en/what-we-do>

Zharkevich, 2010; Levi-Sanchez, 2018). An assumption regarding the key role of the Tajik third sector as a watchdog for political changes, misguided developments, organizing social debates, and public opposition has been debated by many civil society experts and researchers (Abdullaev & Barnes, 2001; Akiner, 2004; Zharkevich, 2010; Ewoh et al., 2012). However, we should not disregard that with the evolution of civil society's definitions, the roles of civil society actors are also changing, as these actors are currently demonstrating their value as service providers, facilitators, volunteers, innovators, conveners, and advocates (World Economic Forum, 2013).

Responding to such questions as to what contribution civil society can make towards addressing priority issues in Tajikistan (in the economic, social, education, and environmental spheres) will require thorough research and analysis of the economic, education, political, and social framework. Since no major research has been conducted lately to explore the awareness of the up-to-date practices of civil society actors in Tajikistan, there is an urgent need to investigate the topic in depth. Therefore, this systematic literature review will analyse the existing data on civil society in Tajikistan, highlight the practices of civil society in the Tajik context, and lay the foundation for further research in this area. A systematic review of the current state of the literature on civil society in Tajikistan is critical to conduct. The review aims to:

- 1) identify previous studies on civil society in Tajikistan;
- 2) examine various forms of self-organization in the associational life of Tajiks;
- 3) assess the practices of civil society actors, including various public organizations such as NGOs, CSOs, and nonprofit organizations, that are focused on solving priority issues in the community.

2. Methodology

The current systematic literature review followed PRISMA 2020 flow diagram guidance² for step-by-step selection, screening, and reviewing of relevant sources. The research scope allowed the researcher to retrieve sources from up to four electronic databases (Google Scholar, Cyberleninka, JSTOR, and international organizations' websites) that were accessible and had required publications on the research topic. It is critical to note that only those publications of international organizations meeting the inclusion criteria specifications were included in this systematic review. The search engines for review were set to cover the period from 1990 to 2023 in order to identify studies that reported primary and secondary data on civil society in Tajikistan. Other research databases used for social study research, such as EBSCO, SocINDEX, Scopus, and Web of Science, were not accessible for material search; hence, they were not used. Only publications written in English and Russian were selected for this systematic review. For the Russian publications, it was ensured that the abstracts were available in English, as it is the primary language of the current paper and widely accessible for international researchers and publishers.

Kitchenham³ claims that the goal of a systematic review is to retrieve as many primary studies linking to the research question as possible using an unbiased search approach. Initially, based on inclusion and exclusion criteria, it was planned to use only primary sources on civil society in Tajikistan; however, due to the insufficient original studies on this topic for Tajikistan exclusively,

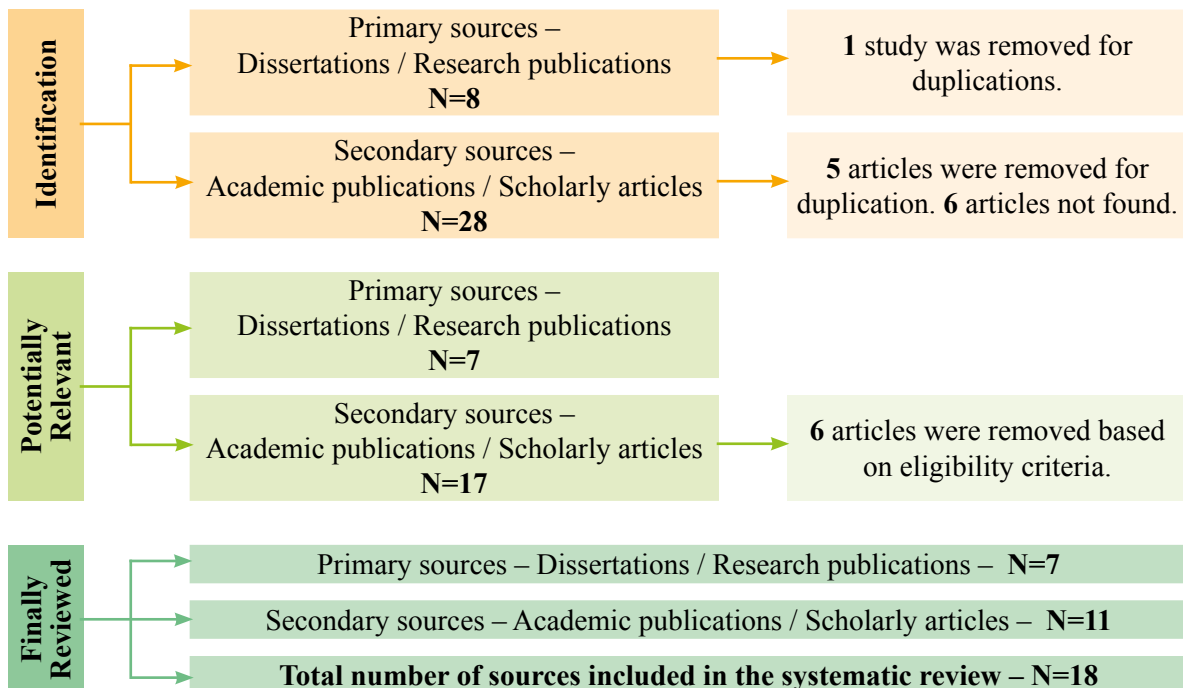
² PRISMA 2020 flow diagram for new systematic reviews. Available at: <http://prisma-statement.org/PRISMAstatement/FlowDiagram.aspx>

³ Kitchenham, B. (2004) "Procedures for Performing Systematic Reviews" Keele University, Technical Report TR/SE0401.

secondary sources were relatively included in this review. Consequently, it could be a potential research limitation of the current study. The Boolean search strategy⁴ was used to refine the data search and match the following criteria: “civil society” AND/OR Tajikistan, “associational life” AND/OR Tajikistan, “NGO” AND/OR Tajikistan, “nonprofit” AND/OR Tajikistan, “nongovernmental” AND/OR Tajikistan, “communal life” AND/OR Tajikistan. Exclusion criteria included: studies that were conducted before 1990s, studies that did not specifically include the keywords in their titles; studies that were not directly related to the topic of “Civil society in Tajikistan”; news highlights; citations on civil society; policies towards civil society; letters to editors.

Initially, after setting the advanced search option in the search engines, over 187 texts were found on the first attempts of the search. Based on inclusion and exclusion criteria, a total of 36 potentially eligible studies were revealed. After a thorough screening of these studies, 18 of them were removed for duplication and eligibility. As a result, 18 sources were retrieved and reviewed at the final stage. Based on inclusion and exclusion criteria, the researcher assessed all the eligible data before categorizing and finalizing 18 studies to include in this systematic literature review. (see Fig. 1) They included 5 primary sources from Google Scholar, 2 primary sources from international institutions’ websites such as the AKDN and the Institute of War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), 5 secondary sources from Google Scholar, 2 secondary sources from JSTOR, 2 secondary sources from Cyberleninka, and 2 reports from international institutions’ databases such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting (CABAR). All these eligible sources were extracted and stored in the Zotero open-source software for effective data management, organization, annotation, and quality citation. To analyse the emerging data accurately, the coding technique was used for synthesizing and categorizing the data into different themes.

Figure 1. Results of review and selection of available data on civil society.



⁴ Boolean searching allows the user to combine or limit words and phrases in an online search in order to retrieve relevant results. Using the Boolean terms: AND, OR, NOT, the searcher is able to define relationships among concepts. Use OR to broaden search results.

Finally, it is vital to note that the topic of civil society in Tajikistan may have been explored broadly beyond the academic domain; however, depending on the inclusion and exclusion criteria of this systematic review, not all sources were found relevant to include in the review. A limited number of data sources from those international organizations were used that have available publications of research on the topic. Also, the term ‘civil society’ has varied meanings and alternative expressions; however, due to the time limitation and restricted research scope, only the above-mentioned keywords were used to search for sources on the civil society of Tajikistan.

3. Findings and Discussions

This section discusses the findings from 18 final sources analysed for the systematic literature review. This review revealed the diverse practices of civil society in Tajikistan and will conclude with the research gaps and recommendations for researching this topic in the Tajik context. The details of all these sources are found in *Appendix A*, following the reference list.

3.1. Findings and Analysis of Primary Sources

Out of the 7 primary studies, only 1 empirically investigated the development and role of civil society exclusively in Tajikistan. It was published in 2007 by the AKDN organization. The rest of the studies that investigated civil society in Tajikistan via comparative studies, including case studies, were published between 2004 and 2021. Most studies (6 studies) used qualitative research methods, and only 2 of them applied mixed qualitative and quantitative approaches. All of them used the case study research method, including similar data collection tools. Research participants were mostly chosen as representatives of civil society sectors; however, not all studies give clear details on the research samples. The deficiency of literature and reliability of data on civil society challenged the researchers during conducting these studies; therefore, empirical research needs to be conducted on the roles and practices of civil society in Tajikistan.

Moreover, from all primary studies, AKDN’s research was able to reach a significant number of civil society communities, as its research scope covered nearly all (main) regions and development sectors in Tajikistan. The rest of the other studies have been conducted only in the capital city and a few other districts, with limited coverage of key development areas. This means not all potential civil society actors or groups have been researched in these studies. Mainly, because of the limited time and research scope, researchers of these primary studies were not able to cover all locations and NGOs/ CBOs agents; therefore, future research is recommended to identify numerous activities and actors of civil society in Tajikistan.

3.1.1. Forms of Civil Society Organisations in Tajikistan

The majority of primary and secondary sources report on the evolution of the heterogeneous forms of civil society in Tajikistan, specifically the development of liberal and communal types of civil society (see *Fig. 3*). Based on primary sources, NGOs are found to be the best representation of the liberal form of civil society, while CBOs, especially traditional institutions like *mahalla*, are discovered to be the main representation of communal form in Tajikistan (Freizer, 2004; Giffen et al., 2005). Moreover, the study of traditional institutions of associational life in Tajikistan became the focal theme for many of the reviewed studies to understand the function and role of civil society in the Tajik context.

Nearly all studies show how successful these organizations are in fostering civil society in Tajikistan. However, the *mahalla* is one of the few traditional institutions that they have investigated, while a great deal of other traditional organizations still require investigation. Furthermore, the results offered incredibly scant data regarding Tajik women's roles in traditional institutions, as just one study (Zharkevich, 2010) has hardly explored this topic through its several case studies. Without further research, it is not possible to ascertain the extent to which the women residents of the *mahalla* have been able to take part in decision-making or actively engage with civil society. Hence, there are other potential gaps in previous studies about civil society actors in Tajikistan. Finally, out of the 7 reviewed studies, 3 recommend conducting further empirical research to adequately analyze the traditional institutions of civil society and the new spaces that are emerging for alternative visions of the future.

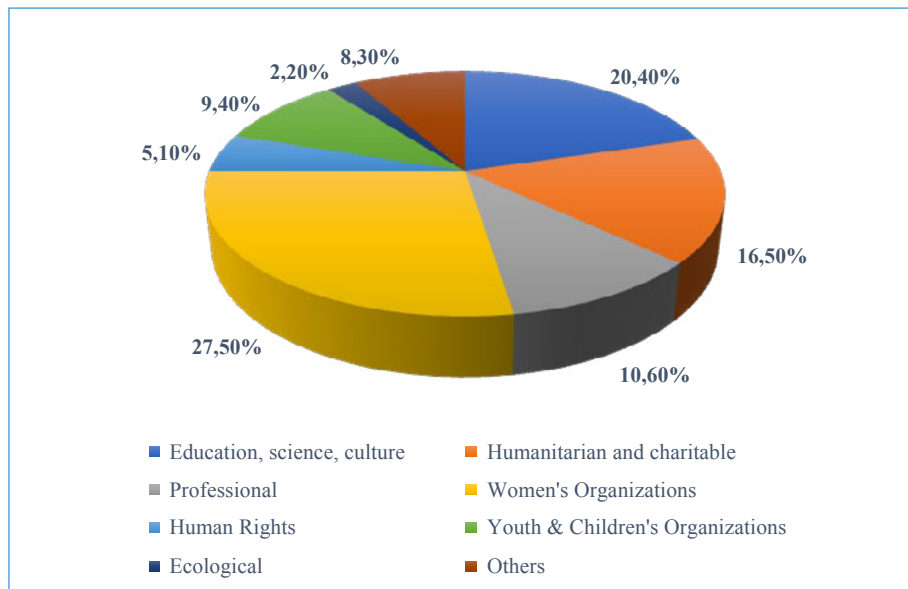
Even though most reviewed studies were focused on researching traditional organizations, none of them have explored faith-based institutions in depth. They report slightly on the signs of re-Islamification and re-traditionalization in Tajikistan. Therefore, 3 of these primary studies recommend further research on religious forms of civil society and understanding to what extent they lead public opinion in the community, whether they can work in coalition with secular institutions, what kind of values they promote, and what role they can play in the state-building process. The findings of several reviewed pieces of literature also suggest investigating the best practices of faith-based INGO activities similar to the AKDN-Aga Khan Foundation (AKF) empowerment projects that were found successful in promoting civil society initiatives in Tajikistan (Giffen et al., 2005; Zharkevich, 2010). Although they lack justification for the claim of AKDN being a faith-based INGO since the organization's activities are not bound to a particular faith community.

3.1.2. The Roles of Civil Society Organisations in Tajikistan

More than 50% (4 studies) of the findings show the number of civil society organizations has increased to 3000 in Tajikistan over three decades after becoming an independent state. Based on these studies, CSOs are non-government actors whose members share common goals and interests without generating profit or seeking power, and they include NGOs, CBOs, traditional associations, charitable organizations, volunteer groups, professional associations, faith-based organizations, and foundations (Freizer, 2004; Giffen et al., 2005; AKDN, 2007; Zharkevich, 2010).

One of the research findings shows a significant increase in the number of women's organizations (nearly 28%), followed by the growth of education-related NGOs (around 20%) (AKDN, 2007). A detailed classification of NGOs with their functional areas is sourced by the same researcher, which is shown in *Figure 2*.

Nearly all studies report CSOs, NGOs, and CBOs being largely dependent on the financial aid of western donors and organizations. Most of the primary studies report NGOs and CBOs (formal and informal) playing critical and diverse roles in the civil society sector, from the provision of education services to improving healthcare, business, and human rights. While many studies focused on the social service delivery roles of these organizations, few studies investigated their political roles. The findings of 3 studies indicate CSOs, including NGOs and CBOs, play key roles in conflict resolution and peacebuilding processes in Tajikistan. However, they also found civil society's role passive in the transformation of the current legal framework and improving the quality of the judicial system.

Figure 2. Civil Society Development in Tajikistan.⁵

Diverse factors, such as the lack of financial resources, an inadequate legal system, corruption, an authoritative bureaucracy, and imposing excessive restrictions on CSO activities, were frequently reported as major challenges for the development of civil society organizations in Tajikistan. Roughly all primary studies recommend further investigations to discover more civil society organizations and their capacity-building activities and identify the impacts of their work on social and political change, economic sustainability, and climate change actions.

3.1.3. Partnership Among Civil Society Actors, Government, and Donors

A significant number of reviewed primary data (5 studies) reports on the lack of trust (on both sides) and ineffective partnership between civil society actors and the national authorities of the state. These issues were more frequently reported for traditional faith-based institutions of civil society; hence, it is critically recommended to explore them in depth to identify the factors. However, few indicators in the reviewed literature point to the collaborations between the Tajik state and traditional institutions, including minor faith-based associations. Also, cooperation between the state and most CSOs was found at different levels, and the latter ones were found to be tolerant and neutral towards the state's authoritative regime. Even though some studies (4 studies) point to the effectiveness of the partnership between donors (INGOs particularly) and NGOs, there is literally no evidence of cooperation between donors and religious associations, as donors seem more in favour of funding secular forms of Tajik civil society. Consequently, more research needs to be conducted to identify the factors that influence the partnership between civil society actors and national authorities, as well as among donors and diverse civil society groups. It is specifically interesting to research how the cooperation of civil society actors with the government on one side and with donors on the other side can transform the process of development in Tajikistan. Also, it is critical to identify further steps for the integration of civil society initiatives into the state and donors' projects.

⁵ Source: Aga Khan Development Network (2007).

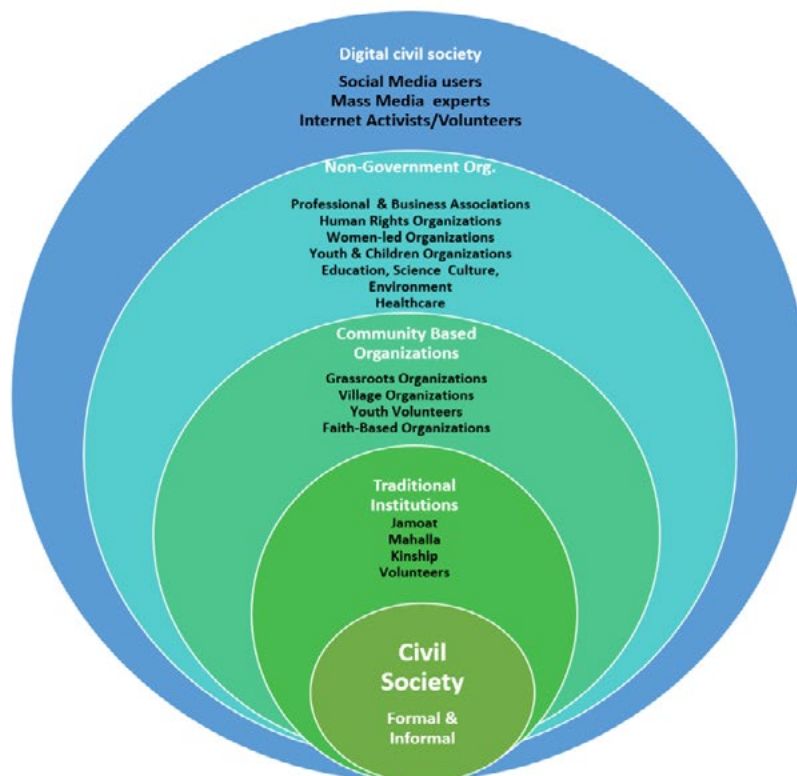
3.2. Findings and Analysis of Secondary Sources

For this systematic review, 11 academic articles were used based on inclusion and exclusion criteria mentioned in the methodology section. 8 of them were retrieved from Google Scholar, 2 were downloaded from the Cyberleninka academic database, and one was from an international organization's database. Out of all the articles, two were written in Russian (with available abstracts in English), and the rest were written in English.

3.2.1. Forms of Civil Society Organisations

As we had already discussed during the analysis of primary sources, a significant number of reviewed literature reports on various forms of civil society organizations in Tajikistan. Based on secondary sources, civil society in the Tajik context is in constant development and includes diverse forms of non-governmental associations, both formal (NGOs or public organizations) and unofficial (communities and councils), that must be registered with the Ministry of Justice (MoJ). Most of these sources (8 articles) consider traditional institutions the most significant and influential form of civil society in Tajikistan. At least 6 articles identified the following forms of traditional institutions (*refer to Fig. 3*), such as kinship: *qawm* (relatives) and *awlod* (descendants), *jamoat* (community groups), *keryar* or *hashar* (joint neighbourhood actions), *gashtak* or *jamomad* (people gathering to resolve community-level problems or celebrate important events), *mahala* council (voted or elected representatives of community members coordinating the processes concerning issues of social well-being), and volunteerism, which have survived for centuries and laid the foundation for contemporary civic voluntary activities.

Figure 3. Heterogenous forms of civil society.



CBOs, also known as grassroots organizations (GROs) in the latest study, were identified as key actors who actively solve grassroots problems and are capable of promoting local engagement and associational life in co-existence with the new Internet culture (Fisher, 2023). One author claimed that Tajik legislation identifies these institutions as self-governance, which is defined as «a system of organizing public activities to address issues of local importance autonomously» (Karimov, 2006).

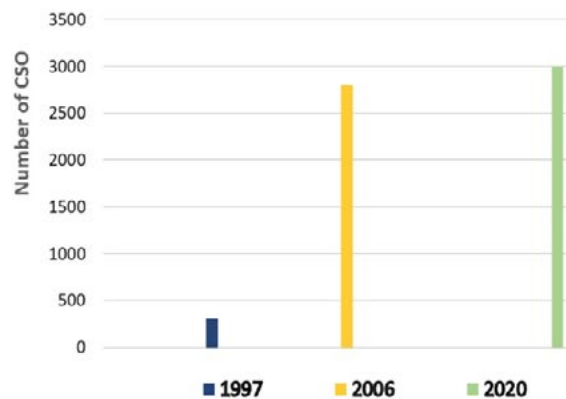
Limited findings indicate *Jamomad* – for women self-organizations, as assemblies organized by women connected by similar forms of ties as link the men in the *Jam'omad*. While playing a key role in the exchange of information, these gatherings effectively engage women in public life. As a result, they enable women to take an equal part with men in the stabilization of social relations in the Tajik context (Dar & Firdous, 2015; Dar, 2018).

Many authors claim that regardless of restrictions on civic engagements from Soviet to contemporary times in a country with an authoritative regime, informal associational institutions have been demonstrating remarkable resilience throughout the vibrant history of Tajik (Freizer, 2004; Freizer, 2005; Karimov, 2006; ADB, 2011; Dar, 2018; CABAR, 2020; Fisher, 2023). They were found to be deeply rooted in the country's cultural legacy, strongly valued among Tajik societies, and becoming more relevant in modern times. Based on the articles' reports, many donors have become more interested in these indigenous forms of community or social organization and are engaging them actively in implementing community empowerment projects. So far, the United Nations (UN), World Bank, USAID, and Aga Khan Foundation are considered the main donors of civil society groups, particularly those community-established organizations located in isolated and rural areas of Tajikistan (Freizer, 2005; ADB, 2011).

According to 3 studies, after the independence of Tajikistan, two widespread community-established organizations – Jamoat Resource Centers (JRCs) at the Jamoat level and Village Organizations (VOs) at the village level – were established by key donors – the Aga Khan Foundation and UNDP. A great number of reviewed studies claim that in Tajikistan, donors effectively engage traditional *aksakals/rais* and *mahalla* leaders in leading their funded projects, and these community leaders are supporting the state in resolving conflicts and community cohesion. However, few studies (2) claim that, apart from engaging civil actors in socio-economic services, donors should involve them in advocacy and socio-political agendas. The authors argue that it is the essence of civil society that teaches true democratization. A study by Weber & Fisher (2015), however, point out that reaching genuine democratization is only possible through the active engagement of civil society in socio-economic development issues, as these efforts face less resistance from the government. Whereas one author completely rejects the idea of receiving funds from foreign donors and recommends the Tajik government avoid foreign funding by involving civil society actors in self-sustainability projects (Karimov, 2006). Therefore, in-depth research needs to be conducted to look at the issue of the financial sustainability of the civil society sector in Tajikistan and identify key factors impacting it today.

Further, based on 3 articles, the number of public organizations or NGOs registered with the MoJ increased between 1991 and 2020, from 300 in 1997 to 2800 in 2006, reaching more than 3000 by 2020 (Karimov, 2006; ABD, 2011; CABAR, 2020). (*see* Fig. 4). According to these findings, NGOs are classified into the following functional fields: humanitarian and charitable; education and healthcare; science and culture; gender equality and women's organizations; professional associations; human rights organizations; children and youth organizations; environment; and volunteerism (*refer to* Fig. 2 & 3).

Figure 4. Growth of CSOs between 1991 and 2020 in Tajikistan.



In addition to CSOs, the intermediary level of Tajik civil society includes the market and the sphere of public debate (Fisher, 2023). It seems forms of CSO are evolving constantly according to their roles and functions; therefore, a research study is critical to identify more CSOs with potentially different roles and commitments or discover new forms of civil society actors.

3.2.2. Priority Issues Addressed by Civil Society

Nearly all secondary sources point out that since 1991, when NGOs emerged in Tajikistan, the opportunities for defending human rights and supporting women's empowerment programs have increased. Few of these studies show how democratization NGOs in Tajikistan both reinforced and developed local traditions by favouring women's inclusion (Weber & Fisher, 2015; Fisher, 2023). *Ghamkhori* was discovered by scholars as one of the most influential NGOs that promoted universal values of women's rights protection in Tajikistan. This NGO is also renowned for assisting in alleviating poverty, especially child poverty (ABD, 2011; Weber & Fisher, 2015), and promoting human rights (Fisher, 2023). Only one study mentioned women-led NGOs such as NGO "Homa", the National Association of Independent Media of Tajikistan, and the Coalition of Female Journalists of Tajikistan, whose activities aimed at protecting freedoms of expression and media (CABAR, 2020). Numerous reviewed sources report on NGOs' involvement in addressing social, economic, and political issues. They unveiled the community's dependence on NGOs for full development, as NGOs are present in all spheres of life, including education, health protection, social insurance, the environment, gender equality, and security, as well as human rights. However, there are no specific studies to prove how NGOs respond to community problems in each of these areas. The findings provide only fragmented information from secondary sources; hence, in order to get the full picture, an empirical investigation is needed to research the roles of NGOs in addressing priority issues of society in the above-mentioned realms of life.

Regarding traditional institutions in Tajikistan, *jamoats* and *mahala* leaders are highly valued and trusted among locals for their commitment to supporting local communities in times of crisis (Karimov, 2006; Weber & Fisher, 2015; CABAR, 2020; Fisher, 2023). In addition to these findings, 2 studies indicate that leaders of *jamoats* are highly appreciated by donors for their ability to resolve critical disputes in the local community, especially in those parts of Tajikistan where judges are absent and courts are inadequate (Dar & Firdous, 2015; Dar, 2018). Consequently, donors trust such *jamoats'* leaders with the implementation of vital projects at VO levels, especially when being involved in distributing humanitarian aid during and after the civil war. Another critical example is the recent

response of civil society activists to the pandemic situation in Tajikistan, when these actors emerged in diverse forms during the lockdown and collected humanitarian aid for underprivileged populations, including health workers (CABAR, 2020). CABAR (2020) reported on the emergence of social media activists as novel civil society actors. Based on the reviewed data, there is no indication of an in-depth study on the role of civil society in times of emergency; therefore, further research needs to be done to explore this question in Tajikistan.

3.2.3. Partnership with Different Actors

According to information from 7 publications, civil society actors in Tajikistan are highly respected and trusted in the communities they serve because they are well-versed in the customs, values, and experiences of the area. These specifics demonstrate that a large number of these players are well-respected, committed leaders who are able to forge strong bonds not only within the community but also between government, donors, and civil society (Freizer, 2005; Karimov, 2006; Dar & Firdous, 2015; ABD, 2011; Weber & Fisher, 2015; Dar, 2018; CABAR, 2020). They also indicated that NGOs and VO leaders implemented empowerment projects successfully based on effective collaboration with donors and state authorities. Active cooperation between the government, civil society actors, and donors was found to be important in solving urgent problems during turbulence.

One particular study claimed the effective partnership between government and civil society in designing new laws for addressing human rights and social problems (Karimov, 2006). In addition to this claim, another report unveiled the clear links between the government and civil society activities, as the latter promotes the state's agenda of solving local economic disputes (CABAR, 2020). Several scholars found that INGOs, NGOs, and VOs (traditional institutions) are cooperating with rural associations to address grassroots' problems. As a result, they not only effectively addressed these issues but also filled the gap between diverse forms of civil society (Freizer, 2005; Dar & Firdous, 2015; Fisher, 2023). Overwhelming evidence (7 sources) from publications of the last decade also recommends strengthening the relationship between the government and the civil society sector. However, over the last few years, there have been almost no research publications on the state of partnerships or relationship-building among key stakeholders, including civil society, government, and donors.

Most details of the sources also indicate the challenges of cooperation between civil society actors and the national authorities of Tajikistan (Web & Fisher, 2005; ABD, 2011; Soliev, 2017; CABAR, 2020); however, according to the latest study, there are some improvements in partnership at the grass-roots level (Fisher, 2023). Few of other sources mention the cases when President Emomali Rahmonov raised this concern with NGOs' leaders, where the president repeatedly refers to the vitality of productive partnerships between the state and civil society and specifically points to the value of civil society activities for the country's sustainable development (Karimov, 2006; ABD, 2011). Based on the several articles' findings, a deficiency of cooperation exists within the government and civil society sectors, especially when it comes to addressing priority issues such as corruption (Karimov, 2006; ABD, 2011; Soliev, 2015). In contrast, the partnership between NGOs and INGOs is often found to be booming, as NGOs heavily rely on donors for funding and training opportunities, and INGOs are interested in funding and actively monitoring NGOs' activities. A number of sources (2 articles) agree that NGOs' reliance on donors' guidance can lead to difficult implications for the delivery of aid programs. Hence, in 4 different sources, recommendations regarding strengthening collaboration and exchange of activities among NGOs and state authorities are repeatedly mentioned. Although none

of these findings suggest practical strategies for the mutual cooperation of government, civil society organizations, and INGOs for the successful delivery of aid projects. Hence, future research needs to be focused on identifying factors that hinder the best practices of effective partnership-building among CSOs, governments, and INGOs in order to propose the best solutions to the problems.

3.2.4. Challenges on the Path of Civil Society

Common challenges civil society actors face were reported by a majority of secondary sources (6 articles) that include corruption, lack of financial sustainability, unstable rule of law enforcement, poor economic environment, lack of training and capacity building, poor access to diverse information sources, and the authoritative regime of the country. These reports in various articles appear repeatedly between 2005 and 2017; hence, there is a critical need for research to investigate how or to what extent the civil society sector was able to take hold and prosper in such an environment over one and a half decades. The authors of 3 articles (Ewoh et al., 2012; Dar & Firdous, 2015; Soliev, 2017) argue that the above challenges hinder the active engagement of civil society in policy advocacy activities. At least 3 sources report on a major challenge to the development of a constructive feedback relationship between state institutions and civil society actors. It was reported to have a negative effect on the operation and strengthening of civil society institutions in Tajikistan (Web & Fisher, 2015; Dar & Firdous, 2015; CABAR, 2020; Fisher, 2023). Adding to this, Karimov (2006) and Soliev (2017) point to the reduced level of trust towards civil society actors as another challenge faced by civil society actors, mainly because of the NGOs' dependency on foreign funding and training. Although there is no clear evidence in their claims of why and how the INGO's aid contributes to the mistrust towards NGOs that use this aid to support community and state agendas.

Moreover, based on 2 articles, civil society and the media are usually kept under strict vigilance during mass demonstrations in Tajikistan (Dar & Firdous, 2015; CABAR, 2020). Nearly 2 sources report on rigorous control over NGOs' activities via imposing high taxes and strict rules (based on multiple amendments to the Public Association Law) related to reports on funding and equipment received from donors. As a result, these restrictions doubled the challenges of NGOs' operations, leading many of them to closure (Elwoh et al., 2012; CABAR, 2020). According to several sources (5 articles), the challenges faced by civil society actors have sprouted from the instability of relationships and partnerships within key sectors, including NGOs, INGOs, and government. Therefore, future research is recommended to look into the best practices that unveil effective strategies for improving relations and partnerships among these sectors.

4. Limitations

The reviewed empirical research works on the civil society of Tajikistan are quite outdated; accordingly, this leads to a literature gap on the topic. A transparent limitation of the study is the significantly reduced quantity and quality of research on civil society in Tajikistan. This limitation is also associated with the lack of qualitative and quantitative research conducted on the topic. Also, in most of the reviewed studies, the methodologies and samples used for data collection are limited, as the scope of their research was restricted to a small population in Tajikistan. Consequently, generalization and application of their research findings to the wider population and the current state of Tajik civil society may not be possible.

One of the critical limitations of both primary and secondary sources is related to the restricted available literature used in the research. It was found to be one of the key limitations in the methodology

part of those primary sources that focused on qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-method approaches. Moreover, as the concept of *civil society* and the understanding of the role of civil society actors are perceived differently worldwide, there is a potential limitation in much of the reviewed literature. This limitation is concerning the restricted knowledge and understanding of the role of civil society in the eastern context, especially when scholars entered the research field with a general (western) knowledge of civil society practices. Hence, it is interesting to explore to what extent the theoretical areas presented in their studies are supported by the findings of civil society practices in Tajikistan.

Finally, as with any study, this systematic review has certain limitations, including the unavailability of primary studies for the review as well as the inaccessibility of vaster academic websites. Also, the time restriction and small research scope confined the researcher to using limited keywords at the stages of searching and selecting sources for the review.

5. Conclusion

The systematic review of civil society in Tajikistan plays a critical role, as it lays the foundation for future targeted research on the topic. As the pieces of evidence in this review demonstrate, the civil society sector in this country was insignificantly studied by researchers. The main research works on the civil society of Tajikistan occurred between 2004 and 2021, and out of them, only AKDN (2007) was able to conduct in-depth empirical research into the Tajik civil society sector. It means there was a dearth of empirical research on this topic over 10 years before and after AKDN's comprehensive research findings on the civil society sector in Tajikistan. Even though the academic studies were limited for conducting this review, they were valuable sources for achieving the goals of this systematic review. Therefore, the researcher was able to:

- ◆ Identify previous studies on civil society in Tajikistan;
- ◆ Study various forms of self-organization in the associational life of Tajiks;
- ◆ Identify the practices of civil society actors, including diverse public organizations such as NGOs, nonprofit organizations, and CSOs, that are focused on solving priority issues at community and national levels.

Also, the reviewed sources supported the general belief that civil society's roles today go beyond the political domain, and indeed, civil society actors in the Tajik context were found to demonstrate their value as service providers, advocates, facilitators, and active volunteers.

The majority of main sources strongly recommend investigating the Tajikistan's civil society sector, its growth, and future activities. Particularly, future research needs to look at the role of civil society in addressing priority issues of national development, which include social equality, improved education and healthcare, climate change action, and employment development. Both primary and secondary sources recommend undertaking future empirical research to thoroughly analyze the traditional institutions of civil society and new emerging platforms that support future practices of civil society. A specific recommendation is given by scholars for the investigation of women's role in the civil society sector, their participation, and their decision-making at the local and national levels. Also, a large number of findings indicate there is an urgent need to research the best practices and propose a solution to the problem of partnership-building among civil society, government, and donors.

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1. Summary of Primary Sources

| # | Author's names | Year of publication | Title of Publication | Database/sources | Research context | Population | Research Methods | Limitation |
|---|---|---------------------|---|------------------|--|--|--|---|
| 1 | Freizer, S. | 2004 | What civil society after civil war? A study of civil society organizations' effect on peace consolidation in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Tajikistan. | Google Scholar | Tajikistan\ Bosnia-Herzegovina Regions covered in Tajikistan: <i>Dushanbe</i> <i>Khujand</i> <i>Kurgantuppe</i> <i>Shahrtuz</i> <i>Khorog</i> <i>Gharm</i> <i>Tavildara and Kulob</i> | Representatives of 2 NGOs & 2 CBOs in each country | Qualitative multiple case studies including: a) <i>data analysis</i> b) <i>semi-structured interviews</i> (with NGOs/CBOs representatives) c) <i>observations</i> (meetings/events, activity sites of NGOs/CBOs/CSOs) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ limited data (literature) on civil society of Tajikistan; ◆ samples' number/gender is not specified; ◆ not all forms of civil society are researched; ◆ its research findings are outdated; ◆ validity and reliability of collected data via comparative approach (especially in countries with different geographical, political, cultural, economic, and social context). |
| 2 | Giffen, J. & Earle, L. with Buxton, Ch. | 2005 | The Development of Civil Society in Central Asia (Situational Analysis Report) | Google Scholar | CA: Tajikistan\ Uzbekistan\ Kyrgyzstan\ Kazakhstan\ Turkmenistan <i>Specific regional context is not defined</i> | CSOs actors (samples are not clearly defined) | Data collection for project report using: a) <i>literature reviews</i> b) <i>questionnaires</i> , c) <i>in-depth interviews, and focus groups</i> d) <i>observations</i> (inspecting meetings/ activities during field visits to key organizations) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ limited data (literature) on civil society of Tajikistan; ◆ samples' number/gender is unclear; ◆ not all forms of civil society are researched; ◆ its research findings are outdated; ◆ validity and reliability of collected data via comparative approach (especially in countries with different geographical, political, cultural, economic, and social context). |

| # | Author's names | Year of publication | Title of Publication | Database/sources | Research context | Population | Research Methods | Limitation |
|---|------------------------------|---------------------|--|------------------|---|---|---|--|
| 3 | Aga Khan Development Network | 2007 | Civil Society Development in Tajikistan | AKDN website | Tajikistan Main Regions covered: <i>Dushanbe Khujand Khatlon Badakhshan</i> | Representatives of: NGOs/CSOs/CBOs (communal and traditional institutions), INGOs (including donors/representatives), state institutions (including state authorities), representatives of business sector, local civil society leaders and ordinary citizens | Mixed-qualitative & quantitative methods including: a) <i>a review of public opinion</i> b) <i>individual in-depth/ interviews and focus groups</i> c) <i>inspecting official documents</i> (CSO registration in the government bodies) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ review of limited literature on civil society of Tajikistan due to absence of previous research on given topic; ◆ due to scope and limitation of study not all CSOs were covered; ◆ its research findings are outdated. |
| 4 | Zharkevich, I. | 2010 | 'The Role of Civil Society in Promoting Political Accountability in Fragile States: The Case of Tajikistan', p.53. | INTRAC website | Tajikistan Regions covered: <i>Dushanbe Khujand</i> | Representatives of CSOs | Qualitative multiple case studies including: a) analysis of secondary sources (existing literature) b) in-depth interviews | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ not all forms of civil society are researched; ◆ its research findings are outdated; ◆ samples' number/gender is not specified; ◆ not all NGOs' sectors were covered; ◆ limitation of existing literature for data analysis. |

| # | Author's names | Year of publication | Title of Publication | Database/sources | Research context | Population | Research Methods | Limitation |
|---|--|---------------------|---|------------------|---|---|---|---|
| 5 | Goziev, S. | 2014 | Mahalla – Traditional Institution in Tajikistan and Civil Society in the West. | Google Scholar | Tajikistan Regions covered: <i>Badakhshan</i> <i>Dushanbe</i> <i>Hisor</i> <i>Fayzabad</i> <i>Shahrinaw</i> <i>Tursunzoda</i> <i>Khujand</i> | Members of traditional CSOs, representatives of international aid organizations | Qualitative method including: a) <i>Document analysis</i> (historical ethnographic literature, reviewing archives & publications' analysis) b) <i>Interviews</i> (with traditional CSOs & international aid organizations reps) c) <i>observation</i> of life in traditional institution (author's own experience & participations) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ use of limited sources for analysis due to unavailability ◆ non-tradition CSOs were not covered ◆ due to scope and limitation of study not all traditional CSOs were covered ◆ samples' number/gender is not specified |
| 6 | Institute of War and Peace Reporting (ed.) | 2018 | The situation of civil society in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. | IWPR website | CA: Kazakhstan\ Kyrgyzstan\ Tajikistan \ Uzbekistan <i>Specific regional context is not defined</i> | 35 representatives of CSOs in Tajik context | Comparative approach using quantitative & qualitative methods including: a) <i>face-to-face interviews</i> (with representatives of CSOs) b) <i>online survey questionnaire</i> . | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ limited data (literature) on civil society of Tajikistan. ◆ not all forms of civil society were researched ◆ research context is not clearly specified ◆ validity and reliability of collected data via comparative approach (especially in countries with different geographical, political, cultural, economic, and social context); |

| # | Author's names | Year of publication | Title of Publication | Database/sources | Research context | Population | Research Methods | Limitation |
|---|------------------|---------------------|--|------------------|--|--|--|--|
| 7 | Levi-Sanchez, S. | 2021 | Bridging State and Civil Society: Informal Organizations in Tajik/Afghan Badakhshan. | Google Scholar | Tajikistan/Afghanistan (<i>Crossboard regions of Badakhshan in both countries</i>) | Representatives of informal organizations, CSOs and official state institutions. | <p>Multiple case study approach: a) <i>interpretive method design and analysis of data</i></p> <p>b) <i>observations</i> (epistemological and ontological approaches based on own observation)</p> <p>c) <i>ethnographic literature reviews</i></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ not all forms of civil society were researched ◆ research context is limited to one region only ◆ limited ethnographic literature on civil society of Tajikistan ◆ samples' number/gender is not specified ◆ validity and reliability of collected data via comparative approach (especially in countries with different geographical, political, historical, economic, and social context); |

2. Summary of Secondary Sources

| # | Author's Names | Year of publication | Title of Publication | Data Sources | Study Context | Research Methods | Limitation |
|---|---|---------------------|--|---|---|-----------------------------|---|
| 1 | Freizer, S. | 2004 | Tajikistan local self-governance: a potential bridge between government and civil society - Tajikistan at a crossroad. | JASTOR | Tajikistan | Review of secondary sources | |
| 2 | Freizer, S. | 2005 | Neo-liberal and communal civil society in Tajikistan: merging or dividing in the post war period? | Google Scholar | Tajikistan | Review of secondary sources | Many of these secondary sources are outdated |
| 3 | Karimov, Sh. | 2006 | Dialectics of the emergence of a civil society and state support of NGOs in Tajikistan. | Cyberleninka | Tajikistan | Review of secondary sources | Provide limited information; limited research methodology and tools |
| 4 | Asian Development Bank (ADB). | 2011 | Civil Society Briefs: Tajikistan. Asian Development Bank. | https://www.adb.org/publications/civil-society-briefs-tajikistan | Tajikistan | Review of secondary sources | Non-academic sources were used for literature review |
| 5 | Ewoh, Andrew, I.E., Nazarova, F., & Hill, R. N. | 2012 | Civil Society Organizations and Policy Process in Tajikistan. | Google Scholar | | Review of secondary sources | Lack of accuracy |
| 6 | Dar, F., & Firdous, T. | 2015 | The role of NGOs in the socio-political development of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan: A comparative study. | JASTOR | CA countries: Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan | Review of secondary sources | |
| 7 | Weber & Fisher | 2015 | Importing Democracy: The Role of NGOs in South Africa, Tajikistan, and Argentina. | Google Scholar | Tajikistan South Africa Argentina | Review of secondary sources | |

| # | Author's Names | Year of publication | Title of Publication | Data Sources | Study Context | Research Methods | Limitation |
|----|---|---------------------|--|----------------|---------------|-----------------------------|------------|
| 8 | Soliev, Sh. | 2017 | The role of civil society in anticorruption policy of Tajikistan: conditions and perspectives. | Cyberleninka | Tajikistan | Review of secondary sources | |
| 9 | Dar, F. | 2018 | Reassessing the relevance and role of traditional communal societies in post-independent Tajikistan. | Google Scholar | Tajikistan | Review of secondary sources | |
| 10 | CABAR.asia (Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting – CABAR) | 2020 | 'Silver Lining of Pandemic: Redefining Civil Society in Tajikistan', Steppes Borderland Project. | CABAR.asia | Tajikistan | Review of secondary sources | |
| 11 | Fisher Melton, J. | 2023 | 'Democratization from below: Civil society in Tajikistan' | Google Scholar | Tajikistan | Review of secondary sources | |

