

THE ROLE OF EDUCATION IN THE FORMATION OF CIVIL SOCIETY

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Abstract

Georgia has gone through a significant transformation in a recent decade and the educational sector is one of the many that has undergone considerable reforms. In an attempt to modernize and to bring it more in line with European and American standards the Georgian government adopted a national accreditation program and began tackling corruption in the sector. Societal involvement and a consensus-based agreement on general principles became of vital importance for the development of Georgia's higher education system. Citizens who actively participate in their nation's public affairs play perhaps the most important role in a vibrant democracy. An informed and engaged citizenry provides both a check on government power and valuable feedback the government can use to become more responsive. During the Soviet era, independent civic initiative was stifled and citizens were encouraged to believe that the state had the sole responsibility for providing for its citizens. Since the "Rose Revolution," there has been a renewed sense of civic pride, but this was demonstrated more in nationalist awareness than civic activism. Georgians have never been shy to take to the streets in demonstrations to express dissatisfaction with the government and this was considered to be the only means of civic participation. However, the summer flood 2015 manifested a completely new era of the commitment of Georgian youth to participatory democracy. The article highlights the case of how Georgian citizens (mostly youth with the academic background they obtained owing to the reformed west-oriented education system of Georgia) effectively engaged with other citizens (national and foreign) and set an example for the government to influence public policy and ensure greater socio-cultural responsiveness. Thus, proving that Georgia can score higher in socio-cultural environment encompassing elements like propensity to participate, trust and giving and volunteering, since these elements are fundamental to the development of a consolidated civil society.

Keywords: Educational reform, civil society indicators, civic engagement, volunteerism, government and public policy, socio-cultural environment, summer flood, youth, Georgia

Introduction

Today, Georgia is in a transitional period. It is undergoing the rebuilding of civil society and democratic institutions, as well as the development of a market economy. However, the final outcome of these processes depends on the success of the education system.

Every successful and powerful nation stands on the pillars of educated society. The law on Education, the Ministry of Education and Science as well as international obligations and commitments assumed by Georgia reflect the following basic principles of the State educational policy: a unified education system throughout the country; decentralized administration of educational institutions and transfer of management to local governments in the provinces; humanistic, scientific and democratic character of education and upbringing; recognition and appreciation of human and national cultural values; independence of educational institutions from political and religious organizations; modern and innovative educational and scientific environment in close cooperation with civil society advocating freedom of choice, fair competition, equal opportunities civil integrity and respect for cultural identity. Educational system as a whole focuses on developing citizens as free individuals, equipped with essential intellectual and physical skills and capacities, nurturing civil consciousness based on democratic and liberal values. Therefore, the main priority of the State policy in recent years has been to provide quality education and invest in future generations (UNESCO [1]).

As a result of reforms implemented since 2005, higher education in Georgia has moved decisively from a centrally-controlled, supply driven, public-funded, state system to a more complex, increasingly market-oriented system, with considerable cost-sharing through student fees and a strongly emerging private university sector.

A brief summary of the major reform initiatives are as follows (UNICEF [2]):

1. The government, in partnership with the World Bank and UNICEF, completed a Consolidated Education Strategy and Action Plan (2007 – 2011), which includes pre-school education and early childhood development, general education, vocational education, higher education, lifelong learning, non-formal education, inclusive education and children with special needs as national priorities and as requirements for the FTI and Catalytic Fund. In 2008 the program department has been established in the MoES to manage and implement these priorities.

2. The government introduced a per capita funding formula nationwide at the general secondary education level in January 2006. Under the new scheme, schools receive a direct transfer of funds from the Ministry of Education and Science (MoES) based on the number of students enrolled for a given year. The voucher covers current school expenditures, of which teacher salaries are the main component. All educational institutions were established as public legal entities. Nowadays, each school is governed by a Board of Trustees empowered by a financial management authority' and made up of teachers, parents and government officials.

3. The administrative structure of the education system has also been adapted. Former Education Departments have been replaced by a network of 72 Education Resource Centers (ERCs) responsible for facilitating schools' work through collecting data, organizing trainings, conducting research, and monitoring accounting.

4. As stated in the Consolidated Education Strategy and Action Plan (2007 – 2011) of the MoES of Georgia, the National Curriculum and Assessment Center, established in April 2006, has introduced a new curriculum, designed to encourage active learning rather than a mechanical transfer of knowledge.

5. The Teachers' Professional Development Center, established in July 2006, aims to develop standards and qualification requirements for teachers, to conduct a process of accreditation of teacher training and retraining programs and to introduce a system of teacher certification.

6. New and more transparent examinations have been introduced.

7. The government has invested heavily in repairing old buildings and improving infrastructure.

8. The *ECD 2007-2009 National Strategic Plan of Action* was drafted and budgeted to provide for programming, communication and policy development. The document was approved by the Parliament of Georgia in July 2008.

9. The Education Strategy and Action Plan for Children with Special Needs (2009 – 2011) has been developed by the MoES of Georgia in partnership with the Save the Children and USAID. In October 2008 the document was approved by the Minister of Education and Science of Georgia.

Starting in 2004, a systematic reform of the higher education system began so that Georgia's higher education system could dismantle the remains of the old Soviet-type system, as well as begin integrating itself into the European space. Despite the results achieved higher education reforms have remained an issue for almost ten years. Recent events (constant changes in legislation and staff of the managing structures (from December 2004 through October 2013, about 500 amendments were made to the Law of

Georgia on Higher Education; in the same time period, 8 Ministers of Education and Science and 5 Directors of the National Centre for Educational Quality Enhancement were changed)) have shown that the absence of a clear vision and a lack of coordination of the reform processes pose a serious threat to the achievement of sustainable results (IIEP [3]). But, as a whole, Georgia's education system has been positively transformed and continues to be so.

High quality higher education is an essential factor for building a contemporary, competitive and fair state and Georgia's further development heavily depends on easy access to high quality education.

Education is the sub-dimension of Social-Economic dimensions and indicators for the CIVICUS Civil Society Enabling Environment Index. Socio-political research suggests that participation and civic activism are supported by higher levels of education and the indicators are Inequality adjusted education index (1-0)/2011, population with at least secondary education at 25 and older (%) - females (2010), population with at least secondary education at 25 and older (%) – males, 2010, school enrollment, primary [% net] – (2010), school enrollment, secondary [% net] – (2010) based on the sources of UN Human Development Index (2011) and The World Bank World Development indicators (2010) (CIVICUS [4]).

The CSI (Civil Society Index) builds indicators on a scale of 0-100 which assess the strength of civil society on the five key dimensions of: the levels of civic participation; the institutional arrangements of CSOs (Civil Society Organizations); the extent to which CSOs practice progressive values; the perceived impact of civil society; and the external environment in which civil society operates (CIVICUS [5]).

Civil society sits between the family and the state. It is made up of associational life that reflects the extent to which citizens share their personal grievances and demands with others. It is the arena where the private becomes public; the social becomes political. The extent to which civil society is an integral part of policy-making, however, is an important factor in national development. How it relates to state institutions matters. Civil Society is not just an arena in which all nongovernmental organizations operate; the existence of universal values for a civil society as well as their attachment to specific historical and social contexts is also important [6].

Seen through the lenses of individual citizens, civil society has at least three main functions: (a) promoting voluntarism, (b) building social capital, and (c) creating an enabling environment for policy input.

Voluntarism is a key aspect of civil society. The notion that individuals make a choice of their own to associate with others or engage in pursuit of a particular goal in collaboration with others is at the root of development. In this respect, civil society has an important socializing effect.

Some people associate with others for altruistic reasons, but it is important to accept that voluntarism is as often the result of utilitarian calculation. As Mancur Olson [7] argued long time ago, collective action comes about as a product of individuals combining their private interests in pursuit of a common good. Regardless of motive, however, it is important that there is choice. Every human being is born into a family and a lineage to which he or she has an inscriptive relation. The extent to which lineage relations bear on a person's choice varies from one society to another. The stronger this pressure is on the individual, the more confined his choices are likely to be. Civil society does not necessarily engage the state or vice versa. For instance, in many countries, the state sees itself as primarily, if not exclusively, responsible for national development.

Weaknesses in Georgia's civil society can be traced, in part, to the relatively short period in which the sector has been active and to the state of socioeconomic relations established under Soviet rule. In fact, the Soviet state itself took the lead in organizing social experiences outside of private life through compulsory participation in various youth, professional, and other groups. Spontaneous, grassroots citizen initiatives were discouraged and seen as a threat to the state's control over society. This did not wholly prevent the formation of civil society, but it explains why it is consistently weak in post-Soviet contexts.

Despite strong political awareness demonstrated through relatively high voter turnout rates and frequent peaceful protests, civic participation in Georgia is not particularly high. Distrust in formal institutions (including NGOs) is widespread, and the strong role of social networks based on family ties, rather than perceived shared values across groups, is persistent. In a 2007 survey, 96% of Georgians said they had not been to a meeting of a club or civic organization in the last 6 months, and 92% had not engaged in volunteer work over the same period. Ninety percent had not made any charitable contributions. CSOs themselves cite a lack of public interest in their activities as one of their most acute problems. The decrease in NGO revenues from membership fees in the 2005–2010 period (from 30% to 13%) may be an indicator of this lack of a support base [8].

But there are positive signs as well. According to one assessment, "Georgia's customs, multi-ethnic citizenry, diverse sub-ethnic cultures, tradition of high educational achievement, the traditional optimism of the population and the capacity of its people to adapt to a new reality increase the chances for success" [8].

Another assessment [9] finds that the existing legal framework does not put up any hurdles for the registration and operation of CSOs. In practice, however, Georgian Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) rely almost entirely on foreign donors, lacking financial support from the government,

local businesses or a membership base. The mechanisms for ensuring accountability of CSOs and their transparent operation are weak, and integrity mechanisms (such as a sector-wide code of conduct) are virtually nonexistent. The ability of CSOs to hold the government accountable and to influence the formulation of its policies is constrained by internal weaknesses, including a shortage of capable professionals and lack of a broad social base, as well as the general political environment in which they operate.

Thanks in large part to U.S. political support and assistance (since 1992, the USG has invested over \$3 billion in Georgia (including funds allocated in response to the 2008 conflict [10]), with approximately half of these resources programmed through USAID), a country close to being a failed state eight years ago now is a strong partner in combating terrorism and nuclear proliferation, contributes substantially to NATO missions, has constructive relations with most of its neighbors, and is one of the most democratic countries in the former Soviet Union. At the same time, Georgia presents challenges to which the U.S. is committed to respond. Georgia requires further democratic development, reforms in other areas need to be sustained, and the Russian occupation of the separatist regions of both Abkhazia and South Ossetia undermines their reintegration into Georgia and puts a brake on the overall reform process, a U.S. priority.

Building on 20 years of partnership, the U.S. Government (USG) proposes to allocate new USAID development resources over the next five years to achieve the goal, *Georgia's democratic, free-market, Western-oriented transformation strengthened and sustained* [10]. To attain this goal, the US will concentrate effort on the following three development objectives: (1) democratic checks and balances and accountable governance enhanced, (2) inclusive and sustainable economic growth, and (3) an increasingly stable, integrated and healthy society. Country Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS) cross-cutting themes include gender equality, youth, human and institutional capacity development, and transparency and evidence-based decision-making. As the Mission has focused from five objectives in the current post-conflict strategy to three objectives under this CDCS, assistance in key areas will graduate, including in large-scale infrastructure, basic education, and health.

Finally, the USG should and will continue to maintain its focus on the Georgian people as the beneficiaries of assistance and not any one administration or counterpart.

Programs under USG and other donor efforts will strengthen civil society, increase access to quality independent news sources, and enhance civic education. As a result, youth, women, and minorities will play an increased role in the governance of their communities; citizens will be better

informed about the political, social, and economic issues of their country; and CSOs will help citizens' voices to be heard, having a positive impact on government policies.

USAID/Caucasus [10] civic education is designed to achieve three broad goals:

- To introduce citizens to the basic rules and institutional features of democratic political systems and to provide them with knowledge about democratic rights and practices;

- To convey a specific set of values thought to be essential to democratic citizenship such as political tolerance, trust in the democratic process, respect for the rule of law, and compromise; and,

- To encourage responsible and informed political participation—defined as a cluster of activities including voting, working in campaigns, contacting officials, lodging complaints, attending meetings, and contributing money.

A central goal is to use civic education as a means to increase the skills and commitment of youth to participatory democracy. Programmatic efforts in this area will create a foundation for constructive and effective citizen participation in Georgia's political processes by expanding young people's knowledge about democratic institutions, principles and practices.

The expected end result will be changes in attitudes and behaviors, as a consequence of greater knowledge of how citizens can effectively engage with other citizens and the government to influence public policy and ensure greater government responsiveness.

A draft Law on Volunteerism is currently before parliament; it foresees granting legal status to volunteers for the first time, regulates labor relations between the volunteer and host organization, determines the employer's duties and responsibilities and introduces some tax-breaks on volunteer-related costs for employers such as transportation and accommodation.

The European approach [11] will also aim to strengthen links between CSOs throughout Georgia, both urban and rural, thereby building capacity, linkages, experience and accountability. At the same time, efforts will be made to link CSOs more actively with civic education curriculum, with the aim of increasing civic participation of all kinds in Georgian regions, especially among youth. At the same time, this should enhance the sustainability of civil society, as it becomes more diverse and vibrant and above all, more relevant, to local communities.

Civic education is supported and its practical aspects strengthened

Indicators

- ✓ Percentage of schools which establish links (visits, project activities) with local CSOs;
- ✓ Trend in pupils and people generally volunteering to work with CSOs;
- ✓ Trend in seed-funding for community-based development;
- ✓ Trend in participation in civic engagement mechanisms at local level;

- CSOs in Georgian regions increase their capacity and outreach

Indicators

- ✓ Trends in quality of policy dialogue and advocacy efforts conducted by regional CSOs;
- ✓ Frequency and regularity of meetings with local stakeholders (media, business, etc.);
- ✓ Trends in CSO staff members, training opportunities and annual turnover;

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 - ✓ Trend in seed-funding for community-based development;
 - ✓ Trend in participation in civic engagement mechanisms at local level;

- Funding: Operational support including mainstreaming:
 - ✓ Support to strengthening of links between local CSOs and schools through visits, CSO volunteer programs and youth summer school
 - ✓ Support to strengthening youth engagement in local activism through Youth Councils, Youth Banks, etc.
 - ✓ Support to small community-based initiatives through the provision of seed funding, administered by local CSOs or Youth Banks [11].

The signs of existence of civil society and civil engagement in large scale matters in Georgia became particularly apparent after the summer flood this year. Heavy rainfall during the night 13 to 14 June caused flash floods in Tbilisi, the capital. Vere River overflow causing severe damage. The flooding was centered in the Vake and Saburtalo neighborhoods which are some of the most densely populated districts in the centre of the city. Along with casualties and some people still missing, out of the 380 households were affected, 100 families from Tbilisi and 180 families from the surrounding villages were not able to return to their homes [12]. The

flooding destroyed enclosures at the city's zoo - allowing a host of dangerous and scared animals to escape and roam the streets. Cars and debris were seen floating along the once busy streets and parks of Tbilisi turned into wasteland by the freak weather. When any type of natural calamity happens elsewhere, it is undoubtedly the state's job to take responsibility of taking care of the outcomes and the neighboring countries willingly try to assist and support along with other countries also willing to participate and donate worldwide. However, what is implied by the state needs to be clarified: the state refers to the officials and authorities, all the state governing structures first of all, with all the subordinate liable executive units and bodies. The latter are ordinarily expected, supposed and even obliged to act under such circumstances considering the interests of the people affected. But what was shocking and quiet surprising for everyone in the city and country was how youth (Georgian youngsters, mostly students) became united and showed the example to the rest of society and government how civic engagement matters and how much can be done if individuals or real citizens of the state stand together hand in hand not led by any political party, but motivated to contribute to the community, thus each understanding his/her own role and responsibility in doing so.

Self-organized youth aware of the benefits of social networking (they created the page on facebook and coordinated all the activities and needs single-handedly), leadership and management skills and social readiness (subconsciously or consciously possessing the high level of civil liability) along with originally encoded messages of humanity, being kind-hearted and helpful consolidated in times of a disaster. Standing together with some foreign students (from Iraq, Nigeria, a couple from Moscow who was offering free sandwiches to the volunteers, and even Dutch tourists who came to visit the city, but kindly offered their help when they thought their hands were needed) rescue teams, army and governmental or non-governmental organizations and groups, they worked day and night to clean the city from debris and mud. Initially they set up medical assistance points before the government joined them later. The will to "save" the city went contagious, those who could not work physically tried to be creative and help anyway: a young lady came out with an idea to charge volunteers' phones while they were working to keep in touch with the family members who were encouraging them from home, so she had been walking charging the phones all day long; another young lady made miniature statues of hippo a symbol of flooding, the one who escaped from the zoo and whose pictures became viral all over the world; this way she could donate the money she would get by selling them; another young man who could not help with either money or physical work offered free taxi service for volunteers; two guys had an idea of giving free flowers to the girls working in Mziuri park

(the area which took the heaviest heat of the flood) all day long, so by the end of the day they would give each some field flowers to express their gratitude thus encouraging them. Examples were many along with an old granny who was not reluctant to walk to Mziuri donating a couple of fresh water bottles she had brought for volunteers and most probably on her pension money; a middle-aged man sharing 5 apples and a loaf of bread (most probable that was all he had); every single person the way he/she could along with different funds, many national and foreign organizations (National state and private banks, business corporations, US embassy, Red Cross, etc.) and national TV projects (“X factor”, “One in One”, “Eka Khopera’s Show”, etc), concerts by nationally and internationally acknowledged stars Sukhishvilebi, Liza Batiashvili, Nikoloz Rachveli and Nato Metonidze (they all became charity after the disaster).

With the same success “Mziuri Generation” did not let the government arrest the director of the zoo who was accused of being irresponsible for providing population with the wrong information on the number of animals missing and eventually a man was killed accidentally by a tiger when he went into the storehouse to accomplish his job duties where a hiding tiger mauled him to death. The volunteers moved from their work places to demonstrate against the government’s attempt to put all the blame on Zurab Gurielidze, the director of the zoo, in front of the parliament and some hours later, the authorities had to announce Z. Gurielidze had never been accused officially and there were even no charges against him to drop. This was another case of consolidation for the truth and justice.

Finally, it is difficult not to see the merit and credit of the Western countries that had noticed the potential in a small country like ours about a couple of decades ago and did their best through implementing various reforms in education and other spheres we have talked above on top of different exchange academic and educational programs to lead the young generation to the point where it is now. Yet much is ahead and a lot is to be done, but one thing is certain: we have a generation serving a tremendous function in building a new type of society understanding the sense of community and citizenry; the generation we can rely on. I would like to end the article citing the words by one of the representatives of the generation - Davit Sarishvili (the former president of student self-governance and a present head of PR office at Grigol Robakidze University): “Recently, it has become urgent to select some names for our generation, some refer to us as to a “new generation” others choose some other names, etc. and I would like to express my point of view regarding the issue: our generation is the generation on the shoulders of whose our country should stand in the nearest future and each of us is profoundly aware of the fact; additionally, we are the generation who always express ourselves and our position when needed

and we are the generation who is always where needed. What makes me wondered is why you are all so astonished by us and speak about us in the way as if you had never known us and never had been aware of what we could do. We did what we had to do and what was coming from hearts and finally, I will say that we are the generation capable to contribute to the development of our country greatly always standing in its service” [13].

Conclusion

Civil society has often been regarded in the past ten years as the hope for the future, especially where governments are weak and corrupt. While it is sometimes true that civil society has accomplished things that the state has failed to do, the two should be treated as interlinked. The quality of the state reflects the quality of its societal base. Public officials are also members of society and carry the same values as other citizens. It is important, therefore, that efforts to improve governance tackle reforms of the state as part of strengthening civil society and the linkages between the two. The summer flood 2015 case revealed that groups of citizens, in non-governmental organizations and associations, as well as individual citizens (with the academic background they obtained owing to the reformed west-oriented education system of Georgia) play a vital role in educating the public and the government on important local and national policy issues. Their presence and activities help assure that the government and citizens comply with the rule of law. An informed and engaged citizenry provides both a check on government power and valuable feedback the government can use to become more responsive. Yet a lot need to be done in the sphere of formation of Civil Society in Georgia and, we hope the set plans of American and European partners (USAID/Caucasus and EU Country Roadmap for Engagement with Civil Society projects) will support the country on the way of promoting participatory democracy.

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