



2020 CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATION SUSTAINABILITY INDEX

AZERBAIJAN
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AZERBAIJAN

Capital: Baku
Population: 10,205,810
GDP per capita (PPP): \$17,500
Human Development Index: High (0.754)
Freedom in the World: Not Free (10/100)

OVERALL CSO SUSTAINABILITY: 5.9



Public attention in Azerbaijan in 2020 was focused on the COVID-19 pandemic and renewed fighting in the long-standing conflict with Armenia.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, a special quarantine regime was imposed beginning on March 24, 2020. During the quarantine, which was in place for most of the year, the movement of individuals and vehicles was restricted; most businesses and educational institutions were temporarily closed; and a special SMS permit system was introduced to allow people to leave their places of residence. As a result of these restrictions, many CSOs faced difficulties implementing their projects and reaching out to their beneficiaries.

Tensions have longed simmered between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, which is internationally recognized as a part of Azerbaijan, but has de facto been a part of Armenia since 1994. Armed clashes broke out in July 2020, with officials in both countries blaming the other for starting the fighting. This was followed by intensified fighting that broke out in September 2020. Fighting lasted for forty-four days until the two warring parties signed a peace deal brokered by Russia. The Patriotic War, as it is known in Azerbaijan, resulted in several thousands of deaths and allowed Azerbaijan to keep a significant amount of the territory it had regained, while requiring Armenia to hand over other areas. The end of the war gave rise to hopes in Azerbaijan that some of the approximately 1 million refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the country could finally return to their homeland.

Political liberties in Azerbaijan continue to be highly restricted, and the country is considered “Not Free” in Freedom House’s Freedom in the World 2021 report, which covers developments in 2020. Snap parliamentary elections were held in February. Although the elections lacked genuine political competition and the ruling party maintained control over the parliament, several CSO representatives did win seats. According to the OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission’s final report on the elections, “significant procedural violations during counting and the tabulation raised concerns whether the results were established honestly.”

In the summer, the Unit on Political Parties and Legislative Power, which was established within the President’s Office in November 2019, met with many political parties in the country, including opposition and unregistered parties; the two leading opposition parties, however, did not participate. After the meeting, seven parties were registered—a notable accomplishment as no political parties had been registered in Azerbaijan for a decade. The dialogue between the government and political parties continued throughout the year. For example, in July 2020, when fighting broke out with Armenia, forty-three parties signed a Joint Statement in support of President Aliyev and the Azerbaijani Army. Similarly, in September 2020, when the war started in Karabakh, fifty of the fifty-two registered political parties signed another statement in support of President Aliyev and the Azerbaijani Army. In addition, twenty parties received office space from the government.

At the same time, the government continued to crack down on the opposition and dissenting voices in 2020, including through the use of COVID-19 related restrictions. Human Rights Watch reported that a number of opposition politicians were arrested on criminal charges during the year. In July, for example, authorities arrested and filed criminal charges against seventeen senior members of the Azerbaijani Popular Front Party (APFP) for disturbing the public order, destroying property, and other offenses stemming from a July 14 pro-war protest, even though most of them had not participated in the protest.

In this context, overall CSO sustainability remained unchanged in 2020. The only dimension recording a change was public image, which improved slightly as a result of the positive public perception of CSOs' support to marginalized groups during the pandemic and the Patriotic War. While the government continued to provide financial support to CSOs through various mechanisms, access to foreign funding continued to be a problem. CSO activities were also impeded by the measures the government imposed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as internet restrictions imposed during the Patriotic War.

According to official information, in 2020, the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) registered 71 local CSOs (compared to 109 in 2019 and 169 in 2018), bringing the total number of registered non-commercial entities to more than 4,500. There are also dozens of unregistered groups in the country. During the year, three CSOs voluntarily dissolved their legal status.

LEGAL ENVIRONMENT: 6.4



The legal environment governing civil society did not change substantially in 2020. CSOs continue to operate under a restrictive environment in which they face many obstacles to their operations, particularly affecting their access to foreign funding. Key legal acts regulating CSOs in Azerbaijan include the Civil Code, Law on Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), Law on State Registration of Legal Entities and State Registry, the Tax Code, and various decisions of the Cabinet of Ministers.

The registration process continues to be complex and unnecessarily bureaucratic. It often takes months or years for CSOs to register, if they are able to do so at all. Much of the delay is caused by the MoJ's practice of issuing multiple letters refusing registration, each of which lists a single problem with the registration

application, rather than mentioning all reasons at once, which would enable the problems to be resolved faster.

The procedures for registering foreign CSOs are also complex and hampered by the subjective approach of MoJ. A foreign CSO must enter into an agreement with MoJ in order to register. Moreover, the legislation requires a foreign citizen who intends to be the head of a representative office or branch of a foreign organization to obtain a permanent residence permit. However, the requirements for obtaining a permanent residence permit are extensive, and in practice, often impossible to meet.

CSOs must register all grants from foreign sources, as well as donations and foreign service contracts, with MoJ. This process requires CSOs to collect a number of documents, and many CSOs need to consult lawyers or other experienced CSO representatives to successfully complete it. To avoid these problems, some CSOs instead operate by setting up commercial companies or registering as individual taxpayers, although in most cases this creates problems in attracting funds from foreign donors. The registration of foreign service contracts continues to be much easier and faster than the registration of foreign grants.

In June, parliament adopted changes to the CSO legislation that enable electronic registration of CSOs and their foreign funding, as well as changes to their statutory documents. MoJ announced that this system will be ready beginning in March 2021. While the electronization of some services can save CSOs some time, it is not sufficient in and of itself to significantly overcome the current legal barriers.

Freedom of expression was threatened in 2020 by amendments to the Law on Information, Informatization, and Information Protection adopted on March 17, 2020, that criminalized the dissemination of purportedly fake news in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Human Rights Watch, by year's end, there had been at least ten cases in which internet users were compelled to remove material criticizing the government's pandemic response. In addition, 127 people were issued official warnings and twenty-eight were fined or arrested for social media posts criticizing the government's response to the pandemic. During the war, the government restricted access to the internet throughout the country; these restrictions were only in place for a few weeks.

CSOs are exempt from income tax on revenue from grants, donations, and membership fees. In December 2018, changes were made to the Tax Code that introduce a 10 percent income tax deduction for commercial companies making donations to CSOs specialized in science, education, health, sports, or culture. In March 2020, the Cabinet of Ministers approved measures to implement this benefit. Unfortunately, CSO representatives were not consulted when developing these criteria, so this is likely to only benefit a few state-funded public associations, such as the Writers' Unions and Artists' Unions.

CSOs face a number of obstacles as a result of the country's lack of a risk-based approach in the field of money laundering and terrorist financing, in contradiction to Financial Action Task Force (FATF) standards. For example, according to the Law on Combating Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing, all CSOs must appoint an internal auditor, develop an internal control system, and identify and verify customers. Such requirements are often beyond the capabilities of CSOs. The Financial Intelligence Service is drafting a new law that will allegedly reduce these requirements. In 2020, the USAID-funded Empowering Civil Society Organizations for Transparency (ECSOFT) project held a webinar on CSOs' obligations stemming from money laundering and financing of terrorism together with MoJ and the Financial Intelligence Service.

State harassment of CSOs declined in 2020. MoJ did not penalize or inspect any CSOs, and only a single CSO received a written warning on deficiencies identified by MoJ. According to Human Rights Watch, in April, the Supreme Court acquitted two former political prisoners—politician Ilgar Mammadov and human rights defender Rasul Jafarov—years after judgments in their favor by the European Court of Human Rights. CSOs still have to receive approval from the local executive authorities before organizing any public events in the regions.

The restrictions imposed to limit the spread of COVID-19 made it difficult for CSOs to implement their projects and reach out to their beneficiaries. CSO representatives objected to the fact that few CSOs were included in the electronic system that allowed the employees of some organizations to bypass the SMS permission system.

On September 9, 2020, a working group was established in parliament to prepare a draft Law on Charity. However, CSOs were unable to access its draft.

CSOs are allowed to earn income through the provision of goods and services, including by charging fees or establishing social enterprises. CSOs can compete for government procurements and engage in fundraising campaigns as long as they follow the rules on donations.

The number of local lawyers who are trained in or familiar with CSO-related laws increases every year through a master's level course in NGO Law that is offered at Baku State University. In the regions, CSOs primarily obtain legal advice from the five NGO Resource Centers operating around the country.

ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY: 6.1

CSOs' organizational capacity remained largely unchanged in 2020. For the most part, regional CSOs continue to have weaker capacities than their counterparts in Baku, as they have fewer funding opportunities (both foreign and domestic), face more legal and administrative barriers, and suffer from a lack of professionals.

CSOs must seek permission from the authorities to organize public events; this makes it difficult for them to establish direct contact with their constituencies, much less to represent their interests. To compensate for the lack of face-to-face contacts in 2020 stemming from the COVID-19 restrictions, both regional- and Baku-based CSOs actively used social media to communicate with their constituents. However, those groups without access to technology or technological skills were left without support.

Funding restrictions prevent even relatively large CSOs from fully adhering to their stated missions, while smaller organizations are in no position to pay much attention to their missions. Financial difficulties also make long-term

strategic planning almost impossible. As a result, few CSOs develop strategic plans and practically none are able to follow them.

Though the majority of CSOs have some written internal policies, these are rarely implemented in practice. Most CSOs have boards or councils with a stated supervisory authority; however, in most cases, the roles of these institutions are limited to satisfying reporting requirements.

The overwhelming majority of CSOs can not afford full-time staff and have limited access to professional personnel, such as lawyers or accountants, much less fundraisers and advocacy staff. Therefore, CSO leaders are forced to perform several of these functions. In 2020, a total of 1,914 persons (677 permanently and 1,237 temporarily) were hired to work on projects financed by the NGO Support Council. Driven by a lack of

funding and financial instability in the sector, the outflow of professionals from civil society intensified in 2020. The lack of professional staff is somewhat compensated for by the increasing use of volunteers.

The year 2020 was announced as a Year of Volunteerism in Azerbaijan. At the same time, the COVID-19 situation and the Karabakh conflict gave impetus to the emergence of informal groups of volunteers at the grassroots level. Most of these groups were engaged in charity, but several also engaged in public awareness raising and advocacy campaigns with state bodies to streamline and/or soften the COVID-19 rules. With support from the Youth Fund, the Azerbaijan Volunteers Coordination Center was set up to reduce the impact of the pandemic. Also, the government granted the Regional Development Public Union the right to formally register volunteers on a dedicated work/travel permit website to provide assistance to those in need during the lockdowns. More and more state bodies and programs, such as the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of the Population, Transport Volunteers Program, and Tourism Volunteers, also use volunteers in their daily work.

The lack of funding forces CSO leaders to use their private residences as their offices, and owning an official vehicle is a luxury almost no CSO can afford. NGO Resource Centers in the regions are reasonably well-equipped and offer their facilities to CSOs for events and day-to-day work free of charge. These centers continued to offer services to CSOs during the year, except for during the strictest lockdown periods, although no events with more than ten participants were allowed. Due to the continuous lack of funds, CSOs' equipment is outdated. New equipment is too expensive for CSOs to buy, especially after the recent drop in the customs-free ceiling for online purchases from \$1,000 to \$300. The Youth Fund has provided youth organizations with grants to modernize their equipment and cover expenses related to office and administrative costs for a year. Likewise, through projects funded by the NGO Support Council, CSOs were able to purchase fifty-six computers, thirteen printers, and sixty-eight other devices in 2020.

CSOs considerably improved their digital skills in response to COVID-19 restrictions. During the year, CSOs made broad use of the internet, which is available in both Baku and the regions, to learn about legislative changes and new funding opportunities, and for online events, such as conferences and training programs. CSOs without adequate equipment were generally still able to access online information and events through their cellphones.

ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY IN AZERBAIJAN



FINANCIAL VIABILITY: 6.4

CSO financial viability did not change in 2020, although there was some growth in the overall number of domestic donors.

According to official statistics from MoJ, 571 foreign grants, 65 foreign service contracts, and 501 foreign donations were registered during 2020, a decrease from a total of 1,955 registered grants, service contracts, and donations in 2019. No data is available on the precise sources of this funding or amounts of these awards. However, according to CSOs, there were fewer direct European Union (EU) grants in 2020 than in the previous year, as at least two of them had to be channeled through the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in order to increase the



chances of Moj registering them. Moj usually does not register grants awarded by the US Embassy. Some foreign grants involve sub-grants to other CSOs.

As in previous years, in 2020 many CSOs continued to receive foreign funding through affiliated commercial entities and individual service contracts. Though this may help CSOs stay afloat in the short term, it does not help them to build a grant history. In addition, unlike CSOs, business entities are subject to income tax and VAT on any income they receive. Moreover, some foreign donors do not allow such arrangements.

Funding from the NGO Support Council and Youth Fund continue to be important funding sources for most active organizations. In 2020, the NGO Support Council financed 505 projects (a decline from 568 in 2019) valued

at nearly AZN 3.6 million (approximately \$2.1 million), a slight decline from \$2.3 million in 2019. Grant competitions were held in areas including patriotism, civic activism, human rights, rights of the disabled, environmental protection, and education, as well as new topics, such as prevention of domestic violence, educating the population on mandatory medical insurance, and implementation of COVID-19 prevention measures. In 2020, the NGO Support Council held grant competitions for NGO projects in cooperation with thirty government agencies and bodies, compared to eighteen state donors in 2019. New agencies awarding funding to CSOs included the State Service for Mobilization and Conscription and the State Agency for Mandatory Medical Insurance. The NGO Support Council also continues to advise state bodies on the grant award process. In 2020, three state bodies sought the advice of the Council with regards to fifty-two project proposals received, of which twelve were approved.

Unregistered groups are still unable to benefit from this funding as they are not allowed to set up bank accounts, whereas large CSOs are generally not interested due to the small amounts offered by the NGO Support Council. Some CSOs complain that they can submit only one project to two of the key local donors per year. In addition, grants go primarily to pro-government organizations, in part because independent CSOs do not apply for these grants as they do not want to be affiliated with the government in the eyes of foreign donors. During the year, forty-six CSOs appealed funding decisions of the NGO Support Council; fourteen of them were granted funding as a result.

The NGO Support Council's SELIS system, which offers more than twenty e-services, proved to be very efficient during the pandemic, as it allowed CSOs to submit their proposals and reports electronically and communicate electronically with the NGO Support Council's staff. In 2020, the NGO Support Council introduced a new procedure to conclude grant agreements and receive final project reports, with the documents being formalized in electronic format through e-signatures.

The Youth Fund held several grant competitions for active youth and youth NGOs in 2020. For example, it supported eighteen local projects and one foreign project through a grant competition in February-March, and in October 2020, it financed twenty projects through the competition My Motherland – Azerbaijan. In addition, it provided travel grants covering attendance fees, transportation, and accommodation for youth CSOs to attend international events.

The Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of the Population continues to be the only ministry that awards social contracts. Although it did not disclose how many social contracts it awarded to CSOs, it issued at least three calls for social contracts in 2020.

On March 19, 2020, the president issued a decree establishing a compensation mechanism to offset the material damage caused to citizens in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this mechanism was mainly aimed at companies and individuals engaged in commercial activities and did not directly benefit CSOs.

CSOs' other sources of income, such as membership fees, local donations, commercial tenders, crowdfunding, and local and international business, continue to be minimal. There is no properly designed regulation for crowdfunding and no legal regulation of cash boxes, which discourages many CSOs from using these fundraising methods.

Donations to CSOs continue to be impeded by a ban on anonymous donations and a limit of 200 AZN (approximately \$117) for cash donations to charitable organizations.

Regional CSOs, as well as many capital-based CSOs, do not have strong financial management systems. Only a handful of CSOs publish annual financial reports with financial statements, though under the law they must submit this information to the Ministry of Finance.

ADVOCACY: 5.5

CSO advocacy remained largely unchanged in 2020.

Due to COVID-19, CSOs were not able to provide many policy recommendations or participate in public councils, discussions, and working groups, other than through online means. The NGO Support Council did not organize any public discussions either. Consultations with CSOs on draft legislation are still not organized consistently. In particular, the Cabinet of Ministers never holds public discussions with CSOs, even on issues that directly affect them, while the parliament has organized only a few such discussions to date. For example, CSOs were not consulted about the criteria for eligible beneficiaries of the 10 percent tax deduction for companies making donations to CSOs; as a result, only a few state-funded public associations, such as the Writers' Unions and Artists' Unions, are eligible.



Other advocacy instruments, such as mahalla committees (voluntary unions of local residents under the Law on the Status of Municipalities), still remain unutilized due to the lack of relevant mechanisms and practices. There are still no procedures to implement the legal possibility for 40,000 citizens to initiate a law.

Despite these obstacles, the government showed greater openness towards CSOs in 2020. In the fall, the assistant to the president organized a series of online meetings with over 300 CSO representatives to discuss their concerns and ways to improve government-CSO cooperation and interaction. In addition, two CSO representatives were appointed by presidential decree to the board of trustees of the Yashat Fund, which provides support to veterans of the Karabakh war and their families. Some government entities demonstrated increased willingness to collaborate with CSOs, enabling a broader range of CSOs to participate in decision-making processes through new public councils.

In 2020, two new state bodies—the State Advertisement Agency and the Ministry of Culture—started the process of setting up public councils that include CSO members, bringing the total number of state bodies with such councils to fourteen. These public councils operate with various degrees of efficiency, but in general their capacity continues to increase. In 2020, ECSOFT prepared a manual on the elections process and operations of public councils based on recommendations developed during a 2019 conference. The powers of public councils are still limited. Despite the fact that President Aliyev stressed the importance of public oversight over the activities of state bodies several times in his public communications during the year, officials do not seem eager to take the necessary actions.

Although the February 2020 parliamentary elections were not free or fair according to the OSCE/ODIHR observers, they did result in a couple of CSO leaders being elected to the parliament. Once in office, they advocated to ease CSO legislation. The role of local CSOs in the parliamentary elections was limited in comparison to previous elections. However, at least two CSOs—Law and Development and Learning Democracy Public Union—were engaged in voter education, while some CSOs, including the Association for Civil Society Support in Azerbaijan (AVCIA), did exit polling and election monitoring.

In early 2020, the National Action Plan (NAP) of the Open Government Partnership (OGP) for 2020-2022 was adopted, even though Azerbaijan's status in OGP has been inactive since 2016. The NAP, which was developed with the close involvement of CSOs and individual experts, envisions cooperation between government and civil

society in monitoring the transparency and accountability of state bodies. It also foresees the involvement of CSOs in the implementation of some of its measures, such as strengthening public councils.

In 2020, CSOs were heavily involved in advocacy on domestic violence. Two CSOs—Constitution Research Foundation and Women’s Solidarity—prepared a package of four proposals to the new draft law on domestic violence, two of which were accepted. Although not yet adopted, the draft law contains important provisions that reflect international practice. In November 2020, the National Action Plan on Combating Domestic Violence for 2020-2023 was approved. The National Action Plan aims to bring the regulatory framework in the field of combating domestic violence in line with international practice. In addition, the plan aims to promote awareness-raising activities in the field of prevention and combating domestic violence; improve the identification of victims of domestic violence; and provide assistance to victims of domestic violence in accordance with modern standards.

Existing CSO advocacy platforms include the National NGO Forum, South Caucasus Women Congress, National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF), and OGP Platform. Advocacy capacity and practices are limited mostly to Baku-based CSOs, while regional CSOs’ capacity to advocate is limited.

CSOs increasingly use social media as a tool for both public awareness raising and advocacy as social networks present a relatively free public space. However, CSOs—especially those in the regions—have yet to learn to use social media to its full extent.

Due to COVID-19, CSOs’ engagement in advocacy on the international arena was limited to participating in online events. In 2020, for example, CSOs used various events of the Council of Europe, EU, and UN to raise their concerns related to CSO legislation, cooperation with the government, and human rights issues.

With financial support from the NGO Support Council, the Constitution Research Foundation involved several CSO law experts in its efforts to develop a package of legislative recommendations that would simplify CSO registration, the registration of grants and service contracts, and reporting. This document was submitted to the NGO Support Council and the parliament. While several MPs support the package, no concrete results had been achieved in terms of its passage in 2020.

SERVICE PROVISION: 5.4



CSO service provision stayed the same as in 2019. The 2012 Law on Social Services provides a framework for the state to engage in social contracting with CSOs, although it is still not widely used. Some state bodies, mainly the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of the Population, engage CSOs to provide services in the areas of social care, health, education, and legal aid.

Large CSOs provide services in a diverse range of areas including research, assessment, monitoring, and training services for other CSOs, including foreign CSOs. CSOs offered new services in 2020 including food assistance to families, medical items (including masks), and financial support to persons in need during the pandemic. With support from the Youth Fund, youth CSOs provided services including COVID-19 related awareness raising

and social care to isolated people and the elderly. CSOs also provided various services to those affected by the Patriotic War, including distribution of food and other items and psychological and legal aid.

CSOs see their role as being in community-related work and, in light of new social developments in 2020, in exercising public control to ensure proper spending in Karabakh, providing psychological aid, and ensuring inclusivity of people with disabilities, especially the increasing number of war veterans.

Due to the crippling enabling environment for CSOs, most organizations concentrate more on their survival than meeting particular communities’ or constituencies’ needs. CSO services are determined more by donors’ agendas, which are generally based on research identifying social needs, than on assessments done by CSOs themselves.

As MoJ registers service contracts more easily than grants, many CSOs still prefer to register their funding with donors as service contracts. A few selected CSOs offer fee-based services, usually focused on the provision of consultations and technical assistance to academia, international organizations, business agencies, and the government; local communities generally are not financially able to pay for services.

In general, the government views CSOs with suspicion, making it difficult to speak of any general recognition of CSO services by the government. Nevertheless, the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of the Population, for example, assesses CSO services rather highly as evidenced by the many social contracts it awards to CSOs. For example, CSOs run daycare centers for children with disabilities in the regions and conducted monitoring of the prices of basic necessities during the pandemic.

In June, a public legal entity called the Social Services Agency was established under the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of the Population. This Agency will provide a number of services which in the past were provided by CSOs, potentially squeezing CSOs out of these service areas.

SECTORAL INFRASTRUCTURE: 5.8

The infrastructure supporting the CSO sector remained largely unchanged in 2020.

NGO Resource Centers in Baku, Guba, Gabala, Mingachevir, Shamkir, and Shirvan continue to provide technical and infrastructure support and arrange training programs for local CSOs. These Resource Centers also provide fee-based services to various groups, including Baku-based organizations, on event organization and outreach to communities and CSOs. In 2020, the NGO Support Council awarded grants of up to AZN 29,500 (approximately \$17,500) for the Baku-based resource center and AZN 18,000 (approximately \$10,500) for the five region-based centers. Except for during the total lockdown periods, the NGO Resource Centers continued providing individual CSOs with technical assistance and consultations during the year.

Though in 2019 CSOs confirmed that a variety of venues, including the International Press Center in Baku, Olympic Complexes, H. Aliyev Centers, Youth Centers, and Baku Congress Center, offered space for CSO events, these facilities were closed for most of 2020 due to COVID-19 restrictions on mass gatherings. The Women Resource Centers (WRC) and Baku NGO Resource Center, which offer pro bono meeting facilities for CSO activities, shut their doors to in-person events in 2020 as well.

There are several national CSO platforms. The National NGO Forum, which was established in 1999, has 743 CSO members, and the independent Azerbaijan National Platform of the EaP CSF, which was established in 2009, unites 71 CSOs. Thematic coalitions also bring together CSOs focused on issues such as children's rights and the rights of disabled persons and people with severe health problems.

With an aim to increase the number of CSOs in the regions and to improve their material-technical base, the NGO Support Council provided funding to eighty-three regional CSOs and delivered other support services in 2020. Some local CSOs regrant foreign funds from the EU, USAID, and other donors.

In 2020, the overall availability of training for CSOs remained unchanged, although most training was provided online. The Azerbaijan National Platform of the EaP CSF organized some online training programs in 2020 on topics such as human rights, leadership, and proposal writing. MG Consulting offered local online training opportunities and materials on topics such as proposal writing, report writing, project management, ethical rules, and advocacy. In 2020, the USAID-funded ECSoft project held various trainings for CSOs, including on anti-corruption, money-laundering, advocacy, fundraising, ethics rules, and capacity building of public council members. With the support of the NGO Support Council, about 400 CSOs attended an online conference on the pandemic.

SECTORAL INFRASTRUCTURE IN AZERBAIJAN



The NGO Support Council also organized six public discussions, two conferences, and three roundtables with CSOs on the Karabakh topic.

Intersectoral partnerships continue to be underdeveloped. The OGP National Platform, which unites ten public agencies and thirty-four CSOs, is a rare positive example of intersectoral cooperation. In 2020, the Platform organized several discussions between CSOs and state bodies and participated closely in shaping the OGP NAP for 2020-2022. Although some CSOs receive limited support and work with businesses as part of the corporate social responsibility policies, no true partnerships between CSOs and businesses or media are known to exist.

PUBLIC IMAGE: 5.6



The CSO sector's public image improved slightly in 2020. The improvement was driven by broad media engagement within projects supported by the NGO Support Council, as well as the positive perception of CSOs' support to marginalized groups during the pandemic and the Patriotic War.

The NGO Support Council supported a number of projects involving media engagement in 2020. For example, Real TV ran TV programs for nineteen days, with the involvement of thirty-eight CSOs, asking people to stay at home to protect society. In addition, twenty TV programs promoted open government, and twelve issues of the Civil Society Journal were published that covered more than 500 projects and activities implemented by CSOs. The webpage www.qhtxeber.az

(NGO news), which is administered by the NGO Support Council, posted approximately 57,000 news items related to CSOs (an increase from 53,450 in 2019) that were read by 420,000 readers (an increase from 370,000 in 2019). Similarly, www.qht.az webpage for CSOs included 2,326 posts that reached 300,000 readers.

Online media more actively covered many CSO activities in 2020, including awareness raising, training, and publications. CSOs must still pay commercial rates to promote their issues on TV, although understanding of the concept of social advertising seems to have increased, especially because of the pandemic situation.

The public perception of CSOs increased slightly both because of their response to the pandemic and support to populations affected by the war. However, many CSOs are still associated with the names of their leaders. Media often present CSO leaders as individual experts rather than as representatives of their CSOs, furthering the sector's personality-driven image. This situation is changing slightly due to the emergence of multiple informal grassroots groups in response to the pandemic and post-war care of veterans.

In general, government perceptions of CSOs continues to be mixed, depending significantly on the CSO leader, the issue, and the individual state official.

CSOs are not in the position to hire professional public relations (PR) staff, so they are forced to rely on volunteers or their leaders to develop and implement PR strategies. CSOs make use of social media, such as Facebook and YouTube, more than TV or print media, to share information about their work, as social media offers more freedom than traditional print or digital media. Online NGO TV (www.qhttv.az) continued to regularly post videos and news related to CSOs; in 2020, it posted 259 videos, with total views since it was launched reaching more than 177,000. In one program, best international NGO practices were discussed. More than 2,000 people subscribe to this portal. NGO TV's Facebook page has more than 3,000 subscribers; in 2020, it posted 103 videos that reached more than 76,000 persons. In addition, a dedicated webpage, www.qhtfilm.az, posts films developed by CSOs on topics such as youth, social issues, internally displaced persons, and disabled people; one video was shared in 2020. Online OGP TV had several programs devoted to CSO issues in 2020.

Many CSOs still lack webpages and fail to publish annual reports. To promote transparency and accountability of CSOs, in 2020 the NGO Support Council provided financial support to five NGOs to set up thirty-two websites for their counterparts. Also, two online portals enable CSOs to post information about their activities for free.

One of these portals (www.qht.az) has an online database of CSOs and CSO leaders. With funding from USAID's ECSOFT project, a local CSO developed a special webpage (<http://ictimaishura.az/>) with information about public councils, including news, reports, and contacts. CSOs do not broadly adopt or adhere to codes of ethics.

Disclaimer: *The opinions expressed herein are those of the panelists and other project researchers and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or FHI 360.*

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