

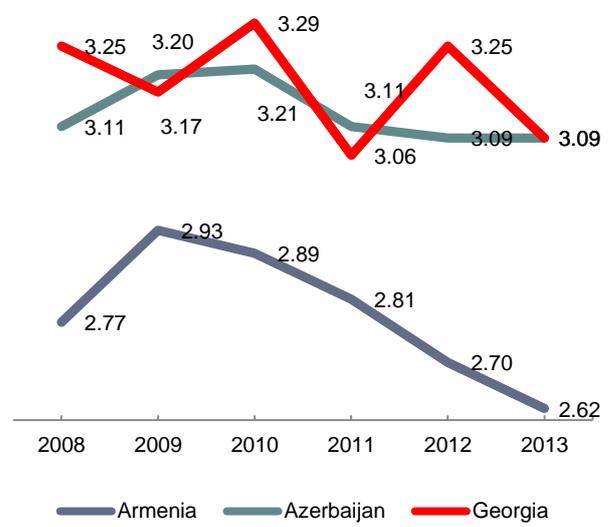


CONTINUOUS DETACHMENT, DECREASING TRUST: SHOULD ARMENIAN NGOS WORRY?

According to the most recent study by the Turpanjian Center for Policy Analysis (TCPA) the Armenian NGO sector remains detached from the broader public. Membership rates in associations are extremely low. Trust towards NGOs is low and decreasing. NGOs either overestimate public trust, or dismiss it as irrelevant for their work. The aim of this brief is to draw attention to this situation. The atmosphere of public distrust and disengagement creates an unhealthy environment for NGOs and reduces their operational capacities.

ARMENIAN CIVIL SOCIETY AFTER 20 YEARS OF TRANSITION: STILL POST-COMMUNIST?

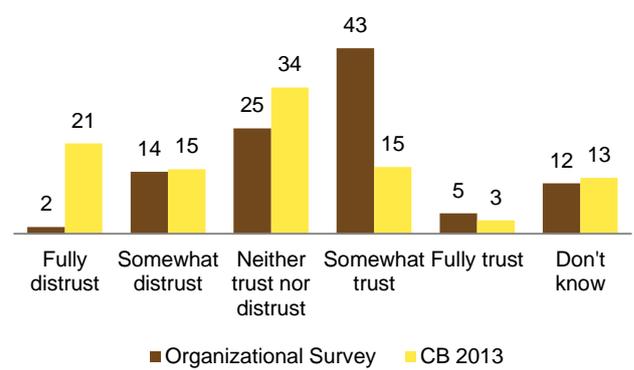
In 2012-2014 TCPA conducted a study of Armenian civil society, employing secondary data analysis, an organisational survey and qualitative interviews. The study was funded by the Academic Swiss Caucasus Net (ASCN). The study confirms the post-communist 'weakness' of civil society in terms of low membership and distrust in Armenia. Only 7% of the population was actively involved in civil society organisations in 2011: a dismal number that has decreased since 1997 when it was 12%. Trust towards NGOs is decreasing in Armenia since 2009. NGOs are less trusted than the local government and the media. The reasons for this 'weakness' however, are conditioned by current social and political problems as much as they are an echo of the past. Most people believe NGOs have limited to no impact on addressing social issues



Average levels of trust towards NGOs. Caucasus Barometer, mean value on a scale from 1 to 5 (fully trust)

NGOS OVERESTIMATE TRUST TOWARDS THEM

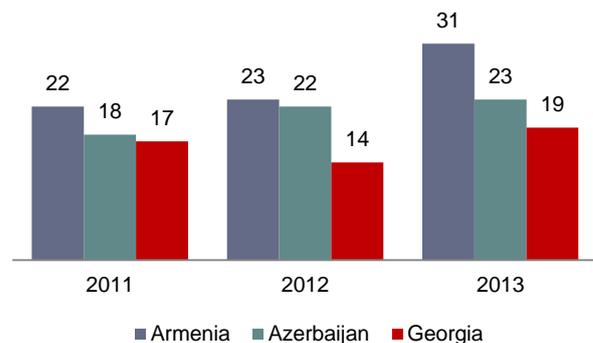
Participants of the organisational survey were asked to estimate public trust towards NGOs, replicating a Caucasus Barometer question. The comparison with public opinion data clearly shows that NGOs overestimate the amount of trust towards them. Qualitative interviews reveal that NGO leaders are convinced that their NGO is trusted, and that is all that matters. When asked to reflect on reasons for mistrust, NGOs name the government, the socio-economic conditions of the country or the 'mentality' of the people. Self-criticism is virtually absent.



Trust towards NGOs: NGOs' estimate vs. public opinion TCPA survey and Caucasus Barometer, %

INFORMAL VOLUNTEERING IS ON THE RISE

Not all the news derived from public opinion surveys is bad, however: Armenia has the highest, and increasing, levels of volunteering in the region. Roughly one-third of the Armenian population is engaged in volunteering, and approximately half of that volunteering occurs outside of organisations. The recent increase in the levels of volunteering has been due mostly to increased informal volunteering, particularly among men.



Self-reported volunteering
Caucasus Barometer, % of "yes"

IS CIVIC ACTIVISM THE NEW 'MAGIC BULLET'?

Issue oriented civic activism seems to be on the rise in Armenia. It is largely spontaneous, mostly driven by youth, and powered by social media. Qualitative interviews with NGO leaders and volunteers suggest that civic activism and the 'new young generation' are sources of hope for civil society actors. However, for Armenian civil society to re-vitalise itself and to connect to the broader public these new energies need to be carefully harnessed and cleverly tapped into. NGOs might be able to benefit from the rise of civic activism, but the benefits are not likely to occur automatically. Our preliminary observations show that there is both cooperation and tensions between the 'old' NGO sector and the 'new' civic activism.

BUILDING BRIDGES BETWEEN RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

TCPA has started a new research project, also funded by ASCN, envisioned as a two-year follow-up to the study of Armenian civil society, focused specifically on interaction and mutual perceptions of NGOs and civic activists, placing these two actors into a broader perspective of Armenian political culture of participation and (mis)trust. While the main aim of the study is academic, we believe this study can be of practical relevance for various civil society actors. For that to happen, however, we need closer cooperation with practitioners. We would like to engage in a constructive dialogue with interested parties. This would help us fine-tune our research and incorporate policy-relevant aspects early on.

The full report of the conducted study of Armenian civil society is available online at TCPA website (<http://tcpa.aua.am/reports-and-publications/>). Please contact us for more information on the completed 2012-2014 study or the commenced 2014-2016 study.

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