

# Constructing an NGO Sector in Transitional Contexts

*The Reach of  
NGO–Donor  
'Partnerships' in  
Post-Soviet Georgia\**

**Kate Hamilton**

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## 1 Introduction

This article explores the nature of the 'partnership' between NGOs<sup>1</sup> and donors<sup>2</sup> in the former Soviet Republic of Georgia. Here, as in much of the post-socialist world, NGOs are a recent phenomenon. They have grown in number extremely rapidly thanks to foreign donors' vigorous efforts to generate and support them. Because of this, the relationship between donors and NGOs is both particularly strong and unusually pervasive. In this sense, Georgia's is an extreme case: however, it can also be read as an extension of relationships that exist between donors and NGOs generally and thus more broadly applicable. In particular the newness and distinctiveness of NGOs within the Georgian context makes clear a number of impacts of the donor–NGO relationship, which in more embedded settings may be obscured by intervening factors. The analysis therefore looks 'beyond partnership' to elucidate some of the ways in which the donor–NGO interaction constructs behaviours and mediates relationships so that they directly impact on the fulfilment of donors' goals in developing an NGO sector.

Donors' goals in promoting local NGOs in Georgia have been shaped by two over-riding priorities. The first has been to contribute to the development of a civil society in this post-Soviet nation, as a component of consolidated democracy. This priority emerges from a perception that civil society is absent in Georgia because communism made it impossible by definition. The perception is further underpinned by an axiomatic belief that vibrant civil society is a precondition for sustainable, meaningful democracy.<sup>3</sup> Donors recognise that developing an NGO sector is not the same as developing civil society, but see it as a core element in the wider project. Having a limited toolbox on which to draw, stimulating NGO growth has been the main strategy through which civil society development has been pursued. This practical limitation has gained discursive weight over time, such that 'civil society' and 'NGOs' are discussed more-or-less synonymously within the Georgian NGO community.

The second priority of donors is to effect a rapid exit from Georgia, leading to an eventual withdrawal of funding. This intention stems in part from a reluctance, felt by many donors as they first

became involved in post-socialist countries, to divert their increasingly hard-won financial resources to a new area on a long-term basis. It also arises from a view that essentially 'developed' countries such as Georgia should quickly become able to meet their own needs, only temporary assistance being needed to address immediate transitional crises. Whatever the validity of this reckoning, donors in Georgia are up-front about their aim to withdraw in the near future. The establishment of an NGO sector is in part designed, therefore, to establish an effective community of development agents on whom donors can rely to take forward the broader agendas of working towards democracy and stability in the country.

NGOs thus have a dual role: a functional role as performers of development projects, and a symbolic role as elements of civil society. The two roles are closely intertwined. The distinction, though, is helpful in accounting for the weight of values attached to NGOs, which goes beyond what might be expected of 'mere' development agents, and for the way in which importance appears to accrue to the fact of being an NGO as much as to the programmes they undertake. NGOs' dual role clearly frames the relationship between them and their donors.

As this bulletin explores, NGO relationships are increasingly discussed in the language of partnership, a language which can at times obscure as much as it reveals about the interactions and negotiations that constitute those relationships. In Georgia, as elsewhere, 'partnership' is applied inconsistently and uncritically. While encapsulating aspirations towards balanced and mutual relationships, in practice the terms of the exchange, whichever the actors involved, are loaded in favour of one side over the other. Rather than dwell too much on this – particularly as donors and NGOs in Georgia see their future not in terms of ongoing partnership but of withdrawal and self-sufficiency respectively – 'partnership' is here used as an alternative to 'relationship', drawing attention more fully to the mutuality of those relationships, even where they appear to be one-sided. A link to other discussions of partnership, which seek to define it as an ideal type of relationship (e.g. Fowler and Malena in this bulletin), is that many of the qualities partners need to possess in the ideal are those that NGOs

and donors in Georgia must achieve in order to realise their objectives of donor withdrawal and NGO self-sufficiency.

In essence, NGOs need to become sustainable and autonomous, and donor behaviour needs to support them effectively in achieving this. It is my contention that while this can therefore be assumed to be the underlying project of donors and NGOs in Georgia, the nature of the 'partnership' between them – something that goes beyond a practical relationship to include cultural and social experiences – conspires against the fulfilment of this project.

## 2 The NGO–Donor Partnership

The relationship between donors and NGOs in Georgia is rooted in the fact that NGOs have largely been created, directly or indirectly, by the former. The first opportunities for non-governmental activity arose in the late Soviet period. However, with a couple of notable exceptions, the groups mobilised at that time quickly developed into politicised entities, participating in the political chaos around independence and civil war and then either sinking into oblivion or becoming political parties.

It was in dealing with the immediate consequences of civil war that many donor organisations first became involved in Georgia. In the same period, public exhaustion with the excessive and divisive politicisation of life encouraged those with the desire to be active in shaping change to seek alternative, non-political forms for public action. As donors established their programmes for developing civil society, just such a form, the NGO, was offered as a means for effecting positive change in the country. Introducing the concept of an NGO was backed up by readily available funding and institutional support. From this point, in the mid-1990s, NGOs have sprung up rapidly, at least 3,000 being officially registered in the capital, Tbilisi, alone by 1999.

NGOs have emerged in a number of ways, all shaped to some degree by donor initiatives and priorities. A small number of NGOs started life as part of a donor organisation, either being set up by, or comprising the local arm of, an international donor organisation, with subsequent establishment as an independent entity. Both international NGOs

(INGOs) and international foundations have 'given birth' to NGOs in this way. Inevitably, such NGOs are strongly shaped by their parent organisation's ideals and plans, and they tend to maintain privileged relationships with them even after gaining their autonomy.

The vast majority of NGOs, though, started out independently. Many originated when friends and colleagues joined together to take up the opportunities that are offered to those establishing NGOs. Apart from financial incentives, NGO work offers the chance to become usefully involved in society, to be busy and to learn skills that will be valuable in the future towards which Georgia is moving. This range of incentives, underwritten by external aid, has been significant for mobilising NGOs in a context where most people's sources of regular employment have disappeared or have stopped paying meaningful wages, and where people feel wary and ill-equipped to venture into the private sector.

Such incentives are available to those who can set themselves up to address problems that the donor community defines as pressing and relevant. The initial expansion of environmental groups reflected donors' sense of 'safety' in promoting environmental issues in a then still unstable and largely unknown political situation. Subsequent broadening of donor interest into issues such as community development and human rights has seen equivalent growth of new and existing NGOs developing programme interests under these headings. New organisations continue to emerge, and the programme focus of the sector as a whole continues to reflect shifts in the issues donors prioritise. The relationship is simple: without donor funds NGOs cannot exist, and to exist they must work in the areas that donors wish to fund. To this extent, while most NGOs have not been created actively by donors, they have nonetheless emerged entirely in response to opportunities that donors have created and around issues that they have deemed important.

The prevalent relationship between donors and NGOs revolves around grants, sums of money tied to time-bound projects, which NGOs carry out. Grants, on which NGOs are almost completely dependent for financing, are usually short-term and discrete; the relationships likewise. In order to survive NGOs may have grants with many different

donors in succession or at once. When grants overlap NGOs take on new staff to cover the work, but they cannot sustain these human resources over the long term. Consequently, potential learning from project to project is often lost. There is also an apparent lack of donor concern for the previous work done by any particular NGO, contributing to a sense that being an NGO is what matters, rather than what programmes have been pursued. Many NGOs have worked on a variety of projects over time that do not build on each other in any meaningful way. Consequently, learning from experience and developing expertise is compromised. It is difficult for NGOs to develop their own agendas, strategy or a focus.

Undoubtedly, over time some NGOs do manage to develop a clear sense of direction. Moreover, a history of successful projects repeated in a particular sector has sometimes proved helpful in becoming a prime candidate for future grants. However, the primary nature of the donor-NGO relationship – organised around discrete grants – does not conspire to make such development easy. In order to stay afloat, many NGOs remain stuck at the level of chasing grants covering a wide range of issues and using all sorts of approaches, changing the organisation to fit the funding rather than growing from experience.

Donors obviously recognise that the skills required for effective NGO work are considerable and have not been developed in the course of most people's previous experience. Therefore, apart from funding NGOs they support capacity-building, typically carried out as a project by another NGO. Through this approach the basic skills for running an NGO, particularly for getting and using grants, are disseminated. Aimed at the whole NGO sector, capacity-building focuses on organisational issues and practice, rather than skills relating to effective work in their field of interest. Again, this contributes to the identification of NGOs by their form and structure rather than their programmes of activity.

The partnership between NGOs and donors is essentially contractual. NGOs perform projects defined by themselves but limited to the programmes of interest to donors, while using the practices that donors define, through capacity

building, as relevant and appropriate to being an NGO. While some NGOs develop beyond the limitations of this set-up, in general the partnership arrangement creates few incentives or possibilities for NGOs to do so.

### **3 Beyond Partnership as Contract: The Socio-Cultural World of NGOs**

In the previous section the NGO–donor partnership was considered in terms of functional arrangements around funding, structuring and formalised practices. However, NGO–donor relationships are more than this: it is also ‘an encounter between different cultures’ (Martella and Schunk 1997). This encounter is usually dominated by the donor partner most directly on the basis of their perceived wider experience of effective development and, ultimately, their financial power.

In a setting such as Georgia, where NGOs are new and appeared as creations of the donor community, the cultural supremacy of the donor is especially significant. There are simply no alternative ideas of ‘NGO’ with which to resist external definition by donors. (To a large extent, there is not even a perception that NGOs *could* be defined any other way, so resistance is irrelevant.) The particular social and cultural world of NGOs that this creates is of more than anthropological significance. It has implications for the fulfilment of the ‘big’ civic project on which the NGO–donor partnership is premised. The ‘socio-cultural partnership’ between donors and Georgian NGOs itself shapes the prospects for attaining an effective, autonomous and ‘civically’ relevant NGO community over the long term.

Sampson (1996), writing about NGOs in Albania, described the NGO sector there as ‘a world of projects’. This idea highlights the extent to which the NGO sector is a cultural world of its own, shaped by rules and practices determined by donors, which ‘local’ NGOs must adopt in order to participate. A ‘world of projects’ can similarly be discerned in Georgia. It is the world of ‘grants’, ‘proposals’, ‘projects’, ‘plans’ and ‘reports’, all apparently neutral terms that in fact emerge from and are embedded in the norms, values and ways of working of the donor community. Their newness in the Georgian context is recognised: hence the need for ‘capacity-building’, through which the appropriate ‘management

skills’ can be imparted. In effect, capacity-building goes beyond learning procedures. At a deeper level, it is a process of acculturation into the specific code of the world of projects and of ‘being aided’, a code which must be engaged with effectively in order to succeed as an NGO (where success is measured in receipt of grants).

Acculturation is an ongoing process, experienced throughout the day-to-day business of being an NGO. It is also loaded with values. Donors represent NGOs as bearers of civility, repositories of good and democratic practice, and beacons of progress towards development and democracy. Participants in NGOs absorb these values as they go about learning the rituals of the world of projects. Everything that they take on is symbolic of a ‘new way’ of acting, appropriate to the positive directions in which NGO-led development is taking them, and constructive of a peaceful, democratic and ‘developed’ future.

At a personal level NGO staff express this new ‘NGO’ way as standing in direct contrast to the ‘Soviet way’ they have known before. The NGO way involves initiative, originality and responsibility. For individuals capable of developing these skills, NGO life is experienced as profoundly liberating and enabling.

Not everyone, though, is equally capable of rapidly learning how to engage in this essentially alien world. It takes aptitude and a certain open-mindedness to adapt to new ways of working. Apart from anything else, it is a huge advantage to speak English, the *lingua franca* of the donor community. It is therefore little surprise that the NGO sector is made up of an élite group of intelligentsia and young graduates. The world of projects is less accessible to those without a developed learning capacity, without the language in which to engage in dialogue, and without the flexibility to work in unfamiliar settings.

The socio-cultural world of the Georgian NGO is clearly one shaped more by donor values than locally known ways of working. Indeed to organise in a style drawn from the Soviet era is seen as inherently anti-progressive and would require ‘correction’ through ‘capacity-building’ before grants would be awarded. However, this is not to say that

Georgians are socially and culturally passive in adopting the NGO as a form. NGO actors press existing social norms and relationships into service to support their work and use their NGOs as vehicles for their own social projects.

Social networks are a key organising feature of Georgian life, drawing on kinship, friendship and professional connections. Most NGOs emerged from a mobilisation of interest within such networks. Once established, NGO actors continue to engage these networks to get support such as volunteer time, access to vehicles and property, coverage in the media and a favourable reception within local authorities. Georgian NGOs draw on norms of hospitality to nourish relationships, for instance through the traditional *supra*, a formal meal that involves an elaborate ritual of drinking toasts to all present and to higher values, such as collaboration and enduring friendship. It is an occasion to generate feelings of mutual commitment and trust between host and guests. Donors are amongst the beneficiaries of such treatment.

At the same time, NGOs have become nodes around which new networks are developing as the non-profit sector becomes influential and significant within Georgian society. NGOs have become a means by which new social relationships and access to new groups of people are established. NGOs and their networks are increasingly powerful within society – firstly, because they represent one of the most active and effective set of actors in the social and political domain in the present context and, secondly, because they are engaged with state and donor actors who themselves wield great power.

Seen in this light, NGOs clearly have evolved some meaning and vitality separate from that immediately vested in them by their donors. In this sense they have perhaps more sustainability and autonomy than the discussion in the previous section suggested. However, the way in which NGOs are built to suit the image of donors makes them much more accessible to a relative élite than to other parts of society. This means that the theoretical virtues of the NGO sector as a component of civil society are compromised, because it is not a sector which all citizens can access and participate in. At the same time, the sociological distinctiveness of the NGO sector serves to reinforce a difficulty that is

experienced in generating a meaningful public relationship to NGOs and their programmes, a fundamental issue addressed in the following section.

## 4 Popular Encounters with the NGO

A central legitimising factor for any NGO sector, whether viewed primarily as a body of development agents or a token of civil society, is its rootedness in a public constituency. In particular, NGOs' abilities to respond to and speak out for needs that are otherwise considered marginal is at the heart of their assumed value as actors in the public sphere.

Public relationships to NGOs in Georgia are very limited. The reach of NGO programmes overall is small, and because of the pattern of grants, interactions where they occur are both sporadic and patchy. For the vast majority, NGOs are something experienced from afar, if at all. Popular interpretations of what NGOs are and why they exist draw on their apparent parallels with other known entities. They are often assumed to be current versions of the Soviet-era public unions, and to be similarly performing party political projects under a guise of non-stateness. Another common perception is that they are profit-making entities, organisations of legitimate or underground business interests. In spite of NGO efforts to generate an awareness of third sector ideals, there is still little public understanding for a category of action that is both non-governmental and non-profit. The prevailing attitude is therefore one of misunderstanding and suspicion, an attitude which many NGO staff confess to having shared before their own involvement in the sector.

Where NGO programmes have taken place and been successful public attitudes are naturally more sympathetic. This may still, though, fall short of rooting NGOs in the public consciousness as agents of their own priorities and interests. NGOs perform pre-determined programmes that address issues and target groups defined by and with their donors as particularly important. There is usually little space to elicit, let alone respond to, local perceptions of these issues. Even where NGOs adopt methods designed to provide this space, such as participatory rapid appraisal (PRA) techniques, their subsequent actions in developing resultant

projects are still bounded by the frameworks of their funders. Consequently, at best, public perceptions will be translated into a language acceptable and compelling within the world of projects. At worst, they may be excluded altogether because they are simply not coherent with that world's values.

A gap between popular values and that of the world of projects is inevitable in a setting where they arise from such different backgrounds. Whilst NGOs draw on ideals of voluntarism, self-help, empowerment and citizens' responsibility to solve social problems, Georgian people refer to their previous experience in deriving expectations and aspirations about their development. For instance, a history of very extensive social service provision by the state shapes public perceptions of an acceptable level of local social provision. The standard expected is often far more sophisticated and professionalised than the basic level, self-managed services envisioned by the NGO community. Experience also conditions people's expectations of how services will be provided. Being accustomed to provision from above, the need for client involvement in service provision is not obvious or automatically considered preferable.

A resulting irony is that as NGOs in practice work on predetermined projects without sufficient scope to incorporate popular ideas – in spite of their opposite intentions – they end up playing the role of 'service-provider from above' that the state once filled. Public misinterpretation of NGOs may therefore be compounded, rather than reversed, by their experience of NGO projects. While NGOs may come to be seen as good, it does not inevitably follow that they become viewed as vehicles for self-development and self-expression, or as entities with which to share a sense of mutual ownership over the process of change.

The NGO sector and donors are well aware that the absence of public understanding and generalised support for their programmes is a problem. To counter this problem they invest a great deal of effort in disseminating public information about NGO work and the ideals of the 'third sector'. Some of this dissemination is highly sophisticated, including regular magazine programmes on TV channels, and 'third sector news' inserts in national newspapers. These activities have contributed to a

perceived increase in public knowledge that entities called NGOs exist and that, broadly, they are engaged in socially beneficial work.

However, such basic knowledge is no substitute for genuine public support. Moreover, it goes only a short way towards generating such support where experience emerging from direct dealings with NGOs is that the world of projects has its own rules, and that where there is a difference it will be these alien rules that prevail over ordinary people's priorities.

## 5 Relationships with the State

For NGOs to have a sustainable and autonomous future role they must have, as well as a genuine public constituency, a reasonable relationship with the state. This is required so that they can rely on being given the space within which to function and, ideally, an accepted role as advocates for public interests within the state.

It is impossible to paint a generalised picture of relationships between NGOs and the state in Georgia. They vary in tone, nature and effectiveness, reflecting the non-monolithic nature of the state and the lack of a consistent, accepted position on NGOs within it. Different NGOs tell different stories about state relations, in part because access to appropriate social networks often determines access to state-located power, and NGOs' networks differ. Some NGO actors are part of social networks that include powerful actors at the heart of government: in particular the sophisticated clique at the heart of the Tbilisi NGO scene is well-connected with individuals including the Chair of Parliament, Zurab Zhvania. For example, the director of one of the most influential NGOs, Horizonti, was his university classmate. Zhvania is one of a few people now in positions of authority who have also been involved in NGOs,<sup>4</sup> and who are therefore trusted as allies of NGOs in general. This reflects how NGOs themselves have become the bases of networks of power, building on other relationships such as shared educational and social backgrounds.

Routes to influence based on personal networks have proved highly effective, for instance in getting fora for NGO–state liaison established. Inevitably, however, they are ultimately subject to the risks of individualised access. As individuals fall from

official favour, or are re-allocated to different tasks, the routes to power for NGOs are blocked or diverted. Being based in social rather than professional mutual interests, there is little reason to suppose that successors to any post will retain their predecessor's connections. (Indeed officials may be replaced in order to wipe out existing networks which have become viewed as corrupt.) Clearly, relationships based on such links are highly vulnerable and, consequently, the legitimacy accorded to NGOs through them is fragile and conditional.

Another source of NGO legitimacy is the relationship between the NGO sector and the donor community. The Georgian state is deeply indebted to the international aid system and dependent on it for maintaining the social and political stability which underpins the nation's current development progress and the legitimacy of the government. Because of this, the state is obliged to take seriously donors' projects, not least the quest for good governance and a role for civil society, in the shape of the NGOs they have developed, in achieving it. Hence, a degree of governmental openness to NGOs is protected by their relationships to the donor community. This is reflected for instance in the privileged place accorded to NGOs in the plans for decentralised government: the process of decentralisation has been supported by donors on condition that there is a meaningful inclusion of NGOs in the resultant institutions. Some NGOs have made the most of the state's aid-dependency by mobilising members of the international donor community to express support for the NGO's lobbying position, exerting a pressure on government that the NGO alone could not achieve.

The state's sensitivity to donor interests is not total, though, and NGO access premised on it is patchy. NGOs that have sought to develop relationships of 'partnership' and 'cooperation' with actors in the relevant state departments, both locally and nationally, have often met with resistance from a state sector that perceives NGOs as treading on their toes and seeking to usurp their authority over the issues concerned. While NGOs are functioning, backed by donor funding, and many parts of the bureaucracy are not, having fallen foul of economic collapse, NGOs are given a space in which to act. This does not, though, reflect a bureaucratic attitude that this is an appropriate or positive state of affairs.

There is little doubt that the existence of donor interests as a backdrop to NGO programmes lends an authority to their demands and activities that the state feels compelled to recognise, given its own dependency. However, when donors cease to support NGOs, the state, or both, the terms of this relationship will fundamentally change.

In sum, NGOs' current means of access to the state are all highly vulnerable to change, especially donor withdrawal. There is little institutionalised relationship, and no evidence of an embedded attitude within the state that NGOs should have any role in governance. Reasonably favourable legislation pertaining to NGO registration and functioning has been enacted, thanks to the involvement in the law-writing process of those NGOs whose contacts in government could invite them to participate. Potentially this provides a basis for institutionalised acceptance of the existence of NGOs. However, the legislation is far from complete and its further development is dependent upon continued political stability and openness to NGO input. In any case, it does not guarantee a role for NGOs in state processes. While NGOs increasingly see themselves as experts and potential partners for the state, able to help the state make the transition into the 'new way' of addressing popular needs, the state as a whole has yet to demonstrate that this vision is a shared one. A long-term relationship, without the mediating influence of donors, has yet to be negotiated.

## 6 Conclusions

NGOs in Georgia are highly dependent upon and shaped by their donors. Apart from near-total financial dependency, the nature of the partnership with donors is not conducive for NGOs to become effective, independent agents of locally determined and prioritised agendas. Nor are NGOs accountable to the public or even deeply accepted by them, and the state has yet to develop a consistent attitude towards NGOs, let alone an inclusive one. Clearly, the basis for autonomy and sustainability has not been established and, as all parties concerned will admit, if donors withdraw any time in the near future, there is every reason to suppose that the vast majority of NGOs will simply close down.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that a small number of NGOs have, in spite of the difficult

conditions, succeeded in establishing themselves as autonomous, strategic and effective organisations. It should also be recognised that the problems of financial dependency and lack of public embeddedness are up-front concerns of these and other NGOs. Donors, too, are aware that progress towards their goal of withdrawing from Georgia, leaving behind an effective NGO community and a vibrant civil society, will be minimal without going beyond the mere proliferation of NGOs to address sustainability and autonomy head-on. This awareness has spawned a number of recent initiatives in the NGO–donor partnership.

Some donors (mostly INGOs) are establishing longer-term relationships with some of the more successful or promising NGOs. Naturally, these relationships are called ‘partnerships’ although they are little closer to an ideal such as ‘authentic partnership’ (Fowler 1998 and Introduction to this bulletin). These partnerships involve NGOs’ in implementing part of the operational programmes that the donor is committed to. This represents an opportunity for the NGO to be involved in longer-term projects, to engage in critical reflection and learning from their work with support from the donor, and sometimes build programme-related skills (for example PRA methods) that are not present in the normal NGO–donor small grants domain. In many respects, such arrangements represent an intensification of the acculturation into the world of projects, through deeper donor–NGO exchange that is still very much on the donor’s terms. However at least they offer the potential to develop ‘better’ NGOs within that narrow framework.

Other donors (also largely INGOs) are developing programmes establishing micro-credit and revolving loan schemes that allow beneficiary groups to develop some financial independence. Over time, grassroots initiatives might then have space to emerge on a financially self-sufficient basis. The spread of participatory methods similarly has some positive potential for mobilising more grassroots-based initiatives and improving the responsiveness of NGOs to grassroots concerns. This is particularly the case if NGOs become able to get funding, which gives them the freedom to respond without having to translate those concerns into donors’ language. A shift in donor policy to award grants on the basis of their appropriateness to beneficiary concerns,

rather than their coherence with donor priorities, might accommodate this.

These and other methodological and procedural reforms in the current donor–NGO relationship may, over time, create more meaningful progress towards the ultimate goals of NGO sustainability, autonomy and embeddedness. One can argue that these are simply issues of ‘best practice’, which donors should have learned from their pursuit of ‘authentic partnerships’ and good development in other contexts. Certainly, issues around NGO autonomy and sustainability have not emerged for the first time in Georgia and the post-socialist world. However, there are also reasons why even applying ‘best practice’ from the development toolbox, in environments that are profoundly different to the various environments in which that toolbox was put together, would not produce the outcomes that are aspired to. Good outcomes rely on good understanding and, while I do not underestimate the extent to which the development machine has misunderstood and ridden roughshod over other settings, it seems that partial and mis-understandings of post-socialist settings are particularly profound. Why? In part because of the presence of persuasive myths that appear to explain current realities without the need for grounded research, and in part because of the reluctance of the donor community to give itself up to a long-term engagement in ‘the second world’.

For example, if apparent public passivity can be explained by outsiders’ beliefs about (ex-) Soviet people, why bother to question whether the problem lies more with the models for action they are being offered than with a learned incapacity for self-help action? If popular aspirations about social services can be interpreted easily as unrealistic expectations based on unsustainable Soviet economic management, why ask whether they in fact encapsulate genuine and meaningful priorities for the way in which society is sustained and valued? If Georgians seem helpfully quick to pick up and run with the idea of forming NGOs, why investigate whether this in fact represents more a lack of other opportunities than a genuine adoption of the values donors attach to them?

Essentially, the path to a sustainable and autonomous NGO sector is one that must go



through a stage of confronting and coming to terms with the Georgian context as it really is, rather than as it seems to fit donors' myths and short-term agendas. If this exchange occurs it is possible that more rooted, effective and accepted organisations can be encouraged to develop. These entities will not necessarily take the form that currently defines NGO. But if they better express people's aspirations and priorities they will surely be more significant beacons of positive change than many of the current NGOs which adhere to the form but lack real content. Based on genuine exchanges of this sort, the NGO-donor partnership could become a vehicle through which an effective development community is established, and the seeds of an 'authentic' civil society are sown.

## Notes

- \* This article draws on research originally conducted for my M.Phil. dissertation. This included interviews and field visits with members of Georgian NGOs, INGOs and donor organisations in Tbilisi and western Georgia during June-July 1999. I reiterate my thanks to all of those who participated in the research, and to those who commented on the earlier work as supervisors and examiners. In addition, I am grateful to Mick Moore for comments on an earlier draft of this article.
- 1 By NGOs I refer throughout to local non-governmental organisations, i.e. organisations founded and registered in Georgia, and run by local staff. International NGOs are present, but are included for this discussion in the category 'donor'.
- 2 Donors include multi- and bi-lateral agencies, international private foundations, and international NGOs in their capacity as funders of local NGOs.
- 3 Both of these points are open to debate, though that is beyond the scope of the current discussion.
- 4 These people include some of the NGO 'pioneers'. In particular many were involved with the Green Movement, one of the earliest NGOs which later developed a political wing that is currently part of the ruling coalition.

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