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# How NGOs react: Globalization and education reform in the Caucasus, Central Asia and Mongolia

Sarfarozi Niyozov

Aga Khan University, [sarfarozi.niyozov@aku.edu](mailto:sarfarozi.niyozov@aku.edu)

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## Recommended Citation

Niyozov, S. (2008). Book review [Review of the book *How NGOs react: Globalization and education reform in the Caucasus, Central Asia and Mongolia*, edited by I. Silova & G. Steiner-Khamsi]. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 38(4), 477-482.



## How NGOs React: Globalization and Education Reform in the Caucasus, Central Asia and Mongolia (Iveta Silova & Gita Steiner-Khamsi, eds., 2008)

Sarfarozi Niyozov

To cite this article: Sarfarozi Niyozov (2008) How NGOs React: Globalization and Education Reform in the Caucasus, Central Asia and Mongolia (Iveta Silova & Gita Steiner-Khamsi, eds., 2008), Curriculum Inquiry, 38:4, 477-482, DOI: [10.1111/j.1467-873X.2008.00426.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-873X.2008.00426.x)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-873X.2008.00426.x>



Published online: 07 Jan 2015.



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# Book Review

*How NGOs React: Globalization and Education Reform in the Caucasus, Central Asia and Mongolia* (Iveta Silova & Gita Steiner-Khamsi, Eds. 2008. Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press. 272 pages.)

reviewed by

**SARFAROZ NIYOZOV**

*Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto  
Toronto, ON, Canada*

The Caucasus, Central Asia, and Mongolia are undergoing painful transformation. Once a crossroads of ancient civilizations along the Silk Road, a region now rich in oil, mineral resources, and a land of more than 60 million people, it has been “forced into independence” (p. 4) in the aftermath of the Soviet Union’s dissolution. The press for democracy has ended in authoritarianism. The emphasis on the development of a market economy, privatization, and decentralization has contributed to a deep polarization of society along ethnic, clan, race, religion, language, and class lines. Clans, dynasties, and elites have reestablished themselves. Civil society has been co-opted. Freedoms and human rights are no better than during the Soviet times. Rule of law is in shambles. Poverty, unemployment, corruption, diseases, guns, and drugs are widespread. Almost all the region’s countries have moved from second- to third- and even fourth-world status. The region’s future prospects are troubling.

All this has occurred subsequent to the 15-year involvement of international organizations in development work in the region. What have these organizations been doing? Are there no signs of hope in the future? The former Soviet landscape had very limited space and role for civil society and international agencies. Education was strictly controlled by the Soviet/socialist states. The early post-Soviet period saw the mushrooming of local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international agencies. Given the states’ initial weakness, a number of the international agencies such as UNICEF,<sup>1</sup> UNDP,<sup>2</sup> USAID,<sup>3</sup> Academy of Education Development, Asian Development Bank, and Aga Khan Development Network effectively impacted the discourse of socio-political and educational development in the region. During this period, local and Western scholarship on the area

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Curriculum Inquiry 38:4 (2008)

Published by Wiley Periodicals, Inc., 350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148, USA, and 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK

doi: 10.1111/j.1467-873X.2008.00426.x

has focused on political, economic, cultural, and religious themes, paying marginal attention to education.

Against the above realities and gaps in scholarship, *How NGOs React: Globalization and Education Reform in the Caucasus, Central Asia and Mongolia* (2008) comes as a welcome contribution. This book focuses on the post-Soviet, socio-political and educational reform initiatives of the Soros Foundation Network (SFN), its national foundations, and the Open Society Institute (OSI), its prime socio-education institution. Editors Silova and Steiner-Khamsi position education in the political economy of the interdependent national, regional, and global contexts. They employ a multidisciplinary, post-colonialist, culturalist analytical framework. This approach challenges modernist and simplistic notions of international, development education such as borrowing and lending, traveling policies, West/East relations, socialism and capitalism. It complicates the existing critiques of neo-liberalism, exposes local elites' victimization politics and democratic rhetoric, and problematizes the monolithic and dichotomized stereotyping of cultures and international agencies. The editors and contributors have an emic understanding of the local cultures, histories, politics, and education. Their contributions reveal critical comparative insights into Soviet and post-Soviet periods.

The chapter entitled "Introduction: Unwrapping the Post-Socialist Education Reform Package" by Iveta Silova and Gita Steiner-Khamsi describes the reform package that was transferred to or borrowed by the region's newly established nation states. Although the package includes strategies that are international (global restructuring, privatization), region-specific (post-socialist adaptation to free market and international standards), and national (conflict resolution), its priorities are determined by external donors. For example, the World Bank has a strong interest in cost-sharing and privatization; UNICEF emphasizes global education; and SFN frames much of its efforts in terms of fostering a civil society. Conversely, the package leaves out some education issues relevant to the local needs such as rural, nomadic, and mountain education, gender, special needs, and minority/bilingual, and religious education. The chapter provides important insights into reforms and the politics of aid: who deserves aid, who gets aid, what constitutes the proper use of aid; how the language of crisis is used in obtaining aid; the role of local elites in diverting aid to sometimes opposite purposes; how global reforms are interpreted differently in different contexts; how NGOs complement, compete, and undermine each other; and finally, why international donors seem oblivious to the misuse of funds.

Iveta Silova's chapter, "Championing Open Society: The Education Logic of the Soros Foundation Network (SFN)," positions this network's operation within the above dynamics of local and global agendas and strategies, implying the complicity of the bilateral and transnational networks in post-Soviet developments. The chapter illustrates the centrality of

education to SFN. Comprising 30% of its budget, education is the key strategy for building equitable civil societies across the region. True to their espoused values, SFN and OSI emerge as self-critical, transparent organizations. OSI starts tactically and practically, establishing its credibility through demonstration projects, such as learner-centred pedagogies. It also operates strategically, institutionalizing its values and ideas, and focusing on policy so as to have an impact at national levels. OSI gains local and international trust, and then re-balances their policy and practice. It links local initiatives to professional expertise, suggesting alternative modes of governance, relationship, problem solving, and decision making. It engages in correcting global capitalism and market economy by ameliorating its negative effects, creating global advocacy networks and campaigns, and remolding aspects of the reform package. These adaptive and responsive approaches serve the network's strategic commitment to education, justice, social inclusion and action, and pluralism, amidst technical, pragmatic, bureaucratic, and political pressures, and governments' and international agencies' competing agendas.

Subsequently, the volume presents nine fascinating case studies from the region. In doing so, it captures a vast Eurasian landscape and addresses multiple education themes (decentralization, privatization, community schools, curriculum and textbook reforms, policy, teacher training, choice, resource issues, and vouchers). In what follows, I present only four cases, which in my view, represent the dynamic and complex issues and developments in the region. Conspicuously, the post-Communist states have taken different sometimes oppositional development trajectories.

Armenuhi Tadevosyan's "The Parallel Worlds of NGOs, Multilateral Aid, and Development Banks" presents the case of community schools in Armenia. Education in Armenia is tainted by post-Soviet unfavorable realities, the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, and the geo-politics of Caucuses after Georgia's Rose Revolution. Tadevosyan describes how different organizations such as OSI, the World Bank, and the government, despite having different agendas, still shared in the sustainable development of 300 community schools. The chapter problematizes the assumption about the irrelevance of external ideas to the region's education reform: "NGO's ideas from outside just helped unleash our natural trends" (p. 82) and were "incubators of innovative practices" (p. 83). The author, however, acknowledges decentralization's paradox: Schools are cared for by the community but owned and controlled by the government (p. 88). Accordingly, these schools manage to navigate their desired outcomes through inconsistent decentralization policies, confusion of the responsibilities among different stakeholders, and prevalence of "state as the solution" mentality.

Saule Kalikova and Iveta Silova's "From Education Brokers to Local Capacity Builders" demonstrates that when a country becomes aid-free, NGOs are forced to redefine their roles. Rich in oil and gas, large in land,

Kazakhstan, not only separates itself from Central Asia, but also dictates terms to the international agencies and consequently, lessens “dependency on Western resources and experts” (p. 141). To make an impact, OSI moves from education broker to local capacity builder. In cooperation with the Kazakhstan’s plan to extend schooling to 12 years from 11, OSI proposes a reform package in the shape of outcomes-based education. This innovation was well suited to local needs. It engenders debates on education reform, infused with possibilities of equity, diversity, and excellence.

“Invisible and Surrogate Education” by Erika Dalieva and Iveta Silova contributes insights into Turkmenistan’s enigmatic post-Soviet education and society. Former President Niyazov’s regime has de-intellectualized the society, crippled freedom, stifled education, ideologized even Mathematics and Science, and imposed *Ruhnama* (Niyazov’s guidance for Turkmens) to replace both Marxist and Islamic scriptures. The regime has warped UNICEF’s global education program, which “instead of reaching the original goal of enriching and diversifying the range of learning/teaching methods employed in schools, . . . has . . . inadvertently resulted in providing the state with a wider variety of educational tools for ideological indoctrination of students and tighter policing of families and communities” (p. 223). Similarly, the Fetullah Gullen’s Turkish international education movement in the country ended up legitimizing the Turkmenbashi’s (Great Leader of Turkmens) system abroad. These schools translated the works of former President Niyazov to Turkish, giving him legitimacy as a prominent leader of Central Asian Turks. Turkey’s international private schools in Central Asia have not been neutral. They have openly supported the government’s drive toward Turkish nationalism even if it comes at the expense of justice, equity, and respect for human rights. This story is about how NGOs can work with a super-authoritarian president like the late Saparmurad Niyazov in ways that fill educational gaps without becoming implicated in the perpetuation of a dogmatic, totalitarian system.

“Circulating ‘Best Practices’ in Mongolia,” by Nadsagdorj Enkutuyais, describes a cross institutional borrowing of the best practices from within the Mongolian education system. Supported by OSI, successful schools in Mongolia adopted struggling schools and helped them develop through peer mentoring and teacher training. The initiative validated and disseminated good teachers’ best practices. This horizontal transfer approach challenges the universal cascade model of professional development. Their success led various NGOs to collaborate with each other. Similarly illuminating are stories of local policy capacity development in Tajikistan; de-monopolization and improvement of teacher training in Kyrgyzstan via a voucher system; struggle to change the textbook production culture in Azerbaijan; the government’s manipulation of the international agencies about decentralization in Georgia; and mainstreaming democratic citizenship values in OSI-sponsored textbooks in Uzbekistan.

In "Conclusion: Centralist and Donor Dependent Government," Gita Steiner-Khamsi restates how the NGOs' work interacts with the history of the region's education, cultures, and contexts, and global geo-politics at various levels. Linking this to the data and literature on NGOs, she challenges established assumptions about development. The OSI experience suggests that working in development requires humility and a flexible and inquiring mind-set. It also illustrates how education policies and practices are social constructs that can be contested and reshaped to serve just purposes. Structures and cultures germinate not only obstacles, but also opportunities. The OSI rethinks and reconstructs many of its approaches: re-orienting itself through complementary, cooperative, and surrogate stances; broadening the concepts of decentralization; re-interpreting vouchers; supporting research and policy capacity, reshaping standardized testing to curb corruption' scaling up and down to impact policy; rethinking outcomes-based education to incite curriculum revision; and holding firm to its commitment to democratic citizenship, human rights and critical thinking. These reconstructions are examples of this hopeful agency. At times, however, the application of such Western-based and progressive approaches as multiculturalism, critical thinking, cooperative learning, or global education can be translated and adapted in ways that serve indocination, parochialism, discrimination, and maintenance of the status quo.

Steiner-Khamsi also touches upon questions such as whether the post-Soviet approaches, couched in various interpretations of globalization, market, liberalism, democracy, and Islam, have proven any better than the Soviet ones. Why have education systems throughout the last decade become more centralized, hierarchical, corrupt, and unequal? Why have structural adjustment policies, such as rationalization, resulted in rural exodus and massive migration to Russia and the West? Why is there continuing decline of education enrollment, destruction of the system infrastructure, shortening of the instructional time, curriculum overload, poor working conditions, multiple shifts, tutoring, and low salaries (pp. 255–256)?

As a Central Asian who appreciates the challenges the Soros Network has faced in the region, I wonder why the network is leaving Central Eurasia when it has proved to be a learning and resilient organization and seems to have had an impact on education and society? Why cannot various international NGOs collaborate better and connect their innovations with the aspirations and goals in the local cultures? Why, instead of rejecting the past, ideologically and methodologically, do international NGOs and changing governments not build upon past experiences? To what extent have the bilateral, multinational development networks and local elites been able to ward off the region's plunge into external dependency and internal colonialism?

One volume, however comprehensive, cannot capture the whole gamut of education reform in the region. For example, a chapter on OSI's turbu-

lent experience in Russia, a major regional force, would have been very valuable. Furthermore, despite the authors' fascinating descriptions of various cases, their analyses begs for more empirical studies, possibly by external and third parties in order to explore the views of local groups (e.g., local governments, local NGO implementers, school districts). Importantly, teachers', students', parents', and principals' experiences with the process and impact of the innovations are also missing. To its credit, the book calls for more follow-up inquiries into the Soros Network's and other NGOs' activities in the region.

These remarks do not belittle the worth of this volume in any way. The book offers rare insights into education and culture in countries that have been at the periphery of global scholarship. Its brave challenge to the post-colonial scholars, development experts, and local elites to take global justice seriously is inspiring. Soros Foundation Network has produced a fair-minded and far-reaching volume that is equally useful to those interested in NGOs, political science, and international, comparative, and development education. Other NGOs will, hopefully, follow the example of the OSI in enlightening us about post-Soviet education and social developments.

## NOTES

1. UNICEF is the acronym for the United Nations Children's Fund (originally the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund).
2. The United Nations Development Programme.
3. The United States Agency for International Development.