

Voice of the Civil Sector: A Study of the Needs of NGOs operating in Rural Regions

Analytical Report



Analytical Report “Voice of the Civil Sector: A Study of the Needs of NGOs Operating in Rural Regions”

This report was prepared as part of a joint effort with the participation of the Public Fund “Center “for Assistance to Sustainable Development”, Public Association “Angel” and the international non-governmental organization “HEJSupport” within the framework of “the EcoDialog project – strengthening Kazakhstani civil society organizations for their active participation in dialogue with government agencies and ensuring human rights in the field of environmental protection.”

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents	3
Abbreviations	5
List of Tables	6
List of Figures	7
Introduction	8
Methodology	11
Data collection	11
Database	11
100 Questionnaires	11
Focus groups	11
Data analysis	12
Quantitative Analysis Method: Descriptive Statistics	13
Qualitative Analysis method: Thematic and Content Analysis	13
1. Landscape of the Civil Sector in Kazakhstan	14
Regional Distribution of NGOs in RK: 487 NGOs	14
Financial Reportings: 487 NGOs	14
Language Preference	15
Youth	16
Regional Distribution in Kazakhstan: 100 questionnaires	16
Funding Sources: 100 questionnaires	18
2. Real Challenges and Needs of NGOs	19
Difficulties Faced by NGOs	19
Limited Access to Digital Equipment, Connectivity, and the Internet	21
Needs for More Effective NGO Operations	21
Areas of Additional Training	23
Assessment of NGO Engagements with Local Executive Authorities (LEAs)	24
Barriers to NGO Cooperation with LEAs	25
NGO Contribution to Solving Local Problems	29
Analytical Observation: Limited Agency of NGOs	30
3. Stories from the Regions: The Reality on the Ground	31
Focus Groups	31
Critical Perception of Interaction with LEAs	31
Positive Examples of Partnership	33
Focus group questionnaires	34
Frequency of Engagement with LEAs	34
Level of NGOs' Influence on LEAs	35



Participation in program Monitoring and Implementation	36
Guideline (Method Sheet)	37
What NGOs Propose: Suggestions for Improving Interaction with LEAs	38
Participation in Discussions and Decision-Making	39
Proposals for Increasing the Engagement of Women and Youth	40
4. Strengthening the Sector	42
1. Financial Sustainability of the Civil Sector: Challenges and Solutions	42
4. Impact Assessment as a Tool for Sustainability	44
Conclusion	46

Abbreviations

GA	Government Agencies
SSO	State social order
EU	European Union
LEA	Local Executive Authorities
NPO	Non-profit Organization
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
IPD	Internal Policy Department
PA	Public Association
RK	Republic of Kazakhstan
MSW	Municipal Solid Waste
CCIS	Center for Civil Initiatives Support

List of Tables

Table 2 Distribution of NGOs by Number of Employees	17
Table 3 Distribution of NGOs by type of activity	34
Table 4 Suggestions for Improving Interaction with LEAs	39
Table 5 Barriers limiting the participation of women and youth	40
Table 6 Proposals for increasing the engagement of women and youth	40

List of Figures

Figure 1 Regional Distribution of 487 NGOs	15
Figure 2 Financial Statements of 487 NGOs	16
Figure 3 Regional Distribution of 100 NGOs across Kazakhstan	18
Figure 5 NGOs' funding sources	19
Figure 6 Difficulties Faced by NGOs	22
Figure 7 Needs for More Effective NGO Operations	23
Figure 8 Areas of Additional Training	24
Figure 9 NGO Engagement in Interaction with LEAs	25
Figure 10 Barriers to NGO Engagement with LEAs	29
Figure 11 Assessment of NGO Impact on Solving Local Problems	29
Figure 12 Frequency of Engagement with LEAs	35
Figure 13 Level of Influence of NGOs on LEAs	36
Figure 14 Participation in Program Monitoring and Implementation	37
Figure 15 Average Level of NGO interaction with LEAs	38

Introduction

Non-governmental organizations (hereinafter – NGOs) play a key role in any society, helping to solve social and environmental problems, protect human rights, develop local initiatives, and engage citizens in decision-making processes. In the global context, they act as intermediaries between the state and society, capable of strengthening the accountability, resilience, and inclusiveness of public policy.

In Kazakhstan, the civil sector has shown marked quantitative growth over the years of independence: the number of registered NGOs has exceeded 23,000¹. These organizations cover a wide range of issues – from social protection and healthcare to environmental matters, youth policy, and inclusive education. With state support, a social-contracting system is in place, and specialized councils and consultative platforms operate (sub-paragraphs 2 and 5, paragraph 2, article 4-2 of the Law²).

Nevertheless, quantitative expansion is not always followed by qualitative strengthening. Most studies³ agree that civil society in the country remains under-developed. The formal existence of thousands of registered organizations does not in itself mean that they perform a meaningful social or political function in society.

Researchers identify a number of factors hindering the development of a sustainable and active civil sector. According to scholars, one of the key reasons for the weak development of civil society in Kazakhstan lies in the nature of the relationship between the state and the civil society sector.

This refers to the phenomenon of so-called *virtual politics*⁴, where the state constructs a formally active but in reality, tightly controlled and one-sided model of engagement with NGOs. In the context of Eurasian autocracies, the state often creates the illusion of a vibrant civil society through mass registration of NGOs, primarily for the purpose of external legitimacy rather than genuine partnership⁵.

A second reason highlighted in the literature is the lack of public trust in NGOs. This mistrust has deep roots in the Soviet past, when participation in public associations was

¹ Forbes Kazakhstan, 2023. [How Many NGOs Are Registered in Kazakhstan](#) (accessed April 10, 2025).

² Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan dated 12 April 2005 No. 36-III “On the State Social Contract, Strategic Partnership Implementation, Grants and Awards for Non-governmental Organizations in the Republic of Kazakhstan.”

³ Gusarova, A. (2016). *Regulation of State Support for NGOs in Kazakhstan: The Devil Is in the Details*. Young Researchers Program in Public Policy, Soros-Kazakhstan Foundation, 72 pp.; Vakulchuk, R., & Overland, I. (2017). Kazakhstan: Civil society and natural resource policy in Kazakhstan. In *Public brainpower: Civil society and natural resource management* (pp. 143-162). Cham: Springer International Publishing; Wilson, E., & Van Alstine, J. (2014). *Localising transparency: Exploring EITI's contribution to sustainable development* (pp. 1-63). International Institute for Environment and Development; Wood, C. (2023). Between a Rock and a Hard Place: How Kazakhstan's Civil Society Navigates Precarity. *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 103, 44-61; Ziegler, C. E. (2010). Civil society, political stability, and state power in Central Asia: cooperation and contestation. *Democratization*, 17(5), 795-825.

⁴ Wilson, A. (2005). *Virtual politics: faking democracy in the post-Soviet world*. Yale University Press.

⁵ Wood (2023, 48).

often formal and imposed. In the post-Soviet context, many Kazakhstani NGOs are still perceived as disconnected from the real needs of local communities⁶.

These findings are also supported by Kazakhstani authors. In Kazakhstan, as in many other post-Soviet countries, persistent stereotypes and distrust toward the civil sector remain widespread⁷. These attitudes are largely influenced by external examples – in particular, by the policy of neighboring Russia, where restrictions have been imposed on foreign NGOs and a law on "foreign agents" was adopted. Such measures have intensified debates across the CIS countries, including Kazakhstan, where state and public perceptions of NGOs are increasingly shaped by alarming foreign policy signals rather than domestic experiences of cooperation. For example, in July 2024, the reputable outlet *EurasiaNet* published an article titled "*Kazakhstan: NGOs Branded as 'Foreign Agents,'*" highlighting attempts to portray active civil society organizations as externally controlled structures⁸.

A third factor cited by researchers is the internal institutional vulnerability of the NGOs themselves. Despite the large number of registered organizations, a significant portion of them lack stable structures, adequate resources, and public trust. They rarely act as genuine intermediaries between the government and the public⁹. Most citizens are unaware of what NGOs do and do not associate their work with addressing specific local problems.

Despite these structural limitations, the sector continues to demonstrate quantitative growth from a formal standpoint. Since independence, the number of registered NGOs has increased from 100 to over 23,000¹⁰. In parallel, the government has been actively financing NGO activities¹¹: in 2005, the amount of budgetary support was approximately USD 100,000, while by 2019, it had grown to USD 40 million. As of 2017, around 35% of the sector's total funding came from state sources.

Nevertheless, the presence of a large number of organizations and the expansion of funding volumes do not resolve the systemic challenges. The three interconnected factors described above – virtual politics, public mistrust, and the institutional weakness of NGOs – continue to hinder the development of a truly engaged and resilient civil society.

At the same time, it is important to note that data on the state of the sector are mixed. Alongside critical assessments, the literature also highlights some positive trends. While international sources often point to stagnation or weakening of the role of civil society in the country, Kazakhstani researchers and NGO representatives in some cases offer a more optimistic view of recent legislative and financial developments¹².

However, even within this context, practical challenges remain that directly affect the sector's effectiveness. Research participants pointed to the lack of transparency in the distribution of state social contracting (hereinafter – social contracting), widespread corruption, and the restrictive language of tender documentation, which requires NGOs to demonstrate loyalty and "promote a positive image of Kazakhstan."

A key issue also lies in the geographical concentration of NGOs. According to official statistics¹³, the highest number of active NGOs is registered in Almaty (5,017), Astana

⁶ Pierobon, C. (2016). The development of state-civil society relations in Kazakhstan. *Ferrari, Aldo*, 203-23.

⁷ Gusarova (2016, 10).

⁸ EurasiaNet, 2024. [Kazakhstan Labels NGOs as «Foreign Agents»](#)

⁹ Gusarova (2016, 11).

¹⁰ Ministry of Culture and Information of the RK, 2023. [23 335 NGOs are registered in Kazakhstan](#)

¹¹ Wood, 2023, p. 52.

¹² Knox, C., & Yessimova, S. (2015). State-society relations: NGOs in Kazakhstan. *Journal of Civil Society*, 11(3), 300-316.

¹³ Ministry of Culture and Information of the RK, 2023. [23 335 NGOs are registered in Kazakhstan](#)

(3,554), Shymkent (1,512), as well as in the Qaragandy (1,237) and Qyzylorda (1,217) regions. Academic sources likewise confirm that civil society has historically been concentrated in large cities, while regional, especially rural NGOs remain on the periphery of the sector, both in terms of access to funding and participation in decision-making processes.

To address this, a combined methodology was applied: a survey of 100 NGOs, focus group discussions in three pilot regions - Zhetysu, Almaty, and Aqmola oblasts - and a review of secondary sources, including academic articles, analytical papers, official statistics, and media materials.

This report represents an attempt to summarize the collected data, identify key trends, and offer substantive recommendations aimed at the conceptual and institutional strengthening of the civil society sector.

Methodology

Data collection

Database

In June 2024, a database of NGOs' financial reports was downloaded from the website of the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Kazakhstan. To identify relevant organizations, a filter by activity type - "environmental protection" - was applied. As a result, 1,327 organizations were selected.

This approach made it possible to determine the actual number of active NGOs working in the field of environmental protection. After data processing, 487 organizations remained.

100 Questionnaires

Between September and October 2024, outreach was conducted with 487 NGOs included in the database. The main objective was to engage NGO representatives in a survey aimed at gaining deeper insight into their activities and needs.

As a result of these efforts, 100 completed questionnaires were collected from representatives of 100 NGOs. The survey was conducted via the Google Forms platform.

The questionnaire consisted of 25 questions divided into 5 sections: information about the organization; purpose and type of activity; experience of interaction with government agencies; barriers to implementation; capacity-building needs

Focus groups

After the completion of the survey phase, the next stage of the study involved conducting focus group discussions aimed at obtaining more detailed insights and facilitating the exchange of views on key issues with NGO representatives. The focus groups were held in three regions: Zhetysu, Almaty, and Aqmola oblasts.

During the focus group discussions, participants were asked four questions grouped into two main topics - their experience interacting with government authorities, and local environmental issues and best practices to address them.

At the end of each discussion, participants were given printed questionnaires to fill out. The forms were provided in both Kazakh and Russian, allowing participants to choose their preferred language.

Zhetysu region

Focus groups in the Zhetysu Region were conducted from December 2 to 4, 2024, in three cities: Taldyqorgan, Ushtobe, and Tekeli. These locations were selected based on both their administrative importance and the activity level of local partners.

Almaty region

Organizing focus groups in the Almaty Region proved to be the most challenging. Unlike the Zhetysu and Aqmola regions, there was very little available information on the activities of active environmental NGOs in this area.



Focus groups were held from February 19 to 21, 2025, in the Enbekshikazakh and Talgar districts, as well as in the city of Qonayev.

Aqmola region

In the Aqmola Region, focus groups were held in two cities: Atbasar and Kokshetau. The locations were chosen based on partner accessibility and logistical feasibility.

Focus Group Questionnaires

The questionnaires were completed by participants directly during the focus group sessions, allowing for real-time data collection within the context of the discussions. Two forms were used for the survey: one focused on interaction with local executive authorities (LEAs), and the other gathered general information about the organization and gender-related aspects.

Both questionnaires included closed-ended questions with predefined answer options as well as open-ended fields where respondents could freely express their opinions and share suggestions. This format enabled the combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches, ensuring a more comprehensive analysis.

Data Analysis

The research applied both quantitative and qualitative data analysis methods. This approach enabled a comprehensive understanding of the state of NGOs, identification of major challenges, and clarification of their needs.

Quantitative Analysis Method: Descriptive Statistics

The analysis of data obtained from the 100 questionnaires was conducted using descriptive statistics. This method allows for the generalization and systematization of collected information, helping to identify key characteristics and distribution patterns of the studied indicators.

Qualitative Analysis method: Thematic and Content Analysis

The data collected during the focus group discussions were analyzed using qualitative methods, including thematic and content analysis. This approach allowed for a deeper exploration of key issues, the identification of patterns, and the determination of the most frequently discussed topics.

Two complementary approaches were used to process the focus group data - thematic analysis and content analysis.

Thematic analysis focused on identifying the main areas of discussion that were of particular interest to the participants.

Content analysis, in turn, was applied for a more detailed examination of statements related to a specific topic - in this case, the interaction between NGOs and government authorities.

The rating scale method was applied to analyze the focus group questionnaires, specifically for three questions in the first questionnaire titled "Experience of Interaction with Government Authorities."

The remaining questions from the first questionnaire, as well as those from the second, were analyzed using descriptive statistics.

Open-ended questions included in both questionnaires provided a more detailed picture, allowing respondents to share their opinions and experiences freely.

Confidentiality of Respondents

At the beginning of each focus group, participants were clearly informed about the objectives of the study and the format of the sessions. Special attention was given to the issue of confidentiality and anonymity. All participants were notified in advance that their personal data would not be disclosed, published, or shared with third parties without their consent.

For participants' convenience, the questionnaires were prepared in two languages - Kazakh and Russian. If translation was needed, the team provided real-time interpretation during the focus group sessions.

1. Landscape of the Civil Society Sector in Kazakhstan

Regional Distribution of NGOs in RK: 487 NGOs

The highest number of NGOs is registered in major cities and economically developed regions. Almaty accounts for 56 organizations, Atyrau Region – 55, and Astana – 49. The high level of activity in these regions is explained by the concentration of administrative and financial resources, as well as the presence of large environmental initiatives.

In particular, the activity of NGOs in the Atyrau Region may be driven by the specific context of the area: the presence of the oil and gas sector intensifies environmental challenges¹⁴, which in turn stimulates civic initiatives.

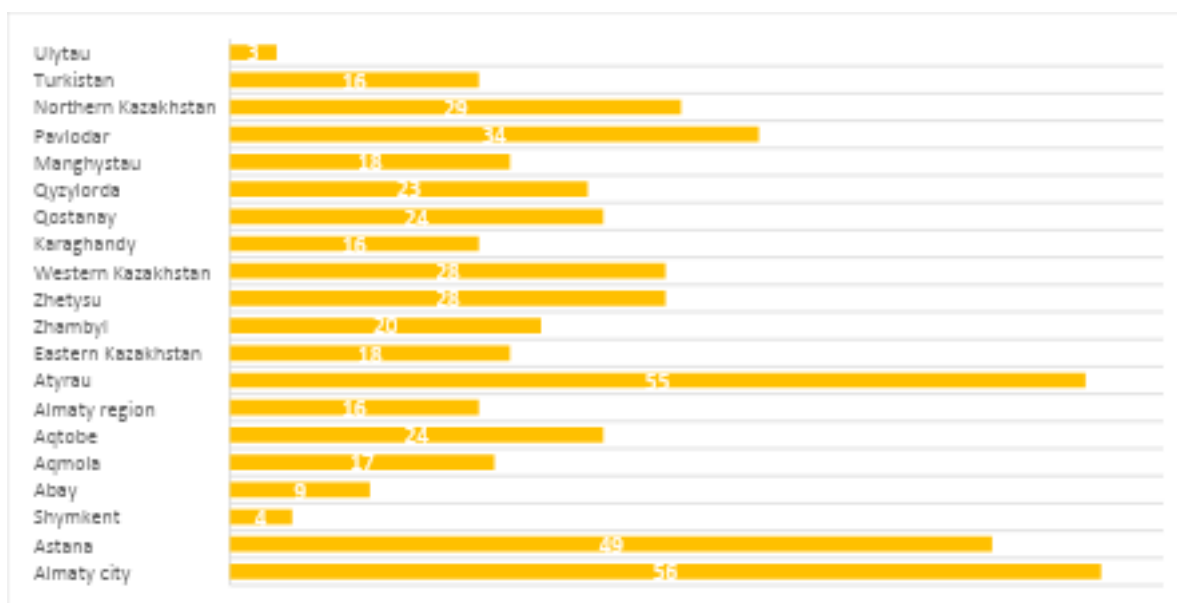


Figure 1 Regional Distribution of 487 NGOs

Financial Statements: 487 NGOs

As noted above, the academic concept of virtual politics describes a situation in which the state creates the appearance of a vibrant civil society by registering large numbers of NGOs that, in reality, carry out little or no activity. This enables the government to showcase a formal partnership while retaining control and excluding the sector from genuine participation in decision-making processes¹⁵.

An analysis of the financial statements of 487 environmental NGOs confirms the relevance of this theory: 72 percent of the organizations – 357 NGOs submitted “zero” reports. Such widespread formal inactivity highlights the gap between the number of registered NGOs and their actual engagement in addressing environmental and social challenges.

One respondent stated bluntly:

“I can’t even shut down my public association now, because the LEAs insists that a nominal number of associations must exist. So it’s all a fiction.”

– Man, West Kazakhstan Region

¹⁴ Vlast', 2023. [Atyrau May Become an Environmental Disaster Zone](#) (Accessed April 9, 2025)

¹⁵ Wilson, A. (2005). *Virtual politics: faking democracy in the post-Soviet world*. Yale University Press.

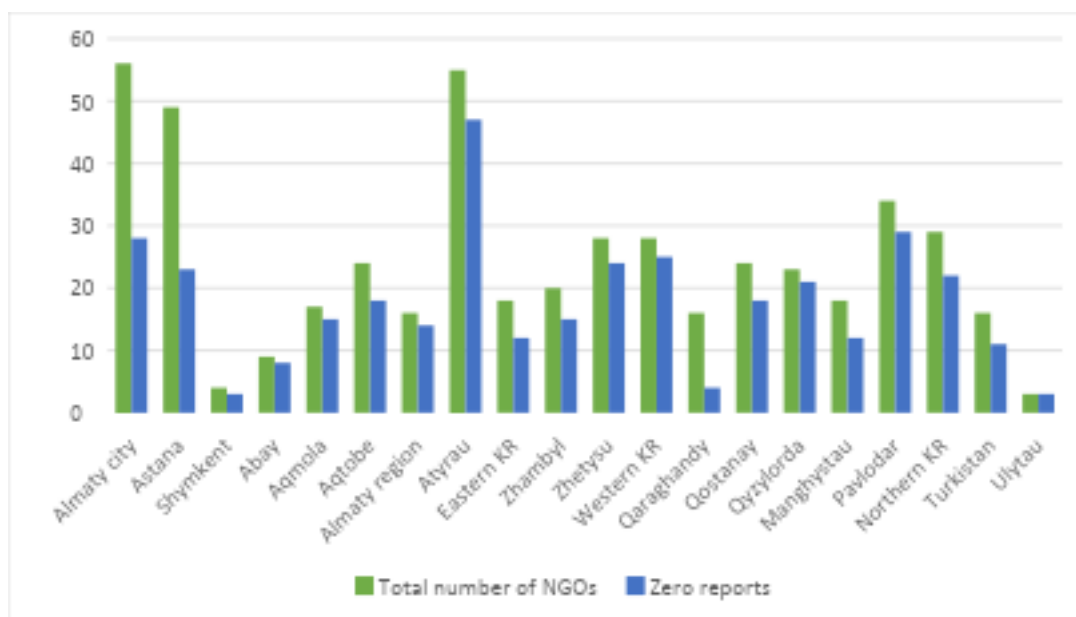


Figure 2 Financial Statements of 487 NGOs

Language Preference

The survey and focus groups conducted among NGOs revealed that the majority of respondents prefer to use the Russian language. Of the 100 completed questionnaires, 88 were filled out in Russian and 12 in Kazakh.

Focus group discussions in the regions confirmed that language use varies significantly. In Zhetysu Region, for example, participants in the cities of Taldyqorgan and Tekeli predominantly conducted discussions in Russian. In Ushtobe, however, the situation was different: conversations often began in Kazakh but gradually shifted to Russian.

Similar trends were observed in Almaty Region. In the city of Talgar, participants preferred Russian, whereas in Konayev and Yessik, discussions often began in Kazakh before transitioning to Russian. In Konayev, by contrast, Kazakh remained the dominant language throughout most of the discussion. Moreover, in both Konayev and Ushtobe, participants explicitly requested that focus groups be conducted in Kazakh.

In Aqmola Region, in the cities of Atbasar and Kokshetau, the entire communication process took place exclusively in Russian.

The analysis of questionnaires collected during the focus groups confirmed these observations. In some cities, Kazakh language predominates, while in others – Russian language, reflecting both the local linguistic environment and the preferences of participants themselves.

Gender

The survey based on 100 questionnaires included questions about the number of staff in NGOs and the proportion of women among them. This made it possible to assess the representation of women in the civil society sector and identify characteristics of gender composition among staff.

According to the data provided, the total number of employees across the organizations listed by respondents is 1,388. Of these, gender was not specified for 240 employees, leaving 1,148 individuals available for analysis. Among those with gender identified, 756 are women, which accounts for 65%.

Data on gender composition were also collected through focus group discussions. A total of 96 NGO representatives took part, 70 of whom were women (73%). This figure closely matches the share of women among NGO employees reported in the questionnaires.

In response to the question about household leadership, in Almaty Region, 6 out of 23 households were headed by women, and 2 reported shared leadership. In Zhetysu Region, 34 out of 61 households were headed by women, and 6 noted equal decision-making. In

Aqmola Region, 5 out of 23 households were headed by women, and 3 reported shared leadership.

Youth

The data collected from the 100 questionnaires showed that the total number of NGO staff amounted to 1,387 people. Of this number, 603 individuals fell within the 18–30 age group, accounting for 43%. The high proportion of young staff indicates their significant involvement in NGO activities and their interest in socially important initiatives.

The findings suggest that youth play an important role in the work of NGOs; however, their participation is uneven. Regional characteristics and the location of activities have a significant impact on the level of youth engagement.

Regional Distribution in Kazakhstan: 100 questionnaires

The results of the survey conducted among 100 NGOs across the country provide insights into the geographical spread of civil society sector participation in the study.

The highest number of respondents came from Aqmola Region – 21 NGOs. This outcome is likely due to the fact that the project partner is based in this region, has established connections with local NGOs, and actively contributed to disseminating information about the study. This led to a sampling bias in favor of Aqmola Region.

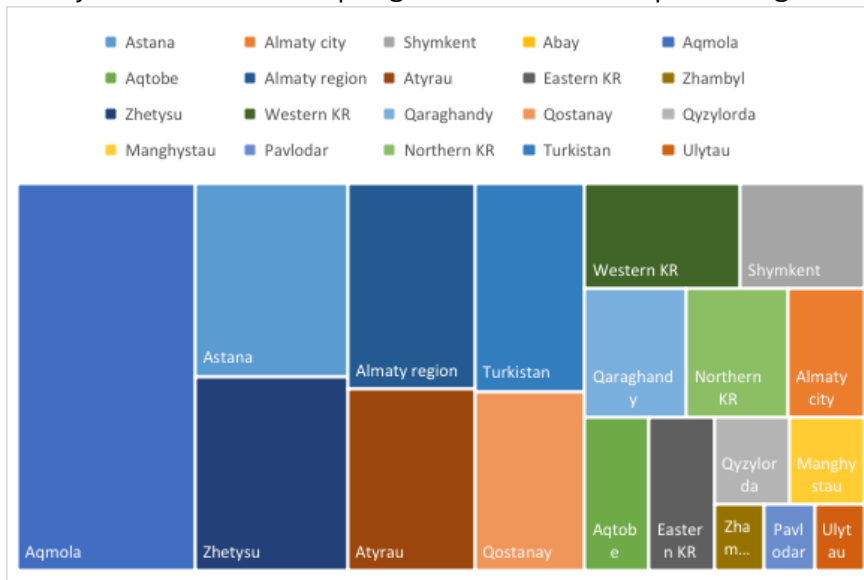


Figure 3 Regional Distribution of 100 NGOs across Kazakhstan

Number of Employees: 100 questionnaires

As part of the study, an assessment of NGO staff size was conducted based on 100 completed questionnaires. Respondents were asked to indicate the total number of employees in their organizations, including both full-time staff and external specialists.

Number of Employees	Number of NGOs (out of 100)
1	10
2-5	47
6-10	22
11-15	7

16-20	5
More than 30	7

Table 2 Distribution of NGOs by Number of Employees

As shown in the table, approximately 79% of NGOs are small teams consisting of between one and ten employees.

Funding Sources: 100 questionnaires

The survey showed that NGOs largely rely on various sources of funding, with the most frequently mentioned being state social contracting. According to the data collected, 40 organizations reported receiving support from government or social programs.

The second most common source was international donors, cited by 12 NGOs. Private donors were mentioned by 11 organizations as either a primary or supplementary source of funding. Around 10 NGOs reported receiving individual donations. Crowdfunding was used by only 2 organizations, while 11 NGOs operated primarily on self-financing. Membership fees were named as a funding source in 5 cases, and 4 organizations reported having no external funding at all.

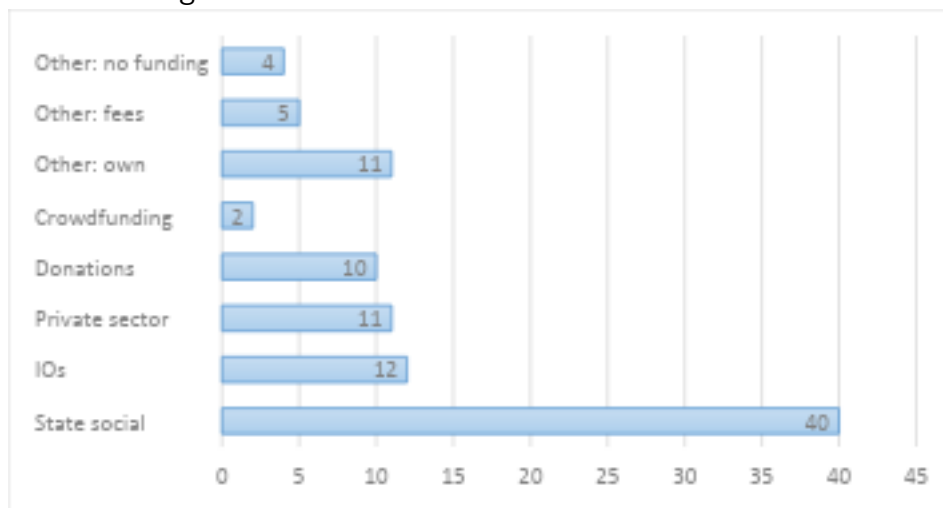


Figure 5 NGOs' funding sources

2. Real Challenges and Needs of NGOs

Difficulties Faced by NGOs

The study identified key barriers encountered by NGOs in their activities. Understanding these challenges is an important step toward developing effective support mechanisms and strengthening the sector's capacity. A total of 100 NGOs from various regions of Kazakhstan participated in the survey, enabling a comprehensive picture of the difficulties faced.

The most commonly reported problem remains financial hardship, cited by 76 out of 100 NGOs.

Notably, respondents rarely mentioned efforts to build financial sustainability through source diversification, partnerships, or alternative forms of support.

As one respondent explained:

"Every year the project ends in December. And from January to March [of the following year] we sit without work. We want our work not to stop but to continue uninterrupted for 2–3 years. Often we sit without work for 2–3 months."

– Man, Western Kazakhstan Region

The shortage of human resources was mentioned by 24 NGOs, making it one of the most pressing issues after financial difficulties.

In the questionnaires, participants pointed to a lack of staff capable of preparing project documentation or working with grant applications.

"There are no specialists on our team who could take part in grant or public service competitions."

– Woman, Zhetysu Region

The issue of language competencies within NGO teams was also raised. The absence of staff fluent in both Kazakh and Russian hinders organizations' ability to adapt to different contexts and requirements.

"We would like to have a specialist who is proficient in both Russian and the state language."

– Woman, Zhetysu Region

The "state regulation" category was identified by 21 NGOs as an area with serious challenges. One participant noted:

"Excessive bureaucratization of financial grants, and lack of involvement of local executive authorities (LEAs) in jointly seeking optimal solutions."

– Woman, Almaty

The issue of limited initiative is also emphasized by respondents:



“Inaction by government officials due to the vertical power structure – they wait for instructions ‘from above.’”

– Man, Turkistan Region

Other participants highlighted the low level of engagement and accountability from local authorities:

“Lack of support from the LEAs. Our requests are mostly met with formal replies or ignored altogether.”

– Woman, Shymkent

In addition, some respondents expressed concern about non-transparent allocation of resources:

“The same NGOs, those close to government agencies, keep receiving the grants and funding.”

– Man, Turkistan Region

Thus, under the term “state regulation,” respondents most often refer not only to rules and procedures but also to the style of interaction, which they perceive as formal, non-transparent, and discouraging of initiative.

A number of other barriers were also reported by respondents, including lack of infrastructure, technical knowledge, and language barriers – each of these issues was cited by 8 NGOs.

Several organizations pointed to the lack of proper infrastructure as a factor that hinders sustainable operations. According to respondents, this includes the absence of adequate workspaces and the need to cover rental costs out of pocket.

Likewise, the language barrier, particularly the lack of bilingual specialists, complicates documentation, participation in grant competitions, and engagement with diverse target groups. For example:

“At the moment, the biggest challenge is the language barrier. Our specialists are not equally proficient in Kazakh and Russian. There is a lack of qualified experts who could share their practical experience and knowledge.”

– Woman, Aqmola Region

This indicates that bilingualism is not a formality but a vital condition for the effective functioning of NGOs in various social and administrative contexts.

Issues with internet access and technology were mentioned by 5 NGOs. Although this category represents a smaller share compared to other barriers, its significance remains important – especially in the context of rapid digitalization.

The data analysis confirms that the main barriers for NGOs in Kazakhstan remain financial difficulties, shortages of human resources, and challenges related to state regulation.

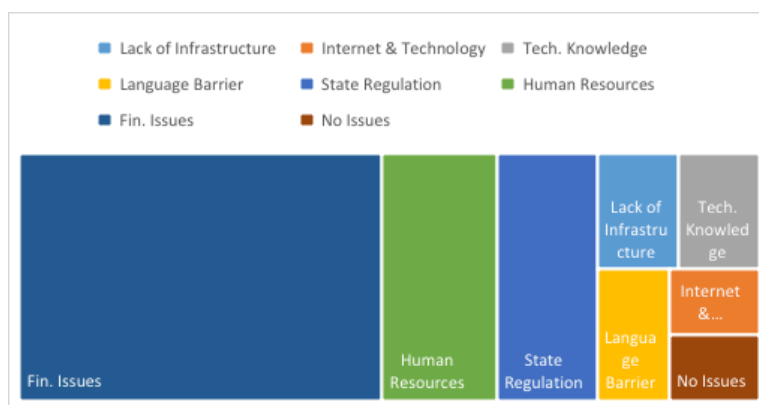


Figure 6 Difficulties Faced by NGOs

Limited Access to Digital Equipment, Connectivity, and the Internet

The survey revealed that 37 out of 100 NGOs face technological constraints with internet access, mobile connectivity, and computers. In other words, nearly one in every three organizations encounters such difficulties. Given that 84 of the 100 surveyed NGOs are located outside the three cities of national significance (Astana, Almaty, and Shymkent), it is clear that challenges in accessing basic digital resources persist in the regions even in 2025.

Needs for More Effective NGO Operations

The survey also identified the areas where NGOs most urgently seek support to enhance their effectiveness. These findings highlight the sector's most pressing demands and provide a foundation for designing relevant measures by governmental, donor, and partner institutions.

Additional funding was cited by 81 of the 100 organizations as their top priority. Respondents emphasized that their request concerns not merely attracting funds but establishing sustainable and reliable financing mechanisms that would enable NGOs to plan their activities over a longer horizon.

Such concerns were echoed in other regions as well. A participant from Aqtobe Region expressed the need for consistency: *"A permanent financial partner."*

A respondent from Zhetysu Region elaborated further:

"Stable funding: Reliable sources of financing allow NGOs to plan long-term projects and ensure sustainability. Diversified sources - grants, donations, and partnerships - reduce risks and promote financial stability."

The issue of training and capacity building also generated significant interest, cited by 50 respondents. Respondents emphasized the need for regular trainings, seminars, and coaching that also address organizational conditions.

The shortage of professional staff ranked third among the reported challenges, mentioned by 23 organizations.

Infrastructure limitations were noted by 8 organizations as a barrier to their operations.

Thus, the findings highlight the importance of a comprehensive and systemic approach to supporting the civil society sector.

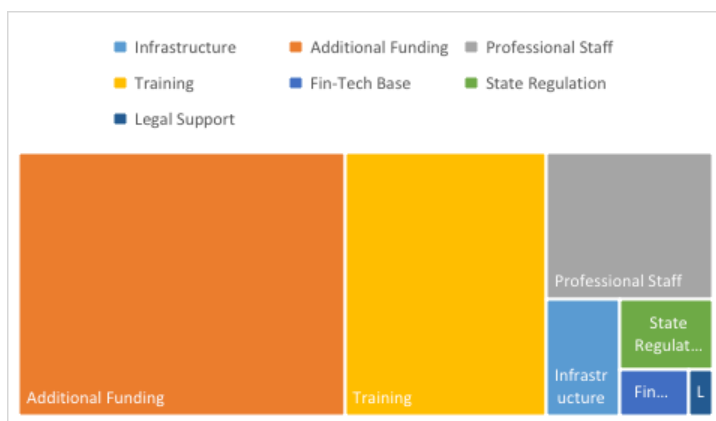


Figure 7 Needs for More Effective NGO Operations

Areas of Additional Training

According to the survey results, the main areas in which NGOs feel the need for additional training include funding, project management, and youth engagement. Funding emerged as the most in-demand topic, selected by 54 organizations. Project management was chosen by 46 NGOs, and youth engagement by 43 organizations. Legal support was of interest to 41 NGOs, while interaction with local executive authorities (LEAs) was selected by 39 organizations. Specialized knowledge in thematic areas was indicated by 33 organizations, and team management by 30 NGOs. Gender-related topics were mentioned by 19 organizations, while only three selected topics outside the provided list.

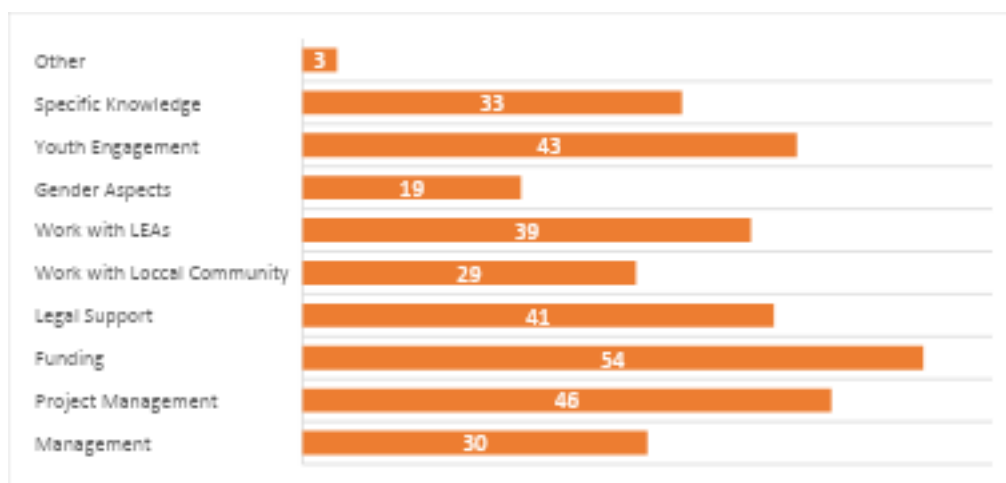


Figure 8 Areas of Additional Training

Assessment of NGO Engagements with Local Executive Authorities (LEAs)

One of the key areas of focus in the study was the assessment of NGO engagement with local executive authorities (LEAs) and their participation in addressing local community issues.

According to the data collected, 38% of surveyed organizations described their level of engagement as high, noting that they actively participate in discussions and regularly interact with LEAs.

Approximately 36% of respondents reported a moderate level of participation: they are involved in dialogue with LEAs, but not as frequently or actively as they would like. 15% of organizations indicated a low level of engagement, stating that they rarely interact with LEAs. 10% of respondents reported no engagement at all – they have no interaction with LEAs. This may reflect either a disconnect between the NGO and the local agenda or the presence of significant external barriers to establishing cooperation.

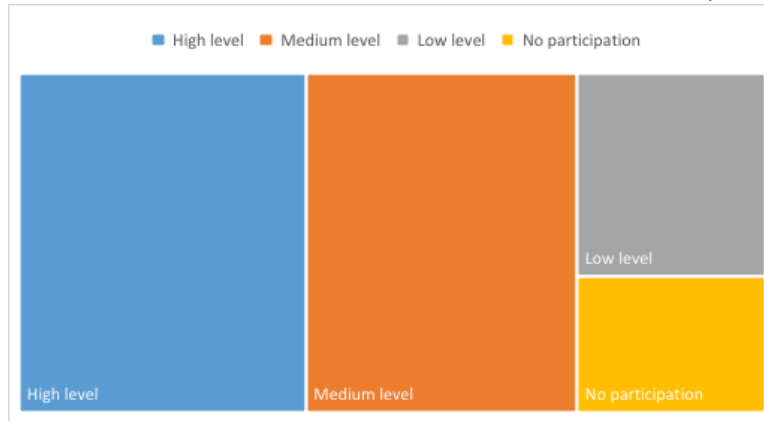


Figure 9 NGO Engagement in Interaction with LEAs

Barriers to NGO Cooperation with LEAs

In addition to assessing the level of engagement with LEAs, the survey helped identify specific reasons why NGOs face difficulties in this interaction. Respondents' answers shed light on the most common barriers that limit the full participation of civil society in local governance.

One of the most frequently mentioned obstacles was the lack of genuine interest from LEAs in the work of NGOs, reported by 24 respondents.

A participant from Almaty noted:

“LEAs do not take the actions and proposals of grassroots groups and urban communities seriously,”

adding that decisions are usually *“imposed from above,”* while ideas originating *“from below”* are rarely taken into account.

A similar opinion was expressed by a respondent from Shymkent:

“LEAs and government agencies are somewhat detached from the needs and realities of civil society. Our proposals for cooperation are not always understood.”

Some respondents directly linked the lack of cooperation to the personal motivation of individual LEA representatives. For example, a participant from West Kazakhstan Region emphasized:

“LEAs don't need this. If the akim has a personal interest [...], the situation is good. If not - the organization simply sits idle.”

There were also reports of events involving NGOs being held in a formalistic manner, without genuine engagement. A respondent from Aqmola Region noted the *“formality in how such events are organized,”* while a participant from North Kazakhstan Region stated:

"The LEAs doesn't respond. We have repeatedly asked for help, but with no positive results."

Some participants remarked that the priorities of LEAs are skewed toward business and administrative matters, while social and environmental initiatives receive little attention. A woman from Zhetysu Region observed:

"The social sphere is not supported. LEAs are mostly interested in business projects."

A male respondent from the same region added:

"Government agencies do not cooperate with eco-activists, as they themselves make decisions that will lead to problems in the future."

The second most cited issue was bureaucratic obstacles, reported by 11 organizations. One of the most frequently mentioned concerns was the lengthy administrative procedures, which hinder timely responses to public needs. For example, a respondent from Almaty Region noted: *"Sometimes issues aren't resolved for months - for example, illegal landfills."* A woman from Aqmola Region added: *"Slow execution of responsibilities."*

Similar difficulties were noted in East Kazakhstan Region, where one participant emphasized:

"Lengthy coordination and paperwork processes make it hard to respond quickly to urgent requests."

Another set of comments pointed to poor information dissemination and a lack of open communication channels. As a respondent from East Kazakhstan Region stated:

"Sometimes there is no clear information about cooperation opportunities or current initiatives from the LEAs."

Additionally, several respondents mentioned a lack of alignment in goals and approaches, as well as a low level of professionalism among government officials in civil society engagement. A woman from East Kazakhstan Region noted:

"Different approaches to work and perceptions of goals can become a barrier to effective cooperation."

A participant from Astana gave a broader assessment:

"Bureaucracy, lack of understanding about the importance of cooperating with civil society, outdated approaches, and unprofessionalism among public servants in building dialogue and organizing communication platforms."

Thus, from the respondents' perspective, bureaucratic barriers are not only about slow procedures but also about lack of transparency, insufficient communication, and the unwillingness of some public bodies to engage in open dialogue.

The issue of mutual distrust between NGOs and local executive authorities (LEAs) was identified by 9 respondents. Their statements suggest that trust is undermined by the lack of open dialogue, closed decision-making processes, and the perception of NGOs as external or inconvenient actors.

A man from Astana noted:

“Only a limited number of approved NGOs interact with the LEAs.”

Some respondents linked the lack of trust to political risks and a sense of surveillance. A woman from Almaty emphasized: *“International funding raises suspicions [from LEAs],”* indicating tension in the perception of organizations working with foreign partners.

Respondents from Turkistan Region mentioned deeper-rooted reasons for distrust. One participant stated:

“1. Corruption. 2. Local authorities are unwilling to work with active rural residents. 3. Lack of trust in the government. 4. Fear that NGOs will expose corruption in LEAs.”

Another participant from the same region added:

“LEAs staff and leadership do not accept recommendations from NGOs and often ignore criticism... they usually follow top-down orders, even when those contradict common sense or contain elements of corruption.”

Thus, for many NGOs, the lack of trust stems not only from isolated incidents but from accumulated experiences of distance, bias, and unequal access to communication. These perceptions underscore the need to create more open and transparent forms of engagement in which NGOs are treated as equal partners.

Some respondents pointed out that difficulties in cooperating with LEAs are also due to limitations within NGOs themselves. Nine organizations cited a lack of resources – both human and technical – as a factor hindering their ability to actively participate in dialogue or co-develop projects.

A representative from Kostanay Region described the situation as a *“lack of time and material resources,”* explaining that staff are forced to split their efforts between core activities and external engagement, thereby reducing the effectiveness of both.

Special attention was given to financial constraints, which were reported by eight organizations as a limiting factor. A woman from Atyrau Region mentioned not only the remote location of her village, but also the absence of state support:

“Our village is far from the city, we lack a budget, there’s no infrastructure. Even the security cameras were installed with our own funds.”

Another comment from the same region emphasized:

“The LEAs has no capacity to solve our community’s problems. Everything is funded out of our own pocket.”

Additionally, some respondents noted that frequent leadership changes within LEAs negatively affect collaboration with NGOs. This issue was raised by three NGOs, who pointed out that staff turnover disrupts established working relationships and undermines continuity in previously agreed plans.

As one participant from Karaganda Region stated:

“Every time the akim changes, we have to start from scratch trying to explain our work again.”

A similar concern was raised in Zhetysu Region:

“Changes in government leadership sometimes cause setbacks because we have to reintroduce the specifics of our work to new officials.”

In some cases, leadership changes are also seen as affecting the strategic direction of LEAs. A respondent from Almaty noted:

“There is no consistency or continuity in LEA decision-making. A change in leadership can mean a complete shift in plans and priorities – often reversing goals altogether.”

Thus, according to NGOs, the lack of leadership continuity and institutional stability in LEAs reduces predictability, increases the administrative burden on the civil society sector, and complicates the implementation of long-term initiatives.

At the same time, 25 organizations reported that they do not face any obstacles in their interaction with LEAs. This suggests that positive experiences of cooperation, a mature culture of engagement, and trust between parties do exist in certain regions.

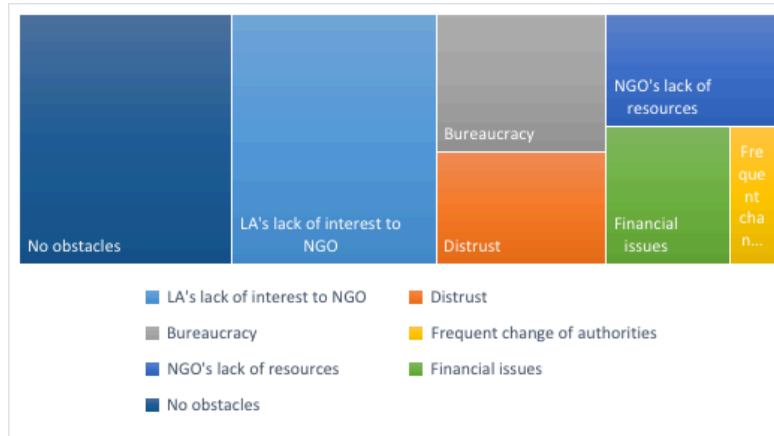


Figure 10 Barriers to NGO Engagement with LEAs

NGO Contribution to Solving Local Problems

To what extent do NGOs perceive their own contribution to the development of local communities? This question was a key part of the survey, allowing an assessment of how NGOs evaluate their effectiveness at the local level.

The majority of respondents – 83 organizations believe that their work truly helps solve local problems. Some NGOs (3 organizations) selected the answer “partially.” At the same time, 3 organizations stated that their activities do not influence the resolution of local issues. One organization found it difficult to answer, possibly indicating a lack of impact assessment systems or limited internal reflection. Additionally, 10 organizations did not provide an answer to this question.

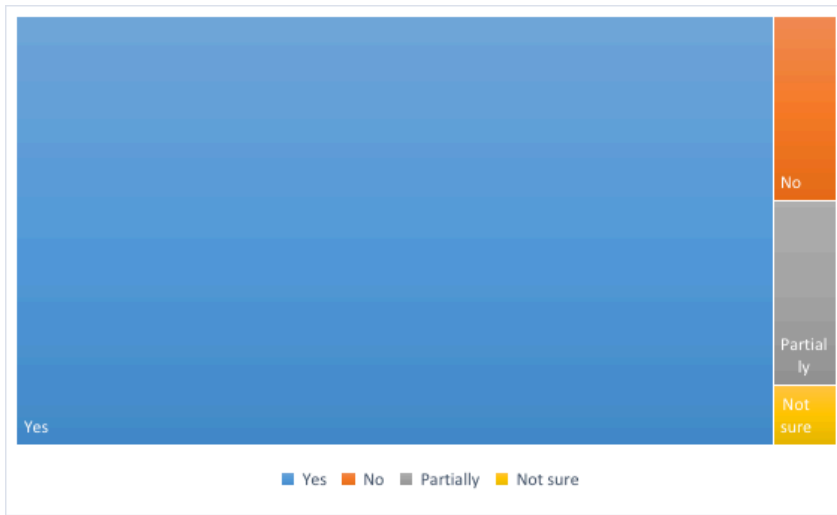


Figure 11 Assessment of NGO Impact on Solving Local Problems

Analytical Observation: Limited Agency of NGOs

Based on the analysis of 100 questionnaires, an important qualitative observation was identified - a low level of agency characteristic of some NGOs. Although respondents did not state this directly, the structure and tone of many responses suggest that engagement with LEAs is more often perceived as a reaction to external initiatives rather than a proactive effort to build partnerships.

3. Stories from the Regions: The Reality on the Ground

Focus Groups

The focus groups served as an important complement to the online survey, allowing not only for the recording of individual perspectives but also for real-time reactions, opinion exchanges, and collective discussions on key challenges. Unlike questionnaires, where each respondent filled out the form individually, the focus groups took place in an open-dialogue format among representatives of various NGOs. This created a different environment - more dynamic and engaging - in which participants could express their views, hear others' perspectives, clarify positions, and collectively build a shared understanding.

Both methods provided quantitative and qualitative data. However, it was the focus groups that offered a deeper understanding of how local-level challenges, barriers, and opportunities are perceived. The live discussion format enhanced participant reflexivity and brought forward issues that are rarely revealed in structured surveys. This approach enabled a more accurate capture of emotional nuances and actual mechanisms of engagement with LEAs - as seen through the eyes of civil society actors themselves.

As a result of the analysis, 37 negative and 14 positive statements regarding interactions with LEAs were identified. This ratio highlights that most participants tend to view the current state of NGO-LEA relations as problematic. Nevertheless, within both categories, a wide range of themes was observed.

Critical Perception of Interaction with LEAs

One of the most frequently raised issues during the focus groups was the lack of transparency in funding mechanisms. This concern was voiced by six participants.

"Grants are most often awarded to the same NGOs, which creates obstacles for new organizations to participate."

NGO representative, Zhetysu Region

"Sometimes, after submitting a project proposal, the idea described in it ends up being implemented by another organization. This leads to disappointment and reduces motivation to participate in grant competitions. The process must be made transparent and support should go to those organizations that bring forward genuine initiatives for regional development."

NGO representative, Zhetysu Region

"I submitted grant applications several times, including detailed project proposals and full budget documentation. Unfortunately, no cooperation with the LEAs followed."

NGO representative, Zhetysu Region

A closely related issue was limited access to information about available opportunities, noted by four participants.

“Information about grants often arrives too late.”

NGO representative, Zhetysu Region

Disregard for environmental issues was highlighted in nine comments. NGO representatives emphasized the insufficient involvement of LEAs in addressing key ecological concerns, even when civic initiatives were present. This creates a perception that LEAs are not genuinely engaged in solving pressing local problems.

“No one pays attention to our efforts... instead, only demands are made.”

NGO representative, Zhetysu Region

“There is a serious issue with electronic waste. [...] The initiative should come not only from the civic sector, but government agencies must also participate, develop programs, and provide support. At the very least, subsidies and infrastructure for proper disposal must be introduced.”

NGO representative, Zhetysu Region

Six participants described the interaction with LEAs as formal and indifferent. Their comments reflect a lack of trust in the motives of LEAs, a reluctance for meaningful engagement, and the perception that NGOs are included only to fulfill reporting requirements.

“At the roundtable they promised affordable electricity for the population, but in reality, the electricity is exported.”

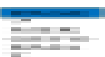
NGO representative, Zhetysu Region

Such expressions of distrust may lead to disrupted or absent communication between NGOs and LEAs. The following example illustrates how NGOs are sometimes forced to act as intermediaries between citizens and authorities:

“Residents often ask me to speak with the local akim on their behalf, essentially asking me to act as a mediator between the population and the LEA. [...] Everyone should have direct access, including the ability to send formal letters or visit the LEAs in person.”

NGO representative, Almaty Region

In this context, noteworthy cases emerged in the Akmola Region, particularly in the cities of Atbasar and Kokshetau, where the recent change in akims (local governors) raised concerns among local NGOs regarding the continuity of previously achieved results and the quality of partnership with the new LEA leadership. According to participants, years of



effort to build relationships with LEAs are now at risk – reflecting the fragility of institutional trust in the absence of leadership continuity and support from new officials.

Similar concerns were raised during one of the focus groups in the Almaty Region. Participants noted that a leadership change in the LEAs resulted in uncertainty about previously agreed projects and the need to rebuild engagement from scratch.

The insufficient competence of government officials and the lack of institutional continuity was another recurring theme, noted by three participants. Respondents emphasized the need for systematic training of civil servants and a better understanding of the specific nature of NGO work.

“We need to start with training activities for LEAs to raise their awareness and competencies.”

NGO representative, Zhetysu Region

Six respondents mentioned the weak responsiveness of LEAs to NGO initiatives. NGOs expressed frustration that their appeals often led to no follow-up action, even when LEA representatives acknowledged the existence of the problems.

“The city akim is aware of the issue with the sewer system; he personally visited and studied the situation. However... no changes followed.”

NGO representative, Almaty Region

Positive Examples of Partnership

Despite the prevalence of critical feedback, in twelve cases, participants described positive experiences of cooperation with local executive authorities (LEAs).

Seven responses highlighted direct support from LEAs for initiatives, including assistance with administrative matters and financial support. Such backing was perceived as recognition of the value of NGO activities.

“The LEAs provides strong support on all issues, including funding. LEAs try to stand by NGOs and actively support our work, offering not only financial aid but also official letters of recognition. NGOs also submit reports to the LEAs, which contributes to transparency and accountability.”

NGO representative, Zhetysu Region

In three cases, respondents mentioned joint projects implemented with the participation of local LEAs. These focused on social programs and targeted assistance, illustrating the potential for constructive partnerships.

“Charity initiatives for large families were funded by district and LEAs. One example is a free one-year sports school training program for 20 children with special needs.”

NGO representative, Almaty Region

Four respondents noted the openness of LEAs to dialogue and their willingness to involve NGOs in discussions on current issues.

“Environmental concerns, including the state of sewage systems and water recycling, are regularly raised by local NGOs during meetings with LEA representatives.”

NGO representative, Almaty Region

Focus group questionnaires

In the focus group questionnaire, the first question was: “What is the legal-organizational form of your organization?” A total of 75 questionnaires were processed.

Type of Organization	Number of NGOs
NGOs	40
Youth	18
Volunteer	10
Women’s	2
Other	5

Table 3 Distribution of NGOs by type of activity

Frequency of Engagement with LEAs

According to the data collected from seven localities, the most common form of engagement between NGOs and local authorities is regular participation, reported by 42 respondents, representing approximately 53% of all responses.

Periodic engagement (2–6 times per year) was reported by 24 participants, or around 30% of respondents.

Rare or no engagement (less than twice a year or none at all) was indicated by 13 participants, accounting for roughly 16%.

Thus, while regular engagement is predominant, in some areas difficulties remain due to the lack of stable communication channels between NGOs and local authorities.

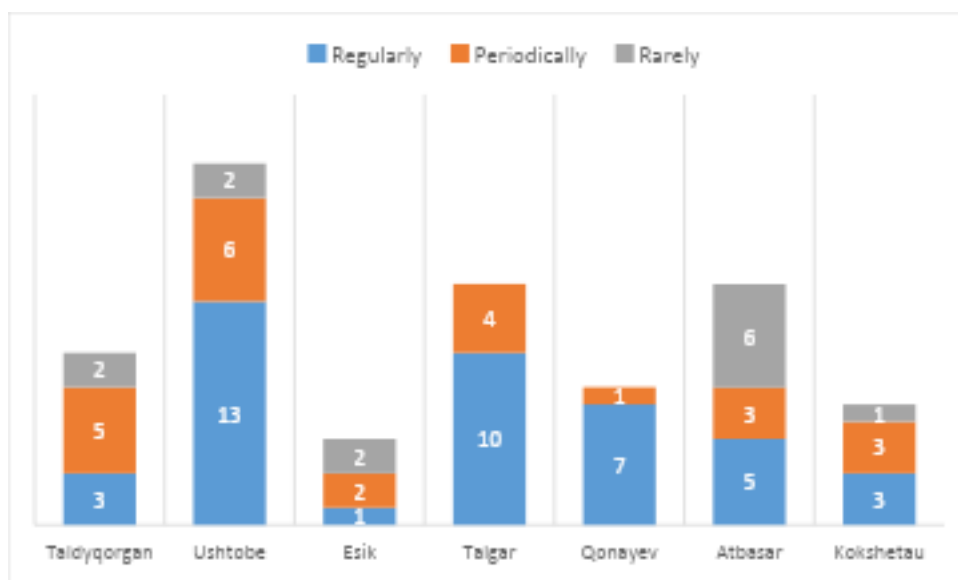


Figure 12 Frequency of Engagement with LEAs

Level of NGOs' Influence on LEAs

The responses to this question provide insight into the extent to which NGOs actively participate in shaping and implementing decisions at the local level. The survey included 74 representatives from organizations in seven cities (excluding Tekeli).

Out of the total number of respondents:

- 33 individuals (44%) indicated that their organization has an active influence on LEAs decisions,
- 28 individuals (38%) chose "limited influence,"
- 9 individuals (12%) noted minimal or no influence.

Thus, although nearly half of respondents perceive their influence as active, a significant portion still feel only formally involved or entirely excluded from decision-making processes.

Overall, the data show that the level of NGO engagement and perceived influence on LEAs decisions varies by region. Moreover, a high self-assessment of influence does not always correlate with other indicators of partnership quality, such as frequency of interaction or participation in program monitoring.

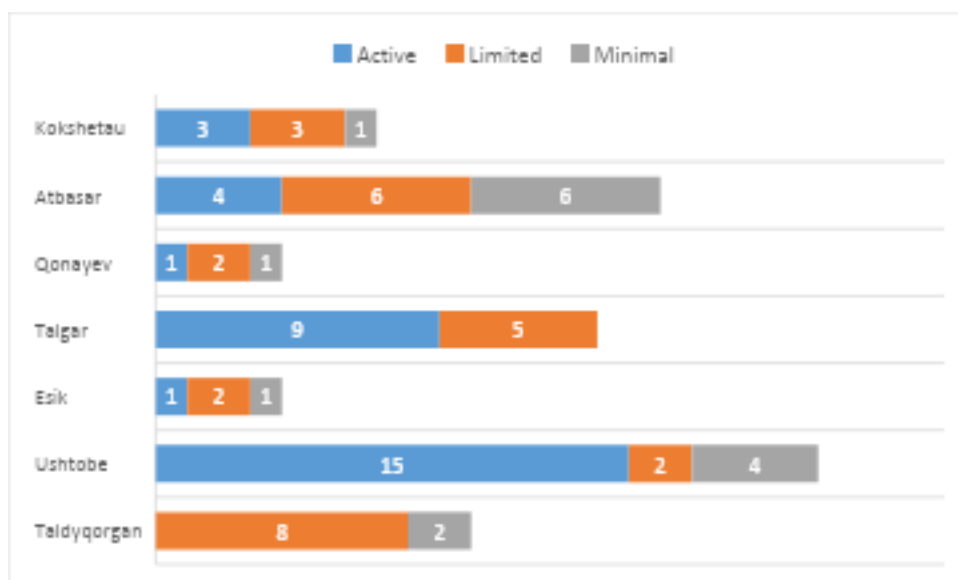


Figure 13 Level of Influence of NGOs on LEAs

Participation in program Monitoring and Implementation

The analysis of responses to this question provides insight into the extent of NGO involvement in the practical implementation of programs aimed at addressing socially and environmentally significant issues. A total of 65 questionnaires from six cities were analyzed.

Out of these:

- 43 respondents (57%) indicated they regularly participate in program monitoring and implementation;
- 22 individuals (29%) stated they participate infrequently;
- 8 organizations (10%) reported no participation at all.

Thus, more than half of the surveyed organizations are actively involved in the implementation of local environmental and social programs, reflecting a high level of engagement and interest in addressing local development issues. However, a third of respondents view their participation as occasional, and 9% report no involvement whatsoever—highlighting the need for more sustainable and accessible engagement mechanisms.

It is also important to note that not all respondents clearly interpreted the terms "monitoring" and "program implementation." Many responses referred to participation in one-off environmental campaigns such as *Taza Kazakhstan*, clean-up days, and territory cleaning efforts. This indicates that some organizations understand monitoring and implementation primarily as participation in events, rather than systemic engagement in supporting or carrying out targeted initiatives.

The high level of engagement observed in certain cities demonstrates that, when supported by political will and openness from local authorities (LEAs), the civil society sector can play an active and constructive role in addressing key local challenges.

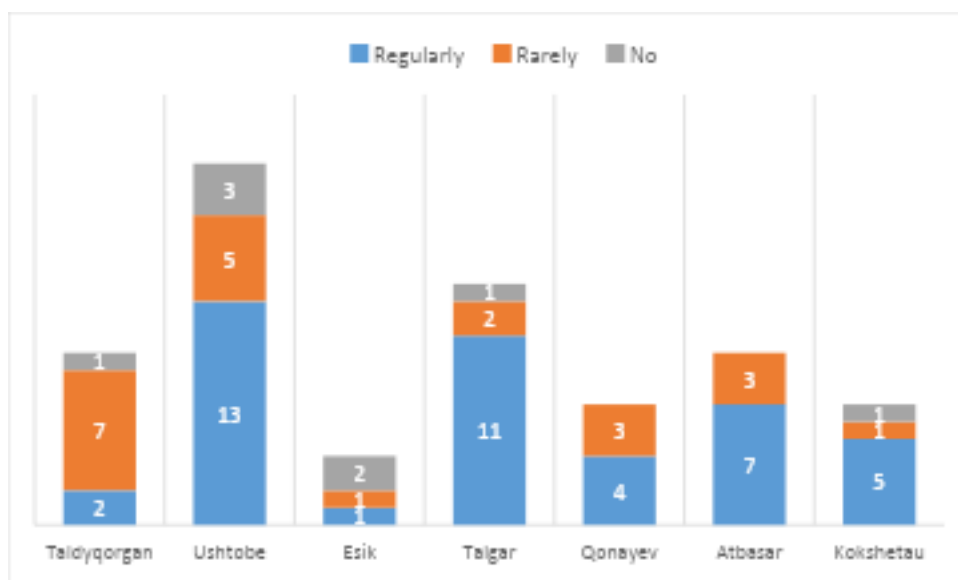


Figure 14 Participation in Program Monitoring and Implementation

Guideline (Method Sheet)

The results of the questionnaires completed by focus group participants revealed significant variations in the level of interaction between NGOs and local executive authorities (LEAs) across different regions.

The highest level of engagement was recorded in the city of Talgar, where the average score was 8 out of a possible 9 – the only city classified as having a high level of engagement. In other regions, the scores fall within the medium level. For example, Usttobe (7.5), Kokshetau (7.1), Konaev (6.5), Atbasar (6.4), and Taldykorgan (6.0) all showed scores that correspond to a moderate level of NGO – LEAs interaction.

The lowest score was observed in the city of Yesik – 4.8 points, which is interpreted as a low level.

These differences underscore that the experience of NGO – LEAs cooperation remains uneven. In some regions, there is support for initiatives and openness to collaboration; in others – interaction remains formal and limited. These findings complement the qualitative analysis of the focus groups, providing a deeper understanding of how NGO participation in local governance is perceived.

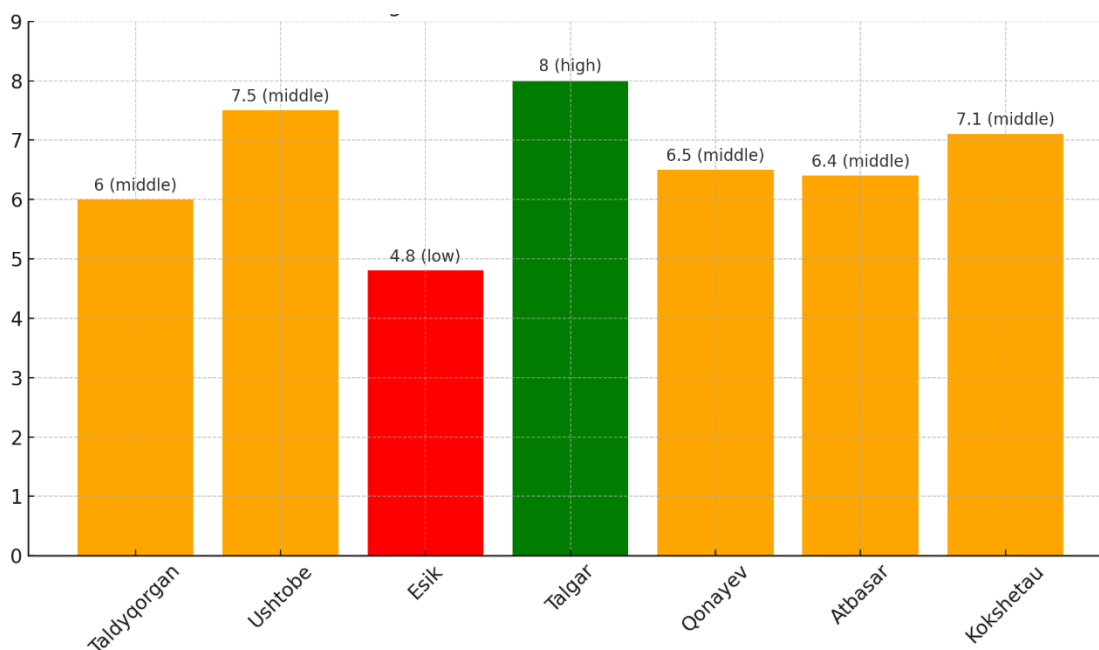


Figure 15 Average Level of NGO interaction with LEAs

What NGOs Propose: Suggestions for Improving Interaction with LEAs

Responses to the fifth questionnaire question reflect NGOs' strong interest in building constructive partnerships with local authorities. Many participants not only identified current challenges but also proposed specific solutions.

No	Area of Proposal	Summary of Content	Number of Mentions
1	Transparency and Accessibility of LEAs	Access to information, transparent procedures, recognition of NGOs as stakeholders	16
2	Regular Meetings and Joint Formats	Forums, working groups, ongoing participation in discussions and decision-making	16
3	Financial and Institutional Support	Increased grants, simplified tenders, methodological support, NGO training	17
4	Environmental Education	Lectures, trainings, awareness campaigns, youth and school engagement	12
5	Practical Environmental Measures	Surveillance cameras, fines, waste recycling, greening, "green corridor" approach	9
6	Sustainable NGO - LEAs Partnerships	Continuous NGO involvement at all stages - from planning to evaluation	7

Table 4 Suggestions for Improving Interaction with LEAs

Participation in Discussions and Decision-Making

The next questionnaire item dealt with the degree of civic engagement: respondents were asked whether they take part in discussions and decision-making on social, environmental, or other community issues.

Out of all replies, 61 respondents indicated that they do participate, while 15 said they do not. Hence, the engagement rate stands at 79 %, signaling high civic activity among NGO representatives. At the same time, the 19 % who answered “no” points to existing barriers that limit the involvement of certain groups.

Education Level of Responses

The survey shows that most participants have completed higher education.

Out of 75 respondents:

- 46 hold a university degree;
- 11 have technical or vocational secondary education;
- 18 have general secondary education.

Key Barriers Limiting the Participation of Women and Youth

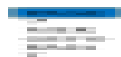
As part of one of the questionnaire's questions, respondents were asked to identify the main obstacles limiting the participation of women and youth in addressing significant social and environmental issues at the local level.

No	Barrier	Brief Description	Mentions
1	Lack of awareness and knowledge	Insufficient information about opportunities; low legal and environmental literacy	23
2	Lack of motivation and initiative	Indifference or sense that participation is pointless, especially among youth	17
3	Financial constraints	Scarcity of funds; no access to grants or material support	15
4	Social stereotypes and mind-set	Gender norms, distrust, perception of women and youth as “non-authoritative” actors	14
5	Absence of invitations and weak engagement by LEAs	Low level of formal inclusion in dialogue and decision-making processes	10
6	Lack of experience and practical skills	No organisational training, project skills, or participation know-how	6
7	No barriers observed	Respondents faced no obstacles or do not perceive them	8

Table 5 Barriers limiting the participation of women and youth

The responses show that both internal and systemic obstacles prevail—ranging from insufficient knowledge and motivation to social attitudes and restricted access to resources—hindering the full participation of women and young people in public processes.

Proposals for Increasing the Engagement of Women and Youth



Focus-group participants suggested a wide range of measures to boost the participation of women and young people in addressing local social and environmental issues. The proposals were grouped into six main areas:

No	Area	Brief description	Mentions
1	Education and environmental awareness	Trainings, lectures, school programmes, information campaigns, skills and literacy development	28
2	Dialogue platforms and events	Clubs, forums, round tables, volunteer camps, accessible public spaces	19
3	Financial and social support	Grants, reimbursements, legal assistance, payment for participation and labour	18
4	Motivation and incentives	Competitions, public recognition, certificates, advancement of active participants	11
5	Volunteering and mentorship	Hands-on engagement, mentoring schemes, support for newcomers	11
6	Targeted programmes and initiatives	Start-ups, involvement in projects and participatory budgeting, bottom-up initiatives	7

Table 6 Proposals for increasing the engagement of women and youth

The respondents' proposals demonstrate a strong interest in involving women and youth in the life of local communities, provided that suitable mechanisms and support are in place. The most frequently cited measures focus on raising awareness, creating regular channels for interaction, and removing financial barriers to participation.

4. Strengthening the Sector

1. Financial Sustainability of the Civil Society Sector: Challenges and Solutions

Civil society organizations play a key role in addressing social, environmental, and humanitarian issues. Unlike commercial entities, their activities are not profit-driven but oriented toward public good. However, to ensure sustainable operations, NGOs require financial resources, which most often come from grants, donations, and partnerships.

Despite the availability of funding opportunities, many organizations face a shortage of resources, which limits their development, project implementation, and ability to attract qualified specialists.

Reliance on a single funding source, such as international grants, makes NGOs vulnerable to shifts in donor policy and external conditions. To enhance financial sustainability, organizations should not only seek support from international donors but also actively explore opportunities offered by government programs, private foundations, and local philanthropists.

"I still don't know how to write project proposals, so I'm very happy about your visit. Now I'll be able to write projects and be useful to society."

Woman, 50, Almaty region

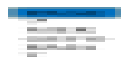
2. Attracting Talent and Engaging Youth

One of the major challenges faced by NGOs is the lack of professional staff and volunteers. The shortage of specialists limits organizations' capacity to implement projects, maintain reporting, secure funding, and work with partners. This issue is particularly acute in rural areas, where young people are often unaware of NGO activities and do not see civil society work as a viable career path.

There is a need to develop systems for attracting and retaining staff. This includes employee training, internship programs, and creating attractive working conditions despite limited budgets. A flexible schedule, non-monetary incentives, and opportunities for professional growth can serve as significant advantages. Additionally, NGOs can partner with universities and educational centers to offer internships and practical training for students.

"There's only one university in Almaty region - SDU, and most students leave for large cities or abroad after graduation. This leads to a serious brain drain, and the region loses young professionals who could have contributed to the development of local communities."

Man, 25-30, Almaty region



NGOs should intensify efforts to engage youth, especially in rural areas where access to information on public initiatives is limited. Information sessions, open lectures, and volunteer campaigns can help generate interest in NGO work. Social media, local media outlets, and educational platforms can be used to share information about job openings, internships, and volunteer opportunities.

“We need to explain the role and importance of NGO work - this can increase young people’s interest in civic activity and perhaps even inspire them to launch their own initiatives or register their own NGO.”

Man, 60, Zhetysu region

Another widespread trend identified during consultations is that many NGOs operate with extremely limited staff. In many cases, only one or two people run the organization, with the director forced to juggle multiple roles - liaising with government bodies, seeking partners, and handling administrative and financial issues. The lack of training and motivational resources, constant workload, and limited support often lead to professional burnout.

3. The Role of Management in NGOs: Resource and team Management

Effective leadership and resource management play a key role in the sustainability and development of NGOs. Leadership is responsible for strategic planning, delegation of responsibilities, fundraising, and maintaining team motivation. Resource management involves not only financial sustainability but also the efficient use of human, material, and informational resources.

To ensure sustainable development, NGOs must diversify their funding sources, seek partnerships with businesses and government institutions, and explore new fundraising methods.

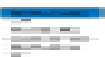
One significant challenge is the lack of communication between NGOs operating in the same region. During focus groups, it became clear that many organizations were unaware of other NGOs working on similar issues. This highlights the need for platforms that promote experience sharing and cooperation. Moreover, training should not only focus on developing managerial skills but also on building strong internal teamwork. For NGOs to develop sustainably, their effectiveness should depend not just on a single leader but on a systemic approach to management.

“The success of our organization depends entirely on my leadership and communication skills. I know many people in the region and can help solve problems.”

Woman, 50, Almaty region

4. Impact Assessment as a Tool for Sustainability

Impact assessment is becoming a crucial tool for the sustainability of civil society organizations. Many NGOs carry out important initiatives but struggle to demonstrate the results of their work. Without a clear system for measuring and presenting outcomes, even the most impactful efforts can go unnoticed by donors, partners, and the general public.



To increase transparency and build trust, it is essential to adopt evaluation approaches that capture both quantitative and qualitative changes. These may include developing key performance indicators (KPIs), conducting surveys and interviews, collecting change stories, analyzing case studies, and observing community-level transformations.

Regular evaluation not only helps showcase results but also identifies weaknesses, informs strategic adjustments, and improves program effectiveness.

“I installed 80 bins for separate waste collection. It was a good initiative. However, it did not receive further support. I didn’t know how to get help.”

Man, 40, Zhetysu region

5. Cooperation with LEAs

For sustainable and effective operations, it is crucial for NGOs to build constructive relationships with government authorities. NGOs should aim to participate in the development of regional and national plans, act as agents of change, submit formal requests to LEAs, and demonstrate that they are legitimate representatives of civil society. One example of successful engagement is a partner NGO that participated in implementing the “participatory budgeting” mechanism – a practice that surprised some rural communities and served as a stimulus for further changes.

The first step toward effective cooperation is systematic communication: regular meetings, participation in public discussions, and attendance at official events help raise visibility and demonstrate transparency. It is useful to identify common interests – such as in environmental education, youth policy, or waste management – and build dialogue based on these overlaps.

Despite bureaucratic complexities, this kind of engagement opens access to government subsidies, grants, social procurement, and other support programs. However, during consultations, NGO representatives noted that they often are unaware of government grant opportunities or learn about them too late, when there is no time left to prepare a competitive application.

“I find out about government grant competitions just two days before the application deadline, and I don’t have time to prepare.”

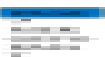
Man, 40, Zhetysu region

Finally, partnerships should not be underestimated: participating in LEAs councils, working groups, coalitions, and networks helps promote initiatives and strengthens an NGO’s position in dialogue with government bodies. Reliability, transparency, and a willingness to cooperate build a reputation that supports long-term sustainability.

“To get positive responses from the LEAs, you need to understand how they work, know how much money is in the budget, and know how to communicate with them properly.”

Woman, 60, East Kazakhstan region

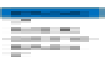
6. Cooperation with Business Structures



NGOs often focus solely on government grants and overlook the private sector as a potential partner, missing out on an important resource and significant opportunities for sustainable development. Meanwhile, many businesses offer their own competitions and grants for NGOs - some do this annually, others on an ad hoc basis. As with seeking international partners or public funding, working with business requires time, human resources, and active monitoring. Some companies support only local NGOs, while others are open to a wider geographic reach. The key is to recognize that the circle of potential partners is broad: it may include banks, large factories, or local LLPs that are thinking about sustainable development goals and are willing to contribute to community well-being.

“In the Atyrau region, Tengizchevroil LLP regularly provides grants to civil society. Thanks to such a competition, I built a children’s playground.”

Man, 60, Atyrau region



Conclusion

This study represents the first comprehensive attempt to assess the current needs, barriers, and interactions between NGOs and local executive authorities (LEAs) in Kazakhstan, particularly in regional and rural contexts. It is based on the analysis of 100 questionnaires submitted by NGOs of various profiles and focus group discussions held in three pilot regions – Almaty, Akmola, and Zhetysu oblasts.

The key challenges faced by non-governmental organizations relate both to internal resources and to the external institutional environment. Firstly, NGOs experience significant instability and limitations in funding. Secondly, the shortage of qualified personnel remains a major issue. There is a noted outflow of youth to major cities, a lack of interest in civil society work, and a deficit of specialists proficient in both Kazakh and Russian, which hinders project implementation and reporting. Moreover, within many organizations, a heavy workload is concentrated on a very limited staff: in many cases, a single person serves as the director, accountant, project coordinator, and communications officer simultaneously. This reduces efficiency and hampers development.

A third barrier is the complex system of state regulation, characterized by bureaucratic procedures, non-transparent grant competitions, and a lack of motivation among LEAs to engage in genuine partnerships with NGOs.

Additional difficulties are linked to infrastructural and technical constraints. Many rural NGOs lack stable internet access and do not possess the necessary technical equipment to perform their tasks effectively. They also face knowledge gaps related to digital tools and the legal framework governing their activities. In some cases, the language barrier also poses a significant challenge, especially when applying for grants or interacting with government bodies.

Together, these factors create a situation where the conditions for effective NGO operation are not systematically supported, but rather sustained by the enthusiasm of individual leaders and their personal networks. This model leaves the civil society sector vulnerable and fragmented, particularly in rural and remote areas.

The needs expressed by organizations through the survey and focus groups highlight systemic gaps in ensuring the sustainable and effective functioning of the sector. Above all, NGOs have a pressing need for additional and stable funding, which would enable them to plan long-term initiatives, retain staff, and strengthen institutional processes. A significant demand is also observed for capacity building: organizations expect training on legal regulation, grant competition procedures, and project management.

An additional issue raised was the lack of infrastructure and material-technical support: NGOs face shortages of office space, equipment, internet access, and basic resources for organizing events and supporting project activities. A necessary condition for further development is also the simplification of state regulation procedures, including the optimization of reporting, increased transparency of grant competitions, and the reduction of bureaucratic burdens. Finally, NGOs emphasize the importance of access to legal support – whether for registration, contract drafting, or engagement with government bodies and donors.

A key area highlighted in both the survey and discussions is the need to increase the participation of women and youth in decision-making processes and in the implementation of local initiatives. Special attention was paid to youth: focus group

participants noted that in rural areas, the number of young people is declining as they move to larger cities in search of education and employment.

According to the study, interaction between NGOs and local executive authorities (LEAs) remains weak, episodic, and lacks stable communication channels. Among the most frequently cited negative factors were: lack of transparency in funding mechanisms, limited information about available opportunities, neglect of environmental issues, formal or indifferent attitudes toward NGOs, and mutual distrust between the parties. Additional concerns include frequent leadership changes within LEAs, insufficient staff qualifications, and weak responses to initiatives from civil society.

At the same time, some positive examples were noted: support for initiatives from LEAs, openness to dialogue, and willingness to include NGOs in discussions on current issues and local agendas.

Focus group discussions revealed a wide range of environmental problems across regions. In Taldykorgan, participants raised concerns about uncollected solid waste near Lakes Balkhash and Alakol, as well as ecosystem degradation in the Karym Gorge, where a hydroelectric plant is under construction. In Ushtobe, the discussion focused on illegal dumping and shoreline pollution. The situation is worsened by low levels of environmental awareness, especially among youth. In Tekeli, participants pointed to chronic pollution from a lead-zinc plant, a lack of recycling facilities, closure of the local landfill, and the rise of illegal waste sites. In the city of Esik, the main issue was the operation of brick factories; although two were shut down, one continues to operate despite public complaints. In Talgar, the issue of tourist littering in natural areas was discussed. In Konaev, participants highlighted problems with wastewater management, the absence of recycling facilities, and the lack of a designated landfill. In Atbasar, the group discussed the disposal of biological waste, the absence of an animal shelter, and the need for a systematic approach to container placement and urban improvement. In Kokshetau, participants emphasized air pollution during peak hours due to traffic congestion, particularly in windless conditions.

Based on the problems and needs identified, the following key directions for supporting and developing the sector have been formulated:

Firstly, systemic efforts are needed to ensure the financial sustainability of NGOs.

Secondly, attracting and retaining qualified personnel, especially in the regions, remains a key challenge.

Thirdly, the development of organizational management capacity is required - including strategic planning, delegation of functions, coalition-building, and resource-sharing among NGOs.

Fourth, the introduction of impact assessment practices. NGOs need training in monitoring tools and presenting results to build trust among donors, partners, and communities, as well as to ensure the sustainability and recognition of their work.

Fifth, improving engagement with government agencies. This requires institutionalized dialogue, simplified procedures, greater access to information about funding calls, and transparent partnership mechanisms.

Finally, partnerships with the business sector need to be expanded - through corporate social responsibility, joint initiatives, and support for local projects.

The implementation of these recommendations will require consistent and targeted efforts. In this context, the *EcoDialogue* project serves as a practical mechanism to address the identified barriers and needs. It includes a comprehensive set of activities aimed at strengthening the sector, expanding organizational capacities, and creating a platform for sustainable partnerships between NGOs and the state.

An educational module will be developed covering key topics - from sustainable waste management and climate change to rights-based approaches, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), grant proposal writing, and participation in policy dialogue.

As part of institutional strengthening, a charter for the NGO network will be drafted, membership applications will be launched, and an online platform will be created in both Russian and Kazakh to strengthen horizontal connections between organizations.

Special attention in the next stages will be given to deepening cooperation between NGOs and local executive bodies (LEAs). Planned activities include a strategic meeting of network members to develop proposals and position papers, consultations between NGOs and LEAs, preparation of an analytical brief with recommendations, and a dialogue roundtable with government stakeholders.

In addition, the project will launch a small grant competition to support pilot initiatives, with a priority focus on women's and youth-led groups, and implement 20 projects within five NGO consortia. At the end of the phase, a final conference with the participation of NGOs and LEAs will be held to review results, share experiences, and agree on next steps.

This report lays the analytical and substantive foundation for planning these activities. Its findings and recommendations will be used to refine training programs, build partnerships, prepare policy proposals, and engage in dialogue with government and donor institutions. More broadly, this research represents a step toward systematically strengthening the NGO sector, leveling the playing field for organizations across regions, and fostering a sustainable model of civil society participation in environmental and social governance in Kazakhstan.