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Promoting collaboration between NGOs and Trade Unions: Lessons from Kyrgyzstan

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is based on four years of exploratory work to bring together activists and experts from the NGO and trade union sectors in Kyrgyzstan around topics of mutual interest. In Central Asia as in other countries, NGOs and trade unions are ‘cohorts’ of civil society that rarely co-operate or interact – and this potentially weakens the reach and impact of civil society activities. In post-communist countries, the role and influence of trade unions has been dramatically reduced, while the NGO sector has developed – sometimes fast, sometimes more slowly. Finding a common approach to tackle new problems when the institutional frame has changed so dramatically has never been easy.

Our experience shows how a determined group of civil society actors, albeit from very different organisations and perspectives, can develop a coherent agenda and useful, innovative activities.

This learning paper describes a project that took place between 2015 and 2018 to promote dialogue and joint activities between NGOs and trade unions around employment and labour rights in Kyrgyzstan. The project evolved through a number of initiatives, with each initiative feeding into the next stage of the process. This offers some valuable lessons that could be used in other contexts to encourage collaboration between civil society actors that rarely come together. We therefore present the key results from our project as a series of steps:

- Step 1: Needs analysis - in our project this involved studies on youth and employment
- Step 2: Opening up dialogue – this involved addressing an identified gap by bringing together NGOs and specialist organisations, in our case trade unions
- Step 3: Capacity development – in our project we undertook joint training with NGOs and trade unions on an identified area of need namely advocacy and communications
- Step 4: Pilot actions – the focus in our project was on organising job fairs
- Step 5: Action research and promotion of results – this step allowed us to build on relationships and skills to address new gaps in knowledge and build a forward-looking agenda for action

The paper identifies ways in which NGOs and trade unions can search for common ground on key issues around employment and unemployment, outlines capacity building areas that were found to be relevant to joint work – via training and action research, and raises some big and small issues that remained at the end of the current phase of work.

BACKGROUND: CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE WORLD OF WORK IN CENTRAL ASIA

International development agencies have recognised that work is a key aspect of human development – see for example the 2015 UNDP global human development report where this is the main theme. One of the major catalysts for this new attention to labour was the 2008-09 Economic Crisis and the wave of protests (e.g. Occupy!) exposing the way in which the international financial system is working against the interests of ordinary people.

International experience shows several options for improving labour rights and conditions. But at the same time, youth unemployment and lack of regular, decent jobs is a growing problem globally. The ILO 2012 report shows this clearly – e.g. countries like Spain where youth unemployment has been above 25-30% for several years. In other countries – including many in

the East Europe and former Soviet Union region – there is structural unemployment only kept under control by the processes of migration (whether to Western Europe or the Russian Federation).

Trade unions are membership associations whose special role is the defence of workers' rights via the establishment of social partnership arrangements with government and employers. In theory, they have a lot of experience to share with NGOs in both these areas – membership development and rights advocacy – but in practice in Central Asia there is almost no contact between trade unions and NGOs. At the outset of our dialogue project, INTRAC identified a number of plus and minus factors that are listed below:

Challenges for society:

- The long-term crisis of unemployment in Central Asia region. Added to which, up to 60-70% of jobs are in the informal sector and not protected by law, unions etc.
- A lack of city and national level strategies for job creation; a lack of attention by CSOs to the problems of unemployed people or those in precarious, seasonal or poorly paid work
- Poor or non-existent relations between NGOs and trade unions. Lack of communications strategies among the various stakeholders to bring issues around employment and unemployment in the national labour market to the general public

But on the positive side:

- Kyrgyzstan has a lot of active youth and students associations, legal and human rights NGOs. Trade unions in some sectors remain strong and influential – e.g. in education and health, mining, railways. Women's and disability groups challenge discrimination at work and inequality in wider society.
- A small number of international agencies are doing good work around employment issues – e.g. ILO, GIZ, Helvetas, Solidarity Centre. Examples include the joint campaigns around child labour and human trafficking – with involvement of NGOs, schools etc.

YOUTH AND EMPLOYMENT REPORT 2015

The origin of INTRAC's NGO-trade union dialogue project lies in INTRAC's 2012-15 action research programme on conflict prevention in the Fergana Valley. The results of the research study provided an effective needs analysis on youth and employment issues in the region, with recommendations that led to further initiatives. This study therefore can be considered as a first step – **Step One: Needs analysis**.

WHAT WAS DONE

INTRAC's 2012-15 programme, "[Research in action: civil society working for conflict prevention in the Fergana Valley](#)", was designed and carried out in partnership with three NGOs. Two of the partners were from Kyrgyzstan - the Osh Branch of NGO Centre Interbilim, and Jalalabad Civil Society Support Centre, and one was from Tajikistan - EHIO Farkhang va Tarakkiyet. Funding was from the British Embassy in Bishkek under the FCO Conflict Pool. The fourth implementing partner was Friedrich Ebert Foundation (Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan).

After the political and ethnic violence in Osh and Jalalabad in June 2010, CSOs were among the most active in finding ways to make peace and tackle the underlying tensions and problems in society. Hence key themes of the “Research in Action” programme were good governance, conflict prevention, and the promotion of diversity and participation of people in solving problems in their community.

During 2012-14, twelve action research studies were carried out by participants in the programme and published and disseminated by INTRAC and its partners. They covered a wide variety of themes – social economic, legal, etc. In the 3rd year, the partners collected a team of action researchers from years 1-2 and carried out a regional study on “Youth and Employment”, working closely with state and municipal authorities and administrations, and civil society organisations in four cities in the Fergana Valley: Khudjand, Batken, Osh, and Jalalabad.

The study was designed to examine one of the most topical issues for the Central Asian countries today: how to engage the rapidly growing youth population in economic activity for their own benefit and the good of their countries. A dozen NGO-based researchers took part in it. No trade unions were involved at this stage. The methodology included desk research, a youth survey (see Box 1), expert interviews and round tables in all four locations. The results were presented at a job fair and final conference in Osh in early 2015.

BOX 1: SOME RESULTS FROM THE YOUTH SURVEY

We interviewed just over 400 people aged 18-30 – about 100 in each city, equally divided by sex. Of the respondents, 54 per cent were “economically inactive” (unemployed or currently studying in the national education system). About 39 per cent had already completed their higher education; 20 per cent had completed specialised secondary education; and 38 per cent - secondary school. Meanwhile, almost 40 per cent already had experience of work migration abroad.

Most of the young people questioned stated that young people find work through personal contacts or with the help of parents and relatives (63 and 65 per cent respectively). Just 43 per cent of respondents stated that young people find work in officially directed schemes after completing their studies; 24 per cent mentioned employment centres, and 25 per cent - job fairs as ways to find work. Young people also scan local newspapers, radio, television and the internet (66 per cent on average) in the search for work. Salary level is a key factor for 72 per cent of young men, but for a slightly smaller proportion (63 per cent) of young women.

More than a third of respondents stated that it is difficult to find work, highlighting barriers including lack of information about vacancies, lack of work experience in their specialisation, and also job offers with low pay. With regard to labour law, 17 per cent of young women reported that employers were unwilling to sign labour contracts; 22 per cent of young men said that they are often paid less than they were promised; and respondents of both sexes noted that young people do not know their rights in the workplace, and so it is difficult to stand up for their rights.

COMMENTARY AND LEARNING POINTS

The expert interviews and round tables that were held alongside the survey brought in additional information and enabled INTRAC and its partners to draw a number of important conclusions.

- **Youth employment** is a serious problem in all four cities. Migration out of the region only partially resolves the problem of the high number of people looking for work. Various employment and youth programmes have been developed at national level. However, the information they are based on did not fully reflect the situation at city and district level. Conducting a full analysis of employment and unemployment levels is difficult because of the large size of the informal sector in both countries. Many young people find work in seasonal

jobs or working part time. They are not protected and unemployment has a very negative impact on certain population groups, including young people with disabilities or low levels of education. Gender differences are also very important. Young people also talked about the need not just to create new workplaces, but also to ensure a fairer allocation of and access to work opportunities.

- **Structures/institutions at city level which work on youth employment issues.** The study exposed a lack of specialised youth and employment programmes or sectoral employment priorities at city level. Municipal Employment Services cooperate closely with employers from the state sector, but they are not able to cover the full range of vacancies and only cover the private and informal sectors to a limited degree. On the plus side, there is a system of short professional training courses (free or subsidised) and short-term job creation programmes (paid public work). However, job creation schemes only provide temporary, very low-paid work for some of the poorest people in society. A significant discrepancy was observed between the work preferences of young people and the requirements of the modern labour market. For example, banks, mobile phone companies, law and accountancy firms continue to be attractive for young people, but the extremely high number of graduates in these areas means that many cannot find work in their area of study.
- **Civil society organisations.** Each of the four cities studied had a small number of experienced youth associations that offer services to develop capacity and professional skills, life and communication skills and support for young entrepreneurs. Many of these work with city level youth committees on issues like leisure and cultural facilities, youth entrepreneurship, political leadership and so on. But on the whole the participation of youth associations in this field could be described as “receiving and disseminating information”, despite the fact that government policy in both countries sets out a rather more significant policy-influencing role for youth. Trade unions have official status within tripartite agreements on social partnership with governments and employers in both countries at national and city level. However, our research shows that young people know almost nothing about this collaboration or what it might mean for their chances of finding a job.

OPENING UP DIALOGUE BETWEEN NGOS AND TRADE UNIONS, 2016

The findings of the study on youth and employment pointed to a gap, namely the need for greater engagement with trade unions as key potential allies for increasing activities in this field and bringing issues around employment rights to the attention of government and employers. Hence the next step in the process was to begin building relationships between NGOs and trade unions: **Step Two – Opening up dialogue.**

WHAT WAS DONE

The Youth and Employment report was published in Russian and its executive summary in English, Kyrgyz and Tajik languages. Round tables in Bishkek and Dushanbe helped to begin a discussion with trade unions and national government about the issues raised. These discussions confirmed that we had identified an important issue that could not be tackled without the support of agencies specialising in the employment field. We had already collected a lot of useful local data and the recommendations made in the report could be used by INTRAC and its partners as a kind of manifesto for future campaigning. Our two CSO partners in Kyrgyzstan had the experience and

contacts necessary to carry out further work in this area, and in Ebert Foundation, we had found a partner specialising in support to trade unions as well as civil society sector more widely.

And then there was a gap of about a year. In the absence of significant funding, the follow-up depended to a very large extent on the commitment of the partners to work around the topic of youth employment¹. One partner was not able to continue work in our consortium – EHIO – with their departure the Tajik side of the project was lost. On the positive side, two new informal partners were added – the Union of Education and Science Workers (Kyrgyzstan), and the Bishkek-based Youth Labour Exchange. Representatives of the two new partners had been involved in a job fair that INTRAC and its NGO partners organised as part of the final events for the Youth and Employment study.

In autumn 2016, the NGO-trade union dialogue kicked off with two round tables in Jalalabad and Osh.

Some 25 people attended each event, roughly 50% from trade unions (TUs) and 50% from NGOs. The structure of the two-day event was the same in both cities. On the first day, the main topics were:

- The external situation for civil society, challenges in implementing social partnership, and current priorities for TUs and NGOs (see figure 1 showing the main stakeholders that trade unions need to take account of)
- A presentation on the state and priorities of the trade union movement in Kyrgyzstan
- Information on the work of the Education and Science Workers Union to gain benefits for teachers, lecturers and students at local level
- Presentations by local youth and legal rights NGOs



Figure 1: Flip chart showing a stakeholder analysis diagram for the trade union sector. They include local authorities, the media, labour inspectors, consumer rights organisations, and the national ombudsman's office. In the centre of the figure are trade unions, their members and the employers.

¹ The financing for design and development came from INTRAC core funds in Central Asia, and for event and trainer costs – from Friedrich Ebert Foundation Kyrgyzstan.

On the second day the participants discussed in groups how to tackle typical labour rights issues in selected sectors: secondary education, health services, restaurant work and taxi services. In the final half-day of the workshop a NGO trainer provided an extended session on communications including:

- how to use internet and social media
- how to create an effective press release

In Jalalabad, a group of Jalalabad university students (members of the Education Workers union) played an active part in this discussion and throughout the workshop. With their participation, a very useful session was devoted to internships, student employment out of university hours, careers advice, and how to lobby labour rights for students in part-time employment. A particular feature of the Osh round table was discussions around defence of workers' rights in the informal sectors of the local economy. This was led by representatives of workers and NGOs from Kelechek Market and the transport trade union working with taxi and minibus drivers. Also present were health and culture workers, staff from the city employment centre and a leading NGO "Youth of Osh". Thus in Osh as in Jalalabad a very varied and high level group of people were assembled and they showed great interest in promoting workers' rights and continuing a NGO-TU dialogue.

COMMENTARY AND LEARNING POINTS

- **A new partnership.** Our key point of contact with the trade union sector was through the Union of Education and Science Workers. Their contribution to both events showed there is a significant constituency of teachers, lecturers and students who could be involved in joint work with NGOs. For example, trade union work to improve teachers' conditions of work can be seen alongside practical NGO work to improve municipal services. Many teachers are NGO activists too.
- **Geographical reach.** In order to involve other trade unions, we used the excellent local contacts of our NGO partners Jalalabad CSSC and Centre Interbilim Osh. We had a problem in bringing trade union (and NGO) representatives from districts outside Jalalabad and Osh, but we succeeded in bringing a very active union delegation from the neighbouring province Batken. We realised that we would need to find a way to involve organisations outside the provincial centres in future.
- **Formal and informal sectors.** Most of the active trade unions in Kyrgyzstan represent workers in the public sector. The informal employment sector is very weakly represented, but the example of the Dordo Market workers union in Bishkek shows that work in the informal sector can bring results. The two round tables showed that local activists are ready to help raise the issue of rights of workers in the informal economy. Added to this, Ebert Foundation-Kyrgyzstan has in the past worked with a number of alternative unions not aligned with the main Trade Union Federation; this involves supporting unions with a small and fragile membership.
- **Dealing with mutual suspicion.** The round table events showed the need to bring in more NGO people to cross-sectoral discussions since there is a widespread ignorance about the existence and role of trade unions. Several local NGOs have a wide experience of legal aid work and rights lobbying that could be very useful in joint campaigning. From the trade union side, we saw that there is an element of suspicion about NGOs as organisations that are not doing much to support workers' rights and where staff are not union members. So it was clear that there is a mutual understanding issue to tackle here.

SPREADING THE WORD: WORKSHOPS ON COMMUNICATIONS AND ADVOCACY, 2017

Based on the feedback from the round tables, INTRAC and its NGO and trade union partners gained the support of Ebert Foundation for a training and information dissemination programme in 2017 aimed at raising key issues of interest to trade unions and NGOs alike in the local community. The round tables in 2016 had contained a short training session on use of media and so it was decided to continue along this path. We consider this therefore to be **Step 3: Joint training**. This played to one of the strengths of the NGO sector – its use of communications and the availability of experienced local trainers. Our trade union colleagues could immediately see the value of the proposed work.

WHAT WAS DONE

In early 2017, we began work by setting up a joint working group led by CSSC Jalalabad and INTRAC to decide the main directions and participants for the programme. CSSC Jalalabad became the main NGO partner in the South because Centre Interbilim was busy with other projects. However, it was agreed that participants would be taken in equal numbers from both oblasts and the training programme was designed in consultation with participants in the two round tables.

We gained the agreement of Ebert Foundation to support a programme of two 2-day training workshops on Communications and Partnership skills (see Box 2), with the overall aim of developing the basic knowledge and skills of participants and organising and advocacy campaign to promote the young people's employment rights.

BOX 2: 2017 WORKSHOPS

Workshop 1 – April 2017 – objectives:

1. Understand the role of communications planning. Examine the basic elements of communication planning
2. Share your communications planning experience
3. Draft frameworks for a communications plan
4. Define next steps for planning communications in your organisation (Homework)

Workshop 2 – June 2017 – objectives:

1. Discuss the concept of advocacy. Examine the main elements of advocacy planning
2. Exchange experience in conducting advocacy campaigns;
3. Discuss the role of partnerships for an effective advocacy campaign (e.g. partnerships between NGOs and trade unions);
4. Draft frameworks for a joint advocacy campaign;
5. Define next steps (an action plan).

Participants would be chosen from NGOs and trade unions in Jalalabad and Osh oblasts, wherever possible two people from each organisation. Participants were required to commit themselves to carrying out follow-up work between the two workshops around developing a communications strategy for their organisation. All this would help INTRAC and its partners to design and run a

joint information campaign using the ideas and skills developed in the Communications and Partnership workshops, on the topic of workers' rights.

The first workshop made use of a Communications Handbook created by INTRAC in Russian and Kyrgyz languages in 2016. This was of great interest to the trade union participants. Added to this, rather than the communication topics that training workshops often focus on (e.g. interpersonal skills, public speaking, negotiation skills), our workshops focused on **strategic issues involved in planning joint communications**. They included 1) deciding together on the message to be communicated; 2) defining primary and secondary audiences, 3) choosing the most effective communications channels.

The work on **advocacy** in the second workshop threw up a number of expected and unexpected issues. An initial discussion around this term produced a long list of associations/definitions from which participants created a working definition of advocacy, as "a process for protecting rights and promoting socially significant interests". At the same time, the exercise showed that while the term advocacy is well known among NGOs, there were trade union participants who encountered this concept for the very first time during the workshop.

Further work in groups showed that the participants have a wide and varied **experience in protecting rights**. Discussion helped them perceive the difference between advocacy and protection of individual rights of individuals, on the one hand, and protection of the collective rights of workers within an organisation, on the other. There was an important discussion around the topic of **social partnership**, in particular the trade union experience of tri-partite discussions with government and employers.

COMMENTARY AND LEARNING POINTS

- **A varying level and character of participation.** The Communications and Partnership workshops, like previous actions, were built on work the experience of NGOs in Central Asia. Trade union participants, by contrast, responded to the questions and issues raised (i.e. they had a more reactive position). The most active participants in the workshops were young people. Leaders of local NGOs and trade union bodies attended but they did not have time to do the homework tasks. The trainers realised that some of the interactive tasks, plus flexibility and availability of time to do homework, was more difficult for those with management and representation responsibilities.
- **Issues around decision-making.** The decision on what campaign to undertake was more difficult for trade unions since it would have to be taken in a formal way. Small NGOs can make these decisions more easily than larger membership associations. Added to which, Kyrgyz law stipulates that trade unions should only undertake activities that are of benefit to their membership. This is a very significant restriction when it comes to various local or solidarity campaigns.
- **Political factors.** Workshop discussions had actively employed examples from advocacy practice in the South of Kyrgyzstan that demonstrated political issues that might arise. For example, during a panel discussion, the question was raised about the use of direct action in advocacy campaigns. An exercise in analysing "force fields" (i.e. forces supporting or opposing a proposed action) showed the need to take into account a wide range of socio-political, cultural, and economic factors when planning for advocacy.
- **Timing of the advocacy campaign.** For INTRAC and Ebert Foundation, a key factor was the Kyrgyzstan presidential elections that had just been set for early autumn 2017. During the lead-up to the elections it was important not to engage in political action that could be seen as affecting the election process.

EXPANDING ACCESS TO DECENT JOBS, 2017

On the final day of our second Communications workshop, participants had worked on ideas for a joint advocacy strategy on rights of young people at work. They identified three possible areas in which to do this: 1) the informal employment sectors (e.g. taxi drivers, service workers); 2) in larger private sector companies (e.g. mobile phone companies, banks); 3) in the public sector (e.g. local government). The main strategies they proposed were aimed at expanding access to information; e.g. by involving employment centres, labour inspectorates, universities, youth centres and committees, employers associations. Another mechanism suggested was the creation of special internet platforms on youth employment rights.

All in all, it was clear that there were enough common themes to form the basis of a joint campaign. Soon after the 2nd workshop the project coordinating committee made the decision to organise a Job Fair, to take place in Osh in October 2017. This would include special discussions on labour rights with visitors to the fair. It was the first time we had organised a joint action with trade unions and so we call this **Step 4: Pilot actions**.

The overall vision of the Job Fair was an event with 1) a positive, constructive aim (to help youth find jobs), 2) multi-sectoral participation (including local authorities, employment centres, and public and private employers), 3) an open structure and big opportunities to provide information on labour rights. It maximised the opportunities and minimised the risks for our coalition of local partners.

WHAT WAS DONE

The Jobs Fair held in Osh State University in autumn 2017 turned out to be a much larger event than we had originally envisaged, largely due to the support of the public authorities and the university branch of the Education and Scientific Workers Union. Their leader had attended the first of our communications workshops and from then on he gave us strong support. Like other branches of the union, the Osh branch united not just education workers in the university but students too. The Memoranda of Understanding signed with Careers Centre and the City Employment Department in advance of the fair represented a big step forward for our work.

The aims of the Job Fair were defined by our partners as follows:

- To provide young people with a platform to express their opinions on current problems of youth employment.
- To inform young people about employment opportunities, vocational training and protection of rights at the workplace.
- To attract the attention of employers, government and non-governmental structures to the issues of protecting the rights of young people in the workplace.

As well as the Education and Science Trade Union at Osh State University, the campaign involved the Youth Committee of the Osh City Hall, the Osh City Administration for Employment, the Youth Labour Exchange of the Ministry of Labour and Social Development, the Youth Council of the Federation of Trade Unions, Centre Interbilim Osh branch, and the Public Association “Youth of Osh. This shows the wide kind of civic coalition that is possible to convene for events tackling important issues of this kind.

The Jobs Fair was held in front of the main buildings of Osh State University, in a large university square located in the centre of the city. The university made its main hall and a ground-floor seminar room available for the discussions, while other events including a formal opening session with the Chancellor of the University, government representatives and project partners were held outside in the square. The head of the Education Workers Union and the student careers centre played a big role in making this possible.

The communications element was carefully planned in advance and led by Centre Interbilim, working with all the main partners. This included designing an information line that ran for several days on local TV, the placing of notices on Instagram, distribution linked to employment vacancies, leaflets and a large banner that was placed on the university gates. A major effort was put into organising four open discussion sections that ran throughout the Job Fair, led by project participants. They were: 1) On job search, 2) On work contracts, 3) The role of trade unions, 4) Countering discrimination at work. An estimated 2,000 people attended the event on 25 October 2017.

COMMENTARY AND LEARNING POINTS

- **Overall assessment.** On the following day, the partners made a joint assessment of the fair. We concluded that it had been a success. All the partners had played a part and the whole event had an open, accessible approach. Our information table helped visitors to orient themselves and find what they wanted. During the fair a number of TV and radio channels had taken interviews with the organisers, employers and young people.
- **Jobs results.** A survey of participants showed that visitors to the fair had received information about the fair from teachers, friends, and adverts in Osh State University. Their main aim was to find a job in their speciality. Their age range was overwhelmingly 18-22 years – i.e. this was mainly a student event - but other people attended too, including adult unemployed people in search of work. The sex ratio was 77% women/ 23 % men. Almost 650 people had received jobs advice at the fair and 37 people got job offers during the day.
- **Discussion groups.** Just under 350 people visited our discussion sections on employment rights, problems connected with discrimination, and the role of trade unions. These informal discussion sections had worked well and it was doubly pleasing in that were led by young activists, legal experts and trainers. This was the special added value that the civil society activists had added to the event.

ANALYSING EMPLOYMENT RIGHTS, 2018

In 2018, the joint project finally realised one of its long-term aims – to train a group of NGO and trade unions activists in analytical and research skills and carry out a small, local action research study into employment rights. Our trade union partners had been keen from the start to include a component on research skills in our training programme. Added to this, if we carried out a small local research study, this would give us useful and up to date information for a new advocacy campaign.

Another issue that was seen as important at this stage was getting our message out to local employers. The Jobs Fair in Osh had been successful but it didn't cover the full range of jobs that young people are searching for and there were fewer employers physically present than we had hoped. In our summing-up session we noted that the information available on vacancies: 1) reflected the state of the labour market where information on jobs in informal sectors is lacking; 2) showed that working more closely with employers was the “next step” for our consortium.

We moved on to **Step 5: Action research and promotion of its results.** This took place between June-November 2018.

WHAT WAS DONE

Round table in Bishkek

There were several stages in the preparation for the action research project. First, INTRAC and its partners formally agreed to use the “Decent Work” agenda promoted by the International Labour Organisation and trade union partners as the frame for our study (see Box 3). This was decided after a round table held at the Federation of Trade Unions in Bishkek, with a major presentation by the ILO’s country representative. Second, the partners gained the support of unions at the national level, working once again with the Youth Council of the Federation of Trade Unions. And third, we decided to maintain our two-city approach, working with partners in Jalalabad and Osh. This time, the Job Fair would be held in Jalalabad. In this way we kept maximum continuity which was important since in 2018 all the partners had limited resources to put into the project.

BOX 3: DECENT WORK DIMENSIONS

- Getting a job that is productive and generates fair income.
- Safety at the workplace and social protection of workers and their families.
- Personal development and the promotion of social integration.
- Freedom of workers to voice their concerns and participate in making decisions that affect their lives.
- Guarantees of equal opportunity and equal treatment for all.

Training workshops in Action Learning Methodology

This component was led by INTRAC and the participants were recruited by Jalalabad Civil Society Support Centre. Once again, they were mainly from NGOs, youth and student organisations. The workshops took place in June and August 2018. Each workshop lasted just two days. Data collection was carried out in a one-month period between the workshops.

The overall aim of the action research workshops was “To promote the national agenda “Decent work for all” by involving representatives of NGOs and trade union organisations in joint research and the promotion of youth labour rights at the local level.” The objectives of the first workshop were to explore and discuss the international and national agendas for creating decent jobs in the labour market; to identify the main features of local labour markets and challenges for youth employment in Jalalabad and Osh; to discuss the process and methodology for collecting data for research; and finally, to form working groups of researchers and develop an action plan for the research.

The second workshop was no less intensive. Its objectives were to provide an introduction to quantitative analysis of data, discuss the results of the study (quantitative and qualitative) and draw conclusions and lessons; to present preliminary results at a “community of practice” meeting; and to develop plans to complete research and present them at the Jobs Fair in Jalalabad.

Due to the shortage of time and financial resources, INTRAC and the trainers had to give a strong lead in organising the study and preparing the report. The second workshop was used to get feedback from participants on how the survey had gone and to start to process and analyse the data that had been collected. This was done with the help of the online programme Survey Monkey: key sections of the survey were chosen as a training exercise and on the second day, the participants were supported in designing and delivering a short presentation from these sections in front of a panel of local experts.

Community of Practice

The Community of Practice tool was developed by INTRAC and its NGO partners during our action research programme in 2012-15 and became an essential step allowing us to test the plans and progress of research at every stage. This not only helped improve our understanding of the issues and the necessary steps in the research; it also began the process of lobbying results with key local actors. The six members of the panel held as part of the 2nd workshop in August 2018 all represented important local institutions. Participants mobilised themselves to make impressive presentations to the panel and got back some very useful feedback on methodology and the conclusions that could be drawn from the study.

At the same time teams were assembled to run discussion groups at the forthcoming Jobs Fair in Jalalabad on our four rights themes: 1) job search, 2) work contracts, 3) role of trade unions, 4) discrimination at work. The results of the study were further analysed by the trainer team and finalised by the participants on the eve of the Jobs Fair in October 2018.

BOX 4: RESULTS OF THE ACTION RESEARCH STUDY

The research covered a formal sector – municipal staff – and informal one – waiters in large and small cafés. One hundred people were surveyed from these two groups, and in addition ten expert interviews and focus groups were held. The most important aspects of decent work for respondents were safety at work, a fair wage, and opportunities for self-development. Results in our four thematic areas were:

Job search. Most respondents find work through friends or relatives, especially young women and people with disabilities, while by contrast less than half use employment centres or the media. Our interviews showed that job centres are doing good work but not all youth apply to them for information or advice, nor do vocational or higher education institutions play an active role in finding jobs for their graduates. Respondents in the survey had varied expectations when seeking employment. Young men valued a good salary slightly higher than young women. The ability to work in a team and good communications skills was noted by many as a key requirement by employers.

Work contract. Some 75% of municipal employees have written contracts, but only 10% of waiters. Interviews showed that the most common form of payment for work is weekly pay without bonuses or overtime payments, even when long hours (up to 12 hours in cafés) are being worked. Less than 20% of waiters get sick or holiday pay. Only just over half municipal workers consider that their pay reflects their qualifications.

Discrimination. A significant amount of respondents complained about lack of equal opportunities. Harassment at work is a problem in the cafés.

Role of trade unions. Respondents named their lack of knowledge about their rights as one of the main problems. Some 28% had experienced a conflict at work - but only 16% of all respondents had approached someone to help – and none had approached a union. Hence one of the main conclusions of the study was the need for information campaigns among the public and with employers.

The Jobs Fair

The Job Fair in Jalalabad was completely different from Osh in that it was held in a city square just off the main street in Jalalabad, next to the main city market, shops and offices. This meant that lots of people dropped into the fair casually alongside those who had been specially invited. The Jalalabad city authorities had prepared the space very well, including banners, information stands and tents in which our discussion groups could be held. At the formal opening of the Fair, all the main partners made speeches.

Employers were well represented at the fair. They included major Jalalabad firms – the Electric Company, the Bai Butum bank, the Kelechek food processing company, clothing firms and social enterprises setup by people with disabilities. Some 200 vacancies from Jalalabad, Bishkek and the Russian Federation were shown on large noticeboards. An important role was played by a new partner in the project – the JIA employers association who occupied one of the tents and helped run the job search discussion session.

The four discussion groups on employment rights got into action soon after 09:00 hrs – i.e. even before the formal opening. Two participants from the action research project led the discussions in each tent. They were confronted by large numbers of local people all speaking and asking questions at the same. The careful planning of information and issues to be presented organised by our team proved to be absolutely essential, allowing the presenters in each tent to support and take over from each other smoothly. Information sheets and handouts were used effectively and the results of our action research studies helped make the discussions concrete and interesting.

COMMENTARY AND LEARNING POINTS

- **Major role played by youth activists.** The two action research workshops had an extremely compressed agenda and INTRAC's trainer team had to make difficult decisions about what to present themselves and what to offer for discussion and decision by the participants. Despite dissemination of project information in both Osh and Jalalabad, this time it proved hard to get trade unions participants – we ended up with a team of young people several of who were students and in which the two main NGO partners, Jalalabad CSSC and Osh Centre Interbilim, plus 3-4 key NGOs from the gender, disability and rights sectors played a key role.
- **The importance of using the national rights agenda was confirmed.** The first workshop was remarkable for the success with which we translated the international Decent Work agenda into the main points for a survey questionnaire, expert interviews and focus groups. Here the trainers played the main role. By contrast, the participants themselves decided on the two main sets of respondents – municipal workers and waiters in cafés and restaurants; also on a special focus on young people with a disability. This enabled the team to address most of the key issues in the Decent Work agenda.
- **Process issues.** As noted above, the research study was carried out in a four week period from late July to late August – i.e. in the summer holiday period. This made it easier for the participants to find time for interviewing, but also caused some problems when potential respondents were unavailable. A reflection by participants on the training workshops and research project as a whole yielded the following comments:

Positive points	Problems that arose
We got a much better knowledge of rights at work	It was difficult to get access to key respondents and to hold their attention
We were able to disseminate knowledge on rights, trade unions and laws to other people	Filling in the questionnaires was a more complex task than we had expected
Everything was very new for us	People may know their rights but are afraid to defend them. They don't work together with others, they just rely on themselves
We got answers to the main questions that we set in the research	

Figure 2: Reflection by participants on the training workshops and research project as a whole, August 2018

CONCLUSION

Our learning paper shows that it is possible to launch a dialogue between two sections of civil society that rarely collaborate with each other. When we look back at the activities we have organised since 2015 to encourage dialogue between NGOs and trade unions in Kyrgyzstan, and when we consider the results of this journey, we can identify some simple steps that helped to make this happen. We have described these five steps in this paper and we hope that they can be used in other contexts and with other civil society groups that rarely come together.

However, some caveats are appropriate here.

NGO-trade union liaison or solidarity is not a big theme in the neoliberal development agenda, although the right to decent work has risen up the agenda with the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). Therefore substantial work in this area can only take place where the agencies concerned are committed to labour rights. The project described above took a significant amount of time to get going and we all had to be quite patient in waiting for results.

What were the results? Apart from the piloting approaches to NGO-trade union dialogue and joint campaigning, the project brought together key organisations and individuals in two cities and trained about 100 people over two years, with much larger numbers of people attending the job fairs, some of whom found work at the fair.

The platform for dialogue and joint action remains quite small and exposed to external pressures. The trade union movement in Kyrgyzstan, like in other countries, remains on the defensive: preoccupied in many cases by the problems of maintaining their network of social and welfare facilities, struggling to make an impact in the private sector. The Trade Union Federation is under attack from many sides in relation to its management practice (e.g. the selling off of welfare facilities). Unions are experiencing huge difficulties in addressing the question of workers' rights in small enterprises and the informal economy.

Our project showed that it takes time for NGOs to perceive any gain from close collaboration with trade unions. Many rights activists see their work in terms of defense of individual rather than collective rights (i.e. defending individual cases of the abuse of rights rather than forming associations of workers). The passivity of union memberships and the unions' focus on issues directly affecting members' rights and interests, runs somewhat against the philosophy of NGOs. As Deborah Eade & Alan Leather put it, in their introduction to a very useful collection of articles:

“Labour unions and NGOs also have had grounds for ideological disagreement. NGOs, for example, may argue that unions do not represent the needs of the poorest, most of whom subsist in an informal economy; that their approach to recruitment and mobilisation is outdated in today's globalised economy; and that they have a poor record on gender and ethnic equity and concerns about women workers. For their part, unions have legitimate concerns about the tendency of NGOs to address poverty reduction through informal-economy mechanisms, such as microenterprises or income-generation projects, which often fail to take labour rights fully into account. Nor are NGOs themselves above criticism on issues of gender equity in the workplace, whatever their funding criteria overseas. And very few international NGOs have a glowing record on ethnic diversity at all levels or drawing their staff from all social classes. Tensions have arisen when NGOs are seen to have undermined local unions by entering into bilateral dialogue with employers or monitoring codes of conduct. Many NGOs basically ignore labour unions as CSOs, while some adopt anti-union policies internally by discouraging or even disallowing their staff to form or join unions.”²

² Deborah Eade and Alan Leather eds, *Development NGOs and Labour Unions*, Kumarian Press, USA, 2005

Our project did arouse interest among union officials and activists. But we had to be extremely careful in not allying ourselves with particular groups, since union activism, based on membership and representative system, are a very political environment. The project remained based in the NGO sector, simply making an offer of collaboration to those in the unions who might be interested. And this was the correct stance.

Among NGOs, the neoliberal values of mobility, flexibility, responsiveness to donor and government priorities, rule the day. This extends to issues around the world of work. NGOs themselves embody much of the neoliberal agenda – small organisations with workers on short-term contracts, often without a significant social welfare provision. However, the work done in this project began to raise some quite basic issues around decent work – including the question of pay, working hours, other working conditions and the right to organise in a trade union and bargain collectively with the employer. These are issues that will hardly go away while societies are organised in such and unequal way. So the project perhaps shows how they can be raised, cautiously and with a serious and long-term approach.



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