

The Effectiveness of Land Related Voluntary Associations  
in the Former Soviet Union

by

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# The Effectiveness of Land Related Voluntary Associations in the Former Soviet Union<sup>1</sup>

The former Soviet Union is a region that has undergone unprecedented peacetime political and institutional change, drastically altering the market and citizens' relations to the land. The shift from public to private ownership of land and other property has had tremendous consequences with regard to income distribution, market development, and the quality of the environment. Scholars of post-Soviet transition have documented many factors that account for poor citizen involvement in regional associations. Their research contributes to a growing understanding of the hurdles faced by associations in their attempts to influence land markets, agricultural markets, and environmental quality. This research provides an opportunity to go beyond identifying the hurdles faced by associations and to begin to develop a framework to assess organizations, which are overcoming the unique organizational difficulties faced in post-Soviet nations. This paper is a review of literature on the development of voluntary associations in general and in the context of countries of the former Soviet Union. Drawing from literature in the fields of political and organizational sociology and post-Soviet studies, this review synthesizes research on how non-governmental organizations (both associations and other types of non-commercial organizations) evolve.

## 1. Background

The decision by countries from Albania to China, particularly by those countries which emerged from the former Soviet Union, to move from planned economies toward market-oriented economies has led to a crisis of governance and serious economic and social problems. One of the fundamental changes in these countries is the transition from state ownership to private ownership of land, buildings, and other assets. Issues of landowner rights, land markets, and land conservation are all vital to the developing market economies of such "transition countries".

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As private ownership of real property has become more prevalent, voluntary associations<sup>2</sup> of people and organizations representing concerns about how to deal with property issues of the transition have also emerged including:

1. associations of people/organizations whose income depends on access to, and use of, the land such as farmers who decide to act through their association to acquire inputs more cheaply for their individual farming operations;
2. associations of land market professionals such as mortgage bankers, real estate brokers, land surveyors, conveyance attorneys, land use planners, whose interest in land tenure policies derives from their involvement in land market transactions; and
3. environmentally oriented associations whose members are interested in the protection of land and water resources to assure their availability for future generations.

These associations represent important opportunities for people with concerns for property issues at the grassroots to improve their own welfare as well as to influence policy formulation at the national level and to push for the implementation of property related programs at the local level.

Addressing the factors that affect the successful evolution of these associations and the acquisition and retention of social capital, is of critical importance for all countries, particularly those which have embarked on the transition to market-oriented economies and political democracies. Putnam (1995:67) defines ‘social capital’ in social psychological terms as the “features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit.”

Bourdieu (2001/1983:102) uses a more structural definition of social capital:

“the aggregate of the actual or potential resources that are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintances and recognition – or in other words to membership in a group – which provides each of its

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<sup>2</sup> By voluntary association we mean an organization created by its members, typically not for profit, for a social purpose.

members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a credential that entitles them to credit in the various senses of the word.”

For Bourdieu people may accumulate, retain and exchange social capital as they do in relation to economic capital. He issued a challenge that “it is in fact impossible to account for the structure and functioning of the social world unless one reintroduced capital in all its forms and not solely in the one form recognized by economic theory” (Bourdieu, 2001/1983:97).

A new way of approaching development activities is needed to explore the structure and dynamics of social capital, a goal which can be approached, at least in part, through a greater understanding of citizen acceptance of, and participation in, land related voluntary associations in the transition countries.

Donors have spent millions of dollars supporting a wide range of associations with the belief that they are necessary to bolster civil society and free market development in the newly independent states. These organizations often function like contractors for donor agencies instead of directly involving and engaging local constituencies. But local level engagement is necessary for strengthening civil society and for supporting the interests of citizens in the democratic and market transition.

Since the 1830s, scholars have cited the importance of a wide variety of associations in the effort to build democratic capitalist societies. De Toqueville noted that the plurality of associations from professional to social, from the whimsical to the serious found in the early to middle 1800s was vitally important to US democracy (de Toqueville 2002/1840). The dynamism of American associations allowed for a plurality of voices to be heard and freedoms to be annunciated and justified. Modern scholars have added to and critiqued de Toqueville’s perspective on associations (Cohen & Rogers 1995; Warren 2001). Associations are seen as vital to the promotion of democracy, annunciating freedoms for individuals, guiding market activities, and for the promotion of community-oriented values among the citizenry.

A thriving democracy has long been linked to strong associations or a “thick” civil society.

Though civil society can thrive outside democratic institutions, as early 20<sup>th</sup> century Germany illustrated, voluntary associations are fundamental in supporting and strengthening democratic governance (Almond & Verba 1989). The effects of associations on democracy are many-fold. They include increased representation of constituent interests, the promotion of non-state forms of governance, the fostering of political awareness and skill, the development of public opinion, support for balanced political power, and a forum for public deliberation (Cohen and Rogers 1995; Warren 2001). Through these functions, associations strengthen both the development of democracy and the value systems necessary to support it (Kornhauser 1959; Lipset 1960)

Evidence is accumulating from various social scientific disciplines that suggests a well integrated and active civil society is of critical importance not only for the effective functioning of democratic institutions, but also for the performance of market economies (see Marsh 2002). Even at the community level, research has shown that communities with strong organizations and active participation by community members in those organizations, (i.e. those organizations that have shown high levels of “social capital”), have more effective program design, were implemented more easily, and resulted in significant long-term benefit (Brown and Ashman 1996). Jonathan Fox (1992; 1996) found that channels for local community participation in Mexican government food subsidies programs fostered wider social networks and capacity building among participants. These programs also created the space and legitimacy for freedom of assembly beyond the village level. These scholars argue that social capital is fundamental to the development of inter-sectoral collaboration that allows for future challenges to be jointly addressed and resolved effectively.

Recent research on social capital in the former Soviet Union shows a society that relied heavily on individual social networks (Rose 1995; Aberg 2000; Aberg and Sanderberg 2003) which were appropriate for the former political system. These networks are still important today, however, they pose a significant barrier to the development of trust in community oriented institutions, such as membership based associations. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the Former Soviet Union have often been disconnected from local constituencies and function as consultants reacting to the interests of donors, instead of responding to the needs and concerns of local citizens. This disconnect from local citizens is frequently cited by scholars who study the civil

society of the region (Mendelson and Glenn 2002; Richter 2002; Henry 2002; Levechenko 1997; Hemment 2004).

A new emphasis must be placed on addressing the unique social relations that voluntary associations face in the former Soviet Union. The current emphasis on legal reform, organizational capacity, and financial viability are all crucial in supporting the development of voluntary associations, but a local association-driven discussion, aimed at developing new strategies to internalize local interests, gain acceptance of the role of associations, and involve local people in association life, would be useful. For these reasons, this paper will explore common characteristics among associations, which develop and maintain an engaged membership and serve a policy advocacy function on behalf of its members.

Civil society and the associations that constitute it are necessary so that a discourse can be initiated regarding land and agricultural markets and environmental issues. For a representative social discourse to occur, citizens must have an active role in shaping associations. Associations that involve citizens provide a means to create regional solidarity, develop representative lobbying power, and disseminate needed information (Fox 1995).

Since the sixties and seventies the definition of advocacy has expanded beyond a narrow legal definition of legal defense. Specifically, advocacy can be thought to contain three aspects: 1) the defense of interests instead of individuals including disenfranchised people, 2) strategies to directly change rules instead of simply defend, and 3) efforts to defend against social exclusion and abuses of the state (Fox 2001).

Some advocacy has been possible by NGOs in post communist states. McMahon (2002) found that professional associations in Russia are showing signs of being successful advocates. These organizations have overcome the collective action problem and have exerted some influence in Russian political decisions (Frye 2002). Specifically, Frye points out that observers have noted the advocacy role of the Russian Union the Industrialists and Entrepreneurs. Over 50 percent of the firms in Frye's study have been successful at lobbying the government, stating that they relied on business associations to lobby for favorable legislation (Frye 2002).

The literature on effective organizations points to four appropriate categories to understand effectiveness in associations that engage members and promote their interests. These categories are distinguished by the following characteristics:

- Organizational traits (strong board, charismatic leader, passionate staff) that promote effective outcomes;
- Deliberative actions (membership services, continuously create a transparent organization, and self evaluation) that are adeptly executed;
- External linkages (facilitative, normative, collaborative, and communication linkages) that are established and managed effectively;
- Institutional context to which associations astutely adapt.

## 2. Categories of Effective Associations

### 2.1 Organizational Traits

#### *Role of the Board of Directors*

The board of directors can play a fundamental role in an association's effectiveness at becoming an organization that develops and retains a membership and advocates for the interests and concerns of those members. The degree of involvement of an association board has been consistently shown to correlate with effective associations (Herman and Renz 1999; 2000). Several board practices seem to be indicators of board effectiveness from the perspective of the organization's constituency. Effective boards are often measured by the activity and effectiveness of the chief officer of the association. The literature also suggests that boards, which actively review and revise the organizational mission of the association, are effective. A frequent review allows the board to provide long-term strategic vision, steering the organization to new opportunities. The imposition of term limits can promote effectiveness by allowing new members to join the board, bringing with them new ideas and expertise. Finally, effective boards, often, formally or informally, evaluate their own performance, providing a means to improve their service to the organization.

A common problem among many post-Soviet NGOs is that they consistently lack an active board. In a 1997 study among NGOs in Gomel, Belarus, Levchenko found that many local NGOs lacked an active board. Board members rarely took part in making important decisions or in raising funds for the organization. Board inactivity is detrimental to effectiveness because the board does not fulfill its role of overseeing the organization and providing vision and direction.

### *Qualities of Leadership*

Effective organizations often have leaders with qualities that have allowed them to effectively guide the organization, particularly during the formation of an association. A charismatic leader first champions a cause or promotes a value system (Dunlop 1989:22). These individuals, through their exemplary character, values, and perspective can develop effective authority and direction for an organization (Blau and Scott 1962). An effective leader may not be charismatic, per se, but instead can have a high degree of humility and be driven to create an organization that has the appropriate systems to be highly effective (Collins and Porras 1997). These individuals can be thought of as organizational builders. These leaders strive to be responsible for building an enduring organization with the capacity to innovate and adapt to future challenges.

Leaders in former Soviet republics have not always taken an approach of building an adaptable organization. Leaders of post-Soviet associations, and the organizations as a whole, tend to be very inward looking. Many are concerned with building both internal connections and connections with foreign organizations, but do not take an active role in developing connections with the general public (Mendelson and Glenn 2002; Richter 2002; Henry 2002; Levechenko 1997; Hemment 2004).

## **2.2 Deliberate Actions of an Effective Association**

### *Membership Strategy*

Associations need methods and means to keep members interested and involved in organizational activities. Effective membership associations develop strategies to facilitate the involvement (either formal or informal) of members (Robinson 2003). Strategic planning is



often used to promote effective services for members and to grow the membership base. Effective associations also regularly poll members to determine their interests, making sure that the services and activities of the organization are meeting the needs of its members. Membership strategies often address members by articulating a perceived need, making sure potential members are familiar with the organization, and communicating common values, credibility, believability, and urgency for the actions of the organization (Robinson 2003).

The development of a strategic organizational culture in most post-Soviet NGOs is still inadequate. Levchenko found that Belarussian NGOs lack clear mission and plans for their organizations. The consequence has frequently been ineffective strategy and the inability to cultivate an image among the general population (Levchenko 1997).

#### *Membership Services*

Many associations provide valuable services to their members. These services can be educational, professional, or informational in nature. Members often depend on these services and are thus interested, concerned, and involved with an organization. These services can include giving members representation, conveying common values, providing agricultural inputs, and a host of possible other services that can benefit members. Effective organizations build means to constantly assess the quality of the services they provide, reacting to the needs and interests of members (Robinson 2003). Organizations that build systems of service assessment and implement the findings of those assessments will develop programs that better meet the needs of their constituents and lead to greater membership interest and involvement.

#### *Organizational transparency*

Associations need to convey to members that the organization is running well and serving their needs. Organizations can achieve a positive reputation by having an organization's management, financial, and service activities perceived to be open to the members and the general public. Effective associations tend to take actions that allow members and the general public to believe they are transparent and running effectively. Good management provides ritualized actions that can serve as a source of organizational and institutional legitimacy (DiMaggio & Powell 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). For membership based associations, the ritualized steps of creating

transparency, such as making meetings open, having a board of directors, and disclosing financial statements can reassure actual and potential members and the greater public that the association is legitimate and trustworthy. These transparent features of an association can lead individuals to feel that the organization is open and serving the interests of its members.

Some post-Soviet associations have become known for their lack of transparency and, at times, secretive nature. Levchenko (1997) argues that lack of transparency is a primary reason for low levels of trust by the average citizen for associations, and for NGOs in general. The lack of a democratic culture could pose another challenge to transparency of post-Soviet NGOs.

### *Goal achievement*

The attainment of organizational goals has long been used by boards of directors and staff of associations, as well as by researchers, to assess the performance of a group (Herman & Renz 1997). Associations use goals to provide a benchmark from which to assess the success of programs and to motivate staff with reason and purpose. Associations, like other organizations, also set goals for the purposeful tasks ahead, measuring the outcome of a task against the specific goal that was set by the organization. These goals, whether small in scale or ambitious in scope, are meant to push the organization in new directions (Collins and Porras 1997).

Membership/policy advocacy associations make the interest of and advocacy for their members the primary goals of the organization. These member-oriented goals can take the form of continually improving services, improvement of strategies, and increasing membership. An evaluation of goals is useful for assessing how the organization sees its specific tasks. Viewing the creation of goals as purposeful tasks can be compared with the execution of the process and the outcome of those processes (D'Aunno 1992).

The self-evaluating process is of fundamental importance for an effective membership organization. The evaluative process allows the organization to understand and react to the interests of members and to develop strategies to meet the challenges of members.

### *Process Indicators*

Process indicators provide a means by which a membership/advocacy association can evaluate quantities, financial and budgetary indicators, or some other measurable factors, in the process of determining how well a project was carried out. These indicators may include assessing monthly the number of individuals solicited for possible membership or the number of significant legislative acts an organization advised the government on. “Process measures assess effort rather than effect” (Scott 1987). Process indicators also include the rapidity with which an association can define problems as well as activities to resolve those problems and the means to monitor and evaluate whether those activities actually resolved important problems (Stanfield, 1979).

### *Outcome Indicators*

Outcomes can inform an organization about its effectiveness. Outcome indicators provide an organization with a means to assess the success of products or projects an organization has produced or been involved with (Scott 1987). Using outcome indicators, an organization can analyze the types of members that have joined and develop an understanding of their interests. An association can analyze its lobbying strategies by evaluating the outcomes of its efforts over the previous year. An association that undertakes constant evaluation and monitoring can more responsively deal with changes that are occurring and tailor its activities and services to meet the needs and interests of its members. Organizations’ evaluations of outcomes will be most useful when they are evaluated in relative instead of absolute terms (Scott 1987). In other words, the performance of one organization can be compared to another organization or to the rational goals that the organization has set instead of evaluating one organization’s performance with respect to a specific project or task in absolute terms. McMahon found that associations in the former Soviet Union usually neither have nor claim to take part in self evaluation in the terms discussed above (McMahon 2002).

Scholars of the post Soviet transition frequently cite the influence of foreign funding on the agendas and goals of post-Soviet associations. Associations in both Russia and Kazakhstan seem to be heavily swayed by foreign agendas causing them to be less effective at gaining local interest and involvement. Environmental associations in the former Soviet Union are

encouraged by western donors to focus on global environmental challenges such as biodiversity and climate change (Weinthal and Luong 2002; Henry 2002). These international issues lack local relevance to citizens of the former Soviet Union and are ineffective at stimulating local citizen interest and involvement.

### **2.3 External Linkages**

Effective associations build bridges with other organizations and groups. These bridges, or linkages, are of three types:

#### *Facilitating linkages*

Effective associations build ties with other organizations and groups that assist the association with its work. These are the informal connections between organizations that provide information, logistic support, and a range of other activities. Facilitating linkages also provide a means to overcome an organization's lack of political power and/or political weakness. "...The low-income parts of our population would have to do what all minority organizations, small nations, labor unions, political parties or anything small, must do- seek out allies. The pragmatics of power will not allow any alternative" (Alinksy 1972:184).

Observers have noted that NGOs throughout the former Soviet Union have developed strong ties with other organizations, especially with international organizations. Organizations that promote the environment, human rights, and women's issues have been particularly successful at building ties to local, regional, and international groups. The Social-Ecological Union, an established umbrella organization, links environmental groups throughout the former Soviet Union (Powell 2002). This well-established organization provides a conduit for information about issues and funding. In addition, it coordinates the activities of Russian environmental NGOs at the regional and national levels.

Professional associations are also showing signs of developing strong internal and external linkages. The Russian Guild of Realtors has been building strong ties with the National Realtors Association (US) to facilitate education, trade, and investment (Smith 1997). Similarly, the

Ukraine Realtors Association has developed strong external ties with other real estate professionals (Realtors.org). Through these linkages, post-Soviet professionals have access to relevant information and to opportunities to forge new business arrangements with the international community.

Richter (2002) found that Russian women's organizations are sustained by a strong network of national and regional groups. It was also found that these feminist organizations did a particularly good job of connecting with women from the former state women's organizations. The intermingling of feminist groups and former state women's association members allows for perspectives to be shared and new connections are made between the government and society as a whole. These types of inter-sectoral multinational linkages provide new opportunities and strengthen the potential of associations.

#### *Normative linkages*

Relationships with other organizations, which provide prestige to the organization, represent normative linkages. Normative linkages are the ways an organization incorporates values and doctrines that connect it with larger social and institutional trends (Stanfield 1979; Esman 1972). They may include taking part voluntarily in an accrediting and certification program or incorporating well established best practices into an organization. These connections and means of structuring the organization provide become a type of myth and ceremony that adds legitimacy to an organization (DiMaggio & Powell 1983; Meyer & Rowan 1977).

#### *Communication linkages*

The degree to which an association gets its messages out to the membership, general public, and politicians define the purpose of communication linkages. Communication linkages emphasize the publicity of the association—newspaper articles, TV, radio programs, and conferences organized. Effective organizations strategically plan on how, when, and where they will use public communication to make people aware of their projects and activities (McLaughlin 2001:42).

Post-Soviet associations frequently have the propensity to develop internal communication linkages with other activists at the expense of reaching out to potential members (Richter 2002). In general, associations in the former Soviet Union have lacked strategies to increase public involvement. Foreign donors have only placed limited money in outreach campaigns further exacerbating the lack of involvement by local citizens in post-Soviet associations. However, members of the environmental community are beginning to recognize this problem (Henry 2002).

## **2.4 Institutional Context**

Associations are effective when they react and adapt to their changing institutional environment. Historical, institutional, and legal factors shape the formation and development of organizations. These norms, rules, and conventions determine the resources and define the environment in which organizations are formed and operate (Scott 1994).

Associations form and grow within the legal and institutional framework of the societies within which they operate. Salamon (2002:7) describes the importance of the legal definitions of non-profit organizations in the US, in particular the legislation establishing their exemption from the payment of certain taxes, and the eligibility of certain types of non-profit associations to receive tax deductible contributions from individuals and businesses as “a reflection of the fact that they are expected to serve broad public purposes as opposed to the interests and needs of the members of the organization alone.” These legal and institutional realities create opportunities and limits to which organizations must adapt.

Legacies of the Soviet Union have created a people who are disconnected from the state and most other organizations. The Soviet Union was not based supremely on the rule of law but instead on the collective will of the party. Citizens from the czarist times and throughout the Soviet Union could not rely on the state to provide for its citizens. The state often failed the citizenry in dramatic ways or put unreasonable demands upon it. Unlike other nations that are non-democratic in nature, the Soviet regime did not tolerate any organizations outside the official sanction of the party state (Rose 1995). This state organizational totality meant that common

citizens could not rely on organizations to insulate them from the capricious demands of the state, but instead needed to rely on individual level relationships for such services. Historically, common citizens called on one another for assistance in times of need. They continue to call on one another when it is often not possible to rely on the state. These social networks, coupled with distrust in the state, have been cited as the reason for the apathetic involvement in these groups by citizens of the former Soviet Union (Aberg 2000; Aberg and Sandberg 2003; Rose 1995).

Throughout the former Soviet Union tax laws that facilitate private and corporate giving have only recently been instated (Cerny 2003). These tax laws provide opportunities for corporate giving, but tend to be very limited as to what types of organizations can apply (Cerny 2003; Sundstrom 2002). The inflexibility of the Russian tax code reduces potential donations for Russian associations. Since the list of charitable organizations that are tax exempt is so small, many businesses lack incentive to donate to these causes.

### 3. Summary

This review of the main threads of organizational effectiveness as applied to membership-based associations where members are concerned with land issues, can be summarized with the following expectations:

Association effectiveness is defined as the ability of the association 1) to attract and maintain active members, and 2) to influence public policies coherent with the goals of the association's members.

Factors which condition association effectiveness and which are to some degree capable of being developed by the association include:

- Organizational traits (strong board, charismatic leader, passionate staff) that promote effective outcomes;

- Deliberative actions (membership services, continuously create a transparent organization, and self evaluation) that are adeptly executed;
- External linkages (facilitative, normative, collaborative, and communication linkages) that are established and managed effectively;
- Institutional context to which associations astutely adapt.

The shift from public to private ownership of land and other property has had tremendous consequences with regard to income distribution, market development, and for the quality of the environment. The weak ties of most associations, including land-related associations to the citizenry is the most pressing issue in the development of a civil society that can address the consequences of rapid land privatization. Land related associations in the former Soviet Union are frequently ineffective at increasing membership, but one should not lose hope. Some associations are developing strategies to promote membership and to engage in lobbying, as shown by the example of the Association for the Protection of Landowners' Rights in Georgia, an organization that has been effective in lobbying for property rights issues with the Georgian Government (see Reed 2004 and Amonashvili/Stanfield 2002). Local environmental organizations in post-Soviet countries are achieving a level of success in involving the public in local environmental issues (Henry 2002). Associations of real estate brokers are emerging to promote the industry and the development of post-soviet land markets (see Flynn 2003 for an example from Georgia).

Empirical studies are urgently needed on associations that are overcoming the obstacles to becoming true membership and advocacy associations. If an understanding can be developed of these new organizational approaches these finding could be used to promote the development of land-related associations that are necessary to achieve equitable income distribution, to preserve the environmental quality of the land, and to promote the types of markets that will make these social outcomes possible.



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