

Environmental issues in Kazakhstan: ecological movements

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Abstract. The article deals with various aspects of ecological associations and non-governmental organizations' activities, as well as the state projects in Kazakhstan. A special attention is focused on the analysis of the events held to improve an ecological situation and also prove the need of reforming this sector in order to increase the efficiency of undertaken measures. The authors conclude the article with possible mechanisms of a larger involvement of citizens and increase the efficiency of NGO's activity in the ecological sphere.

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Introduction

Environmental problem is one of the global issues in the contemporary international relations. According to expert conclusions, environmental situation in several regions of the Republic of Kazakhstan nowadays is not only unfavorable, but even catastrophic. The most dangerous demonstrations of today's environmental crisis are oil pollution of the Caspian Sea, reduction of water in Aral Sea, a harmful effect of the former Semipalatinsk nuclear test site [1].

While considering environmental problems of the modern world we cannot ignore the question of ecological movements, their origin, nature, role and importance. They should be regarded as one of the varieties of a wide range of new social movements, a phenomenon of modern times, appeared due to the development of democratic rights and the expansion of people's political rights and freedoms. Ecological movement is based on environmental protection, appeared in the late 60's of the XX century [2].

In Kazakhstan, this process began its development in the late 80's [3]. During this period, the society was mainly focused on environmental problems of Semipalatinsk nuclear test site, Aral Sea region, etc. One of the brightest examples of social movements of that period is the "Nevada-Semipalatinsk" [4] movement that achieved a shutdown of the site and set international relations, but also gave a start to an intensive development of social and ecological movements in the country.

Methodology

Analysts believe that the current ecological situation has institutional character [5]. It is formed under the influence of one institute of production and should be solved by another one, particularly, the state, without special role of civil society, environmental movements and non-governmental

organizations. However, we believe that public social institutes are one of the main social mechanisms influencing on formation and development of an ecological situation. Therefore the interdisciplinary researches [6] including the philosophical, sociological, legal and natural science knowledge is getting more topical in researching environmental movements.

Main part

The state's social-oriented policy and the course towards democratization in the independent Kazakhstan made the public sector necessarily to be developed as a main possibility of involving concerned citizens to solve global, public, social and ecological problems during transitional period.

Thanks to the active promotion by the government and international community, numerous organizations, associations, centers, unions, foundations, movements corresponding to all the characteristics of civil society developed since the time of gaining the independence.

Moreover, partnership mechanisms between the state authorities and the non-governmental sector were created, a social Government procurement for organization of socially important events was set for NGOs in Kazakhstan. As a result, the number of registered NGOs only in Almaty exceeded for more than 5000 [7].

For example, only in Almaty appeared a number of various public organizations more or less engaged in solving environmental issues, they are: "Kazakh Society for Nature Protection" NGO, Socio-Ecological Fund "NGO ECOforum", "Guldenu" NGO, Institute of Ecology and Sustainable Development, "Tau" Ecological Center" NGO, "Ecology of biosphere" laboratory, "NGO Ecological Forum's Resource Center" NGO, Ecological Union for associations and enterprises of Kazakhstan

“Tabigat”, “Atom” NGO, “Center for sustainable production and consumption” Corporate Fund, “Ecological center” Fund and many others.

In addition to state regulations, globalization of ecological problems requires an active participation of non-governmental ecological organizations and ecological movements on the global, national and regional levels.

NGOs’ active environmental activities in the Republic of Kazakhstan are caused mainly by the unfavorable ecological situation in some regions, insufficient performance of local authorities in solving environmental issues. This explains the fact of appearance of about 300 NGOs dealing with environmental issues [8]. The “greens” are mainly engaged in the research and practical work in the field of environmental protection, environmental education, radiation safety, support for civil environmental initiatives, the problems of population and ecosystems of Balkhash lake, Aral and Caspian Seas. Currently, the process of consolidation in this sector of civil society is taking place, “Kazakhstan’s NGO Environmental Forum” was created in 1997.

The creation of that Forum as a dialogue platform for all environmental NGOs and government institutions, intensified the collaboration process between them. In 1998-2000 there were organized annual environmental campaigns in order to clean up rivers. In 2000 was signed a Memorandum of cooperation between the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection and the Special Working Group of Kazakhstan’s NGOs. In 2001 environmental NGOs together with the state performed a campaign against the import of nuclear waste to the territory of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Thus, Kazakhstani NGOs gained some experience in the protection of the environment. Several non-governmental organizations are involved in the creation of environment protection legislation and monitor its implementation (e.g. “Green Salvation”). For several years “Kaspyi Tabigaty” Atyrau NGO sharply criticized the activities of OKIOC and Tengizshevroil companies in the Caspian Sea, forcing them to solve problems of a negative impact of their activities on the ecological situation in the region. During 2002, the Ecological Union “Tabigat”, Karaganda Ecocenter and other “green” NGOs set on a large anti-nuclear campaign, organized public hearings concerning the problem of import and disposal of radioactive waste on the territory of different towns of Kazakhstan.

Today, a large number of local NGOs can present themselves in front of international organizations as competent partners for cooperation in the development that can be an independent alternative to public institutions.

Among the most significant achievements of environmental NGOs it is necessary to note the development of environmental education. Kazakh environmental NGOs’ important activity is the environment protection, which is a crucial issue of sustainable regional development. For example, in the framework of a government initiative on the “green economy”, the Civic Alliance of Kazakhstan (consolidated Institute of NGOs) began to develop its own concept on possible mechanisms for the participation of non-governmental organizations in the implementation of this direction. Thus, the Institute of Ecology and Sustainable Development has developed a pilot projects of environmental education for middle and high school levels, formed the so-called “green” bags, collections of data on the natural diversity of Kazakhstan and also developed thematic plans of measures.

According to the global research of the Yale University Center for Environmental Law and Policy, in 2012, the environmental performance index in the country achieved point of 32.94 and it is the 129th among 132 countries [9]. This indicates that the activities of Kazakh environmental NGOs are not sufficiently effective.

According to some experts, the environmental movement in Kazakhstan has not yet formed till the end. For example, an ecologist S. Mambetalin in his interview to Deutsche Welle says that due to the fact that Kazakhstan is a country with the raw materials industry, “green parties” are prohibited under any pretext, in other words, any social movement without governmental support is foredoomed to failure [10]. K. Kreiser and L. Lachmann also agree with opinions of the NGOs’ ineffectiveness in solving urgent environmental problems. According to them, the state does not allow the impact on the important national decisions of legislative and executive authority, which reduces the powers of NGOs at a low level [8, p. 23].

Insufficiently developed environmental movements and low efficiency of their activities are closely associated with common problems and difficulties for the whole domain of non-governmental organizations. For example, NGOs’ unsystematic activities should be noted here. Most of the activities represent only one-off event, mostly aimed for obtaining the necessary informational occasion rather than the solution of the problem. This case is also explained by the fact that the leaders of non-governmental organizations often aim for advertising themselves and obtaining various kinds of political dividends. Most of the registered NGOs are staffed by 2-3 persons.

Despite the fact that the amounts of funding with the social government procurement for

organizing social projects, including on the environmental themes did not live up to the expectations of the emergence of organizations that could solve the problems of modern society. They simply win in the state tenders.

However, among the total number of different NGOs there is a certain percentage of those actually working and “experienced” organizations, engaged in their main activity for quite a long time.

The main obstacles for the regular work of NGOs are successful innovations in the legislation of the Republic of Kazakhstan. So, for example, after winning the tender for accommodating socially important services, at the beginning the non-governmental organization is required to add a certain percentage of finances from the total cost of the project [11]. Given that the NGO is primarily a non-profit organization, which has no income of their own in fact, this measure becomes “unaffordable” for most of the organizations.

These circumstances at the “local” market of funding sources, namely toughening of the rules of participation in public tenders create preconditions to Kazakh NGOs to receive grants from foreign foundations.

Despite this situation, there are NGOs funded by the state. One of the notable examples is the creation of youth labor groups “Zhasyl EI”. This initiative aimed to recruit high school, college and university students was presented almost in the whole Kazakhstan. During the first 5 years of their work, the number of active participants in the program achieved 114 000 people [12]. The goal was to renew green implantations, to clean riverbeds, to organize mass Saturday cleaning events, to create and implement different projects on environmental protection for youth, as well as to teach a respect for the environment to the younger generation.

NGO Forum in Almaty 2013 entitled to “the green economy” [13] showed the presence of a whole range of environmental associations in Kazakhstani megalopolis. Thus, during the opened exhibition were presented different kinds of projects for environmental education and training, energy and heat saving, development of alternative sources of energy, municipal solid waste recycling, etc. As the result of the Forum, a memorandum was signed to establish a coalition of non-governmental organizations on the implementation of measures of “green economy”. It is possible that implementation of this memorandum will help to consolidate various types of environmental NGOs in Kazakhstan and make them work much more efficiently.

Conclusion

The environmental movement in Kazakhstan passed a way from a complete denial of environmental associations to their recognition by the state and society as well as to the cooperation with them. Nowadays, the development in this direction is intensive owing to the increasing government support and funding for this sector.

However, the contradictions remain in the mentioned sphere, a lack of system of activities that adversely affect the overall picture of the environmental movement development in the country, organization of non-systematic, one-off events with no results have a less impact on the public involvement in such events.

Recommendations

Given the current situation with the development and implementation of social initiatives, as well as the increased activity of non-governmental organizations working also on the environmental issues, we think that it is necessary to introduce a new and effective forms of interaction mechanisms between NGOs and public authorities at all levels, responsible for the environment protection. It is known that the strengthening of civic institutions in the modern society allows to create conditions to increase people’s quality of life, ensuring their rights, freedoms and legitimate interests in the formulation and implementation process of various government programs and initiatives, develops civil society and social legal state, increases the social responsibility of authorities and business communities.

Under this mechanism, we consider as appropriate to provide the following measures:

- An infrastructure development in the cooperation between NGOs and state authorities, the establishment of and support for the work of Councils for cooperation with NGOs in Akimats (Mayor offices), meetings, working groups of other institutions of intersectional interaction with state authorities, the organization of discussions, public hearings, public receptions and other forms of dialogue and exchange between the government, society and business on a wide range of issues, including the environmental security of the region;
- Ensuring the participation of NGOs in the legislative activities, their involvement in the formation of sectoral target programs;
- The development of informational-educative and expert-consultation forms of interaction between NGOs and authorities, organization and provision of expertise-analytical activities of NGOs;
- The creation of mechanisms for public expertise and public control in the socio-economic

development of the country and its regions;

- Extension of evaluation criteria for NGOs activity efficiency in the Republic of Kazakhstan, including their participation in cross-sector social partnership;

- Making a monitoring research on the effectiveness of the NGOs, public authorities and business community interaction in solving various problems;

- Further study and application of foreign experience in social partnership and public self-governing.

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