

THE ROLE OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS IN DECISION MAKING AND POLICY MAKING

Drita Memeti

^{1}Department of Sociology, Faculty of Philosophy
Corresponding author e-mail: drita.memeti@unite.edu.mk*

Abstract

Democracy is a comprehensive system that represents the general will of the citizens, alluding to their co-governance at higher levels of state institutions. In reality, we are facing a completely different situation, since in North Macedonia the general will of the citizens is not sufficiently articulated at the highest state levels. Given this, it is necessary to create NGOs, the sectors of which serve as a bridge between the interest of citizens and policy-making bodies.

In North Macedonia, there is a large number of civic organizations that defend the general interest of the society, ranging from organizations that advocate for gender, religious, national, age groups' issues, workers' organizations, ecological organizations, even organizations that protect animal rights.

This study aims to highlight the current role of civil society engagement in the decision-making and policy-making process in our country by using the analysis as a breakdown method and thus this activity of local organizations will be compared in the final part of the paper with the dynamics and activity of various organizations around the world.

Keywords: Democracy, citizens, general will, social groups, non-governmental organizations

1. Introduction

The Republic of North Macedonia is a democratic state that aims to represent the general will of society in higher state instances. This is also confirmed by the Constitution as the highest document of this state, where the very first words in the Constitution are democracy, human rights and the dignified representation of every citizen in this state. But, based on the everyday situation, we cannot say that the realization of democracy in our country has been or is at a genuine level, the institutions still neglect the legal obligations to respect citizens' rights and their involvement in decision making. Therefore, there is a need to create a non-governmental sector which will serve as a corrector of governmental mistakes in order to represent citizens fairly in the concrete institutions.

This paper covers most of the activities undertaken by the civil sector to raise public awareness of the rights they are entitled as citizens of a democratic state, which are also explained through explicit analysis, analogical induction, method of concretization, case study method and descriptive method.

The paper also provides a critical review of the power of non-governmental organizations to participate in decision-making and policy-making, analyzing:

- Concrete activities of non-governmental organizations
- Involvement of citizens in non-governmental organizations
- The current number of organizations
- The most important initiatives undertaken by NGOs.

2. The concept of general will and civil society

The general will has been subject of debate and discussion since ancient Greece, but the ways in which it has been defined and articulated have changed over time, depending on the ideologists, philosophers, and thinkers of the concrete times.

Initially, general will meant the people as a whole and as such expecting to be represented in the state, thus counting the state as the highest institution that would protect and ensure the rights and freedom of the individual.

But the state has historically been subject to various political systems, often questioning the right representation of citizens. This created a gap, the gap between the general interest of citizens and the state as the highest body of representation. This space was filled by the activism of ordinary citizens who were not directly involved in policy-making and decision-making.

Such initiatives were undertaken by well-organized groups that were labeled as civil society, later to be referred to as non-profit or non-governmental organizations. Historically, communities have been forming non-profit organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and other similar institutions to provide human services, promote grass-roots economic development, protect civil rights, and pursue other important goals to local communities but left unattended to by the state. (Habiba A. Ibrahim, 2017)

Despite the naming, the idea remains the same. The main purpose of the establishment and functioning of non-governmental organizations is the equitable representation of citizens in a democratic state. For Plato and Aristotle, civil society must be the state itself, since they believe that the state must perfectly represent the rights of the individual at that level as the individual would represent himself.

Scholars like John Locke and John Stuart Mill saw the role of the state as limited, assuming that the state would be stronger if civil society was weak. Another view sees civil society and the state as supporting each other. Alexis de Tocqueville, the French aristocrat, was impressed by the small number of Americans in the city, who would organize to solve community problems. Robert Putnam updated Tocqueville's theory, saying that civil society equips individuals with cooperative behaviors and problem-solving and thereby improves governance. (UNDP, 2008).

And later Habermas links the existence of civil society with the need for communication. According to him, a society that can communicate easily can realize its rights and freedoms within a democratic state. In other words, Habermas points out that, in order to develop the most perfect public-political communication in the full sense of the word, it must be free, argued and developed on an equal participation. (Jurgen, H., 1984).

3. The role of NGOs in citizen integration in state institutions

Generally, four levels of citizen involvement in the decision-making process are recognized, starting from the lowest to the highest:

- information,
- consultation,
- dialogue and
- partnership. (KEEN, 2018)

Regarding the first level of citizens' engagement in the decision-making process, there is advancement in our country. The rise of this level has also been positively influenced by the social networks through which state leaders communicate in a direct and immediate form to the mass by sharing news in real time. Despite the advancement of information, other levels of citizen involvement in state institutions are "frozen" and in this regard we do not have any mobility, as citizens definitely are not *consulted* on decisions made by the legislator, the citizens are not *asked* at all about dissatisfactions, demands and their needs and lastly the citizens do not count as a strategic partner in ratifying any executive agreement. Based on this scheme of integration of citizens in state institutions, we can freely judge that the need to activate the non-governmental sector through non-governmental organizations is indispensable, since democracy in principle means the representation of all the people. In the time we are living in, the constitution of the state has changed, now we are not dealing with an ancient city-state in which direct democracy could be organized and thus citizens were given the opportunity to be decision-makers.

We are now confronted with the concept of a multicultural, multiethnic state that encompasses a larger territory inhabited by a large number of citizens. Direct democracy is very difficult to achieve (it can only be achieved through a referendum), so activating non-governmental organizations is the only way through which citizens can be represented and preserve their identity, as Habermas emphasizes in his book *The Dialectics of Secularization*.

As democratic citizens, they impose laws themselves, in which they, as private citizens of society, can preserve their cultural and worldview identities and mutually respect each other. This new circumstance of democratic states, civil society, and the subcultural authenticity is the key to a fair understanding of the two motives that compete today, though they had to complement each other. (Habermas, Jürgen, H. 2007). Therefore, even in political sphere, NGOs are increasingly being accorded key role in national democratization processes and in the development of the civil society. (Rodger, W., 1993).

4. Capacities of North Macedonian NGOs

NGOs are private, not-for-profit organizations that aim to serve particular societal interests by focusing advocacy and/or operational efforts on social, political and economic goals, including equity, education, health, environmental protection and human rights. (Allard, G., & Martinez, C., 2008).

According to the Central Registry data, in April 2018 in the Republic of North Macedonia there were 8780 registered non-governmental organizations, compared to 2015 when the number of organizations was 14.245, but only 4148 were active. (<https://www.nvosorabotka.gov.mk>).

These organizations are of different fields as in the following table:

Table 1. Field of activities on which NGOs operate in North Macedonia

Democracy and human rights	Against violence and tolerance
Children, youth and students	Education and science
Economic development	Customer organizations
Ethnic groups	Development of civil society
Women and common questions	Rural development
Environment and nature	Social care
Health	Sport, hobby and recreation
Information	Elderly persons
Culture	Professional organizations
People with special needs	Others

Based on this overview, we can conclude that there is a large number of non-governmental organizations operating in our country which are based on the general interest of citizens and representation in state institutions as well as the provision of human rights that are legally required.

Except the fact that non-governmental organizations protect human rights and freedoms, they also have employer capacity. According to the data from the official website of the Government of North Macedonia in 2018, the total number of employees in the NGO was 2058, which increased for 3.3% since 2015 (1990 employees). (<https://www.nvosorabotka.gov.mk>).

5. Good practices from the participation of Non-Governmental Organizations participation

NGOs play an important and indisputable role in integrating citizens into policy-making and decision-making processes. The participation of citizens in the decision-making process is directly related to the principle of good governance. It leads to higher transparency and accountability of the institutions. (BCNL, 2015) Over the years, it has been proven that major changes in society have been achieved on the initiative of these organizations.

In the following part we will mention some concrete cases where changes in government policies have taken place due to non-governmental sector initiatives.

Kezharoski Case: (2013), the North Macedonian Journalists Association, supported by many other journalists and NGOs, came to defense of the daily newspaper “Nova Makedonija” journalist, Tomislav Kezharoski, who was accused for an article written 5 years before, respectively in 2008, where, according to the prosecution, Kezharoski had revealed the identity of a protected witness. To protect the journalist, protests were organized, as well as a petition addressed to the Supreme Court. After this citizen’s reaction, the Supreme Court sent the case back for retrial. (www.znm.org.mk)

Jugohrom Case: (2015), Air pollution is one of the main issues people face with in our country. To further aggravate this situation, the factory "Jugohrom" operated for years in the Municipality of Jegunovce, the Municipality of Tetova region, without any environmental standards or proper filters. As such, it became the main air pollutant of Tetovo Municipality region. In the absence of concrete actions by state institutions, the non-governmental sector aiming to raise public awareness alarmed about this situation many times, but there were no results and these demands were not taken into account nor by the Municipality of Tetovo or the Ministry of Ecology. Therefore, a number of NGOs, led by ECO-Guerrilla, organized mass protests demanding installation of filters or to termination of operation of the Jugohrom plant. After this reaction, the Government decided to terminate its operation. (<https://sh.time.mk/c/950425819d/protesta-kunder-ndotjes-ne-tetove.html>)

The case of the "Colorful Revolution": (2016), "No justice, no peace" - was the motto of this "revolution" organized by the Citizens' Movement for Protection of Macedonia (CMPM) where a large NGOs acted together, and was later supported by several Macedonian opposition parties as well as various ambassadors accredited in the country. The initiative was launched following a series of scandalous government decisions led by the then Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski and President Gjorge Ivanov. After many protests and civic activism in various cities, the Government fell and was preceded by a Technical Government deriving from the Przhino Agreement. Also, the decisions of President Ivanov were ignored by the institutions or were abolished in some way by the country's courts (<http://fax.al/read/news/3697450/11673684/lqmm-sot-proteston-ne-6-qytete-te-maqedonise>).

The Maternity leave Case: (2017), a group of Non-Governmental Organizations took the initiative to amend the law on maternity leave extending it from 9 to 18 months. As part of this initiative, 10,000 signatures were collected for the petition to reach the Parliament agenda. Unfortunately, the claim was rejected due to legal errors, but although it was not approved, it sparked a great deal of debate in the Assembly and the general public, increasing the employers' awareness of the necessity for maternity leave. This led some private companies to, at least, respect the nine-month leave. (<https://sh.time.mk/c/c56306718f/maqedoni-refuzohet-iniciativa-qytetare-per-zgijaten-e-pushimit-te-lindjes-video.html>).

Non-governmental organizations in our country and worldwide

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) play an essential role in promoting sustainable development. They are decisive actors in the formation of international law, sometimes even more than some states, so their actions must be described to understand the international legal political arena. (Varela, M. (2013).

The role of non-governmental organizations is manifold and indisputable even internationally. But if we compare our country's organizations with those of the world, the difference is clear. Non-governmental organizations operating at world level have managed to make major changes in daily politics, undertaking special initiatives, depending on the issue that needs to be solved.

Following are two of the many organizations that operate and change the world.

PETA, an animal rights organization opposing hunting, fishing and animal testing, recently launched an interesting campaign in collaboration with fashion houses, voluntarily posting many models who wanted to convey the message that they will not use animal skin for their clothing.

Amnesty International, a human rights organization, has launched a so-called "Courageous" campaign aimed at protecting human rights in any state where it is said to be violated or infringed. The organization recently added Donald Trump to its list of human rights abusers.

6. Conclusion

Non-governmental organizations in every democratic country are important, almost on par with the state bodies themselves, as the state is the highest institution of legal representation of citizens and organizations are the constant overseers of such representation. Concerning our country, as elaborated in the paper, there is a considerable number of active organizations in the country and if they cooperate more actively, they can initiate very positive changes in many spheres of life or raise awareness at a different level.

To reinforce this thesis, some concrete cases were mentioned where NGO initiatives did not only protect the citizens' rights, but they also, when necessary, influenced judicial decisions in case of potential violations that may occur, or oppose decisions of executive bodies, whether local or national.

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