

New Civil Society Developments in Siberia

by Gennady Aidaev

The mayor of Ulan-Ude in Buryatia, Russia, discusses why and how non-governmental organizations are partnering with government officials to reach out to the public and achieve positive social outcomes for all segments of society.

In a true civil society, there should be collaboration of citizens and authorities. Also, effective and successful development of a country depends on a dialogue among civil organizations, governmental structures, and the private sector. The result of this collaboration is the recognition of our mutual human rights and freedom.

Ulan-Ude City, the capital of Buryatia, is part of the post-Soviet landscape in the Russian Federation. The strategic aim of our municipal social policy is to approximate the national standard of living through implementation of special programs for the region. We recognize that community work should be based on a two-way dialogue between governing authorities and citizens to set priorities in addressing community problems. The most urgent community problems in our city are as follows:

- ◆ Child disability and rehabilitation
- ◆ Poverty and single parent families
- ◆ Drugs, alcohol, and smoking
- ◆ Homeless children and orphans
- ◆ Socially driven diseases
- ◆ Social and psychological problems in older people
- ◆ Education, upbringing, employment, and housing for the younger generation.

Thematic Years

During the last several years, the municipal government initiated and developed a number of social programs that positively affected the community, the most important and universal of which include the following:

- ◆ *Year of Youth 2001.* A special program supporting youth initiatives.
- ◆ *Year of the Child 2002.* A program that made all children a target audience.
- ◆ *Family Year 2003.* A special municipal program aimed at preserving family traditions, promoting mutual understanding, restoring salutary child rearing practices, and rendering assistance during the transformation period.
- ◆ *Year of Health 2004.* A program directed at public health and popularizing sports and physical fitness.
- ◆ *Senior Citizens Year 2005.* A year devoted to the sixtieth anniversary of the Victory in the Great Patriotic War and support of the older generation.
- ◆ *Year of Culture 2006.* A year devoted to the 340th anniversary of Ulan-Ude City.
- ◆ *National policy.* A project aimed at preserving peaceful relationships and harmony among the nations of the Baikal region.

These thematic years emphasize certain main ideas that help public officials and the private sector interact with the public. Related campaigns are designed and developed to address a specific issue or number of issues, solve problems, and correct or improve living conditions in Ulan-Ude. These activities are all components of the entire system—a special approach to implementing municipal social policy.

We also have projects in the fields of education, youth policy, sports and recreation, library services, healthcare, and national and civic pride. Moreover, relations with civil, religious, national, cultural, and political organizations are a special emphasis in our work, aimed at establishing contacts with citizens, studying their opinions and attitudes toward municipal policy, and encouraging their involvement in civic life.

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Emergence of Nonprofit Organizations

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Russia and other post-Soviet transition republics play an important role in the development of civil society. Russian society now finds itself in the midst of transformation and reforms, much of which began more than ten years ago. As a result of further democratization, new types of nonprofit organizations also appeared.

Nowadays, studies of NGOs as an essential part of Russian society focus more on quantitative characteristics than on their social functions. More emphasis is needed on qualitative characteristics and contributions, their dynamics, and problems of development in the process of transformation. Also, analyzing their relational and collaborative behavior in social policy development and implementation is important.

The Republic of Buryatia today features more than 1,000 registered nonprofit organizations—more than half of them of a social service nature. The second largest group of NGOs works in culture, religion, and education. Next, a well-respected and powerful group of NGOs are environmental organizations struggling to protect and preserve Lake Baikal (recognized as a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization World Heritage site). The main reasons for the great number of NGOs in our region (which has a population of no more than one million) are favorable internal and external circumstances, such as lack of ideological barriers, strong legislative support, active citizen participation in public life, and significant foreign philanthropy.

Recent polls reveal that

- ◆ 61 percent of the region's NGOs have stable, cooperative ties with local authorities;
- ◆ 75 percent have an active dialogue with their municipal-level counterparts; and
- ◆ 60 percent are not satisfied with their local government relationship.

To explain these seemingly mixed results, respondents note that they owe mainly to the local authorities' limited use of NGO proposals. Nevertheless, NGOs have recently raised their dialogue with both the community and government officials to a new level.

As for the Ulan-Ude City administration, we also should be much more active in reaching out to NGOs—particularly as the governmental entity for the

region's capital. Some evidence of this outreach includes the following:

- ◆ Cooperative agreements are now being signed with all NGOs.
- ◆ NGO representatives now act as city council members.
- ◆ NGO representatives now serve as experts in the formation, implementation, and evaluation of social programs in education, social care, and youth policy.
- ◆ The city administration and NGOs now regularly share information with each other.
But our cooperation can be much improved.

Structural Change

Committee for Social Policy

Among structural elements in the city government, the Committee for Social Policy is responsible for interactions with NGOs and their involvement in social policy. The Committee's goals are to

- ◆ study the social process, phenomena, and issues; make a prognosis; and reach effective management decisions;
- ◆ gather socially significant information for analysis, make effective public management use of analyses through proposals, consult with the city's leadership, and improve social programs; and
- ◆ coordinate a variety of efforts to enhance the quality of life and cooperate with NGOs and other structures to achieve improved social policy outcomes.

Community Charity Foundation

In 2005, local civic leaders established the first Community Charity Foundation, with the participation of the Ulan-Ude City administration as a full partner. After a year's operation, the foundation has effectively attracted public attention to the most urgent problems of the population and raised money in support of public initiatives. Already, we can point to social projects implemented, initiatives launched, playgrounds constructed, and other objectives achieved. We also can evaluate positive outcomes and changed public opinion.

Grant Competition

Another important and effective addition to the relational landscape is the grant competition used widely and successfully by authorities for NGO and state

Get in Touch!

The author hopes that the management techniques of Ulan-Ude City have much in common with the efforts of our public-sector colleagues around the world. We all face similar challenges in reaching out to the public, and we are eager to learn from others who already have had success.

Please share your perspectives, experiences, and any feedback you want to pass along on the efforts underway in Buryatia. Send them to soc@u-ude.ru.

Thank you!

supported noncommercial organizations. The goal of the grant program is to help community groups undertake social projects of their own design. Last year, we funded eleven successful projects directed toward the region's elderly population, with emphasis on such matters as healthcare, transportation, communication, commercial education, and community service. This year, we continue using a community-based approach; the grant competition is tied to the Year of Culture 2006 and devoted to the 340th anniversary of Ulan-Ude City.

Planning

Clearly, local authorities need NGO assistance and collaboration in efforts to improve the quality of life for residents. A section of our strategic five-year plan is devoted to cooperation with the NGO community and its involvement in social service delivery as part of the competitive grant-making process. The main role of NGOs in this regard is to augment the government's capabilities by

- ◆ adding stability to the social service system,
- ◆ providing consumer feedback to local officials,
- ◆ assisting local officials in social services planning and selection of priorities, and
- ◆ helping resolve conflicts.

All these tasks are priority items in the process of transformation to democracy. NGOs can help people adjust to new realities, effect social change, and lay the groundwork for civil society. Their effectiveness benefits from certain internal and external conditions, such

as political and financial stability, conformance to ethical norms, and a high level of professionalism in the governmental and non-governmental community.

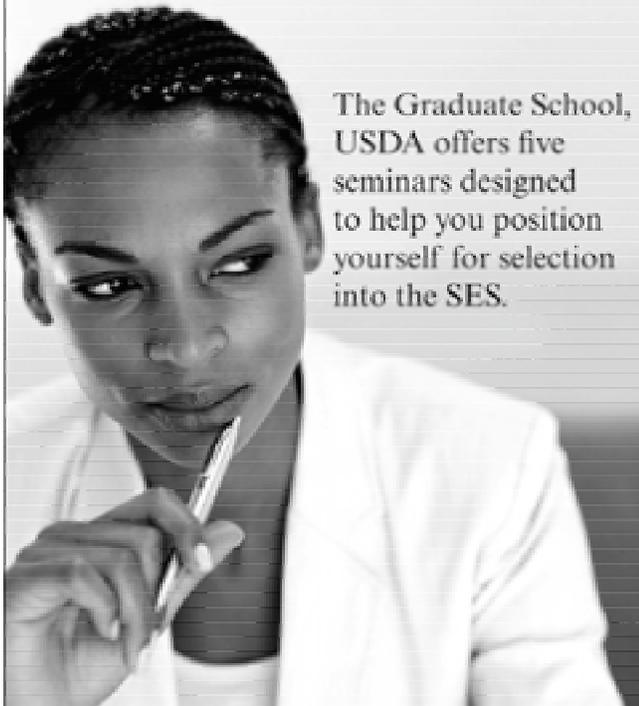
International Assembly of Capitals and Cities

Municipal authorities are much more successful if they work in collaboration with NGOs. In this regard, the Year of Culture 2006 in Ulan-Ude will include an international conference on municipal social policy and the public under the umbrella of the International Assembly of Capitals and Cities (MAG). For three years, Ulan-Ude has been a member of this organization, which unites fifty-nine capitals and large cities of the former Soviet Union. On June 30 and July 1, 2006, our city hosted the conference, and delegations from different MAG member cities came and participated in a variety of activities. The main theme of the conference was cooperation—with the public, NGOs, business

community, etc.—aimed at achieving common municipal social policy goals.

MAG member cities meet regularly to discuss common problems and solutions in the form of roundtables. Among issues commonly discussed are urban water supply, transportation, public service, social policy, and pollution. In our 340th anniversary year, we have suggested organizing the next MAG conference in Ulan-Ude to exchange views and practical experience on how to improve our efforts to serve the public. As a result, there was a formal proposal to declare next year's conference in Ulan-Ude part of the Year of Public Initiatives 2007. Financial support will be provided to NGOs for grassroots ideas on next year's activities under a special municipal program. The public sector is being encouraged to work in collaboration with NGOs to help in these grassroots initiatives. ❖

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