

PARTICIPATION OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS IN PROVIDING ASSISTANCE TO CITIZENS DURING THE PANDEMIC AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CSO

Activities of civil society organizations in the country were almost suspended during the quarantine. Members of these organizations, just like many other citizens (with the exception of a limited number of people working for state bodies and individuals engaged in some spheres of the economy) were faced with movement restrictions. Citizens were allowed to leave their homes for only 2-3 hours during the quarantine, and only to make food or medicine purchases or to receive emergency medical care. Moreover, even such a short opportunity of leaving home was possible only after receiving a permission via SMS.

During the times of quarantine regime suspension, activities to provide social and humanitarian services to people over age 65 could be carried out only by volunteer civil society organizations, as well as those NGOs that managed to get certain financial support. According to information received from The Council on State Support to NGOs, projects of 56 NGOs approved before the pandemic were reoriented to provide assistance to the most vulnerable families and elderly citizens. In other words, financial resources allocated by this state council for the implementation of 56 projects, were used to support population.

According to the information from The Council on State Support to NGOs, 204 NGOs provided (most of them with their own financial resources) food assistance to 11200 families and medicines to 6748 citizens in need, during pandemic days. Another 119 people in vital need of help were provided with financial assistance. Unfortunately, there is no precise information on the number of people over age 65 assisted by NGOs.

As you can see, according to official information, only 204 NGOs (approximately 5% of the total number registered by the Ministry of Justice of Azerbaijan) were active during the COVID-19 pandemic. Such an extremely insignificant participation of NGOs in helping the population is, of course, the result of an unfavorable legal climate for non-governmental organizations in the country. Therefore, for a more efficient use of the resources of civil society during periods of emergency situations in general, and, in particular, during periods of a pandemic, it is necessary first of all:

- 1) to consolidate efforts to improve the legal environment for civil society organizations and, in particular, for the smooth and fast registration of NGOs and, also, to ensure access to grants and donations, both from domestic non-governmental sources and foreign ones;*
- 2) to be persistent and seek permission from government agencies to operate freely in a pandemic, as is allowed for certain categories of government agencies and officials.*