

# Introduction



## **1. NGOs in Action – Combating Drug Addiction and Infectious Diseases across Central Asia and China**

The study of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in drug treatment and HIV prevention is important, particularly in regions like Central Asia and China. These areas face unique and complex challenges that make the role of NGOs indispensable in addressing public health crises. Understanding the contributions and methodologies of these organisations provides valuable insights into effective strategies and interventions that can be replicated and adapted worldwide.

In this introduction, I will outline the purpose of this publication. First, I will address the significant challenges posed by drug use and the spread of infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS, hepatitis C, and tuberculosis (TB) in China and Central Asia. Next, I will explore the crucial role that NGOs play in tackling these interrelated issues. Finally, I will provide an overview of the book's chapters and discuss its overall contribution to the ongoing debate.

In this volume, the term “non-governmental organisation” (NGO) is used broadly to encompass all forms of organised civil society organisations. NGOs, formed by citizens, aim to provide services or advocate for public policy improvements. They include community organisations, self-help groups, patient associations, foundations, and international NGOs, each representing different facets of civil society action.

Central Asia and China present distinct socio-political and cultural landscapes that influence the effectiveness of drug treatment and HIV prevention programmes. In Central Asia (CA), the intersection of political instability, economic challenges, and social stigma creates a multifaceted problem that requires innovative and flexible solutions. NGOs often step into the gap left by insuffi-

cient governmental programmes, providing crucial services such as harm reduction, education, and community support. In China, rapid modernisation and urbanisation have led to new patterns of drug use and a public health crisis. The Chinese government's collaboration with NGOs has allowed for the introduction of cutting-edge technologies and therapies, such as artificial intelligence and digital health platforms, which are transforming the landscape of addiction treatment and HIV prevention.

Globally, the response to HIV/AIDS relies heavily on the active participation of NGOs and civil society. In China, however, the government has traditionally been the primary provider of health and social services, limiting the role of NGOs compared to other countries (Kaufman 2011). Despite this, China has gradually opened the door for NGO participation in its response to HIV/AIDS, initially due to donor pressure and later due to official recognition of the crucial role these groups play in controlling the epidemic. Since the 1990s, Chinese AIDS-service NGOs have made significant contributions in areas such as access to medication, support for treatment compliance, outreach to marginalised groups, and efforts to reduce stigma (Kaufman 2020).

In March 2006, China's State Council announced the AIDS Prevention and Control Regulations, marking the country's first official legislation targeting HIV/AIDS control. This legislation, along with the Five-Year Action Plan to Control HIV/AIDS (2006–2010), represented a significant milestone in China's evolving response to the epidemic, which had begun over 20 years earlier with the identification of the first HIV case (Sheng/Cao 2008). The development of these measures was a complex process, involving early missteps, extensive domestic and international education, trial-and-error learning, debates, and scientific research. Initially, the government's approach focused on preventing the virus from entering the country, enforcing policies that restricted entry for HIV-positive individuals and criminalised behaviours such as drug use and homosexuality. However, as the epidemic spread, particularly among high-risk groups like injecting drug users (IDUs), former plasma donors (FPDs), and sex workers, the government adopted a more proactive and pragmatic stance.

In the early 2000s, China introduced comprehensive policies, including the "Four Frees and One Care" policy (Wu et. al 2007),

which provided free antiretroviral drugs, voluntary counselling and testing, and support for affected families. Nationwide campaigns were launched to improve blood safety, expand methadone maintenance treatment, and establish needle exchange programmes. Education and public awareness efforts were also ramped up, with initiatives like sex education in schools and condom promotion. Despite these advancements, challenges such as the stigma associated with HIV/AIDS and the need for consistent policy implementation at local levels persist. Overall, China's response has evolved into a committed effort to control the epidemic through prevention, treatment, and education, while addressing the needs of vulnerable populations (Wu et.al 2007).

However, the recent decline in donor funding, coupled with new government policies aiming to exert greater control over NGOs and their funding, threatens the survival and effectiveness of these organisations (Kaufman 2020). This development poses a significant challenge to the future of HIV/AIDS prevention, treatment, and care in China. Despite these challenges, China's AIDS response over the past 20 years has evolved from denial to becoming a global example, thanks to strong national leadership, evidence-based policies, and the involvement of NGOs. However, the shrinking political space for NGOs could undermine future progress in controlling the epidemic (Kaufman 2020).

NGOs in CA and China have pioneered various innovative approaches to combat drug addiction and prevent HIV. From the implementation of digital therapies and neuromodulation in China to grassroots community engagement and legislative advocacy in Central Asia, these organisations showcase a wide array of strategies tailored to local contexts. Studying these interventions provides a blueprint for addressing similar challenges in other parts of the world.

One of the most significant impacts of NGOs is their ability to build resilience within communities. By fostering self-organisation among people who use drugs, as seen in Germany and replicated in various forms in Central Asia, NGOs empower individuals to take charge of their recovery and advocate for their rights (UN-ODC 2022). This community-driven approach not only enhances the effectiveness of treatment programmes but also ensures their sustainability.

Central Asia and China are crucial regions for international efforts to tackle illicit drug trafficking and its related problems, such as dependence on illegal opioids, infectious diseases, and the rise of synthetic cannabinoids and stimulants, particularly methamphetamines in China. The “Northern Route” for heroin, morphine, and opium trafficking towards Russia and Europe makes CA vulnerable to both drug trafficking and local consumption (EM-CDDA 2015). Countries like Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan face high drug dependence rates and infectious diseases like HIV/AIDS and hepatitis among injecting drug users.

The effectiveness of harm reduction services in CA is hampered by a conservative legislative environment, which negatively impacts key populations, including those living with HIV/AIDS and people who inject drugs (Shadymanova/Musaeva 2022). To enhance these efforts, several concerns need addressing in future studies. Firstly, there is a significant lack of structural preventive measures, such as outpatient counselling, assistance services, and outreach programmes, which are currently sparse and primarily provided by NGOs of former drug users. Secondly, social work in the region is underdeveloped, especially in supporting drug-dependent individuals (Esimova et al. 2022).

International donors have positively influenced drug policy, treatment, and the prevention of infectious diseases in the region over the past decade. This has led to the adoption of modern harm reduction approaches by local NGOs, fostering social and professional initiatives aimed at encouraging local governments to adopt more humane drug policies. The “Bishkek Resolution” by the Central Asian Drug Action Programme (CADAP) project highlights the importance of collaboration among NGOs, community-based organisations, government agencies, and international donors in advancing social work with drug users (Stöver/Michels 2022).

Despite progress, hepatitis C (HCV) remains a significant issue, with prevalence rates among injecting drug users ranging from 60 % to 80 % in the CA region, yet treatment options are scarce and unaffordable (Stöver/Michels 2022). A key tool in harm reduction is the “trust point” or “friendly cabinet” model, which provides services like clean needles, condoms, and initial counselling, while also playing a crucial role in building trust within affected communities. These cab-

inets, located in AIDS centres and other medical facilities across CA, offer confidential and anonymous services, including HIV testing and prevention counselling (Bakirova 2022). Through peer-to-peer outreach, NGOs in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan provide essential services like safe behaviour education, harm reduction programmes, and overdose prevention to key populations, highlighting the critical role NGOs play in the region's harm reduction efforts (EHRA 2018).

Despite a recent decline in substance use due to effective prevention, treatment, and harm reduction measures, these regions still face significant challenges. Both CA and China support the United Nation's (UN) comprehensive approach to drug policy, emphasising prevention, treatment, education, after-care, rehabilitation, and social reintegration, as outlined in various UN declarations. While modern treatment standards exist, they lack institutionalisation and need further scaling-up. NGOs, vital to sustainable drug policies, remain weak and undersupported in these regions.

The insights gained from studying NGOs in Central Asia and China have far-reaching implications for global health policy and practice. Policymakers can draw lessons from the successes and challenges faced by these organisations, leading to more informed and effective drug treatment and HIV prevention strategies. Additionally, public health professionals and researchers can benefit from the wealth of knowledge generated by these studies, paving the way for new innovations and improvements in the field.

The importance of studying NGOs in drug treatment and HIV prevention cannot be overstated. The unique experiences and innovative approaches documented in Central Asia and China offer invaluable lessons for tackling these critical public health issues globally. By understanding and supporting the work of NGOs, we can foster more resilient communities and develop more effective, inclusive, and sustainable health interventions.

In addressing drug addiction and infectious diseases, NGOs have played a crucial yet often underappreciated role. Their dedicated efforts, innovative strategies, and commitment have significantly impacted lives and communities globally. This book examines the essential roles that NGOs play in this ongoing challenge, offering a clear and informative analysis of their contributions.

The countries covered in this book—China, Germany, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan—face unique and pressing

challenges in dealing with drug addiction and infectious diseases. Central Asia, with its complex socio-political landscape and varying levels of governmental support, presents a particularly tough environment for NGOs. In these regions, the resilience and adaptability of NGOs are particularly evident. Across China, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, the role of NGOs is not only significant but also indispensable.

The challenges in these regions are complex and varied. NGOs face legislative barriers, societal stigma against drug users, resource shortages, and the persistent threat of infectious diseases such as HIV and tuberculosis. Often working in areas where public health systems are inadequate or overburdened, NGOs must overcome these obstacles to deliver crucial services, highlighting the extraordinary and vital nature of their efforts.

This book offers a unique window into the diverse strategies and practices of NGOs. Each chapter presents a distinctive perspective, from the implementation of cutting-edge digital therapies in China to grassroots community engagement in Kyrgyzstan. These chapters collectively offer a comprehensive understanding of the varied approaches NGOs employ to address drug addiction and infectious diseases.

Ulla Pape's chapter on drug policy highlights the strategic role NGOs have played in shaping and influencing policy at national and international levels. Ingo Ilja Michels' focus on self-organisation among drug users in Germany provides insights into empowering communities from within, fostering resilience and self-reliance.

In the rapidly evolving field of addiction treatment, Tianzhen Chen and Hang Su's exploration of artificial intelligence and digital therapies opens up new avenues for innovative interventions. Their work underscores the potential for technology to revolutionise traditional approaches to addiction treatment.

Nazgul Eshankulova and Jarkyn Shadymanova bring to light the challenges and achievements of legislative collaboration in Central Asia. Their chapter provides a nuanced understanding of how NGOs can work within complex political frameworks to achieve their goals. Analysis is also given to the impact of the Law "On Foreign Agents" adopted in 2024.

Kazakhstan's fight against addiction and infectious diseases is described by Kuralay Muhambetova, Medet Kudabekov, and Nurlan



Baigabylov. Their insights emphasise the pivotal role NGOs play in both understanding and combating these pervasive issues.

Guzalkhon Zakhidova's focus on Uzbekistan reveals the crucial support NGOs provide in HIV prevention, drug treatment, and helping vulnerable populations. Her work illustrates the vital safety net these organisations create for those most in need.

In the second part of the book, "NGO-Led Interventions: Inspiring Case Studies", compelling case studies highlight the diverse and innovative approaches NGOs employ to combat drug addiction, control infectious diseases, and engage with communities.

In Kyrgyzstan, the story of the public foundation "Door" is told by Vyacheslav Goncharov and Ksenia Kiss. Their grassroots efforts in combating tuberculosis showcase the power of community engagement in addressing public health crises.

Natalya Shuskaya and Chinara Imankulova present the pioneering web-based outreach initiatives of Aids Foundation East-West (AFEW) in Kyrgyzstan, targeting users of new psychoactive substances. Their case study reveals the transformative potential of technology in prevention and outreach.

In Uzbekistan, Tatyana Nikitina and Elena Devyatova explore the multifaceted efforts of the NGO "INTILISH" in fighting drug addiction and preventing HIV and TB. Their narrative underscores the comprehensive approach required to tackle these interlinked challenges.

The WINGS intervention in Kyrgyzstan, presented by Danil Nikitin, Alla Bessonova, Louisa Gilbert, Tina Jiwatram-Negron, and Assel Terlikbayeva, highlights an important initiative aimed at preventing gender-based violence. Their work illustrates the broader social impact of addiction interventions.

Yulia Alekshina's exploration of alternative TB treatment methods in Kyrgyzstan rounds out this section. Her examination of NGO-driven innovations in treatment delivery underscores the adaptability and ingenuity of these organisations in improving public health outcomes.

This book invites you to embark on a journey through the inspiring and transformative world of NGO-led interventions. Through these compelling stories and in-depth analyses, you will gain a deeper understanding of the indispensable role NGOs play in re-

sponse to drug use and infectious diseases, and the profound impact they have on individuals and communities worldwide.

The insights and lessons presented in this book have implications far beyond the countries discussed. They offer valuable lessons for global public health, highlighting the importance of community engagement, innovative thinking, and resilient strategies. The experiences of these NGOs provide a blueprint for tackling similar issues in other parts of the world, demonstrating that despite the challenges, significant progress can be made.

This book serves as a vital resource for understanding the crucial role NGOs play in combating drug addiction and infectious diseases. By highlighting innovative strategies, community-driven initiatives, and technological advancements, it provides a comprehensive overview of effective interventions across diverse regions. The detailed case studies and expert analyses presented within these pages offer valuable insights into the challenges and successes faced by NGOs, making this book an useful tool for policymakers, public health professionals, and researchers.

For students and academics in fields such as public health, social work, and international development, this book offers a rich source of knowledge and real-world examples that can inform both study and practice. NGOs and community organisations will find inspiration and practical guidance to enhance their own interventions and advocacy efforts. Policymakers and government officials can gain a deeper understanding of the critical support NGOs provide, facilitating better collaboration and more effective policy formulation.

Moreover, this book is helpful for anyone interested in global health issues, social justice, and community empowerment. It shines a light on the tireless efforts of NGOs and underscores the importance of their work, encouraging greater support and recognition for these essential organisations.

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