

CIVIL SOCIETY INITIATIVES AND PUBLIC HEALTH POLICY IN POST-COVID-19 AZERBAIJAN: AN ANALYSIS OF COMMUNITY-ORIENTED PROGRAMS FROM A SOCIAL CAPITAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This study analyzes the role of civil society initiatives in the field of public health in Azerbaijan after the COVID-19 pandemic in the context of social capital theory. The pandemic has shown that health policies in central and state administrations alone are not enough. Approaches based on trust, solidarity and collective actions are necessary for the effectiveness and sustainability of public health. The study analyzes how civil society institutions contribute to community-based public health in the post-pandemic period and how they increase the efficiency and legitimacy of health services through the production of social capital. The article argues that civil society, as examined in the Azerbaijani case, is not just a complementary or secondary actor, but also a mechanism that facilitates the public access to services and provides alternative approaches for their implementation. The findings show that community-based initiatives and projects strengthen state-society relations and contribute to the sustainability of public health policies. In this regard, the study makes a significant theoretical and empirical contribution to the scientific literature on public health in the post-pandemic period.

Keywords

Civil society, public health, social politics.

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has clearly demonstrated that public health crises cannot be managed solely by state resources. During and after the pandemic, institutional constraints were not the only issue. During this period, people's trust in each other, solidarity and collective action also became factors affecting public health. This once again showed that approaches that associate public health only with state policy are insufficient.

In the post-pandemic period, the public health system in Azerbaijan faced significant structural and societal pressures, mainly due to the increased demand for such services and the long-term social impacts of the pandemic. The continuous burden on health services, especially in areas such as access to these services by disadvantaged groups, necessitated the existence of community-based services. This necessity shows that centralized health services provided by the state are not enough. Thus, the effectiveness of health policy also depends on the relationships established with the community.

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In the post-pandemic period, Azerbaijani civil society organizations and other community-based initiatives in the field of public health have moved from being secondary participants to acting as complementary actors. Civil society has also played a role of bridging the gap in service provision and building trust between the state and society. However, while this activity has been mainly defined at the level of practical contributions, the contributions of civil society to public health have not been systematically analyzed in the context of social capital.

Existing literature studies public health activities in the post-COVID era based on state policy and the institutional capacity of the state. These studies have not considered how civil society influences and shapes public health policies, especially in the case of Azerbaijan. This leads to the perception of civil society contributions as only “supportive” and the consequences of social capital being ignored. This study aims to fill the existing theoretical and empirical gap in this area.

The aim of this study is to analyze civil society initiatives in the field of public health in Azerbaijan after the COVID-19 pandemic within the framework of social capital theory and to assess the effectiveness of community-based programs. The article examines the impact of civil society on the applicability and legitimacy of public health policies through the production of social capital. The research questions are as follows:

1. How do civil society actors in Azerbaijan contribute to community-level public health services in the post-pandemic period?
2. How do civil society initiatives affect the effectiveness of public health services through the production of social capital?
3. What is the role of community-oriented programs in building state-community relations?

In this regard, the study aims to make a unique contribution to the post-pandemic literature in the Azerbaijani context by examining public health, along with the issue of social policy, in the context of processes and social relations that contribute to the production of social capital.

The article has three original contributions to the post-COVID-19 public health and civil society literature. First, this study conceptualizes civil society not only as an actor complementing state services, but also as a mechanism for the production of social capital that significantly contributes to the effectiveness of public health policies. With this approach, one can see the crucial role of solidarity and collective action in public health policies. Second, it provides empirical evidence on how civil society initiatives have impacted public health in the post-pandemic period, focusing on the context of Azerbaijan, which has always implemented health policies with centralized management and therefore has little place in the existing scientific literature. Third, the results of the study allow policymakers working in this field to be aware of how the sustainability of public health policies can be strengthened through state-civil society cooperation and building social trust.

2. Literature review

2.1. *Civil society and theoretical foundations*

In order to theoretically analyze the concept of civil society, it is necessary to open the concept of democracy, to which it is directly related. Because the existence of civil society directly depends on citizen participation and the functioning of democratic institutions. Democracy does not only mean holding elections consisting of various

political procedures, it is the ability of citizens to play an active role in social issues that concern them and are directly related to them and to decide their own destiny (Dahl, 1998). Erkal (2011) defines democracy in his research work titled “The Nationalization Process and Obstacles” as follows: “Democracy is not a regime of masses, but of nationalized societies that are aware of how and why they came together, have national symbols and share common ideals and culture. Democracy is a political system in which citizens have a say in the governance of the state. In this system, people’s fundamental rights and freedoms are also ensured (Dahl, 1998). However, the existence of democratic institutions does not mean that citizens’ active participation and social responsibility are fully ensured. Although the fundamental principles and institutions of democracy ensure citizens’ participation in political decision-making, the development of civil society is an essential condition for these processes to be both effective and sustainable. Civil society increases the participation of individuals and communities in political and social life through various associations, voluntary organizations and social initiatives and builds relationships and networks based on trust (Putnam, 1993). In this sense, democratic reforms and the strengthening of civil society are considered two complementary processes. The concept of democracy gains meaning and becomes sustainable through the strengthening of civil society (Salamon, 2012).

Civil society has found its place in discussions of democratic theory since the 1980s. Klein says about civil society: “It can be said that a strong civil society will increase the democratic quality of society” (Klein, 2000).

The words “civilized” and “civilization” are derived from the Latin word for city, “civitas” (Kaypak, 2012) and are considered the equivalent of the Azerbaijani word “mülki.” This word, which means non-military in translation, is generally understood as a person who is not a military or civil servant, is a member of the public and does not hold any military or official position (Explanatory Dictionary of the Azerbaijani Language, 2006). It is within this meaning that the concept of civil society is formed. Thus, civil society is an area where individuals come together on a voluntary basis and work for the sake of public interests (Cohen & Arato, 1992; Salamon, 2012). Thus, the civil content of civil society, which arises from the concept of “civitas”, is directly related to its foundation of voluntariness, public participation and non-state nature (Evers, 2013). From this perspective, civil society can be viewed as a social space that acts not only as a political but also as a public actor.

Although the role of civil society organizations in international relations and their influence on international decision-making mechanisms has not yet been clearly defined, their supporting functions are an undeniable fact. Although they do not have a central role in the systems and processes in question, civil society organizations have a number of supporting functions (İşbilir, 2021).

In recent times, local self-government policies have become more important in terms of functionality and efficiency. Because in order to solve problems more optimally and quickly and to ensure socio-economic and cultural diversity, it is necessary to be close to the public. According to the theory of participatory civil society, while accepting the authority of the state over society, it prefers to democratize the relations between the state and civil society. This approach mainly prefers the perspective of close interaction between the civil sphere and the political sphere (Babacan, 2018).

The processes taking place in the international arena and globalization, global social problems and various global threats have increased the role of NGOs in politics. Against the background of all this, civil society institutions have become one of the main

actors in politics (Bulgur, 2020). Thus, civil society acts as actors carrying out public diplomacy activities on issues that are the responsibility of the state.

2.2. Public health and public health policy

Today, healthy and educated human capital is considered one of the greatest assets of nations (Özkahraman, 2013). The quality of human capital is considered to be one of the factors that determine not only individual social well-being, but also the overall productivity and sustainability of society. In this context, health protection does not only mean the availability of medical services. It is also a complex process that includes preventive measures along with community participation (WHO, 2016). Winslow's classic definition of public health in 1920 states: "Public health is the science and art of preventing disease, promoting physical and mental health and well-being and prolonging life" (Winslow, 1920, as cited in Grant, 2012). Until the 1940s, the roles of health services were very limited. These roles included the control of infectious diseases, the improvement of maternal and child health, personal hygiene and guidance in seeking medical care, among other services. Now, the functions of public health have increased and become even more advanced.

In 1988, Winslow's definition of public health was revised and updated by Sir Donald Acheson. His definition is that "public health is that art or science which, through the concerted efforts of society, deals with the prevention of disease, the prolongation of life and the promotion of health" (Azari & Borisch, 2023). He added the phrase "through the organized efforts of society" to the old definition. This means that if there is a collective effort to protect health and provide medical services, it can be called public health.

Over the past two decades, phenomena such as climate change and global warming have affected the health and well-being of people all over the world (Verweij & Dawson, 2007). It is becoming increasingly difficult to prevent the problems caused by these phenomena. At this point, these problems in health care go beyond the scope of mere administrative management and become the subject of political discussions. As a phenomenon, politics arises from the relations between various socio-economic groups and the conflicts caused by these relations. The interests of these groups are represented through politics. Identifying the problems in society and providing alternative proposals for them is one of the main issues of politics (Toygar, 2022). The main providing force of politics is the state. Although state resources provide services for the health of the population on the one hand, they are not sufficient on their own in some cases. Structural change programs implemented with the regulations of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund also aimed to reduce the responsibilities of the state. The processes of decreasing the public responsibilities of states and the emergence of the private sector have also had their impact on health services (Vural & Taşpınar, 2006).

2.3. The relationship between civil society and public health policy

According to Evers, civil society is a social sphere that operates independently of the state and the market and articulates public needs. This social sphere, where collective activities are organized, also plays a role in the formation of public health policy (Evers, 2013). Civil society initiatives, based on the principles of volunteerism and community-based activities, raise awareness in this area, increase access to services for at-risk groups and complement public policy in terms of strengthening social trust (Putnam, 1993;

WHO, 2020). In this regard, public health is not only a service provided by state structures, but also a multi-faceted social process that is shaped by the participation of civil society.

The main factor that forms the basis of health policy is its planning. That is, the foundation of everything is based on sound planning. Health planning has different aspects from other types of planning. The first of these is that the training of health professionals requires a long process. This means that the health sector is more labor-intensive than others (Toygar, 2022). For these reasons, decisions when preparing health policies should be based on not short-term, but long-term and inclusive planning. Thus, the aforementioned planning approaches require decision-making mechanisms created not only by state bodies, but also with the participation of society. Therefore, the participation of civil society actors has an important role in the implementation of social policy and the protection of public interests.

In 1988, the American Institute of Medicine listed three main functions of public health. The first of these functions is evaluation. Evaluation involves measuring the health status of the population with certain indicators and identifying emerging diseases. (Monitoring), policy development and provision are included. The basis of this evaluation is control mechanisms. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that there is very little investment in conducting such assessments and preparing for public health activities around the world. The lack of sensitive surveillance methods, the development of tests and the lack of sufficient capacity to conduct large-scale studies were among the main problems of the health system (Brownson *et al.*, 2020). The implementation of the listed main functions of public health, such as evaluation, policy development and provision, cannot be seen as the sole responsibility of the state. The listed functions are parallel to the areas of activity of civil society. In particular, the participation of civil society organizations in community-based monitoring and evaluation, identification of social needs, public participation mechanisms and policy development processes coincide with public health goals. In addition, civil society is also active in identifying risk groups and providing them with access to opportunities, educating the population and providing early warning. Thus, civil society acts as an actor supporting state structures in strengthening public health mechanisms and increasing resilience.

2.4. Community-based health initiatives after COVID-19

In December 2019, the COVID-19 epidemic emerged in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China and quickly spread to 6 continents and hundreds of countries (Dikmen *et al.*, 2020). The first signs of the disease were seen in people who visited a live animal market in Wuhan. As a result of the analysis of samples taken from patients, it was revealed on January 7, 2020, that the disease was caused by a virus from the Coronavirus family, such as SARS (2002) and MERS (2012). The virus, which has the ability to spread from person to person, was named Novel Coronavirus 2019 (2019-nCoV)^{1,2} due to these characteristics. The first case of the disease after China was observed on January 13 in Taiwan and within just 2 months, the disease spread from Asia to Europe and the Americas. The World Health Organization (WHO) Scientific and Technical Advisory Group on Threats, together with the Secretary-General, declared COVID-19 a “Pandemic” on March 11, 2020 (Varol & Tokuç, 2020). COVID-19 went down in history as the first pandemic caused by coronaviruses. Later, the WHO, after reviewing all the information about the pandemic, decided that a containment strategy and appropriate measures should be implemented to overcome the problem and at the same time, the

infection status of communities should be monitored in order to update public health recommendations in the last 2-3 weeks of February 2020 (Dikmen *et al.*, 2020).

In public health, assessment is one of the most important conditions for preventing such problems. The COVID-19 era has also seen a lack of investment in public health activities. The main problem in this regard was the lack of tests and even the lack of capacity to develop tests (Brownson *et al.*, 2020). Although the foundations of public health surveillance date back to the first recorded epidemic in Egypt in 3180 BC, these problems are still relevant (Choi, 2015). For such infectious epidemic diseases, a surveillance mechanism based on modern science, supported by reliable tests and adequate laboratories, must be established.

The social life, livelihoods and above all, physical and mental health of billions of people around the world, including in our country, have been shaken by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the striking points is that many countries have based their pandemic management on economic necessity rather than scientific data. However, the failure of healthcare systems based on commercialized market economies during the pandemic was experienced (Varol & Tokuç, 2020). These experiences have led to the emergence of people-centered, community-based, multidisciplinary and preventive approaches in the post-pandemic period. Community-based initiatives are approaches and programs that target the socio-economic development of women, especially women, to reduce poverty and increase access to health services. This approach mainly aims to improve the well-being and health of communities living in different places by focusing on the self-sufficiency of individuals. Thus, in the Post-COVID phase, cooperation between government agencies and civil society organizations, as well as local communities, has become one of the components of the public health system. In this regard, NGOs have a say in both communicating the needs of the public to the state and representing their demands in the political arena. In this regard, NGOs are increasingly becoming one of the most active actors in politics (Toygar, 2022).

In the globalized world, the private sector has also started to operate in almost every field of health services. In this regard, states are now sharing the areas that we are used to seeing under their control with the private sector. In this way, they contribute to the health sector by setting various goals (Kahveci Ceylan *et al.*, 2023). Public health, which is an approach aimed at protecting health, is aimed at improving the well-being of communities through various social measures. Specialists working in this field try to contribute to human well-being through a biopsychosocial approach by approaching diseases not only medically, but also socially and psychologically (Yurtsever & Ofluoğlu, 2021). This is also one of the approaches of social workers. Thus, social workers can also produce effective solutions to social problems by cooperating with non-governmental organizations for the needs of society (Ismailbayli, 2023). The target group of both the social work profession and professionals working in the social field is usually disadvantaged groups such as children, patients, the elderly and the disabled (Ören, 2021). On the other hand, according to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, the main risk groups covered by the COVID-19 pandemic are people aged 65 and older, chronic lung disease or moderate and severe asthma patients, diabetics, infants, pregnant women and other similar categories. This coincides with the target group of social work professionals (Tanriverdi *et al.*, 2020). Thus, professionals working in the fields of public health and public welfare have several common goals. As such, workers in both fields work to ensure high health conditions for all people regardless of social status, enable

individuals to determine their own destiny, reduce environmental risk factors, ensure social justice and protect public health (Yurtsever & Ofluoğlu, 2021).

According to the latest statistics from the World Health Organization, 836,510 cases of the disease have been reported to the organization since the first day of the pandemic in Azerbaijan (World Health Organization). Worldwide, 779,051,482 cases have been registered, of which 9,432 were identified during the last period of December 21-28, 2025 (World Health Organization). The impact of these statistics has necessitated the initiatives of civil society institutions during the pandemic. These initiatives usually consist of public health interventions.

Table 1.

Project implementing organization	Project name
“Fighting Infectious Diseases” public association (“Yoluxucu Xəstəliklərlə Mübarizə” ictimai birliyi)	Initiatives to prevent the spread of coronavirus and reduce the number of infections
“Assistance to the Development of Municipalities” public association (“Bələdiyyələrin İnkişafına Yardım” ictimai birliyi)	Educating the population about infectious diseases through social networks
“Taraqqi” social research public association (“Tərəqqi” sosial tədqiqatlar ictimai birliyi)	Promoting vaccination against COVID-19 in remote regions
“Integration Towards Development” public association (“İnkişafa Doğru İnteqrasiya” ictimai birliyi)	A publicity campaign dedicated to the ways of infection and prevention of infectious diseases
“Women, Development, Future” public union (“Qadın, İnkişaf, Gələcək” ictimai birliyi)	Educating internally displaced women living in the Ganja and Goygol regions about COVID-19 and infectious diseases
“Women's Initiative for Development” public association (“İnkişafa Doğru Qadın Təşəbbüsü” ictimai birliyi)	Prevention of dangerous infectious diseases in boarding schools
“Towards a TB-free future” public association (“Vərəmsiz gələcəyə doğru” ictimai birliyi)	Educating the population about the ways of infection and prevention of infectious diseases
“For Civil Society” Independent Advice and Assistance Center (“Vətəndaş Cəmiyyəti Uğrunda” Müstəqil Məsləhət və Yardım Mərkəzi)	Providing HIV/AIDS awareness and socio-psychological support services in prisons during the COVID-19 pandemic
“Bright Future” youth public association (İşıqlı Gələcək” gənclər ictimai birliyi)	Organizing awareness-raising events among the population about infectious diseases
“Health Protection” public association (“Sağlamlığın Qorunması” ictimai birliyi)	Conducting awareness-raising activities about diseases that threaten human health

Note: The table was prepared by the author based on official data from the Agency for State Support to Non-Governmental Organizations

Source: The Agency for State Support to Non-Governmental Organizations

It should be noted that these initiatives were endorsed by the “National Action Plan for Promoting Open Government for 2020-2022”, adopted by the Decree of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan No. 1859 dated February 27, 2020 (Presidential Decree Approving the National Action Plan for the Promotion of Open Government (2020-2022)). Paragraph 5 of the Plan lists “Measures to expand the activities of civil society members, increase public oversight and public participation”. These measures are aimed at supporting the activities of non-governmental organizations and other civil society organizations in Azerbaijan. In addition to their own small initiatives, the

institution that supports their activities is the Agency for State Support to Non-Governmental Organizations of the Republic of Azerbaijan. The Agency, which operates in 2021, annually organizes grant competitions dedicated to various topics. Table 1 shows the winning projects dedicated to public health topics immediately after COVID-19 in 2021:

The Agency was established in 2021 and since then, 23 public health awareness projects in 2022, 5 in 2023, 5 in 2024 and 6 in 2025 have been awarded grants announced by the Agency. The projects, including those listed in Table 1, show that public health measures based on the costs of citizens in Azerbaijan in the post-pandemic process include campaigns related to vaccination against COVID-19 and the analysis of infectious diseases. Of these, the public association “Helping the Guides” in 2021 is an information campaign on social networks within the framework of the “Plan of measures for social protection of the population through social networks”, with other companies assisting as participants, enabling advocacy and changes among the public. The initiatives in question coincide with the classic community-based health advocacy model. At the same time, it shows that the target groups of these projects are internally displaced women, children and people living in remote regions and that they are purposeful community projects. These projects and the allocation of funding for them and the accessibility of health services provided by the state and the reduction of risk factors reflect the priority directions of the plan for the post-pandemic period from the perspective of civil society.

The short-term nature of initiatives in the post-COVID-19 period limits their long-term sustainability. Thus, the main challenges faced by grant-based civil society initiatives are: the long-term sustainability and institutional continuity of projects; the ability of communities to self-mobilize and sustain initiatives through their internal resources; and the systematic integration of initiatives into and cooperation with state structures. On the other hand, these initiatives also demonstrate that in times of crisis, civil society organizations possess the capacity to respond rapidly to the needs of vulnerable groups and to build public trust. In particular, awareness campaigns and cooperation carried out through digital technologies are an important indicator of the transformation of public communication. As a result, public health initiatives in Azerbaijan in the post-COVID period have opened up new opportunities in terms of both preventive and communication-oriented interventions, as well as activities to expand state-civil society cooperation on an institutional basis.

2.5. Social capital theory

Although the idea of social capital has long historical roots, dating back to concepts such as “citizenship” and “civic participation”, the term social capital became more widespread in the 1980s and 1990s with the works of the three “fathers” of social capital - Bourdieu, Coleman and Putnam (Van Bakel & Horak, 2024). Since this concept has a multidisciplinary nature, such as economics, sociology, social philosophy and political science, it can be assessed from various aspects. In this part of the study, the theory will be approached from the perspective of civil society.

The main starting point of social capital research is the goodwill values that people transmit to each other. In a narrow sense, social capital is a product of communication that is established between at least two people and is based entirely on trust. In a broad sense, it can be defined as a set of trust, norms and communication networks that increase the productivity of society by facilitating coordination between individuals, the state and civil society that make up society (Temple, 2002). At the same time, social capital is also

one of the topics of discussion in collective action and democratic governance (Ekmekçi, 2023).

There are two principles on which the theory of social capital is based: 1. relationships between people are very important; 2. these relationships must be maintained in order to achieve things that they cannot achieve alone or can achieve with difficulty. People in any communication network tend to share common values with other members of the network. This communication network can be considered a kind of capital formation, since it creates a resource for them (Aslan, 2013).

Thus, the strengthening of trust and communication networks, which form the basis of the theory of social capital, is directly related to civil society and their legal support. In this context, two main articles of the Constitution can be considered as one of the main mechanisms for the development of social capital in Azerbaijan: 1. Article 49. Freedom of free assembly; 2. Article 58. The right to association. The official functioning of civil society institutions in Azerbaijan and the establishment of NGOs and public associations are regulated by these two articles. According to the freedom of free assembly, everyone has the freedom to freely assemble together with others, which is ensured by the Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan and international treaties to which the Republic of Azerbaijan is a party. The state ensures this freedom of citizens and takes appropriate measures to ensure that meetings held on this basis are peaceful and unarmed (Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Article 49) On the other hand, for the existence of civil society, it is important for individuals and groups in society to unite around common goals and act collectively in order to express their interests. The freedom of assembly, which constitutes the legal basis for this activity, acts as one of the main conditions for the institutionalization of civil society and public participation. This means that the freedom of assembly is directly related to the existence of civil society. At the same time, the freedom of assembly directly contributes to the strengthening of social capital by creating conditions for the formation of mutual trust, common norms and sustainable communication networks in society.

According to Article 58 of the Constitution, the Right to Association, everyone has the right to associate with others. At the same time, no one can be forced to join any association and remain a member of it and has the right to create any association, political party, trade union and other public association or join an existing association. The state guarantees the free activity of all associations (Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Article 58). This right is the main legal basis for the formation of civil society in the country. The implementation of this right strengthens mutual trust in society, creates sustainable communication networks and creates conditions for the formation of common norms. These processes constitute the main components of social capital. From the point of view of social capital theory, these processes ensure the sustainability and reciprocity of social relations, preventing their limitation to formal associations. This right creates conditions for the transformation of relations into a real social resource, their institutionalization and opportunities for mutual activity. Thus, civil society contributes as the main environment in which social capital is formed and developed.

2.6. Gaps in the literature

The analysis of existing literature indicates that the study of civil society within the framework of social capital theory has been conducted mainly by drawing on the experience of Western countries. There is a lack of empirical and systematic analysis of these concepts in Azerbaijan and the post-Soviet space. Notably, the role played by civil

society initiatives in the field of public health after the COVID-19 pandemic remains underexplored within the framework of this social capital theory. This study seeks to address this gap and analyze the role of civil society initiatives in the field of public health in Azerbaijan and the directions of social capital in this framework.

3. Methodology

This study examines the role of civil society initiatives in public health services in Azerbaijan in the post-COVID-19 period in the context of social capital theory. The study adopts a primarily qualitative research design rather than a quantitative approach. Accordingly, the study focuses on examining the nature and scope of civil society contributions to public health services. In this regard, qualitative research methods were employed. Given that social capital theory encompasses concepts such as communication networks, collective action and solidarity, this approach is more appropriate for their empirical understanding.

The design of this study is grounded in a descriptive-analytical approach, with primary emphasis on document analysis. This method enables the analysis of how civil society-state relations have been shaped in the provision of public health services in the post-pandemic period, the institutional framework within which these relations operate and the activities of civil society initiatives. This approach facilitates a clearer comparative analysis of both normative documents and institutional practices.

The data used in this study are derived from secondary sources. The sources includes the following documents: 1. The Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan and legislative acts related to public participation; 2. Official statistical data and reports published by the World Health Organization; 3. Written and descriptive reports of projects implemented by NGOs in the post-pandemic period; 4. Open data published by the Agency for State Support to Non-Governmental Organizations of the Republic of Azerbaijan regarding the results of grant competitions for the period 2021-2025. In addition, scientific literature on the concepts of civil society and public health, as well as the social capital theory, served as a theoretical foundation of the study. The collected data were analyzed through the use of thematic analysis. During the analysis, the available data were systematized and categorized under main thematic headings. These headings cover forms of state-civil society cooperation, work with risk groups, education, community-oriented health programs, among other key areas. These headings were analytically linked to the core concepts of social capital theory, thereby expanding the scope of the study.

4. Conclusion

The results of the study show that civil society initiatives in the field of public health in Azerbaijan after the pandemic are one of the mechanisms that complement state policy. Community-oriented programs implemented in this area have an important role in terms of both awareness-raising and the formation and mobilization of social capital. In particular, the trust-based activities and continuous communication of NGOs with risk groups increase the effectiveness of these interventions.

The results also show that the freedom of assembly and the right to association enshrined in the Constitutions of the Republic of Azerbaijan both provide support for institutional activity and pave the way for the development of social capital. This means that civil society, in addition to playing a role in building social trust in the

implementation of public health policies, is also an actor that strengthens community-state relations.

One of the main issues revealed by the study is that community-based initiatives during the pandemic and post-pandemic period are short-term and mainly in a project format. This somewhat reduces the long-term effects of social capital. However, for the sustainability of public health policies, civil society initiatives need to be more systematically integrated with state structures and the possibilities for intra-community mobilization need to be strengthened.

The study also confirms that public health in the post-COVID-19 stages is a process related to the production of social capital and its effective use. In this regard, civil society and other community initiatives are important for the effectiveness of public health policies, as well as for legitimacy.

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