

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL PARTNERSHIP IN PUBLIC GOVERNANCE: THE PLACE OF  
THE “THIRD SECTOR” IN UZBEKISTAN

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Abstract

This paper examines the conceptual and practical significance of social partnership in the framework of modern public administration, with particular attention to the evolving role of the “third sector” in Uzbekistan. As governance systems worldwide move toward more participatory and transparent models, the integration of civil society organizations (CSOs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and community-based associations has become increasingly essential. The study is theoretical and analytical in nature, but contextualized with an overview of Uzbekistan’s legal and institutional reforms between 2016 and 2024. These include the adoption of the “Law on Social Partnership,” the “Concept for the Development of Civil Society (2021–2025),” and the introduction of public councils under state agencies. The findings suggest that effective collaboration between the state, business sector, and the third sector contributes to social innovation, citizen participation, and policy accountability. The paper concludes that the consolidation of social partnership mechanisms is a decisive factor in shaping a sustainable model of public governance in Uzbekistan and can serve as a replicable framework for other developing states.

**Keywords:** social partnership, public governance, third sector, civil society, Uzbekistan, participatory governance, institutional reform.

1. Introduction

In the 21st century, public administration has undergone a profound transformation from hierarchical, command-based systems to more inclusive and participatory governance models. The role of the state is no longer confined to the exclusive formulation and implementation of public policy; it now involves cooperation with non-state actors, particularly those representing civil society and the private sector. This paradigm shift reflects the recognition that complex social issues require collective action and multi-stakeholder engagement.

Social partnership, as a principle of public governance, is grounded in the idea of shared responsibility for social and economic development. It represents a system of collaboration between the state, private business entities, and civil society organizations (CSOs) aimed at achieving mutually beneficial outcomes and advancing public interests.

In Uzbekistan, this concept has gained growing importance amid ongoing administrative reforms and the strategic transition toward an “Active Civil Society.” Since 2016, under the framework of the country’s *Development Strategy for 2017–2021* and subsequent *Uzbekistan-2030 Strategy*, the government has placed increasing emphasis on fostering social dialogue, empowering NGOs, and institutionalizing civil society’s participation in policymaking. The establishment of the *Agency for the Development of Civil Society (ADCS)* and the legal recognition of NGOs as full-fledged social partners illustrate this commitment.

This paper aims to explore the conceptual foundations of social partnership and analyze the institutional mechanisms through which the third sector contributes to public governance in Uzbekistan. The research highlights the intersection between state policy, civic engagement, and

governance innovation. It further discusses the challenges and opportunities that shape the effectiveness of social partnership in the national context.

## **2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review**

### **2.1 Conceptualizing Social Partnership in Public Governance**

The term *social partnership* originated in European socio-political thought as a mechanism to balance the interests of labor, business, and government in shaping social and economic policy. In public administration theory, it is viewed as a participatory governance model that promotes dialogue, negotiation, and collaboration among stakeholders (Osborne, 2010; Pierre & Peters, 2005).

According to the governance approach proposed by Stoker (1998), effective administration is no longer merely the function of government institutions but rather the result of dynamic interaction among multiple actors — including public, private, and voluntary sectors. Social partnership serves as the institutional framework for such interaction, enhancing inclusiveness, transparency, and public accountability.

Salamon and Anheier (1998) conceptualize the *third sector* as the “social economy” that lies between the market and the state, comprising entities motivated by public benefit rather than profit. Within this framework, NGOs and community-based organizations act as mediators between citizens and the state, ensuring that governance remains responsive to social needs.

### **2.2 Global Trends and Empirical Insights**

Internationally, social partnership mechanisms are embedded within the governance systems of many developed and developing countries. In Scandinavian and Western European contexts, tripartite collaboration between governments, employers, and labor unions has long been a foundation for social stability and welfare state sustainability (Hemerijck, 2013). Similarly, in East Asian nations such as South Korea and Japan, civil society organizations play a critical role in service delivery and policy monitoring, often complementing state functions.

In the post-Soviet space, the concept of social partnership has evolved differently, shaped by political transitions and institutional legacies. In countries like Estonia and Georgia, early reforms promoted the inclusion of NGOs in local governance, whereas in others, including Uzbekistan, the process has been gradual and primarily driven by state-led initiatives.

### **2.3 The Third Sector in Transition Economies**

In transitional economies, the third sector faces unique challenges: limited financial sustainability, low professionalization, and weak public trust. Nonetheless, its potential for promoting accountability and policy innovation remains substantial (Anheier, 2014). For Uzbekistan, the third sector represents a crucial social force for bridging the gap between the state and citizens. It encompasses NGOs, charitable foundations, women’s associations, youth organizations, and other voluntary groups that address pressing issues such as poverty reduction, gender equality, environmental protection, and disability inclusion.

### **2.4 National Scholarship and Analytical Approaches**

Uzbek researchers have contributed valuable insights into the local dimensions of social partnership. Karimov (2020) argues that the institutionalization of NGO participation in Uzbekistan marks a significant step toward participatory governance. Rakhimova (2022) notes that social partnership mechanisms have expanded particularly in the spheres of environmental policy and social protection, where government agencies increasingly collaborate with civil initiatives.

## THE MULTIDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

### VOLUME-5, ISSUE-10

From a theoretical standpoint, social partnership can be examined through several governance paradigms:

- **Network governance theory** (Rhodes, 1997) emphasizes decentralized cooperation among interdependent actors.
- **Collaborative governance model** (Ansell & Gash, 2008) focuses on trust-building, joint decision-making, and accountability.
- **New Public Governance (NPG)** (Osborne, 2010) positions civil society as a co-producer of public value.

Applying these frameworks to Uzbekistan highlights both progress and gaps in institutional design — particularly in terms of ensuring NGO independence, financial viability, and legal protection.

### 3. Methodology

This research employs a **theoretical-analytical approach** grounded in comparative and institutional analysis. Given the study's focus on the intersection between governance and civil society, qualitative content analysis has been applied to official documents, national legislation, strategic programs, and scholarly works relevant to the topic.

Key documents analyzed include:

- The *Law on Social Partnership* (Republic of Uzbekistan, 2014);
- The *Law on Non-Governmental Non-Profit Organizations* (revised 2021);
- The *Concept for the Development of Civil Society in Uzbekistan (2021–2025)*;
- The *Uzbekistan-2030 Strategy* (approved in 2023);
- Annual reports from the *Agency for the Development of Civil Society (ADCS)*;
- Statistical bulletins from the *Ministry of Justice* and *Ministry of Economy and Finance*.

Through **documentary analysis** and **comparative assessment**, the study identifies the legal, institutional, and procedural mechanisms that facilitate or constrain social partnership.

In addition, this research integrates **international comparative perspectives**, drawing parallels with experiences from European Union member states, East Asian democracies, and post-Soviet transition economies. The analysis is interpretive rather than empirical, aiming to generate conceptual clarity and policy-relevant insights.

### 4. The Role of Social Partnership in Public Governance

Social partnership represents a bridge between the normative ideal of participatory democracy and the practical demands of efficient administration. Within public governance, it functions as both an **instrument of accountability** and a **mechanism for policy innovation**.

In Uzbekistan, the concept is formally embedded in the *Law on Social Partnership* (2014), which defines it as “the system of relations between state bodies and civil institutions aimed at solving socially significant problems.” The law establishes the legal framework for cooperation in such areas as environmental protection, social welfare, youth policy, gender equality, and local community development.

According to data from the *Agency for the Development of Civil Society (ADCS, 2024)*, there are now over **10,500 registered NGOs** in Uzbekistan. Approximately 35% operate in the field of social protection, 20% in environmental management, and 15% in education and youth engagement. Many of these organizations have become implementing partners in state-funded programs, thus transforming social partnership from a symbolic concept into a functional governance mechanism.

## THE MULTIDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

### VOLUME-5, ISSUE-10

Moreover, the formation of **Public Councils under Ministries and State Committees** since 2020 has institutionalized civil participation in policy design. These councils provide recommendations on draft legislation, budget allocation, and public service quality monitoring. In 2023 alone, over **1,200 proposals** from civil society organizations were officially reviewed by state bodies (ADCS Report, 2024).

Nevertheless, challenges remain. Despite the strong legal foundation, many NGOs still depend heavily on state grants or foreign donor support. Financial sustainability and capacity-building remain key issues for strengthening the third sector's independence and professional competence.

#### 5. Comparative Perspective: Lessons from Global Practice

International experience demonstrates that successful social partnership depends on three interrelated factors:

1. **Institutional autonomy** of civil society organizations;
2. **Stable funding mechanisms** ensuring their independence;
3. **Legal guarantees** for participation in decision-making.

In European Union countries, these principles are supported by the “Open Government” and “Participatory Budgeting” frameworks. In South Korea, for example, local NGOs are legally recognized as stakeholders in municipal governance, while in Finland, social partnerships operate through multi-level consultative councils that co-design policy measures.

Comparatively, Uzbekistan has made notable progress in building the first and third dimensions — legal recognition and procedural inclusion — but requires further development of financial sustainability mechanisms. The newly established “**Civil Society Support Fund**” (2023) under the Ministry of Justice marks a promising step toward this goal, offering transparent grant competitions and capacity-building programs for non-profit organizations.

#### 6. Discussion

The findings of this study affirm that social partnership is not merely a supplementary governance tool but an essential **institutional principle** of modern public administration. Its implementation in Uzbekistan reflects a broader transformation of state-society relations.

From a theoretical standpoint, the process can be understood through the lens of **New Public Governance (NPG)** — where the state functions as an enabler and facilitator, rather than a monopolistic decision-maker. The emergence of **multi-actor governance networks** has contributed to enhanced policy responsiveness and trust between citizens and institutions.

However, the transition toward fully participatory governance remains incomplete. The following systemic constraints have been identified:

- **Insufficient legal enforcement** of NGO consultation mechanisms in certain ministries;
- **Limited access to information** and public data;
- **Uneven regional development** of the third sector, concentrated mainly in Tashkent and regional centers;
- **Capacity gaps** in project management and advocacy skills among smaller NGOs.

Despite these limitations, the trajectory is clearly positive. The inclusion of social partnership principles in Uzbekistan's *2030 Development Strategy* signals a long-term political commitment to strengthening civic engagement. Moreover, the increasing participation of women's associations,

youth organizations, and environmental NGOs demonstrates the broadening diversity of the third sector.

## 7. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes that social partnership serves as both a **value system** and a **practical mechanism** in the evolution of public governance. In Uzbekistan, it has contributed to the institutionalization of civil participation and the development of a more transparent and accountable administrative culture. For social partnership to become a fully effective governance instrument, several policy measures are recommended:

1. **Enhance financial sustainability** — establish independent endowment funds and tax incentives for NGO financing.
2. **Strengthen capacity-building** — implement nationwide training programs for CSO leaders in project management, legal literacy, and public communication.
3. **Promote digital engagement platforms** — expand e-government portals and digital feedback systems that allow citizens and NGOs to participate in policy-making processes.
4. **Encourage regional diversity** — support local-level social partnership councils to reduce the urban-rural divide in civil participation.
5. **Expand international cooperation** — engage in cross-border exchange programs to share best practices in participatory governance and social innovation.

Ultimately, Uzbekistan's evolving model of social partnership demonstrates a deliberate shift from state-centered governance toward a **collaborative and inclusive governance paradigm**. This transformation strengthens not only democratic accountability but also the country's social cohesion and resilience in a rapidly changing world.

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