Eurasia Program Portfolio Review

The Cotton Campaign

The Portfolio Review of the Cotton was held on July 18, 2014. Alisher Ilkhamov, Program Manager in charge of the portfolio and Jeff Goldstein, Senior Policy Analyst at OSF-DC who represents OSF on the cotton campaign’s Steering Committee, presented an overview of this campaign, its accomplishments, its weaknesses and how OSF has supported it. Consultant to the EP Sabine Freizer served as discussant and Chris Stone moderated the discussion.

Alisher and Jeff reported that from 2004, the Central Eurasia Project, the predecessor of the current Eurasia Program, initiated and financed the Cotton Campaign to create diplomatic, economic, and political pressure on the government of Uzbekistan to end state-sponsored forced labor of adults and children in the country’s cotton sector. Since its first grant in 2004, OSF has utilized multiple tools to address this problem, including grant making, research, direct advocacy and its convening power.

Although the Cotton Campaign began in 2004, the portfolio review focused on the campaign’s efforts since the fall of 2010 when it had a major public relations success, as a result of which Gulnara Karimova (the daughter of the Uzbek president and herself, at the time, a government official) was banned from showing her clothing line at New York’s Fashion Week.

Alisher described the evolution of the campaign into a coalition of stakeholders including NGOs, trade unions, socially responsible investors, business associations and companies. While most coalition members are based in the U.S. and in Europe, Alisher noted that the coalition also includes three Uzbek NGOs (two of them based in Europe), while over the last two years one South Korean and two Australian NGOs have joined. Only a handful of NGO members currently receive financial support from OSF. He also noted that CEP put a great deal of emphasis over the years on developing the professionalism of the coalition, including pushing for the creation of a Steering Committee in 2011 and the hiring of a full-time Coordinator later that year.

Looking forward, the review considered the next major organizational issue facing the Cotton Campaign -- financial sustainability. While OSF only funded 5 of the 26 coalition members in 2013, those five struggle to find other donors to support their work on the campaign. To begin to address these issues, OSF-DC hired a development consultant to provide an independent review of the campaign’s operations and fundraising potential. Following the Portfolio Review, the campaign’s steering committee has begun a discussion of the consultant’s recommendations. The Steering Committee decided to begin a rebranding exercise to improve the Cotton Campaign’s visibility and fund raising potential. The Eurasia Project will also consider hiring a specialist for a 6-12 month consultancy to assist the campaign with development and fundraising. Meanwhile, coalition members have also begun preliminary discussions on whether to broaden the campaign beyond its single-issue and single-country focus.

The review noted that after a long period without a significant progress, the cotton campaign has achieved successes since 2011, including the European Parliament’s almost unanimous rejection of a textile protocol that would have provided privileges for Uzbek textile imports, the Uzbek government’s 2012 decision not to mobilize children younger than 15 and its agreement to host an ILO monitoring mission in 2013, and the U.S. decision to downgrade Uzbekistan to Tier III, the lowest ranking in its annual report on trafficking in persons.

However, these same successes have led to new challenges, as forced labor has shifted to the adult population while the ILO mission’s guardedly positive report gave support to those in the West seeking to engage with Tashkent. The fact that adult forced labor is not as sexy an issue as child labor increased demand for a more robust media and public outreach strategy, an area where the Cotton Campaign has not had much success since 2010. Since the portfolio review, the Cotton Campaign has adopted one of the suggestions of our development consultant and created a Media Working Group that has created a strategy for and begun coordinating the campaign’s media engagement.

Uzbek efforts to portray the declining use of forced child labor as significant progress, without reference to the simultaneous increase in adult forced labor has provided another new challenge as international financial institutions use it as justification for starting or expanding programs in Uzbekistan in the fields of agriculture and education. The cotton campaign has begun, and going forward will continue to increase its engagement with relevant IFIs to ensure that they take adequate measures to ensure that their engagements do not benefit the forced labor system. The campaign will also begin to engage the IFIs on support for agricultural reform in Uzbekistan to put an end to the forced labor system.

In her comments, the discussant Sabine Freizer noted that the campaign’s goal was not entirely clear and had apparently shifted over time, making it difficult to determine if it had accomplished its original aims and it might be time to consider winding down the effort. If the goal is to end child labour, the campaign has helped reached that aim and the coming years should mainly be about monitoring that there is not further back sliding. If however the goals are to end forced labor and even regime change in Uzbekistan, then there is plenty more work to be done. The same is true if the campaign does not have to be focussed only on Uzbekistan but can address problems of forced labour in neighbouring countries.

The presenters responded that while the campaign had always called for the end of “forced labor of children and adults” the focus had been on children as an emotional symbol of the larger problem. When the government banned the mobilization of school children the campaign had to shift its focus and it became more challenging to keep public attention on the broader issue.

Sabine also questioned why the campaign had not had more success in getting EU based stakeholders on board and wondered to what extent the Campaign had really helped Uzbek partners develop their capacities. Are they more sustainable and professional than they were five years ago?

Alisher responded that in the EU zone we had been less lucky with partners than in the U.S. The Environmental Justice Foundation, which was expected to build a EU based coalition of stakeholders, had failed to meet our expectations. Anti-Slavery International, which replaced EJF in the role of EU coordinator, had concentrated more on its own advocacy than on coalition building. This year they decided to revisit this agenda and promised to improve their performance on this front.

Eleanor Kelly who represented Communications made some useful recommendations, as follows: although the diversity of the cotton campaign is one of the campaign's biggest strengths, this does not feature prominently in the campaign's communications; the campaign should seek to cultivate engagement and interaction with its following, for example through email updates or social media; the campaign should also think carefully about resourcing its communications and how to use the capacity of the coalition while also respecting the individual communications needs of the coalition partners.

Viorel Ursu suggested to “follow the money”, by developing further the recent success of research commissioned by Eurasia Program into the financial flow in and around the cotton sector in Uzbekistan. The campaign should raise the issue of transparency and accountability of cotton export revenues which would allow the campaign to align with the well-established global movement for great transparency of national export revenues.

Another element of the discussion was internal OSF cooperation in support of the Cotton Campaign. It was noted that while EP (and CEP before it) had always worked closely with OSF-DC and OSEPI on the campaign, this has not been the case with thematic programs, although there had been good cooperation with ESP in 2013 around the issue of a proposed a $40-million grant to the Uzbek government by the Global Partnership for Education (GPE). Alisher noted that EP needs to make greater efforts to reach out to other programs, such as the Program on Independent Journalism and the programs dealing with transparency and accountability.

During the discussion, Chris asked what we would have done differently had we known what we now know. The major conclusion was that we would not have supported work to find means of tracing raw cotton through the garment industry’s supply chain. This work turned out to be far more technically difficult than we had initially hoped and did not produce useful events. The EP cut off grant support for work in this direction only in 2013. Instead, the EP would have focused more on bringing into the campaign organizations that had more experience in public and media outreach and campaigning and encouraged the campaign to pay more attention to its own organizational development.

Chris asked “Is a coalition the right vehicle” to make an impact? He made the argument that it is very difficult to determine how political change happens, different tools exist – for example working from inside or outside, engaging or pressuring counterparts, focussing on political or legal arguments – and it is useful to consider whether in this context the right strategy was employed, mixing and matching the different tools to the greatest effect.

The review concluded that over last three years, the campaign and its Steering Committee have been gradually improving performance. This allows us to hope that over the next two years the Cotton Campaign can develop from a concept into a field of well-established NGOs that target the systems of forced labor in Uzbekistan and perhaps other closed societies.