

**UCLA**

**InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies**

**Title**

Review: *How NGOs React: Globalization and Education Reform in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Mongolia* by Iveta Silova and Gita Steiner-Khamsi

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1539q3vq>

**Journal**

InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies, 6(1)

**ISSN**

1548-3320

**Author**

Schuckman, Hugh E

**Publication Date**

2010-01-25

**DOI**

10.5070/D461000666

Peer reviewed

**How NGOs React: Globalization and Educational Reform in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Mongolia** by Iveta Silova and Gita Steiner-Khamsi. Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press, 2008. 303 pp. ISBN 978-1-56549-257-8.

In the field of International Education, connecting with the *right* people, individuals with funding and influence, is a categorical endeavor that *How NGOs React* does not take lightly. While a plethora of interesting articles make their home in this volume of edited works on Central Asian education reforms, the real magic appears in Iveta Silova and Gita Steiner-Khamsi's savvy editorial choices. As they explicitly note in their introduction, "In order to secure a grant or loan, the ministries of education had first to learn to speak the language of international donors" (p. 14). If any Central Asian Department of Education needs pointers on crafting a message, *How NGOs React* should be the guidebook; through their deliberate choices, Silova and Steiner-Khamsi highlight the conceptual power of space, image, and ideology in framing projects to fit the predilections of conservative funding agencies.

Published in 2008, *How NGOs React* marks a strategic departure from geographic positioning of earlier books on Central Asian Education. Whereas most editors (such as Stephen P. Heyneman and Alan J. DeYoung in their must-read book *The Challenge of Education in Central Asia*) show an indelible Soviet Urstoff in their characterizations, Silova and Steiner-Khamsi realign the boundaries to weight an Asian identity. In particular, with the prominent inclusion of Mongolia, a sparsely populated country that barely registers in other education texts, this identity challenge is largely solved. Though Mongolian culture itself felt nearly 70 years of Soviet hegemony before 1990, the Western *perception* of Mongolia goes much further back in history. In place of the "Iron Curtain," Euro-American investors can conjure the glory of Genghis Khan's imperial charge through China, India, and Eastern Europe. Steiner-Khamsi, North America's foremost Mongolian education specialist, begins and ends the book with comparative discussions of Mongolian education. By relating Central Asian educational trends through the most exotic and geographically distant country to Russia, Silova and Steiner-Khamsi harness the Euro-American Orientalist view of Mongolia as an untamed, free nomadic space. While mapping Central Asian geography apart from associations with Soviet Socialism, they simultaneously add weight and distinctiveness to this region.

While redrawing the map for Euro-American education funding agencies, *How NGOs React* reimagines the students of Central Asia. This book refuses to reify our expectations with snapshots of charming yet bucolic learners; the students in *How NGOs React* are refreshingly dapper and professional. Enscenced in a tasteful, corporate navy blue background, one large black and white photo

focuses on a classroom at student eye level. Like businessmen preparing for a company board meeting, an assembly of well-dressed male students gathers near the back of the room in what appears to be a group activity. In the foreground, one young male student, sharply dressed in a well-fitted suit, tie, and white shirt, confidently faces the camera. The image is not that of a Soviet backwater, but of a region populated with connatural power and potential; Central Asia is ready for business.

Complementing the image, *How NGOs React* depicts Central Asia as ideologically compatible with Western-backed development, ringing off upbeat, free market-friendly titles such as “Unwrapping the Post-Socialist Reform Package,” “Championing Open Society,” “The Free Market in Textbook Publishing,” and “Quotas for Quotes: Mainstreaming Open Society Values in Uzbekistan.” As the second and fourth of these titles suggest, the book’s central ideological glue is the Soros Foundation, the brainchild of the well-known liberal businessman and philanthropist George Soros. While *How NGOs React* does not *sell out* to free market interests or simply act as a cheerleader of the global market, the articles largely espouse the outlook that harmonizes with market-oriented reforms. In the article on the Kyrgyz Republic titled “A Voucher System for Teacher Training in Kyrgyzstan,” for example, the evaluation of a voucher system (a capitalist pet project) receives a glowing review. The authors, Alexander Ivanoc and Valetin Deichman, state that, “Teachers, the beneficiaries of the voucher-based training courses, have responded enthusiastically to the changes the new system set in motion” (p. 167). We find a distinctly economic tenor in their language; the teachers are termed as beneficiaries. Soon after, they highlight the “financial success” and note that “the project resonated with the donor community, and new donors have come forward and expressed interest in funding the voucher mechanism” (p. 168). Herein, they give the gold standard for success in development: the fact that other institutions have signed up to be part of the success. Finally, the authors make a pitch to other potential funders, stating that, “The most feasible scenario for the future is the following: Donor organizations adopt a new financing mechanism and help to implement it throughout the country” (p. 168). While this article does contain information about an educational program in Kyrgyzstan, the orientation targets a distinct audience. The tone of the other articles in *How NGOs React* is much the same. With this much success, the authors could double as speechwriters for the next Asia Development Bank Christmas fundraiser.

Simply reading *How NGOs React* for the content would miss the merit of the work. This book is not another stack of articles thrown together post-conference *post haste*. Silova and Steiner-Khamsi thought deeply about the process of editing this volume. Through their consummate scholastic endeavor, they have begun in their own way to mold the discourse of Central Asian identity

to better position this region in terms of education reform funding. For a struggling region largely ignored by the international community, this news is certainly welcome.

### **References**

Heyneman, S., & DeYoung, A. (2004). *The challenge of education in Central Asia*. Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing.

### **Reviewer**

Hugh E. Schuckman is a second year PhD student at the UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies in the division of Social Science and Comparative Education. His areas of interest include education development in Central and East Asia, post-colonial theory and education, and the history of education in Japan and Mongolia. He can be reached at [hschuckman@ucla.edu](mailto:hschuckman@ucla.edu).