

## Community Development in Central Asia

### Summary

This paper summarises the findings of a research process initiated as part of INTRAC's programme of civil society strengthening in Central Asia, funded by DfID. Field research was undertaken in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan in 2003 in an attempt to gain a greater understanding of the dynamics of rural communities in the three countries. The researchers looked at traditional forms of social organisation and mobilisation and practices inherited from the Soviet era, as well as the impact of these on community development interventions promoted by external donors over the past decade.

Since the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991, and the subsequent independence of the Central Asian states, the region has been the recipient of considerable aid flows and international attention. American aid has been particularly forthcoming, in part because of the geopolitical significance and sensitivity of the region. INTRAC feels that there is a considerable lack of understanding amongst the donor community as to the way in which communities have adapted themselves to the severe economic crisis and collapse of state infrastructure and services post-independence. There also appears to have been a reluctance to engage with some of the more complex issues that will impact upon the success of any externally designed community development initiative. The research findings have been published by INTRAC as an Occasional Paper (OPS 40). Whilst the case studies in this paper are from Central Asia, lessons drawn from the experience in this region are relevant for practitioners and policy makers working elsewhere in developing and transition states.

### Conceptual Issues

The term 'community development' has been defined - and the concept put into practice - in a variety of ways. In general, it is used to refer to individuals in communities or neighbourhoods working together to improve local infrastructure. However, methods used to promote this type of development vary greatly. These can be considered on a continuum, ranging from the most instrumental of approaches (such as those of the British in the 1940s and their push for the mobilisation of labour to 'develop' the backward colonies) to ideals of participation and inclusion, championed in the rhetoric of today's NGOs, where communities are 'empowered' and enabled to take control of their collective futures.

Community development approaches can usefully be classified according to their 'method' or 'process' orientation. For example, a project to install rural infrastructure could be either method or process oriented depending on the key aim behind the project. If this aim is just to supply services to a rural area, then working with the community can be interpreted as a method, or a way in which these services can be provided. A process approach would look to the skills and opportunities that a community could accrue through their involvement in rural infrastructure installation, and how social capital could be strengthened.

## Practice

During the Soviet era associational activity in Central Asia was strictly controlled; NGOs, as understood in the West, only emerged in the region during Perestroika. Their numbers have now grown significantly, mainly as a response to the availability of donor funds, and growing levels of poverty. However, without a strong non-governmental sector in place, new NGOs springing up post-independence have had few examples on which to model themselves. In general, they have evolved as a rather urban group of organisations, staffed by highly educated multilingual professionals who can be out of touch with the rural poor.

There has also been a growth of community-based organisations (CBOs). According to the theory, these should be self-reliant, representative membership organisations, focused on self-help. In practice in Central Asia, 'Community Initiative Groups' are very often formed by external donors in order to implement projects aimed to install infrastructure (irrigation systems, drinking water, gas pipelines). Drawing on pre-Soviet traditions of mutual aid, donors mobilise contributions in kind, by asking respected members of the community to encourage villagers to provide their labour for free. Whilst the Initiative Group members are supposedly representative and elected by community members, in reality villagers may have very little choice as to who they elect, because of underlying relationships of power and patronage of which donors are often unaware.

Donors solicit the views of the community through the use of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) techniques. Despite their widespread use, these are not without troubling limitations. Case studies showed how women and poorer individuals can be prevented from voicing their opinions about planned projects. In other examples, the power of the former collective and state farms to make or break a project had not been evaluated.

Traditional institutions within rural communities were also found to have a potentially important impact on community development interventions. Whilst some donors had attempted to engage with these institutions and practices, these relationships had often been oversimplified. Traditional forms of working and those in powerful positions within society can be very positive actors in processes of community development. However, their collaboration and potential as a force for positive change cannot be taken for granted. The research process also highlighted the problematic area of gender relations in the region, particularly attitudes towards young women.

### Case Study – Village A, Kyrgyzstan

The Elder of a nearby settlement had managed to bring the problems faced by this new village to the attention of a foreign donor. He had successfully mobilised community members to provide their labour for free to install an irrigation pipeline, paid for by the donor, that would serve the villagers' garden plots. Despite having gone through the motions of participation, the more marginal members of the village were not happy with the outcome of the completed project. A group of poorer women explained that the pipes were laid so as to benefit the Elder's sons. Although these women also receive water when an electric pump is switched on, as their gardens are further away from the water source, it is too expensive for them to use often enough to make a difference to the yield of their plots. They did not feel able to raise these points at the PRA meetings and project planning stage, as the Elder is a respected individual in the village. His position is such that contradicting him could have serious consequences for poorer residents. He provides help to the more vulnerable families in the village by distributing flour after the harvest and gives them temporary employment on his fields at busy times of year. He is also likely to preside over the distribution of credits in a new micro-finance project to be established in the village. This is an example of how powerful local figures can easily manipulate projects for their own ends, even if donors insist on participatory approaches to project planning.

## Discussion Points and Lessons Learnt

### CBOs – legitimacy and representation

- Donor choices about who to work with in a community can maintain unequal power relations or even worsen social inequalities.
- CBOs can often have a very narrow focus that reflects the professional and personal interests of its founders and leaders.
- Donors and local NGOs can be over reliant on one powerful or educated member of a village or CBO.

### Participation

- The use of PRA tools has become formulaic, and its related exercises are often regarded by local staff as 'hoops' to jump through: a kind of condition on funding.
- Rigid adherence to specific 'participatory' tools will not necessarily promote participation.
- Women's views, in particular, can be marginalised, even if blueprints for participation are followed.
- Traditional forms of social mobilisation are not always voluntary, nor do they leave much space for input and discussion from community members.

### The resilience of Soviet structures

- Despite their weak financial status, the former collective and state farms remain very influential in rural areas.
- Individuals in powerful positions within the farms can make or break a community development initiative.

### Attitudes towards women

- NGOs and CBOs in Central Asia have a very limited understanding of 'women's rights' and do not tend to challenge the myth that sexual equality was achieved during the Soviet era.
- Because of the perceived strong role that Central Asian women play within the household, there is a mental block around the idea that women can be subjugated by family members and have their rights violated.
- Women's role in society is closely linked to national tradition, and discussion of these roles can be taboo.
- NGOs promote women's involvement in business but simultaneously place great value on traditional female roles of motherhood and subservience to the mother-in-law. They fail to consider the potential conflict between these two different models.

### Interacting with traditional ways of working

- Donor demands to form new groups at community level often lead to duplication of structures that are already in place.
- The work of some donors suggests that they have not properly understood the extent of social capital and the highly developed mechanisms of social organisation that already exist in Central Asian communities.

## Policy Implications for Donors and NGOs

1. Positive social outcomes from a community development initiative are unlikely to be achieved if a donor takes a highly instrumental, method approach to grass-roots level development projects.
2. CBOs and local NGOs should not be regarded by external donors as mere vehicles through which resources are dispersed. Donors should give greater consideration to the history and structure of these groups and organisations and their potential to promote community development.
3. In order to ensure full participation and the promotion of the community as the 'driver' for development, donors must ensure that a greater number of 'voices' are heard in meetings and that more viewpoints influence decision making. The use of 'traditional' practices does not necessarily ensure full participation and democratic decision making. A fundamental re-evaluation of participatory techniques and their aims must be undertaken by donors in Central Asia if there is to be any real attempt to promote social inclusion, women's empowerment and to address power imbalances.
4. In order to make progress on the issue of women's rights in Central Asia, the development community must go beyond speaking of 'women' as a catch-all category and consider the marked difference between the social roles and responsibilities of younger and older women.
5. The fact that 'tradition' can be harmful and that there are problematic issues surrounding customary gender roles must also be accepted and addressed by national NGOs and external donors and brought onto the agenda.
6. Thorough examination needs to be made of the way in which traditional institutions and local self-governing bodies work and involve their constituents, before collaborative projects are initiated or new community groups are established.

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### Further Reading

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### INTRAC Publications

Earle, L. et al. (2004) *Community Development in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan*. OPS 40.

Garbutt A. and Heap S. (2003) *Growing Civil Society in Central Asia*. OPS 39.

Hunt, M. (2001) *Women's Participation in NGOs in Kyrgyzstan*. OPS 34.

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