INTRAC

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN KAZAKHSTAN, KYRGYZSTAN AND UZBEKISTAN

Lessons Learnt from Recent Experience

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Executive Summary

This occasional paper documents fieldwork carried out in the republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan in 2003. It begins with an overview of the history of 'community development' and an analysis of the concept. It then presents lessons drawn out of an examination of how individuals and communities in Central Asia engage with local level development projects. These lessons are grouped under five main themes:

- The Individual and the Community Based Organisation
- The Resilience of Soviet Institutions
- Pre-Soviet Practices and Forms of Social Organisation
- Perceptions of Gender and 'Women's Role'
- Community Engagement with Local Government

The aim of the paper is to encourage development agencies which are implementing (or plan to implement) community level projects in the region to undertake a reflection of their practice. The paper presents empirical data taken from a series of case studies of community development initiatives and provides some practical recommendations.

PART 1: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

CHAPTER ONE

SUMMARY OF LESSONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1.1 The Concept of Community Development

- The term 'community development' has been in use since the early twentieth century and has been employed to denote a number of very different practices, including politically motivated colonial interventions.
- Many organisations and agencies within the development sector are now using the term, but their approaches can be very different.
- Community development can be implemented along instrumentalist lines as the most cost-efficient *method* of installing infrastructure in rural or urban communities.
- Or it can be understood as *process* through which community members will gain new skills and even better representation and 'voice'.

It is important to understand that 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.

1.2 Community Based Organisations – Legitimacy and Representation

- Donor choices about who to work with in a community can maintain unequal power relations or even worsen social inequalities.
- CBOs 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 just one powerful or educated member of a village or CBO.

CBOs and local NGOs should not be regarded by external donors as mere vehicles through which resources are dispersed. If donors are really concerned with successful implementation of projects then greater consideration should be given to the history and structure of these groups and organisations.

- Communities are not always properly informed of how grant programmes, donor funded projects or micro-credit schemes are to be implemented.

- Some local NGOs show a reluctance to hand over responsibility to the communities themselves for management of projects. Management and initiative can remain completely external to the target villages.

Donors need to ask themselves what will happen to these CBOs once donor aid and grants are no longer available. Greater empowerment of local level organisations could contribute significantly to their potential sustainability.

1.3 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.
- Despite its widespread use, PRA is not without troubling limitations. Rigid adherence to specific 'participatory' tools will not necessarily promote participation itself.
- Women's views, in particular, can be marginalised, even if blueprints for participation are followed.

If donors really are aiming for full participation and the promotion of the community as the 'driver' for development, then they must ensure that a greater number of 'voices' are heard in meetings, and that more viewpoints influence decision making. More thoughtful and innovative ways of bringing marginalised voices into the open are needed.

- *Ashar* (a traditional form of voluntary labour) is being used as a tool to encourage participation.
- The process of organising for *ashar* at present does not leave a great deal of space for the input of the majority of community members.
- Participation in *ashar* is not always voluntary.

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 needs to 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.

1.4 Grant-making Schemes

- Grant-making can encourage a type of charity mentality, rather than any more substantial form of community co-operation.

- Criteria for grant-making can rule out families and individuals with lower educational levels, those marginalised or isolated from village activities and women who are subjugated by family members and traditions within the household.

Providing funds for individuals to undertake small projects can undermine opportunities for community projects that promote co-operation and a collective response to collective need.

1.5 Understanding 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 project.

- NGO interventions can exacerbate tensions in and between villages that are linked to power struggles within the farms.

Ignoring the power of the former state and collective farms and their impact on village communities is potentially self-defeating for an agency attempting to implement projects in rural areas.

1.6 Problematic Attitudes Towards Women and Gender Relations

- 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 to family members, and as such have their rights violated.
- Women's role in society is often closely linked to national tradition and discussion of these roles can be taboo.
- There is an important difference between the way that younger and older women are perceived and treated by society and family.

If progress is to made 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.

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.

- NGOs and CBOs in Central Asia have a very limited understanding of 'women's rights'.
- These organisations do not tend to challenge the myth that sexual equality was achieved during the Soviet era.
- 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.

Complex issues surrounding gender roles and national traditions need to be brought onto the NGO agenda in Central Asia. A great deal of hard work will be needed to raise awareness and levels of understanding around issues of gender and inequality.

1.7 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.

The institutions that exist may not be perfect, but donors should look to strengthen the capacities of those involved in local self-governing bodies and the like. It is especially important to raise levels of awareness amongst the population of the role of civil society organisations and the potential benefits of collaboration in community development

initiatives. A thorough examination needs to be made of the way in which institutions work and involve their constituents, before projects are initiated or new community groups are established.

CHAPTER TWO

BACKGROUND TO INTRAC'S CENTRAL ASIA PROGRAMME (ICAP)

INTRAC's involvement in Central Asia began in 1994 with an invitation from UNV/UNDP to design a community-based poverty alleviation programme in Kyrgyzstan. From 1994 to 1997, INTRAC focused on strengthening the organisational capacity of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and NGO support organisations in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Drawing on evaluation findings and recommendations, from 1997–2000 INTRAC expanded its focus to include institutional development of the sector as a whole. This involved work at multiple levels – communities, local government, NGOs, NGO support and coalition organisations, donors and central government – balancing continued development of the role and capacity of NGOs with promoting a positive enabling environment for NGO activity. Work focused on Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, but involved and encouraged the participation of organisations and individual NGO staff from Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. In 2001, INTRAC moved into a second phase, with a DfID-funded three year programme to strengthen the capacity, independence and effectiveness of targeted NGOs, CBOs and NGO support organisations, expanding into all five Central Asian republics. INTRAC is working towards this aim by (1) strengthening the organisational capacity and independence of existing and new partner support and coalition NGOs; (2) enhancing development-related knowledge, skills and critical thinking amongst NGO support organisations and NGO support staff; (3) developing links with and support to CBOs; (4) promoting effective working relationships between NGOs, local government staff and beneficiary groups in selected target areas and (5) improving communication and understanding between NGOs and the donor community. The overall goal is to develop a vibrant, effective and independent civil society in Central Asia (INTRAC 2001).[1]

2.1 Introduction to the Community Development Component of ICAP

This paper is the result of a period of initial research carried out in 2003 that aimed to add to INTRAC's understanding of the nature of community involvement in village-level social development projects in the three post-Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Many external donors (taken here to mean multilateral bodies, bilateral agencies and European and US based NGOs or international NGOs) are now focusing on rural infrastructure projects that promote participation by the users themselves, channelling resources to community groups. Noticing this trend in funding, civil society organisations in the region have approached local INTRAC staff for guidance on how to undertake this type of community development work.[2] However, very little research has been carried out to date into the dynamics that underpin village

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[1] For a broader overview of the aims and activities of ICAP see Garbutt 2003.
[2] The dramatic shift from NGO development to community development was problematic for organisations that had previously been working towards capacity building for NGOs. Staff suddenly found themselves having to work at community level but without adequate skills or knowledge about how to get communities and local government involved. The latter was a condition of some donors and was particularly difficult in Kazakhstan where well-organised community structures, such as the mahallas in Uzbekistan, were harder to locate. (Source: email communication with L. Abdulsalyamova)

life in the Central Asian states and as such there is limited understanding of the most appropriate ways that external actors can engage with individuals and groups within communities[3]. INTRAC therefore considered it appropriate to conduct some preliminary research so as to gain a broad overview of the situation in each of the three target countries. This was achieved by preparing a series of case studies. This paper draws upon the findings of these studies in order to present some practical lessons and recommendations for development agencies, both international and local, that are engaging (or plan to engage) with community level projects. It is hoped that the information gained from the specific community case studies will have a wider resonance for those working in Central Asia, and that the analysis presented here can help to inform the practice and policy of the development actors in the region.

The first phase of research within the community development component of the programme is nearing completion, but work on community interaction and engagement with development projects will be ongoing as part of INTRAC's Central Asia Programme (ICAP). This paper draws upon seven case studies (two each in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan and three in Uzbekistan) as well as other data generated by work in progress, secondary data (published and unpublished) and a process of feedback and consultation with ICAP's regional partners. Whilst this is a small sample, the issues that are discussed here reflect themes that recurred across case studies and countries during the course of the research, many of which are backed up in the available literature. The aim of this paper is to raise a number of questions that are highly pertinent for development agencies engaging with local communities in the region, in an attempt to stimulate a process of self-reflection and examination of practice within these organisations.

This paper will begin with an introduction to the idea of 'community development', including some background to its historical evolution and theory surrounding the concept. This is followed by a brief overview of the situation with regards to community development in each of the three countries and a discussion of methodology. It is important to note that the situation in the three target countries varies to a significant degree. However, we believe that there is sufficient overlap in a number of areas to warrant a thematic, rather than country-specific focus for the main body of the paper (always providing space for a discussion of difference between contexts). The themes have been chosen as they cut across national boundaries, manifesting themselves in different cultural and geographical contexts where community development projects have been implemented. We believe that a proper understanding of these themes is crucial if community development initiatives are to be appropriately implemented. The themes are:

- The Individual and the Community Based Organisation
- The Resilience of Soviet Institutions
- Pre-Soviet Practices and Forms of Social Organisation
- Perceptions of Gender and 'Women's Role'
- Community Engagement with Local Government

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3 See Page 12 for more discussion of the term 'community'.

CHAPTER 3

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The term 'community development' has been applied to describe interventions to promote social development at the grass-roots level since the early twentieth century. The current widespread use of the term would suggest that the approach is having a renaissance. But rather than signalling a 'rediscovery' of the concept in recent years, it would seem that an old term is being used to denote new practices. Tracing a history of community development is a difficult task, as the term has been in use for a considerable amount of time and yet employed to denote different approaches in very different contexts. For example, it was used to describe the strategies of the British colonial powers in East Africa during the 1940s which aimed

> to mobilise the labour of rural and urban communities in support of national government objectives to build social and physical infrastructures, and increase 'self-reliance' (Pratt and Boyden 1985:141).

Newly independent nations adopted these methods in their attempts to develop the poorer rural regions after the wave of decolonisation in the 1950s and 1960s: community development as a government-sponsored approach is particularly well known in the example of independent India. However, the popularity of community development with governments in developing countries was on the wane by the 1970s: it was considered to have had limited success and attention shifted to the search for immediate technical solutions to the problems of rural poverty.

These early approaches to community development had also been criticised as attempts on the part of government to extend control to rural areas, rather than efforts to stimulate community initiatives or participation. Marsden and Oakley note that by 1982, there was a reluctance even to use the term, as it was perceived 'in many quarters as passé, [and] associated with a discredited epoch of attempted structural transformation in the immediate post-colonial world' (Marsden and Oakley 1982:153). Writing 16 years later, Oakley notes that a comparison of texts on community development between 1970 and 1997 would reveal a completely different discourse. He points out that 'the term has lost much of its early potency and has been replaced by a wider body of concepts and terms which reflect the liberation from centrally-directed community development initiatives and their replacement by a more political and power-focused perspective' (Oakley 1998:365). These terms include *grass-roots*/*participatory*/*bottom-up* development, brought about in conjunction with *community based organisations*, *NGOs* and other *civil society organisations*.

It was from the late 1970s onwards, as a reaction to the state-led approach to community development, that publications began to appear whose focus was on encouraging peasant farmers and the poor to be the initiators of their own development – in this way the 'last would be put first' (Chambers 1983)[4]. The rhetoric of these texts centred around participation and:

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[4] See for example the work of Roland Bunch, Paulo Freire, Benno Galjart.

community level development as a process of 'empowering' and negotiation. They have also seen the whole development process as a 'liberating' experience and not merely the imposition of externally designed programmes and projects' (Oakley 1998:366).

Interestingly, the same discourse of people-centred development, and the participatory tools developed by some of the same authors, are now being used to form the backbone of the 'new' community development currently being implemented in Central Asia and elsewhere.

There has also been a parallel shift towards 'community development' on the part of states and multilateral institutions which has helped to shake off its poor reputation. It has now again become pivotal in attempts to alleviate poverty in the developing world. Much of this has to do with changing global politics and realignment of the development agenda. With the end of the Cold War, the growth of 'neo-liberal' approaches to state welfare provision and the reduction in the capacity and resources of the state in many countries, 'collective self-help' has been trumpeted as the way to address the needs of poor communities. The World Bank and other institutions have now come to see community development as an efficient way of mobilising labour and channelling resources as the state is rolled back. However, they appear to want to take on this sponsorship of community organisations themselves, rather than leave engagement with the grassroots to the NGO sector, or newly emerging self-governance bodies. This can perhaps be seen as a response to the perceived failure of NGOs to solve problems of poverty in the developing world. During the 1990s, these organisations were seen as the best mediators between poor people and sources of funding and were lauded as most able to engage with communities, understand them and address their needs. However, the perceived inability of the sector to give sufficient evidence of its impact that might 'prove' its comparative advantage, has led bilateral and multilateral agencies to rethink their attitude towards engagement with poor communities. This about-turn in thinking is now evidenced by the World Bank's focus on Community Driven Development.[5]

A brief review of the literature on the subject of community development would therefore suggest that the term has been used as a catch-all, to describe, in general, attempts to improve human and social well-being at the grass-roots level. It could be argued that in the current political climate, the attitudes towards engagement with the community on behalf of the multilateral institutions has finally converged with that of the NGOs. The term and the old approaches it alluded to may have gone out of fashion with governments and inter-governmental agencies, but NGOs have been working at this level all along, albeit using a different terminology and with a grass-roots customised approach, rather than a standardised national package. However, as will be seen below, there are still stark differences between the fundamental rationales behind decisions to work at the community level. The following section will examine some of the concepts bound up in the differing interpretations of the term.

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[5] The World Bank now has a number of web pages devoted to Community Driven Development. www.worldbank.org/cdd

CHAPTER FOUR

THE CONCEPT OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

The complex history of the use of the term 'community development' is reflected in the many varying definitions of the concept, its goals and how it can be put into practice. 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, reaching from the most instrumental of approaches, those of the British in the 1940s for example, 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. This can also be understood by classifying community development approaches 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.

The method approach is currently very much in evidence in Central Asia. The shift towards implementing community level development projects has been undertaken on a large scale by the World Bank, ADB and UNDP[6] in Central Asia, occasionally in conjunction with bilateral donors such as DfID. There has been a push to execute a large number of very similar projects over a wide area; perhaps as a response to the perceived inability of the NGO sector to scale up activities beyond local one-off projects. Certainly, judging from literature produced by the World Bank, the drive for efficiency is a key factor behind this new community focus:

> CDD [Community Driven Development] is an effective mechanism for poverty reduction, complementing market- and state-run activities by achieving immediate and lasting results at the grassroots level…CDD has also been shown to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of poverty reduction efforts. Because it works at the local level, CDD has the potential to occur simultaneously in a very large number of communities, thus achieving far-reaching poverty impact. Finally, well-designed CDD programs are inclusive of poor and vulnerable groups, build positive social capital, and give them greater voice both in their community and with government entities. (Dongier et al 2000: 5)

The authors note that projects are much more likely to be implemented successfully and infrastructure maintained, if the users or clients are involved in decision making and management processes. This very instrumentalist view of local level social development projects is revealed in the term the Bank obviously feels most comfortable using, that of 'community *driven* development'. Reading between the lines of the above quotation, the priorities of the Bank become clear. Their approach is one that sees working at the

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[6] These multilateral agencies all work through the State as their main partner/client, and thus also face the challenge of how their approach to community development is aligned to their work on governance and other national agendas.

grass-roots level as a method, rather than a process: it is not the community itself that will develop in some way, but the community that will direct the way in which its infrastructure is developed and have control of resources. A more recent text on CDD specifically in Central Asia does, however, note that CDD initiatives can help strengthen civil society, although it does not elaborate on this point (Peabody et al. nd: 4).[7]

The World Bank text by Dongier et al quoted above does state that CDD can promote the growth of social capital, although this item comes last on a list of the positive outcomes of CDD projects, and social capital itself is defined in very narrow and instrumentalist terms: 'the ability of individuals to secure benefits as a result of membership in social networks'. A different understanding of social capital is that in the tradition of Putnam, where networks of civic engagement amongst individuals generate trust, and as a consequence facilitate collective action (Putnam 1995). The only reference to trust in the World Bank text quoted above is made in relation to traditional networks of savings groups. It would seem that trust, solidarity and community cohesion do not have much of a place in the World Bank's idea of community driven development.[8]

As has been noted above, however, definitions of 'community development' vary widely. In the case of the World Bank, the approach is highly instrumental: villagers should be involved in a project to ensure maximum efficiency and avoidance of élite capture. Any social benefits accrued are added extras. For others, moving towards the 'process' or empowerment end of the continuum, positive social benefits are placed before installation of infrastructure. For example, community development

> aims to enrich the web [of personal relationships, group networks, traditions and patterns of behaviour] and make its threads stronger, to develop self-confidence and skills, so that the community (the people) can begin to make significant improvements to their neighbourhoods (the place) and its material environment (Flecknoe and McLellan 1994).

Key to an understanding of the difference in approaches is an appreciation of the fact that for the World Bank, positive social outcomes will occur only if a CDD project is 'well-designed', whilst for others, a community development project will not have been successful unless positive social outcomes are achieved.

However, projections of how a development project at village or neighbourhood level could work can be idealist, even utopian. As has already been discussed widely elsewhere, the notion of 'community' is often romanticised, and an adoption of an idealised view of community will impact upon perceived potential for community

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[7] This candid review of CDD in Central Asia to date notes that more could be done to improve capacity building of communities, so that it is not just intermediaries, or a minimal number of individuals who benefit from training. It also notes that adequate localised social assessments are rarely undertaken before CDD is initiated. There are now plans to give communities much greater control over resources, to intensify capacity building at the grassroots and give greater focus to analysis and learning, although the text still emphasises the efficiency argument for CDD.

[8] This definition also raises another set of questions about where the 'driver' for village level development comes from. For whilst the term 'community development' can suggest (perhaps uncomfortable) notions of empowerment and the less tangible and easily measured side of development interventions, 'community driven development' is, in the Central Asian case, very often a misnomer. The extent to which projects at community level are driven by outside agents is discussed in the main body of this text.

development.[9] Across the world, donor projects are often initiated with the stated aim of reducing social tensions and potential conflict, on the basis of relatively small scale and/or short term interventions, implying a somewhat utopian idea of community and community development. This would see the majority of actors in a village or urban neighbourhood come together around a troubling issue pertinent to all of them, upon which they would act, jointly, in order to solve this problem. They would simultaneously become 'empowered' – finding voice when speaking to local authorities, ensuring that women and other marginalised groups are equally and properly represented as well as improving skills such as communication, negotiation and lobbying.[10] All the while, involvement and participation would contribute to greater peace, cooperation and understanding amongst members of the same community. This is quite a lot to expect from any project, and particularly difficult in Central Asia, considering the current focus on one-off infrastructure projects, however participatory.

But these definitions, on different points of the continuum, run into difficulties when one queries whether community (driven) development can be promoted from the outside. Certainly the 'driven' definition of the Bank suggests that the initial impulse for a project or the energy to sustain it should come from within the community. More process oriented approaches, similarly, would surely also necessitate some kind of endogenous awakening amongst a particular community, after which its members would autonomously address their collective needs. In practice, however, the majority of the projects studied in the course of the research had been promoted by external donors: examples of community development where donors had not been involved were harder to locate.

The issue of external versus internal motivation was one that influenced the search for a definition of 'community development' within ICAP that would inform the research. Also, literature that exists on community development is, seemingly without exception, based on experience of very different social, cultural and economic contexts. As a consequence, a loose definition of community development was adopted. Rather than searching for examples of good practice in 'community development' in Central Asia, it was thought best to keep an open mind as to what community development in Central Asia might look like. One of the aims of the community development component was to identify the difference between projects that were purely based on improvements to infrastructure and social services and those that endowed a community with something 'extra'. For example, greater cohesion between different ethnic groups within a geographical area; improved negotiating and lobbying skills; greater ease of mobilisation; awareness of rights and of the need for advocacy; resolution of differences. Sustainability of community mobilisation was also a key area for analysis. The research aimed, furthermore, to look closely at the dynamics and power relations running through these villages, to see how these had impacted upon attempts to implement development

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[9] There is sometimes an implicit assumption of homogeneity in the use of the term 'community'. Indeed, as has been pointed out by feminist critics and other commentators, the term tends to ignore difference, and even to deny it, as the projection of one particular identity is favoured over others. Anderson goes so far as to say that communities do not exist as givens, but are the creation of active intellectuals and ideologists. For more discussion see for example De Berry (1999); Gujit and Shah (1998) and Anderson (1991).

[10] Peabody et al. make an interesting observation in this regard. Writing on the Central Asian context they note, 'CDD initiatives appear to be undertaken with the implicit assumption that all community-based efforts, particularly those involving creating or strengthening local organisations, are good in themselves and will automatically have a spill-over impact, generating new initiatives and new perspectives.' (Peabody et al nd:21)

projects. This general investigation of approaches that had and had not worked was considered more appropriate than an attempt to identify positive examples of community development *per se.*

The purpose of this introductory section has been to break down some of the history and concepts behind the term 'community development'. Its complex past is reflected in the multiplicity of definitions and understandings that are detailed in the recent literature. The challenge to donors will be not to gloss over the very real differences between the approaches and fail to see the lack of fit between an instrumentalist, efficiency based rationale for working at community level, and process oriented approaches that work towards a far broader understanding of 'development'. What is clear is that a trend has been set for development initiatives and agencies' involvement at the grass-roots level. It remains to be seen which type of approach turns out to be most effective in terms of poverty alleviation and infrastructure provision. Similarly, it will be interesting to note what type of organisation is most appropriately placed to work at the community level.

CHAPTER FIVE

COUNTRY OVERVIEWS

5.1 Kazakhstan

In general, civil society organisations are poorly developed, particularly in rural areas. Kazakhstan is a vast country, with the majority of the population clustered around industrialised centres, which means that within-country networking is patchy and rural populations are often isolated. Many NGOs are based in urban areas and very few have either a mission or capacity to support community based organisations of any type. National development policies are clearly centred on the economic drive provided by the extensive exploitation of oil and gas and other extractive industries, but with little attention to issues related to resource distribution. Reform in governance has not included any decentralisation and thus there is little empowerment at the local level and few policies have a chance of implementation without the political endorsement of the President's administration. As such, community development initiatives tend to be donor or government driven and lack of decentralisation to date restricts opportunities for partnership between community based organisations, NGOs and local authorities. The lowest level of government – the *Akimat* (similar to a mayoral office) – is still often the only point of call for communities needing improved infrastructure and resolution of other problems. These bodies tend to be fairly bureaucratic in outlook, are headed by executives who are appointed by the President, and have extremely limited funds to respond to this type of demand. Despite their lack of resources, these bodies are still considered important institutions by communities as they are responsible for the distribution of certain social benefits and can wield influence amongst local business leaders and on individuals further up the hierarchy. Some local level government bodies are becoming more interested in working with civil society organisations, although this is often because of the external funding that these organisations can attract or because of central government directives.

There are however, promising areas for community development. After the break-up of the former state and collective farms, new agricultural structures have emerged, including small scale co-operatives at community level. Another legacy of the Soviet era, the Women's Councils, are also regenerating themselves so as to be more responsive to the needs of women in both urban and rural areas. Pre-Soviet traditional practices as seen in other republics in the region are also common, such as community co-operation known as *assar*[11] and rotating savings and socialising groups. Councils of *aksakals* (elders), that mediate and solve domestic problems are also prevalent. Given the ethnic and geographical diversity of the country these trends are not visible nationwide, but have been observed in 'pockets of activity'.

There are a number of international NGOs and bilateral donors working in Kazakhstan, although external agencies' commitment to the country is on the wane as the country realises its direct investment potential and economic indicators reflect a 'middle income' status. Previously, large scale external interventions at community level have been concentrated in the Aral Sea area where chronic environmental degradation has had

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[11] See discussion of Kyrgyz *ashar* below.

serious negative impact on levels of poverty and well-being, as well as around the former nuclear testing ground in the Northeast. On a smaller scale, some community development interventions have been supported in decaying 'company towns' and in some of the poorer urban areas.

5.2 Kyrgyzstan

Some early promising democratic reforms meant that Kyrgyzstan has a more favourable environment for the growth of local civil society organisations than its neighbours in the region. There has also been considerable donor interest in the country, both because of its very low GDP, and in response to the initial (limited) moves made by the President towards a market economy and liberal democracy. Decentralisation of local government has been taken further in Kyrgyzstan than in the other Central Asian republics, although there are still reports that the lowest level of government, the *Ayil Okmotu*, can be intransigent and unwilling to co-operate with civil society organisations[12]. Levels of understanding of the non-governmental sector amongst the authorities is high, compared to the neighbouring republics, although greater awareness of the benefits of collaboration is still needed.

Although the country's nomadic populations were forced to settle by the Soviets, a number of traditional practices continue, and the influence of kin and extended family is thought by some to be of special importance. As in Kazakhstan, the *aksakals* are important figures in rural communities, and the use of *ashar* is widespread (although its nature is changing as donors adopt the practice). Strong communal ties could be conducive to community development initiatives.

Community development work is more advanced in Kyrgyzstan than in Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan, in part thanks to the early work of UNDP and its Community Development Centres. Active and influential civil society support centres across the country, funded by a number of different external donors, have encouraged the growth of local NGOs and community based organisations. Similarly, UNDP has been actively supporting the decentralisation process and promoting a range of mobilisation activities. These in turn have often brought in more funding from other international organisations. Bilateral donors, often in support of credit provided by the development banks, notably the British and Swiss, have been implementing far-reaching programmes at village level in rural areas, concentrating particularly on water, sanitation and rural livelihoods. A number of USAID-funded NGOs are also working at the community level, and are particularly concerned with conflict prevention in areas with a history of ethnic tension. However, organisations at the community level are often groups formed by the external donors to manage village projects, which can mean that functioning local structures are bypassed.

5.3 Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan has the most authoritarian regime of the three countries studied here, and perhaps for this reason, international agencies, INTRAC included, have been slower to

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[12] There is an ongoing debate in Kyrgyzstan as to whether the *Ayil Okmotu* is a government institution or a civil society actor. The *Ayil Okmotus* themselves tend to want to side with the community groups, and their representative Association is adamant that they are civil society organisations. Yet community members and groups often regard them as structures within the new Public Administration, replacing the former functions of the lowest level *Akimats*. The *oblast* level government officials certainly view the *Ayil Okmotus* as vehicles through which to administer State policies.

become involved in the republic. Despite a number of laws concerning public associations, including the Law on Non-Governmental Organisations adopted in 1999, the regulation of existing NGOs and registration of new ones still creates some difficulties for the work of civil society. However, there has been a surge of donor interest in the region after the events of September 11th 2001: Afghanistan borders the Southern Uzbek *oblast* of Surkhandarya and there are a couple of radical Islamic groups known to be operational in the country. The US now has a military base in the South of Uzbekistan, and has pledged millions of dollars to rural infrastructure development projects in the Southern *oblasts* and the troubled Ferghana Valley. However, Uzbekistan's poor human rights record means that other bilateral donors have been less keen to channel money into the country.

A programme focused on community development, the Mahalla Initiative Programme, was piloted by USAID in Uzbekistan. This experience was then adapted for neighbouring countries. USAID is now one of the main donors in the country, and funds a number of different INGOs to implement community level projects in Uzbekistan, but their approaches and priorities – to promote village involvement in installing or repairing infrastructure – are very similar. They tend to work through (often externally created) local NGOs/CBOs or NGO support centres and often focus on preventing conflict over access to limited resources, particularly in border areas. Other European-based INGOs are also active in the country and direct their efforts towards similar goals of poverty reduction through infrastructure projects, micro-credit and income generation, strengthening of the civil society sector and conflict prevention. Over the past three years the World Bank and UNDP have also stepped up their level of intervention in the country, with concern for strengthening civil society organisations and increasing their involvement in poverty reduction policies.

As in the other republics, there are strong traditions surrounding mutual aid to members of the extended family and community. These are particularly strong in the traditional *mahalla* communities in older quarters of large cities. In some cases, recent donor-led projects to install or repair infrastructure in *mahallas* are not seen by residents to differ considerably from long-standing practices of contributing labour to improve community facilities. More progressive NGOs are now also considering how to provide capacity building for *mahalla* employees to enable them to work better with their constituents.

CHAPTER SIX

METHODOLOGY

It was felt that for the purposes of this particular piece of work, a qualitative, ethnographic angle was needed if the research were to capture the dynamics and tensions that underpin community development projects in the Central Asian region. As such, it was decided to undertake a number of case studies. Areas for study were selected by the local researchers in consultation with ICAP partners – national NGOs, civil society support centres and NGO support organisations. This was important, as it meant that the researchers' work in the field was facilitated by trusted individuals who were familiar with the communities. They were also able to provide the researchers with background literature to the project and the area, and to give general information about projects, success stories and problems. The actual fieldwork trips were generally undertaken after a number of previous visits by the local researchers and other contact with partners at training events and workshops. The first day of each visit was often spent with local NGO or support centre staff to learn more about the area and the projects being implemented in order to reach consensus about which communities would be appropriate for study.

The three local researchers spent approximately five days in each case study area in their designated countries, collecting data through semi-structured interviews, focus groups and occasional mini surveys. [13] Planning detailed interviews with key individuals in advance could be difficult as the researchers could not be sure who they would be able to speak to once in the communities. Interview guidelines were prepared in advance, as were a list of appropriate questions for villagers. These were then adapted according to what type of informant was then available. In general, a very informal 'conversation-type' approach was taken with villagers, in order to encourage them to speak freely about their involvement with a particular project. In some cases, researchers would later return to the village for follow-up interviews with key individuals who had not previously been available, or to make up for shorter first visits.

When accompanied by the researcher from Oxford, after each day in the field there would be long discussions about what had been heard and how the data could be analysed. Sometimes the interpreter would also be a useful informant, especially if he or she were from the area. Discussions would follow on who could be interviewed the following day. Case studies were then written up by the lead and local researchers in collaboration. They were then translated back into Russian for feedback and further comments to partners who had been involved in the process, and then amended accordingly. These case studies are available at www.intrac.org.

There were a number of problems faced by the researchers in the different areas where fieldwork was undertaken. One of these was the use of the word 'community'. The purpose of the research was to understand community involvement and engagement with development projects. Who and what the community consisted of was fairly clear, in

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[13] The local researchers were accompanied on approximately half of the fieldwork trips by lead researcher Lucy Earle from INTRAC, Oxford. They were also given valuable in-country support by INTRAC staff Lola Abdulsalyamova, Charlie Buxton and Simon Forrester.

geographical terms, where isolated rural villages or individual *mahallas* were under consideration. However, in densely populated rural areas, it was not clear where one village or community ended and another began. This was also a problem in peri-urban settlements, referred to locally as 'villages' but which were a sprawling jumble of different neighbourhoods. In these cases, where an informant remarked, 'the whole community was involved', it was very difficult to understand what this really meant. The problem was further compounded in one area of Kyrgyzstan where an external donor had taken to referring to projects as 'jamaat', meaning 'community' in Kyrgyz. This definition had been taken up by local residents involved in the initiatives and led to a further lack of clarity as to who was actually engaged in the projects under study. For the purpose of this piece of work, the term 'community' refers to the geographical unit of a village or neighbourhood.

Also problematic were occasions when local partners had 'talked-up' the level of community involvement in a project. Opportunities for research into 'community development' were seriously curtailed in one area by the obvious lack of engagement of community members with the NGO implemented project.

Liaison between the researchers and community based organisations was generally facilitated by the local NGO. However, this did not mean that the whole neighbourhood or village were informed as to what the researchers were doing there. In one case, villagers came to the conclusion that the researchers were there to sort out their access to natural gas supply and a huge crowd gathered around the local CBO office. When it became clear that the researchers were there to learn from their experiences, rather than provide the village with infrastructure, there was a great deal of anger and frustration.

Although the purpose of the fieldwork visits was to learn how communities had interacted with development projects, obviously inquisitive researchers and probing questions led, in many cases, to ICAP partners and CBO leaders reflecting upon their own work. The presence of researchers in one village became a source of embarrassment over the infighting that had hindered the implementation of a particular project. As a matter of pride, community leaders became determined to overcome difficulties in order to complete works in their village. For the supporting NGO the visit was a catalyst both for greater community involvement in the project, and for a process of self-examination.

Finally, the one male local researcher was initially worried that he would not be able to speak to women, particularly in rural communities. However, this problem was overcome by conducting focus groups, rather than individual interviews, or by being accompanied by trusted female staff members from partner NGOs.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CASE STUDIES: LOCATION AND PRINCIPAL FOCUS

Kazakhstan

Village D
A small, isolated village in Southern Kazakhstan situated close to a nature reserve.

Formation of NGOs and CBOs, levels of engagement with community and the impact of grant-making schemes.

Settlement K
A group of peri-urban settlements on the outskirts of a large city in Southern Kazakhstan.

The work of the Women's Council at village level, women's traditional role and new expectations for female involvement in the labour market.

Kyrgyzstan

Village A
Recently established village in densely populated agricultural area of Ferghana Valley.

Traditional form of community mobilisation (*ashar*) and its adoption by international donors and local NGOs, power dynamics within the village, problems of participatory methods.

Village K
Village in North-Central Kyrgyzstan.

Attempts to implement social partnership programme, competition and rivalry amongst CBOs, relationships with local governments.

Uzbekistan

Mahalla U
A well-established *mahalla* in a large town in the Ferghana Valley.

Community engagement with the *mahalla*, traditional ways of working and the results of collaboration between the Mahalla Citizens' Assembly and an INGO.

Village N
A small village in a rural area of Southern Uzbekistan.

Relations between neighbouring villages, conflict over resources, the role of traditional figures at village level, power struggles within the former

collective farm, communication between urban-based NGO and local CBO.

Rayon K   A rural *rayon* in Karakalpakstan that includes a former state farm, now *shirkat*.

Relationship of villagers to the *shirkat* and Rural Citizens' Assembly, traditional forms of community collaboration and organisation.

PART 2: RESEARCH RESULTS – THEMATIC ISSUES

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE COMMUNITY BASED ORGANISATION

Along with 'community development', the term 'civil society' is much employed by development agencies working in Central Asia, including INTRAC, whose Central Asia programme aims to assist the strengthening of civil society organisations. A flourishing civil society is widely regarded as a key component of a democracy, as well as a force that will deepen the democratic process. Civil society in general terms can be understood as

> An intermediate realm situated between state and household, populated by organised groups or associations which are separate from the state, enjoy some autonomy in relations with the state, and are formed voluntarily by members of society to protect or extend their interests, values or identities (Manor, Robinson and White 1999)

or

> Unofficial, autonomous and self-regulated social activities and initiatives undertaken outside governmental structures and institutions (Tismaneanu 1995).

Under debate is the type of organisations, networks and activities that should be filling this space between the family and the state. In Central Asia, certainly at the time of independence, there was no 'neo-liberal' style civil society – this can be understood as a synonym for the non-profit sector, and NGOs in particular, that are independent from the state, but able to take over its role in the provision of certain services. Another similar conceptualisation of the 'right type' of civil society organisations would be: professional associations, unions, political parties and public interest groups (Roy 2002: 123). Some of the literature written on the region implies that prior to independence, civil society was practically non-existent in the Central Asian nations.[14] As Roy neatly summarises,

> In the […] conceptualisation based on Western ideas of political and economic freedom (free elections, free markets), 'civil society' has to be created from scratch in Central Asia. This is either because there is nothing of value today upon which to build (the entire Soviet legacy being cast as negative) – or because there is no such thing as a traditional society in Central Asia, owing to the onslaught of the Soviet system on previous social structures (Roy 2002: 125).

Roy goes on to note that the Central Asian states are in fact endowed with an 'immense social fabric', a statement fully supported by the results of this fieldwork. There continue to be strong networks of support, within families, villages and across lines of kin, as well as traditional forms of community interaction, management and positions of

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[14] See, for example, the introductory chapters of Ruffin and Waugh (1999).

responsibility. These institutions, traditions and practices can also fit into the two broad definitions of civil society given above. As Freizer has posited,

> Globalization propelled the civil society argument to far flung parts of the world – [which] previously may have remained entirely excluded from the debate – and incited a re-consideration of the term to fit new contexts. (Freizer 2003:3)

It is for this reason, she argues, that scholars increasingly speak of 'traditional' or 'communal' civil societies that are more relevant for non-Western contexts. This model may not fit with externally developed definitions of civil society, and it raises difficult questions around clientelism, inclusion and the potential for 'uncivil' society, but it cannot be ignored.

However, the number of NGOs in the Central Asian region has burgeoned since independence, and an embryonic 'neo-liberal' style civil society is in evidence. This growth has occurred in response to the availability of donor funds, as well as the acknowledgement by educated and well-informed local professionals of both the growing need of a large percentage of the population and of Western-style responses to this. But these NGOs, similar to many in the developing world, can often be out of touch with the majority of the poor. Without a strong non-governmental sector in place, new NGOs springing up post-independence 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, many of whom are women who have been squeezed out of the public sector.[15] Whilst their motivation is not in question here, it is clear that engaging with poor communities, especially in rural areas, has been a challenge for many of these NGOs. This has had an impact on their ability to become involved in community development projects, and has problematised interaction with their target groups at the grass-roots level. Commentators have argued that staff in these organisations have learnt 'donor-speak', but that this has made them incomprehensible to their users: the rural and urban poor.[16] On the other hand, some would argue that NGO engagement with government and international donors has helped to bring interest groups together to discuss policy priorities and shape the space for civil society development in Central Asia.

There has also been a growth of what are named Community Based Organisations or CBOs. According to Holloway, these organisations are distinguished by a set of characteristics. CBOs in his general definition are membership organisations with a focus on self-help, usually run by volunteers with few paid staff; locally resourced with a small area of operation, multi-sectoral and unregistered in law and formed by people with some (often geographic) connections, to improve their own circumstances. Arrossi et al (1994) also concur that CBOs are characterised by self-help, and quote Verhagen (1987), noting that 'A self-help organisation is a membership organisation which implies that its risks, costs and benefits are shared among its members on an equitable basis

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[15] For further discussion see Garbutt 2003.
[16] Sada Aksartova argues that international donors working in Central Asia are now dependent on these professionalised NGOs whose working practices mirror their own, as the only 'local' organisations that understand their methods, approaches and jargon. Furthermore, adopting the structure, practices and rhetoric of international organisations may have facilitated Central Asian NGOs' interaction with these external bodies, but it has alienated them from their own governments, other civil society groups and individuals outside of the NGO sector. Source: *Donors and NGOs in Kyrgyzstan: Trust, mistrust and social networks*, paper presented at Central Eurasian Studies Society 5th Annual Conference, October 2nd – 5th, Harvard, Cambridge, Mass.

and that its leadership and/or manager are liable to be called to account by membership for their deeds'. Korten goes further in his definition of People's Organisations, which 'represent their members' interests, have member accountable leadership, and are substantially self-reliant' (Korten 1990). Currently, along with the INGO focus on community level work, UN agencies and other multilaterals are looking towards greater involvement with CBOs. But what these organisations look like, the extent to which they correspond to the above definitions, and the manner in which they operate in the Central Asian context is problematic, as will be shown by the case study material presented in this paper.[17]

The exponential growth of CBOs comes as a response to the recent scaling up of American donor interest in the region. In some ways, the new focus on community-based development coming from the American donors is surprising. Certainly, after the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the USSR, American foreign policy and aid agency priorities revolved around democratisation and the development of vibrant civil societies that would help to establish democracy fully and keep a watchful eye on those in power. Many American funded NGOs in Central Asia were initially concerned with the civil and political rights of the individual – making a clear distinction between their approach and the communal approach that had been unrolled in the region by the Soviets. Some of the earliest organisations to be exported to the region were the National Endowment for Democracy and the National Democratic Institute that promote electoral democracy and undertake election monitoring. However, ten years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the world was again profoundly shaken, and, in the aftermath of September 11th 2001 a new form of geopolitics has emerged, with the Central Asian region at its very core.

There is now a palpable urgency in the American donor sector, to implement projects at the grassroots that will improve living standards and hopefully prevent large numbers of Uzbeks and Kyrgyz from turning to Islamic fundamentalist groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and Hizb ut-Tahrir, for alternative solutions to their poverty afflicted lives. Incidents in Osh in 1990 had already alerted external agencies to the real possibility of communal violence, especially in border areas, that could destabilise the region.[18] Although USAID-funded conflict mitigation programmes were already in operation in the Central Asian states, the events of September 2001 sparked the 'rapid roll-out' of community investment schemes aimed at conflict prevention.[19] There is also pressure, especially in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, to undertake activities at the

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[17] Giffen (2003) has noted that definitions of NGOs and CBOs and the distinctions between them are not fully clear in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. This is partly because initiative groups managing village level projects will often register officially as NGOs, even though the scope of the organisation is very limited. This situation is further problematised by the lack of adequate legislation for organisations working as CBOs. She notes further that 'some international donors are attempting to create CBOs out of these NGOs, requesting them to broaden their constituency to the whole village' (Giffen 2003: 11). Saley (2001) also notes this trend in Kazakhstan where the line between CBO and NGO has become blurred, and these organisations find themselves competing for funding.

[18] At the Fifth Annual Central Eurasian Studies Society Conference held at Harvard in October 2003, former and current employees of the US State Department clearly set out the US' three strategic goals for the region. These were (1) security and stability; (2) access to energy resources and (3) human rights. It was pointed out on several occasions that although access to energy resources is dependent on stability, it was not clear how the third goal of increased respect for human rights could be addressed in light of the other two priorities.

[19] USAID press release, July 11th 2002. www.state.gov/p/eur. Accessed 31/12/03.

community level that will show real results, as a type of payment in-kind for the use of military bases at Khalkhabat and Manas.

As such we see the USAID-funded INGOs focusing on the community, and launching a number of multiple project programmes in potential 'hot-spot' areas such as the Ferghana Valley, that spans Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and the Southern Uzbek *oblasts* of Kashkadarya and Surkhandarya that are close to the Afghan border. The push to show quick results, coming from the US government and its hosts in the region, however, has created a whole series of difficulties surrounding the make-up and activities of these newly formed organisations. Other international donors in the region are also adopting a community-based approach.

8.1 Power Relations in Rural Areas

Olivier Roy has argued that the networks of power and relations that existed in rural areas before socialism was introduced to Central Asia remained unreconstructed during the Soviet era. The same networks that had been in place for centuries adapted themselves to the new forms of social organisation that were introduced.

> The Central Asia kolkhoz produced new clans and tribes, as patronage networks and extended family ties woven inside the kolkhoz stretched and thrived outside the kolkhoz. Here we have the revenge of a traditional culture and society on an imported system (Roy 1999: 111).

In Tajikistan, for example, this manifested itself in the division of collective farms along lines of ethnic identity. Today, Roy sees the chairmen of the privatised *shirkat* in Uzbekistan (former state and collective farms) as the new Khans or local rulers. He notes that little has changed for rural workers:

> The dependency of the peasants on 'notables' has not disappeared, but simply been transformed into a new relationship of economic dominance. Privatisation has not produced new actors, only new space for action for the traditional actors (Roy 2002: 137).

Although power dynamics in the Central Asian states have been shifting at the national level since independence, Roy's radical views do tally with the findings from the case studies of rural communities. Whilst privatisation has maintained powerful sectors of rural society in dominant positions, so the intervention of external donors has bolstered the position of the more educated sectors of village society who become the 'new leaders' of community groups and organisations. There is a danger that the way CBOs or community initiative groups are formed does little to challenge power relations at the village level.

At present, the large majority of international agencies working at the grass-roots level in Central Asia are USAID-funded INGOs. Those with the widest outreach are currently Mercy Corps, Counterpart Consortium, Soros, IREX and CHF. Additionally, in Kyrgyzstan UNDP has established a number of outreach offices and deployed a mixture of international and national UN volunteers to staff these offices. The manner in which these agencies work is very similar across Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Sometimes, village residents make the first contact with a donor agency through a local support centre or office, on other occasions, the donor will approach local government officials or other local figures, with a request for contact within a particular village or

cluster of settlements. Consultation meetings are then held at village level to ascertain the extent to which there is interest in undertaking a project – this almost always involves installing or renovating infrastructure (gas supply, irrigation or drinking water systems, road and school repairs, for example). The next stages involve needs assessment, during which participatory techniques are used at further meetings, where community members are divided up into separate groups of men, women and young people. Consultations are also held with villagers to design the project, based on results of participatory exercises and to elect members to a 'community initiative group' or 'action group', who will mediate between the donor and the villagers, helping to mobilise their input. The community generally has to raise a percentage of the cost of the project and it is at these meetings that those assembled also decide on the type and amount of their contribution. Very often, this will be delivered through *ashar*[20] or voluntary labour.

An interesting case from the South of Kyrgyzstan, Village A, illustrates how even with supposed community involvement, many can end up excluded both from the planning stages and the eventual benefits of a project.

Box 1: Manipulation of projects by local powerful figures

In Village A, the concept of *ashar*, in which everyone in the village is expected to contribute their labour or other form of assistance in a joint effort to improve overall living standards in the village, was nothing new. The village itself had been established shortly before the collapse of the Soviet Union, and its inhabitants, mainly young couples whose relatives lived in another village just a few hundred metres away, were having to live without even the most basic infrastructure. The *aksakal*[21] of the parent village used his influence to get materials from the local government and to organise the villagers through *ashar*. In this way electricity had been installed, as had a crude irrigation system for garden plots, all this in the early 1990s, before the arrival of donors to the region. The entrepreneurial *aksakal* had then seen, as American donors came to the area, that there were resources to be tapped that could fund infrastructural improvements to Village A.

The *aksakal* was successful in that he brought representatives from a donor-funded civil society support centre to the village where they carried out needs assessment through PRA (Participatory Rural Appraisal) and undertook participatory planning for a project. The village now has 4km of irrigation pipe, that splits off in two directions. An electric pump has also been installed, since the village is built on a steep slope. Despite having gone through the motions of participation, however, it would appear that the more marginal members of the village are not happy with the outcome of the project. A group of notably poorer women spoke to us on the road and explained that the pipes were laid so as to benefit the a*ksakal's* sons who were now each serviced by one of the branches of the irrigation system. Although the women also receive water when the pump is working, it takes an hour for it to reach them, as they are not directly served by the new pipes. The electricity for the pump is expensive: generally three families will use the pump for three hours at a time, paying 100 som (US$2.30) each. The older women told us that the system is not making a big impact on the productivity of their plots since they cannot afford to use it very often. They felt unable to complain either now or at the planning stage of the project since the *aksakal* is a respected elder and a relative.

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[20] A pre-Soviet form of collective voluntary work, where groups of people are mobilised, normally to provide manual labour to help family and neighbours. This will be described in much greater detail below.
[21] Village elder, literally 'white beard'.

The position of the *aksakal* within the village is such that attempting to contradict or cross him could have serious consequences for the livelihoods of poorer families. His current status as unofficial leader of the village stems from his favourable economic circumstances and useful contacts. He owns enough land to be able to sell surplus crops and all three of his sons have influential jobs within the local administration. We were also told that the *aksakal* provides help to the more vulnerable families in the village by distributing flour after the harvest and is further able to give temporary employment to poorer residents at busy times during the agricultural calendar. Finally, a number of female residents had expressed concern that he would preside over the distribution of credits in a new micro-finance project to be established in the village.

Kyrgyzstan/Village A

Despite its widespread use, PRA is not without troubling limitations.[22] In this case there were a number of factors that prevented women and poorer residents from speaking their minds. Traditionally, women in more conservative areas of Central Asia are discouraged from voicing any opinion in front of men, or even from talking at all. The type of exercises generally referred to under the term PRA aim to facilitate the input of women and marginal groups, encouraging them to set out their priorities. However, the women in Village A who were subsequently unhappy with the implemented project did not voice their concerns during the PRA exercise. They were well aware of the priorities of the *aksakal* and they told us that even if they had raised the issue, he would not have taken any notice of their opinions. It also became clear that the women had not considered it in their overall interests to contradict the proposed plans for the irrigation pipes: were they to gain in this respect, they might well endanger other livelihood solutions. It would appear the donor interventions can maintain or even worsen the status quo in rural villages, in terms of power relations and social inequality.

It is easy to understand why the local NGO responded positively to the proposals of the *aksakal*: he is obviously dynamic, motivated, experienced and fully able to mobilise village residents. But the *aksakal* used his involvement in the project and links to the donor to consolidate his authority and improve his own status. He also improved living standards for his two sons, who were already relatively wealthy. In this case the PRA tools used did not help to get the local women to voice their opinions, even though exercises were held in a group where no men were present. More thoughtful ways of bringing alternative views into the open are needed, rather than a rigid adherence to specific 'participatory' tools.

8.2 CBOs: Questions of Representation and Legitimacy

As has been noted above, community organisations are often formed by external donors (they are referred to as Community Initiative or Community Action Groups). Alternatively, groups are formed at village level when it becomes clear this is a way to access donor funding. Indeed, the donors themselves are reliant on these groups so that they can engage with village residents and substantiate the claim to be 'working directly with the community'. Also, if we are to take the World Bank's view of CDD on board, this community involvement will give their projects a greater chance of success. However, the donors do appear to be taking a very instrumental approach to the formation of these

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[22] For discussion see Mosse (1994) 'Authority, gender and knowledge: theoretical reflections on the practice of participatory rural appraisal', *Development and Change* 25:3.

groups: there is very little evidence of a 'process' mentality with regards to the formation of these CBOs. Empowerment or skills development are rarely a top priority, as there is great pressure on donor organisations to show quantifiable results as quickly as possible. For example, the literature produced by the USAID-funded Community Action Investment Program implemented by different INGOs across all five Central Asian countries clearly states that its principle aims are social stability and the 'alleviation of sources of conflict'. However, considering the time frame in which externally funded projects are often to be implemented (sometimes in as little as six months), the potential for anything more than the most rudimentary community engagement with the project is severely curtailed. Furthermore, while there is great emphasis on ensuring equal numbers of women in these community groups, and their involvement in community meetings and PRA, this type of tokenistic involvement has strong echoes of the quota system employed in the Soviet system. As has been acknowledged by some critics (for example Kandiyoti 2002), this type of formal equality, although it gave women greater freedom of opportunity than ever before, did nothing to address structural inequalities amongst men and women in society. There is a danger that INGOs will also state their commitment to gender equality using the example of the community initiative groups, just as they claim to be participatory, without an examination of the dynamics at work in communities that can make a mockery of these formulaic attempts at inclusion.[23]

In theory, the initiative groups will have legitimacy since they are chosen by the community. Group members are very often referred to as the 'most respected' residents of a particular village. In reality, villagers may have very little choice as to who they elect: in a public meeting, there is often limited space for dissent. As has been noted above, INGOs need these organisations to be in place so that community members are drawn into the implementation of the project, but more often than not, the number of active members of the group is far less than the ten to fifteen that are elected to it. In some cases, there is really only one person properly involved in the 'CBO'. This flies in the face of some of the rhetoric propounded by the donors. Furthermore, rather than include more of the community in the initiative, the leaders can skew the project so as effectively to exclude them from it. One must query whether analysis of the reality on the ground would make uncomfortable reading for policy makers back in the US or Europe, or whether the veneer of local respectability and legitimacy are sufficient.

The following example, again from Kyrgyzstan, illustrates challenges facing donors when choosing which organisations to work with.

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[23] For more discussion see the section on Perceptions of Gender and Women's Role.

Box 2: Donor choice of local partners
In this particular village, an international agency had intervened after Tajik and ethnic Kyrgyz refugees were resettled there, having fled the conflict in Tajikistan. Donor interest in the village was assured because of the presence of refugees, and six residents, a mixture of local and refugee Kyrgyz, joined together to implement an INGO project to improve the drinking water system. Before the project had ended, however, the group had divided into two factions, one of which refused to help complete the project. The reasons for this are varied: from personal to professional and political. There was no attempt to hide these divisions, and yet a second INGO saw fit to fund the 'splinter group' in a separate project. This despite the obvious tensions within the village, where the majority of refugees were not interested in contributing to joint projects[24], including the *ayil bashi* himself (the elected, but unpaid, local village leader), who had actively sabotaged the original water project. This should have had important implications for the donors, since the refugees are amongst the poorest in the village, and were the original reason why donors had been drawn to work there.   **Kyrgyzstan/Village K**

CBOs and local NGOs should not be regarded as mere vehicles through which resources are dispersed. If donors are really concerned with successful implementation of projects then greater consideration should be given to the history and structure of these groups and organisations. The above example is not an isolated incident: similar occurrences have been noted by UNDP in their report on water projects in Kazakhstan. They note that failing projects that have lost funding from their original donors are able to access resources from other institutions, despite their evident lack of impact or progress.

> It has been common for one donor to abandon a project that is going nowhere, only to have another donor take it over. Lessons about effectiveness are muted in those cases (UNDP 2003: 23).

This would appear to be because INGOs and official agencies need experienced partners who can speak their language (meaning both English and development jargon) and are familiar with bureaucratic donor agency processes.

8.3 Strong Leadership vs. Individual Domination

A pattern emerges from the case studies across the three countries as to the internal structure of CBOs. As in the developing world, these organisations tend to revolve around a strong charismatic founder-leader.[25] Ideally, strong leadership would draw others into an organisation, but if these organisations are to flourish, then these leaders must empower other members and must themselves go through a process of major change. 'If leadership can't shift then no organisational process can succeed' (Kaplan quoted in James 2003). However, this dynamic process did not appear to be evident in the case study villages. The reliance on one central figure was particularly problematic when the goals and activities of the organisation followed too closely the personal aims of the leading individual. It must, however, be acknowledged that these are very 'young' organisations.

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[24] The refugee populations have been given land and citizenship of Kyrgyzstan. Apparently, they are not planning to return to Tajikistan.
[25] James (2003) notes this phenomenon in 'young' civil society organisations across Africa.

Two different examples of this were visible in one case study village in the South of Kazakhstan.

Box 3: CBO leadership and focus

Several different donors (multilateral bodies and INGOs) had funded projects in the village, principally because of its proximity to a large nature reserve. Levels of poverty in the isolated village are high, due to the collapse of local industry and curtailment of funding for the reserve. As a result, environmental degradation around the village on the outskirts of the reserve is increasing. The link between poverty and non-sustainable use of resources is an important one, and yet the two principal NGOs[26] in the village, linked and run by a biologist and zoologist couple, are much more oriented towards biodiversity conservation.

Within the same village (of just 2000 people) there are at least five CBOs or community initiative groups that are sporadically active. These also tend to centre around just one individual. One example is that of the women's organisation which officially has 15 members. In reality, its leader appears to be the only person actively engaged in it. She is a professional who sees her role as CBO leader as helping to protect the rights of female villagers, and by way of example speaks of the several occasions when she has fought legal battles with government bodies to ensure that women receive the social benefits they are entitled to. She is able to assist other women by providing legal advice, and is occasionally able to mediate in disputes over land, property rights and salaries. While this appears to be the main activity of the CBO, its leader seems to be the only person in the organisation capable of negotiating on behalf of other women.

Kazakhstan/Village D

A CBO can often have a very narrow focus that reflects the professional and personal interests of its founders and leaders. In the example of the women's organisation, there is no attempt to develop the skills of other women in the village or to broaden understanding of their rights. The leader of this organisation is providing services for which she is rewarded by grant money from international organisations. As such, her approach could be interpreted as 'paternalistic' rather than empowering. It should be noted here, however, that there is very little support available for NGOs in Kazakhstan to help them find appropriate ways to approach and work with communities or community based organisations.

8.4 The Capture of Small Grant Programmes by Individuals

Other community members in the same village in South Kazakhstan have also received funding, but without setting up CBOs or initiative groups. The situation described in the box below is very unusual, not only for Kazakhstan, but for Central Asia as a whole.

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[26] These organisations are officially registered as NGOs, but their structure and limited geographical focus renders them similar to CBOs.

> **Box 4: Promotion of charity rather than development**
> Individual villagers, men and women, many of whom are subsistence farmers working small garden plots, are coming up with ideas for 'projects', which are then worked into grant proposals by professional local women with the necessary education and experience and submitted to the small grant programmes of TACIS and the World Bank. Examples include a grant to one man to plant apple trees on a plot formerly used as a rubbish dump; resources provided to one family to purchase equipment to produce oil from sunflower seeds; to another for bee-keeping; and a grant to one woman to start producing kumys[27]. In each case, there are supposed to be some benefits for the community as a whole: the individual involved with the apple trees will give saplings free of charge to people in the village and also employs one resident; other families in the village can now process sunflower oil, giving just a small percentage to the family who own the equipment, and the oil produced is worth much more than sunflower seeds, which families had previously sold at a very low price. The woman awarded a grant to produce kumys has promised to give the product free to individuals suffering from tuberculosis, and the bee-keeper is supposed to give honey to children in a sanatorium.
>
> **Kazakhstan/Village D**

In this example, opportunities for community projects that promote co-operation and a collective response to collective need have largely been lost. The benefits to the wider community are limited at best. Generally it has been individual recipients and their families who have profited from grant money. The lucky few who have received funds from international agencies are asked to share the benefits that they reap with those less fortunate, but this seems to be encouraging charitable giving rather than any more substantial form of community co-operation. Expectations from poorer members of the community on those who have received grants might well introduce new and unequal power relationships.

Furthermore, in this case, grants are awarded to those who have initiatives in mind and the confidence and ability to start the application process. Grant-makers' criteria also include the ability of the recipient to manage the project effectively and for TACIS grants recipients had largely attended village seminars and training. The criteria for grant making rules out families and individuals with lower educational levels, those marginalised or isolated from village activities and women who are subjugated by family members and traditions within the household.

However, there are a couple of examples of collective action in the village that show potential for community development, notably the community initiative groups that respond to practical problems that affect the majority of villagers – blocked streams or channels, erosion – and that are not constantly chasing grants in an effort to survive. These groups often work without funding, generally involving children or older people in activities that have a clear benefit for all.

Finally, there is an interesting example of an agricultural collective, that formed spontaneously after former state farm employees found the scale of their small plots unworkable economically. Members have joined their lands together, but also successfully applied for a grant that will set up a community pasture. Land for grazing is rotated, and a field has been set aside for growing winter feed. As most residents own

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[27] A drink made from fermented mare's milk, said to have medicinal properties.

one or two cows that they use for dairy production, this is an initiative that responds to great need and benefits a large proportion of the village inhabitants.

8.5 The Future for CBOs

If there are troubling issues surrounding the engagement between CBOs and the communities they supposedly represent, there are also problems with the relationships between CBOs and NGOs, especially concerning trust and willingness to hand over responsibility for project management. Local NGOs have obviously noted the new push towards more direct work at community level, and it is clear that they do not want to be sidelined as a result of this most recently applied approach. However, the perceived growth of importance of CBOs must be troubling for individuals employed in NGOs, who may see their own professional livelihoods under threat.

The findings of the case studies highlighted a number of worrying aspects of the attitude of local NGOs to their CBO partners.

Firstly, communities were not always properly informed of how grant programmes, donor funded projects or micro-credit schemes would be implemented. Although this was sometimes due to the activities of saboteurs within the communities themselves, local NGOs had not always invested much effort in raising awareness of the goals of a project, or even informed villagers that there was a project planned at all. This suggests that participatory methods are not being properly used.

Secondly, there was a reluctance to hand over responsibility to the communities themselves for management of projects. This was noted especially in two case study villages in Uzbekistan, where the NGOs did not seem to think the CBO members were able to manage or run the project alone.

Thirdly, as indicated in the examples from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan above, donors and local NGOs can be over reliant on one powerful or educated member of the village alone.

It is questionable as to whether communities are being encouraged to think beyond project funding from donors. In the case of the village mentioned above, where a large number of grants had been made, even the most humble of subsistence farmers had set their hopes on receiving foreign funding for a personal project. As one resident noted, 'Getting a grant is like receiving money from God'. There was a similar attitude noticeable at times in the case study village in South Kyrgyzstan, where there appeared to be a type of 'project fervour'.

The question, then, is what will happen to these CBOs once donor aid and grants are no longer available? Will community members still manage to coalesce around troubling issues in order to work out some kind of solution? Or will any motivation disappear with the project funding? This is a particularly pertinent issue in Kazakhstan, where many donor agencies are already considering withdrawing, as revenues from oil and gas extraction start to make their mark on the country's wealth ranking. Also, what will happen to infrastructure installed with donor money? It is important to ask whether local government will invest in the maintenance of project results, which were funded externally precisely because local government was without sufficient resources.

While there are encouraging examples of more autonomous social organisation and mobilisation, the future does not look so positive for some of the CBOs that have been formed by external agents. In one case study in Uzbekistan, for example, the community initiative group existed in name only: management and initiative were all completely external to the target villages. One must surely question the potential for any further community action in examples such as this, were all funding to disappear. Greater empowerment of local level organisations could contribute significantly to their potential sustainability.

CHAPTER NINE

THE RESILIENCE OF SOVIET INSTITUTIONS

One of the most commonly levelled criticisms of donor interventions in Central Asia from local and international practitioners alike, is the way in which the creation of new community groups ignores structures that are already in place. There is however, a counter argument to this accusation: there are a number of pre-Soviet institutions and traditions that donors have picked up on, and integrated into their project work (for example, the Mahalla Initiative Programme of Counterpart Consortium in Uzbekistan, where the traditional institution of local self-governance is brought into the development process). However, the *mahalla* is not the only form of social organisation in Uzbekistan and across the region there are many indigenous structures and positions of responsibility in place. Ignoring these can have grave implications for the successful implementation of a development project. These traditional practices will be discussed in more detail below, with particular reference to the way in which they have been adopted and adapted by INGOs.

Pre-Soviet traditions and institutions are not the only practices or bodies to have an importance for rural populations. Much of the social infrastructure established during the seventy years of centralised government control is still in place. Even though American donors seem keen to draw a line between their democratic approach and the old regime, the adoption of community development rhetoric with its stated aims of participation and co-operation in reality draws on a more 'communal' approach. For the moment though, there appears to be a lack of enthusiasm on the part of these donors to give proper consideration to and engage with the institutions and practices from the Soviet era that continue to have relevance for rural populations. Local NGOs show a similar reluctance: they perhaps see former Soviet institutions, particularly the collective farm, as outmoded and unfashionable.[28] After all, local NGOs have had a great deal of exposure to the American donor way of working. But it is important to stress here that ignoring the power of the former state and collective farms, and their impact on poor communities, is potentially self-defeating for an agency attempting to implement projects in rural areas.[29]

9.1 The State and Collective Farms

The former state and collective farms, *sovkhoz* and *kolkhoz*, continue to wield power and influence over rural populations, although the extent of this reflects the degree of restructuring within country, that varies across the region. Of the three countries under study here, Uzbekistan is the one that has taken fewest steps to reorganise its agricultural sector. The large scale farms are now referred to by the Uzbek term *shirkat*, whilst others have supposedly been reorganised as 'ADFs' or Association of *Dekhqons* (peasants) and Farmers. Despite this, these associations are still required to fulfil quotas for cotton and wheat production set by the government under the State procurement programme, and must sell to the State at fixed prices that are usually below

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[28] The same can be said for NGO/donor attitudes to the Soviet era organisations that represented women, disabled people, pensioners and young people.
[29] Roy would go further, stating categorically that the former state and collective farms are *the* basis for the strengthening of civil society in rural Central Asia (Roy 1999).

the market rate. The influence of the farms extends to the social sphere as is shown in two of the case studies from Uzbekistan.

Box 5: The power of the farm chairman

In one village (Village N) in the South of the country, a rural infrastructure project was seriously jeopardised by factional fighting over the role of *shirkat* chairman. A local NGO had helped to establish a CBO in Village N and was then attempting to connect the village to a drinking water pipeline, by digging trenches and fitting pipes and a pump (see figure 1). There were many complicating factors to this seemingly simple project however, including problematic relations with a neighbouring settlement (Village T) included in the same overarching Mahalla Citizens' Assembly. In the recent past, positions of responsibility within the local *shirkat* had been held by residents of Village N, including that of *shirkat* chairman. This position is an extremely important one in rural Uzbekistan, as the chairman has power over distribution of crucial resources, principally land and irrigation water, upon which families are dependent for subsistence agriculture[30]. Traditionally strong family and village ties will mean that the *shirkat* chairman is likely to give priority in the distribution of these resources to his own people and neighbours. The chairman can also use his position to lobby for the installation of infrastructure in his own village.
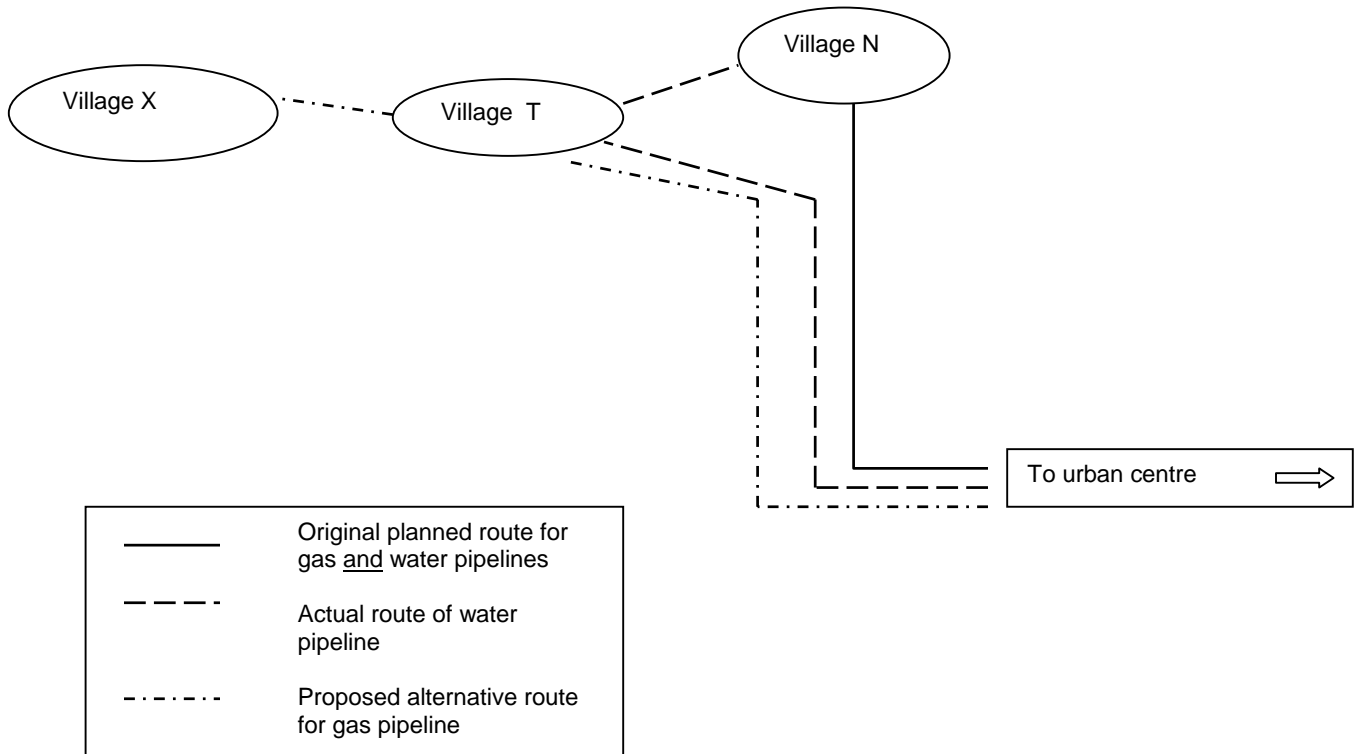
During the time of the Village N *shirkat* chairmanship, another well-connected resident had successfully used his contacts and influence to lobby the State Government for funds to connect the village to a natural *gas* pipeline. However, funds ran out before the pipeline was completed. At about the same time, the *shirkat* chairman was replaced by a man from a village in a separate *mahalla*, Village X, that would benefit were the pipeline to be redirected away from Village N through its neighbour, Village T. This new chairman declared that he would supply his own village with natural gas, and as a consequence would also supply Village T.

The water pipeline had also been left unfinished as changes to the original project plans meant that it had been re-routed through Village T. Residents of Village N then doubted they would ever benefit from the water pipeline and refused to carry on providing their labour for it. But it was *gas* that was the most pressing issue for them, and left uninformed about the activities of the chairman from Village X they were beginning to accuse Village T of robbing them of their right to the gas supply. At the time of the first research visit, tensions were running so high that villagers were talking about fighting their neighbours for access to the gas supply pipeline. Steps have now been taken to calm the situation, villagers are better informed and it now seems as though both villages N and T will be connected to the gas and water pipelines, thanks to the involvement of a group of active villagers (cf. Box 7)

Uzbekistan/Village N

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[30] Garden plots are becoming increasingly important for rural livelihoods as the large farms, that are the principal employers in these areas, are no longer able to pay workers any wages.

Figure 1: Water and Gas Pipes

————	Original planned route for gas <u>and</u> water pipelines
– – – –	Actual route of water pipeline
– · – · – ·	Proposed alternative route for gas pipeline

NB. Please note that at the time of writing it was not clear what route the gas pipeline would take.

The position of *shirkat* chairman can be very influential in rural areas. In this case, the chairman's support and active co-operation were vital to the success of the water supply project. The local NGO found themselves dependent on his goodwill. Unfortunately, they had not considered the risk that a new chairman might renege on commitments made by his predecessor. This was one reason why the project suffered considerable delays.

The example also shows how existing tensions between and within villages can be exacerbated when NGOs attempt to implement projects. The local implementing NGO did not seem to be aware of the competition for scarce resources between the neighbouring villages, that was closely linked to struggles for influence within the former collective farm. As has been very visible elsewhere in the region, unequal access to resources can promote tension and even violent conflict.

The problems encountered here have serious consequences for NGOs that are implementing rural infrastructure development projects in sensitive areas, where access to resources is scarce. Many American INGOs state one of their principal project aims as preventing local conflict. Their budgets do not stretch to blanket provision, however, and if one village does not have the right 'criteria' as defined by the organisation, they will not be provided with grant money for a project even if their immediate neighbours that were once part of the same collective are. This could easily lead to conflict, in an paradoxical reversal of stated INGO aims.

Research undertaken in the autonomous republic of Karakalpakstan also highlighted the huge amount of power the former collectives can have over rural residents. As in the

case study explored above, rural people are almost entirely dependent upon the farms for their survival. Although these farms are bankrupt, and in some cases have not paid wages in many years, people continue to work the land as they depend on the farm structure for subsistence plots and inputs for them such as machinery, fertilisers and seeds. They are also periodically paid in kind with oil or wheat, and there is a chance for a few weeks' remunerated work during the cotton harvest. This is often the only livelihood option for poor rural families, as other forms of employment in these areas are rarely available.

The attitude amongst rural people towards the Association of *Dekhqons* and Farmers (ADF) is a complex one. On the one hand, it would appear that villages and the farm have coexisted for so long as to be almost inseparable. Ilkhamov notes

> Communalism of a sort is the traditional mode of socio-political organisation for the settled population of Central Asia and the collective farm style of organisation of agriculture has strengthened this institution even more (Ilkhamov 2001).

Rasayanagam (2002) also argues that workers continue to feel a sense of belonging to the former collectives, and show strong loyalty towards them. However, one respondent suggested that families continue to work the land of the ADF without payment or proper ownership over their plots simply because they have nothing else to do. Certainly, the practical non-existence of other forms of employment or livelihood strategies suggest that resignation is as much of a factor as loyalty maintaining workers on the farm.

Box 6: The continuing significance of the former state and collective farms

In Karakalpakstan, the poorest area of the republic of Uzbekistan, the villages visited were grouped as departments of the local farm. It appeared that the history of the local villages was very much bound up with the history of the former *kolkhoz*, to the extent that it was almost impossible for local people to distinguish between 'villages' and the farm. For example, local NGO staff had spoken of plans to install a new pump to supply fifteen villages with irrigation water, which would be undertaken jointly by the former collective farm and the villagers themselves. Questioning the chief engineer of the ADF about this gave an interesting insight into the relationship between the villages and the former collective farm. Whilst the NGO had suggested that villagers would provide their labour, and the farm would provide the necessary equipment, this division of tasks and responsibilities did not appear to make sense to the engineer – the villages and collective farm were considered by him to be one and the same thing.

During the course of this piece of fieldwork, informants were also queried about the role of the Rural Citizens' Assembly, the equivalent of the *mahalla* in urban areas. Initial responses suggested very little contact between the local self-governing body and rural communities. The Assembly was seen mainly as a source of social benefits. However, further research appeared to suggest that the ADF is the vehicle through which institutions of State power, including the Assembly, assert their influence over the local population. The researchers observed the Chairman of the Assembly supervising work in the fields of the ADF. In theory, the assembly and the farm are two entirely separate entities. When asked whether the land belonged to the farm or had been given to the families of former farm workers, he answered that all the fields had been distributed among families, and they were responsible for producing crops. However, this arrangement seems to be a loose one, and obviously contradicted by his presence in the

fields giving orders and supervising a 'brigade'[31]. He explained that he had mobilised workers to work on one particular plot that belonged to an individual family who were engaged in the farm's silkworm production and as such could not tend their own fields. In reality it would seem that workers or 'farmers' do not have a great deal of autonomy over what they plant on what is nominally their own land, since the ADF must still meet State quotas for certain crops.

This helped to explain the close relationship between the Assembly and the ADF: central government places a great deal of emphasis on agrarian policy and as such local *khokimyats* (mayoral offices) are anxious to fulfil State orders on cotton and wheat. These higher levels of government consider the local self-governing bodies responsible for ensuring that quotas are met. Thus, central government demands are passed down to the local population through a chain of institutions that are supposedly independent of each other. But the boundary between the ADF and Assembly is blurred, reflecting the way social control was exercised through the state and collective farms during the Soviet period. As has been noted, the ADF also has power over the local population through its ability to provide land and irrigation water for rural families, and food products as in-kind payment. **Uzbekistan/Rayon K**

This case shows that the former state and collective farms are still highly relevant for rural populations, despite the fact that many are bankrupt. Donor organisations considering interventions in rural areas should take this fact into consideration. Although large scale collectivisation caused terrible suffering and upheaval and ultimately failed, over fifty years of collective agricultural practice cannot be shaken off overnight, or indeed, over the course of a decade. In this example, former workers find themselves newly dependent on the ADF, in a quasi-feudal style relationship with the farm administration, working the land without wages in return for the right to farm a small subsistence plot. More positive examples of former workers pooling their land to work in collectives have been noted, especially in Kazakhstan (Gray 2000). Social development projects should take these alternative agrarian structures into consideration.

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[31] Brigade is a Soviet term that denotes a group of workers.

CHAPTER TEN

PRE-SOVIET PRACTICES AND FORMS OF SOCIAL ORGANISATION

As has been noted above, it is important *not* to equate a dearth of 'neo-liberal' civil society with the non-existence of civil society altogether. However, it would appear that some donors do indeed interpret the lack of formal organisations or regular village level meetings as an indicator of the non-existence of social capital. For example, one international organisation undertook a survey on community development in the Southern Uzbek *oblasts* of Surkhandarya and Kashkadarya, and subsequently reported that there were very low levels of citizen involvement in public life across the villages surveyed. The report notes that

> The vast majority of respondents (97%) does not belong to or participate in public organisations. People's non-participation in political or public organisations may be mostly because these organisations have almost no influence upon daily life (CHF 2002: 16).

This statement is made despite statistics published with the report that show that 44 per cent of respondents had at some point contributed their time to the improvement of the *mahalla*, and 47 per cent had contributed money. The figures are high, and the latter remarkably so, considering levels of poverty in the region. They further indicate the degree of influence that the *mahalla* can have on the population. The report demonstrates an obvious bias towards a neo-liberal style of civil society and there are also clear political motives behind its production.[32] However, much of the questionnaire was misleading or inappropriate, and the interpretation of statistics was skewed so as to give a fundamentally inaccurate picture of Uzbek society in the two *oblasts*. This adds to the general impression that there is a lack of understanding amongst international organisations as to how communities actually function. Or, perhaps, a reluctance to think more carefully about how working practices might be altered so as to be more appropriate for local contexts. In reality, many development agencies are beginning to take the importance of local forms of community organisation into account. However, a 'blind-folded' way of working is still in evidence as can be seen in the following example.

10.1 The *Domkoms/Biys*

This term *domkom* is a Soviet one, derived from 'home committee'. During the Soviet period these individuals were generally the representatives of communities living in apartment blocks. Similar 'street manager' positions existed for those living in houses. However, in this particular village, where there were no apartment buildings, the men referred to by residents as *domkoms* had a type of hybrid position: they were neighbourhood representatives in the restructured Mahalla Citizens' Assembly but had also taken on a traditional role, organising community social events such as weddings, circumcisions and funeral commemorations. According to residents, it had been the

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[32] If used as baseline data with which to evaluate impact after the programme has run its course, it is very likely that there will be positive results recorded against indicators such as number of community meetings attended and knowledge of the role of CBOs amongst the population.

brigadiers of the former collective farm that had undertaken these responsibilities during the Soviet era. However, feeling that this term would no longer solicit respect, villagers had adopted the term *domkom* to describe the individual who played this particular role. It is not the term itself that is important here; in the area of Karakalpakstan where research was carried out, villagers used the term *biy* to describe a similar individual. What is crucial is to recognise that these positions of responsibility and organisation exist. Below is an example of the dangers of ignoring these figures, taken from the same drinking water project in Uzbekistan discussed above in Box 5. It is located in the same region as that surveyed by CHF, but was implemented by a different organisation.

Box 7: The influence of traditional figures at community level

A national NGO with foreign support had helped to form a CBO, and then partnered with it in order to implement a drinking water project. The political rivalry that hampered the project has been discussed above (Box 5), but another significant problem was poor communication, due to the exclusion of the village *domkoms*. The national NGO working in South Uzbekistan did not involve the *domkoms* adequately in the local project. The CBO in question was a women's centre, which therefore limited the inclusion of the (generally) male *domkoms*. Only one was involved, and it was his responsibility to inform the other *domkoms* of the project and its goals. He however had personal reasons for not doing so: as a trained paramedic, he was unhappy with the fact that medical services provided by the centre for free were taking business away from him. As a consequence he failed to inform the other *domkoms* of the project and actively sabotaged it by telling those who did know about it that there was no need for the community to contribute either resources or labour.

In a focus group with four *domkoms* from Village N during the first research visit, it became clear that they were not aware of the progress of the water pipeline project. In contrast, the *domkoms* of neighbouring Village T had become very much involved in the project, successfully mobilising villagers, once they realised that changes to the original plans meant their own village would benefit.

While the *domkoms* in Village N, the original project focus for the water pipeline, had not been properly involved in the initiative, as a group they had been very proactive in their attempts to get a gas supply to the community. They had negotiated effectively with the local government and the former collective farm and collected money from residents to pay for initial plans to be drawn up. This was undertaken without the active co-operation of the women's centre/CBO, despite the relevance to its members and the village as a whole.

These examples from both villages show how the *domkoms* can play a key role in village mobilisation. Furthermore, the researchers' visit made an impact upon the Village N *domkoms*, and by the time of the second visit five months later, they had become very much involved in the water project. When re-interviewed they stated their determination that the water pipeline should be completed, as a matter of village pride.

It is not clear whether the women's CBO continues to play an active role, but the overseeing NGO's sole reliance on this newly formed organisation to implement the project appears to have been a mistake. This was not the only factor behind the delay, but a more realistic appraisal of individuals and structures in the village before the project began might have helped it to run more smoothly. **Uzbekistan/Village N**

As this example shows, the manner in which donors set up community groups, and the composition of these groups can be counterproductive to the aims of the project. Donors and local NGOs do need to be able to communicate with the community through some form of representative groups, but in villages where *domkoms* are active, it would make sense to involve them in any type of grass-roots intervention rather than try to bypass them with a new group of individuals. The *domkoms* are known to the community, and have been elected by them. Their function is to liaise with their neighbours to organise joint celebrations and mediate between them and the local government body. They are therefore very well placed to spread information about any potential project.

If real change at grass-roots level is desired then greater consideration is needed for the way in which community members are involved in the development intervention. The extent to which members of a community group are active within it, their ability to mobilise and communicate with others and the motivation behind their involvement will have repercussions for the way in which the project is implemented, who it benefits, and how infrastructure will be maintained.[33]

10.2 *Aksakals*

The example above of the exclusion by donors and NGOs of the *domkoms* is, however, drawn from a single case study, and in many cases donors do aim to involve individuals in their projects who fulfil traditional positions of responsibility within the village. The most notable example of this are the elders or *aksakal*s, who are, generally, male members of the community who sit on the *aksakal*s' council and resolve local disputes. Donors have realised the importance of dialogue with these community members before projects are initiated, and an *aksakal* is very often included in the community initiative groups that are then established. Their inclusion is seen both to help legitimise the project in the eyes of the villagers and to ensure that they will be mobilised to participate in it. Often, the authority of the *aksakal*s is needed to persuade community members to contribute their labour and/or money to a particular project. These individuals are perhaps also seen as representatives of rural populations, since they are in theory chosen by the communities themselves.

However, as has been seen in the case of Village A in the first case study above, the *aksakal* did not act in the interests of the village as a whole. He was concerned to influence the project to ensure maximum gains for his sons. This example would suggest that it is therefore unwise to believe that respected members of the community are necessarily situated outside of local power struggles. There are also implications for gender equality here. Ilkhamov (2001) has noted the growth of Islam and a return to more patriarchal values in poor rural areas of Central Asia, whilst Kandiyoti (2002) sees a retrenchment of attitudes towards women, who, with the growth of subsistence agriculture, are being increasingly drawn back into the sphere of the household. These factors have the potential to limit women's access to a fair hearing from an *aksakal*'s court were they to enter into dispute with a male family member, or their husband's family, for example. There are interesting developments in Kyrgyzstan, where younger

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[33] It should be noted that donors tend to forget about ownership of buildings, pipelines and irrigation systems and so on after completion of a project. Infrastructure can end up appropriated by local government, as it is sometimes difficult for small organisations to maintain it. For those that are unregistered, this can prove impossible. (Source: Email correspondence with L. Abdulsalyamova)

village residents are becoming more involved with the way in which their village is run. One promising example has been noted in a community in Talas *oblast* where a CBO representing the needs of young people has successfully lobbied to get the Aksakal's Charter changed. More research needs to be done, however, on the role of the *aksakal* and the *aksakal*s' court to examine the extent to which elderly male villagers are open to the needs of the younger generation, particularly of women.

10.3 *Ashar*: Participation and Inclusion

Whilst it is important to be aware of indigenous forms of community or social organisation, it is equally important to subject these to rigorous questioning and analysis. Unfortunately, there is sometimes a tendency amongst international donors to romanticise practices such as *ashar* as an ideal of interaction and engagement, buying into the 'myth of the community' (Guijt and Shah 1998). Local NGOs perhaps find it difficult to question these practices because of the current pressure to venerate all that is 'traditional'/non-Soviet, as the autocratic leaders of these nation states search for some kind of national identity. Also, it is of course very difficult for local researchers and NGO workers to take an objective stance when considering forms of interaction that are embedded in their culture and upbringing.

This unquestioning approach can be seen in the widespread use by donors of *ashar*, particularly in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Since *ashar* has been encouraged so strongly by a number of external donors in the region, it was decided to undertake a study of the practice in the South of Kyrgyzstan. As noted above, there is a type of blueprint approach to working with communities in Central Asia, and *ashar* is almost always part of this. Donors often require a contribution from the community towards costs, in cash or in kind, mainly as symbolic evidence of their commitment to a project. This community contribution, that varies from 5 to 25 per cent of costs, is required by all the main donors in Kyrgyzstan: UNDP, Mercy Corps, Counterpart Consortium, World Bank and CHF[34], and is introduced to the communities as *ashar*.

Although it is a pre-Soviet tradition, the form *ashar* takes can vary, and indeed, the practice of it since independence seems to have undergone considerable change. The research therefore looked at how the use of *ashar* has evolved and how it is being used at present. The origins of *ashar* are not clear, but one source suggests that it was practised by nomadic peoples (Horton 2002). It survived during the Soviet period, when, according to one group of informants from a local NGO, it was generally organised to help build or repair housing. The extended family would assist one household, but so would unrelated neighbours and other villagers. Up to fifty people would help build a simple house (for a newly married son, for example) that could be completed within a day. Traditionally, men who were fit enough would provide manual labour, *aksakal*s would give advice and women would prepare food for the workers.[35]

What has become clear is that the nature of *ashar* as practised currently differs to that of Soviet times. Community assistance to just one family is now much rarer. This has been

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[34] Donor insistence on community contribution to a project, in whatever form, is not unique to Central Asia. Community 'matching funding' in donor interventions is common practice across the developing world.
[35] There was, however, difference of opinion amongst informants as to the extent to which *ashar* was practised during the Soviet period. Some older informants stated that it had been frowned upon, since relative prosperity during this time meant that individuals could pay for construction labour and would be ashamed to bother their neighbours with these requests.

attributed by the local NGO to the negative effects of transition in Kyrgyzstan. The introduction of the market system since independence has brought notable economic divisions within communities. The polarisation of income has reduced the extent to which individuals in communities are willing to provide their labour to others for free. Some members of the local NGO commented on the decline in the supportive role of the extended family as the economic situation has worsened. This is a moot point however, since it is often in times of economic difficulty that family members become more reliant on each other for livelihood strategies.

But if family oriented *ashar* is in decline, 'community' *ashar* (in the sense of community self-help) is on the increase since independence. There appeared to be consensus of opinion amongst informants that during the Soviet era, collective voluntary mobilisation to install or improve village infrastructure was fairly rare.[36] Since 1991 a large number of mosques have been built using *ashar*, particularly in the Ferghana valley region, but there has also been an increase in the occurrence of community *ashar* in the *rayon*[37] on other projects. This can be attributed both to the decline in the provision of services by government and to the large donor presence in the area. Asking for voluntary contributions, in cash or in kind, for social projects that will benefit the community as a whole is a practice that has been adopted by international donor agencies.

When questioned, employees of the local NGO agreed that the impetus for *ashar* had come from external sources. However, they maintained that the tradition was an indigenous one, practised before the arrival of donors and that '*ashar* was in their blood'. A number of *aksakal*s from the area had 'stories' about the origin of the practice, suggesting it had originated locally. While this contradicts other research, the fact that these stories exist and are recounted suggest that the practice of *ashar* is deeply ingrained in the culture of the South and that there is a desire to demonstrate some form of ownership over the tradition.

External donors have tried to build on this tradition: it is familiar to communities across the Central Asian region, it can draw them into the project and it tackles the problem of villagers' contributions, as many rural people are extremely cash poor. Local NGO staff stated that community *ashar* increased the sense of ownership of a project's outputs and levels of village pride. These informants explained that in Soviet times, care was not taken to maintain village or farm infrastructure, since the state could be counted on to make repairs or provide replacements. In contrast, since independence, people are coming to realise the inability of the state to act in this way. As far as practical goals are concerned, the adoption of *ashar* by donors seems to have promoted some positive outcomes. Beyond this instrumental viewpoint, there are also important social aspects to *ashar*.

Perhaps most important is the role of *ashar* in capacity building of the community and its impact on collective mentality. In three of the villages visited, informants noted that there had been reluctance amongst community members during the first attempts to implement community *ashar*, but they contrasted this with the willingness now shown by villagers to provide labour for projects that would benefit the community as a whole.

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[36] This would appear not to be the case for Central Asia as a whole: this particular *oblast* is located in a very fertile farming area of Kyrgyzstan, and would have received high levels of investment through the state farm system. The occurrence of 'community self-help' to repair village infrastructure prior to independence has been noted in isolated areas of Tajikistan (conversation with S. Freizer, Oct 2003).
[37] A territorial-administrative unit at the level of 'district'.

They remarked that villagers had at first been waiting for help from the state, and remained passive as they had been during Soviet times. They had been reluctant to believe that the community could solve its problems on its own. However, projects successfully implemented through *ashar* had persuaded villagers of their own potential, and stimulated them into thinking of new ways to improve their lives.

This may also sound like an imitation of donor rhetoric, and yet there was evidence that using *ashar* to improve community infrastructure encouraged further initiatives. In four of the five villages visited during the course of the fieldwork in South Kyrgyzstan, the communities had, at some point since independence, contributed their labour and other resources to the improvement of infrastructure, without the external push from donors. They had then received funds from an American INGO through the local NGO. In all five villages this had encouraged initiative from group members, and other individuals, to consider further projects and apply for more funding. NGO staff pointed to a domino effect in the *rayon* where communities who had received a grant had gone on to carry out works in the village without donor support. Similarly, villages neighbouring those that had received a grant had often taken the example and planned a project that addressed their own needs. In some cases this involved a grant application, although examples were given of communities whose proposals had not been successful, but had nevertheless implemented their planned projects. Perhaps, then, more than just to provide basic services, the role of *ashar* in community development is to make people aware of their potential to impact upon their collective future.

Ashar is being used as a tool to encourage participation. 'Participation' has been an important development buzzword for many years, but it gained enormous popularity and weight after Chambers' series of publications in the 1980s (for example, *Rural Development: Putting the Last First*), that have become extremely influential. INTRAC itself introduced participatory techniques such as PRA and PLA to Central Asia between 1996 and 1998 (Garbutt 2003). These tools have now been widely adopted, and are very much part of the approach employed by USAID-funded INGOs.

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.
At present *ashar* is being promoted as a way of achieving high levels of participation, but this positive image of *ashar* masks some troubling issues: notably the extent to which villagers' involvement can be described as voluntary and the amount of input they have in decision-making processes. The way in which the *aksakal* of Village A managed to manipulate the project for his own ends has been noted above. Women, especially, had felt excluded from the decision-making process.

The process of organising for *ashar* at present does not leave a great deal of space for the input of the majority of community members. Whilst individuals in a particular village may all contribute to a project in some way through *ashar*, they are very often responding to orders rather than involving themselves in a process of negotiation, consensus building and participatory planning. Often, *ashar* is just announced – in the mosque by the imam, or by the local *ayil okmotu*. In Uzbekistan, it might be the *mahalla* chairman or the *aksakal*s that call on the village to contribute their labour to a particular initiative. As such it is a top-down process, despite its apparent grass-roots origin.

If donors really are aiming for full participation and the promotion of the community as the 'driver' for development, then they must ensure that a greater number of 'voices' are

heard in meetings, and that more viewpoints influence decision making. *Ashar* may be an authentic strand of local culture and a traditional form of social organisation, but this is not sufficient reason for donors to promote the practice so widely. As it stands, the practice of *ashar* as promoted by donors has more in common with the Leninist Subbotnik than the pre-Soviet practice motivated by solidarity amongst kinship groups. The Subbotnik was initiated by powerful institutions or leaders who would call on the people to participate in order to receive some kind of reward. As such, they were reduced to the providers of free labour – the responsibility for the project was removed from them. There is a danger that donor insistence on *ashar* without greater autonomy for community members will lead to kind of fatigue with the practice and a new form of apathy or passivity.[38]

A fundamental reappraisal of the use and aims of participatory techniques needs to be undertaken by donors and all practitioners in Central Asia if there is to be any real attempt to promote social inclusion, women's empowerment and to address power imbalances. As a whole, the concept of participation is not fully understood in Central Asia, and the use of participatory methods has done little to help achieve greater participation and better representation of marginal voices. *Ashar* alone is not sufficient to promote real participation, and the way it is used at the moment threatens to undermine the stated goals of the donor agencies that are promoting it.

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[38] Email correspondence with N. Kolybashkina, November 2003.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

PERCEPTIONS OF GENDER AND WOMEN'S ROLE

It is particularly important that the issue of gender relations is given serious consideration by organisations working in the Central Asian region. Unfortunately, the myth of sexual equality propagated by the Soviet regime is still being repeated today, even in the international development institutions. The World Bank, for example, was until recently still unwilling to give due consideration to the question of the subjugation of women (Harris 2000). Unfortunately, much research into the impact of transition on women has been undertaken from a purely economic perspective that looks at the macro economic situation and changes in the labour market. Very little research has been done on how these changes have impacted upon women in the private sphere. Furthermore, the Soviet period is posited by these scholars as the golden age where women enjoyed full employment to the same extent and to the same level as men.[39] Other researchers have shown the errors in this analysis: it is now widely acknowledged that quota systems to involve women in government and in management positions in state enterprises did not change structural gender inequalities and actually served to increase women's burden. Furthermore, women were often kept in subordinate positions in these enterprises, particularly in the state farms (Kandiyoti 2002).

Part of the problem surrounding the lack of attention paid to issues of gender is that the majority of staff in the NGO sector in Central Asia are women. They are highly educated and professional, believe in their own equality with men and are often unable to see beyond their privileged position. The Soviet myth of equality continues to be cited, as do certain stereotypes surrounding Central Asian women in general. This very often revolves around the power of women in the household. Conducting a mini survey in Village D in the South of Kazakhstan, in response to questions about men and women's role in decision-making processes, the researchers were told 'men and women are equal'. The interpreter quoted a common saying: ' the man may think he is the head, but the woman is the neck', by which she meant that whilst men may perceive themselves as dominant, women are in fact able to control their every move. The power of women to sway their husband's point of view was also suggested in a study undertaken in a city in the Ferghana valley.

Because of the perceived strong role that women play within the household, there is a mental block around the idea that women can be subjugated to family members, and as such have their rights violated. There is very little critical analysis of the real situation facing women in Central Asia, particularly young women. After all, their emancipation and subsequent equality with men is seen as one of the crowning achievements of the Soviet era in the region. Attempts to gain greater insight into gender relations and women's role within the family were difficult, since the topic is an extremely sensitive one. The myth of women's equality appears to be bound up with national pride. An interesting example of this occurred during research in Village D in Kazakhstan.

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[39] Some NGO leaders have found this a useful argument to make when appealing to government not to allow a deterioration in women's education and labour force involvement.

Box 8: Subjugation of younger women within the family
In this village a number of informants related accounts of the ill treatment of the *kelin* or daughter-in-law, who goes to live with her husband's family (generally after marrying the youngest son). In this particular village, we were told that in a couple of more traditional families the *kelin* must cover her head, carry out all domestic tasks even when heavily pregnant, must remain silent in front of elder relatives and must eat separately from the rest of the family. This contrasts strongly with the generalised assertions that 'women rule in the household'. While older women in the family have authority and command great respect, the same cannot be said for young brides who move in with their husband's family. It is only when the young bride becomes a mother of marriageable-age sons that she can assert herself over her own daughters-in-law.

The power of the elder female figure seemed to blur respondents' overall appraisal of women's position in the home. And yet it was difficult to engage informants on the topic of the *kelin* at all. The respondents who raised the issue of the treatment of the *kelin* in Village D were both professional women: one was Russian, and the other of mixed Russian and Kazakh descent. Both were married to men of European origin. This gave them a degree of distance from the issue and as 'outsiders' the ability to address a topic which might be taboo for other individuals. Their own ethnic and social backgrounds also increased their ability to criticise Kazakh traditions, which in the current climate of ethno-nationalist revival would perhaps be more difficult for ethnic Kazakhs. Whilst criticising these traditions, the interpreter and the local researcher attributed them to nationalities other than their own. It is important, however, not to make generalisations about the situation for women in Central Asia. The situation of women varies considerably from region to region, depending on ethnic tradition. For example, in Karakalpakstan, relations between the sexes are much more relaxed than, for example, the conservative Ferghana Valley. It would also seem that the situation in urban areas is more favourable to women, although more research is needed in this area.   **Kazakhstan/Village D**

The fact that 'tradition' can be harmful and that there are problematic issues surrounding customary gender roles must be accepted and addressed by national NGOs and external donors. The violation of the rights of younger women both inside and outside the home has been noted by a number of researchers and there has been a worrying increase in the practice of bride stealing (Kuehnast 1998, Kandiyoti 2002)[40]. Unfortunately, these practices are considered to be traditional and as such are held sacrosanct in the current climate of ethno-nationalist fervour.

Another worrying issue is the limited understanding of women's rights amongst the NGO sector in Central Asia. Certainly, in Kazakhstan, two of the women's organisations that were examined, although they claimed to be working for women's rights, had confused notions of what promoting these rights meant or entailed[41]. These were very often associated with women's role within the domestic sphere.

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[40] Not all cases of bride-stealing take place without the consent of the bride and her family. Sometimes the 'theft' is arranged to avoid having to pay bride price.
[41] The case of the women's organisation in Village D in South Kazakhstan has been discussed above.

The following case study, from South Kazakhstan, focuses on the role of the Women's Councils[42].

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Box 9: Contradictory perceptions of women's role

In the literature produced by the Women's Council at *oblast* and village level, the organisations profess to have a focus on women's rights. However, when questioned, one village council chairperson did not have a clear idea of what this entailed. She spoke of women's voice and their right to have an opinion. However, this was expressed within the domestic domain and was coupled with the 'right of the mother'. She stated that 'Women should have an equal role in the decision-making processes that affect the family', and remarked that she had already seen change in women's role within the family: in the past men had made all the decisions but were now asking for their wives' opinion. However, she then stated 'It is in our mentality that women should do everything in the house'[43], although she then said that this was not necessarily a good thing. She continued, saying that women should have jobs and be equal to men in this respect so they can support their families. She explained that as the State is no longer able to provide support, women are having to find work to feed their children. Rather than promoting women in work and business as a right in general, and an important component of sexual equality, this support for women's income generating activities appears to be motivated by practical livelihood concerns.

At the time of the research, the *oblast* council had recently brought out a publication that glorified heroine mothers (women who have had more than ten children) in the province. Its main activity, however, was to lend its support to the promotion of women's entrepreneurial activity.[44] At the village level, similar income generating activities to give women financial independence were being promoted, and yet traditions which maintained women's subservient roles in the home were highly valued. The village level chairperson, despite being very active in her fight to improve women's standard of living in the community, admitted that her own daughters had been, from an early age, prepared for their role of *kelin* when they marry. She spoke with an air of determinism about this tradition, and did not immediately see the contradiction between the two models of businesswoman and *kelin*.

The village level council also supports the *bastanga*, which is a gathering where women of different ethnicity meet to tell each other about their traditions and discuss ways of educating children in these customs. The chairperson described it as a forum which 'influences the formation and development of a woman's personality and helps women who face problems by providing her with allies'. The educational element of the *bastanga* tends to be focused on young female children. They are taught to respect elder people in the family, to protect their own 'honour' and to uphold traditions particular to their ethnic group with specific reference to the manner of dress. In a focus group discussion members made it clear that there are differences between the way these

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[42] The Women's Councils operate at *oblast*, *rayon* and village level. They are the successors of the Soviet system of women's councils, but now operate independently, working to promote women's rights and involvement in business and government.

[43] It is not clear whose 'mentality' she was referring to. The respondent herself was of ethnic Uzbek origin, but put emphasis during the interview on Islam as a common factor that drew the community's women together.

[44] It is interesting to note that President Nazarbaev often speaks about the need for growth in the ethnic Kazakh population and has on a number of occasions extolled the virtues of large families and mothers who give birth to many children. This is contrary to the policies of his own Health Ministry.

women think the sexes should be educated: boys are granted a degree of freedom, but young girls should observe national traditions and should be made aware of their preparation for marriage and their 'new life'.   **Kazakhstan/Settlement K**

There are contradictions surrounding the way women's roles in the public and private spheres are perceived and promoted. This is especially evident in the glorification of the 'heroine mother'[45], the support for the conservative attitudes of the *bastanga* and the promotion of women's involvement in business. In this case there was no acknowledgement that domestic pressures on women (that have grown during transition) might make entrepreneurial activity out of the home difficult. Although support for micro businesses will hopefully promote sustainable livelihood options for women by increasing their skills, it will probably serve to add to women's already heavy domestic workload. The question remains whether women in Kazakhstan and elsewhere see this situation as contradictory and unacceptable. It is possible that they do not, and are willing to reconcile these different roles without there being any changes to the perception of women's duties or the distribution of labour within the family.

If progress is to made 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. However, issues surrounding women and tradition – the *kelin*, bride stealing, polygamy – are highly sensitive and it is difficult to find informants willing to talk about them. Even educated, professional women find it difficult to believe that these practices are prevalent in their own countries. As such there is a critical need for greater investigation and analysis of the situation so as to get these issues onto the NGO agenda in Central Asia. A great deal of hard work will be needed to raise awareness and levels of understanding around issues of gender and inequality.

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[45] A Soviet award which complemented the traditional Central Asian predilection for large families.

CHAPTER TWELVE

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT WITH LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Civil society organisations of any shape cannot and do not operate in a vacuum, despite the fact that many theorists have 'overdrawn' the line between state and the institutions of civil society (Makarova 1999: 40):

> The very idea of the state should be integrated in the analysis of civil society. It is in the exploration of complex interaction between them that the concept of civil society can be operationalized.

Evans (1996) has also expounded the importance of 'state–society synergy' in development and encouraging the growth of social capital.

> "State–society synergy" can be a catalyst for development. Norms of cooperation and networks of civic engagement among ordinary citizens can be promoted by public agencies and used for developmental ends. Figuring out how such public–private cooperation might flourish more widely should be a priority for those interested in development (Evans 1996: 1119).

Although at present the political context in Central Asia problematises interaction with government[46], if there is to be real sustainable change to levels of social development in the region then some form of involvement between civil society organisations and the state is imperative. Fortunately, getting the state on board has been recognised as important by a number of donors working in the region, and is seen as the way ahead by scholars and policy makers alike. A number of 'social partnership' programmes have been established; for example, the *mahalla* initiative programme in Uzbekistan and its equivalent in Kyrgyzstan, both of which are programmes of Counterpart Consortium. Here the idea is to forge a partnership between the local self-governing body, a local NGO and a community initiative group to improve or install infrastructure at village level. Individual projects have had varying degrees of success, but there are endeavours to provide training for local government staff, as well as to communities, in an attempt to raise levels of understanding of the NGO sector, CBOs and the role of civil society organisations in general.

The extent to which community organisations can engage with local government is partly dependent on the country context: Kyrgyzstan has undertaken decentralisation on a much more serious level than Kazakhstan. However, whilst Uzbekistan is by far the most autocratic of the three countries, the *mahalla* is still an important window through which civil society organisations can engage with the state. This traditional institution has a complex recent history, and although many scholars already lament its decline and it co-optation by the state government, if certain conditions are met, the *mahallas* can still provide space for co-operation and consultation with the neighbourhood they represent.

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[46] The extent of this varies according to country.

12.1 The *Mahalla*: Between the State and Civil Society

The term *mahalla* originally referred to a neighbourhood within a city, often grouped around a mosque, with some shared common property resources. The word is derived from Arabic, but the pattern of neighbourhood settlements is pre-Islamic and has been dated to c.500 BCE in some of the larger Uzbek cities. As a territorial unit, the *mahalla* was also a signifier of identity. In some places, especially where the *mahalla* has been in place for centuries, the feeling of group identity around the *mahalla* is still very strong. Traditionally, residents would be subject to the moral authority of the *mahalla*, but could expect support from it in times of difficulty. During the time of the Soviet Union, although there were attempts to do away with many traditions, the *mahallas* were recognised by the Communist party and incorporated into the system as territorial-administrative units. 'Mahalla Committees' were created to govern neighbourhoods, including in apartment blocks and new areas of cities[47], but their mandate was considerably reduced and they did not have a right to engage in economic, social or charitable activity. After independence the government of Uzbekistan started to give greater weight to traditional institutions and the *mahalla's* management structure was reorganised. The adoption of the law "On Citizens' Self-governing Bodies" in 1993 and the amended version of 1999 are considered to be the principal measures taken to strengthen the *mahalla* committees. This latest version is particularly important since it has given self-governing bodies the right to open bank accounts, engage in economic activity and take on a wide range of competencies relating to community management. *Mahalla* committees are now known as 'Mahalla Citizens' Assemblies' and their population generally varies between 3000 and 5000 people. These institutions also exist in parts of South Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. There is a confusing overlap between the *mahalla* and the Mahalla Citizens' Assembly, and although INGOs working in the region tend to make reference to the *Mahalla*, in reality, they are engaging with the local self-governing body.

The *mahalla* can have a significant influence on its members with respect to moral issues and can attempt to regulate behaviour and relationships. For example, when a house is sold it is still the *mahalla* neighbourhood that should be informed first before an outside buyer can be invited to purchase the property. The *mahalla's* younger generation is expected to follow the advice of the older generation and *aksakal*s can call residents to order if they are thought to have behaved inappropriately. If an individual ignores the view of the *mahalla*, they can be prevented from attending festivities such as wedding ceremonies in an attempt to isolate them from community life. [48] Makarova, who carried out extensive research into the *mahalla* in Samarkand and Tashkent during the 1990s notes

> People take their obligations to the mahalla very seriously, though very often they are perceived as a heavy burden, which one nevertheless has to carry. (Makarova 1999: 145)

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[47] There was a slightly different arrangement in rural areas, where villages would be grouped as *kishloks*. Post-independence, rural settlements are now also grouped together under Mahalla Citizens' Assemblies.
[48] Whilst informants explained that they responded to the dictates of their *mahalla* out of a sense of duty, the *mahalla* also wields legal powers which mean that residents know that it is in their interests to conform. In this way that the power of the *mahalla* can be seen as similar to the *ashar* experience noted above: individuals are fully aware of the benefits and risks associated with compliance or disobedience.

During research on one *mahalla* in a large city in the Ferghana Valley, informants noted that levels of participation in the activities of the *mahalla* were in decline across the city. They gave different reasons for this, but many were connected to the transition from socialism to a more market oriented economy.[49] This does appear to have had an impact on motivation to contribute to community-based projects. Some respondents stated that people need to spend more time earning money, in contrast to the Soviet era where almost everyone had stable employment and income. Others remarked that young people now show less interest in the life of the *mahalla*. It seems that patterns of social interaction generally are changing: if in the past most men would gather in the tea house in the evenings to talk, now there are more varied leisure options available. Women may also be meeting less frequently, but for different reasons, as they have increased concerns with income generation and reproductive work.

Despite these changes, the case study of Mahalla U provides an example of how the Mahalla Citizens' Assembly can still engage with the community.

Box 10: Traditional versus donor ways of working

In the past, residents of Mahalla U had worked together to make a number of infrastructural improvements to their neighbourhood, including building a tea house, a school, the health post and the *mahalla* committee facility. These initiatives have their roots in traditional *mahalla* activity, when neighbours worked together to solve common problems. In 2003, a USAID-funded INGO supported three short projects within the *mahalla* to make repairs to the roads, the school roof and the sanitation system. This recent collaboration with international donors to improve services in the *mahalla* is, therefore, nothing new.

What is interesting is the way in which international donors interacted with these structures. They attempted to set up Community Action Groups (CAGs) to implement their projects. In the case of Mahalla U, six out of nine members of the CAG were also in the *mahalla* activists' group, which traditionally advises the Chairman and acts as a check on him. However, even with the creation of this new group, finances were being managed in a traditional manner, and activities connected with the implementation of the project were carried out by the Chairman and his assistants. The Chairman made the following comment on the role of the CAG: 'Their participation is necessary in financial matters and the rest of the work can be done by us'.

The INGO's aim was to get the CAG to take on responsibility for the project, but the Mahalla Chairman and his assistants took over its functions. As one of the field officers of the INGO noted (an Uzbek): 'We tried to create something new for the *mahalla* and make it work, but they will do it the way they are used to'. In some cases this could be cause for concern, and might suggest that powerful individuals were manipulating the project for their own ends. However, almost all informants took the active involvement of the Chairman as a matter of course and said that that was how the head of the self-governing body should work. They explained that he is from the community, and perceives his position as more than just 'work': he has a responsibility to the *mahalla* and is trying to do his best for his own community. He can also draw on his assistants and regularly consults the elected activists group.   **Uzbekistan/Mahalla U**

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[49] These findings are echoed in Makarova (1999)

Forming new groups to meet the demands of the external donors often duplicates structures that are already in place. In this case the *mahalla* already had its own mechanisms for solving problems and experience of community work on behalf of and in collaboration with the members of the *mahalla*. As such it was unnecessary to create a new structure. One problem for INGOs is that the Mahalla Citizens' Assembly now receives funding from the state government, and is seen by some as the way the state is attempting to extend its control right to the grass-roots level. There is perhaps concern amongst donors that channelling funding directly to the Mahalla Citizens' Assembly could strengthen the state and divert funding away from the *mahalla* residents. This would explain attempts to set up parallel structures for the implementation of projects.

Donors should look to strengthen the capacities of the people already involved closely in the work of the Mahalla and the Citizens' Assembly and ways to increase community participation in decision making. Although donors do tend to choose partner *mahallas* on the basis of prior experience of community initiatives, they do not often carry out any analysis of how the mechanisms for interaction with the community actually function. Some external agents perhaps perceive the *mahalla* as 'authentic' and as a culturally appropriate body through which to work, but more thorough examination needs to be done into individual institutions and the way they work before projects are initiated or new community groups established. Questions should be asked about the extent to which ordinary *mahalla* residents are involved in decision-making processes, how well women and minorities are represented, and the dedication and motivation of the chairman and his/her advisors.

The case study above is a largely positive example of a Mahalla Citizens' Assembly behaving like a CBO.[50] Most important of all was the *mahalla* chairman's interaction with his advisors and the elected activist group, which rendered this particular *mahalla* relatively democratic. But it must be acknowledged that the Mahalla Citizens' Assembly as an institution is far from perfect, and ability and willingness to engage with the community will vary from one neighbourhood to another. In some *mahallas* in Uzbekistan, a history of community collaboration will perhaps mean that further grass-roots development will be a natural continuation of this, but this cannot be assumed to be the case across the whole country. There is an argument that where *mahallas* have existed over generations, are staffed by community-minded individuals from the neighbourhood itself with good relations with their constituents, there is real opportunity for community involvement and community focused development. However, further research is needed. Interestingly, Makarova (1999) notes that during the Soviet era, people living in neighbouring, modern apartment blocks often spontaneously created 'informal' *mahallas* in order to reproduce patterns of interaction that existed amongst neighbours in 'traditional' *mahallas*. She identified similar behaviour in neighbourhoods built in the 1950s and 1960s on plots of formerly common land. However, the government since independence has 'mahallarised' Uzbekistan, delineating thousands of new units in non-traditional settings, within cities and rural areas across the country. The extent to which residents of these areas associate themselves with these new territorial entities and would engage in community initiatives is also matter for further

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[50] Stevens (2003) in his research has, however, noted problematic issues surrounding NGO engagement with *mahallas*: the *mahallas* are sometimes only valued for their ability to mobilise the population.

research. Another problem involves the deliberate loopholes in the Mahalla Citizens' Assembly legislation which leaves them open to political manipulation by the élite.[51]

In contrast to the positive example from Mahalla U, research in North Kyrgyzstan has shown the divisions that exist between local self-governing bodies and their constituents.

Box 11: Limited understanding of the potential for collaboration
In this case, an NGO based in the *oblast* urban centre was attempting to set up a three-way collaboration with a CBO and the local organ of self-government, the *ayil okmotu*. The village where the project was to be implemented was one of four quite widely spaced settlements under the authority of this body. Funding for the initiative, which would repair the drinking water and sanitation infrastructure, would be provided by an American-funded INGO. The community and the local government would also have to provide some kind of contribution. Initially, the *ayil okmotu* pledged its support for the project, but after the head of the body was replaced in an election, this support was withdrawn. The project still went ahead, but without any involvement of the self-government body, despite the fact that this was one of the principal aims of the programme as a whole.
Kyrgyzstan/Village K

There is often a lack of information amongst government officials about the role of civil society organisations, and the benefits of co-operation. In Uzbekistan, as has been seen, there is a traditional connection in the older neighbourhoods of older cities at least, between the *mahalla* and its constituents, and this experience of collaboration has fed into some of the new Mahalla Citizens' Assemblies. In the case study village in Kyrgyzstan, however, this type of interaction was unusual. The *ayil okmotu* continues to be very 'Soviet' in its attitude towards planning and without a great deal of authority to take alternative approaches to service provision. However, a very different experience has been documented in the South of the country where dynamic staff in a civil society support centre now liaise with the *rayon* level *ayil okmotu* on social policy.

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[51] Source: Interview conducted by Bahodir Fozilhujaev in August 2003 with Shukhrat Djuraev (chairman of a Tashkent *mahalla*, and former head of a branch of the Mahalla Foundation, a government-founded 'NGO').

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to draw out lessons from research in a small number of communities in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Although these lessons may be contested by examples from other villages and neighbourhoods in the three countries, the themes included here surface in one guise or another in all the case studies undertaken. They also echo findings of other published research on the region. There is, however, space for a great deal more research. What is needed is thorough ethnographic analysis of the way in which Central Asian communities operate. For example, problematic issues surrounding gender relations and the situation of the *kelin* have been raised tentatively here and by other scholars, but this needs to be backed up with more far-reaching research. Another area of importance which is still little understood is the notion of 'clan' or 'kin'. These terms are often used by development workers, generally in conjunction with a statement about how difficult it is to work in the region because of these strong, complex webs of relationships. There is a need to get beyond these generalisations to see what the impact of these networks really is at local through to national levels.

In terms of community development, the extent of it and its future in the region, any conclusions will depend very firmly on the definition of the term used. Following World Bank terminology, in some areas there is a great deal of development going on at community level with installation of infrastructure that provides benefit to local people. However, the driving motivation behind these initiatives will have a strong impact on how they are implemented and whether they continue to function in future. If speed is imperative, as it appears to be for many donors, the level of structural change that will take place regarding community co-operation and skills, is likely be minimal. In some cases it is necessary to question whether the interests of the community are being put first at all, or if donors are more concerned about disbursing their resources. Certainly, for many INGOs working in the region, their success is judged on the number of irrigation or gas systems that are installed and how promptly, rather than some of their other less tangible stated aims. Interestingly, many of the US-funded INGOs implementing community level infrastructure projects are, in theory, 'process oriented', in that community development interventions are aimed to help prevent conflict arising in the area. However, in many cases, there seems to be very little fit between the way in which a project is implemented, and its potential to mitigate tensions in the area. Above all, the speed with which these projects is undertaken and the pressure on the INGO to implement a project blueprint in fifty or more villages at once would appear to negate a genuine process approach.

For INTRAC, however, community development means more than infrastructure provision. It is about empowerment, participatory democratisation, skills development and greater social inclusion. If progress is to be made towards these goals there needs to be a fundamental rethink about the way donors approach communities in the Central Asian region. The short term project mentality must be reconsidered. Long term changes cannot be introduced in under three years. (This is the average amount of time afforded to infrastructural projects in the region, many others are meant to be implemented within six months). Already large donor agencies are realising how difficult it is even to raise basic contributions of labour and money from communities in such a short space of time.

Often, further investment of time and training is then needed to mobilise populations sufficiently for them to play an active part in the rolling out of a project. What is more, greater thought needs to be given to the ways in which people in communities are encouraged to participate. All players in the region should examine their own practice and consider more carefully the ideals and aims behind approaches to 'participation'. Rather than see certain participatory tools as just another stage in the planning cycle, there should be a much greater commitment to the creation of an enabling environment in which communities can lead the way to their own development.

At present, donor organisations seem to be attempting to create this enabling environment by tapping into traditional practices and promoting their own priorities as something recognisable to community members. This is particularly noticeable with their adoption of *ashar* which is how community contribution to development projects is generally described. But here donor organisations are in danger of mimicking the authoritarian leaders of the Central Asian states who are engaged in nation-buildling projects, presenting 'tradition' as that which is authentically national and inherently good. In many cases, there are anti-developmental consequences of a return to tradition, that can, for example, impact negatively on the rights of women and marginalised ethnic groups. Donors drawing on traditions of *ashar*, the *aksakal*s or the *mahalla* must examine these practices and institutions carefully, to understand better how to work with them, rather than take their perceived authenticity as proof that they are necessarily good for a community.

As the findings of the research presented here have shown, at present CBOs in Central Asia are generally weak organisations, often centred around one key individual and lacking legitimacy from any constituency. They do not have much in common with the definitions presented in the introductory section of this paper, in which community based organisations are representative groups that are held together by strong membership. Some would argue that the way forward is therefore to professionalise the sector; to make sure that CBOs are properly staffed and that there is continuity between projects. But this is perhaps not appropriate for the Central Asian context when external funding cannot be guaranteed in the long term and relationships between civil society and government are still uncertain. What is needed is for people in communities to have skills they can draw on and the motivation to act as and when problematic issues arise. In order to achieve this, donors need to make sure that they are interacting with the right people at the grass-roots level and addressing the key issues, even if these are difficult or even taboo.

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Glossary

ADF	Association of *Dekhqons* and Farmers. The Uzbek name given to former state and collective farms that have been restructured. *Dekhqon* means 'peasant'.
Akim	Mayoral figure at *oblast*, *rayon* and city levels in Kazakhstan, and in Kyrgyzstan *rayon* level.
Akimat	Organ of government at *oblast*, city and *rayon* levels.
Aksakal	Literally 'white beard' – term used across the region to denote village elder, generally male. *Aksakals*' councils at village level help resolve domestic disputes. (Kaz, Uz, Kg)
Ashar	Known as 'assar' in Kazakhstan and 'hashar' in Uzbekistan, a traditional practice of mutual assistance amongst extended families and neighbours. Now more broadly refers to community self-help. Often takes the form of repairs to or installation of village infrastructure.
Ayil Bashi	Elected but usually unpaid village leader, who reports to the Ayil Okmotu. (Kg)
Ayil Okmotu	Lowest form of local government but also a self-governing body. The area governed is usually three to five neighbouring small villages. It is considered by some to be a civil society organisation, rather than an organ of state government. The head of this body is referred to by the same name. (Kg)
Bij	Term used in parts of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to refer to member of a village chosen by other residents to organise community events and celebrations.
Domkom	Soviet term derived from 'home committee' and referring to elected but unpaid community representatives. Usage varies from country to country.
Jamaat	Kyrgyz term that refers to 'neighbourhood' or 'community'. Larger villages may be divided into several such units. The term is now commonly used also to describe particular interest groups in a village, for example, the 'potato farmers' jamaat'.
Kelin	Term used across the region to describe a young woman who goes to live with her husband's family.
Khokimyat	Rayon or city level mayoral type council (lowest level of state) (Uz)

Kolkhoz	Soviet term referring to collective farm. Similar to sovkhoz, but distinguished from it by the fact that some management control was granted to the farm administration.
Mahalla	Originally referred to traditional neighbourhoods found in older Uzbek cities, now used to denote neighbourhoods generally, across the country. In rural areas several small villages can be grouped under one mahalla. (Uz)
Mahalla Citizens' Assembly	Local self-governing body in Uzbekistan based on traditional form of community organisation. It now appears to be increasingly dominated by the state government.
Oblast	Largest territorial unit, or 'province'.
Rayon	Territorial unit below oblast level.
Rural Citizens' Assembly	Local self-governing body in rural areas of Karakalpakstan and parts of Uzbekistan.
Shirkat	Uzbek term used to describe former state and collective farms that continue to operate as large scale agrarian structures.
Sovkhoz	Soviet term meaning state farm.

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COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN KAZAKHSTAN, KYRGYZSTAN AND UZBEKISTAN
Lessons Learnt from Recent Experience

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with
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This occasional paper documents fieldwork carried out in the republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan in 2003. It presents lessons drawn out of an examination of how individuals and communities in Central Asia engage with local level development projects. These lessons are grouped under five main themes: The Individual and the Community Based Organisation; The Resilience of Soviet Institutions; Pre-Soviet Practices and Forms of Social Organisation ; Perceptions of Gender and 'Women's Role' and Community Engagement with Local Government

The paper provides some practical recommendations for agencies that are implementing (or plan to implement) community level projects in Central Asia and encourages them to undertake a reflection of their practice.

INTRAC