



**LOCAL DEVELOPMENT IN PRACTICE: A CASE STUDY.
MAHALLA COMMITTEES IN THEIR INTERACTION
WITH A FOREIGN NGO IN THE VAKHSH VALLEY IN TAJIKISTAN**

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Abstract: The paper explains the issue of cooperation between the Mahalla communities and a foreign NGO. The main goal of this paper is to examine the way in which the communities respond to ideas of social development introduced by an outside NGO using the example of the project implemented by the Polish Centre for International Aid (PCIA) and the Tajik NGO Mehrangez, entitled 'Reinforcing local community development through institutional support for mahalla committees in Tajikistan'. The main issue considered here is interaction between the local authorities and the communities involved in the project. The paper is based on a field study (2010–4) as well as information gathered during a three-year-long project implemented between 2013 and 2015 in the Khatlon province of Tajikistan.

Keywords: self-government, local development, traditional and informal institutions, local administration, international organisations.

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Local Development in Practice: A Case Study. Mahalla Committees in Their Interaction with a Foreign NGO in the Vakhsh Valley in Tajikistan

The paper explains the issue of cooperation between the Mahalla communities and a foreign NGO. The main goal of this paper is to examine the way in which the communities respond to ideas of social development introduced by an outside NGO using the example of the project implemented by the Polish Centre for International Aid (PCIA) and the Tajik NGO Mehrangez, entitled 'Reinforcing local community development through institutional support for mahalla committees in Tajikistan'. The main issue considered here is interaction between the local authorities and the communities involved in the project. The paper is based on a field study (2010–4) as well as information gathered during a three-year-long project implemented between 2013 and 2015 in the Khatlon province of Tajikistan.

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Introduction

The main purpose of this paper is to reflect on the dynamics of interaction between the Mahalla communities in Tajikistan and an external actor, in this case, specifically a foreign NGO. The paper examines how the communities respond to ideas of social development introduced by an outside NGO, using the example of the project implemented by the Polish Centre for International Aid (PCIA)¹ and the Tajik NGO Mehrangez,² entitled 'Reinforcing local community development through institutional

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- ¹ The Polish Centre for International Aid (Polish: Polskie Centrum Pomocy Międzynarodowej, PCPM) is one of the largest Polish charities specialising in humanitarian and development aid abroad. PCIA focuses its primary efforts in priority countries such as South Sudan, Ethiopia, Palestine, Tajikistan, Lebanon, Georgia, and Ukraine. The NGO was founded in 2006 and since then has implemented over 40 projects in the core areas of disaster preparedness, health and education, secure livelihoods, and refugee assistance. In addition, the organisation undertakes large-scale efforts at educating the Polish public on the issues relating to international affairs and development cooperation through its journal *Development Aid* and news website www.infoswiat.com. In Tajikistan, PCIA was present in the years of 2008–15 implementing various projects regarding disaster prevention, community development, and micro-business support for women.
- ² Mehrangez is the Tajik NGO working to reduce poverty, promoting sustainable development, supporting social and professional involvement (especially women), cooperating with local authorities in implementing programs to improve education, health and agricultural production in the Khatlon region of Tajikistan. The organisation was registered in 1997, however started to function during the civil war. Initially, Mehrangez's activity aimed at assisting refugees returning from Afghanistan. From 1998 to 2012, the organisation implemented more than 20 social development projects. Mehrangez is a member of the Tajik Microfinance Association, Association of Adult Education of Tajikistan, the Development Partnership Program and the Poverty Reduction Program. The main sources of financing the organisation's projects are grants from international organisations such as the Christian Aid (UK), ICCO (Netherlands), Helvetas (Switzerland), the Polish Center for International Aid (PCIA), as well as the Committee of Women and Family of Tajikistan (the Tajik governmental organisation).

support for *mahalla* committees in Tajikistan'.¹ Another issue discussed here is the relationship between the local authorities and the communities involved in the project. The paper is based on my research on the *mahalla* conducted between 2010 and 2015, and information gathered during a three-year-long project implemented between 2013 and 2015 in the Khatlon province of Tajikistan in the Jilikul, Qumsangir and Bokhtar districts by PCIA and the Tajik NGO Mehrangez. Part of the ethnographic material I gathered was published in 2015, in the book entitled *Community, the State and Development Assistance: Transforming the Mahalla in Tajikistan*. This paper also presents part of the material collected during the project's evaluation conducted by me in October 2015.²

In my discussion, I examine the relationship between formal and informal institutions within *mahalla* / villages in the region of study and consider the mechanisms of interaction between them in the context of the internal community's relationships as well as external contacts with the state organs and NGOs. I describe what local relationships look like in practice at the local level in Tajikistan, from the perspective of communities and NGOs which implement the project. It briefly traces the relationship between organisations, communities, and local state organs, pointing out the characteristic contradictions of this relationship, analysing the rhetoric of local power, the importance of local informal relationships in providing services to communities, as well as the fluidity of local relations while dealing with external actors such as NGOs.

Historically, the *mahalla* social organisation can be understood as a self-governing small community regulated by rules based on practices and customs deeply rooted in the Central Asian Islamic tradition. In the past, the *mahalla* used to be a small community living in a particular place linked by territorial, professional, family and / or ethnic relationships. The *mahalla*'s members were integrated through participation in common ceremonies such as weddings, circumcisions, funerals, Islamic celebrations, and other life-cycle rituals. They formed special bonds of solidarity which were not only based on the fact of living in the same place but also on a common history, shared real or legendary ancestors, the same holy places located in a particular area and participation in collective rituals [Sukhareva 1976; Polyakov 1980; Geiss 2001; Arifkhanova 2009; Abashin 2011; 2015; Shaniyazov 2011; Urinboev 2011; Dadabaev

¹ The project is financed by a Polish donor — the Solidarity Fund within the framework of the 'Support for Democracy' program, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Poland.

² The project proposal was based on my research and the experience of the NGO Mehrangez in work with rural communities in Tajikistan. In 2013, I was the coordinator for the project on the Polish side. In March 2014, the second edition of the project was launched, within which I worked as a consultant until the end of 2015.

2013; Cieślewska 2015]. Different terms are used to describe the same phenomenon, such as *guzar*, *ku* and others [Sukhareva 1965: 101; Abramov 1989: 4; Abramson 1998; Sievers 2002; Jasiewicz 2004: 192].

The systemic changes introduced by the Soviet Union impacted the entire pattern of existing relationships; it transformed modes of production by abolishing guilds and the introduction of the *kolkhoz* system, as well as impacting upon the traditional structures of community life. In spite of this transformation, the *mahalla* as a social institution still retained its importance in terms of preserving traditional practices and Islamic tradition. Following the collapse of the USSR and during the civil war in Tajikistan, in many places, the state institutions ceased to function, and the *mahalla* provided at least a semblance of social order at the local level. Nevertheless, many communities were destroyed and decentralised. After the war, during the period of post-conflict reconstruction, the whole system of collective farms was transformed. Unfair land reform, as well as the further collapse of the infrastructure and public services had deep effects on the *mahalla*, as on other social structures. Other factors influencing the *mahalla*'s traditional structure and institutions are unemployment and mass migration to other countries, these affecting mainly the male part of the population. This resulted in a transformation of relationships within social groups according to gender, age, and levels of income [Cieślewska 2015: 2].

As of the present, the *mahalla* has an administrative role in Tajikistan and as a form of social organisation it has undergone a legal transformation. The Tajik government has attempted to integrate the *mahalla* into the state system by enacting 'The Law on Public Self-Initiative Bodies' ('the *Mahalla* law')¹ of 2008, which in practice made the *mahalla* the smallest administrative unit of the Tajik state administration. The law indicates that each 'body of self-directed social initiative' (*mahalla*) should be registered in the territory of the *jamoat*² in which it is located. Therefore, each village is expected to establish a *Mahalla* Committee (MC) which plays the role of an executive body. The head of a *mahalla* is called a *raisi mahalla* and should be someone selected by the given community. In order to address social issues, the MC can cooperate with the government, local NGOs and international organisations working in Tajikistan.

¹ Law of the Republic of Tajikistan 'On Public Self-Initiative Bodies' no. 347, 5 January 2008 (Russian *Zakon Respubliki Tadjikistan ob Organakh Obshchestvennoy Samodeyatelnosti*).

² In Tajikistan, a *jamoat* is the community level of local administration (municipality) in villages and towns; in towns — *jamoati shakhrak* and in rural areas — *jamoati dekhrot*. *Jamoats* are subordinated to *rayons* [Tajik: *nohiya(kho)*; English: *district(s)*]; city and district administrations which are subordinated to *oblasts* [Tajik: *viloyat(kho)*; English: *province(s)*]. The Dushanbe city districts and those of the thirteen districts are directly subordinated to the Republic. [The words *rayon* and *oblast* are the Russian administrative denominations in use since the early Soviet period. — *Eds.*]

Although formally the MCs are guaranteed a wide range of competences, in practice their members in the majority have little awareness of their rights, as well as limited operational capacities. Our project shows that the *mahallas* and local administration have little knowledge of ‘the *Mahalla* law’. The *mahallas* also rarely cooperate with international organisations. Communities often do not understand the principles of development assistance, confusing it with the humanitarian aid widely provided during the civil war (1992–7) (see: [Boboyorov 2013; Cieślewska 2015]).

Due to the limited participation of the state in local development, communities are forced to undertake independent actions. However, in practice, the results depend on a particular community’s level of self-organisation and financial capacities. Despite their minor contribution to local development, state administrators have consistently tried to expand control over the MCs, religious leaders, and different types of local institutions (such as *mazars*,¹ mosques, etc.). In many cases, the MC’s authorities are selected by the *jamoat*, a clear break with the past, when a *rais* *mahalla* was always elected by the members of a community. That said, my research shows that if a *rais* is appointed by the *jamoat*, the community tends to have weak social bonds and is not well integrated [Cieślewska 2015].

The project’s framework

Village authorities are capable of launching independent initiatives, but simultaneously they need institutional and financial support, and it is necessary that they improve their organisational and operational capacities. The situation in the Vakhsh Valley is especially difficult due to the structural changes resulting from the transformation of the political and social system in the country and severe warfare during the civil war (1992–7). Prior to the collapse of the USSR, the collective farms (*kolkhozes* and *sovkhozes*) in the valley focused mainly on the cultivation of cotton, with only limited agricultural production of other kinds. All renovations to existing infrastructure and building of new facilities were conducted by the authorities of the collective farms and *selsovet* (municipality).² The *mahalla* as a form of social organisation among the Tajik communities was preserved only partially, mainly within the scope of life-cycle practices. The

¹ *Mazar* / *mazor* / *ziyaratgakh* (also other terms) — a holy shrine or tomb. The shrines can take different forms. Some of them are very significant and can attract thousands of pilgrims every year; others are of a smaller size and can serve as a holy place for the residents of a single village / *mahalla* or of a certain region.

² The literal translation of *selsovet* is ‘village soviet’, but in practice this term is widely used in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, e.g. Kyrgyzstan (*ail-okmotu*), and Poland (*gmina*) not just for the jurisdiction administering a single village, but one covering several villages; therefore, the term ‘municipality’ has been preferred here.

tribal communities also maintained their traditional institutions, which often merged with the collective farm structures. During the post-war reconstruction and land reform, most of the collective farms were divided and parcelled out, while the villages were established as autonomous administrative units. Subsequently, a MC was organised in every village. As mentioned above, the MC is expected to exercise supervision of community affairs, to participate in all organisational activities, and to represent a community before the local administration (*jamoat*) [Roy 1999; Boboyorov 2013; Cieřlewska 2015].

While writing the project proposal, we discussed in detail the type of activities which can reinforce a community's self-organisational skills, and build a basis for cooperation with NGOs and the local administration. Community-based projects should primarily support people in their use of local resources and in adapting local practices so as to reinforce development. They should not impose any particular ideology or strategy. A common mistake within conventional development strategies involves implementing external innovation models that have not been adjusted to local conditions. As co-author of the project, I was inspired by an endogenous development approach, the main purpose of which is reinforcing the potential of communities for using their own self-regulation and self-organisation mechanisms. An important role is assigned to traditional authorities and the community itself, which is expected to regulate its own affairs and to eventually come to a decision whether the external support of an NGO is necessary, and if so — what kind of support is actually needed [Haverkort, van't Hooft, Hiemstra 2003: 29–36]. At the beginning of the project, however, we did not know how communities would react to the model of cooperation proposed by the PCIA and NGO Mehrangez.

By and large, participatory processes are not easy to initiate, since frequently the different interests and values within a community can become an obstacle in reaching a common decision or the process may even lead to reinforcing inequalities [Hauschildt, Lybæk 2006: 9]. In the case of the post-Soviet Vakhsh Valley, which from the 1930s was the subject of modern Soviet development, it is difficult to distinguish between 'traditional (indigenous) institutions' and hybrids of traditionalism and modernisation. For instance, 'the *Mahalla* law' was issued by the government of Tajikistan with the purpose of regulating the administrative status of communities and villages. The *mahalla* was a traditional social organisation among the sedentary population in Central Asia. Nevertheless, at present in Tajikistan, even villages populated by a traditionally tribal population are obliged to establish the MCs as an executive organ of the community. Consequently, in many places throughout the country, the *mahalla* is perceived not as it was in the past when it was seen as a traditional social organisation, but rather as a semi-official state

body that is partly formalised with some elements of the traditional structures (see below). Thus, at the beginning of our project we faced an additional challenge regarding establishing the actual leadership within particular communities. As a result, we had to solve various issues, such as with whom we should work with within the project, which involved establishing the main actors in a particular community, and finally we needed to determine the most appropriate forms of cooperation with ‘the modernised *mahalla*’.

A pilot project was launched in 2013 for ten villages. In 2014, five other communities were invited to participate. In 2015, thirteen villages cooperated with us within the framework of the project; however, two villages were excluded due to problems in communicating with their authorities. Throughout the duration of the project, the fifteen *mahalla* committees participated in workshops regarding legal rights and the responsibilities of *mahallas* within the framework of ‘the *Mahalla* law’. Subsequently, they also took part in seminars on community mobilisation, a course on accounting for bookkeepers working in the *mahallas*, seminars on project planning, seminars on communication and *fundraising*. All *mahallas* prepared project proposals and received micro-funds amounting to up to 40% of the total budget of the projects. As a result of the micro-projects, a number of initiatives were launched: five primary-care clinics were built, one medical clinic was equipped, another was renovated, and dental equipment was bought for one medical ward, seven rural roads were levelled, three pumps were replaced, and one water pump at a big pumping station was also exchanged, one transformer supplying electricity was installed, electricity was connected to one street, a roof was built at a local primary school, a car for delivering water was bought by one of the villages, two bridges were renovated in a village, one school building was equipped, and one tailoring workshop was organised. Most of the work was voluntary (*hashar*), but the *mahallas* also provided financial contributions. The project also included a component for female groups on hygiene and health care for young mothers and children.

Regional factors: An outline

The area of project implementation is characterised by great cultural diversity. All of the villages invited to cooperate were established during Soviet times. Most residents were resettled to the Vakhsh Valley during a period of the intensive restructuring of this region towards cotton farming.¹ The residents of the villages where the PCIA

¹ In the 1930s and 40s, the Vakhsh Valley was targeted for the construction of an irrigation system in order to increase the area under cotton cultivation (Russian *Vakhshstroy*). Between 1931 and 1938, a huge irrigation system was constructed which eventually covered an area of 130 thousand hectares. Many thousands of people were brought to the Vakhsh Valley to be settled in the newly established

has worked were relocated to the Vashkh Valley from such areas as Ghozimalik, Rasht Valley, Danghara, Kulob (Kulyab), Nurak (Nurek) and Faizobod, as well as the Ferghana Valley. The indigenous inhabitants of the region who have participated in our project include tribal Uzbeks, mostly Kungrats, a few Lakai and Durman families, as well as members of the Turkmen ethnoses. Before the revolution, these groups led a nomadic or semi-nomadic way of life. At present the majority of them live in settlements that are also inhabited by Tajiks. Two villages participating in the project are inhabited by Kungrats, while in the case of a third village they constitute a majority of the residents. Ethnic diversity determines the methods of working with the communities. Each of the groups within the communities is unique, for example, many speak their own dialect (or — in the case of tribal groups — their own separate language) and maintain their own traditions, cultural identity, and sense of historical memory. During the Civil War (1992–7), different groups were ascribed to the two conflicting parties. For instance, Tajiks from Gharm, colloquially called Gharmis, were considered as part of the opposition. Therefore, to this day the villages inhabited by Gharmis are under the strict control of the Tajik state structures, and their relationship with the authorities is a sensitive issue. During the War, the entire Vakhsh region valley became the site of intensive fighting. The conflict led to the destruction of the infrastructure and the economic system, as well as the deterioration of environmental conditions and public services (education and health care), which have still not fully recovered. This resulted in the weakening of state structures, as well as a generally low level of the development of human and social capital.

The recent political and social crisis in Tajikistan is reflected in the relationships at the local level. The ban introduced on the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRP) towards the end of August 2015 and the persecution of their members are evidence of the increasing pressure the state is exercising on society [Pannier, Salimov, Valsamaki 2015]. The Tajik government regularly undertakes action against the political opposition, using the threat of Islamic extremism and the Afghan Taliban as an excuse. Undoubtedly, the unstable situation on the border with Afghanistan is a security threat for Tajikistan (Jilikul and Qumsangir, two districts involved in the project activities, border Afghanistan). According to our local informants, in the month of Ramadan (June / July 2015), the road from Shahriz District (adjacent to the Jilikul District) was blocked by the authorities due to an alleged Taliban raid into the region. This

collective farms. About 90% of the population of 'new Vakhsh' came from different parts of the Soviet Union. The resettlement of people began in the 1930s and was continued until the late 1960s [Gomart 2003: 87; Sarsembekov et al. 2004].

information was never officially confirmed, nor was the incident covered by the media. Nevertheless, it is clear that the Tajik government is exploiting the Islamic / Afghan factor as an excuse to increase control over society. On the other hand, predatory acts committed by state officials remain largely unpunished.

At the local level, the authorities of district administrations (*hukumats*) function as fiefdoms, with the heads of local *hukumats* acting as ‘lords of the manor’, making use of their ties with the central government based on clientele-family networks. Consequently, the *hukumats*’ relationships with the local administrations (*jamoats*) and the Mahalla Committees are ruled by various informal links and connections. The vast corruption in the state administration prevents carrying out transparent procedures. As a result, most of the issued documents and certifications are subject to informal payments (bribes). This makes it very difficult for a community or a person to obtain such documents using normal procedures. Therefore, people are forced to seek different alternatives. For instance, within the project under discussion, in a few cases a parcel of land needed for the construction of a medical facility was given by a resident of a certain community or by a mosque. The local administration refused to provide land despite numerous requests.

In addition, the crisis in the Russian Federation resulting from sanctions imposed by Western countries has had a negative impact on the economic situation in Central Asia. The decrease in investments and deteriorating service sector, as well as the depreciation of the rouble against the US dollar, has negatively influenced the situation of Tajik migrants in Russia. Alongside this, the changes introduced by the Russian legal system regarding migration have contributed to a fall in the number of Tajik migrants. Subsequently, this has adversely affected the incomes of many families relying on remittances sent by their relatives from the Russian Federation [‘Vsemirnyy bank...’ 2015].

Local contacts

The *mahalla* committees (MCs) also functioned in Soviet times, in most cases in the larger cities and in some bigger settlements. As previously mentioned, in the rural areas, collective farm authorities fulfilled all organisational tasks, and the *mahalla* as a traditional social organisation operated informally within the sphere of traditional practices. In some cases, the interviewed people stated that the term ‘*mahalla*’ was not used at all; while others claimed that it appeared sometimes to stress a community’s internal relationships [Abashin 2011].

The territories of kolkhozes were divided into smaller parcels (Russian *uchastki*). Each land parcel was supervised by a foreman who at times also played the role of the informal traditional leader. In the case of the Tajik communities participating in our project, there were various informal leaders such as *aqsaqals* (during interviews they were also called *raisi mahalla* or *koloni mahalla* — all these terms are used to indicate the head of a community), mullahs (religious leaders), and other respected members of a community, i.e. the elders (described with a variety of Turkic / Persian terms: *aqsaqals* / *aqsaqols*, *muysafedons*, and so forth). To this day, these informal leaders perform a regulatory role in the communities, participating in the decision-making process and enacting mediation between parties.

The MCs of the villages in which we worked were established during different periods of time but after the collapse of the USSR. The formation of the MCs was encouraged by *jamoats*, and ordered by the *hukumat* of a district to ensure the implementation of different tasks, such as the dissemination of humanitarian aid or community participation in the activities of international NGOs and those of the local government. According to ‘the *Mahalla* law’, the MC is comprised of five to fifteen persons. In most cases, they would include rich farmers, religious leaders, former kolkhoz elite representatives, as well as teachers, medical doctors, and others [Cieřlewska 2015: 80–1]. Prior to our projects, in the fifteen villages participating in our project many MCs functioned only nominally.

As noted, members of the MCs were not familiar with ‘the *Mahalla* law’; hence, they did not know what rights they had, and what their responsibilities and obligations were. Nevertheless, the decision-making process was undertaken as earlier by the community elites, whose members wield influence due to their wealth, network of connections, special skills, or personal charisma. The community leaders perform key roles in local political, social, religious, and welfare activities [Boboyorov 2013]. In many cases, these people are also members of the MC. However, others function outside the MC circle but are still the most important people in a given village. As one member of an MC stated during an interview, ‘Significant people from our *mahalla* usually meet after *shom namaz*¹ in the mosque to talk if there is something important to discuss. Two or three times a year, we organise a *madjlis* [English: assembly], in which the representatives of each household are invited to participate.’ In most cases, members of the local administration are also present at the *madjlis*. Within the framework of our project we organised a number of *madjlises* to ensure that the goals and activities of our project were known to the entire community and not only to an elite group.

¹ Arabic *maghrib*, a prayer performed just after sunset.

The example of *mahalla* M. shows the mechanisms behind the sharing of power within *mahallas*. Since 2013, we have worked with the MC of village M., in majority inhabited by Gharmis with a few representatives of other regional / ethnic groups. In 2013, the *mahalla* was headed by the *rais* who also performed the role of the informal local religious leader. The community was very well organised due to authority of the *rais* and his leadership skills. At the beginning of 2014, two sons of the *rais* were imprisoned on charges of robbery and murder. Rumours were spread that they had been wrongly accused as a result of a provocation by some governmental forces attempting to undermine the authority of the influential Gharmi leaders. However, it is difficult to state whether this was true or not. Eventually, due to family problems, the *rais* resigned from his position. He was replaced by the director of the local school. The latter however was not capable of fulfilling the duties of a *raisi mahalla* in a satisfactory manner. As a result, some project activities were disregarded or postponed. We complained to the old *rais* and he promised to find a solution since he continued to hold considerable standing in his village. Finally, at the beginning of 2015, another person was selected, a local activist and a *mirob*.¹ The situation in the village improved slightly but at the same time almost all the members of the MC were replaced by associates of the new *rais*. Only two of the previous members of the MC retained their posts. As regards the project activities, the new people had not participated in the seminar and workshop that had been organised in previous years. Thus, due to a power shift in the village, the main goal of the project, which was to reinforce the organisational skills of the MC, was undermined.

Changing the head of a community does not always entail the replacement of the entire MC. However, since the MC consists of members of various kinship groups (*avlods*) connected to local networks, various hierarchies determine the power relationships within a community. In extreme cases this can lead to a conflict of interests [Boboyorov 2013]. Well-integrated communities are characterised by balanced relationships among the different parties. At the beginning of the project, one of the most difficult issues in our work was gaining knowledge regarding local structures and relationships, both formal and informal. We gradually became more aware of the situation. Particularly during the realisation of micro-projects, which required the involvement of the whole community and its leaders, many hidden tensions within the *mahallas* came to surface. Nevertheless, understanding the intricacies of local networks has been a constant learning process, which involves continuous research, formal and informal meetings with different social actors, cooperation with local leaders, and so forth. As far as the MC is

¹ A person responsible for water distribution.

concerned, working with its members does not always mean cooperating with the real community leaders, as can be shown on the example of villages populated by Kungrats.

Kungrats inhabited the Vakhsh Valley before the October Revolution. However, in independent Tajikistan, they are homogeneous communities that are relatively isolated from the external world [Karmysheva 1976; Abdunazarov et al. 2014: 158–66]. The Kungrats living in Tajikistan speak a dialect of the Uzbek language, and many of them do not know the Tajik language. They have their own structures based on a tribal system that has survived to this day, whereby a tribe is divided into sub-groups and further into individual kinship groups (*qawms*) which function within *ayils* (nomad settlements). More precisely, one *qawm* lives within the territory of a single *ayil* which is headed by an *aqsaqal*. One village is divided into a few *ayils*. The Kungrats from two villages in which we worked, kishlak D. and kishlak A., belong to the *Oinli* (*Oinna*) subgroup, which is further divided into twelve kinship groups. The biggest and most dominant group is the *Beshbolo* [Cieřlewska 2015: 118, 198–201].

The *raisi* MC of village D. is also the head of the *Beshbolo* kinship group in this area. Thus, his authority extends beyond village D. In both kishlaks D. and A., the MCs were established at the beginning of the 2000s by order of the local administration. According to the words of the *rais* of village D., following the collapse of *kolkhozes*, villages became separate units and the MC structures emerged. At the beginning, people did not know what an MC was since a *mahalla* as a form of social organisation had never existed among the tribal population of Central Asia. Thus, for the first four or five years the MC was not recognised at all by the residents of the villages. Traditionally, decisions regarding various village matters are taken by the elders (*aqsaqals*) of all the *qawms*. *Qawms* are subject to a certain hierarchy and those considered more important within a tribal structure are more influential. As a result of establishing the MC, a system of dual rule developed with the domination of informal tribal institutions. The MC is considered to be a state administration structure but in fact it is a hybrid of both informal and formal networks.

Our project included a component for women on hygiene and health for young mothers and children. The selected female leaders were expected to undergo a series of training sessions, and subsequently to provide information on the material covered to women from their communities. Village A. is the poorest and most disadvantaged village in our project. It is situated in a peripheral part of Jilikul district. Due to the collapse of the water infrastructure, the village is deprived of water, which should be delivered from the Vakhsh River or nearby

canals. The remote location of the village is also the cause of the very low level of social and economic development, the poor local education system, and the lack of contact for some groups (such as women) with the outside world. Many of them are not allowed to go anywhere outside of their own homes, and are strongly controlled by family networks.

At the beginning of 2014, a year into the project, we initiated the component for women. It was very difficult to find any female leaders in village A., even though we had already gathered information over the previous year that there were a few female teachers who had participated in the seminars organised there. While visiting the *raisi* MC of village D., we mentioned this problem. He asked why we had approached him so late about the issue and told us to wait, while he picked up the phone, dialled a number, and started talking with someone in the Uzbek language. After finishing the conversation he told us the following, ‘Everything is fine. They will find appropriate people for the seminars.’ We asked him how he had managed to find a solution so quickly. He answered that people followed his orders because he was the head of the *Beshbolo* group and they could not refuse to grant him a favour of this kind. In the end, we managed to work with women in both villages populated by Kungrats.

The above example depicts how informal structures influence relationships at the local level. Despite the fact that we had attempted to work with the official structure of the MC in village A., it was only through an informal institution (the head of the *Beshbolo*) that we were able to pursue the project’s activities. The fact that the *raisi* MC of *kishlak* D. was simultaneously the head of the *Beshbolo* group shows the ambiguous nature of the *mahalla* as a structure imposed by the state administration.

Shaping local relationships.

The case of medical primary-care clinics in two villages

Two villages within our project — *kishlak* F. and *kishlak* H. — decided to build medical primary-care clinics within the scope of the micro-grants obtained in 2013. The primary-care clinics were implemented during the projects at different locations as a result of submitting appropriate project proposals by the villages to the PCIA and NGO Mehrangez. At the stage of planning the project proposal by the *mahallas*, the PCIA and NGO Mehrangez visited the relevant authorities to be certain that they would take responsibility for the facilities after their completion. When the buildings were finished, the PCIA and NGO Mehrangez handed over all the clinics to the local authorities. Consequently, the second stage — equipping the primary-care clinics and making them available for the residents — was expected to be the joint action of the community and the relevant

district authorities, without the financial participation of the PCIA and Mehrangez. In practice, however, authorities only provided employment for the medical staff, and at times some modest equipment. The village's informal leaders made the most effort to bring about the opening of the medical facilities and to make them available to the communities [Cieślowska 2015: 202].

Village F. is inhabited by different regional groups with a majority of Tajiks from Faizobod, but also some Kulyabis and Gharmis. The *mahalla* is well integrated. The *raisi mahalla* used to be the kolkhoz's engineer and a member of the Communist Party; his sons are local businessmen, one of whom is the owner of the commercial building in which the *rais* has his office. The *vice-rai*s is a former head of the district *hukumat* as well as a teacher. He is very well established within the local networks, with a variety of personal contacts also in Dushanbe.

Land for the clinic in village F. was sectioned off from the territory of the Friday mosque since the *jamoat* did not provide any other location. Funds for the construction of the building were collected from the residents, and obtained within micro-grants released by the PCIA and NGO Mehrangez. Following the construction of the clinic and after it was handed over to the authorities, *mahalla* F. began to apply for financial assistance to buy medical equipment. They went to the district public health institution and district *hukumat* to ask for funds, but were refused any assistance. Subsequently, they went to visit the regional authorities, also to no avail. Finally, the *vice-raisi mahalla* arranged a meeting with the Minister of Health of the Republic of Tajikistan, who used to be his student, and the *vice-rai*s knows his family very well. 'I told him that we are giving people injections on *kurpachas* (mattresses). He could not refuse to help me. You see... not so long ago, he poured water on my hands.¹ Finally, we got about 1,300 USD, and we managed to buy some basic equipment.' The community of *mahalla* F. is well organised. Nevertheless, they were not capable of persuading the local authorities to facilitate the primary-care clinic. The financial assistance was only obtained through the *vice-rai*s *mahalla*'s informal networks.

Community H. also experienced many difficulties in opening their local medical facility. Prior to the construction of the building, the MC was not able to collect a sufficient amount of money from the residents. Financial assistance was provided by the head of a big farm who lives in the village, and finally the building was completed.

¹ In Central Asia, traditionally before a meal, guests have their hands washed. Water is usually poured on the hands of guests by younger hosts and people with a lower status in the social hierarchy. By using the expression 'not so long ago, he poured water on my hands' [Russian: *eshche ne tak davno on polival vodu na moi ruki*], the *vice-rai*s was underlining that he is related to the Minister, while also suggesting that the latter was much younger, and that the *vice-rai*s was on close terms with the Minister's father.

Despite the efforts on the part of the MC, the authorities responsible for local medical health centres refused to open the place, postponing the decision, explaining that they did not have enough funds to cover the salaries and pay for the medical equipment. PCIA and NGO Mehrangez were involved in the negotiation process with the authorities, visiting the relevant institutions regularly, and assisting the *mahalla* in writing applications. Eventually, the clinic was opened only in 2015, in the presence of the media and local authorities who willingly announced that they had successfully managed to create the new medical facility in their area.

Both cases show how informal relationships may influence local development and investment. Although *mahalla* F. is much better organised than *mahalla* H., ultimately success was only possible due to the personal contacts of the *vice-raïs mahalla*. Despite efforts on the part of the authorities of *mahalla* H., the opening of the clinic was postponed, and only the intervention of the involved organisations led to positive outcomes.

Concluding remarks

Without the support of the state, villages are capable of conducting only minor investments or reparations within their territories. After the collapse of the USSR, international organisations partly replaced state funds, becoming a third actor in local relationships. Nevertheless, it is not always easy to establish the place and role of this new stakeholder in local networks. In most cases, international NGOs are perceived as the representatives of authorities since often the projects are channelled through state institutions. In this case, they act as intermediaries between the state and the local population.

In Tajikistan, however, most of the local relationships are based on family, friendship and / or political ties. Formal institutions such as the government's structures are determined by informal institutions. This in turn influences the course of the project's implementation and its outcomes. If an international organisation intends to work directly with local communities, it has no other choice than to adjust to local conditions by developing appropriate network-enabling functions in the field. It takes a lot of effort and time to know what is actually important at the local level, and who is responsible for shaping particular relationships. A local NGO can thus play the role of an intermediary in the field. Nevertheless, it should be borne in mind that the local NGOs are also involved in local affairs and actions. Hence, while the organisation's contacts and experience are useful in implementing a project's activities, they can be also a hindrance in terms of equal distribution of aid or even sometimes to dealings with other actors.

Consequently, there are many controversies surrounding the work of international organisations. As previously mentioned, many such organisations delivered humanitarian aid in the Vakhsh Valley during the civil war and shortly after. Unfortunately, part of the aid was wasted or ended up directly in the pockets of local officials. Hence, at the beginning of our cooperation with *mahallas*, we faced some difficulties in gaining our beneficiaries' trust. It took time to change this situation. Only later did our beneficiaries tell us, 'We were suspicious of you, we thought that you were like the others,' or 'Several organisations abused our trust. They promised something, then they did not fulfil their promises, or even worse, they cheated us; money which had been planned for a particular investment or goods disappeared.'

In Tajikistan, the local communities are challenged from many sides, and face two significant institutional obstacles. On the one hand, communities are forced to take over the responsibilities of the state administration. On the other, they cannot function independently due to corruption as well as top-down relationships with the state organs. This seriously limits communities' independent actions and their capacities to self-regulate and self-govern, and hampers their achievement of practical objectives.

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