SOCIETY AND CULTURE IN TRANSITION

Livelihoods in rural areas

The following case studies of Basid, Tavdem and Kuna Kurgan attempt to highlight certain current aspects of daily life in typical villages in Gorno Badakhshan. The studies aim to illustrate the processes involved in changing socio-economic and political conditions at the local level during the first post-socialist decade. They depend on a participatory appraisal of natural conditions and dynamics, and on an assessment of household needs and coping strategies. This complex approach greatly enhanced insights into the potentials for future development at the village level, as well as obstacles to development.

The villages of Tavdem and Basid are situated in the Western Pamirs, at a height of about 2500 m, and are endowed with similar natural resources. About 600 people live mostly from irrigation agriculture in both villages. Quite large pasture areas and alpine meadows are used extensively in both villages for livestock herding in the summer.

Natural resources and land use

The forced intensification of agriculture has let to soil degradation. Soil erosion and widespread eluviation resulting from inappropriate irrigation practices are particularly difficult problems that even lead to gully erosion on some of the steeper plots in Tavdem.

Arable land is also directly affected by a vicious cycle of energy needs. Most villages in the GBAO have faced serious energy shortages since supplies of coal, among others, ceased in 1991. In the current transition phase, people are forced to meet the demand for energy by exploiting alternative sources, such as fuelwood and dung cakes. The limited supply of fuelwood is rapidly decreasing, with the undesirable negative impact of declining soil fertility on arable land, resulting from reduced application of dung. The lack of organic compounds also has a negative impact on soil cohesion, eventually contributing to increased susceptibility to wind and water erosion (eolian deflation and eluviation).

Under current economic conditions, where people are forced to live on what they grow on their own land, they have virtually no financial means to supplement lost nutrients in the soil by buying chemical fertilisers. Hence the resource base becomes increasingly marginal.
From socialism to subsistence

Socio-economic conditions in Basid and Tavdem have been determined by reversion to an almost completely rural society since the breakdown of the Soviet system. As socio-economic transformation renders income generation more difficult, many villagers migrate to Dushanbe or Russia in order to support their families by sending home part of their salaries.

"When the sovkhoze was dissolved I lost my job. To live we had to sell our own possessions including animals, furniture and our car tires. To survive, many young people had to leave the village to find a job and send part of their salaries home. This, in turn, split up the families."

Villager in Tavdem

Sudden dependency on own resources after a period of heavy subsidies during the Soviet era has left the region in despair. Villagers try to intensify agricultural productivity, as they are compelled to engage in subsistence farming. Their efforts are impeded by the limited amount of arable land, the rather poor quality of the soils, lack of funds for fertilisers, and a generally low level of knowledge about agricultural techniques.

Since the dissolution of the local kolkhoze and sovkhoze and the distribution of arable land, every family has cultivated an average 0.2 ha privately. Although the same amount of land was allocated to every villager, soil quality, distance between plots and houses, and the availability of water were not officially taken into consideration.

Furthermore, people are no longer accustomed to managing agricultural production themselves. During the Soviet era they were employees of the local kolkhoze/sovkhoze. Current circumstances have brought forth a new kind of solidarity.

Dietary adjustments
- reduce the number of meals
- send family members to relatives

Income generation strategies
- extend the variety and the size of kitchen gardens to improve vegetable and fruit yields
- produce handicrafts e.g. Pamiri socks to generate alternative income

Asset-depletion strategies
- sell livestock
- take children out of school
- sell household assets such as carpets, sewing machines, etc.

Informal safety net
- cultivate social networks in the village for day-to-day support
- migrate and send money home
- become a member of a local institution to gain access to informal networks and the benefits of lobbying

To secure their livelihoods, households develop strategies at different levels to improve their economic and social situation. (Degen 2002, Kanji and Gladwin 1999)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wealth group</th>
<th>Main source of income</th>
<th>Secondary source of income</th>
<th>Least important source of income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Well-off</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basid 20%</td>
<td>• private enterprise</td>
<td>• agriculture</td>
<td>• kitchen garden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• employment with an</td>
<td>• livestock</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NGO</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• pension</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• family member</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>working abroad</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constrained</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basid 35%</td>
<td>• salary</td>
<td>• kitchen garden</td>
<td>• livestock</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• pension</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• family member</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>working abroad</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Struggling</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basid 45%</td>
<td>• kitchen garden</td>
<td>• help from relatives</td>
<td>• collecting berries/wood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• selling milk</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• pension</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• herding</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Household wealth rankings and typical sources of income.
“During Soviet times, the village was heavily supported by the Soviet system: consumer goods were available in state shops and social services were free of charge. Today we aren’t supported anymore by the government, those who are responsible for the district first look after themselves.”

Villager in Basid

Since the collapse of the Soviet system a certain social stratification has also become obvious. While the gap between rich and poor villagers was obscured under the communist principle of equality, it has become more visibly evident today. Wealth rankings based on indicators of differentiation assessed by the villagers show that only a quarter of the villagers have adapted to the new circumstances and are well-off, while 30% of the population in Tavdem and 45% in Basid are suffering from a lack of resources and know-how (see table on household wealth rankings). Poverty is widespread and the scope for action very limited.

“If we knew how, we would leave the village immediately. But one has not enough money to migrate, the other has to look after his family with children, a third has elderly parents he can’t leave.”

A young villager in Basid

NGOs have begun several credit programmes that include the establishment of local savings groups and aim to advance the development of local micro-enterprises. These programmes try to impart some economic know-how to traders and businessmen/women, as adaptation to the new market system is still incomplete. In Basid and Tavdem a certain amount of shame about selling was observed. This is a relic of the communist principle of solidarity, and constitutes an impediment to business, especially among men, who are more fearful of their reputations than women.

“I don’t want to condemn the trade. On the one hand it’s good that traders make consumer goods available in the village, but on the other hand it is against my conviction to do business with my neighbours.”

Villager in Basid

Civil society

The impression of the social environment in the villages is one of a quite intact system of networks in clans and neighbourhoods, with reciprocal support and great dependence. In the past decade of transition, ties between people have become even more intense, and the small populations in the villages have developed a strong sense of solidarity within the community. But there are still families, mostly poor, who are disconnected from the villages and do not stay in contact with their relatives. Such families are still completely dependent on assistance. In this context the new social stratification becomes very obvious.

“The disappearance of the Soviet system changed our dependence on our relatives and neighbours: since we have to organise the ploughing, seeding, harvesting ourselves we are more dependent on the support of the neighbourhood. So we go back to old customs and traditions again, because it’s the only way to cultivate and to survive in the end. The collapse brought a more intense but also more economic form of solidarity.”

Villager in Tavdem

The Village Organisations (VOs) and women’s associations are community-building institutions. Against the background of the Soviet tradition of functioning institutions, the recent aim of the MSDSP to implement these new institutions at the local level faced no major obstacles. However, failed projects and problems in communicating with the MSDSP generated some scepticism about the abilities of the VOs, particularly in Basid.
Decision-making concerned with village affairs is negotiated at the VO meetings, where different subgroups can introduce objectives and purposes, or comment on the work of the VO management by district. Experience in Tavdem and Basid shows that they are ideal places to promote participatory forms of interaction and thus support further development at the local level.

Needs

Sustainable regional development that aims to reduce dependence on humanitarian assistance can hardly be entirely endogenously driven. Development builds on two economic pillars: optimising local opportunity, and making use of possibilities outside the region, e.g. migrant work. Villages need financial resources generated by village inhabitants and foreign investment, and a policy that takes account of promotion of local knowledge and the local capacity for innovation, as well as technology transfer and know-how. The region also needs revenue to invest in local enterprise development, administration, and social services. To achieve increased agricultural production within the limits of sustainable management of natural resources, substitute energy sources must be found, agricultural areas expanded, and land use management adapted.

With respect to social development, analyses in Basid and Tavdem showed that there was little consensus about the priority of action in the fields of policy and administration. External moderators assigned high priority to needs in these sectors. However, there was agreement that parallel structures in government and in NGOs are not desirable. On the basis of the village studies, it is recommended that democratic principles be promoted to build the foundation of regional administration and to ensure the participation of the population. In addition, community-building processes should be supported to connect disadvantaged families to networks and resources, and suspend the process of social stratification.

Development options

Diversification of sources of income would make people less dependent on subsistence production. The establishment of manufacturing enterprises and industries for wool processing, tailoring, food processing, leather production, etc., would be an important step towards a more balanced local economy in Basid and Tavdem.

Electricity is seen by local households as a prerequisite for future development. In particular, electricity generated by hydro-power should support women in their daily housekeeping work, facilitate the establishment of processing shops, and be a substitute for firewood. Construction of the small local hydroelectric plant supported by the MSDSP was an important step. However, as the example of Basid shows, villagers need to be supported with regard to power station maintenance: three months after it had been built, the power station broke down and has not been repaired since.

An agricultural extension service could help meet the lack of know-how in individual farming on small agricultural plots. This would probably enable the villagers to intensify production and protect natural resources more professionally. Even if the populations of Basid and Tavdem do not become totally self-sufficient in nutrition in the next few years, the degree of self-sufficiency could at least be increased and stabilised by intensifying cultivation to a reasonable extent.

Village overview: Basid
Altitude: 2440 m
Average annual temperature: 9.6°C
Average annual precipitation: 213 mm
Population: 587
Households: 104
Arable land per household: 0.2 hectare
Distance to centres:
Rushan: 85 km (5 hours by bus)
Khorog: 149 km (6 hours by bus)
Public infrastructure:
Secondary school, hospital, hukumat (local government), radio station, post office, religious site, the klub, mills, small hydroelectric plant, security system for lake Sarez.
Institutions:
Local institutions: jamoat, Village Organisation (VO), women’s group, shirkat and Farmers’ Association.
Civil society organizations: MSDSP, Focus, Red Cross, PSF

Village overview: Tavdem
Altitude: 2460 m
Average temperature:
January -16° to -12°C, July 16 to 20°C
Annual precipitation: 300 mm
Population: 644
Households: 104
Demography:
0–15 years: 236 (37% of total population)
>15 years: 408 (63% of total population)
Arable land per household: 0.19 hectare
Distance to centres:
Khorog 20 km (40 minutes by car, daily bus connection available)
Public infrastructure: post office, hospital, medical aid station, small hydroelectric plant, secondary school, MSDSP warehouse, mill, religious site, and the klub.
Institutions:
Local institutions: jamoat, Village Organisation (VO) and Farmers’ Association.
Civil society organizations: MSDSP, AKF, Red Cross
Kuna Kurgan
Michael Domeisen

Kuna Kurgan is one of five jamaats in the Tajik Eastern Pamirs. The region is characterised by large, dry plains at an average altitude between 3500 and 4000 m, intersected by mountain ranges reaching altitudes of 6000 m and more. Plant growth remains limited due to the lack of sufficient water – crops can barely be cultivated and must be imported across the passes of the Pamir Mountains.

“... It is a land where cold and storms prevail and pastureland is as poor and rare as nowhere else in the world.”

Sven Hedin, who travelled the Pamirs in 1889

Natural resources and land use

The main natural resource is pastureland, with rich alpine meadows and shrub vegetation. Pastures are situated in valleys below glaciers (summer pasture) or along large rivers (winter pasture). Apart from livestock herding, winter fodder is cut where possible. The cultivation of both crops and legumes is barely possible and is done only in irrigated kitchen gardens. Recently, pastures near villages have been threatened by degradation because the cessation of high-altitude mobile herding has led to overuse of these areas.

When supplies of coal and electricity ceased, people were forced to collect and use teresken, a sub-shrub that serves as animal fodder and protects slopes from erosion. Local people and experts consider the harvesting of teresken to be the major recent ecological threat.

Other natural resources include thermal water sources and mineral deposits of coal, silver, gold, uranium and precious stones. These resources are currently used only in minor ways.

Livelihood in Kuna Kurgan

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, strategies for generating income shifted back to subsistence production. The keeping of several private sheep and yaks, originally in addition to paid labour, became the basis of livelihood for many families. Depending on household size, people received additional animals when privatisation took place in 1999. In Kuna Kurgan the average flock size today is only 10 sheep units per person. It is stressed by both herders and local livestock experts that more than 30 sheep units per person are needed to sustain a livelihood based on livestock breeding.

“Only about 2–5% of all herding households are able to live only from livestock breeding. The rest are forced to earn money elsewhere or depend on humanitarian aid.”

Chairman of Farmers’ Association

Given harsh environmental conditions and isolation from markets located in the lowlands of Kyrgyzstan and China, alternative household strategies for generating urgently needed income are limited. Households that produce a surplus of dairy products sell parts of it on the local bazaar, reducing their own stocks for winter. On summer pastures children are occupied with collecting shrubs and dung that are sold on the market as fuel; hay is also sold as winter fodder. In general, strategies for securing household livelihoods are highly diversified within a larger network of social and kinship relations. The diversification of strategies to secure a livelihood, together with the provision of flour by humanitarian aid organisations, has helped households to sustain their existence, even through years of drought and civil war.

The socio-economic situation

The most frequently mentioned aspect of the transformation process is the shift from a planned economy to a free market economy. This transformation is still not completed: rural regions in particular suffer from the collapse of economic structures of production and distribution of raw materials, capital and goods. The decline from full employment to an unemployment rate of more than 80% has been the most distressing change. In Kuna Kurgan today, more than 70% of all households are considered poor or very poor, and 95% are receiving humanitarian aid in the form of food and clothes.

Subsistence production covers about half of household income. The rest consists of humanitarian aid, the sale of animals and dairy products, hay, and teresken. Considering the need to buy flour – almost half of a family’s expenses are for flour – the very low purchasing power of the local population is the most pressing problem.

“Every autumn we have to sell half of our flocks to buy flour that we need for winter.”

Poor herder on a summer pasture

Derelict infrastructure (roads, power plants, irrigation facilities), weak administrative structures, and isolation from markets are factors that aggravate the difficult socio-economic situation.
The social environment and gender aspects

In general, a family is headed by a senior male member called aksakal (white beard). His tasks relate mainly to financial affairs and decision-making. Whenever possible, he joins the family at the jailoo (summer pasture), since according to Kyrgyz tradition, it is a sign of a household’s social status to have one’s own summer camp. While the head of an übülo (household) is not directly involved in hard daily work, female family members in particular have to bear the main burden of daily tasks such as milking, dairy production, cooking and housework. Children are mainly occupied with the herding of small ruminants and the collecting of fuel material. School is in session for only about 6–7 months a year.

“We cannot afford to go to jailoo, but here the animals will not grow fat. If humanitarian aid stops there will be nobody left to help us.” 17-year-old mother

In general, rich and poor households are mainly distinguished by the size of their social network. Poor households are often marginalised and suffer from fewer relations with key persons – which makes their situation even worse. Despite bad socio-economic conditions in Kuna Kurgan, there has so far been no outmigration; the population is still growing considerably.

Needs

Local people emphasise the need to increase livestock as well as hay yield for winter forage. This demand will eventually require more mobile herding and the empowerment of institutions that are responsible for the regulation of access to land.

Another task is solving the energy problem. Teresken as a fuel must be partially replaced, and electricity supply restored, especially in view of the introduction of small-scale manufacturing industries. It will be crucial for future development to break through the isolation of the Kuna Kurgan region, re-activate market relations, and ensure fair terms of trade. Such development requires the enforcement of local administrative institutions, the rehabilitation of infrastructure, and access to information and education for households in all social classes.

Development options

The people of Kuna Kurgan underwent a sharp decline in their welfare and way of life after the collapse of the USSR. In order to achieve sound development planning at the community level, a multi-stakeholder negotiation process must be initiated. Livestock production will remain the backbone of the economy in Kuna Kurgan, and can also be an important contribution to the national economy. Improved livestock production is thus essential. Niche production of specific animals should be supported. The development of the internal market system is of paramount importance. Added value can be realised locally through the processing of goods produced at the local level. Considerable investments in social and economic infrastructure are necessary. Combined with the development of the secondary and tertiary sectors, this could help to decrease dependency on the agricultural sector, and the integration of the various fields/sectors of economy could be enhanced.

Overview: Kuna Kurgan

Village altitude: 3650 m
Altitude of summer pastures: 3900–4500 m
Annual precipitation: 65 mm
Population: 1,027
Number of households: 235
Average household size: 4.4
Age distribution:
  0–15: 41%
  16–59: 50%
  >59: 9%
Life expectancy: 52 years
Total area: 727,700 ha
Arable land: 400 ha
Pastureland: 78,792 ha
Distance to nearest town: 421 km (Osh, Kyrgyz Republic)