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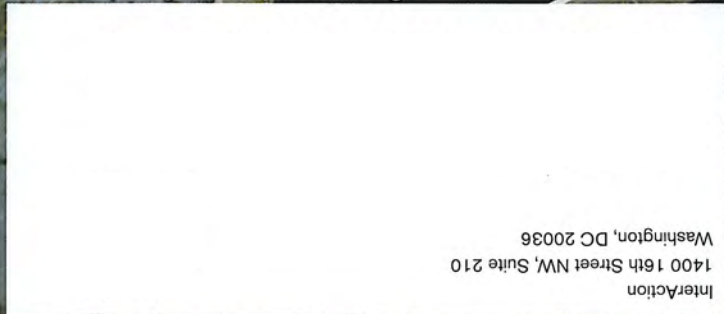
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Shifting Mindsets in Post-Soviet Tajikistan

► Fostering change from the grassroots up.

By David Taylor, Communications Officer, Aga Khan Foundation USA

IT WAS THE BEST OF TIMES, IT WAS the worst of times. It was when the government provided free health care and education, subsidized housing and a salary of roughly \$35, which got you through the month with change left over, recalls Yodgor Faizov. He grew up in Shugnan, in the Gorno-Badakhshan region of Tajikistan, located on the border with Afghanistan; and in the late 1980s he was First Secretary of the Khorog City Committee for the Communist Party's Youth Organization.

Then it all fell apart. When the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, Tajikistan faced catastrophe, and a conundrum: how do you advance, as the poorest Soviet republic, into a post-Soviet era? How do you get citizens and leaders to think differently after a centralized system has vanished, and globalization sets new benchmarks for economic development and governance?

"Shifting mindsets for a post-Soviet era is indeed a challenging task," says Gulnoza Khasanova, communications officer for Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation in Dushanbe. "One of the preconditions for succeeding in development cooperation has always been bringing about behavioral change." But a shift has begun, she notes, starting from villages deep in the mountains. In its very survival, Tajikistan shows a post-conflict society finding a foothold for stability at the grassroots.

In the two decades since independence and a bloody civil war, the country has struggled

back from famine. Development agencies grappled first with a wartime humanitarian crisis, and then with trying to build institutions for a civil society. Both tasks were complicated by the logistics of working with communities isolated from central resources, from the northern Alay mountains to the Pamirs in the south.

Even Tajikistan's angular borders, shaped by those mountains and the Russian empire's expansion in the 1880s, reflect its isolation. This has had some benefits historically, including the preservation of strong cultural traditions and local languages in Gorno-Badakhshan, the poorest and most remote province. But when the Soviet system failed, the isolation devastated services. It led to the awareness that local solutions may be the only viable ones.

Coming out of war

"The country was broke, and the people in places like Gorno-Badakhshan had already lost a great deal of whatever wealth they had," recalls John Tomaro, director of the health program for the Aga Khan Foundation. Bank accounts were rendered worthless when converted from rubles to the new Tajik currency. "It was a very unstable time," says Tomaro. "Our first efforts were focused on keeping people alive." Many people left Gorno-Badakhshan, producing an estimated 1.2 million refugees and displaced people.

The civil war destroyed vital infrastructure that villages could not repair, such as irrigation

systems, says Daene McKinney, professor of civil and environmental engineering at the University of Texas at Austin. When the war ended in July 1997 with a compromise, it left gaping holes in roads, bridges, schools and power plants. Provincial centers became even more distant.

"The whole region suffered when the Soviet system collapsed," observes McKinney, who has worked throughout Central Asia, with stints in Tajikistan after 1991. Under the Soviet system, Tajikistan enjoyed relatively high literacy. Since then it has declined, and despite recent advances it remains, by some estimates, 10-15 percent below its former level.

From the ground up

In that setting, the basis for governance turned on its head. Villages became the natural foundation for a system of deciding priorities and acting on them. Created in 1993 by the Aga Khan Foundation in response to requests from local leaders, a first national-level NGO adopted this approach; in 1997 it expanded from humanitarian relief and food security to development more broadly, and became the Mountain Society Development Support Program. It and other NGOs aimed to help local groups fill the gaping holes in their healthcare, education and other services. They called these groups simply, "village organizations."

The idea met some resistance initially, says Khaleel Tetlay, now chief operations officer for the Rural Support Programs Network in Pakistan. In his first meetings with communities in 1998, Tetlay says, "I insisted that the need for cash savings was an essential ingredient. In several villages people said that while they were willing to save, the fact was, *they had no cash.*"

Instead, the village groups identified ways

to use in-kind savings (especially at harvest time); and in place of regular savings deposits, they instituted fees that could be paid annually. Right from the start, the groups were innovating in response to their particular situations, including cashflow issues.

Membership grew. Women showed interest in joining the local groups as well. Balancing cultural norms circumscribing women's roles with the need for their participation involved creating sub-groups for women within each village organization. This proved to be a way to ensure at least one woman in each village had a leadership role, and it allowed women to meet either with the men or separately, depending on local custom.

Village organizations mushroomed. Within the first year 129 had formed; by March 2005, there were 917 nationally and 46 percent of their members were women. The groups chose how to use their pooled savings in ways that reflected their priorities. Several chose to pay the school fees for children from poor member families. Says Tomaro, "It was very clear that the communities wanted to preserve their education system and their health system." He adds, "You walk into any house in Badakhshan, the first thing you will see are books."

Yet with central planning and resources gone, services still suffered. McKinney saw that with the rising cost of energy and declining school budgets, many schools closed for winter months, unable to heat the classrooms.

After the war's end, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation focused on the health sector. Post-Soviet healthcare was plagued by decaying facilities, inefficient management and low-quality primary care, says Khasanova. Patients were forced to pay unofficial "fees" as medical salaries plummeted. That prompted a decade-long healthcare reform program that highlighted family medicine at the local level and policy reform at the national level. In Gorno-Badakhshan, volunteer health promoters from the communities have helped to fill the need for services. The local volunteers help medical staff and promote healthy lifestyles with lessons including improved sanitation.

Yodgor Faizov, now CEO of the Aga Khan Foundation Tajikistan, says that in 2004, with village organizations strengthened and the national government stabilized, NGOs expanded their capacity-building efforts to local governments, working toward ensuring basic services, accountability and trans-

parency. From 2006 to 2010 they helped to shape new laws that created a more welcoming environment for civil society organizations.

Hearts, minds and wallets

Perhaps the biggest mindset change, says Tomaro, "is a realization that things cost. Healthcare costs, education costs and someone has to pay for that. In the past, there was not that realization at all." He adds, "People are now willing to commit to pay for services. That's important because the payment gives people dignity and leads to the idea, 'If we're paying for something we should have a say in how that system operates.' For example, people who pay for their kids to come to school now feel very empowered to be represented on the PTAs."

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A greater emphasis on monetary transactions, though, brings its own problems including drug trafficking. Many Tajiks want to contain the opium trade from Afghanistan and view cross-border programs there with skepticism. Yet cross-border projects offer advantages for economies of scale and reduce the marginalizing effects typical of high-mountain borders. Since the construction in 2002 of a first bridge across the Panj River, cross-border initiatives have included border-straddling markets, power lines and irrigation systems, bringing a flow of goods and services across the Afghan border. NGOs have conducted surveys on both sides, aiming to identify shared concerns and underlying prejudices. Bringing women's groups from both sides together to talk about their lives, for example, can shift their perspectives.

In recent years Central Asian governments have consolidated power, posing new challenges, according to Dr. Gavin Helf, senior democracy and governance advisor for the U.S. Agency for International Development's Middle East and Asia Division. But "in Tajikistan we have not seen the level of evolution in state-civil society relations that we have in Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan, where the state

has largely co-opted civil society by funding it directly," says Helf. He says the Tajik government's attitude toward local groups appears to be "benign neglect."

A changing environment

A growing concern, according to McKinney, is how this high mountainous region with important hydrological resources will handle climate change. Tajikistan's glaciers are melting, bringing risks of water shortages. "Climate change is a big question mark in Central Asia," he says. Tajikistan is planning hydroelectric power projects, which involves a need to manage the resource and plan for changes, including new runoff patterns. McKinney sees little evidence of such planning, but he finds hope in efforts by donors to expose Tajik policymakers to examples of managed systems, and the University of Central Asia campus recently established in Khorog. Chartered by three countries and the United Nations, the university infuses a sense of broader shared concerns across Central Asia. For example, it brings together Tajik and Afghan students to foster cross-border cooperation, and its Mountain Societies Research Centre generates interdisciplinary analyses and creates a regional knowledge hub.

Given the region's power structures and national government oversight, Tomaro is cautious in assessing development's overall impact. "We have exposed people to new ways of thinking," he says, and to a new development agenda. "It will take more time, more patience and more investment to achieve once again the indicators in place during Soviet rule."

Faizov is equally wary of making big claims. He says the first grassroots organizations did create a basis for independent thinking. But Tajiks still do not like to pay for services, he cautions. "The private sector remains weak, and many people would prefer government jobs to creating their own businesses." It is not easy for the generation over age 50 to accept "the new life," he says, with its sharpened economic lines. "Society is divided between the poor majority and the rich minority, with almost no middle class. There's still high nostalgia about the Soviet system: its low unemployment, free health and education, and good access to food." Change takes generations.

Still, Tajikistan's return from the brink, with a push for self-reliance, offers lessons for other countries emerging from conflict. Including its southern neighbor, Afghanistan. 