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Exchange Relations and Regional Development in Gorno-Badakhshan, Tajikistan



Edited by

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Institute of Geographical Sciences  
Freie Universität Berlin

2020

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# BERLIN GEOGRAPHICAL PAPERS

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Freie Universität Berlin

2020

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The Panj River represents the border between Afghanistan (left) and Tajikistan (right). Since 2002, four bridges connecting the remote provinces of Badakhshan and Gorno-Badakhshan, along with border posts and cross-border markets have been built to promote cross-border trade and the flow of consumer goods. Photograph taken by Dörre, March 2020



Cross-Border markets sponsored by international donor organisations provide traders and customers with the opportunity to earn an income and purchase products that are cheaper or unavailable in their own country. Unfortunately, the markets are oftentimes closed, officially due to the insecure situation in Afghanistan. Photograph taken by Dörre at the cross-border market between Ishkoshim (Tajikistan) and Sultan Ishkashim (Afghanistan), May 2015



## Preface

Empirical research and fieldwork practice conducted by students have formed a central part of the master degree programme provided at the Centre for Development Studies of the Institute of Geographical Sciences at Freie Universität Berlin. In an attempt to bridge the gap between theoretical concepts and actual experiences during fieldwork in real-life settings, these projects limited in scope and time aim to provide opportunities for deep learning, for intercultural encounter and for reflecting about the explanatory value of development concepts as taught in the classroom.

The fieldwork practice was carried out in the remote high mountain region of the Western Pamirs in the year 2018 in close collaboration with the University of Central Asia (UCA) on its campus in the City of Khorog as the administrative centre of the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO) of Tajikistan (Fig. 1).

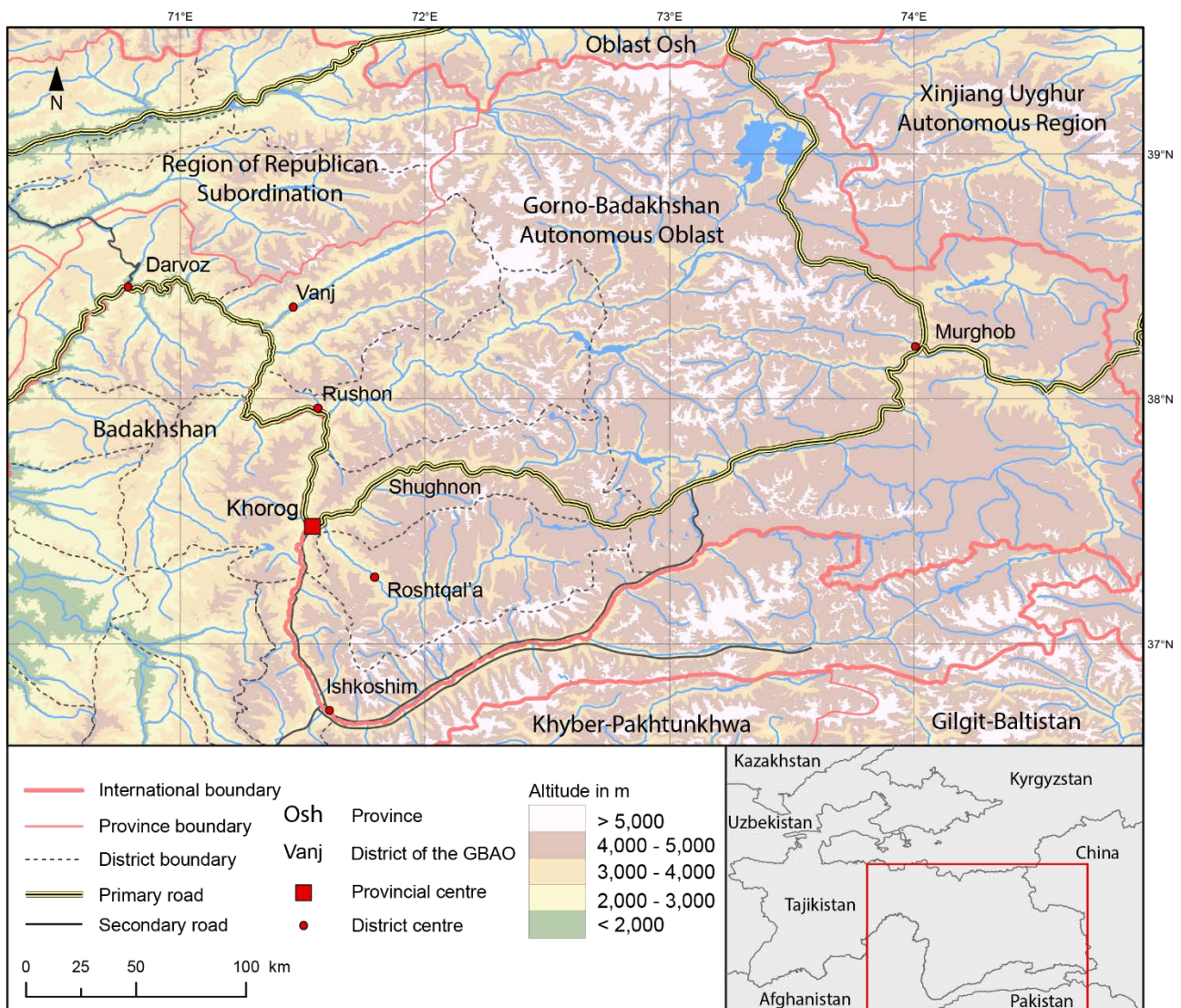


Fig. 1: The Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast of Tajikistan.

Source: Dörre 2020 (draft) based on Jarvis et al. 2008

The overall thematic umbrella was selected from the field of regional and urban development; twelve individual research projects were conceived in partnership with faculty members from the University of Central Asia and subsequently further refined and jointly developed by teams of students from Freie Universität Berlin and the University of Central Asia in Khorog.

The particular study area was selected for didactic and practical reasons. In the Western Pamirs, manifold social, economic and ecological challenges and constraints meet in a confined space. In combination they provide complex and difficult conditions for different facets of societal development. The twelve student teams focused on certain aspects and implemented their individual projects in independent fieldwork. The thematic focus of the case studies investigating specific problems moved within the three subject areas “economic relations and economic development”, “social and ecological challenges” and “social services” in Khorog and beyond. Specifically, the studies dealt with questions of international trade relations, marketing strategies for food, agricultural practice and production, migration, development cooperation, natural hazards, education, provision and consumption of electrical energy, everyday mobility, tourism and waste disposal. Fieldwork in and around Khorog was carried out in July 2018. This volume comprises six selected studies that provide an impressive picture of the challenges the region is facing, but above all of the human agency of local people and their creative and proactive ways of dealing with these conditions.

The first paper by Safarmamadova, Siemering and Yang deals with the impact of growing trade between Tajikistan and China on urban development in Khorog. The provincial centre (Fig. 2) is located at the crossroads between the border post at Kulma Pass and the Tajik capital of Dushanbe. The paper looks at how this trade touches down in Khorog as a transit point, how the urban economy is affected by growing trade relations, and how its daily practice is organised and observable.

The second paper written by Caleta, Okhironazarova and Wlß deals with the urban food system of Khorog by highlighting wheat’s position and central function as the most important staple food. The organisation of the wheat trade and the articulation and structure of wheat value chains are investigated. The strive for safeguarding a constant supply is another central aspect of the argument put forward in the paper.

Khorog as a place with a thriving fast food sector is the starting point for the paper by Hasse, Nasratshoeva and Rupp. By using the framework of glocalization, it looks at how global fast food chains form an inspiration for local entrepreneurs and how they adopt globalised branding images and adapt those strategies to local taste and culture. By studying fashionable and hip eating places, the authors provide a glimpse into marketing strategies, global fashion, and politics of culinary taste in Khorog.

The paper by Jumakhonov, Kessler and Laube looks at the ubiquitous phenomenon of labour migration in Tajikistan from the viewpoint of those who stay behind. Based on in-depth case studies the focus is on the multiple ways in which long-term migration strategies affect gender roles and responsibilities at the household level in Khorog.

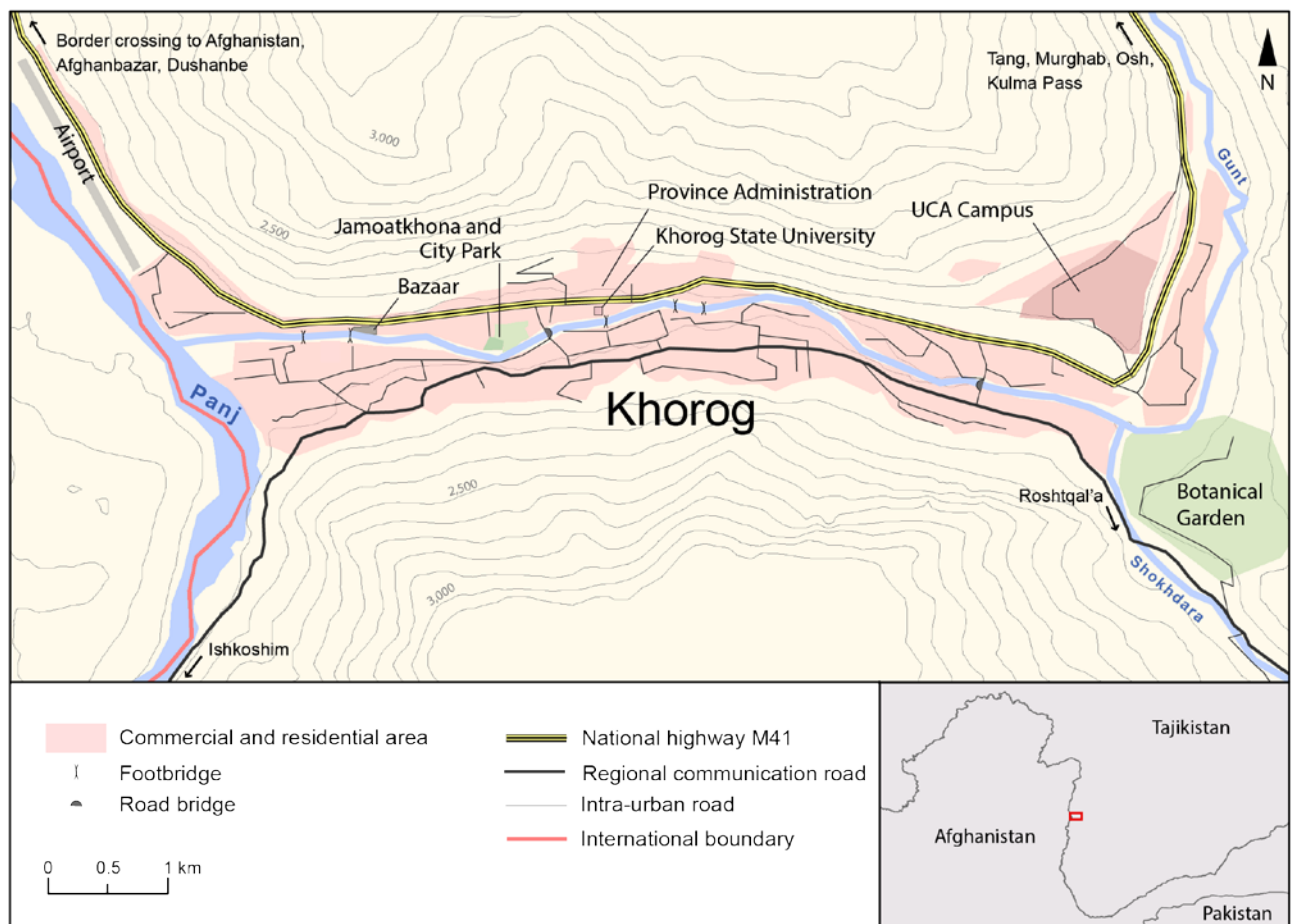


Fig. 2: Khorog City.

Source: Dörre 2020 (draft) based on Jarvis et al. 2008

The University of Central Asia as a driver for local and regional development is the focus of the paper by Azum, Belling and Rahmatshoev. It looks at the economic, material and social processes stimulated by the construction of the Khorog Campus of the UCA that was finalised and started operations in 2017. Their findings are based on interviews with various staff members on the campus and its affiliated schools in the city; furthermore, they talked to displaced villagers who lived on the land allocated for the construction the University of Central Asia. This academic institution is perceived as an important vehicle for setting in motion a variety of largely beneficial development processes in the Western Pamirs.

The final paper by Bredigkeit, Imomyorbekov and Vipavc looks at the role that national and international organisations play for facilitating social and economic development. Based on a register of the diverse practical development work carried out in the region the authors conclude that the privatisation of state responsibilities is captured by the wide range of activities that are carried out by a large number of non-governmental organisations and especially the Aga Khan Development Network.

The successful implementation of this student project was significantly dependent on the invaluable help and contributions provided by many individuals affiliated with the University of Central Asia. Chiefly, both Munira Amidkhonova and Myrza Karimov facilitated communication and were instrumental in providing logistic support for empirical fieldwork.



The support of Saidzulolsho Shozodaev as chief of administration at the UCA Khorog Campus was critical, as was the help of Murodbek Laljebaev and other UCA faculty to provide critical commentary to improve the design of individual research projects and to serve as interview partners in their field of expertise.

The student project in Khorog was generously supported by both the 'PROMOS-Programme for the mobility of undergraduate and postgraduate students' jointly funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research and the Freie Universitaet Berlin whose Department of Earth Sciences increased the budget with an additional grant. We are very grateful to all supporters.

Berlin, April 2020

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## Notes

Currency exchange rate

US \$ 1.00 = Tajik Somoni 9.11

Jamoat (Tajik)	Municipality
Nokhiya (Tajik)	District
Oblast' (Russian)	Province
Rayon (Russian)	District
Viloyat (Tajik)	Province

## **Manifestations of the Tajik-Chinese Trade: Khorog at the Periphery of a Fast-growing Trade Relationship**

### **Abstract**

The Tajik-Chinese trade has flourished ever since the opening of Tajikistan and China's only border crossing point at Kulma in 2004. Nowadays, China is not only one of Tajikistan's leading trading partners, but also its biggest direct investor. This paper is based on fieldwork in and around the Tajik city of Khorog, capital of the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO), and Tajikistan's capital, Dushanbe. It follows products as they travel across the border from major production sites in China to the main markets of Dushanbe and local markets of Khorog. Its research aim is to examine how the Tajik-Chinese trade impacts the local realities in Khorog. Therefore, the study considers three main strands related to the trade: The transport of goods, administration of the trade and effects on Khorog's local economy. In trying to identify change effected by the formation of a Tajik-Chinese trade relationship, this paper focuses on the question of how the trade manifests itself in Khorog. The research results highlight ambivalent, fragmented effects of the Tajik-Chinese trade. The Tajik-Chinese trade does not affect noticeable growth for different actors on different levels across-the-board due to the marginalisation of Khorog's local market. Still, the consequences of the border opening have penetrated the market of the study area as well as the lives of the local people visibly.

### **Introduction**

Today, China's influence on Tajikistan is omnipresent in the country, due to the formation of a flourishing trade relationship over the past two decades. This raises the question of how this relationship was developed from being non-existent at the time the Soviet Union collapsed to China becoming one of Tajikistan's leading trading partners. To begin with, Tajikistan is highly disadvantaged on the world market based on its geographical location and subsequent constraints alone (Coulibaly 2012: 2). It is a mountainous and landlocked country in Central Asia that has only limited access to other markets. Shaped by high mountains, framed by Kyrgyzstan in the North, Uzbekistan in the West and Afghanistan in the South, Tajikistan is separated from China by high mountain ranges. These constraints add to Tajikistan's "poor logistics and business environment" (Coulibaly 2012: 6) and already fragile economy. The geographical conditions in Tajikistan favour either trading with former Soviet partners or its powerful neighbours in the region, particularly China. Still, Tajikistan's regional trade ties are weak and its transport links remain upgradable. Together, these conditions make Tajikistan vulnerable to external shocks (Asadov 2012: 6-7). Infrastructural improvements are the prerequisite for economic growth in Tajikistan. Thus, the country is "seeking to improve its transport corridors and multimodal logistics services that could significantly enhance its regional competitiveness" (Asadov 2012: 6), and China is its most important partner in doing so.

Against this background, the paper focuses on aspects of regional economic development in Khorog, Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO) in the Western Pamirs. The GBAO constitutes 45 percent of Tajikistan's area, although it is "sparsely populated" (Kreutzmann 2016) with only about 214,000 inhabitants. 30,000 inhabitants live in Khorog, which "functions as the administrative and economic hub of the Pamirs" (Kreutzmann 2016). In

regard to the increased Chinese influence on Tajikistan as a whole and Gorno-Badakhshan in particular, the research interest of this paper is to examine how the Tajik-Chinese trade manifests itself in Khorog. In doing so, three main dimensions of the Tajik-Chinese trade relationship will be explored in the following chapters: (i) the logistics of the China trade in terms of transport of goods, (ii) its administration and (iii) its impact on Khorog's local economy. The paper aims to identify how products travel across the border and how actors along the transport route operate; how the trade is regulated and what effects the opening of the border had on the city's local market.

Thinking about relations between the core and periphery provided analytical inspiration for in this paper. In aiming to explain the uneven development between regions or between urban and rural areas the core-periphery model works on different scales, from towns and cities to regions and global relations. In the context of this paper, periphery refers to a region that is relatively marginal economically. Both the economy and its development lag behind the standards of the core region. Due to limitation in resources and infrastructure, the periphery is significantly less competitive than the core region (Borgatti and Everett 2000). Here, Khorog and Gorno-Badakhshan are regarded as periphery on a national scale, compared to Dushanbe and its surroundings.

## **Research methods**

Research for this paper was carried out mainly in and around the city of Khorog, as well as in Tajikistan's capital, Dushanbe. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a wide variety of participants involved in the China trade. In Khorog, interviews were conducted with the 'Department of Investment and State Property Management in GBAO,' the 'Department of Economic Development and Trade' and the 'Regional Customs Office,' business owners, entrepreneurs and sellers at the local bazaar. Additionally, interviews were conducted with inspectors, customs officers and truck drivers at a terminal in the nearby village of Tang and sellers at the 'Korvon' market in Dushanbe. The interviews were complemented by findings gathered through participatory research at the terminal in Tang and at Khorog's local bazaar, together with a customer survey and a survey of business people at the local bazaar. Due to the limitations of this study, the conclusions are tentative and require further in-depth research to fully assess the complex and growing structure of Tajik-Chinese trade and its far-reaching impacts on the local population.

## **Contextualisation**

The following part will briefly introduce aspects of the historical, political and economic context that are relevant for understanding international trade between China and Tajikistan.

### ***Remnants of Tajikistan's Soviet past***

The region of Central Asia is generally defined as the following five independent states that were former Soviet Republics: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. Central Asia has "long been a zone of conflict and competition" (Pannell 2011: 105) as regards local groups and external actors alike, going back to the 'Great Game' between Russia and Great Britain in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Historically, Tajikistan's economy has



been shaped most notably by being part of the integrated Soviet economy (Coulibaly 2012: 2). Since its independence in 1991, there have been little changes in Tajikistan's domestic production and export structure and remnants of the Soviet era persist to this day. The dissolution of the Soviet Union led to "instability and uncertainty both in central and provincial political institutions" (Parham 2016: 359) in Tajikistan, a consequence of the "shift from a planned to a market-led economy and the withdrawal of subsidies from Moscow" (Kanji 2002: 138). Following its independence, Tajikistan was shaped by the devastating effects of a civil war in the 1990s (1992-1997). During the Soviet era and until the late 1990s, there were hardly any relations between Tajikistan (or the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic, respectively) and China. After the peace agreement in 1997, Tajik-Chinese relations developed gradually within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) (Olimova 2008: 63).

### ***The Tajik-Chinese relationship within large international frameworks***

China's interest in Central Asia is "both diplomatic and economic in character" (Pannell 2011: 110) and regulated to different policy initiatives. The SCO, apart from being an important Eurasian political and economic union, mainly focuses on security issues. The organisation was initially referred to as the 'Shanghai Five,' consisting of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and was founded in 1996 as a "loose regional security alliance" (Pannell 2011: 114) in light of growing Islamic extremism. Since 2001, the organisation's scope has widened with additional members (Uzbekistan, India, Pakistan) and becoming a relevant counterweight to European and US influence. Generally, China's economic advancement of Central Asia is oriented towards security.

China's 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI) has been a main emphasis of Chinese foreign policy since its launch in 2013. Developing economic corridors in Central as well as South Asia through "a series of transport nodes that are strategically placed" (Dave and Kobayashi 2018: 268) and connectivity with Europe are the initiative's aims. Furthermore, the initiative's "developmental thrust [...] and 'win-win' promise is very appealing to [...] Tajikistan" (Dave and Kobayashi 2018: 271) as it promises to better integrate Tajikistan into the dynamics of regional trade in Central Asia. Overall, the SCO, BRI as well as continually growing economic and commercial relations with Central Asia, made China gain "increasing economic and political influence and extend the arc of security westward into Central Asia" (Dave and Kobayashi 2018: 268).

### ***Major Chinese investments in Tajikistan***

So far, "Tajikistan has benefitted the most from Chinese investments in road infrastructure" (Peyrouse 2011: 1) compared to all other Central Asian countries. Hence Tajikistan welcomes the Chinese development efforts in Central Asia and the rapid expansion of Tajik-Chinese relations, based on the mutual interest in the realisation of major infrastructure projects like the construction of a transport corridor connecting China and Tajikistan. However, for China this means that "Tajikistan is both a market for its exports, a gateway to Southwest Asia, as well as a prospective buffer zone to provide safety to Chinese borders" (Olimova 2008: 65). China is the largest foreign investor in Tajikistan with investments in vegetable and cotton growing and, since arable land is limited, major investments in the hydropower sector (including the construction of the world's tallest dam in Rogun), power engineering,

cement and manufacturing goods (Dave and Kobayashi 2018: 272). Various joint projects and regular business meetings testify to the “growth of private Chinese business in Tajikistan” (Olimov and Olimov 2010: 13).

### *The border*

The Tajik-Chinese border spans 430 kilometres and a border limitation treaty between Tajikistan and China was signed in 2002. On the Tajik side of the border lies the GBAO, one of the poorest regions in Tajikistan and “one of the most remote parts of the former Soviet Union, isolated to some degree from the rest of Tajikistan by the Pamir mountains” (Kanji 2002: 138). Similarly, the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) on the Chinese side of the border occupies a special position within the country as well (Pannell 2011: 106). It was only in the 1990s that China initiated the “Xibu da kaifa” (Develop the West), a strategy to develop its Western part that lagged behind the rest, mainly involving infrastructural measures and economic growth (Pannell 2011: 115) with Xinjiang leading the way. At 4363 metres a.s.l. on a mountainous plateau, the Kulma Pass is currently the only border post between Tajikistan and China. The Kulma Pass is approximately 95 kilometres east of Murghab in Tajikistan and 14 kilometres west of Karasu, the border crossing point on the Chinese side. It was opened in 2004 and, even though the GBAO and the XUAR had no previous trade relationship, being the only border post, it quickly became a key location in the Tajik-Chinese cross-border trade. A direct 700-kilometre-long transport corridor through Kulma emerged, connecting Khorog, the capital of the GBAO, with the Chinese city of Kashgar (Kaminski and Mitra 2012: 31; Olimova 2008: 64). Since Kulma is the only border crossing point, this route not only connects the GBAO and the XUAR, but also ultimately links Khorog to Tajikistan’s capital, Dushanbe. Historically, the GBAO has been dependent on external relations. Similar patterns can be observed today while Tajikistan is influenced significantly by its neighbour in the East.

### *Transport of goods in the trade*

#### *Transport of goods between China and Tajikistan: Increasing and challenging*

The Pamir highway is a crucial west-east artery in Tajikistan’s transport system, which connects Dushanbe, Khorog and Murghab. It is the longest transport route in Tajikistan and also the only direct connection between Tajikistan and China (Olimshoev 2014). Since the Tajik-Chinese border was opened, the route via Kulma Pass has become one of the most important roads in the bilateral trade of the two countries (Kaminski and Mitra 2012: 31). Alternatively, it is possible to cross the border of China and Kyrgyzstan at Irkeshtam and then through Kyrgyzstan’s Alai Valley and Tajikistan’s Rasht Valley and continue to Dushanbe (Laruelle and Peyrouse 2012: 60). The advantages are that this route is shorter and is in better condition. However, there are high taxes to be paid to the Kyrgyz state ever since Kyrgyzstan joined the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in 2015 and shares a common external tariff policy with its fellow member states Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia (Khitakhunov, Mukhamediyev and Pomfret 2017: 61). Therefore, most of the transport between China and Tajikistan is processed via the direct route. Figure 1 shows the two major transport routes connecting Kashgar and Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan. Since the opening of the border, the amount of goods shipped increased from 833 tons in 2004 to 389,600 tons in 2014. Over



Fig. 1: Map of the major transport routes connecting China-Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan.

Source: Dörre 2020 based on Jarvis et al. 2008; Siemering & Yang 2018 (draft)

the last decade, the Karasu point of entry has cleared 1.4 million tons of goods in total, worth over 7.67 billion US\$ (XNA 2015).

#### *Following the goods: the process of the transport of Chinese goods to Tajikistan*

A significant trade imbalance between Tajikistan and China can be observed. The main flows of the trade consist of cheap Chinese products which are sold to Tajikistan in large amounts. Conversely, there is only a small number of products that are sold from Tajikistan to China.

In the process of the transport from China to Tajikistan the main stops along the way on the Chinese side include Urumqi, the largest wholesale market for Central Asia, and Kashgar, a centre of transport, stocking and distribution as well as the second largest market in Xinjiang (Fig. 2).

These places in Xinjiang are the main distribution centres of goods in Tajikistan and an increasing number of Tajik traders (especially wholesalers from Dushanbe) travel directly to the places of production in China to get cheap goods. On the Tajik side, the main stations are Murghab, a rest stop which is also the nearest city to the Kulma Pass, Khorog City with a relatively small consumer market, and Dushanbe, Tajikistan's largest consumer market.



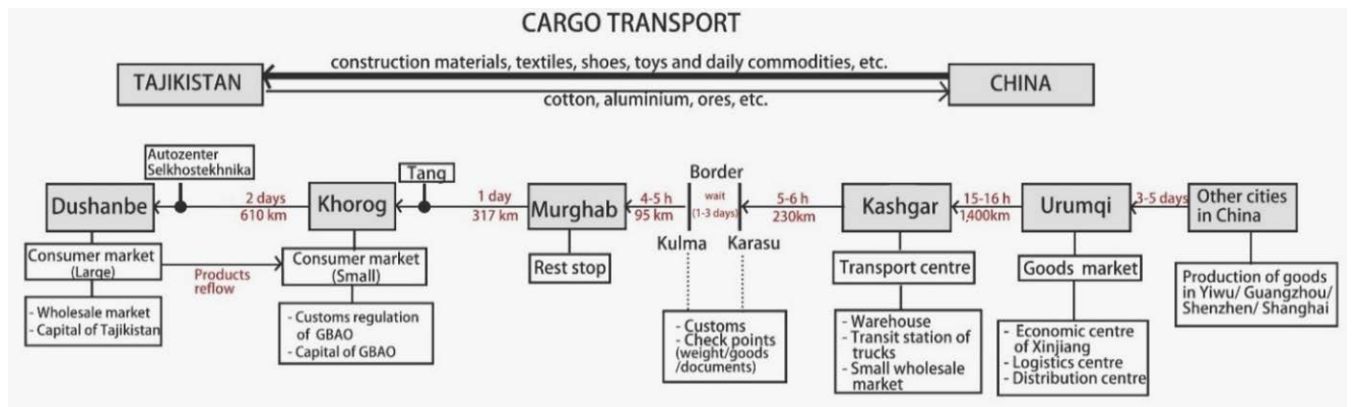


Fig. 2: The cargo transport process in the Tajik-Chinese trade.<sup>1</sup>

Source: Siemering & Yang 2018 (draft)

It usually takes five to ten days to ship the goods from Urumqi to Khorog and ten to fifteen days to Dushanbe. There are many uncertainties in the transport such as weather conditions (especially during winter), waiting time at the border crossing, the need for informal payments along the way and the waiting time to repair trucks due to the poor road condition.

On account of most of the truck drivers, they mostly drive directly to Dushanbe instead of Khorog, indicating that the role of Khorog and Tang is somewhat peripheral compared to Dushanbe. The role of the terminal in Tang changed substantially since the border was opened. Between 2004 and 2014, Tang was the only terminal in Tajikistan and all customs clearances of foreign trucks en route to Tajikistan were processed here. Since 2014, new terminals were established in Dushanbe. Additionally, another terminal was recently built near Murghab.<sup>2</sup>

Between 2008 and 2010, road transport accounted for more than 75 percent of all freight turnover in Tajikistan. About 80 percent of vehicles in Tajikistan are bought from China by Tajik transport firms employing local truck drivers (Olimshoev 2014). Additionally, there is an increase of privately-owned trucks. In the early period of the opening of the Kulma-Karasu pass, Chinese transport firms and truck drivers were more numerous than Tajik agents. However, with the growing development of the trade, some Tajik truck drivers and traders gradually accumulated a certain amount of capital, began buying Chinese trucks in Kashgar and started their own transport businesses (mainly shipping cargo from Kashgar to Dushanbe). Since Tajik drivers are paid only a third compared to those from China (Tajik drivers earn about US\$ 500 for one-way transport from Kashgar to Dushanbe), they had a price advantage, gradually replacing Chinese drivers in the transport business. Today, Chinese transport firms and drivers mainly ship goods from China to other countries in the

<sup>1</sup> The time period between two places indicates the average travel time for the truck only while the total time also includes the waiting time during checks, the drivers' breaks and unforeseen circumstances, such as the time for the repair of a truck. According to the interviewees, the transport from Kashgar to Khorog takes three to five days. The transport from Urumqi to Dushanbe (the most common route in the trade) takes ten to fifteen days. Differences are mainly due to the weather, i.e. it takes much longer for the transport during winter time.

<sup>2</sup> Since this study was conducted, the terminal near Murghab began operation and took on the business of the terminal in Tang, which was closed down subsequently.

region such as Kyrgyzstan and Pakistan. Among the small transport firms existing in Tajikistan, there are not only Tajik entrepreneurs but also Chinese, especially from Xinjiang. Moreover, there are several hundred Tajik small-scale entrepreneurs owning only one truck (Olimshoev 2014).

Wholesalers in Khorog and Dushanbe ship goods to Tajikistan differently. The traders in Khorog organise the transport of their goods mainly by themselves. They contact different truck drivers and/or firms at least twice in the transport process. Besides, they need to pay for each stage of the transport individually: the cost of transport from Urumqi to Kashgar ranges from US\$ 3,000 to US\$ 4,000 per vehicle (usually carried out by Chinese truckers). The transport from Kashgar to Khorog costs about US\$ 3,000 to US\$ 3,800 per vehicle (carried out by Tajik truck drivers). However, the transport fees for trucks and drivers account for only a fraction of the transport costs. The owners of the goods need to make other payments too, including informal payments at police checkpoints (paid by the driver), service fees for the Chinese agency that prepares the required documents and also for the services of the warehouse in Kashgar.

In contrast to importers in Khorog, those in Dushanbe outsource the transport to transport firms. They give an order to a firm and then wait for their goods to be shipped to Dushanbe. The cost is based on the weight or volume, and it ranges from US\$ 1/kg to US\$ 1.3/kg or US\$ 220/m<sup>3</sup> to US\$ 260/m<sup>3</sup>. Once the trucks arrive at their destination, the customs clearance must be done in one of the terminals in Tajikistan, usually the terminal nearby. The owners of the goods must pay for the customs clearance before they receive their goods. Furthermore, the price of customs clearance has increased annually and it is about US\$ 7,000 to US\$ 9,000 for each vehicle in 2018 in Khorog. In principle, the cost of one-way transport from China to Khorog is cheaper than to Dushanbe. However, because of large amounts being shipped from China to Dushanbe, it is much easier for Dushanbe traders to share a truck with several other traders.

#### *The mobility of traders*

There are generally two options for the Tajik traders travelling to China to purchase goods, either by car or plane. Since Dushanbe, being the country's capital, is home to an international airport, Dushanbe traders prefer to go by plane. For Khorog's traders, it is typical to drive to the border and then call a Chinese taxi to Kashgar, since Tajik private cars are not allowed to enter China. Alternatively, they can go to China by plane from Dushanbe, but because Khorog is halfway between the border and Dushanbe, directly driving to China is the cheapest (US\$ 100 for a round trip compared with US\$ 500 for a round trip by plane) and easiest way for Khorog traders. Between 2012 and 2016, Tajik traders could only go to China by plane, since the border was open to trucks exclusively.

#### *Poor infrastructure*

Tajikistan's logistics performance is one of the poorest in the world due to the weak traffic infrastructure and challenging geographical conditions resulting in an overall poor transport accessibility (Asadov 2012: 19; Coulibaly 2012: 2). Even though some construction projects were implemented to improve the road condition, for example roadwork between Murghab and Kulma as well as two tunnels in the Dushanbe-Kulyab district which reduced the travel

time from Dushanbe to Khorog, the condition of the road as a whole is still poor (Olimshoev 2014). According to truck drivers, the average speed on the Pamir highway is only 20 km/h. There are almost no service facilities along the way from Kulma to Dushanbe aside from some rest stops in Murghab, Khorog and Tang. Especially a repair shop on the route is in urgent need.

#### *Border crossing*

The Tajik-Chinese border at Kulma-Karasu is covered with snow for several months during winter. In the past, the border was closed during winter time (from November to May), but now it is open even in winter. However, only 300 trucks per month cross the border in winter, 200 vehicles less than in summer. The transport costs are also higher in winter due to increased travel time and petrol consumption.

Aside from the constraints caused by the weather and geographical conditions, the administrative issues on the border are a significant problem in the transportation process. On the Chinese side, it takes a long time for the truckers to wait for the Chinese customs to perform the checks of goods and documents. Their hours of operation are from 11 am to 12 pm and 2 pm to 5.30 pm. Hence, only 20-30 vehicles can go through the Karasu border each day, which leads to long waiting times of one to three days. On the Tajik side, the border officials work more efficiently. Truck drivers can usually pass the border quickly when they make an informal payment of US\$ 100-200.

#### *Trade imbalance leads to high empty load rate*

So far, the Tajik-Chinese trade is mainly one-sided with Chinese exports to Tajikistan. "Thousands of trucks leave Tajikistan empty" (Coulibaly 2012: 17). By the end of 2008, their number had already reached more than 21,000 (ibid.). This waste of transport resources is already a significant problem in the cross-border trade. It is primarily due to a Chinese regulation ensuring that the private traders are not allowed to bring goods to China. During interviews, traders in Khorog expressed their hopes that they will be allowed to sell Tajik goods like honey and herbs to China in the future. Making use of the empty trucks would be an accessible means to bring at least some products from Central Asia to external markets.

#### *The administrative level of the Tajik-Chinese trade*

##### *Agreements at the basis of the bilateral trade relationship*

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, international organisations and stakeholders encouraged Central Asian countries to "join initiatives fostering regional cooperation" (Asadov 2012: 14) to counter the region's most pressing challenges regarding the lack of regulation and infrastructure. In response, Tajikistan was among the countries that joined initiatives such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia (SPECA) or the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) Programme. Altogether, "most cooperative agreements within these initiatives have had little impact in harmonizing trade and transport policies of member states" (Asadov 2012: 14).

In 2007, the Republic of Tajikistan and the People's Republic of China signed the so-called Treaty on Good-Neighbourliness, Friendship, and Cooperation, which will be in effect for 25 years. It emphasises fostering development on each side and includes bilateral cooperation



in political, military, economic and commercial areas with strengthening of trade being one of the focal points (Olimova 2008, 63; Olimov and Olimova 2010: 12). The signing of such agreements accelerated the development of Tajik-Chinese relations as they serve as frameworks of joint ventures like the implementation of infrastructure projects. According to a representative of the Department of Investment and State Property Management in the GBAO more than 200 agreements between China and Tajikistan exist at the present time and counting. Besides, the framework of Tajik-Chinese relations is often discussed at meetings, such as the annual Pamir Invest Forum in Khorog, an annual meeting in Kulma, where Tajik and Chinese representatives discuss trade issues, as well as quarterly regional meetings of customs officers from China and Tajikistan.

#### *Hierarchies of the trade organisation*

On the national level, Tajikistan's Ministry of Trade is the supreme authority and has the responsibility of overseeing the Tajik-Chinese trade, whereas the Department of Economic Development and Trade in Khorog oversees all trade-related branches in the region of the GBAO. The department in central Khorog monitors seven provinces, amongst others Khorog itself, analyses current trends, predicts future developments and gives reports to the government's Ministry of Trade. Administrative authorities emphasised that the Tajik-Chinese trade relationship grants many freedoms and few limits. Overall, Tajikistan was said to have an 'open-door policy' regarding investments. For instance, one interview partner engaged in administration explained that the city of Khorog is expanding and thus anyone, privately or commercially, is invited to invest. Especially Chinese investments in the region have been embraced by administration officials. Actors on the administrative level commonly describe the opening of the Tajik-Chinese border in Kulma in 2004 as a catalyst for progress in Tajikistan and agree on the positive influence on the part of China that has been promoting the Tajik economy. Khorog's customs officers stress that customs played a major role in rebuilding Tajikistan after the civil war. Nowadays the trade relationship enables Tajikistan to import goods that the country is unable to produce itself from China at a low price. The consensus is that China helps to promote progress in Khorog both directly through investments and indirectly by providing the materials needed for construction as well as products that increase the local quality of life.

Establishing trade with China did not only have an impact on the local population, but also on the GBAO's ruling class. Tajikistan has a pro-Chinese business lobby, for example 'Milal-Inter,' an association of Pamiri businessmen with "lobbying strategies at the institutional level," who have joined "the provincial administrative organs of Gorno-Badakhshan" (Peyrouse 2011: 4) and also have an office in Kashgar. Likewise, it is widely known in the local population that some "members of the presidential family, directly involved in the most profitable sectors of the national economy, have Chinese-linked interests" (Peyrouse 2011: 4) as is exemplified by the management of the terminals and customs clearance posts for trucks that travel between Kulma and Dushanbe. Except for the privately-owned terminal in Tang, all terminals are owned by the company 'Faroz,' which is run by members of the presidential family.

### *Crossing the border*

As a rule, all trucks that cross the Tajik-Chinese border are registered in Kulma. Border officials do customs and documents checks to register the truck, driver and cargo. The documents that are needed depend on the cargo carried by the truck. According to the interviewed customs officials, Tajik and Chinese trucks are treated equally at customs and document checks are executed according to international standards. As long as they obey the rules, they are allowed to cross the border. Border issues are discussed on a regional level by the governments of the GBAO and the XUAR in keeping with the bilateral agreements. Customs officials frequently address their dissatisfaction with the Tajik border post, which does not meet international standards yet and whose “poor infrastructure and obsolete equipment [...] are glaringly at odds with the shiny buildings and expensive equipment found on the Chinese side” (Parham 2016: 361).

Trucks that enter Tajikistan via Kulma correspondingly enter the autonomous region and special military zone of Gorno-Badakhshan. Hence, “all access to, and movement within, the territory is granted only to persons who possess a special *propusk* (permit) issued by the Ministry of Internal Affairs in Dushanbe” (Parham 2016: 361). This internal permit is needed for multiple checks and registrations of the trucks entering the GBAO to ensure lawfulness. Nevertheless, it is known among truck drivers and traders that carrying this permit can be avoided “depending on the connections a driver and/or his employer in China possess within Tajikistan” (Parham 2016: 361).

According to bilateral agreements of China and Tajikistan, 16 documents are needed to cross the border on the Tajik side. On the Chinese side twelve documents are required, ten correspond with the Tajik side (UNESCAP 2017: 173-188). Due to the complicated procedure of preparing these documents, almost all traders commission Chinese agencies that handle the required formalities and charge about 5,000 Tajik Somoni (currently about US\$ 520). As a matter of fact, in the majority of cases truck drivers do not need to show all the documents that are required. Besides, the Chinese visa poses a problem for the Tajik traders and truckers. In the past travellers were issued visas of three up to six months, but it was changed to a one-month visa for business people and 15 days (with two border crossings granted) for truck drivers. Visas cost US\$ 25 and people have to travel to Dushanbe and back to obtain the visa, which causes additional costs.

### *The customs clearance process*

The Tajik customs law allows customs clearances to take place anywhere in Tajikistan, thus they often take place wherever the traders prefer, for instance at storage locations. In the GBAO customs clearances are primarily done in Khorog or around Tang, a small village, approximately 30 kilometres east of Khorog.<sup>3</sup> All terminals can also serve as customs offices. For example, the terminal in Tang is affiliated with the customs office in downtown Khorog. Tang serves different purposes, both as a stop where the truck drivers can take a rest, and where food and accommodation is offered, and as a checkpoint where documents are checked, trucks are registered and weighed and cargo can be transhipped. In case the trucks

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<sup>3</sup> The terminal in Tang has since been replaced by a terminal in Murghab, which is also owned by ‘Faroz,’ meaning that all Tajik terminals are now in the hands of ‘Faroz.’

are overweight, a fine of at least US\$ 1,000 per ton overweight is due. Sometimes the cargo is examined at Tang's terminal as well. For that, the Tajik and Chinese seals on the back door of the truck's container are broken and some packages are cut open as samples. Many people can be involved in the signing of documents and transshipment of cargo, including inspectors, customs officers, intermediaries, company owners, warehouse owners and day labourers. Previously the customs clearance and registration of the trucks was done by hand, but nowadays it is supposed to be electronic to comply with international standards, make the process quicker and allow traders to face less challenges. "It only takes fifteen minutes to do the customs clearance," one interviewee reports. Yet, in reality it is still frequently done by hand due to the varying places the customs clearance takes place at.

The "customs payments are made directly to customs officers, increasing informal payments and corruption; no bank or guarantee system is in use" (Coulibaly and Thomsen 2016: 19) as was confirmed by numerous interviewees who expressed frustration at the lack of administrative oversight and high degree of corruption. Traders complained about the high tax they pay for imported goods from China. They confirmed that there is currently no formal customs proceeding and reported that they pay for the customs clearance in cash at the local Customs Office. Additionally, one interviewee described that "the customs clearance fees change constantly and often increase quickly." Over the past years, the price of customs clearance has increased, now averaging about US\$ 7,000, depending on the cargo. Reportedly, some traders have to pay more than others.

#### *Informal payments*

Informal payments are a common problem in long-distance transport across Central Asia. Since the payments are still made in cash, informal payments are difficult to avoid. Peyrouse argues that: "[...] nearly the entire Central Asia trading system is based on corruption schemes" (Peyrouse 2011: 4). Along the way from the Kulma Pass to Khorog and Dushanbe, several checkpoints and terminals can be found which may require to pay informal fees ranging from a few dollars up to US\$ 200. When a truck is overloaded, informal fees to get the permission to pass the border and terminals arise. The trucks are usually stopped at checkpoints on the borders of provinces, and their documents are checked there. There are eight checkpoints between Dushanbe and Khorog alone (Olimshoev 2014). The informal payments in the transport process are paid by the importer who purchased the goods. Coulibaly (2012) regards the low wages of the customs officers and the lack of transparency as causes of the widespread corruption.

#### *Challenges on the administrative level*

Although increased collaboration between Tajikistan and China is planned in the future, several challenges impede the Tajik-Chinese trade at present. Inflation in Tajikistan has evidently hampered economic growth and has resulted in an unfavourable currency exchange rate for Tajikistan's weak currency. As one customs officer explains: "Petrol used to be cheaper, now it is much more expensive. Factors like these influence the trade and its profitability." Moreover, inefficiencies at the border post and the "weak control of corruption resulting in informal taxation that adds to the cost of doing business" (Coulibaly 2012: 9) pose challenges on the administrative level of the Tajik-Chinese trade relationship. In regard to how the formation of the Tajik-Chinese trade relationship acts as a means of

development in Khorog, it becomes apparent that informality, a lack of transparency and administrative barriers such as the GBAO's special status as an autonomous region still hinder Khorog's development opportunities. An increase in trade was not accompanied by an increase in the monitoring of trade or a decrease in corruption. Ultimately, the Tajik regime represents two contradictory interests. On the one hand it wants to prove itself as member of international organisations such as the SCO in ensuring border security, however as seen in the lack of implementation of these agreements and the pursuit of private interests, it simultaneously hopes to "benefit from new regional economic patterns, both legal and illegal" (Peyrouse 2011: 6).

### *Effects of the Tajik-Chinese trade on Khorog's local economy*

Tajikistan's domestic production cannot compete with the Chinese economy, since it has a "constrained production capacity and constrained accessibility to market" (Coulibaly 2012: 9). Additionally, the Pamirs are a particularly "remote and resource-poor region" (Kreutzmann 2016). The trade with China was established soon after the opening of the Kulma border crossing in 2004 and China has "strengthened its economic presence in Tajikistan" (Olimova 2008: 63) ever since, with Chinese goods now being ubiquitous on Khorog's local market.

### *The manifestation of the China trade in Khorog*

Mainly two types of traders in Khorog are involved in trade. Firstly, large-scale traders who buy goods directly from China and, secondly, small-scale retailers who obtain their products from wholesale markets in Dushanbe. After the opening of the Tajik-Chinese border, the number of Khorog-based traders who travelled to China themselves in order to buy large numbers of goods for the local market was considerably higher. At present, only few large-scale traders in Khorog import their goods directly from China, while most are small-scale traders, who purchase them from the capital instead. In the beginning, this business was very profitable for them due to significantly lower customs clearance fees and a currency exchange rate that was much more favourable than today. However, in recent years an increasing number of large-scale traders in Khorog have given up their businesses. Aside from the rising cost of customs clearances, the main reasons are the drop in the exchange value of the Tajik Somoni against the Chinese Yuan which reduces the purchasing power of local traders and trade-related actors in Dushanbe who have built up many structural and organisational advantages over Khorog-based traders.

Most Chinese goods are purchased from Xinjiang. "For our needs, Xinjiang is the most important region. Urumqi and Kashgar have all the goods we need", one interviewee at the regional customs office reported. At present, the most imported commodities from China are construction materials, textiles, shoes, toys and various everyday products like dishes and kitchen appliances. The majority of non-Chinese products are imported from Russia, Iran, and Turkey. Women's clothing in particular is mainly imported from Turkey, because of different clothing styles and sizing in China and Tajikistan.

### *Large-scale traders in Khorog*

Generally, the large-scale traders of Khorog still doing business with China today started doing so immediately after the border crossing at Kulma opened. Currently they own more



than two stores each, some servicing special demands such as textiles, while others have a more diversified scope of business. Compared to smaller retailers who have a booth at the bazaar, the large-scale traders of Khorog look back on 15 years of experience in cross-border trade. During this time, they were able to gradually accumulate capital, which now helps them to occupy a unique position. The cost of purchasing a full truck load of goods from China is about US\$ 65,700 in total, consisting of US\$ 50,000 for goods (for a load of 50 m<sup>3</sup>), US\$ 7,000 for transport (from Urumqi to Khorog), customs clearance fees of at least US\$ 7,000 and other services amounting to US\$ 1,700. Compared with the GDP per capita of Tajikistan which came to US\$ 1,015.50 in 2017, a single full truck load already constitutes a massive investment. In other words, trade of this size is impossible for small-scale business people.

Large-scale traders usually have long-term cooperative partnerships with distributors and emphasise the importance of having trustworthy business partners in China as well as in Khorog. Coordination with other traders who sell the same products and knowing basic Chinese to communicate efficiently is common. Over the past years, Tajik traders and Chinese sellers have drawn on using WeChat, a communication app widely used in China. For instance, the Chinese contact persons will send Khorog-based traders' pictures or videos of the products, whereupon they place an order and to send the money to China. This way some of Khorog's traders "have their own transit service unit, thus providing a full logistic service of transporting and distributing goods" (Coulibaly 2012: 16) from Urumqi and Kashgar to Khorog.

Even though the procedure of purchasing goods from China has become easier for Khorog's traders, the profits have declined substantially compared to the early years of the cross-border trade. A businesswoman said: "Now we can only get 30 percent profit from the goods that we sell, but it used to be 50 percent - 60 percent. Therefore, many traders here in Khorog closed their businesses. Nowadays it is easier for the traders to buy Chinese goods from Dushanbe instead of China." Dushanbe's dominance in the trade is another reason for the closing of many direct trade businesses in Khorog.

#### *Purchasing goods from Dushanbe*

For small-scale traders in Khorog the advantage of buying Chinese goods from Dushanbe is that they can also be purchased in smaller quantities and without paying for the customs clearance. In this case, local traders only have to pay for the transport from Dushanbe to Khorog, which is more suitable for small-scale traders with little capital. Small-scale traders often share trucks. The main advantage of Dushanbe-based traders are their capital resources which enable them to buy Chinese goods in large quantities with quantity discounts on a regular basis.

Most Khorog-based traders get their products from one of "four large wholesale markets" (Coulibaly 2012: 16) in Dushanbe that form a distribution and re-export system that allows products to enter the market. Korvon market in Dushanbe is the largest market in Tajikistan. Most traders in Dushanbe go directly to China to get their goods - some even go to the original places of production in China's coastal provinces. Each time they purchase goods worth about US\$ 15,000-20,000 in total. Usually they go to China 4-5 times a year. The Tajik traders at Korvon Market mentioned the devaluation of Tajikistan's currency as being a major

problem in the trade, too. Yet, traders in Dushanbe never mentioned that customs clearance fees are an obstacle to their business, which is in strong contrast with the statements of traders in Khorog.

#### *Impact of the trade on the daily life in Khorog*

The emergence of Chinese goods had several positive impacts on people's lives in Khorog, since the trade provides both employment opportunities and access to products that were hardly accessible before. Besides, the main benefit of Chinese products is the same for customers and sellers alike, namely that they are affordable. Simultaneously, customers are unsatisfied with the poor quality of the products, citing easy and cheap access and lack of alternatives as the main reasons for purchasing them. The Chinese goods that are sold in Tajikistan, particularly at bazaars, are generally regarded as of the worst quality. Customers as well as administrative officials are aware of better-quality products from China, but criticised that Khorog's traders solely purchase low-quality and low-cost Chinese products due to the low incomes of locals. As a Chinese businessman at Korvon market explained "most of the products at Korvon market are from small 'underground' factories, where there are no quality inspections and safety tests. Hence the price is very low." Low-quality and low-cost Chinese products have hence become inevitable on the local market. However, based on past developments, customers as well as administrative officials, hope for a local income growth in the future accompanied by the arrival of better-quality products. It is worth noting that the trade with low-quality, short-lived Chinese products is hardly sustainable on an ecological level, though this is not an issue that is widely received as problematic among Khorog's local population. Despite the poor quality of the products, most locals believe that the cheap goods from China have greatly improved their quality of life since the opening of the Tajik-Chinese border. One of the most popular Chinese imports in Khorog are minibusses, unofficially called 'Tangen.' The import of these minibusses enabled Khorog to develop a public transportation system that has significantly improved the local population's mobility and constitutes an important source of income.

In brief, the consensus among business people is that the trade with China helps in promoting Khorog's economy. A shop owner stated: "We do not have the ability to produce these products in Tajikistan and a few years ago, they were not available in Tajikistan at all. So overall, the situation has definitely improved." Consequently, the availability of new products as well as their affordability is regarded as a result of a positive impact on behalf of the Chinese. Likewise, Khorog's traders claim their business experiences with China to mostly be positive.

#### *Khorog's marginalisation in the Tajik-Chinese trade*

Most of the goods that are shipped from China to Dushanbe are owned by several large companies in Dushanbe, including 'Faroz,' that buy large amounts of Chinese goods, thus forming a market monopoly and leaving smaller, local vendors with little to no alternative aside from purchasing products from them. "The monopoly is in the hands of the presidential family. It makes it very affordable to buy from Dushanbe, but we ultimately have to buy from them," one seller at the bazaar explained. Due to the large amounts they order, these companies can obtain products at a very low purchase price in China and the price of Chinese products from Dushanbe is not much different from the price of a small number of goods

purchased directly from China. Moreover, more traders in Khorog have business contacts in Dushanbe than in China, which makes ordering and shipping the products easier. According to regional government officials in Khorog, they pursue the goal to reduce the disadvantages local traders face in competition with traders in Dushanbe in the future.

To local traders, the rising cost of customs clearances and the clear monopoly of Dushanbe pose considerable challenges. They are attributed to “government regulations and interventions that weaken the business climate” (Coulibaly 2012: 9). Further barriers to the trade, such as inflation and a currency exchange rate that is not as profitable as it used to be after the border opening, are also due to the government’s mismanagement. Furthermore, business people in Khorog point to a high degree of corruption and informal payments along the transport route. Correspondingly Parham speaks of a “perceived negligence by the forces of border control” and “structures of a powerful state are experienced by the locals as having departed” (Parham 2016: 363, 365).

Khorog’s market, though of regional importance for the GBAO, does not play a major role on a national scale (Peyrouse 2011: 4). In the future, Pamiri traders hope to fulfil an intermediary function on a bigger scale than the local market. By both investing in the transit role of the GBAO and strengthening the regional role of Khorog’s market in the face of Dushanbe’s monopoly through facilitating direct trade relations between Khorog and China, Tajikistan can make use of the market’s “non-negligible commercial opportunities to the local populations” (Peyrouse 2011: 4) and use Khorog’s distance from major markets to their advantage. For example, the advancement of small-scale trade relations to Afghanistan would create a “commercial niche” (Peyrouse 2011: 4) for the local population and is obvious regarding Khorog’s location in proximity to the Tajik-Afghan border. Nevertheless, in order for Khorog to compete, the GBAO has to improve its transit infrastructure by fixing infrastructural deficits. At the moment, growth through transit business is significantly hindered by “unreliable connectivity service raising the cost of trading and limiting access to markets and technology” (Coulibaly 2012: 9).

## Conclusion

In recent years, affordable Chinese products have not only flooded the markets of Tajikistan, but also the markets of Central Asia in general. Although the quality of these products is poor, they have influenced the quality of life of Khorog’s local population significantly. The Chinese presence in Tajikistan is observable and it is rarely more obvious than when driving along the Pamir highway in the early morning as it is crowded with trucks transporting Chinese goods. Not only does the cross-border trade bring income and employment opportunities to direct participants, but also to people indirectly involved in the trade, like bazaar sellers and service personnel (Kaminski and Mitra 2012: 7-8). However, in regard to how the formation of the Tajik-Chinese trade relationship acts as a means of development in Khorog, it becomes apparent that opportunities are not equally accessible. Poor people in a marginalised region such as the GBAO cannot afford the investment of a booth at the local bazaar, the cost of visas or travelling in order to establish business contacts. Hence the poor can at best find opportunities to participate in the trade indirectly in low-paying jobs as service personnel. Additionally, the participation in the trade has many more obstacles,

not only due to 'hard obstacles' like connectivity and lack of capital resources. Also 'soft obstacles' caused by non-transparent governance, administrative barriers and the dependence on informal networks play an important role.

In the cross-border trade between China and Tajikistan, Khorog is caught between China's main distribution centres and Dushanbe, and is largely bypassed by the continuous flow of goods from China to Tajikistan. The bazaar and trade economy is crucial in reducing poverty and alleviating unemployment. Nonetheless, as the capital of one of the poorest, least populated and most peripheral regions in Tajikistan, the development of the GBAO in general and Khorog's development in particular were ruled out both by political power and market development leading to gradual marginalisation in the Tajik-Chinese trade, turning it into a secondary market of Dushanbe. Moreover, geographical factors cause the poor accessibility of the GBAO to the national market, and cultural factors (such as different religions and ethnicities), cause political neglect, which results in less economic opportunities. Thus, Khorog's marginalisation in the Tajik-Chinese trade is the result of the combined influence of market mechanisms and national development strategies aiming at the development of selected growth poles. As the country prioritises the strengthening of central cities, these policies contribute to further marginalisation of already marginal areas. Apart from general policies and structural developments, the cross-border trade between Tajikistan and China is also impacted by small-scale regulations on the mobility of personnel and goods as well as customs clearance tariffs. These administrative issues accelerate the marginalisation of Khorog. Ultimately, these factors result in a current trading system that is volatile and not sustainable.

Since development strategies in Tajikistan are heavily based on Chinese investment, it is worth looking at their implications for regional development in the GBAO. China mainly focuses on investing in infrastructure projects in Tajikistan. Regarding Tajikistan's potential as a transit country and potential growth through the transit business, it is confronted with fierce regional competition by the transport corridors of its neighbouring countries (Asadov 2012: 6). Under the framework of BRI and SCO, agreements have been made to strengthen trade and investment between Tajikistan and China. However, many projects have shown that both countries adopt similar policies of strengthening central cities and therefore focus their attention on the connection between Dushanbe and Urumqi. A future development potential for Khorog may be its proximity to Afghanistan. Considering the reconstruction of a bridge between Tajikistan and Afghanistan and the opening of a border market, Khorog is likely to become a re-export market, exporting Chinese goods to Afghanistan. Peyrouse argues that Khorog's market plays "a more regional role" by offering "non-negligible commercial opportunities to the local populations [...]. Small commercial niches are thereby created, with Pamiri traders aiming to become intermediaries in China-Afghanistan trade" (Peyrouse 2011: 4).



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A truck with imported goods from China masters a difficult passage of the road connecting the GBAO with the Western parts of Tajikistan. Photograph taken by Dörre, March 2018



Between Murghab and Khorog, the China-Tajik trade uses the Pamir Highway, which connects Khorog City with the city of Osh in Kyrgyzstan. This picture shows a section of the Pamir Highway east of Khorog in the Gunt Valley. Here the road runs through small parcels of irrigated land. Photograph taken by Dörre, July 2014



## **The Urban Wheat System of Khorog**

### **Abstract**

This paper seeks to reveal how the supply of the most important staple food – wheat – is organised in Khorog, the capital of Gorno-Badakhshan. During July 2018, a case study was carried out, approaching this issue through the theoretical lens of (urban) food systems. By applying an adapted version of the approach, the high degree of interconnectedness between the sub-systems of Khorog's urban wheat system are highlighted, and the way external factors have implications for the supply of wheat in Khorog and its surroundings are revealed.

### **Introduction and context**

Tajikistan is a mountainous, landlocked country with limited options for agrarian production. Only 5.3 percent of Tajikistan's land area is eligible for agriculture (The World Bank 2010). With about eight million inhabitants, Tajikistan is a country with one of the lowest amounts of arable land per person worldwide and with the lowest ratio in Central Asia (approximately 0.1 ha) (Akramov 2013: 128). Due to population growth and land decline, this problem even intensified over the last two decades (ibid.), leading to an impossibility of subsistence agriculture in most cases (Robinson & Guenther 2007: 360). The problem of food shortages is omnipresent in Tajikistan, but it is even more distinct in remote parts of the country (Abassian 2005: 40). In the Tajik Pamirs, satisfying food demands "is an ongoing struggle" (Doerre & Goibnazarov 2018: 104).

The research area of this case study, Gorno-Badakhshan, is one of the poorest and most isolated parts of the most impoverished country in Central Asia (Robinson & Guenther 2007: 373). Arable land areas and natural resources are not sufficient to meet the needs of its population (Middleton 2013: 1). Nonetheless, low agrarian productivity in Tajikistan and especially in the GBAO is not only determined by geographical constraints. During the Soviet era, the GBAO was benefited with a heavily subsidised system of food deliveries. This was mainly because of the high strategic importance of the Pamirs during the 'Great Game', but also in Soviet times, when the region served as an important border area as well as a demonstration site of Soviet modernisation policy (Kraudzun 2016: 162-163). The measures of heavily subsidising should prevent the important border area from a depopulation (Middleton 2016: 254). After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the independence of Tajikistan in 1991, this form of support suddenly ceased to exist. With the outbreak of the civil war in Tajikistan in 1992, the situation exacerbated dramatically. Although the land productivity of Tajikistan almost tripled between 1997 and 2010, it is still significantly lower than in the early 1990s (Akramov 2013: 136). Despite this improvement, the Pamirs will not be able to achieve self-sufficiency very soon and are therefore still heavily dependent on food imports.

The case study on urban wheat systems took place in Khorog, the administrative capital and only major urban area of Gorno-Badakhshan, where wheat is the most important resource for calorie intake. In whole Tajikistan, wheat accounts for more than half of the daily calorie and protein intake, usually in the form of bread (Akramov 2013: 131; FAO 2015). The 2015

published cookbook 'With our own Hands' (Van Oudenhoven & Haider 2015) may serve further impressions of the strong cultural rootedness of bread in the Pamirs.

In urbanised Khorog, off-farm activities and remittances are a major source of income (Robinson & Guenther 2007: 366), embedding the population in a cash economy. Hence, the population is mainly dependent on the availability of wheat on the market as well as on cash-based income to meet their daily demands. Facing current price hikes, access to wheat presents an essential and steady challenge.

Because of these constraints, the research interest lies in an examination of the highly complex wheat procurement in Khorog, which is – given the enormous contribution for the nutrition of Tajikistan's inhabitants – vital for its population.

The analysis is based on data gathered during 17 interviews with different actors of Khorog's urban wheat systems, and by means of field observations. Among the respondents were different wheat traders, bakery owners and bread sellers at the roadside, a truck driver, an employee of the Mountain Society Development Support Programme (MSDSP) of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) responsible for Nature and Resource Management, an employee of the World Food Programme (WFP), a Research Fellow at the University of Central Asia (Khorog campus), employees of the governmental grain mill in Boghev Village, the Head of the Department of Economic Development and Antimonopoly Policy of the Province Administration of the GBAO as well as employees from the Department of Food Distribution.

The examination of the structures of wheat supply in Khorog has been approached through the theoretical lens of 'Food Systems'. The food system approach has been introduced by Terry Cannon in 1991. The British geographer David Smith enhanced this approach, focusing on urban food systems and linking "production and consumption networks at local, regional and global levels [...]." (cited in Bohle & Adhikari 2002: 402).

Applying an adapted form of the approach, this paper seeks to reveal how the supply of the most important staple food in Khorog is organised in such a remote (and yet urbanised) and import-dependent city, and how the population of Khorog is able to gain access to it.

### **Theoretical framework: Urban wheat system of Khorog**

According to Cannon,

"a food system includes four sub-systems: Production, Exchange, Distribution, and Consumption (P, E, D, C). These are not neatly distinct categories [...], but to some extent there is a progression from P through E and D to the final satisfaction (or not) of nutritional needs at C." (Cannon 2002: 354).

Cannon's framework was used in a slightly modified version to structure Khorog's urban wheat system into four main sections: Imports, Distribution, Processing and Purchase & Consumption.

This adaptation (Fig. 1) is related to the finding that local wheat production does not play a major role in Khorog and is therefore located outside of the inner circle in the figure. Imports are of major importance due to the remoteness of Khorog and its insufficient local wheat



production. Distribution of wheat is influenced by infrastructural conditions. Further processing is an important localised step, regulated both privately and governmentally. Purchase and Consumption emphasises the local food culture and purchasing behaviour. By connecting these categories further aspects emerge, which in Terry Cannon's Framework mainly would belong to the category of 'Exchange'.

Considering the socio-economic situation, the physical constraints and the recent history of Khorog and the GBAO, the application of the urban food system approach can be valuable in different ways.

At first, it helps to see Khorog's food system in a global context and emphasise its linkages to the international political-economic system. As David Smith states, the world's population is tending to renounce from subsistence agricultural systems and is continually interwoven into a "globalization of food systems" Smith (1998: 208).

Secondly, "[u]rban food systems are usually complex entities involving production, processing, distribution and retailing, together with the various exchange and transfer mechanisms that link these activities" (ibid: 212). Thus, each sub-system is influenced by many factors and processes regarding economic, social, spatial, physical-material and infrastructural aspects.

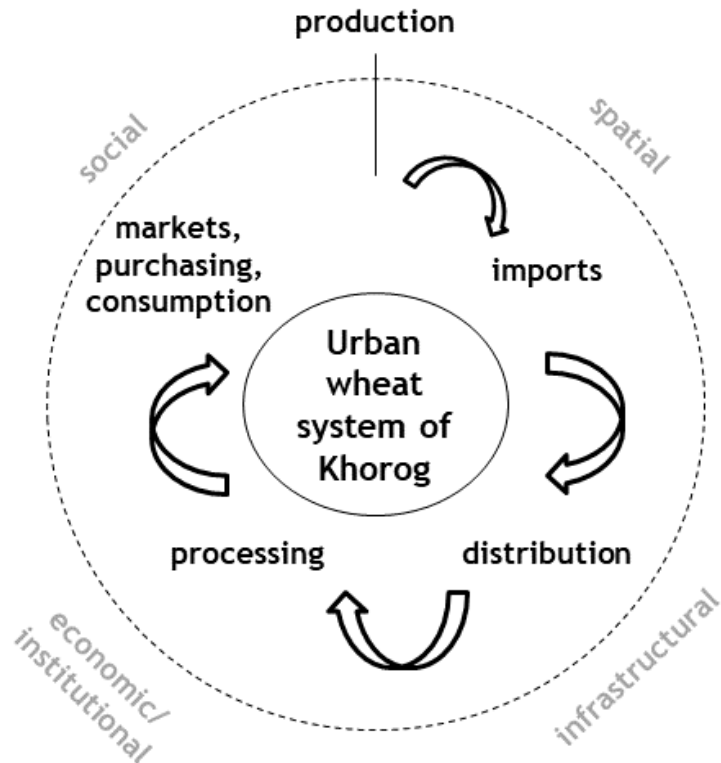


Fig. 1: Research framework.  
Source: Caleta & Wilß 2018 (draft)

## The case study in Khorog

There exist two different regulation systems in terms of providing wheat for Khorog's population, driven by private as well as government actors. The insights into the governmental regulation system were mainly made possible through interviews with the Head of the Department of Economic Development and Antimonopoly Policy of the Province Administration of the GBAO in Khorog as well as with governmental employees of a department responsible for the distribution of food within the GBAO. A significant part of the urban wheat system in Khorog is centrally organised by Government authorities who established a controlled price regime for wheat and wheat flour.

### *The dependency on imports and the implications for exchange*

Agricultural production and capacities of Gorno-Badakhshan are not sufficient to feed the local population, leading to a dependency on wheat imports even though the production of wheat is still an important component of the subsistence-oriented agricultural practices of

individual households in Gorno-Badakhshan. Therefore, the vast majority of wheat supply in Khorog is imported from Kazakhstan.

Kazakhstan is the largest wheat exporter for Central Asian countries and is therefore often considered as the 'bread basket' of Central Asia. In 2016, Kazakhstan accounted for 100 percent of officially imported wheat in Tajikistan (OEC 2019). Considering the fact that more than 50 percent of per capita calorie intake in Tajikistan comes from cereals (Akramov 2013: 131; FAO 2015), wheat imports from Kazakhstan are essential for the Tajik population. The situation in Khorog seems even more intensified.

Among all of the surveyed wheat vendors, only one of the sellers - a small farm shop next to the office of MSDSP - offers regionally grown wheat flour in smaller amounts. This wheat flour is usually mixed with pea flour. This local wheat flour production takes place through farming in the Bartang Valley (Roshan District) and the lower Wakhan (Ishkashim District) as well as both the Shugnan and Roshtqal'a Districts according to the interviewed expert from the MSDSP. Reportedly, only very few farmers can produce a surplus to bring their remaining wheat on the market. The mentioned farmer shop receives the locally grown wheat from farmers from Roshtqal'a and sells it in small amounts. One kilogram of the locally produced wheat was sold for six Tajik Somoni (TS) during the time of fieldwork. The Research Fellow of the UCA emphasised that there is not much farming activity in the urban area of Khorog owing to less land availability, so virtually everyone depends on the market to provide wheat flour. When asked about the almost non-existence of locally produced wheat in the surveyed wheat shops, the expert from the MSDSP asserted that most of the locally produced wheat is used to supplement own requirements. Hence, locally produced wheat (and wheat flour) can be mainly considered as a niche product in Khorog, which finds especially use for festive occasions or special diets (e.g. diabetes) but not for covering the daily calorie intake.

Five major wheat sellers (including several employees of the government-run processing mill) could be identified in Khorog and its surrounding areas. Among these wheat sellers two are run by the government (Fig. 2) and three



Fig. 2: State-run wheat flour shop at the main market. Photograph taken by Caleta, July 2018

are privately owned shops. The available wheat flour is distinguished between *white flour* (all purpose flour), *brown flour* (wholemeal flour) and *superfine flour* and is usually sold in 50 kg sacks (Fig. 2; Fig. 3). This classification could also be observed at the private shops. However, differences in prices were striking. The governmental seller in the main market offered white flour processed in Boghev Village, Suchon Municipality, nearby Khorog for 150 TS/50 kg and brown flour for 120 TS/50 kg. Also, smaller amounts of wheat flour directly imported from Kazakhstan was available and sold for 175-180 TS/50 kg. The prices in private

shops were significantly higher. The price for white flour processed in Sughd Province in Northwestern Tajikistan was around 165-175 TS/50 kg and the price for brown flour from the same region was sold between 145-147 TS/50 kg. Nevertheless, it is notable that locally produced wheat sold in the farmer's shop is significantly more expensive compared to imported wheat. However, this observation may also be based on the fact that the sale of local wheat takes place in much lower quantities (1 kg vs. 50 kg).

The dependency on imports has a series of economic effects crucial for the price mechanisms of wheat in Khorog. In 2015, wheat prices reached record levels in Tajikistan with 26 percent higher than the national average (FEWS NET 2015: 1).



Fig. 3: Wheat flour offered for sale in Khorog: white (left) and brown (right). Photograph taken by Wilß, July 2018

Because of the remoteness of Khorog to market centres as well as the relatively low turnover in comparison to markets such as Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan, wheat prices in Khorog are always relatively higher than on the national level. It was notable that most of the respondents were aware of a connection between local wheat prices and currency and fuel price fluctuations. In a market report published by the WFP in cooperation with UKAid, the price hikes in Tajikistan are explained with a global increase of fuel prices, increases in Russian export taxes and a ban on their wheat exports which led to higher competition for wheat in Kazakhstan and increases in transit fees in Uzbekistan (WFP and UKAid 2011: 4). Additionally, a decrease in remittances played a critical role in terms of price mechanisms. Due to reduced remittances, the Tajik currency depreciated by 27 percent against the US Dollar between 2014 and 2015 (FEWS NET 2015: 5). This is strongly related to a point articulated by Karimova and Najibulloev who emphasise the connection between Tajikistan's dependency on imports and the resulting pressure on its hard currency reserves, leading to a higher inflation rate in the consumer sector (Karimova and Najibulloev 2017: 4). This development is especially affecting those who have no own food sources. In urban Khorog where there is little food production, dwellers are highly vulnerable to wheat price fluctuations. The strong dependence on imports, therefore, can be seen as a vicious cycle, reinforcing price hikes in Tajikistan.

### ***The distribution and transport of wheat***

One of the main challenges for the whole GBAO is the remoteness of the region, combined with the highly vulnerable infrastructure. The GBAO is connected with Western Tajikistan by a single road, which runs over a ca. 2,000 m high pass (Herbers 2001: 368; Photograph on page 22) and is highly vulnerable due to landslides and avalanches (ASIA-Plus 2017 quoted by Doerre & Goibnazarov 2018).

Wheat distribution basically relates to the delivery from the place of production to the site of consumption. Applied to this case study it was examined how wheat is distributed physically from Kazakhstan to the markets and ultimately to the households in Khorog. Given



the highly distinct remoteness and difficult accessibility of Khorog, the examination of the trading routes is an important step for understanding Khorog's urban wheat system and how it is embedded transnationally. The labelling of the packaging served as a first indicator of the origin or the processing place (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4: Different packagings of 50 kg wheat flour bags. The pictures A and B show white wheat flour imported from the Sughd Province. The pictures C and E display sacks of white wheat flour from Kazakhstan, and picture D shows a bag of white wheat flour from the Boghev Mill. Photograph A taken by Wilß, July 2018; Photographs B, C, D and E taken by Caleta, July 2018

Wheat sellers were subsequently asked about the origins and processing stations of their wheat supply and about the means of its transportation. Additionally, an administrative staff member of the government department responsible for food distribution provided detailed information on wheat-trading routes.

Wheat import and wheat flour processing are organised slightly different in the cases of private and governmental trade. Privately imported wheat is mainly processed in the Sughd Province of Northwestern Tajikistan and then transported as flour into the Pamirs. Most of the wheat imported by the government is processed in a flour mill in Boghev Village, which is located close to Khorog in the Gunt Valley. This mill processes and stores wheat and delivers large amounts of wheat flour to designated shops. It plays a pivotal role in the urban wheat system of Khorog.

The complex interlinkages between the sub-systems of Khorog's urban wheat system are clearly recognisable in the case of flour distribution. When wheat or already processed wheat flour is imported from Kazakhstan, it needs to be transported through Uzbekistan, giving rise to logistical challenges. Railway tariffs and import taxes are important factors influencing the trading routes of wheat. As observed by McKee, a change in transportation routes took place after railway tariffs in Uzbekistan were increased to US\$ 0.18 per ton per kilometre. While the imported wheat and wheat flour was formerly carried via the rail route through Uzbekistan to Dushanbe, today most of the wheat passes through Sughd Province in northwest Tajikistan by rail. There are a number of mills in the Sughd Province where the imported wheat grain is processed to wheat flour and subsequently further distributed by trucks. This rather recent development is also connected with the improvement of the Khujand-Dushanbe highway, which connects Tajikistan's milling centre with the capital of



the country (McKee 2014: 12-14). This road is now adequate during winter, thereby saving on transportation costs when avoiding the transit through Uzbekistan (Abassian 2005: 10).

Government-owned trucks transporting wheat flour from the Sughd Province have special licence, which facilitates a speedy delivery of wheat. A large part of the imported produce is however processed in the Boghev Mill, from where the Khorog market is supplied four to five times a week with 100 bags of flour (5 tonnes). A further 30 tonnes are regularly delivered to other districts of the GBAO.

Conversely, in privately organised businesses, wheat flour prices vary because of shifting prices in transportation, fuel, truck driver payments, and the US Dollar exchange rate. Private trucks can carry 250 wheat flour sacks (12.5 t), resulting in higher fuel consumption and transport costs (Table 1). Reportedly, truck drivers receive also higher payments in the private wheat trade.

Table 1: Wheat flour prices in Khorog per 50 kg packages in TS in 2018

Category	Main market (governmental)	Private businesses
July 2018: white flour	150	165-175
July 2018: brown flour	120	147
December 2018: white flour	165	195
December 2018: brown flour	130	170

The logistics of wheat distribution provides important insights into Khorog's urban wheat system, as external economic and political factors such as railway tariffs or changes in tax regimes as well as physical-material factors such as infrastructure conditions shape the urban wheat system of Khorog. The map (Fig. 5) depicting major trading routes in the wheat business is primarily based on the statements of the interview partners as well as on the existing road system (Chabot & Tondel 2011: 14).

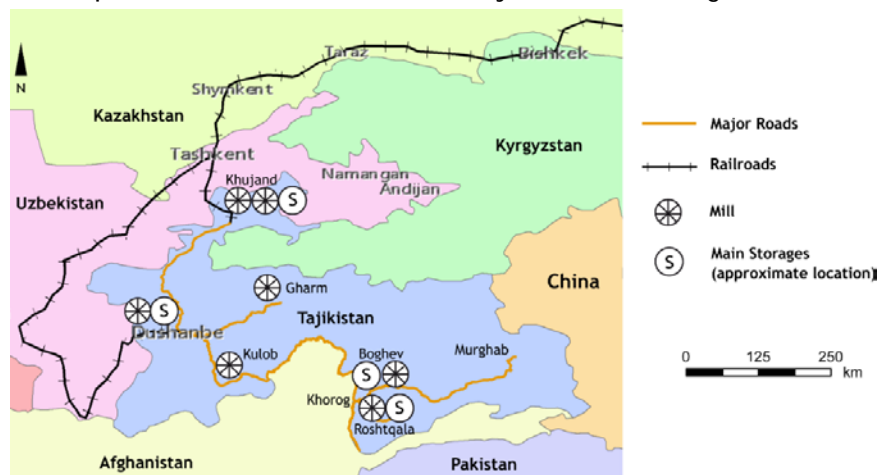


Fig. 5: Trading routes of wheat and locations of flour mills and the main grain storages in Tajikistan.  
Source: Caleta & Wilß 2019 (draft)

### *Processing wheat in the Boghev Mill*

Processing wheat is also crucial for the Khorog wheat system and the recently opened state-run mill in Boghev as an important government intervention into the wheat (supply) market for the region is a case in point (Fig. 6).

The mill in Boghev serves as a main processing and distribution place for the governmentally imported wheat in the region. It was officially opened in 2015 by Tajikistan's president Emomali Rahmon himself. The mill in Boghev is the first, and, so far, only state-run flour mill in Gorno-Badakhshan (Asia-Plus 2015).

All wheat which is processed in this mill is imported from Kazakhstan. The state-run mill has the capacity to process up to 60 tons of wheat flour per day. The wheat flour is subsequently delivered to governmental wheat shops by state-run trucks as well as directly sold from the mill for fixed prices.



Fig. 6: Grain elevators in the mill in Boghev, which was established in 2015.

Photograph taken by Wilß, July 2018

In addition to serving as a processing and distribution place, the mill in Boghev also functions as storage, not only for already processed wheat flour but also for imported raw wheat grains. The function as wheat storage unit has major implications for the region of the GBAO. In winter or in the event of unexpected events or disasters such as mudslides and floods, the only road connecting the GBAO with Western Tajikistan happens to be impassable. This often leads to a temporary interruption of wheat deliveries, threatening the region's wheat system. To address this problem, the mill in Boghev serves to supply the region during an emergency and to mitigate wheat shortages.

Hence, the mill in Boghev has an important strategic impact for the GBAO and especially for Khorog and its surroundings. The mill employs 30 staff members and significantly contributes to the tax revenues of the region even though it only supplies certified shops.

The situation in terms of processing is different for privately imported wheat where processing takes place in the Sughd Province. In recent years, this region has become the most important processing centre because of the locational advantage, milling 80 percent of the imported wheat and 25 percent of the domestically grown wheat (McKee 2014: 13-14).

Tajikistan is aiming to reduce the imports of flour and simultaneously increase the import of raw wheat grain for further processing domestically (Aliyeva in Azernews 2018). A presidential decree dating back to November 2008 reduced the value-added tax (VAT) on imported wheat from 18 percent to ten percent while keeping the duties on imported wheat flour at 18 percent. Since 2009, a trend is visible towards increased wheat imports and

stagnant flour imports (McKee 2014: 11; Randall 2015: 13). The government recently launched further projects to decrease the dependence on Kazakh imports. The rise of the Sughd Province as the milling centre of Tajikistan as well as the recent construction of the mill in Boghev are relatively new developments, representing infrastructural investments adding value in the wheat chain inside Tajikistan against the background of a strong import-dependency from Kazakhstan.

A short calculation emphasises the important role of the Boghev mill. Reportedly, the mill provides wheat shops on the main market in Khorog with 100 packages (50 kg each) of flour on average four times a week. Extrapolated to one year, this means that the governmental shop in the main market receives about 1,040 tons of wheat flour from the mill (approximately 208 deliveries a year á 5 tons). Estimates by government officials count an average annual consumption of 135 kg wheat flour per capita in Khorog. Given the fact that Khorog has approximately 30,000 inhabitants (Kreutzmann 2016), the annual consumption of wheat (flour) in Khorog is about 4,050 tons. This would mean that the mill alone could supply more than one quarter (25.7 percent) of local demand, underlining its relevance for local wheat security.

### *Purchase and consumption*

Purchasing and consumption form an essential element of the urban wheat system, where inhabitants rely on cash to access food items: “It is this dominance of the cash economy over access to such a basic need that links urban food systems to poverty and vulnerability” (Smith 1998: 212).

While Gorno-Badakhshan is one of the poorest regions in Tajikistan, the prices for wheat in Khorog were always registered as the highest in Tajikistan, mostly due to its distance from the national milling centre in the Sughd Province and associated transport costs (Abassian 2005: 36). In December 2018, the prices for privately imported wheat amounted to 195 TS (white flour processed in the Sughd Province) and 170 TS (brown flour processed in the Sughd Province). Prices in governmental shops amounted to around 165 TS (white flour processed in Boghev) and 130 TS (brown flour processed in Boghev). Compared to the price survey in July 2018, prices in private wheat shops rose by more than 15 percent; in state-run shops by about ten percent.

The asymmetry of relatively high prices and low-income opportunities for an urban majority is mitigated by a strong inflow of remittances into Khorog (Middleton 2013: 1). Urban food availability and access are embedded into market indicators (WFP 2016), leading to vulnerability to market price fluctuations for basic staple foods. “For mountain communities, access to markets is critical both for household consumption and trading activities” (Dame and Nüsser 2011: 187). Against the background that Khorog is characterised by unfavourable trading conditions in relation to national milling centres, government efforts to keep wheat prices stable serve as important policy measures. Constructing the mill in Boghev can be seen as an important step in achieving the desired price stability.

Interviews showed that the customers purchase wheat mostly at the end of the month, which indicates that purchasing behaviour depends on the payment of salaries and pension, but also on the flow of remittances. Peak days for wheat purchase are Mondays and Saturdays.

The state-run wheat shop at the main market sells 20 to 50 wheat flour packages per day. More generally, the purchasing behaviour of urban inhabitants is notable because of their preparedness for seasonality and disasters. Whenever possible, households tend to buy additional wheat for storage. This aspect is confirmed by our household survey conducted in Pashor Village nearby Khorog.

However, some restrictions apply. Whereas the private and more expensive wheat businesses operate without limitations, government shops may only sell a certain amount of wheat flour per customer.

To dig deeper into purchasing behaviours a small case study was carried out in Pashor Village at the urban fringes of Khorog. About half of the resident 100 households were asked about their wheat buying behavior. Most get their wheat from private shops nearby, relying on owned or hired cars to transport the 50 kg packages to their houses. Local wheat sellers have an agreement with private lorry drivers, who are delivering the wheat flour from central storage facilities in Dushanbe. All wheat in Pashor is from the processing mills in the Sughd Province, where the quality is reportedly better. However, given the absence of governmental shops in the locality cheaper alternatives are more difficult to access. Nevertheless, there are also households (24 percent) who are using the locally processed and cheaper wheat from the mill in Boghev available at the main market in Khorog.

### **The urban wheat system of Khorog - result of a long-term learning process?**

Khorog's urban wheat system is made up of both state and private actors that operate in a cooperative manner. Government measures aimed at minimising the risk of food shortages and preventing the threat of famine satisfy the population, especially the urban and rural poor, by facilitating access to subsidised wheat flour.

In a region extremely sensitive to food supply, the governmental wheat system regulation with all its subparts, the strong presence of governmentally organised sellers and their reportedly high sales indicate that there is a demand and need for cheaper wheat flour in Khorog. This indicates that a learning process in relation to the procurement of wheat but also in the purchasing behaviour has taken place and prevails. The governmental wheat regulation system provides comparatively cheap and accessible food. In difficult times, for example during winter when the main road from Dushanbe to Khorog is often impassable, the governmental procured wheat may be able to mitigate wheat shortages or price fluctuations. When privately organised wheat vendors struggle because of price and currency fluctuations, the governmentally procured wheat can be a temporary opportunity to overcome obstacles such as high prices for wheat or even shortages. Governmental interventions in the urban wheat market of Khorog are visible and may increase further due to the alleged trend of increased processing of wheat flour in Boghev. Still, when they can afford most customers prefer the privately sold wheat with its better quality. Table 2 summarises the main characteristics of the public and private wheat supply systems of Khorog:

Table 2: A brief comparison of the wheat supply systems in Khorog

Governmentally regulated wheat market	Privately owned and organised businesses
Cheaper produce and relatively stable price	More expensive produce and volatile prices
Limited amounts for selling (legal regulation remains unclear)	No limitations in selling amounts (bulk buys possible)
Salaries independent from sold amounts	Salary depends on the sold amounts
Governmentally negotiated transportation duties	More uncertainties due to transportation costs

The study showed the high degree of interconnectedness between import dependency, distribution, processing and purchase and consumption of wheat in Khorog. External economic and/or political factors such as railway tariffs or changes in taxes but also physical-material factors just as infrastructure conditions have significant implications for the supply of wheat. Khorog's urban wheat system is integrated into the global wheat market, primarily through its dependence on Kazakh wheat as well as on remittances. The entanglement of the urban wheat system with fuel prices, international currency exchange rates as well as tax regimes in the import business has become clear. To mitigate the worsening terms of trade, the Tajik government aims to buffer price fluctuations and wheat scarcity through market interventions in order to guarantee constant access to wheat for affordable prices.

As such, given Khorog's special importance as urban and administrative centre of Gorno-Badakhshan, the strategic interventions aim at sustainable food security in the region and represent upgrading initiatives in the international wheat chain. Working in tandem with the profit-oriented wheat businesses that supply better but more expensive quality, the urban wheat system in Khorog caters to different needs but ultimately ensures constant access to Tajikistan's basic staple food.

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Festive atmosphere during a folklore fair in the City Park (Chor Bagh Park) of Khorog.  
Photograph taken by Dörre, July 2018



The central minibus station at the bazaar of Khorog. Photograph taken by Dörre, July 2016



## **Glocalization of Fast Food in Khorog**

### **Abstract**

This article explores the recent development of fast food restaurants in the administrative and economic centre of the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast of Tajikistan, the city of Khorog. It examines the strategy of glocalization, used by local entrepreneurs to open fast food restaurants in the city and adapt menus to the local condition. Thereby, the availability of kitchen appliances and necessary ingredients, the created atmospheres and images of restaurants, and restaurant staff's culinary knowledge were analyzed. We argue for an understanding that the concept of fast food was transferred to Khorog from Russia, but is nevertheless associated with its American origin.

### **Introduction**

Eastern Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO) occupies almost half of the country's area and is characterised by the high mountains of the Pamirs. Inhabited by approximately 214,000 people, its biggest city and administrative and economic centre Khorog is home to about 30,000 people (Kreutzmann 2016). In recent years, the urban centre of the GBAO has witnessed great changes, including its gastronomic scenery. Not only the overall numbers of restaurants and cafes in the city are increasing, there are also more and more international influences palpable on its culinary landscape. After the Indian restaurant-chain Delhi Darbar was the first non-Tajik restaurant to open in Khorog in 2007, more enterprises serving foreign food and drinks have been finding their way into the city. Especially the number of restaurants which advertise and serve American-style fast food is notable. This paper focuses on the question of how this development of a changing culinary scenery towards more Americanised fast food occurred in the remote and high-altitude city of Khorog.

The development of restaurants and cafes offering Americanised fast food is comparatively new to Central Asia. Until 2015, no American fast food chain had opened a branch in either Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan or Tajikistan. The first fast food restaurant chain to enter the Central Asian market was the California-based restaurant franchise company McDonald's, which opened its first restaurant in the Kazakh capital Astana in 2016, about four months after the coffeehouse chain Starbucks had entered the Kazakh market (Shaw Media 2016). Kentucky Fried Chicken, known as KFC, was the first to open a branch in Kyrgyzstan in 2017 (nov-ost.info 2017a), as well as the first global acting fast food chain that opened up a branch in Uzbekistan's capital Tashkent in September 2018 (The Tashkent Times 2018). Dodo Pizza and Papa John's Pizza are other companies that entered the Kyrgyz market in the last two years (nov-ost.info 2017b; Ovchinnikov 2018). However, no American fast food chain had opened a branch in Tajikistan until July 2018, when research for this paper was conducted.

In Khorog's city centre an increasing number of gastronomic facilities advertise with images of fast food products, famous brands' logos or creatively play with their names. Contrary to the increasing number of fast food franchise branches in the capitals of the Central Asian region, in Khorog, no franchises of McDonald's or Kentucky Fried Chicken but MAC Doland's



and Khorog Fried Chicken have opened recently. These enterprises are owned by local entrepreneurs, who started serving different dishes that are commonly connoted with the term fast food, including fries, burgers and fried chicken.

The aim of this paper is to understand the contemporary development of fast food in Khorog, with a special interest in restaurants' strategies to successfully implement their food concepts and rebranding of international chains in the local context. Robertson's glocalization theory serves as the framework for analysis, which states - in a nutshell - that a universal concept has to be adapted in order to fit and function in a local context. Several studies have analyzed the role of glocalization for food enterprises in their strive to adapt to local contexts (e.g. Kumar and Goel 2007; Prakash and Singh 2011; Simi and Matusitz 2017). Yet, the geographical aspects of a remote, high altitude mountainous area, which is only marginally integrated into both national and regional economies, have not been evaluated so far. In doing so, glocalization theory serves as a helpful tool to better understand how the concept of fast food is transferred into such a place.

### **Glocalization of fast food**

The glocalization approach emerged as a business concept in the 1980s, and subsequently became one of the marketing buzzwords during the early 1990s (Robertson 1995: 29). The term was employed as a critique about the ignorance of local conditions in contemporary globalization theory in sociology (ibid: 27). In line with the argument put forward by Cook and Crang (1996: 137) in their critical assessment of McDonaldisation theory proclaiming global homogenisation through standardisation, Robertson emphasises that globalisation in its attempt to override the local is nevertheless shaped to some degree by local ideas and frameworks, but also that the 'local' itself often represent an outside construction. (Robertson 1995: 27, 36). While local influences on global trends are comparatively rare, the interaction of the global and the local gives shape to what is called glocalization: local customs and values have significant influences on how global trends or products are articulated in a given local environment. Simi and Matusitz describe glocalization as creative use of of a worldwide concept through social actors who change it to fit their pre-existing homegrown values (Simi and Matusitz 2017: 574).

Cook and Crang have pioneered research on the glocalization of food (Cook and Crang 1996). Glocalization of food has since become a popular research interest, with its biggest focus on globally acting restaurant chains. Here, research focussed especially on fast food chains, as they usually apply a universal concept in different settings.

Various attempts exist to define fast food. Janssen et al. simply define fast food as the food served by the eight major fast food chains (Janssen et al. 2018). Winarno and Allain associate fast food with low cost in price, preparation after ordering, preparation time as well as its style of preparation (Winarno and Allain 1991). Watson stresses the importance of clear regimentation, standardisation and a predictable outcome for fast food preparation (quoted in Matejowsky 2007: 38). A more precise definition is given by Hogan and Maiburger, who define fast food as

"[...] a genre of restaurant food items that are freshly prepared, packaged, and served either across a counter or through a drive-through window. [...] fast food is generally served in a

short period of time [...]. Most fast food restaurants provide some customer seating, but usually not table – service. Food types vary, including a wide range of meat offerings, ethnic styles, and preparation methods. Hamburgers are the mainstay of fast food fare, but chicken, fish, roast beef, hot dogs, pizza, and pasta are also quite common. Fast food items are commonly inexpensive, delivered quickly, and often wrapped for carry out.” (Hogan and Maiberger 2017: 139)

This definition also links fast food to restaurants and therefore distinguishes it clearly from street food, which is “ready-to-eat foods and beverages prepared and/or sold by vendors or hawkers especially in the streets and other similar places,” according to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO 2009: IV).

Metin and Kizgin, as well as Simi and Matusitz have observed the modification of American fast food chains’ menus in Turkey and India (Metin and Kizgin 2015: 108; Simi and Matusitz 2017: 576). Simi and Matusitz addressed that customers hybridise the local and the global and that restaurants therefore constantly revise their food items to suit different customer tastes (ibid.: 575). They observed, in the case of India, how the Subway-chain has opened vegetarian-only restaurants and developed menus aimed at catering to Jain customers, i.e. not offering any meat, animal product or root vegetables (ibid.: 579-580). Critical to the modification of menus are the origins of food (Cook and Crang 1996: 135; Cook 2004) and the respective system of food provision itself (Cook and Crang 1996: 132) as they have a direct influence on food availability. This is especially crucial for the remote high-mountainous context of Khorog, where the supply situation is more difficult because of the fragile road connections and transport infrastructure.

Against this background, the flow of culinary knowledge about fast food to the ‘roof of the world’ was of special interest to us. Particularly Ceccarini and Cook and Crang have provided some interesting insights (Ceccarini 2010; Cook and Crang 1996). The latter frame the term of geographical knowledge, what they define as the knowledge about a food’s origin. In her work about pizza in Japan, Ceccarini focussed on how pizzaiolos (i.e. pizza cooks) found their way to the archipelagic state and concludes that they not only introduced a new food item but a new occupation too (Ceccarini 2010: 14), as more and more Japanese are becoming pizzaiolos nowadays. She also highlights the importance of solid staff training for restaurants’ success (ibid: 13).

Simi and Matusitz find that there is a positive correlation between frequent fast food dining and obesity and that Indians are aware of that (Simi and Matusitz 2017: 575). Nevertheless, Subway introduced ‘healthy’ fast food, as customers were able to witness every step of its preparation through Subway’s open kitchen, which also influenced customers’ food purchasing behaviour (ibid: 576-577). Contributing to the restaurant’s ambience, the authors observed how Subway intentionally uses colours with certain cultural meanings to create a pleasant atmosphere (ibid: 578-579).

Another popular strategy of fast food chains is the adjustment of advertising practices to attract customers (Metin and Kizgin 2015: 108, 114; Simi and Matusitz 2017: 580-581). This is supported by Robertson’s statement that glocalization is mainly a marketing strategy.

Additionally, Simi and Matusitz discussed how the use of social media is key to successful marketing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Simi and Matusitz 2017: 581-582).

## **Methodological approach**

The empirical data presented in this paper was collected during fieldwork in Khorog in July 2018. Initial explorations found that small shacks selling diverse kinds of street and fast food concentrated around the main bazaar play an important role in catering to the city's inhabitants. Restaurants and cafes also cluster along the main street (Lenin Street), mostly near the bus terminal and around the park area. Acknowledging the importance of adjusting restaurant ambience to local conditions (Simi and Matusitz 2017), we focussed our approach on places that offer the possibility to consume food within the premises. There, we were able to examine the modification of menus, means of culinary knowledge, health concerns, food purchasing behaviours, restaurant ambience and the adjustment of advertising practices.

After attaining a general overview of the city's culinary landscape, our main interest was to better understand the recent development of restaurants opening in the city centre of Khorog and the strategies applied by proprietors in selected case studies. Interviews with department heads of the local municipality responsible for licencing restaurants and its affiliated hygiene institute helped to gain insights into licensing processes and training programmes. Semi-structured interviews with owners and managers of nine restaurants, as well as six employees and 38 customers form the basis of the main argument of this paper.

## **Results**

The understanding of fast food employed here focuses on what could be best described as American-styled fast food. Nonetheless, several other dishes served in restaurants in the city of Khorog would meet the definition of fast food by Hogan and Maiberger (2017). Samosas, a type of savoury pastry frequently served in restaurants, are one example that can be classified as fast food. Yet, it was found that all types of interviewees not identify them as fast food. Rather, people perceive them as 'traditional food':

'I like the place [i.e. the restaurant] because of the atmosphere and the staff. Today, I had a cheeseburger, but sometimes, I also order traditional food, such as samosas.'

This perception of fast food corresponds with Padrão et al., who classified 'sambusa' (a synonym for samosa) as traditional Tajik fast food (Padrão et al. 2017: 2). However, classifying certain food items as 'traditional' is difficult. As Middleton stresses, potatoes were introduced by the Russians at the end of the 19th century, but are now one of the main food crops in the region, together with wheat, barley and rye (Middleton 2016). This understanding coincides with van Oudenhoven and Haider, who provide a description of the changing history of culinary culture and agriculture in the Pamirs susceptible to outside influences (van Oudenhoven and Haider 2015). Therefore, those dishes perceived as 'traditional' by interviewees are classified here as regional food. The recent developments of the gastronomic scenery with an increasing number of fast food options thus can be referred to as an 'American-style fast food trend.'

The overall gastronomic scenery in Khorog is versatile, with changing offers of food and drinks and an often-limited lifespan of restaurants. An official list of registered restaurants in Khorog amount to 25 places, with many of those having closed in the meantime and others having emerged without being registered yet. Based on own observations there were 24 restaurants in Khorog. In addition, about 20 food vendors offer their services round the main bazaar.

Most restaurants were classified by the authorities as serving 'traditional' regional food, i.e. Tajik, Kyrgyz, Uighur, and Russian-influenced. The aim was to understand how fast food entrepreneurs build their businesses and adapt them to local market conditions. Fieldwork focused on three restaurants that serve fast food according to the definition used in this paper.

### ***Khorog Fried Chicken***

Khorog Fried Chicken (KFC) opened in September 2016. It is located on the main street west of the bazaar. The two-storey building hosts a 'Play Station Lounge' on the second floor and the actual restaurant on the ground floor. The size of the restaurant is approximately 30 m<sup>2</sup>, ten of which are kitchen space. Six red tables, each with four seats, form the customers' area. The open kitchen consists of new machinery and equipment made of stainless steel. The menu offers a variety of pizzas and chicken dishes. The bulk of customers, young adults or local workers, order pizza, french-fries and a soft drink. Chicken dishes are less frequented. Per shift there are two employees. A delivery service is offered throughout Khorog between 10 o'clock and 20 o'clock.

### ***Bamaza***

Bamaza translates as 'tasty' and opened in May 2017. It is located on Lenin Street on the east side of the bazaar opposite of Pamir Plaza, the city's major shopping centre. The size of the restaurant is about 40 m<sup>2</sup> and offers seats to 24 customers at a time. The interior consists of wooden furniture, yellow and orange walls and a menu displayed on TVs above the counter. Showcases in the counter present the different food options, which include burgers, hot dogs, pizza and burritos. Especially during lunchtime, the restaurant is filled with adults. Five employees work in the restaurant during the day.

### ***MAC Doland's***

MAC Doland's is located on Lenin Street right opposite the main bazaar on the third floor of a three-storey building. It opened to customers in April 2018. The size of the one-room restaurant is about 70 m<sup>2</sup>, providing space for approximately 20-25 customers on six tables. The open kitchen is located in one corner of the restaurant. The dominant colours of the furniture and walls are red, yellow, light green and orange. The menu is displayed above the counter and red food trays are served over the counter, sporting stickers with the McDonald's logo pasted in each corner. Customers are mostly families, parents with smaller children, adolescents and young adults. Typical meals include burgers, hot-dogs, french-fries and soft drinks or coffee.

### ***Advertising fast food***

A common approach of all fast food restaurants in Khorog is the application of a 'modern' image, manifested in different ways. MAC Doland's advertisement arguably is best visible in



the city. Right opposite to the busy bus terminal where most regional transport arrives or departs, a four-by-one metre banner advertises the restaurant's name next to the official McDonald's logo and a 'Free Wi-Fi'-sign (Fig. 1). Many among MAC Doland's' customers chose to have their lunch there because of its centrality and short distance to the terminal. Other customers referred particularly to the free Wi-Fi service in a city where the overall internet access is poor.

The bus terminal and neighbouring bazaar as the commercial and transport hub of the whole region form the busiest part of the city. Several food shacks use advertising pictures of fast food (Fig. 2) in order to attract customers, albeit without offering it: "Fast food is good to attract customers. That's why our advertisement focuses on that."

MAC Doland's' name itself serves as advertisement. It intentionally plays with the name of one of the world's biggest fast food franchise chains. However, this wordplay has an additional meaning as the acronym of the first name of its three owners. The other restaurant that creatively plays with a famous international fast food chain is Khorog Fried Chicken. KFC's manager stressed that the name was chosen because of a foreign investor, insisting on the name to create attention. Because of his decision the initial plan to only offer pizza was modified and chicken items were also included on the menu. KFC was observed to be the only restaurant in Khorog with a diverse advertisement strategy, including placing flyers in hotels, a branded car for delivery and an internet presence (Fig. 3). The latter focussed on TripAdvisor and Facebook in order to attract tourists.

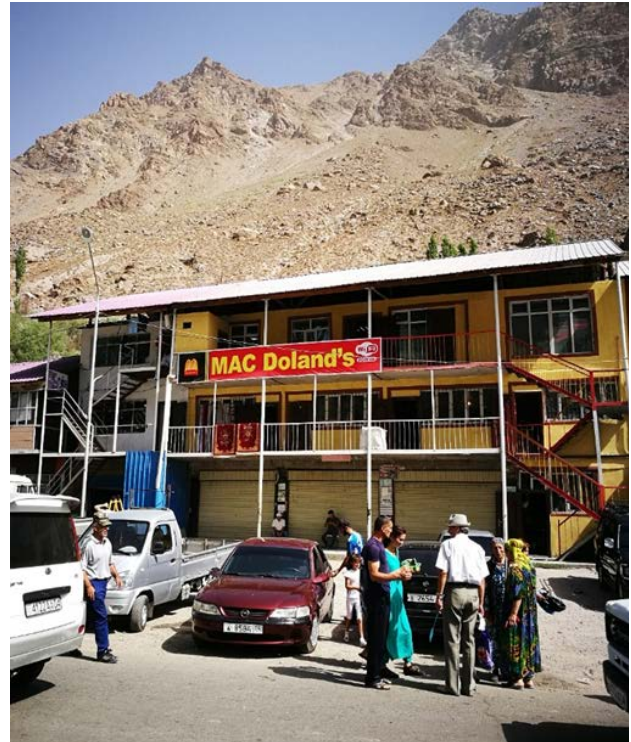


Fig. 1: The banner advertising the MAC Doland's fast food restaurant.

Photograph taken by Hasse, July 2018



Fig. 2: One off the shacks, which use food pictures and global brands for advertisement.

Photograph taken by Rupp, July 2018



Fig. 3: KFC's delivery car.  
Photograph taken by Hasse, July 2018

### *'Roland MAC Doland' - a modern image*

KFC's delivery service was the first to be introduced in Khorog. Between four to ten times per day, the car with a large logo and the restaurant's name printed on both of its sides delivers mainly pizza and drinks to customers around the city. This service leads to high visibility of the restaurant in the city, especially during afternoons when most orders are placed. The convenience of a delivery service was well appreciated by all interviewed customers and contributed to its overall positive image of a 'modern' restaurant. Two young female customers at KFC described the restaurants' atmosphere even as a '[...] feeling of holidays. It's bright, it's comfortable and one feels free. It somehow feels like home.'

However, other fast food restaurants aimed to copy the modern image of KFC. MAC Doland's and Bamaza achieved this through the way their menus are presented. While KFC used leaflets, the other displayed their menus above the counter. MAC Doland's copied the approach from its name-giving franchise chain, and Bamaza uses big TV flat screens for display. Combined with the dominant colours red, yellow, orange and light green, customers are intended to find themselves in a similar atmosphere like the one created by McDonald's, as its founders stressed. This is reinforced by the way that food is received over the counter: packaged burgers, boxed fries and soft drinks in plastic-topped paper cups with straws are served on red trays.

Fast food is seen to be a customer-magnet and especially attractive for the younger generation. Therefore, all fast-food-serving restaurants try to create an atmosphere perceived to be pleasant for that age group. The use of music is crucial for that. US-American, English, Russian and Persian Hip Hop and Pop music is played in every restaurant;

some even broadcast music videos on TV-screens. Other multimedia devices were also visible in restaurants. KFC's staff uses a tablet to place orders and facilitate the payment process.

On the counter of MAC Doland's a laptop replaced the calculator commonly used in most restaurants and was also used to display the menu to staff members. Wall decoration supported the accomplishment of the desired atmosphere. The best example is given by MAC Doland's and its attempt at 'glocalising' McDonald's



Fig. 4: 'Roland MAC Doland'.

Photograph taken by Rupp, July 2018

clown mascot (Fig. 4). In the picture, Ronald McDonald wears the traditional Pamiri hat and socks, apart from his typical clown suit. A button on his chest contains the McDonald's logo together with the name of MAC Doland's. Hung up right opposite the entrance, it is the major eye-catcher when customers enter the restaurant.

Another picture of 19,5 carrots equalling a burger is placed on the wall to dubiously point at the health benefits of consuming a burger. Comically photoshopped pictures show celebrities eating burgers, such as the football player Cristiano Ronaldo or the President of the United States, Donald Trump. Such pictures shall convince customers that their food is meant for everyone and not only for children, who, together with their parents, form the biggest customer group.

While fast food is often associated with low prices (Winarno and Allain 1991), this is not the case in Khorog. Bamaza's manager reported that his food "[...] should be something special, that people save up for". Altogether, the reception of fast food in Khorog is diverse. Some interviewees expressed outright antipathy, while others were not bothered. However, most interviewees, including managers of other restaurants and government officials, appreciated fast food as an addition to the culinary scenery in the city: "It's the 21<sup>st</sup> century, so we need to be modern." Fast food is thus seen as a step towards a positive development in the city. Modernity and development were catchwords often mentioned by interviewees, and such positive connotation was perceived as more important than the price.

### ***Health concerns***

Interestingly, there were only very few negative statements about fast food and its impact on health. Most customers did not share any health concerns, in contrast to the manager of KFC admitted that "fast food messes up your health". However, the frequency of consumption remains the responsibility of the customer, while the KFC-management sees itself responsible for providing good quality and fresh food out of local produce.

Health issues were however mentioned by customers regarding cleanliness and hygiene within fast food restaurants. Heat, smell and the presence of too many flies were criticised by many interviewees. However, this perception was not shared by the hygiene institute.



Officials praised the high hygienic standards in fast-food restaurants to be 'the cleanest in Khorog and laboratory checks of fast food were all satisfying'. This claim seems justified in light of recent openings and the use of modern kitchen appliances. Additionally, it was stressed that all employees are instructed and trained to follow hygienic standards set by the institute.

### *Microwave-burgers*

In addition to Government training in hygienic standards, all interviewed managers of fast-food-serving restaurants provide in-house training. Some employees already had gastronomy experience from previous work in Moscow. Nevertheless, all staff received additional training at their workplace because the standardised processes of fast food preparation were often new to restaurant workers. KFC's delivery man also reported being trained for behavior in traffic jams and customer service.

The availability of well-trained staff is an issue for managers of fast food restaurants in Khorog. Bamaza's owner explained that he would like to expand his menu and include more Mexican-styled food options but that he does not find kitchen personnel with the adequate skill-set to prepare such novel food items. He himself taught how to prepare Burritos, a skill he acquired while working in Dushanbe, but other Mexican food items so far remain beyond the scope of Tajik chefs whose skills are bound to localized geographical and culinary knowledges. Even though most interviewees associated fast food with the USA, the first contact with such food was often made in Russia while on labour migration. This included all the current restaurant's managers and owners. The only exception was KFC's manager, who studied in the USA.

The owners of MAC Doland's, KFC and Bamaza all stated problems regarding the preparation of fast food. Primarily, the availability of food ingredients and kitchen appliances are problematic. There are no specialised businesses for kitchen appliances or restaurant equipment in the Tajik Pamirs, and the existing trade infrastructure allows restaurants to purchase kitchen appliances only for higher pricing. This challenge of limited capacity for kitchen appliances leads to different food preparation strategies largely relying on the use of microwave heaters as an alternative to expensive chip pans in the case of MAC Dolands. On the contrary, the owner of KFC invested in new machinery for the restaurant's opening in 2016. She managed to buy state of the art kitchen appliances from China. The pizza oven, fryer, burger fryer and showcases are all made of stainless steel.

The style of preparation is crucial to fast food, and all fast food managers indicated that their preparation processes were standardised. For example, the restaurant Bamaza uses a patty form to ensure the same sizes of burger patties. The same happens at KFC for pizza, where patterns of four different sizes are used to ensure a predictable outcome. To accelerate the preparation of pizzas, KFC's staff prepares the dough before the restaurant's opening hours and prepacks it ready for order. In contrast to KFC, MAC Doland's was not able to serve standardised portions of burgers and fries, due to fewer kitchen appliances at their disposal.



### ***Menu adjustments***

Restaurants developed a variety of food preparation strategies when confronted with a changing availability of food ingredients. As a rule, ingredients are almost exclusively of local produce and bought from the bazaar, with only dairy products usually being shipped from the Sughd region in northwest Tajikistan. A common problem is the shortage of vegetables in Khorog during the winter season. The manager of Bamaza came up with a simple coping-strategy: "During winter time some products are not available, so I change the menu and create the food without them - just adjust."

Additionally, restaurants changed fast food items to fit the local taste. Because consumers expressed their preference for bigger chicken pieces and less spicy coating, KFC's management acted accordingly. It probably helped that the original recipe for Kentucky fried chicken included 15 spices to be used in the marinade but only eight out of those were available in Tajikistan.

In order to meet local tastes, MAC Doland's adjusted the size of burgers towards a lower but broader shape when compared to the original. "In the beginning, we wanted to serve beef and chicken burgers, but very few people ordered beef. Owing to customers' preferences, we only have chicken now." The concept of the burger was successfully adapted at the Choy Khona ('Tea House') restaurant. The restaurant created a 'Kulcha Burger,' combining the local wheat flour bread with the ingredients of an American-style burger.

Customer preferences also led to the combination of regional Pamiri and fast food as was observed in several restaurants. A typical lunch meal at one of the four restaurants consisted of items from one of the region's most common dishes, plov (a meal made mainly from rice and meat), sided by french-fries and accompanied by tea. Customer interviews indicated that the availability of both types of food is preferred. More generally, it appears that fast food is consumed by the younger generation, whereas older people almost exclusively order regional food perceived as 'traditional.'

### **Discussion**

In the case of Khorog, the concept of glocalization helps to explain how the universal concept of fast food has been adapted for the local market, constrained by a limited availability of ingredients, trained employees and kitchen appliances. The remote location of Khorog makes importing new kitchen appliances and equipment more expensive, and in fact only KFC was able to import all the required appliances, being the only restaurant with a foreign investor.

Global food companies have thus far not attempted to enter the market of Khorog, but their branding strategies were introduced by local food businesses. As such, the global flows of culinary knowledge are of special interest (Cook and Crang 1996, Ceccarini 2010). For most food entrepreneurs in Khorog their first encounter with fast food took place in Moscow, but the image of their restaurants is 'American-style fast food'. About half of employees in the studied places were already experienced restaurant workers in Moscow. The other half required extra training, coinciding with findings from other contexts that solid staff training is of high importance for the success of a restaurant, and that new food concepts often

create new occupations altogether (Ceccarini 2010: 13-14). It might be argued that all fast-food restaurants created new occupational fields, but the delivery service introduced by KFC can be seen as the greatest innovation in the gastronomic scenery of the city.

The modification of restaurant's menus is observed as a strategy to fit local tastes (Metin and Kizgin 2015: 108, Simi and Matusitz 2017: 576). In Khorog, both MAC Doland's and KFC have changed their menus and other restaurants included regional food options in their menus to be more attractive to customers who prefer a variety of options. This 'hybridisation' (Simi and Matusitz 2017: 575) was observed in all restaurants offering fast food and regional cuisine.

The correlation between regular fast food dining and gaining weight (ibid) was not drawn by customers in Khorog. In fact, the opposite was observed as most respondents had positive impressions regarding health and the consumption of fast food. As confirmed by statements from the local governmental health institute, fast food restaurants in Khorog are those with the highest hygiene standards and levels of cleanliness in the city. However, cleanliness was only one aspect contributing to a modern image of fast-food restaurants. The use of music (videos) broadcasting inside all fast-food serving restaurants contributes to the creation of a special atmosphere, as does the use of certain colours as used in the original American brands (Ceccarini 2010: 13, Simi and Matusitz 2017: 578-579).

It can be concluded that glocalization of fast food is happening in Khorog. In terms of advertisements and the creation of restaurant atmospheres, glocalization is intentionally used as a marketing strategy. The most remarkable (and visualised) example is the transfer of McDonald's mascot Ronald McDonald to 'Roland MAC Doland' (wearing traditional Pamiri hat and socks).

However, it was found that customers at Bamaza had to wait about 15 to 20 minutes after their order was placed and even up to 90 minutes at KFC, especially when using the delivery service. This leads to the question, whether their foods can still be identified as fast food (Winarno and Allain 1991, Hogan and Maiberger 2017). Standardisation and predictability of food were understood as the main aspect of fast food preparation (Watson quoted in Matejowsky 2007: 38), both of which can not be attributed to restaurants in Khorog because of a lack of appropriate kitchen appliances and the seasonally varying availability of ingredients.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has discussed the contemporary development of a growing culinary scenery in Khorog, Tajikistan, with a focus on fast food restaurant's strategies to successfully implement their food concepts in the local context. Following Robertson's glocalization theory, we have examined different criteria of these strategies. We can conclude that the concept of fast food has been glocalised in Khorog and transferred from experiences gained in Russia rather than from the USA. Two important issues further arise from increased fast food consumption in Khorog that need addressing in further work on the subject. First, the packaging of fast food leads to an increasing production of urban waste, and second health aspects of hybridized fast food consumption would need further scrutiny. This is especially

important as the Pamirs are a region susceptible to food scarcity, often linked to malnutrition.

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## **Effects of Labour Migration on Household Roles in Khorog**

### **Abstract**

The majority of research on labour migration focuses on strategies of migration. Comparatively few researches focus on the consequences of labour migration on households in the labour migrants' place of residence. This research emphasises the changes that occur by the labour migrants experience and contact with a relatively unknown culture and its subsequent impacts on his/her's perception of his/her's own cultural values and on traditional family roles.

As labour migration presents a lucrative way to generate income in Tajikistan, especially in Khorog, most families in town have an absent member who is in labour migration. Therefore, we point out the importance of this topic and the wide range of issues in a household that can be affected by labour migration. With the concept of social remittances, we analyse what and how labour migration effects household roles in Tajikistan and its meaning especially for the females in Khorog.

### **Introduction**

Labour migration plays a significant role in Tajikistan's national economy. In recent years financial remittances by labour migrants have accounted for up to 50 percent of Tajikistan's GDP and are, according to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), much needed to finance the country's foreign trade deficit (UNDP 2015: 12). Thus, labour migration is a widely spread household survival strategy in the face of prevalent unemployment and low wages. A survey of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) found that for an enormous share of 62 percent of households in Tajikistan remittances account for more than half of their financial incomes (ILO 2010: 25).

This is also true for Khorog, the capital of the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO) largely populated by the Ismaili minority of Tajikistan. The city is situated at about 2100 meters above sea level and only connected to the capital Dushanbe towards the northwest and Kyrgyzstan and China towards the northeast via the so-called Pamir Highway, which is in poor condition in large parts. The number of inhabitants is about 30,000 (Bliss 2006: 2). During the civil war (1992-1997), the GBAO suffered heavily as opposition forces used the difficultly accessible area as base to continue the war after losing the fight for the capital Dushanbe (Bliss 2006: 2). This is why the GBAO was, and to a certain degree still is, heavily supported by international humanitarian aid and development assistance, above all through the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) (Bliss 2006: 328-29; Middleton 2016: 262). However, the region still remains one of the poorest in Central Asia (Middleton 2016: 246). Official statistics for Khorog demonstrate that in 2017 more than 5,700 people left the town to find themselves a job elsewhere, most of them heading to Russia. This form of migration is highly gendered as male persons accounted for 83 percent of this figure (OVIR 2017).

Given the great scale, with almost every fifth inhabitant of Khorog on labor migration, there is a clear need for more knowledge about the implications of this process. The focus of this paper is on what Victoria Lawson calls one of 'the classic migration questions' (Lawson 1998: 49): How are household dynamics affected and transformed by labour migration? Research has been carried out on this topic in other contexts (e.g. by Schafer (2000) for Zimbabwe,



Kaspar (2006) for Nepal, Desai and Banerji (2008) for India and Boehm (2008) for Mexico, Archambault (2010) for Tanzania, Zhang and Fussell (2017) for China). Results of these studies vary, as the cultural production and transformation of household divisions of labour are highly context dependent (Lawson 1998: 50). However, not much, if any, work has been done on this topic in the context of Gorno-Badakhshan, which makes it an important topic of research.

## **Materials and Methods**

The argument presented here is based on fieldwork carried out in Khorog over the course of two weeks during July 2018. Material has been collected through qualitative empirical research based on semi-structured and in-depth qualitative interviews with members of seven households: five women, two men, and one couple. These persons were interviewed two times, which allowed us, as interviewers, to go into more detail on important issues raised in the first round of interviews. The interviews took place at the respondents' workplace, at their personal residences, and in some instances in public spaces. Interviews were translated and transcribed from Shughni and Tajik into English by Muybalikhon Jumakhonov, our research partner from the UCA. The interview transcripts served as the basis for analysis.

Interviewed households practiced different and dynamic types of labour migration strategies to Russia, in turn leading to varying and also dynamic resident household structures and compositions:

- sole male migration (Households A, B, C, E, H);
- sole female migration (unmarried) (Households B, G, H);
- family migration (Households D, E, G, H).

Household and residency situations of our respondents are the following:

- nuclear family households with an absent husband (Households B, C);
- extended family households living in the same house with an absent husband (Household A);
- extended family households living in the same house without anyone absent (Households D, E, G, H).

Only three interviewed persons were single female migrants. These women went on labour migration before they got married, often being followed by their later husband. In our interview sample these are interviewees B, G and H. Four respondents (D, E, G and H) went to Russia with their nuclear families. However, the majority of our interviewees were formerly or are currently affected by the migration of their husbands (A, B, C, E and H). The different strategies led to different household compositions and residence situations during the time of the interviews, which are important for the coherence of the analysis. Two interviewees, both females, lived with their nuclear family but an absent husband in Khorog (B and C). One person, a female spouse, lived in an extended family household with her parents in law while her husband was in Russia for work (A). Half of the interviewees, both female and male, lived in an extended family household without a current absent member, but have been engaged formerly in labour migration to Russia (D, E, G and H).

The analysis of interviews showed that the two concepts of social remittances and empowerment were prominent aspects of migration strategies and consequently form the focus and analysis of this paper.

### ***Anthropological approaches to household***

Households can be defined as “the actual domestic arrangements [...] form[ed] to pool and manage labour, allocate food, money, and other resources, to manage child care, and to transmit property” (Peterson 1994: 90). Households are not static, but rather flexible units that are dynamic and responsive to change, and can always “[re]arrange roles within the household to suit their needs” (ibid.: 91). It is common for households to have one or even more members staying abroad to be able to contribute to the household incomes. These migrants, however, remain part of the household despite not living under the same roof, as they actively and regularly engage in decision making or child upbringing via phone and social media. In fact, migrants are often the most important part of the household as economic unit. This is the case also when long term labour migrants have formed a second household in Russia, even though such examples were not encountered in the interview sample.

With the household as a research unit one has to keep in mind that household boundaries are of analytical nature. Obviously, households are integrated in families, neighbourhoods and broader social, political and economic systems. Thus, a reification of households should not promote the image of households as isolated, clearly distinct entities (ibid.: 93). For the purpose of analysing changes in household roles it is, however, important to arrive at a sensible definition.

Empirical social science methods such as interviews are able to identify details and dynamics within urban households and a means to arrive at a better understanding of womens’ roles within these structures (ibid.: 87). The rationale is to identify how, and what variations occur in household roles and responsibilities when various labour migration strategies are put into place. Attention is directed to the social relations within a household, its dynamics under condition of labour migration, and especially to womens’ roles and contributions.

### ***Social remittances***

Interviews conveyed what has been described by Peggy Levitt as social remittances, i.e. “ideas, behaviours, identities, and social capital that flow from receiving- to sending-country communities,” constituting a “local-level, migration-driven form of cultural diffusion” (Levitt 1998: 926). The flow of social remittances is, however, varying with the degree of the migrants’ exposure to the host society (ibid.: 930). To show how these different levels of contact affect social remittances, Levitt suggests distinguishing between three broad patterns of interaction with the host society: A) recipient observers, who are almost exclusively in contact with other migrants, both at work and during their free time; B) Instrumental adapters whose exposure to the host society is limited to pragmatic reasons; C) Purposeful innovators actively search for and absorb new things, who “creatively add and combine what they take in with their existing ideas and practices and thereby extending their cultural repertoire” (ibid.: 931). This typology is used to show how social remittances influence household roles in Khorog.



## Empowerment

The idea of womens' empowerment through their own migration or by staying at home while their husbands leave has been a prominent feature in debates on labour migration. It has been claimed that male out-migration "empowers women by increasing their role in the family" (Malyuchenko 2015: 10; see also Archambault 2010), while others note how the absence of men actually strengthens the traditional gender ideology and leads to an increase in social control by households, families and communities (de Haan 2006; Desai and Banerji 2008). This ambiguity in the literature can be focused on the situation in Tajikistan. Many interviewees stressed that the Pamiri customs facilitate more egalitarian gender roles that are different and more liberal than those in other parts of Tajikistan. These are described as being extremely conservative and suppressive in the private sphere, despite the promotion of gender equality in the public sphere during the Soviet era (Harris 2004; Kikuta 2016). In contrast, the anthropologist Frank Bliss remarks that "women must be seen as the main losers in the radical changes that took place after 1991. This is, however, not readily admitted in [the] GBAO, as the Pamiris are proud of the equality enjoyed by their women" (Bliss 2006: 327; see also Ishkanian 2003). Empowerment is context specific, and in this research we follow an understanding of the concept that is not only about "the ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied" (Kabeer 2001: 19), but that also involves the ability to influence what choices are on offer (Reeves and Baden 2000: 35).

## Results

Against this background the remainder of this paper closely follows a qualitative content analysis of interview texts that established four major categories derived from a combination of inductive and deductive approaches (Fig. 1).

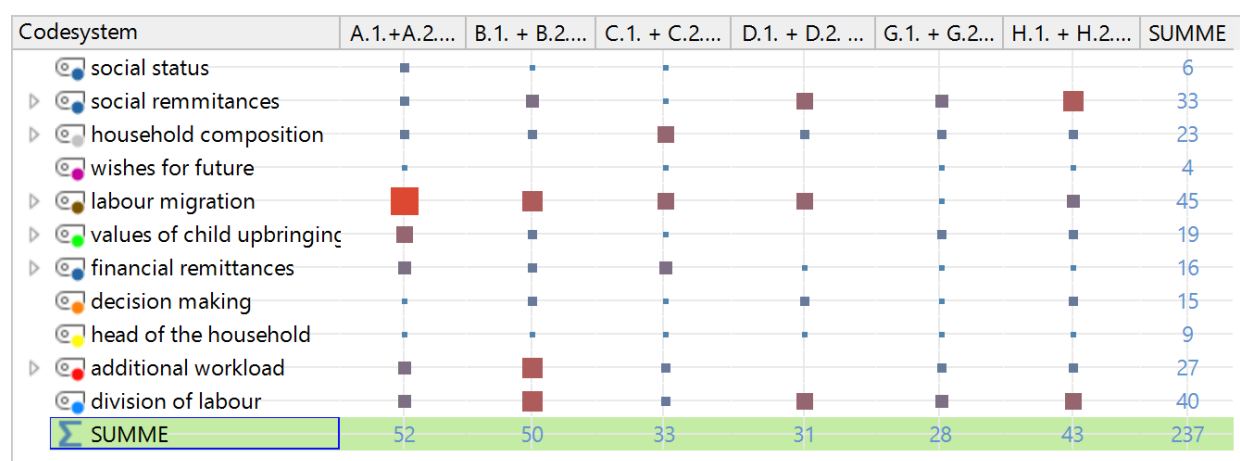


Fig. 1: Coding categories and number of codings.

Source: Jumakhonov, Kessler & Laube 2018 (draft)

## Division of labour patterns in different households

In urban households of Khorog there is a strict gendered division of labour. This means that there is a widespread conception of what work tasks are the responsibility of male and female household members respectively: "The heavy work is for men and the light work is

the responsibility of women" (Household D: Interview 2), or: "Females do not do heavy work" (Household B: Interview 2). Household chores such as preparing food, child caring and child upbringing, doing laundry, cleaning and caring for the parents in law are considered female tasks. Tasks for men included looking after the kitchen garden, chopping firewood and lighting fires, carrying heavy groceries or any kind of construction work. This gendered division of labour is very clear as conceded by a female respondent: "[i]n our culture it is embarrassing to see men washing their clothes" (Household B: Interview 1), and "the kitchen is the place of women" (Household B: Interview 1). Another respondent stated that she is obliged to perform these tasks as her husband "cannot cook and cannot do laundry" (Household H: Interview 2).

Interview partners who live in a nuclear family household and deal with an absent husband made it clear that it is up to the remaining females to do all the male work: "Since I do not have a man at my home right now, I try to do all the work by myself" (Household B: Interview 2). This pattern, however, only appeared in nuclear family households.

There are only very rare variations from this point of view. Just one respondent stated that "[m]y husband helps me with the preparations of meals" (Household D: Interview 1), but "the rest is done by myself" (Household D: Interview 1). Another woman said that in her family "there is no particular division of tasks, [...] we help each other" (Household A: Interview 1). While it remains her responsibility to perform all other emerging house chores there does not appear to be any discontent with this division of labour.

One interviewee however declared not to be satisfied with the prevailing division of labour. In her opinion, "he [her husband] should help, but he does not want to" and adds that "sometimes conflicts" occur about this topic. Ideally "there should be reciprocal help between couples". She is the only respondent who receives help from her son when it comes to female tasks: "[h]e washes dishes, cleans and does laundry". Still "he does not like kitchen work, but I force him to do it" (Household G: Interview 1).

The shape of household structures and compositions appears to be a defining factor for labour migration strategies. Women who have themselves migrated prior to being married did not engage in migration again after the birth of their children. They returned to Khorog to raise their children and/or to take care of their parents in law, as this is also seen as a female obligation, further underlining the wide range of gendered divisions of labour. Only one interviewee with teenage children expressed her wish to go to Russia for work, but her husband would not allow her to come and join him as he thinks she should make sure her children pursue their education properly.

### ***Decision-Making processes***

The oldest male member of a household in Khorog holds the position as head of household. Responsibilities in this respect refer to the management of the household's finances, educating children about social norms and safeguarding the continuation of house construction.

All interviewees who live with adult men in a household state that it is either their husband or their father (in law) who serve as the head of household: "The head of the family are my parents in law, especially my father in law" (Household A: Interview 1); "My husband is the

head of the household" (Household D: Interview 2); "He is the oldest of his brothers, so he is the boss" (Household H: Interview 2). Interview partners who live in nuclear households without an adult male all state that they themselves are now the head of the household: "My husband used to be the head of the household, but in his absence, I am the head of the household" (Household B: Interview 1). In these cases, labour migration induces a clear shift of responsibilities, indicated in turning male-headed to female-headed households. Only one interviewee mentions that there is a discrepancy from the outside to the inside view: "I can say that my husband, [...] is head of households for the people, but, in fact, inside the house it is me" (Household H: Interview 2). Interesting findings emerge when the position of the head of household is contrasted with the process of decision-making. Holding the position of the head of the household does not necessarily come along with having the last word when it comes to decision-making: "In his absence, I am the head of the household. Nevertheless, my husband decides upon the most important issues also when he is not here" (Household B: Interview 2). "He does not allow me to go to Moscow for labour migration. [...] Still, it is me who currently is head of the household" (Household C: Interview 1). "Because my husband is away, whatever he [her father in law] says, we always do it. He gives us different advice on many topics" (Household G: Interview 1).

Three interviewees explained that decision-making processes are handled jointly in their households: "It was mutually decided that my husband engages in labour migration" (Household B: Interview 1). "Whatever we decide, we negotiate and come to one consensus" (Household C: Interview 1). "Everyone says their opinion and we choose the best option" (Household D: Interview 2). These statements make clear that being the head of the household does not always mean to be in charge of the decision-making processes, especially when the person is not the oldest male.

### ***Workload***

In cases of husbands being on labour migration interviewed women were confronted with the need to shoulder additional tasks. This was especially challenging, as at the same time all women were employed in a full-time job to make ends meet.

When living in a nuclear household, this puts a lot of pressure on the women in Khorog. Work activities such as irrigation of their kitchen garden, including the need to fetch water as there is not necessarily a pump or irrigation channel on site, carrying heavy groceries, such as the common 50 kg packs of flour, or collecting firewood were left in the responsibility of the women. A strategy to cope with this additional workload was to utilise kinship networks, neighbours and friends to reduce the workload. In one case, the value of communal work in the process of completing the house construction was stressed. Building materials were bought and food was prepared with the financial remittances sent by the husband, and the labour force was recruited via reciprocal communal help. Relatives also played an essential role in child caring during women's work shifts. In exchange for taking care of her children while at work, one respondent regularly bought food supplies for the related neighbouring household.

In cases where women lived in an extended household, these additional burdens were partly mitigated by other household members: "the work in the kitchen garden and other heavy

work is completed by my father in law [...] and my mother in law supports me by preparing the meals when I come home from work exhausted" (Household A: Interview 1).

Nevertheless, a state of hierarchical household relations that inhibit women remained: "I feel shy and uncomfortable to ask my father in law to do something, so that is why sometimes I do the work by myself" (Household A: Interview 1). Emotional well-being is further affected in nuclear households as "at night my children and I feel lonely sometimes" (Household C: Interview 1).

Independent of household compositions, all interviewees reported of similar constraints due to an increase in their workload. Time to visit own relatives was scarce: "Since I am alone, I cannot visit my mother very often" (Household B: Interview 2); "If my husband would be here, I could visit my mother more often" (Household A: Interview 1). Additionally, women often are forced to miss some important social events: "Sometimes I can not go to a wedding. Even though I get invited, I can not make it there" (Household A: Interview 1). The time they have to spend with their children is less than they would like it to be: "I am not even able to go for a walk with my sons. I cannot spend much of my time with them, which is sad" (Household A: Interview 1).

### ***Social Remittances***

When asking our interviewees on how their own or their husbands' experience of migration to Russia has changed their perspectives on household roles, we were often told that such a change would not occur. The only change people recognised for themselves were reports of different forms of social capital gained, skills that migrants acquired through their jobs which then helped them to either find a job in Khorog, or another, better paying job in Russia. This, however, did not challenge or transform the household roles in any way. Wondering how multiple years of migration would not challenge perceptions of household roles and the division of labour in one or the other way, it soon became clear that most migrants did not come in close contact with Russians whatsoever. One woman reported how her husband is, together with other migrant workers, living in the same construction site he is working at. Another woman said about her time in Russia: "I worked with Tajiks and Uzbeks, [...] I do not think I changed a lot because we worked for more than 10 hours a day, so there was no place for too much thinking [...] and we did not have time to have a chat with anyone" (Household B: Interview 2).

We argue that this narrow window of actual exposure to the Russian society, embedded in a subculture consisting of other migrant workers with comparatively similar cultural backgrounds and almost no free time is limiting the potential for social remittances to change household roles. This pattern arose for two-thirds of the migrants in the households of the interviewees. The other one-third had a higher level of interaction with the receiving society. These migrants were in contact with other Russians on a day to day basis, both at their workplace, as well as in their neighborhoods and talked about their overall migration experience in a more positive manner. One family even took on the Russian citizenship. From members of these households we then received reports of partly changing household roles. This became most obvious in their perception of what roles and tasks their children should fulfill when helping with household chores. The households with the more culturally exposed migrants were the only ones in which male children were supposed to help with chores who



are traditionally received as 'female jobs'. As one interviewee puts it: "I want my sons to help me with cooking, laundry, dishwashing and the like and also they should be able to help their wives one day. It is important" (Household H: Interview 2). However, such changes could also create potential for conflict, especially when the migrants returning with such new ideas are female household members. In both cases the women seem to be the driving force in giving their sons an understanding of such 'female tasks' whilst their husbands were dismissive: "My husband for example did not live in Russia and did not stay with Russians before, so when it comes to do some work, laundry, baking bread, cooking or washing the dishes, he says that in our culture men do not do these chores and he simply does not do them." (Household G: Interview 2)

Another domain in which one migrant who gained social remittances showed a discrepancy in perceptions to the other interviewees concerned help among neighbours. She highlighted how "here in Badakhshan, in Khorog, we care about our neighbours; you need to be a good person for them," which is contrasted with her experience in Russia: "Russian people, how to say, they do not care for their neighbours" (Household H: Interview 2). Referring to this difference she explains how it made her and her husband reject some request of their neighbours in case they did not suit them: "Sometimes you have to say no to your neighbours" (Household H: Interview 2), thereby breaking up normative structures of neighbourliness and community participation in Khorog.

## Discussion

Before interpreting our analysis in regard to social remittances and empowerment, we like to contextualise our findings with relevant literature on Tajikistan and labour migration in Central Asia.

The work of Kikuta showed that the women in the Fergana Valley took over the entire tasks and the division of labour formerly handled by their husbands, now absent in labour migration (Kikuta 2016: 102). In contrast, Khusenova stressed that labour migration leads to a decrease of women in their ascribed fields of work such as the organisation of the household (Khusenova 2013: 370). Our results suggest that all the women who could not count on the help of another male household member take over the responsibilities formerly handled by the absent migrant, leading to an increased workload for them in addition to their reproductive chores. Additionally, there were almost no long-term alterations in perceptions of established divisions of labour, neither in the Fergana Valley nor in our research sample (Kikuta 2016: 102). The only exceptions are provided by the two households with female migrants who engaged in strong exchange with Russian mainstream society at the time of their stay abroad. This experience and the transfer of social remittances led in these cases to a loosening of established gender roles in their respective households.

However, the wider literature on Tajikistan asserts that the majority of labour migration strategies lead to increasing workloads for women as well as the strengthening of traditional gender hierarchies (Hegland 2010: 16). This is supported by our findings, even though no relevant examples that also led to a strengthening of generational hierarchies were encountered (ibid: 20-23).

Most interviewees reported that it is their social network and their wider family who are supportive in mitigating the increasing workload, as is the case elsewhere in Tajikistan (Khusenova 2013: 370). Labour Migration thus leads to a gap in nuclear families to be filled by women's work, and it may also lead to insecurities for those left behind, especially for children who have to deal with missing role models (Hegland 2010: 27). Another effect is the rising number of extended family households in Tajikistan (Khusenova 2013: 370). Such a pattern however does not appear in our sample. Quite in contrast, those respondents who at the time of fieldwork formed part of an extended family household strived to separate and become a nuclear household.

An interesting observation made by Hegland is that women regularly take over the position as head of household, but only as long as there is no other male family member present (Hegland 2013: 20). Nonetheless, she argues that the power of female household heads, when it comes to resource controlling, is minor to the power of a male household head in the same position (*ibid.*: 21). This is also true for Khorog: those female interviewees who acted as household head claimed to not have full power over decision making processes in their households.

A factor that has been stressed in multiple studies conducted in Central Asia is the high number of women in low-paid jobs (Akiner 1997: 272; Kanji 2002: 140; Khusenova 2013: 358). The majority of women who participate in the labour market are underpaid and work jobs that do not fit their qualifications. Among respondents for this study, most had a medium- to higher-level education, being trained as nurses, teachers, meteorologists or psychologists. None of them, however, was working in a job close to their original profession, leaving this potential in human capital underutilised. Bliss adds that educated people may even lose their skills and can not keep up with new technical developments when only carrying out unskilled labour (Bliss 2006: 333).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the concepts of social remittances and empowerment are used to assess interview findings and results from the wider literature.

The aspects discussed above suggest that for migration to have an influence on household gender relations, migrants need to acquire social remittances, i.e. have a certain level of exposure and interaction with their receiving society. This observation is line with Levitt's findings on labour migrants from the Dominican Republic who fall in two major categories: so-called purposeful innovators with a high degree of exposure to the host society and recipient observers with very limited contact to mainstream cultural practices (Levitt 1998: 930-31). Using this distinction, in the Khorog-study two households (G and H) can be seen as purposeful innovators. In both cases, the spouses have been in labour migration together but when returning to Khorog, it was the women whose social remittances changed the cultural pattern of certain procedures in child upbringing. Interestingly, we found that in order to avoid conflict these women did not challenge their ascribed roles and associated tasks in direct discussions with their husbands, but nevertheless they were reflecting about established gender roles and aimed to pass a new understanding about gender relations on to their children. In contrast, women in households without access to social remittances

supported the established assignment of tasks for their children: “I teach my daughters only female skills like cooking, washing, laundry and cleaning the house. Men’s jobs should be done by men” (Household B: Interview 2). As recipient observers, their norms and practises were not challenged due to their limited social engagement with the host society. Their established cultural repertoire worked among other Central Asian migrants, while in cultural terms they were living a life very similar to the one back home. Clearly, in our study only two women who became purpose innovators challenge social ascriptions of gender, while the majority are recipient observers and avoid doing so.

In terms of empowerment for women, it has become clear that male labour migration has very limited effects. It has been argued, that when women become heads of nuclear households they gain more decision-making power (Desai and Banerji 2008). However, in Khorog it is more often the case that absent migrants still make all important decisions via social media or phone, thereby hindering women’s “ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied” (Kabeer 2001: 19). Maybe even more importantly, becoming head of household was not a voluntary choice but acquired by sheer necessity. Empowerment as a means to widen opportunities about life choices is not happening in households affected by male labour migration in Khorog.

Likewise, the idea that taking over male household tasks by women would constitute an empowering effect (Hadi 2001) is not the case in Khorog. Rather, the additional workload is perceived as a burden, and there was no ‘power to’ involved in gaining responsibility in these domains. Again, there was no choice for women. These additional tasks limit women’s ability to take part in important social events such as weddings. Time for child caring and rearing also was reduced. As such, rather than leading to means for empowerment, labour migration and the affiliated increase in workloads for women constrains the spatial and social mobility of women in Khorog. In other contexts, these constraints were interpreted as a moral evaluation of female mobility when remaining without a husband (Reeves 2011), but in Khorog it has clearly to do with the additional burden imposed on women.

It is evident that the experiences of our interview partners point to a variety of ways in which labour migration affects household roles in Khorog. In the wake of the increased workload, social networks, families and neighbours become more important to mitigate the effects. Labour migration thus is a double-edged sword. In economic terms, the remittances sent by migrants represent an increasingly important livelihood ingredient, but managing household affairs in Khorog often leads to difficult situations for women. By no means should the fact that women become nominal heads of household be seen as empowerment. At the same time, the transfer of social remittances leading to progressive changes in gender relations remains the exception rather than the rule.

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## **The UCA as a Catalyst for Regional Development**

### **Abstract**

The concept of universities solely being a centre of research and education has changed throughout the last 70 years. Especially the influence of higher education institutions in structurally weak regions is taking a centre stage in the scientific debate about regional development in the present day. We examine the social and economic impact of the University of Central Asia through its current social and economic connections and as a provider of professional higher education in the mountainous region of Gorno-Badakhshan. Additionally, we seek to draw attention on the impacts the actual construction of such a large-scale project can have on local society and economy. This paper argues that higher education institutions can be a driving factor for social and economic growth and an anchor for knowledge structures in a region that is usually connected to the phenomenon of brain drain.

### **Introduction and theoretical framework**

Concerning their classical duties of research and education, universities have a self-conception of being primarily supra-regional institutions. Nevertheless, most of them have a wide range of connections to the region. Especially since the expansion of higher education in the industrialised countries of the 1960s and 1970s, new universities were established as economic and social pacemakers, specifically in structurally weak regions. In the view of politics and regional planning, these relatively isolated educational institutions were obligated to become institutions with strong social interconnections. The expectations and focus of that time was usually directed on the economic effects. That applies for the scientific debate as well. While Bauer describes how employment and income effects (indirect and direct demand effects) were seen as most relevant (Bauer 1997: 2), Böhret classified eight university-related effects on a region (Böhret 1985: 12). As most important he considered the cultural effect (expansion of cultural activities and socio-cultural climate), the labour market related effect (employment effect), the economic effect (impact on regional income and economic structure) and the infrastructure-related effect (housing market, transportation, etc.). In any case, the economic impact of a university can be striking. It is not only an important employer for academic and technical-administrative staff and a producer of human capital, but also causes direct income effects and indirect employment effects by reason of its demand for goods and services. However, long-term effects, network effects, structural effects, and image effects of universities on the region were neglected in the discussion (Zajontz 2010: 34).

This changed in recent discussions about the role of universities, rooting in the significance that is attributed to knowledge as a source for the wealth of regions and nations in the process of globalisation. Revitalised by the idea of the 'global knowledge society' (Forstorp and Mellström 2018: 8-9) and concepts of knowledge-based development, higher education institutions are again in the centre of consideration (Zajontz 2010: 41). Universities are seen as reservoirs of creativity and innovation whose accomplishments should be targeted to the regional economy and development. In this perspective, a university has three main functions: 1. As research centre it facilitates the production of knowledge, especially in

interaction with regional and external research institutes and companies. 2. As knowledge reservoir it channels the absorption, collection and allocation of existing knowledge, not least for the production of human capital. 3. As institution of regional-development it promotes the exchange of knowledge to trigger regional learning processes (Fritsch et al. 2007: 20).

As such, not the mere existence of institutions and organisations (actors) is decisive for their regional development potential, but rather their ability of knowledge transfer, their degree of interactions by network building and their awareness of being an economic entity. In the words of Boucher, Conway and van der Meer it is "the existence, creation and strengthening of informal and formal linkages, as a set of functioning structures and streams, interactive networks and forums for collaboration [...]" (Boucher, Conway and van der Meer 2003: 887) that promotes the economic development of a region. On that account an increasing importance of interactions on the regional level has been observed (Zajontz 2010: 36). New ways of management and organisational structures are crucial to initiate knowledge-based development processes. Krücken and Meier summarise this process as turning the university into an organisational actor (Krücken and Meier 2006). "By the term 'organizational actor' we try to evoke the image of an integrated, goal-oriented entity that is deliberately choosing its own actions and that can thus be held responsible for what it does" (ibid.: 241). Like most new concepts of modern universities, the 'organizational actor' approach can be traced back to trends in the American higher education sector. Furthermore, the USA deemed to be the reference-system for what is understood as the modern university (ibid.: 242). In addition, the role of universities as source for innovation activities is mainly discussed in the context of North-America, Europe and parts of Asia. They may not be easily transferable to peripheral world regions characterised by a history of long-lasting foreign rule and serious socio-economic problems as is the case in Central Asia. However, innovations are not about genuine world innovations. Dahlmann describes an innovation in the context of less developed countries as "[...] the first use of existing global technology in the domestic setting" (Dahlmann 2006: 2). Innovations also will be defined broadly to include products, processes and new business or organisational models. In this way universities in peripheral global regions have to be seen as potential catalysts for change processes, especially for the economic sector. They can help the local population to develop their skills and their awareness to absorb new ideas and concepts (Schiller 2006: 68).

Against this background of the wider roles of universities and the manifold connections between higher education institutions and development processes, the focus of the present study is inspired by Goldstein, Maier, and Luger (1995). They have identified eight different functions, or outputs, of modern universities that potentially lead to economic development and that we use to analyse our findings: 1. Creation of knowledge; 2. Human-capital creation; 3. Transfer of existing know-how; 4. Technological innovation; 5. Capital investment; 6. Regional leadership; 7. Infrastructure production and 8. Influence on regional milieu.

In focusing on regional development, the concept of 'region' needs to be clarified. The status of regions changed in the globalisation discourse. Regions are declared to be the increasingly relevant space for political, scientific and economic activities, with the

objective to positioning themselves (as sublevel of the national state) in the global (capitalist) world system and to initiate local development processes (Zajontz 2010: 38). Various concepts were developed in this context and many of them focus on knowledge and learning processes to improve the global competitiveness of a region. But what exactly is a region? There is nothing like a single theoretical concept that is generally accepted. In the very different concepts of Blotevogel and Werlen for example, regions are defined as socio-spatial unities formed on the basis of interactions (Blotevogel 1999; Werlen 2007: 197). In the understanding of Koschatzky, regions can be differentiated by the criteria of homogeneity (similar structure), functionality (interregional interdependence) and institutional character (administratively, politically, by planning aspects), whereby hybrid forms are also possible (Koschatzky 2001: 15). We have defined the term region here as functional system, with the city of Khorog being the administrative and political centre and the surrounding rural area and villages as its periphery.

## **Methodology**

This paper is based on empirical fieldwork conducted in Khorog, a city of nearly 30,000 inhabitants and the administrative centre of the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO) (AKF 2002: 18). During the fieldwork, we opted for a qualitative approach pursuing intensive structured and semi-structured interviews in English and Shughni as well as non-participatory observations. We made a short survey on how the local population views the University of Central Asia and the university's facilities in Khorog.

Following this approach, we conducted nearly 40 interviews in English and Shughni with university staff members as well as students, professors, the auditor and the civil engineer of the UCA, and with inhabitants of Dasht - the district of Khorog City located adjacent to the UCA campus that was relocated in the construction process of the university. We also talked to a local member of the office of the Aga Khan Foundation and to an official of the Khorog State University (KSU). To have an insight on the network of higher education institutions we interviewed a spokesperson of the KSU as well. Furthermore, we interviewed contractors and companies that worked with the university in one or another way during and before the construction in 2015. To expand our knowledge on how the UCA as a part of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) impacts on regional development, we also approached the Aga Khan Lycee (AKL) and the School of Professional and Continuing Education (SPCE). Altogether we collected approximately 750 minutes of qualitative interview data and conducted two non-participatory observations as well as a short quantitative survey.

## **The UCA as a catalyst for development in Gorno-Badakhshan**

Findings generated through this methodological approach are presented with reference to the process of physically developing and constructing the UCA, and its manifold material, educational and social functions. This will take into consideration the effects of the construction process and its physical and measurable development factors as well as immaterial aspects such as knowledge generation and transfer in a specific cultural setting.



### *University of Central Asia - one university, three schools*

The AKDN is a network of private development agencies founded by the Aga Khan IV to fulfil his hereditary responsibilities as the leader of the Shia Imami Ismaeli Muslims (AKF 2018a). The network comprises three main development sectors, focusing on economic, social and cultural development. The AKDN employs approximately 80,000 people and works in over 30 countries, mainly in Central Asia, Africa and the Middle East. The annual budget for non-profit development activities is approximately US\$ 950 Mio (AKF 2018b). While the foundation of the network is deeply rooted in a religious system, many branches of the AKDN promote a secular view. This is the case for the UCA project that is part of the social development sector. The UCA consists of the Schools of Arts and Sciences (SAS) located in Naryn (Kyrgyzstan), Khorog (Tajikistan) and Tekeli (Kazakhstan) as shown in Figure 1.

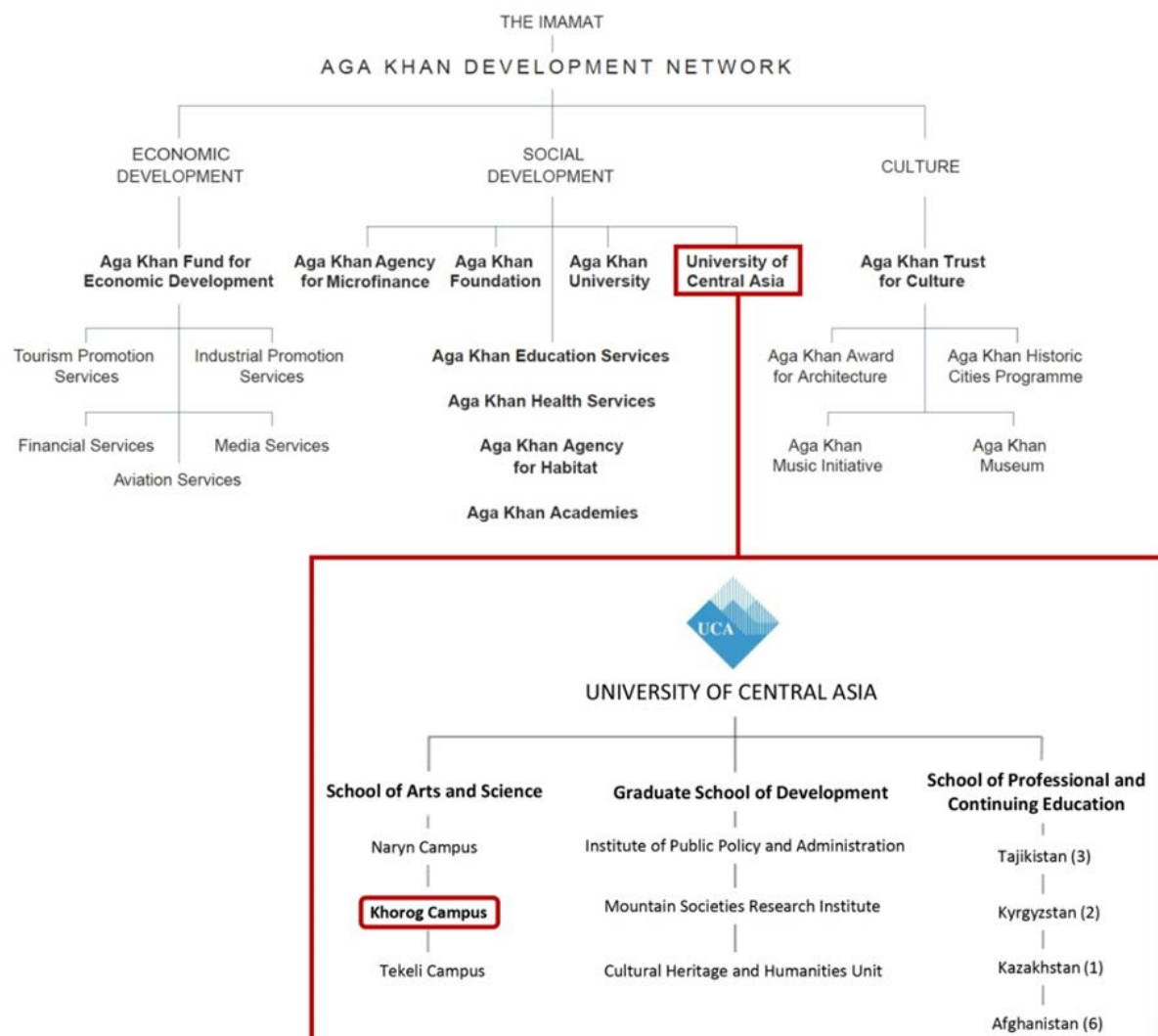


Fig. 1: Institutional structure of the AKDN and the UCA.

Source: Azum & Belling 2019 (draft based on AKF 2019b and UCA 2019c)

It also contains other research institutes and the so called 'Schools of Professional and Continuing Education' (SPCE). The SPCE's agenda is "to strengthen academic inquiry in the region and provide the foundation of knowledge, human resources, research products, and

curricula to support UCA's undergraduate and graduate programming" (AKF 2018c). It strives to improve employment through short term education programmes focussing on professional and vocational qualifications in various fields (AKF 2018c). These efforts are materially represented in Khorog's townscape itself, as the SAS at the campus of the UCA, the SPCE, the AKL, the Jamaat Khana as Ismaeli Centre, a community park, a botanical garden and a hospital, all being fully or partly funded by the AKDN.

### ***Relocation and resettlement of the former village of Dasht***

The UCA campus site of Khorog opened to the broader public and took its first admissions of students in 2016. However, the planning process already started as early as the year 2000, when the President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon and Kharim Aga Khan IV signed and ratified a treaty for the development of a construction site for the UCA (Interview 1). Subsequently, an assembled team of engineers and other experts evaluated possible campus sites. After three years of planning and evaluation, the 86 hectares large area of the former village of Dasht in the vicinity of Khorog was selected by the Aga Khan IV himself, leading to the preparation of the actual construction of the UCA campus. The following land acquisition led to the relocation and/or removal of 126 private houses, 60 subsidiary constructions and 20 government institutions, among them a prison that was rebuild elsewhere with advanced sanitary installations (Interview 1). The governmental 'Technical Inventory Company' (TIC) evaluated and assessed the value of the inhabitant's property such as buildings, subsidiary constructions, but also material and agricultural lands and properties, e.g. trees and crops. Then, by direct command of Aga Khan IV, an additional payment of 45 percent to the already calculated value of the property was given to each individual household that was affected by the relocation process, summing up to US\$ 30,000 in compensational payments for each dweller. As stated by an engineer who had overviewed the construction works from the very beginning, these payments alone represented a major economic windfall and also social turning point for some households in Dasht, leading to the creation of new businesses such as hotels and restaurants. In some cases, the payments were used to start a new life since former Dasht inhabitants used the compensations to migrate to Dushanbe or elsewhere. While some dwellers used these compensational payments for longer term investments, others used them to satisfy individual needs with no sustainable effect (Interview 1).

The UCA respected the wish of the majority of Dasht households to relocate to a nearby site that initially was uninhabitable. In the process the UCA created new infrastructure such as an asphalted road, waterpoints, an electricity grid and street lights to facilitate the relocation process for the affected. In addition to these material compensations, the relocated dwellers of Dasht also complied with the relocation plans out of their religious belief in the Aga Khan as devout Ismailis (Interviews 24 - 32). Also, most respondents from Dasht recognised that the UCA will be a major turning point for the development of the region in some way or the other, and they were hopeful of accessing new opportunities for their children (Interview 27, 30). There were also grievances, however, relating to a perceived unjust distribution of payments between neighbours holding the same size of land, and unfulfilled promises of being recruited at the construction site (Interview 20). One respondent complained that the street provided by the UCA is not usable during winter and that the water supply is not on par with the one they had before (Interview 25), and another

felt disadvantaged because his landholdings were significantly diminished after relocation (Interview 20).

Altogether, the Aga Khan spent approximately US\$ 1.5 Million in form of compensation or rebuilding measures for private households and governmental institutions. Economically, the relocation process of the Dasht community alone had a fairly large impact on the region. Compensational payment for individual households were substantial when compared to the average monthly wage in Khorog of around US\$ 300.

### ***Construction of the UCA Campus***

The resettlement process and clearing of the building site was finished in 2003, but the actual construction of the UCA only started in 2015. After resettling the inhabitants of Dasht, the site had to be levelled. In this process, 160,000 m<sup>2</sup> had to be cleared from rocks which then were used as “base material for roads, buildings, manufacturing of concrete and general use in the construction of the campus” (UCA 2016a). The UCA formally secured a loan in 2015 that was necessary to advance the construction of the UCA campus. While the AKDN committed US\$ 64.4 Million, the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) and the United States Development Finance Institution contributed US\$ 30 Million to complete the first construction phase. The first construction phase was completed in 2017 and included an academic block, a laboratory building, a student-life building, residences, a library, a computer lab as well as athletic facilities, all built according to the highest international standards (AKF 2018d). The lead engineer of the construction asserts that the investment of approximately US\$ 95 Million is actually fairly low when compared to the average costs for such large ventures. This was reportedly only achievable by opting for the agency-construction-management-method (ACM) instead of a general contracting method (GCM). In doing so, the whole construction of the campus was split up into 30 different work packages. This enabled local companies and entrepreneurs to participate in the bidding process and compete with international companies for individual contracts, rather than putting one large international company at the helm, which would have made the construction significantly more expensive (Interview 1). Such price efficiency was not the only reason favouring the ACM, as the entire construction approach was oriented on the facilitation of regional development and the inclusion of a local workforce, thereby “maximising the University’s local economic impact while offering greater control over cash flow and design changes throughout the construction” (UCA 2016b). The inclusion of local industry and workforce did not stop with the ACM, and several measures were taken to ensure that the local sector would profit from the construction. The management of the UCA actively supported local companies in the bidding and construction process through the following procedures:

### ***Ensuring realistic bids from local companies for the work packages***

Local companies were mostly unfamiliar with the concept of bidding for contracts, leading to rather low bids from local entrepreneurs that were economically not sustainable. Through consultation, the UCA made sure that companies made realistic biddings so they could actually profit from the construction process. In at least one case, the management team even wrote the bidding document itself for the local company (Interview 1).

### *Purchase of technical equipment and training of local contractors*

The UCA management team led several workshops in woodworking techniques for local contractors before the actual construction began. Some local companies also did not have the proper technical equipment necessary to ensure a trouble-free construction. At this point the UCA provided loans to local contractors for purchasing needed technical equipment such as a batching plant, a crusher, a scaffold, tipper trucks, concrete trucks, cranes and excavators. Local companies used these loans for technical upgrades and higher competitiveness (Interview 1).

### *Special arrangements with international firms*

International companies were only allowed to bid when signing contracts guaranteeing that at least 80 percent of employees were recruited from a local labour force. This resulted in 850 local people being employed by international companies. These were professionally trained and provided with certificates, so that the local employees could use their new capabilities to access future employment and long-term security. For example, a German Company named 'STO' that focuses on façade work and engineering trained 70 workers of a local company. The company 'Turas' trained local workers in slate fixing. Other professional trainings concentrated on roofing, mechanical and electrical plumbing, asphaltting, stone and wood working and concrete framing. The forced cooperation led to the emergence of an internationally trained workforce in Khorog itself (Interview 1). The international firms also had to pay local taxes in Khorog to boost incomes for the region.

### *Business opportunities for non-construction/building companies*

The construction process also had downstream effects for the local food sector. The caterer for the canteen at the building site prepared about 1,000 meals per day for the entire time of construction. He used mostly locally produced ingredients for cooking and indirectly benefitted the farming sector in the region (Interview 1, 33).

### *Labour conditions and contracts*

Conditions for construction labour were regulated according to social standards. Working day were eight hours, life and health insurance was provided to each worker, as well as clean work clothes and protection equipment, a welfare facility with showers, WC and a canteen which served lunch and dinner (Interview 1).

The locally retained share of the net construction costs were calculated as 31.78 percent for the Central Asian market, and 22.68 percent in the GBAO. As such, the university construction was a driving factor for socio-economic development in the region because the planning process laid special emphasis on the inclusion and development of local companies and a local workforce (Interview 1). Local companies such as 'Khudoyorbek' or 'Pamirstone' increased their total annual turnover tenfold and are now able to compete with international contractors in their respective fields. 'Pamir Energy Service' is now considered as the best mechanical and electrical plumbing contractor in the whole GBAO region. Most of the local companies that worked at the UCA Campus grew in size and advanced economically (Interview 1). The transfer of existing know-how from international companies to local entrepreneurs was one of the driving factors that made this development possible.



### *Empowerment through employment*

Today, the UCA provides a substantial number of diverse job opportunities. The campus is workplace for 126 regular members of staff, out of which 120 are local residents. The operational staff of 90 people is entirely from Khorog and surroundings. In addition, there are 50 temporary positions filled by local employees, and also a significant number of seasonal employment relationships in the gardening section and for regularly needed craftsmen and mechanics (Interview 6). The UCA's working contracts for newly employed regular staff are initially on temporary basis, limited to one year and including a probation period of three month. However, after one year renewed contracts become permanent (Interview 6).

Most current employees were hired in the period between March and December 2017. The staffing followed the rules of 'open recruitments', and all job offers were publicly advertised (Interview 6). Only two respondents holding specialised positions emphasised that this procedure resembled a formal act with a foreseeable outcome (Interview 14, 17). Most interviewed staff members, however, reported about a multilevel application processes of various tests and interviews, including laying open a personal history and current living conditions (Interview 7). It was not easy to find qualified persons for some highly specialised positions, but in general the Human Resource Department had to deal with a large number of applications for advertised positions. It was not uncommon to have a three-digit number of applicants for a single post, all of them invited for the first round of tests. The tests were designed in 'simple English' (Interview 6), as it was decided that a good command of English was an important first criterion for recruitment. The actual working experience in the specific position and a job qualification were other selection criteria.

This procedure of open recruitment and the multilevel selection process pursues the target of transparency to avoid charges of nepotism. Decision-makers were thus enabled to resist social pressures of their kinship networks (Interview 6). Nevertheless, some minor allegations were communicated to the research team in light of the administrative decision to soften employment criteria for some specific departments. This was the case for gardeners and some security men who were employed by the UCA since commencing the construction phase. These groups had to pass the multilevel application process but were not able to speak English properly. However, since the persons concerned were the only breadwinner of their households', exemptions were agreed upon (Interview 6).

It is striking that a high number of labourers who are doing manual and often unskilled work have an academic background (Interview 6, 7, 15). This fact points to the lack of adequate work opportunities in the region (Interview 13), resulting in labour migration as a dominant phenomenon in the GBAO (Hohmann 2013: 158; Kessler et al. in this volume). A high number of interview partners were at some point in their life, sometimes for more than a decade, labour migrants, mostly in Russia (Interview 15). Many interview partners underlined the advantage to be close to their families and friends (Interview 5, 15), but the most important fact encouraging highly educated persons to engage in menial jobs are the comparatively high salaries provided by the UCA also for unskilled labour. While a common school teacher in Khorog earns less than US\$ 100 per month, not even enough to cover the minimum living expenses (Interview 4), a cleaner at the UCA earns nearly three times more (Interview 6).

Additional benefits of working for the UCA are social security measures such as insurance payments, sick-leave payments, pension payments and shift bonuses and holiday payments – by no means a self-evident fact in the region (Interview 6, 15). Equally important, employment at the UCA is bringing along an increased social status as it is “most prestigious place to work in Tajikistan” (Interview 8). This is because the UCA is an AKDN project, and the UCA’s chancellor is the Aga Khan himself. Working for such an institution in an Ismaili dominated region like the GBAO (Hohmann 2013: 158; Olimova and Olimov 2014: 181) provides also religious and emotional value (Interview 7).

The beneficial terms of employment led to increased household security for all sections of the workforce, and led to individual investments in different domains, e.g. financing the education of siblings, marriage decisions, family planning and house construction (Interview 4, 16, 17, 18).

### *Education as a chance for development*

This chapter aims to provide a better understanding of the relation between education and development in the UCA context, and the kind of knowledge production and transfer that takes places on the UCA Campus in Khorog.

Different perspectives on development were expressed during interviews: a general betterment of life (Interview 9); stable socio-economic living conditions (Interview 18); economic growth and the ability to access more opportunities (Interview 19). Aspects of hope and better future perspective were emphasized when talking about the development role of the UCA (Interview 5). Development and education were considered as deeply interconnected, and particularly so in relation to the regional development in Khorog and other Central Asian mountain regions (Interview 19). Education in general is understood as the key for positive change in the region. However, such broad concepts of education go beyond the academic education as provided by the UCA.

It is pertinent to underline that the UCA Campus is only part of a bigger idea, rooted as it is in the various endeavours undertaken by the AKDN. For example, all local students we talked to were graduates of the AKL (Interview 18 - 23), which even provided a special, UCA-supported upgrade programme to prepare students for both the UCA application and studies (Interview 19). Several present staff members were taking up the opportunities provided by the UCA-SPCE for vocational trainings (Interview 3, 11). Instructors were profiting from ‘The Central Asian Faculty Development Program’ and its scholarships, through which the UCA supported potential local educational staff (Interview 3; 4; 5). The approximate goal is after all to have a ratio of 50 percent local, 25 percent regional (Central-Asian) and 25 percent non-regional professors (Interview 3).

An important aspect is the offering of language education by the AKDN educational services (AKS 2019; Interview 3). The UCA and SAS are focused on knowledge transfer in English, understood as the ‘main language’ of both the academic world and global knowledge production. The curricula at UCA are developed in cooperation with Western universities mostly from North-America and Europe, with the University of British Columbia taking on a leading role (AKF 2019a). Nevertheless, contextualization of curricula according to the regional circumstances also takes place (Interview 5).

A member of the teaching staff described the special concept of the UCA (Interview 5): "UCA's key is the multi-campus [...] each campus is almost fully functional and at the same time they are closely integrated. There is student's mobility back and forth, there is faculty mobility and there is staff mobility [...] It's just starting but as it is fully functional, you'll have that". Six five-year major programmes are provided by the UCA, assigned to the three campuses: 'Computer Science' and 'Communications and Media' in Naryn, Kyrgyzstan, 'Engineering Sciences' and 'Business and Management' in Tekeli, Kazakhstan (scheduled opening in 2021), 'Earth and Environmental Sciences' and 'Economics' in Khorog, Tajikistan, (UCA 2019a). The two majors that can be studied in Khorog have been selected in expectation that they convey the most important knowledge for regional development, but also because the Naryn and Tekeli campuses are providing better circumstances for the other majors. In contrast to Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan has a relatively liberal state and Kazakhstan a booming economy.

The integration of the UCA in the community and institutional structures of Khorog also has just begun. The community service is already a firm part for each UCA faculty, the students are expected to do volunteer community work, and some staff members have to spend some working hours for the community. For example, the English and Mathematics faculty gave lectures at the AKL and the KSU, students went outside the town and taught primary students English and the campus chef gave lessons for hygienic preparation and cooking (Interview 4, 14, 22). Moreover, there are guided tours for visitors almost every day, regular sporting events, celebrations to which UCA members can invite friends and family and there is almost always the option to invite guests over during day-time (Interview 5, 20).

However, the UCA Campus area is not generally open for the public. It is surrounded by a fence, supervised by security personnel and its location physically remote in relation to the residential districts of Khorog. Either way, all common people we randomly talked to in Khorog City gave at least neutral, but in most cases a very positive opinion on the UCA. Even our interlocutor at the KSU provided an unexceptional positive estimation of the UCA. Opened in 1992, the chronically underfunded KSU is located in the centre of Khorog, has a much higher number of students than the UCA will ever achieve, and the teaching language is Tajik (Interview 4). KSU officials perceive that great opportunities lie in fruitful cooperation with the UCA (Interview 32).

However, there are some hurdles for increased collaboration. Until autumn 2018, the UCA was waiting for the official affirmation as educational institution by the Tajik government authorities. Although a verbal agreement was given that enabled the university to start its teaching activities, official collaborations with other educational institutions in Khorog were severely limited. After formal authorisation, collaborations will likely start to intensify (Interview 22; 19), possibly resulting in common research and field work about local and regional development opportunities (Interview 5).

The UCA provides modern facilities and conducive surroundings to facilitate study and research. One respondent stated: "Local people say, 'when we enter the UCA we are like in a different part of the world', which is a really really great feeling" (Interview 3). The library is high standard and the equipment comparable to world class Western universities (Interview 4, 5). However, student fees are moderate and the UCA proclaims: "Once a

student is admitted, financial assistance is guaranteed" (UCA 2019b). Annual fees amount to US\$ 8,000 per year, but the UCA provides support by providing grants, interest-free loans and/or scholarships at different levels, considering individual financial backgrounds and academic performances. In light of these different support schemes, students we talked to had to pay annual amounts between US\$ 700 and 1,500. While some mentioned economic strains for their families, all of them emphasised the moderate fees, especially in light of the increased opportunities likely to be gained by graduating at UCA. Almost every interviewed student plans to go abroad for master studies, also because there will be no UCA master programme for these future graduates. Nonetheless, a majority shares the perspective to come back to work in the GBAO or Central Asia (Interview 18; 19; 21).

Even when students go, there will be still multiform connections to the region. And even if not, they would be a shining example for younger students (Interview 5). Concepts of "brain circulation/exchange" (Eich-Krohm 2013: 162) become relevant here, rather than brain drains. The UCA is seen as a symbol of hope and inspiration for local people. Without such inspirations, people would have only the perspective to leave the country or to come to terms with a lack of opportunities (Interview 5).

Future graduates, even when they leave the region, are also seen as potential future financiers of the UCA. At this time, the university is fully dependent on the financial support by the AKF. Such high dependency on external financing is quite normal for most universities. This was also the case for the SPCE in the beginning, which today is nearly self-sufficient by means of course fees and further support provided by graduates and members. One hope is that successful future graduates will support the university by giving endowments. Philanthropists among the Ismaili Community could be potential donors too (Interview 5). While these aspects are difficult to predict, high external support enables the UCA already today to provide scholarships for students not belonging to the socio-economic elite.

A rising number of young people apply for admission to the UCA. In the first year alone, there were 2,500 applicants for 80 student places (Interview 3). As a result, only few local students are going to get the chance to study at the UCA. In spite of the scholarship scheme, access to education remains a question of class affiliation, also in Central Asia (Bulbulov and Niyozov 2013: 155). Arguably, this is true for the UCA in Khorog too, and none of the students we talked to has a poor family background. Universities worldwide are elitist institutions, and the UCA is no exception.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

The study has shown that the UCA may indeed be seen as a driver of economic and social development in the region. Using the eight-tiered framework developed by Goldstein, Maier and Luger (1995), this final chapter elaborates on the different functions the UCA as a modern university may provide for the region.

The UCA is very young and no graduates yet exist. However, the creation of knowledge in both study programmes on the Khorog Campus, 'Economics' and 'Earth and Environmental Science' is aimed to be practice oriented. With enough financial resources, the UCA has a high number of students and academic personnel rooted in the local community. The



possibility of fruitful research activities exists and the UCA can serve as ideal partner for research projects conducted by international scientists.

The creation of human capital and the transfer of existing know-how is most evident through the direct employment that is necessary to run a university, referring to the teaching and admin staff, food providers, gardeners, cleaning staff, security personel and more. The transfer of existing know-how took place on a greater scale between international and local companies during the construction process, and the forced certification enabled local companies to upgrade their businesses not only in size but also in form of producing power and development of hard skills. These companies are now standing on their own ground and benefitted from knowledge transfer and the creation of human capital.

Knowledge transfer and creation of human capital also comes along with teaching activities. Enrolled students are satisfied by the high standard of education which they receive and are very optimistic about their future life. The idea to offer world-standard education seems not exaggerated, and in doing so the UCA follows a model of westernised education. Such orientation towards the modern western universities has been criticized as rooted in modernisation theories (Benz 2014: 17). Still, by respecting regional culture and by aiming to serve the needs and interests of the local population, the UCA strives to absorb and utilise a successful concept for higher education. Admission policies are relatively neutral when it comes to the socio-economic background of the students, but also contributes to reproducing current socio-economic conditions by charging student fees. The UCA is also engaged in wider community services that involves knowledge transfer to community members.

The UCA is filled with modern technological equipment for both teaching and research that is unparalleled in the region. By providing the newest equipment, research and teaching paves the way for innovations which will likely benefit the region. As such, the UCA is a driver for facilitating technological innovation. The UCA also channeled large capital investments for the purpose of furthering business objectives (Kenton 2018). The construction process alone retained millions of US\$ in the region.

The UCA also assumes the role of regional leadership in education, and its reputation in Tajikistan and whole Central Asia is very positive. Being a part of the enormous engagement of the AKDN in the education sector as a whole, the UCA is seen as the peak of a mountain built on a strong fundament. Already now it is perceived as a prestigious place to study and work, and it enhances Khorog's supra-regional reputation.

Built on high investments, backed by the AKDN and accepted by the community and the Tajik State, the UCA has a high local and regional importance and the ability to be a leading institution. At the same time, with its high financial dependency on the AKF the UCA is not a completely independent player.

The production of infrastructure through the UCA is self-evident - building of the campus itself, the construction of a new village and prison site, its associated streets and waterpoints. The AKDN as umbrella organisation has been involved in the production of infrastructure in Khorog also before the emergence of the UCA. Many streets in and out of

Khorog are being maintained by the AKDN, providing a stable road network that plays a crucial role in the supply system of the region.

Institutions of higher education in economically weak countries are often suspected to intensify processes of brain drain (Freytag, Jahnke and Kramer 2015: 88). The example of the UCA is different. Its activities rather facilitate a brain gain, in providing opportunities for local academics to study, teach and do research in Khorog, instead of having to leave the region. The same effect holds true for a majority of local companies.

The campus will be further growing in the future, and planned new construction phases will have further positive employment effects, stimulating local demand for goods and produce.

Although it is too early to make decisive statements about the potential impact the UCA will have in the following years, important pillars for success are already built. Through its affiliation with the AKDN and the Aga Khan it is already deeply incorporated within the social, cultural, economic and infrastructural networks of the region and enjoys an extremely good reputation in the regional context. The UCA itself is aware of its role as a social and economic pacemaker of the region.

The entire approach of the AKDN itself is a model approach for interconnecting local players with international know-how and expertise. We highly recommend a follow up study in the coming years about the impact of the UCA as a higher education institution for furthering development processes in the GBAO.

## List of interlocutors

Interview 1	Resident Project Manager, Construction and Facilities Division of UCA
Interview 2	Staff of Internal Audit of UCA
Interview 3	Coordinator Co-operative Education Programme of UCA
Interviews 4 - 5	Teaching staff of UCA
Interview 6	Staff of Human Resources Office of UCA
Interview 7	Staff of Cleaning Team of UCA
Interview 8	Cleaning Supervisor of UCA
Interview 9	Gardener (regular) of UCA
Interview 10	Gardener (seasonal) of UCA
Interview 11	Staff of Facility Management of UCA
Interview 12	Staff of Sport Facilities of UCA
Interview 13	Staff of Transport Section of UCA
Interviews 14 - 15	Staff of Kitchen Team of UCA
Interview 16	Staff of Maintenance Team of UCA
Interview 17	Maintenance supervisor of UCA
Interviews 18 - 23	UCA students
Interview 24	Farmer from Dasht
Interview 25 - 28	Residents of Upper Dasht
Interview 29	Resident of Dasht
Interviews 30 - 31	Residents of Lower Dasht
Interview 32	Spokesperson of KSU
Interview 33	Local entrepreneur (Caterer supplying the canteen of UCA)

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View of the upper part of Khorog City and the University of Central Asia Campus located above the agglomeration. Photograph taken by Dörre, August 2016



The office of the Pamirs Eco-Cultural Tourism Association (PECTA) in the City Park of Khorog. This non-commercial organisation was established in 2008 with the support of the Mountain Societies Development Support Programme in order to develop the tourism industry in Gorno-Badakhshan. Photograph taken by Dörre, August 2016

## **Microcosm of Development Organisations in Gorno-Badakhshan: Actors, Areas and the Tajik State**

### **Abstract**

The research paper introduces the actors who work in the field of development processes in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO) while trying to explain an omnipresence of organisations in the Pamir Region. By using the 'state fragility' framework of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development we assume that the Tajik state lacks to fulfil its responsibilities towards the people in the GBAO. We examine if government tasks in Tajikistan are adopted by development organisations and present the thematic areas in which the organisations work predominantly. To substantiate the thesis, interviews were conducted with development actors based in the capital of the GBAO, Khorog. An additional literature review analysed the relationship between the fragility of the state and the development processes of the study region.

### **Introduction**

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Tajikistan obtained its independence. The accompanying transformation processes had a major impact on the country, and especially in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO). As part of the Soviet Union, the GBAO received subsidies from Moscow in a system of exchange between Soviet republics that were directed towards "medical and social services, subsidise housing and electricity, support large families, and look the other way at certain kinds of black-market trade" (Kalinovsky 2018: 249). These subsidies were discontinued after the independence of Tajikistan and the resulting scarcity of goods and services heavily affected the livelihoods of the population.

The impact on the GBAO was reinforced by a five year long civil war between 1992 to 1997, in which various religious and regional factions fought for political power in Tajikistan. "Right from the start, the conflict in Tajikistan was mostly a confrontation amongst sub-ethnic groups, which developed in a progression from regional mobilisation to regional domination" (Nourzhanov and Bleuer 2013: 329).<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, "the real issue was the rising power of the excluded regionalist groups (Gharmis and Pamiris) against the communist establishment" (Roy 2007: 140). The independence and following civil war led to various challenges in all areas of people's lives. In a short time, the Soviet supply system collapsed completely along with the economy of the country, resulting in an economic deprivation of a large part of the population. Only through the support of external development actors an impending famine could be averted. Even today, the GBAO is characterised by widespread poverty, structural deficiencies and inadequate infrastructure. The historical conflict between the Tajik central government and the GBAO and the fragility of the state means that sustainable development is a multifaceted challenge: political, economic, social, environmental and in relation to security questions (Breu et al.: 2005: 139).

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed overview see for example Nourzhanov and Bleuer (2013: 277-323) and Steinberg (2011: 126-133).



As a result, in the GBAO the density of development organisations is very high, especially when compared to the size of the population of 2.5 percent of Tajikistan's inhabitants living on 44 percent of the country's surface (ASPRT 2018: 9, 30).

The civil war period made external intervention necessary in order to secure the bare survival of the people of the GBAO. Ever since, deficient measures of national support for the region resulted in a continuation of activities by development organisations.

Against this background, this paper aims to analyse the development actors and activities in the GBAO in its broader historical and institutional context by using the conceptual framework of 'state fragility' developed by Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The OECD-framework serves as a tool to diagnose and measure economic, environmental, political, security-related and societal fragilities in a given context, which in turn can be translated into risk management and coping strategies for affected populations. A central assumption is that the Tajik Government lacks accountability and is defective in fulfilling its responsibilities towards the people in the GBAO. It is this lack of state-led development initiatives in Gorno-Badakhshan that led to the high number of non-governmental development organisations aimed at addressing fragile contexts.

The major development organisation in the region is the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) and its affiliated organisations and institutions. Its widespread activities have manifested itself in the form of local institutions, programmes and actions. The fragility framework when applied in light of the contentious history of the GBAO is helpful to address the shape and functioning of the development microcosm in Khorog, and to explain how the AKDN was able to establish what might be termed a semi-state like structure, something akin to a state within a state.

### **'Development' and 'Fragile States'**

Within Development Geography, 'development' is a contentious term since it "has long been critiqued as a form of neo-colonial intervention, based on Eurocentric concepts and, despite the rhetoric of partnership and participation, driven by vested interests in Europe and North America" (Willis 2014: 584). Over time, the understanding of what 'development' actually is has changed along with transformations of development theories - from the grand theories to post-development and postcolonial approaches. By using the term 'development', it is thus necessary to acknowledge that the term is inherently a normative paradigm, loaded with different concepts and meanings. The term is neither universally definable nor neutral, but dependent on space and time as well as on individual and collective values (Nohlen 2002: 227). A definition is therefore needed that accounts for Tajikistan's Soviet history, and the idea of 'development' that arrived with the collapse of the Soviet Union.<sup>2</sup>

### ***The understanding of 'development' in the context of Tajikistan and Gorno-Badakhshan***

The idea of development and socialist modernisation was essential to the Soviet regime and its plan to achieve social and economic progress in Central Asia. The GBAO represented one

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<sup>2</sup> For an overview about the Soviet Union's experiment in developing a socialist economy in Central Asia and the socialist ideas about the meaning of 'development' in the Soviet Union see Peterson (2011) and Kalinovsky (2018: 67-90).

of the most remote parts of the former USSR and was consequently targeted by development endeavours. The whole region was considered as backward and in need of fundamental While the Eastern part of the GBAO represents a high, arid and sparsely inhabited plateau predominantly useable for animal husbandry, the Western part is characterised by high mountain ranges separated by deep and denser populated river valleys where small-scale agriculture is practiced on small irrigated land plots (Fig. 1). transformations directed by the centralised government of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in Moscow.

Basic infrastructure such as schools, hospitals and communication lines were introduced, which increased the standard of life dramatically. Supplies for the province, such as food, pharmaceuticals, fuel and fertilisers were directly imported from the economic centres of the USSR (Sievers 2003: 6). Accordingly, the GBAO performed extremely well under Soviet rule compared with its neighbouring countries (Bliss 2006: 243). These interventions aiming for modernisation and development led to much higher living standards, a fact that helped the USSR to achieve and retain legitimacy.



Fig. 1: Typical river valley landscape in the Western part of Gorno-Badakhshan.

Photograph taken by Bredigkeit, July 2018

Over the period of Soviet rule, the practice of the USSR providing its population with essential resources turned into a general expectation towards the state as the provider of welfare: "People's belief that the state could and should do things to make life better (provide decent healthcare, education, reliable and cheap electricity) shaped not only what they expected from officials today, but also how they viewed the Soviet legacy and contemporary aid donors" (Kalinovsky 2018: 250). Despite abandoning the communist ideology in 1991, the Tajik population remains deeply influenced by Soviet modernisation efforts and welfare activities.

Many consider the inhabitants of the Pamir region to be 'outsiders', neither real 'Tajiks' nor real Muslims (Kanji 2002: 147). This fits to some degree with local self-awareness, when people in the Pamirs describe themselves as being Ismailis and Pamiris in the first place. "They tend to express antipathy toward Tajiks and make a considerable effort to set themselves apart from that ethnicity" (Steinberg 2011: 139). During the civil war, many Pamiris were involved in the Islamic Democratic Alliance (IRP) that sought to bring political change to Tajikistan.

During the civil war, the state was far away and not able to provide enough goods, especially food, fuel and spare parts. Therefore, "80-90% of the nutritional needs of the region were met through food assistance during the early period of the conflict" (Kevlihan 2016: 423), mostly provided by the AKDN. In 1993, the national government allotted less than ten

percent of the required amounts of food, and only three percent of the needed wheat flour as staple food of the region. "This resulted in a shortfall of more than 75 percent, which put the survival of all people living in GBAO at stake and could only be compensated by external aid" (Bliss 2006: 297).

After the end of the civil war in 1997, Tajikistan adopted social welfare and economic growth as political goals and invited international institutions to help achieving them. "After the "system alternative" offered by the Soviet bloc has faded away, the challenge to the "traditional Western approach" now appears to come from increasing activities of state and non-state actors outside of the largely intergovernmental aid system centred on OECD donors" (Grimm et al. 2009: 7).

In 1997, the upper-limit for self-sufficiency in the GBAO reached 40 percent. According to the Aga Khan Foundation (AKF), the staple food sufficiency has reached nearly 70 percent by 2000 (AKDN 2002: 3). However, in years of unstable weather or drought this level might drop. "This means that [the] GBAO will continue to rely on external aid if it fails in developing any other sectors apart from agriculture" (Bliss, 2006: 297).

According to Bliss, the level of national support in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century was almost as low as it was in the first few years after the civil war. "The government in Dushanbe has certainly not begun to consider that [the] GBAO should be given priority in the distribution of national resources" (ibid.: 297). A cause for the unjust treatment of the GBAO is the perseverance of mutually hostile attitudes and distrust between the government in Dushanbe and the autonomous region. "In the 1980s, the official line of the Tajik leadership denied the Pamiris their cultural uniqueness: "the Pamiris are Tajiks by descent and their languages are nothing more than dialects of Tajik"" (Nourzhanov and Bleuer 2013: 102).

### *The Concept of 'Fragile States' and the Multidimensional OECD-Model*

There is no legal concept that defines 'fragile states', and the use of the term in social and political science is contested, addressing a wide spectrum of questions related with the legitimacy of state institutions in the sense of the Weberian understanding of the state and its authority (Nay 2013: 329). Hence, what is meant by labelling a state as 'fragile' varies strongly from author to author. That the term is used as an equivalent to words like 'weak', 'unstable' or 'failed' confuses the understanding further.

As part of the social contract, the state is expected to deliver certain public goods "ranging from welfare, education, and health to infrastructure, housing, and electricity" (Miller 2013: 63). In return, citizens are expected to follow the rules and laws set by the state. The goods and services delivered by the state can vary, depending on context. In this view, a 'fragile state' lacks the possibility or willingness to provide its citizens with some or all services and goods, and hence can be described as incapable of taking care of the population or some group within the population. The reasons for the lack of service provision can vary, ranging from unwillingness, penalty measures for certain population groups to the chaos of civil war. At the same time, the government as well as the population do not have the capacities to cope with or compensate for associated risks. This is reflected in the OECD model of fragility, a multidimensional approach that is oriented on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).



The organisation describes the framework as an improvement compared to the harmonised lists that merely divides states into ‘fragile’ or ‘non-fragile’ and thereby neglects different shades and nuances of fragility (OECD 2016: 70). The “new OECD framework links fragility with a combination of risks and coping capacities rather than focusing primarily on weak governance” (ibid: 72) in 58 countries classified as ‘fragile’. It is a multidimensional approach measured along five dimensions: economic, environmental, political, security, and societal. Fragility is defined

“as the combination of exposure to risk and insufficient coping capacity of the state, system and/or communities to manage, absorb or mitigate those risks. Fragility can lead to negative outcomes including violence, the breakdown of institutions, displacement, humanitarian crises or other emergencies [...] The calculations reflect a systems-based conceptualisation of fragility. [...] In addition, capacities are measured at state level, as well as incorporating the various formal and informal mechanisms societies can draw upon to cope with negative events and shocks” (ibid.: 22).

The OECD methodology suggests that fragility is (a) multidimensional, (b) measurable in its level of intensity and (c) expressed in different ways, depending on the respective dimension which is considered (OECD 2018a: 265ff). The methodology is based on a two-stage process, using both quantitative and qualitative methods to (first step) examine contexts in each of five dimensions and classify those contexts into groups within each dimension (OECD 2016: 265). For that purpose, the principal component analysis (PCA) is used, “a statistical procedure with the aim to reduce the number of variables in the study to a few (say two or three) that express most of the variation within a sample” with minimal loss of information (Butterfield and Ekembe Ngondi 2016).<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, for all five dimension the PCA is applied to combine the two components ‘risk’ and ‘coping capacity’ into two components per dimension (five dimensions = ten components).<sup>4</sup> ‘Risks’ are defined as hazards, threats and vulnerabilities that are either generated inside the society as well as coming from the outside (other countries or environmental events) (OECD 2016: 149). ‘Coping’ on the other hand outlines capacities that stop a subsequent chain reaction ex-post (Table 1).

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<sup>3</sup> For an introduction into the selection of a subset of variables by using PCA see Dunteman (1989: 51-55).

<sup>4</sup> The complete data and methodology for the 2018 OECD fragility framework can be found on github: <https://github.com/githubIEP/oecd-sfr-2018>. For an exact listing with the contribution and correlation of each variable see: [https://github.com/githubIEP/oecd-sfr-2018/blob/master/data\\_out/dimensional%20pca%20contributions.csv](https://github.com/githubIEP/oecd-sfr-2018/blob/master/data_out/dimensional%20pca%20contributions.csv)

Table 1: Examples for risks and coping capacities

Dimension	Description	Examples for risks	Examples for coping capacities
<b>Economic</b>	Fragility in the economic sector can be ascribed to a weakness in the economic foundations of a state as well as the human capital that leads to vulnerability.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ strong aid dependency</li> <li>→ strong dependence on resource rent</li> <li>→ high number of unemployed youths</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ good education</li> <li>→ high number of citizens in labour force</li> <li>→ strong regulatory ability of government</li> </ul>
<b>Environmental</b>	Fragility in the environmental sector is the vulnerability to environmental, health and climatic risks that have an effect on the lives and livelihood of the citizens.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ strong exposure to natural disaster</li> <li>→ poor quality of the air</li> <li>→ lack of sanitation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ strong civil society</li> <li>→ food security</li> <li>→ effective government that provides a high quality of public services</li> </ul>
<b>Political</b>	Political fragility is vulnerability to risks related to the political processes, decisions and events.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ state-perpetrated violence (e.g. assassinations)</li> <li>→ high degree of corruption</li> <li>→ long regime persistence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ strong government accountability</li> <li>→ secured independence of judiciary</li> <li>→ decentralised elections</li> </ul>
<b>Security</b>	Fragility in the security sector can be ascribed to both political and social violence.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ high risk of violent conflict</li> <li>→ high homicide rate</li> <li>→ strong impact of terrorism</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ effective control by the state over the whole territory</li> <li>→ high number of police officers and armed security</li> <li>→ presence of alliance with other states</li> </ul>
<b>Societal</b>	Societal fragility is the vulnerability to risks resulting from inequalities - vertical and horizontal.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ strong gender inequality</li> <li>→ high urban population growth</li> <li>→ high number of refugees</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ strong civil society</li> <li>→ secure and effective access to justice</li> <li>→ state-society accountability</li> </ul>

Table based on OECD 2016: 73; OECD 2018a: 268-277. The information provided in this table represents a compilation of examples for risks and coping strategies presented in the reports.

Subsequently, the acquired information is aggregated to arrive at an overall picture of fragility (OECD 2018a: 265). In the 'States of Fragility Framework 2018' each dimension of a respective state is classified on a scale ranging from minor to severe fragility.

Out of 172 analysed countries, only the 85 that are classified as 'fragile' were included in the report (Hammond 2018).

As an analytical tool, the OECD framework understands 'fragility' as a manifestation of an exposure to risk by insufficient coping capacities. The goal is to outline the degree of fragility in each context depending on the dimension (Fig. 2) instead of numerical listing the countries since it "has become increasingly incongruent with the growing recognition that fragility is a multidimensional issue" (OECD 2016: 160).

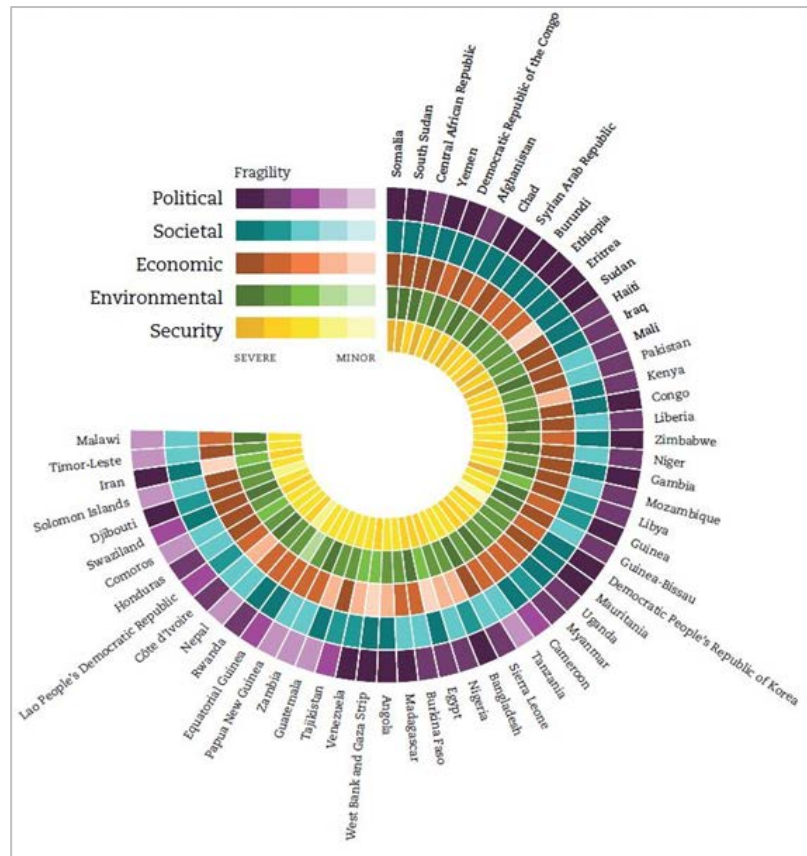


Fig. 2: States of Fragility Framework 2018.  
Source: OECD 2018b

### *The relation between the GBAO and the central government*

Many people in the GBAO still harbour a widespread insecurity and mistrust towards the central government. Violent conflicts occurred in Khorog in 2012 when up to 60 people got killed in fightings between supporters of local strongmen and Tajik security forces (EIU 2014). Although the civil war is over, the aftermath "continues to damage a state's security environment even after organised political violence has stopped" (Miller 2013: 58).

The lack of effective governmental development programmes is especially visible in the GBAO where many people heavily depend on external aid and resources. This is reflected in national poverty statistics, claiming that 39 percent of the population in the GBAO live in conditions of poverty (The World Bank 2018a: 14)<sup>5</sup>. This makes the region one of the poorest in Tajikistan (Fig. 3).

The contentious relationship with the Tajik state also became apparent during fieldwork. Most interview partners were not willing to judge the work of the central government in the GBAO, some even outrightly refusing to talk about the state at all, conceding only there is always a degree of cooperation and negotiation involved between any development actor and Tajik government authorities. The state and its intelligence agencies seek to control

<sup>5</sup> The World Bank defines people who subsist on less than US\$ 3.10 as living in poverty. If individuals have less than US\$ 1.90 a day they suffer from extreme poverty (The World Bank 2018a: xi, 13).

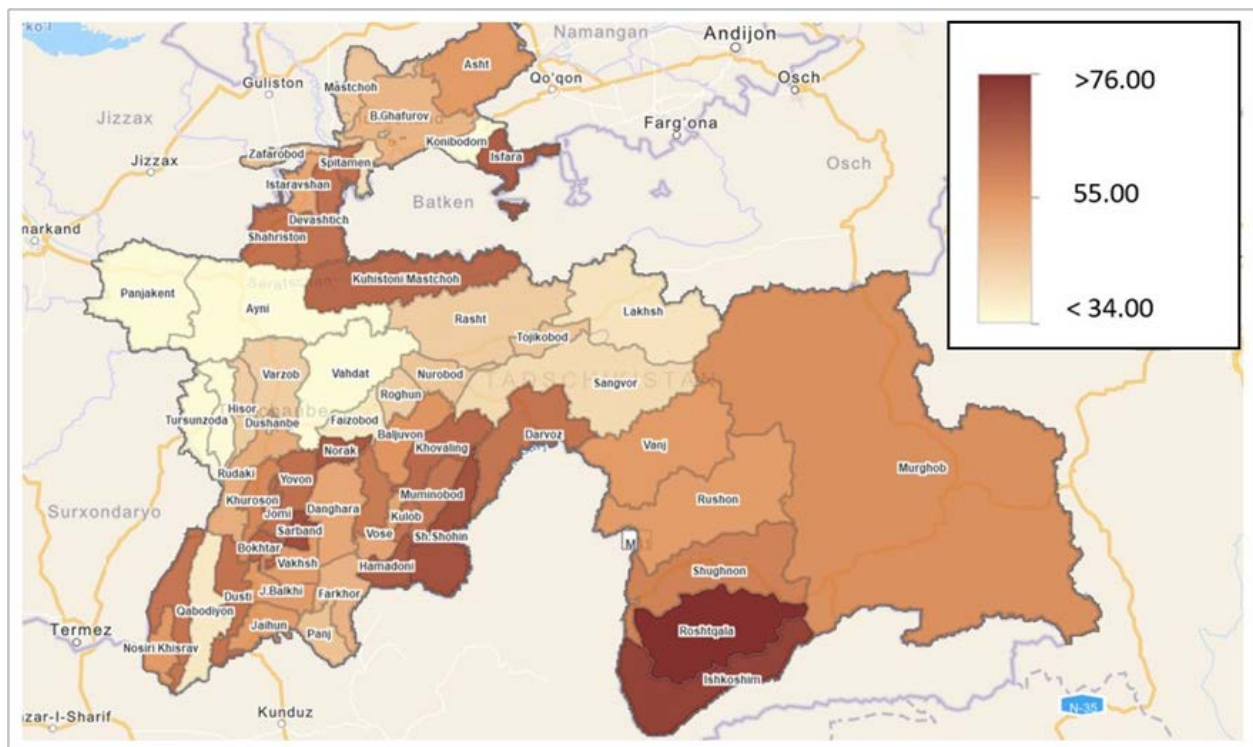


Fig. 3: Poverty distribution map of Tajikistan (in percent of the population).

Source: Bredigkeit & Vipavc 2018 (draft based on The World Bank 2016)

everything and everywhere. According to respondents, authorities have already shut down projects such as micro-credit-banks and international development programmes in the past.

The effect of insufficient state-led development initiatives is an institutional vacuum in the region. This vacuum has been partly filled by national and international organisations that took over spaces of governance and assumed capacities that would nominally be in the responsibility of the government. While this could potentially lead to a destabilising situation, Kevlihan claims that “contradictory to other analysis of aid and conflict, where it is stated that the engagement of international aid actors deepens the conflict in situations of civil war, the amount of organisations taking over the responsibilities of the government strengthened the peace and stability between Dushanbe and GBAO” (Kevlihan 2016: 423-424).

## Methodology

For our project we focused on development organisations based in Khorog, distinguished as national and international, as well as governmental and non-governmental institutions. Altogether 20 open interviews with representatives of the various organisations were conducted. Subjects addressed in these interviews were the means, strategies and problematic issues of project implementation, and how the organisations cope with risks perceived and associated with the OECD assessment of Tajikistan and the GBAO as fragile contexts. We have divided the existing development projects carried out by these organisations in the GBAO into different thematic areas of activity (Tables 2 and 3).



**Table 2: Overview: organisations present in Khorog and thematic areas of activity**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Accelerate Prosperity (AP)			x	x				x			
Aga Khan Foundation (AKF)	x		x	x		x	x		x		
Aga Khan Early Childhood Development (ECD)				x		x			x		
Aga Khan Habitat (AKH) (AKH)		x			x						
Aga Khan Education Service (ES)				x					x		
Aga Khan Health Service (HS)				x		x					x
American Space (AS)				x							
Camp Tabiat (CT)		x	x		x						
Center Nur (CN)				x		x					
Gesellschaft fuer Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH (GIZ)	x		x				x				
International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)						x			x		
International Organization for Migration (IOM)	x		x	x					x	x	x
Madina Microfinance (MM)								x			
Madina Public Organisation (MPO)			x	x		x					
Mountain Societies Development Support Programme (MSDSP)	x		x		x		x	x	x		x
Microfinance Bank (MB)			x				x	x			
Operation Mercy (OM)	x		x	x		x					x
Pamir Eco-Cultural Tourism Association (PECTA)			x	x	x				x	x	
United States Agency for International Development (USAID)	x			x							x
World Food Programme (WFP)		x				x	x				

Fields of activity: 1 Agriculture; 2 Disaster Relief; 3 Economic Activity; 4 Education; 5 Environment; 6 Health; 7 Infrastructure; 8 (Micro)Finance; 9 Security/Peace/Democracy/Participation; 10 Tourism; 11: Women. This classification is based on information from the interviews with representatives of the development organisations active in Gorno-Badakhshan.

The interviews were mainly conducted with the representatives or executive directors of the respective company, organisation or bank. Furthermore, we visited a peri-urban village to get direct insights into projet implementation and the inclusion of the population. The resulting case study of participatory and community-based joint local development planning in the village of Khidorjev seeks to demonstrate how a community-based approach can strengthen coping mechanisms in order to deal with multidimensional risks in a fragile environment through the establishment of a village organisation.

Table 3: Overview of the projects in Gorno-Badakhshan identified by the authors

Area of activity	Specific topic
<b>Agriculture</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Food processing</li> <li>- Wood processing</li> <li>- Beekeeping</li> <li>- Fruit drying</li> <li>- Juice production</li> <li>- Building greenhouses</li> <li>- Tree management</li> <li>- Yak wool processing</li> <li>- Mushroom growing</li> <li>- Providing of food in remote areas</li> <li>- Providing school meals</li> <li>- Agricultural management</li> <li>- Innovative technologies</li> <li>- Extension services (alternative energy, sustainable land management, training in modern technologies)</li> <li>- Improvement of resilience through terrace construction, planting (erosion), riverbank stabilisation</li> </ul>
<b>Disaster Relief</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Food supply</li> <li>- Repair of houses, waterpipes and roads in case of hazard</li> </ul>
<b>Economic Activity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Offer (further) training/education</li> <li>- Milk processing/Cheese production</li> <li>- Support local businesses</li> <li>- Expansion of economic activities</li> <li>- Improve Conditions for business creation</li> <li>- Production small carpets for Tourists, souvenirs</li> <li>- Food processing</li> <li>- Wood processing</li> <li>- Beekeeping</li> <li>- Training: Homestay</li> <li>- Dry fruit production</li> <li>- Juice production</li> <li>- Building greenhouses</li> <li>- Pasture management</li> <li>- Tourism development (brings jobs)</li> <li>- Support local businesses with microcredits</li> <li>- Support small-medium businesses (SMI)</li> <li>- Marketing</li> <li>- Cross border trade</li> <li>- Training in modern technologies</li> <li>- Helping returning migrants open their own business</li> <li>- Support start-ups</li> <li>- Business training</li> </ul>
<b>Education</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Train people in health sector</li> <li>- Supporting young people in learning English (with book, DVD's, Clubs)</li> <li>- Provide children with internet access</li> <li>- Outreach programme (inform the rural population about the offer)</li> <li>- Invite journalists to inform others about GBAO</li> <li>- Intercultural tourism training</li> <li>- Training teachers and parents to work with disabled people/children</li> <li>- First aid training</li> <li>- Quality education</li> <li>- Training Teachers and school managers</li> <li>- Training people for early childhood development</li> <li>- Training in the rights of children</li> <li>- Support the role of the youth in leading</li> <li>- Business trainings</li> <li>- Day School (Aga Khan Lycee) with high standard education</li> <li>- Live skills programme</li> <li>- Early Childhood Development</li> <li>- Scholarship for top performing students</li> </ul>

<b>Environment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Climate change adaptation</li> <li>- Soil conservation</li> <li>- Sustainable natural resource management</li> <li>- Pasture management</li> <li>- Joint forest management</li> <li>- Sustainable tourism</li> <li>- Resource management</li> <li>- Sustainable, reliable energies</li> <li>- Terrace building</li> <li>- Planting (erosion)</li> <li>- Riverbank</li> </ul>
<b>Health</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Community health programme (secure the access to medicine and treatment)</li> <li>- Training: Hygiene (e.g. hand washing for kids)</li> <li>- Construction Hospital and dental clinic</li> <li>- Community based financing programme (health financing)</li> <li>- Afghan Soldier Treatment</li> <li>- Training: Nurses</li> <li>- Psychology (e.g. Families of missing persons)</li> <li>- Medical support</li> <li>- Technical support for disabled people</li> <li>- Training: First Aid</li> <li>- Training: health promoter</li> <li>- Improving health service in rural areas</li> <li>- Rehabilitation centre</li> <li>- Training: Teachers and parents to work with disabled children</li> </ul>
<b>Infrastructure</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Irrigation Channel</li> <li>- (Drinking) water supply</li> <li>- Building bridges, routes</li> <li>- Stabilisation of infrastructure (in case of hazard)</li> </ul>
<b>(Micro)finance</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Health credit for vulnerable people</li> <li>- Infrastructure Credit</li> <li>- Fast Credits (within 30 minutes): up to 3,000 Somoni (25 percent or 36 percent)</li> <li>- Agricultural Credits: up to 80,000 Somoni (10 percent)</li> <li>- Seed/Fertiliser Credit: 10 percent</li> <li>- Start-up Credit: up to 50,000 Somoni</li> <li>- Consumer Needs Credit: up to 10,000 Somoni (25 percent or 36 percent)</li> <li>- Reduce Poverty</li> <li>- Developing local business</li> <li>- Provide bank service (in remote areas)</li> <li>- Improving access to microcredits</li> </ul>
<b>Security/ Peace/ Democracy/ Participation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Cross border programme</li> <li>- Treatment of Afghan Soldiers</li> <li>- Border management (support cross border business; markets)</li> <li>- Capacity building for military staff (e.g. communication)</li> <li>- Prevent resource conflicts</li> <li>- Whole community will benefit (bottom-up)</li> <li>- Support cross border relations for tourists</li> <li>- Reestablishment of family links between detainees and their relatives</li> <li>- Participatory governance - community-based planning, village organisation system (Mahalla)</li> <li>- Training: Children Rights</li> <li>- Breaking up stereotypes throughout team building (University students)</li> </ul>
<b>Tourism</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Training: Homestay Skills</li> <li>- Invite journalists to attract more tourists</li> <li>- Souvenir Production</li> <li>- Training: What do Tourists like?</li> <li>- Promote Regions as tourist destinations</li> <li>- Promote cultural understanding</li> <li>- Support cross border relations for tourists</li> <li>- Establishment of general standards (e.g. hygiene of hot springs)</li> </ul>
<b>Women</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Empowerment in Agriculture and Tourism (e.g. drive tractor, use machines/technologies)</li> <li>- Increase health service for women</li> <li>- Training: Health Education to help families and neighbours</li> <li>- Women resource centre (domestic violence; legal &amp; psychology help)</li> </ul>

This classification is based on information from the interviews with representatives of the development organisations active in Gorno-Badakhshan.

### *Limitations of this paper*

China is described as the most important donor for Tajikistan. However, there “is no vision of inclusion or social transformation. Chinese aid is about Beijing’s economic interests and its desire for stability in the region” (Kalinovsky 2018: 254). Before and during our stay in Khorog, we could not establish any contact or even find out if there are Chinese development actors situated in the city. As such, we mainly focused on western donors and agencies, as well as organisations and programmes affiliated with the AKDN. We followed a three-step approach by first identifying development actors, then exploring their areas of activity and their cooperation and interactions with other actors. The paper can not claim to account for a complete overview of actors but is focused on the microcosm of the AKDN and other actors located in western discourse. Another limiting factor is that our research was conducted in Khorog and its immediate surroundings only. Hence the analysis just includes actors with a representation in Khorog and precludes those without an office in Khorog (e.g. the Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development ACTED<sup>6</sup>). However, all interviewed organisations have projects in different districts in Gorno-Badakhshan.

### *Development Actors in Khorog*

We held interviews with representatives of twenty national and international organisations including governmental and non-governmental institutions. The AKDN forms the umbrella structure for several organisations present in Khorog and is the most visible international development institution in the region targeting different spheres ranging from economic and social development to education, emergency relief and environmental protection, amongst others. Table 4 shows the number of

**Table 4: Number of organisations active in the seven districts of Gorno-Badakhshan**

Name of district	Number of organisations active in the district
Darvoz	13
Vanj	14
Rushon	13
Shughnon	20
Roshtqal’a	14
Ishkoshim	13
Murghab	16

development organisations active in the seven districts of Gorno-Badakhshan. The most important development actor in the region is the AKDN (Fig. 4). The network is formed by a group of private development agencies established by the Aga Khan IV, 49th spiritual leader of the world’s 15 million Ismaili Muslims. Seen as living proof of god’s existence (*hujjat*), the Aga Khan inhabits a special role that combines religious authority with political legitimacy. However, this should not be confused with legitimate political power (Mohammad Poor 2014: 7ff). While the Ismaili belief is mentioned in the public material about the work of the AKDN, it is as clearly expressed that the programmes carried out by the multiple branches of the network are faith-inspired rather than faith-based. Ismaili religious orientation and a culture of volunteerism advertising the obligation to help socially and economically disadvantaged people is paired with the emphasis on development and made the network one of the world’s largest private development agencies (Ruthven 2011: 189ff). The cluster of AKDN institutions is active in more than 30 countries in the world, with an annual budget of US \$ 950 million (2018). The network has built a good reputation over the last decades through highly effective programmes (Karim 2014: 153).

<sup>6</sup> For more information check: <https://www.acted.org/en/countries/tajikistan/>



## Areas of development intervention

The main areas of development as compiled in Table 4 form the structure for the following brief synopsis of activities in the region. The five dimensions of the OECD 'fragile statehood framework' are addressed throughout.

### *Agriculture*

During the Soviet times, about 90 percent of consumer goods were imported from other republics and local self-sufficiency in agricultural production was reduced to a minimum. In 1993, the Pamir Relief and Development Programme (precursor of the MSDSP) initiated negotiations with the government with the aim to privatise and distribute landholdings that were not used by state farms. Eventually, the government privatised land rights for certain areas in the GBAO and farmers started working with the MSDSP, leading to an increase in agricultural production in different municipalities (Middleton 2016: 258-259).

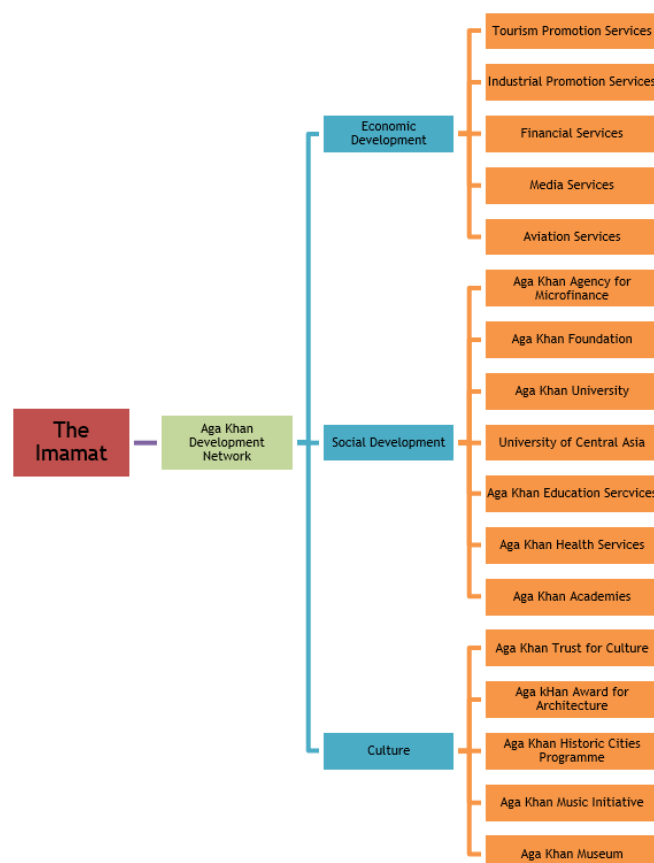


Fig. 4: AKDN organisational chart.

Source: Vipavc 2018 (draft based on AKFT 2018: 27)

The short growing season in the Pamirs represented a bottleneck for achieving higher rates of self-sufficiency for food security, and because of the lack of adequate storage and processing facilities, significant shares of the yield were in danger of getting lost. Today, however, even a temporary oversupply with certain agricultural products can be sometimes observed. The major problem today is seemingly not one of agricultural production capacities but of detrimental market conditions characterized by low local demand and very limited export opportunities. This is why development agencies started projects aimed at increasing processing technologies such as fruit drying and juice production, and promoted agricultural innovations such as the construction of greenhouses. Against the background of the global sustainability narrative, projects in sustainable land management and agricultural extension services were implemented. Additionally, agrotechnological measures for both the prevention and mitigation of disasters like debris flows and soil erosion were applied, including the construction of terraces and the planting of trees for both slope and riverbank stabilisation.

### *Disaster Relief Help*

Tajikistan and especially the GBAO are regularly affected by natural disasters and extreme weather events. "Due to the knowledge gap on climate-glacier interactions [...], it is difficult to predict hazards triggered by extreme weather events, like flash-floods, landslides, and glacial lake outburst floods (GLOF)" (Xenarios et al. 2018: 9). The most frequent hazards are floods and mudslides, with 85 percent of Tajikistan's surface threatened by mudflows

(Barbone et al. 2010: 6). These disasters commonly occur in mountainous regions, sometimes destroying whole villages, important infrastructure and damaging the local economy. This disrupts everyday life in a manner “where local resources cannot handle the demands of the situation” (Ireni Saban 2014: 15 in accord with Quarantelli 2001: 332ff). Less frequent but devastating are droughts, rainstorms, snowstorms, windstorms and avalanches (Xenarios et al. 2018: 9). As a result of the unpredictability of such events, one of the main development activities is the preparation of the local population for emergency cases.

### ***Economic Activities***

Supporting local economies is the most prominent development activity, with more than half of organisations in Khorog running at least one project in this broad domain. Interviews findings conform to the OECD assessment of Tajikistan experiencing severe fragility in the economic dimension. At the same time, economic development was described as the sphere with the most development potential in the GBAO. Development professionals explained the reasons for this fragility in different ways.

The Soviet era was seen as an explanation for the persistent economic weakness of the GBAO. Because there was a continuous external supply during the Soviet time, the population of Gorno-Badakhshan had little experience in establishing their own businesses. One interview partner stated: “Thinking economically and plan in accordance was unlearned by the Pamiris during the Soviet era”. Hence, the promotion of local businesses through different measures ranging from skill training to start-up consultation and providing financial assistance is seen as an important driver for the sustainable development of the area. Furthermore, the importance of creating new job opportunities and strengthen economic activity in the GBAO was repeatedly emphasised.

Gorno-Badakhshan has the highest official unemployment rate in Tajikistan with 6.8 percent, compared to 2.3 percent in the whole of Tajikistan (The World Bank 2018b: 7). The rate of unregistered unemployment is however substantially higher. Along with a general lack of financial resources this results in an extremely high number of people emigrating to work abroad, mainly to Russia. Tajikistan is the most remittance-dependent economy worldwide (BS 2018: 35), with remittances taking a share of 40 percent of Tajikistan’s GDP (The World Bank 2018a: x).

Much development work is directed towards the facilitation of cross-border trade with Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan and China. Interview partners emphasised the reestablishment of close economic relations with the border region of Afghanistan. This includes the construction of cross-border bridges, the expansion of the road networks, the development of localised markets and trading places as well as the export of hydroelectric energy across the border. These programmes led to an increasing exchange of goods and knowledge.

### ***Education***

Another main area of interest for development agencies is education. There are AKDN-founded educational institutions such as the Aga Khan Lycee (AKL), the University of Central Asia (UCA) and the School of Professional and Continuing Education (SPCE). The focus is on educational training for people of every age. Activities include early childhood programmes, school education as well as skill training for adults engaged in manual work, health or social

sectors. However, there are also educational projects that are not promoted by the AKDN-related agencies and organisations that pursue the similar goals. In either case, the idea to facilitate education for development is that the local population should be enabled to drive the development of the country without having to rely on external donors or expertise.

### ***Environment***

The idea of sustainable development today serves as a comprehensive model of development cooperation, with the aim to enable ecological management, environmental protection, resource conservation, social justice and economic efficiency. The agencies in Khorog that engage in the fields of environmental protection and sustainable development initiate projects dealing with climate change adaptation, soil conservation, sustainable natural resource management or sustainable tourism.

### ***Health***

New health facilities such as a dentist clinic, a new hospital and a diagnostic centre are currently constructed along with training programmes for medical staff. The latter aspect addresses one of the main problems in the health sector that is suffering from a lack of educated and skilled employees. Limited adequate health services in remote areas are addressed through rural community health trainings. Target group are women in particular, who are trained to provide basic health service to family and neighbours, complemented by hygiene courses for children and educational programmes for pregnant women.

### ***Infrastructure***

Infrastructure projects aim at the construction of bridges, the repair of irrigation channels and the maintenance of drinking water supply systems. These activities are essential for integrated development as they are closely linked to food security, health and economic development that all depend on functioning infrastructures.

### ***(Micro)Finance***

Micro Finance Institutions (MFIs) make financial services available to small private enterprises and households. Small businesses as well as private persons can borrow small amounts of money, albeit with high interest rates. Until recently no microfinance programme existed in the GBAO. In cooperation with the AKDN the First MicroFinance Bank - Tajikistan (FMFB-T) was established in 2003 and started operating in 2004. The programme facilitates access to and use of formal financial services. However, all credits - except agricultural credits with ten percent interest rate - have high interest between 24 and 35 percent, and under these profit-oriented procedures its effects as a method to facilitate economic development seems doubtful. Background checks shall safeguard that "loans are only granted to people with sustainable income or a business, so nobody ends up in debt", as an interview partner said. A more accessible approach to cash money is provided through the work of community-based saving groups that have been established by the MSDSP in 2010 and that today function independently of external intervention. Its most popular form is the Gaja-system functioning at the village-level, but also in certain urban neighbourhoods of Khorog.

### ***Security/Peace/Democracy/Participation***

In development policy discussions and practical development cooperation there is a debate about the connection between participative processes and the democratic rule of law. Projects that focus on the issues of security, crisis prevention, peace building and the promotion of democracy refer to cross border and border management programmes, establishing participatory governance through community-based planning, establishing village councils to facilitate local governance systems and the prevention of resource conflicts.

### ***Tourism***

Tourism is seen as one of the most promising sectors for the economic development of the GBAO. The main task is to develop a tourist friendly environment without losing authenticity, and some organisations are active in promoting the local tourism industry through consultations, providing maps and other materials and selling local handicraft items to foreign tourists. The community-based tourism programme that is highly successful in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan has also started in the GBAO, but there remains room for improvement.

### ***Women***

It can be observed that in Gorno-Badakhshan the share of women in labour force is higher than in the rest of Tajikistan (Middleton 2016: 20).

This is supported by development initiatives, underlined by the belief that such initiatives are conducive to empowering women in the GBAO. Projects focus on women in low-income households, and women receive cash transfers needed to take advantage of prenatal care, trainings on nutrition and hygiene, as well supporting their children's school attendance and health checks.

This very general overview gives an idea of the wide range of development efforts taking place in the GBAO. The fact that the AKDN is the only development actor that has a presence in all these thematic areas serves as an indicator for its role in substituting of governmental responsibilities since the civil war. "In the mountains of Tajikistan [...], the Ismaili global assemblage constitutes an administrative and symbolic entity in many ways more significant than the state itself. The implications for sovereignty and citizenship are significant" (Steinberg 2011: 131).

### ***Tajikistan as a fragile state***

Tajikistan has achieved huge improvements since the end of the civil war in 1997. According to the World Bank, the country achieved a rapid poverty reduction over the last two decades, with 'extreme poverty' falling from 54 percent in 1999 to five percent in 2015 ('poverty' as defined by the Tajik state fell from 73 percent in 2003 to 31 percent in 2015), although the process has slowed down over the last years (The World Bank 2018: xi) - with strong seasonal fluctuations as well as severe differences between rural and urban areas. Even though poverty declines and per capita incomes rise, the whole country is highly dependent on the economy of Russia, being "the most remittance-dependent economy in the world" (BS 2018: 4). Another problematic factor is widespread bribery, as perceived by a programme manager of an NGO in Khorog: "[it] is everywhere, at every level in every institution."

According to the OECD, Tajikistan worsened in four out of five fragility dimensions between 2016 and 2018 (Fig. 5). “However, deterioration was particularly apparent in the security [...] dimensions. The decline in the security dimension was the most obvious, with risks associated with terrorism and violent conflicts having increased” (OECD 2018a: 89). In 2018, the economic dimension represented most critical aspect of Tajikistan’s state fragility, followed by high degrees of ‘environmental’ and ‘societal’ fragility. It would be important to explore in further work if a correlation exists between the number of development projects as explored in this paper (Fig. 6) and different dimensions of state fragility. The OECD-evaluation, however, contradicts a report from the International Fund for Peace, stating that Tajikistan “strongly improved’ between 2016 when the country was classified with a ‘high warning’” (Messner et al. 2016: 7) and 2018 when the classification dropped to “elevate warning” (ibid.: 7). However, the general picture is the same - both reports locate Tajikistan on the threshold to fragility.

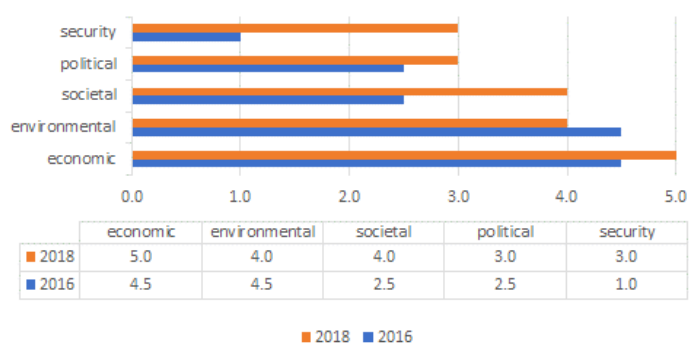


Fig. 5: Fragility level in Tajikistan in the years 2016 and 2018.  
Source: Vipavc 2019 (draft based on OECD 2016: 76; OECD 2018a: 83)

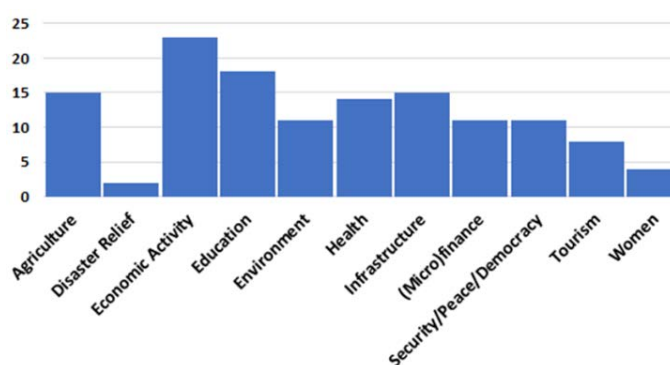


Fig. 6: Number of development projects in Gorno-Badakhshan.  
Source: Bredigkeit 2018 (draft)

### *The AKDN in Gorno-Badakhshan - a state within a state?*

Mohammad Poor reaches the conclusion that the AKDN network can be described as “authority without territory” an “embodiment of a “hybrid leadership” which is not eroded by modernity, but it has even become more powerful through it” (Mohammad Poor 2014: 21). An important addition can be found in Bolander’s work, who summarises that the idea of a united Ismaili community is largely achieved by the “widespread use of nation-state symbols and structures, including a constitution and a flag, a cohesive “development bureaucracy”, a “highly centralised”, “institutional infrastructure”, and a shared official language - English” (Bolander 2016: 584). In some countries, representatives of the AKDN enjoy diplomatic status, and the “national “resident representative” has legal ambassadorial status” (Steinberg 2011: 11), which is the case in Tajikistan as well (Mohammad Poor 2014: 196).

Development actors and citizens of Khorog alike asserted that people identify themselves as Ismailis and Pamiris first rather than Tajiks, corresponding to Steinberg who writes that in (often isolated) spaces, where the state persecutes and marginalises its own citizen, “individuals [...] become more closely affiliated with a transnational, nonterritorial



organisation than with the territorial nation-state of which they are citizens" (Steinberg 2011: 19). Even though there was no significant military action in the GBAO during the civil war, the consequences for the region were overwhelming and the "exclusion of Ismailis in Tajikistan must be framed at least in part in the context of the Tajik civil war" (ibid.: 126). Marginalisation of the Ismailis meant that "over 60,000 Ismailis living in the central parts of Tajikistan took refuge in Badakhshan" (Elnazarov and Aksakolov 2011: 57). It is crucial to keep in mind that until the period of Gorbatschow's *perestroika* and *glasnost* policies, any religious beliefs were actively suppressed by the central Soviet government. Hence, only after 1991 the embedding of the Ismailis of Central Asia into their wider community became possible (Bolander 2016: 590). Together with the formation of the AKDN, this process could explain the cohesion of the Pamir-Ismaili community in and beyond the borders of the GBAO.

The AKDN played a substantial role in the aftermath of the civil war by starting the first comprehensive relief programme (Pamir Relief and Development Programme). Since 1993, US\$ 110 million from own resources were mobilised for Tajikistan (Abdullaev and Akbarzadeh 2010: 51 f.). During this time, the network took over almost all responsibilities that a state must fulfil and contributed to "somewhat fragile, and uneasy peace" (Kevlihan 2016: 424). It can be safely stated that the "AKF virtually assumed the role of the government in Badakhshan during this period, while also establishing itself as the dominant broker between the international aid system and the population of the region" (ibid.: 524).

Today, the website of the network states that the "AKDN works towards the vision of an economically dynamic, politically stable, intellectually vibrant and culturally tolerant Tajikistan" (AKDN n.d.). As an organisation with roots in a religious belief, AKDN programmes were not exclusively targeting Ismailis but directed at the whole population of Gorno-Badakhshan. This intercommunal focus has been both interpreted as a holistic approach and a strategy to secure its own legitimacy by stabilising the country (De Cordier 2008: 176).

For example, the Aga Khan Education Service (ES) has an outreach programme all over the GBAO to facilitate the education of government teachers through AK-teaching staff in order to assure quality education in public schools and to teach people to become responsible citizens: "We serve the country in a peaceful way. [...] governmental school children and teachers should have the same chances and education." The omnipresence of the AKDN in Gorno-Badakhshan is obvious. Every other organisation we had interviews with collaborated with one or several institutions of the network and any project we saw carried their logo. Project signs are often on the side of the road and refer to specific measures applied at the respective place (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7: Project sign in Buni Village.  
Photograph taken by Vipavc, July 2018

### *The Establishment of Village Organisations by the MSDSP*

A concrete example about the way the AKDN branches work is provided through a case study about the implementation of a Village Organisation (VO) in Khidorjev Village by the MSDSP.

The MSDSP has a strong presence in the region and according to their statistics works in 443 out of the 700 villages in the GBAO. In these places, community institutions of 'participatory governance', i.e. VOs, were established. The goal of the programme is to establish civil society institutions skilled in political participation by increasing the competency, accountability and legitimacy of the VO as the governing body for local community based local development planning. Thus it "creates a form - neither entirely exogenous nor entirely indigenous - that is not simply specialised and oriented toward "development" but is also a generalised, new, and enduring element of local society" (Steinberg 2011: 166). The VO has several tasks: it serves as a village council that plans community projects, conducts monetary or no-cash help programmes for people in need through a common fund, requests development aid or money for certain projects, plans festivities and maintains common places in the village. In other contexts, these tasks are carried out by the state, but "since 1991, there has been virtually no state-run administration at this level" (Bliss 2006: 318).

We had the chance to visit one village where the concept of the VO was implemented and presented as highly effective, with the resident population seemingly convinced about its virtues. Steinberg (2001), however, states that the "feelings toward the VO structure are highly ambivalent and sometimes critical" (Steinberg 2001: 168). He ascribes this restrained commitment to a utopian memory of the Soviet era. To explore these different perceptions about the VOs, a case study was carried out based on interviews with the members of the VO and inhabitants of Khidorjev. Results indicate that there was a high degree of acceptance. This can be illustrated by introducing the proceedings of a participatory community-based joint local development planning in Khidorjev.

#### *Case Study: Participatory Community based joint local development planning*

Khidorjev has a population of 1,178 inhabitants residing in 143 households and is located close to Khorog. In 1999, a Mahalla committee was introduced by MSDSP where each resident can participate. The head of the committee is the *Rais* who gets elected for five years by the whole population of the village (Fig. 8). Every member of the committee must pay six Tajik Somoni per month. The main focuses of the development topics for the village are set by the committee. Efforts are made to facilitate the employment for young people, natural disaster management and the processing of agriculture activities. Once a month a meeting takes place in which the residents can submit proposals in a panel

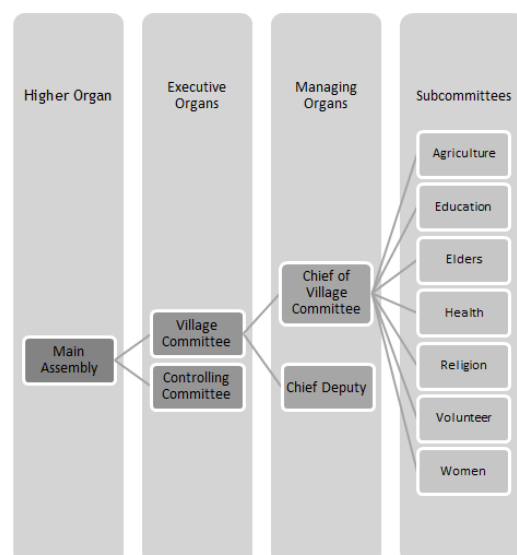


Fig. 8: Village Committee Structure.  
Source: Bredigkeit 2019 (draft based on information provided by the head of the VO of Khidorjev 2018)

discussion on how the development of the village can be promoted. If the committee agrees on a problem solution, the committee will try to realise the development project either on its own or by appealing to the help of larger development organisations.

By raising funds in the community people of Khidorjev built new irrigation channels, supported a poor family, and repaired bridges. Other projects are supported by different development organisations. For example, an Early Childhood Education Centre was built with the support of private donors from Canada and MSDSP as well as new village factories to ensure further processing of various products. Eighty percent of the monthly contributions of community members are deposited into a bank account, enabling households to apply for a loan from this bank account in times of need. The borrower must pay two percent interest on the loan, a much more reasonable possibility when compared with the offers of micro financing institutes. In terms of coping with risk situations that affect residents of Khidorjev, they employ various coping strategies often initiated by the VO and partially financed by development agencies (Table 5, Fig. 9).



Fig. 9: Project sign Khidorjev Village. Photograph taken by Vipavc, July 2018

Table 5: Risk and coping capacities in Khidorjev Village

Risks	Coping capacities
Strong exposure to natural disasters	Natural disaster management: Disaster information and early warning systems, deforestation, improved farming methods
Lack of sanitation	expanding household infrastructure
High number of unemployed youths	e.g. loan from organisation with better conditions for business creation, creating jobs by building new factories
Missing education, no school with standards	Early Childhood Development Centre by MSDSP
Strong dependence on resource rent and a lack of opportunities for producing fruits and vegetables	Processing of agriculture activities, building factories, new infrastructures (e.g. storages)

## Conclusion - Microcosm of Development Organisations in Khorog

This paper dealt with the fact that in the case of Gorno-Badakhshan many government responsibilities are outsourced to development organisations, and that the AKDN assumes a central role in carrying out and coordinating development efforts in the region. The work of development organisations led by the AKDN filled the institutional vacuum that emerged after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and today addresses all dimensions identified by the OECD state fragility framework for Tajikistan. AKDN institutions promote bottom-up, community-based approaches, and its activities reach far beyond the region of the Tajik Pamirs, representing a transnational community of Ismailis all over the world. It is by far the most important organisation in the GBAO, and its outreach to a majority of villages through the VO-programme led to the establishment of accountable institutions of local governance that also cooperate with government authorities and NGOs.

The approach of the AKDN in Gorno-Badakhshan is successful in serving a majority of the people and in strengthening peoples' capacities, while at the same time relieving the central government of engaging in social and economic development in the region.

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