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**„Institutions in Transition –  
Challenges for New Modes of Governance”**

**IAMO Forum 2010, 16-18 June 2010 | Halle (Saale), Germany**

**The influence of local governance on agricultural advisory services in Tajikistan**

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**Abstract**

The present article investigates the influence of local governance on agricultural advisory services in Tajikistan. The Central Asian Republic of Tajikistan is an agricultural country that has been described as a hybrid state, where local governance tends to be dominated by a few powerful actors. Local governance processes do have a strong influence on the agriculture practise and on the exchange of the knowledge. Agricultural advisory services claim various effects in the country. Especially in regions that are dominated by monocultures, advisory services have limited success. Therefore the present article assumes that the nexus of knowledge and innovation in Tajik agriculture is largely dependent on the decision-making of local governance processes. The article outlines the important role of local governance for distribution and use of knowledge in rural areas and emphasizes the context of agricultural advisory services in Tajikistan.

**Keywords:** Tajikistan, Agriculture, Advisory service, Local governance, Elites

## 1 Introduction

Among the 15 successor states of the Soviet Union is Tajikistan the one with the lowest per capita gross domestic product (GDP). Although the country has experienced steady economic growth since 1997, about two-thirds of the population continue to live in poverty (UNDP 2009). Some 75% of the population lives in rural areas; poverty is therefore mainly a rural phenomenon. Cotton and wheat are the main cash crops in Tajikistan, who alone contribute almost 30% annually to the GDP. However, the overall volume of Tajik agricultural output is not sufficient to ensure food security.<sup>1</sup> The performance of the sector remains below its potentials (FAO 2008, Robinson et al. 2008, Lerman et al. 2009a, 2009b).

Tajikistan's political culture has been described as neo-patrimonial, with patrons using public resources in order to secure the loyalty of their clients. The state is only partially present in rural areas, instead informal patron-client relationships are prevalent that can reach from very high up in state structures down to individuals in small villages. Tajikistan appears as a hybrid state (Zuercher 2005, Koehler 2004), but no weak state. In selected areas, as security, interior politics or the cotton industry, the state is considerably strong. However, in many other fields, as education, health or infrastructure, the state delegated much of its competencies to other agencies and actors. On the local level this mixture of state and other actors<sup>2</sup> affects both, local governance and agricultural production. While the central government is promoting e.g. *Freedom to Farm*, in many rural areas basic rights of farmers are not guaranteed. The distribution of power alternates in most Tajik regions, preventing that a central actor as the Ministry of Agriculture implements a nationwide policy. On the opposite, farmers are hardly able to lobby effectively for their interests (Livinets 2007, FAO 2008, Sehring 2006); „the majority of the rural population is excluded from information and decision making in the villages“ (Sehring 2009: 74).

The present paper argues that the heterogeneous picture of agricultural extension and knowledge management in Tajikistan derives from varying local government settings within the country. Despite market economy and land reform, main profits from agriculture are made by elites who influence the development of the sector.

## 2 Social-economic set up of rural areas in Tajikistan

The transition process from Soviet command economy to a market-oriented, private economy stagnated in Tajikistan in the late 90's of the previous century and led to a mixture of both. Political efforts to move the society towards a market economy culminated in a set of land reforms (Robinson et al. 2008, Spoor 2007, Porteous 2005, Gerber et al. 2005) that produced a vast number of people with heterogeneous access to land. Great deals of these new farmers possess only limited knowledge about farming (Wall 2006, Eshchanov et al. 2007). „A consequence is that agricultural extension and other forms of adult education have a more important role to play in [former communist] countries than elsewhere in the world.“ (Ban 1999: 121)

The major part of the rural population are smallholder, who own very small household land plots, but accumulate on average 1 to 2 ha through tenure and other leasehold

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<sup>1</sup> Tajikistan is a low-income, food-deficit country, with the highest rate of undernourished population (56 % of total pop.). See WFP, retrieved 04/2010 at: <http://www.wfp.org/countries/tajikistan>

<sup>2</sup> The heterogeneous local elites consist of former kolkhoz leaders, religious figures or warlords.

mechanisms. The annually available farmland for a family household allows only limited production, which alone does not secure livelihood (Herbers 2006, FAO 2008). It has been stated that most of them will never manage commercially competitive farms; however recent studies underline the growing productivity of smallholder production (Lerman et al. 2009, Robinson et al. 2008, FAO 2008).

Currently the structure of agricultural enterprises in Tajikistan consists of highly interdependent farms of various sizes: Big agricultural enterprises, private farms (Dehkon farms) and smallholders with household plots (Lerman et al. 2009, Robinson et al. 2008, Машрабович 2008). According to the Tajik State Statistic Committee (2005) 65% of arable land is owned by private farms. The figure is misleading as especially big private enterprises only changed by name, while continuing to work kolkhoz-alike. “Unreformed (enterprises and collective dehkan) farms still hold over half of sown land in Tajikistan.” (FAO 2008: 7). Especially in cotton growing areas, individual private farming is marginal and faces particular problems (ICG 2005). Still, collective kolkhoz or sovkhoz successor enterprises control most farmland, with the bulk of the rural population employed on these farms. They basically continue to produce in the kolkhoz manner, although on lower levels as input, machinery and advice is lacking or not appropriate. At the same time, the quality of natural resources rapidly declined (Oxfam 2010, Mikhalev 2008). According to the policy of the Tajik Government, the land resources of collective enterprises are to be privatized. However, heads of such large farms pursue a very reluctant privatization strategy (Porteous 2005). For the time being, many of these farms maintain the hitherto, i.e. soviet, business concept (Robinson et al. 2008); their future development is barely predictable.

Individual Dehkon farmers, who are believed to become the motor of commercial farming, possess on an average between 1 and 10 ha of farmland (Robinson et al. 2008, Herbers 2006b, 2006a). However, the political and economic environment causes dependencies. Dehkon farmers are impelled to work in close symbiosis with the kolkhoz and sovkhoz successor enterprises in order to accomplish basic forms of industrialized farming or to ensure proper access to irrigation and other input. Apart from that, private farmers deal with interferences by state administration, local governance or farmers associations, especially with regard to cropping decisions (Porteous 2005, Wall 2006, ADB 2008). In cotton growing areas, most Dehkon farmers obey to a hidden quota regulation on their land, e.g. 70% own crops, 30% cotton. In addition, marketing of cash crops as cotton or wheat is managed by collective farms and related enterprises that channel profits into the pockets of elites (Atta 2008, ICG 2005). The marketing of other produce is hindered by the small amounts produced (WFP 2005), only a small surplus is available (Spoor 2007). The major part of produce is needed for household consumption. Furthermore, high transaction costs prevent market access and local and regional commodity markets remain weak (Livinets 2007, FAO 2008). Thus, agriculture commercialisation in Tajikistan provides often a very limited income. Eventually, revenues of Dehkon farmers are not significantly higher as smallholders and wageworker earnings, so that some farmers even abandon private farming (Herbers 2006a, ICG 2005).

### **3 Local Governance**

The rural society in Tajikistan is structured by different agencies and actors as the state or indigenous social bodies, religious and elite figures. Local societies rule their

affairs, e.g. make decisions, through negotiations held between institutions and agencies or actors. “Local governance is political organisation of social order in a local context which reflects coherent interactions of different actors through historically and culturally embedded power structures and networks.” (Boboyorov 2009: 16). This is of relevance, as the outcomes of local governance processes do have enormous impact on agricultural matters, as they regulate for instance the distribution and use of resources.

Often, it is not the state that controls local affairs. Decisions are made through local governance processes that are executed according to the set of institutions and takes place in a given social arena. The latter is called ‘social order’. The term encompasses the particular constellation of institutions and agencies or actors which can be found in one moment of time (Schetter 2009). It describes an underlying system of flexible norms that is obligatory to all members of the community and which has been relevant even in times of the complete absence of state (Schetter 2009, Mielke 2007). Institutions, famously described by North (1990) as “rules of the game”, are framing the political processes (governance) and are enabling and constraining the implementation of political contents. Social order however, forms the framework of institutional arrangements in which all rural organizations as Mahallas (neighborhood associations), professional associations, as well as rural municipalities and kinship groups. Traditional collective actions as *hashar*, *sadaqa*, *qars*, *uschr* or *hums* are mobilized through social order.<sup>3</sup> Thus, local governance processes are embedded in social order. There is a variety of variables influencing both, the shape of social order and local governance. For example institutions or the multiple, fluid and dynamic nature of collective identities that is depending on both social-cultural contexts and political actors (Boboyorov 2009).

Within this framework, decision-making processes in local communities take place. Not all institutions and actors are considered equally, their potential depends on the relation to power (Lauth et al. 1999). In many cases, rural communities are dominated by powerful actors (elites) that derive their power from land property, key positions in the local administration or personal prestige (Wiegmann 2009, Grundmann 2004). Elite figures are not acting outside local governance, on the contrary, they are well represented in local agencies and organisations in order to steer decision-making processes. The local governance process is affected by variables as legitimacy, knowledge management, institutions etc. Elites tend to dominate the local governance process by controlling a few variables at the same time. “In different rural settlements the Soviet *kolkhozi* elites, who have maintained the leading positions in rural organisations, are actively reinventing and reinterpreting their economic and political rights.” (Boboyorov 2009: 1).

Due to the inconsistent distribution of power within the Tajik state, labelled as hybrid state, the public administration does not play a compensating role in local governance processes, e.g. as guarantee of rule of law. Some scholars argue that the aforementioned unstable conditions generate formal and informal income opportunities for the elite and provide extra ways to exercise power (Christophe 2005, Zuercher 2005). This applies to agriculture production, in some areas elites tend to block changes and innovation in order to keep the *status quo*. Eventually their intention leads to conserve an established agricultural praxis to protect their basis of power, e.g. clients under their patronage, or financial interests. Other collective bodies as buyer and

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<sup>3</sup> Some informal community institutions are: *hashar* – collective harvesting; *sadaqa* – money collection for people in need; *qars* – local tax to finance marriages, diseases, departures to working migration; *uschr*, *hums* – local tax to finance community projects.

supplier units or farmers associations are often times coopted by local elites and do not act in favour of their clientele (Robertson et al. 2008, Herbers 2006a, Wall 2006).

#### **4 Agricultural advisory service and local governance**

Nevertheless, research and advice have been identified as a potential boost to Tajik agriculture. It is highly welcomed by both, agronomists and farmers (CACAARI 2009, Wason 2002). However, relevant content is currently hardly available through a national agricultural advisory system, but from scattered local initiatives. Currently there is no centrally steered extension system for whole Tajikistan in place.

The current situation of agricultural research and extension in Central Asia is weak, as previous institutions and knowledge management structures deteriorated since the end of the Soviet Union (Morgounov et al. 2001). Agricultural expert knowledge that was integrated in Soviet research structures, is partly lost or became outdated (Wall 2006). The remains of this knowledge form the basis of current cultivation praxis that often times has not changed much. That is especially true for the cotton industry, where soviet praxis is widely maintained (Atta 2008, ICG 2005). Despite various efforts by international organisations and NGOs to enhance learning and information sharing, the overall access to knowledge and ability to exchange knowledge among farmers are weak (Livinets 2007, FAO 2008).

Due to Tajikistan's mountainous geography it is difficult to communicate in general. The dissolution of the Soviet Union and a subsequent civil war had further a devastating impact on the country's infrastructure. After 1991 the information flow between the regions came to halt, while shortcomings of communication means prevail. Currently there is no common informational space in the country. Taking the example of the media, as a cornerstone of public communication, it is hardly present in rural areas (Benzmann 2007, Wason 2002). Media in Tajikistan faces harsh restrictions and is only sporadic capable to cover agricultural issues (Loersch 2000, NANSMIT 2009).<sup>4</sup>

This led to a situation, where communication and joint decision-making is consequently very difficult. Such principal challenges cause problems to agricultural extension, seen as "a series of embedded communicative interventions that are meant, among others, to develop and/or induce innovations which supposedly help to resolve (usually multi-actor) problematic situations" (Leeuwis et al. 2004: 27). The nexus between knowledge and innovation is challenged by the interests of the state and local elites. Unlike western extension systems that rely on free choice of farmers regarding their farm practise (Röling 1994) farming innovations may be delicate issues in Tajikistan, which are monitored closely by the state and powerful local actors. Especially in cotton growing areas, farmers are far away from the propagated Freedom to Farm (Lerman et al. 2009b). In many cases farmers are impeded to implement innovations (Wall 2006, Herbers 2006a, ICG 2005). Most effectively pressure is exerted on farmers through ambiguous land tenure rights, leading to high insecurity of land property (Robinson et al. 2008, Herbers 2006a).

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<sup>4</sup> "Zafar Murodov, a reporter for Kulyabskaya Pravda, was detained for an hour by police on 23 January, when he was covering a demonstration by a group of market vendors outside the local government building, in the town of Vosei, southern Tajikistan. Murodov believes that police, who were forcibly trying to disperse the demonstration, wanted to prevent him from reporting the events." Reported by IFEX, 2006, retrieved 03/2010 at [http://www.ifex.org/tajikistan/2006/01/27/journalist\\_detained\\_prevented\\_from/](http://www.ifex.org/tajikistan/2006/01/27/journalist_detained_prevented_from/)

Local governance processes and subsequently elite figures play in Tajikistan an important role for the access and use of agricultural information (Grundmann 2004, Wiegmann 2007). The differentiated set up of local governance may explain the mixed picture of extension conditions. Agriculture in Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Province (GBAO) with ca. 100% of smallholder farmers benefited to large extent from regional advisory service with strong gains in productivity and harvest (Bliss 2006, FAO 2008). However, efforts to improve productivity through extension in the Region of Republican Subordination (RRS, cotton and wheat production) were minor (Wason 2002). Conditions for advisory work change soundly in these two regions. In the case of GBAO one positive indicator is the much advanced privatization, as well as a high participation in local governance processes. Areas with intensive smallholder cultivation as GBAO, reintroduced traditional farming practices that ensure subsistence farming (Bliss 2006). Constraints in RRS derived from governmental demand to control farmer knowledge sources, as media or farmers associations. Subsequently farmers were prohibited to apply new practises (Robinson et al. 2008, Wason 2002). Experiences in the northern province Soghd display a positive ground for advisory service, although effects in terms of increased income remains to be seen (GAA et al. 2006).

## 5 Conclusions

The present article tries to explain the heterogeneous picture of agricultural extension and knowledge management in Tajikistan with varying local governance structures. It is argued that local governance processes exercise a strong influence on the distribution and use of agricultural knowledge.

Taking into account the unequal alignment of existing agricultural producers towards market economy, it is further to question which advice is appropriate. There is a demand of generalist advice that reflects the needs of the (subsistence) family unit, including the aim of diversifying income opportunities. At the same time agricultural extension is ineffective without a good system of input and credit supply and of marketing of produce. Because of small land property and the overall lack of resources, innovations will apply only to a small percentage of farmland. Especially the economic development of the group of Dehkon farmers is key for the Tajik agriculture. With regard to the above quoted consideration of Ban (1999), the Tajik policy needs to understand on local and national level that the nexus between knowledge and innovation is related with productivity growth.

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