

Development Programme in GBAO

Text and photos by Robert Middleton

A SUCCESSFUL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES

“The core problem is not ideology but poverty, especially in mountain areas. Whereas direct efforts to repress political extremism and the drug trade have largely failed, the problem of rural poverty can be successfully addressed today.”

Testimony by Frederick Starr, Chairman of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, Johns Hopkins University, to the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee on “The problem of Islamic extremism”, November 1999

Today, I am no longer persuaded by this argument of a causal connection between the programme that I initiated and co-ordinated in Tajikistan from 1992 to 2003 and any diminution of political extremism in Central Asia. In Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, repressive régimes were as violent as the Islamists they were supposedly containing with Western military and financial support. The programme was certainly worth doing for its own long-term contribution to reducing human suffering, but not because of any putative corresponding reduction in “Islamic extremism” or terrorism. By necessity, I negotiated with the Tajik version of the Taliban – and even with the precursor of Al Qaeda that the local mujaheddin called at the time “the Arabs”. I am not, however, sure that feeding the people in proto-Taliban areas of the Pamirs in the early 1990s made these proto-Taliban any less violent – it only made them less relevant.

Today I lean rather to the conclusions of William Easterly (“The War on Terror vs. the War on Poverty”, *New York Review of Books*, November 24, 2016 – see [here](#)): “The connection between the wars on poverty and terror had two unintentional negative consequences that are becoming more evident as time passes. First, it deepened negative stereotypes about the poor that contribute to the current wave of xenophobia against refugees and immigrants in the US and Europe—attitudes suggested by the Brexit vote and the rise of Donald Trump and other far-right leaders. Second, in justifying support for dictatorial regimes, the connection discredited Western advocacy of the ideals of democracy worldwide. The negative stereotypes about the world’s poor got worse during the War on Terror because it was alleged that poverty was the principal cause of terrorism. Unfortunately for this politically convenient outcome, the idea that poverty is the root of terrorism never was based on concrete evidence. A considerable number of systematic studies by social scientists soon after September 11 failed to find a link between poverty and the propensities of young people to become terrorists. Researchers found that terrorists and their supporters were usually well above the poverty line and had secondary or higher education.” RM]

Historical dependency

During the Soviet period, Gorno-Badakhshan, the poorest and most isolated part of the poorest Republic in the Soviet Union, was unable to feed its population from its own production: valleys are narrow and most of the land area is above 2,500m; in 1992, of a total of about 16,000 hectares of arable land, only 12,000 hectares were actually under food crops. During the Soviet period, under the centrally planned economy, subsidies were introduced distorting the hard law of nature that applies to isolated and poor rural areas and is at the root of subsistence farming: as many persons can live in a given area as the land there will support, others die or emigrate. At the end of the Soviet era, Gorno-Badakhshan was dependent for 85% of its food and all of its fuel on subsidised supplies from other regions. The region benefited from advanced social services out of all proportion to the actual economic wealth of the region: at the end of the Soviet era, male and female literacy in Gorno-Badakhshan was 99% and there were more hospital beds per head of population than in most Western developed countries.

This dependence was deliberate. Since the subjugation of Central Asia by the Russians from the mid-nineteenth century on, the Pamirs were of great strategic importance: first, in the "Great Game" played out between soldiers and adventurers of the Russian and British Empires, then in the contested area of Turkestan immediately after the Bolshevik revolution and finally for military access to Afghanistan after the invasion of that country by the Soviet army in 1979.

Warning of famine

In 1991, leaders of the Ismaili community in Gorno-Badakhshan (representing some two-thirds of the local population) drew the attention of His Highness the Aga Khan to the potential danger of famine in the region as a result of the cessation of Soviet subsidies following the independence of Tajikistan.

Consultants sent by the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) (www.akdn.org) to Gorno-Badakhshan in 1992 to review opportunities for long-term development programmes reported that, before any longer-term development programme could be envisaged, a solution must be found to the immediate short-term threat of famine arising from the already acute food shortages in the region: people would be unable to participate in development activities until they had food in their stomachs.

Relief programme

Preparations were made for a humanitarian relief programme targeted at the most vulnerable families. In December 1992, civil war broke out in Tajikistan. Many years earlier, large numbers of Pamiris had been forcibly resettled in the Southwest of the country to develop cotton production; others had moved to Dushanbe where many were active in intellectual life. The civil war led to brutal reprisals against the Pamiri ethnic groups and many fled to the relative security of their homeland, swelling the population of Gorno-Badakhshan from 200,000 to more than 250,000, all

of whom had to be considered as vulnerable following the complete breakdown in supplies from the capital.



Trucks with humanitarian assistance on Taldyk pass (3,615m)

Since 1993, more than 200,000 metric tons of relief supplies have been transported from Osh in Kyrgyzstan and distributed throughout Gorno-Badakhshan, an average truck journey of 2,000 km over passes above 4,000m. This same route is now being used to deliver relief supplies to the vulnerable population of Afghan Badakhshan, across the river Pyandj, the frontier between Tajikistan and Afghanistan.

A local NGO, the Mountain Societies Development Support Programme (MSDSP), was set up in Moscow, Osh and Khorog in order to undertake procurement, logistics and monitoring for the humanitarian programme.

Agricultural reform programme

In parallel with the humanitarian programme, an agricultural reform programme was initiated, to promote agricultural production and productivity and reduce dependence on subsidised and free food. A number of other measures were also introduced with a view to increasing rural incomes and access to food through increased purchasing power.

In late 1993, MSDSP obtained a landmark decision from the local government in Gorno-Badakhshan that unused or under-utilised state farm land could be distributed to villagers who wished to become private farmers. Village-level dialogues were held throughout Gorno-Badakhshan to encourage private farming. Private farmers were assisted, on credit, with improved seeds and fertiliser and received technical assistance from trained MSDSP staff – a channel building programme was initiated to extend the area of arable land available to private farmers.

Since then, almost all state farm land has been placed under private management in agreement with the local government and some 25,000 private farmers are now working with MSDSP in Gorno-Badakhshan. Total land under private management is now more than 11,000 hectares. Yields of potatoes and wheat per hectare have more than doubled. By 2002, Gorno-Badakhshan was producing 70% of its basic food needs (compared

with 15% in 1993) as a result of improved cereal yields and an increase in the area of land under food crop cultivation. Self-sufficiency in basic foodstuffs is now within sight.



A young family member brings the harvest home



MSDSP agronomists inspecting a new variety of wheat

Wheat, barley, rye and potatoes continue to be grown as the main food crops. Seed returned in repayment of loans is made available to participating farmers for spring and autumn planting, together with fruit tree saplings. Seed was procured locally, in order to encourage farmers to market their surplus, and to inject cash into a cash-starved economy. High-quality seed, fertiliser, fuel, agricultural machinery and dairy-processing and other equipment continue to be made available on a cash or credit basis.

Food diversification

A horticultural programme has tested and introduced new varieties of vegetables in order to provide a balanced diet and a sustainable supply of vitamins and minerals: nine new varieties of beans and six varieties of peas were tested – suitable varieties, which are well adapted to the particular climatic conditions of the region, have been identified and planted. In addition to increasing fruit and vegetable production through the provision of fertiliser, seeds, saplings, and plastic tunnels for small greenhouses, the horticultural programme also provides training and equipment for processing and preserving horticultural produce, including apricot drying. Two greenhouses from the Soviet era were rehabilitated: they are heated and irrigated all year round from nearby natural hot springs and can supply a small, but profitable market for out-of-season vegetables to the regional capital, Khorog, and other areas.

A livestock programme is being implemented to address poor animal health, insufficient fodder availability and lack of organised marketing systems. A breeding programme aims to improve livestock quality and yields of meat and dairy produce.

In order to improve livestock health as well as to enable herders to process raw milk into marketable products, fodder seed, concentrated feed, medicines and vaccines, and basic dairy processing equipment are procured and distributed on a sale or credit basis. Local processing is being encouraged with a view to adding value to livestock products.



A yak is prepared for milking in Murghab district

In addition, small animal husbandry activities, largely managed by women, have been initiated in both regions, including poultry, wool-processing and bee-keeping.





Village-level autonomy

The programme has now moved beyond the exclusive and urgent focus on food self-sufficiency and now deals with broader long-term economic and social development at village level. The underlying philosophy is that rural economic development is best catalysed and sustained through village-level institutions that are autonomous and transparent, and that contribute to democratic norms of behaviour and to the growth of civil society. Civil-society organisations such as MSDSP were an entirely new concept in the region in 1993.



Village Organisations draw up a village plan, determine village needs and priorities, manage infrastructure projects (such as mini hydroelectric plants, road and bridge construction, school repair), and also grant microcredit for small enterprise and small trading,



with special attention to women's needs. Internal rules of the VO require that if the leader of a VO is a man, the deputy leader must be a woman.



Contribution to peace and stability in Central Asia

By improving food security in Gorno-Badakhshan and the Karategin/Rasht valley – regions to which large numbers of former opposition fighters fled during (or returned after) the main fighting in the Tajik civil war (1992-1993) – and by offering the opportunity of private farming and credit, the programme has contributed to the promotion of peace and stability in Tajikistan and to alternatives to criminal activity such as the drug trade. Many former fighters are now MSDSP farmers.



MSDSP advisers inspect the wheat crop

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Health and Education

As already noted, the Soviet Union brought high levels of social development even to far distant corners of the USSR such as Gorno-Badakhshan. The Aga Khan Development Network is working with the government of Gorno-Badakhshan on reform in the social sector, to help local authorities to cope more efficiently with reduced resources while at the same time benefiting from new approaches in education and healthcare provision and related training.

Experience with reforms in Gorno-Badakhshan contributes to the formulation of national reform policies.

Partners

AKDN programmes in Tajikistan have been funded with the generous support of the governments of Canada, Finland, Germany, Japan, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Tajikistan, the United Kingdom and USA as well as the European Union, the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank.

Evaluations

Evaluations of the programme by donor agencies have been highly complimentary. In 1997, a joint Swiss/German team reported on the humanitarian programme that “in few other places has leakage of food aid been documented at such low levels (average loss well below 1%)”. A German government report concluded in 2000 that the agricultural programme was one of the most successful it had funded.