

SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT OF AGRICULTURE ADVISORY SERVICES IN THE REPUBLIC OF TAJIKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

The former Soviet Republic Tajikistan is a low-income, food-deficit country with a high contingent of rural poverty. Agriculture plays a major economic role and is of high importance to ensure rural livelihoods. Agriculture advisory services are considered as promoter of productivity, but are not adequately developed. Often the available expertise causes little economic effects. Despite various efforts to enhance learning and information sharing, farmers overall access to knowledge and options to exchange and use knowledge are weak. The present article investigates the social and political context of agricultural advisory services in the country, asking for most influential factors.

Tajikistan has been described as a hybrid state, where local governance processes, tend to be dominated by powerful actors. Local elites are heterogeneous; they consist of previous kolkhoz leaders, state administration, religious figures or former warlords. Agricultural production is heavily influenced by local governance, as it regulates for instance the distribution and use of resources. The present article argues that local governance has also key importance for the exchange of knowledge. It outlines the role of local governance for the distribution and use of knowledge in rural areas, thus emphasizing the political context of agricultural advisory services in Tajikistan. The present research is based on literature and project experiences from development organisations. It is assumed that in order to achieve future growth, local elites need to change its approach towards agriculture advisory services and should foster knowledge exchange processes.

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

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1 INTRODUCTION

Among the 15 successor states of the Soviet Union Tajikistan is the one with the lowest per capita gross domestic product (GDP). Although the Central Asian country has experienced steady economic growth since 1997, about two-thirds of the population continue to live in poverty (UNDP 2009). Around 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 25% annually to the GDP. However, the overall volume of Tajik agricultural output is not sufficient to ensure food security (WFP 2010). Despite growth, the performance of the agricultural sector remains well below its potentials (FAO 2008, Robinson et al. 2008, Lerman et al. 2009a, 2009b). Tajikistan's political culture has been described as authoritarian and neo-patrimonial (Wiegmann 2009), where patrons use private and public resources to secure the loyalty of their clients. Informal patron-client relationships are prevalent; they can reach from very high up in state structures down to individuals in small villages. This leads to a perception of the Tajik state as hybrid state (Zuercher 2005, Koehler 2004), which is not equally present in rural areas. However, this does not mean that Tajikistan is a weak state. In selected areas, as security, internal politics or the cotton industry, the state is considerably strong. However, in other fields, as education, health or energy supplies, the state delegates much of its competencies to other agencies and actors. On local level, a mixture of state and other actors as NGO, international organisations or local elites steer local affairs through local governance processes. The outcomes of such decision-making processes do have enormous impact on agricultural matters, as they regulate for instance the distribution and use of resources. Decisions made in these processes are not always balanced between the diverse interests. Partaking and assertiveness of farmers is volatile, often their interests tend to be neglected. Against this background, the experiences of extension projects left a rather mixed picture, with varying success and impact in the different provinces of Tajikistan. The present paper seeks to outline current forms of agricultural knowledge exchange in Tajikistan and identify factors that influence advisory work.

2 SOCIAL-ECONOMIC SET UP IN RURAL AREAS

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). Due to specialization of farmers within the kolkhoz/ sovkhov system,

they rarely possess the skills to run a farm in a private market system. “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.” (van den 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 mechanisms. The annually available farmland for a family household allows only limited production, which alone does not secure livelihood (Herbers 2006, FAO 2008). Instable access and high insecurity of land property prevents farmers from necessary investments in technology or soil protecting measures (Robinson et al. 2008). It has been stated that most of these smallholders will never manage commercially competitive farms; however recent studies underline their growing productivity (Lerman et al. 2009, 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 (Robinson et al. 2008). Still, collective kolkhoz or sovkhos 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 is rapidly declining (Oxfam 2010, Mikhalev 2008). According to the policy of the Government of Tajikistan, land resources of collective enterprises are to be privatized. Privatizations are implemented by the collected farms themselves, together with the district government body *Hukumat*. However, the heads of 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) and their future development is barely predictable.

Individual Dehkon farmers, who are believed to become the motor of commercial farming, possess on average between 1 and 10 ha of farmland (Robinson et al. 2008, Herbers 2006b, 2006a). It is mainly the economic environment that causes dependencies. Dehkon farmers are impelled to work in close symbiosis with kolkhoz and sovkhos successor enterprises in order to accomplish basic forms of industrialized farming and to ensure proper access to irrigation and other input. Apart from that, private farmers deal with interferences by state administration, local governance or farmer associations, for example with regard to cropping decisions (Porteous 2005, Wall 2006, ADB

2008). In cotton growing areas, most Dekhon farmers must obey to a hidden quota regulation, so that they plant e.g. 70% own crops and 30% cotton on their soil. In addition, marketing of cash crops as cotton or wheat is managed by the same collective farms or related enterprises that channel profits into the pockets of its leading personnel (Bliss 2008, Atta 2008, ICG 2005). At the same time, the marketing of other produce is hindered by the small amounts produced (WFP 2005). Only a small surplus is available for the market, as the major part of produce is needed for household consumption (Spoor 2007). Additionally, high transaction costs prevent market access, thus local and regional commodity markets remain weak (Livinets 2007, FAO 2008). Agriculture commercialisation in Tajikistan provides often very limited income. Eventually, revenues of Dehkon farmers are not significantly higher than smallholders and waged worker earnings, so that some farmers even abandon private farming (Herbers 2006a, ICG 2005).

3 LOCAL GOVERNANCE

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). 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, rural municipalities and kinship groups are included. Traditional collective actions as *hashar*, *sadaqa*, *qars*, *uschr* or *hums* are mobilized through social order.¹ 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 (Boboyorov 2009).

¹ 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.

Within this framework, decision-making processes in local communities take place. Not all institutions and actors are considered equally important, 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 dominant position from land property, key positions in the local administration or personal prestige (Wiegmann 2009, Grundmann 2004). In Tajikistan, especially smallholder 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). Nevertheless, 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, hybrid distribution of power within the Tajik state, the public administration does not play a compensating role in local governance processes, e.g. as guarantee of the rule of law. Its influence changes broadly within the provinces and sub regions. Some researchers 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*. It is thus in the interest of elites to conserve an established agricultural praxis that works in favour of their basis of power, e.g. nourishing clients under their patronage and one’s own financial interests. Collective bodies as buyer and 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

Research and advice have been identified as a potential boost to Tajik agriculture and is highly welcomed by both, agronomists and farmers (CACAARI 2009, IMF 2009, Wason 2002). However, specialized agricultural knowledge is rarely available. The current situation of agricultural research and extension in Tajikistan is weak, as previous institutions and knowledge management structures deteriorated. Agricultural expert knowledge that was integrated in Soviet research structures, is partly lost or became outdated (Wall 2006, Morgounov et al. 2001). However, 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 deliberately maintained (Atta 2008, ICG 2005). Currently, no centrally steered advisory system for all provinces of Tajikistan is in place. Instead a mix of state and private service providers is in place, which is in most cases initiated by international organisations and NGO (WFP 2005). With regard to agricultural extension in Tajikistan, at least four different ways of distribution can be found:

1. State extension officers, who are attached to the Ministry of Agriculture or to regional or provincial governments.
2. Private advisory services run by NGO's, international organisations and private companies.
3. Internal advice within collective Dehkon farms and non privatised enterprises, e.g. in the cotton sector.
4. Local forms of knowledge exchange and mutual consultation inside the *Mahalla*.

Although the various ways of knowledge exchange do exist in rural Tajikistan, agricultural extension is far away from being “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). Instead, local governance interferes in both, farmer's communicative interventions and their exposure to innovation. These two points appear as main drawbacks to advisory services in Tajikistan at the moment.

Firstly, due to Tajikistan's mountainous geography it is difficult to communicate in general. In the course of the grave deterioration of the country's infrastructure, since 1991 the information flow between the regions came to halt. Currently there is no common informational space in the country. Taking the example of the media, as a cornerstone of public communication, there is no nationwide newspaper, only one channel of Radio and TV for several hours a day (Benzmann 2007). Media are only present at a minimum in rural areas (Wason 2002). Apart from infrastructural and economic limitations, Tajik media faces harsh political restrictions² and is only sporadic capable to cover agricultural issues (Loersch 2000, NANSMIT 2009).

Secondly, innovations in agriculture are massively hindered, as farmer potentials to decide and act independently are very limited. Communication and joint decision-making faces even on local level many difficulties. The above named nexus between knowledge and innovation in agriculture is challenged by the

² One example: “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/

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 are delicate issues in Tajikistan, monitored closely by the state and powerful local actors. Especially in cotton growing areas, private farmers are bound to crop quotas, production techniques, input supplies and marketing mechanisms (Atta 2008, Bliss 2008). In cotton and wheat areas a system of knowledge governance is in place, which manufactured negative incentives for innovation (Wall 2006, Herbers 2006a, ICG 2005). As indicated above, pressure on private Dehkon farmers and smallholders is exerted through economic dependencies and ambiguous land tenure rights (Robinson et al. 2008, Herbers 2006a).

However, apart from cash crop regions the modus of local governance is likely to change, being more liberal and representing better farmer's interests (Grundmann 2004, Wiegmann 2007). The differentiated local political set up may also explain the mixed picture of extension conditions. Limitations, regarding the access and use of agricultural information vary broadly. Agriculture in Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Province (GBAO) with ca. 100% of smallholder farmers, benefited to a large extend from regional advisory service and achieved strong gains in productivity and post harvest processing (Bliss 2006, FAO 2008). Instead, efforts to improve productivity through an extension project in the Region of Republican Subordination (RRS, cotton and wheat production) were minor effective (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 of land. Additionally, the set up of new municipal councils led to transparent local governance processes. Mountainous areas of intensive smallholder cultivation as GBAO are economically of minor importance. These areas abstain to a large extend from market production, partially traditional farming practices were reintroduced to ensure subsistence farming (Bliss 2006). Constraints to advisory services in RRS derived from state interferences on farmer knowledge sources, as media or farmers associations. Farmers in the RRS province were subsequently prohibited to apply new production practises or rather to address certain issues as land rights, loans, market prices or livestock and crop protection (Robinson et al. 2008, Wason 2002). In contrast, experiences in the northern province Sugd display a positive ground for advisory service, although effects in terms of increased income remains to be seen (GAA et al. 2006, MEDA 2006).

5 CONCLUSIONS

The present article links the heterogeneous picture of agricultural extension in Tajikistan to the varying local governance set up throughout the country. It is argued that difficulties in communication and the implementation of innovations are major constraints to advisory services. Rural knowledge exchange is steered by local governance that is itself influenced by state policy and elite interests.

However, traditional forms of mutual exchange do exist, but are cut off from external input. Especially the economic development of the group of Dehkon farmers is key for the future growth of the Tajik agriculture. The article emphasizes that this group has limited potentials to benefit from advice, as their work is subject to interferences by elites or large agricultural enterprises. With regard to the above quoted consideration of van den Ban (1999) on the importance of agriculture extension in former communist countries, Tajik policy and local elites need to recognize the nexus between knowledge and innovation as boost to agricultural productivity.

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