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ANDREAS MANDLER

Knowledge and Governance Arrangements in Agricultural
Production: Negotiating the Access to Arable Land in
Zarafshan Valley, Tajikistan

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Authors' address

Andreas Mandler
Center for Development Research (ZEF), University of Bonn,
Walter-Flex-Str. 3
53113 Bonn, Germany
Tel. 0228/73-1728 / -1731, Fax 0228/73-1972
E-mail: amandler@uni-bonn.de
www.zef.de

Knowledge and Governance Arrangements in Agricultural Production: Negotiating Access to Arable Land in Zarafshan Valley, Tajikistan

Andreas Mandler, ZEFa

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Abstract

The economy and society of Tajikistan depends strongly on agriculture. Approximately three-quarters of the Tajik population live in rural areas. The agricultural sector generates about one fifth of total GDP and provides 55 per cent of employment (Akramov and Shreedhar, 2012). However, this does not translate into a sufficient agricultural output. On the one hand, the natural conditions of the country are not particularly favourable for agriculture, as its high elevation limits the land area that is suitable for farming. On the other hand, national legislation and local governance arrangements are not always conducive to agricultural production. The present paper inquires into the role of knowledge and governance in local agricultural production. It concentrates on access to arable land in the upper Zarafshan Valley, a remote mountainous area in northern Tajikistan. The paper analyses how the individual knowledge of farmers relates to the common knowledge that is represented by local governance arrangements. To exemplify this relation it focuses upon one local institution that implements land distribution, Bobogi. The shifting status of knowledge and institutions enables farmers to exercise influence on negotiation processes of access to land. Bobogi is seen to be a publicly legitimized institution that contributes to the construction and maintenance of social order in local communities.

Keywords: Agriculture, governance, knowledge, social order, Bobogi, Zarafshan Valley, Tajikistan

Abbreviations & Glossary

Aksakol	<i>Facilitator and arbitrator of marriages, divorces, conflicts etc.</i>
Arenda	<i>Rus. for leasehold</i>
Ariza	<i>Taj. letter. Notion for complaint letter</i>
Ayni	<i>District capital, Sughd region</i>
Bobogi	<i>Taj. 'from the grandfather'; here referring to land property</i>
Bor	<i>Orchard with mainly apricot trees</i>
Dehkon	<i>Taj. Farmer</i>
Dehkon farm	<i>Notation for a privatized individual, family or collective farm</i>
Hadj	<i>Religious pilgrimage to Mecca</i>
Hashar	<i>Joint, mutual labour within a community or among villages</i>
Hokim	<i>Taj. ruler, common notion for the chief of the district</i>
Hukumat	<i>District government</i>
Jamoat	<i>Taj. Administration of the sub-district</i>
Kelin	<i>Taj. Daughter in law, responsible to take care of the internal household</i>
Khaliddi Islom	<i>Taj. the key of Islam</i>
Kolkhoz/ Sovkhoz	<i>Main types of collective farms in the USSR</i>
Kuhistoni Mastchoh	<i>Remote district in the upper Zarafshan Valley, District in Taj.</i>
Maclisi Umumi	<i>Grand community assembly or notion for any big meeting in the village</i>
Mahalla	<i>Autonomous neighborhood associations</i>
Mastchohi Nav	<i>District in the northern lowlands of Sughd region</i>
Muezzin	<i>Person that summons Muslims to the mosque</i>
Mullah	<i>Muslim man and farmer, knowledgeable in Qur'an and sacred law</i>
Obshikori	<i>Kitchen garden, attached to the house</i>
Panshakent	<i>District capital, Sughd region</i>
Qishloqdori	<i>Concept of village identity</i>
Qur'an	<i>The central religious text of Islam</i>
Raisi	<i>Taj. chief. Notion for chief of Dehkon farm, or chief of board, school etc.</i>
Raisi mahalla	<i>Chief of mahalla or chief of all mahallas in a community</i>
Rissk	<i>Idea of personal fortune or destiny in Islam</i>
Shurhoi Deha	<i>Village board</i>
Sotiq	<i>One hundredth of a hectare</i>
Tajik Somoni	<i>The national currency of Tajikistan</i>
Tinji	<i>Concept of peace, adequacy and corporate behaviour in a community</i>

1 Introduction

Despite a series of agricultural reform policies implemented since Tajikistan's independence some 20 years ago, work in the agricultural sector in Tajikistan correlates with a high risk of poverty for farming households.¹ The stable growth of agricultural production in recent years does not detract from the fact that general output and the commercialization of agricultural products is low (Lerman and Sedik, 2009, Robinson et al., 2008). Income, nutrition and perspectives of self-development have changed in many rural communities for the worse following the end of the Soviet collective farming system. Tajikistan is still dependent on grain imports, while only a minority of farmers manage to live solely from their agricultural production. For the majority of the rural population subsistence production, often complemented by remittances, remains the dominant mode of livelihood (WFP, 2005, Geppert and Oppeln, 2011).

The reorganisation of the agricultural sector in Tajikistan since independence has led to the individualization of agriculture; which should not be considered equivalent to the privatization of agriculture (Bliss, 2011, Welthungerhilfe, 2010). Major obstacles to farming such as the cotton debt crisis or the lack of 'freedom to farm' have been partly resolved (IMF, 2012). However, the current situation is an "agriculture of smallholders" (Lerman, 2012: 213) that despite formal liberty of production provides rather limited perspectives of economic growth. Remote areas such as the Zarafshan Valley face multiple impediments, e.g. lack of arable land, poor irrigation and general infrastructure, but also an unfavourable economic environment for agricultural production besides poor rule of law (Welthungerhilfe, 2012, Welthungerhilfe et al., 2008). Structural shortcomings in legislation and in particular in implementation have led to different outcomes of land reform in each sub-region of Tajikistan (Lerman, 2012, Herbers, 2006).

Against this background this paper inquires into the role of knowledge and governance in one particular agricultural production region of Tajikistan: Kuhistoni Mastchoh. The limits of agricultural advisory services in post-Soviet Tajikistan have been linked to a lack of agricultural innovation (Shtaltovna, 2012, Mandler, 2010); explaining this by examining adverse governmental policies and the absence of economic incentives. However, during field research it appeared that farmers pay less attention towards knowledge linked to innovations, as for example introducing new cultivation techniques or post-harvest technologies. Instead their main concerns are to keep, safeguard and extend the existing basis of production; namely their access to arable land.

Investigating how arable land has been distributed and its present distribution pattern reveals that local institutions and practices, in addition to national legislation, determine the process. This process is certainly linked to the specific constellations of power and governance in any given community, with involvement by state organs. However, how one value or worldview is prioritised over another to legitimate decision-making is based on conceptualisations of reality accepted in the community. Thus, in order to receive or maintain access to arable land, it is necessary for farmers to pay attention to, and also to shape, their immediate and the wider social and political context. In reference to Herbers' (2006) estimation of the "Handlungsmacht" [room for manoeuvre] of single actors during the post-Soviet transition in southern Tajikistan, this paper refers not only to individuals, but extends to consider broader social structures of local communities; the social order. The paper sets out to estimate to what extent individuals' room for manoeuvre may increase or diminish through the use of knowledge in negotiation processes. Governance and decision-making is considered to occur within the framework of social order (Mielke et al., 2011). Social order

¹ See Akramov & Shreedhar (2012) and Ruralpoverty.org. Consistent data is generally difficult to obtain for Tajikistan. The poverty headcount rate in Tajikistan has fallen from 72 % in 2003 to 47 % in 2009 (% of population below national poverty line), while extreme poverty declined from 42 to 17 % during the same period. About 5 million people, approx. 73 % of the Tajik population, live in rural areas (2010). About half of them are considered as poor (2010, Data retrieved from the Rural Poverty Portal: <http://www.ruralpovertyportal.org/web/rural-poverty-portal/country/statistics/tags/tajikistan>; accessed the 14.9.2012). This assessment is valid also for upper Zarafshan Valley region.

comprises the institutions, norms and processes which structure daily life, thus forming the arena in which the negotiation of access to land takes place. Eventually social order can possibly generate a “legitimate order” (Heathershaw, 2009, Bliss, 2010). However, by taking a social constructivist perspective originating from Berger and Luckmann (1984), I consider knowledge in society as constantly being shaped and at the same time shaping people’s behaviour. It is thus permanently constructed and established by society.

The findings presented here result from nine months ethnographic field research in 2011 and 2012 in Kuhistoni Mastchoh district in Tajikistan. While living with local families especially in two villages, data was collected through participant observation and interviews with farmers and some national specialists who worked in the district.² The paper starts with a discussion of agriculture at the interface of knowledge and governance. After an overview of the research region the paper proceeds with two sections describing local governance arrangements, in particular with regard to the distribution of arable land and the practice of Bobogi. In the conclusion the role of the Bobogi land distribution scheme is discussed as a publicly legitimized institution contributing to the construction and maintenance of social order in local communities.

² Throughout the paper local square measure Sotiq is used. E.g. one Sotiq equals 1/100th of a hectare. Exchange rate at time of the field research in 2011 and 2012 was approximately at 1€ = 6 to 6,45 Tajik Somoni.

2 Agricultural Production at the Interface of Knowledge and Governance

Governance and knowledge are two ever present attributes of everyday life that structure any social entity. Agriculture, either perceived as a livelihood or economic activity, rests strongly in the local community. Therefore this paper departs from the hypothesis that governance and knowledge build an intertwined nexus that strongly impacts on the way how agricultural production is realized. More specifically this research asks how knowledge and local governance processes influence the access to arable land in Kuhistoni Mastchoh district.

Governance describes a rational social situation, embedded in a territorial, temporal and ideological (*weltanschaulich*) continuum. General conceptions of governance, like the definition of World Bank as “exercise of political authority and the use of institutional resources to manage society's problems and affairs” (World Bank, 1991: 1) remain too broad and lean predominantly on activities of the state. More generally, governance may be understood as reciprocal process that refers to detectable structures (as institutions, networks, hierarchies etc.) and deal with processes of interaction among various structures, which eventually entail decisions and its implementation. This view allows an understanding of governance as a field of interaction of state and non-state actors, whose relations are determined by an institutionalized orderly framework and the non-institutional sphere as well; called social order. Collective communal activities and decision-making are mobilized through this framework. This net of interlinked institutions (e.g. Mahalla, Akaskol, Shurhoi Deha, Hashar) and underlying flexible norms (e.g. Tinji, Qishloqdori) is obligatory to all members of the community and constitutes the local social order. Social order is at the same time affected by (structured structure) as well as influencing this framework (structuring structure). It is perceived as “the structuring and structured processes of social reality. [Social order] is constantly generated by the interplay of worldviews and institutions.” (Mielke et al., 2011: 1). It has been relevant even in times of the complete absence of state (Schetter, 2009). The term social order encompasses the particular constellation of institutions and agencies or actors, not necessarily at state level (North et al., 2009), that can be found in one locality in a certain moment of time (Mielke et al., 2011). In this context, the “governance concept points to the creation of a structure or an order which cannot be externally imposed but is the result of the interaction of a multiplicity of governing and each other influencing actors” (Kooiman and Vliet, 1993: 64) and this includes processes, one would need to add. In the present case of Kuhistoni Mastchoh a core function of resource governance is to provide within a given community binding decisions and their implementation (Ribot and Peluso, 2003). However, governance processes often appear as negotiations among overlapping institutions, mechanisms and processes, through which actors formulate their interests, settle conflicts or comply with rights and duties (Poos, 2011, Mielke et al., 2011). Local governance may well go beyond community members as various political levels can interfere in the process. The power and potentials of the various actors involved in local governance processes already indicate that in practice democratic or autonomous decisions are not necessarily made.³ Powerful actors not only shape governance processes, but also enable or avert enforcement of decisions. Potentially, elite actors accumulate power which puts them in the position to “structure the possible fields of action of others” (Wolf, 1990). However, elite actors are equally bound by the social order in place. The locally established social order is intersubjectively agreed on and as such an intrinsic part of the local “reality” in a constructionist sense. It consists of a full set of institutions, deeply rooted within the community that are therefore relevant and inevitable to all members of the community. The incorporated institutional arrangements – to name only a few – are rural organizations as Mahallas (neighbourhood associations), local traditions, procedures, also professional associations, kinship groups or conceptions of village identity like Qishloqdori (Boboyorov, 2012: 141). Institutions, famously described by North (1990) as “rules of the

³ Power is assumed as something that cannot be possessed, but power resources (Uphoff 1989, 2003), which eventually establishes influence on others' actions (Foucault, Bourdieu, Lukes).

game”, framing not only political processes, but enable or constrain social life and activities. Institutions relate to certain ideas of values and norms, which reflect dominant identities, legitimacies, social practices and worldviews (Boboyorov, 2009, Mielke and Schetter, 2007, North, 1994). Eventually, based on development paths and embedded in social order, institutions create a reliable base of expectations for any local governance process. However, being intrinsically interlinked, the status or significance of institutions varies, as for example legal laws, local traditions or role of religiosity (Hodgson, 2006). In this regard, institutions in Tajik rural areas are modified according to contextual requirements and provide ad hoc interpretative models and determinations, even, in order to avoid clearness and unambiguousness (Christophe, 2006). Functional overlapping of different institutions – institutional bricolage – occur, according to actual needs in a given decision-making process (Cleaver, 2002, Sehring, 2006). At the same time, parallel decision-making is taking place, as institutions or official decrees may contain contradictions or are being thwarted by state-directives or other more “powerful” institutions. In fact, local governance processes shift through various institutions until the “right” group of people agrees on pending decisions. The flexibility of how institutions are applied, indicates the potential of powerful actors to exercise influence (Lauth and Liebert, 1999).⁴ Their outreach expands usually on more than one institution.

Certainly, agricultural production is in many ways subject to governance. Ordering starts with governmental policies, laws and directives. Other issues refer to the use of natural resources as land and water that need sound agreements within the local community. The same holds true for other challenges as timing of work processes, the selection of seeds and the coordination of harvests. However, actual decisions regarding individual agricultural production are made on the level of the single household. In this regard, agricultural production processes are understood as the interface of knowledge and governance.⁵ Agriculture production is a knowledge intense activity; everyday working conditions are determined by this interface. Addressing knowledge in agriculture refers usually to technical know-how to solve concrete problems. Such agro-technical expert knowledge is bound to individuals who, hence, developed a competence for action essentially to spur agricultural production. Following Rammert, knowledge is considered “more as a competence to do something than a compact good that one can transport and store” (Stehr, 2004: 86f). This competence results from individual potential to combine the “known” with the enacted “knowing” (Dewey and Bentely 1949). Already Scheler (1928) established knowledge as a basic condition of being (Seinsverhältnis) together with – an actively – becoming (Werden), instead of being a static entity.

However, knowledge in society is not a fixed entity. Following Berger and Luckmann’s social constructivist approach that declares knowledge as “the sum total of ‘what everybody knows’” (Berger and Luckmann, 1984:16), that is knowledge is perceived as what society defines as knowledge. This implies the inter-subjectively transmissive character of knowledge, which allows for permanent definition, redefinition, use, instrumentalization or abandonment by social actors (Assche and Hornidge, 2012: 1). With regard to agriculture, this notion of knowledge is certainly useful, as it is rarely an individual affair, but an interaction of farmers with society. Knowledge in this context signifies an epistemic situation of inter-subjective agreements or disagreements towards commonly identified processes, objects or values. Already language wise the term knowledge is positively coined, implying that the status of the particular issue or object is already agreed in society. As the examples of natural resource management in Kuhistoni Mastchoh below underline, there are very different perceptions towards the status of knowledge. Value and significance of knowledge are ‘localized’ (Jasanoff, 2004, Jasanoff and Wynne, 1998), each society is shaping knowledge autonomously and values it differently. A certain stock of commonly agreed knowledge is necessary to create reality. However, the processes that shape reality are certainly political as the selection of

⁴ Whereas actors often hide the logic of their operations and relying instead on the efficiency of other institutional or personal arrangements.

⁵ Long defines a “social interface is a critical point of intersection between different life worlds, social fields or levels of social organization, where social discontinuities, based upon discrepancies in values, interests, knowledge and power, are most likely to be located.” (Long 2001: 243)

what is added to the stock of commonly agreed knowledge is not arbitrary. Knowledge per se has a political dimension, as politics are grounded on so called factual knowledge. Learning on the insight of Schütz that “knowledge is socially distributed” (Schütz, 1964: 121) this translates into certain knowledge which is acknowledged in a society, inter-subjectively transmitted and constitutes local reality, while other knowledge is neglected. It is this implicitly agreed knowledge that structures every-day life and institutions. Consequently, in the regular governance processes this knowledge matters most. On the other hand there is specialized knowledge attached to individuals based on education and experience. Governance shapes such specialized knowledge through validation or rewarding procedures, which potentially translate into forms of self-regulation or censoring. With regard to the problem posed within this paper, the focus lies on everyday knowledge and its relevance for local governance processes.

3 Zarafshan Valley: Environment, Agriculture and the System of Livelihood Provision

The Zarafshan Valley divides central and northern Tajikistan; it extends straight from east to west direction from the Kyrgyz to the Uzbek border. The immediate objects of the research were communities along the valley: The village of Garibak in the lowlands, Soosun village in Aini district in the middle and upstream villages in Kuhistoni Mastchoh district. However, this paper focuses particularly on Kuhistoni Mastchoh.

Map 1: Map of Tajikistan with the research area



Source: SDC, Dushanbe

The physical environment is characterized by a long glacial valley, formed by the Zarafshan glacier. The landscape has sparse dry steppe vegetation. Steep tributary valleys contribute to the much degraded central river. Mostly, settlements and arable land are not at river level, but situated on alluvial fans, stemming from narrow tributary valleys. Throughout the entire Zarafshan valley agricultural land is very limited; plots are usually small and fragmented. A higher concentration of inhabitants is found in the lower parts of Mastchoh district with lesser amounts of land under their disposal as compared to those people living in the upper part of the district. The climate is

characterized as continental, warm temperate, and semi-arid. Precipitation follows an annual pattern with peaks in late autumn and spring with annually 400 to 700 mm.⁶ The micro-climate of the most elevated Kuhistoni Mastchoh district is determined by its high mountain environment exceeding 5000 m.

Agricultural production

Although the mountainous conditions of the area provide precipitation, arable land needs irrigation for cultivation. Rain fed cultivation is common only in the lower areas around Panshakent. Small rain fed plots for fodder (Lucerne, Barley) or wheat provides very low results or fail completely. According to farmers, rain fed agriculture became almost impossible in recent years in the Zarafshan Valley. It is not practiced at all in the elevated regions. Instead minor cultivation with irrigation is pursued in tributary villages. Climatic conditions allow crop cultivation from April to October. There is a limited potential to extend crop cultivation to two crops a year, but this is rarely practised at the moment. Poor livelihoods constrain farmers to practise intensive cultivation with massive use of fertilizer, pesticides and agro-techniques. Extensive land use strategies are not an option for most farmers.

Horticulture⁷ in Central Asia is traditionally practiced on irrigated plots around the house, kitchen gardens called Obshikori (Rowe, 2009). Such kitchen gardens produce onions, carrots, tomatoes and potatoes, together with fruits such as cherry or apple trees. In case of abundance, products are marketed, although very high transaction costs especially in Kuhistoni Mastchoh prevent reasonable benefits. Horticulture is prevalent in the upper Zarafshan Valley, as well as small- and medium scale potato and wheat cultivation. Onions and Lucerne have become increasingly popular in recent years, both for consumption and for fodder. The elevated regions provide favourable conditions for growing vegetable and seed potatoes. Potatoes, therefore provide the most important cash crop (Welthungerhilfe et al., 2008: 139). Bigger fruit garden plots with up to several dozen of trees (apricot, mulberry, apples) are called Bor and are situated on nearby slopes. Such gardens also provide important fodder for livestock.

Livestock, e.g. mostly sheep and goats, is an increasingly important component of local agriculture – often managed in labour division with stockbreeders from lower settlements (Transhumanz). Farmers invest savings in animals, trying to balance out their business between plant production and animal husbandry. During the Soviet period the Kuhistoni Mastchoh district was dominated by livestock production, which due to shortage of fodder is not maintained today. “In Soviet times the Kolkhozes in the district were specialized on animals. Today there are more people living here than before. The kolkhoz had about 1500 unites of livestock” (Revomutk, 16.6.2011). Shortage of fodder prevents people from accumulating more livestock.

⁶ Data obtained from the Madrushkat meteorological station in June 2012.

⁷ Horticulture primarily differs from agriculture in two ways. First, it generally encompasses a smaller scale of cultivation, using small plots of mixed crops rather than large fields of single crops. Furthermore, horticultural cultivations generally include a wide variety of crops, even including fruit trees with ground crops, whereas agricultural cultivation generally focus on one primary crop.

Table 1: Characteristics of research villages in Zarafshan Valley

Village/ district	Elevation, m	Inhabitants	House-holds (hh)	Total irrigated land, ha	Total garden Obshikori, Ha	Livestock, approx.	Total (Fruit-) Garden ha	Average irrigated land property/hh estimated	Peak of labour Number/ estimated	Peak of villagers on migration Percentage,
Garibak/ Panshakent	1000	2939	721	160	155	10'000	ca. 65	30 Sotiq	600/ 20,4%	
Soosun/ Ayni	1450	2658	518	99,5	Unavailable	5000	54	10 Sotiq	753/ 28,3%	
ObBurdon/ Kuhistoni Mastchoh	1800	1482	263	56	24,82	1000	41,9	25 Sotiq	49/ 3,3%	
Revomutk/ Kuhistoni Mastchoh	1920	820	124	101	10,45	1500	39	30 Sotiq	22/ 2,6%	
Madrushkat/ Kuhistoni Mastchoh	2235	952	174	145	17,39	3440	ca. 50	50 Sotiq	25/ 2,6%	

Compilation by the author. Source: Welthungerhilfe, DFID et al. (2008), Interviews and Jamoat statistic office

Not all agricultural actors in the research area are participating in the market economy. It is estimated that 15 to 20% of all households exclusively pursue subsistence cultivation. Due to low yields, poor quality harvests and low revenues, agriculture is considered by many farmers as an uncertain livelihood. For the vast majority of village inhabitants it is necessary to seek additional income outside farming. Households comprise the family nucleus of parents and children, plus close relatives (parents, single brothers or sisters). Thus, the average household may consist of 6 to 12 persons.

Table 2: Average land distribution in the Upper Zarafshan Valley

Arable land per family in the upper Zarafshan Valley	Ayni district	Kohistani Mastchoh district
Landless families	17,4 %	0,6 %
Less than 10 Sotiq (0,1 ha)	32,5 %	1,4 %
10 – 20 Sotiq (0,1 – 0,2 ha)	27 %	4,5 %
20 – 50 Sotiq (0,2 – 0,5 ha)	9,4 %	13,2 %
50 – 100 Sotiq (0,5 – 1 ha)	2,2 %	20,5 %
1 – 2 ha	3,2 %	34 %
2 – 5 ha	1,6 %	16 %
More than 5 ha	5,4 %	9,8 %

Source: Ege 2008, based on World Bank, DFID, UNDP and Welthungerhilfe, DFID et al.(2008)⁸

Since 1991 the population of Ayni and Kuhistani Mastchoh districts increased significantly.⁹ Kuhistani Mastchoh district was the subject of a resettlement campaign starting in 1956. The then communist government of Tajikistan decided not to develop certain regions any further and to resettle its inhabitants in lowlands where they supported cotton production. People from Kuhistani Mastchoh were resettled in the north of the country near the Uzbek border. New settlements with identical names were founded. Since the 1960s people have started to return to Kuhistani Mastchoh, a process that accelerated in the late 1980s when the first generation of families living in the lowlands sent their sons back to the mountainous villages to start families there.

The distribution of collective land to individuals started in Kuhistani Mastchoh around 1989 with Soviet *Perestroika* politics and ended approximately in 2005. Most collective farms remained functional, but possess very small land titles today, and are sometimes used for public purposes as for the school, pensions etc.¹⁰ Leasing land from the collective Dehkon farm is considered impossible in the Kuhistani Mastchoh district. Leasehold land [Arenda] has been distributed to a number of households with long-term contracts in the past. Within the village, occasionally private opportunities occur to lease land, e.g. in case of seasonal labour migration to Russia.¹¹ Such arrangements apparently work only within the extended family. In fact, this kind of leasehold is

⁸ Generally figures on arable land plots and how land is distributed are not easy to obtain, often incorrect or misleading. For instance tell official figures for Revomutk village about 101 ha of irrigated fields in 2011. An earlier report in 2006, based on data from the Jamoat statistical office, informs that the village has 27 ha of irrigated land at disposal.

⁹ Although the general fertility rate for Tajikistan decreased since 1989 to 3,3 in 2010 population growth is at 1,47 % in 2011 (Worldbank 2012). However, the birth rate in rural areas is often higher than the national average.

¹⁰ Such services are officially provided by the Jamoat: In most villages visited it was not possible to hand out arable land to new entries to the local Dehkon farm. Some villages provide “construction” land to build; especially for young families.

¹¹ Fees for one year leasehold land in ObBurdon village were stated at about 300 Somoni for 7 Sotiq.

taking place rarely because “the good Dehkon never gives his land to strangers” (Olimov, 15.6.2012). The fear is quite realistic that leased land will not be returned to the proprietor. In all the villages visited, the possibility to buy land was categorically denied; however, at a later point offers and prices were circulated as well.¹²

Livelihoods and Social stratification

Livelihood is discussed in the realm of this research with regard to strategies of the households to fulfil their subsistence needs. If livelihood is “the command an individual, family, or other social group has over an income and/or bundles of resources that can be used or exchanged to satisfy its needs” (Wisner et al., 2004: 12) then these goods derive in Kuhistoni Mastchoh mainly from agricultural labour. However, the majority of people in the research area are forced to pursue a “combination of subsistence agriculture, labour migration and shuttle-trading through which the poor seek to earn a living” (Heathershaw 2009: 39). People try to diversify income opportunities by working within the village or elsewhere as driver, day labourer, shopkeeper, dressmaker, midwife, shepherd, etc. The labour market on a local and district level is very limited, while casual labour is generally very low paid. The most significant way of earning money remains therefore migration to Russia.¹³ Despite this phenomenon, in the course of this paper, household units that pursue agriculture only partially are assumed as equal agricultural actors. In fact, only a very few households in the research area can rely on agriculture as their only source of income.

Decision-making in the household regarding e.g. agricultural production is often reserved to males and follows criteria of age, merit and expertise. A considerable number of female headed households (estimated about 10 %) exist in Kuhistoni Mastchoh, either due to permanent or temporary absence of the male. However, decision-making in female headed households is often negated as relatives or remote husbands actively interfere. Nevertheless, depending on personal character and support by parents and neighbours, many female headed households act independently. However, throughout the research area I came across only very few female headed households that locally were regarded as “middleclass”. This indicates the strong relation of property, e.g. general household prosperity, and social reputation. Without too much simplification, households in the villages visited form the following hierarchical pyramid displayed in a relational typology.

¹² Also in ObBurdon it was mentioned in a group interview that it is possible to buy for 1000\$ one Sotiq of land. However, also in most other villages elite farmer stated that ways to buy land exist.

¹³ Apparently each village or sub-region link to a partner community in Russia as e.g. the city of Sverdlovsk, Petropavlovsk Kamtshatsk a.o. However, labour-migration to Russia is more frequent in downstream Zarafshan where a considerable part of the villages’ labour force is seasonally absent. This is due to better working opportunities in Kuhistoni Mastchoh district.

Table 3: Relational typography of farm sizes

Farm size	Ayni district	Kuhistoni Mastchoh dis.	Land tenure, approx.	Economic Status	basis/
Small	86,3 %	19,7 %	between 0.1 and 0.5 ha	Poor, considered as average people	
	The largest group of people with very marginal land property, relying on other income (labour migrants, driver, day-labourer, female headed households, etc)				
Medium	5,4 %	55 %	0.6 and 2.0 ha	Middle income, Well respected	
	Small intermediate group of middle-class farmer (teacher, school director, local self-made people, successful farmer)				
Large	1,6 %	16 %	2.1 ha and above	Comparably rich, Elite status	
	A narrow group of wealthy rural elites (as Raisi Xodshagi Dehkonon ¹⁴ , Member of Hukumat and other central administration, `noble´ or important families, sometimes the chief Mullah of the village)				

Compiled by the author, based on Ege 2008

¹⁴ Chief of local Dehkon farm. The local collective farm (Xodshagi Dehkonon) is the successor of former Kolkhoz/ Sovkhoz enterprise.

4 Government Structures and Local Governance Processes

Within the research area, the state is very much present with administrative and executive structures.¹⁵ The Hukumat governs the district, which comprises a department for agriculture, the cadastre office as well as the “power organs” police, army and secret service. Hukumat administration is important to conducting agriculture as it represents the highest local authority. Since the administrative principle of subsidiarity is not yet very much developed in Tajikistan, basically all documents have to pass the Hukumat’s offices. Below Hukumat level there are Jamoats; municipalities that integrate a number of villages. At Jamoat level a statistical committee, a land committee, women’s committee, a village board and other boards are set up. The Jamoat is also busy with settling conflicts on village level. At the same time it is responsible for collecting taxes (Bliss, 2010, Bliss, 2011).

In recent years Tajikistan modified its legislation in order to enhance rural development (Lerman and Sedik, 2008). Despite modern government structures in place and several rounds of land reforms, governance arrangements on the ground are still highly centralized and far from self-determined (Bliss, 2011). This implies that higher authorities considerably interfere in village affairs, e.g. regarding the distribution of resources, and the cutting of trees. Nevertheless, on local level, community leadership is not attached to one institution such as to the Dehkon farm, the Mahalla, the village committee or any others. Instead, local decisions are made following a set of overlapping institutions which can be newly introduced by state or NGO, figurations of soviet structures and traditional institutions. A nucleus of institutions makes the permanent point of reference for public affairs. Apparently this may be local committees as Mahalla- and village committee or the chiefs of Jamoat and Dehkon farm. Lately the state introduced Shurhoi Deha, the village board, as the sanctioned local governance structure. However, the existence and significance of the various committees or other local governance arrangements changes considerably, even in neighbouring villages. Regular decision-making goes through the direct democratic vote at grand community assembly, Maclisi Umumi, which takes place in each village one or two times a year. All inhabitants – typically only male will attend – may speak out and request decisions to be made. In between, other Maclisi – meetings – may take place on request. Village elites not necessarily play a prominent role at such assemblies. If needed, they demonstrate strength by mobilizing successfully majorities for their projects. Rather, the Maclisi Umumi is the place to publicly criticize elites and administration. However, discussion of decisions taken often ends in further discussion and only some implementation.

Governance levels above the local social order provide already less reliable services. Many administrative issues of rural life, as the certification of land titles,¹⁶ are exclusively clarified at Hukumat or even national level in Dushanbe. Such services are time and money intensive. Most services have regular fees e.g. for land certification, excluding sons from the army, going on Hadj. Paying money to people in charge ensures and accelerates such requests. Such payments appear regular and reliable; the necessary sums are definite and not at all separated into regular costs and bribes.¹⁷

¹⁵ The administrative structure of Tajikistan consists of provinces (Tajik: Viloyat, Rus: Oblast) that technically have their own regional governments; within those are 58 districts (Tajik: Nohiya, Russian: Rayon), 367 sub-districts (Tajik: Jamoat) and finally towns, settlements or villages, which do not have any administrative recognition (Population of the Republic of Tajikistan as of 1 January 2008, State Statistical Committee, Dushanbe, 2008 [Russian]) The President appoints heads of provinces and districts. Since 2009 Jamoat leaders are appointed through the head (Hokim) of the respective district administration (Hukumat).

¹⁶ A certified land title is the maximal recognition of property one can have in Tajikistan.

¹⁷ “We are without law, everything is done through money!” (Accountant Revomutk, 17.6.2011) Despite this, there is the saying that at least one public servant in the Hukumat works without extra payments.

“You pay 2000 Somoni for the certification of land. The price is the same from one to five hectare. The full sum goes to the Raisi [chief] of the land committee. He divides between the Jamoat and Hukumat. The rest is for himself. If you pay, the process is fast, otherwise it is slow.” (Accountant Revomutk, 17.6.2011)

These payments and procedures are widely criticized, but accepted. They illustrate the dilemma of public leadership. As Bliss underlines, bribe-payments are a main source of income for underfunded administration – Jamoat, Hukumat and subordinated committees (e.g. land committee).¹⁸ They are indispensable for receiving the required services, decisions or their implementation. People in charge are dependent on such payments as it constitutes the main income. For example, the position as chief of the local collective agricultural enterprise, the Dehkon farm, is rather important¹⁹, but the post itself does not provide many material benefits. It depends therefore on the material background and individual reputation to be considered as community leader.²⁰ Personal reputation derives from family background, individual character and the potential to mobilize resources. Nowadays reputation is massively generated by adhering to Islamic lifestyle. Local authority is based on institutional resources, reputation, wealth or particular spirituality. As Heathershaw points out, the logic underlying the actions of the elites is not to “make [local public spaces] work effectively for the general good” but to monopolise them and contribute to their ‘authority’ (Heathershaw, 2009: 112). Twice I came across chiefs of Dehkon farms who were apparently not as powerful and assertive as in other villages. One farmer explained bluntly why he refuses to become chief: „Without money your speech is of no value“. He explained that he was not wealthy enough to establish good relations with the Hukumat and Jamoat. Both authorities possess plenty of means to hinder the work and initiatives in the village. For any agreements requested financial contributions fall due. Consequently the Raisi needs to invest private money to get things done at higher levels otherwise villagers will reject the weak Raisi (field diary 15.6.2011). Thus, potentially good, but poor candidates will not apply for such posts (Bliss, 2011: 47). Reviewing the strength of the Raisi is clear at village meetings, the Maclisi. During field research two Raisi of village committees resigned with the explanation that “Nobody listens to my words” (field diary 21.6.2012).

Local governance of arable land

Nevertheless, important disputes are not solved simply through payments to authorities. There are many conflicts in “limbo” that are attached to the distribution of land plots, irrigation, redistribution of incorrectly appropriated land, and other unsettled disputes among villagers. The central government has been in many regards not in a position to implement laws and policies. Thus, within the past two decades diverse conclusions were given to similar types of conflicts, leaving a situation where central rule of law and local institutions contradict, but are equally in place. This way disputes are sometimes halted as local institutions and the administrative units at Jamoat or Hukumat level categorically refuse to interfere. This is the case for instance in Revomutk village where claims of redistribution of arable land spurred considerable tension among villagers. A similar situation was found in other villages of Kuhistoni Mastchoh district. Disputes about resources relevant to farming activities are most common in the research region. Villagers therefore revert to various procedures to influence local governance processes.

Procedures that impact on local governance

In the case of Revomutk village the stalled negotiations around land distribution is certainly in the interest of the established village elites. Existing arrangements are contested by smallholder villagers, but will hardly ever be brought to court. Several village institutions charged to solve local

¹⁸ Bliss (2011) depicts this process as an increasing state retreat.

¹⁹ The position enables operational powers over resources, a long-term influence on village development and establishes contacts to state structures and other relevant people. Often the chief of the Dehkon farm appears as mayor of the community, thus contact person for village outsiders.

²⁰ “An emphasis on personal ‘authority’ necessitates that practices that are *de jure* codified are *de facto* dependent on the person who implements them” (Heathershaw 2009: 112).

conflicts in order to prevent external intervention (Boboyorov, 2012). Ordinary farmers firstly lack funds to raise interest for their appeals at higher administrative levels. Secondly, writing letters of complaint [Ariza] may do more harm than good as it provokes a response from lower tier authorities, who are themselves integral components of the local elite system. Furthermore it is a common opinion that Ariza writing will jeopardize village Tinji [village peace].²¹ Tinji, literally wellness or peacefulness, is a term that describes the ideal peaceful harmony among villagers. It is used by elites to denote full political affirmation and not to create discontent among villagers or with authorities (Heathershaw, 2009: 73, Boboyorov, 2012). Thus, complaints by single farmers that exceed usual levels and culminate in Ariza writings or other public outrage may lead the complainant to become stigmatised and eventually exclude the whole family as a threat to village Tinji (Boboyorov, 2012). Apart from spoiling village peace, this may even lead to threats by the authorities and police, even resulting in physical violence (field diary: 17.06.2011). Complaining too much to other villagers and authorities contains the danger of isolating the household from the community. Being socially excluded is a real danger as it puts the family's system of livelihood provision at risk, as also confirmed in the work of Boboyorov (2012). One farmer in Revomutk village explains how his requests to the Jamoat, the court [Prokurator] and the land committee for more land for his family failed. He wrote complaint letters, but without any success. He didn't receive the land requested. "Nobody helped; they will only give to their relatives." Requesting land in the village is a sensitive issue. "Addressing the land committee means *war*", because the authorities do not take any decision and avoid responsibilities. Instead the conflict remains in the village. According to him, only if the Hukumat redistributes the land will the distribution be accepted by the community and therefore possible without turmoil: "The government must distribute [the land]. If I write a letter and the land is distributed due to my letter, then people will come to me and ask: Are you the son of my father or why do you take our land?" (Revomutk 29.6.2011). Any attempt to stretch or circumvent local social order may cause, especially for non-elite actors, negative repercussions from state power organs and the village community. Ariza writing, thus, referring to a legal framework that is above the local arena (as land reform laws) is considered a legitimate method to influence local governance; but a double-edged affair. The risk to appear spoiling the village Tinji or Quishlokdori is apparently prevalent; many villagers eventually abstain from writing to the Jamoat, Hukumat or other state organs.²²

Steering local governance arrangements

Local elites employ other means to shape governance processes with their key feature being authority. Identifying "elites groups" within the village is not easy at all. Still, a closer view shows that some individuals with their families have better access than others to arable land, state positions or linkages to attractive business within the research area particularly potato cultivation, transport, and village shops. Elites manage to acquire the best pieces and more land than others, however even poor people possess land. Beside the chief of the Dehkon farm, authorities on village level are the Raisi mahalla and Aksakol²³, the director of the school, the main Mullah, as well as representatives of "power organs". Authority is linked to functions in public life, but also based on reputation. Education or professional merits are no key criteria. Apparently, various people may form temporarily an elite consortium that pre-shape village governance arrangements. Such consortia are focussed on short term aims. The first analysis of my field research data does not indicate that

²¹ A typical first statement that one comes across when visiting a village says: "Each family in this village has land." The motivation for such a statement is to respect village tinji. However, apparently in the same village (Revomutk) one sixth of families possess only kitchen garden, e.g. 20 families (out of 120) are without land.

²² Instead, some people refer to the president of the Tajik Republic, Emomali Rahmon, as the addressee of Ariza. Since Jamoat, Hukumat and regional level are equally considered as one elite group with a disputable legitimization, farmers that publicly dispute their issues repeatedly mentioned to apply to the president. This idea is supported by national TV stations that broadcast from time to time reports of immediate presidential crackdowns on corrupted state structures (Heathershaw 2009). It appears a strong, but rather rhetorical figure.

²³ Mahallas are autonomous neighborhood associations, Aksakol are the traditional facilitators within the Mahalla.

strategic groups (Evers, 1999) dominate local governance per se. In contrast, local elite arrangements appear neither fixed nor unique. Contradictions among elites occur on a daily basis. However, such elite competition does not conceal the domination of certain governance processes. "The ethic of 'authority' demands that information and law are used and abused to maintain control, rather than being in themselves regulative of social control. [...] Where official information becomes a hidden weapon of 'authority' it is unsurprising that its public transcript is reduced to the provision of bland statistics, or is completely withheld." (Heathershaw, 2009: 112). Local elites manage to source their power with knowledge to topple others while functioning at the same time as gatekeeper of certain information (Heathershaw, 2009: 152). This holds true especially with sensitive topics in communities, as for example land distribution processes or lucrative external development interventions. Usual daily routine in the village provides regular opportunities to meet: five times a day the mosque, at weddings, on the field, official meetings, guest celebrations, ritual feasts etc. Meetings often take place in private houses so that exclusiveness is easily ensured.

5 Bobogi: Accessing and Safeguarding Arable Land

Availability of land is perceived by most farmers as the biggest obstacle to their livelihood as arable land is insufficient. As exemplified above, access to land is generally very limited and not equally distributed. Disputes over access to natural resources cause frequent discontent and conflict among villagers. Requests for land on the basis of existing laws are being dismissed by the chief (Raisi) of the Dehkon farm with the argument that no further land is available. Arable land can neither be bought nor rented (Lerman, 2012), selling agricultural land is legally prohibited. By law, all land belongs to the state. Land has been gradually distributed according to various reforms between 1995 and 2005 (Lerman and Sedik, 2008). Thereby, all members of Kolkhozes or Sovkhozes were entitled to receive land.²⁴ The distribution of natural resources did not proceed transparently in Tajikistan, which is comparable to other post-Soviet states.²⁵ Nevertheless, the implementation of the land reform varied throughout Tajikistan's sub-regions (Herbers, 2006, Robinson et al., 2008). In fact, acquiring land depended very much on individual disposition to mobilize reputation, resources, and information. One female farmer complained: "Land distribution was not so good because my husband was not active to acquire farmland at the necessary time" (Madrushkat 30.6.2011). Given that each former Kolkhoz member was entitled to receive roughly 20 Sotiq (0,2ha) of arable land, one could expect a rather equal distribution of land. However, as shown in the tables above, in all villages visited a significant number of families were found who have less land available.²⁶

Bobogi – legacy of grandparents

Only later I learned that in Zarafshan Valley, and particularly in villages in the Kuhistoni Mastchoh district, land distribution processes did not exclusively follow the official legislation, but also followed local arrangements called Bobogi. The institution Bobogi is not unique in Kuhistoni Mastchoh; it is also found elsewhere in Tajikistan.²⁷ However, it seems to be prominent in the whole upper Zarafshan Valley, in particular in Kuhistoni Mastchoh district.

Bobogi literally means 'from the grandfather' or 'land of the grandparents'. It implies to restore land tenures to previous proprietors. The practice to claim former property is said to have already started in the late 1980s, when formerly resettled inhabitants returned to Kuhistoni Mastchoh.²⁸ Indigenous villagers and their descendants claim that certain land plots were allegedly owned or created by their ancestors. Massive land distribution happened during the 1990s, when the inflow of people to Kuhistoni Mastchoh peaked. Its appearance coincides with a period of extreme political insecurity due to a civil war in the country. However, Bobogi is also known and practiced in other districts of Zarafshan Valley, for example, in Ayni district, where no resettlement took place. During the 1990s many villages in the Kuhistoni Mastchoh district observed considerable demographic gains. In recent years however, also due to the shortage of land, the inflow of new people has diminished. Farmer Abdukosir came in 1992 together with other young men from Mastchoi Nav district to the village of Revomutk, where they chose also their wives: "It was our wish to come back to Vatani Bobogi [the

²⁴ The dismantling of collective farms took place according to the legislation of the Land Reform (Herbers 2006, Lerman 2008). Officially the distribution of land was finished in 2005 (Decret 111). However, land was not divided throughout Tajikistan in the same way.

²⁵ An increasing amount of literature deals with comparable development paths in neighbouring post-Soviet countries as Kirgizstan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan: Robinson, Higginbotham et al.(2008), Assche and Hornidge (2012) as well as Eichholz et al. (2012), Trevisani (2011) and Veldvisch (2012)

²⁶ While at the same time there are apparently always people who possess much above average: E.g. Revomutk: 1 owner of 14ha, Padask: 1 landowner of 60ha, another farmer with 6ha; Madrushkat: 1 farmer with ca. 6ha.

²⁷ Interview on land of the grandfather in Sharitus district, south Tajikistan in April 2012.

²⁸ As the population of other mountainous valleys of the former Soviet Republic of Tajikistan, inhabitants of Kuhistoni Mastchoh were resettled to a newly created district in the northern lowlands of the country, called Mastchohi Nav: The new Mastchoh. There, settlements with identic names were founded.

homeland of the grandfather]. We asked the Hokim for land and he gave us the land.”²⁹ They had no documents or evidence to prove their right to request land. People knew the family names, thus “local inhabitants didn’t say anything; they just returned the land of our grandfather to us” (Revomutk 18.6.2012).

Claims for Bobogi land were not always settled with a decision taken by the Hokim, Raisi, or other authoritative actors. Other requests were communicated through village and district institutions, such as Mosques, local committees and boards. In some villages, such requests were discussed at Maclisi Umumi (grand village meeting). However, the chief of the local Dehkon Farm, the land committee on Jamoat level (municipality) and the district Hokim are central figures for Bobogi requests. These institutions have to communicate the request, comment on it and are finally in charge handing over the land. Requests are based on hardly more than family name and history, as it is almost impossible to bring evidence in form of documents. “Old people know very well where the land plots are and how they were distributed. This information [regarding family land property] is passed through the generations. No documents were available or necessary. They [the board of old villagers] unite and discuss and finally decide unanimously” (Abduhofiz, Ayni district, 28.6.2012). However, eventually, approval on the restitution of land comes through the chiefs of the local Dehkon Farm, the land committee and Hukumat, as they keep the cadastral land register.

Social enrooting of Bobogi

Throughout the research area a broad acceptance of Bobogi was experienced. Core principles of Bobogi such as ‘land is the private good of the family’ or ‘the one who created land should use it’, and so on, are widely agreed. Farmer’s attachment to the inherited, family land is frequently emphasized. Some informants mention that even during Soviet times land tenure wasn’t changed: “Bobogi land distribution is in place in the whole Mastchoh district. It is permitted and fair, as it also was when the Kolkhoz was in place. People officially rendered their land to the Kolkhoz, unofficially they continued to work their family land and paid taxes. [...] It is better that the law on land reform is not implemented here as it means civil war. [...] In Mastchoh you can’t do anything. How can you take from one and give to others?” (Field diary 22.6.2011). Due to the harsh environmental conditions, arable land usually had to be “built”, e.g. made arable. The legitimacy of a Bobogi request is justified with the individual efforts of the grandfather to create the land, e.g. levelling it, providing top soil and irrigation.³⁰ Such “building” stories are very popular among farmers, although questions remain to which year such activities refer to? Either to a time right before the forced resettlement around 1956, which would refer to a situation of collectivized agriculture. Or does it refer to pre-Soviet property structures before circa 1920, thus about three generations ago? Both explanations are problematic. The first one would refer to a time of collective agriculture with almost no private land plots. The latter explanation points to a time period before 1920, thus 80 to 90 years ago, when their grandparents have been infants.

While the former land tenure of the grandparents may be questionable, current connection with land plots in the village is not. Often farmers possess land plots they were in charge of during collective agriculture. Thus, for example, an apricot gardener possesses today the former kolkhoz orchard where he worked all his life. Similarly, the employees of the weather station managed to work on the adjoining land. The same holds true for former Kolkhoz brigades. Members of brigades continued to work on the land of the former brigade. Not all examples may be applicable; however, it seems that plausible requests for land are often developed by those who were able to underline habitual use.

²⁹ They were sent from their families who live in Mastchohi Nav, to live in Kuhistani Mastchoh were they had the chance to obtain the previous houses and arable land. Similarly do people nowadays in Kuhistani Mastchoh when they send some of their sons to settle in Safarobod in northern Tajikistan.

³⁰ In this regard the reputation of a grandfather and diligence of the respective family is important. “Other people don’t have Bobogi land as their grandfather didn’t work but sleep.” (Revomutk 18.6.2012)

Legitimization of Bobogi: Mistrust, Conflict and Reconciliation

Despite widespread acceptance, Bobogi continues to stir up conflicts among villagers in the research area. In particular, because underprivileged smallholders expect a general redistribution of land conducted by the Hukumat. Asked on which basis such a distribution has to be grounded – according to national legislation, or to pre-Soviet property – the response is undecided. This reflects well the contradictory situation: On the one hand Bobogi is contested, while on the other side very few villagers speak out for land distribution strictly according to land reform legislation. Disputes about the legitimacy of Bobogi are therefore commonplace. It appears impossible to display a coherent picture of Bobogi acceptance or distribution throughout the research area, as its pros and cons are continuously discussed.

People are sceptical towards Bobogi decisions, as they may be rigged, especially when history of family and ancestors are easily manipulated (Boboyorov, 2012). In some cases land plots or orchards were simply declared as family property, often by habitual users. There is suspicion that Bobogi decisions are in favour of persons coming from Mastchohi Nav because they are able to create a “story” (Revomutk 28.06.2012). In fact, only a minority of local farmers were able to request land on the basis of Bobogi. Others simply link Bobogi to money, indicating that it is just a form of corruption: “Bobogi comes with money” (Madrushkat 1.7.2011). According to another informant, Bobogi is just additional income for elite people. One farmer angrily summarized: “Of course it is not according to the law if I want land somewhere, but of course I give the money and I get the land” (Revomutk 5.7.2011).

Interestingly, it appears that favouring Bobogi or state laws corresponds with certain lifestyles in the given village. Communities where Bobogi was widely applied – and still is publicly justified – were by trend also much stricter in displaying Islamic daily life. The subjective perception of a different religiosity was supported by soft indicators as the presence of females in public, the construction and maintenance of mosque buildings, or availability of alcohol and cigarettes in local shops. More signs of intense religious lifestyle as huge letters of an Qur’an sure which decorated a local mosque or the Muezzin summoning to pray – both supposedly illegal in Tajikistan today. Already the self-expression of some villages underlined their right belief in contrast to other villages that were denounced as “little Hindustan”. In return, these villages were labelled as religious strongholds and “opposition villages” as their population supposedly aligned themselves during the Tajik civil war with the United Tajik Opposition.³¹

Apparently, both types of villages – religious and less religious – are irregularly distributed within upper Zarafshan Valley. Socially they are separated by tensions that stem from the Tajik civil war. Consequently relations between the villages remain affected by mistrust.³² The institution of Bobogi receives support by an Islamic lifestyle and worldview. Villages that display a particular Islamic worldview, as e.g. Hudgifi Oftob, Revomutk, ObBurdon and others, did not question the legitimacy of Bobogi as others did elsewhere. Instead land shortage and poverty in the own village were likely explained as resulting from personal or family shortcomings: The grandfather played cards or that Kelins [Kelin: daughter in law] fight with each other and so on. “The poor are not poor, they go to Russia instead. They build big houses. You need to work, to think, to use the brain, then also 10 Sotiq will be enough.” And, as this better-off farmer continues: “May their face turn black! Who has no land owns livestock! Many people lie! Rissk [A concept of fortune and destiny in Islam] is everywhere the same, independent from owning 5 Sotiq or 5 ha.” (Revomutk 18.6.2011) Thus, this way of unequal distribution of arable land is displayed as individual destiny, which would be heretical to question. Particularly in these villages an arbitration procedure called Khaliddi Islom [the key of Islam] was introduced and practised in order to settle land disputes. Nevertheless, Khaliddi Islom is

³¹ UTO, United Tajik Opposition – the overbearing party in Tajik civil war from 1992-97

³² One farmer somberly summarized: “We drink. [We drink alcohol, therefore we are bad Muslims.] In Revomutk, Hudgif, ObBurdon and other villages they don’t drink. If they could, they would kill us”. (Field diary 22.5. 2012) This distrust impacts further on inter-regional trade, inter-marriage and any other regional cooperation.

also elsewhere in Tajikistan known. This procedure involved inviting the two protagonists each to hold with one finger a key tied into the book of Yoshin of Qur'an. Whilst holding the book and repeating prayers of the book of Yoshin, the piece of land went to whom the Qur'an finally turned its front side. The process was much criticized, but practised in various villages. Later, after a certain local Mullah, who was in favour of Khaliddi Islom procedure, had passed away, it was abandoned.

Photo 1: How the procedure of Khaliddi Islom works



Photo: A. Mandler

Even in the villages with a decidedly Islamic lifestyle, a continual discussion took place as to whether Bobogi was in accordance with Islam or not. Questions were raised about the justice and fairness of a land distribution that favours a few people, while "according to Islam all people should benefit equally". Reportedly even the local Mullah was not in favour of Bobogi distribution (Revomutk 15.6.2011). Apparently many, although not all, who benefited from Bobogi, demonstrated a rather strict religious daily life, e.g. regarding nutrition, clothing, talk and order of the day.

Bobogi and land reform – the cocktail of local logics

Thus, despite a general acceptance of Bobogi in Kuhistoni Mastchoh and beyond, its implementation is contested. Apparently throughout the research region the relevance of Bobogi changes profoundly. While it was criticized and contested in all visited villages, local application differs. Some villages stopped applying Bobogi or did it only partly; while in others it is still in use. Thus, in upper Zarafshan not only the logic of Bobogi is applied, but the enactments of land reform as well. The role of the state, for example, the Hukumat as the authority in charge, has been rather positive towards the Bobogi procedure. Despite other legislation, as land reform acts and particularly the state decree number 201 on Bobogi, the district Hukumat abstained from interfering into local business. Obviously, public objections to Bobogi in the form of complaint letters, Ariza, were effectively neglected. Instead, requests for Bobogi progressed and eventually were accepted by the Hukumat's organs, e.g. land committee, statistic office at Jamoat and others. It is not clear what made the Hukumat positive towards such land requests besides the commonplace suspect of additional payments. A similar opaque process is currently the attempt of many farmers to end uncertainty and trying to get their land plots certified at Hukumat and with the land committee. Apparently in return for corresponding payments, all kinds of land, including Bobogi and Arenda [leasehold] are certified.

Most of villagers do not have this latest certification yet, thus their land is potentially at risk for being redistributed on the basis of Bobogi. Some villages as Madrushkat try to discontinue with Bobogi procedures. Although requests are still being formulated, coming mostly from other villages or

people from Mastchohi Nav, such requests are considered as “not fair” and “painful” and are commonly defeated. Villagers display such requests as attempts to stir up social unrest within the village. However, they collectively and individually developed effective replies in order to avoid such threats:

- Requests are negotiated at Maclisi Umumi, the grand village assembly, where other cases have been refused earlier

For instance in Madrushkat village, people agreed earlier, between 2002 and 2005, in a grand village meeting [Maclisi Umumi] to abstain from Bobogi. This decision meant that only a few cases of Bobogi distribution appeared in this village. Further requests were denied. The subsequent land distribution was based on land reform legislation, which apparently led to more equal results. As a matter of fact, social tensions were expressed explicitly less in this community in comparison to some neighbouring villages.

- Passing Bobogi land requests on to others

Another way of avoiding and turning down requests for Bobogi land is to point to other unsettled land disputes. One farmer explained: “Bobogi was exchanged here, but nobody lives on his Bobogi. If people ask me for Bobogi, I will ask others for my Bobogi” (Madrushkat 14.6.2012). That way, such requests may be postponed and eventually turned down. Apparently a decision at Maclisi Umumi determined not to engage in this kind of interlaced conflicts.

- Postponing land requests

Another argumentation also points at transforming the individual request into a public affair. Land requests are accepted under the condition that a similar piece of land is offered as compensation. This is almost impossible. The land exchange is therefore meant to fail, and thus solved in a satisfying way for the current user.

6 Conclusion

This paper exemplifies how access to arable land in villages in a part of Tajikistan is not solely determined by state legislation and supervised by its representatives, but also by institutional arrangements within the local social order. In the context of Tajikistan, national policies do not fully arrive at the local level; representatives of state organs often abstain from implementing national legislation. To prevent negative repercussions that may result from uncertain political arrangements and decision-making, farmers rely on local institutions to negotiate the access to land. Thus, since Tajikistan's independence two procedures have mainly determined access to arable land in the research region: first, state legislation, implemented through institutions as the Hukumat, the Jamoat land committee and the chief of the local Dehkon Farm; second, the institution of Bobogi. To exemplify how access to arable land is negotiated and to underline the inherent role of knowledge, the institution of Bobogi has been highlighted because it rests in local values but contradicts state legislation.

As discussed above, processes of local governance in Kuhistoni Mastchoh occur among a set of institutions such as Mahalla, the Shurhoi Deha and other committees, the Raisi of the Dehkon farm, local Mullah, women-led institutions, the grand village meeting Maclisi Umumi, and so forth. However, the assertiveness and relevance of an institution depends on its acceptance and legitimacy in the local community; in other words, its status in the local social order. Institutions need continued public acceptance in order to remain relevant; even state supported institutions and practices are not sacrosanct. The shifting acceptance or non-acceptance of Bobogi in the research area indicates reservations towards it, while other local institutions, such as Hashar or Quishlokdori, are less subject to questioning. In fact, while some villages apply Bobogi to various degrees, others have seemingly abandoned it completely. Simultaneously land reform enactments are in place, however to bring Bobogi into compliance with such formal policies is rarely possible.

There appears to be an element of choice involved, as people chose for many different reasons to lend legitimacy to Bobogi. This is a contribution from "below" to the described bricolage of institutions (Cleaver, 2002). However, by selecting and strengthening some institutions more than others, the community makes a clear statement of how local conceptions of reality are shaped. Such public arrangements contribute to the construction and maintenance of social order in local communities. The selection and legitimization of institutions underlines what counts as common knowledge in a community. At the same time, the deliberate selection of certain institutions may be influenced by actors that benefit from the subsequent arrangements. Thus, by shifting legitimacy to particular institutions concrete influence on governance arrangements can be exercised. The extensive demonstration of religious values and lifestyle apparently has enabled some villagers to enhance Bobogi claims. Often those who present themselves as "good Muslims" and pursue a "more" Islamic daily routine than others sustained the institution of Bobogi. This group of people is very much present in today's village affairs, and seem to benefit considerably from Bobogi arrangements. The underlying argumentation refers to supposed Islamic values inherent to Bobogi, namely family and heritage. Symptomatically for this theological perspective is the former practise of Khalidi Islom that permitted nearly unlimited possibilities to interfere in present land use structures. The underlying rationale of Khalidi Islom and Bobogi is hard to contest, as both claim legitimacy through being in line with orthodox Islam, thus referring to an approved and uncontested worldview. Current contestations to claim or defend Bobogi land that refer to Riskk [personal destiny] or the shortcoming of ancient grandfathers or daughters in law indicate a similar tendency. Motivating an institution with religious features is considered by Berger and Luckmann (1984) to be the highest legitimization possible. By maintaining the linkage between the eternal values of religion and the local conception of reality, the significance of the institution is perpetuated. Opposing perceptions may be refuted easily within the community as heretic; as spoilers of a village's Qishloqdori.

The framework of social order contains many different, even contradicting institutions. Bobogi appears to be a well immersed component of the social order in the research region; however, its

status is disputed. Those villages that stopped distributing Bobogi land, developed other processes and institutions in order to reject Bobogi requests. Interestingly enough, farmers do not simply refer to its contradiction to existing laws. Instead, as shown above, reference is made to the unworkability of the requests and the risk of disturbing village peace, or Tinji. Doing so allows some villagers to circumvent Bobogi requests without necessarily appearing as secularist, i.e. questioning values of Islam.

The paper's findings in the realm of agricultural production underline the immediate relation of knowledge and governance that coincide in local social order. In a social and political context as depicted for Kuhistoni Mastchoh, farmers are not at first inclined towards outsider agro-technical knowledge that enables increases in agricultural production. Instead it is necessary for a farmer to remain immersed within the local order so to stay in or drop out of professional agriculture.

This demands from local farmers a twofold approach to knowledge: individually it is necessary to be knowledgeable about farming. But, currently more importantly, individuals require knowledge to defend or gain access to arable land. Besides that, the single individual is part of a community that sets the rules of the game. Daily exchange about decisions, intentions and values shape not only the social order, but consequently local governance arrangements. Social order, which is a representation of the socially constructed reality of a particular place, is no stable entity in the community and may be rather diverse among neighbouring villages. Therefore, as local governance processes are based on common knowledge and perceptions of reality, they are hardly predictable and may change. Local governance is thus, as knowledge, constantly being shaped and at the same time shaping people's behaviour. The various settlements in order to apply or defeat Bobogi demonstrated how farmer's individual knowledge may comply or conflict with what is locally perceived as knowledge or reality.

Due to what was described as the interface of knowledge and governance in agricultural production, farmers have to deal not only with specialized knowledge, but with perceptions of reality in the community as well. That this is not a straight forward matter illustrates the fact that some farmers are capable of promoting certain institutions and knowledge within the community and thus, increase their room for manoeuvre or limit the operations of others.

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Author: Andreas Mandler, Center for Development Research (ZEF).
Contact: amandler@uni-bonn.de

Photo: Andreas Mandler

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