

6 Looking Back: Plausible Links Between a Research Intervention and the Course of Development in the Tajik Pamirs

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6.1 Context and policy objectives of the research

Promoting sustainable development in the mountainous region of the Tajik Pamirs is socially, economically, and ecologically challenging. This region of Tajikistan was always considered of high geostrategic importance by the Soviet Union because it shares borders with China and the Indian subcontinent (i.e. with Pakistan and Afghanistan). The breakdown of the Soviet Union led to the disintegration of Central Asian states and vital subsidies that had become the backbone of mountain economies in these states were abruptly cut (Figure 13). In Tajikistan, the political transition after independence caused impoverishment, economic slowdown, and environmental degradation throughout the whole country and particularly in the Pamirs. A decline in living conditions and outmigration were the consequence. At the same time, refugee influx due to the civil war raging in other regions of Tajikistan aggravated the situation, bringing the region close to a humanitarian catastrophe. With the support of development assistance from the international community, the situation stabilised in the mid-1990s but remained critical, with continued dependence on foreign aid.

As one of Tajikistan's international cooperation partners since the 1990s, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) initiated the Pamir Strategy Project (PSP) as part of the International Year of Mountains in 2002. The PSP was a pilot project with a twofold aim: to improve living conditions in the Tajik Pamirs while also developing a new methodological approach to mountain development that could be applied in other areas as well. The Pamir Strategy Project consisted of a transdisciplinary research approach involving scientists from different disciplines, as well as local, regional, national, and international stakeholders. Academic and non-academic stakeholders collaboratively worked on defining a development strategy for the Tajik Pamir Mountains and finding solutions to the problems of transition.

The Centre for Development and Environment (CDE) implemented the project with support from SDC and in cooperation with agencies from the Aga Khan Development Foundation (AKDN), the Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development (ACTED), and local authorities. A Geographic Information System was established, combining data on the status and dynamics of various sectors with information from participatory studies at village level. Against the background of the information provided, a multilevel workshop in the Gorno Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO) brought together 80 stakeholders from the local to the international levels to negotiate

a strategic vision for the region in October 2002. The active involvement and broad participation of numerous stakeholders helped to create a consensus on the priorities of the future agenda (Hurni et al 2004; Breu et al 2005).



Figure 13: Tavdem, a typical village with 644 inhabitants in the remote area of the Tajik Pamirs. The transition of this high mountain area from a socialist planned economy system to a market economy still poses a great challenge today. (Photo by Chris Hergarten)

The present study explores the effects of the methodological approach on the actors involved in the PSP, slightly more than ten years after completion of the project. This looking back on the long-term outcomes of the research intervention is a selective view, with no claim to a comprehensive understanding of the various effects of the Pamir Strategy Project.⁵ The study tracks the outcomes of the following policy objective: participating actors – local communities, NGOs, and district-level and national-

⁵ Among the aspects that could be investigated in a more comprehensive inquiry on outcomes are how the PSP contributed concretely to sustainable mountain development and whether the methodological approach was transferred to other projects and programmes.

level government bodies – are expected to integrate the results of the workshop in their institutions and adopt the participatory stakeholder approach of the workshop. This objective may be of minor importance compared to the overall effects expected from the Pamir Strategy Project. But without these initial steps no progress is to be expected on any of the dimensions of sustainable development. Therefore, it is of primordial importance for the region concerned. Further, the chosen participatory approach was probably applied for the first time in a remote mountain region of the former Soviet Union states; therefore, assessing its outcomes is of general interest.

Having said this, we would also like to mention that the most important direct outcome of the Pamir Strategy Project – excluded from this study – was the initiating of a Global Environmental Facility (GEF) project known as Sustainable Land Management in the High Pamir and Pamir-Alai Mountains (PALM). As a transboundary initiative of the governments of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the PALM project goes beyond the Tajik borders in order to “address the interlinked problems of land degradation and poverty within one of Central Asia’s crucial freshwater sources and biodiversity hotspots”.⁶ The PALM project adopted the comprehensive approach to development that was at the core of the Pamir Strategy Project, namely to link the assessment of environmental and socio-economic problems by a broad range of disciplines, and to strengthen the region’s capacity to address the problems by enhancing collaboration among different stakeholder levels.

6.2 Researchers’ engagement with key stakeholders

As a truly transdisciplinary research process (Wiesmann et al 2008), the interaction between researchers and stakeholders took place in all phases of the project. In this paper we focus on the phase of collective interpretation of results and definition of priorities (for more details, see Breu and Hurni 2003).



Figure 14: Participants of the participatory multi-stakeholder workshop for Sustainable Development of the Tajik Pamirs, held in Khorog, October 2002. (Photo by Daniel Maselli)

⁶ See the PALM website: <http://www.ehs.unu.edu/palm/>; retrieved 27 March 2013

The Pamir Strategy Project organised a Workshop for Sustainable Development of the Tajik Pamirs, aiming to ensure a sound validation of the results and obtain a broad representation of actor groups. It was a four-day multilevel stakeholder workshop held in Khorog, in October 2002 (Figure 14). More than 80 participants were present, representing various stakeholder groups, ranging from communities to international organisations. The overall goal of the workshop was to define the elements of a strategy for sustainable development of the Tajik Pamirs and to provide a platform on which different stakeholders and different scientific disciplines could share knowledge about the status and dynamics of the region.

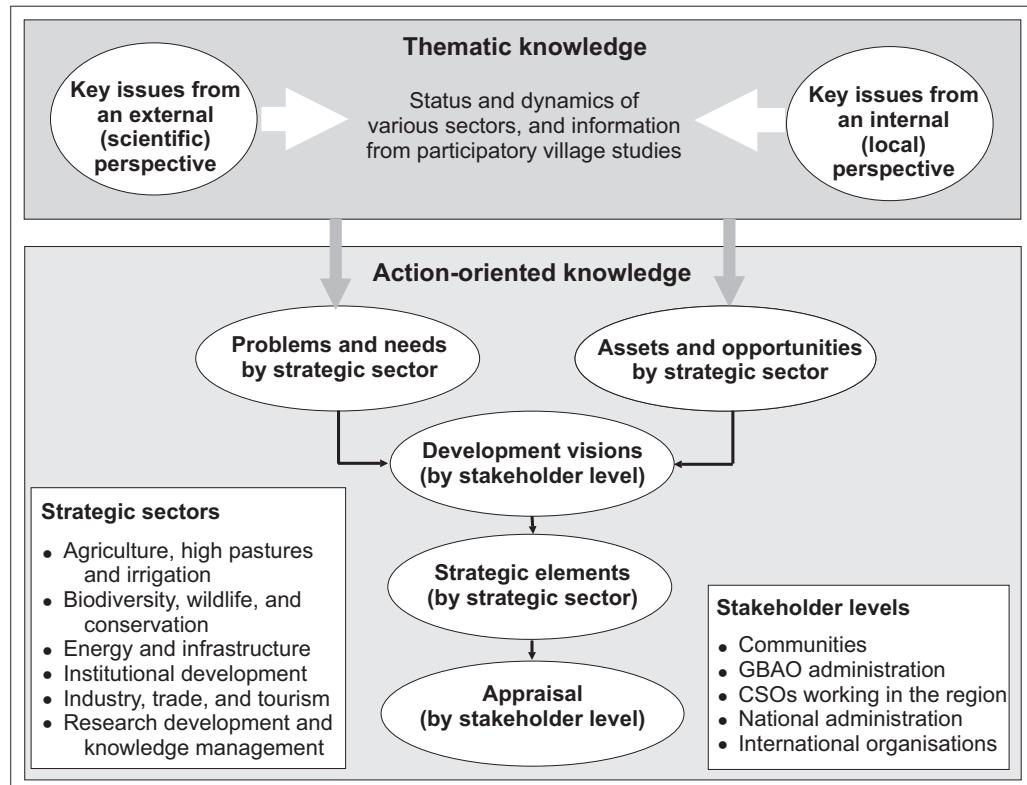


Figure 15: Process of the Pamir Strategy Workshop involving stakeholders from the local, district, national, and international levels, and addressing various sectors. (Source: Breu et al 2005, p. 141. Reproduced with kind permission of the publisher and authors)

The multi-stakeholder workshop consisted of five steps (see also Figure 15):

1. The workshop started with a presentation of the results of a number of studies providing information collected by researchers through village studies, statistics, maps, and literature reviews, prior to the workshop. The researchers distinguished between an ‘external’ view and an ‘internal’ one whenever their own values and perspectives differed from those they had found among local people.
2. As a second step, a list of strategic sectors was jointly established by all participants. The strategic sectors chosen were: agriculture, high pastures, and irrigation; biodiversity, wildlife, and conservation; energy and infrastructure; institutional development; industry, trade, and tourism; research development

and knowledge management. Problems and needs, as well as assets and opportunities for each sector were discussed in working groups that included representatives of all stakeholder levels (from the local to the international).

3. New working groups were then established for each stakeholder level. These groups defined visions of sustainable development from their perspective.
4. Then strategic elements were elaborated by sector. For each sector, two to three elements were defined. For example, for the energy and infrastructure sector these were: maintenance and upgrading of communication systems; improved energy capacity; and maintenance of public infrastructure and services.
5. Finally, the groups constituted according to stakeholder levels appraised the different elements of the strategy by sector and according to importance and urgency. The common draft strategic vision – the final result of the workshop – included the compilation of all the perspectives.

The feedback from the workshop participants was very positive: participants appreciated that the participatory approach treated representatives from different stakeholder levels and disciplines in an equal manner; they also found the clear structure of the approach useful for collectively defining priorities. Given the fact that both the ruling party and the former communist elite had almost absolute political power, such a participatory negotiation of a draft development strategy involving stakeholders from the local, province, national, international, and NGO levels was exceptional.

6.3 Outcomes: stakeholders' changing practices

The multi-level negotiation was seen as a starting point for an on-going process of participatory strategy development and implementation. The participants were expected to integrate the results of the workshop in their institutions and to use the participatory stakeholder approach in future. In order to track progress on this objective, follow-up interviews were conducted in 2012 for the present study with five of the 80 participants. The interview partners were selected according to their stakeholder level and importance. The interview sample aimed to ensure feedback from each level of decision-making.

- **At the NGO level:** An interview took place with Butabekov Dilovar from the Aga Khan Development Foundation (AKDN). The AKDN is an important and well-off player operating in the area since 1993 with humanitarian programmes and development initiatives. The activities were carried out by the Mountain Societies Development Support Programme (MSDSP) founded by AKF. Although other interview partners attested an influence of the Pamir Strategy Project on AKF, this was hardly mentioned by Butabekov Dilovar during the talk.
- **At the national level:** Two interviews were carried out. The first interview partner was Ogonozar Aknazarov, head of the Pamir Biological Institute of the

Academy of Agricultural Science, and the second was Sanginboy Sanginov, former head of the Tajik Soil Institute of the Academy of Agricultural Science and currently with the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) in Tajikistan. Both interviewees are Tajik scientists: Aknazarov works in the province and has an in-depth understanding of the provincial changes that occurred after the workshop, while Sanginov is working at the national level and has an outside perspective on development in the Pamirs.

Ogonozar Aknazarov remembered the workshop as interesting in terms of topics, procedures, and grouping of people. It was the first time he participated in a workshop with such an approach. From his point of view, an immediate outcome of the workshop was an improved level of information on development issues among the participants. It was a new topic ten years ago, he assured, and since then, many development initiatives have taken place in the area. In terms of concrete actions for meeting the strategic objective, important progress had been made in his view, but still did not meet what was originally envisioned. For example in the field of energy, issues had been mainly pursued in the Tajik area. The legal base was improving but not yet satisfactory. The huge potentials for tourism and geothermal energy could still be more exploited. New technologies had been introduced, such as species for cultivation that had a positive effect on potato production, for example. But people were also suffering from the lack of land and pasture degradation in the Eastern Pamirs had not been stopped. A positive outcome was a fruitful collaboration with the NGO Christensen Fund in the field of biodiversity. Ogonozar Aknazarov believed that thanks to the involvement of local stakeholders during the workshop, the results of the workshop in the province had been disseminated. He assumed that the provincial government took up results of the workshop as well. But he did not know of a direct reference to the Pamir Strategy Project, and many other important agencies were now present with development initiatives in the province. All in all, the PSP was a new tendency to include local knowledge and only few actors had worked with multi-level stakeholder workshops ten years ago. It became a common practice later, but this cannot be attributed only to the Pamir Strategy Project. For sure, however, the PSP was one of the early projects to use an approach that later was mainstreamed.

Sanginboy Sanginov also made positive statements about the outcomes of the Pamir Strategy Project. However, he distinguished between the strong influence the project had on NGOs, e.g. MSDSP, other donors, and external agencies in general, compared to the weaker influence on Tajikistan's government agencies. But he also saw a positive influence on the government side, in terms of uptake of the results as well as adoption of the participatory approach. For example he mentioned that parts of the Pamir Strategy document can be found on the official website of the Gorno Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast administration.⁷

- **At the province and NGO levels:** Boimamad Alibakhshov – at the time of the workshop member of the Gorno Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast Adminis-

⁷ www.gbao.tj; retrieved 2 May 2013

tration and head of the NGO ‘Milal-Inter’ – was another interesting interview partner. Boimamad Alibakhshov drew positive lessons from the workshop. He appreciated the stakeholder views that became visible through the participatory approach and it was important for him to meet influential people. He assumed that this was a totally new approach for most participants. The approach is still relevant for his work in his NGO ‘Milal-Inter’ and he also experienced replications of the approach, for example in the PALM GEF but also on other occasions. He observed different direct outcomes of the workshop. For instance he believed that the law on mountains as well as the GBAO development plan for 2015 were highly influenced by the strategy. In addition, he mentioned the establishment of the free economic zone in Ishkashim, which had been put forward as a strategic goal. He mentioned that the workshop proceedings were translated and distributed in the province, but the effects were unfortunately not known to him. He came across familiar formats for stakeholder involvement on various occasions since then, in regional workshops, e.g. on water, natural resources, and with international agencies such as SIDA, OSCE, and others. In this sense, the workshop was also useful to become acquainted with an approach that later became common practice within the international community in the Pamir area and elsewhere.

- **At the local level:** An interview took place with a former Chairman of Roshtkala district Shodibek Kilichbekov as representative of this level. He mentioned the fact positively that his district was given a voice during the stakeholder workshop and was heard by representatives of the provincial level on this occasion. He was all the more disappointed that later no development initiatives were carried out in his village, for example by the PALM GEF. From his point of view, the workshop raised major expectations that were not fulfilled later.

In sum, all interview partners had vivid memories of the workshop. They remembered the activities and results of the workshop as well as the participants. This can be considered as an outcome as such because with a ten year time-lag the workshop took place a long time ago. The interviews provide a mixed picture of outcomes. Given the low number of interviews, no general conclusion is possible but the interviews provide interesting impressions on possible trends. For example, the fact that all interview partners were able to mention outcomes, that some outcomes were much more far reaching than others, and generally speaking that the influence of the strategy workshop seemed to be more lasting on expatriates and external agencies than on governmental units and communities.

6.4 Plausible links between researchers’ engagement and outcomes

Attributing outcomes to a research intervention over a long time period is full of analytical difficulties. The most important one is that over time, the influence of contextual factors on outcomes and impacts increases. In the case of this study, a very broad range of actors and factors are influencing the course of development of the Tajik

Pamirs region and the Pamir Strategy Project is just one among many initiatives. This makes it difficult to attribute the influence of the PSP to the outcomes observed. The problem is known in evaluation literature as the “attribution gap” (Herweg and Steiner 2002). In general, but particularly in the case of this study, we expect instead to delineate plausible links between research and development rather than assume a causality from research activities to societal changes (Michel et al. 2010a; Michel et al. 2010b).

Indeed, several times the interview partners mentioned the problem of tracing the influence of the Pamir Strategy Project to current changes. All interview partners mentioned that many development agencies were now actively influencing the course of development in the Tajik Pamirs. An isolated view of the outcomes of the PSP was impossible. However, different interviewees very clearly saw that the basic orientation and many of the strategic objectives had been mainstreamed at the provincial government level, although the government authorities did not actually refer to the PSP strategy. By tracing discursive changes, e.g. the replication of the workshop proceedings or the original text of the strategic vision on websites and in organisations’ planning documents, it was possible to assume a clear influence of the PSP. For example, Ogonozar Aknazarov and Boimamad Alibakshov mentioned that the results of the workshop in the province were translated and disseminated. This is an outcome that can be traced back to the workshop without any problem. The difficulty lies in appraising the meaning of a discursive change. A discursive change may be, but is not necessarily, a precondition for a more substantial attitudinal, procedural or behavioural change. Even if we distinguish between types of outcomes, it remains difficult to get a clear picture of the influence the PSP had on the actors involved.

Our way of addressing the problem of the attributional gap was to interview people who had been directly involved as participants and asking them questions about a very precise issue. We asked them to estimate the influence of the workshop on their own practices and on those of their partners. Therefore, we relied on their perceptions and their ability to plausibly link the outcome of a ten-year-old research intervention to daily practices in the Tajik Pamirs.