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Mountain Communities in Central Asia: Networks and New Forms of Governance

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Mountains have been an intergovernmental and transnational issue of growing importance for 15 years. Thanks to global conferences such as the UN Conference on Environment and Development in 1992 and regional treaties such as the Alpine Convention (1991), it is easier and increasingly useful for local communities to connect across borders. This growing will and capacity to be associated with intergovernmental initiatives is the result of a general trend in

public affairs to bring together different stakeholders at various levels. However, the “voice” of mountain people sometimes remains outside debates and decision-making processes related to mountain development. The present article focuses on the emergence of a mountain community network in Central Asia. It addresses the issue of local governance and the international networking process to strengthen the “voice” of mountain people.

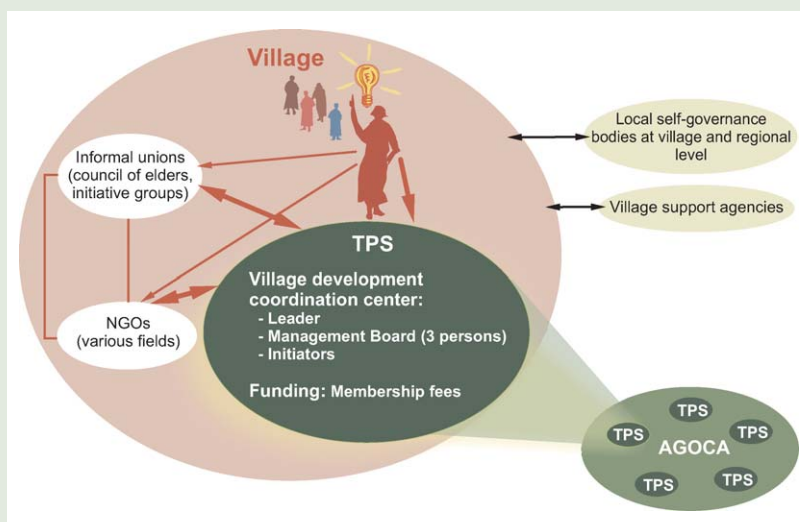
Bringing mountain people’s “voices” into the arena

The Global Mountain Summit, held in Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan) in autumn 2002, was the final event of the International Year of Mountains. It referred to the mission statement of IYM 2002 to promote “the conservation and sustainable development of mountain regions, thereby ensuring the well-being of mountain and lowland communities.” Little space had been given in debate to mountain people themselves, however. In order to bring the “local perspective” into the arena, the Central Asian Mountain Partnership (CAMP), a Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation program, initiated a pre-Summit event in Bishkek: the first Conference of Mountain Communities for Sustainable Development, attended by representatives of mountain communities from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan.

The conference participants discussed the challenges their communities were facing. They stated 2 expectations: first, to exchange experiences, and second, to ensure representation of their interests at the political level. In this context the idea of creating an “Alliance for Mountain Communities in Central Asia” was proposed. Representatives of Alliance in the Alps (www.alpenallianz.org) were invited by the conference organizers and asked to present their organization. This network of Alpine communities, created in 1997 at the initiative of the International Commission for the Protection of the Alps (CIPRA), pursues the primary goal of exchanging knowledge and experience in order to implement the European Alpine Convention at the municipality level.

During a second Conference of Mountain Communities for Sustainable Development, held in 2003 in Dushanbe (Tajikistan), the Alliance of Central Asian Mountain Communities (AGOCA) was created with the mission of “assisting sustainable development of Central Asian mountain regions and thereby helping to improve the living standards of their inhabitants.”

FIGURE 1 Long-term vision of the role of TPSs in villages. They are initiated by ‘the person with ideas,’ who can be an individual, a leader, or a member of an NGO. The AGOCA strategy at present is to help strengthen teams in TPSs and their work with local governance bodies and networking. In this case TPSs being opened for the whole village population will have real potential to serve as a village development coordination center working in several directions. (Sketch by Valeria Nikonova)



Increasing local governance

Decentralization in Central Asia is a reform that is actively underway. It parallels the creation of national development strategies and programs for poverty reduction. Both processes follow a top-down approach; this may explain the difficulties in making them concrete.

AGOCA has the potential to stimulate mountain communities to organize themselves. Indeed, as a prerequisite for entering AGOCA, each community has to estab-

lish itself as an NGO known as a ‘Territorial Public Self-governance’ (TPS) (Figure 1). In this form, communities have a means of presenting their needs, ideas, and visions to state representatives at the local level and negotiating with them. Some TPSs support local governance bodies (*ail okmoty* in Kyrgyzstan, *jamoat* and *hukumat* in Tajikistan, *akimat* in Kazakhstan) in implementing concrete projects. In Kyrgyzstan, they have the status of local governance bodies, and thus have broader rights in local decision-making.

The main potential of a TPS (normally represented by a limited number of active members) is its capacity to mobilize the majority of the population in a village when there is a need to solve different problems (Figure 2). This has a strong traditional background: social mobilization in the form of *ashar* (*hashar* in Tajikistan, *assar* in Kazakhstan) exists in mountain regions in Central Asia as a form of collective action. *Ashar* has a religious basis and is associated with the clan system, where people from one clan (which can include half of the village population) are considered relatives and it is shameful to refuse to participate in *ashar*. Another advantage of a TPS is its openness to the entire population of a village, which makes it potentially a strong actor at the local level in expressing civil society’s view of state governance bodies.

Regional networking: a tool for capacity building

However, TPSs are not always very efficient, as a result of lack of knowledge and experience in village organization management (including financial management) and democratic decision-making. Although CAMP representatives conducted a series of thematic workshops in AGOCA villages, TPS institutional strengthening needs to continue. Moreover, local governance bodies are not always ready to cooperate (several TPSs have not yet found support from local governance authorities).

Sustainable development principles are provided to TPSs through AGOCA, working in collaboration with international development agencies. The Alliance, through its Board and Secretariat, establishes links between TPSs to coordinate their interactions. AGOCA in particular creates a platform for exchange of experience between communities, and distribution of information about the best local experiences through a magazine and a *White Book* (a collection of the best projects). In addition, AGOCA annual conferences are combined with forums on different current themes relating to mountain regions.

Today, the alliance unites Kyrgyzstan (16 communities), Tajikistan (11 communities), and Kazakhstan (5 communities).

“Currently there are 20 members in our TPS. But if necessary, we can organize the majority of adults to repair the school or fix the road. We work in cooperation with the hukumat (local governance body), which provided minor financial support and offered a room in its building for the TPS office free of charge.” (Jurakul Hikmatov, TPS head of Bobosurhon village, Tajikistan)



FIGURE 2 The main instrument and potential of TPSs (normally represented by a limited number of active people) is their ability to mobilize the majority of the village population when the need to discuss and solve different problems arises. Jergetal village, Kyrgyzstan. (Photo by Martin Strele)

“Most mountain villages don’t get the necessary information on opportunities to develop their villages. The Alliance can help them in exchanging experience and obtaining information. We all should understand that the stronger and more active the TPSs are in villages, the stronger our Alliance will be.” (Ishenbek Musakhodjaev, AGOCA president)

FIGURE 3 Exchange of experience between villages is the main idea of AGOCA: CAMP training in Swiss cheese-making technology for women in Akshi, Kazakhstan. (Photo by Valeria Nikonova)



As pointed out in the report of the first Conference of Mountain Communities, “The differences between these three Central Asian countries in terms of legislative framework, autonomy from local and central government, and traditions mean that their mountain communities have an accumulation of various experiences” (see www.camp.kg/eng/index.html). Political scientists have demonstrated that, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the new Central Asian States have developed nationalistic discourses with strong ethnic references. This represents an impediment to cooperation in the region. Local communities sharing experience beyond their borders are thus a great counterweight to this major trend. CAMP initiated the creation of 3 follow-up agencies in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan, which among other activities, provide secretariat services to the Alliance and support concrete project activities in AGOCA villages.

International cooperation

The interaction of AGOCA and CAMP agencies is the beginning of a new network representing interaction among 4 levels: local, national, regional, and international.

The Alliance, itself representing the “voice” of mountain people, serves in the network as a source of ideas, demands, and local expertise, and as a partner for project realization at local and regional level. It also disseminates results (Figure 3).

Viewing the Alpine Convention “as an example of the sustainable development of transboundary mountain regions,” the Ministers of the Parties to the Alpine Convention expressed their willingness to share with other mountain regions the “Alpine Experience” (Meran Statement, 19 November 2002). Since 2003, representatives of the Alpine Convention Permanent Committee in Germany, Liechtenstein, and Switzerland as well as CIPRA International and Alliance in the Alps, have undertaken concrete actions to support AGOCA development.

But AGOCA also has international contacts at the community level with Alliance in the Alps. To “seal” their relationships, the Alpine and Central Asian networks have founded the Mountain Villages Partnership and Development Foundation, whose purpose is to link people proposing projects and potential sponsors. Presently, proposals for implementing energy-saving projects in the AGOCA villages through the Foundation are being developed. AGOCA and Alliance in the Alps also has contacts with Caucasus mountain communities, which signed a Memorandum for creation of the Alliance for the Caucasus, inspired by Alpine and Central Asian experience. Moreover, at the beginning of 2006, AGOCA became a member of the International Mountain Partnership.

In the eyes of Silvia Reppe of the German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety,

“Alpine experience has already been passed on to Central Asia. What started in November 2002 in Bishkek has already borne fruit. In the Caucasus region a first step towards a transboundary community network was taken, together with an initial eight pilot communities from four countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and the Russian Federation. Cooperation between three mountain regions—the Carpathians, the Caucasus, and Central Asia—and other regions could generate

substantial added value. It is particularly important to instigate an exchange of experience between representatives from Alpine communities and the three mountain regions and to intensify the transfer of know-how from the Alps to these three mountain regions.”

As with any new structure of governance, one might wonder about how TPS and AGOCA are accepted by pre-existing institutions. Local, regional, and national institutions seem very conscious that these new organizations are not competing, and recognize their capacity to offer international support for the implementation of concrete projects at the local level.

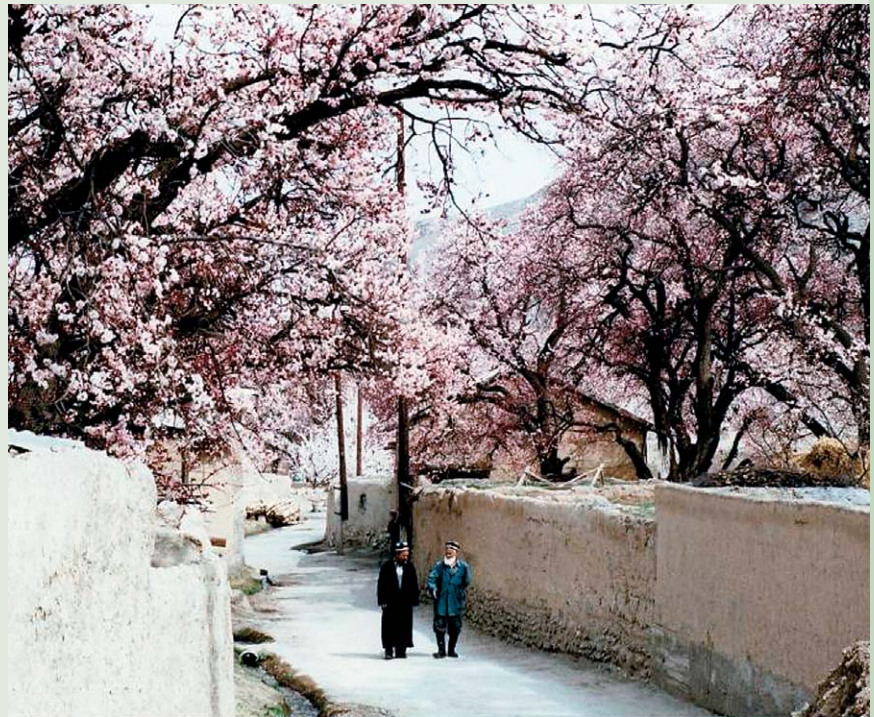
AGOCA gains legitimacy from its international contacts and illustrates the paradox that the political scientist Olivier Roy pointed out when he observed that in Central Asia, NGOs say that “the local exists in fact only through its relation to the transnational.” Inter-level networks have a growing influence on the spatial organization and perception of social groups. Thus, local territorialities and national identities have been greatly challenged by individual mobility and global information.

Conclusions

AGOCA is a major opportunity for the mountain people of Central Asia as well as for decision-making bodies at all levels. But for the time being much work remains to be done. First of all, the Territorial Public Self-governance is a new structure working at the village level which is still seeking acceptance and capacity-building actions. Second, the AGOCA development fund is very small because of the minimal ability of its members to make payments. This means that the Alliance will remain dependent on donor support for quite some time in future as well.

AGOCA aims to respond to 2 expectations: exchange of experience and defense of the interests of mountain com-

FIGURE 4 Hodjai-Ailo village, famous for apricot production and full of innovative ideas related to this rich potential, is a member of AGOCA in Tajikistan. (Photo by Katrin Haltmeier)



munities. Even if AGOCA represents a good incubator of local and innovative initiatives (Figure 4), we are still far from meeting the second expectation. Although the cultural politics of Central Asia may explain this, the structure of AGOCA is also an explanatory factor. AGOCA primarily federates innovative communities already cooperating with international cooperation agencies. Although these may try to raise mountain issues in national parliaments, there has so far been no real attempt to represent the variety of mountain communities.

Networking is a good instrument for exchanging experiences between mountain communities in different regions and for creating new alliances based on common principles of mountain development. At the same time, the experience of different mountain regions is unique, and the main task is to adapt external examples to a local context and find unique models of networking in each region.

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