



Rural Support Programmes Network

A Note on a Visit to the Community Institutions fostered by the Aga Khan Foundation/ Mountain Societies Development Support Programme in the Gorno Badakhshan Autonomous Region of Tajikistan

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Khaleel Tetlay¹ and Koshif Rijabekov²

Introduction:

Under the European Union (EU) supported Sindh Union Council and Community Economic Strengthening Support Programme (SUCCESS), a 12-member team from the Rural Support Programmes Network (RSPN), National Rural Support Programme (NRSP), Sindh Rural Support Organisation (SRSO), Thardeep Rural Development Programme (TRDP) and Government of Sindh (GoS) undertook an experience sharing and learning visit to Tajikistan. The visit was kindly hosted and facilitated by the Aga Khan Foundation/Mountain Societies Development Support Programme (AKF/MSDSP). The team met with AKF/MSDSP senior management, representative of EU Tajikistan, international non-government organisations (INGOs), and undertook field visits to meet with members and leaders of the Community Institutions (CIs) fostered by AKF/MSDSP in Faizobod and Garm districts of the Rasht Region and Mominobod district of the Khatlon Region. The visit was held from April 7, 2017 to April 15, 2017. A separate report on this visit is being prepared.

On April 15, 2017, the team flew to Pakistan, and from April 15-22, 2017, Chief Operating Officer RSPN undertook a visit to the Gorno Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast/Region (GBO) to meet with AKF/MSDSP's Regional Team and to undertake visits to four CIs in Roshtkala and Shugnon districts.

Background to AKF/MSDSP in Tajikistan:

During the Soviet Era, all across the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), the state was responsible for the provision of employment, access to social services and economic decision making as it owned, controlled and managed all economic resources. One important reason for the heavy USSR investment in Tajikistan was that it was strategically located next to China and Afghanistan, and Pakistan just 20 km across the Wakhan Corridor.

The net result of the Soviet investment was that, while personal and political freedom was strictly controlled, the standard and quality of life was very high, e.g. there was universal and free access to health and education, including higher education and full employment. As long as the 'party line' was followed, life was good and predictable. Even the remotest villages had schools, medical points, electricity, access roads, government shops, full employment, etc. The state policy and actions did not allow for the development of the market sector and civil society organisations; everything was controlled by the Communist Party and its affiliated entities. Overall, the population felt that 'it never had it so good'. 'Dependency' had led to good life.

However, the whole 'comfortable' situation changed suddenly with the dramatic collapse of USSR. On September 9, 1991, Tajikistan became an independent country. The breakup of USSR meant that central flow of economic resources and supplies to Tajikistan stopped. This led to the crash of the economy; the new currency (Tajik Rouble) collapsed. Different political and regional groups sought power. This led to

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six-year civil war that further compounded the economic misery. Shut down of government factories led to mass unemployment. Those working in government service sector saw their salaries and wages melting away. In the Soviet Era, a teacher with her monthly salary could purchase 30 bags of flour; after the economic collapse, it would take six month's salary to buy one bag of flour. Highly educated professionals had to take up petty trading to try to make ends meet. Flower gardens were dug up to grow vegetables. If someone did find a well-paid work, he/she would have to support their own family as well as other relatives.

While all Tajikistan suffered from the USSR collapse and it's after affects, the Gorno Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast/Region (GBAO) suffered the most. GBAO is the largest geographical region of the country with smallest proportion of population, estimated at 100,000 in early 1990s. During the civil war, people of GBAO (called Pamiris) living in other parts of the country were targeted and about 50,000 had to move back to GBAO. Under the previous system, food security was ensured by the state as it imported about 80 - 90% of the food needs of GBAO from other parts of Tajikistan and USSR. After independence and economic collapse, the support from Moscow and Dushanbe dried up, particularly the food imports. There was a real threat of famine. It was in this context of famine-like situation that the Tajikistan's government requested the international community for humanitarian support. AKF was amongst the first organisations to respond to this appeal.

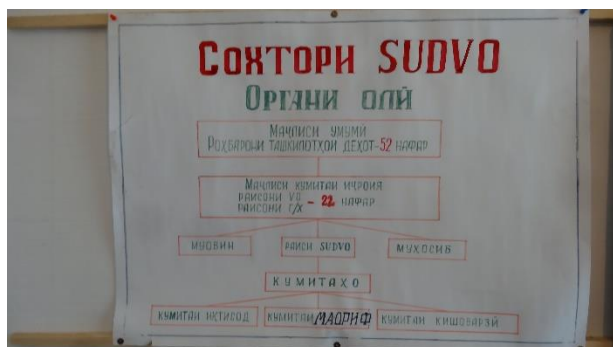
Since 1993, AKF/MSDSP's work in Tajikistan has strategically evolved. The first major effort was the **Humanitarian Assistance Programme (HAP)** bringing in supplies to meet the food needs of the population. The second major effort was the **Agricultural Reform Programme (ARP)** to boost local food production and also to create local on-farm employment. Key feature of AKF/MSDSP's strategy was to work with government for the privatisation of state farms, provide training to 'new' farmers and set up supply systems for agricultural inputs. The net result of AKF/PRDP ARP was that wheat yields increased from 700 kg/hectare (ha) on state farms to 3,000 kg/ha on private farms. Yields of potatoes also improved significantly. Agricultural inputs were provided on credit; to be repaid in kind as there was total lack of cash in the local economy³. New land was brought under cultivation through construction and repair of irrigation channels. Significant increase in local food production meant that, over time, HAP was reduced and finally stopped.

The third major initiative was social mobilisation through the **Village Organisation Programme (VOP)**, initiated in GBAO in 1998, and expanded to the Rasht Valley (2000), the Khatlon Region (2002), and over the past few years to Sughd Region of northern Tajikistan. VOP was adopted and adapted from the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) approach in mountain areas of northern Pakistan in 1982 that was developed and taken to scale under the leadership of Mr. Shoaib Sultan Khan. By the end of 1999, over 90% of the communities of GBAO had fostered VOs. Even localities within Khorog town had set up VOs. In 2001, AKF/MSDSP developed a new structured strategy for social mobilisation, i.e. the Village Development Planning Process (VDPP). The major purpose of this strategy was to build the capacities of communities for playing a greater role in local development. A key stage of this strategy was the Village Management Plan (VMP) wherein VO members analysed their local context and situation, explored opportunities and then developed a three-year plan for the village. Given the situation of the country at that time, major focus of VMP was on enhancing food security, diversification of income sources,

³ Later a more formal, cash based Micro Credit Programme was launched which was then separated and converted into the First Micro Finance Bank of Tajikistan.

improving community productive and social infrastructure, undertaking small social protection measures and mobilising local and external resources. With the initiation of VDPP strategy, the name of VOP was changed to Social Organisation Development Programme (SODP), and VOP Coordinator was re-designated as Social Development Advisor.

In 2003, under the guidance of General Manager AKF/MSDSP (Mr. Yodgor Faizov), an approach was developed for the clustering of VOs at the Jamoat (Union Council) level. This approach was developed in order to allow VOs to move along the ‘institutional continuum’, and to take greater responsibility for their own self-management, and to develop more productive relationship and cooperation with the Jamoat administration, the lowest tier of the government structure. This approach was discussed with the GBAO Deputy Governor who appreciated the approach and recommended that this be initiated in all (seven) Jamoats of the Ishkoshim district, which lies about 100 km south of Khorog town, and about 25 km away from Chitral district of Pakistan, across the Wakhan Corridor. Initially the new social structure was called Committee of VOs (CVO). When it came to CVO’s registration, the available law was Social Union (itehaad e ijtemaee), therefore a new name was coined that both fit with the law and the main purpose of the clusters of VOs: Social Union for the Development of Village Organisations (SUDVOs). In Tajiki language this was ‘Itehaad e Ijtemaee brai Inkeshof e Tashkeelot e Dehoti). All VOs are represented in SUDVOs via a general body (GB), the GB then elects an executive committee (EC), and EC then selects the SUDVO leaders, i.e. President, Vice-President, Manager and Accountant. On need basis, SUDVO can set up various committees. AKF/MSDSP also provided ‘seed capital’ to SUDVOs, about USD 2000 to 3000, to initiate an internal lending programme through the member VOs to meet the needs of households, as well as to cover some of the administrative costs of SUDVO.



Structure of SUDVO Nasimeghund, Shugnon district

SUDVOs were set up in all seven Jamoats of Ishkoshim districts. Monitoring and Evaluation Section conducted regular visits to SUDVOs, and based on their feedback SODP made necessary corrections. Given the relative success of SUDVOs, in 2005 AKF/MSDSP devised a strategy for the rollout of SUDVOs across the Rasht Valley and Khatlon Oblast.

In 2008, Tajikistan adopted a new micro finance law. This allowed that only those organisations can undertake micro credit operations that are registered with the National Bank of Tajikistan. This meant that VOs and SUDVOs could no longer carry on with internal lending programmes. Under the new law, a Micro Lending Organisation (MLO) could be set up and registered with a minimum capital base of USD 50,000. AKF/MSDSP held dialogues with VOs and SUDVOs and then upon their acceptance supported these organisations to set up five MLOs in GABO, Rasht and Khalton. VOs and SUDVOs pooled their capital to meet the minimum capital requirement. MLO has staff in each Jamoat and lends only to VO members. Upon year end, VOs and SUDVOs receive a dividend relative their shares in MLO. Currently, AKF/MSDSP is considering to move to the next stage, i.e. setting up of the Micro Saving and Lending Organisation with a capital base of USD 500,000. As a first step in this direction, five MLOs have merged into one MLO (Rushd e Kohistan – mountain development). In order to have more direct role in MLO management and operations, AKF/MSDSP has become a shareholder in MLO. Another key development has been that the VOs are now registered and recognised by government; they have legalisation

certificate and rubber stamp. This has given them greater recognition and authenticity. VOs are registered under the Self-Acting Social Bodies law (Mokomoti Khudfaoliyati Jamiyati –MKJ). Today, VOs are known as MKJ.



CBSLG meeting in VO Bartevedem, Roshtkala district

Under a project of Mastercard Foundation, AKF/MSDSP initiated the Community Based Savings and Loaning Groups (CBSLGs), i.e. a sub-group of VO members (10-15) would set up CBSLG, select two leaders, meet on a weekly basis, members save according to their capacity, and once capital has build-up to initiate internal lending programme. Since the micro finance law prohibits micro credit operations by non-registered bodies, CBSLGs use a loophole in the law that allows for ‘mutual assistance’ and interest rate is not charged only ‘haq e khidmat’ (services charges) is charged. Hundreds of CBSLGs are active across AKF/MSDSP programmes areas. SUDVOs and VOs facilitated AKF/MSDSP in setting up of these groups, and now play a key role in supervising them.

AKF/MSDSP has also set up Common Interest Groups (CIGs) at the sub-VO level. CIGs are groups of VO members with one common economic interest, e.g. vegetable production, processing and marketing, poultry rearing, etc. Again, the VOs and SUDVOs support and supervise these CIGs.

In GBAO three district level Association of SUDVOs (ASUDVO) have also been set up so as to have closer interaction with District

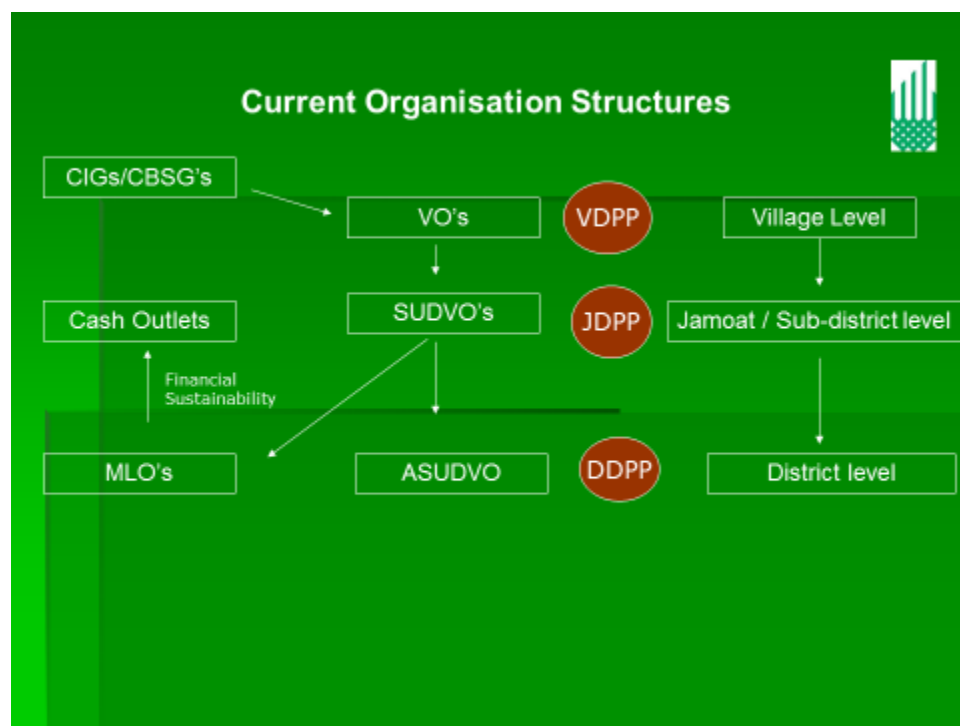
Administration and AKF/MSDSP district office. These ASUDVOs compile the Jamoat Development Plans into a District Development Plan (DPP) for sharing with the District Administration. This contributes to avoid duplication of efforts as well as pooling of resources for prioritised activities.

As part of its enterprise development efforts, AKF/MSDSP has supported the setting up of service centres that provide training and other support for micro and small enterprise development. By adopting the tendering process for community engineering projects, AKF/MSDSP has allowed a local contracting and construction organisations to grow. VOs have a key role in supervision of construction process. After the end of ARP, local entrepreneurs are now bringing in fertilizer.

SUDVOs are very much like Pakistan’s Local Support Organisations (LSOs). They are allowing people and their own institutions to take on more responsibility for self-management and local development through local assessment, planning and resource mobilisation. VOs and SUDVOs fostered by AKF/MSDSP prepare Village Management Plans (like RSP VOs’ Village Development Plans), which are then

consolidated into Jamoat Development Plans (like RSP Union Council Development Plans), and then these are shared and validated by Jamoat chairpersons. More recently, in GBAO, joint JDPs have been prepared by Jamoat administration and VOs; VDPs are incorporated into these JDPs.

AKF/MSDSP's strategy and operations have continued to evolve as the local socio-economic context has changed. Earlier AKF/MSDSP was service delivery oriented whereas now it has a more facilitative role that allows other set of actors and organisations to come forward and play their due roles. One District Manager said: "In old days of AKF/MSDSP, I had 24 staff members in my district working on three major programmes: HAP, ARP and VOP. With maturing VOs and SUDVOs in place and taking on more responsibilities, today there is only me!"



AKF/MSDSP's internal surveys in mid-2000s have shown that income levels in GBAO had improved and the number of poor households had decreased; income sources had diversified, including remittances from Russia, increase in non-farm activities and improved access to services, e.g. improved water supplies.

Purpose of the Visit to GBAO:

The key objectives of the EU/RSPN/RSPs SUCCESS programme are to:

1. To increase household income levels
2. To diversify the sources of household income
3. To contribute to poverty reduction
4. To contribute to improve access to public services, particularly to:
 - a. Education
 - b. Health

5. To develop cooperation with local government
6. That the Community Institutions (CO/VO/LSO) should be sustainable. The new Village Organisations – will they be useful, will they be sustainable?

Therefore, the objective of the visit to GBAO was to meet with AKF/MSDSP and community institutions to understand their achievements since the start of social mobilisation programme in 1998, particularly from the perspective of the above mentioned areas. Mr. Koshif, Civil Society Officer AKF, also joined the visit to GBAO.

During the visit, four sub-districts (Jamoat) were visited and meetings were held with the head of sub-districts (Chairman Jamoat), SUDVOs and representatives of Village Organisations. Altogether 16 representatives of SUDVO, VO and local authorities participated in the meetings. In addition to the meetings with SUDVO, VO and sub-district authorities a general meeting with MSDSP staff was held on Friday, 21th of April to share the rapid assessment findings and discussion on the overall cooperation.



Briefing session with AKF/MSDSP Regional Team at Khorog

A brief meeting was held at AKF/MSDSP office at Khorog. Regional Manager Mr. Khojamiyor welcomed COO warmly and after introducing his team, outlined the plan for field visits. Two SUDVOs in each of the Roshtkala and Shugnon districts would be visited.

Chairman Jamoat's Perspective:



Meeting with Roshtkala Centre Jamoat Chairman

After the meeting with the AKF/MSDSP Regional Team, COO, Koshif and Mamadsaid, COO's ex-counterpart at AKF/MSDSP, left for Roshtkala town, about 50 km away. There was a meeting with the Chairman of the Roshtkala Centre Jamoat. COO explained the purpose of the visit and said that he particularly wanted to hear the local government's feedback about the local SUDVO and its member VOs. Chairman said that his Jamoat is located in and around Roshtkala

town. After the collapse of USSR and independence of Tajikistan, the country faced many issues. An immediate issue was the lack of food supplies to meet the needs of the people. Due to civil war, many people were moving back to their villages from other parts of the country. This added to the problem. Upon the request of the government of Tajikistan, AKF/MSDSP was the first organisation to step in and set up a system to provide humanitarian assistance to the people. It was only with this assistance that people survived through those 'difficult' years. For the distribution of the humanitarian assistance, the

local government and AKF/MSDSP worked closely to ensure that all communities, including those living in remotest parts of the district, received their due assistance. During the land reform period, again government and AKF/MSDSP worked closely to ensure that all households received their due share of land. Later in 1998 when VOs were fostered, government officials joined in the dialogues with community members. For the construction of various projects, AKF/MSDSP and VOs needed government permission and this was provided instantly. This close working relationship with AKF/MSDSP has persisted to this day.

Chairman highlighted that with improved fiscal space over the past 10 years, the salaries of government employees have improved significantly. More investments have been made in education, water supply and health sectors. Local small businesses are growing. Many small entrepreneurs travel and work in the Khorog town market. Many male adults have migrated to Russia, some on seasonal basis and some on semi-permanent basis. Their remittances are now an important source of household incomes. Production of fruit and vegetables is increasingly market driven. Some households have set up small poultry units. Chairman said that overall economic situation has improved significantly compared to 15 years earlier. However, there are still significant issues that have to be addressed.

In the Jamoat there are 12 VOs and one SUDVO. All households are members of VOs; Chairman's own household is a member of VO. The process of setting up VOs began in 1998 and was completed in early 2000. SUDVO was set up in 2005. Since the setting up of VOs, people have become more active in solving their own problems through their own organisations. The presence of a structure within the communities gives their efforts legitimacy, authenticity and empowerment. Local disputes are settled by VOs. They are contributing to greater social and cultural cohesion within the communities. The payment of membership fees by members shows that they have the ownership of VOs. Over the years, VOs have undertaken many self-financed initiatives as well as with the support of AKF/MSDSP and other NGOs. In several cases, local Jamoat has also contributed to these projects, e.g. provision of heavy machinery, allocating land, etc.

Chairman said that one of the problems that communities face is when there are multiple power centres, i.e. lack of unified leadership in communities. Since the registration of VOs in 2008, now over 80% of the elected councillors (Vekils) of Jamoat are also VO presidents. The arrival of cell phones has also allowed us to reach out to VO presidents more frequently. Whenever there is any issue in a community, the VO president is only a call away. Similarly, the VO presidents can call the Chairman. Then there are regular monthly meetings of VO leaders at SUDVO forum that the Chairman also attends. In terms of celebrating national days, VO and SUDVO leaders seek Chairman's guidance and plan events. For this year's March 21 Navruzi (New Year) celebrations, a plan had been chalked out with VOs for events at village level and Jamoat level. Due to heavy snowfall these celebrations were delayed by few weeks. When they were conducted all communities actively participated in these events.

Chairman Jamoat said that with VOs in place, he has closer interaction with households through attending VO meetings. In case of emergencies, VO leaders inform him and then he takes up the matter with the District Administration so that immediate response can be provided. Chairman showed the Jamoat Development Plan document jointly prepared with VOs and SUDVO. JDC lists the prioritised activities and mentions against each activity the contribution of various stakeholders, e.g. government, community, AKF/MSDSP, private sector, financial institutions, etc. JDC is also reviewed on a quarterly basis.

VOs and SUDVOs have built up small capital base that allows them some autonomy in meeting self-identified local needs. SUDVO provides an excellent forum for him to directly interact with VO leaders at monthly meetings. At these meetings, VO leaders bring their monthly updates. This way the Chairman gets to know what is happening in each VO. Chairman concluded his comments by saying that the VOs are now his right hand in the Jamoat; he cannot envisage being effective without them.

COO asked the Chairman about the quality of 12 VOs. Chairman said that he is happy and satisfied with 10 VOs as they are active; two VOs have problems and this is linked to there being two leaders on these villages (one being Vekil and one being VO president). Chairman has visited these two villages and impressed upon the member households to learn from the experience of other 10 villages and to make suitable democratic decisions. COO then asked about the role of women in VOs. Chairman said that the Women's Groups of VOs are quite active. Migration of men to Russia has provided benefits but also placed extra burden on village women. Women's Groups are quite active in education and health sectors. The setting up of CBSLGs has also given an opportunity for women to meet more frequently, save, take small loans, make repayments and generally discuss various socio-economic issues that they may be facing. CBSLGs, WGs and VOs have expanded social space for women. Government focus is to try to further improve access to social services as these directly impact women. With improvements in quality of education, now more and more students (boys and girls) are going to universities in Khorog and Dushanbe. Most of the local micro enterprises are managed and run by women. In the years to come they will play an increasingly more important role in household, community and Jamoat affairs. COO thanked the Chairman for his comments.

SUDVOs' Perspective:

COO had developed a tool to capture socio-economic changes at the Jamoat level after discussions with Koshif and Mamadsaid. The tool is based on seven indicators (these have been mentioned above). For each indicator, groups of SUDVO participants are expected to give two scores from 1 to 5; first score is for late 1990s and the second score is for the current year. COO and team then visited four SUDVOs; two in Roshtkala district and two in Shugnon district.



SUDVO 1: Shoetir Andoz of Roshtkala Centre Jamoat, Roshtkala District. SUDVO has 12 VOs as members. President of SUDVO is Mr Serge Khudanazarbekov from VO Maidan, which has all 46 households as members. Membership fee is Tajik Somoni 1 per household per month (about Rs 12).



SUDVO 2: Khursand of Tevdem Jamaot of Roshtkala District. SUDVO has 14 VOs as members. SUDVO President is Mr Panah from VO Tevdem, which has 107 households. Membership fee is Tajik Somoni 3 per household per month (about Rs 36).



SUDVO 3: Shukhcharv of Shirinjon Jamaot of Shugnon District. SUDVO has 6 VOs as members. SUDVO President is Mr Iqbal from VO Omedjoin, which has 62 households. Membership fee is Tajik Somoni 2 per household per month (about Rs 24).



SUDVO 4: Nasimighund of Novobod Jamaot of Roshtkala District. SUDVO has 11 VOs as members. SUDVO President is Mr Kyrgyz Kadirov from VO Gurjwin, which has 73 households. Membership fee is Tajik Somoni 1 per household per month (about Rs 12).

Presentation of the Results:

Among the sub districts visited, the Navobod SUDVO was identified the strongest in terms of paperwork/documentation, accountability, generation of local funds both at the VOs and SUDVO level, availability of information about Community Saving Groups at the sub-district level, ability to present the SUDVO and VO work and cooperation with local government. The illustrations below are part of the visible documented information on incoming and outgoing funds at the VO level and membership fee to SUDVO as well as information of the member VOs, households, members, male and female and date of the establishment of the member VOs.

Basic Information about Social Mobilisation in Jamoat Novobad, Shugnon district

The sustainability of the VOs and SUDVO was seen due to their registration under the law, fund generation, management and utilization, and skillful leadership⁴. All the mobilization of the government and non-government organizations at the community level goes through VO.

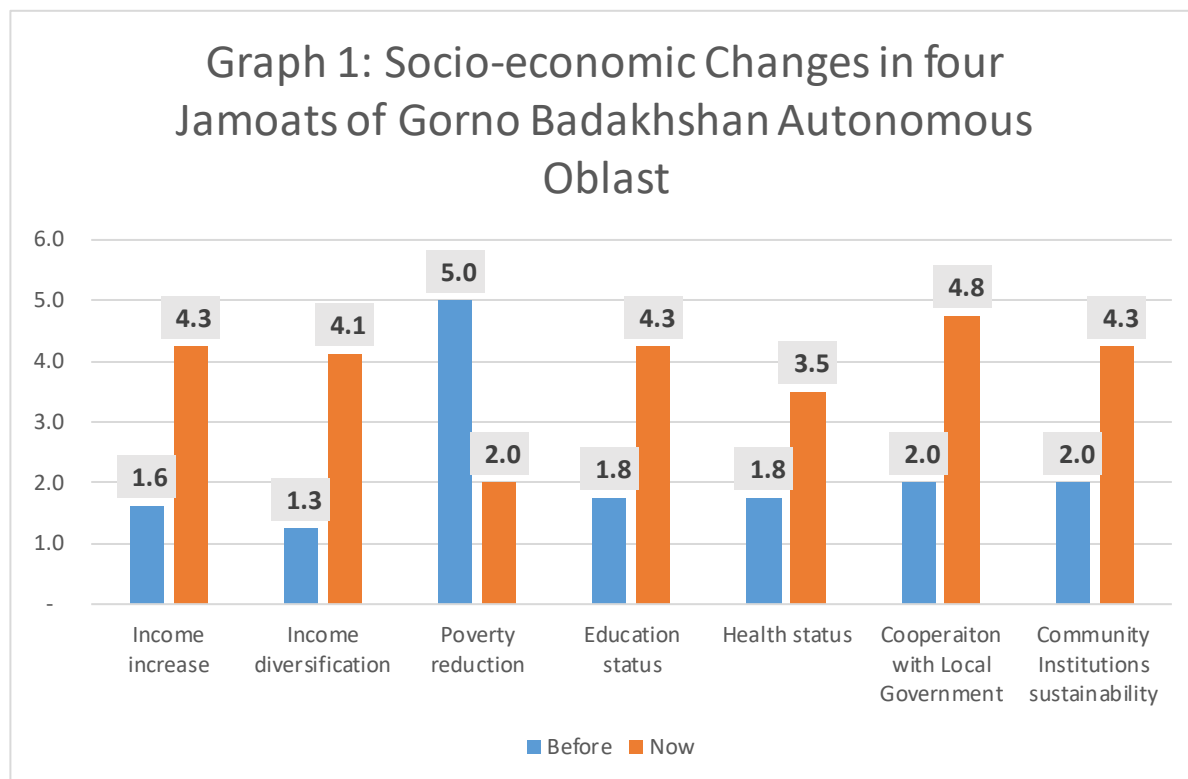
Graph 1 presents the average scores for four SUDVOs against each indicator.

1. Increase in household income: Looking to the situation in the late 1990s, SUDVO represented a low score, average score being 1.6. For the current year, the average score given was 4.3. This clearly indicates that the household income levels have increased in the intervening period. For example, if a teacher’s salary was USD 3 per month in 1998, it is now about USD 60. After land was privatized, agricultural productivity increased and this also contributed to increased income. Migration to Russia took off as local employment opportunities were limited, and remittances also contributed to increase. As Graphs 2-5 show, this trend is found across all four SUDVOs/Jamoats.

2. Diversification of household income sources: In the late 1990s, agriculture and livestock was the main source of household income and average of scores given was 1.3. For the current year, average score given was 4.1. This clearly reflects on the diversification of income sources has taken place. Apart from diversification in agriculture and livestock, e.g. vegetable production, processing and marketing, other important sources now are remittances, government employment, micro and small enterprises, value added activities (e.g. fruit processing and marketing), etc. The returnees from Russia do not only

⁴ Late Dr Akhter Hameed Khan, the founder of the Comilla Pilot Project, used to say that ‘honest and committed’ leadership is the key to sustainable organisational development at the community level.

bring back capital they also bring back new sets of skills, ideas and networks. This leads to creation of various service oriented enterprises that offer not only self-employment, but also employment to



others. Access to credit from First Micro Finance Bank, MLO and CBSLGs has played a key role in allowing households to diversify their income.

3. Poverty Reduction: In the mid-1990s, right after independence, economic collapse and civil war, there was ‘universal’ poverty; humanitarian assistance was provided to all in urban and rural areas, including university professors, doctors, farm workers, nurses, etc⁵. Benefits of land privatisation and market development had not as yet kicked in. The average score given to poverty level in mid 1990s was 5. Given the increase in income levels and diversification of income sources since then, there was a correspondingly a significant poverty reduction. The 2017 score given was 2.

In one Jamoat, the Chairman⁶ said that his village has witnessed almost a revolution since 1990s. With support of the government, state farm land was given to households, leading to improved labour absorption and increased productivity with support from ARP. With AKF/MSDSP support, VO constructed an irrigation system that brought extra land under cultivation. Through Village Development Fund, VO was able to support migration to Russia. Remittances made significant contribution to household incomes. Some of the returning migrants have set up micro and small enterprises. Those with

⁵ In 1999, COO also received 5 kg of vegetable oil under the humanitarian programme.

⁶ Previously he was SUDVO president, and previous to that he was VO president.

construction skills readily find work at construction sites in Khorog and other district centres. One group of returning migrants has set up automobile service stations along the Murgab to Darvaz road.

Improved and regular electricity supply from the Aga Khan Development Network's (AKDN) Pamir Energy hydel power stations has also contributed to strengthening the local economy. CBSLGs are active and they now have significant capital and provide small loans to members for various needs, including for education, health, house improvements, migration, and small micro enterprises. Within the village, extreme poverty has largely been eradicated. However, it still persists in several households who have certain characteristics: elderly people who are alone, and people with physical or mental handicaps. Community supports these families. For example, VO has set up a group of youngsters who support one elderly woman; they prepare her land, plant wheat, irrigate the fields, harvest the crop and deliver the produce to her.

In all four Jamoats visited, there were a large number of houses with new iron sheet roofing, which is also indicative of improved living standards.

4. Education status: In the late 1990s, an average score given on this indicator was 1.8 and in 2017 the score given was 4.3. The improvement has been due to demand and supply factors. On the demand



Early Childhood Development Centre in village Shukhcharv, Shugnon District

side, as household incomes have increased they are better able to support their children to attend school. Government, AKF Education, AKF/MSDSP and other NGOs⁷ have worked on the supply side. Many schools have been rehabilitated, new classrooms have been added, teachers have been re-trained, Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) have become active and teachers' salaries have increased significantly. This has meant that the schools are now in a better condition to provide better education. More recently, Early Childhood Development (ECD) has been introduced in GBAO by AKF

Education. In all four SUDVO meetings, one key indicator was mentioned about the improved status of education; that now more students from Jamoats attend universities at Khorog and other cities of Tajikistan.

Health status: In all four Jamoats, SUDVO representatives said that in the mid-1990s the health facilities were largely inactive due to lack of repairs and/or supplies. However, medical and para-medical staff was present despite their negligible salaries and continued to provide some assistance. The average score given was 1.8. Over the years, the central, provincial and district government, AKF Health, AKF/MSDSP, Tajikistan Red Crescent Society and other NGOs have supported the health sector's revival. With increase in household incomes, diet has also improved leading to better nutritional status. The current score given was 3.5. In all Jamoats, children's immunization was 100%. In Jamoat, 60% Married Women of Reproductive Age were using child spacing services. The VOs are supporting Community Health Promoters (CHP) to reach out to each and every household.

⁷ Central Asia Institute is also present in GBAO.

Cooperation with Local Government: Rural communities in GBAO have always had close cooperation with the local government (Jamoat). However, after the collapse of USSR and Tajikistan's independence in 1991, the local government system suffered a great deal due to lack of resources. Despite this, they still had authority and legitimacy as the state's local structure. The Jamoat played a key role in facilitating the breakup of state farms and privatisation and distribution of land to households on per capita basis. Their participation in ARP ensured transparency in the whole process that was often lacking in other regions of the country. It was in this context that the SUDVO representatives gave a score of 2 for 1990s. Since the setting up of SUDVOs in 2003-5, and particularly after the registration of VOs, the level of cooperation between VOs/SUDVO and Jamoat has enhanced manifold and an average score of 4.8 was given for the current year. It should also be kept in mind that improved fiscal space allowed more flow of funds from centre to GBAO Administration to District Administrations.

The cooperation between the two bodies takes place at regular VO and SUDVO meetings that the Chairman Jamoat attends. Local issues are resolved locally. Legalisation of VOs has given them extra authenticity as reflected by the fact that after registration household membership of VOs increased from about 85-90% to 100%. Whenever the VO or SUDVO wants to undertake any activity, they invariably involve the Jamoat chairman. VOs/SUDVO and Jamoat have developed a joint Jamoat Development Plan. The Jamoat chairman also uses his/her influence to attract and facilitate other organisations to support the implementation of activities in JDP. In case of emergencies, VOs use the office of the Jamoat chairman to access district and provincial departments. At the local level, both parties work together to celebrate national days, e.g. Navruz.

Community Institutions Sustainability: in the Soviet Era, government institutions dominated the social space in the village. The only exception was the presence of a religious guide (Mullo/Calipha) who performed birth, marriage and death ceremonies. In 1998, AKF/MSDSP initiated VOP. There was an overwhelming response to the programme and within 18 months 90% of GBAO communities had VOs. The main reason for this response was that the people had and were benefiting from AKF/MSDSP's HAP and ARP, i.e. the people had developed trust in AKF/MSDSP and were willing to partner AKF/MSDSP for fostering VOs. However, their expectation about the longer term sustainability of VOs was unclear, despite repeated messaging by the VOP team. Hence in their view, the average 1990s score for sustainability was 2.

Over the past 15 years, VOs have made tremendous achievements and gained great experiences, as well as their own capital at CBSLG, VO and SUDVO levels. Then with the fostering of SUDVOs and registration, VOs have gained legitimacy and recognition beyond the village⁸. Their VDPs are now part of JDPs. District and Jamoat administration now recognise VO/SUDVO and reach out to them, as well as being accessible to them. Now VO/SUDVOs have a track record. This is what gives them confidence about their relevance and their sustainability. Therefore, it was not surprising that for the current year, the average score for four SUDVOs was 4.8.

At all four SUDVO meetings, COO asked one question: You have said that over the past 15 odd years the household incomes have increased (from score of 1.6 to 4.3), household income sources have diversified

⁸ Key indicator of the VO legitimacy in the eye of the community is contributions/donations that the migrants in Russia make. And, this is common to GBAO, Rasht and Khatlon.

(from score of 1.3 to 4.1) and that poverty reduction has taken place (from score of 5 down to 2). What has been the VOs contribution in this? In all four cases, SUDVO representatives responded that the key message of AKF/MSDSP about the importance of having own organisation, building up a capital base and improving managerial, financial and technical skills has been internalised. Initially there may have been some doubts about VOs, but over time the VOs have proven their value. The frequent interaction with AKF/MSDSP staff, both formally and informally, was useful in building the capacities and skills of VO leaders. The broad based VO has inculcated values of inclusion, democratic decision making, participatory planning, foresight and further enhancement of social capital within the community as well as with other stakeholders. This allowed for local energies, local ideas, local knowledge and local resources to be mobilised for productive use.

The foremost contribution of VOs has been to involve all households in its affairs and this has created ownership amongst the people. This ownership is reflected in full participation in dialogues, in meetings, in Village Management Planning meetings, in paying the monthly membership fees, providing cash, labour and in-kind contributions to self-initiated activities as well as those supported by government, AKF/MSDSP and other organisations, playing a full role in the implementation and then management of these activities. VOs played key role in equitable distribution of state farm lands and in increasing agricultural productivity by access inputs and credit from AKF/MSDSP. VOs ensured that various Natural Resource Management activities were properly managed, e.g. goat banks, nurseries, green houses, poultry, forestry blocks, land development, livestock vaccination, etc. AKF/MSDSP provided small revolving grants meant only for women members of VOs, who well managed and many women set up small enterprises.

The management of Village Development Fund, especially in the early years, allowed VOs to provide credit for new micro enterprises, expansion of existing ones, and support migrants to move to Russia in search of work. VO members have learnt about financial management and now many are lining up the First Micro Finance Bank and MLO for accessing credit. VOs have supported the education, health and drinking water activities. VOs have fostered CBSLGs with AKF/MSDSP's support, and now supervise and monitor them. VOs are active members to SUDVO. After the registration of VOs, now have closer cooperation with Jamoat, including having their Village Development Plans incorporated into the Jamoat Development Plan. Jamoat Chairperson now values VOs and is in regular contact with them. Another important contribution of VO has been to support poor families in the community. One SUDVO representative said, "In a manner of speaking, VOs have facilitated the transformation from the state controlled system to a more market driven system."

Another SUDVO representative said that over the years, AKF/MSDSP support has enabled the community members through the VO structure to enhance their various resources, e.g. social, physical, financial, and natural, etc. This has allowed VOs to play a greater role in local development. Another SUDVO representative added that compared to time of independence the Tajikistan government is in a strong position and has increased its own development budget. Government and AKDN have worked to improve national and regional infrastructure, e.g. half of the Khorog – Dushanbe road has been significantly improved and traveling time and costs have correspondingly reduced. Within GBAO, AKDN's Pamir Energy is providing reliable electricity. Another SUDVO representative added that the registration of VOs has given greater recognition and legitimacy to VOs. All these factors combined together to allow VOs to contribute to improving the socio-economic status of the people. The catalytic role of AKF/MSDSP was mentioned many times during the discussions.

COO also asked about the challenges faced by the VOs. One SUDVO representative replied that in some villages people have elected presidents who are not active and cannot really provide leadership to the community. Another SUDVO leader said that the increasing market penetration and development has provided many benefits in terms of increasing income and employment, yet also at the same time economic differentiation is taking place. Most people's lives have improved, however some families are still very poor. While communities provide some social protection support to them, longer term strategies are needed to move them from 'ultra-poor' category to 'poor' or even higher category. The challenge would be to do this without disturbing the indigenous social protection practices and indeed to build upon them.

It is worth noting that generally the life has improved a great deal in comparison to mid-1990s, and even though VO and SUDVO have played a significant role in the transformation of the life of people in GBAO there are other important factors at play as well such as the role of migration to Russia, increasing investments by the government, INGOs and NGOs interventions, role of local market development and role of local civil society that impacted and accelerated the process of improvement.

(Results for individual SUDVO ranking of socio-economic changes of past 15 years are presented in Annex A.)

Debriefing Session at AKF/MSDSP Regional Office Khorog:

At the end of COO's visit to GBAO, a debriefing session was held with AKF/MSDSP team. Apart from sharing his findings from meetings with four SUDVOs, COO made three presentations: 1) on RSPN/RSPs work in Pakistan, 2) the EU's SUCCESS programme, and 3) regional experiences of the adaptation/adaptation of RSPs' social mobilisation approach to community driven development. COO said that the work and achievements of AKF/MSDSP in partnership with the organised communities of GBAO are exceptional and well recognised by the communities, especially given the very difficult context of post-Soviet collapse and civil war. The strategies and approaches followed by AKF/MSDSP offer many lessons to others and also give confidence that if the said approaches can lead to significant, meaningful and sustainable socio-economic changes in GBAO than more can be achieved in more favourable environments.



Debriefing Session with AKF/MSDSP Regional Team, Khorog

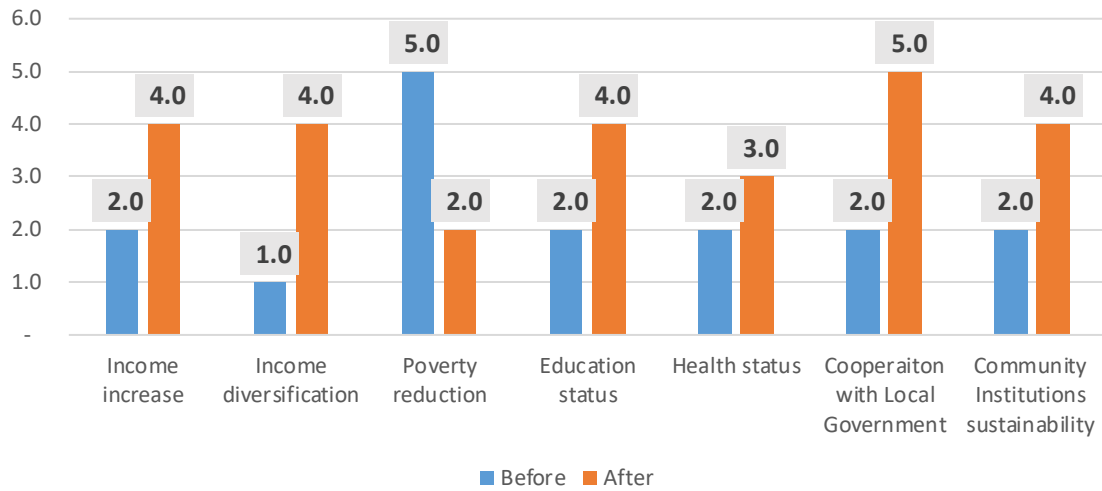
COO concluded by saying that the EU supported women-only SUCCESS programme also aims to contribute to raise household incomes, diversify income sources, reduce poverty, improve access to social services, strengthen CO/VO/LSO links with local government and strengthen capacities of community institutions so that they are sustainable. The achievements of AKF/MSDSP and GBAO communities in these areas further strengthens RSPN/RSPs' belief that they too will be able to achieve the desired results.

COO thanked AKF/MSDSP for facilitating RSPN/RSP team's visit to Rasht Valley and Khatlon, and his own and Koshif's visit to GBAO. COO concluded, "It is always a great pleasure to visit Khorog, to meet with friends and colleagues from AKF/MSDSP and VO/SUDVO leaders and members. It's almost like I have come home!"

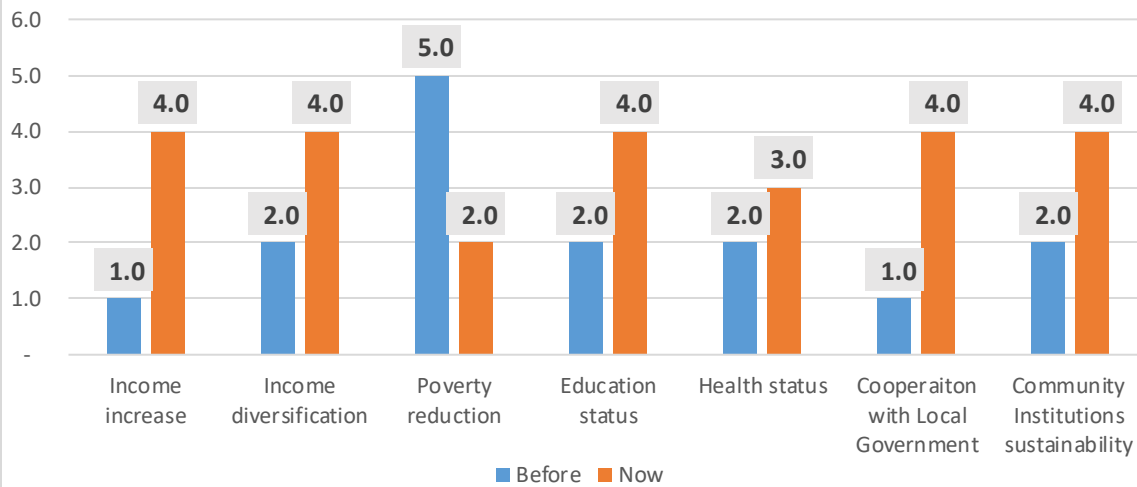


April 2017: Travels in Gorno Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast

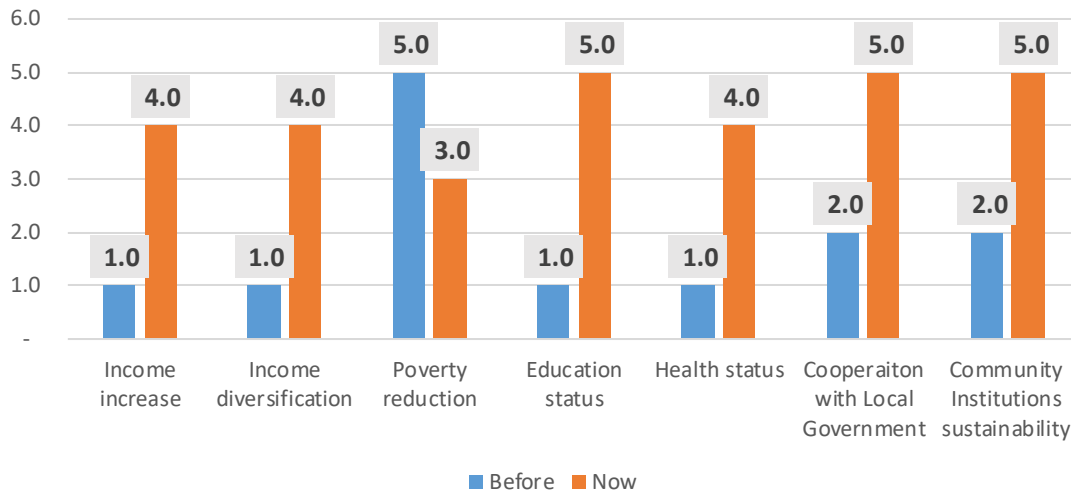
Graph 2: Socio-Economic Changes in Jamoat Roshtkala Centre: SUDVO Shoetir Andoz's Response



Graph 3: Socio-Economic Changes in Jamoat Tevdem: SUDVO Khursand's Response



Graph 4: Socio-Economic Changes in Jamoat Shirinjon : SUDVO Shukhcharv's Response



Graph 5: Socio-Economic Changes in Jamoat Novobod: SUDVO Nasimi Ghund's Response

