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Decentralization and Community Development

Strengthening Local Participation in the Mountain Villages of Kyrgyzstan

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Kyrgyzstan, officially called the Kyrgyz Republic, is a small and highly mountainous former Soviet republic situated in northeast Central Asia (Figure 1). It is surrounded by the Pamir-Alay Mountains to the southwest and the Tien-Shan range to the northeast; the Tien-Shan ridge predominates. Ninety-four percent of the land area is located above 1000 m; 40% is above 3000 m, with large glaciers and permanent snow. The average altitude is 2750 m. Since gaining independence in 1991, the Kyrgyz Republic has undergone a difficult transition from a command and supply economy to a market-oriented one, embracing a democratic system of gover-

nance. The government has strongly promoted decentralized local governance and community development through the formation of local self-governing bodies and emphasis on intensive mobilization of human resources and local capital at the grassroots level. In reaction to the government's commitment to promote a high degree of local governance for community development, the UNDP-supported Decentralization Program began to help mobilize mountain communities in the Kyrgyz Republic to initiate community development efforts that would meet the needs of villages in Kyrgyzstan.

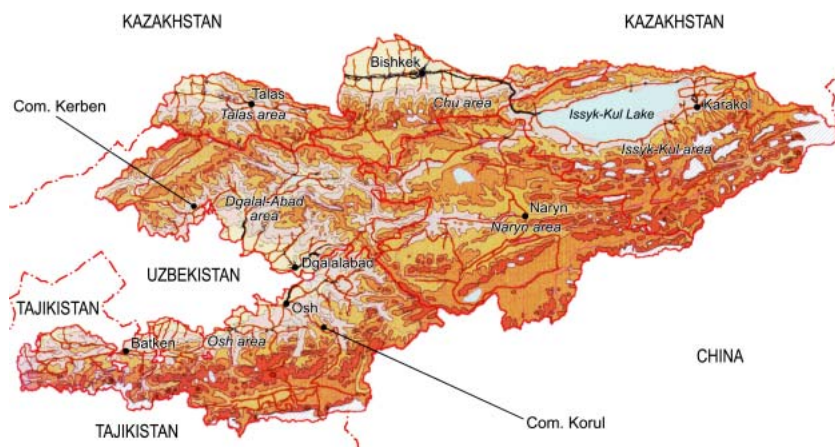


FIGURE 1 Map of Kyrgyzstan, with location of the 2 case study areas. (Courtesy of UNDP)

Decentralization and community development: The UNDP in Kyrgyzstan

Effective and sustainable local governance requires effective participation, not only at the institutional level but also at the community level, in order for the governance mechanism to muster community dynamism that is beneficial. Community dynamics can be ensured by full participation through the establishment of local self-governing institutions at the grassroots level to harness the potential of the state and its citizens to achieve sustainable social and economic development.

Self-governing grassroots institutions are possible only if rural people are organized into self-governing, community-based organizations that enhance the role of the community in taking initiatives that con-

cern their livelihoods. Properly designed community mobilization processes lead to self-governing, sustainable institutions that promote socioeconomic development. This helps people enhance their capacities and work together for household and community initiatives. A systematic and process-oriented approach must be adopted to ensure community participation in effective, sustainable local governance. Appropriate resources must be made available from the local government, donors, and other agencies.

In remote mountain areas where the central government is not in a position to directly influence local development activities, local government plays a vital role in ensuring that local development problems and potentials are considered and local voices are heard. To this end, a strong partnership between community organizations and local government bodies must be established as a first step toward developing participatory local governance and decentralized development. The UNDP Decentralization Program supports local governments in undertaking such initiatives in the villages of Kyrgyzstan, for example, in Kerben (Figure 2) and Korul, the 2 case studies presented below.

A twofold approach

Decentralization initiatives in Kyrgyzstan are geared toward developing the capabilities of local communities and local self-government at the *aiyl* (village) level so that decisions on planning and manag-

ing local development initiatives are made and responsibility for resource mobilization and allocation are taken at the local level.

The two main strategies of the Decentralization Program in Kyrgyzstan are (1) promoting local participation in development planning and other decision-making processes and (2) developing the capacities of local authorities. This support is provided through the development and promotion of community-based organizations (CBOs) in a process of social mobilization and linkage of these institutions with the local government.

Processes and tools

Capacity development among local village authorities

One of the key instruments in creating conditions for community participation is the introduction of a planning process in which communities, local authorities, government agencies, and other stakeholders jointly participate in decision-making. In Kyrgyzstan, the process of capacity development began with

- a. Establishment of information centers at the local level, with comprehensive databases in the villages.
- b. Electronic linkages, with e-mail connections established by each local government.
- c. Training organized for the heads of local governments and elected deputies of the municipalities.
- d. Pilot villages in the region used as a training venue and heads of local government of nonpilot villages trained for advocacy and replication.
- e. Organization of regular meetings between local governments and leaders of community organizations to achieve linkages.
- f. Involvement of local authorities in the process of social mobilization and participatory planning.
- g. Preparation of Village Development Plans for each pilot *aiyl okmotu* (municipality) through incorporation of the projects prioritized by community organizations and approved by the *aiyl* Advisory Council.



FIGURE 2 View of a typical Kyrgyz village in the mountainous region of Kerben Aiyl Okmotu, home to 6087 people living in a remote area approximately 125 km² in size. (Photo courtesy of National United Nations Volunteer)

Establishment of self-governing community organizations

A properly designed social mobilization process leads both male and female community members to form sustainable, self-governing community organizations that help people enhance their capacity to receive and utilize resources and work together on household and community initiatives. Social mobilization is geared toward the development of grassroots organizations, generation of capital for development of these organizations, and development of skills in planning and implementing social and economic activities. These development processes are described below in 2 broad areas—organizational development and planning and implementation of social infrastructure development projects.

Formation of community organizations at the aiyl level: The program encouraged people to organize and form their own broad-based CBOs. These CBOs are a coalition of people whose continuing economic and social interests are best served by organizing themselves into a group. Total coverage of the village with representatives from each household was the goal for the purpose of active participation. This is necessary for the whole society to achieve consensus and build social capital.

Capital generation through community savings: A CBO has the potential power to achieve

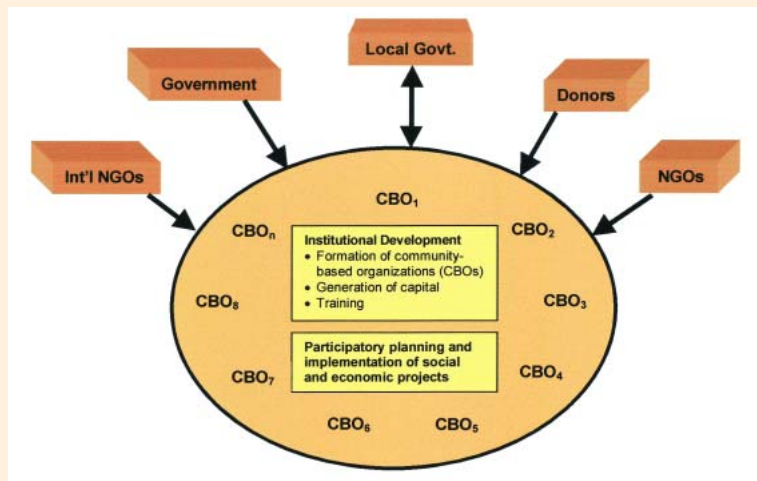


FIGURE 3 Concept of local self-governance developed by the UNDP Decentralization Program in Kyrgyzstan.

Microcapital grants to community organizations provide a mechanism by which a community organization and its members can capture the potential benefits of social change and enhance existing social capital by organizing villagers in the productive and social development sectors. An essential element is that capital grant funds are matched with cost-sharing contributions (in cash or kind) from the national and local governments and community organizations.

The following 2 case studies illustrate the UNDP approach to decentralization and participatory local governance systems, highlighting the innovative approach to community development in Kyrgyzstan.

Kerben: Planning and implementing rural infrastructure projects

Kerben Aiyl Okmotu in the Aksy District is located at 1600 m asl in the southern part of Kyrgyzstan and is about 520 km from the capital of Bishkek. There are 5444 households in Kerben AO. People have faced several problems in the past 9 years of independence. The major ones relate to drinking water, irrigation, schools, health, and roads. Since independence, the central government has made no serious efforts to rehabilitate and reconstruct social infrastructure due to limited budget allocations. As a result, people in this mountainous village have been desperate to undertake development activities at the local level on their own initiative.

The UNDP Decentralization Program initially began working in Kerben in 1999 by establishing partnerships with the *aiyl okmotu*. The objective has been to institutionalize a participatory process in which the local government builds a partnership with its citizens through the formation of CBOs and uses grassroots-level CBOs as local self-governing institutions to increase the effectiveness of the delivery mechanism.

To date, a total of 51 CBOs have been formed and work at the community level, with a total of 1112 members. Sixty-three percent of the members are male and 37% female. In the pilot villages, the program covers 5444 households in 7 villages (100% of the total villages of the *aiyl okmo-*

its goal if it can generate its own assets. Without capital, it will never realize its full potential. In this effort, it is necessary for all members to initiate savings programs at their regular meetings. Savings generated by individual members are the assets of the CBO and are the first step toward self-reliance. The generation of capital through savings is of paramount importance to the viability of the CBO and can be used to finance subsequent microenterprise development at the household or village level.

Capacity development through training: Community participation can be effective and fruitful if the people maximize their potential by upgrading their skills. By harnessing existing skills and building on the experience of the villagers, the community can manage new inputs, technology, and resources effectively. To this end, various training programs will be offered to select members of the community who can provide such services. This training could be related to organizational development, small-scale enterprise development, savings and credit programs, various skills related to agriculture, livestock, forestry, bookkeeping, computers, management, or other key disciplines.

Participation in project planning and implementation for socioeconomic development

To enable the community's participation in facilitating self-defined projects, initial support is necessary in the form of resources from the local government, donors, and other agencies. Provision of microcapital grants is one method used in Kyrgyzstan to develop a mechanism that complements the resources of local governments and communities in implementing priority social infrastructure projects identified by the people (Figure 3).

“Before the Decentralization Program, we were like camels in these areas but now we are horses. In a period of 1½ years, we were able to carry out 7 projects for which we had waited 9 years!” Chairperson of the Korul local government



FIGURE 4 The community of Kerben Aiyl Okmotu of Aksy Rayon (District) gathers to identify and prioritize community needs and demands—an important step in the process of implementing social infrastructure projects. (Photo courtesy of National United Nations Volunteer)

tu). Most of these CBOs have been registered in the municipalities and are working in close collaboration with them. In the process of generating their own internal resources, CBO members have already voluntarily saved a total of 51,000 soms (US\$ 1040), which is being used for self-development activities.

In the first stage of their organizational development, the CBOs established regular meetings at the settlement level and developed their own rules and regulations for their organizations, electing their own managers and leaders. The managers and leaders have already undergone training in management, leadership, and accounting skills to make their organizations' activities more effective. At the next stage of development, the CBO members began to generate internal savings, deciding the amount and rate of savings by group consensus. Some CBO members use these internal savings to initiate small enterprises.

In the past 2 years, CBOs have been meeting regularly to plan and prioritize small-scale development projects (Figure 4) that can be implemented by generating internal resources from local self-government, state administrations, and the Decentralization Program (Figures 5, 6).

Community development efforts by the citizens of Kerben have shown how a local self-governance system can be effective in an area far away from the capital city if people participate in planning and making decisions on the projects that are most needed.

Korul: Constructing a school

Ninety percent of Korul Aiyl Okmotu in the Alay District, located in the south-southeastern part of the Osh region, consists of a mountain valley situated at 1560 m asl. It has 933 households and

about 1500 children of school age. Previously, there were only 2 middle schools and a primary school; the growing number of children led to problems in the early 1990s. The village of Tash-Kiya, consisting of 220 households, is one of the villages that suffered most. The school-age children of Tash-Kiya had a very difficult time attending school, especially during the winter, since they had to walk a long way to attend classes in a different village.

After the inception of the decentralization program in Korul, people began to mobilize into CBOs to discuss village problems and ways of solving them. Five CBOs consisting of 113 members began to plan the construction of a school in Korul. The CBOs unanimously decided to give this priority and prepared a proposal for approval by the village council for the support of local government. The people sought ways to mobilize resources for a construction project worth about US\$ 37,000 prepared by the CBOs. After intensive discussion among the local government, CBOs, and the decentralization program, a cost-sharing agreement was made whereby US\$ 19,000 (51%) would be contributed by the local government and the district administration, US\$ 15,000 (41%) by CBOs (mostly in kind), and US\$ 3000 (8%) by the decentralization program (external support).

The project began in May 2000 and was completed by November 2000, resulting in a 9-room school in the village (Figure 7). Currently, 216 students attend up to 9 grade levels at the school, taught by 19 teachers and 5 technical instructors.

Construction of the school was planned and implemented through the active participation of the CBOs, which

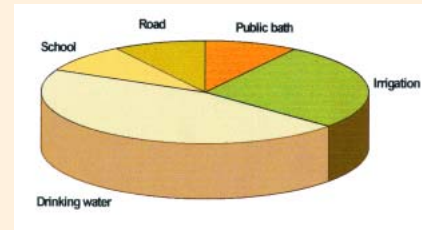


FIGURE 5 Proportional distribution of projects implemented in Kerben by project type. Altogether, CBOs worked on 11 different development projects in 2000.

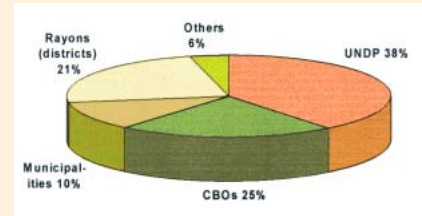


FIGURE 6 Percentage of contributions from various partners. The total cost of projects was US\$ 51,812.

FIGURE 7 Today, community members of Korul Aiyl Okmotu enjoy the fruits of their labor in the form of a community school planned, built, and financed by community members. (Photo courtesy of National United Nations Volunteer)



FIGURE 8 Members of Cholpon CBO in Korul Aiyl Okmotu of Alai Rayon gather at a monthly meeting to discuss common problems and generation of funds to support community enterprise initiatives. (Photo courtesy of National United Nations Volunteer)



also played an active part in nominating the School Director—Kalik Ashirov, a qualified teacher from their own village. The decision made by the CBOs was well received by the local and state government authorities, who later endorsed the nomination.

As a result of the school project, the villagers feel strongly that they should be organized into groups to deal with development-related activities in the village. The implementation of this project and the nomination of the school director are signs of the initiation and development of strong local self-government in Korul (Figure 8).

Lessons Learned

- Community mobilization is a social learning process geared toward human development. Every community responds to participation in different ways. Moreover, willingness to accept the concept of social and community mobilization varies from one community to another. Education, exposure to development issues, religion, tradition, geography, and economic conditions are some of the key factors that affect a community's decision to accept a new way of life through participation.
- Community mobilization can be effective if local communities are involved in the process of transforming community organizations into self-governing institutions at the grassroots level. This will empower them and enable them to increasingly take their development

into their own hands. It is an approach that takes considerable effort and time.

- Rural people can make decisions on the planning and management of local development initiatives and mobilize resources if their potential is harnessed and they are organized.
- When people organize and start working together, they can use the strength of community organizations to convince the local government to support their decisions to implement the projects they planned.
- When rural people see the results of their involvement in planning and implementing projects they have chosen, they develop confidence in how local development initiatives can be materialized with the involvement of community organizations.
- The decentralized system of local government in mountain villages can be made equally effective if a mechanism to generate partnership between the people and local government is established for community development initiatives. As a direct result of people's collective efforts to address community issues and needs, social cohesiveness will exist among community members, contributing to the development of the community and local self-governance as well as to establishing linkages between the local government and CBOs at the grassroots level. Grassroots initiatives to establish CBOs have thus been recognized as a powerful approach to full participation, equity, and sustainable local development efforts.

AUTHORS

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Yuri Misnikov, a native of Belarus, is a UN Development Program staff member. At present, he is UNDP Deputy Resident Representative in Kyrgyzstan. Prior to that, he held several positions at the UN Office in Belarus. Until 1993, he held academic posts at the Belarusian State Regional and Urban Development Institute. He holds degrees in Human Geography and Demography from Belarusian State University and Moscow State University. His publications have focused on spatial aspects of social and demographic development.