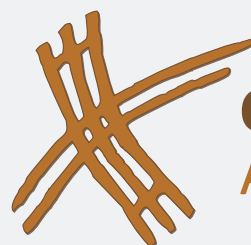13

CROSSROADS
ASIA
Conflict · Migration · Development

The Ontological Sources of Political

Stability and Economy:

Mahalla Mediation in the Rural

Communities of Southern Tajikistan

Hafiz Boboyorov

Bonn, September 2013

Crossroads Asia Working Papers

Competence Network Crossroads Asia: Conflict – Migration – Development

Partners of the Network:

Freie Universität Berlin	Freie Universität Berlin Zentrum für Entwicklungsländerforschung (ZELF)
	Humboldt Universität zu Berlin Zentralasienseminar
LMU LUDWIG-MAXIMILIANS-UNIVERSITÄT MÜNCHEN	Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München Institut für Ethnologie
universitätbonn	Universität Bonn Institut für Orient- und Asienwissenschaften (IOA) Zentrum für Entwicklungsforschung (ZEF)
Universität zu Köln	Universität Köln Geographisches Institut
EBERHARD KARLS UNIVERSITÄT TÜBINGEN	Universität Tübingen Institut für Ethnologie
ZMO Zentrum Moderner Orient	Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO)
Funded by: Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung	

The Ontological Sources of Political Stability and Economy:

Mahalla Mediation in the Rural Communities of Southern Tajikistan

Hafiz Boboyorov[1]

Table of Contents

Abstract

For the sake of a modest contribution to Crossroads Studies, this article argues that state and society in Tajikistan is embedded into personal (kinship, patron-client, etc.) networks of people. These networks structure social interactions by crosscutting institutional and spatial boundaries and frameworks. Notably, the networks are not stable per se especially in the aftermath of the post-Soviet and post-Civil War transformations of Tajik society. Rather, the case study of mahalla shows that the elites and their local mediators mobilize the material and immaterial resources of local people, religious and state institutions, and international donors to enforce these contested networks. Especially due to the state elites' limited material and military power, therefore, there is a reliance on local mediators, including family elders and religious notables, who shape the mahalla's committee. The concept of 'ontological security' explains how mahalla mediation is an effective strategy to frequently mention about chaos, uncertainty and insecurity.

Keywords: 'Ontological security', Stability, Mahalla, Mediation, Personal networks

1.   Introduction to the concept of 'ontological security'

People trust and rely on certain networks and abstract systems to reduce chaos, uncertainty and insecurity in their everyday life (Kinnvall, 2004; Giddens, 1990: 100; Berger & Luckmann, 1967). The same person is affiliated to different identities and networks and believes in various abstract systems, such as religious cosmology or state ideology. People in the modern society rely on the abstract ideas and particular institutions of the state to secure their life (Giddens, 1990: 83). However, as Kinnvall (2004: 743) notes, the state is also losing its image and function as an omnipotent and omnipresent structure that meets "individuals' desire for security and welfare".

In many societies, including the modern ones, kinship and religious networks therefore provide welfare and protection. These intertwined networks maintain structural conditions of safety and protection for the affiliated people. That's why they desperately protect their kinship and religious identities and why the effective discourses related to kinship and religion mention about dangers. The dangers can be both real due to natural and social conditions and imagined as interpreted by the people's sanctified or 'ontological' sources of stability.

The individuals are thus committed to obey certain kinship, religious and if necessary state institutions which protect them against 'ontological anxieties'. Mother is the first person who enforces what Erickson calls the 'basic trust' of the children in the familiar identities and institutions (in: Giddens, 1990: 94). Other agents who represent family, mosque and state are necessary to 'teach' people which identities and institutions safeguard their everyday life and save them in the afterlife. To offer a comprehensive understanding, I borrow the notion of 'ontological security' (Giddens, 1990; Kinnvall, 2004), which can also be compared to Berger & Luckmann's (1967) 'symbolic universe'. As Giddens defines, "The phrase [ontological security] refers to the confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action" (1990: 92).

The concept built on the notion of 'ontological security' (Kinnvall, 2004) explains how people's concern about order, certainty and security sustains certain identities and institutions. Feelings and experiences of (in-)security are not only psychological traits of individuals but also structural features of natural environment, religious beliefs and socio-political situations. The concern about order and security also draws attention from the classical sociologists, although they resolve the problem by different theoretical frameworks. Parsons, for example, defines 'the problem of order' as the preeminent objective of sociology which poses the question how the

social system is held together "in the face of divisions of interest which would 'set all against all'" (in: Giddens, 1990: 14). The discussion of social order has further been elaborated by Mielke et al. (2011) who propose that social order, defined as the structuring and structured processes of social reality always exists. The same authors argue that disorder, chaos and uncertainty are not methodologically relevant, as the social reality is exclusively constructed and generated by the interplay of worldviews and institutions (2-4).

Particularly significant for this paper is the role of discursive elements of disorder, chaos and uncertainty to enforce social order. The concept of 'ontological security', therefore, explains why and how people contest and simultaneously maintain multilayered identities and contradictory norms and institutions. The concept also illuminates how the effective personal networks (kinship and patron-client) do not rely on group solidarity or class differentiation but rather crosscut and merge groups and classes. Accordingly, any society is built upon both primordial and at the same time eroded and therefore reconstructed ideologies and structures (e.g., Michie, 1981: 23; Blackwood, 1997: 278). The other complicated puzzle the concept resolves is the classical division between structure and agency as well as further attempts to overcome this division (such as Giddens' structuration theory and Bourdieu's *habitus*). While structure is a notion dealing with objective conditions that influence human interactions, the notion of agency refers to an individual's personal effort and subjective concern to maintain structures that reduce or blunt ontological anxiety. The structural conditions are dominant in shaping that social world, while human agency adjusts or transforms them if they do not maintain ontological security.

1.1.   The ontological sources of collective identities and personal networks

By reference to Erickson, Kinnvall stresses the link between security and identity, describing the latter "as an anxiety-controlling mechanism reinforcing a sense of trust, predictability, and control in reaction to disruptive change" (2004: 746). The individuals have multiple, overlapping or merged identities and easily switch from one to the other but at the same time feel affectively attached to each of them. This apparently confused state of mind and behavior reflects their purposeful search for safety and protection in different contexts. The notion of 'context' refers to the situations people behave in certain ways or change their strategies and identities in order to secure their life and afterlife.

The framework I elaborate here contrasts with the famous concepts on the Central Asian identities, such as 'sotsium' or 'etnos' (Idiev, 2006; Nourzhanov, 2005), regionalism (Tadjbakhsh, 2008; Roy, 1997, 2000), 'clan identity' (Luong, 2002; Collins, 2002, 2003; De Martino, 2004; Freizer, 2004) and 'communal identity' (Sievers, 2002; Freizer, 2004; Radnitz, 2005). According to these concepts, people belong to distinctive 'identity groups' (such as ethnic or regional groups) which differ from each other by primordial and institutional distinctions. As for example the neo-institutionalists suggest with the notions of 'clan identity' and 'clan politics', distinctive clans and regional groups have shaped distinctive political parties, movements and thus dominated state offices (Luong, 2002; Collins, 2003). Roy (2000) proposes the other appealing concept of regionalism or 'localism'. According to this perspective, the local identities and networks embedded the Soviet political and economic systems and determined important post-Soviet events in Central Asian countries, such as civil war and political and religious movements in Tajikistan (for more discussion of these conceptual approaches see Heathershaw & Herzig, 2011: 8).

Diverging from these concepts, I propose that individuals interact through the crosscutting personal (e.g., kinship, friendship and patron-client) networks, regardless of their ethnic, regional, clan and other affiliations. These networks are not reduced to separate 'identity groups' but rather integrate actors of different origins through local, religious, state and economic structures at various levels. A primary administrative unit, for example a village community, is not an encapsulated and isolated world apart from both other communities and 'the state'. Rather, my framework defines 'community' and 'state' as embedded into the personal (e.g., kinship and patron-client) network of different actors, including state elites, development brokers, religious notables and family elders.

Notably, personal networks are not reduced to dyadic relations measured by economic calculations, as observed in some contexts (Scott, 1972; Wolf, 1966a; in: Michie, 1981: 23). The 'ontological security' framework goes beyond the dyads' economic calculations and sheds light on other important dynamic aspects of personal networks. The stigmatization of protests and riots against inequality and hierarchy (e.g., by propagation of such notions as 'stranger', 'enemy', 'polluted' and 'newcomer'), rather than of ranks and classes (e.g., Blackwood, 1997), are important to maintain the central principles of personal network, including patronage, clientism, loyalty and tenancy. The frequent reference to collective identities and discourses of stability, which stress the sense of 'we' vs. 'others', seek to enforce the contested alliances through marriage and patron-clientism.

People trust personal networks rather than other forms of relationships, interpreting the former as effective means to maintain order, certainty and security. From this perspective, Tilly (2007) defines kinship and other personal networks as 'trust networks', which secure the members' life by reciprocal practices. Reciprocity as both moral and "material aid in emergencies" is the central condition of trust networks. "What is trust? ... If you trust me, do not just tell me so; let me take charge of your children's education, lend me your life's savings for investment, take medicines I give you, or help me paint my house on the assumption that I will help you paint yours" (Tilly, 2007: 6-7). Other studies also suggest that the concern for order, certainty and security is crucial to shape the trust networks of kinsmen (Giddens, 1990: 101), patrons and clients (Scott, 1972: 101-2; Weingrod, 1968: 382-5; in Michie, 1981: 23-4), and doctors and patients (Stein, 1984: 34-5).

> "What is often painfully clear in clinical encounters is that despite physicians' encouragement of greater patient responsibility and autonomy, many patients wish to preserve the hierarchical, paternal, or maternal doctor-patient relationship. […] Behind much patient dissatisfaction and litigation is the angry accusation that the physician is not a good enough "father" or "mother." Patients ask their physicians to mediate on their behalf what they feel they cannot do alone. Frequently, not maintaining or enhancing their health status, and as often as not, endangering their health, patients nonetheless expect the physician to be able to rescue them from illness, disability, and death which is to say, accept the patron role, intervene, and assume responsibility for them. When the physician does comply for his or her own reasons the patient's experience of vulnerability and helplessness is only temporarily assuaged by obtaining the physician's omnipotence by proxy." (Stein, 1984: 35)

People do not trust in the state and development institutions due to short-term, unstable and unpredictable nature of the protection they offer, especially in the post-Soviet and post-Civil War (1992-1997) context of Tajikistan. Instead, they transform these institutions into their long-term reciprocal networks and redistribute the related resources to reduce political and economic uncertainties and threats. This perspective of 'ontological security' does not divide between formal and informal institutions but rather explains how people transform and adapt any institutions into their trust networks. People prefer the more enduring and reliable institutions, beyond the division between the formal and informal ones. They rely on reciprocal and patron-client relations and thereby seek protection in an unsecured world, although the economic benefits are often not fixed, calculated and regularly paid (Stein, 1984: 30-1).

Currently, reciprocal, cliental and tenancy relations are more preferable in the agricultural sector of Tajikistan. Day laborers, whose relationship "ends as soon as the wage is paid" (Blackwood, 1997: 287), do not have such long-term relationships and therefore they have an inferior social status. Status and hierarchy are therefore the effects of ontological security, that is, reflect (un-)secured positions of human individuals, rather than power relations or priori truths. The jobs and relations become inferior, dangerous and stigmatized if they do not provide a secured life and saved afterlife. From this perspective, Ferguson (1985) mentions the livelihood strategies of practitioners of animal husbandry in Lesotho in protecting against uncertainties and insecurities. He therefore criticizes the classical concepts of 'dual economy' which divide between cultural and economic practices often labeled as 'formal' and 'informal' relations. Rather, the migrants invest in the surplus unproductive stock against market principles as an 'ontological security' strategy to endure their status as the 'head' of household, to use it for reciprocal and patronage relations with other villagers and to insure the "retirement fund" for migrant laborers who return unemployed (Ferguson, 1985: 661).

1.2. Mediation of the contested networks

Not always do kinship and patron-client networks protect people from threats and dangers; often they provide greater uncertainty "in the long run and at a deeper level of analysis" (Stein, 1984: 30). The unresolved problems and the increasing marginalization of the subject people give rise to their paranoid and anxious reactions. They do not believe in themselves but rather rely on their patrons, whose inability to meet their needs provokes their distrust and hostility. Thus, the endurance of kinship and other patronage networks depends on the mediation practices and structures (Stein, 1984: 32-3). As will be shown with the case of mahalla in this article, the role of mediation is to ensure the 'ontological' sources of stability in response to the clients' distrust and hostility. The mediators mention the dangers for kinship relations and highlight religious obligations and the collective honor of clients. The certain types of patron-client relations, such as political hierarchy and agricultural sharecropping, are imposed as moral and benevolent relations of the kinsmen (Blackwood, 1997: 278).

Religious and state institutions, such as mosque, court and school, are also adapted to serve the mediation system. Religious cosmologies interpret the sacred or secured sources of the social and natural worlds in the divine order (Giddens, 1990: 103). Religious notables serve to sanctify kinship and patron-client networks and thus embed them into the divine order. To neutralize increasing discontent, the divine order also explains natural disasters and social problems as meaningful and necessary conditions for the salvation in the afterlife. Le Vine defines this

function of the religion as the regular rationalization of the sufferings or as an indirect psychological support for coercive regulation (1973: 141; in: Stein, 1984: 31). This function is also suggested by Weber's concept of 'salvation religions', which "infect daily life with existential fears, invoking as they do a tension between sin and the promise of salvation in an afterlife" (Giddens, 1990: 107-8; see also Weber 1963: 166-70). To maintain the continuity of the divine order, therefore, the mediation system honors and actualizes the past experiences of the ancestors and the reliance upon supernatural beings in the symbolic systems and ritual practices. Especially the mediators use religious settings and ceremonies to perpetuate kinship and patron-client networks. They praise loyal kinsmen and clients and stigmatize and destroy the social bonds of those who breach kinship and patron-client norms (Blackwood, 1997: 285-6; Ferguson, 1985).

2. Mahalla-mediated identities and networks

Mahalla Committee (hereinafter mahalla) is a semi-official political structure in the rural settlements and urban neighborhoods of Tajikistan. The structure represents local notables and state elites who mediate to stabilize contested political and economic relations. The Tajik mahalla is not a registered state entity and the degree of its functioning is not intensive and overwhelming to govern the body and mind of each citizen, as some studies observe in the case of Uzbekistan (Poos, 2011; Noori, 2006: 533, 537-538; Rasanayagam, 2009; Sievers, 2002). But rather the mahalla mediators and their state allies frequently refer to collective norms and identities of local people to establish mahalla as an internal structure of surveillance. Also state structures at various levels are perceived and integrated as the source of the elites' power. The subject people do not see any privileged relations with the state institutions if they have problems with the elites. They perceive the state as a field and network of the elites' extended influence. Some other studies have also observed a similar situation in the northern and central regions of Tajikistan (Idiev, 2006; Heathershaw & Herzig, 2011).

One of the basic challenges that shapes political processes at different levels in post-civil war Tajikistan is concern of the political elites to legitimize their privileged but highly contested access to political and economic resources. The established patron-client networks serve their interests to maintain the personal loyalty of local powerful men, elders and religious notables. These networks had also embedded the Soviet kolkhoz system and its official representation at village and inter-village levels (Roy, 2000; Luong, 2002). Today Jamoat (formerly the Village Council) has replaced the Soviet kolkhoz system not only to implement state regulations but especially to maintain the stability of personal networks at local level. In this context mahalla monitors and implements most of the related functions at village level. For this purpose, the new Law on Local Self-Governance (2008) seeks to legalize some of its important activities, including redistribution of resources, mediation of disputes and mobilization of manpower for some elite-run economic activities, such as cotton growing and harvest. Also other recently adopted laws on Tanzim (2007) and on Religion (2009) have enforced some mediation roles of the mahalla members.

To maintain the contested stability in the post-Civil War context, therefore, leads the elites to mainly rely on the 'soft' power of mahalla mediators, including family elders (*oqsaqols*) and religious notables (including *eshon, hajjis, imam-khatibs* and mullahs). These mediators especially serve to suppress the subject people in favor of the elites. They heavily rely on the indigenous norm of '*tinji*' (peacefulness or tranquility) and thereby spread the discourse of

'stability'. *Tinji* is a commonly referred concept of the local people which reflects their understanding of the sacred or 'ontological' sources of stability reified in kinship, religious and other personal networks. Notably, in this discussion the notion of 'stability' does not refer to its positivist or normative understanding which especially dominates state-centrist discourse. Rather, stability is the state of the Tajik state that "has been called into question most often, both from inside and outside the region" (Heathershaw & Herzig, 2011: 5). The state elites and their mahalla mediators use the discourse of 'stability' to generate the environment of uncertainty and insecurity if they lose their privileged position.

2.1.   Mahalla as a 'syncretic' network of the elites and their mediators

Often mahalla is understood as 'domestication' of the state since the early Soviet Union. This state-centrist approach blames the central executive power for monopolizing and thus reducing 'the power and autonomy of regional leaders'. From this perspective, the neoliberal perspective of decentralization promotes mahalla as a 'self-governance' structure to which the state power should be devolved as a way to democratize society (Noori, 2006: 534-6; Martino, 2004).

However, as my study shows in the rural settlements of the southern districts of Tajikistan in Khatlon province, mahalla reflects a 'syncratic' network of the elites and their local mediators. Some other scholars (Idiev, 2006: 7; Matveeva, 2009: 22; Heathershaw & Herzig, 2011: 5) also observe a certain combination of 'tradition' and 'modernity' or the 'old' and the 'new' in the body of mahalla in different regions of Tajikistan. Mahalla is a body through which the elites exercise combined power since the Soviet Union (Noori, 2006: 536-7; Poos 2011; Sievers, 2002). This crosscutting network, which represents families, neighborhoods, mosques, Sufi circles, farms, Jamoat, police and other state departments, as well as local development organizations, also reflects expectations of the local people. They consider religious, state and development offices and resources as private and at the same time patronage means of the elites.

Local politics is, therefore, shaped in the course of interactions among the elites, their intermediaries and 'development brokers' (Bierschenk et al., 2002: 4). Other scholars have also observed the persisting and increasing role of mediators and the mediatory function of mahalla and development brokers across post-Soviet Central Asia (Sievers, 2002; Stevens, 2005; Noori, 2006; Rasanayagam, 2002, 2009; Poos, 2011) and around the world (e.g., in Afghanistan by Schetter, 2013: 6-13 and in Benin by Bierschenk & de Sardan, 2003: 153-4). Sievers (2002), for example, captures mahalla in Uzbekistan as a mediatory structure especially in the case of *oqsaqol* who "is an older male in mahalla selected by consensus from his generational cohort" (100).

In rural settlements *oqsaqols* or mahalla mediators are selected from among families, neighborhoods and religious circles. Such inclusive but hierarchical representation of the local people refers to their sacred or ontological sources of stability and order. These sources reified in their kinship, neighborhood and religious networks sustain the highly contested cotton-growing farms. In the cotton-growing communities mahalla consists of the head of mahalla or *vakil* (literally: 'authorized representative')*, imam khatib* (officially recognized mullah), *oqsaqols* (family and neighborhood elders) and other powerful men who represent their families and sub-residential units (*kuchas*). In most successfully run mahalla*s*, regardless of the size of the respected villages, *vakil* and *imam-khatib* have close personal relations with state elites and religious notables, such as *eshons* (saints) and *hojis* (pilgrims).

In post-Soviet Tajikistan Islam is an important source to legitimize the elites' political and economic claims. Many scholars (including Heathershaw & Herzig, 2011, Steinberger, 2003, Sagdeev, 2000 and Malashenko, 2000) underline the legitimatizing role of Islam throughout Central Asian countries. They question the dichotomous view on the 'official' and 'hidden' forms of Islam and show instead how they intersect in favor of the elites (Heathershaw & Herzig, 2011: 13). The formerly communist elites go to *Hajj,* swear with Koran, participate in religious ceremonies, submit to Sufi saints and pursue the 'proper' way of Islam to improve their religious image and reputation.

Due to the important position of the religious notables at local level, Islam also serves to sanctify the hierarchical representation of mahalla. Mosques and religious practices and ceremonies (including *jamoa* or public prayer, wedding, funeral and holiday) are important to achieve this status. In different regions of Tajikistan, village and sub-village mosques sanctify and spread socially important information and experiences of the mediators (Boboyorov, 2013; Idiev, 2006). This is achieved by the religious notables who exclude the deviating people from religious ceremonies and services, especially weddings and funerals. The religious notables 'call the souls' to curse and ostracize the deviating people in the case that they are not controllable and hence dangerous for the public. The regular and specialized religious ceremonies and settings serve to either isolate or 'heal' both men and women who deviate from acceptable behaviors. Therefore, religious mediation is quite necessary and effective to ensure solidarity of the subject people with the mahalla representatives.

Especially the sub-village mosques (so-called *choykhona*) in large and ethnically heterogeneous villages of Shahritus district serve to consolidate related neighborhoods under the authority of

their mahalla representatives (such as *oqsaqols* and *kucha* mullahs). Mostly small and ethnically homogenous villages (e.g., in Shuroobod district) have extended family guesthouses or unauthorized sub-village mosques while the elites run village mosques.

Some cases in the cotton-growing villages of Shahritus district show that the underrepresentation of family elders and Islamic notables in mahalla weakens the effective domination of the elites. This explains both contested and weak authority of *vakil* and other mediators who do not represent all families and neighborhoods. In such situations the villagers are split up into distinct kinship and religious communities as well. An informant explained that "[t]here is no single public place in the village; the mosques are divided into *avlods* [patrilineal extended families]. Each *avlod* [members] pray in a separated place, mostly in a kinsman's home. The common mosque is only used for [religious] holidays" (personal interview; Shahritus district; April 15, 2007).

Also the reference to kinship and Islamic affiliations enforces the challenged belief of the local people that the elites have 'God-given' or inherited 'wealth' due to religious superiority (*davlat*) and divine competency to sustain 'peace' (*tinji*) and to distribute 'justice' (*insof*) (see below figure 7). Such use of the local identities becomes necessary especially when the elites are accused of being responsible for the increasing inequality and when the development programs intervene to introduce new and sometimes competing structures and actors at local level. The elites provoke concern of the subject population about the incompetent leaders of the development programs which give rise to discord among kinsmen.
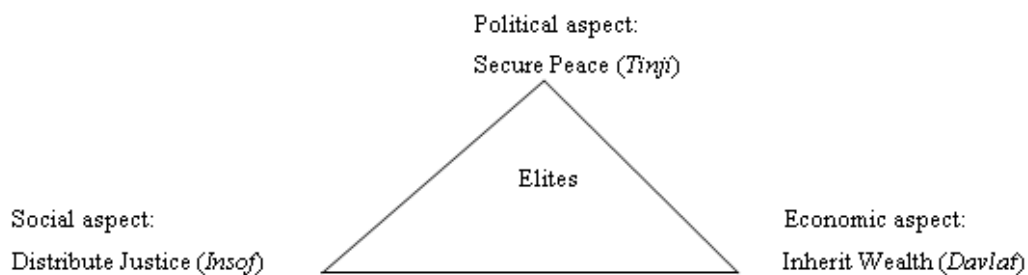

Figure 1. The sacred image of the elites

The elites' claim also influences the strategic choices of the development policy-makers. During my field research in 2007 the representatives of Shuroobod Government and MSDSP[2] agreed to follow the 'experience of Mu'minobod' in integrating development structures and programs into the elites' patron-client networks. As the deputy governor of Mu'minobod district assured, this would prevent the problems of 'two-fold power' and 'three-fold power' or parallel political structures to mahalla (personal interview; Mu'minobod district; May 3, 2007).

The other prominent feature of the 'experience of Mu'minobod' is that the elites refer to the sacred sources of Islam to categorize development actors and structures. They alienate those actors or structures that are not integrated into their networks and thus categorize them as 'foreigners'. The categorization as 'foreigner' hints at non-Muslim and religiously stigmatized (e.g., 'Shia', 'Ismaili' or 'infidel') origins and identities. The elites often use religious ceremonies and settings to ritualize such practice. Local mosques, for example, serve to transform participatory exercises and development programs as the 'community' of male prayers.

It is a widespread rumor among the local recipients of development aid that MSDSP's Village Organizations (VOs) may have 'hidden' (i.e., anti-Islamic) intentions, although they believe rather different future: 'Aga Khan', like any other 'foreign organization', will leave their villages after 'the poor' get enough wealth. A manager of public outreach at MSDSP, who is closely related to the district government's elite network, completes his dual job. When he visits villages for the first time to introduce VOs in the mosques, he first mentions 'the wrong image of Aga Khan as a Westernized Ismaili' and then rejects the 'slander' by manifesting a detailed *shajaranoma* (genealogical book) about "Aga Khan who is not only Ismaili but also a direct *Sayyid*, i.e. the great-grandson of the God's prophet [Muhammad], who came in the appeal of our government to help the poor" (personal observation; Mu'minobod district; May 5, 2007).

Also the elites discredit non-related leaders of the locally integrated development organizations (such as VO, Jamoat Resource Center or Water Users Association) as 'servants of foreigners'. Such categorization seeks to arouse the local people's concerns vis-à-vis against 'foreigners' and 'their' development projects and organizations. Rather, any 'foreigner' is acceptable only if the elites endorse his or her presence and especially if they represent the person. Thereby the elites monopolize development programs by integrating them into their personal networks. Mahalla is

---

[2] MSDSP (Mountainous Societies Development Support Program) is a development program funded by Aga Khan Development Network.

one means to achieve this status and position of the development programs in the broader context of Central Asia, especially Uzbekistan and Tajikistan (Noori, 2006).

The elites' categorization of 'foreigners' invokes popular concerns about danger and invasion from outside and thereby shapes prioritized aspects of activities and socio-political capacities of the development actors. This is a way in which local and state elites link 'foreigners' to their networks and thus shape the scope and trajectory of their agency. Elites utilize development resources to legitimize their privileges and to maintain their predominance over their opponents. "De Danieli [2010] argues that such international security assistance has the effect of subsidizing the state and allowing the regime to concentrate on its core concern: maintaining its control over society, and its place in the economy, both legal and illegal" (Heathershaw & Herzig 2011: 15). Ishkanian (2006), Stevens (2005) and Noori (2006) observe a similar situation in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan: when development agencies are mainly attractive due to their economic resources and 'nonpolitical' activities. Their social welfare and development programs are reduced to humanitarian aid and technical support "that address the symptoms but not the causes of poverty, social exclusion and social polarization" (Ishkanian, 2006: 379). As has been observed in other countries and contexts (e.g., Bierschenk et al., 2002), therefore, development aid mainly empowers the elites and their local clients and avoids posing a challenge to the existing power structures and relations (Williams, 2004).

2.2. Mahalla-mediated activities and resources for stability

Mahalla maintains the so-called 'state affairs' at local level by means which often contradict statutory codes and institutions. As both a traditional and a modern tool, mahalla employs such enforcement measures as cooptation, military pressure, political discourses and collective references to maintain stability 'on-site'.[3] Otherwise, the state could not provide enough means and resources to ensure stability in the everyday life of the local people. Elites' control of subject people by 'on-site' means compensates for the scarcity of welfare resources and the weakness of the means of the state violence. Noori (2006: 534) also observes this function of mahalla in Uzbekistan. However, the state budget assigns very few resources to achieve the order the state elites demand from the mahalla mediators. The latter are thus expected to extract and to redistribute the local peoples' resources to mitigate and to reduce the risk of public discontent and conflict due, in part, to increasing political and economic inequality. Notably, as scholars have also observed in Uzbekistan (e.g., reviewed in Noori, 2006: 534), the mobilization and redistribution of resources have negative consequences. They enforce existing

---

[3] '*Dar joyash*' (in Tajik) or '*na mestakh*' (in Russian); the mahalla mediators frequently refer to this phrase.

power relations and economic structures that suppress marginalized people in favor of privileged elites.

Below I discuss two main fields the mahalla mediators use in Tajikistan, albeit in a less systematized and legalized manner than in post-Soviet Uzbekistan (Poos, 2011; Noori, 2006; Rasanayagam, 2009). These fields include 1) the reciprocal practices of resource distribution, such as reciprocal practices of families and neighbors, modified reciprocal practices, and external (state and development) schemes and programs, and 2) the 'on-site' means of dispute settlement.
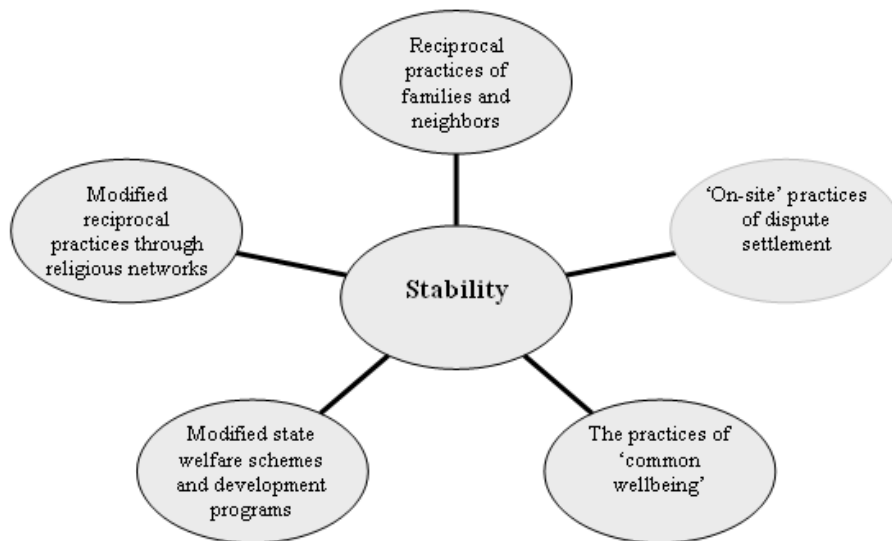
Figure 2. Mahalla-mediated activities and resources for stability

2.2.1. The reciprocal practices of resource distribution

Both the central state and neoliberal agencies (such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund) have stimulated decentralization of the welfare programs of the state and to devolve its functions to the domain of 'civil society', including mahalla, local NGOs and private enterprises. These attempts were seen as weakening the role of the corrupted government structures (Ishkanian, 2006: 366-7, 369). Consequently, the relevant programs (such as World Bank-initiated and Government-run Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper) have been transformed into the elites' tool to sustain socio-political stability by indebting the poor. Kinship and patron-client networks replaced local 'civil-society' groups that the neoliberal agencies expected to see in the development field.

The mahalla mediators enforce the 'ontological' sources which they believe will stabilize the contested political and economic relations. These sources refer to the norms and institutions of reciprocal practices of family and neighborhood networks. In return, these reciprocal practices subjugate juniors and women to their seniors, include the poor into support networks and thus indebt them to the elites and maintain the 'wellbeing' of religious and other important assets. The reciprocal norms and institutions of families and sometimes neighbors maintain shared households, the everyday exchange of basic food, an exchange of labor force (e.g., *hashar*), joint economic activities and enterprises, shared patrimonial properties and resources, patrimonial inheritance, mutual support during economic hardship, privileged public services, parental commitment to children, old-age care (insurance) for parents, support of widowed and disabled family members and redistribution of remittance. Sievers (2002) observes that mahalla in Uzbekistan enforce some of these practices, which he defines as 'insurance mechanisms'. Poos (2011) discusses similar "social securing functions" as the central role of Uzbek mahalla. Notably one should not romanticize these functions of mahalla as a model for a morally committed structuring of a human community. The Tajik mahalla is quite different from what some scholars may assume as "an ideal of mutual aid and communal solidarity among residents" (Rasanayagam, 2009: 103). Rather, mutual aid and communal solidarity are achieved by mediators as selected actions to enforce the political and economic powers of the elites.

In Khatlon Province, including its southern districts, the reciprocal practices are mainly restricted to extended families. The family members support each other during economic hardship and share resources through family ceremonies and agricultural activities. This is first of all due to the structural conditions when not only in the region but also in the whole country "[t]he majority of Tajiks continue to live in large extended families. [...] According to the recent UNDP-World Bank Tajikistan Living Standards Survey (TLSS) [...], two-thirds of the population live in a household with three or more adults and children, and mean household size varies between 5.2 in Dushanbe to 8.3 in Regions of Republican Subordination (RRS), with households averaging 7.0 people in GBAO, 6.1 in Leninabad [Sughd], and 7.7 in Khatlon" (Falkingham, 2000: 15).

My observation shows that the extended family does not reflect the model of moral community, as it rarely involves others in its reciprocal networks. This is both due to distrust of others and due to the indigenous moral norm that stigmatizes reciprocal exchange beyond extended family as an act of 'begging'. A common example is *hashar* (sharing labor force and some material goods) which is practiced exclusively within individual extended families. The inclusive *hashar,* which may involve more than one extended family, is often organized by mahalla mediators.

By reference to future uncertainties, the mediators commit junior family members to reciprocal practices. In the case of Sayyod village, for example, the reference to extended family (*elkheshi*) highlights the moral norm of 'family integrity' ('*oilai ahl*') and 'good brotherhood'. Islamic identity shapes the prayer communities of the reciprocal networks around extended families' mosques (*choykhonas*). *Hashar*, everyday mutual support, public services, mutual support during labor migration and especially support of poor family members are considered as 'family honor' and 'religious debt' of the people. The reference to 'family honor' and 'religious debt' also ostracizes those who deviate from these practices. In part, *khatm* and other (re-)initiation ceremonies commit people to share their resources with other family members or sometimes neighbors.

Especially the increasingly practiced *khatm* in post-Soviet migratory communities is devoted to Tajik migratory laborers in Russia. It reminds them about their family commitment, checks their trustfulness and religious fidelity based on their willingness to redistribute their financial resources through the reciprocal practices. Today, labor migrants invest in the kinship and religious networks of the local people; "[o]ne migrant provides up-keep for between 3 to 10 relatives" (Matveeva, 2009: 17). The contribution of this source is substantial since "each year nearly 10% of the population leaves Tajikistan to seek employment opportunities abroad" and "[r]emittances sent home account for more than a 1/3 of national GDP" (International Organization for Migration, 2011).

The reciprocal practices and networks of extended families and sometimes neighbors cannot cover all marginalized families. No moral norm could commit the elites and their mediators to poor families if the latter would not threaten the socio-political and economic privileges of the former. The mahalla mediators involve marginalized families into modified reciprocal practices and adapted external (state and development) schemes and programs. This measure seeks to ensure the existing order in the face of desperate plight and the increasing discontent of the poor.

For this purpose, the mediators modify such practices as religious taxations (*zakat* and *ushr*) and individual and collective support of the poor (*sadaqa* and *khayriya*). Through these practices they provide support for the poor families, including widowed women without any male adults, poor women without family networks, and orphans and handicapped men. The mediators also use religious circles (*choykhonas*) and ceremonies (such as funerals and holidays) to include the poor in the reciprocal networks of neighborhoods and farms. To share minimal food, clothes

and some cash, the mediators highlight the people's religious commitment through regular religious ceremonies, such as funerals, weddings and holidays. The adopted Law on Tanzim (2007) also serves to modify these indigenous support practices and networks.

The redistribution of external (state and development) support schemes and programs also serves to stabilize the privileged status of the elites. These schemes and programs include the state 'welfare' schemes of pension, poverty allowance, exemption of some families from certain taxes (*lgot*) and the development programs of INGOs. Especially the state support schemes are integrated and interpreted in a way that distinguishes between the elites and subject people. In part, retirement pension, poverty allowance, mahalla fund and the indigenous practice of *sadaqa* serve to categorize and to indebt the 'poor'. In Devdor village, for example, the elites and their mahalla mediators distribute external support schemes and programs in their name and thereby indebt about 60 recipient 'poor' families out of 117 in total.

The state schemes and development programs are mobilized and distributed according to the local practices and "perceptions of what is meant by poverty" (Falkingham, 2000: 85). The Tajik Government (Government of Tajikistan, 2002: 20) and the World Bank (2001, in: Bretton Woods Project, 2002: 3) admit that, in the local context, dealing with poverty is complicated and multi-dimensional and that formal categories of 'vulnerable groups' (such as women, disabled people, orphans and elders) are not applicable. Rather, 'vulnerable groups' or 'the poor' are defined by the political machine based on which families may endanger the favorable position of the elites in the existing socio-political and economic relations and therefore need to be controlled. The support schemes, which involve almost all 'vulnerable groups' (Nygaard et al., 2005: 2), thus serve to stabilize the existing socio-political and economic relations despite the poor's increasing marginalization.

2.2.2. The modified practices of 'common wellbeing'

In both mountainous and cotton-growing rural communities, the practices of 'common wellbeing', such as *hashar*, serve to maintain religious and other valuable assets and thus to improve the political and economic power of the elites. These practices are primarily devoted to the 'wellbeing' of the religious and public assets, such as cemeteries, mosques, shrines, schools, irrigation infrastructure, roads and bridges. The status of the elites depends on the wellbeing of these assets, which shape key political and economic structures.

The central state elites also publicly encourage district governors to learn and follow the 'exemplary experiences' of Shahritus and Mu'minobod districts for which a Spring Seminar was

called.[4] These districts' governors support the mahalla mediators (especially family elders and religious notables) in mobilizing financial resources and labor forces of the local people through the practices of 'common wellbeing'. The mediators reshape the scopes of the indigenous practices of resource mobilization, otherwise practiced mainly within their family or occasionally in neighborhood networks. Thereby they intensively and effectively organized *hashar* in many villages to repair and to construct new buildings for schools, religious assets, roads and bridges, and to clean cotton-related irrigation infrastructure. The resources were mobilized from different sources, including individual households, mosque funds, well-offs, labor migrants, economic enterprises and development organizations.

Through the mediation of local authorities the 'successful' Shahritus government reshaped *hashar* in its cotton-growing villages for cleaning irrigation infrastructure and harvesting cotton. To commit the local people to *hashar,* the mediators, including veterans, pilgrims (*hojis*) and Eshon-i Qabodiyoni,[5] sanctify it by announcing it in religious settings and by personal initiation of the practice. They also enforce the practice of *khayriya* (individual donations mostly during public and holiday prayers) to maintain religious assets and thereby to improve their religious role. Without religious mediation, however, many development programs of 'common wellbeing', such as female-run Village Support Program, JRC entrepreneurship microcrediting, could not achieve their primary goal to promote female leadership and local entrepreneurship. The head of a VO expressed the common experience of the VOs in Shuroobod district in an MSDSP-organized workshop of the heads of VOs by stating that "[i]t is impossible to convince people that their debt to God can be paid off if they give their *zakat* to VOs" (personal observation; Shuroobod district; June 7, 2007). People contribute their *sadaqa* and *khayriya,* which are, in part, cash support of the poor and people who suffered from natural disasters, only if their village and religious boundaries are highlighted vis-à-vis their others, such as the inhabitants of other villages and 'infidels'.

---

[4] First channel of the state TV of Tajikistan; January 6, 2008; 20:00-22:00 Dushanbe time.

[5] Eshon-i Qabodiyoni is the Sufi saint or the most reputable and powerful religious leader of *mahalli* (native) Tajiks, Uzbek tribes and Arabs of Qabodiyon oasis. Only *kuhistoni* ('mountainous') Tajiks, who were relocated to the oasis from mountainous regions of the country during the 1950s by the Soviet government for cotton-growing, do not accept him as their spiritual leader.

2.2.3. The 'on-site' means of dispute settlement

The 'on-site' or indigenous means of dispute settlement are important to maintain stability in the face of the increasing contestation over the unequal distribution of political and economic resources. These 'on-site' means refer to the ontological principles of the local social order which include kinship and religious ties and identities. Stability achieved through these means is the function that historically shaped mahalla throughout Central Asia and still persists at least in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan (see also Idiev, 2006; Noori, 2006; Sievers, 2002; Rasanayagam, 2009; Poos, 2011). The 'on-site' means include such ontological principles as the indigenous norms and practices of 'peace' ('*tinji*'), inclusion/exclusion practices (family and communal ostracism) in/from reciprocal and religious networks and services, religious institutions of marriage and divorce and religious and public institutions of correction and surveillance (village mosque and school).

The mahalla mediators invoke people's kinship and religious commitments to commit them to the contested norms and practices of ontological stability, including hierarchical and differentiated relations. They interpret and thereby neutralize disputes over political status and economic privileges of the elites as 'village secrets' that the 'strangers' should not know. Rasanayagam (2009) observes the similar 'on-site' practices in Uzbekistan when "people's actions are constantly the subject of gossip, judgement and intervention by the mahalla leadership and neighbours" (107). Such intervention also prevents and discredits the disputants' appeals to state court, which have the jurisdiction to hear and settle disputes. The court hearing is interpreted as 'distorted' kinship and religious behavior and as betrayal to other members of kinship and religious communities.

> An old teacher in Qumshokh village was angry with the illegal seizure of his support (*presidenti*) land plot by the mahalla authorities. But at the same time he declared his 'undistorted' intentions, saying "I have never written *ariza* [a complaint letter] against anybody in my lifetime." And this was certainly one central reason that he refrained from making a court appeal (personal interview; Shahritus district; March 22, 2007).

Consequently, in different regions of Tajikistan, including in Shahritus and other districts of Qabodiyon oasis, only a small number of court appeals deal with disputes over property rights in the agricultural sector (Arbitrazh, 2007). The NGO Arbitrazh represents an arbitration court (*sudi hakamavi*; non-state mediation), which consists of both educated lawyers and traditional mediators, including respected elders and religious notables as well as some respected women.

The arbitration courts have been established by DFID (Department for International Development of UK) at nine Legal Advice Centers in nine regional centers of Tajikistan. Their primary goal was to mediate disputes and conflicts related to property rights and in this way to support small enterprises of least favored people (Arbitrazh, 2007). However, according to a representative of the NGO Arbitrazh, so far only 5 per cent of the appeals have dealt with the disputes over important agricultural properties (such as land and small economic enterprises), and less favored disputants are in the minority. Most deals, however, were related to market traders and their creditors in towns (personal interview; Shahritus town; March 13, 2008).

In the cases of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, Collins (2003) and Sievers (2002) explain court avoidance due to 'community solidarity' or 'clan identity' of the subject people. However, the thorough analysis of the Tajik and Uzbek cases show the reason as being distrust in courts and other state institutions (see also Falkingham, 2000; Noori, 2006) and especially in the 'on-site' means of dispute settlement. As Noori clarifies, "Neither state courts nor the local hokimiyat (local government) are [sic] authorized to intervene in disputes involving residents, unless one of the parties obtains written permission from his or her mahalla committee documenting the committee's intervention or attempt at reconciliation" (2006: 538).

Although the Tajik mahalla does not enjoy the same official enforcement that the Uzbek mahalla does, local notables and state elites agree that "the advantage of local self-governance is that the problems are settled 'on-site" [Tajik: *'dar joyash'* as well as Russian: *'na mestakh'*] (personal interview; Shuroobod district; June 13, 2007). The 'on-site' means of dispute settlement are based on the local people's moral norms praising hierarchical relations and collective honor. Both in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, mahalla prevents the residents to seek justice through the court system. "In so doing mahalla committees restrict population's access to public institutions" (Noori, 2006: 539).

The 'on-site' means, especially the 'delegation' of mahalla and state authorities, serve to enforce and protect the core pillars of ontological stability in the local communities. These pillars include, first of all, private properties, family and neighborhood networks and religious practices that enforce these networks, especially sanctions on pre-marriage relations and unauthorized divorce. The delegation consists of family and neighborhood elders, religious notables, mahalla leaders, state *veterans,* Jamoat functionaries, police officers and public judges. Primarily the delegation prevents court appeals of some people to solve their disputes related to the ontological pillars of stability, including family relations and property rights. The state functionaries and mahalla mediators portray these disputes as disloyalty to the moral values of 'village integrity' and 'kinship concession'. Such moral commitment minimizes the use of other means, including state court and military intervention. This measure is devoted to

'peace' (*tinji*) as a morality which mobilizes families, neighbors and village communities for political economy in the cotton sector. Only in a few cases does the delegation give way to 'public' and state courts to punish and stigmatize those who endanger local communities' core pillars of ontological stability.

The delegation functions through kinship and religious practices and institutions. One of the principal tasks is to subjugate the juniors to their family seniors by declaring the deviating behavior disrespect to the seniors. This is also the reason the mediators raise public concern over the increasing number of 'ill-bred' children and adolescents whose fathers are labor out-migrants. The presence of mothers, they assure, is not effective since 'a male awe' (*haybat*) is necessary to frighten juniors. As a measure of public surveillance, the mahalla mediators always ask the juniors about which families and fathers they belong to. Also they support the family-related religious institution of *vasiyat* (the last will of father), which ensures both economic and political subordination of the family juniors to their seniors. *Vasiyat* is practiced just before father dies or more commonly during his old age. To prevent juniors' deviating behavior, the mediators also intervene to marry them off in their 'marriage age' and to reduce divorce cases.

Religious practices, such as feasts, funerals and public (*jamoa*) prayers, especially serve to maintain inner and subjective sense of ontological security. The subject people obey religious mediators of mahalla (mullahs and *eshons*) partly due to their belief about the latter's piety and sacredness and mainly due to their own need for religious services. The religious notables threaten that they will not attend and serve the disloyal people's religious ceremonies, especially their personal funeral prayer. According to common belief, the funeral prayer is necessary to save and perpetuate the dead's soul. Such desire for salvation also makes 'the dead slaves' defer to their religious notables and family seniors who are simultaneously mahalla mediators and delegation members. A common sentiment is that "everyone wants to have a place in the heart of his senior, who is the only person to protect his esteem [during his funeral]" (Personal interview; Shahritus district; March 13, 2008).

This subjective need and desire for protection and salvation shape especially mosques and public schools into institutions of hierarchical enforcement. In part, the sub-residential mosque (*choykhona*) spreads and institutionalizes socially important information and experiences of family elders to young generations. Not only was this function successfully used to propagate the Communist ideology during the Soviets (Idiev, 2006: 100), but the mosque served and serves to reproduce indigenous practices and norms of hierarchical interactions. Today it is also the religious center of separate residential and kinship categories. In a similar way, village

20

schools and teachers serve to propagate moral norms of hierarchical obedience among pupils at an early age. Especially the strict teachers are reputable among the parents, who often view them as easing the burdens of child training (*tarbiya*). In turn, the mahalla authorities raise the reputation of village teachers and turn the public school into the institution of moral and physical punishment.

Some of these 'on-site' means have also been used in other regions of Tajikistan (Idiev, 2006; Matveeva, 2009). Idiev (2006: 62), for example, mentions the role of mahalla in the central region of the country which commits especially the juniors to stabilizing contested hierarchical relations of family members. The local mediation of the disputes thus shapes mahalla as an internal and hidden structure of social cohesion and control, which sometimes impresses observers with its "unconflictual structure of relations between people" (Idiev, 2006: 90). Rather, at least my cases show, the discourse of stability reminds the local people about disruption of kinship and cliental ties, civil war and epidemic diseases, if they do not obey current conditions. In other parts of the world scholars observe similar means, including gathering files on suspicious people, 'internal mahalla exile' or ostracism in Uzbekistan (Noori, 2006; Sievers, 2002) and the measure of 'stalemate' in Indonesian communities (Barron et al., 2004). In all these cases the state authorities and their mahalla mediators prefer neither resolution nor escalation but rather stalemate, that is, neglect and refutation of the complaints of powerless disputants. In Tajikistan the cases of stalemate are even more relevant due to the frequent reference of the elites and their local mediators to the experience of the Civil War in the 1990s.

2.3. The case of mahalla-mediated cotton economy

In the context of the cotton-growing communities, the political body of mahalla represents all kinship and neighborhood networks which in turn shape cotton farms. This representation function of mahalla serves to maintain 'ontological' stability of the cotton 'communities'. The centrality of this function of and concern about such stability is also due to the increasing discontent and contestation over the unequal distribution of land resources allocated for and the economic income generated from the cotton economy. In the cotton-growing sector the elites monopolize most land and other agricultural resources. Powerful and reputable men or women, who at the same time constitute the mediation structure of mahalla, run the farms of their extended families as well as sometimes those of their neighbors, descent or ethnic groups.

The elites privilege and oblige these mediators, such as family or descent group elders and religious notables, to establish and to run the cotton farms. This measure is necessary to elevate

the cotton farms to the sacred status, related to the origins of kinship and Islam. In the early 2000s the kinship and religious nobles were privileged to overcome the 'cotton crisis' or disintegration of cotton farms and the lack of manpower for the intensive but underpaid work in the cotton fields. The farmers' status allows them to effectively mobilize subordinate workers for cotton growing and harvest as their honorable commitment to their families, descent groups or religious communities. These "Soviet-style working units" (Christophe, 2003: 198; Nissen, 2004: 5) are an effective means of maintaining the intensive but underpaid cotton economy. The elites personally visit cotton fields and family ceremonies of their cliental farmers and materially and symbolically reward them during sowing and harvest seasons. As one of them stated, "I am old and suffer from blood pressure. But the district governor came to me on my birthday and asked me to get additional land and promised to register it without any payment and to provide technical facilities" (personal interview; Shahritus district; March 14, 2008).

Notably, there are no clear-cut boundaries between extended families, neighborhoods, descent groups and sometimes ethnic groups. However, the mahalla mediators and the state elites at district and lower levels highlight the relevant local identities to realize these boundaries. This boundary-making practice serves as an immaterial incentive to shape the political economy of the cotton sector, to effectively mobilize the cotton workers. The mediators interpret the cotton farms as symbolic goods of extended families or descent groups. For the same purpose, the religious centers, such as *choykhona,* shape the cotton farms of the sub-village neighborhoods and kinship networks. The mediators organize seasonal and religious ceremonies and food-share rituals during the early sowing season which articulate the distinctive identity of larger neighborhoods (*kucha*) and thereby enforce their cotton-growing 'communities' or farms.

Kinship and religious notions and boundaries also sanctify most effective cotton-growing institutions, such as *agat, norma, mehnat, muomila, muroso* and harvest *hashar*. Invocation of family honor and reference to descent and ethnic identities sustains the institutional practice of *agat* – a unit of area of cotton field assigned to each family. *Agat* system obliges individual households to work a cotton field of a certain size throughout the cotton-growing season (through December to August). The reference to family, *qawm* and religious identities also commits the families to the practice of *norma* (quota) which sets a certain size of the cotton harvest for each family. The collective norm of 'kinship relation' discredits the demands of immediate payment in the form of salary. Thus, the subject workers are paid and served in the forms of reciprocal and patron-client exchanges. *Mehnat* (the payment for labor contribution), *muroso* (reciprocal return) and *muomila* (reciprocal bargain) compensate the intensive and underpaid work in the form of in-kind payment, occasional salary, registration of salary for retirement fund, reciprocal exchanges and patronage favors. The elites also 'ask' for mediation

from family elders, religious notables and state veterans to ensure the intensive cotton growing activities. The mediation interprets the cotton harvest *hashar* as an important attribute of 'village honor' and 'religious debt' of the local people.

> A case from Ayvoj village in Shahritus district illustrates how ontological sources of the local people are used to mobilize them for cotton growing activities. The chairman of Ayvoj collective farm could not find a brigadir for 57 hectares (out of 300 hectares of total land). Then, the chairman of Jamoat*,* the head of mahalla and Eshon-i Qabodiyoni gathered the villagers to select a brigadir. Even the threat of the farm chairman to bring Jamoat police officers and district could not solve the problem: nobody wanted to take over the job. The next day, immediately after the Friday prayer in the village mosque, the authorities discussed the problem with the prayers and negotiated to equally distribute the remaining hectares to every household, according to *norma* system. The negotiation was achieved partly due to equal commitment of all village families to their *norma* and partly due to the pressuring rumor that "Eshon-i Qabodiyoni was offended by disbeliefs [*shakkoki*] of some men" in the previous meeting (personal observation; Shahritus district; April 19-20, 2007).

Imagine, without sanctifying the *norma* and linking it to the sacred sources, the elites and their mahalla mediators could not sustain the cotton sector. Rather, most men of labor force age withdraw from agricultural activities and become labor migrants to Russia, leaving the cotton sector mainly for women and children (see also International Crisis Group, 2005; SOAS, 2010). Hence, the discursive production of especially children's and women's inferior political and economic status is a necessary function of mahalla mediation. The village schools serve to mobilize children for cotton growing and harvest by threatening them with expulsion and by discrediting the disloyal children. The school managers, the local state functionaries and the parents are threatened to lose their jobs or welfare payments if they fail to mobilize the children (SOAS, 2010: 20-21, 29).

The reviving religious discourses and norms interpret the increasing economic and political role of women as 'dangerous' and threatening to the ontological pillars of stability. One such pillar is the loyalty and inferior status of women and juniors in the family hierarchy. Many senior informants expressed their concern that salary makes women and juniors arrogant and alien to their families. They do not always spend their salaries for their households and they can engage in 'dangerous' activities if they have the means for it. Women are not expected to generate and possess economic wealth and resources, which would give them a voice in the economic and political choices of their families. Falkingham (2000: xi) also observes the post-Soviet revival of

Islamic practices and institutions which contribute to the women's withdrawal from political and economic activities.

Instead, cotton-growing activities of women introduce them as loyal and industrious household-keepers. Especially the junior female workers raise their reputation and thus gain their 'luck', i.e. marriage in the proper age, which is another important ontological pillar of stability. Falkingham (2000: 7) observes that the male status is different from the female one. The latter is measured in terms of collectively perceived female functions, especially childbearing and household keeping. My research also reveals that the employment of women in public organizations, such as schools, hospitals and *dehqan* farms, is legitimate when it is interpreted as an extension of 'household work'. Here different local terms (such as *kolkhoz* worker, household-keeper, unemployed and so on) are used to describe the same woman who works for cotton farms. The relevant discourses shape the female image and work in the cotton farms as the family 'face' and as the necessary household-keeping quality of the women. If they do not work for their households, including for the cotton farms, they are publicly dishonored and stigmatized. This also dishonors their men as being suppressed by their women.

As long as women have no actual right to land and other agricultural resources, the situation additionally enslaves them both in 'private' and 'public' life. The state and local elites mediate to contribute female body in the cotton field. This gender aspect of political relations has also been observed in other 'fields' (Nissen, 2004: 6; Falkingham, 2000; for more discussion of the literature see Heathershaw & Herzig, 2011: 13-14). The observation sheds doubt on the assertion (e.g., made by Idiev, 2006: 60) that the cotton sector opens the public sector as a 'field' to improve women's educational and professional status in society.

3.   Concluding remarks

This article has discussed how local people's personal (such as kinship and patron-client) networks shape institutional (reciprocal) practices of their political and economic life. The emphasis has been especially the fact that these networks and the related practices are not stable per se. The contested (re-)distribution of political and economic resources and benefits adds to the overall uncertainty and insecurity. The case of mahalla has thus shown local mediation as one of the central components for stabilizing personal networks. The mahalla mediation is itself very deliberately organized using the structures and authorities of family, religion and state. The effective mediation, first of all, refers to moral norms and collective identities to arouse people's concern for the stability of the existing socio-political and economic order. For this purpose, the key mediators are family elders and religious notables while the state and court functionaries support the institutionalization of the mediation authority of these elders and notables through mahalla.

While the state functionaries occasionally employ violent means, the mediation often highlights threats and dangers. To comprehensively reflect upon this important component of social life, the article has borrowed the concept of 'ontological security'. This is an attempt to link between multiple institutions and identities that individuals accept in different contexts. People trust in and rely on certain personal networks and abstract systems to reduce chaos, uncertainty and insecurity. In the conditions of Tajikistan the state institutions are not competitive with the kinship and patron-client networks especially in meeting individuals' desire for security and welfare. The social relations are thus embedded into these networks, which protect the individuals against 'ontological anxieties.' These structural conditions shape the social world while the human agency adjusts or transforms them if they do not ensure ontological security.

From this angle, people's search for particular identities derives from their feelings and perceptions of security. Their affiliation to multiple identities, the ease with which they switch from one to the other and affective attachment to each of them reflects their need for collective protection from contextual threats, rather than their primordial traits or rationally constructed behavior. People are not solely isolated into certain "identity groups", such as ethnic or religious groups. They also do not differ from each other due to primordial and institutional traits. In contrast to scholars who propose the concepts of 'sotsium', 'clan identity', 'regionalism' and 'communal identity', this paper has shown that people interact through the crosscutting personal (e.g., kinship and patron-client) networks. Collective identities are frequently reinvented to enforce the contested networks based on the strategies of marriage

and patron-clientism. These findings are consistent with other Crossroad Asia research demonstrating that networks structure the social interactions of people irrespective of their institutional and territorial affiliations.

People trust networks which are more effective to secure their life and afterlife. Reciprocity as both 'material aid in emergencies' and moral good is the central condition for the 'trust networks'. People do not trust the state and development institutions due to the short-term, unstable and unpredictable protection they offer in Tajikistan. Instead, mahalla serves to transform these institutions into long-term reciprocal networks which then reduce political and economic uncertainties and threats.

References

Arbitrazh. (2007). *Nakhustkonfronsi millii hakamoni Tojikiston* [The First National Conference of the Arbitration Judges of Tajikistan]. Dushanbe: The Public Fund of the Development of the Arbitration Courts and Advocacy Centers of "Arbitrazh" (in Tajik).

Barron, P., Smith, C. Q., & Woolcock, M. (2004). *Understanding Local Level Conflict in Developing Countries. Theory, Evidence and Implications from Indonesia*. World Bank: Social Development Papers, Conflict Prevention and Reconstruction, Paper No 19. Retrieved from: http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTJUSFORPOOR/Resources/UnderstandingLocalLevelConflictin DevelopingCountries.pdf.

Berger, P. L. & Luckmann, T. (1984 [1967]). *The Social Construction of Reality. A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge.* London: The Penguin Press (Reissued in Pelican Books).

Bierschenk, T. & de Sardan, J.-P. O. (2003). Powers in the Village: Rural Benin Between Democratisation and Decentralisation. *Africa 73* (2): 146-173. Retrieved from: http://liportal.giz.de/fileadmin/user_upload/oeffentlich/Benin/20_geschichte-staat/s2_p_pouvo.pdf.

Bierschenk, T., Chauveau, J.-P. & de Sardan, J.-P. O. (2002). Local Development Brokers in Afrika. The Rise of a New Social Category. *Working Papers* (Johannes Gutenberg Universität, Institut für Ethnologie und Afrikastudien, Department of Anthropology and African Studies): 13: 1-44.

Blackwood, E. (1997). Women, Land, and Labor: Negotiating Clientage and Kinship in a Minangkabau Peasant Community. *Ethnology 36* (4) (Autumn): 277-293.

Boboyorov, H. (2013). *Collective Identities and Patronage Networks in Southern Tajikistan*. Berlin: Lit Verlag.

Bretton Woods Project. (2002). *Building with Science or Encouraging Debate?* Part II World Bank Analysis Determines PRSP Policies. Retrieved from: http://www.brettonwoodsproject.org/art.shtml?x=15847.

Christophe, B. (2003). Bringing Culture Back into a Concept of Rationality: State-Society Relations and Conflict in Post-socialist Transcaucasia. In J. Koehler & C. Zürcher (Eds.), *Potentials of Disorder* (pp. 193-207). Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press.

Collins, K. (2002). Clans, Pacts, and Politics in Central Asia. *Journal of Democracy, 13* (3) (July), 137-152.

Collins, K. (2003). The Political Role of Clans in Central Asia. *Comparative Politics, 35* (2) (January), 171-190.

De Martino, L. (2004). Tajikistan at a Crossroad: Contradictory Forces at the Heart of the Tajik Political System. In L. de Martino (Ed.), *Tajikistan at a Crossroad: The Politics of Decentralization* (pp. 152-159). Geneva: CIMERA Situation Report 4

Falkingham, J. & Baschieri, A. (2005). *Gender and Poverty: How We Can Be Misled by the Unitary Model of Household Resources – the Case of Tajikistan* (Southampton Statistical Sciences Research Institute, Applications and Policy Working Paper A04/21). Retrieved from: http://eprints.soton.ac.uk/13984/1/13984-01.pdf.

Falkingham, J. (2000). *Women and Gender Relations in Tajikistan.* Manilla: Asian Development Bank Country Briefing Paper

Ferguson, J. (1985). The Bovine Mistique: Power, Property and Livestock in Rural Lesotho. *Man (New Series), 20* (4) (December), 647-674.

Freizer, S. (2004). Tajikistan Local Self-Governance: A Potential Bridge between Government and Civil Society? In L. de Martino (Ed.), *Tajikistan at a Crossroad: The Politics of Decentralization* (pp. 17-25)*.* Geneva: CIMERA Situation Report 4.

Giddens, A. (1990). *The Consequences of Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Government of Tajikistan (2002). *Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper* (Resolution No 666 of the Parliament (Majlisi Namoyandagon of Majlisi Oli) of the Republic of Tajikistan about Approval of Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper). Retrieved from: planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/.../Tajikistan/PRSP/Tajikistan%20PRSP%202002.pdf.

Heathershaw, J. & Herzig, E. (2011). Introduction: The Sources of Statehood in Tajikistan. *Central Asian Survey 30* (1), 5-19.

Heathershaw, J. (2007). *Peace as Complex Legitimacy: Politics, Space and Discourse in Tajikistan's Peacebuilding Process, 2000-2005*. London: University of London, School of Economics and Political Science.

Idiev, K. (2006). *Traditsii i novatsii v kontekste izmeneniya obtshestvennoy zhizni sovremennogo Tadzhikistana* [Traditions and Innovations in the Context of Social Change in the Contemporary Tajikistan]. Dushanbe: Irfon (in Russian).

International Crisis Group (2005). The Curse of Cotton: Central Asia's Destructive Monoculture. *Crisis Group Asia Report* 93 (February 28).

International Organization for Migration (2011). *Message from the Chief of Mission*. Retrieved from: http://www.iom.tj/.

Ishkanian, A. (2006). Social Policy and Development in Central Asia and the Caucasus. *Central Asian Survey 25* (4) (December), 373-385.

Kinnvall, C. (2004). Globalization and Religious Nationalism: Self, Identity and the Search for Ontological Security. *Political Psychology 25* (5) (October), 741-767.

Law on Local Self-Governance (2008). Zakon Respubliki Tadzhikistan "Ob organakh obtshestvennoy samodeytel'nosti", № 347 [Law of the Republic of Tajikistan "On Local Self-Governance Authorities", No 347]. Dushanbe (in Russian).

Law on Religion (2009). Qarori Majlisi Namoyandagoni Majlisi Olii Jumhurii Tojikiston "Oid ba qabul namudani Qonuni Jumhurii Tojikiston "Dar borai ozodii vijdon va ittihodiyahoi dini". Akhbori Majlisi Olii Jumhurii Tojikiston, № 3, moddai 1400 [Decree of the Lower Chamber of the Supreme Majlis of the Republic of Tajikistan "On the Adoption of the Law of the Republic of Tajikistan "On the Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations"". News of the Supreme Majlis of the Republic of Tajikistan, No 3, Article 1400]. Dushanbe (in Tajik).

Law on Tanzim (2007). Qonuni Jumhurii Tojikiston "Dar borai tanzimi an'ana va jashnu marosimho dar Jumhurii Tojikiston" [Law of the Republic of Tajikistan "On Re-ordering Traditions, Celebrations and Customs in the Republic of Tajikistan"]. *Jumhuriyat*: *68* (21275) (June 9), 1-3 (in Tajik).

Luong, P. J. (2002). *Institutional Change and Political Continuity in Post-Soviet Central Asia: Power, Perceptions and Pacts.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Malashenko, A. (2000). The Islamic Factor in Relations between Russia and Central Asia. In R. Sagdeev & S. Eisenhower (Eds.), *Islam and Central Asia. An Enduring Legacy or an Evolving Threat?* (155-169). Washington: Center for Political and Strategic Studies.

Matveeva, A. (2009). *External Democracy Promotion in Post-Conflict Zones: Evidence from Case Studies. Tajikistan* Retrieved from: http://www.polsoz.fu-berlin.de/polwiss/forschung/international/frieden/ib/projekte/democracypromotion/index.html.

Michie, B. H. (1981). The Transformation of Agrarian Patron-Client Relations: Illustrations from India. *American Ethnologist 8* (1) (February), 21-40.

Mielke, Katja, Conrad Schetter and Andreas Wilde (2011). Dimensions of Social Order: Empirical Fact, Analytical Framework and Boundary Concept. In: *ZEF Working Paper Series* 78, Bonn University (April); 25 pages.

Mitchell, J. P. (2002). Patrons and Clients. In A. Barnard and J. Spencer (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology* (416-417). London and New York: Routledge.

Nissen, S. W. (2004). Tajikistan's Land Reform Programme: Sowing the Seeds of a Brighter Future. *OSCE Magazine 1* (3) (July), 4-12. Retrieved from: http://www.ppl.nl/ebooks/files/3343_en.pdf.

Noori, N. (2006). Expanding State Authority, Cutting Back Local Services: Decentralization and Its Contradictions in Uzbekistan. *Central Asian Survey 25* (4) (December), 533-549.

Nourzhanov, K. (2005). Saviours of the Nation or Robber Barons? Warlord Politics in Tajikistan. *Central Asian Survey 24* (2), 109-130.

Nygaard, D., Jumakhonov, D. and Hendrickx, K. (2005). *Seizing Opportunities to Promote Development and Improve Food Security in the Mountainous Regions of Central Asia*. Retrieved from: www.akdn.org/publications/2005_akf_mountains_paper1_english.pdf.

Poos, H. (2011). The Local Governance of Social Security in Rural Surkhondarya, Uzbekistan. Post-Soviet Community, State and Social Order. *ZEF Working Paper Series* 87, Bonn University (December), 33 pages.

Radnitz, S. (2005). Networks, Localism and Mobilization in Aksy, Kyrgyzstan. *Central Asian Survey 24* (4), 405-424.

Rasanayagam, J. (2002). Spheres of Communal Participation: Placing the State within Local Modes of Interaction in Rural Uzbekistan. *Central Asian Survey 21*, 55-70.

Rasanayagam, J. (2009). Morality, Self and Power: The Idea of the Mahalla in Uzbekistan. In M. Heintz (Ed.), *The Anthropology of Moralities* (pp. 102-117). Berghahn Books.

Roy, O. (1997). Is the Conflict in Tajikistan a Model for Conflicts Throughout Central Asia? In M.-R. Djalili, F. Grare & Sh. Akiner (Eds.), *Tajikistan: The Trials of Independence*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Roy, O. (1999). Kolkhoz and Civil Society in Central Asia's Independent States. In R. M. Holt & D. C. Waugh (Eds.), *Civil Society in Central Asia*. University of Washington Press.

Roy, O. (2000). *The New Central Asia: the Creation of Nations.* New York: New York University Press.

Sagdeev, R. (2000). Central Asia and Islam: An Overview. In R. Sagdeev & S. Eisenhower (Eds.), *Islam and Central Asia. An Enduring Legacy or an Evolving Threat?* (7-26). Washington: Center for Political and Strategic Studies.

Schetter, C. (2013). Introduction. Schetter, C (ed). *Local Politics in Afghanistan.* New York: Columbia University Press; pp. 1-19.

Sievers, E. W. (2002). Uzbekistan's Mahalla: From Soviet to Absolutist Residential Community Associations. *The Journal of International and Comparative Law at Chicago-Kent 2*, 91-158.

SOAS (2010). *What Has Changed? Progress in Eliminating the Use of Forced Child Labour in the Cotton Harvests of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan*. University of London: Centre for Contemporary Central Asia and the Caucasus, School of Oriental and African Studies (November). Retrieved from: http://www.soas.ac.uk/cccac/centres-publications/file64329.pdf.

Steinberger, P. (2003). 'Fundamentalism' in Central Asia. Reasons, Reality and Prospects. In T. Everett-Heath (Ed.), *Central Asia. Aspects of Transition* (219-243). London and New York: Routledge Curzon.

Stevens, D. (2005). NGO – Mahalla Partnerships: Exploring the Potential for State-Society Synergy in Uzbekistan. *Central Asian Survey 24* (3), 281-296.

Tadjbakhsh, S. (2008). International Peacemaking in Tajikistan and Afghanistan Compared: Lessons Learned and Unlearned. *Les Etudes du CERU. Program for Peace and Human Security, No 143*. Retrieved from: http://www.ceri-sciencespo.com/publica/etude/etude143.pdf.

Tilly, C. (2007). Trust Networks in Transnational Migration. *Sociological Forum 22* (1) (March), 3-24.

Weber, M. (1963). *The Sociology of Religion.* Boston: Beacon Press

Williams, G. (2004). Evaluating Participatory Development: Tyranny, Power and (Re)Politicisation. *Third World Quarterly 25* (3), 557-578.

Information on the competence network Crossroads Asia

The competence network Crossroads Asia derives its name from the geographical area extending from eastern Iran to western China and from the Aral Sea to Northern India. The scholars collaborating in the competence network pursue a novel, 'post-area studies' approach, making thematic figurations and mobility the overarching perspectives of their research in Crossroads Asia. The concept of figuration implies that changes, minor or major, within one element of a constellation always affect the constellation as a whole; the network will test the value of this concept for understanding the complex structures framed by the cultural, political and socio-economic contexts in Crossroads Asia. Mobility is the other key concept for studying Crossroads Asia, which has always been a space of entangled interaction and communication, with human beings, ideas and commodities on the move across and beyond cultural, social and political borders. Figurations and mobility thus form the analytical frame of all three main thematic foci of our research: conflict, migration, and development.

- Five sub-projects in the working group **"Conflict"** will focus upon specific localized conflict-figurations and their relation to structural changes, from the interplay of global politics, the erosion of statehood, and globalization effects from above and below, to local struggles for autonomy, urban-rural dynamics and phenomena of diaspora. To gain a deeper understanding of the rationales and dynamics of conflict in Crossroads Asia, the sub-projects aim to analyze the logics of the genesis and transformation of conflictual figurations, and to investigate autochthonous conceptions of, and modes of dealing with conflicts. Particular attention will be given to the interdependence of conflict(s) and mobility.

- Six sub-projects in the working group **"Migration"** aim to map out trans-local figurations (networks and flows) within Crossroads Asia as well as figurations extending into both neighboring and distant areas (Arabian Peninsula, Russia, Europe, Australia, America). The main research question addresses how basic organizational and functional networks are structured, and how these structures affect what is on the move (people, commodities, ideas etc.). Conceptualizing empirical methods for mapping mobility and complex connectivities in trans-local spaces is a genuine desideratum. The aim of the working group is to refine the method of qualitative network analysis, which includes flows as well as their structures of operation, and to map mobility and explain mobility patterns.

- In the **"Development"**-working group four sub-projects are focusing on the effects of spatial movements (flows) and interwoven networks at the micro level with regard to processes of long-term social change, and with a special focus on locally perceived livelihood opportunities and their potential for implementation. The four sub-projects focus on two fundamental aspects: first, on structural changes in processes of transformation of patterns of allocation and distribution of resources, which are contested both at the household level and between individual and government agents; secondly, on forms of social mobility, which may create new opportunities, but may also cause the persistence of social inequality.

The competence network aims to mediate between the academic study of Crossroads Asia and efforts to meet the high demand for information on this area in politics and the public. Findings of the project will feed back into academic teaching, research outside the limits of the competence network, and public relations efforts. Further information on Crossroads Asia is available at www.crossroads-asia.de.

Publications in the Crossroads Asia Working Paper Series

- Marsden, Magnus (2011): Mobile Life on the Frontiers of Crossroads Asia. In: Crossroads Asia Working Paper Series, No. 1.
- Schetter, Conrad (2012): Translocal Lives. Patterns of Migration in Afghanistan. In: Crossroads Asia Working Paper Series, No. 2.
- Hill, Joe (2012): A Post-Area Studies Approach to the Study of Hill Irrigation across the Alai – Pamir – Karakoram – Himalaya. In: Crossroads Asia Working Paper Series, No. 3.
- Ismailbekova, Aksana (2012): Coping Strategies: Public Avoidance, Migration, and Marriage in the Aftermath of the Osh Conflict, Fergana Valley. In: Crossroads Asia Working Paper Series, No. 4.
- Ibrahimi, Niamatullah (2012): Shift and Drift in Hazara Ethnic Consciousness. The Impact of Conflict and Migration. In: Crossroads Asia Working Paper Series, No. 5.
- Jamali, Hafeez (2013): The Anxiety of Development: Megaprojects and the Politics of Place in Gwadar, Pakistan. In: Crossroads Asia Working Paper Series, No. 6.
- Kreutzmann, Hermann (2013): The Significance of Geopolitical Issues for Internal Development and Intervention in Mountainous Areas of Crossroads Asia. In: Crossroads Asia Working Paper Series, No. 7.
- Tiller, Petra & Hiltrud Herbers (2013): „Der Entwicklungsprozess des Islams in Tadschikistan nach dem Zerfall der Sowjetunion" als Figuration nach Norbert Elias? Eine erste Annäherung. In: Crossroads Asia Working Paper Series, No. 8.
- Behal, Rana (2013): Coolies, Recruiters and Planters: Migration of Indian Labour to the Southeast Asian and Assam Plantations during Colonial Rule. In: Crossroads Asia Working Paper Series, No. 9.
- Wenzel, Christoph (2013): Being a *muhajir* in present-day Afghanistan – Views on flight and migration from inside. In: Crossroads Asia Working Paper Series, No. 10.
- Benz, Andreas (2013): How migrants made their way: The role of pioneering migrants and solidarity networks of the Wakhi of Gojal (Northern Pakistan) in shaping the dynamics of rural-urban migration. In: Crossroads Asia Working Paper Series, No. 11.
- Ismailbekova, Aksana (2013): Migration and patrilineal descent: the effects of spatial male mobility on social female mobility in rural Kyrgyzstan. In: Crossroads Asia Working Paper Series, No. 12.
- Boboyorov, Hafiz (2013): The Ontological Sources of Political Stability and Economy: Mahalla Mediation in the Rural Communities of Southern Tajikistan. In: Crossroads Asia Working Paper Series, No. 13.

Crossroads Asia Concept Papers

- Working Group Conflict (2012): Conflict Research on Crossroads Asia – A Conceptual Approach. In: Crossroads Asia Concept Paper Series, No. 1.

- Working Group Development (2012): Development at the Crossroads. Development Research on Crossroads Asia – a conceptual approach. In: Crossroads Asia Concept Paper Series, No. 2.
- Working Group Migration (2012): Crossroads Asia through the Lens of Mobility and Migration: A Conceptual Approach. In: Crossroads Asia Concept Paper Series, No. 3.