PC-AAB-05

CONTROLLING CONFLICT IN CENTRAL ASIA

What we now know as the sovereign territories of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan were created by Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin in the 1920s to divide and conquer the Central Asian peoples. The artificial boundaries separated communities, created ethnic enclaves, and disrupted patterns of trade and movement. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, these unnatural dividing lines became international borders. To compound the tension, Uzbekistan, which is bordered by the other four Central Asian republics and Afghanistan, has militarized its borders in an attempt to combat the threats of terrorism, drug smuggling and illegal immigration.

Though the republics have a combined population of 55 million, a land mass larger than Western Europe and a significant share of the world's oil and gas reserves, the people of Central Asia face a precipitous loss of socioeconomic security for all but the new elites. Competition between ethnic groups, artificial boundaries, poorly managed natural resources, and the conflict between Islamic fundamentalism and repressive secular governments are endemic problems. When this is coupled with an inability to express frustration through peaceful political channels, citizens' alienation and grievances can easily erupt in the form of violent conflict, as has happened repeatedly over the past decade.

PEACE AND STABILITY ARE FRAGILE AND YET ESSENTIAL TO ANCHOR A PROCESS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN CENTRAL ASIA. SO, FOR USAID, BUILDING CIVIL SOCIETY IS A PRIORITY.

BY BARBARA JUNISBAI

Because many conflicts in Central Asia have arisen at the local — rather than international — level and because USAID's ability to change structural factors at the national level is limited, the agency has adopted a strategy to mitigate conflict that focuses on giving citizens opportunities to participate in decisions that affect their communities and improve their living standards. This strategy cuts across the agency's four core objectives in the areas of economic development, democratization, health care and natural resources management.

Nurturing Civil Society

The majority of people in Central Asia, particularly those outside of large cities, believe that they are powerless over the issues that affect their lives. By increasing citizen participation in community decision-making and promoting cooperation within and between communities, between NGOs and local governments, and between citizens and their local government representatives, USAID/CAR is helping communities identify, prioritize and solve their own problems, problems that often lead to conflict, building on traditional models of self-help already existing in the local culture. Here are some of the program's success stories.

Bridging Cross-Border Villages. The Ferghana Valley in eastern Uzbekistan is especially notorious for Soviet-drawn borders that cut through villages and communities of surrounding Kyrgyzstan. There, in Batken Province, Kyrgyzstan, two villages are bisected by a slice of Uzbekistan's territory. The Uzbek government closed the border in 1999, stringing barbed wire and imposing cross-border tolls and taxes on goods where none existed before, making life extremely difficult for the Kyrgyz villagers separated by the now strictly enforced border. Lines of communication and trade were sundered, families divided, and children in one village were prohibited by armed border guards and barbed wire from crossing through Uzbek territory to go to their school in the other Kyrgyz village.

To come to a solution, USAID-funded Counterpart Consortium worked with a local NGO and the local communities to conduct an intensive, participatory needs-assessment. Residents of the two Kyrgyz villages identified the lack of access to each other as their main problem and, on their own initiative, planned a solution and identified local resources to implement it.

Apart from the impossible border crossing, the only way to connect the two Kyrgyz villages was to traverse a small river. Residents determined to build a bridge using local labor and material. No grant was requested, and none was given, and the bridge was completed in fall 2001.

With this small act, local residents have significantly lowered cross-border tensions between the Uzbek and Kyrgyz sides. Confrontations between irate Kyrgyz citizens and Uzbek border guards have dropped dramatically. At the same time, the two Kyrgyz villages' joint effort has proven to themselves that there is much to be gained by cooperating with one another.

Reducing Interethnic Tensions over Water. The village of Dusti (Friendship), a community of 1,500 people in the Sughd province of Tajikistan, uses water from Kyrgyzstan for irrigation. The same water supply is also used by farmers from the Kyrgyz village of Arka, located just across the border in Kyrgyzstan. Because the Kyrgyz villagers use this water to irrigate their land, they often block the channel to divert the water. As a result, farmers from Dusti do not receive enough water for their own irrigation needs.

With the assistance of Counterpart Consortium and a local NGO, Ittifok (Unity), Dusti community members developed a Community Action Plan in November 2001 to build 1,300 meters of underground pipeline from the main channel. However, the villagers from Arka opposed allowing Tajiks to lay pipeline through their territory. Leaders from Arka were invited to participate in a roundtable conducted by Ittifok, and, after discussing the situation, they signed an agreement permitting the pipeline. In return, the Tajik villagers agreed to repair a drain system located in Kyrgyz territory but used by both communities. Both groups also agreed to resolve future conflicts through negotiation and roundtable discussions. The pipeline was completed in January 2002.

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Solving Local Environmental Problems. The ARMON Women's Center for Environmental Law, in partnership with the USAID-funded American Bar Association/Central and East European Law Initiative, established the Environmental Public Advocacy Center in Uzbekistan in February 2001. Staffed by local lawyers and environmentalists, EPAC educates citizens on their environmental rights under both Uzbek and international law and helps them identify and address local environmental concerns. It also holds environmental public advocacy workshops, assists the public in resolving local environmental issues, and provides free legal advice to citizens and NGOs.

Recently EPAC assisted a group of citizens from Brichmulla, a town 150 kilometers from Tashkent and the site of Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan incursions in mid-2000, with a project to plant safflower seeds in 50 hectares of exposed land along the Chervok Water Reserve. After finally obtaining approval from the local mayor, the citizen group purchased seeds and planted 10 hectares of land as a pilot project. The project will prevent further erosion from dust storms that currently plague the area and will employ up to 40 local citizens. EPAC is helping the group register as an NGO and seek funds to purchase equipment.

EPAC's efforts demonstrate both the public's substantial need for legal and technical assistance to resolve local problems and the success of environmental advocacy as a tool to promote public participation and democratic practices in Uzbekistan.

Investing in a Community's Response to Drought. On July 25, 2001, U.S. Ambassador Herbst and Esnazar Usenov, executive director of Atamakan, a non-governmental charitable organization, signed an agreement providing $25,000 to fund a potable water supply improvement project for residents of the Karakalpakstan community of Khalkabad. Khalkabad has suffered from a two-year drought that affected all of Karakalpakstan. This funding was provided by USAID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance in response to the government of Uzbekistan's request for emergency relief.

Atamakan, with the assistance of local communities, the city hokimiat (city mayor's office) and local organizations, drilled 70 wells and installed hand-operated pumps. From the outset, Atamakan closely collaborated with mahallas (local communities or neighborhoods), the city hokimiat, and local organizations to plan the project. Executive Director Usenov, with the support of the local hokim and

mahalla representatives, organized participation of all residents in determining the location of the hand pumps. Representatives from more than 1,700 families actively participated in the preparatory phase. They selected 50 three- to five-person groups to monitor all work related to drilling wells and installing hand pumps. Atamakan contracted with local producers and construction firms for the actual drilling and installation. For example, 70 hand pumps were manufactured at the cotton-processing plant located in Khalkabad, using its idle machine shop and employees.

The majority of people in Central Asia believe that they are powerless over the issues that affect their lives, even at the local level.

This project was followed closely by the Karakalpakstan public and received considerable attention from the local mass media. As a direct result of the project, nearly 10,500 residents of Khalkabad now have reliable access to potable water. One resident noted, "It is a great support for our families. Now we have a reliable source of water. It gives us a confidence in the future."

A striking by-product of this process is that Atamakan received more than 20 proposals from mahallas and the city mayor's office for assistance in resolving different social and economic problems.

Opening up a Dialogue with Public Hearings. Leninogorsk, a city with a population of 53,000, is located in eastern Kazakhstan near the Russian border. After participating in a USAID-sponsored study tour of Poland on decentralization reforms organized by the International City Managers Association, Ms. Galina Tischenko, secretary of Leninogorsk's maslikhat (city council), convened the city's first public hearings. These provided an opportunity for residents to discuss energy rate hikes, one of the most hotly debated issues in Kazakhstan.

To prepare for the hearings, Ms. Tischenko invited ICMA trainers to conduct a special seminar instructing official participants — city council deputies, the Anti-Monopoly Committee's regional representatives and city government specialists — on conducting public hearings. The trainer was the Pavlodar city council secretary, Sansyzbai Akimbekov, an experienced local government practitioner. Ms. Tischenko chaired the hearings and kept the audience focused on the topic. Local energy providers, Anti-Monopoly Committee specialists and the mayor all openly discussed the issue with the audience.

As a result of the public hearings, energy providers agreed not to increase utility rates, and residents' confidence in their elected officials was strengthened. Community members saw that they could play a role. Even the mayor agreed that the public must be informed about and participate in the decision-making process.

Strengthening Local Government Independence.

USAID Goes Back to Basics in Central Asia

Since 1992 U.S. assistance [to the Central Asian republics] has totaled more than $1.7 billion, including $650 million in USAID assistance. The expected results of USAID's programs, based on the Eastern European model of rapid [structural] transition [to open market democracy], were too ambitious for the political and economic realities of the region. Some expectations about the pace of change possible in Central Asia were naïve and unrealistic.

With the benefit of experience and greater realism, USAID's new assistance strategy shifts focus and emphasis. The most important change is the increased emphasis on individuals, communities and the institutions that nurture and serve them. ...

The new strategy is more realistic about what is possible and what is required to bring about change. It is more selective about the assistance provided to each country, less centered on technical practice and more devoted to improving public knowledge and changing attitudes and values. And finally, the new strategy emphasizes a longer-term perspective: stressing fundamentals; focusing on basic sociopolitical issues; and designing ways to build relationships and partnerships between these new nations, their citizens and the world community. The need to build a constituency for reform across the board, in health, democracy and enterprise development programs, is fundamental.

These broad changes ... stem from the hard lessons learned from eight years of development experience in the region...

Excerpted from USAID's Assistance Strategy for Central Asia 2001-2005, issued by the USAID Regional Mission for Central Asia, July 2000.

Officials at the city level have created the Kyrgyz Republic's first independent local government association, the Association of Cities. USAID's implementing partner, the Urban Institute, facilitated the establishment of the association in late 2000, and has worked with the group to develop it as a real member-based organization independent of the national government. The association provides information to its constituents and advocates local governments' interests through participation in government committees, law drafting, publications, televised interviews, research, and briefings by governmental officials.

The Kyrgyz Republic has a strong tradition of hierarchical, centralized rule in which all levels of government are subordinate parts of one apparatus. As a result, local governments lack meaningful experience in lobbying for their own interests.

Thanks to energetic interventions from several mayors who recognize the value of a separate, independent association, attempts to sweep the association into a larger grouping headed by national officials were rebuffed. Mayors and council chairpersons mandated that the association actively solicit comments from city governments on upcoming local finance legislation and advocate their interests. To secure its independence, the Assembly of the Association of Cities formally voted on a membership dues structure of 30 tyin (about half a cent) per person per year, which should yield roughly $6,000 in dues annually. Membership dues make the Association of Cities one of a very few NGOs in the Kyrgyz Republic to be able to support itself with funding sources outside of donor grants.

As these examples show, the participatory approach is proving to be the crucial instrument of empowering people, enabling them to believe in their own strengths in solving local problems. People in towns and cities throughout the region have commented that they had been waiting for someone else to solve their problems, never imagining that they could come together as a community to analyze and tackle them successfully on their own. USAID/CAR's contribution to these efforts is like a small pebble striking water: the ripple effect extends beyond our original reach. ■

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