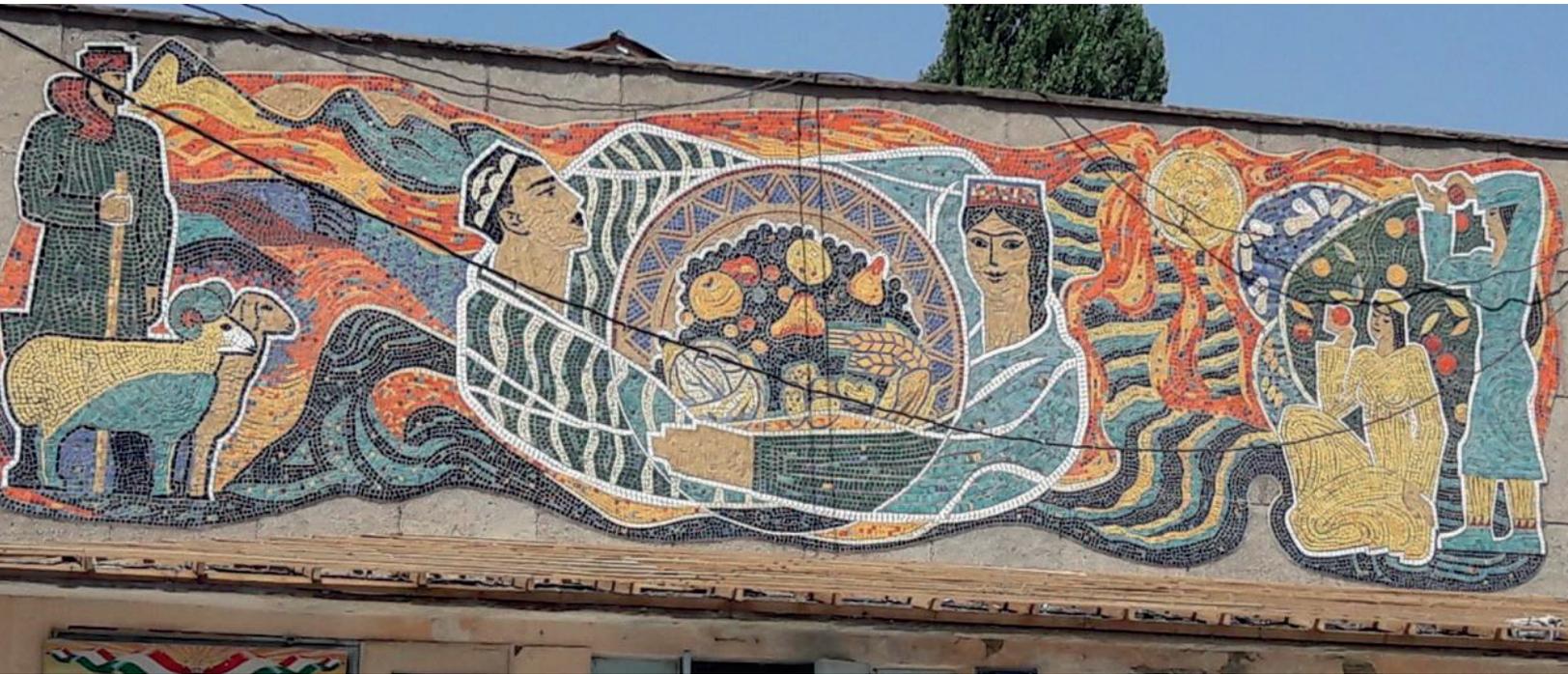




MSRI Brief

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Lessons learned from interventions in areas of medium and high intensity conflicts: A case study of Vorukh (Tajikistan) and Ak-Sai (Kyrgyzstan)

Policy issue:

Territorial disputes between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan were aggravated after the countries gained independence in 1991. However, hotbeds of tension, accompanied by violence, already existed during the Soviet period. The so-called Isfara events of 1989 were the first documented large-scale violent confrontation between the Vorukh and Ak-Sai communities, and led to the introduction of a curfew in the Isfara river valley which was divided between the Isfara district of the Tajik SSR and the Batken district of the Kyrgyz SSR¹. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, territorial disputes were aggravated by new offenses and unfulfilled obligations from both sides. The conflict between the Vorukh and Ak-Sai communities is complex and multifaceted. At first glance, it is a struggle for land and water,

¹ Information about earlier conflicts of 1975, 1979 remains unpublished.

FINDINGS:

- Although project interventions of international organizations are effectively addressing challenges faced by border communities - such as increased access to water, introduction of new farming technologies and improved natural resource management - they may also influence and alter the local power structures, provoking tensions and causing new confrontations. When implementing infrastructure projects, it is therefore critically important to verify official understandings on both sides of the border potentially affected by planned interventions.
- The highly dynamic state of conflict in border areas requires the use of adaptive management mechanisms in the implementation of cross-border projects. Both

but it is also a result of long-term disillusionment with government actions, the militarization of border areas, lack of access to justice, corruption, and the marginalization of local communities during border negotiations.

Territorial disputes and the construction of bypass roads transformed the space in question into a puzzle of contradictions. Bypass roads, the construction of which began since independence, are considered a tool aimed at changing the balance of power and distribution of resources in the region, and a driver of tensions. In the eyes of the Ak-Sai and Vorukh communities, the fear of remaining isolated justifies infrastructural interventions in the form of bypass roads. However, despite their engagement and support, the communities themselves have, over time, become hostages of these projects. As the dynamics of the conflict has shown, each attempt to start or continue the construction of bypass roads causes open confrontation between neighbors and leads to new casualties on both sides.

The border area is characterized by a network of shared water, roads and trade infrastructure. In a situation of conflict escalation, both parties use various methods to block the shared infrastructures and boycott any forms of interaction. Thus, the very existence of joint infrastructure along with the sharing of natural resources - water and pastures - has been increasingly regarded as a source of conflict.

People living in Vorukh and Ak-Sai are increasingly frustrated and impacted by the growing distrust and permanent conflict. For 20 years, the governments of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have been conducting rather sluggish negotiations, and despite the periodic meetings of the parity commissions, there has been no qualitative shift in the border delimitation and demarcation process. Negotiations at the level of state bodies are seen by the residents of Vorukh and Ak-Sai as being elitist, and in fact do not take into account the opinions of local people. Hence, locals of Vorukh and Ak-Sai do not trust the negotiation process and perceive the decisions of the authorities as contradictory to the interests of the communities.

Project interventions aimed at peacebuilding, support for women, improving water and trade infrastructure, developing income-generating activities, improving natural resource management and others are being implemented by international organizations within the study area. This policy brief summarizes the

parties are represented by a variety of interest groups, so project development should be carried out keeping in mind how support or the loss of support of various interest groups will impact the project.

- Understanding the communication system between different levels of decision-making in both countries is an important tool for moving forward successfully. Maintaining continuous communication with decision-makers and institutions at vertical level (local, district, oblast or national) and horizontal level (civil society, opinion leaders) can significantly advance resolution of issues in districts or territories with uncertain legal status.
- Tools for the mitigation of existing conflicts in the form of peacebuilding initiatives such as friendship festivals, youth and women's conflict prevention groups are inefficient in the situation of Vorukh and Ak-Sai, since the discourse around cooperation and interaction has been marginalized leading to the rejection of any cooperative activities. It is necessary to re-think applicability of the peacebuilding concept to the situation in Vorukh and Ak-Sai, since tensions in this zone are associated with infrastructural interventions undertaken by the authorities, through which local communities suffer. In this regard, the emphasis of project interventions should be made at the level of local government and state structures, rather than focused on mitigating local-level conflicts between communities who suffer the effect of these state infrastructures.
- Despite permanent conflicts in the area, data, knowledge and/or information exchange and project coordination between various organizations remains weak. Open and systematic discussion of lessons learned would significantly improve the planning of cross-border programs.

findings and presents an analysis of experiences of cross-border project interventions and offers recommendations for initiatives for the future. This policy brief is based on data collected between 2016-2019 through participant observation at events organized by international organizations, in-depth interviews with employees of international organizations, and participation in round tables in the framework of projects by various international organizations in the study area.

Experience from project interventions:

When implementing projects in a cross-border area, organizations have faced the problem of ambivalence around interventions, where the obvious benefits for one party can cause unintentional damage to the other party

neither addressed acute environmental stress issues in the Isfara River Valley. At the same time, the Council provided a platform for communication between water management organizations, which, occurring during a boycott of relations, is a valuable mechanism for delicately maintaining cooperation.

There is a growing concern about the lack of informal dialogue at the grassroots level that could help build a broader social consensus for supporting cooperation when relations are strained politically. In this regard, interventions aimed at using methods of people's diplomacy (e.g. meetings between community leaders), creating and supporting youth and women's conflict prevention groups, and joint cultural festivals which has a long history of implementation in the area, are not able to fill the lack of dialogue. The violent conflicts in 2018 and 2019 show that the peacebuilding approach should be reconsidered, and local governments should be the focus of the dialogue building efforts.

Organizations implementing cross-border projects have faced the problem of data exchange and lack of coordination of interventions in the Batken region. A coordinating council of investors and donors under the plenipotentiary representative of the government in Batken does exist, however, its activities are not systematic and the structure is unable to analyze the situation sufficiently to coordinate interventions. The Council does not conduct an analysis of project interventions at the district level or more broadly at the regional level. The Council serves more as a platform for informing officials about new projects

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Achieving political border agreements will take time. Therefore, it is critical to continue the work at the level of local authorities to ensure a basic dialogue and legal basis. Strengthening local authorities could help ease some tensions and build confidence at the national level during the negotiation process.
- Residents of Vorukh and Ak-Sai do not trust the current negotiation process occurring at the national level. In this context, more inclusive and multi-level negotiation practices are needed, and it is necessary to build a sense of local involvement and ownership of process and agreements achieved.
- It is very important for international organizations to apply adaptive management when implementing cross-border projects. The situation in Vorukh and Ak-Sai is extremely dynamic. In this context, it is difficult to expect consistency in the commitments made by the parties. It is necessary to be prepared for providing patient mediation between the major interest groups.
- It is important to review the work of the Donors Coordination Council under the Batken Oblast Administration; mechanisms for coordinating current project interventions and planning for future ones should be put on the agenda. It seems expedient to initiate joint meetings with the coordinating council of the Sughd region when launching cross-border projects.

and, to a lesser extent, as a tool for feedback on existing programs or gathering lessons learned from completed programs and projects.

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Cover photo: A mosaic on the cinema building in Vorukh village, Tajikistan, built during the Soviet period, residents of Ak-Sai and other nearby villages would come here to watch Indian movies in Soviet time. Photo credit: Asel Murzakulova.

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