

INDIGENOUS DIMENSIONS OF “CIVIL SOCIETY” IN KYRGYZSTAN— PERSPECTIVES FROM THE MARGINS

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Introduction

This is the first study to address an ongoing gap in current literature on informal patterns of associational self-organization and assertion in peripheral communities of Kyrgyzstan. The study looks at pertinent perspectives and reflections on the meaning of “civil society” in Kyrgyzstan. It raises a crucial policy-tied point that the externally imported concept of “civil society” can have sweepingly different meanings and manifestations in local context. The key corollary of the overall argumentation is that a “standard” donor approach to the phenomenon of “civil society” and the applicability of the term, in its loose meaning, to indigenous environment of patrimonial polities is, in fact, myopic.

In this vein, the following argument made by Roy is not supported by current evidence and field perspectives on traditional forms of self-assertion in Kyrgyzstan: “In the conceptualization based on Western ideas of political and economic freedom (free elections, free markets), “civil society” has to be created from scratch in Central Asia. This is either because there is nothing of value today upon which to build (the entire Soviet legacy being cast as negative)—or because there is no such thing as a traditional society in Central Asia, owing to the onslaught of the Soviet system on previous social structures.”¹

¹ O. Roy, in: *Civil Society in Central Asia*, ed. by M.H. Ruffin and D. Waugh, Center for Civil Society International, U.S., 1999.

Further, the study attempts to unravel complex underpinnings of Kyrgyzstan’s diverse society and communitarianism through exploring the tribal, clan and kinship affiliations as well as community level powerhouses (“*Jama’ats*”), which constitute the informal backbone of individual, social and political behavior in Kyrgyzstan.

Until comparatively recently, of all the Central Asian states, Kyrgyzstan has been the most willing to follow a clear pro-Western political and economic course, including commitment to the development of democracy and open society. However, during last several years then ruling regime started to show the increasing signs of autocratic propensities severely limiting political liberties and civic rights at home.

Gradual backtracking of democratic policies found its expression in direct state interference in the parliamentary election of 2004 widely recognized as rigged and non-democratic. In the same vein, persecution of dissenting politicians and shut-downs of opposition press outlets culminated in political violence and notorious killings of demonstrators in Southern Kyrgyzstan in 2002.

With the backdrop of growing economic morass, endemic corruption and crisis of governance, a severe power struggles between competing tribal elites has only worked to worsen domestic situation. The State as an institution of provision, protection and guarantee has proved unable to perform its functions and secure a politico-eco-

conomic stability. Admittedly, the State has totally failed to exercise its key role in local context of clan-based *corporativism*, that is to arbiter between influential regional clans and keep a power *status-quo* intact.

So-called “*Civil Society*” failed to exercise its classical Western mission, which is to protect wider citizenry from encroaching intrusion of the State into private and public domains of life. Moreover, it has found itself essentially compromised to build a well-oiled channel of articulation, dialog and negotiation between the State and populace at large. Civil unrest and killings of popular demonstrators in Southern Kyrgyzstan in 2002 have entirely demonstrated an evident policy failure of donors committed to “*civil society strengthening*”—overfunded, top-down and core-based civic groups failed to create effective bridge-building between protestors and local authorities. Thus, national “*Civil Society*” groups claiming to have a mandate from wider spectrum of citizens, in fact, has failed to make that mandate workable, that is to serve as a buttress against expanding State.

The concept of civil society has been hijacked and skillfully manipulated by essentially clan-based dichotomies during recent political upheavals in Kyrgyzstan. Revolution in Kyrgyzstan has produced one obvious indication—*behind-the scene* clan-based antagonism has gained a prominent visibility making the conflict an explicit cause of national implication. Skillfully coupled with democratic rhetoric, Southern clans have managed to mobilize civic groups, thus assuming a politically motivated oppositional stance. Crisis of clan politics has informed a genuine drive for political change and came from upstream clan domains and not from “*Civil Society*”.

The latter, mainly youth groups, played a certain whistleblowing part aftermath the marred parliamentary election though have come to be manipulated and used as a civic standpoint by those regional groups intent on destabilizing political situation and capturing power. Ethno-regional clans have emerged to claim stakes in local and national public arena. The homegrown actors now await to be included in Kyrgyz civil society lexicon and definitions making the concept more closer to local specifics of Kyrgyzstan.

If to look at the phenomenon via local semi-feudal and patriarchal perspective, one will see hurried attempts of foreign paymasters and policymakers to indoctrinate external values and ideas of associational organizing into Kyrgyz context. Recent uprising and ongoing uncertainty have clearly shown a degree to which Kyrgyz perceptions of civic virtues and ideals are sweepingly departed from those of Western ones. Artificial pressure on trajectory of societal evolution in non-Western communities with deeply-seated collective philosophy is counterproductive.

Particularly, conferring a rightful status of a “*Civil Society*” to urban-based instrumental associations and NGOs with no outreach to the poorest in the peripheral fields is a parochial approach. “*Civil Society*” debates have come to be intermingled with organizational debates, by-passing viable importance of local environment in which indigenous organizational forms are emerging and functioning. Arguably, locally rooted forms of social organization and self-assertion such as “*Jama 'ats*,” tribal clan loyalties, age-based rural councils and Islamic networks are felt to enjoy better capacities to improve enabling environment and rural livelihoods.

Among those local self-improvement groups are voluminous informally rooted networks holding more authority and social status with local communities. Namely, those are extended households, tribal clans, ethnic identities, old-age, patronage and Mosque webs. Little is known about these unique and locally rooted organizational forms as well as their impact on local development. Thus, the study seeks to inform and feed into current field policy discourse via investigating *jama 'ats* and other self-improvement community networks as potential catalysts of social mobilization, grassroots resources and policy change on local level.

Overall, the paper deals with the concept of “*civil society*” and the ways it is understood and misinterpreted on the ground and attempts to figure a way out of conceptual maze and facile perceptions.

The subsequent points attempt to highlight a crucial role and social impact on locally generated development discourses exercised by community-based initiative making groups, such as *Jama 'ats*.

How the Concept of “Civil Society” is Perceived or Misperceived in Local Context

The Western backed concept of “*civil society*” in Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia has found its expression in a wide array of projects and organizational forms with democratization, poverty reduction and civic empowerment as core policy goals. While certain progress was achieved in building capacities for more open society, civil or not, policy discourse and agenda on “*civil society strengthening*” in Kyrgyzstan have come under excessive ideological influence and biased Western interpretations of what is known as “*civil society*.”

Extensive donor reliance on highly formalized, pro-status and English-speaking urban-based groups gave rise to exclusivist and elitist proclivities resultant in “*bad practice*” and favoritism known as “*mirror effect*.” According to Howell,² “In Central Asia the donor agenda has tended to support environmental, human rights and democracy groups, most of which are located in capital cities. As donors find it easier to deal with professional leaders and representative, which command English and Russian and are at ease with Western Europeans and North Americans, they implicitly reinforce elitist tendency of civil society.” Writing up formal reports on the part of the groups is normally accorded a higher priority rather than gauging social impact of the projects in the field and reaching out the poorest.

The long-term and negative impact of this policy is now becoming increasingly apparent in rural Kyrgyzstan and in the region—growing center-periphery divide, dearth of sustainable grassroots constituencies, cash stress, weak networking, powerlessness, shrinking responsibility, legitimacy and accountability.

Thus, the core problem with donor-driven thinking lies in its inability to acknowledge that creation of numerous formal institutions on the ground does not necessarily lead to straightforward causality with democracy building and vice versa. “Late twentieth-century societies, governments, and parties have embraced the rhetoric of civil society and have claimed they stand for genuine, popular democracy. Yet, both in historical and contemporary terms, this identification is more conceptual than factual.”³

Conversely, indigenously self-regulated community organizations, patrimonial relationships, tribal loyalties, power struggles at micro-level, informal networks, clan hierarchies and faith-based institutions are largely ignored and not acknowledged as “*civil*” actors on the grounds that they do not interact directly with the State and instead operate within unofficial realm.

“No other form of “civil society” organizations gets a look in. Skewed in favor of legally-registered NGOs, civil society strengthening in Central Asia, like so many other parts of the world, is partial and lob-sided.”⁴ In the same vein, Fowler notes that “to willfully ignore the informal structure of action outside of the state is to deny the very essence of how many societies function and how people survive, collaborate and assert themselves.”⁵

² J. Howell, “Making Civil Society from the Outside—Challenges for Donors,” *European Journal of Development Research*, No. 12/1, 2000, pp. 3-22.

³ L. Roniger, “Civil Society, Patronage and Democracy,” *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, Vol. 35, No. 3/4, Sep.-Dec. 1994.

⁴ S. Heap, *Civil Society and External Donors in Central Asia. Paper presented at “The Geopolitical and Economic Transitions in Eurasia—International Conference,”* Fatih University, Istanbul, Turkey, 2001.

⁵ A. Fowler, “Strengthening Civil Society in Transition Economies,” in: *NGOs, Civil Society and the State: Building Democracy in Transitional Countries*, ed. by Clayton, INTRAC, Oxford, 1996.

Arguably, this type of approach has impeded the growth of a vibrant and inclusive “*civil society*” in Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia relegating huge parts of non-formal spaces, organizations, practices and values to the back stage. Grassroots reality demonstrates that this is indigenous and “*underground*” institutional framework based on religion, age, solidarity and patronage affinities, which exercises much stronger local legitimacy, authority and wider popular representation.

“More than a decade after independence, democratic reform has made little progress,” argues Lambert⁶ in a survey on Central Asian democratic performance. Similarly, Starr indicates that “...five new states of Central Asia are not fertile soil for the implantation of voluntary associations nor for the growth of civil society.”⁷

Further overlooking inherently existing cultural paradigms and indigenous dimensions of civic expression will be counterproductive to social and political transformation and development process in Kyrgyzstan. In this regard, Roper-Renshaw from Oxfam, for example, warns that “because development is so complex, an organizing concept like civil society is very appealing... However, oversimplifications lead to distortions, poor analysis and poor outcomes.”⁸

Indeed, highly complex traditional idioms, cultural idiosyncrasies and informal practices on the ground give an ample reason to believe that there is more to “*civil society*” in Kyrgyzstan rather than visible sorts of NGOs and other formalized and occupational groups.

“*Window dressing*” reforms and policies in “*democracy building*” programs reinforce a need to revisit early experience and rethink newer concepts of a society based on indigenous and self-regulated values, philosophies and perceptions.

There exists an urgent need to inquire into “*neo-traditional*” and “*archaic*” patterns of associational life in Kyrgyzstan that neatly combines with local collective thinking. Critically, ongoing analysis needs to accommodate a *household-based family, kinship and clan* as entry points in building a workable theoretical base of Kyrgyz “*civil society*”, if we are to advance current understanding of the phenomenon on the ground.

Having identified ongoing perspectives of “*civil society*” as a problem, I will now demonstrate a complex organizational context of the phenomenon and its impact on associational organizing at grassroots level: “We need to look at the indigenous experience and not to Eurocentric models of social change.”⁹

Jama'ats (self-mobilization networks)

As Western concept of “*civil society*,” in its instrumental meaning, has a very limited relevance to patriarchal societies of Kyrgyzstan, one can look for a better-functioning local one. In fact, there are voluminous community-based institutions, functions and relationships evolving out of a traditional social fabric of a society though lacking formal registration. Within rural setting much of the associational life stems from an extended household, the kinship and clan affiliations.

⁶ C. Lambert, “At the Crossroads. A Survey of Central Asia,” *The Economist*, 26 July, 2003.

⁷ S.F. Starr, in: *Civil Society in Central Asia*, ed. by M.H. Ruffin and D. Waugh, Center for Civil Society International, U.S., 1999.

⁸ R.L. Roper, Strengthening Civil Society: the Role of NGOs, *Journal of SID*, No. 4, 1994.

⁹ M. Kaufman, *Community Power and Grassroots Democracy*, International Development Research Center, Zed Books, Ottawa, Canada, 1997.

Associational forms of self-organization and interaction are diverse and happen outside of formal structures providing an important social environment. These occur in a form of routine socializing on a household level, festivities and rituals mixed with Islamic hermeneutics and semi-pagan beliefs, wedding ceremonies with complex procedures and kin get-togethers. Individual communication and networks are especially rooted in such informal social activities as collective praying, conciliation meetings, funerals, regular village meetings and tea-drinking ceremonies of the aged. Based on kin particularities, social bonds and self-regulatory activities are implemented under the cover of closely combined community initiatives, religious affinities and old age.

Against this backdrop, *Jama'ats* (the word has an Arabic origin and connotes a "community of the faithful" and a "group") are increasingly acting as effective policy mediators on a community level addressing local poverty and unemployment issues through initiating job creation projects and income generating activities.

Jama'ats as self-improvement networks have witnessed a rapid growth over time as key stakeholders and catalysts of social transformation process. These forms are increasingly providing an umbrella for local communitarians and households via mobilizing local resources for rebuilding physical infrastructure.

Indeed, value-based practices are "indigenized" in local context to the extent that these may be wrongfully taken by donor interventions as an institutional hindrance. Donor efforts to formalize and reorganize traditionally and historically conditioned local legitimacy, which props up indigenous structures, may lead to decimation of the whole conventional way of living and organization. Detribalization will accelerate kinship cleavages and erosion of collective identities reducing tribal entities to mere residual categories of peripheral life.

By-passing these unique forms of self-organization and focusing more on highly formalized and urbanized associations may result in the latter appropriating and monopolizing "civil society" ideas ("mirror effect"). Moreover, they may subvert local-level networks which also play a critical part in diffusing grassroots conflicts. As a result, traditional sources of non-formal expressions of "civicness", as it is understood by, and found relevant to local people, situations and needs may be discredited.

Collective values, voluntarism and kin allegiances are shaped not externally but within community domains where groups members are tied up with kin and neighborhood affiliations.

Since 2003 Yrys Aldy Yntymak, a local *jama'at* community was selected as a focus group by local Public Association called Aibek. Given devastating flooding and mudslides in Kerben town and Chong-Tash village of Aksy District in March 2003, an *ad hoc* community meeting convened by a steering committee of Yrys Aldy Yntymak has decided to construct a dam across the river Avletim. Given the urgency of the situation and limited resources, "ashar" method was proposed by a local elderly council (*Sovet Aksakalov*) that received unilateral approval on the part of the villagers.

As of 28 March, local residents launched the project with roles, personal contributions and functions distributed among participants. Elderly Council offered its consulting and advise on the best way to organize technical part of the project. Key laborers included local youths who followed the advise of the aged as the construction required certain know how, skills and experience traditionally held by elderly villagers. Women activists helped men to off-load stones from a tractor and cooked for builders. 16 volunteers were involved in the project and local resources were used: construction timbers were provided by an inland ("rayon") forestry farm.

Limited emergency assistance on the part of the Environmental Ministry in view of budget constraints is another factor encouraging local livelihoods to resort to collective community projects as the only tool available.

Tribal Clans

The Kyrgyz society is characterized by deeply rooted clan identities and kinship reciprocities, which substantially affect and shape politics and power relationships on individual and collective levels. Historically, a social substance of a rural community includes a wide range of actors, practices and networks “hidden” under traditional patterns of informal decision making structures. Clan-based “*patron-client*” relations and ethno-regional solidarity groups exert a substantial impact on building and sustaining local identities and elite loyalties.

These include segmental loyalties such as kinship-based networks, ethnic identities, clans, regional elites, clientele and tribal cleavages interwoven into social fabric of the society. “In an effort to locate public and private identities many people have returned to the tribal roots that shaped this region of the world only 70 years ago.”¹⁰ “Historically, nomadic society relied on co-operation and individualism; however, the roots of the Kyrgyz nomadic tradition have been completely erased and Russified.”¹¹

Secluded and exclusive structure of clan-based system of relationships is believed a key reason of why overall political system of representation yields no space for alternative agendas and stakeholders. Thus, an ongoing tussle to shape and monopolize rules of a game between contending groups creates a need to internalize and keep power struggles within the unofficial realm leaving no scope for external scrutiny.

Clan-orientated politics of the state in Kyrgyzstan essentially limits an equal playing field for other civic actors that nurtures public resistance and erosion of trust toward the State. As a consequence, such traditional institutions as the family, clan, kin and tribe nets are becoming highly visible and trusted vehicles of local and regional politics. Put it differently, there is virtually no organizational form of self-expression in Kyrgyzstan, which is totally immune and free from kin allegiances.

Those sorts of structures have a complex system of internal power sharing, agenda setting and regulating power relations. They are closed to external inquires and based on clearly defined linguistic, blood, geographical origins and lineage affinities. Indeed, secluded and unaccountable nature of clan domains breeds deeply running and exclusive systems of patronage wherein patronage is reserved for a small group of friends and intimates.

It should therefore be recognized that democratization and “*pluralization*” of communitarianism within non-official domain of associational life in Kyrgyzstan will not be progressed unless “the interior architecture of tribe is explored. This requires explaining not only the social and moral codes of kinship and tribalism but also, crucially, investigating the ways in which these codes intersect with issues of gender and poverty.”¹²

The clans are managed by a group of senior members who represent the most influential and powerful tribes very often dominated by traditionally revered elderly males. The judgment and final decisions made by elders carry substantial authority and political weight locally and sub-regionally. It comes as no surprise that a majority of local and regional senior officials or business elite are closely affiliated with their tribal and clan associations. In case, any of those seeking a political office, clan and kinship support may make a decisive difference between failure and success.

The key characteristic of a clan structure is its constant producing and re-producing with leverage of powers and resource allocation circulating within clan and tribal stakeholders. They shape political and social demands that a clan makes on the central powers. “It is not a secret that responsible

¹⁰ L.M. Handrahan, “Gender and Ethnicity in the ‘Transitional Democracy’ of Kyrgyzstan,” *Central Asian Survey*, No. 20 (4), 2001.

¹¹ P. Kolsto, “Nation-Building in the Former U.S.S.R.,” *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 17, No. 1, 1996.

¹² J.M. Lonsdale, B. Berman, *Unhappy Valley volumes*, ed. by J. Currey, London, 1992.

officials of the highest rank come primarily from this or that clan (“*rodovoi klan*”). That is reality. In Kyrgyzstan, no matter where you turn, everyone is someone else’s man.”¹³

Divisions along kith and kin have always been a decisive factor in semi-patriarchal context of Soviet Kyrgyzstan and has gathered in strength aftermath Soviet collapse when semi-feudal system of societal relations took a strong root. Usually numbered in less than a few thousand members, kin groups and individual self-identification along origin have amplified time over and are increasingly seen as a factor of informal social guarantees.

Clan representatives holding key positions in local and regional power base capitalize on their status to strengthen a role and influence of their kin circles. Localism is clearly manifest in the mere fact that “*plum*” jobs are filled in by close relatives and cashflows are concentrated in the hands of intimate confidants of a patron. Accordingly, strategic failure of a patron in micro-power calculations sweepingly dwindles a status of his/her clan group.

Given a disproportional and highly *nepotized* policymaking on both upstream and grassroots levels, it proves fairly easy to manipulate kinship ties and mobilize local resources during elections or clan wrangling. Recent riots and arsons in Southern and Northern provinces of Kyrgyzstan have clearly shown an extent to which a rapid mobilization of clan constituencies to resort to violent means was enabled by kin operatives.

Generically, nor is there a clear-cut power vertical neither a horizontal system of management on upstream political level in Kyrgyzstan. Deeply built in a system of patronized solidarity works to breed permanent competition and struggles for an exclusive access to financial resource base and its re-distribution between various regional loyalties. The latter are equal in power resources and influence on their disposal which creates a balance and makes it difficult for either group to take an upper hand. As a consequence, individual, group and clan interests are taking higher preference in policy-making calculations rendering an effective decision making meaningless.

Characteristically, a severe tussle of corporate stakes between clan elites and groups of influence has gained a prominent visibility in recent Kyrgyz *coup* making it clear that competing clans have deeply plunged in crisis. In pursuit of their narrowly defined interests certain political circles have gone so far as flouting national interests and putting managerial abilities of ruling elite into question.

Conventionally, a latent potentiality for violent confrontation between Northern and Southern clans has been seething since the 1990s and has only seen itself galvanized in pace overtime. The toppled regime has long skillfully manipulated and masked growing demands of regional players by way of trading governmental positions between conflicting elites. Seemingly, this practice has exhausted itself to accommodate grievances of warring factions and, in fact, reinforced disproportions in distribution of power quotas along North and South in favor of the North.

As a key argument for their cause, Southern clans flag up the fact that the agrarian Southern province hosts more than a half of the population of the country and agricultural production caters for the needs of the industrially standstill North. Along with these arguments, Southern representatives voice ideas of relocating key central ministries and agencies from the capital to the South and, even conferring a status of the second national capital to Osh city.

Ethnically mixed up with sizeable Uzbek communities and mainly located in Jalal-Abad and Osh, Kyrgyz influence groups of the South form a backbone of sturdy regional identity and ethnic hierarchy, which share cultural and traditional values of both ethnic groups. In this very sense, a term “*titular*” may not be purely ascribed to Southern elites.

The fact is further amplified by long growing protests of Osh based Uzbeks, who insistently demand to omit an official status labeling them as “*national minorities*.” These developments give a

¹³ E. Huskey, “An Economy of Authoritarianism?”, 2001 (unpublished article).

strong foundation to claim that potential threat of ethno-regionalism and separatism in densely populated areas of Ferghana Valley are possible flash points.

Fuelled by chronically ill economy and eroding regional management, *status-quo* was further frustrated by renewed internal clashes between ruling family and the Southern clans. Skyrocketing antagonism has degenerated into violence and uprising, when Southern clan-turned-democratic-opposition plotted conspiracy bringing a highly unpopular Northern elite down. Thus, failure to bring conflicting clan interests and calculations to negotiating table lie at the heart of recent seizure of power by ousted South and ongoing anarchy in Kyrgyzstan.

Domestic political and economic decision making is successively controlled by two Northern and two Southern clans. Along geographical origins, the North is represented by Chui-Kemin and Talas-Naryn clans. The Southern clans are recruited from two most powerful kin groups inhabiting Aalay and Osh provinces, namely, Ichkilik and Otuz Uul.

Nepotism and localism are two driving factors on the scene that shape collective views, opinions and values (“*anti-values*”) of clan clientele networks. Notably, growing controversies between separate fulcrums of power are provoking inevitable cleavages within clans, thus paving the way for potential intra-clan conflicts.

Rural Councils of the Aged

The *Councils of the Rural Elderly* (“*Aksakals*”—“*grey beards*”) are semi-official and patriarchal community structures comprising of older males coming from various tribal identities. They hold higher status, knowledge and influence in social participation—performing social roles and determining day-to-day custom practices affecting the whole community life. “Because tribalism is ruled through a biological, paternal, kinship lineage, with power reserved for certain essential male biological descendants, tribalism is essentially patriarchal.”¹⁴

An important rationale for elders to hold elevated position socially is that fact that a majority of those are WWII veterans and publicly affiliated with *Rural Councils of Veterans*. Certain Councils include females though overwhelmingly these are underrepresented and their roles carry less weight in key decisions making. Social functions of the elderly entail various forms.

“Council of *Aksakals* is trying to work with the local youth to promote peaceful problem solving. The issues they try to solve involve family problems and students not attending the schools. School officials will alert the Council to students absent from school and then he will visit the home and talk with both parents and children.”¹⁵

As these structures function officially in local village and community municipals, it is them who exercise important “*shadow*” roles in clan hierarchies. The elderly, who enjoy higher social status normally occupy leading positions of *Mullahs* and *Imams* in a Mosque clergy and delivering opinion on congregational practice.

Field visits to *Shamaldy-Say* village in the South, for example, has specifically revealed that local elderly clerics played a critical part in mobilizing resources and labor to build a Mosque. The role of elderly in communal self-mobilization is substantial in that they consolidate and strengthen a practice of “*Ashar*,” which implies an individual and collective contribution offered jointly and voluntarily to accomplish a community project affecting local livelihoods (construction of a school, Mosque or irrigation repair civil works). This, in turn, suggests that community initiatives based on “*mahallya*”

¹⁴ E. Huskey, op. cit.

¹⁵ Help Age International, 2002, Field mission in Jalal-Abad, Southern Kyrgyzstan, U.K. (HAI).

principle of collective coexistence at a neighborhood level are actually getting closely tied up with Islamic consciousness and drive.¹⁶

“*Ak-Mechit*” (“*The White Mosque*”) *jama'at* group was created in 2003 with the aim to improve local livelihoods via implementation of income-generating projects and create jobs for poor households. The group includes 150 households with each household incorporated into 10 units headed by a chair—a *target community*. Each such a community generates its own working capital funds by means of running a business and cattle-breeding with a monthly income saved into household fund facility as a membership contribution.

The *jama'at* activists have undergone intensive training organized by UNDP projects and have produced two successful draft projects for rehabilitation of school buildings in the village. The organizational bottleneck, very characteristic of many *jama'ats* in the area, faced by the group was the lacking of an office premise to arrange member assemblies, keep financial savings, files and policy documents. Local government “*Ayl Okmoty*” was not helpful to solve the problem. As a temporary option, activists arranged ashar and renovated a dilapidated Soviet-built public canteen previously used as a “*chaihana*”, traditional tea-drinking cite for elders and then left neglected. Once it was totally rebuilt via voluntary contributions with one room used as an office and the second given as a resting place for elders, *Ayl Okmoty* lodged claims that the building legally was a public property.

These demands generated conflict between both sides involved. To escalate the conflict, *Ayl Okmoty* has launched a lawsuit against the group in order to appropriate the premises. The further initiative was taken by *Aksakals*, who used one part of the premises for their tea-drinking ceremonies. They gathered all vociferous users of the canteen and spontaneously brought themselves to the *Ayl Okmoty* office to demand their rights. The pressing action proved successful as the authorities stepped down and suspended their claims. To date the canteen is still used as an office and a canteen ensuring an official and informal dimension of community self-organizing.¹⁷

Muslim clerical circles and elder parishioners are increasingly involved into mediation roles in community conflict settlements as “*troubleshooters*” using their knowledge, authority and experience in finding workable solutions. In rural settings main conflict situations arise over ethnic tensions, cross-border commerce, land and water sharing between borderline trading and land growing communities. “An interesting example of a conflict mediated and the role of older people takes place in a bazaar frequented by Kyrgyz, Uzbek and Tajik traders. The local authorities were causing problems by their unfair/unequal treatment of different traders. Trained mediators became involved and now when a local official wants to “check” a trader, he must be accompanied by two persons—a representative from the Village Committee and an *Aksakal*.”¹⁸

The elderly are selected as intermediaries in conflict situations based on their age, local authority, education and a capacity to lobby communal issues at local governing institutions. “These mediators receive training in conflict analysis, negotiation and methods of effective communication as part of the “Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan Conflict Prevention at Community Level” Project funded by the Swiss Office for International Development. Trained mediators are between the ages of 40-60 and almost always male (not clear if any women have been trained).”¹⁹

As a growing body of field evidence suggests, they have a role in communal conflict solving processes through making judgments on a collegiate base and putting them on public approval. This particular function has led to creation of the “*Courts of the Rural Aged*” that reserve a right to summon and impose informal social pressure and sanctions including ostracism from the community. The verdicts

¹⁶ Personal fact-finding in Jalal-Abad Oblast, 2004.

¹⁷ Personal interview with *Kara-Darya Jama'at* Group, Jalal-Abad, 2004.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ P. Hinchliff, *Older People and Institutional Development in Kyrgyzstan: A Report on a Help Age International Visit to Kyrgyzstan, Field mission in Jalal-Abad, Southern Kyrgyzstan, Help Age International (U.K.), 2002.*

made by the Courts are seen as a final appeal to a case before proceeding to the official courts. Thus, the old age groups carry out multidimensional roles in regulating social, legal, custom and spiritual relations on a grassroots level.

C o n c l u d i n g R e m a r k s

If a “*civil society*” concept is still serviceable and applicable to the realities on the ground, two caveats should be entered into wider civic and policy discourse nationally and regionally.

Firstly, there needs to be an urgent shift in perspective from a biased focus on formal associations toward clear-cut *policy* dimensions of civic groups. This is needed in order to expose transformative manifestations of resource mobilization on local level to external scrutiny and analysis. Spontaneously organized protests initiated by the elderly groups, locally generated drive to improve deteriorating livelihoods and traditional projects of self and mutual assistance are important civic activities happening at the periphery of formalistic practices.

Policy-based approach tied up with social impact of grassroots projects needs to be included within civic activities. Otherwise, it would run a risk of being overlooked as such. As noted above, interests articulated by kinship or age groups are not often accommodated on the grounds that those are not purely civic.

Meanwhile, range of detailed policy cases testify to the fact that non-formal activities and policy practices of these indigenous groups interacting with local governments are virtually civic in nature. They remain fundamental to local and regional politics informing a political dimension to key decision making process and actors. “Political language unites people over what to argue about. It provides the images on which they can base their ideologies and ideologies mobilize political support around social divisions.”²⁰

Secondly, it is pivotal to enlarge *key institutional framework of civic action* and include unregistered and semi-official rural networks that generate cash for their voluntary community projects. These groups include micro-credit groups, cooperatives, farmers associations, water users associations, self-help associations and *jama'ats*.

Indigenous community-based networks “*Jama'ats*” identities are increasingly assuming key roles in local micro-politics as policy agents, social capitalists, potential lobbyists and service providers capable of affecting local policymaking and building alliances with other stakeholders thereby contributing to community empowerment and resource mobilization.

Put it plainly, there is a need to ascribe a rightful status to all organizational forms that are informally involved in income generating projects locally to improve their financial situation. Informal economic organizing often plays roles in conflict along the lines of the central State and grassroots societies in that they engender economically strong elite groups locally that are increasingly turned into political stakeholders and claim for more powers on localized and mainstream levels.

“*Civil society*” now awaits to be perceived via the lenses of non-formal grassroots perspectives, realities and values where a resurgent phenomenon of *jama'ats* are now increasingly appear to be acting as social capitalists and intermediators between local policymakers and beneficiaries. Informal environment, Islamic sentiments, clan-based kinship and paternalism need to be emphasized as core organizational values when looking at peripheral patterns of popular activism and self-assertion in Kyrgyzstan.

²⁰ P. Hincliff, op. cit.