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25 Years of Rural Development in post-Soviet Central Asia: Sustaining Inequalities

Abstract

To show that post-Soviet rural development in Central Asia has been confronted with sustained inequalities, three particular factors are analysed in this paper have being viewed as fundamental in influencing national and rural development. Firstly, most countries have based their growth models on economic nationalism (not only creating borders and national institutions, but also choosing inward-looking strategies), while leaning one-sidedly on their natural resource wealth (carbohydrates such as oil, natural gas and minerals, but also industrial crops like cotton). Secondly, and related to the first explanatory factor, the region has been struck by hidden and open resource-based conflicts, in particular on land and water. Inter-state tensions have emerged, in particular between downstream (irrigation water dependent) countries, such as Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, and the upstream (hydropower energy dependent, and carbohydrate-poor) ones, such as Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Thirdly, all the countries analysed here have followed a rather unequal capital city-centric growth model, using the proceeds of exports of mineral wealth (or cotton) for rapid urbanisation with little or no investment in rural development, resulting in a growing urban-rural divide and increasing rural-urban and cross-border migration. While it is recognised that this region is indeed a bridge between West and East (also re-emphasised by the Chinese 'One Belt, One Road' initiative), it is argued in this paper that there is a need to reduce these inequalities and unbalanced growth, being that they will be an obstacle to the sustainable growth and development of rural areas.

Keywords: inequalities, Post-Soviet, Central Asia, sustainable development

Post-Soviet Central Asia: Sustained Inequalities

In a seminal piece published right after the demise of the Soviet Union, Frank (1992) underlined the centrality of Central Asia in Eurasian history, as the bridge between Europe and China. He emphasised the Central Asian region showed a form of symbiosis between the nomadic people of Central Asia and the more urbanised societies based on sedentary agriculture.

The article was published 25 years ago, emphasising that the region of 'Central' (центральная), 'Inner' (внутренней) or 'Middle' (Средняя) Asia had played a crucial historical role in the movements of agricultural commodities, precious metals, horses, religions and knowledge, which moved along a complex set of silk routes. This old network is still central to the linkage between West and East, although times have changed, in particular with the re-emergence of China as a regional power and the investments in road and train transport that currently are being made ('One Belt, One Road' initiative).

The region is indeed a fascinating one, and I have had the opportunity to visit it from the Brezhnev era onwards and up until recently. I have travelled to cities such as Alma Ata or Tashkent, or far-away rural areas such as in the regions of Shymkent or Kashkadarya, in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan respectively (see Figure 2, with photos of 1980, taken by the author), as part of various trips to the former Soviet Union (to the European part, Siberia, Central Asia and the Caucasus).[1]

What has become very clear during these trips are a number of crucial inequalities, particularly noticeable in the area of rural development, which are still relevant today. The following three factors will be discussed that underlie these inequalities, using available secondary sources and existing databases, but also by including some personal anecdotal evidence encountered in particular during the visits that were made during the 1990s, in the early years of transition. Each of them will be looked at briefly in

[1] As an undergraduate student of mathematics and physics at Leiden University I made visits to the USSR starting in 1970. In those days there were limited possibilities to travel, only in the form of organised group travel with a student-travel agency in Amsterdam, which had special contacts with the Communist Youth organisation (Комсомол). Interestingly enough, in spite of the tightly organised context there were ample opportunities to deviate from the planned journey and visit other spots to meet other people.

this introduction, while more detailed analysis will follow later, with an emphasis on the impact of rural development and the rural populations of the five Central Asian countries.

Firstly, directly after independence in 1991, these countries started moving towards what we can call 'economic nationalism', possibly in response to the fact that all the important economic decisions were previously made in Moscow, but with independence there was a move towards political and economic self-determination[2], in an opposite direction from the cooperation the Soviet republics had secured (or were forced to adopted) during the era of the USSR.

The formation of new nation states and the emerging nationalist tendencies was also quite contrary to the traditional role of Central Asia, which was a region of exchange, trade, transport and multi-cultural development, of which the densely populated Ferghana valley (which is in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan) is possibly the best example. However, towards the end of the 1980s (just before independence) ethnic tensions had begun to rise, for example between Uzbeks and Meshketian Turks, threatening this peaceful co-existence.

Furthermore, this inward-looking economic growth (and development) path was mostly based on the extraction and further exploration of natural resources (Pomfret 2012). These resources included, in particular, carbohydrates such as oil (Kazakhstan), natural gas (Turkmenistan and, after some time, Uzbekistan), aluminum production (Tajikistan, on the basis of imported bauxite). However, they were also based on an industrial crop, namely cotton (Uzbekistan, and to a lesser extend the other four states).

Secondly, and partly related to the previous issue, a series of quite serious resource-based conflicts emerged, often expressed under ethnic banners. In June 1990, violent conflicts broke out between Uzbek and Kyrgyz communities, in particular over agricultural land access in Osh and Jalal-Abad, an area that I visited soon after in the early 1990s. This conflict unfortunately emerged again in the same region in 2010, as the underlying factors to the tensions had not been resolved.

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[2] To strive towards self-determination after independence sounds slight weird, but the reality was that these independent countries had to start from scratch to build independent national institutions, after many decades being under Soviet rule (centralising the most important policies and decisions in Moscow).

Resource conflicts should also be seen in the context of deregulation processes, of land and tenure reforms (see Dudwick et al. 2007; FAO 2011; Kimhi and Lerman 2013), of de-collectivisation (Trevisani 2007), and of the contestation of water rights (Spoor and Krutov 2003), with stark contradictions between upstream countries (the "water suppliers") and downstream ones (the "water users") within the water basins of the main rivers Syr Darya and Amu Darya (Figure 3). However, at a more micro-level along water basins (of which there are many in Central Asia), tensions became even more apparent.

Hence, it is important to understand the conflict between hydropower production in the higher-up and mountainous countries such as Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which have no carbohydrates for energy generation, and the demand for irrigation water in the lowlands (such as Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan). Water allocation was centrally allocated in the Soviet period, but with independence, tensions arose over the seasonal demand and allocation of water resources.

Water (and land use) mismanagement has also given rise to the rapid shrinking of the Aral Sea, contributing to local climate change and the worsening of various environmental indicators, such as air pollution, salinisation, temperature increases and changing cultivation patterns (Micklin 1992; Spoor 1998, 2010). These processes have their origins in the Soviet period, when the dramatic expansion of cotton production was forced upon these (then) Soviet republics. This occurred since the 1960s in particular, but in breaking up the Soviet Union many of the existing river basin organisations (Spoor and Krutov 2003) became powerless and chunks of large rivers became ruled by national legislations, which made rational water allocations even more difficult.

Thirdly, after an initial deep economic crisis, nearly all of the newly independent Central Asian states recovered and developed economically with what we can be seen as 'capital city-centric' growth models, in which the rural areas lagged behind (excepting Kazakhstan in housing the largest share of the population). Visiting Ashgabat in the mid-1990s, or Almaty in the early 2000s (and most recently in 2016), and subsequently contrasting these visits by journeys to far-away rural areas or small towns (in Kashkadarya in Uzbekistan, Charzhou[3] in Turkmenistan, Kyzylorda

[3] Renamed in 1999 into Turkmenabat.

in Kazakhstan, or in poor regions of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan), I was provided with insights in the unequal character of growth (Field notes by the author of various trips).

Although having diminished substantially since the initial crisis years of the early to mid-1990s, I could see that poverty levels are still substantial (UNDP 2014). There is a wide rural-urban divide, shown by the much higher rural poverty figures (often comparable with smaller cities, as unemployment is high there), in comparison with the capital city of the country involved (World Bank, 2005). If we look at access to social services and focus on 'multidimensional social exclusion' (see UNDP 2011; Spoor 2013; Spoor, Tasciotti and Peleah 2014), it is clear that the rural-urban divide is possibly deeper than shown by spatially differentiated poverty rates.[4]

Finally, the renewed emphasis on Central Asia in the context of the huge investments planned by China in their 'One Belt, One Road' initiative, and the accompanying economic growth in certain sectors, will definitely influence Central Asian development, possibly strengthening already existing inequalities. After this introduction, these three main factors underlying inequalities will be discussed in slightly more detail with particular focusing on their impact on rural development and the rural populations of these countries. As the region still has (with the exception of the more extensively urbanised Kazakhstan) large rural populations, looking critically at the past 25 years of post-Soviet development where, in particular, rural development seems pertinent.

Emerging nationalism and Resource Extraction

Journeys in the early 1990s along the newly established borders between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, and lastly Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, provided a vivid picture of how borders between Soviet republics (which could hardly be seen as frontiers) produced separations between emerging nation states, featuring border guards, custom officers, and clear delineations in some cases they had been rather undefined during the USSR era). Taking a trip by car from,

[4] In these studies, empirical material came from 6 country surveys, including Kazakhstan, Macedonia, Moldova, Serbia, Tajikistan, and Ukraine (see for the survey methodology and measurement of social exclusion UNDP, 2011 and Spoor, 2013).

for example, Almaty in Kazakhstan to Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan was relatively easy, as hardly any border controls existed, a trip from Bishkek to Osh (in the very south of Kyrgyzstan).

However, passing along the Toktogul artificial lake and large hydro-power dam, was not only lengthy but also complicated. In particular, the last stretch from Jalal-Abad to Osh actually took you straight through the eastern tail of the Ferghana valley. In those early days there were pieces of the road which were claimed both by Kyrgyzstan as well as by Uzbekistan, meaning that border controls (whether legal or illegal, as sometimes "environmental tax" or экологический налог had to be paid) were manifold.

Extending the trip from Osh into the Uzbek part of the Ferghana valley made me aware of what emerging nationalism meant. It would have been better not to travel with Kyrgyz number plates, as the Uzbek traffic police stopped us quite a number of times, even in Tashkent. Furthermore, during one trip, when passing the city of Andizhan (in the Uzbek part of the valley) and taking the main road to Tashkent, the driver, a Kyrgyz engineer turned taxi driver, asked *me* several times the way, as the road signs had been changed (in 1995) from Cyrillic to Latin, and he could not read the word Tashkent, and only knew the sign Ташкент (see also Megoran 2012: 480).

Newly created nation-state borders have complicated inter-regional trade and transport, as the custom offices became very lucrative places for rent seeking. In the early days of transition, borders were still rather permeable and controls could be avoided. However, after a series of conflicts between particularly Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan (on water allocation and gas supplies) the situation became tenser; for example, the Osh-Andizhan bus service was suspended temporarily in 1998 (Ibid.), to the detriment of particular local Kyrgyz citizens (of by the way mostly Uzbek descent).

Travelling from Uzbekistan to Turkmenistan by road was even more interesting and challenging in the 1990s. We did some training courses in the field of agricultural project and investment analysis for the Economic Development Institute (EDI) of the World Bank in the early 1990s, where participants had to be selected through visits to the respective countries. Being in Uzbekistan, and still having to visit Turkmenistan, the question was how to go there?

Being used to travel in not always the easiest conditions, and having good personnel connections in the two countries, I travelled by car (an old Niva 1600) to Bukhara and then crossed the border into Turkmenistan,

towards Chardzhou (now Turkmenabat). In order to cross the border into Turkmenistan, my companions looked up a friend from the local KGB in the border town. Fulfilling this necessity – according to them at least – meant that there should be no problem at the customs. Indeed, we crossed the border without problems and drove to the airport of Chardzho, where they bought a ticket for me.

Hence, after a little hassle we did indeed arrive in Ashgabat, but in the domestic part of the airport (of course…). To avoid problems upon our return another intervention was needed, as I now had entered the country illegally, I called my own contact in Ashgabat (a former Turkmen student of mine), who was very surprised to hear from me in this respect.

He drove to the airport, involving somebody from the consular department over there (also a former student) and arranged a visa for me in which my (imaginary) arrival with Turkish Airlines that day was mentioned. After some days of work, I found myself standing in line to depart with this paper which, in fact, was my ticket to leave the country legally. These anecdotes show something of the complexities related to establishing new borders and institutions of border control, not to mention the customs and international agreements on borders, visas, migration rules etc.

They also describe a situation in which new countries emerged as nation-states, which had once been Soviet republics within the rather centralised command economy of the USSR. To establish new institutions, rules and regulations, borders and install custom services that facilitate rather than become obstacles to trade has been a major challenge for the newly independent Central Asian states. Indeed, a detailed study on transport (UNECE 2008) showed these problems very clearly. The silk road or silk routes – those that have always been known for their linkages and transport of commodities, people and animals - have now been fragmented and complicated because of the costs involved to pass a border and the waiting time involved.

Hence, this study presents, amongst others, two cases. Firstly, a cargo trip from Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan) to Novosibirsk (Russia), passing through Kazakhstan. The whole trip did cost 8.7 days, of which respectively 2.7 and 2.4 were spent at the Akzhol/Kordai and Sharbakhty/Kuluna border crossings. The second case was a trip from Tashkent to Istanbul, passing from Uzbekistan into Turkmenistan, Iran and finally Turkey, in which the border crossings cost 4 days in total (of an overall trip of 15 days). Waiting

time was translated into costs, although other costs, such as bribes and 'informal taxes', were not included in the report but were a real problem in much of the transport.

A few years earlier, the International Crisis Group (ICG 2002) had already indicated the severe problems of new borders. These included the emergence of regular territorial conflicts and the difficulties created for local people in border regions, as well as the blocking of international transport and trade. They particularly focused on the densely populated and earlier mentioned Ferghana valley:

> The most complicated border negotiations involve the Ferghana Valley where a myriad of enclaves exist, and all three countries which share it – Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan – have both historical claims to each other's territory and economic interests in the transport routes, rivers, reservoirs, and industries. Negotiations over border demarcation in the valley have been charged with tension and have stalled over scores of disputed points. While talks continue with a broad understanding that border issues must be settled, there is little likelihood of a final breakthrough any time soon.

The issue of border problems remains a great challenge for Central Asia, negatively affecting its economic potential, including that of its agricultural sector. What is more, nationalism has also appeared strongly in economic development strategies. As centrally planned distribution of goods and services, which took place in the Soviet era, disappeared, and international trade took its place, decisions were also taken in the agricultural sector on what to produce, on whom to be dependent. In some cases these decisions were taken in the direction of national food self-sufficiency. While food security is an important goal, if strategies towards national food self-sufficiency have negative effects on particularly environmental indicators, then rather than following agro-ecological determinants, the strategy becomes problematic.

Indeed, in this way a country such as Uzbekistan became largely grain self-sufficient (see UNDP 2010); taking into account high levels of food and income poverty, this was an important achievement. However, as argued elsewhere (Spoor 2009, 2010) the change in land use (more grain, less cotton) has also led to expansion of grain into marginal land areas where even more water was needed, leading to an overall larger use of

water (rather than less, which could be expected in the move from a water intensive crop towards a less water intensive one), while avoiding the importation of Kazakh grain.

Furthermore, a very important element of these economic strategies was to focus on the development (and export) of natural resources (Pomfret 2012), such as natural gas in Turkmenistan, oil in Kazakhstan (and to a lesser extend in Uzbekistan), special metal mining in Kyrgyzstan, aluminum production in Tajikistan (on the basis of imported bauxite), and cotton in Uzbekistan (and to a lesser extend in the other four countries), in particular in the Ferghana valley and along the river shores of the Amu Darya and Syr Darya. As has been shown in many other cases of resource extraction, the dependency on one single sector (with often little added value generated) leads to rent-seeking behaviour and wealth accumulation by the elite(s) in power.

It also often discriminates (whether through exchange rate overvaluation, known as the 'Dutch disease' effect, or through deliberate policies) other sectors of the economy (or in the case of cotton other sub-sectors in agriculture) and does not contribute to broad-based (and 'job-rich') growth as an outcome of a 'resource curse'. Kazakhstan, through its establishment of a national development fund financed by its vast oil revenues, has at least tried to diminish these effects for other sectors. In the case of Turkmenistan (although reliable data is not available), this seems much less the case and that is much to the detriment of the poor rural population.

Resource conflicts in Central Asia: Land and Water

Land reform has been implemented in the countries of post-Soviet Central Asia in various ways within various sequences, and with varying outcomes (see Spoor 1995; Dudwick et al. 2007; Swinnen and Rozelle 2006; Kimhi and Lerman 2013; Djanibekov et al. 2012, and many others), within the context of an overall transition to more market-led economies. De-collectivisation, liquidation of state farms, redistribution of land in usufruct, privatisation of individual plots and the buying/selling (and leasing) of land by financial capital, led to winners and losers, in which 'land grabs' (obtaining land through illicit ways, paying too little or no compensation, etc.) have often occurred (Visser and Spoor 2011, on land grabs in Russia, Ukraine and Kazakhstan).

Inequalities in terms of access to land, water and means of production between large farm enterprises, small/medium farms and peasant 'dekhan' farms emerged. These also represent conflicts between powerful rural elites and particularly poor rural populations, mostly the previous *kolkhoz* and *sovkhoz* workers, who still had low but guaranteed wages and access to social services, although after land reform and farm restructuring they lost much of the latter.

The question of who finally got the land in individual use or ownership after de-collectivisation has also been a major cause of violent conflicts fought under ethnic banners. In particular, in cases where there is high population density and land and water resources are scarce, such as in the earlier mentioned Osh/Jalal-Abad region, and in other areas of the Ferghana valley (see further the fascinating history of what is called the 'heart of Central Asia', in Starr 2011).

In such an important agricultural region, these resource conflicts need to be resolved through negotiations at inter-state level. These conflicts have also occurred at regional and local levels, which is one of the challenges of today and not resolving them means a clear obstacle for further development. Another related resource conflict originates in the topological differences within Central Asia, which contains mountainous areas (in particular Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, but also parts of Kazakhstan) where the main river systems of the region originate, and the lowland areas (in particular southern Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan).

Hydropower is of crucial importance for the more northern countries, which do not have oil or natural gas resources and are confronted with harsh cold winters in which energy is crucial for heating. Already during the Soviet era, many hydropower installations, dams and artificial lakes have been constructed to resolve these problems, based on centralised planning from Moscow. However, when energy is needed in the winter, the upstream country will open the gates of the dam in order to have the turbines produce electricity, while the lowland or downstream country does not need to water for irrigation. When the latter does need water, such as in spring or summer, the upstream country will often close the dam, or reduce the water flow, as it wants to build reserves for the winter in the artificial lakes.

Since inter-republican coordination broke up with the collapse of the USSR, water has been the main point of contention between the newly

independent states of Central Asia (see Spoor and Krutov 2003). Speaking in the 1990s to policy makers and academics on both sides, for example in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, I encountered sometimes quite extreme opinions, such as "We will stop delivering gas to our neighbors", and "If they do not pay for our water, we will close the dam". In the past 25 years, this on and off upstream-downstream conflict of interests over water has led to wars of words, and increasing tensions between countries, over water flows in various river basins. Although these disputes can lead to violent conflicts, they might alternatively lead to more cooperation, as all the parties involved are dependent on this most precious resource, namely water (see Arsel and Spoor 2010; Heggenes 2014: 9–10).

To finalise this part, it seems that the shrinking of the Aral Sea, which was very much on the agenda in the early 1990s, has largely disappeared from the public eye, while intensified (or at least continued) over-use of water for agriculture (in particular cotton production) has remained the main cause of this environmental disaster. And it is indeed. When writing about this huge problem in the mid-1990s (see Spoor 1998), the expectation of most experts (such as Micklin 1992) was that the mere existence of the Aral Sea was greatly under threat at that moment and urgent measures to reduce water use (and make it much more efficient) were needed.

Nevertheless, it seems that (looking at the most recent pictures of Aral), the disaster has really taken place. While in the mid-1990s, the volume of water was around 30 percent of its original size of the 1950s, recent estimates state that it is currently less than 10 percent.

The Aral Sea will not return, even with improved water management and strongly reduced water use by investing in much more efficient irrigation systems (possibly learning from traditional underground water distribution tunnels that were destroyed in the 1920s and 1930s, and new ones such as drip irrigation etc.). However, by doing this and producing crops depending on the agro-ecological environment rather than policy directives, they will certainly improve the remaining parts of the Aral Sea and, in particular, protect the two large river deltas that represent a wealth of biodiversity. Nevertheless, this will require political will, regional cooperation and river-basin water management, rather than focusing on national interests and those stretches of rivers that flow through the individual countries (see also Abdullaev et al. 2010).

Capital-city centric growth: the urban-rural divide

The first comprehensive study on poverty and inequality in transition economies has already shown that there were significant differences in poverty rates between rural areas, urban centres and the capital cities (World Bank 2005; Macours and Swinnen 2008). With data mostly coming from 2003, research has shown that poverty rates below the international poverty line (2.15 USD PPP/Capita at that moment) were very low in the capital cities of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan (respectively 2 and 4 percent). In rural areas the percentages were much, much higher; namely, 31 and 55 percent respectively.

In the smaller, poorer and more rural countries Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan the capital cities showed respectively 42 and 54 percent poverty incidence, while in rural areas it was even 57 and 76 percent. Interestingly, and also understandingly, in smaller towns (named 'other urban') poverty rates have been even higher than in rural areas of Kyrgyzstan (namely 68 percent), mainly because of the deeper impact of the economic crisis for the population lacking income from land resources, which rural dwellers have. The poverty rates in Tajikistan were even slightly higher, with 73 percent, with only small differences between the capital city (Dushanbe), other urban centres and rural areas, as Tajikistan is by far the poorest country of Central Asia.

Poverty rates have decreased, in particular during the 2000s (at least until the economic crisis of 2008-09), as we can see in the World Bank's POVCALNET dataset, which was used in UNDP (2014), taking the same 2.15 USD PPP international poverty line (expressing 'extreme poverty') as the threshold. At the 4.30 USD PPP poverty line, the headcount is much higher in, for example Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, when comparing these with some other mostly poor transition countries, such as Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

However, to measure more than 'only' income poverty, UNDP (2011) has developed a multidimensional index of social exclusion (or inclusion), using the same methodology as developed by Alkire and Foster (2007).

Apart from the economic dimension (represented by income levels and poverty rates), researchers also looked at access to social services and civic participation. The dimension of (lack of) access to social services was shown to be the most important amongst the three dimensions in five out

of six countries, which clearly indicated that focusing on income poverty is not enough. On the basis of this study and the data sets available for six transition countries (Macedonia, Serbia, Moldova, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan), Spoor (2013) also calculated that social exclusion was higher in rural areas than in urban ones, indicating sustained inequalities and a rural-urban gap.

Spoor, Tasciotti and Peleah (2014) used the same detailed survey data to look at basic services such as access to running water, having a toilet, etc. This data also showed clear gaps in access between rural and urban areas; in particular, the poorer transition countries, such as Moldova and Tajikistan, but also in Kazakhstan.

These large inequalities between rural areas (villages) and the capital cities of the countries in Central Asia form an obstacle for agricultural and rural development, but they are also for sustainable growth and development. As was already indicated, the improvement of food security (and sometimes food-sufficiency) has been a target of the Central Asian countries and has indeed been improved (FAO 2011, 2015) in particular because economic growth has provided income to have access to international food markets (while Uzbekistan in particular moved towards grain self-sufficiency, see Introduction).

However, child malnutrition, although diminished, is still a major problem and is often measured in terms of the stunting of children under 5 years (FAO 2015:9; Franz and Fitzroy 2006; Gassmann 2011). Poverty is also the main 'push' factor for rural-urban and cross-border migration (in particular from Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan-Uzbekistan towards Kazakhstan-Russian Federation), together with the 'pull' factor of much higher wages/incomes in the capital cities and the receiving countries (OECD 2015; UNDP 2015). For example, GNI/capita for the periods 1993–2013 and 1995–2013 respectively, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan represented only 10, 15 and around 20% respectively of the GNI/capita of the Russian Federation and Kazakhstan (UNDP 2015:16).

While remittances have been shown to constitute a very important source of finance in the development of these three countries (UNDP 2015), there are also negative social consequences from cross-border migration in particular. As the OECD (2015) stated, men who migrate to in particular Russia start a new life, which means "new life, new wife", abandoning their own wives and children in the sending country. Furthermore, rural-

urban migration might lead to increasing wages or incomes, but in case of encountered unemployment (or bad jobs with low wages), and in particular for the youth, this sometimes means replacing rural poverty for urban poverty and the development of marginal and poor areas in the expanding cities.

Conclusion

It is clear for all five Central Asian countries that the agricultural (and rural) sector needs more investments, more education and skills. Finally, it also requires better (social and productive) infrastructure and provision of services (see amongst others FAO 2011) to overcome the still existing (and in some cases increasing) rural-urban inequalities.

In this paper, it was shown that many of these inequalities are caused by the particularities of the growth and development strategies of the past 25 years of transition (economic nationalism, resource extraction rather than broad-based growth, unresolved recourse conflicts in particular about water, and capital-city centred economic development). These inequalities need to be tackled, together with efforts to overcome disagreements about territories, resources, resource use, borders (and their custom regimes) in a region that has a long tradition of tolerance, multiculturalism and development based on cooperation and exchange.

Of course, this is easier said than done, but only such a strategy might lead to giving again more 'centrality' to the region (Frank 1992) and re-gaining its importance as the bridge between West and East, as it was in the pre-Soviet past. The Chinese initiative 'One belt, one road' is also clearly pushing in that direction and might provide opportunities. However, there are also risks that these massive investments will support rather than counter the existing unbalanced growth paths in Central Asia, again to the detriment of particularly poor rural populations.

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