

Coping with transition in rural Central Asia and Caucasus: ZEF researchers gain insights from farmers' diaries

The states of Central Asia and the Caucasus are undergoing rapid socio-economic processes of transformation. At the same time, they continue to rely substantially on agriculture for providing livelihoods. In order to provide potentially better services to local farmers, a good understanding of the knowledge and information that form the basis of agricultural decisions is required.



Farmers' diaries reveal how local communities deal with transition.

Research at ZEF

Two research projects at ZEF are tackling the question of how local farming communities in this region deal with the challenges of transition. Research comprises substantial and qualitative field research. In addition to conventional methods of qualitative research, a "farm diary" was designed and introduced to farming households. This enabled the researchers to (a) capture the full agricultural cycle and (b) experiment with and develop further the qualitative data collection method of diary writing, especially in a non-Western agricultural context.

Methodology and implementation

Farm households documented their farming activities on a weekly basis for a one-year period. Particular focus lay on the thorough documentation of weekly farming activities, the reasons and motivations behind them, the knowledge stocks required and obstacles faced.

Surveys among farmers were conducted in two villages in Tajikistan – one in the southern Shartus region and another in Garibak village in the northern Zarafshan Valley. Since ZEF researchers Andreas Mandler and Hafiz Boboyorov had worked in these two locations before, the survey was based on well-established relations with communities and the research assistants were trusted people. Eight households in each village were selected

- based on their interest in contributing to the project, social situation, farm size, and educational background. The selected households had to fill in a four-page questionnaire on their agricultural activities on a weekly basis over a one-year period, except for the winter break. A small reimbursement was paid for each completed questionnaire. During this period, a research assistant would regularly visit the households. She collected the completed interviews and discussed the detailed accounts given by the farming families. The research assistant translated all collected farm diaries, after which they were checked by a local researcher and project member.

Findings

The farm diaries provide detailed insights into farmers' weekly agricultural and daily activities throughout an entire production cycle. The responses outline routine agricultural activities such as the struggle for inputs and resources for agriculture, on-farm labor, or post-harvest processing such as sale and storage. Furthermore, the farm diaries reveal what knowledge and innovation sources are available among farmers, how they participate in community affairs and divide labor within their families. The data also provide examples of failing farming activities due to the acute shortage of financial resources. This insight explains why many households calculate that investments in agriculture will not pay off and choose to maintain farming activities on low levels. Farmers proudly reported agricultural achievements. The data, however, outline manifold conflicts and challenges surrounding access to natural resources, commercialization of produce and communal responsibilities. These conflicts might explain why investments and changes in agricultural production systems in the research area are hard to accomplish under the current circumstances.

This research is conducted in close collaboration with the Institute of Philosophical, Political and Legal Sciences of the Academy of Sciences of Tajikistan. Two ZEF projects are involved: 'Epistemic Cultures and Innovation Diffusion in post-Soviet Southern Caucasus and Central Asia' (funded by BMBF) and the project 'Conversion of Knowledge in post-Soviet Agriculture' (funded by the VW Stiftung).

Outlook

The farmers' diaries were collected between 2012 and 2013, and the data are being analyzed now. The data offer a very intricate and personal insight into the motivations and preferences of the farming families and the localized logics of everyday farming practices in Tajikistan today.



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