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Editors: Ingeborg Baldauf, Stephan Conermann, Hermann Kreutzmann, Shahnaz Nadjmabadi, Dietrich Reetz, Conrad Schetter and Martin Sökefeld.

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Project Office

Center for Development Research/ZEFa

Department of Political and Cultural Change

University of Bonn

Walter-Flex Str. 3

D-53113 Bonn

Tel: + 49-228-731722

Fax: + 49-228-731972

Email: [crossroads@uni-bonn.de](mailto:crossroads@uni-bonn.de)

Homepage: [www.crossroads-asia.de](http://www.crossroads-asia.de)

**Postscript for  
Development Research on Crossroads Asia: A  
Conceptual Approach  
Crossroads Asia Concept Paper**

Henryk Alff, Joe Hill, Shahnaz Nadjmabadi and Lutz Rzehak

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## 1. Introduction

Our main research principle, outlined in the initial concept paper, was to take a non-statist perspective towards development, defined broadly as social change. Therefore, our aim was not to put at the fore of our enquiry (statist) development schemes. Rather, within the four work packages, it was envisaged that we would focus on the outcome/process of social change in and across particular (interconnected) locales, to see how development is negotiated on a discursive level as well as embodied in everyday social practices. In our concept paper we drew on sociological and anthropological perspectives to argue that the term development is not merely a concept, but rather signifies a set of processes, practices and ideas. This definition served to highlight the complexity of the notion of development, which can mean various things to differently positioned persons. Mobility – spatial and social mobility of people, things and particular ideas – was discussed as an analytical lens through which to explore how social change is informed, shaped and narrated. The next section reflects upon these conceptualisations, both of development and of mobility as a lens through which to view development, with respect to the research of the four sub-projects.

## 2. Reflections upon the notion of development from an empirical perspective

### *Development as discourse, as historical process of social change, and as practice/intervention*

Project **D1** (Henryk Alff/Matthias Schmidt) inquires upon interacting visions of ongoing social change across nodal points for trans-continental trade flow, namely at Almaty's Bolashak and Bishkek's Dordoy Bazaar. It draws on an actor- and practice-oriented approach for exploring the spatial and social mobility as well as connections, networks and positionalities of trade entrepreneurs that make up bazaars as places (Alff 2014a). This approach also strives to grasp the often mutually interconnected (yet more commonly represented as conflictive) ideas of change that have continuously shaped discourses surrounding and interventions towards these bazaars over the past decades (Alff 2014b, accepted). Therefore, this approach was concerned with the intersections and overlapping of development discourses, historic processes and practices.

The initial aim of project **D2** (Shahnaz Nadjmabadi), examining development processes in Iran's Eastern provinces, was to investigate the meaning of self-determined development, to capture the ideas and visions of the population about improving life conditions, and how such a state of 'development' might actually be achieved. Insights from field research highlight that discourses on development and social change, being determined at the political (administration and planning), intellectual (academia) and public levels, differ from the kind of development practices that have been introduced through the intervention of state development agencies and private initiatives. While the discourse particularly points to the region's history and its isolation during the last two decades, thus creating historical consciousness among the population, industrialisation and infrastructural development by state and private initiatives have facilitated entrepreneurship, business and crafts at a scale not seen before.

Work package **D3** (Joe Hill) focuses on farmer-managed irrigation systems in the mountain valleys of the Alai, Pamir, Karakorum and trans-Himalaya. Empirical research confirms that the distinction between the three notions of development (as practice, process and discourse) is but a conceptual one. For example, in the contemporary (neoliberal) period, and depending upon territorially-defined

governance arrangements, there is not always a clear-cut distinction between the categories government and non-government, for in some regions one finds staff working for government and non-government agencies or having family members in bureaucratic, political and non-government positions. Long-term processes of social change in high mountain valleys are driven by geo-political economic processes taking place at various scales (from the global, regional to the national), and by state-led or state-sanctioned policies and programmes, unevenly implemented across geographical space due to power-imbued scalar and network dynamics. Households and communities respond to such policies and programmes in varied ways, according to their individual and collective endowments e.g. via trans-local development strategies such as migratory nonfarm employment.

The project of Lutz Rzehak (**D4**) studies the link between society and language with a focus on terms qualified as social key words within the conceptual framework of Crossroads Asia. With a regional focus on Afghanistan, the research is based upon the idea that words can be explored as conceptual tools that reflect a society's past experiences of thinking and acting in certain ways and provide static structures shaping the long-term memories of the speakers of a language. Analyzing the link between the life of a society and the lexicon of the language/s spoken by it implies revealing the concepts speakers of a language typically have in mind when a particular word is used. Such concepts are subject to variation when society changes, but a person's conceptual perspective on life remains influenced or constrained by the conceptual tools provided by his or her native language. Since the concepts behind words can be seen as static structures influencing memory, the definition and exploration of social key words as conceptual tools adds not only a linguistic but also a cultural dimension to the discussion of development and modernity.

### ***Mobility as a lens for the analysis of social change (mobile ideas, spatial mobility, social mobility, and social mobilisation)***

The linkage of the (boundary) concept 'mobility' to that of 'development' seems to have held fairly well and to have proven useful during empirical research. We linked 'mobile ideas' with 'discourses of development', 'spatial mobility' with 'migration, trade, urbanisation (and remittances)'; 'social mobility' with 'poverty, inequality and social differentiation'; and 'social mobilisation' with 'access to and control over resources'. This was done while keeping in mind that an overemphasis on one socio-spatial concept (mobility) at the expense of others (e.g. place, territory, scale) would be one-dimensional and an over-extension (Leitner et al. 2008, Jessop et al. 2008). We were also wary not to get caught in the academic trap of privileging the application of an outside (etic) concept.

Mobile ideas, i.e. discourses of development, flowing into places or locales from elsewhere (other places/territories/across scales) is very much relevant, and is expected to be a major theme in all four work packages' analyses. In project **D1** this has been pertinent for the various notions of improvement and especially of modernity, shifting spatially and socially over time. If and how these affect and/or are appropriated and contested in the everyday life social practices of bazaar traders in Almaty and Bishkek, lies at the core of this research (Alff 2014a and b). While, for instance, private entrepreneurship at bazaars is often considered uncivilised and to be 'opposing modernity' in public discourse, trade practice is reliant on qualities like competitiveness and flexibility that are increasingly propagated as advantageous by the modernizing state (e.g. in Kazakhstan and China).

Project **D2** points out the important role of brokers in the development process, in this case those who, following the exploration and growing exploitation of resources made possible by

infrastructural developments, are moving to eastern provinces of Iran. Brokers carry with them innovative knowledge systems, information, ideas and values, contributing to the formation of new assemblages of technical experts, planners and management agents.

The role of mobile ideas (development discourses) in government and non-governmental agencies' support for varying types of property regime, or endorsement of differing types of transfers to villagers, is central to project **D3**. Development ideologies and the practices which accompany them, which may be imported to a nation-state from global discourses, or to a region from its mainland, invariably contributes to the shaping or defining of community relationships at the local level (as shown by Baker 2005: 97, see also Hill 2012). For example, the Hill Council model, which shapes local politics in Kargil, was developed in the eastern Himalayas and later imported into Ladakh (Van Beek 1999). Other influences, such as educational and religious discourses and practices, also contribute to and reinforce people's development condition and the sense they make of it. Empirical research shows that local populations are not (only) passive recipients of such discourses and practices.

Such tendencies are detected in project **D4** (Lutz Rzehak). For example, notions of modernity have spread across Afghanistan due to changes in linguistic behaviour. Particular varieties of Dari-Persian in Afghanistan are characterized as being more 'modern' (*'asrī*) than others. In this context the term 'modern' conveys a particular state of social development and a speaker's attitude towards it; the language is understood as having its own features on all levels of language, i.e. phonology, morphology, syntax and vocabulary. What is perceived as 'modern' Dari-Persian is mostly based upon the urban dialect of Kabul (although not completely identical to it), which can be traced to the fact that this variety has been popularized for decades by modern media, especially radio and TV stations located in Kabul, which has imbued the language with notions of modernity and development. Today it can be heard all over the country, overshadowing, more or less successfully, other local, often considered rural, dialects.

Mobility not only of ideas, but also of people and things, is important for all four work packages. Boundaries and borders, as both static structures delineating space and, often at the same time, being dynamically shaped by and informing mobility (boundary work), form an important aspect in this regard (Paasi 2005). In many cases both, social and spatial mobility as well as the impact of socio-cultural and political boundaries cannot be thought of and analysed separately from each other, but have to be explored in their interaction, intersection and mutual impact. Project **D1**, for instance, has shown in an illustrative way how Dungan traders have been involved in dynamic socio-spatial boundary-strengthening and weakening practices, in order to benefit from increasing commercial exchange across the Xinjiang-Kyrgyzstan-Kazakhstan borderlands since the Sino-Soviet rapprochement in the late 1980s. As similar processes could be observed regarding Baloch traders (in work package C1) and Uzbek water managers (research by Hornidge), synthesising of data across work packages and working groups was achieved (Alff et al. 2014, under review), thus bringing together otherwise isolated analyses. **D2** explores borders in the context of shifting security regimes and shows how processes of securitization at the Iran-Afghanistan border are reflected in complex processes of bordering, de-bordering and re-bordering.

Project **D3** shows how the Central Asia (former Soviet Union) – South Asia divide, and the Pakistan – India divide (Hill 2014a), have pronounced consequences for local populations; these divides are not solely academic or geopolitical constructs. An obvious example is labour migration which from the

Kyrgyz Alai and Tajik Pamir is directed northwards and from the Pakistani Karakorum and Indian trans-Himalaya is directed southwards. Another example is government funding: the Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan governments have no funds to invest, while the Pakistani and Indian governments are pumping funds into irrigation and other projects (which also support their standing armies). Few academic studies directly link migration and irrigation management, perhaps because the effects of government actions and people's spatial mobility/migration are difficult to separate.

Social mobility – alternatively social inequality or social differentiation – is a longer-term process of social change that is deeply intertwined with the implementation of (or absence of) government-sanctioned development programmes or interventions. In **D3** it is observed that, whether in Gorno-Badakhshan or Gilgit-Baltistan, particular families/lineages/households have retained socio-economic and political dominance in their localities over the past century. In Gorno-Badakhshan Shokhdara valley's former ruler's great-grandson continues to have the village's largest landholdings, having weathered the entire Soviet Union period (Hill 2013a); while in Gilgit-Baltistan's Shigar valley we find the families of the pre-partition local ruler and of his former advisor in the present-day dominating politics and having positions in the local government and the region's prominent NGO (Hill 2014b). On the other hand, in some places we see instances of rapid shift in inter-household social mobility within villages caused by, for example, the discovery of a mineral (Hill 2013b).

Social mobilisation, meaning the process/practice of gaining access to and beneficially utilizing or retaining control over various resources (knowledge, values, various types of capital etc.), has been analysed, though so far rather implicitly, in the four work packages. Work packages **D1**, **D2** and **D3** address social mobilisation through notions of progress and improvement, embodied in the intentions of statist development interventions as well as in the emic, everyday understanding of improvement by local actors.

### **3. Conceptual Broadenings: Positionality, Scale, and Processes of Becoming**

For understanding social change in particular places, initially underrepresented but interrelated concepts (e.g. positionality, negotiation/becoming, value theory) have been fed into our research. In the course of project **D1** it has become clear that statist intentions of achieving modernity, though strongly debated, are generally supported in their symbolic value by large parts of the population, including many trade actors. However, the underlying principles are often deemed utopian/unattainable by the latter, as the outcomes of modernizing interventions, at least in the case of bazaar trade in Kazakhstan, are perceived as unsatisfactory due to the lack of capability and moral accountability ascribed to the post-Socialist state authorities in contributing to the greater good (Alff 2013, 2014b). Consequently, 'real improvement' in living conditions across society, in the opinion of many traders, especially those involved in wholesale, carries a connotation of morality they feel obliged towards by providing affordable goods and labour, even though their cross-border trade practice between suppliers in coastal China and customers in Siberia is widely considered illicit, unorganised and unsophisticated. The situative positioning of people within horizontal and vertical connections, flows of goods and values and between various locales, indeed appears as a manifestation of the multidimensionality of social spaces (Jessop et al. 2008, Leitner et al. 2008). The argument of Jessop and colleagues that no particular sociospatial dimension (e.g. territoriality, distance, network, mobility, or scale) should be privileged resonates with the findings of project D1.

Our research clearly shows that scalar dichotomies of 'statist' as opposed to 'local'/'individual' visions of development cannot hold. Such visions are mutually constitutive, continuously shaped during actors' social practice. In order to understand the dynamics of social change taking place in concrete, yet connected, places, impacting upon and being shaped by influences from the bodily to the global level (without giving the imperative to any one of them), it seems worthwhile to incorporate "scale jumping" as a component of analysis (van Schendel 2002). In the context of **D1**, the modernisation paradigm in political rhetoric in Kazakhstan, propagating progress by forging a civilising mission towards trade disorder at bazaars from above, is neither rejected nor accepted by the traders. Rather it is constantly and often strategically re-negotiated, adapted and accommodated in everyday discourse and practice (Alff 2014b). Therefore, it is argued here, that development in bazaar trade could be conceptualized not as a 'state of being' but rather as a 'process of becoming', in which social interaction over knowledge, values, power and resources across places and scales is constantly reconfigured.

In work package **D2**, Iran's Eastern province's population's historical consciousness regarding favorable living conditions in the past contrasts with their current bordering situation with Afghanistan and Pakistan. Related to the aspect of development as social change, **D2** has drawn on value theory by considering value as the way actions become meaningful for an actor as they become integrated (incorporated) into a larger social entity (Graeber 2001). Social change manifests once the underlying basis for human action (i.e. value systems) have been transformed. Development in all its varieties and shades, as illustrated in projects **D1-D3**, is closely related to negotiation processes as a part of human interaction and, thus, cannot be separated from questions of communication and language, the focus of project **D4**. We aim not only to examine existing concepts and impacts of development, but also to analyze language and linguistic behaviour as an integral feature of social development.

#### **4. Methodological reflections**

The application of multi-sited and mobile ethnography was practiced successfully in project **D1**, although field research in Xinjiang has been limited so far due to security and practicability considerations. For a variety of reasons, e.g. to enable the gaining of trust and confidence of interlocutors, project **D2** chose to pursue longer-term research in a few locales. Project **D3** struggled with short field research timeframes in previously unknown, fairly inhospitable environments.

Methodologically what are of great interest at present are the post-fieldwork and writing-up phases. How can the material generated be brought together and organised, how can and should auto-critiques be presented, which narratives should be sketched out and which ones left aside? Rabinow and Stavrianakis (2013: 32-33) state that the relations of fieldwork and the knowledge produced from it, as well as one's exit from the field and what one engages in during the subsequent period, have largely been ignored or under-examined in the literature. Having left the field the following elements require reflection and transformation: the objects of knowledge produced, the subject positions of the former participant-observer, the affective dynamics of the field and the exit from it, and the narrative modality given to this process (ibid., see also Clifford 1986). Left unanswered at present is the larger issue of how we (as a network, or in our working groups) produce knowledge: currently this is pursued on an individual level (in our office, behind our computers) and not collaboratively.

## 5. Conclusion

It is clear that when pursuing an actor-centred approach to research, we must try to understand emic categories and representations (in recognition of the importance of language), while remaining conscious that large areas of social life and cognition are non-linguistic (Eriksen 1995); and objects too have agency (Latour 2005). An awareness of the emic-etic dichotomy remains of fundamental importance in our research, especially for short field research trips. Yet the historical dimension to our research also illustrates, for example, that what might now be considered emic may once have been etic. Though the insights gleaned from long-term fieldwork in one locale cannot be dismissed, we also want to highlight the methodological value of multi-sited, often shorter-term research that crosses borders and boundaries, for it can reveal insights (from 'being there') that would otherwise (e.g. from literature reviews alone) remain unrevealed. However most of our project experiences show that an individual researcher cannot possibly cover all the identified methodological possibilities; thus one idea for the future could be that groups of researchers with different disciplinary backgrounds and topics could work alongside each other in geographical areas.

Statist and local/individual attitudes (or values) towards social change should not be treated as dichotomous or as being in opposition to each other. Rather, viewing the multiple intersections and dynamic interactions between the two helps to gain an understanding of how places connected spatially and socially (multilocalities) evolve and change over time. Positionality, a relational concept that links perspective and scale, can reveal power relations and emphasise the situated nature of knowledge (and so challenge those who claim objectivity) (Sheppard 2002). It describes the flexible situatedness of actors (and non-human entities) to one another in time/space (ibid.) and acknowledges their reflexivity, while it requires self-reflexivity of the researcher him/herself. Space in this respect is not regarded solely in the territorial sense of location or distance, but also takes on a social dimension, referring to the positioning of actors and accommodation of their practices in interpersonal relationships (networks) as well as in flows of people, goods and ideas. Serving as an intermediary concept to spatial dimensions like place, scale and networks, positionality is thus posited as a promising lens for exploring social change.

The notion of becoming in a Deleuzian sense (Deleuze 1995, Biehl and Locke 2010), which describes the dynamic process of interaction that produces new relations, trajectories, knowledge and representations on an everyday basis, provides a promising way to grasp what we have referred to earlier as negotiation. Thus, we argue that various notions of development are fixed neither in time-space nor in seemingly static and pre-assumed power asymmetries. Rather, they are constantly re-arranged and re-configured in an everyday process of negotiation, dependent upon the socio-spatial situatedness of actors and non-human entities.

Finally, a closer look at boundary-making and weakening processes may be helpful for the empirical analysis of the sometimes pragmatic positioning of actors between translocalities, as well as in processes of spatial and social mobility and in connections and flows of things, values and ideas that inform and are shaped by social change. In a broader (ontological) sense the contestation of disciplinary and categorical boundaries may also be required for overcoming methodological and conceptual one-sidedness in research, as our research has shown through our exploration of notions of development practices and ideologies, and statist and local perspectives towards social change.



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## Information on the competence network Crossroads Asia

The competence network Crossroads Asia derives its name from the geographical area extending from eastern Iran to western China and from the Aral Sea to Northern India. The scholars collaborating in the competence network pursue a novel, 'post-area studies' approach, making thematic figurations and mobility the overarching perspectives of their research in Crossroads Asia. The concept of figuration implies that changes, minor or major, within one element of a constellation always affect the constellation as a whole; the network will test the value of this concept for understanding the complex structures framed by the cultural, political and socio-economic contexts in Crossroads Asia. Mobility is the other key concept for studying Crossroads Asia, which has always been a space of entangled interaction and communication, with human beings, ideas and commodities on the move across and beyond cultural, social and political borders. Figurations and mobility thus form the analytical frame of all three main thematic foci of our research: conflict, migration, and development.

- Five sub-projects in the working group **“Conflict”** will focus upon specific localized conflict-figurations and their relation to structural changes, from the interplay of global politics, the erosion of statehood, and globalization effects from above and below, to local struggles for autonomy, urban-rural dynamics and phenomena of diaspora. To gain a deeper understanding of the rationales and dynamics of conflict in Crossroads Asia, the sub-projects aim to analyze the logics of the genesis and transformation of conflictual figurations, and to investigate autochthonous conceptions of, and modes of dealing with conflicts. Particular attention will be given to the interdependence of conflict(s) and mobility.
- Six sub-projects in the working group **“Migration”** aim to map out trans-local figurations (networks and flows) within Crossroads Asia as well as figurations extending into both neighboring and distant areas (Arabian Peninsula, Russia, Europe, Australia, America). The main research question addresses how basic organizational and functional networks are structured, and how these structures affect what is on the move (people, commodities, ideas etc.). Conceptualizing empirical methods for mapping mobility and complex connectivities in trans-local spaces is a genuine desideratum. The aim of the working group is to refine the method of qualitative network analysis, which includes flows as well as their structures of operation, and to map mobility and explain mobility patterns.
- In the **“Development”**-working group four sub-projects are focusing on the effects of spatial movements (flows) and interwoven networks at the micro level with regard to processes of long-term social change, and with a special focus on locally perceived livelihood opportunities and their potential for implementation. The four sub-projects focus on two fundamental aspects: first, on structural changes in processes of transformation of patterns of allocation and distribution of resources, which are contested both at the household level and between individual and government agents; secondly, on forms of social mobility, which may create new opportunities, but may also cause the persistence of social inequality.

The competence network aims to mediate between the academic study of Crossroads Asia and efforts to meet the high demand for information on this area in politics and the public. Findings of the project will feed back into academic teaching, research outside the limits of the competence network, and public relations efforts. Further information on Crossroads Asia is available at [www.crossroads-asia.de](http://www.crossroads-asia.de).

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