Qualitative Approaches in Researching Social Cohesion

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- Research: **'Social Cohesion through Community-Based Development'**
    - **Aims** of 'Qualitative Tracking Study' (QTS)
    - Methodology: **Narratives on Social Cohesion, Conflict & Project Proposals**
    - **Fieldwork Locations: Villages** in **Naryn & Osh** *oblasts*
    - **Some Key Findings**

Aims of 'Qualitative Tracking Study' (QTS)

- General Aim of QTS:

  - **Complement quantitative aspects** covered in Baseline Survey Report (BSR) by developing **qualitative approach** on aspects such as **trust**, senses of **belonging** or **participation** in community decision-making

- Main Aim of **2015 fieldwork (phase 1)**:

  - What are the **basic parameters of social cohesion** at individual, household & community levels?

- Main Aim of **2016 fieldwork (phase 2)**:

  - How is the emergence, handling and imagination of **project proposals** related to social cohesion?

- Main Aim of **2017 fieldwork (phase 3)**:

  - In which ways have **implemented** project proposals already **impacted** social cohesion locally?

Methodology: Narratives on Social Cohesion, Conflict & Project Proposals

- Research instrument: **qualitative interviewing** with open-end questions
    - Opportunity to express viewpoints freely
    - Empirical data: in-depth rather than generalizable

- Approach: **interview guideline** (IG) with key questions
    - Trigger **narratives on social cohesion &**
        - **conflict generally** = **2015** fieldwork: e.g. personal events (*toi*) or community events (*ashar*)
        - **project proposals** = **2016** fieldwork: e.g. local appropriateness, decision-making process, imagined consequences
        - **implementation impacts** = **2017** fieldwork: e.g. long-term collective goals, inclusion of marginal groups

2015 fieldwork:
Example of a conversation on village information flow

- Q: **When you meet, what do you talk about?**

- A: …They talked about the water issue…Why did they increase the price to 15 Som and not 10 Som?…Regarding this water issue, women said that **if they were there, they would have raised this issue**. This **decision was made by 20 people, not more**. Many complained that this was decided by few people. Maybe some were **not properly informed**.

- Q: Whom do people **blame** [for this]?

- A: I think **these bearded men** [*aksakal*], because AO does not decide it on its own. **AO gathers local people. I guess mainly *aksakal* came.**

- Q: Who could **say something against it** [this decision]?

- A: **Young people** could. People say that there is a youth committee. They **could stand up**. I think those who **pay more**, those who have **more members** in the family, they could say something against it [as well].'

2016 fieldwork:

Example of an informant's rationale for supporting a kindergarten project

» 'For example, last year on the **1st of June,** I saw parents being involved. Kids are small and cannot perform on their own… Approximately 10 parents from the bigger group and 10 parents from the smaller group gathered and **created a performance,** like a comedy show. Parents were of different age groups: younger and older ones. So parents came together, did something together. **This is the unity.** If their kids would not be in kindergarten, they would not know each other. Who knows who lives in the upper side [of the village] and who lives here? They know each other because their kids go to kindergarten.'

2017 fieldwork:
Example of a project's spillover impact on a local community

» 'It was in winter and they installed [the heating]. We made a decree to have a holiday at that time, and later on, we will study on Saturdays [to compensate for those days]. The school and kindergarten made the same thing. **Everyone helped... We have organised a marathon and they all said that if the money is not enough, they will gather money.**
All people said that they are ready for everything... There are sometimes people who say "we don't need it [a certain project]". **But in this project all people were united.** I think we understood the project well... **Around 100.000 Som were collected.** I am not sure how much exactly... But, this money was enough. It is good money.'

- **23 Villages**:
  - **5 in Naryn** *oblast*: all mono-ethnic Kyrgyz
  - **18 in Osh** *oblast*: mostly multi-ethnic Kyrgyz & Uzbek
- **184 Interviews**:
  - In **Kyrgyz or Uzbek** language; between **20 and 60 minutes** long
  - **Sex**: 97 respondents female (53%), 87 male (47%)
  - **Ethnicity**: 136 respondents Kyrgyz (74%), 43Uzbek (23%), 5 other (3%)

- Level of **whole rural communities**:

  - Tension of **collective social harmony** (*yntymak*) **vs. individual, alternative interests**

  - Participation **of marginal influence groups** (women, youth) in decision-making depends on ability to mobilise **minimal necessary number** of own members

  - In **smaller villages: more participation** during collective events (festive or work-related); **but also**: alternative interests **rather subordinated** to value 'social harmony'

- **Relation** between residents and local AO in large parts **disconnected**:

  - **AO** activities focused on **(public) cultural events**; otherwise community **challenges unaddressed**, resolved **slowly,** or receive attention **only upon outside stimulation**

  - Expectations towards AO not primarily financial; **needs** concern **improvement of information flow** (e.g. inclusion of all villagers); **transparent and fair mediation** of interests ('managing expectations'); **advocacy** on behalf of residents towards third parties (e.g. the AO as a liaison between villagers and NGOs)

  - **Disinterest and a lack of self-initiative** among villagers as regards communal matters; **potential to mobilise limited** when **no individual and immediate material profit** in sight, but **'only' a long-term and collective goal**

- **Comparing Naryn & Osh *oblasts*:**

  - **Naryn:** more respondents **knowledgeable & involved**; **Osh: more confusion, mistrust & frustration** due to previously 'unfulfilled promises' (reasons: higher population density, stronger structural neglect)

  - **Osh:** more often **'socio-cultural factors'** play into project rationales (prestige, stigmatization from speaking up, enviousness)

- **Projects focused on social infrastructures** (kindergarten, school etc.); 'safe choice' = **avoiding suspicion** of unjust distribution & favouritism?

- **Decision-making**: key **orientation** for individual behavior & for public legitimization = **imagined, homogenous village community** (*el* = the people); in **practice: individual interests subordinate** to pre-established collective opinion

- **System of alternatingly distributed funds** between villages; 'pragmatic clustering' = **empathy** for others' problems **& self-interest** (next in line, alleviate own challenges) = sign of **trans-village social cohesion?**

- **Limitation**: fieldwork occurred shortly after project implementation or even prior to it; therefore: certain aspects could not be examined, e.g. long-term goal-orientation or continuous inclusion of marginal groups

- **Early insights that need further examination (part 1)**:

  - Do **smaller and remote communities reveal stronger self-initiative to foster social cohesion and utilise opportunities** than larger settlements and those that are closer to regional centres?

  - What is the appropriate **'density' of certain projects** and from where on do potentials for translocal social cohesion become constrained, e.g. if all villages had soccer fields, then (male) youth would remain strictly local instead of befriending with the youth of neighbouring villages?

- **Early insights that need further examination (part 2):**

  - Which are the **diverging effects** of projects that focused on **social infrastructures** (e.g. kindergarten renovation), as compared to those with an **economic or mixed purpose** (e.g. a veterinary service)?

  - How can implemented projects create **spill-overs to wider and indirect beneficiary groups**, e.g. from a renovated kindergarten to parents supporting one another actively?

  - What steps can be taken to **conserve the positive 'spirit'** in project communities to create robust foundations of social cohesion that ensure the **future maintenance** of these social or economic infrastructures?

THANK YOU!