

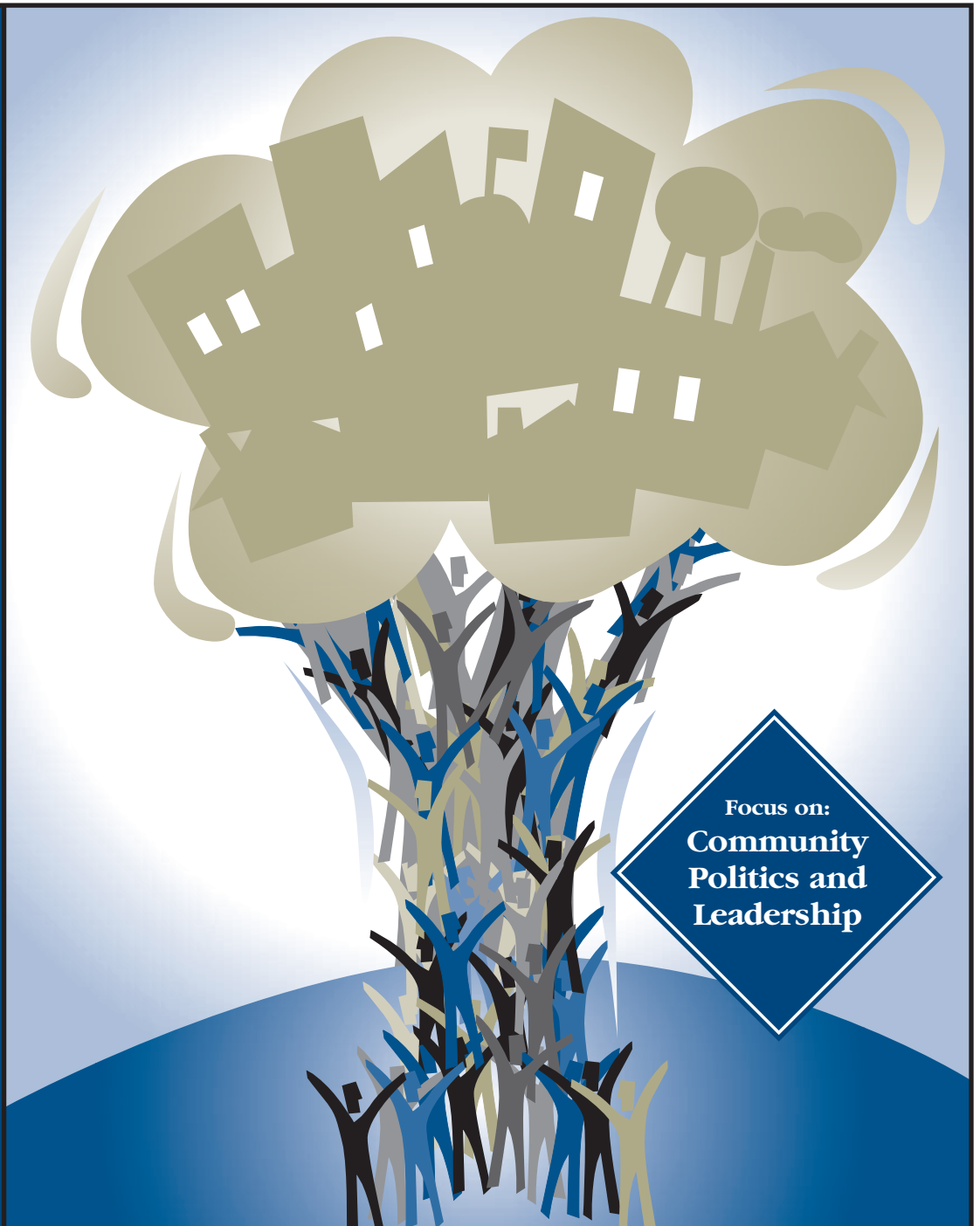
CONNECTIONS

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From Dialogue to Action in Tajikistan

By Parviz Mullojanov

It was August 1999 when we, 17 Tajik citizens representing different political, social, and ethnic factions of our society, gathered in Moscow in order to participate in one of the most decisive and important rounds of the Inter-Tajik Sustained Dialogue. Begun in 1993 during one of the most disastrous periods of the Tajik civil war, the Inter-Tajik Dialogue had helped bring about the peace treaty, signed in 1997, between government and opposition forces. During the postconflict period, the dialogue had served as a way to discuss the most acute problems related to the peace process.

By 1999, there was one major concern shared equally by all of us: how to ensure the further strengthening of the peace- and confidence-building process in Tajikistan, how to make the peace in our country sustainable. The treaty had been seriously tested twice in the two years since its signing, by clashes and fighting between the progovernment and opposition troops, and it was our common feeling that something had to be done in order to guarantee further development of the Tajik peace process.

Another concern was the future of the Inter-Tajik Dialogue: As internal political conditions in Tajikistan change, we asked ourselves, what shape and role should the dialogue take in the postconflict period?

During the August meeting, dialogue participants reached the following main conclusions:

It was time to move from the discussion and deliberation process to the next stage: implementation of practical actions. Over the six-year course of the Inter-Tajik Dialogue, its members had managed to identify the most acute problems and obstacles confronting the peace process in Tajikistan. Moreover, they had managed to work out and propose a number of choices and approaches as a basis for some principal peace agreements.

The dialogue's next stage — as it was identified by the August meeting participants — was to be a period of practical implementation of the major decisions and approaches worked out during the previous long and productive process of deliberation.

It was time to shift the Inter-Tajik Dialogue from Moscow to Tajikistan. Since the beginning, the dialogue had been held in Russia due to the complexity of the political situation in Tajikistan. But after the adoption of the peace treaty, internal political conditions became much more conducive to holding events such as the dialogue, inside the country.

It was also time to shift the dialogue from the top- and mid-levels to the level of ordinary citizens and communities. The official peace process involved a restricted number of top decision makers and could therefore be violated at any moment due to subjective reasons, such as personal misunderstanding between those involved or political self-interest.

The only way to make the peace process really sustainable was to make it more public. In other words, the more people, especially on the community level, involved in the peace process, the more stable it will become.

During the August meeting, participants designed a plan of action that included concrete ways to implement the decisions resulting from the dialogue.

One of the major decisions was to establish a nongovernmental organization (NGO) inside Tajikistan to be responsible for practical implementation of the action plan. The NGO was established and registered in Tajikistan in March 2000 as the Public Committee for Democratic Processes (PCDP).

The main course of action for the PCDP was carefully designed by a working group consisting of the most prominent members of the dialogue based on

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Members of the Economic Development Committee (EDC) in Dushanbe, Tajikistan. The citizens group was one of the first EDCs established by the Public Committee for Democratic Processes.

The EDC Track could be described briefly as conflict resolution through social and economic development, with the main approach being public deliberation.

international experience; in this respect, the advice and recommendations of Harold Saunders, director of international affairs for the Kettering Foundation (KF), and KF associate Randa Slim were especially useful for working-group members.

One of the major directions of the PCDP became what is known as the Economic Development Committee (EDC) Track. This involved the establishment of citizen groups in three different regions of Tajikistan where ethnic, political, and social tensions still threatened regional stability. Each EDC's primary aim was to mitigate the tensions and stabilize the situation on a community level by involving representatives of opposing groups in deliberation about social and economic issues, joint economic activities, and cooperation.

We decided that every EDC should consist of 12-15 people representing all levels, ethnic groups, and factions of local society. Representatives of different and sometimes opposing factions were to discuss economic and social problems specific to their region and find ways to solve them. In other words, the EDC Track could be described briefly as conflict resolution through social and economic development, with the main approach being public deliberation.

The EDC Track proceeded in stages:

First — We selected three regions of the republic: Kofarnihon, located near

the capital, Dushanbe, and considered one of the opposition strongholds; Shahritus, located along the Afghan-Tajik border; and the city of Qurghan-teppa, located in the south. The three regions are different but, at the same time, they had one particular feature in common: in all of them, clashes and atrocities during the civil war were widespread. As a result, the tension between local communities and ethnic groups was still high.

The Kofarnihon and Shahritus EDCs were created on the community level. The Qurghan-teppa EDC, however, was established on the government level and was supervised by the local deputy mayor, which turned out to be a mistake: being too official, the Qurghan-teppa EDC finally failed and was discontinued at the end of the first year. But the other two EDCs survived and are successfully continuing their activities today.

Second — We carefully selected two moderators in every region. We tried to find the most respected and influential people to use as our representatives in the regions. We asked the moderators to identify among local people potential participants for every EDC. In order to get good feedback, it was especially important to ensure wide representation on the EDCs. Therefore, EDC members represent all levels and ethnic groups of local society; among them are doctors, farmers, engineers, laborers, journalists,

and local officeholders. We tried also to maintain balance inside every EDC in order to avoid any kind of domination in terms of ethnic, regional, or professional affiliation.

Third — In June 2000, we conducted the first training workshop for the moderators. During the next two years, every EDC moderator participated in a series of workshops on moderating skills held by the Public Committee.

Fourth — Each EDC conducted a series of monthly meetings during which the participants discussed economic and social conditions in their region and identified a cluster of the most acute problems and issues. In the course of the first year, EDC members successfully completed the issue-framing and naming stages. Throughout this period, PC representatives participated in every EDC meeting, taking responsibility for logistical issues and helping local moderators facilitate when necessary.

Fifth — At the end of the first year, the EDCs entered the next stage: the design of concrete actions. In the previous stage, they had managed to identify the most acute economic and social problems in their communities; during the next stage, they identified ways and mechanisms to solve the problems. The Public Committee offered to EDC members a series of one- or two-day training workshops on fundraising and proposal writing. EDC members then developed concrete projects and proposals, which were later submitted to the appropriate

donor agencies. A separate working group made up of EDC members and invited experts from outside worked out the details for each project.

Sixth — The two EDCs have each developed a few proposals based on the needs and characteristics of their regions. For instance, in Kofarnihon, where many stock-breeding farms are located, the EDC developed proposals for the creation of a milk-processing factory in the region. By the end of the second year, donor agencies had approved some of the proposals, and both EDCs entered the stage of practical implementation of their own ideas and plans.

Seventh — Today, the Public Committee is shifting its attention to other regions of the country, creating new EDCs in the city of Kulob (south) and Buston district (north). As for the original EDCs, they themselves were responsible for defining their future: they had to decide whether to end their activities after implementation of the first grants or to continue their own development as informal associations of citizens or NGOs.

Both Kofarnihon and Shahritus EDC members have decided for now to continue their activities. As one of the Kofarnihon EDC members recently stated: “We want to continue our EDC activities because this is an opportunity for us to become more responsible for our own future and rely on our own efforts.”

During my last visit to Kofarnihon, I asked a group of local EDC members to

We tried also to maintain balance inside every EDC in order to avoid any kind of domination in terms of ethnic, regional, or professional affiliation.

Photo courtesy of the Public Committee for Democratic Processes



EDC members in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, represent all levels, ethnic groups, and factions in their region. They discuss local economic and social problems and explore ways to solve them.



“We want to continue our EDC activities because this is an opportunity for us to become more responsible for our own future and rely on our own efforts.”



define the main outcomes of their work. Their answers could be summarized in the following way:

First of all, the relationship inside the EDC between representatives of different communities and ethnic groups has essentially changed. Through working together, people have established steady contacts and, sometimes, even friendships. As members of the EDC working groups, they were accustomed to meeting frequently, and for many of them, seeing each other every other day has turned into a kind of habit. As a result, the stereotypes and biases they used to have about each other have diminished. Moreover, they have begun to understand that economic and social development of their communities cannot be secured

without joint efforts by all community members, regardless of their political or ethnic backgrounds.

In the future, as proposals and projects are implemented, cooperation between EDC members is going to increase. This would gradually affect more and more people outside of the EDCs. In time, the relationships between the communities and people involved should improve and become more peaceful and cooperative instead of conflictual. I suspect this would be the real and most essential outcome of our dialogue.

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Correction

Photo captions on p. 24 and p. 26 in the May 2002 issue of *Connections* mis-identified the country in which Cuenca is situated. It is in Ecuador.

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Connections is published by the Kettering Foundation, 200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2799.

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