

Community, the State and Development Assistance: Transforming the Mahalla in Tajikistan

Anna Cieřlewska



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*in memory of my grandfather,
Stanisław Cieřlewski*

ANNA CIEŚLEWSKA

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Kraków

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Abstract

This study analyses various aspects of the interaction of the state administration, international organizations and the *mahalla* in Tajikistan, and investigates the social and economic changes which have influenced this traditional form of social organization. The text interweaves a theoretical approach with observations and research gathered during the conducting of fieldwork and the implementation of NGO projects. Particularly, three main questions are addressed in the text. The first of these is the relationship between the *mahalla* and the state administration, concerning which I provide insights into its legal basis as well as its practical implications. The second analysed issue involves the complex problem of donor policies regarding local development as pertains to adopting elements of traditional self-government into the tenets of their development strategies. Lastly, the socio-economic situation in Tajikistan is considered, including its impact on the transformation of the traditional social institutions of the *mahalla*. The main conclusion of this study is that neither the state nor international organizations have managed to develop a model of cooperation with the *mahalla* based on principles of equality and partnership. Instead, this traditional social organization is subjected to various modifications aimed at conforming it to the requirements of the various parties concerned. In addition, over twenty years of economic crisis have resulted in changes within the social structures of Tajik society, which have further contributed to reshaping communal institutions and traditional practices.

Key words: *self-government, civil society, local development, traditional institutions, international aid, local administration*

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For centuries, the mahalla as a quarter within cities and villages, regulated the life of sedentary communities maintaining relative autonomy at the grass-root level. During the Soviet period, the mahalla underwent transformation, nevertheless, its practices and traditions still shaped local relationships. The rapid changes after the collapse of the USSR also affected the mahalla, which has been included into the legislative framework of Tajikistan, and since 2008 has become the smallest administrative unit, partly losing its traditional functions. In the meantime, the mahalla have also become popular as an indigenous form of communal organisation among the Western aid agencies operating in the region.

The book Community, the State and Development Assistance: Transforming the Mahalla in Tajikistan by Anna Cieřlewska, is a critical analysis of the various interactions between state administration, international organizations and the mahalla in the context of the social and economic changes in contemporary Tajikistan. The author provides examples from field research and development projects conducted between 2010 and 2014.



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