

## **Development interventions, grassroots movements and policy reform in Kyrgyz Republic**

Development interventions by states or donor organizations often envision socioeconomic transformations of target societies. However, external interventions most of the time prescribe some models or frameworks that might have been successful elsewhere to be replicable in a given context. That is why critical development scholars argue that development interventions often fail to benefit target societies and lead to unintended consequences when they ignore local realities (social relations, knowledge, culture, history and geography) and how these are entangled with broader political and economic systems.

This Masters' thesis project focuses on an irrigation project in Kyrgyz Republic and the role of grassroots movements in enforcing policy reforms on water management. Since 1991, the agricultural sector of the Kyrgyz Republic underwent numerous institutional and legal reforms. After the rapid privatisation campaign following independence from the Soviet Union, continued reforms aimed at improving agricultural productivity and local governance. Regarding irrigation, those reforms were only partially successful. The initial belief that local Water User Associations (WUAs) would deliver irrigation water and manage respective facilities on their own and from their own account soon turned out to be unrealistic. However, existing laws made it impossible for local water users to equitably access water resources. Therefore, with the support of the Irrigation Water Integrity Project (IWIP) of Helvetas Kyrgyzstan, a local group of engaged advocates in 2018 started to lobby for changes to the Kyrgyz Water Code, the Law on Water User Associations, and the Code on Legal Violations of the Kyrgyz Republic. In late 2021, the National Parliament and the President of the Kyrgyz Republic eventually endorsed the respective reform package. Creating new opportunities for cooperation between local authorities and WUAs, the legal reform changes the way how on-farm irrigation is financed, managed, and maintained. At the same time, it paves the way for further sector reforms.

This project, therefore, aims at investigating the patchy landscape of implementation of the new water reform at local, regional and national level, and understanding the effects of the new legal framework on the delivery of local irrigation services, whether and how it affects the practices of key actors at different levels, and how this might influence future reforms of the Kyrgyz irrigation sector.

The research also aims at better understanding possible differences in the effectiveness and efficiency of the old and new model. To this end, it will be important to understand how LSGs, WUAs, end users (farmers), and other relevant system actors perceive, interpret and apply the new legal framework at local level, and which advantages and disadvantages they experience. At the same time, it will be important to understand and analyse previous and current discourses regarding irrigation management in Kyrgyzstan (there has been plenty of research on this). Key actors at national level include state ministries; the National WUA Union; the National Union of Local Self-Governments (LSG Union); the World Bank and other donor agencies; international, national and local NGOs; and others. What has been their position with regard to the legal reforms; how do they perceive, interpret and engage with the new laws and rules?

**Approx. 3 months of field research in Kyrgyzstan** (starting date ideally spring 2023)

- Logistical support by Helvetas Kyrgyzstan in terms of accommodation, transport, networking, translation
- Co-funding by Helvetas Kyrgyzstan and the University of Zurich, Dept. of Geography
- Expected outputs: Presentation of preliminary results in Kyrgyzstan at the end of the field research period; Final presentation in a virtual / hybrid format (e.g., at the Helvetas Zurich office) upon completion of the MSc study; MSc study

Supervisors:

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