

Grassroots Peacebuilding: Cross-Border Cooperation in the Ferghana Valley

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Borders and border issues have enormous implications for peacebuilding. A bottom-up perspective is especially important, as people on the ground are the best resource for building and sustaining peace. Cross-border grassroots peacebuilding practices have shown how state borders do not simply divide people into territories, but in fact underlie their everyday interactions. Peacebuilding does not need to be imposed, but rather supported by cross-border communal engagement to strengthen social cohesion. This paper looks at grassroots peacebuilding through the example of formal and infor-

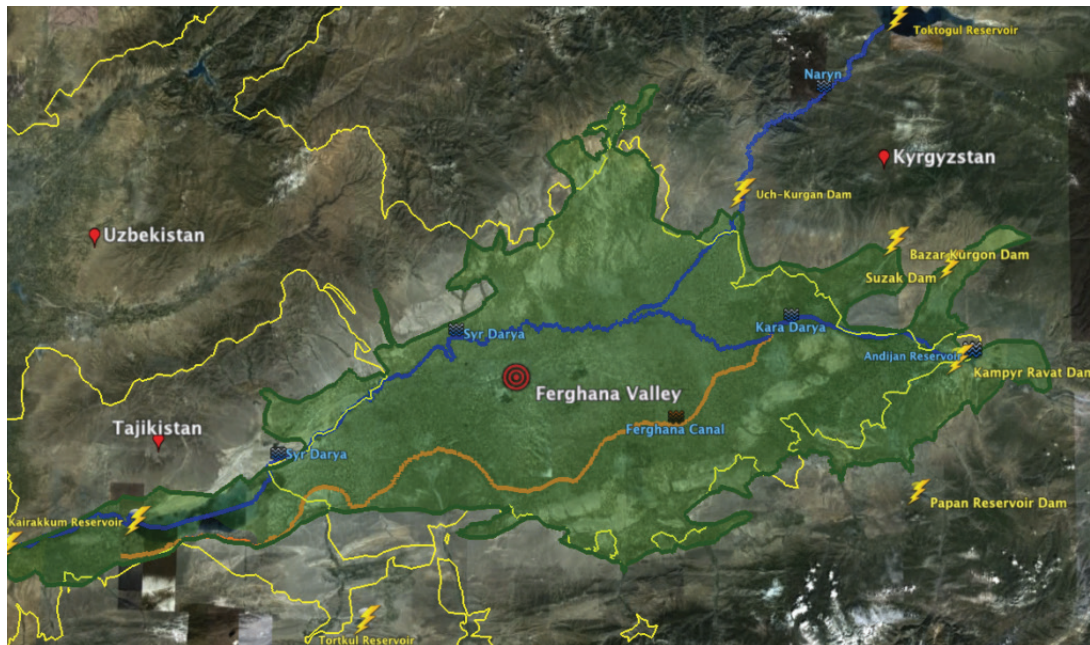
mal cross-border cooperation in Central Asia's Ferghana Valley.

Referred to as the heart of Central Asia and located at the intersection of three Central Asian countries, the Ferghana Valley brings together Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, and Tajiks. The overall population of the Valley is nearly 12 million; it comprises almost one-third of the total population of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan and close to one-quarter of the population of Uzbekistan.¹ This is a highly populated area, with an average population density of around 360 persons per square kilometer.² The Ferghana Valley brings together states and people

with common histories, similar cultures, and nearly identical infrastructure, yet it is politically and linguistically divided. Since the 1990s, security dynamics in the region have deteriorated. Disputes over land, road use, water and irrigation, pastures, trade, ethno-national identity, and more continue to cause cross-border incidents that sometimes escalate into conflicts.

In view of the imperative to secure peace, this policy paper looks at examples of cooperation between cross-border communities and discusses how these interactions can sustain grassroots peacebuilding. It argues that there are many examples of productive and meaningful cooperation between cross-border communities. This interaction responds to the needs of the people living around the borders, builds trust between cross-border communities, and consequently sustains peace on the ground.

Regrettably, the current policy approach of the region's governments on border issues and peacebuilding is to view these everyday interactions and practices through the lens of

Map 1. Fergana Valley

Source: “Osh and the Fergana Valley,” *Geohistory*,
<http://geohistory.today/osh-fergana-Valley/>

security—and to respond with more border posts, more border officials, more checkpoints, and more restrictions, thereby making it more difficult to communicate and collaborate across borders. While securitization is part of nation-building and state-building processes, states should place greater emphasis on its effects on ordinary people and balance border security with the everyday needs of border dwellers. Indeed, border dwellers resist such “securitization” on the part of governments and find ways to continue their grassroots cooperation, by means formal and informal. These interactions and collaborations at and across the borders have secondary, yet important, benefits that are conducive to building trust and facilitating peace at the grassroots level.

Grassroots peacebuilding could be even more effective if state policies were to support grassroots efforts. This paper first discusses the drivers of cross-border tensions and conflicts in the Fergana Valley. It then revisits the current policy approach to border issues and peacebuilding and the limitations thereof, before discussing existing grassroots practices at the borders that sustain peace. Finally, the paper concludes with policy recommendations.

Drivers of Cross-Border Tensions and Conflicts

The Soviet Union drew the borders of the Central Asian states during the 1920s and 1930s. The process of administrative and national delineation was complex, led by Lenin’s decision to authorize maps of Turkestan and then

assess the possibility of merging or dividing areas of Uzbekia, Kyrgyzia, and Turkmenia.³ Moscow had to negotiate the borders with the Central Asian elites, uniting national groups and dividing what had been the vast region of Turkestan in order to avoid the consolidation of Muslim leaders. Local elites and ordinary people alike petitioned Moscow to rule in their favor over contested cities, villages, and areas. Interestingly, territorial issues during those years generally had a low profile, and the redrawing of administrative boundaries did not have an immediate effect on local populations, since borders remained more or less open, boundary lines were not enforced, and local institutions were weak.⁴

However, with the independence of the Central Asian states in 1991, territorial issues began to present

challenges to cross-border communities. The administrative borders of Soviet times became real, a fragmentation that led to “a painful and unpleasant lesson for the local population.”⁵ In the two decades between 1989 and 2009, some 20 dangerous conflicts took place in the Valley.⁶ Of the reported incidents between 2010 and 2013, a total of 62 occurred on the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border and 102 on the Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan border.⁷ Over the course of 2014, the Kyrgyzstani authorities registered a total of 37 border incidents in the region: 32 on the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border and 5 on the Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan border.⁸ In 2015, 10 border incidents took place, all of which occurred on either the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border or the Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan border.⁹ Some smaller incidents presumably went unrecorded by the authorities, hence the actual number of incidents may be higher. Some incidents involve the use of

weapons and result in casualties. For example, between 2014 and mid-2015, 16 incidents involved the use of weapons, causing 16 casualties and leaving 12 people wounded.¹⁰

Various explanations have been proposed for the conflict dynamics at the borders in the Ferghana Valley. Yet most of the conflicts can be understood through the prism of securitization of borders, competition over resources, and growing nationalism.

Securitization of Borders

Soviet maps were drawn and redrawn in the 1920s, 1950s, and 1980s, resulting in varying border lines in the Ferghana Valley. The elite gave contested lands to one country and then another. As a result of Soviet “divide-and-rule” policy, the borders were generally ill-defined and ill-suited to the on-the-ground realities of the territory, as they did not respect

ethnic or geographic spaces. To wit, 8 enclaves and exclaves were created in the Ferghana Valley: four Uzbek and two Tajik enclaves in Kyrgyzstan and two enclaves—one Tajik, one Kyrgyz—in Uzbekistan.¹¹

Despite more than two decades of attempts to redefine the borders and resolve conflicts in the border region, incidents and conflicts of varying intensity and scale continue to occur in the borderland. As the newly independent states attempted to establish borders in the Ferghana Valley in the early 1990s, arguments evolved around two claims: first, claims over disputed territories (linked to the pre-Soviet history or the use of different Soviet-era maps); and second, claims regarding actual land use (linked to ethnicity or citizenship).¹²

In more than 25 years of independence, the governments of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have

Map 2. Enclaves in the Ferghana Valley



Source: “Ferghana Valley Enclaves: Travel Advice,” Caravanistan, <https://caravanistan.com/border-crossings/ferghana-valley-enclaves/>.

managed to delimit only around 60 percent of their mutual border (519 km/322 miles out of 978 km/608 miles); negotiations continue over the remaining 459 km (285 miles).¹³ In total, the two governments have held 27 bilateral meetings on border delimitation, including those on 58 contested sections, especially in the Isfara river valley.¹⁴

In the case of the Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan border, the situation began to change after Shavkat Mirziyoyev, the new Uzbek president, came to power in late 2016 and started promoting open borders and trade in the region. In fall 2017, the two countries signed a historic agreement covering 85 percent of the border, at which time they set the goal of agreeing on the remaining 15 percent by the end of 2018.¹⁵ The mutual border between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan is 1,378 km (856 miles) long, with 1,170 km (727 miles) of agreed border lines and 208 km (129 miles) contested.¹⁶

The unclear international boundaries in the Ferghana Valley during the early 1990s kept border controls to a minimum. As the political and economic trajectories of these countries began to diverge, however, differentiated border policies started to emerge. The period between 1998 and 2000, in particular, was considered a border crisis: religious extremists bombed Tashkent, and in 1999 the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) invaded southern Kyrgyzstan and neighboring regions in Tajikistan, prompting tightened border controls.¹⁷ Yet it was Uzbekistan that took the

most severe measures, efforts that would be redoubled following the Andijon riots of 2005.¹⁸ Tashkent suspended cross-border bus routes; sealed the borders; deployed more soldiers, border guards, customs officers, and special forces units; established new control posts; upgraded existing facilities; demolished cross-border bridges; closed border crossings; and even scattered landmines across areas of its frontier bordering Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.¹⁹ Since 2000, Central Asian countries have continuously strengthened their emerging security discourse, a discourse financially supported by the international community in the name of the “global war on terror”.²⁰

Competition over Resources

Typically, border incidents and conflicts start because of disputes impacting livelihoods. Agriculture and cattle breeding have been central to economic activity in the Ferghana Valley for centuries and are the primary source of many families’ livelihoods. Most of the conflicts in the region are caused by competition over access to—and distribution of—two major resources: water and land.²¹ As such, the highest number of conflicts and incidents often occur during spring and fall, the former period being when economic activities and cross-border interactions of local communities at the borderland begin and the latter being when the agricultural season is in full swing.

Ferghana Valley agriculture plays an important role in the economies of its constituent states. The

area of cultivated land is growing, and the comparative figures between 1991 and 2006 are instructive: in Uzbekistan, the area of cultivated land expanded from around 15 percent of the total area to 40 percent; in Kyrgyzstan, from 40 percent to 50 percent; and in Tajikistan, from 13 percent to 26 percent.²² There are claims on all sides that borders are being shifted back and forth in pursuit of fertile agricultural land.

Agricultural lands also include rangeland or land used for grazing livestock. During the Soviet period, states and collective farms used to sign special long-term lease agreements to allow animals to graze in cross-border pastures.²³ After independence, maintaining similarly close economic relations between border countries became more difficult. Indeed, pastures are a persistent cause of cross-border incidents. In 2014, for instance, an incident occurred over the pastures in Kok-Tash village on the Tajikistan-Kyrgyzstan border. The border guards exchanged fire, leading to casualties.²⁴

The situation is exacerbated by additional problems, including the degradation of pastures, the outbreak of epidemics among livestock, livestock theft, and the destruction of cultivated land when livestock are herded through it.²⁵ In 2013, the Kyrgyzstani side reported the loss of 5-10 percent of its livestock while herding its cattle through Vorukh. The Tajikistani authorities denied such claims, countering with the contention that 150 of their own livestock had been

stolen by the Kyrgyzstanis, and also charging the Kyrgyzstani side with having damaged cultivated land and crops during the cattle crossings.²⁶

Access to and distribution of water resources is yet another major cause of cross-border conflicts. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are the region's major suppliers of water, a resource central to the economic development of the Valley.²⁷ The Syr Darya, which originates in Kyrgyzstan, is one of the major rivers serving the Aral Sea basin and is the key water source for the valley. Less than 15 percent of the water of the Syr Darya is allocated to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan between them, while Uzbekistan alone receives more than 50 percent.²⁸ During the Soviet period, the countries in the Valley shared in a highly integrated network of large irrigation canals, water reservoirs, and other infrastructure. With independence, by contrast, border communities have witnessed numerous low-level disputes over access to water.²⁹

Growing Nationalism

The Ferghana Valley has always been treated as a zone of social diversity, pluralism and multiple identities coexisting side by side, but today inhabitants of the three states are oriented toward three different—and distant—capital centers.³⁰ The countries' political elites take every opportunity to bolster nationalism and emphasize ethnicity. Tashkent, for example, in support of its border militarization, portrayed Uzbekistan as "a united and prosperous historic homeland of the Uzbek

people, governed by a strong president and standing up to the insidious threats posed by its neighbors."³¹ Clashes between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in Osh and its environs in June 2010 brought the issue of ethnicity to the fore. Scholars argued variously that ethnic discord provoked the events,³² that ethnic communities mobilized in response to political uncertainty,³³ and that the events were the result of growing alienation between the Uzbek and Kyrgyz communities, "which over time developed a mutual antipathy, and lacked a shared vision of the future."³⁴

This is not to argue that ethnicity per se drives conflict. Rather, ethnicity is politicized by politicians' nationalist rhetoric, the border regime, and the availability and allocation of resources. For border communities, disputes are not purely "ethnic," but grievances and accusations can easily be assigned to an ethnic group; "communities [come] to more readily affiliate with their ethnic groups and tend to stereotype the opponent in increasingly ethnic terms."³⁵ As a result, all the socio-economic factors that cause border incidents and conflicts feed the existing inter-ethnic tensions in the valley. It is often the case that border conflict over the use of water between Kyrgyz- and Tajik-identified villages, such as Ak-Sai and Vorukh, cause clashes between young men mobilized along ethnic lines.³⁶ In the long term, ethnic divisions associated with border conflicts only reinforce negative stereotypes and cause the hardening of ethnic and national identities.³⁷

Overview of Current Policies and Effects of Border Militarization

One of the major issues in post-independence Ferghana Valley is what replaces the older order of Soviet trans-border commonality and interdependence, and how this order can sustain cross-border peace. States increase border security and militarize the border in the name of nation-formation and state-building without taking into account the effects that these policies have on ordinary people at the borders. The current policy approach taken by the authorities in the three countries in fact securitizes normal, genuine, everyday interactions and negotiations between ordinary people. The militarization of borders results in increased tension, frustration, and resentment between the states and ordinary people in border communities. It has a negative effect on familiar economic practices, personal relations and transport routes. This section looks at some of Kyrgyzstan's key policies on border issues and peacebuilding, as well as discussing the effects of border militarization on grassroots interactions.

Current State Policies on Border Issues and Peacebuilding

A number of major policy documents recognize border and peacebuilding issues as key security challenges. The National Security Concept of the Kyrgyz Republic³⁸ highlights the potential occurrence of inter-ethnic conflicts, the existence of competing claims regarding borders

and the use of water resources, and the lack of border delimitation with neighboring countries. In response to border and peacebuilding issues, the state seems to offer various approaches: securitization of borders, inter-ethnic unity and conflict prevention, and economic development of border territories. Several policies also mention the importance of natural resource management and simplifying border crossings for people, goods and services.

The National Sustainable Development Strategy of the Kyrgyz Republic 2013–2017,³⁹ the country’s five-year development plan, highlights:

- Securitization of the borders, including completion of legal delimitation of the national borders with neighboring states and treating borders as an important element of “national security” and “protection from various destructive forces”;
- Economic development of border areas—the need to “create favorable conditions for the free movement of goods, services and labor” and “stimulate economic development of border territories”; and
- Promoting peacebuilding—it calls for “unity of the nation as a prerequisite for preserving statehood and successful development,” “fighting ethnic intolerance,” and the “creation of a system of conflict prevention with the involvement of state agencies, local government and civil society through the establishment of consultative and advisory bodies.”

Policies on Border Management

There are a number of specific policies aimed at managing border and related issues. In 2012, Kyrgyzstan developed its National Strategy for the Creation and Implementation of the Integrated State Border Management System for the period up to 2022,⁴⁰ identifying key challenges to border security, such as incomplete delimitation and demarcation of borders and the exacerbation of water and energy problems in the region. The Action Plan for this Strategy calls for improving border delimitation and demarcation; simplifying procedures for transporting persons and goods across the border; developing inter-state agreements on common usage of summer pastures and territories used for animal crossings; and a list of other securitized action steps, such as building a new border checkpoint.

In addition, the Law on Confering Special Status On Separate Frontier Territories of the Kyrgyz Republic and their Development⁴¹ prioritizes the security and socio-economic development of border territories and calls for the rational use of natural resources in border areas. Based on this Law, Kyrgyzstan developed the State Program on Security and Socio-Economic Development of Certain Border Areas of the Kyrgyz Republic with Special Status for 2013–2016 and Action Plan,⁴² which calls for strengthening control over illegal movement and grazing of animals from neighboring states on the territory of Kyrgyzstan; tightening the regime governing foreign citi-

zens’ residency in border areas; and introducing a ban on the sale of land plots, houses, and other objects located in border areas of Kyrgyzstan to foreign individuals and legal entities, as well as stateless persons.

Furthermore, special state structures and commissions were formed to work specifically on the issue of border delimitation and demarcation. The Department on Border Delimitation and Development of Border Territories under the Government Office of the Kyrgyz Republic⁴³ coordinates the work of the relevant ministries and state agencies, including the Interstate Commission on Border Delimitation and Demarcation. The Department also collects information on border issues, produces analysis, and organizes expert groups to support the commission’s work. In addition, a government commission on border issues was formed to coordinate the work of state delegations on the delimitation and demarcation of state borders between the Kyrgyz Republic and neighboring states, as well as settle border, water, and land issues with Kyrgyzstan’s neighbors. The interstate commission on border delimitation and demarcation, for its part, was established to produce normative instructions on border demarcation, organize inter-state meetings, delimit the border, form and manage working groups on border demarcation, and submit protocols on agreed borders and maps for approval.

Peacebuilding Policies

In addition to state policies on border issues, Kyrgyzstan also has specific policies on peacebuilding. The Concept of National Unity and Inter-Ethnic Relations in the Kyrgyz Republic⁴⁴ references border, land and water issues in the border areas and their effects on inter-ethnic relations, highlighting the need for the state to develop and adopt a special program on the socio-economic development of border territories. The Concept also calls for establishing an effective early-warning system for conflicts with a potential ethnic dimension, and encourages the involvement of all social groups, public organizations, ethno-cultural unions, religious organizations, and territorial and social groups in the process of harmonizing inter-ethnic relations.

Following the June 2010 inter-ethnic violence in southern Kyrgyzstan, the government requested that the UN respond with a plan to promote peace and trust in the country. As a result, the Peacebuilding Priorities Plan⁴⁵ was developed by UN agencies, approved by the special Joint Steering Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, and financed by the UN Peacebuilding Fund to the tune of US\$15 million. One of the Plan's key priorities is the reduction of local-level tensions through the promotion of dialogue between local authorities and the local population on natural resource management. The relevant UN agencies had completed the implementation of the specified projects as of 2016; a second

Peacebuilding Plan is currently being developed.

Overall, the current state policies on border and peacebuilding issues are directed, by and large, toward greater securitization of the borders. They call for more border posts, better security, strengthening control over crossings, tightening the residency regime, etc. While securitizing the border is justified and necessary for any state, the question is *how* this securitization is done and whether its effects on people at the borders are considered. While current policies identify and address key strategic areas—such as socio-economic development of the border territories, inter-ethnic unity and tolerance, natural resource management, and the simplification of border crossings—they generally remain broad and lack specific strategies. The current policy approach, with its limited number of detailed plans for achieving the announced strategic outcomes, fails to recognize the important role that border dwellers could play in peacebuilding outcomes, thereby limiting these communities' participation in decision-making and grassroots peacebuilding. Not only do current state policies need further elaboration, but they also need to be revisited, as state policies aimed at enforcing securitized borders often negatively affect people living around the borders. They create obstacles to continuing usual interactions and collaborations, and at times even cause violence at the individual, family, or communal level.

Militarization of Borders and its Effects on Grassroots Interactions

The militarization of borders has an enormous effect on daily life and cross-border interaction for many people in the Fergana Valley. Since the establishment of the new border regime, communities have experienced a constant “sense of danger” while crossing the border, as the rules of engagement between officials and civilians remain uncertain and depend on unequal relations of power. Border officials often use common areas on the border to generate revenues from the people crossing the border.⁴⁶ As a villager from Ak-Sai (on the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border) observed, “[The government] started putting up all sorts of posts—customs posts and border posts—and all those stop people from living [*use meshaiut liudiam zhit*]...”⁴⁷

The militarization of borders has also meant enforcement of the border regime at community level. A Kyrgyzstani Uzbek estimates, for instance, that Uzbekistan demolished some 250 homes on the Uzbekistani side of Dostuk (on the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan border) in 2007, giving land and small monetary compensation to those who had to find a new place to live. Despite some popular resistance, the state—representing authority and order—was ultimately able to enforce its will. Likewise, in 2010, Chek, another village on the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan border, found itself facing up to the state's enforcement of the border regime. Owing to a border

delimitation agreement between the authorities of the two countries, a “wire border” was put on the land where bulldozers had demolished houses.⁴⁸ Communities, families, and livelihoods were divided.

Since Uzbekistan introduced a visa regime for citizens of Tajikistan, Tajikistani students traveling from Khujand (in Tajikistan) to Osh (in Kyrgyzstan) require visas to pass through the Sokh enclave, which is administered by Uzbekistan. As such, students prefer to take the longer, rocky, and uncomfortable back road than experience delays, face humiliation, and give bribes while crossing the border without visas.⁴⁹ Sevara, a student, explained how the militarization of borders affected her experience of driving from Khujand to Osh for her studies.⁵⁰ She complained that whereas before 1997 she took one bus and spent eight hours on the road, since 2000—with the new border posts and changes to the visa regime—it takes her thirteen hours on five different buses.

The militarization of borders has also meant a sharp reduction in cross-border transit and trade, creating inconveniences and economic hardships for the area’s inhabitants.⁵¹ According to an International Crisis Group report, since independence and new restrictions at the borders, the volume of trade has decreased, as the local population has found itself harassed and humiliated by border guards at customs posts.⁵² Throughout the centuries, trade has been vital to the prosperity and economic security of the Fer-

ghana Valley, which represents the most densely populated potential market in the region. Small-scale trade is especially key for neighboring regions of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, where it sustains thousands of people.⁵³ Experts argue that there is local demand for deeper economic cooperation,⁵⁴ something that cannot be developed without “economic and human bridges between constituent national zones of the Valley.”⁵⁵

The militarized border regime has also affected the cultural links between trans-boundary family networks.⁵⁶ To take the example of Chek village, which is situated between the Jalalabad and Andijon regions on the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan border, marriage with someone from the other side of the border was common for generations.⁵⁷ Some border villages had family members in both countries and with mixed citizenships; at different points in their lives, residents lived and worked on both sides of the border.⁵⁸ Often, however, people were unable to visit each other or attend funerals and marriages across the border. An ethnically Tajik man, who was born and lived in a Tajik-majority village in the Uzbek SSR but moved to Dushanbe, to study and work, always wanted to be buried in his ancestral land. After his death, a group of his relatives carried the corpse along the 120-mile road, but the guards did not allow them to enter Uzbekistan.⁵⁹ From a legal standpoint, this was simple adherence to the law, but culturally it was unacceptable.

Some local communities were able to resist the enforcement of border militarization. Residents of the Uzbek village of Sharhabad, a border community located within the Soh enclave in Kyrgyzstan, prevented Kyrgyz guards from establishing a mobile checkpoint in 2003.⁶⁰ Initially, the post was removed only temporarily, but the locals continued to express their opposition. Negotiations with state officials took place, angry crowds threw stones at the border guards, and the checkpoint was ultimately removed.

Other border dwellers have found creative ways to resist the new rules imposed by border regimes and overcome the challenges posed. In Chek village, when the Uzbek authorities prohibited border crossings by car, the local population used donkey carts, parked their cars on one side of the border and walked the remaining distance, or built temporary bridges and passes.⁶¹ Reportedly, local communities know every checkpoint and unofficial route, allowing them to maximize their profits as traders or their efficiency as travelers, whether by cutting wires or bribing border officials. That said, border dwellers seek to continue their usual interaction and cooperation across borders; as such, they tend to resist or avoid the securitized regime rather than attempting to exploit it to their advantage.

Cross-Border Interactions at the Grassroots Level That Sustain Peace

Cross-border interaction between community members is unavoidable

able. Border dwellers cope with the effects of securitization and find ways to continue their everyday interaction at the grassroots level through formal and informal practices. This cooperation is meaningful and productive for people living in the borderlands, as it meets their everyday needs and sustains their lives. Most importantly, this cooperation has secondary benefits that are conducive to building trust between cross-border communities, thereby facilitating and sustaining peace on the ground. Examples of cross-border cooperation are evident in two major areas: resource-based interaction, such as water, irrigation canals, and pasturelands; and economic activities at the border, such as trade.

Resource-Based Cross-Border Interactions

Water and Irrigation Canals

Cross-border water management is rather complicated as Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan have taken somewhat different approaches to the issue. Kyrgyzstan was the first in the region to establish Water User Associations for the operation and maintenance of irrigation systems at the local level in a more decentralized manner. Tajikistan also established Water User Associations, but under the authority of State Water Institutions. However, due to different institutional models, the two states have yet to harmonize their approach to water management.⁶² In addition, administrative procedures on issues like cross-border maintenance of irrigation infrastructure

are complicated. For example, Uzbek authorities from Andijon province report that cross-border maintenance with Kyrgyzstan would require a joint agreement on the need for maintenance, details of all persons and vehicles to cross the border, and a number of official letters requesting permission from different Kyrgyzstani authorities, not to mention compliance with the more stringent regulations imposed by Uzbekistan.⁶³

Cross-border water management is even more complicated when it comes to regulating conflicts related to border dwellers' comparative access to—and share of—water. Water management policies across the border focus on technical matters and lack guidance on conflict management and resolution. A review of treaties covering 123 small transboundary tributaries in the Syr Darya Basin concluded, among other findings, that most of these treaties were narrowly focused on “hard,” or technical, issues such as water allocation (98 treaties) or operation and maintenance (15 treaties) rather than “soft” or peripheral issues such as conflict resolution mechanisms.⁶⁴

Yet there are examples of community-based water management practices at the border. Indeed, some argue that cooperation on water issues occurs more at district and provincial level than it does at national level.⁶⁵ Wegerich et al. discuss the case of Syrdarya-Sokh Basin Irrigation System Administration, noting that despite the securitization of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan border, workers

still cross the borders informally to carry out maintenance work on water facilities. They avoid crossing the border at official border posts, where they would be arrested by border guards.⁶⁶ There are also examples of informal arrangements regarding water distribution. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan signed an agreement on the issue in the 1980s, but Wegerich et al. indicated that it had still not been implemented as of 2009.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, water officials in the cross-border provinces discuss water distribution from common sources over the phone every week.⁶⁸ There are also still cases where pump stations and other water management infrastructure are located in one country but are the property of another.

Another example of cooperation between cross-border communities relates to the common use of water. The Isfara River, for example, divides and unites communities on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border.⁶⁹ Myrza-Patcha village, located in the administrative district of the city of Isfana (in Batken region, Kyrgyzstan), is not included into the hydrographic zone administered by the city Water User Association and instead relies on water from the Isfana River. This river is also the major source of water for people living in the Navruz *mahallah* (neighborhood) of neighboring Korgoncho village, Tajikistan. The Isfara River does not have any water intake structures; in the event of a mudslide, residents of both cross-border communities organize *ashar* (collective labor) and clean the

river bed communally.

Cross-border communities also cooperate when it comes to maintaining shared irrigation canals, which often start in one country and end in another. The canal in Samarkandek village (in the Batken region) channels its water downstream to villages across the border in Tajikistan. Local residents from the two countries share this canal and rely on its water. In spring, landslides regularly trap the water in Samarkandek and impede it from flowing downstream. When this happens, border communities cooperate to address the common problem.⁷⁰

Finally, local dwellers cooperate across borders over the use of the community canal system. In her anthropological studies, Reeves highlights the importance of the canal system and its flaws as a marker of social relationships at the borders.⁷¹ The so-called *aryk* (ditch) network is a community-based means of regulating water flow and its distribution between upstream and downstream communities. For instance, a villager from Gaz, in Kyrgyzstan, knows that he/she drinks the same water as an inhabitant of the downstream village of Hushiar, across the border in Uzbekistan. All this resource-based interdependence maintains cooperation between cross-border community members.

Pastures

During the Soviet era, it was customary for livestock from Tajikistan to graze in the mountains of

Kyrgyzstan.⁷² With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the adoption of various policies by the Central Asian states, joint pasture use became a challenge.

A new Law on Pastures in Kyrgyzstan advanced the development of decentralized and community-based management of agro-pastoral resources with pasture users' associations.⁷³ However, community-level participation has not yet matured: the local population does not represent their interests through formally established democratic mechanisms, and sees the pasture users' associations as agencies that control the use of resources, impose taxes, and exclude some people from decision-making.⁷⁴ In Tajikistan, meanwhile, pastures are not recognized as a distinct land type; land tenure falls under the management of local authorities and Local State Forest Management Enterprises, with an option for herders to hold a rent agreement with the government or inherit user rights.⁷⁵ As a result, states employ different mechanisms of power distribution between national and local authorities and assign different roles in the pasture management process to community residents or members of the pasture committee.

According to the Land Code of the Kyrgyz Republic, foreigners cannot legally acquire land plots.⁷⁶ All pasturelands belong to the Kyrgyz Republic and renting out land is illegal. For Tajik herders to be able to use Kyrgyz pastures, both governments need to sign an inter-state agreement on leasing pasturelands. An important bilat-

eral agreement on pasture lease has been pending since 2008.⁷⁷ This leaves Tajikistani farmers in a state of uncertainty and the Kyrgyzstani government without the economic benefits to be had from renting out pastures.

In response to the legal gridlock and in light of their mutual needs, cross-border communities continue their historical interaction and cooperation on common pasture use via informal mechanisms. There are different levels of established cooperation: informal arrangements on the use of pastures are made between shepherds, between the relevant pasture committees on both sides of the border, or between Kyrgyzstani and Tajikistani heads of villages or local governments.⁷⁸ This trans-border practice is visible today between Soghd and Batken: livestock owned by Soghd shepherds is grazed in Kyrgyzstan for a service fee.⁷⁹ Another example is the case of Chorkuh village in Tajikistan, which does not have its own pastures, compelling Tajikistani farmers to graze their livestock in the Karavshin and Kashambish pastures in Kyrgyzstan.⁸⁰ To avoid dealing with border guards, livestock is sometimes also taken to Kyrgyzstani pastures through the gardens on the Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan border.⁸¹ Some residents of border communities claim that livestock from Tajikistan is grazed informally on Kyrgyzstani pastures as though it were livestock raised in Kyrgyzstan.⁸²

A similar example of cooperation on joint pastures use can be

found between residents of Myrza-Patcha village in Kyrgyzstan and the Navruz *mahallah* (neighborhood) in Tajikistan.⁸³ Residents of the Tajikistani village do not have pastures attached to their territory, hence they graze their cattle in the pastures of Myrza-Patcha. It is not entirely clear who on the Kyrgyzstani side creates grazing opportunities for Tajikistani shepherds and receives payment for this. People in the communities are aware that this is informal but recognize the need and see it as a common practice between border dwellers. In addition, since it is more convenient to water the livestock on the Tajikistani side of the border, it is informally agreed that this occurs there. These informal joint arrangements are often discussed in the mosque located in Myrza-Patcha, which is attended by individuals from both countries. As one resident of Kyrgyzstan explained, “Elders from Navruz come to us asking for permission for their cows to graze with ours.”⁸⁴

Economic Activities

While the problems of developing economies are acute—be they weak governance and corruption, shadow economy activities, or the drug trade—and need to be addressed via different measures, informal economic activities between ordinary people in border communities are small-scale and of a different nature. For cross-border traders and agricultural producers, markets across the border are often the only place to buy and sell goods in their remote areas, given the

underdevelopment of road networks. These markets are a source of income and (at times) the only way to sustain their lives.⁸⁵ Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, traders are among the most interested parties in maintaining peace after the conflicts in the Ferghana Valley.⁸⁶ The scale of informal trade and crossings demonstrates a high degree of cooperation and the need for a more porous border regime in the Ferghana Valley. Local traders avoid customs duties and customs fees and choose illegal trade opportunities.

Trade

Local border communities find ways around borders as they trade for a living. Reeves recounts the case of Mohammed, an ethnic Kyrgyz and a resident of Uzbekistan, who works in Batken’s small daily market.⁸⁷ He buys up to 300 kg (660 lbs) of goods—including chocolates, white sugar, sweets, macaroni, oil and tea, among other items—in the Ferghana city bazaar in Uzbekistan and sells them in this local bazaar in Kyrgyzstan. The crossing usually takes place via *chernyi vkhod* (an informal parallel crossing point), where commodities are handed over through a house located right on the border, while the trader goes through the official border crossing, giving the customs officers a cigarette or two as he passes in order to maintain friendly relations with them, then meets his goods on the other side. The homeowner who allows commercial goods to go through his house also collects a fee, and many say that customs officers and border guards receive part of that fee.

There are several similar informal crossing points at different points along the border in the Ferghana Valley; some of them even have names. The bottom line is, as Mohammed noted, that both traders and border officials are interested in maintaining harmony. In a legal sense, this practice is informal, yet it is ethically justified because it sustains families and officials at the border.

Megoran relates another story of an informal border crossing with goods to trade, this one from Chek village on the Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan border. One family allows traders and smugglers to pass through their yard in order to bypass the official crossing point nearby. A Kyrgyzstani customs officer once took Megoran to this yard to drink and eat with Uzbekistani customs and border officers. He observed how border officials peacefully “cooperated” with that family and those who passed through during that time, shaking their hands and receiving a fee. This prompted Megoran to ask whether this should be considered corruption, resistance on the part of the local population, a lack of patriotism on the part of those state officials who take bribes, or cooperation based on “contextual moral judgments about what is the norm, and what movements it is reasonable to facilitate, albeit illegally.”⁸⁸

Similarly, border dwellers use other innovative informal border crossings, such as water canals on the border, to transport their goods for trade. Uzbekistani residents often go to the Kara-Suu bazaar in Kyrgyzstan to buy food,

commodities, and clothing. Kara-Suu, where the market is located, is not only one of the larger commercial areas in the Fergana Valley, but was also historically a major trading point on the Silk Road. The market is made up of thousands of stallholders and brings together traders from across the region, local produce, and Chinese imports. Back in 2003, a “bridge of friendship” across the Shahrihan-san canal in Kara-Suu on the Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan border was dismantled, threatening many communities that were dependent on it for their livelihoods. In response, an ethnic Uzbek living on the Kyrgyzstan bank of the canal offers an “inflatable tire-ferry” across the 12-meter (40-ft) wide canal, transporting goods and around 100 people per day.⁸⁹

Megoran also provides an example of small-scale trade through an unofficial border crossing on an unmarked border between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.⁹⁰ Elmira, a resident of a bordering village in Batken region, regularly goes to the Tajikistani side to purchase cheap household goods to sell in the market on the Kyrgyzstani side. There are many people who, like Elmira, smuggle small amounts of produce and goods across the border while avoiding the customs regime. Numerous other cases of illegal smuggling by small-scale traders have been observed in the Dostuk area near Osh on the Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan border: men on bicycles smuggling salt from Uzbekistan to Kyrgyzstan, or women smuggling aluminum.

Apricot Production

Not only do border dwellers trade across the borders, but they also cooperate and rely on each other, as in the case of apricot production, processing, and export. Batken region is known for its apricot gardens and farming. A number of Kyrgyz families in this border area grow apricots. Tajiks, on the other hand, engage in apricot processing and distribute the fruit to foreign markets. It is common for Tajiks to buy ripe apricots from Kyrgyz farmers; at times, they even unofficially “rent” Kyrgyz lands to grow apricots.⁹¹ Sometimes they sell it as “Kyrgyz-grown” produce and smuggle it back through Kyrgyzstan to markets in Kazakhstan and Russia.

A similar story of cooperation in the apricot business is described by Reeves, who introduces us to Kanysh-Ai, an apricot-grower in Gaz village, Upper Sokh Valley, Kyrgyzstan.⁹² For Kanysh-Ai, as for many others in the Sokh Valley, apricots are the primary source of domestic income. Once the apricots are washed, dried for a couple of days, and sorted, Tajiks, who often dominate the commercial apricot market, come from the district center of Isfara to purchase the fruit. Uzbeks, in turn, travel to the border bazaar in Hushiar to buy the apricot pits, which they fry and salt to sell at the local market.

To summarize, beneath this grassroots-level cooperation—be it over water and irrigation, pastures, trade, or apricot production—lie common reasons why

people cooperate, which facilitate peace. On the whole, border dwellers cooperate to respond to their everyday needs, such as access to water or the need for a free flow of people, goods, and services across the borders. This enables them to get on with their daily lives despite government-level securitization. Often, border dwellers cooperate because their needs are interdependent: they use the same water sources, share infrastructure, or are mutually benefited by joint use of pastures. This day-to-day, need-based, and often interdependent cooperation at and across borders has secondary benefits that are conducive to building trust between community members, improving relationships, and building cross-border networks, thereby facilitating and sustaining peace on the ground.

Conclusion

In this paper, I demonstrate how existing examples of cross-border cooperation facilitate and sustain peace at the grassroots level. Despite militarization of the borders and securitization of community interactions, border dwellers find ways to continue their usual grassroots practices and cooperate in both formal and informal ways. This cooperation is evident in the examples of water management and maintenance of shared irrigation structures, grazing practices for the cattle and joint pasture use, and small-scale trade and border crossings through informal border posts. It is through these collaborative efforts that local actors build trust at and across borders, which,

of shared irrigation structures, grazing practices for the cattle and joint pasture use, and small-scale trade and border crossings through informal border posts. It is through these collaborative efforts that local actors build trust at and across borders, which, in turn, is conducive to building peace. This is not to romanticize and justify informal practices, but rather to highlight the challenges that border communities face on a daily basis when the border works not for the people but for the state. Thus, the current policy approach to border issues and peacebuilding taken by the states in the Ferghana Valley should be revisited.

There is an evident need for the states to move toward greater interdependence and policy approaches that balance border security with the needs of people living in border areas. There is a substantial mismatch between what the state enforces on border management and peacebuilding efforts and what community members living in cross-border areas want (and strive to accomplish). Certainly, the solution lies in recognizing the importance of people living in the border regions, their needs and interests. This will not be possible without strengthening overall good governance practices and improving linkages between states and citizens.

The efforts of all stakeholders should begin at the grassroots level, in a cooperative and participatory manner. Decision-making should engage all relevant stakeholders; feedback on the major

problems surrounding an issue should be integrated into the eventual practices and policies. This should inform local practices and policies, which should in turn complement regional and national frameworks, with the ultimate aim of being reflected at the inter-governmental level.

Unfortunately, there is always the potential for violent conflict due to major drivers of current border incidents. In order to limit this as much as possible, existing peacebuilding approaches must be revisited. Most importantly, the existing potential of grassroots solutions must be tapped. The nature of cross-border tensions and incidents and the inevitability of interaction between community members in the Ferghana Valley provide the most compelling argument for border dwellers' participation in peacebuilding efforts. Peace can be sustained when grassroots actors continue cross-border cooperation and when borders are made for the benefit of citizens, families, and communities across the borders.

Recommendations

This policy paper argues that peacebuilding in the border areas of the Ferghana Valley should be sustained through a comprehensive, people-centric approach—not only by the state, but at sub-state level, with participation by local actors and communities in the borderlands and investment in their needs. The policy recommendations are three-fold and essentially promote multiplying the effects of existing cooperation; taking initial steps to facil-

itate border crossings for people, goods and services; and promoting participatory decision-making at the grassroots level. These recommendations aim to inform relevant state actors at the national and local levels, as well as the donor community and development actors.

1. *Scaling up examples of cooperation*
 - Conduct field research in the Ferghana Valley to identify and analyze cases of cross-border cooperation
 - Design evidence-based programs; invest in piloting and scaling up positive examples of cooperation
2. *Simplifying border crossings for people, goods and services*
 - Collect data and evidence on the challenges the border regime presents to border communities
 - Draft a strategy on a special regime for border communities in order to ease the crossing of people, goods and services
3. *Engaging border communities in decision-making*
 - Include representatives of cross-border communities in the existing decision-making structures (eg. a Working Group on the Inter-State Committee on Border Delimitation and Demarcation)
 - Develop mechanisms for public participation on bor-

der and peacebuilding issues at the local government level

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