

THREE DECADES OF DEVELOPMENT AID IN TAJIKISTAN

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INTRODUCTION

Development aid is intrinsically linked to international relations. It is an umbrella concept for policies aimed at supporting socio-economic and political development in recipient countries. The development aid instruments include, but are not limited to, project grants, direct budget support, concessional loans as well as the provision of expert knowledge. Development aid, regardless of a form, implies a specific relationship between involved parties, including the donors, i.e., governments which allocate funding, international organisations which manage it, and recipient governments. While development aid is presented as a gift, gifts are not provided for free, as the social theories of reciprocity tell us. Aid recipients cannot return the same donations to their donors, and they are not expected to do so. Instead, they are supposed to pay back in different ways, for example, by demonstrating loyalty in the international arena, providing economic concessions to the donor country or accepting normative frameworks which accompany aid.

Central Asia became involved in the international development aid system only in 1991, after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The end of the bipolar world and newly independent statehood constituted the context in which countries in the region became beneficiaries of international assistance. This explains the initial dominant lens of development aid which implied the region's socialisation into liberal universalism. The present paper focuses on Tajikistan and development aid that it has received since 1991. The overview of the nearly three decades of development aid builds around five main phases: 1) humanitarian aid during the Tajik civil war, 1992-1997, 2) the post-civil war peacebuilding and reconstruction in the late 1990s

and the early 2000s, 3) security-focused aid throughout the 2000s, 4) the broadening of the donor landscape in the 2010s, and 5) the COVID-19-related aid in 2020. The description of these stages is somewhat sketchy. The distinction, however, helps identify and discuss the changing characteristics of aid and aid-related international relations, including the major fields of assistance and volumes of aid, the dominant actors, and the shifts in donor-recipient relations.

PHASE ONE: HUMANITARIAN AID IN 1992-1997

Tajikistan started receiving international assistance during the Tajik civil war which broke out soon after the country's independence. In this context, donors and international organisations (IOs), which have been opening their offices in the country, played two major roles. First, they were involved in the distribution of humanitarian aid to various groups of the population which suffered the most during the conflict. Figure 1 reflects growing aid flows in that period. The most active organisations at that time were the International Organization for Migration (IOM), as well as a range of United Nations (UN) agencies, such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Food Programme (WFP). The beneficiaries included over one million people who were displaced, either internally or across the borders, as a result of the fighting, as well as about 25 thousand widows and 55 thousand orphans.¹

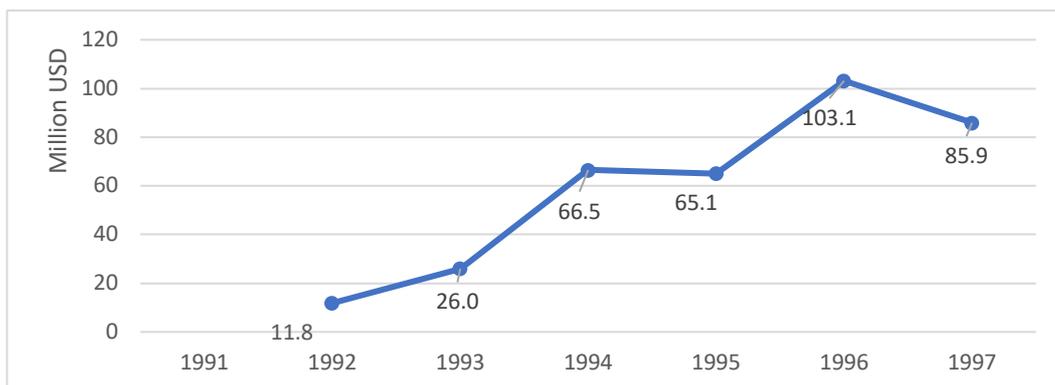


Figure 1: Net official development assistance (ODA) provided to Tajikistan (current USD), World Bank data²

Second, the IOs supported conflict mitigation efforts. The UN-mediated the peace agreement between two fighting blocs – along with Russia, Iran and observers from neighbouring countries, the Organisation of the Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

In this phase, one can hardly identify a clear stance of the government on donor and IOs' interventions. The Tajik government was involved in the civil war as one of the fighting blocs and, consequently, building relations with IOs was not among its priorities. However, it clearly did not object to international assistance.

PHASE TWO: POST-WAR PEACEBUILDING AND RECONSTRUCTION IN THE LATE 1990s AND THE EARLY 2000s

Following the peace agreement, donors and IOs engaged in post-war peacebuilding. Comparing to the first stage, aid disbursements in the second phase increased by two-three times (Figure 2). A big number of other IOs and international NGOs opened their offices in Tajikistan to support the post-conflict reconstruction. In 2001, aid received by Tajikistan amounted to nearly 16% of the country's gross national income (GNI).³

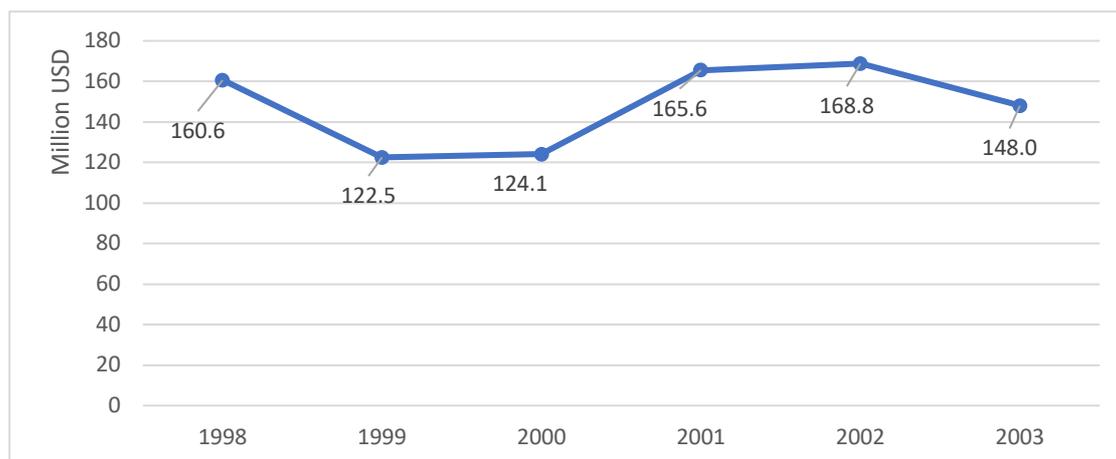


Figure 2: ODA provided to Tajikistan (current USD), World Bank data⁴

As part of peacebuilding efforts, Western donors and IOs had actively supported democratisation from below. They did so mainly by funding non-governmental organisations (NGOs), as a new form of civil society in the region. In this regard, Tajikistan was late in comparison with its Central Asian neighbours, where NGOs mushroomed already a decade earlier.⁵

In the second phase, international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) became the new protagonists of development aid in Tajikistan. They got involved in shaping the country's market economy, mainly by pushing for the privatisation of formerly state-owned companies and creating a

legal environment which would be favourable for private entrepreneurship. Seeking international recognition and trying to attract financial resources, the cash-strapped post-war government of Tajikistan did not object to the paths dictated by donors. More than that, in this phase, it was largely compliant with their normative frameworks.

PHASE THREE: SECURITY ASSISTANCE IN THE 2000s

Development aid to Tajikistan saw major changes in the aftermath of the 9/11 and the beginning of the war on terror in Afghanistan. Given the fact that Tajikistan shares its entire southern border with Afghanistan, Western donors feared a potential spillover which could lead to a rise of insecurity in Central Asia and beyond. Tajikistan gained further importance on the donor map as a strategic ally of the United States. The country provided an alternative route for the NATO-led military mission in Afghanistan, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). Against this backdrop, in the third phase of development assistance, the focus was on the broadly conceived security sector. The grants in this period prioritised strengthening border control, anti-narcotics, combatting terrorism and professionalisation. Furthermore, they included the provision of defence equipment, advisory programmes and military training and education. Between 2001 and 2010, the declared security assistance from the United States alone amounted to 170 million USD.⁶ Many other donors and IOs followed suit.

The available statistics reflect increasing aid disbursements from Western donors throughout the 2000s (Figure 3). This shows growing attention to Tajikistan and other countries in Central Asia as a result of the “discourses of danger” which saw the region as a potential hotbed for terrorism and militant Islamism.⁷ While not all aid which Tajikistan received in that period was strictly security-related, security components were often present in many seemingly unrelated, socio-economic projects. This is because designing projects in such a way increased the chances for donor funding.

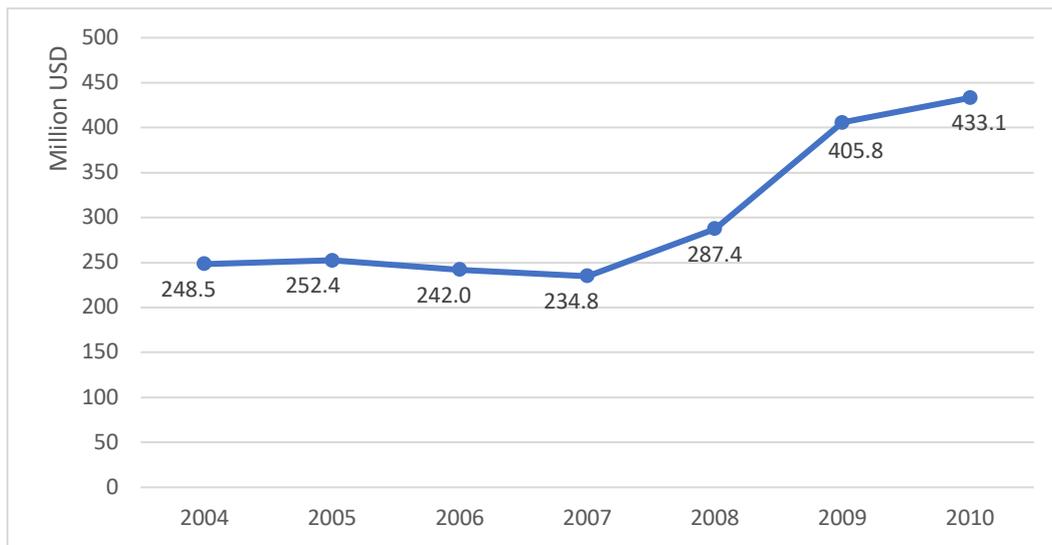


Figure 3: ODA provided to Tajikistan (current USD), World Bank data⁸

In this phase of development aid, it became clear to the Tajik policy-makers that donors and IOs needed Tajikistan as much as Tajikistan needed aid. This realisation allowed the government to renegotiate its position vis-à-vis donors, and move from being a passive beneficiary of international assistance towards a more pragmatic and less normatively charged cooperation.

PHASE FOUR: DONOR ABUNDANCE IN THE 2010s

The recent decade brought a multiplicity of new, diverse donors and significantly broadened the development landscape of Tajikistan by truly internationalising it. Aid flows from traditional (i.e., Western) donors have also increased significantly (Figure 4). Unlike in previous phases, when dominant fields of assistance could be identified, in the fourth phase, grants were allocated for a variety of sectors and ranged from socio-economic to energy and infrastructural projects.

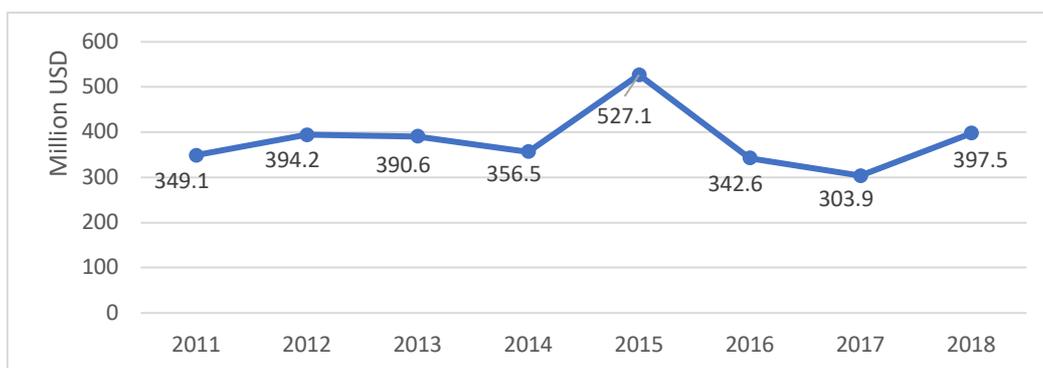


Figure 4: ODA provided to Tajikistan (current USD), World Bank data⁹

Without a doubt, China has gradually dominated the development aid architecture in Tajikistan. According to publicly available data, between 2006, when the first Chinese projects were implemented in the country, and 2017 China provided 2,97 billion USD of aid.¹⁰ In particular, the flows from China started to grow after launching of the One Belt One Road (OBOR), later renamed as the Belt Road Initiative (BRI), in 2013 (Figure 5). The available data, however, is not complete, as many Chinese projects are not reported in aid flow databases, and the volumes of several projects are not disclosed. Therefore, Chinese disbursements are most probably higher. China’s aid differs from Western donors in that it conflates traditional components of development aid, such as project grants, budget support, debt relief and humanitarian assistance with economic investments which bring direct benefits to China. It is also important to point out that Chinese aid, which is focused on infrastructure, made Western donors reconsider their approaches, which in turn resulted in a rise of transportation and energy projects in the country. This suggests a shift from the Washington consensus centred around structural reforms towards infrastructure-driven development – both globally and in Tajikistan.

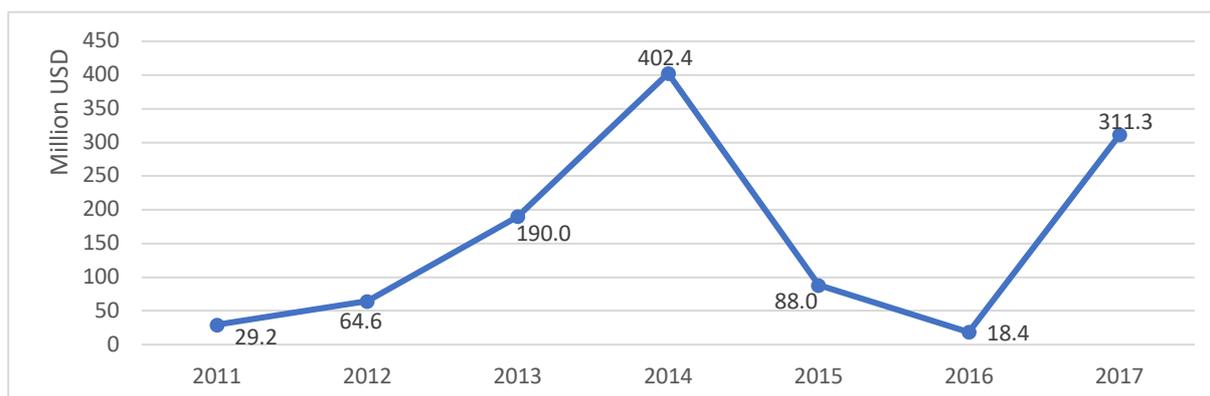


Figure 5: Chinese aid to Tajikistan¹¹

The internationalisation of development aid in Tajikistan has further strengthened the position of the Tajik government vis-à-vis Western donors. It offered the country more flexibility to choose which donor to collaborate with and on what terms. If Western donors do not provide funding for certain fields, new donors will do it, and vice versa. At the same time, the dominance of Chinese aid created new dependencies and debt, and their consequences are yet to be seen.

PHASE FIVE: THE COVID-19 AID IN 2020

The fifth phase of aid concerns the assistance which Tajikistan received during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The official data show that, as of September 2020, the country obtained humanitarian aid worth 32,2 million USD from 58 donors (Figure 6).

It included 17 thousand tons of personal protective equipment and medical supplies for the overwhelmed hospital system, as well as basic food supplies for the most vulnerable communities. It is remarkable that in a situation which required instant decision-making, the major donors turned to be single states and not IOs, where approval processes are much more complex and time-taking. Moreover, the majority of humanitarian aid came from new donors, such as China, Turkey and India, rather than from the traditional, Western ones. New donors to Tajikistan also included two other Central Asian countries, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. This suggests that a new trend of intra-regional development assistance started in Central Asia.

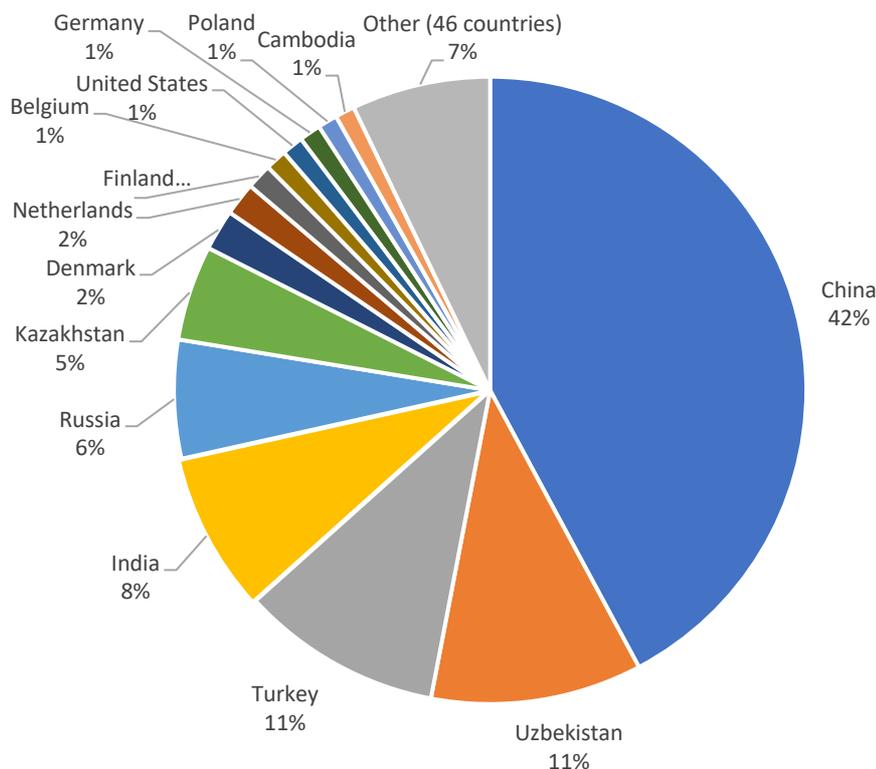


Figure 6: Donors' contribution to the total of 32,2 million USD COVID-19 aid to Tajikistan between January and September 2020¹²

Starting from March 2020, the Tajik government has been actively fundraising for COVID-19 relief, conducting several meetings with the country's donors and IOs. International financial institutions, such as the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the Islamic Development Bank (IDB), have committed to providing 13,6 million USD for more long-term projects aiming at mitigating negative economic consequences of the pandemic.¹³ As news about non-Western donors' contributions appeared in the media in the spring, along with the Tajik government's statements of gratitude, IOs such as the European Union (EU) and a range of UN agencies also started declaring to launch COVID-19-related projects in the near future – as if in fear of the further weakening of their position in Tajikistan.

CONCLUSION

This policy brief sketched an overview of nearly three decades of development aid in Tajikistan by identifying five distinct phases. Over this period, the development architecture broadened significantly, both by increasing the number of sectors of assistance and diversifying the donor landscape. The relations between the Tajik government and donors changed as well. As the country was gradually recovering from the civil war, Tajikistan moved from being a passive recipient of aid and accompanying normative frameworks, to an agile player who seeks to minimise donors' interference into domestic matters by simultaneously maintaining high inflows of development aid. From an International Relations perspective, this is an interesting case of a resource-poor, largely peripheral country in the international arena, which learned how to exploit the rivalries between various donors to its benefit.

NOTES

¹ Erturk, Y. (2009) *Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development*. Report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women. United Nations Human Rights Council.

² ODA consists of loans and grants provided to and by members of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD); as well as multilateral organisations. Currently, DAC has 30 members, mainly European and North American countries. See: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/DT.ODA.ALLD.CD>

³ See <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/DT.ODA.ODAT.GN.ZS?locations=TJ>

⁴ See: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/DT.ODA.ALLD.CD>

⁵ Kluczevska, K. (2019) *Changing donor-NGO relations in Tajikistan*. European Neighbourhood Council. http://www.encouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/ENC_Analysis_Changing-donor-NGO-relations-in-Tajikistan_reviewed.pdf

⁶ See: <https://securityassistance.org/data/program/military/Tajikistan/2000/2010/all/Global//>

⁷ Heathershaw, J., Megoran, N., Reeves, M., & Lewis, D. (2010) *Discourses of danger and Western policy towards Central Asia in light of recent events*. Chatham House.

⁸ See: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/DT.ODA.ALLD.CD>

⁹ See: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/DT.ODA.ALLD.CD>

¹⁰ See: <http://china.aiddata.org>

¹¹ See: <http://china.aiddata.org>

¹² Asia Plus (2020) *Tadzhikistan poluchil pomosh' dazhe ot Kambodzhi. Na bolee \$380 tys*. October 21. <https://asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/society/20201021/tadzhikistan-poluchil-pomotsh-dazhe-ot-kambodzhi-na-bolee-380-tis>

¹³ Idem.

About the author

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The policy paper is produced as part of a project “Debating International Relations in Central Asia: Regional Developments and Extra-Regional Actors”. The project is led by Shairbek Dzhuraev and Eric McGlinchey with support of the Hollings Center for International Dialogue.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of Crossroads Central Asia or the Hollings Center for International Dialogue.