How to Translate ‘Good Governance’ into Tajik? An American Good Governance Fund and Norm Localisation in Tajikistan

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ABSTRACT
This article analyses how international norms are transferred to aid-receiving countries and with what outcomes, when tensions exist between these norms and local realities. By taking a case study of an American-funded good governance project in Tajikistan, it investigates a multi-level and multi-actor process of norm localisation, looking at why and how different development agencies re-appropriate international norms. The article proposes to see a failed localisation from the point of view of donors, in a way that outcomes differ from their initial intentions, as a successful localisation from the point of view of local actors. The distortion of international norms indicates that local actors re-appropriated them in accordance with their biographies, personal views, and political opportunities and constraints of organisations which they represent.

KEYWORDS
Tajikistan; USAID; foreign aid; good governance; NGO; norm localisation

Introduction
In Tajikistan, there are so many NGOs that behave like cockroaches. They are eating bread crumbs of donors’ geopolitics. We need be different.¹

How does ‘good governance’ travel through continents, languages, different institutions and diverse socio-economic, political and normative contexts, to eventually become an ‘effective government’ (Tajik: idorakunii samaranok) in the regions of Tajikistan? In other words, this article asks how international norms, that is shared ideas about appropriate behaviour of states, which are promoted by foreign donors as universal (Finnemore 1996, 22–23), are being transferred to local contexts in the so-called ‘developing countries,’ and with what outcomes, if tensions exist between these norms and reality on the ground.

Following the Soviet collapse in 1991, Tajikistan emerged as one of five independent states in the Central Asian region.² In comparison with Latin American and African colleagues, which have already experienced decades of poverty alleviation, structural adjustments and loans from Western donors, Tajikistan was integrated in Western neoliberal development aid relatively late (cf. Sievers 2003). International organisations (IOs) have massively arrived to the country during the Tajik civil war (1992–97), which coincided with the ongoing post-Soviet political and economic transition. Throughout the 1990s,
thus, IOs have been involved in the distribution of humanitarian aid, conflict mitigation and peacebuilding (Heathershaw 2009). They have also created a new neoliberal civil society in the form of the foreign-funded non-governmental organisation (NGO) sector, initially tasked with the distribution of humanitarian help (Abdullaev 2006; Mullojanov 2017). In the 2000s, after the country’s gradual recovery from the civil war and in conjunction with the war on terror in neighbouring Afghanistan, donors started paying more attention to the issue of governance, because, as they assumed, a potential failure of state institutions might result in Tajikistan repeating Afghanistan’s experience. While Tajikistan remains the poorest country of the former Soviet Union, in terms of an official average annual income per capita, the Tajik government led by the president Emomali Rahmon, who has been in power since 1992, seeks to maintain a high influx of aid to the country. At the same time, Tajik policy-makers are increasingly sceptical about several international norms, including Western, neoliberal good governance, which inseparably accompany incoming funding, and which interfere in the domestic domain, characterised by a centralising state system and constantly decreasing space for oppositional voices.

In August 2016, as part of my doctoral fieldwork, I started a six-month action research in a big Tajik NGO Future, based in the capital city, Dushanbe. As per an agreement with the NGO, I could conduct research on the everyday work of local NGOs for my PhD thesis, while working for the organisation along with its regular employees. I started assisting them in the implementation of one of the main projects of NGO Future at that time, which was an initiative to support good governance in the country, funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). My initial involvement in this project included drafting of press releases, donor reports and translating project documentation from Russian to English. Over time, however, as I became more involved in meeting with donors, as well as project activities in the regions, I observed that my colleagues from the NGO Future had a difficult task of mediating between different parties involved.

The project itself was structured like a Matrioshka doll. It envisaged several intermediaries between USAID headquarters in Washington and final beneficiaries based in rural areas in Tajikistan, which included the USAID Mission to Central Asia, USAID country office in Tajikistan, NGO Future based in Dushanbe as the main implementing agency, and rural Tajik NGOs as sub-grantees of the project in the region. The NGO Future found itself in the middle, trying to reconcile often conflicting interests and views of USAID, NGO sub-grantees, as well as the Tajik government. When my action research finished, for the next eight months I continued participating in project-related seminars and trainings to see further trajectories of these re-appropriations of good governance, and conducted additional interviews with employees of USAID, NGO Future and rural NGOs.

By looking at the American-funded initiative to promote good governance in Tajikistan, this article traces the process of norm localisation, which includes interpretation, negotiation and transformation of international norms on the ground (Bonacker, von Heusinger, and Zimmer 2017, 2). As Acharya (2004) writes, localisation involves ‘an active construction (through discourse, framing, grafting and cultural selection) of foreign ideas by local actors, which results in the former developing significant congruence with local beliefs and practices’ (245). Such localisation is inevitable in contexts which are not only non-favourable for a pure reception of donors’ ideas, but also increasingly
resist them, such as Tajikistan (cf. Heathershaw 2009; Kluczewska 2017, 366). There is a caveat which needs to be explained here. The article does not aim to assess the outcomes of the good governance project and its impact on enhancing good governance in Tajikistan, in a way that would be done during a project evaluation. Neither does it argue that local NGOs in Tajikistan manipulate the ideas of donors. On the contrary, drawing on the International Relations (IR) literature on norm diffusion and the anthropology of development, the article proposes to reverse the perspective and see an apparently failed norm localisation from the point of view of Western liberal donors, because the localisation’s outcomes differ from their intentions, as a successful case of localisation by local actors. To foster their agendas in aid-receiving countries, donors rely on local organisations, which they see as intermediaries of international norms, and which they provide with funding to implement development projects on the ground on donors’ behalf (Acharya 2004, 249). However, local actors, instead of passively transmitting donors’ ideas, actively re-appropriate them, by re-conceptualising them in local socio-economic, political and normative contexts (Mosse 2011). As a result, a localisation which indicates a distortion of international norms can be seen as successful in a way that local actors, whose agency is usually marginalised within Western development aid, managed to take ownership of international norms. This ownership, developed from the ground up, significantly differs from a structured, controlled ownership which the neoliberal Washington consensus envisages for local actors. This ownership can be observed in everyday development work, and as this article shows, it is not always communicated to donors.

Following this introduction, the article outlines the theoretical lenses used to view norm localisation. In turn, it critically engages with good governance in the context of Western development aid, and describes how the norm was incorporated into American aid and with what objectives. The following sections analyse four stages and four agents of localisation of good governance in Tajikistan. The conclusion discusses the implications of such donors’ projects for political trajectories of Tajikistan.

**Diffusion and localisation of international norms**

In the last two decades, a rich literature on norm diffusion by international donors emerged both in constructivist IR, as well as the anthropology of development. More specifically, the former had paid attention to IOs instigating change by socialising states to various norms which gained an international status (Finnemore 1996; Risse-Kappen, Ropp, and Sikkink 1999; Acharya 2004; Fawn 2013). The latter, through ethnographic immersion of researchers, had denounced development discourse and practices as tools of neoliberal expansion and control of aid-receiving countries by the West (Ferguson 1990; Escobar 1995), as well as analysed processes occurring within development organisations and reactions by local communities (Lewis and Mosse 2006; Mosse 2011). Both strands can be complementary, and also useful for our understanding of trajectories of good governance in Tajikistan.

The IR research aligns with IOs. Although some IR literature on norm diffusion views positively the localisation of foreign ideas in contexts where they are being imported (cf. Checkel 1999, 85–87), by adopting a perspective of spiral models to promotion of international norms, this literature continues giving primacy to IOs and their points of view (Bonacker, von Heusinger, and Zimmer 2017, 6). By that, as argued by Zimmermann (2016, 105), ‘IR research
on localization often echoes the socialization paradigm (…). The “local” again becomes a barrier through which certain parts of a norm set enter and by which others are filtered out. While looking at norm diffusion, IR literature tents to assesses whether these norms are localised in accordance with the intention of donors. This literature has been widely criticised for its western-centrism and lack of recognition of the agency of local actors, whom it views as passive recipients of donors’ ideas (Acharya 2004, 249; Bonacker, von Heusinger, and Zimmer 2017, 4). However, this is precisely why it allows to understand the attitudes of donor agencies and IOs towards local actors and determine their socialising tools in Tajikistan, such as conditionality exercised through project funding.

By focusing on practices on the ground, anthropology of development allows to reverse this angle (Lewis and Mosse 2006; Petric 2012). This literature highlights how, on the one hand, local actors comply with donors’ ideas by making supportive claims, and transgress and renegotiate their meaning in practice, on the other. It shows how donors’ intermediaries on the ground, instead of passively transmitting international norms to the very local level, actively re-appropriate them by re-conceptualising them in different localities and political contexts, to the extent that the norms sometimes acquire completely new meanings (Mosse and Lewis 2006, 13–14). Such localisation is inevitably informed by personal beliefs of actors involved in the process, which draw on their biographies, social networks and interests at stake (Hindman and Fechter 2011; Mosse 2011). Local actors develop an ability to at the same time comply with international norms by making supportive claims, while also transgress and renegotiate their meaning in practice (Crewe and Axelby 2012, 60). This process involves interiorising the vocabulary of donors – or ‘development buzzwords and fuzzwords’ (Cornwall and Eade 2010) – and developing an ability to frame local actors’ activities as corresponding to donors’ interests, even if they actually diverge (Craig and Porter 1997, 233). Notably, this focus on the agency of local actors reveals that often, by lip-synching to donors’ discourses to maintain the flow of aid which secures their livelihoods, they themselves contribute to the perpetuation of development interventions worldwide. Having clarified the theoretical underpinning, the next section explains what the good governance norm entails.

**Good governance as an international norm**

The underlying idea of good governance is the notion of governance, which is an outcome of a changing nature of authority in international and domestic politics. Given a growing number of involved actors, the location of authority has dispersed, shifting from centralised *governments* to a decentralised *governance*, which involve nodal networks and partnerships (Weiss 2000, 806; Shearing and Wood 2003). As a result, governance refers to an inclusive decision-making and coordination efforts between state and non-state actors, with the aim of producing and distributing efficiently good-quality public goods and services. It diminishes the traditional role for the state and assigns it a new role of a meta-governor (Jessop 1998) who supervises the process of collective decision-making, without though imposing its will or a moral position, for instance through a bureaucratic top-down state apparatus. The adjective ‘good’ refers to technical aspects of such governance.

While the term ‘good governance’ has been coined by African scholars who first used it in 1998 to describe state-society relations in Africa (Mkandawire 2010), in the 1990s, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) incorporated it in Western development aid. After structural adjustments of the 1970s, and the third wave of
democratisation and the free market in the late 1970s and 1980s, good governance became a major norm in Western development aid (Doornbos 2001). Various components of good governance started being promoted by the majority of Western donors in aid-receiving countries around the world with the aim of ‘fixing’ them. More specifically, within development aid most often good governance refers to promoting accountability, efficiency, transparency, the rule of law and participation (Van Doeveren 2011).

Despite donors’ claims that the norm refers to technical aspects of governance and does not imply any specific ideological position, the commonly used indicators of good governance clearly carry normative, liberal-rationalist underpinnings (cf. Bukovansky 2006). These include a small and decentralised government with a limited engagement in the market, effective provision of services, pro-business orientation, and a strong civil society which provides a counter-balance to government actors (Brinkerhoff and Goldsmith 2005; Andrews 2008, 382). All of these features suggest a neoliberal expansion, which weakens the role of governments and their responsibility for the well-being of citizens. In the post-Soviet space, the good governance agenda further justifies the rollback of the welfare state promoted by donors during post-Soviet transitions to free-market economies and, supposedly, democracy (cf. Sievers 2003).

Good governance has been criticised by critically oriented scholars both for reliance on an aggregation methodology (Oman and Arndt 2010), and fostering reforms which are inadequate, or even dangerous, in aid-receiving countries whose socio-political context differs from the trajectories of Western states which serve as a reference of the good governance agenda (Andrews 2008). Despite these denouncements, rankings of good governance continue guiding the allocation of development aid worldwide (Doornbos 2001, 94; van Doeveren 2011) and good governance is still transferred as part of the donors’ socialisation package worldwide. Tajikistan has also seen a rise of donor-funded good governance projects. In the recent few years, with some variations in definition, the norm was promoted by several donors to the country, including the World Bank, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and USAID.

**The US and a global good governance agenda for security and democracy**

US policy-makers adopted good governance as a policy tool following the launch of the Millennium Challenge Account by the Bush Administration in 1992. The Account increased the US development foreign aid budget and foresaw channelling it to fewer ‘developing’ countries, which, however, would have to prove an improvement in governance performance, in accordance with the US government’s indicators (Lancaster and Van Dusen 2005, 1–4). The new scheme was introduced to balance the US military endeavours of the war on terror after 9/11 with more soft power measures aimed at securing allies. By that, good governance was integrated into American aid as a tool of the country’s foreign and security policy (Hout 2007, 70).

The new strategy represented a shift from aid allocation based on economic growth towards allocation taking into account policy-making in aid-receiving countries. The issues regarding the type and quality governance became part of the new development aid package implemented worldwide by USAID, which is ‘the principal international assistance arm of the federal government’ (Lancaster and Van Dusen 2005, 32). The USAID’s Democracy and Governance Strategic Framework states that:
For democracy to flourish over the long run, competent, transparent, and accountable government institutions are needed. Good governance provides security, operates according to reasonable standards of justice, and provides basic public services. Furthermore, democracy is more likely to be sustainable when it is held accountable by checks on its authority. (…)

Citizen participation in decision making results in more effective public institutions, peaceful settlement of disputes, and respect for the rule of law. (5)

In other words, this attention to good governance resulted from a conviction among US policy-makers that governance which the US government defines as ‘good’ is a precondition for a worldwide democratisation, which in turn is viewed as central for the security of the US and the world. In turn, lack of good governance could lead to aggravating of global security threats. USAID (2005), therefore, defined four crucial dimensions of good governance and committed to fostering them worldwide. These included the rule of law; institutions of democratic and accountable governance; political freedom and competition; and citizen participation in democracy (8).

The Obama Administration continued building on the pillars of the Bush Administration (Gibler and Miller 2012), although more attention was paid to capacity-building of partners from the public sector who provide basic services at the national and community level. A new operational model of development was also envisaged, by including diasporas, NGOs and the private sector in the implementation of US-funded development projects worldwide (USAID 2010). These measures marked a further institutionalisation of the global shift from a government conceptualised as an authority exercised by the state apparatus, towards governance as a common space of state and non-state – private and civic actors, such as NGOs. Notably, this inclusion of local NGOs in the network of (good) governance in development aid to the post-Soviet space coincided with the previous international donors’ initiatives aiming at supporting the neoliberal civil society to strengthen political participation and by that improve the democratic performance of countries in transition. Such idea about a ‘vertical civil society’ (Malena 2008) which organises itself voluntarily to counter-balance to the state, became central among donors since the waves of protest in Central and Eastern Europe in the late 1980s, and later during post-communist transitions in the 1990s (cf. Kubicek 2002).

The Joint Strategic Plan for USAID and the Department of State 2014–17 stated: ‘We [the US policymakers] work to ensure that civil society continues to demand government accountability, transparency, and services, and engages in their respective political systems (US Department of State and USAID 2014, 32, emphasis added). Thus, at a global level, the US government assigned local NGOs in aid-receiving countries a role to foster good governance by demanding that their respective governments adhere to four principles of rule of law, accountability, political freedoms and participation – on behalf and with the support of USAID. The next section shows the transformations which this definition underwent on the ground.

Localisation of good governance in Tajikistan (Table 1)

Stage 1: USAID Mission to Central Asia: good governance in Central Asia as empowering NGOs to make governments improve public accountability

In 2014, USAID office in Tajikistan launched a call for proposals from local NGOs, to assist USAID in implementation of a multi-million USD good governance project in the country.
The initiative to launch such projects in Tajikistan and other neighbouring countries came from the USAID Bureau for Asia, based in the US. Already in 2013, American employees of the Bureau, who had previous working experience on the ground in the Central Asian region, proposed to allocate some of the available funding of USAID for a good governance project there, because, as they believed, the basic pillars of good governance were missing in the region. The Bureau for Asia consulted with the USAID Mission to Central Asia based in Almaty, which was responsible for USAID activities in the whole Central Asian region, as well as the USAID country office in Tajikistan, how to effectively promote the rule of law, accountability, political freedoms and citizen participation in the region, by involving local NGOs. Because good governance was a new sphere for USAID in Central Asia (USAID 2014, 6), there was no shared understanding what it means in the context of the region and how to successfully promote it without resistance of regional governments. Thus, before launching the project, USAID in Central Asia already had to re-interpret the norm in accordance with the interests and visions of USAID in the Central Asian context and local realities.

Precisely because of this vagueness of meaning of good governance locally, the published call for proposals seemed to be offering a broad space for initiatives from local actors in the Central Asian region, by stating that through the project, USAID aimed to support NGOs to achieve durable good governance reforms. Interested NGOs would have to propose activities, which could lead to institutionalising reforms in how government bodies serve the public. Overall thus, although the objectives of the document clearly resonate with the US government’s global good governance agenda, they paid more attention to two particular aspects of good governance which USAID believed to be the most relevant in Central Asia, and feasible to address, that is public accountability and participation. Accountability in this context refers to the Central Asian governments assuming social responsibilities, and participation in involving NGOs in national decision-making. These two aspects reflect the core idea of governance, which promotes collaborations of non-state actors with the governments as equal partners. In other words, USAID believed that good governance could be enhanced in the region through incentivising NGOs to work with governments on structurally improving the provision of public services to populations in Central Asia.

### Table 1. Localisation chart.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Framing of good governance</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>USAID Mission to Central Asia</td>
<td>Almaty, Kazakhstan</td>
<td>Good governance</td>
<td>Empowering Central Asian NGOs to make governments improve public accountability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>USAID in Tajikistan</td>
<td>Dushanbe, Tajikistan</td>
<td>Good governance</td>
<td>Empowering Tajik NGOs to counter-balance the government by demanding better public services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>NGO Future</td>
<td>Dushanbe, Tajikistan</td>
<td>Effective governance (Russian: effektivnoe upravlenie)</td>
<td>Supporting the government in provision of public services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>NGOs Reform and Youth</td>
<td>Rural areas, Tajikistan</td>
<td>Effective government (Tajik: idorakunii samaranok)</td>
<td>Serving the government in provision of public services</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Stage 2: USAID in Tajikistan: good governance as empowering Tajik NGOs to counter-balance the government by demanding better public services

USAID employees in Tajikistan with responsibility for supervising the project in Tajikistan and selecting local NGO implementing partners, largely agreed with the USAID Mission in Central Asia that the most burning issues regarding the quality of governance in the country concerned a limited participation of non-state actors in decision-making, and lack of accountability of the government in provision of public services.  

By deciding upon how to enhance these two aspects in the country, they, however, further localised good governance.

Based on their assessment on the ground, the organisation employees saw the new project first and foremost as an opportunity to empower Tajik NGOs to hold the government to account, by demanding better public services. In the eyes of an employee of USAID in Tajikistan:

In recent years, Tajikistan returned to a condition from before the Bolshevik revolution, to feudal times when there was an emir [sultan] and everyone was subordinated to him, rather than him being at the service of the society. (…) The Tajik government needs to hear the society and receive its feedback, otherwise it will always end up pursuing abstract or private goals.

Based on this assessment, USAID in Tajikistan reinterpreted the good governance project, arguing that:

We cannot blindly look at ideas coming from [USAID in] America. We need to assess what is possible to do in Tajikistan. (…) For us [USAID in Tajikistan] good governance is more than effective management [as USAID in Washington understand the norm]. Good governance should be about a [real] cooperation of the government with communities

This quote includes a view that as long as local NGOs remain weak, there can be no real cooperation between NGOs as non-state actors, and the Tajik government. As a result, USAID in Tajikistan saw the project foremost as an opportunity to strengthen local NGOs to be able counter-balance the Tajik government by demanding better public services. These dynamics reveal that although the launched call for proposals for NGOs seemed to be offering a broad space to NGOs to design their own activities, in practice from the very beginning USAID in Tajikistan had its own specific vision of the project. USAID in Tajikistan ignored that fact that Tajik NGOs themselves would not be eager to challenge the Tajik government. While the conventional wisdom is that since the wave of colour revolutions across the post-Soviet region – Georgia 2003, Ukraine 2004, and Kyrgyzstan 2005 and 2010 – Tajik NGOs have been facing scrutiny by the government, and in the last years their space for action has been constantly shrinking (Buxton 2011, 172; Mullojanov 2017), some longer patterns of NGOs’ acquiescence to the government can be indicated. This is related, in the first place, to the Soviet training of Tajik NGO activists, which is described later in the article. Second, Tajik NGOs have been always reluctant to openly criticise the government because of continuing memories of the Tajik civil war, which lead to associations of resistance to the government with violence and anarchy (Karimov 2006, 25).

Overall, at the second stage of localisation the vision of good governance by USAID in Tajikistan did not envisage much space for local ownership of the project by Tajik implementing partners. Despite that, as the next section shows, after initial misunderstandings, the NGO Future managed to further localise good governance.
**Stage 3: NGO Future: good governance as creatively supporting the government in provision of public services**

The call for proposals announced by USAID in 2014 met with a big interest of Tajik NGOs. With a general decrease of donors’ funding for NGOs in Central Asia in the recent years, the call was widely disseminated through online platforms re-posting announcements for NGOs. The Dushanbe-based NGO Future decided to apply for the project, although based on previous precedents, NGO employees were aware that norms imported by donors are rarely feasible in local realities. As one of the employees involved in project development admitted: ‘We knew what good governance means for the US government and that this definition was very political. But we started wondering what good governance might mean in the context of Tajikistan and what we could do with it.’ In the project application, the NGO Future proposed a research among Tajik NGOs on how they understand good governance among local communities where they carry out their everyday development work. Depending on the research findings, the next step could involve mapping of the quality of public services provided in selected pilot regions and identifying ways how NGOs could contribute to the improvement of their provision.

Soon after the submission of the proposal, the NGO was informed that it was awarded the grant. At the same time, USAID in Tajikistan asked for substantial changes in proposed activities. According to an employee of the NGO Future:

> Basically, USAID [in Tajikistan] removed most of our components and asked us to become a bank that channels money from USAD to smaller NGOs in the regions of Tajikistan. We realised that USAID was not interested in our ideas, but it needed a local NGO [based in the capital] with good managerial capacities, which would administer the project on their behalf.

Apart from assigning the NGO Future an administrative task of coordinating work of rural NGOs throughout the country, USAID in Tajikistan also planned a series of capacity-building and advocacy trainings for rural NGOs in Tajikistan, to ‘strengthen their abilities to work with government structures.’ By that, USAID wanted to make sure that Tajik NGOs move away from, as stated in the Central Asian development strategy of USAID (2014), what the donor saw as ‘centralized, control-oriented Soviet approaches to “western” economic, political and social models of development’ (1).

The NGO Future perceived that by providing funding USAID might push rural NGOs to enter into sensitive fields, and criticise the Tajik government for its negligence to provide high-quality public services to the population. This was a common practice among donor agencies and IOs in Tajikistan, and employees of the NGO Future sensed that the project could bring trouble to their organisation and other NGOs, which the government already saw as mercenaries of Western donors. This position is summarised by one of the interviewees from the organisation:

> IOs have so much more political power [than local NGOs], but they prefer to make us [local NGOs] do all dirty job, in this way making us very vulnerable. It is not our role [as NGOs in Tajikistan] to demand sensitive policy changes. Instead of criticising state officials on behalf of donors [who do not want to do it themselves not to destroy relations with the Tajik government], we should support the government by offering new ideas.

The NGO was not interested in provoking the government for two inter-related reasons. The first reason was pre-emptive, because as mentioned above, challenging the
government could put on halt activities of the NGO by deploying a whole range of official tools, including meticulous audits and inspections, which would discipline the NGO. The second reason was clearly ideological, and at the same time pragmatic. It was related to the profile of decision-makers in the NGO Future. They were in their mid-40s, had a prolonged working experience in the government, and a clear opinion regarding the relations between NGOs and the government. As one decision-maker remarks:

The government is a strong apparatus [Russian: moshnaya mashina], and our role as NGOs is to support it by bringing it closer to the people. We [the NGO sector] should not go against the state, it is like going against the grain [Russian: eto kak budo idti protiv techeniya]. (...) We also should not do any stupidities [Russian: ne nado delat’ glupostey] [go against the government] because we need to think about employees of our organisation, about their families and children. They need to have a stable income and not worry about future.19

The NGO considered abandoning the American-funded project, however, eventually it accepted conditions of USAID because of a dramatic financial situation of the organisation. As a result of running out of other donors’ funding, the NGO was risking shutting down in the next few months.20

Despite tight frameworks, the NGO, however, managed to substantially regain ownership of the project by slightly reframing its title when translating it to local languages. While English is commonly used among IOs in Tajikistan, Russian remains the main language of Tajik NGOs based in the capital, and Tajik is mostly used among rural NGOs. At this stage of localisation, thus, good governance was translated as ‘supporting effective governance’ (Russian: podderzhka effektivnogo upravleniya). First, the ‘support’ (Russian: podderzhka) that was supposed to be offered by NGOs to existing initiatives of the government, was different from donors’ good governance, which had connotations of bringing new ideas from abroad, and by that challenging the existing policies and order. Second, the Russian word for governance (upravlenie) did not mean exactly the same as governance. While governance refers to a decentralised, nodal network of state and non-state decision-makers, upravlenie revokes a different kind of governance, such as a systemic guidance, supervision, management, subordination, control and ruling. This is because in the Soviet Union, of which Tajikistan was part, upravlenie referred to a top-down, hierarchical, abstract and bureaucratic state which demanded subordination from people – and that legacy remains influential today.

The NGO Future launched its own call for proposals for rural NGOs, 20 of which would be offered small grants to implement their individual good governance projects throughout Tajikistan. The call invited rural NGOs to propose initiatives which would offer a support to the government (Russian: podderzhka upravleniya) by improving mechanisms and processes of the provision of public services in social and economic spheres, such as education, health care, environmental protection, transport etc. Employees of the NGO Future were confident that a successful collaboration with local authorities to improve state systems of the provision of services was feasible:

Until now, the NGO sector in Tajikistan is not fully institutionalised. We have clear registration procedures [for NGOs], but operational guidelines are still missing, and the informal rules apply. As a result, the border between which activities are allowed and which not remains blurry. (...) For NGOs working at the national level it is always hard to collaborate with the [central] government, but working on a local level is easier because a lot depends on personal
factors. Local authorities are more familiar with work of NGOs in the regions, they know the ones which are hardworking and trustworthy.21

While USAID assigned the NGO Future a role limited to an administrative manager of rural NGOs, the NGO has been systematically guiding rural organisations how to effectively collaborate with government structures. In the understanding of employees of Future, local authorities would support the project only if no inputs were required from their side, such as additional budget allocations, creating new job positions or placing additional duties on the shoulders of officials. Small-scale projects of rural NGOs would thus have to link already existing public services and simplify them, for example by introducing IT components. In what follows, the article analyses how exactly NGOs in the regions have been supporting local authorities.

Stage 4: Rural NGOs: good governance as serving the government in the provision of public services

The last stage of localisation of good governance has been taking place on a municipal level, during the actual implementation of specific good governance projects in the regions across Tajikistan. The outcome was influenced by three simultaneous processes, which relate to the issue of translation; the profile of NGOs in the regions of Tajikistan; and the capacity of the NGO Future to speak the language of donors.

First, as for the translation, the Russian term ‘supporting effective governance’ (podderzhka effektivnogo upravleniya) used for good governance, with upravlenie recalling a hierarchical Soviet-state, translated to Tajik as ‘serving an effective government’ (tashabbus bahri idorakunii samaranok). Notably, in this case, the Tajik word bahr which replaced Russian ‘support’ (podderzhka) has connotations of serving someone; and idorakunì recalled not as much Russian governance (upravlenie) perceived as a strong, bureaucratic state system, but rather resembled Russian pravlenie – a strong rule of a governor, like in the pre-Soviet Emirate of Bukhara which used to partially cover the territory of nowadays’ Tajikistan. These linguistic nuances created a base for a further reinterpretation of good governance as serving the government, and interplayed with Tajik government’s own vision of domestic politics (cf. Heathershaw 2014, 37). Indeed, as stated by an employee of one of rural NGOs which replied to the call of proposals launched by the NGO Future: ‘From the announcement I saw in a local newspaper I understood that Future was looking for NGOs which would truly serve the state, which could help the government to do their job better.’22

The second reason which influenced the localisation process concerns structural features of rural NGOs in Tajikistan. Since the early 1990s, when the NGO sector started developing in the country, the organisations working in rural areas have been highly dominated by active individuals who received education in Soviet Tajikistan, and many of whom have already gained some working experience in government structures or the state-led civil society before the Soviet collapse (Abdullaev 2006; Cieślewská 2015; Mullojanov 2017). After 1991, many former activists of the Soviet political youth organisation Komsomol, trade unions and voluntary circles transferred their charisma, optimism and organisational skills to the newly established NGO sector. Until now, these activists are often described in Tajikistan as ‘people of the Soviet school’ (Russian: lyudi sovetskoy zakalki) or ‘Komsomol members’ (Russian: Komsomolcy), which implies that they are hardworking and dedicated
to the society. Although nowadays there are also some younger organisations led by people who were schooled after 1991, NGOs led by former Soviet activists remain the most active across the regions.

Notably, these individuals gained their organisational skills and developed networks in civil society institutions of a Soviet socialist state, which used to, literally, serve the state in the implementation of social policies. Although for more than two decades these former Soviet activists and current NGO leaders continued implementing western-funded projects, primarily because of no other jobs with attractive salaries available in rural areas of Tajikistan, their understanding of civil society continues to significantly differ from one of the Western donors. Despite working for donor-funded NGOs, many continued to believe that the ‘real’ civil society should serve the state and not challenge it (Buxton 2011, 8). A high level of mobility of employees between local authorities and NGOs in Tajikistan, as described below, significantly consolidated such view. There is also a strong dose of pragmatism in the NGOs’ support for the government, because serving the latter through everyday development work allows is safer for livelihoods of NGO activists, than challenging it.

The third factor which facilitated this creative localisation of good governance on the ground concerned the ability of the NGO Future to ‘speak’ the donor’s language. Based on several years of experience in the NGO sector, the NGO employees mastered the skill of writing project reports by framing ongoing activities in a way which would make them relevant for the USAID agenda and by that please the donor. To quote an NGO employee: ‘We let rural NGOs do their job properly, while we take care to make the donor happy about the project.’ The two cases presented below illustrate these dynamics.

**NGO Reform: good governance as helping the government conduct the housing reform**

The NGO Reform operates in the Khatlon region, in the south of Tajikistan. The head of the NGO, an active man in his mid-60s, back in Soviet times was known as one most dedicated Komsomol members in the region. In early 2000s, he opened his own NGO to create a new space for activism for the local population and support poverty reduction in the south of the country, which experienced a severe economic decline after the Soviet collapse, as well as destructions caused by the Tajik civil war which devastated this part of the country.

Within the USAID-funded project, the NGO Reform was awarded a small grant to support the reform of community housing. The project was presented to the donor as targeting a passive approach of local communities to solve common problems. After 1991, apartment buildings, which were previously owned and managed by the state, were privatised and became a property of individual citizens. However, as the project description written by the NGO Future explained to the donor, in an attempt to resonate with USAID’s expectations, until now ‘the [local] population still hopes and thinks that the state will solve their problems, and does not show any initiative [to manage and upkeep common areas of the estates].’

As a result, by creating associations of homeowners managing apartment buildings in the region, the project seemed to carry a mission to de-sovietise people’s minds, a goal that is important for USAID in the post-Soviet area (cf. USAID 2014, 1), through breaking with the Soviet tradition of people accepting and expecting that the state will manage their life. The project also seemed to aim at diminishing the influence of the government,
in that by empowering citizens to form homeowners’ associations, it contributed to replacing expensive and ineffective house management companies (Russian: domuprav-lyayushie kompanii), which are commonly viewed as an extension of Soviet-era state-led institutions managing apartment buildings.

From the perspective of the NGO Reform, however, the project did not challenge the Tajik government, but, on the contrary, served interests of the hukumat (local authorities at the district level). This is because back in 2009 the government adopted the Law on Maintenance of Apartment Buildings, which encouraged the formation of homeowners’ associations, exactly the same like the ones which were supposed to be formed through the USAID-funded project. USAID, however, was not informed that through the project the NGO supported an already ongoing housing reform, launched by the government. Because in 2016 there were still very few such homeowners’ associations in Khatlon, as an employee of the NGO Reform argued, ‘recently, from the central level there has been a pressure on the hukumat to speed up the process of formation of such homeowners’ associations. We simply helped them do their job.’ 25 The NGO, thus, only facilitated the government’s work on the ground (Figure 1).

**Figure 1.** Soviet-era apartment buildings in Khatlon. Although the apartments became privatised after the Soviet collapse and became property of inhabitants, they continued to expect that the government should uphold the buildings. Through the good governance project aiming at creating associations of homeowners, USAID wanted to challenge what it saw as the Soviet mind-set of people in Tajikistan. 3 May 2015, author’s photograph.

**NGO Youth: good governance as improving educational institutions for youth with disabilities**

The second organisation which was awarded a grant was NGO Youth from the Sughd region in the north of Tajikistan. The NGO leader, an energetic lady in her mid-50s, was well known in her region. In the past, she also used to be a prominent Komsomol activist. After the dissolution
of the Soviet Union, she first became the head of a local school, and then was promoted as a raisi jamaat, head of the government at the municipality level. After leaving this position, she became the head of the local Centre for Extra-Curricular Educational Work, a state institution modelled upon the Soviet-era House of Pioneers (Dom Pionerov), which used to organise out-of-school-hours educational activities for the youth. In the early 2010s, she established an initiative group to activate the local youth by involving them in the organisation of cultural events, instructive theatre spectacles and voluntary public work during the weekend, similar to Soviet-era unpaid community work during weekends, subbotnik.

Within the good governance project, the NGO Youth was awarded a grant to improve the efficiency of afterschool educational centres and involve children with disabilities in activities of these centres. Like in the case of the NGO Reform, when communicating with USAID, the NGO Future presented the project as confrontational towards local authorities. Officially, thus, as the NGO Future wrote in one of its reports for USAID, this project aimed to challenge the negligence of the government towards ‘youth with disabilities [who] are excluded from existing after-school classes, extra-curricular activities, and apprenticeship programs in the target district (...) [and not] not taught [any] craft or a profession.’ The practice on the ground, however, showed a different story. The leader of the NGO Youth saw her work as a service to the state. She explains: ‘As a former government official I know very well that the jamaat has a small budget at its disposal and I wanted serve my country (Tajik: baroi davlat hizmat kardan) by bringing in funding from donors.’26 With the donor’s funding, the project involved young people with disabilities in additional computer, singing, dancing and sewing classes at the Centre for Extra-Curricular Educational Work, and taught several young people basic crafts, so that they could support their families with their work. The jamaat appreciated the dedication of the NGO and praised the project for

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**Figure 2.** The main street in a town in Sughd, and a poster with a slogan ‘Youth is a creative force of the future’ (Javonon nerui oyandasoz miillat) accompanied by the logo of the Committee for Youth Affairs, Sport and Tourism. Often, because of extremely limited funding and a massive brain drain of skilled officials from the regions, the actual engagement of local authorities with the youth is limited to placing such posters in public venues. 9 September 2017, author’s photograph.
supporting educational institutions for youth with disabilities, and even allocated some extra budget for additional activities of these institutions (Figure 2).

The dynamics in the two case studies suggest that on the municipal level good governance was localised in the realm of a Soviet-era civic activism serving the Tajik government. Nowadays, however, this activism is financed by foreign donors, rather than the government itself. Such localisation allowed all organisations involved in the project to carry out their activities without disruption. The ability of the NGO Future to maintain an illusion of alignment with the donor’s vision allowed USAID offices in Central Asia and Tajikistan to provide the USAID’s headquarters in Washington with a perfect project report. In turn, the localisation which informally refocused the meaning of good governance on the ground allowed Tajik NGOs to maintain the influx of foreign funding, which finances their livelihoods, while maintaining good relations with the government. As for the Tajik government, the localised notion of good governance contributed to strengthening its authority, while outsourcing provision of public services to donor-funded NGOs.

**Conclusion**

By analysing trajectories of good governance(s) in Tajikistan, this article discussed how the tension between global paradigms imported by donors to aid-receiving countries, and local realities is resolved on the ground through a multi-level and multi-actor localisation. This localisation foresees a reinterpretation of the paradigm in accordance with the biographies of actors involved, their worldviews, personal and institutional interests at stake, the financial condition of their organisation, as well as political opportunities and constraints. The case of the good governance norm in Tajikistan also shows that the human agency is fundamental for the outcome of localisation, as often individual employees interpret and bend rules and institutional frameworks in which they operate. By doing that, they are able to significantly influence institutional and project frameworks in which they operate. Through bending of rules, local donor-funded NGOs become themselves engineers of development work.

The US government defined good governance as a rule of law, accountability, political freedoms and citizen participation; and incorporated it in the agenda of its national development agency, USAID, with the aim of advancing worldwide democratisation and security. This article analysed four stages of localisation of good governance. The first one occurred at the premises of the USAID Mission to Central Asia, where good governance was narrowed down to two principles, such as accountability of the state towards citizens; and participation of non-state actors in decision-making. Employees of the USAID Mission to Central Asia believed that such defined good governance could be enhanced through empowering local NGOs to improve systems of the provision of public services, and in this way raise accountability of governments of their countries. At the second stage of localisation, employees of USAID in Tajikistan saw the project as an opportunity to counterbalance the Tajik government which they saw as decreasing the space for local NGOs. At this stage, good governance gained a meaning of empowering NGOs to confront the Tajik government by demanding better public services. At the third level of localisation, the Dushanbe-based NGO Future reinterpreted good governance within the realms of ideological and pragmatic considerations, as supporting the Tajik government in the provision of public services. At the fourth and last level of localisation, rural NGOs
understood good governance as serving the state. This means that rural NGOs support the government, for example by financing the implementation of policies with donors’ funding.

Nuances of this localisation invite reflection on the final outcome of re-appropriations of good governance on the ground. The ultimate definition of the good governance paradigm by rural NGOs not only differs from, but clearly contradicts the initial intention of the US government. For the latter, good governance meant replacing the government with governance, conceptualised as a decentralised network of state, civic and private partners involved in decision-making (cf. Jessop 1998; Shearing and Wood 2003). Within such governance, accountability and participation were understood as the involvement of a broad number of state and non-state actors in decision-making and coordination, as well as equal partnerships. However, localised good governance in Tajikistan envisaged a return to a vision of a strong, a centralised government taking the decisions. The authority shifted back to the government. The accountability of the government towards non-state actors did not increase, on the contrary, the Tajik NGOs saw themselves as accountable to the state. Instead of demanding to be included in decision-making processes in the NGOs started implementing pre-established government decisions. This is how ‘good governance’ turned ‘serving an effective government’ and further strengthened the government instead of promoting governance. This suggests, that because of its western-centrism and naivety about political and economic transitions elsewhere, Western development assistance continues to have a reverse effect on Tajikistan’s political trajectory, by legitimising the current domestic order (cf. Heathershaw 2014).

Drawing on the insights from IR literature on IOs (Finnemore 1996; Acharya 2004) and anthropology of development (Escobar 1995; Lewis and Mosse 2006; Petric 2012), this article argued that while from the foreign donors’ point of view this case might represent a failed localisation because the outcome reveals a distortion of donors’ ideas, it should be viewed as a successful localisation by local actors. By assigning the project to the NGO Future, USAID tasked the NGO with a top-down diffusion of good governance, which envisaged no space for local ownership of the norm by local actors. However, through a skilful localisation local actors themselves took ownership of the norm and implemented it the way they deemed necessary. Such apparently failed localisation is a victory of actors on the ground who managed to bypass constraints related to rigid project frameworks and geopolitical interests of donors.

Notes

2. Apart from Tajikistan, post-Soviet Central Asia includes Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.
3. 85 Western development agencies are present in the country. In 2016, net official development assistance (ODA) to Tajikistan amounted to 334 million USD (with the pick of 433 million USD in 2010). See the World Bank data: http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/DT.ODA.AALLD.CD
4. The names of all local NGOs mentioned in this article are pseudonyms.
5. For instance, the World Governance Index (WGI), released by the World Bank since 1996, pays attention to six dimensions of good governance: Voice and accountability; political stability and absence of violence, governance effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law and control of

7. Interview 12.
8. This view was stated clearly in the USAID Regional Development Cooperation Strategy for Central Asia 2015-2019 (USAID 2014), published later that year, in October 2014.
9. Interview 12.
10. Interview 12.
11. Interview 12.
15. Interview 12.
17. Interview 2; 3; 7; Interview 6: employee of the NGO Future, 5 January 2017; Interview 8: employee of Future, 3 April 2017.
18. Interview 2.
19. Interview 6
20. Interview 2; 3; 8.
21. Interview 3.
23. Although other employees of these NGOs might be younger, the decision-makers are usually individuals in their fifties and sixties, who were former Soviet activists.
24. Interview 5.

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