

# CREATING NEW NGOS IN CENTRAL ASIA

## THE EXPERIENCE OF THE CAMP PROGRAM

### Pioneering in Central Asia

The Central Asian Mountain Partnership (CAMP) Network unites four organizations working for the development of mountain villages in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan. The Network was initiated with the support of the Central Asian Mountain Partnership (CAMP) Program of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) 2000-2008. When this program was launched in 2000 the creation of local national NGOs was not foreseen but became an important issue in Phase II which started in 2002. It was the beginning of a long and difficult process for all three country teams. The designated CAMP successor organizations – CAMP Alatoo in Kyrgyzstan, CAMP Kuhiston in Tajikistan and CAMP Consulting in Kazakhstan – started developing in their own way and at different speeds. But all went through similar and inescapable steps of institutional development described below.

### From an inconceivable idea to lift-off

When Ernst Gabathuler, the Swiss Program Leader of the CAMP Program until 2003, first approached the local team members with his vision of creating a network of national NGOs as a follow up to the program, nobody believed in such an idea. Encouraged through examples of similar programs in other regions where local staff had decided to continue foreign development programs by creating self-sustained NGOs, interest rose and questions appeared. In 2002 the whole CAMP team members invested themselves into the 'Dom Gor' ('Mountain House') project and their commitment and identification with the program grew. As a result of these efforts the 'Alliance of Central Asian Mountain Communities' (AGOCA) was created and officially registered in 2003. It became the first of the four so called CAMP

successor organizations. By the end of 2002 the option of creating independent national NGOs had become an envisagable option.

### Towards institutional development

It is commonly agreed that every emerging organization goes through similar phases of development, starting with what could be called a pioneer phase, followed by a set-up phase and a consolidation phase, possibly ending with a fossilization phase and ultimately with its dissolution. The pioneer phase is usually characterized by a motivated, creative, cohesive team full of expectations and ambitions. In contrast, strategies and approaches are little developed at this stage. The visibility of projects and products is low, the working style is often neither goal oriented nor very efficient, particularly because the organization of working processes and procedures is weak, rules



have not yet been established, coordination is feeble, and responsibilities are not clear. In the set-up phase the motivation of people is generally unchanged as is the cohesion within the team. Plans and approaches get clearer, the visibility of projects and products increase and the goals become better defined allowing the team to work more efficiently. But there are generally still little rules, only weak coordination, no clear responsibilities and no common working processes and procedures. Only in the consolidation phase do organizations establish rules, decide upon responsibilities, emphasize better coordination and agree on working processes and procedures.



In the case of the CAMP Program the pioneer phase has been a very long one in all three countries, especially in Tajikistan, where lesser resources were invested and frequent staff changes hampered progress. The whole CAMP team actually went through two pioneer phases: I (2000-2002) initiation of the CAMP Program and II (2002-2004) decision to create national NGOs and first steps of institutional development. While phase I was clearly led by the implementing agency - the Centre for Development and Environment (CDE) of the University of Bern, Switzerland - the responsibility for the second was gradually shifted to the local teams. However, "we were still an SDC program, implemented and led by CDE and even if negotiations about the directions and activities within the program took place, we only played a minor role in them" (Ulan Kasymov, Director CAMP Alatau and Coordinator CAMP Network in 2007). This contradiction between 'self-responsibility' and 'imposed decisions', was one of the most difficult challenges for the teams while they were gradually increasing their experience and broadening their partner network.

### Between the pioneer and set up phases – a critical juncture

The years 2003 and 2004 were strongly affected by ups and downs. The decision to build up CAMP successor organizations and its approval by the SDC was an important milestone for the teams to engage with the process of institutional development. This implicated a withdrawal by the program leader from internal discussions in order to guarantee ownership and let local staff take over responsibility and develop own visions. "This withdrawal was quite a shock for the team", Ernst Gabathuler remembers, "since it happened during a time when the hierarchy was still strong within the program and people were not used to taking decisions on their own". Despite punctual inputs of support from external experts to the process of institutional development, the team felt lost in the beginning as no new local leader had yet been appointed to take over the responsibilities. The first team building workshop held in summer 2003 helped in developing a common vision. It was the first opportunity for the staff to take time for critical reflection on what had

been achieved so far. Intensive and passionate debates took place and lots of critics on the program were expressed. Difficult to deal with but certainly important for shaping the identity of the future follow up organizations, this was a major challenge for the Swiss Program Leader Regula Imhof. The second major milestone and critical incidence occurred in 2005 when the SDC decided to end the CAMP Program earlier than expected. Luckily this shock for everyone was smoothed by the fact that it coincided with new mandates acquired from other donors such as the GTZ-CCD and BMU. The teams realized that other possibilities of financing existed providing the necessary self-confidence to master the future independently.

### Shaping and consolidating identities

The broad thematic approach and the long experimentation phase of the CAMP Program gave people space for creativity and innovations but made it also quite difficult to decide upon a clear profile and goal for the CAMP successor organizations. The teams realized, that

**CAMP**kuhiston



**NGO for  
sustainable  
mountain  
development**

institutional development does not happen by itself, but that it needs additional time and that decisions have to be taken to bring the process forward. The implementation of projects had to give way to the development of planning, coordination and management capacities. Not only did the different agencies have to register officially, but a status had to be elaborated, and rules and procedures discussed and agreed on. Moreover, the locally registered NGO had to adapt their reporting system - including book-keeping - to country-specific laws and requirements. This time-consuming administrative work was commonly underestimated. Different trainings were then necessary to assure knowledge transfer and capacity building on thematic and methodological issues. In the post-Soviet context the strengthening of capacities for independent work of each team

## **HISTORICAL MILESTONES OF CAMP'S INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

- 2000** *Start of the Central Asian Mountain Partnership (CAMP) Program in Kyrgyzstan*
- 2002** *Start of the CAMP Program in Tajikistan and Kazakhstan*
- 2003** *Creation of the Alliance of Central Asian Mountain Communities (AGOCA)*
- 2004** *Registration of AGOCA in Kyrgyzstan*
- 2005** *Creation and registration of ten 'Territorial Public Councils' (TPCs)*
- 2006** *Registration of the Public Foundation CAMP Consulting in Kazakhstan*
- 2007** *Registration of the Public Foundation CAMP Alatoo in Kyrgyzstan and creation of CEEBA*  
*Registration of the Public Association CAMP Kuhiston in Tajikistan and creation of the Mountain Village Development Foundation*  
*Creation of first Energy Committees in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan*  
*Creation of the Public Foundation "Micro credit agency of villages"*  
*Creation of first Pasture Committees in Kyrgyzstan*
- 2008** *Start of first multi-annual project for the GTZ-CCD on pasture management in Kyrgyzstan by CAMP Alatoo*  
*Joint venture of CAMP Kuhiston with the Centre for Competence in Disaster Reduction (CCDR) in Tajikistan*

member is particularly important. Therefore the program leader started to shift more and more responsibilities to the new NGO members. Step by step they were involved in decision making processes and given the responsibility for managing small projects including the handling of small budgets. Finally they were encouraged to take over all steps from the elaboration of a project proposal to the final reporting.

Last but not least, it was important to invest time into teambuilding efforts, a crucial aspect for the consolidation of an organization, which is often underestimated and usually left out, when time is short.

## **Partnerships – an asset and a challenge**

The CAMP Program was designed to build on partnerships with local, regional and international actors and to emphasize the active involvement of villagers, local institutions, partner organizations and experts. The program started by conducting action-oriented research and base line studies as well as designing and implementing small projects for product development and marketing. Very quickly, the number of project partners and working groups increased and led to difficulties in maintaining quality control. Moreover, the distribution of responsibilities for planning, implementation, evaluation and follow up was sometimes confused or even neglected.



Thus one of the strengths of the program – i.e. the large amount of partnerships at many different levels - became a threat. While the many partnerships had helped to expand the geographical focus of projects and to foster sustainability, the rapid expansion of activities with many different partners compromised quality standards, monitoring and the learning process due to insufficient time and financial resources. Therefore, in Phase II and III the CAMP Program focussed on four core activity fields and also reduced the number of partners by selecting the best and most reliable ones. Nevertheless the lack of good partners remained a critical problem while workload increased. As a reaction the CAMP agencies helped in creating new institutions at regional level (AGOCA), at national level (Mountain Villages Partnership and Development Fund MVPDF and Center for Energy Building in Central Asia CEEBA) and in particular at village level (Territorial Public Councils TPCs, energy and pasture committees) in order to maintain one of CAMP's original strengths, the participatory collaboration with villagers.

The regionality of the CAMP Program represents an innovative and important asset

allowing the teams in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to use synergies for exchanging experiences and disseminating best practices. But at the same time this regionality is a big challenge since regional coordination requires additional time and money and since country specific laws and policies act as obstacles for a close collaboration. The independent CAMP NGOs are still in a very early stage of their development trying to strengthen themselves and to find their national identities. The construction of a strong and active regional CAMP Network will thus remain a major challenge in the future.

### Lessons learnt and outlook

The broad program approach, its diversification and national specificities, the gradual handing over of decision power and the imposed regional collaboration have all proven to be both potential opportunities and challenges alike. Whether the process of institutional development leads to success or failure ultimately depends both upon single individuals and fortunate coincidences. Capacities in negotiating with international donor organization, strategic thinking or human resource management are crucial for the sustainability of the young NGOs

but need more time and additional external support. Expecting miracles will only lead to frustration and failures.

To date, the three CAMP agencies as well as AGOCA are at different stages of their institutional development with their own strengths and weaknesses. It appears difficult to create an atmosphere of mutual help and support rather



than rivalry given the 'fight for survival' of each entity. Nevertheless these organizations have all been created and fostered through partnerships. Only by maintaining and further strengthening their own regional partnership, can thus the four CAMP successor organizations become credible and able to convince other actors to join efforts to contribute to the sustainable development of mountain regions in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan.



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