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Hilfswerk International: An NGO in Central Asia as Science Communicator between the Society, Governments and the Private Business Sector

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A commonly encountered hurdle to overcome in international project implementation - particularly between “Western” and developing countries - are communication standards as cultural and language barriers as well as country-specific political or hierarchical structures may differ considerably.

In this context, we present the Central Asia Mission of the Austrian NGO Hilfswerk International (HWI; www.hilfswerk.tj) and its role in general communication and decision-making at the interface between science, society, and governments. Drawing from the experience of two different project setups, we delineate its activities not only in outreach but also in feedback transfer.

First, we discuss the classic geoscientific PAMIR Project dedicated to a large-scale geohazard assessment in Central Asia. Besides the traditional expected scientific outcomes, one major aspect of the project was to improve the livelihoods of local communities. Here, Hilfswerk International gradually deepened communication links among relevant stakeholders and actively engaged in the design, implementation, and coordination of actions directly dedicated to mountain communities. Key outreach activities consisted of training and info-campaigns, involving specialized staff like social workers, publications in different languages, gathering feedback and evaluation of the perception of tasks, personal visits to residents and direct talks to local communities, adapted means of communication and science dissemination, school programs, emergency awareness building at different levels, respecting of typical hierarchies (e.g. the Kyrgyz Ayl Ykmyty or the Afghan Village Council), etc.

Second, we present the mechanism of operation of an agro-economic project series initially consisting of two different grant concepts: economic development of small farming in the framework of the EU Program “Central Asia Invest”, and food safety on academic levels within Erasmus+. Hilfswerk International individually designed communication strategies ultimately linking (initially non-complementary) project types and creating win-win situations through outreach. For example, experiences of local farming communities were incorporated into

academic curricula, while agricultural standards elaborated on academic levels were brought back in adequate forms to respective units of produce, i.a., by tailored training for farmers, round-tables, or the creation of local working groups that nowadays sustain themselves.

From these – and other – projects, we conclude several essential points:

- Science often serves as a neutral base for argumentation and a ground for mutual agreement; however, it needs to be communicated in a way understandable for all involved parties respecting mentalities, traditions, cultural differences, levels of education, and the local context.
- Strategies of science communication are to be adapted for every project, requiring versatility and flexibility; here, NGOs as non-partial organizations might have a wider scope.
- Cooperation through a neutral science communicator has a positive effect on the working climate and, in the long term, makes communication channels self-sustaining.

At the example of Hilfswerk International, we point out the beneficial role of NGOs in general communication and outreach as successful international cooperation will become increasingly important in times of climate change, environmental pollution, water security, and resource consumption.