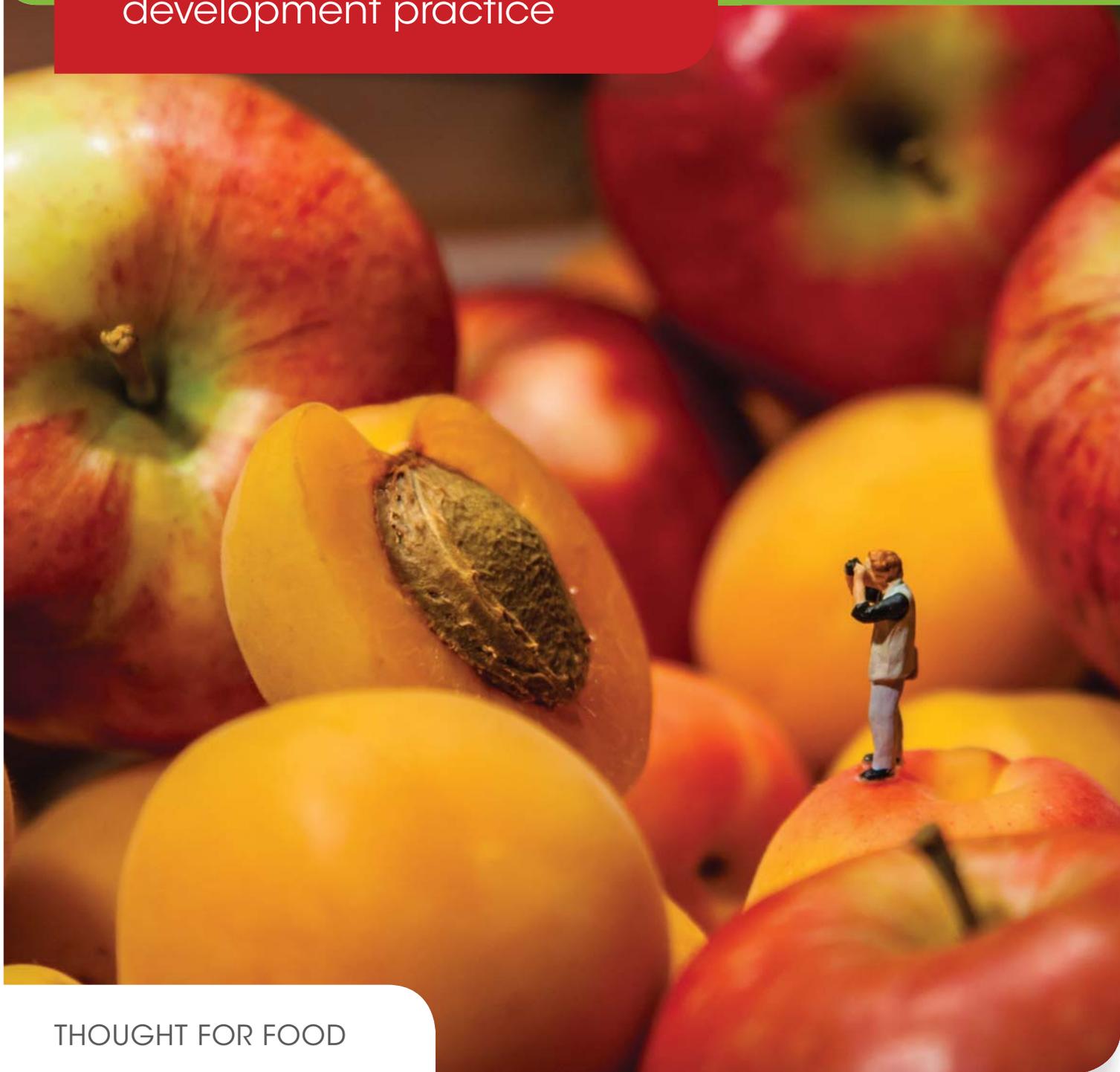


# Seeds and Ideas

Food as a method in  
development practice

L. Jamila Haider &  
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THOUGHT FOR FOOD



OXFAM Novib

## Colophon

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## Content

<b>Introduction</b>	5
<b>Part I: How do ideas emerge?</b>	8
Food as a method to shift power	10
<b>Part II: In autonomous spaces, where do ideas come from?</b>	12
Food as a method to excavate memories and inspire ideas	13
<b>Part III: How do ideas take root?</b>	16

## Introduction

Ideas seem to happen to us. Like the flashing light bulb in a cartoon, or Archimedes lowering himself into the water of his bathtub. First the idea isn't there. Then, spontaneously, it is. Or is it?

To understand how ideas come to be, and particularly how they take root in people's minds and in the collective mind of societies, it is not enough to locate where they began. In a sense (Foucault (1977) would say), origins are irrelevant: understanding the paths that ideas take as they evolve, and the passions, struggles and dissensions that shape them, brings us much closer to their essence than locating their beginning. Ideas are not singular, incorruptible monuments, but networks of interacting ideas and the powers that move them.

This may sound abstract, but it will be useful as a premise in explaining the intention behind this paper: to explore how new ideas that exist outside the mainstream discussions about development can be brought into its narrative and influence its course. And how food in general, and agricultural biodiversity in particular, can help facilitate this process.

We would like, firstly, to trace the evolution of the idea that gave rise to this paper. It is the idea of a book, and begins with a testimony of our own blindness.

We had both been working in the Pamirs for two years. The Pamirs are the mountains that straddle the border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan, spreading also into Northern Pakistan and Eastern China. They are beautiful and isolated, a barren desert if not for the small patches of irrigated land that people have created to grow food. The Pamiri people have a rich culture expressed in their ancient celebrations and traditions, dance and music, and in the many hundreds of varieties of grains, pulses and fruits that have evolved under their care. Strangely, the food we ate during those years in the Pamirs seemed to have little bearing with that agricultural wealth. All that time, the food in restaurants, along the road, and even at people's homes seemed mostly Russian-influenced and greasy with foreign oil. Not much to write home about, except for the flatbreads, '*gartha*' or '*non*', which were wonderful.

After two years, a question dawned. Why, in a region where 153 varieties of wheat are grown, is simple white bread the only thing made with it? In a culture that is so deeply rooted in agricultural traditions, where did all the food go? It was a good question. In response, our colleagues, scientists from the Pamir Biological Institute, proudly brought us home-cooked *osh*, *noshkhukhpa*, *komnigul*, *tukhp-khakhpa* and *khikhtz*,<sup>1</sup> all dishes made from local crops and products. It was as if a new window on life in these mountains opened. Together, we began to look for more foods and, in less than half a year, had found the names of more than a hundred traditional recipes. One day, during a conversation with a grandmother in the village of Mun, in the Tajik valley of Ghund, she told us stories about the food she once used to eat. Soon the entire family was there, listening to her, and more and more people from her community joined. When she had finished, she asked us to write down her recipes in a book so that she could leave them for her grandchildren so they wouldn't forget. That is how the idea of a recipe book was born.

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<sup>1</sup> *osh* (noodle soup), *noshkhukhpa* (dried apricot soup), *komnigul* (apricot pit soup), *tukhp-khakhpa* (cheese curd soup) and *khikhtz* (sweet wedding cream)

A year later, we returned to the Pamirs. We had a list of recipes and ingredients, but to our foreign minds they made very little sense. How do you make a soup from dried apricots and flour? What is sourdough soup, and why do you prepare the head and legs of a sheep, for breakfast? Travelling through the Pamirs to look for the people behind these recipes, through villages we had never been in, we arrived at people's doorsteps as complete strangers, unannounced and uninvited. "Could you perhaps cook something for us?" we would ask, "something special," and presented the list of recipes we still did not understand. The embarrassment we felt at doing this was always swept away by an overwhelming hospitality and kindness, and that window which had opened with hesitation two years before, now let in a colourful new world of tastes, memories and stories. Speaking about food helped us to understand more of the difficulties of Pamiri life, and more of its beauty, and to see these in a light that went beyond resource scarcity or war, themes usually associated with this part of the world.

These 'food stories' are about agriculture and the landscape in which it is practiced; they are about the history of the Pamirs. Less clearly, they are also about its future: when thinking about the past in a different way (for example, through the lens of agriculture, food or poetry instead of economics or politics), different futures begin to appear. Strengths and knowledge emerge that seemed hidden before.

This simplified genealogy of 'our' book idea, by now, spans five years, and much longer if one counts the work that Pamiris have done to cultivate and select their ancient seeds and fruit varieties. What we mean to illustrate with this example is that it is often silly to try to demarcate an idea, where and when and with whom it began. Doing so denies it its many beginnings, its many creators, the connections between them, and the intentions, passions, doubts and labour that have given it life.



A field of *lashak-makh* ('rye-pea') in the village of Gorzwinj, in the Afghan valley of Shughnan (photograph by Judith Quax).

Rethinking the conversations about food we had had with farmers, mothers, elders, teachers and children, ideas emerged that to us seemed very important to the future of the region. These were ideas about identity and ways of living that are truly Pamiri, and about not losing these amidst the rapids of current change. Very few of these ideas were reflected in the development efforts being implemented. Why weren't they there?

The remainder of this article seeks to find an answer to that question, and a possible remedy. The reasoning goes as follows:

1. ideas emerge because they are needed or useful. Usefulness, however, is never objective, it is in the eye of the beholder. The beholder who wields the greatest power (in the development arena or elsewhere) therefore has the greatest influence over whether ideas are found to be useful and become established. Ideas from actors who are less powerful become marginalised. Speaking about food is one way to shift this power. It can create a space where different 'beholders' have equal power.
2. However, even if a space has been created in which existing power dynamics are broken down or circumvented, what if few sovereign ideas exist? Where do original ideas come from? We propose that food as a method can help unearth ideas, old and new, that are true to a place and a people.
3. In the final part of this paper we explore ways in which these ideas, once unearthed, can take root in society.

## Part I: How do ideas emerge?

One simple reason that ideas emerge and become established is because they are useful. Development organisations judge and justify their actions based on how useful they are in helping to achieve their missions and targets.

Foucault (1977) makes a similar observation about the history of morality: many historians, he says, view the development and genesis of morality as concerned mostly with utility. Norms, behaviour, actions are morally acceptable, and therefore become established, when they serve a purpose.

Morality and utility join forces in the interventions of development organisations, which usually act on the strong moral basis of improving the human condition and the environment. In their interventions, they select the ideas and actions that are useful from this moral standpoint.

The difficulty is that it is rarely easy to know what is useful or morally appropriate in any given place or context. Utility is determined in response to a problem, which is often identified by the organisation itself. Project proposals and prevailing funding systems require that problems be defined in a simplified manner so that the responses to them become manageable and easy to monitor. In this process of simplification, the problems against which the utility of interventions is judged become one-liners—poverty reduction, market development, ‘fighting hunger’, climate change adaptation—which make it easy to lose sight of the many reasons why things are done the way they are. An agricultural field, for example, if considered from the perspective of food production, may be judged on its soil nutrients, irrigation, or crop productivity, and development responses would focus there. If viewed from the perspective of market development, the typical response is to grow marketable crops. The other functions a field may have, such as health, labour, crop diversity, or links to specific foods, may be lost in the process.

More specifically, consider the Pamiri tradition of jointly cultivating grain crops and pulses, referred to in Shughni, one of the local languages, as *lashak-makh* (literally ‘rye-pea’). Many fields are sown with a mixture of rye, barley, pea, grass pea (*Lathyrus sativus*), lentil and faba bean. To a classical agronomist, the field looks like a mess. Yields are poor, labour is high, the scope for intensification enormous.

A more forward thinking agronomist or ecologist would view this practice as an example of ‘traditional ecological knowledge’: the mixture of plants and root systems prevents erosion, the nitrogen-fixing pulses reduce the demand on the soil posed by the grain crops, and the diversity of crops grown together reduces the risk of damage from pests and diseases. That is its function.

To the Pamiri cook and farmer, the function of *lashak-makh* is broader still. They use the harvest from these fields to make a flour called *hazorza*, which means ‘mix of a thousand’. The crops are not separated, but harvested and milled together, and the *hazorza* flour is used to make bread or a nutritious noodle soup called *osh*, which is rich in protein and energy and has a cooling quality when working the fields in summer. Many kinds of *osh* exist, made with different mixed flours that come from different combinations of crops grown at different altitudes, and many songs and poems are recited about *Osh*. The soup and the cultivation system are interlinked; the agronomic utility of the cultivation system is connected to the nutritional and cultural utility of *hazorza* and *osh*, and strengthened by it.

Many (agri)cultural norms and practices have functions that are not readily apparent. Is it possible to know which knowledge, practice or idea that seems irrelevant now will be useful at some future point in time? And if it is possible, who are the people to decide on what practices should remain and which ones could go? Who decides on change?

### Ideas need power to move them

When different useful ideas about development compete for implementation, it isn’t always the idea that is most worthwhile that wins. Let’s return to Foucault: when writing about the history of morality, he continued to say that historians were in fact wrong to reduce the history of morality to an exclusive concern for utility. The simple explanation of utility as the genesis and persistence of ideas, he said, is blind to a very important influence: power. In our case, the power of development organisations.

In the Pamirs, the dynamics of power between competing ideas can be illustrated by looking at two different kinds of seeds: local seeds and ones that are introduced.

Farmers in the Tajik valley of Rushan tell how during the Tajik Civil War (1992–1997) that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union, foreign aid agencies promoted a high-yielding wheat variety to help prevent famine. The prospect of higher yields was so tempting that many farmers readily abandoned their old varieties, dismissing the warnings of many of their parents. Soon, however, they began to understand that they had made a poor choice: the new variety did not suit their way of cultivating wheat. It rotted when left to dry in the field and its taste was poor. By then, however, no alternatives seemed left, the old seeds were gone. A few farmers finally crossed the river to Afghanistan, recovered their ancestral varieties from the farmers there and redistributed them amongst their communities.

High yielding crop varieties do have a clear utility in solving problems of hunger and malnutrition. In relatively controlled settings, their functionality has been proven by laboratories and research organisations; you could say that these crops have scientific authority. For development organisations, such authority is welcome, as funding must often be spent on solutions that are known to work and that will help achieve targets and objectives. Science offers legitimacy to development practitioners and their ideas. It doesn’t necessarily hold true, however, once it’s in the field.

In the absence of a laboratory, from where does a native seed variety gain its legitimacy? In the Pamirs, local seeds, or ‘landraces’ are often the result of several generations, and in some cases many centuries, of family farming. They have survived because they are trustworthy, tasty, able to withstand drought or high altitudes. Their legitimacy comes from having passed through many hands of neighbours, family and friends.

In different ways then, albeit in very different contexts, both seeds have a proven utility. The use of the introduced seed is relatively narrow (to produce high yields); that of most local varieties, or landraces, generally broader: the taste of its flour to make bread or soup, the use of its straw for fodder and building materials, its adaptation to local growing conditions and cultivation techniques.

For farmers in Rushan, it took the experiment with the high-yielding wheat variety to realise that even in times of hunger, yield isn’t their main reason for cultivating a crop. But while the Rushani farmers learned a lesson (and had the chance of reverting to their traditional varieties), such seeds continue to be distributed as a symbol of modernisation and development. At times, so much effort and money are invested in their promotion, that the introduction of the seeds seems to become an end in and of itself, rather than a means to relieve hunger or increase income.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The idea of the means becoming an end was elaborated by Frank Mulder in an earlier piece in this series (2014).

## Locating Power

With hundreds of thousands of crop landraces in existence, adapted to settings as difficult as the Pamirs, power becomes more important than utility in explaining why a handful of high-yielding seeds dominate fields (and minds) across most of the globe.

In development contexts, power often operates in subtle ways. Part of the power of a development organisation lies in its position to formulate responses and development interventions in response to problems it itself defines. Often, this means that the problems defined by organisations correspond primarily to their own capacities, or the funding they are able to obtain, and only secondarily to the reality in which the organisations work. As long as, consciously or not, problems are defined in such an external manner, solutions will be too, and identifying local sources of strength and ingenuity in a development context will remain difficult.

The purpose of these reflections is not to condemn. There is real hardship in the Pamirs, on both sides of the Afghan-Tajik border—famine, poverty, opium addiction, child mortality—and the need for development aid is often justified. Yet, however genuine the motivation, and however sensitive, community-based, or rights-based the approach to development, it remains extremely difficult to break free from an outsider's perspective of a place and one's own position of power. Li (2007, p 5) writes: an organisation's "claim to expertise in optimizing the lives of others is a claim to power."

The example of the improved wheat seed shows the unintended side effects this power can have, and illustrates the inevitable gap that often exists between that which is intended and attempted by development organisations, and that which is accomplished.

To move the locus of power from outside organisations to people and communities who receive development assistance means, firstly, to shift the responsibility of who defines problems and solutions to those very people and communities. The 'inevitable gap' becomes less inevitable when the perspective on development is derived more from within, becomes more endogenous. Food may be one way to achieve this.

## Food as a method to shift power

During the course of our work in the Pamirs, 'food' proved to be a useful tool to break down or at least circumvent power relationships and help gain a deeper understanding of this place and its culture. With 'food' we simply mean the act of cultivating and preparing food, of eating together and speaking and thinking about it. But the experience of working on a book by no means proves that this tool would necessarily be useful in other hands or for the exploration of other questions in different cultures. Would it be something that is useful for development practitioners for their work in agricultural communities? Would redefining and redirecting development efforts around food (in its broadest sense) be meaningful? We will explore a number of qualities of food that suggest it might.

First, food is intimate and unimposing. It is quite different from the jargon that we are often inclined to use when discussing food policies, conservation or development. Such vocabulary impersonalises something that for most farmers is very personal, and makes it difficult for them to participate in these discussions. Food touches on people's identity and history and involves those who are often excluded from the development process (mothers, grandparents, children). It isn't just about cooking and eating.

Second, food provides a common vocabulary. Everyone can speak of food, it suggests no class, does not discriminate between women or men, or donors and their 'beneficiaries'. Food turns women into experts, and experts into fools. It has this quality, we found, because it holds a certain legitimacy as knowledge that is in use (i.e., part of common everyday practice), rather than knowledge in books or guidelines (Taylor, 2004). By virtue of these qualities, food helps give words to that internal perspective needed to shift power away from outside agencies.

Third, although the act of using food as a method is simple, it isn't simplistic. In fact, through food, people can understand global, political or economic developments, because the reverberations of these developments are felt in their food and how they obtain it, in their health, and ultimately also in their landscapes.

In many of our conversations we were presented with so much knowledge and experience we indeed felt a little like fools: how silly did we look trying to bake bread in a traditional *kitsor* oven, but singeing our eyebrows instead. How much was there to learn about the proper way of grinding mulberry flour (*pikht*), the best temperature of the mill stones, the spiritually appropriate days of the week to go to the mill...

## Part II: In autonomous spaces, where do ideas come from?

Through listening and trying to learn these skills from farmers, mothers and shepherds, our conversations with them created a space where we could speak as equals. Where power relations, if not absent, were less apparent than if we had been there as researchers or development workers. This, we felt, was a space far away from the ‘problems and solutions’ defined by the outside world of development, a relatively endogenous space in which people could speak freely and ideas could emerge. And often they did.

At times, however, we were struck by people’s seeming lack of endogenous ideas about their future; a lack of initiative in changing things that weren’t working, or protecting things people were proud of. Where were those ideas and where had the energy gone? A strange contradiction in a conversation with a wealthy shepherd in the Wakhan valley of Afghanistan suggested we ought to look at power in yet a different, more subtle way.

This shepherd explained to us that he used to have a large herd of cattle—sheep, yak, and a few Bactrian camels. Many died during a particularly severe winter and in recent years he had begun buying more of his food from the market. But he sensed that those foods were causing his children to become sick and that there were many more health problems in the community now than there used to be. He also felt that he was being cheated. Towards the end we asked him what he wishes for the future of his children. His answer was: to have better access to the market.

Why did he say this? If markets make him feel cheated and are causing his children to become sick, why have better access to them? What would be the benefit? There seemed to be no logic in his response; it was as if he wasn’t speaking for himself.

Perhaps, we thought, his own ideas seemed irrelevant. From the point of view of the shepherd, a country that has been governed by war for as long as most people can remember may require solutions that are larger than he or his community can imagine or impel. His ideas may have appeared so small as to be powerless.

This perceived smallness of ideas has to do not so much with the power of physical, political or economic domination of one group of people over another—that kind of power can often strengthen local ideas and identity through the resistance it evokes—but rather with power at the more subtle level of ideas. Writing about post-colonial India, Spivak (1988) asked whether those who have been colonised, suppressed, dispossessed, or otherwise marginalised can still speak for themselves. The same question can be asked about ideas: will people whose ideas have consistently been disregarded, dismissed, or outshone by other ideas (ideas with more ‘utility’ and more power behind them), lose the ability to believe in their own ideas?

It sounds crude, but there are instances where the impact of development has been precisely that. For development organisations to achieve their visions of a better world, they need buy-in from the communities with which they work. If the wishes of communities do not coincide with the work an organisation is able to do, those wishes must sometimes be moulded. In the same way that, in our world of hyper-consumerism, corporations seek to shape desires through marketing and advertising, development organisations gain buy-in and legitimacy through the promotion of standardised

and simplified solutions (Scott, 1998, p. 268). In some sense, writes Li (2007, p. 5), it is comparable to the way a government exercises power over its subjects: “by educating desires and configuring habits, aspirations and beliefs. It sets conditions [so that people], following only their own self-interest, *will do as they ought.*”

In the Pamirs, where the Afghan and Tajik governments have very little capacity and still fewer means, development organisations are in fact very near to fulfilling the role of government. And browsing through the names of their development projects, it is not difficult to see the direction in which these organisations would like the future wishes of their beneficiaries to move: there are projects for ‘cross-border markets’, projects to develop market value chains, projects to provide ‘licit and sustainable income opportunities’ (AKDN 2007a) and stimulate enterprise development. And even when projects have as objectives the increasing or diversification of agricultural production, fruit and vegetable processing (Roots of Peace 2008; CIDA 2011; USAID 2010), community-based tourism, or the building of community institutions (AKDN 2007b) it is generally through the lens of markets, ‘pro-poor growth’, or ‘unlocking the Pamirs’ development potential’ (FAO 2010).

Returning to the Wakhi shepherd, we ought to consider the possibility that it was the simple fact of our presence, and the development trajectory of modernisation and market development we represent as foreigners, that caused the strange contradiction in his story. Even if our position was not one of power, he may have felt his conclusion was desirable in our presence. Or, his previous contact with development organisations that view markets as the main answer to poverty and hardship may have conditioned his “aspirations and beliefs”.

And so, despite being in his house, having prepared food with his wives and having created what we thought to be a space with less power, our baggage still met his baggage. The legacy and sheer force of the modern development paradigm weighed heavily in our interaction. It seems infuriating, for how can endogenous development occur if the ideas that obstruct it are part not only of our own minds, positions and institutions, but also dominate those of the people we are working with?

## Food as a method to excavate memories and inspire ideas

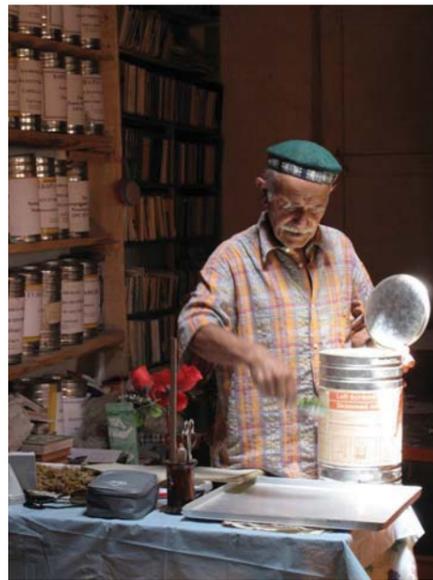
At some point in our conversation with the shepherd we stood around a big pan of baht and he recounted how he used to go to the pastures as a young boy. Baht is a special festive food, prepared after the summer when the women return from the pastures and the men have finished harvesting the grains that grow in fields near the village. The dish combines the fresh butter and cream from the high pastures with the best wheat from the village’s fields, and so symbolises the families’ long-awaited reunion after summer. It is always cooked by the shepherd.

*Baht* is one of the most sacred, special foods made in the Pamirs; it is a dish to rejoice and give thanks to the productivity of the land and animals. While cooking the baht, he began to speak about the health of his family, and to remember a time when he had control over what he exchanged through trade. He mentioned then that, rather than having better access to markets, he wanted more power in the market. He wanted to have a say about the things he traded and be able to trust the quality of the products like before. He then came back to the future of his children again, saying simply that he would like his children to have a normal life in which they would maintain a connection to their lands, with a livelihood to feed them. It is the same thing we would hear many more times from other parents and grandparents in the Afghan and Tajik Pamirs. The food seemed to help him go back to his own life, his youth, his animals. It helped him dig deeper into his memory and in that memory emerged ideas that were more of his world—a space of sovereign thought where our presence and our baggage did not act.

What is it about food that helps us get to that space? You could say that food is a tool for ‘mental archaeology’: it helps excavate memories and ideas. We look at several properties that, in our experience, give food this quality.

Food is evocative. Its tastes and smells awaken memories and ideas, especially in places where traditional agriculture has been practiced for a long time. Even speaking and thinking about food has this effect.

Food is tangible and can lend that quality to things that are immaterial, such as memories. Asking elders about their favourite traditional foods often resulted in an unexpected cooking session and the proud sharing of an almost forgotten meal, embodying an almost forgotten past. Often, the associations evoked by food are positive, making it particularly suitable as a lens through which to imagine futures that are not couched in the language of hunger, destitution or war. By always framing problems in the negative, we may find immediate solutions, but rarely will those solutions change the system that caused the problem to be born. If the problem is a lack of access to the market, then its solution is access. If poor health is the problem, the answer is more hospitals. Usually these solutions require external help. Through food, it is easier to come to solutions that build on local possibilities.



A Pamiri doctor prepares a tea that has become a popular remedy against stomach parasites such as giardia. In the tins behind him are the plants he finds in the mountains around his home and which he uses to make his natural medicines (photograph by Jamila Haider).

Two simple health principles, explained to us by a Pamiri doctor, illustrate these possibilities. The first is the 2000-year old advice by Hippocrates “Let food be thy medicine and medicine be thy food.” People in the Pamirs probably hadn’t heard of the Greek physician, yet they created a natural diet that truly follows this idea. There is barely a traditional recipe in our book that does not also have distinct medicinal properties. The second principle comes from the writings of Avicenna, who tried as much as possible to treat his patients in their home environments, with medicines that came from there. The doctor told us how important these two ideas had become over his 40 years of practice: “We were born here. We have grown together with this place, we breathed this air, drank this water and received our food from this soil. It makes sense to find our medicines in the things we grow or the plants we find.” More than half of his Tajik Pamiri patients suffer from diet-related diseases because they are buying processed foods from Canada, China or Iran, he told us. Most of these diseases, he said, could be treated simply by following Hippocrates’ advice, or by listening to our grandparents and eating their food. And if not through food, many remedies can be found in the more than 90 medicinal plants that grow in these mountains.

Third, to prepare food requires action. To make baht is to do more than making the recipe itself. Long before the cooking, the land needs to be prepared, the particular variety of wheat selected and the grains sown. The irrigation channels through which the water is directed to the fields must be maintained, there is weeding to be done, threshing and milling. And higher in the mountains, in the pastures, the milking of the goats, the churning of the butter, and the reciting of the songs, poems and sayings to help the process. All together, reinvoking these actions creates a perspective of landscape and life that is quite beautiful and full of ability, far removed from despondency.

Lastly, besides being tangible and inspiring action, food represents values that are fundamental to Pamiri identity. In the Pamirs, as in many other cultures, food taken from the land is considered a gift from Allah, which can barely be owned and must not be traded for profit. It should be shared and given to the weak or those who are in need. This value of

communality is at odds with the trend of commercialisation visible in the names of Pamiri development programmes, as are many of its other values: bread represents respect, hospitality and generosity, baht thankfulness and family—all values which people feel are slowly declining.

Food is a vessel of many things. It is not by accident that preparing it evokes memories and ideas that are otherwise buried. Using food as a method helps create a space in which novel ideas emerge and can be expressed, and where old ideas can be excavated, dusted off and become part of an endogenous perspective on development. The question that remains is how, once ‘small’ local ideas emerge, they can take root and thrive alongside or in competition with more powerful ones.

## Part III: How do ideas take root?

The idea that food can help reimagine alternative ideas about development was not present at the start of our book journey, when all we intended to do was to collect recipes. While the process of describing how these recipes became stories, and the stories became ideas, is not simple, the conclusion, surprisingly, is. To cook food with people and to eat together from a shared dish allows us to understand ideas and solutions for rural development practice as springing from the relationship between people, their communities and their landscape. Just as plants and animals are part of an ecological system, and seeds need to be understood in the agricultural system of which they are a part, ideas about food and the development of agricultural landscapes need to be understood in relation to, and as a result of, other ideas and the people who carry them. This way of understanding how ideas interact has been called an 'ecology of ideas' (Bateson, 1972).

In such as an ecology, as an idea becomes established, it increasingly connects to other ideas until, eventually, the idea becomes crucial to the survival of the system as a whole. Throughout this paper we have discussed some of the ideas that Pamiri farmers shared with us about their future: raising their children to maintain a connection to their land and traditional livelihoods, growing grains and pulses together in *lashak-makh* fields, using food and local plants for medicine. In other words seeking and adopting a type of development that does not destroy important local and traditional values. But if these ideas find no soil, no social or institutional network into which they can be incorporated and nourished, they cannot flourish and survive. Ideas are not singular entities and cannot exist as such; they need a support structure, or an ecology of which they become a part.

The reason that, viewed from the perspective of an 'ecology of ideas', food has such evocative power, and that phrasing ideas in the language of food may help them spread and gain relevance, is that food touches on most elements that make up daily life: health, livelihood, agriculture, science, spirituality, trade. The more such linkages are allowed to persist, the more these elements remain seen as integral parts of the food system, and the greater the power of food to help new ideas connect to an existing ecology and take root.

Yet unfortunately this is not usually the way development programmes introduce their ideas (or their seeds). The way in which the organisations and donors behind these programmes are organised requires that the building blocks of human life be compartmentalised into sectors that can be managed within the framework of projects: productivity, income generation, health, culture, thereby severing the same linkages that make food such a holistic and overarching concept. Imagine how an improved seed variety, designed for monoculture, would fare in the colourful chaos of a field of *lashak-makh*? It would not survive its difficult soils without a substantial dose of fertiliser, or competition from other plants without the use of herbicides. The agricultural system must change if the newly introduced seed is to succeed; it must be compartmentalised. And so the seed becomes divorced from the soil and the traditional practices that connect farming and communities, such as seed saving and selection. It will no longer have its place in prayer, in food and in social networks of exchange—the very things that give a local seed its relevance and that enable it to adapt to changes in its environment and culture.



The same field of *lashak-makh* from nearby (in Gorzwinj, Shughnan, Afghanistan). Photograph by Frederik van Oudenhoven

The same risk exists for ideas. Let's return one last time to the dichotomy between ideas as singular monuments and ideas as networks and interactions. Even though external ideas are part of networks as much as local ideas are, we have in this paper pictured them as more 'monumental,' as one-liner solutions to problems whose conception often occurred elsewhere. In many ways they are more monumental—and they take root as a plant's taproot might: central, singular, and straight. In being monumental and more rigid, they are less able to adapt to a new home, and less sensitive to it.

In contrast, what we have called endogenous, or local ideas, are the ideas that spring from everyday processes of innovation and learning; the way a farmer learns when working her fields. Having no one source or origin, and, perhaps, also no fixed goal or direction, they evolve and adapt when faced with something unknown, drawing on a reservoir of related ideas, whether prayer, technical knowledge or folklore.

We do not argue that all 'small' local ideas are good and all external 'big' ideas are bad. Both are needed, but they need to be able to interact on a more equal level. It is in facilitating such interactions, through engagement and experimentation, through the collective interrogation of ideas, and through being modest about introduced ideas and judging them against the wisdom of ancestral knowledge present in the places where they work, that we argue development organisations have a very positive role to play.

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