Institutional Design, Local Elite Resistance, and Inequality in Access to Land: Evidence from Cotton-Growing Areas of Tajikistan

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Abstract

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Tajikistan, like other post communist states, embarked on agricultural land reform. The government, assisted by international organizations, implemented laws and created campaigns to break up Soviet-style collective farms and encourage independent farms. After over a decade, 66 percent of farmers in the country, including in cotton-growing areas, continue to work collectively, and 71 percent of arable land is held in collectives. I argue that the decentralized nature of the land redistribution program enabled the managers of former collective farms, re-labeled as "collective peasant farms," to gain power so that they could use informal practices to resist peasant shareholders' efforts to actualize their land rights. Theoretically, my argument reconciles competing perspectives about the reasons for limited land redistribution in the context of post socialist transition. The study's policy implication is that the government of Tajikistan, and foreign donors, instead of decentralizing the implementation of land reform, should take an active role in physically redistributing land among shareholders.

Keywords

land reform – agriculture – cotton – Tajikistan

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1 Introduction

This paper uses field interviews conducted in the summer of 2014 to provide a snapshot of the challenges shareholders faced in five cotton-producing districts in Tajikistan when actualizing their land rights. Additionally, this paper uses original data based on government land records to show the extent of farmland restructuring nationwide and in cotton- versus non-cotton-growing areas. Since the inception of land reform initiatives in the early 1990s, most farmland in Tajikistan, as of 2013, has continued to be concentrated in a type of farm which mimics Soviet collective farms in its style of management. Agricultural land reform programs began after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The government reorganized former socialist farms into various corporate structures, including "*dehqan* [peasant] farms." The reformed land tenure laws gave members of *dehqan* farms the right to separate their land shares and establish family or individual farms.[1] International development agencies, including the World Bank, conducted awareness-raising campaigns about land rights, provided free cadastral services, and issued land certificates at a minimal cost. Few farmers took advantage of the programs, and most land remained collectivized.

It is puzzling that land reform initiatives have resulted in limited land reallocation. Surveys show support among shareholders for land reform, while a high labor to land ratio is said to favor large-scale land redistribution.[2] Comparative studies find that, unlike countries with land- and capital-intensive production systems, countries with labor-intensive production systems have rapidly shifted from collectives to individual farms (Swinnen and Heinegg 2010). Tajikistan has one of the most labor-intensive production systems among communist and postcommunist countries.[3] Why have cotton-growing areas of Tajikistan experienced limited land redistribution? Why have most shareholders continued to work in collective *dehqan* farms instead of operating individual farms?

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1 For example, the 1998 decree "On Farm Reorganization" and the 2002 law "On *Dehqan* Farm" granted shareholders an unconditional right to withdraw land from the *dehqan* farm to establish a family farm. Throughout this paper, I use the terms family farm, individual farm, and independent farm interchangeably.

2 In 2012, the World Bank, USAID, and DFID surveyed shareholders in select districts of Soghd, Khatlon, and the Districts of Republican Subordination (DRS). The survey asked the extent to which shareholders were in favor of the changes that had occurred in the area of land use rights. Of a subsample of 862 shareholders of *dehqan* farms from cotton-growing districts of Soghd and Khatlon, 54 percent were in favor.

3 In 2005, the ratio of agricultural labor to arable land, nationwide and in the two cotton- growing regions, was 0.5, which was higher than all the transition countries with the exception of China, Vietnam, and Albania, which had a score of 0.6 (Macours and Swinnen 2002).

Prominent empirical studies of postsocialist transitions advance two explanations of limited institutional change. The first, which I call a "resistance" argument, attributes limited land redistribution to resistance by local elites, a category comprising farm managers and district-level government bureaucrats (Barnes 2006; Allina-Pisano 2008). The second, which I call a "reform design" argument, emphasizes the government's land allocation strategy as a determinant of land reform outcomes (Wegren 2009). These explanations enhance the understanding of land reform outcomes, but neither in isolation provides a compelling account for why and how land reforms unfolded as they did in Tajikistan and other postsocialist countries.

The argument that I advance in this paper bridges the "resistance" and "reform design" explanations. I argue that Tajikistan's land reform strategy impeded land redistribution because it inadvertently empowered farm managers, who come from the ranks of the Soviet rural elites, to use informal strategies to prevent shareholders from establishing individual tenure. The central government created laws that supported a decentralized reform strategy in which individual farm members, called shareholders, were to decide whether to continue working collectively or establish an individual tenure. By leaving the decision to shareholders and keeping the state at some distance, this strategy inadvertently enabled the managerial class to easily exercise their resistance to shareholders' demands for independent access to land.

The fundamental reason farm managers resist the subdivision of collective *dehqan* farms is that they want to concentrate land in their own families. Specifically, they want to ensure that their children and grandchildren have access to land. By law, as members of the collective *dehqan* farms, farm managers, just like other members of the farm, are entitled to one share of the land upon subdivision of the farm. As such, they are naturally opposed to equal divisions of land, which could leave them as relative losers vis-à-vis other members whom they manage.4 To preclude that possibility, farm managers prefer and seek to acquire, by various strategies, the shares of other non-family members of the farm.5

My argument is based on the assumption that government officials in Tajikistan abide by formal rules, for otherwise they would forcibly reallocate

4 Theoretically, farm managers can replace non-family members and reregister a collective *dehqan* farm into a family farm. In practice, this would not be easy, because according to the law "On Dehqan (Commercial) Farm," each shareholder should receive an equal share of land. Therefore, unless the manager has a large household, family members could not have all the excess shares put under their names.

5 See Nekbakhtshoev (2016) for anecdotal evidence about various strategies farm managers use to dispossess shareholders of their land share.

the land of the collective *dehqan* farm among its members. Those familiar with the country's politics might object to this assumption by countering that if the government truly desired for reform to result in greater farm individualization, it would have enforced land laws to the benefit of collective *dehqan* farmers. After all, they would argue, Tajikistan and other countries of the region are run by authoritarian governments (Collins 2006; McGlinchey 2011; Markowitz 2013). I lack systematic data to ascertain the Tajikistani government's preference over land reform. Future studies should take up this task.

Tajikistan is not unique in adopting a problematic decentralized approach to development. Since at least 1980, governments across the developing world have experimented with decentralization and participatory approaches to development in order to circumvent shortcomings in centralized service delivery, and to empower and benefit local communities. These approaches encourage the involvement of the local population in decision making and the implementation of development and conservation initiatives. However, as indicated in a review article by Lund and Saito-Jensen (2013) on land reform in sub-Saharan Africa, such participatory initiatives have largely failed in promoting equity, accountability, and democratic participation because they are prone to elite capture.

Elite capture appears to be an inevitable outcome of all decentralized and participatory approaches (Cooke and Kothari 2001; Fritzen 2004; Platteau 2004; Mattingly 2016). To solve this problem, some scholars (Knight 1992)—including the author of the present work—advocate for strong interventions by the central government to ensure social equality. Other scholars, such as Jones Luong (2003), favor a bottom-up approach by suggesting that marginalized individuals can successfully subvert repressive conditions through effective alliances with similarly disadvantaged groups or NGO s. As will be shown with reference to a donor-funded social activism project, a bottom-up approach in Tajikistan has been ineffective.

To be sure, managerial resistance, enabled by the decentralized reform design, is an important (but not the only) reason some shareholders remained in collective *dehqan* farms. Likewise, it would be erroneous to assume that all collective *dehqan* farm members prefer individual over collectivized tenure arrangements. As will be discussed, a smaller proportion of collective *dehqan* farm members interviewed either preferred to establish an individual tenure but could not afford to run an individual operation due to a lack of labor and money, or they thought working collectively was more advantageous, regard- less of circumstances. Likewise, recent studies have found material constraints (World Bank, USAID, and DFID 2012) and a stronger sense of loyalty to the

collective (Müller and Rommel 2018) to be factors driving shareholders' decision to remain in the collective *dehqan* farm.

This paper focuses on the cotton-producing areas of Tajikistan primarily because most of the country's population and prime farmland is concentrated in these regions. These areas are also of interest because there is disagreement over whether cotton production has something to do with a lack of meaningful farm reorganization in these areas. Policymakers and scholars, including myself, generally agree that most of the benefit from cotton accrues to authorities linked to the family of the country's president and that the pass-through to shareholders, and (I would argue) even farm managers, is negligible (Sattar and Mohib 2006; Van Atta 2009; Hofman 2018; Boboyorov 2012). Farm managers, as noted earlier, resist farm individualization in order to preserve land for family members. In any event, guided by this consensus, several studies based on limited data go so far as to claim that government pressure for cotton production is the reason collectivist arrangements continue to persist (Chorshanbiev 2015; Rowe 2010; Kassam 2011), or even lower levels of farm individualization in cotton- versus non-cotton-growing areas (Hofman and Visser 2014).

Contradicting these studies, survey findings used in a donor report imply that cotton production does not impede land redistribution (Lerman and Sedik 2008).[6] Likewise, evidence from southern Kazakhstan suggests that cotton and collectivized agriculture do not always go together (Petrick et al. 2017). As will be discussed, my own finding based on government land records supports the latter view, as it indicates that cotton-growing districts have higher levels of farm individualization compared to non-cotton-growing districts. This finding does not refute the idea that the biggest beneficiaries of the cotton economy are those with close ties the president's family. These findings further suggest that the government's desire to produce cotton might not be the reason for limited farm individualization.

Nonetheless, a full evaluation of the effect of cotton production on land reform should examine the likely effect of Tajikistan's food policy, as well as local attitudes towards this crop versus non-cotton crops, which falls outside the scope of the present analysis. For example, concerning the effect of food

6 For example, analyzing the 2008 survey data collected by the Asian Development Bank in twenty-two cotton-growing districts of Khatlon and Soghd, Lerman and Sedik (2008) were puzzled that "Respondents did not reveal a strong tendency to reduce the areas under cotton if allowed freedom from hukumat (government) intervention, though the reasons for such puzzling behavior are not clear." Thus, contrary to the prevailing idea, the survey data showed that, even in the absence of government interference, the majority of farmers preferred to assign a greater proportion of their farmland to cotton.

policy, since 2010 the government of Tajikistan has encouraged farmers to practice crop diversification by growing wheat and horticultural products to ensure the country's food security. As a result, cotton's share of arable land has decreased (IFPRI 2016). Future studies should explore whether crop diversification is responsible for higher levels of farm individualization in cotton producing areas.

This paper is organized as follows. In the following section, I reconcile the "resistance" and "reform design" narratives to emphasize the decentralized aspect of land reform policy. Then I briefly describe state land reform initiatives and provide evidence for their limited redistributive effect. After describing the study sites and data in section four, I use interview and survey data to show how local elites resist land reform in section five. Finally, I draw on several policy implications in the concluding section.

2 Reconciling Prevailing Explanations of Limited Land Reform

Prominent explanations in the literature on postsocialist transitions attribute limited land redistribution to either resistance from local elites (the "resistance" argument) or the specific type of land allocation methods that host states use to redistribute land (the "reform design" argument). My argument strikes a balance between these two arguments in stating that the reform strategy provided an enabling institutional environment for managers of collective *dehqan* farms to successfully resist land redistribution.

According to the "resistance" argument, a major reason why state land reform programs failed to result in extensive decollectivization of agriculture in countries such as Russia and Ukraine was that local elites obstructed the implementation of the reform (Pisano 2004, 2008; Barnes 2006). A prevalent strategy that local elites used was subversion: they "obeyed," but did not "comply," with top-down land reform policies. For example, local elites discouraged shareholders who wanted to leave the collective farm and denounced them for being profit-oriented, or they limited the interaction of shareholders with reform-oriented actors. Despite the broad agreement that local-level elites powerfully influence the outcome of land reform, scholarly works associated with the resistance argument differ in understanding the motivations of elites for thwarting land reform. One strand of the resistance argument maintains that the potentially high social cost of land reform is what leads local elites to resist the redistribution of state land and collective farms (Pisano 2004, 2008; Meurs 2001).

Contrary to the arguments emphasizing elite rent-seeking behavior (Hellman 1998) as obstacles for economic reform, Jessica Pisano (2004) asserts that norms about the appropriateness of reform influence the decisions of local elites to thwart reform. Specifically, farm managers resist decollectivization because they regard agricultural collectives as social units that provide employment and welfare benefits. To them, allowing decollectivization would mean destroying the social fabric of the community. To be sure, agricultural collectives did not continue to serve their welfare-enhancing function everywhere in the post-Soviet region as they did in Ukraine and Russia. This is especially true in post-Soviet Tajikistan, where shareholders who work in collective *dehqan* farms receive only negligible in-kind payment (Action Against Hunger 2003; Van Atta 2009). The second strand of the resistance argument maintains that local elites have private interest to resist top-down reforms because reforms threaten their political authority and economic interests (Barnes 2006; Jones Luong 2003). Specifically, Andrew Barnes (2006: 94) maintains that farm managers resisted decollectivization in Russia because they feared losing control over farm assets.

Although studies associated with the resistance argument illuminate the diverse reasons that motivate local elites to obstruct the process of land redistribution, they do not provide an adequate explanation for why these elites were so successful. To be sure, these studies point out that local elites appropriated Soviet-era informal rules, practices, and norms for use in the post-Soviet period to shape land reform outcomes. For example, Pisano (2004) notes that by virtue of having accumulated knowledge about the way government works and having cultivated relationships with the bureaucracy under Soviet rule, local elites were able to stall reforms. However, for explanations that rely on informal rules and practices to be valid, they must account for cross-national variation in the outcomes of land tenure reform among former Soviet republics. All former Soviet republics inherited, and targeted for dissolution, Soviet-era collective farms, which were hierarchically organized and presided over by farm managers. Furthermore, it is reasonable to assume that, much like their counterparts in Ukraine and Russia, farm managers elsewhere had knowledge of, and cultivated expansive connections with, the local bureaucracy under Soviet rule and had something to lose from land redistribution. Thus, under the resistance argument, one would expect farm managers to resist land reform successfully. Yet despite sharing a common rural institutional feature, some countries, such as those in the Caucasus and Moldova, had a high rate of land redistribution (Cemovich 2001; Lerman and Sutton 2008). The resistance argument does not explain why farm managers were able to reassert themselves to

undermine land reform in some countries but not others. An answer to this question, as I elaborate on further below, will point to the crucial role that land reform strategy can play in affecting the ability of farm managers to resist land redistribution. The other prominent line of research, the "reform design" argument, emphasizes the design of land tenure reform as key to understanding land reform outcomes in post communist countries.

Perhaps more than any other analyst of post communist land reform, Stephen Wegren (2008, 2009) makes the most explicit case for the role that the land allocation method played in impeding meaningful land reform in Russia. He argues that an important reason why land tenure reform in Russia did not cause a strong shift from collective to individual farming was because the legal framework governing land reform entitled shareholders to abstract shares instead of real land (2009: 216–18). Consistent with Wegren, a handful of comparative studies attributed the divergent reform pathways among post communist countries to different land allocation blueprints that states have used to implement land reform. These studies show that, in countries where the state restituted land to previous owners (as in much of Central Europe) or physically redistributed land plots to former employees of large-scale socialist farms (in Hungary, Romania, Georgia, Armenia, and Moldova), land redistribution was extensive (Swinnen and Heinegg 2002). By contrast, in countries where governments redistributed farmland equally per capita among members of the collective and state farms in the form of paper shares, as opposed to real land (as in Russia, Ukraine, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan), land reallocation from collective to individual farmland was limited. This has led some observers to variously describe the countries that used a share distribution system as "reform laggards," "slow," or "gradual" reformers (Lerman and Sedik 2008;Lerman 2009).7

Proponents of the reform design argument tend to deemphasize resistance by local elites as a possible explanation for why state land reform efforts resulted in limited land redistribution. For example, to differentiate his work from the work of scholars such as Verdery (2003) and Pisano (2008), Wegren (2009) asserts that "a variety of factors exert influence on households' behavioral responses to reform institutions, including resistance by local interests. But the impact of resistance on reform outcomes was at the margins [emphasis added], and therefore in order to understand Russia's contemporary land reform it is necessary to consider first and foremost the design of reform" (217).

7 An exception to this trend appears to be Kyrgyzstan, where extensive land redistribution took place under a share-based system of land allocation (Lerman and Sedik 2009). Future studies should investigate the underlying reason(s) behind Kyrgyzstan's exceptionalism.

As such, Wegren's work leaves one to wonder how reform design could—in isolation from elite resistance, which he describes as insignificant—impede land redistribution. I concur with the author that the inability of rural residents in Russia to actualize their land rights due to economic constraints should be factored into an analysis of reform outcomes. However, if the focus is mainly on household-level endowments to predict reform outcomes, then the design of land reform institutions becomes less of an issue than the level of material endowment at the disposal of each rural household.

The limitation of the reform design argument is that it does not spell out why or how the share-based system of land allocation used in Tajikistan and other countries stifles land redistribution. While it is intuitive that land redistribution was extensive in countries that restituted and physically redistributed land plots to eligible citizens, the inability of shareholders to gain independent access to land under a share-based system, given that they are legally entitled to a land parcel, is puzzling. Studies associated with the reform design argument do not shed light on the issue besides pointing out (as, for example, do Swinnen and Heinegg 2002: 1) that "the land reform process of allocating private ownership in the form of shares in former collective and state farms creates severely restricted and incomplete individual property rights on the land." Although in a subsequent work Swinnen and colleagues (2010, 305), much like Wegren (2009), highlight the absence of "a direct link between the individual and a specific plot of land" as a reason for why the process of decollectivization in countries such as Tajikistan has been complicated and slow, they stop short of elaborating why or how undefined shares might constrain land redistribution.

Both categories of explanations—local elite resistance and reform design—contribute to the understanding of why the government's reform program in Tajikistan and other post communist countries has not led to greater land redistribution. However, to be persuasive, resistance arguments must address why local elites have been able to successfully resist land reforms in some countries but not others, and the reform design argument must flesh out why and how the share-based system of land allocation suppresses land redistribution. It is my contention that in their current form, and in isolation, these explanations are ill-equipped to address these questions.

3 Land Reform Legislation in Tajikistan 1992–2016

As in other post socialist states, after the breakup of the Soviet Union, the government of Tajikistan worked closely with foreign donors such as the World

Bank, IMF, and USAID to support land reform in agriculture. In that effort, the government redistributed the land of the collective and state farms equally per capita among employees or shareholders. Instead of distributing actual land, the government distributed paper shares or certificates, which did not define specific plots but instead listed the names of the people eligible to receive a share (Swinnen, Herck, and Vranken 2010). In Tajikistan the state owns all land, but the land code permits individuals to have land use rights, which they can transfer through sale, gift, inheritance, or leasing.8

Like the reform experience of other post communist countries, land reform in Tajikistan was initiated from above through numerous legislative acts and presidential decrees. Tajikistan's land reform has gone through two stages: the first stage occurred from the time of independence until the end of the civil war (1991–1997) and the second from 1998 until the present (2017). The second stage involved the onset of on-the-ground engagement by the World Bank, and later bilateral donors, including USAID, in farmland division and titling.9

Some of the first agricultural reforms came into force in 1992 with the laws "On Land Reform"10 and "On *Dehqan* (*Dehqan*) Farms."11 These laws required farms to reorganize and specified that farmers would be able to create independent farms. As a result, *kolkhozes* and *sovkhozes* were divided along former so-called "brigade" lines into "Joint Stock Companies" and "Collective *Dehqan* (*Dehqan*) Farms." Policy specialists regarded the reorganized enterprises not as decollectivized but as changed in name only. In 1996, near the end of the civil war, a presidential decree12 on the reorganization of agricultural enterprises gave *dehqan*s the "unconditional" right to withdraw land from collective farms. Foreign reform advocates consider this decree foundational, but it did not lead to significant change in patterns of decollectivization (Lerman and Sedik 2008).13

8 Article 17 of the 2002 Law of the Republic of Tajikistan "On *Dehqan* Farm" and Article 25 of the 2009 law "On *Dehqan* Farm" permit leasing of the land plot and collateralization of land use rights. Articles 19 and 27 of the 2012 Land Code permit the sale and collateralization of land use rights, respectively.

9 This classification of empirical stages is my own, as the stages reflect major initiatives related specifically to land reform as opposed to agricultural reform, which is a broader term that also includes land reform. Depending on the number of major initiatives under-taken, the stages of agricultural reform could be classified differently than land reform.

10 Law No. 594 (May 5, 1992).

11 Law No. 421 (May 15, 1992).

12 Presidential Decree No. 522 (June 25, 1996) "Reorganization of agricultural enterprises."

13 Perhaps, owing to the economic difficulties exacerbated by the civil war, few farmers had the capacity or the will to bear the brunt of independent farming.

The second stage of land reform was a push by government and international organizations to convert all farms into "*dehqan* farms." At the recommendation of international organizations, the national government further broke up some of the remaining *kolkhozes*, *goskhozes*, and the "reformed" collective farms (such as joint stock companies and leasehold enterprises). As of 2013, 70 percent of farmland in Tajikistan was held in *dehqan* farms, which range in size from 0.01 to over 30,000 hectares.

Of all farm types, only *dehqan* farmland is subject to further reallocation among land users, and for this reason this article focuses exclusively on this farm type. The 2009 law "On *Dehqan* Farms" further distinguishes between individual/family *dehqan* farms and partnership *dehqan* farms. (Instead of partnership *dehqan* farms, throughout this article I use the old legal term "collective *dehqan* farms" because of the ways in which these farms resemble Soviet farms in terms of top-down management style.14) The law governing *dehqan* farms supports a decentralized land allocation process.15 Specifically, it grants shareholders of *dehqan* farms the authority to decide whether they want to work collectively (remain a part of the farm) or individually (with- drawing shares). Furthermore, the law prohibits all government officials and non-state actors from reallocating the land of the *dehqan* farm without the shareholders' consent. Thus, according to the 2006 law "On Land Reform," the procedure for a member of a collective *dehqan* farm to establish an individual farm is as follows. The shareholder petitions the district chair, who submits the petition for further review to the State Committee on Land Management (SCLM). The SCLM's surveyor visits the farm and measures and maps the plot. Based on the land survey, the SCLM draws up land tenure documents and sends them to the national-level Land Committee, which, after reviewing the documents, issues land certificates (titles) to each member of the newly created farm. The District Land Committee registers the land certificates and creates farmland accounts. Upon obtaining the certificate, members of the farm

14 The Law on *Dehqan* (Commercial) Farm, amended in 2016, no longer uses the categories of family, individual, and collective *dehqan* farms. Instead, it distinguishes between *dehqan* farms created by an ordinary person versus a legal entity. Operating as an individual enterprise, a *dehqan* farm established by an ordinary person can have up to 50 members. Operating as a company or an association, a *dehqan* farm established by a legal entity does not have any limitations on membership size. Importantly, the amended version of the law does not affect the relevant articles in the law that authorize shareholders to make an independent decision as to whether to farm collectively or individually.

15 Presidential Decree No. 1775 (June 30, 2006) "Rule for reorganizing and reforming agricultural enterprises."

become entitled to the land. The farmers must register the farms with the local statistical committee and tax agency.

Despite institutional innovations to facilitate land transfer and on-the-ground assistance from the World Bank, land reform initiatives achieved modest results in terms of enhancing collective *dehqan* farm members' independentaccess to land. As of September 2013, the World Bank land reform project dis-tributed 65,079 land certificates throughout the country. Considering the factthat, in 2010, state statistics records show that 1,414,645 people 15 years old andabove worked in agriculture, the project distributed certificates to only four percent of farm workers nationwide. The picture does not change much even if one looks at the number of individuals who claim membership in family farmsor the amount of land held in family farms nationwide. According to data in Table 1, which is based on my estimation of 2013 government land records, although the majority (73 percent) of registered *dehqan* farms can be classified as individual farms, only 29 percent of shareholders claim membership in individual farms, and 24 percent of arable land is held in individual farms. Despite the government-enacted legislative initiatives, and foreign donors spending millions of dollars to promote farmland restructuring, the redistributive effectof reform initiatives is modest at best.

table 1 Outcome of farmland restructuring across 53 districts of Tajikistan

	Total (N = 53)	**Cotton-growing districts (N = 28)**	**Non-cotton-growing districts (N = 25)**
Total # of *Dehqan* Farms	74,536	49,198	25,338
% Family Farms	73%	71%	77%
% Collective *Dehqan* Farms	12%	29%	23%
Total # of Shareholders in *Dehqan* Farms	757,002	498,732	258,270
% in Family Farms	29%	34%	21%
% in Collective *Dehqan* Farms	66%	66%	79%
Total Arable Land in *Dehqan* Farms (hectares)	570,907	346,351	224,555
% of Land in Family Farms	24%	29%	15%
% of Land in Collective *Dehqan* Farms	76%	71%	85%

source: "land balance," state committee on land management and geodesy of the republic of tajikistan, 2013

Data in Table 1 also allows me to assess an alternative explanation that attributes limited farm individualization in cotton-producing areas to a government's insistence on cotton production. To reiterate, these studies assume that non-cotton-growing areas have a higher level of land redistribution than cotton-growing areas, because in former areas, the government has nothing at stake in preventing shareholders from actualizing their land rights (Hofman and Visser 2014; Rowe 2011). Data from Table 1 does not bear out this expectation. As indicated in the table, districts that do not grow cotton have a much lower level of arable land in individual tenure (29 percent) than districts that grow cotton (15 percent). This difference, which is statistically significant,16 suggests that to find clues about limited reform in cotton-producing areas, and indeed the country as a whole, we should investigate the properties of the land reform regime.

4 The Study Sites and Data

I selected the study sites from cotton-growing regions in Tajikistan because most of the population and prime farmland of the country is concentrated in these regions. Tajikistan is administratively divided into three main administrative provinces (regions), or *viloyats*: Khatlon, Sughd, and the Gorno Badakhshan Autonomous Province (abbreviated "GBAO"). Each province is divided into districts or *nohiya*. The districts are subdivided into tertiary administrative units, rural councils, or *jamoats*, which are the smallest admin- istrative divisions in Tajikistan.17

I chose six districts in two heavily cotton-growing regions.18 The districts selected for the study were Zafarobod and Spitamen in Sughd, as well as Bokhtar, Qumsangir [recently renamed Kushoniyon and Jaihun respectively], and Shartuz in Khatlon. Within each district I randomly selected two *jamoats*, and within each *jamoat* I randomly selected three villages, with one village

16 Two-proportions z test returned X-squared = 15055, df = 1, p-value < 2.2e−16.

17 The regions vary widely in terms of population, topography, and agricultural development. Most of the agricultural land and population of the country is concentrated in the Khatlon region, which produces roughly 40 percent of the country's crop output, including seed cotton. The Sughd region is the second-largest cotton-producing region and was the most industrially advanced region of Soviet Tajikistan.

18 As of 2012, there were 31 districts in Tajikistan (accounting for 53 percent of all districts nationwide) which produced at least a thousand tons of cotton. Due to time constraints, I did not extend the study to districts directly subordinated to Tajikistan's capital city Dushanbe.

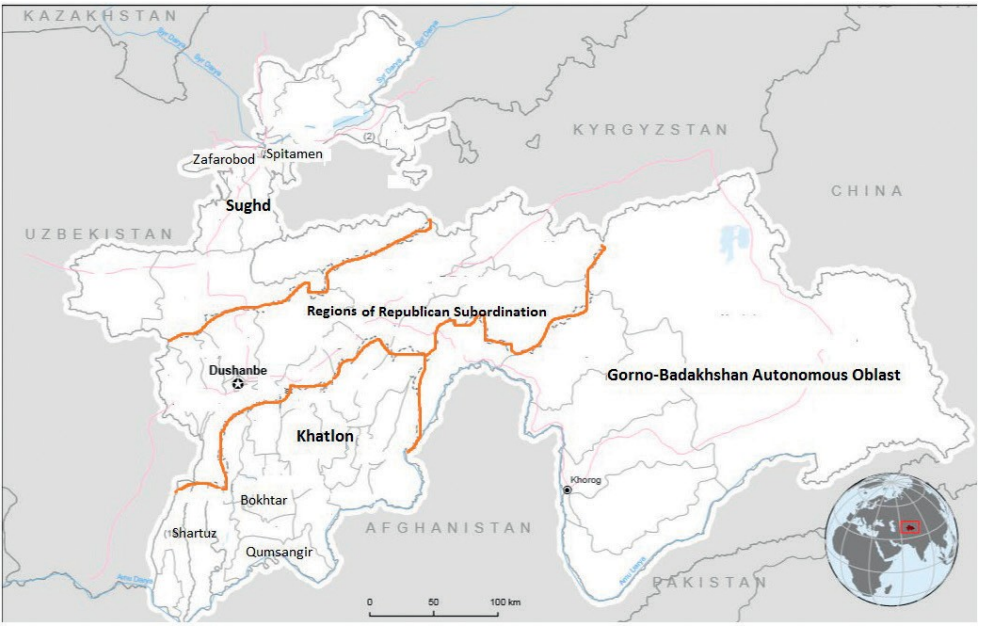

figure 1 Map of Tajikistan (2013)
source: UN office for the coordination of humanitarian affairs

table 2 List of *jamoats* and their corresponding districts

Region	Khatlon			Sughd	
Districts	Shartuz	Boktar	Qumsangir	Zafarobod	Spitamen
Jamoats	Obshoron	Zargar	Telman	Zafarobod	Taghoyak
	Istiqlol	Bokhtariyon	Qumsangir	Login	Kurkat
	Sayod				

selected as an alternative in case I was not able to enter one of the villages. Only in Shartuz did I include an additional *jamoat* in the study, in large part because I had a local connection from that *jamoat* who was willing to host meand facilitate my research. In total, I visited twenty villages.

Figure 1 shows the location of the two cotton-producing regions and the districts within these regions.19 Table 2 lists the names of the *jamoats* corresponding to each district, but not the villages. I chose not to disclose the names

19 To protect the confidentiality of my respondents, I do not provide a map displaying the location of the selected villages.

table 3 Percentage of respondents by present-day position in five cotton-growing districts

N = 196	
Collective *Deqhan* Farm Manager	13%
Collective *Deqhan* Farm Shareholder	10%
Independent Farmer	27%
Other	51%

source: author's interview data

of the villages or my interlocutors because of the risk that doing so would compromise the anonymity of my respondents.

This study uses interviews and external data to establish that the institutional design of the reform privileged the interest of farm managers at the expense of shareholders. As part of my fieldwork (which lasted from October 2013 to March 2014), I conducted 205 interviews, of which 197 were semi-structured and took place in villages. To get a diverse range of perspectives about how land reform transpired, I interviewed members of collective *dehqan* farms and individual farms, managers of collective *dehqan* farms and individual farms, villagers with no affiliation with any type of farm, government officials of various levels of government *(jamoat*, district, and national*)*, and NGO representatives. Table 3 provides information about the number of respondents in each category, except government officials and NGO representatives for whom I did not keep systematic record. The category "Other" in the table refers to villagers unaffiliated with any farm type.

In each village, I spent about three days conducting roughly five in-depth interviews per day. Most of my interviews lasted for about an hour. Through the interviews I wanted to find out why some people work in collective *dehqan* farms while others farm independently, and whether opposition to land redistribution comes from farm managers—and if so, what strategies they use to resist shareholders' demand for independent access to land.

5 Decentralized Reform, Local Elite Resistance, and Inequality in Access to Land

To provide a more compelling explanation of limited farm individualization, I integrate the "resistance" and "reform design" arguments within an explanatory

framework that emphasizes the decentralized aspect of the land allocation scheme. Drawing on field interviews and observations, I argue that a major reason why Tajikistan experienced limited farm individualization was because the legal framework governing land reform decentralized the process of land redistribution, which inadvertently enabled and incentivized managers of collective *dehqan* farms, who come from the ranks of Soviet rural elites, to easily exercise their resistance and infringe upon the property rights of shareholders outside the purview of the state. Specifically, laws pertaining to land tenure reform grant shareholders the authority to decide whether they want to work collectively or individually. Furthermore, by prohibiting government officials of all levels and non-state actors from reallocating the land of the *dehqan* farm without shareholders' consent, the land tenure laws give farm managers tremendous leeway to influence shareholder decisions in ways that impede landredistribution.20

By focusing on the decentralized nature of land allocation, I enrich both the "resistance" and "reform design" arguments. To the resistance argument Iadd that the reason why farm managers were so successful in obstructing landredistribution in some countries, but not in others, was because they operated under a decentralized land redistribution scheme, which prohibited the state from intervening in matters of land allocation. To the reform design argument I add that the reason why the share-based system of land allocation stifled land redistribution was not because shareholders had abstract shares, but rather because the decentralized nature of the land reform strategy put them in an inferior bargaining position in relation to farm managers.

At its core, my argument is about a gap between formal institutions that confer power on shareholders and the inability of these shareholders to actualize their right to land. As such, it finds resonance with the political science literature on institutions: particularly a strand that grapples with the question of the persistence of socially inefficient institutions. The work of Acemoglu and Robinson (2006) is especially noteworthy in this regard. They distinguish between *de jure* and *de facto* power and claim that even though the

20 The possibility that farm managers operate with the support of local government officials to deny shareholders their land rights cannot be ruled out. This said, government officials of all levels in Tajikistan have divergent and ambiguous views about the necessity of conducting land reform. For example, during the fieldwork conducted for this study, the deputy minister of agriculture at the time, alongside officials at the district-level tax office, favored the proliferation of individualized farms, because they thought this would increase the district's tax base. By contrast, district-level water authority officials tended to favor the concentration of land in a few large farms, because they thought it would make the task of water delivery more tractable.

state allocates *de jure* power to citizens, the elites wield tremendous *de facto* power, which they can deploy to offset the effects of formal laws. The measures elites undertake to increase their *de facto* power include but are not limited to collusion, intimidation, and bribes. In short, the premise of this literature is that state policies or new institutional arrangements have distributional implications and that powerful members of society, typically the elites, thwart those state policies that disrupt the inefficient status quo institutions and promise to allocate political and economic resources widely (Acemoglu and Robinson 2008; Bardhan 2001; Knight 1992).

Consistent with my argument, recent scholarship on sub-Saharan Africa assailed World Bank land reform policies for engendering, albeit unintentionally, tenure insecurity and inequitable land allocation. As these studies show, land reform policies that international organizations recommend to recipient governments in the developing world often overlook preexisting power disparities among community members which can become salient with the introduction of land reform (Peters 2004; Sitko et al. 2014; Platteau 1996). When the implementation of land reform is decentralized, as it is in much of sub- Saharan Africa, rural hierarchies reassert themselves to distort the process of land allocation, causing land inequality, dispossession, and poverty (Bruce and Knox 2009; Brück and Schindler 2009).

Capturing the effect of decentralized reform strategy in a direct and systematic fashion is a formidable task, because no farm manager would admit to infringing upon shareholders' land rights. Nonetheless, it is possible to infer this effect through statements by government officials and the various strategies that managers of collective *dehqan* farms deploy to infringe upon the property rights of shareholders. Before illustrating how managers deploy informal strategies to prevent shareholders from establishing individual tenure, it is necessary to establish that government land reform initiatives indeed privileged the interest of Soviet rural elites at the expense of collective *dehqan* farm members and other shareholders in general.

6 Soviet Rural Elites Still in Charge

Despite years of state initiatives entitling Tajikistani farmers to agricultural land, the way land reform has unfolded has left most land concentrated in collective *dehqan* farms. Moreover, farm managers and others with the means to acquire prime farmland have retained control over the land, recreating the former Soviet system under the guise of reform. In most cases, the intended beneficiaries of the reform, that is, the shareholders, did not become residual

claimants within independent farms, and they continue to operate as shareholders for negligible in-kind payment on collective *dehqan* farms.

The five cotton-growing districts that I visited were no exceptions to this trend. As a male migrant returnee from Qumsangir who reflected upon the situation in his district stated, "it is a curious thing, those who genuinely needand deserve land [shareholders] cannot get it, those [farm managers and other wealthy people] who do not [need or deserve land] continue acquiring more." To highlight the disjuncture between government proclamations and the situation in his village, a resident of Bokhtar district noted, "The president declares that land finally found its true owner [former *kolkhoz* farm workers]; unfortunately, its true owners are not the poor *dehqan*s like us, but the rich and well-connected." Table 4 corroborates these views.

Table 4 provides information about the Soviet-era occupation of present- day farm managers in five cotton-growing districts. This data is based on my interview with a total of 195 respondents who were asked to report their occupations under and after Soviet rule.21 As indicated in Table 4, despite comprising a smaller percentage of all respondents in the sample (11 percent), the majority of Soviet rural elites or individuals who occupied senior and mid-level positions within the hierarchy of Soviet collective farms emerged firmly in the post-Soviet period to control farmland. Specifically, of the 66 farm managers interviewed, senior-level officials (*kolkhoz* and *sovkhoz* farm chairs,accountants, agronomists, veterinarians, hydrologists, and procurement officers) hold the largest percentage of management positions. Together with mid-level employees (brigadier, tractor driver, and person in charge of directing

table 4 Soviet-era positions of present-day farm managers in five cotton-growing districts

N = 66	**Senior-level**	**Mid-level**	**Farm-worker**	**Other**	**Unknown**
All *Dehqan* Farm Managers	30%	23%	15%	29%	3%
Managers of Collective *Dehqan* Farms	38%	27%	0%	36%	0%
Managers of Family Farms	25%	20%	25%	25%	5%

source: author's interview data

21 Given the small sample size, caution is warranted about extrapolating the results to applyto other time periods and settings.

irrigation water), senior-level officials account for the absolute majority of management positions.22

A breakdown of management positions by farm category shows that regard- less of farm type, the majority of farm managers come from the ranks of senior- and mid-level employees.23 An interesting pattern that emerges from Table 4 is that no single person from the "shareholder" category, which includes former *kolkhoz* and *sovkhoz* shareholders, manages a collective *dehqan* farm.24 The category "other," which accounts for the majority (40 percent) of all respondents, includes positions such as teacher, nurse, or student. In other words, this category includes anyone who was not employed by the former *kolkhoz* or *sovkhoz* as a farm worker or a high- or middle-ranking employee responsible for agricultural production. Some respondents in this category received land out of the state land fund, land which is of much poorer quality than the land held within *dehqan* farms. Others, such as the former city bus driver from Shartuz who was not legally entitled to receive a land share from the collective *dehqan* farm, became the manager of the farm (in this interviewee's case, after his brother passed control over to him).

How did Soviet rural elites and mid-level employees become farm managers in the post-Soviet period? In most cases, Soviet farm chairs and local government officials following the land reform law divided the land of the *kolkhoz* and *sovkhoz* along the preexisting divisions, known as brigades, in order to create collective *dehqan* farms or other types of farms with modern-soundingnames such as Joint Stock Corporations and Cooperatives. In Soviet collective farms, each division had a supervisor, known as a brigadier. Upon restructuring Soviet collective farms, former collective farm chairs and brigadiers transitioned into managerial positions of collective *dehqan* farms or family farms. By law, the former Soviet shareholders had the right to choose a manager, but in practice, rural elites and mid-level managers, often with the approval of government officials who led the formal process of farm reorganization in the initial stage of land reform, became the managers of the new enterprises.25 Some

22 In the senior-level category, accountants were the largest group. In the intermediate category, brigadiers represented the majority. Within the mid-level category, managers of collective *dehqan* farms were exclusively former brigadiers, who also accounted for the majority—i.e., 71 percent—of family farm managers. In the category "other," students were by far the largest group.

23 In the shareholder category, *kolkhoz* shareholders were the largest group.

24 The "unknown" category refers to the two percent of respondents for whom I lack data regarding their Soviet-era profession.

25 See, for example, Article 12 of the 2009 law "On *Dehqan* Farm." As shareholders, former Soviet shareholders also have the right to establish an independent farm, but as I show

former farm chairs and brigadiers subsequently allowed for their relatives, particularly sons, to replace them as the new farm managers of collective *dehqan* farms. A study based on a small survey sample corroborates these findings by showing that most rural respondents were dissatisfied with how land reform unfolded in select cotton-producing villages (Hierman 2018). My findings also agree with the studies that emphasize the enduring positional power of socialist elites in marketization (Walder 2002; Pisano 2008; Vedery 2003).

7 Local Elite Resistance Outside the Purview of the State

Despite renewed efforts by the central government to promote farm individualization in 1998, farm managers took advantage of the institutional design of the reform to prevent shareholders from claiming land. To reiterate, this reform strategy authorizes shareholders to decide whether they wanted to work collectively or individually, and it prohibits the state and non-state actors from reallocating land without shareholders' consent. By leaving the decision over matters of land allocation to shareholders and keeping the state at some distance, this strategy inadvertently enables the managerial class to easily exercise their resistance to shareholders' demand for independent access to land. To document instances of managerial resistance, I rely on external sources and my own interviews.

One piece of external evidence that goes to suggest that managerial obstructionism was at work comes from the statement made by Abdurahmon Qodiri, then the interim chair of the Sughd Province. On the order of the president, this official was dispatched to select cotton-producing districts in Sughd in 2013 to explain to shareholders the benefit of land reform, and the following quote also sums up the result of his mission.[26]

> … the heads of the *dehqan* farms use thousands of groundless excuses to create obstacles to land reform, because the implementation of the order of the president does not benefit the managers, but the *dehqan*. The government of the republic of Tajikistan, [i.e.] the head of state,

above, doing so presented a challenge because farm managers were unwilling to give up control over land.

26 Qodiri's statement, in which he implied the failure of his mission, also appeared in a Russian-language newspaper. See Faizullaev, Bahrom, "A. Qodiri. Mi ne doljni dopuskat bezotvestvennogo otnosheniya k zemle" (A. Qodiri. We should not let people treat land irresponsibly), *Asia Plus*, December 20, 2014. http://www.news.tj/ru/print/200405.

> Emomali Rahmon, desires for people to become owners of land and for families to be employed and earn good incomes in order to have decent lives. Working in our homeland is better than labor migration. However, groups in localities still want to be managers and prefer to command others, and for this reason, land reform has been protracted.

Qodiri's inability to assist shareholders in gaining access to land at the time, alongside his recognition that managers were a source of the problem, is indicative of the constraining effect of decentralized land reform strategies, for otherwise he would have used the power of the state to forcibly reallocate the land in those districts.27 Through interviews and observations, I found out that managers used diverse strategies to deter shareholders from establishing an independent farm. These strategies include making independent access to land contingent upon debt payment, exaggerating the costs of independent farming, and limiting shareholders' horizons by preventing them from having contact with reform advocates.

7.1 *Farm Debt*

Perhaps no other barrier to land redistribution has been as prevalent as cotton farm debt. Opinions differ about the origins and nature of the debt as well as who is liable for its repayment.28 Reportedly, farmers owe the debt to cotton investors and the state. Cotton investors claim the bulk of the debt, which farmers owe for inputs that were not paid for after the harvest, presumably because the harvest was not profitable. The state claims the rest of the debt for outstanding tax, electricity, water, and irrigation service fee payments. In 2009, following a series of high-profile meetings with foreign donors, the national government made a decree to cancel cotton farm debt. During field research, I encountered many shareholders who had the desire to establish an individual farm in order to be able to farm independently and derive more money from selling produce, but who nevertheless continued to work in the collective *dehqan* farm. As Table 5 indicates, the major reason they did so was because farm managers made land access contingent upon immediate debt payment.

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27 Given the dearth of temporal data, it is hard to say whether Qodiri's mission has led to greater farm individualization in the region since 2013. Compounding the problem, the government's statistical yearbooks use the general term *dehqan* farm to lump together individual/family *dehqan* farms and collective *dehqan* farms, which makes it difficult to obtain accurate information about the amount of land under each farm type.

28 For more on this, refer to studies by Kassam (2011); Van Atta (2008); and Hofman (2018).

table 5 Reasons why shareholders of collective dehqan farms did not establish family farms

N = 36	Zafarobod	Spitamen	Qumsangir	Shartuz	Bokhtar	Total
Shareholders prefer but cannot get land to establish a family farm due to resistance by farm manager	0	3	2	0	6	11
Shareholders prefer but cannot operate a family farm due to lack of labor, money, distance of the farmland from home	0	1	0	2	1	4
Shareholders prefer collective *dehqan* farm over individual farm	2	1	0	0	0	3

source: author's interviews, 2013

Perhaps most controversial of all was how some managers of collective *dehqan* farms claim that when they took over the farm from the previous manager, they paid all farm debt. Then, the farm managers prorate the initial "invest- ment" among the shareholders, later demanding repayment before sharehold- ers can separate. This practice violates the law "On Dew Farm" in two ways. First, the law grants shareholders an unconditional right to withdraw their land parcel and does not make debt repayment a condition precedent. Second, farm managers, by spreading debt among shareholders yet individualizing potential profit from farming, violated the law, which states that profits are to be shared among shareholders.29 From this perspective, it is problematic to

29 Since I lack systematic farm-level data on revenue stream, my claim about farm managers receiving more benefits than shareholders should be taken as tentative.

require shareholders to pay the debt because, in essence, the farm manager received all the profits, and by not partaking in the profits, the shareholders effectively paid back the manager.

For their part, government officials have expressed mixed views. In Bokhtar, the district chair allegedly urged collective *dehqan* farm shareholders to ignore the land debt. In the Qumsangir district, the deputy district chair and his associate stated in an interview with the present author that if collective *dehqan* farm shareholders were smart, they would quickly settle what these officials described as a small amount of land debt, equivalent to $1,000 per hectare, before that debt could gather interest. The interesting thing to point out is not that the local government's response to the plight of shareholders was heterogeneous but instead how some local officials, such as the one in Bokhtar, appear to have sided with shareholders without helping them claim their land shares.

As indicated in Table 6, despite a government initiative to cancel the debt, shareholders of the collective *dehqan* farms continue to perceive it as a major barrier to land access. The table presents survey data collected by international aid agencies (DFID, USAID, World Bank 2011) on the percentage of respondents representing either family farms or collective *dehqan* farms who perceived debt as an obstacle in 2007 and 2011.

table 6 Percentage of respondents who perceived debt as an obstacle to establishing a family farm

Year	Group	Major problem	Minor problem	Don't know
2007 (N = 534)	Collective *Dehqan* Farm Shareholders	59%	10%	31%
	Family Farm Shareholders	74%	11%	15%
2011 (N = 862)	Collective *Dehqan* Farm Shareholders	64%	17%	19%
	Family Farm Shareholders	57%	26%	16%

source: USAID and the world bank, "survey of knowledge, attitudes, and practices of 1500 farmers in 15 tajikistan regions concerning land use rights and farm restructuring," 2007; DFID, the world bank, and USAID, "assessing development impacts on rural vulnerability and resilience survey," 2011

Overall, perhaps because of the government's debt cancellation decree in 2009, the perception of debt as a problem has slightly decreased since then. However, the percentage of collective *dehqan* farm members who perceived land debt as a barrier to land redistribution increased between 2007 and 2011. This signals that, despite the decree, managers of collective *dehqan* farms continue to use debt as a strategy to discourage potential land claimants from establishing a family farm. Most importantly, as long as the decentralized reform strategy is in place, farm managers can easily offset the effect of any emancipatory policy simply by influencing the choice of shareholders.

7.2 *Instilling Fear about Independent Farming*

Another strategy farm managers have used to discourage shareholders from actualizing their land rights has been to exaggerate the difficulty of independent farming. In particular, they have reminded shareholders of the difficulty of accessing water, farm machinery, and paperwork associated with farm registration, or they have emphasized tax payments independent farmers must make.

It would be simplistic to suggest that all collective farm shareholders who signaled reservations about independent farming would actualize their land rights if given the opportunity to do so. Among those who were least willing and prepared to cope with the risks of independent farming were households that had few men to provide labor or money through remittances. As indicated in Table 5, of the 36 interviewed collective *dehqan* farm members, 22 percent preferred to establish individual tenure, but due to a lack of labor and money could not afford to run an individual operation, and 17 percent thought working collectively was better no matter what.

Similarly, albeit with a higher frequency, the 2012 study by DFID, the World Bank, and USAID found a material constraint in the form of "lack[ing] access to farm machinery" to be the most commonly cited reason why collective farm member shareholders did not become individual farmers.30 However, the study qualified this finding by noting that "qualitative interviews also showed that many collective farm heads, who benefit from their current status, have actively discouraged farmers from petitioning to restructure by warning them of barriers to farming if they do" (2012: 19).

30 By contrast, small farms tend to be the least commonly cited reason. Likewise, during my fieldwork I did not encounter anyone who chose to remain in the collective *dehqan* farm because their land share was too small to be worth withdrawing from the collective and taking the risk of operating an individual farm.

I concur with the donor study in saying that caution is warranted in taking shareholders' responses about material constraints at face value. On at least two occasions that I recorded,31 shareholders of collective *dehqan* farms would at first engage in dissimulation by citing material constraints or simply reporting their preference for collectivized farming, but upon further inquiry they admitted that the reason they did not establish an individual farm was because farm managers had not given them land. Past research suggests that this behavioral tendency is typical of subordinate social groups (Scott 1990). A shareholder from the Spitamen district stated that he would not operate an independent farm because of the high fertilizer prices and taxes, but when I asked if he had independent access to his land share, he stated with indignation that "farm managers will not give you land. All land is indebted. Kids go to Russia to help me." Asked if he would be able to farm independently, he mentioned having three sons in Russia who send remittances and four cows, and that the he could use the money from these sources to pay the costs of farming but that getting land was not easy.

7.3 *Limiting Horizons*

To prevent shareholders from splitting from the collective farm, farm managers in some post-Soviet countries actively seek to contain land reform ideas and practices from spreading in the countryside (Pisano 2008; Petrick and Carter 2009). They have done so by excluding land reform advocates from attending public meetings or denying them a meeting space for awareness-raising events about land rights. As the study by Schaffner (1995) shows, such strategies were not unique to postcommunist countries. The author uses the term "limiting horizon" to describe how plantation owners in Brazil confined laborers to plantations to prevent them from becoming aware of their poor labor conditions, which could have led them to fight for their property rights.

During my fieldwork, I encountered other means by which managers of collective *dehqan* farms sought to limit the horizon of shareholders. In the Bokhtar district, a collective *dehqan* farm manager tried to prevent me from interviewing members of his farm, assured me that everything was fine, and exhorted his members to convey the same message. In Qumsangir district, one interviewee, the son of the collective *dehqan* farm manager, stormed in to inquire about the purpose of my visit and assured me that if the interviewee wanted his land share, they would not object to giving it to him.

Foreign donors made investments in legal aid centers and local activists to inform shareholders about their land rights. Called "tashabuskor," these

31 The second instance of dissembling manifested itself in a village in Bokhtar district.

table 7 People and organizations respondents stated they met with to discuss land userights or farm restructuring processes

People and organizations	2007 (N = 534)	2011 (N = 862)
Government Officials	20%	23%
District Land Committee	19%	20%
Head of *Dehqan* Farms	26%	40%
Legal Aid Center	6%	4%
Tashabuskor / Rural Activists	8%	4%
District Center Land Cadaster	–	2%
Other Farmers	1%	13%

source: USAID and the World Bank, "Survey of Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices of 1500 Farmers in 15 Tajikistan Regions Concerning Land Use Rightsand Farm Restructuring," 2007; DFID, the World Bank, and USAID, "Assessing Development Impacts on Rural Vulnerability and Resilience Survey," 2011

activists are highly educated individuals in their home villages and have the potential to be a source of pressure against the horizon-limiting activities of farm managers. Despite several success stories associated with their work (USAID 2008), donor reports recognize that overall, *tashabuskors* have had limited impact. Table 7 indicates that these activists have been largely ineffective because often, villagers have never encountered them. In fact, in 2011, four percent of shareholders met with *tashabuskors* to discuss land reform—but by comparison, 40 percent, or ten times as many shareholders, discussed landreform with farm managers.

The way some *tashabuskors* operated, as well as the perception that man- agers of collective *dehqan* farms created about them, provides insights into why these *tashabuskors* might have been ineffective. During my field research I met two former *tashabuskors*, one from the Shartuz district and the other from the Spitamen district. Both were female, highly educated, and managing their own collective *dehqan* farms.32 That I was able to find only two *tashabuskors* to interview supports the survey finding in Table 7 about their limited com- munity presence.

The former *tashabuskor* from Shartuz stated that she was often unable to address shareholders about their land rights. For example, after notifying farm managers a day before about visiting "their" farms, the managers canceled

32 For the sake of brevity, I will not discuss the role of the activist from Spitamen.

farm work the following day. She said that in private conversations, managers of collective *dehqan* farms would advise her against holding meetings with shareholders for fear that it would create discord and conflict in the village.33 Since she resided in the village, sometimes she was able to meet members of some farms. However, she noted that farm managers offset the effect of such awareness-raising campaigns by discrediting her in the presence of their farm members. Farm managers would tell them not to follow her advice because "she was too close to the government and … it would be futile for an average shareholder to even try getting land." The foregoing discussion is not intended to downplay the work of these *tashabuskors* but to give a sense of the challenges they face in performing their work. Being a female instigator of reform in a cultural setting that sustains gender discrimination against women is sure to make this task all the more difficult.

Much has been written about local elites or vested interests posing obstacles to land reform in post communist countries, including Tajikistan. In the analysis above, I moved beyond this assertion to substantiate the claim that reforms truly privileged the interest of Soviet rural elites turned farm managers, also showing how they have exploited the institutional design of the reform to deny shareholders their land rights.

8 Conclusion

Land reform efforts in the cotton-growing areas of Tajikistan have achieved little in the way of redistributing land from large farms to individual farms. The essence of land reform in Tajikistan was the division of common land of the former socialist state and collective farms among shareholders for the purpose of creating family farms. Prominent studies of post communist land reform emphasize either resistance by local elites, or the specific institutional design that states used to reallocate land, as reasons why land reform in other former Soviet countries resulted in limited land redistribution. Although they contribute to the understanding of land reform outcomes, as they stand, these arguments do not explain why resistance by local elites in some countries, but not in others, succeeded in stifling land redistribution or why and how the design of land reform has the effect that the authors claim it does. Without choosing sides in the debate, I incorporated resistance and reform design arguments within a theoretical framework that emphasizes the decentralized feature of

33 The *tashabuskor* from Spitamen also said that in private encounters, managers of colletive *dehqan* farms conveyed similar concerns.

land reform in Tajikistan. I have argued that to a large extent, the government's decentralized reform strategy is responsible for why state land reform initiatives have resulted in limited land redistribution.

Codified in the law "On *Dehqan* Farms," the decentralized reform strategy that the government of Tajikistan adopted at the recommendation of foreign donors prevents the state from subdividing the land of the *dehqan* farm with- out shareholders' consent. By virtue of leaving the decision over matters of land allocation to shareholders, the decentralized reform strategy enables the managerial class to easily exercise their resistance and infringe upon the property rights of shareholders outside the purview of the state. I have used diverse data sources to try to establish the validity of this claim.

The findings of this article are relevant to policy, as they point to a possible solution for alleviating land inequality in a country where access to land is one of the key means to gaining a livelihood and where food insecurity remains an acute issue. In particular, the findings suggest the need for direct intervention by the central state in matters of land allocation. If the national government of Tajikistan had physically redistributed land to shareholders, a model that was adopted in several post-Soviet states, instead of leaving the issue of land allocation to be decided at the farm level, as the current reform strategy prescribes, it is less likely that shareholders would have faced the obstacles that they currently do to claim land, and legal awareness-raising initiatives would have been unnecessary.

My argument for direct state intervention finds support in the work of at least one prominent institutional theorist who argues that because of resistance by powerful members of society, decentralized change is likely to become cumbersome, and that state intervention may accomplish socially efficient changes more quickly (Knight 1992: 213). Overhauling the land tenure reform laws to allow for direct state redistribution may be costly and confusing, but it would have the potential to truly enhance shareholders' land tenure security, which in turn could become an engine for agricultural productivity and rural development.

This article suggests that the type of land allocation strategy that government adopts matters for how land tenure reform unfolds. Post-Soviet states adopted divergent reform strategies. Future studies should examine the reason for this disparity. Why, for example, did governments in Tajikistan and Russia distribute shares, whereas those in Georgia and Armenia physically redistributed land? Additionally, this article leaves no scope for central government officials, only mentioning their role in introducing the laws governing land reform. If, as I argue, the decentralized land reform strategy impedes land reform, the question arises: Why does the government of Tajikistan abide by it? Implicit in

this paper is the idea the government accepted, without further investigation, the blueprint for reform recommended by international advisers.34 If so, is the government unwilling to change the rules because it does not want to facilitate extensive land redistribution, or does it keep them in place because international organizations expect it to? Future studies should empirically scrutinize the preference of central government elites and their interactions with inter- national aid agencies.

Finally, one can perhaps expand the scope of the study to include cases from sub-Saharan Africa to determine whether a decentralized land reform strategy empowers local elites at the expense of shareholders and potentially stifles land individualization. Given that the World Bank is recommending to governments in the developing world, including some in sub-Saharan Africa, the adoption of a decentralized reform strategy, there is an opportunity for such a cross-regional comparative study.

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34 This is consistent with Van Atta's (2008: 1) assessment that the government of Tajikistan gave little thought to the necessity of conducting land reform and accepted it as "part of the usual and necessary post-Soviet reform package […] it was then implemented with- out much concern for the context in which it was undertaken."

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