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Understanding the social determinants of sustainable grassland management—a case-based analysis of 3 Tibetan villages in Sichuan, China

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Introduction The individual allocation of user rights to pasture may have beneficial effects on the grassland, but it has created many operational difficulties for households in some herding areas of China. This is because grassland management differs from that of agricultural land. Livestock need to maintain mobility and flexible access to grassland and this is not suited to tightly designated terms of operation. However, if grassland deteriorates further, even the individualized, group herding model which households in the survey area have adopted will be impractical.

Materials and methods The study utilized Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) methods in three Tibetan villages to understand how social factors affected sustainable grassland management. Focused interviews with local villagers gave insight into their livelihood strategies and how they utilized grassland.

Results The study indicated that allocation of grassland user rights to individual households, which then operated their combined holdings jointly, was an effective method for sustainable grassland management. Actually, the allocation of grassland user rights to household level in the three villages under study had only been nominal. Herder households continued to graze their livestock jointly in the traditional group mode of operation. Moreover, they considered this to be an appropriate strategy. However, where grassland resources were, or became, scarce there were more disputes and social management was affected. Better-off villages were able to overcome this problem through income diversification. However, in the majority of cases, it was the traditional village processes of mediation which could still lessen the intensity of disputes and their outcomes. It is now necessary to review the contradictions which exist between some current grassland policies and traditional techniques. For example, the proportion of shrubs in the composition of the grassland has recently increased, whereas herders would prefer to have more grass. Shrub increase results from the banning of the process of light burning of grassland under the natural forest protection program. Herders had traditionally used this light burning to suppress shrub growth. Similarly, the traditional grassland allocation and operation process was based on equity principles and often embodied in village social agreements. It is these features that continue to give vitality to the traditional grassland management principles.

Conclusions Current grassland policies in herding areas have some bias toward the improvement of physical living conditions and tend to overlook capacity-building and the role of traditional local institutions. Other policies, such as cropland conversion to pasture, would benefit from associated government activities which would strengthen their overall impact.