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User-based Pasture Management in Kyrgyzstan: Achievements, Challenges, and Trends

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Abstract

In Kyrgyzstan, a high mountain country in Central Asia, grasslands occupy almost half of the territory. These extensive resources represent the basis for seasonally mobile animal husbandry, which is relevant for both individual households and the national economy. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Kyrgyzstan's transition into a market economy, these formerly state-owned grasslands were parceled out and privatized. Considerable socio-economic distortions and ecological problems occurred during this process. In order to meet such unintended effects, a legal framework for user-based pasture management was established in the course of an institutional learning process. This package of measures corresponded to a decentralization of responsibilities in natural resource management through the stronger involvement of rural communities and, thus, aligns with a central paradigm of the global development discourse at the time. Positive examples can be observed in terms of increasing equal access to grazing land, the empowerment of rural communities, and reduced ecological damage. At the same time, there are local cases of pasture-related ecological problems and overstrained management institutions. In addition to the challenges posed by cross-border pastoral mobility and scrub encroachment on summer pastures, social issues came into focus in current pasture-related interventions in Kyrgyzstan. This paper traces the developments of the regulations and practices of pasture management after 1991, placing an emphasis on the analysis of current trends, achievements, and challenges.

Introduction

Kyrgyzstan's grasslands form one of the essential sources for securing the livelihood of individual households and the economically important animal husbandry of the country. In order to ensure their long-term preservation and to re-regulate access to, use of, and management approaches towards pasture resources, new regulations were formulated in the course of state independence, which led to ambivalent socioeconomic and ecological effects. Against the background of these results, the experiences and findings of political decision-makers, international donor organizations, and changed global development paradigms, the pasture legislation underwent several changes. Since 2009, a user-based resource management approach has been applied.

Methods and study site

The findings are based on the authors' many years of research experience and the collection of materials on the topics of this paper, a systematic analysis of literature and legal documents, and recently conducted expert interviews with representatives of civil society, the scientific community, and governmental organizations. While previous work of the authors is based on local case studies in different regions of Kyrgyzstan (e.g., Dörre and Borchardt 2012; Dörre 2015; Kasymov and Thiel 2019), the findings presented here refer to the entire country.

Results

In order to be able to assess both the emergence and performance of user-based pasture management in Kyrgyzstan, we outline the most important developments in pasture legislation with regard to resource use and management-related aspects. In our conceptualization of pastoral institutions and their change, we build on North's understanding of institutions as formal and informal 'rules of the game' (1990: 3). In addition, we extend this notion, and argue in line with Watts that institutions are to be understood as regulated and habituated 'rules in use' (2005: 268), which are perpetuated by actions and investments. The diachronic sketch and presentation of the current management approach are followed by an overview of scientific perspectives on this institutional change. Finally, we identify and evaluate current trends and challenges in the pasture sector of Kyrgyzstan.

Discontinuous development of legal pasture regulations

The proclamation of Kyrgyzstan's independence in 1991 was followed by economic decline. The country was forced to embark on a new economic policy course and to find international partners to help address this

challenge. It found them in multilateral donor organizations, which tied their support to so-called ‘Washington Consensus’ conditionalities (e.g., deregulation, privatization, and decentralization). During the ‘shock therapy,’ industrial and agricultural enterprises were quickly privatized, along with the technical equipment, livestock, and farmland (Kasymov et al. 2016). Pastures remained state property, but the previously forbidden private use was made possible by means of long-term leases. Comprehensive management responsibilities for seasonal pastures previously held by collective and state farms were decentralized, parceled out, and allocated to different administrative levels (GRK 1991; PKR 1995; GKR 1999; Crewett 2012; Dörre 2012; Kasymov et al. 2016; Kasymov and Thiel 2019).

The crisis-ridden societal development and the problematic implementation of the new regulations led to complex problems on the ground. Due to limited resources, many pastoralists were not able to maintain long-established, spatiotemporally integrated migration systems. Decreasing seasonal mobility, high livestock concentrations on easily accessible pastures resulted in both increasing degradation and previously non-existent conflict situations between pasture users. At the same time, several remote pastures became increasingly unusable due to underuse and lack of investments in infrastructure such as water pipes, wells, and drift paths. The division of management responsibilities among organizations at different administrative levels led to a patchwork of individualized utilization rights and encouraged the disintegration of proven spatiotemporal migration patterns. At the same time, these organizations were under-equipped in almost every respect and, therefore, overburdened with duties (Shamsiev 2007; Crewett 2012; Kasymov et al. 2016; Kasymov and Thiel 2019). In an attempt to counteract these developments, the government issued a decree based on the advice of various donor organizations and development agencies in 2002. The core contents were the granting of individual usage rights by means of auctions, as well as fragmented management obligations (GKR 2002; Undeland 2005; Shamsiev 2007). Thus, the decree continued to be based on the credos of the primacy of the market as the regulator of social negotiations, privatized resource appropriation, and fragmented management. Steimann (2011) and Dörre (2012; 2015) argue that the adherence to the market principle, the complexity of procurement procedures for pasture usage rights, and fragmented management responsibilities remained the main reasons why the problems mentioned above have not been solved, and have actually worsened.

Against the backdrop of unsatisfactory results, and in the context of the global debate on how to anchor development measures more firmly in civil society, the law ‘On Pastures’ marked a turnaround in 2009. Based on assessments of international organizations, national decision-makers, and, to some extent, local pasture users, as well as experiences from pilot projects on user-based pasture management, the reform was intended to transfer pasture management responsibility to local players. This approach meant an end to the auction-based allocation of private pasture lease rights, and encompassed regulations for the reinvestment of user fees in both ecological pasture rehabilitation and infrastructure maintenance measures in line with local needs. Specifically, it is planned that local pasture users’ associations (PUAs) will establish so-called pasture committees (PCs), which are responsible for the preparation of usage and payment plans, monitoring and sanctioning of violations, and developing schemes for the reinvestment of the generated revenues (GKR 2009; Bussler 2010; Steimann 2011; Dörre 2012; 2015; Kasymov et al. 2016). Looking at these aspects in light of the international development discourse, it becomes clear that the user-based approach can be understood as an implementation of the popular participatory approach in community resource management and rural development. The impression of the legitimacy of the approach is underlined by the fact that in almost every local authority a PC was established shortly after the implementation of the law. However, due to widespread structural equipment deficits, the new regulation also meant an unwelcome burden for many PUAs. This assessment is underscored by the fact that international donor organizations have, to date, provided substantial funds for user-based pasture management, although the approach itself was already seen as a solution to the problems (IBRD 2013; Jafarova 2013; EI CAMP Alattoo 2020; EI DP 2020).

Scientific perspectives on institutional change

These reforms are viewed and assessed very differently in the literature. Kasymov et al. (2016) study the ‘intentionality of institutional change’ to explore how changing beliefs, belief systems, and learning experiences of policymakers affect the development of new pasture-related institutions. Crewett (2015) evaluates the concrete implementation of formal regulations in local settings. She emphasizes the importance of interest-led street-level bureaucrats who, depending on their authority, act as more or less effective agents of change. As a result, pasture use and management regimes are locally specific outcomes of negotiation processes of unequally powerful actors. Isaeva and Shigaeva (2017) highlight the path dependency of institutional change, emphasizing that the Soviet knowledge, management, and use practices internalized by

individual actors are reflected in the *de facto* regimes and, thus, have a long-term impact. According to Dörre, a fundamentally critical reading of the reforms is to interpret the commodification of pasture land, the withdrawal of the state from administrative tasks, and, finally, the delegation of resource management costs to the local level as an expression of neoliberally informed austerity policies (Dörre 2015). Dörre (2012; 2015) also criticizes the reform from 2009 for being based on an externally developed blueprint model and an apolitical understanding of the community that ignores local power asymmetries and unequal needs and capabilities. Shigaeva et al. (2016) use examples to show that the supposedly participatory character of the user-based management approach is highly controversial at the local level. To some extent, top-down initiated measures, management bodies, and procedures are seen as instruments of paternalism and agencies of resource control and exclusion of certain groups from decision-making processes. Furthermore, Kasymov and Thiel (2019) pose questions about the significance of interactions of formal and informal institutions for the ecological degradation of pastures until 2009 and how subsequent reforms of the formal framework have been changing power relations among pasture users, influencing pasture management and use regimes on the ground. A local case study shows how the formal regulations in force until 2009 promoted ‘grandfathering rule,’ in the sense of “first in time, first in right” (Damon et al. 2019), i.e., how powerful individual pasture users holding long-term usage rights put their own interests first and, thus, limit the resource appropriation options of their competitors. The authors argue that with the 2009 reform, the balance has been shifting in favor of economically weaker pasture users, contributing to increase their pastoral mobility. It has become more likely that pasture management and use will become socially, ecologically, and economically more sustainable in the future.

Current trends and challenges

In our opinion, the current situation seems to support the arguments presented by Kasymov and Thiel (2019). User-based pasture management is increasingly finding legitimacy with local communities and is gradually achieving desired results in terms of growing pasture mobility; a greater participation of local stakeholders in both pasture management-related decision-making and the economic potentials of the cooperation in resource use; a more effective monitoring and sanctioning of usage practices; and a decrease in conflicts within user communities. The continued support of local management structures by international organizations through capacity building measures contributes to these improvements. These measures also address long-standing problems of insufficient information generation and the tenacious exchange of knowledge within the PUAs. However, the positive impression is clouded by the observation of various experts that trained pasture managers are increasingly switching to better paid jobs – so that one can speak of an inner-Kyrgyz brain drain – to the detriment of user-based pasture management (EI CAMP Alatoo 2020; EI DP 2020; EI MSRI 2020).

From an institutional and legal perspective, two developments may have strong effects in the long-term. In order to increase the collection of user fees by PCs, which had previously been considered inadequate due to a lack of transparency and effectiveness, the new state budget code from 2016 introduced the rule that pasture fees are to be paid to the respective local authority instead of to the PC (GKR 2016). This enables the administration to invest directly in pasture-related measures. However, the obstruction of the work of the PCs resulting from the delayed transfer of funds has been criticized (EI CAMP Alatoo 2020; EI DP 2020; EI MSRI 2020). The second development is the extension of the user-based management approach to pastures of the forest fund category, which were managed until 2018 solely by state-owned forest enterprises. This puts an end to the long-standing practice of different management approaches for pastures of different land categories, which had created a great deal of confusion for pasture users. However, there is no guarantee that the cooperation between PUAs and state-owned forest enterprises will run smoothly and free of conflict, as oftentimes different interests are pursued by the involved players (GKR 2018; EI CAMP Alatoo 2020; CAMP Alatoo 2020).

The questions of how to regulate cross-border pastoral mobility and the use of pastures by foreign citizens remain largely unsolved. In this respect, the law refers to bilateral governmental regulations, which to our knowledge do not exist (GKR 2009; Ibraimova et al. 2015; Murzakulova and Mestre 2016). While Dörre (2016) already emphasized the problematic connection between the new state borders in Central Asia and pasture mobility, Kurmanalieva and Crewett (2019) show in a detailed case study how conflicting interpretations of historical usage practices, notions of resource usage as a zero-sum game, and institutional ambiguities lead to conflict situations that repeatedly lead to open violence, but in individual cases also lead to pragmatic bottom-up solutions.

From an ecological point of view, the increasing scrub encroachment (*Caragana*) of summer pastures has become a serious problem in recent years (DP 2020; EI DP 2020). According to experts, the reason for this

development is that these plants are no longer used as fuel and construction material for corrals. Additionally, the phenomenon is an unintended effect of the decrease in goat grazing. At present, efforts are being made to deal with this problem through experiments with heavy clearing technology and chemical solutions such as the controversial application of glyphosate (Nurmanbetova 2017; EI DP 2020).

To date, many development organizations implement various projects that address different aspects of pasture use and management. One of the recent focus areas is child and youth education and awareness building pursued by the ‘Development Centers on Jailoo’ project, which is supported by international organizations and has been implemented by national partners since 2014. It is active in all seven provinces of Kyrgyzstan. The background of the project is the observation that many children and adolescents of pastoral households have only limited access to education and learning opportunities during the summer grazing period, and, therefore, suffer long-term professional disadvantages. Under the motto ‘Gleams of hope,’ cultural, ecological, social, and scientific issues are taught free of charge and at an age-appropriate level. This knowledge can be applied in the short-term in schools and in the long-term in the children’s professional lives. By 2019, the program is said to have reached over 15,000 children and nearly 6,000 parents (EI DCJ 2020).

Conclusion

The results reveal three key dyads. First, the shifting pasture management-related institutions are to be understood both as proactive attempts to shape human-environment relations in times of social change and as reactive measures against unintended developments. Second, it becomes clear from situated pasture management regimes that the ‘rules in use’ are not a one-to-one translation of legal provisions but rather correspond to a contingent interplay between formal and informal institutional aspects that depend on local socio-ecological conditions. Third, it is evident that Kyrgyzstan’s pastoral sector is still changing and is characterized by challenges for which pragmatic solutions are still being sought. Kyrgyzstan’s pastures are increasingly being treated as a socially embedded and multidimensional issue, rather than reduced to the problem of finding an adequate institutional framing. This observation strengthens the hope for a stronger focus on pastures not only as an economically relevant natural resource and ecosystem service provider, but also as a socially, culturally, ecologically, and economically important component of the society of this high mountain country.

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