

Special Issue: Central Asian Mountain Societies in Transition

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Special Issue: Central Asian Mountain Societies in Transition

Dear Readers,

Mountain societies in Central Asia have experienced systemic economic, political, social, and environmental changes since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and have demonstrated varying degrees of resilience and capacities to transition. Due to these changes, Central Asian mountain societies face accentuated development challenges as well as promising opportunities.

While there is growing recognition of the scope of challenges and opportunities that Central Asian mountain societies have before them, there is a lack of natural and social science analysis of current realities and of the impact of development practices. Rigorous research on Central Asia and analysis of existing and potential development practices are needed to both fill known gaps and explore blind spots in knowledge of Central Asian mountain societies. Such findings are essential for further developing options for sustainable livelihoods and sound ecosystems, together with the people of Central Asia's mountains (Kerven et al 2012, in this issue; Kreutzmann 2012).

In June 2011, the University of Central Asia's Mountain Societies Research Centre (UCA/MSRC) and the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) North-South organized an international symposium on pastoralism in Central Asian mountain areas. This symposium and the subsequent development and publication of this special issue, including selected papers from the symposium, are targeted towards elevating the quality, usefulness, and profile of research in and on Central Asian mountain societies.

The MountainDevelopment section of the issue begins with Wibke Crewett's study of pasture governance practices in Naryn, Kyrgyzstan, and her finding that administrative hurdles are not the major cause of unsustainable practices. She suggests, therefore, that ongoing administrative reform efforts will not lead to the intended improvements. She points instead to the importance of designing effective local enforcement mechanisms for seasonal livestock migration. Dominic Stucker and co-authors focus on cooperative adaptation strategies in a small transboundary river basin in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Their work demonstrates that, despite transboundary tensions between the countries, local communities can find, and have found, solutions to water issues. Tatjana Rosen and co-authors explore the effectiveness of external interventions in a snow leopard conservation project in Gilgit-Baltistan, northern Pakistan, and find that efforts to address the consequences of the conservation-development conflict through a locally based insurance scheme and some support from externally funded projects have positively impacted mountain societies; but without local empowerment, the positive impact is limited. The final MountainDevelopment article by Christoph Wiedemann and co-authors demonstrates how thermal insulation measures financed through microloans and aimed at reducing use of biomass fuels in the Eastern Pamirs (Tajikistan) have successfully saved heating energy. However, the savings are not being realized by the main users of biomass fuels, ie poorer households, and the authors suggest an integrated strategy, including provision of alternative fuels and dissemination of energy-efficient technology, to better target these poorer households.

The MountainResearch section begins with Karina Liechti's examination of tensions between government and local community perceptions of pasture quality and degradation processes. Her findings illustrate the link between current practices and identities and the meanings associated with the Soviet period and the post-Soviet transformation. The 2 following articles—by Andrei Dörre and Peter Borchardt, and by Kim André Vanselow and co-authors—also show the multidimensional nature of factors influencing pasture use. The former examines how historical, socioeconomic, legal, and management factors influence pasture use strategies and challenges in Kyrgyzstan's walnut-fruit forest region. The latter examines the spatial and temporal variability of current pasture use and associated livestock numbers in Tajikistan's Eastern Pamir region.

In her analysis of the diversity of agropastoral systems in the Chuy region, Kyrgyzstan, Raphaële de la Martinière develops a typology of household farming systems and demonstrates the link between each system type and the corresponding households' ability to seize economic opportunities, especially in relation to the production of milk and beef. Adam Pain and Paula Kantor's article explores the livelihood pathways of households in Badakhshan in northeastern Afghanistan. Their findings illuminate the "corporate nature" of villages and the ways in which relative richness of the resource base and the degree of social differentiation impact the capacity of villages to provide village-level public goods. In the final MountainResearch article, Nazneen Kanji and co-authors explore how physical remoteness influences the quality of life of people living in Afghanistan's Badakhshan province. They argue that remoteness is an important barrier to improving health and well-being and that holistic approaches are more suitable than purely market-led approaches for improving quality of life.

The MountainNotes section presents a synthesis of a longer review of mountain agro-pastoralism completed by Carol Kerven and co-authors. The review concludes that the focus of policies, programs, and projects in the past 20 years has been driven by 2 unproven orthodoxies about the extent and causes of pasture degradation and the need for decentralization and pastureland privatization. The authors argue that there is a need for long-term, field-based, empirical research to critically assess these orthodoxies and to provide useful findings for practical application.

Kerven and co-authors' challenge to researchers—and the projects and organizations that fund them—is explicitly or implicitly addressed by several of the articles in this special issue. In addition, Hermann Kreutzmann's recently published collection entitled Pastoral Practices in High Asia (2012) similarly elevates the profile of field-based, empirical research that challenges development orthodoxies. In Kreutzmann's case, the challenge is to the revival of development orthodoxies based on modernization theory. Together, Pastoral Practices in High Asia and this special issue of MRD are filling recognized gaps and exposing blind spots in knowledge and sustainable development practice for Central Asian mountain societies.

It has been a privilege for the Mountain Societies Research Centre of the University of Central Asia to serve as guest editor to this special issue; to bring focus to important research and development concerns of relevance to Central Asian mountain societies; to highlight existing and emerging needs; and to prepare a Russian translation of the issue which should be available online and in print before the end of the year. We hope you will find this issue informative and useful.

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