

Livelihoods in transition: Changing land use strategies and ecological implications in a post-Soviet setting (Kyrgyzstan)

Jyldyz Shigaeva - International University of Kyrgyzstan (IUK), Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

Michael Kollmair – International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD)

Peter Niederer - Schweizerische Arbeitsgemeinschaft für die Berggebiete, Bern, Switzerland

Daniel Maselli - Centre for Development and Environment (CDE), University of Bern, Switzerland

Central Asian Survey (September 2007) 26(3), 389–406, Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group

ABSTRACT

The sudden independence of Kyrgyzstan from the Soviet Union in 1991 led to a total rupture of industrial and agricultural production. Based on empirical data, this study seeks to identify key land use transformation processes since the late 1980s, their impact on people's livelihoods and the implication for natural resources in the communes of Tosh Bulak and Saz, located in the Sokuluk River Basin on the northern slope of the Kyrgyz Range. Using the concept of the sustainable livelihood approach as an analytical framework, three different livelihood strategies were identified:

- (1) An accumulation strategy applied by wealthy households where renting and/or buying of land is a key element; they are the only household category capable of venturing into rain fed agriculture.
- (2) A preserving strategy involving mainly intermediate households who are not able to buy or rent additional agricultural land; very often they are forced to return their land to the commune or sell it to wealthier households.
- (3) A coping strategy including mainly poor households consisting of elderly pensioners or headed by single mothers; due to their limited labour and economic power, agricultural production is very low and hardly covers subsistence needs; pensions and social allowances form the backbone of these livelihoods.

Ecological assessments have shown that the forage productivity of remote high mountain pastures has increased from 5 to 22 per cent since 1978. At the same time forage productivity on pre-mountain and mountain pastures close to villages has generally decreased from 1 to 34 per cent. It seems that the main avenues for livelihoods to increase their wealth are to be found in the agricultural sector by controlling more and mainly irrigated land as well as by increasing livestock. The losers in this process are thus those households unable to keep or exploit their arable land or to benefit from new agricultural land. Ensuring access to land for the poor is therefore imperative in order to combat rural poverty and socio-economic disparities in rural Kyrgyzstan.