

Revisiting Collaborative Forest Management in Kyrgyzstan: What happened to bottom- up decision-making?

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Executive Summary

Over the past 15 years, the Swiss government, through the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, has collaborated with the Kyrgyz government in developing its forestry sector. The Kyrgyz-Swiss Forestry Support Programme (KIRFOR) covered a wide range of activities, including collaborative forest management (CFM). This was introduced in 1998 as a pilot approach, promoting the involvement of local people in managing and deriving sustainable income from the walnut-fruit forests in the south of the country. As Swiss support has now come to an end, this paper focuses on the experiences and outcomes, and the challenges of introducing a participatory approach in a post-Soviet regime.

Twelve years on, CFM leases have become widely accepted as a means of enabling local people to have a greater role in forest management; over 1,000 have now been signed, covering an area of over 8,300 ha. These leases are supported by an appropriate policy and legislative framework, built on field experience, as well as by the necessary institutional structures. Local CFM boards have been set up as a forum for discussion among all main stakeholders, and have become strong arbitration bodies in the case of conflicts—promoting good local governance.

The impact of CFM on poverty, gender awareness and sustainable forest management has been mixed. Those working with the project have a greater awareness of gender issues, although gender stereotypes are difficult to break. Tenants, some of them poor, have improved their livelihoods through CFM plots, yet on the whole it is difficult for the extreme poor to benefit from the system. CFM plots are generally well maintained, although it has not been possible to bring about major innovations in sustainable forest management.

It seems highly likely that CFM will continue in Kyrgyzstan after the withdrawal of Swiss support. Two achievements are highlighted in particular. One is the clear policy and legal framework, the strength of which lies in the way it was developed through piloting in the field, in an iterative process. The other is the broad recognition, on the part of authorities as well as local people, of the importance of equitable decision-making, reflected in the form of appropriate institutional mechanisms.

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Background: Twelve years of CFM in Kyrgyzstan

Kyrgyzstan is a landlocked country in Central Asia, bordering Kazakhstan, China, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The mountainous region of the Tian Shan covers over 80% of the country, with the remainder made up of valleys and basins. Formerly part of the Soviet Union, Kyrgyzstan gained independence in 1991 and has since experienced major social, economic and political upheaval. It hit international headlines in April this year with widespread rioting and the ousting of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev—a man who had taken the reins of power only a few years previously, in 2005, amidst high expectations of reversing the deepening social and economic problems in the country. Under his rule, however, many citizens perceived things to grow only worse – and there were widespread complaints of corruption, and a deepening divide between rich and poor. In June, political unrest flared in the South of the country, in what was widely reported as an ethnic conflict between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz—although behind it lay more complex power relations. Hundreds of people died, many more were displaced, and the region remains unstable. The story of collaborative forest management (CFM) in Kyrgyzstan cannot be seen in isolation from this troubled background.

Over the past 15 years, the Swiss government, through the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, has collaborated with the Kyrgyz government to support the development of its forestry sector. The Kyrgyz-Swiss Forestry Support Programme (KIRFOR) covered a wide range of activities, including support for developing a new forest policy and associated legislation, forest inventory and GIS, economic reforms including the im-

proved processing of forest products, research, and the introduction of a participatory approach to forest management. Known as collaborative forest management (CFM), this approach was first piloted in 1998 in two locations. Now that Swiss support for forestry development in the country has come to an end, this paper looks at what worked well and what did not, and draws out some wider lessons for other countries in transition. Regular readers of the *Gatekeeper Series* may remember a paper published in 2003 on the same project “*Collaborative Forest Management in Kyrgyzstan: Moving from Top-Down to Bottom-Up Decision Making*” (Carter *et al.*, 2003); this is a follow-up to that paper. The findings presented here are drawn partially from the observations and experiences of the authors, enriched and validated by key stakeholders who were invited to a final reflection workshop held in Bishkek (the Kyrgyz capital) in October 2009.

CFM: What and why?

The basic concept behind CFM was taken to be “*a working partnership between the key stakeholders in the management of a given forest, in particular the immediate, local users and the relevant forest authorities*” (see Carter and Gronow, 2005). Partnership with local people was a totally new concept in Kyrgyzstan, where past patterns of management and communication were strictly top-down. In Soviet times, personal initiative or questioning the relevance of orders were strongly discouraged (Carter *et al.*, 2001), and even now this influences behaviour, although to a lesser extent than when the project began. The Kyrgyz authorities were clear from the beginning that the most appropriate form of ‘partnership’ would be to lease forest land to individuals in exchange for forest-related work. They needed new ways of managing forests given the drastic reduction in state funding for forestry (and other sectors) following the break-up of the Soviet Union. The Swiss project stressed that leases should be viewed as only one option. However, project activities rapidly became focused entirely on leases, with no other mechanism being viewed by partners as feasible. At the local level, forest management is organised through (Soviet instigated) state forest enterprises or *leshozes* (Box 1).

The new CFM approach was particularly designed for the biodiversity-rich walnut-fruit forests in the southern part of the country, as it offered opportunities to complement livelihoods from non-timber forest products (NTFPs), especially walnuts, which in years of good harvest can yield a significant income. Forest plots were leased to interested persons (or households) or groups of households, who agreed to conduct forest work (mainly planting, collecting seeds and growing planting material, but also weeding, road maintenance and similar tasks) in return for the right to harvest NTFPs and sell them independently on the market.

What has been achieved?

CFM was chosen by the project as a means to promote:

- Biodiversity conservation, through the productive, sustainable management of selected forest plots (CFM was never viewed as an approach applicable to all forest stands, but rather one management option).

BOX 1. THE *LESHOZ* AS A TERRITORIAL AND SOCIAL UNIT FOR FOREST MANAGEMENT

Set up during Soviet times to manage forest land on a productive basis, the *leshoz* was, and still is, both a territorial entity and a 'community' of people living in and working for the organisation. The *leshoz* once served as a complete unit of social organisation (providing shops, primary health care, nursery care, schooling, and social amenities), but the severe cuts in the state budget following independence meant not only that these social benefits disappeared, but many people also lost their permanent jobs. During Soviet times, *leshoz* operations were dictated in a highly top-down manner, with 10-year management plans for the walnut-fruit forests being prepared thousands of kilometres away in Moscow. *Leshoz* staff then had to implement them, in a contractual manner. Today, each *leshoz* has a certain amount of autonomy in the preparation of its 10-year work plan, which is based on a national forest inventory. Decisions regarding implementation of the plan are an internal affair for the *leshoz*, and in this respect it is significant that *leshoz* staff are also a part of the community (and thus in some ways more answerable to it).

After independence, forest management decision-making power moved from Moscow to Bishkek; it was then further decentralised, at least to some extent, to the individual *leshozes* (of which there are 53 in the country overall, and 14 in the southern walnut-fruit forests). With this increased independence came the expectation on the part of the state—indeed it was a necessity—that the *leshozes* would largely generate their own funding. This placed *leshoz* managers in a difficult position, especially as they were hampered by certain aspects of state legislation—in particular a total felling ban on walnut (imposed to curb illegal logging) which effectively inhibits *leshozes* from managing their timber reserves in a productive or sustainable manner. *Leshozes* had to find other ways to meet their broad targets (still set by Bishkek, in an annual plan) and to at least break even.

- The empowerment of local people, giving them greater responsibility for forest management (and potentially other aspects of their lives), and increasing motivation to conserve the forest. This also required a change in the attitudes of *leshoz* staff.
- Social equity, as far as possible, through group management of forests.
- The eventual improvement of local livelihoods through sustainable resource use and income generation opportunities arising from this.

In the sections that follow we look at how CFM has contributed to each of these aspirations in turn.

Sustainable forest management

The project's goal was to improve the sustainable management and protection of the walnut-fruit forests and their biodiversity through increasing the value of the forests to local people (ensuring that they benefit from them directly), and promoting a sense of local ownership and responsibility for their maintenance. The project recognised that the heavy population pressure in much of the walnut-fruit forest area was a major threat, and that local collaboration would be essential for the forest's continued existence. This logic was at first severely tested by the way in which CFM was perceived by the *leshoz* management as a general way to get forest work done, mostly outside the

individual plots of tenants, although over time greater focus has been brought to bear on conducting forest activities on CFM plots. Forest management in Soviet times was broad-based, corresponding to set norms and procedures with very little room for local adjustments to field conditions. It had been hoped that CFM would provide an opportunity to introduce more interesting and innovative silvicultural practices, tailored to individual plot characteristics and production potentials. A separate research project has been investigating these issues (Sorg, 2010). However, it has been constrained recently by a felling ban introduced by the government in 2008 to control illegal felling—which had the side-effect of prohibiting any selective silviculture. What has happened is that CFM plots are *maintained* by tenants, generally to a good standard; they have not been cleared for other purposes. Nevertheless, this cannot be claimed to be the same as sound, sustainable management.

Perhaps the greatest opportunity for tenants to truly collaborate in management decisions is at the time of devising the *leshoz* plan itself. The planning process still follows the (Soviet) 10-year cycle; the most recent inventory and planning process for the *leshozes* in the walnut fruit forest area occurred just when CFM was being introduced. At that time the tenants were too few, and the idea too new, for true collaboration with the inventory and planning specialists. It is hoped that when the next planning cycle begins (very shortly), a far greater participation of CFM tenants will be possible.

In terms of area covered, the number of *leshozes* in which CFM leases exists expanded from two in 1998 to five in 2001, to 14 in 2004—thus covering all the *leshozes* in the walnut-fruit forests. The concept has also expanded beyond the walnut-fruit forests to other forest types; by mid 2008, 16 *leshozes* out of a total of 20 in the region (*oblast*) of Djalalabad had developed CFM contracts with 939 families, covering 6,231 hectares of forest. In Uzgen region, a total of 119 families had contracted plots under CFM for a total area of 1,073 ha. Of course some leases have also been terminated for various reasons, but the overall trend is clearly of increase, with well over 1,000 leases currently in operation.

With this number of leases, CFM appears to have reached a critical mass – or 'point of no return'. Although other types of leases exist and cover a far greater area,¹ it would be extremely difficult to completely reverse the CFM process given that legally CFM principles now apply to all types of leases (see Box 4 below). Whilst the more recently signed CFM leases are still in a period of trial (and therefore of short duration), a growing number have been prolonged to 49 years. Indeed, this is perhaps the most interesting point—such long-term contracts start to bring in an inheritance element, and to creep in the direction of private property (although this has not been voiced in official fora). Already there are cases in which the male tenant (who signed the CFM contract) has died, and his family (particularly the wife) has automatically continued the contract. How issues of inheritance by the next generation are handled on a systematic basis is yet to be decided.

¹ KIRFOR supported the *Oblast* (Regional) Forest Administration in establishing and maintaining an accurate database on the forest area leased out under CFM, but similar levels of detail are unavailable for other types of leases, some of which are in any case temporary (seasonal).

A related question for the future concerns how those who do not have CFM plots will behave in a context of increasing pressure on the forest as population levels increase. Will those who do not have plots seek to harvest illegally from un-leased parts of the forest (still under *leshoz* management) or from those who have plots? Will tenants be tempted to over-exploit their plots to make some quick profits? Will CFM plots be inherited, and split in the process? In the longer term this would render them non-viable. Will the system of individual or small group leases eventually lead to a creeping privatisation of forest resources, thus depriving other households of their access to forest resources? All these matters still need to be addressed. It is possible that seasonal or long-term migration from rural areas may curb the pressure on the forest, but such matters are difficult to predict.

Empowerment of local people

The last 12 years have seen a move away from completely top-down forest management, but “bottom up” management is still elusive. As the number of leases has grown, people have been able to exert an increasing voice in decision making. The general perception of those involved is that CFM leases have been a “win-win” solution. Nevertheless tenants are contractually obliged to work for the *leshozes*, and of course only have temporary (even if in some cases long-term) tenure rights; they do not have forest ownership. Furthermore, questions remain regarding the equity aspects of lease allocation. What has evolved is a specific Kyrgyz approach to collaboration between state authorities and local people in forest management.

From the beginning of the CFM project any form of collaborative, group activity was not popular; people wished to make a break with the past and to work individually. The project has nevertheless retained the belief that through coming together, tenants could better defend their rights and better negotiate with the administration. This has indeed been demonstrated in a number of cases. In one, the group action of tenants resulted in a very corrupt *leshoz* director being removed from his post; other examples include group work in road repair, in transporting harvested products to market, in forest fruit processing, and in organising the payment of taxes. In a few cases, CFM representatives have been selected by other tenants to participate in meetings or to discuss specific issues with the *leshozes*. These nevertheless remain separate incidents in which there was a clear logic to working together, rather than representing a growing trend to organise, and to build solidarity. It remains possible that tenant associations will develop in future (some involved in CFM speak actively of this), but much depends on the evolution of Kyrgyzstan’s political environment.

The CFM boards were a specific institutional mechanism by which the project sought a formal voice for tenants (Box 2). Although (as noted in the box) some of these function better than others, they are nevertheless now well-established and recognised bodies, which are likely to continue to exist.

The CFM boards have helped to change attitudes amongst *leshoz* staff, have contributed to a better understanding of the interests and capacities of tenants, and have increased tenants’ sense of status and morale. In the 2003 paper, the term “adaptive planning” was

BOX 2. SUPPORTING GOOD GOVERNANCE: THE CFM BOARDS

To govern CFM the project set up a two-tier system: (1) *leshoz* and range^a level commissions; and (2) an independent CFM board in each *leshoz* in which CFM operates, made up of representatives of the regional forest administration (*oblast*), the *leshoz*, the tenants, a forest scientist, the *ail okmot* and the village elders (*ak sakal*). In practice, the functioning of the commissions has been limited. It is the CFM boards that have emerged as important local decision-making bodies—considering matters such as complaints by different parties regarding the fulfilment of CFM agreements; contested rights to the same CFM plot; and reports of illegal activities on CFM plots. Decisions may include the revoking of a CFM lease if the tenant has truly failed to meet the terms agreed, or a fine where illegal activities are proven.^b The CFM boards are recognised by the local judiciary. However, some CFM boards are more active and respected than others; inevitably in some *leshozes* the CFM board members are more committed and fair-minded than others.

- a. A range is a territorial unit within a *leshoz*; there are generally three to five forest ranges per *leshoz*.
- b. Despite early fears on the part of some *leshoz* staff that CFM leases could lead to illegal forest use, little has occurred in practice. There is only one recorded incidence of a tenant having been found guilty of removing a walnut burl from his plot. In this case he was fined *Som* 150,000 (approx. US \$ 3,330) and lost his lease. In another case of burl theft, a tenant was found innocent (though after considerable delay by the CFM board), the burl having been stolen by outsiders. These two cases are the only ones so far in which the parties could not accept the CFM board ruling, and took it to the local court—which in both cases upheld the decision of the CFM board.

coined to describe the way in which the *leshoz* management adapted the concept of CFM to their needs—that of fulfilling the annual *leshoz* plan (of afforestation and other targets). The need to fulfil the plan remains a preoccupation of *leshoz* staff, but as many have themselves taken CFM leases their understanding has increased, and there has been considerable interaction with tenants and project personnel. The following observation sums up this attitudinal change quite nicely:

"CFM began in Uzgen leshoz in 1998. At this time we feared the use of this new method, we had no legislation and rules on it. We gave 72 ha of walnut forest plots to 9 families for CFM use. There was a lot of misunderstanding and false words about CFM among the people, and we were also worried about the results that we would obtain in the future. We didn't know what benefits and what losses might occur. When we signed contracts with the tenants we made some mistakes, but admitted and corrected our mistakes in the following years by changing some of the terms in the contracts. The tenants also agreed to sign contracts with the aim of getting forest plots, and agreed to fulfil the leshoz's plans according to our instructions, although it was difficult for them to implement some items of the contracts. Then we and tenants understood about these difficulties, and by the help of the CFM Board we corrected our mistakes." Raimjan Kadyrkulov - Current director (and former Chief Forester) of Uzgen *leshoz*

As this statement indicates, there was a tendency in very early contracts for tenants to agree to unrealistic conditions set by the *leshoz*, and to sign documents that they could not honour in practice. What is also interesting to note from the statement is that a senior *leshoz* official is openly admitting that there were mistakes and misunderstandings. This is a long way from Soviet-style management behaviour in which mistakes would be covered up, and certainly not voiced in a public meeting in such a humble but constructive manner.

The willingness of tenants to agree to near-impossible demands may be explained in part by their eagerness to obtain a forest plot on any terms, in part because they saw paper documents as having little value, and probably also because they trusted *leshoz* staff and assumed difficulties could be solved in a friendly manner. Today tenants are much more aware of the value and significance of written documents, and the conditions set out in them. The benefits enjoyed by CFM tenants are varied, but that of status is one that should not be underestimated. Many tenants talk about their CFM lease almost as if it is a job.

Social equity and improved livelihoods

It has already been noted that the project has had limited success in facilitating collaboration between tenants; thus social equity was not promoted through the group management of forests. Another aspect of social equity is gender relations. There remains a general perception in Kyrgyzstan (usually expressed by men) that “there is no gender problem”—whereas to outside eyes there is an issue. A woman who has proved herself to be an extremely dynamic entrepreneur commented as follows,

“I think that it has long been considered amongst our people that going to the forest to get wood, planting trees or protecting the forest, is men’s work. I don’t think that in this case there is any infringement of anybody’s rights because our Kyrgyz women participate actively. The only thing is that they don’t sign any documentations or agreements in the name of their families. I don’t think that’s a big problem... On the other hand, if we look at it in our project of processing whole-food forest products, I can give some examples. We have 16 enterprises processing different jams in the villages and only two men and 14 women are directors of those 16 enterprises, so in total about 100 women and 5 to 10 men are employed; this is also because of the specific nature of the work. I think that the problem of gender equality was daunting 10 years ago when women were temporally pushed aside from society life. I think nowadays it is not a daunting problem because women work in all spheres of life.”

Gulmira Ismailova - Head of Dary Lesa enterprise

Our own field observations indicate that CFM has provided a significant number of women and men (within the 1,000 CFM tenant families) with opportunities that they would not otherwise have had. This has thus enhanced their self-esteem and assets (both physical and economic). Nevertheless, most of these opportunities are in rather gender-stereotypical activities. A few women have proved that they can do ‘men’s work’, and are held up as role models. This, however, does not amount to a widespread change in gendered relations—although the project has at least challenged men and women to think more openly about their interactions, and promoted mutual respect.

Assessments of the general dependence of households on forest resources in the walnut-fruit forest area conclude that better rights of access and opportunities for poor households to benefit from these resources would alleviate poverty (Fisher *et al.*, 2004; Schmidt, 2007). In recent years—and as poverty in Kyrgyzstan, and national awareness about it, has grown—the project has tried increasingly to reach poorer households through CFM. In the view of those involved in the project, this has met with success; the observations in Box 3 are typical in this regard.

BOX 3. CFM AND LIVELIHOODS

"I know one person who lives far from me in our village. His life was very hard, he was poor and I pitied him. He has 4 daughters and one son. I told him to gather crops from my plot – I said, 'You have children, and they could help you'. Now he lives well. When we meet he thanks me every time. Nowadays he has one cow with calf, 4-5 sheep, and hens.... We pushed him to be a member of CFM, explaining that CFM could be useful for him and his family. He got a 5 ha walnut forest plot." Jeenbaev Jumabek - CFM tenant, Uzgen leshoz

"CFM opened a chance for the people to participate in the forest management. People provide their labour... [in forestry activities] and in return they obtain forest products such as walnut, apples, pistachio, and sell them freely on the market, and then buy cows, sheep, horses, and they improve their lives. People's living standard is now better than before. CFM is very useful for the people, they have employment, and poverty is decreased." Arapov Kubanych - CFM tenant Toskoolata leshoz

"About 90% of the people from our village are connected with the forest, and they rely on the forest to generate income. Many people have improved their well-being thanks to CFM. I'd like to tell you one story.... Sabyrbek was a CFM tenant, and a chairperson of the aksakal (elders) commission of our village. Last year he died. His forest plot is dog rose. Frankly speaking, his wife is a talker and never worked in this plot. This year she constructed a new house, and recently her daughter was married... It was snowing, and that lady came to our workshop. Her arms were scratched, her galoshes were worn through, and she asked to borrow money for entertaining her guests. She gathered 10 or 12 sacks of rosehips from her husband's CFM plot. I realised that she had not waited for any help from anywhere, but had used the forest plot to earn money. These 12 sacks of rosehips weigh about 500 kg. Last year people sold rosehips at US\$ 2 per kg. At the beginning of the project it was difficult to explain CFM to people [but now they understand]..." Kudayberdiev Omurbek, Forest ranger Kara-Shoro Forest range, Uzgen leshoz

These quotes make clear that CFM was an opportunity to be seized by those who could, and that these people have done well. They may have started with few assets, but through working hard, they have managed to improve their well-being.

A state benefit system exists for those falling below the official poverty line (or the Guaranteed Minimum Consumption Level, GMCL), but the system for assessing eligibility is based more on trying to stop abuses rather than reaching out to those in need (Ibraliyeva and Mikkonen-Jeanneret, 2009).

In assessing current trends in poverty in Kyrgyzstan, Ibraliyeva and Mikkonen-Jeanneret (ibid) note that key factors determining vulnerability are seasonality, migration, and household debt. Seasonality refers to the harsh Kyrgyz winters, which represent a time of high vulnerability; heating can be very expensive. One CFM tenant explained how one can differentiate a pauper (extremely poor person, *Jakyr* in Kyrgyz) from a poor person, "A pauper is someone who only has one set of clothes to wear in both winter and summer." Keeping warm in winter is certainly a challenge with only one set of clothes, and means that the availability of fuelwood in the walnut-fruit forest areas is a major advantage in comparison with town dwellers. While legally obtained firewood costs money (the *leshoz* charges for it), a CFM plot from which fuelwood can be harvested free is a valuable asset if one can do the harvesting. It is less of an asset if it is far from home (involving heavy transport costs), or if the remaining household members are in poor health. Another as-

pect of seasonality is the opportunity to sell harvested nuts for a good price late in the season. Households can only manage this if they do not need the money immediately and can keep the nuts until prices rise.

Migration, a very common solution to economic problems, effectively rules a household out of getting a CFM plot as the household members have to be present on a regular basis to tend the plot or conduct other forestry activities, and often all the able-bodied members of poor households migrate.

Our broad assessment, based on observations and local interactions, is that whilst CFM has improved the well-being of most tenants, some of whom were no doubt considerably poorer beforehand, relatively few CFM tenants would be described as being amongst the poorest (*Jakyr*).

Ensuring that CFM lasts: Institutionalising the approach

With KIRFOR ending, it is pertinent to ask whether CFM will remain in Kyrgyzstan. We are convinced that it will—not only because of its broad institutionalisation within a clear legal framework (Box 4), but also because it has become widely accepted at the local level. The project choice of partner—the government forest agency—has meant that all policy, legislative and institutional changes have been fully owned from the start by the responsible body (even if that body itself changed in name and institutional setting an impressive number of times over the project’s life). At the same time, another significant partner—the decentralised local government bodies or *ail okmot*—has emerged over the course of the project’s life, and it has been important to try to include them as far as possible in local level activities. Unlike many projects in other countries, it was not possible to adopt a true multi-partner approach, working with NGOs as well as government agencies. No suitable NGO partners could be identified when the project began. Over time, the establishment of fledgling organisations was encouraged, and considerable capacity building was provided. Whilst the individuals concerned number less than 10, they represent a source of knowledge and expertise on CFM for the future.

Within the forest agency, possibly one of the greatest remaining hurdles for full CFM institutionalisation lies at the *leshoz* level among staff members who have not been exposed to CFM, and are not familiar with its provisions or convinced by the concept. Tenants often complain that the turn-over of *leshoz* staff is very rapid, and that it always takes time for new staff to understand the local context.

The CFM boards are recognised as being very important for ensuring a basic degree of equity in the CFM system, even if they cannot ensure total fairness in lease conditions. To date the project has supported their functioning by paying the travel expenses of members located some distance away, and particular concern has been expressed about how the travel of *oblast* (regional) representatives to meetings will be covered in future. The fact that this has provoked much discussion probably indicates that a solution will be found.

BOX 4. ENSHRINING CFM IN LAW: A LEARNING APPROACH

The first CFM leases were conducted on a pilot basis, in order to gain experience in developing a sound legal framework. At the same time, KIRFOR supported Kyrgyzstan's overall forest policy reform in a process designed to be as participatory as possible. The development of the CFM approach formed one part of this process, and was guided by a CFM National Working Group comprising a group of professionals with a range of relevant skills and experiences. Members of this group have consistently commented that their exposure to alternative forest management systems through study tours (to Pakistan and Albania as well as within the country) helped to develop ideas for CFM. Perhaps what was particularly true was that these visits confirmed their view of the differences between Kyrgyzstan and other countries, and their pride in developing a specific Kyrgyz approach.

The first clear achievement of the CFM National Working Group was to produce the CFM Rules and Regulations, approved by the Kyrgyz government as Decree 377 in 2001. These rules restrict the amount of land that can be leased by one household, and outline (rather weak) eligibility criteria (the most important aspect being local residence).

However Decree 377 was somewhat undermined by an earlier decree (226) which allowed long-term leases without restrictions on the amount of land or eligibility and was often given preference by the *leshozes*. It became clear that this decree was being used in some cases to lease large plots of forest land to wealthy non-residents. An important legal step in 2007 was to replace Decree 226 with Decree 482 on "other forest plots leasing and use". This implies more uniformity in lease modalities, according to CFM principles. Decree 377 has also been revised to make it more practical and thus essentially user friendly.

It is significant that the legislation governing CFM has been developed and modified in the light of field experience. Whilst it is still not ideal, the precedent has been set for learning from experience, and updating legislation accordingly. As a final significant step, in 2007, the Kyrgyz government gave formal approval for the CFM concept and development strategy.

When CFM was first introduced, the *ail okmots*² (which generally cover several villages and a territorial area other than that of the *leshozes*) had only been in existence for a few years. The *leshozes*, as well-established bodies having legal jurisdiction over forest lands, were far more powerful. These power dynamics have altered as the *ail okmots* have developed, received a regular budgetary allocation, and taken on an increasingly important local role in administration and land use management under Kyrgyzstan's decentralisation policy. In contrast to the *leshozes* that report to the central government, the *ail okmots* are downwardly accountable since their head is elected by the local community.

It has become clear over time that supporting a greater role of the *ail okmot* in CFM could be a means to promote equity, transparency and accountability. This is not only through their participation in the CFM boards, but also in planning and lease allocation. For example, the *ail okmot* maintains social records which include data on which households fall below the official poverty line. Even if such records are not entirely accurate, they represent a base from which to identify marginalised households, and to ensure that any lease agreement that they might take out is tailored to their circumstances. To

² While the plural of *ail okmot* is *okmoty*, we have anglicised it in our text to *okmots*.

date these records have been used to identify households which should qualify for free or subsidised fuelwood, but the idea of allocating plots on the basis of need has still to take hold. Given that the *leshozes* still see CFM as a means to achieve forestry work, they are often prejudiced against giving leases to poor households—perceiving them as lacking the resources to fulfil such tasks.

To explore the greater role of *ail okmots* in CFM, a new tripartite arrangement was introduced towards the end of the project, and is now being tested for CFM leases.³ This entails a contract between the *ail okmot* and the *leshoz*, so that the two bodies are involved at the same level in CFM, and interact jointly with the tenant. Although introduced in the frame of the project only at a trial stage in three *leshozes*, this further demonstrates the openness of the Kyrgyz authorities to testing new approaches. It remains to be seen how *leshoz-ail okmot* collaboration over CFM will evolve in future.

Lessons for other countries in transition

“Particular issues likely to be shared [with other countries in transition] are the difficulty of promoting participation; a possible resistance to group work; a context in which forests are becoming more important to rural livelihoods than they were; a potentially growing disparity between rich and poor; and a possible need for new forest management techniques. Although in many countries, forest departments have a reputation for hierarchical decision-making, the degree to which this is found in countries in transition is exceptionally strong and difficult to overcome.” (Carter et al., 2003)

These comments were made in 2003 and remain valid today. Lessons for other countries in transition who want to adopt a similar approach are as follows:

- Change processes, especially participatory ones, take many years. We have noted that attitudes amongst foresters needed to change for CFM to be successful. The *leshoz* management needed to develop a rapport with tenants as collaborators, rather than workers who should be ordered about. At the same time, tenants have needed time to understand the new system, to gain confidence in negotiating their rights in written contracts, and to seek to uphold those rights if necessary through the CFM board.
- Political fluctuations can be challenging. The frequent political changes in Kyrgyzstan have played a significant part in the time needed to develop CFM. Delays in policy and legislative decisions have been common due to staff transfers or uncertainty about political tendencies. This is perhaps particularly true because the project’s main partner was a government agency. Projects that have multiple partners, including non-government ones, can often function more effectively in times of political turmoil.
- Reducing poverty requires an explicit focus. While CFM has certainly improved livelihoods, it was not specifically targeted at the poorest families. Projects need to be specifically designed to reach the extreme poor if this is their intended goal.

³ The new arrangement required a memorandum of understanding between the State Agency for Environment Protection and Forestry (SAEPF) and the National Agency on the Affairs of Local Self Governance (NALSG), signed in 2006.

- Implementing participatory approaches like CFM requires adaptation to local conditions. The original concept of collaborative forest management as it was introduced in Kyrgyzstan was an external idea, based on community forest management practices that have worked well elsewhere. In its practical implementation in the country, it was thoroughly re-worked to fit the local situation. In that sense the project was true to the principle of participation, in seeking ways to operate that were acceptable to all key stakeholders.

In conclusion, it is unlikely that CFM would have taken root in Kyrgyzstan had it not been for the external support provided; thus CFM is in itself a project legacy. Furthermore, it is likely to be a legacy that lasts, due in large part to the process of fundamental questioning and mutual learning adopted. This has led to a clear policy and legal framework based on field experience, where the inter-exchange between field practice and policy development was crucial. The other aspect to highlight is the creation of expectations of equitable (if not bottom-up) decision-making, combined with the establishment of institutional mechanisms to support this. This chimes strongly with the current political mood of the country, with the demand for a more equitable distribution of resources overall.

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