

CASE STUDY

Kyrgyzstan



Engaging local communities in forest ecosystem co-management

Forests are crucial for safeguarding land, environment and livelihoods of rural households. However, in Kyrgyzstan, issues such as illegal logging or ineffective forest resource management threaten the forests and the livelihoods of people that depend on them. This case study describes a model of sustainable forest ecosystem co-management that fully engages local communities. The model is being tested in two pilot areas and the learnings serve as inputs in proposed forestry strategies of the Kyrgyz Republic.

PRINCIPAL ORGANISATIONS INVOLVED

Rural Development Fund (RDF);
Batken Forestry Enterprise;
Chon Kemin National Park.

Location

Kyrgyzstan

Timeline of the case

2010 to present

TARGET AUDIENCE

Forest users organisations, local communities, NGOs, and governmental bodies involved in forest conservation and management

KEYWORDS

Forestry, conservation, illegal logging, traditional knowledge, leskhoz



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Good practices

towards making land governance more people-centred

This case study is part of the ILC's Database of Good Practices, an initiative that documents and systematises ILC members and partners' experience in promoting **people-centred land governance**, as defined in the Antigua Declaration of the ILC Assembly of Members. Further information at www.landcoalition.org/news/antigua-declaration-ilc-members

This case study supports people-centred land governance as it contributes to:

- Commitment 6 Enable the role of local land users in territorial and ecosystem management.
- Commitment 7 Ensure that processes of decision-making over land are inclusive.
- Commitment 8 Ensure transparency and accountability.

Case description

Background issues

Kyrgyz forests are rich in biological diversity, they are key in the conservation of the country's water resources, and they are central in local communities' livelihoods and cultural values. Most forests are state-owned under the State Forest Fund (SFF), which is managed by the government. The State Forest Fund covers 3.5 million ha, or about 17.7 percent of total land area. This area comprises 1.1 million ha of natural and cultivated forest and 1.1 million ha of pastureland, while the remaining 1.3 million ha are hayfields, arable lands, lands under garden and orchards, lands under settlements, and other type of lands. The SFF covers forests that are of state importance, which are managed by state forestry authorities, as well as municipal forests, forests of protected areas, and assigned forests. There are an additional 0.3 million ha of forests in Kyrgyzstan that remain outside the State Forest Fund; they are either managed by local self-governing bodies or rural communities (according to *Government Resolution #407, July 2011*).

The institutional framework for forest management is a vertical hierarchy within the Division of Forest Ecosystems, which is itself within the State Agency for Environmental Protection and Forestry (SAEPF), to oversee territorial divisions and ground level forestry enterprises, or *leskhoz*. The *leskhoz* forestry farms were set up in the Soviet era and include both forested land as well as land set aside for afforestation—establishing a forest or stand of trees where none existed previously, and often used for pasturage for animal herds. The SAEPF lacks sufficient resources to carry out hands-on oversight of its subordinate entities or to develop policy, leaving substantial discretion to the *leskhoz*. Forests are managed only by forestry staff through working plans that are imposed from higher levels. For example, the scope and time for afforestation are set by the central forestry agency in forest inventories, but *leskhoz*es come up with implementation plans to meet these targets.

This conventional management of the forest ecosystem is exclusive, opaque and ineffective and has led to a growing number of conflicts between local governments, communities and forestry management over access to resources and sharing benefits of use; as well as significant environmental degradation. Indeed, leasing small forest plots to individual households divides the communities and fuels conflict between those who are allotted forest plots and those who are not. In forests with high population densities and high-value resources, conflicts between current and potential users are increasing as virtually all forest plots have already been allocated. Moreover, the conventional forest management favours households who have the manpower and resources to engage in forestry activities and discriminates poor households and women. Finally, the conventional practice of leasing small forest plots to individual households has led to biodiversity loss and fragmentation of forest ecosystems because the leaseholders fence their leased plots and are more likely to remove the forest cover.

To address these issues, the Government of Kyrgyzstan is slowly advancing reforms: it started decentralising forest management, and is engaging users to join community groups in managing resources. Further, a legal foundation has been set up allowing co-management of forests in the country, but so far it has not been reflected on the ground, due to a dearth of specific arrangements.

Solution

In response to these openings from the government, the non-governmental organisation RDF (Rural Development Fund) has developed and initiated a model of forest ecosystem co-management that fully engages local communities in understanding their rights and responsibilities related to the management and use of natural forest resources. The model promotes a holistic concept of management and conservation, thereby jointly protecting bio-cultural diversity and sustainable use of the resources by vulnerable populations, based on traditional ecological knowledge of local communities and leading local and international practices.

This model is unique for Kyrgyzstan because it is the first management model that does not separate conservation of the forest ecosystem from the management and use of forest resources, but rather gives equal weight to both. Further, the management model does not engage the individual forest users (as in the conventional system) but the whole community. Therefore it is called 'forest ecosystem co-management'.

The model is tested in Batken and Chon Kemin regions, two geographically and socially diverse areas in southern and northern Kyrgyzstan respectively, which shows the potential for replicating the model elsewhere in the country, with possible use by practitioners outside the country as well.

Activities

The activities implemented by RDF in each of the pilot sites followed three steps:

Set-up of local institutions

In the frame of the project, RDF facilitated in establishing new informal local institutions – *meikyn jamaats* (Landscape Communities).

According to Kyrgyz law, the *jamaats* are comprised of all members of the community, including local authorities and foresters. The *meikyn jamaats*, which were established, carry out their activity according to the Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic and the following laws of the Kyrgyz Republic: *On local government*, *On Jamaats and their associations*, and associated bylaws. Even though there is no legislation for the *jamaats* to manage forests, one purpose of the pilot is to provide inputs to develop adequate legislation that would provide a larger basis for communities to be engaged in the management of forest resources.

The *meikyn jamaats* that were established in the pilot case comprise active resource users as well as potential users of particular plots of forestland. In the northern pilot area (500 ha in the Orto-Kayindy forest in the Chon-Kemin national park buffer zone) was allocated to the Karool-Dobo *meikyn jamaat*. The Karool-Dobo *meikyn jamaaty* is formed by all villagers of Karool-Dobo village, who traditionally have used resources in the Orto-Kayindy forest plot. In the southern pilot area (2300 ha of forestland managed earlier by the Batken *leskhoz*) was assigned to be managed by the Alasan community. The Alasan *meikyn jamaaty* is formed by villagers from three villages of the Samarkandek municipality, which traditionally have used that particular forest area.

The General Assembly of the *meikyn jamaat* serves as its primary decision-making body. Convoked usually once a year, additional sessions can be organized as required. The General Assembly approves the Charter of the *meikyn jamaat*, determines the basic directions of *jamaat* activities and approves action plans and budget. Between the General Assembly Meetings, the *meikyn jamaat* is managed by the Community Ecosystem Conservation and Management Boards (CECMB), which is elected by the community, and includes representatives from the local self-government unit, *leskhoz*, formal and informal village leaders, and representatives from different user groups. In CECMB meetings, forest user groups such as collectors of non-forest timber products are mostly represented by women, whereas youth are active on wildlife protection and tourism activities.

The CECMB in essence represents the central groups of the community in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of Community Ecosystem Conservation and Management Plans; it coordinates the *jamaat* activities; it implements the *meikyn jamaat* action plans; and it serves as conflict resolution organism.

The Community Ecosystem Conservation and Management Plans are developed for periods of five years in a participatory manner. The Plan allocates the user rights to forest resources. It describes the community forest areas (location, borders, animals and plants including tree species, endangered species etc.); the types of forest resource use (collection of forest berries, mushroom, medicinal herbs, fire wood; the use of pasture lands.); a baseline of the forest state and the forest resource use; and the forest users. The Plan also includes a budget, with an indication of how much forest resources can be collected and how they should be distributed amongst users.

The Community Ecosystem Conservation and Management Plan also describes the activities that need to be carried out by the community members in order to conserve the forest ecosystem:

- » patrolling the community forest area in order to suspend illegal logging and poaching in the community forest;
- » increasing environmental awareness of villagers, including school children, by distributing information on the importance of the forest, endangered species and necessity of their protection;

It is the first management model that does not separate conservation of the forest ecosystem from the management and use of forest resources.

- » conducting participatory monitoring of forest and biodiversity of the community forest;
- » preventing of and fighting against forest fires;
- » replanting of local forest tree species and fast-growing trees and bushes;
- » establishing and maintaining community forest nurseries;
- » regulating the number of livestock grazing in community forest areas and nearby pastures;
- » building the capacities of the *meikyn jamaats*;
- » developing and maintaining facilities for eco-tourism in the region.

Participatory planning for use, management and conservation of existing forest resources

Within the scope of this model, RDF developed a methodology that jointly provided training to community members and forestry unit-representatives, following which a participatory inventory of forest resources was conducted to develop a baseline of basic available forest resources in the respective community forestry plots. Inventory results were then used by the pilot areas to develop an overall framework for the Community Ecosystem Conservation and Management Plan for a period of 5 years. The Plan was then included in the *leskhoz*/national park action plans and later on approved by the *leskhoz*/national park administration and local self-government.

Promoting better conservation practices

In consultation with the *meikyn jamaats*, RDF Kyrgyzstan also encourages afforestation of endemic species to strengthen the resilience of the ecosystem. The holistic management and conservation approaches practiced by the community, based on local traditional knowledge and best practices, went hand-in-hand with the strong commitment of local communities to protect the forest.

Importance of the case for people-centred land governances

The co-management undertaken by the local community and local government unit for managing and conserving forest resources demonstrated the benefits of allocating use rights to local communities, and including communities in the management of forest resources that they use. The application of this model resulted in the sustained use of forest resources to support the immediate livelihood needs of households that depend on the forest.

Changes

Baseline

The Community Ecosystem Conservation and Management Plans include baseline information that was agreed upon by the community at the start of the project. According to this participatory baseline information for the two pilot plots, the forests were not well managed, local communities were not included in this management, the forest resources were being used unsustainably, and bio-diversity was decreasing.

In the pilot area in the Chon-Kemin National Park (covering 500 ha), 530 trees or 220 m³ of timber were illegally cut in 2012 - the year before the community management took off - with an estimated cost to the community of around 393,093 Kyrgyz *soms* or approximately USD 8,000. In the entire Chon-Kemin National Park, 2076 cases of illegal logging were registered in 2012.

Achievements

The community co-management of the forest plots, which started in 2012 and continues today, is showing positive effects in a number of areas.

Decrease of illegal logging

Illegal logging in the Chon-Kemin community managed forest plots has been reduced to almost zero (only 14 trees or 0.9 m³, in 2013, compared to 530 trees or 220m³ in 2012), thanks to the community management of the forest plot. In the entire Chon-Kemin National Park the number of illegal logging cases decreased from 2076 cases in 2012 to 648 in 2013.

Environmental awareness of children and adults in the communities has increased

The various meetings and trainings organised within the *jamaats* increased environmental awareness. In this regard, the local users' traditional conservation knowledge and best practices were used in order to promote sustainable management and use of the forest resources.

Joint cooperation between communities and local governments

Conflicts were reduced considerably thanks to the joint involvement of communities and local government units in the creation of the Community Ecosystem Conservation and Management Plans and in the monitoring of their implementation. The community ecosystem conservation and management model of RDF was acknowledged as a good practice by governmental authorities, donor communities and a wide range of stakeholders in Kyrgyzstan. It is expected that the experiences of the pilot plots will be used in the formulation of a new Forestry Management Strategy by the Government and will be replicated elsewhere in the country, with support from the World Bank.

Lessons learned

Lessons for civil society

Agreements need to be reached within the community.

All community members need to be engaged and gradually involved in the co-management of forest ecosystems. Responsibilities and roles of different community members need to be clearly allocated, and awareness needs to be raised on the principles and benefits of sustainable use of natural resources, with related capacity building.

Agreements need institutional back-up

It is important that the communities are supported in their co-management by the state, through state agreements, and by the local government, through agreements with the *leskhoz*es (local government units) and institutional back-up. The *leskhoz*es need to espouse the idea that the community co-managed forest resource use, management and conservation has potential benefits. At the same time, the national government needs to be lobbied to have an enabling legal framework and related aid for guaranteeing the allocation of forest use rights and co-management by local communities.

Lessons for policy makers

Policy makers that realise the need for sustainable use of forest resources and that grasp the potential of co-managed forest resources can help a great deal by developing a legal framework for co-management and by popularising the idea of co-management amongst local government units and local communities. National support is often needed in light of (a) resistance from local forestry units (*leskhoz*s) to changes in policy and management frameworks and to further decentralisation of forest management to the community levels, (b) the frequent changes of forestry unit heads, and (c) the lack of adequate local capacities, information and institutions to effectively manage natural resources.

Challenges

Initially, there was resistance from local forestry units (*leskhoz*s) to changes in the forest policy and management framework and decentralisation, but over time, as it was observed that co-management led to decreased illegal logging by more than 98%, *leskhoz*s supported this initiative. However, the frequent turnover of *leskhoz* heads due to the political instability in the country has led to difficulties in the implementation of the model in the pilot areas. Usually, newly appointed *leskhoz* heads try to limit their engagement in different and new approaches. Moreover, given this situation of instability, the *leskhoz* have short term visions for *leskhoz* development, which creates a lot of uncertainty in the joint activities.

Further, the implementation of the co-management of the forest in the two pilot sites was initially met with resistance from the communities themselves who were reluctant to get involved in the new approach. However, over time, by closely involving the communities in inventories and forest management plans and monitoring, trust was built up in the pilot communities. In general, the community organisation established in Chon-Kemin area is functioning more successfully, while the Batken pilot had to be stopped due to shortage of funding.

In legal terms, at the national level there is a broad framework for the co-management of forest resources and ecosystem conservation. However, there are no regulations or mechanisms for the implementation of this framework on the ground.

Scaling up

RDF is currently working, in a close partnership with state counterparts and local communities, to fine-tune and document the forest ecosystem co-management model.

Moreover, as representative of the NGO sector in the republic's Committee for Reform of the Forestry Sector, RDF can directly feed the experiences derived from the pilot sites in the further development of innovative legal frameworks for the co-management of forests.

Supporting material

References and further reading

Undeland, Asyl (2012). The Development Potential of Forests in the Kyrgyz Republic. Washington: PROFOR. Also available at http://www.profor.info/sites/profor.info/files/docs/ProFor%20Kyrgyz%20report_web.pdf



Community forest patrolling group in Chon-Kemin, Source: RDF

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The opinions expressed in this brief are those of the authors and do not necessarily constitute an official position of the International Land Coalition, nor of its members or donors.

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