

# Community organizing—A key step towards sustainable livelihoods and co-management of natural resources in Mongolia

Sabine Schmidt, Gansukh Gongor,  
Kamal Kar and Keith Swenson



**Figure 1. Herders of Bulagtain.** Discussing pasture and water resource use in Bulgan Sum, South Gobi (courtesy Sabine Schmidt)

From unmemorable times, Mongolia's nomadic herders have been the managers of the natural resources at the basis of their livelihoods—the very resources upon which the country's economy still depends today. Their traditional practices were based on common property of pasture and mobility as a key management strategy. Those were altered over many decades of centrally-planned economy and during more recent socio-economic changes, resulting in unsustainable practices (increased numbers of herding households, changes in herd structure, lack of proper grassland management, indiscriminate cutting of shrubs and trees for fuel wood). These practices, as well as changes in climate, appear to be at the roots of the current processes of land degradation and desertification in the country. During recent winters there have been massive losses of livestock, which deprived many rural households of their livelihood and increased poverty among herders. Biodiversity *per se* is also affected by the illegal and unsustainable taking of wildlife and plants for (mainly cross-border) trade, which is threatening several rare species.

At the Rio Summit, the government of Mongolia committed itself to an ambitious Protected Area Program that should eventually place 30% of Mongolia's territory under formal protection.

Currently, approximately 15 % of the country's territory is formally protected. The limited government resources for conservation and the non-equilibrium grasslands ecosystem, which creates a spatially and seasonally highly variable resource base, made it an obvious choice for regional and local government agencies to seek the involvement of local communities in resource management, and to seek developing strong local institutions. Some donor-funded initiatives have assisted towards these objectives. These include the Gobi project<sup>1</sup>, with a focus on institutional and policy development on proven models of community-based natural resource management and the Altai Tavan Bogd Project<sup>2</sup>, with a focus on poverty alleviation and capacity building for tourism.

The Gobi Gurvan Saikhan National Park, named after the three mountain ranges "Three Beauties of the Gobi", is situated in the South Gobi Province bordering China. The Gobi project area is very large, including the park and important features such as the "Valley of Lakes" (a Ramsar Site) and the Ikh Bogd Mountain, which encompasses the most diverse



**Figure 2. Traditional Kazakh Felt Ger** (courtesy Keith Swenson)



ecological zones in the Gobi, from desert to high alpine. The park is important for the conservation of its unique biodiversity, ecosystems and geomorphological phenomena, as well as for the protection of traditional resource management practices, cultural traditions and historic, prehistoric and paleontological sites. Many locations, particularly mountains, are sacred or associated with legends and described in ancient scripts. The earliest petroglyphs found in the park are believed to have been created by Indo-Iranian people during the Bronze Age. Globally significant paleontological findings include 30 new fossil species discovered in the area. Although the Gobi seems an inhospitable region, the park represents an old cultural landscape used by nomadic people as hunting and grazing grounds, as well as by sedentary populations, for thousands of years.

**Community organizations respond to the need for communal action for pastoralism in an arid ecosystem and severe climate. Winter preparation, risk management, resolution of pasture disputes and grassland management are essential communal tasks.**

The Altai Tavan Bogd National Park lies within the westernmost part of Mongolia, bordering China and Russia. It encompasses high, glaciated mountains, including Mt. Khuiten (4374 m)—Mongolia's highest peak, forested foothills and rolling steppes with numerous lakes and rivers. The area is inhabited mostly by ethnic Kazakh people, a minority in Mongolia, and is the ancient home of Turkic Peoples. Prehistoric and historic sites dating back some 6000 years, including petroglyphs, stone mounds and carved stone figures, are numerous in the park and its buffer zone. Rare wildlife includes the snow leopard, the Eurasian otter and the musk deer, as well as several endangered plant species. The local communities in the park and buffer zone herd livestock mainly for subsistence and have very limited income opportunities. Awareness of environmental and park regulations is low, and "poaching", illegal cutting of wood and overgrazing of park lands by domestic livestock are serious problems. Few tourist groups currently visit the park, but their number is slowly increasing.

## Community organizing

The main actors in local initiatives for the conservation and sustainable use of natural resources

are the herder communities and the citizens of the district centres. Herder organizations and local branches of national NGOs are emerging as innovators, co-managing grassland resources and protected areas together with the district governments, the Ministry for Nature and Environment, private enterprises and park authorities. This has been a crucial progress, as recent changes to land and livelihoods require much more than applying traditional knowledge to new situations. Today's rural communities need to increase their capacities to manage their natural resources in a sustainable way, but also need to diversify their sources of livelihood, add value to their products and assert their natural resource rights. As right holders, they can negotiate and agree with other stakeholders on rules and mechanisms for the

management of natural resources and protected areas.

The external technical cooperation agencies in the projects mentioned above have been facilitating the analysis of problems and opportunities by the local communities, their self-organizing, exchanges of experience among communities, the building of linkages between communities and private and public sector organizations and civil society as a whole, and the development of decision making by consensus among stakeholders in co-management settings. Since the first groups formed, several years ago, community organizations are becoming well-recognized local institutions in the Southern Gobi. In a recent experience-sharing workshop, leaders and members of community groups discussed what helped them developing into empowered community organizations. They found that successful groups had certain values and norms in common, such as: equality, transparency, information sharing, close cooperation with local government, involving and helping the poor, and planning for self-reliance without external support. They also confirmed in their words the significance of the strategic support offered by the external agencies: "The project made a big intellectual investment in our community, - a good investment in our mind". The workshop participants also identified some important livelihoods and environmental improvement consequent to communal action and strengthened community

institutions: "Pasture land is now used properly" "Illegal taking of falcons by foreign hunters has decreased", "Communities can influence the government", "Other organizations are interested to cooperate with us", "Education of community members has improved", "The living standard of families has improved".

Community groups in the Gobi refer to themselves as Nukhurlul, which may be translated as "support group". In forming Nukhurluls as their own institution, it appears that local people have combined the benefits of tradition and modern times. While young couples (in fact, mostly young women) typically lead the community initiatives, there is support in the background from elders who share their wisdom and knowledge rooted in community history and traditional resource management practices. Importantly, unlike with previous socialist collectives, the community organizations and their initiatives are all on a voluntary basis. Moreover, the Nukhurluls have taken community organizing into a new era by forming district-wide associations of local groups and exploring legal and organizational aspects of establishing an overall apex institution. This is genuine grassroots organizing and may play a very important role in rural development and sustainable natural resource management in Mongolia.

## Managing natural resources and co-managing protected areas

Local community institutions first formed in the Gobi region, but exchanges and experience sharing between the project regions have now facilitated the

adaptation of models from the Gobi to the Western Mongolian Kazakh culture. Kazakh herders previously hostile to park authorities have now a voice in the management of the national park and in the use of its natural resources. They have come together with park authorities, women's NGOs and local government to form buffer zone councils and begin an active dialogue to address the needs of people while protecting the environment.

***The community organizations are also emerging as key actors to diversify community livelihoods in the new market economy and as powerful institutions to access services, build linkages, participate as equal partners in co-management settings and contribute to the overall policy and rural development of the country.***

The sharing of experiences among communities has also led to the emergence of a women's NGO (Women Federation) as the primary actor in co-management settings. The NGO has taken participatory methods and people-centred approaches into other sectors such as health care and social welfare for the most vulnerable households. The resource centre of a particular prominent and active community group (Ireedui) in the Gobi, originally set up by local herder women, is developing into an innovative community learning institution. The Ireedui Nukhurlul was the first group to conclude a contract with the Park Administration and District government that transfers land and resource rights to the group for (initially) 15 years. The contracted land extends over all management zones of the park, including its core area. The herders have agreed on pasture management norms and are working on a more detailed management plan, with external support to make the process as participatory as possible. Many community groups, members and students have visited Ireedui, and the governor of the South Gobi province sent all district governors there to learn about community development and co-management.

As a matter of fact, different local models for collaborative management are emerging. Facilities such as visitor centres are co-managed. Local communities assign member families to patrol certain valleys, and "Volunteer Rangers" are authorized by the park. The vigilance of local communities who have a strong sense of stewardship over local resources helps to control poaching and illegal trade, for

example of falcons. Tourism decisions and related income are shared between park authorities and local communities. Importantly, self-organizing of

community groups without any external input is occurring in, and beyond, the project regions, and contracts for transferring natural resource rights to local communities are currently being discussed between governors and community organizations in several districts. Those concern medicinal plants, wildlife and community-based tourism. A working group including representatives of local governments, communities, research organizations and policy makers has also been established to develop



appropriate concepts for community-based natural resource management in the whole of Mongolia. The group is examining issues of transfer of resource rights and management responsibility to local community institutions, long-term custodianship, ecological and economic viability of resource uses, capacity building of involved organizations, and policies in support of all of the above.

In the Mongolian context, the significance, role and relevance of the emerging community organizations is manifold. Community organizations respond to the need for communal action for pastoralism in an arid ecosystem and severe climate. Winter preparation, risk management, resolution of pasture disputes and grassland management are essential communal tasks. But the organizations are also emerging as key actors to diversify community livelihoods in the new market economy. And they are revealing themselves as

powerful institutions for the management of natural resources, able to access services, build linkages, participate as equal partners in co-management settings and contribute to the overall policy and rural development of the country.

*Sabine Schmidt (schm2405@magicnet.mn) is Advisor with the project Nature Conservation and Buffer Zone Development: Integrated Prevention of Desertification in the Gobi Region. Gansukh Gongor (gtzgansukh@yahoo.com) is senior staff in the Gobi project. Kamal Kar is a consultant on participatory development. Keith Swenson (kswe983887@aol.com) is Project Manager for the Altai Tavan Bogd National Park Project: Poverty Alleviation and Park Management. Sabine, Gansukh and Keith are members of CEESP/CMWG. Sabine is also a member of CEESP/ WGSL.*

## Una nueva pedagogía del poder en Paute—Ecuador



Hernán Rodas

Quienes transitamos afanosos por la cotidianidad, tratando de acompañar los procesos de construcción de ciudadanía nos encontramos con un pesado ambiente de falta de credibilidad política, corrupción administrativa, creciente migración al exterior reduciendo la base de la política a pura emocionalidad. Encontramos que son pocos los que intentan construir el futuro gobernando la globalización. Son muchos los discursos y los enunciados sobre Desarrollo Humano Sustentable, democracia, poder local... palabras que se diluyen en una realidad de subdesarrollo, inhumano, insustentable.

El Cantón Paute despertó, sacudido por un desastre natural e hizo de la desgracia una oportunidad para

enfrentar la evidencia de las desigualdades sociales y económicas, la crisis ambiental, la debilidad de los sentidos compartidos. La magnitud del desastre que subí casi lo obligo a restituir capacidades y poderes a

los ciudadanos y al Poder Municipal—la única respuesta válida que había. La tarea masiva de la reconstrucción del valle fue puerta abierta para diseñar y diseñar estructuras sociales de participación, de

solidaridad, de organización. Las nacientes organizaciones asumieron el autodiagnóstico, la elaboración del Plan de Desarrollo Cantonal y el seguimiento y auditoría social sobre las actividades, pensando lo local en el marco de los desafíos de la humanidad.

***Se vivió la confrontación con los viejos liderazgos que le temen a la participación ciudadana, que imponen con el argumento de la autoridad y no con la autoridad de los argumentos contruidos en consenso...***



**El Movimiento Paute Construye.** El movimiento tiene 10 C como lemas: Construye Cambio, Cogestión, Confianza, Corresponsabilidad, Capacitación, Comunicación, Comunidad, Cooperación, Cordialidad, Creatividad. (Cortesía Hernán Rodas)

Introducir una nueva pedagogía del poder en el ritmo normal de nuestras sociedades rurales andinas exige espacios de participación en las que las personas tienen la experiencia humana de tener derechos y obligaciones, de redistribuir el poder, de modificar las relaciones sociales, más allá del discurso, comprobar desde la práctica la riqueza de la autogestión, la autonomía, el gesto solidario. Así nació el Movimiento "Paute Construye" con sus 10 C como lemas: Construye Cambio, Cogestión, Confianza, Corresponsabilidad, Capacitación, Comunicación. Comunidad, Cooperación, Cordialidad, Creatividad.

El movimiento elaboró el Primer Plan de Desarrollo, desde la periferia al centro, desde la palabra de los marginados, desde los constructores y no de los "damnificados" como eran llamados por los diferentes actores externos, que traían respuestas a preguntas que no las hacían los habitantes de esta región. Se vivió la confrontación con los viejos liderazgos que le temen a la participación ciudadana, que imponen con el argumento de la autoridad y no con la autoridad de los argumentos construidos en consenso.

La limpieza de escombros, la recuperación de los suelos, la construcción de las viviendas, de la infraestructura vial, sanitaria, de educación, las asambleas de autodiagnóstico y respuesta a los desafíos, los comités de gestión, administración, auditoría, el encuentro con Dios en la historia diaria. La activa participación de cientos de mujeres organizadas en la Red de Mujeres, la escuela de formación ciudadana, las microempresas nacidas para responder a los requerimientos de la reconstrucción y plan de desarrollo, el periódico "El Pauteño", la cooperativa de ahorro y crédito que nació con 120 socios y dos mil dólares y hoy ya tiene 18.000 socios y más de 8 millones de dólares de activos, Corpoarte productora y capacitadora en varias líneas de artesanía, los niños trabajadores, la Unión de Organizaciones para el proyecto de Uso Múltiple del Agua y Cuidado de los Recursos Naturales.

El Comité Ejecutivo del Plan de Desarrollo, presente en el Municipio, buscando un presupuesto participativo, el Comité de Seguridad Ciudadana, el Comité Anticorrupción son—entre otras—formas de construir un nuevo nivel de participación ciudadana, de estar presentes en la corriente más cálida desde donde buscamos la globalización de la esperanza, de la vida plena.

Hernán Rodas (ceccapau@etapa.com.ec) es Director del CECCA (Centro de Educación et Capacitación del