THE CONSEQUENCES OF POST-SOCIALIST TRANSITION AND DECENTRALIZATION
FOR RURAL LIVELIHOODS AND PASTURE LAND MANAGEMENT IN MONGOLIA

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Introduction and objectives

In 1990 Mongolia embarked on a far-reaching series of political and economic reforms following the demise of the former Soviet bloc of which it had been a part for some 70 years. In common with post-communist transitions elsewhere, these reforms aimed to bring about a separation of the political, executive, and judicial pillars of the state; and to increase the role of markets rather than the state in allocating resources within society. This reform agenda remains far from complete, however, and is far less tidy in practice than the notion of ‘transition’ implies (cf. Nelson et al. 1997). Contemporary Mongolia is characterized by a mosaic of formal and informal institutions, including the results of new experiments in policy making seen alongside the remnants of old arrangements and patterns of behavior.

Any attempt to understand the forms that decentralization has taken in Mongolia to date, and its consequences for natural resource management, must be seen in and distinguished from this broader context of post-socialist transition. A problem of attribution arises. Post-socialist transition and decentralization both involve the transfer of powers from state to non-state bodies, and efforts to increase the accountability of public institutions. Decentralization is here understood to refer specifically to formal transfers of power ‘to actors and institutions at lower levels within a political-administrative and territorial hierarchy’ (Agrawal and Ribot 1999: 475). Although they have so far been modest in scope, Government efforts to advance a democratic decentralization agenda in Mongolia may be regarded as a sub-set of the broad domain of transition reforms, which also include some of the institutional pre-requisites for decentralization of natural resource management to work in practice (e.g. a closer specification of property rights). The problem of attribution arises because of the difficulty of distinguishing the outcomes of these overlapping sets of policy reforms in terms of their consequences for local livelihoods and natural resource management practices.

This paper makes no claims to resolve this problem of attribution. It begins by describing what is meant by decentralization in statements of current Government policy, and offers a brief synopsis of the current status of decentralization in Mongolia, benchmarked against a number of other developing countries. This snapshot captures the intended and unintended consequences of past policies as actually implemented, whether or not those policies were promulgated in the name of decentralization. The paper then applies Agrawal and Ribot’s (1999) ‘actors, powers, and accountability’ framework to show how certain far-reaching policy reforms over the past decade, including important elements of democratic decentralization (Manor 1999), have contributed to significant changes in local livelihoods and pasture land management practices. Contrary to the intentions of some certain reforms in seeking to promote environmental justice and social

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1 The problem of attribution of environmental outcomes to changes in public policy is not unique to decentralization or post-socialist transition. A growing literature on the imputed environmental implications of ‘structural adjustment’ suffers from similar methodological flaws, as discussed elsewhere (Mearns 1991). Other analytical frameworks that offer insights into the linkages between public policies and livelihood and environmental outcomes include the environmental entitlements framework (Leach et al. 1999) and the sustainable livelihoods framework (DFID 2000).
inclusion, present trends suggest that these changes in resource management practices pose a serious threat to environmental sustainability, and reflect conditions of rising social and economic inequality.

This case study is based on field research by the author on pastoral livelihoods in areas representing diverse ecological and market-access conditions throughout rural Mongolia in several periods over the course of the 1990s (Mearns 1993a, 1993b, 1996, 1997; NSO and World Bank 2001); insights gained from the author’s ongoing management of the World Bank’s support for ‘pro-poor’ rural development in Mongolia; and published secondary sources.

Decentralization as policy

To what extent is decentralization currently claimed as a tenet of policy by the Government of Mongolia, both in general and in relation to natural resource governance and environmental justice in particular? Textual analysis of relevant official documents reveals that ‘decentralization’ is intended in several different ways. General statements of intent are offered in the Government’s overall Action Program, which mirrors the manifesto on which the present Government was elected with a landslide victory in June 2000 (GoM 2000a). This document sets out an ambitious agenda including the promotion of regional and rural development, in part to address the over-concentration of economic opportunity in the capital city and central, more market-accessible regions of the country; increasing accountability in the public sector; increasing the capacity of local governments to generate revenues over which they have discretionary control; and offering citizens ‘greater opportunity to directly monitor the performance of their elected Citizen’s [sic.] Representative Hural [assemblies] and the executive agencies nominated by the Hural’ (GoM 2000a: 53).

Other relevant declarations of Government policy include the Public Sector Management and Finance Law (PSMFL), which seeks to increase the accountability of public sector institutions at all levels, including civil service reform linked to the budgeting process and overhaul of the existing system of inter-governmental transfers. The PSMFL ‘continues the initial political [sic.] decentralization process. It puts more authority in the hands of local assemblies and clarifies the responsibilities of local government’ (GoM 2000c: 36). The Government’s ‘Good Governance for Human Security Program’ refers to ‘decentralizing and empowering local self-governance and local administration’ (GoM 2001a: 12), and aims to support ‘stakeholder consultation, voice, and participation’ in the broader policy process, including ‘monitoring …citizen satisfaction and recommendations with regard to services, rights, and government responsiveness to citizen demands’ (GoM 2001a: 14). The Government’s Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy echoes the broad theme of raising public accountability, notably through greater public voice in and scrutiny of the budget process (GoM 2001b).

Concerning claims for decentralization as policy with respect to the environment more specifically, most official sources (NCSDM 1999, GoM 2000b) refer principally to the need to enhance citizen voice and participation in decision making, monitoring and evaluation, usually mediated through civil society institutions. These are not binding policy documents, however, and few concrete, budgeted proposals are made to advance them. In the case of the NEAP, cursory

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2 The Participatory Living Standards Assessment 2000 (NSO and World Bank 2001), led by the author, drew on the experiences and perceptions of some 2,000 rural and urban community members throughout Mongolia, systematically elicited using participatory learning and action methods, in order to compile a profile of livelihood sources, strategies, and dynamics throughout the 1990s, differentiated according to well-being status, gender, age, and geographical (regional and rural/urban) location.
mention is made of the principle of subsidiarity: ‘decisions on environmental issues are to be taken at the lowest appropriate level’ (GoM 2001b: 16). The Interim PRSP, however, goes further than most other Government documents in outlining a strategy with respect to natural resource governance that involves support for herder groups to undertake collective action in grassland and pastoral risk management, and support for effective implementation of the land law. Pilot projects with donor financing are testing the practical feasibility of this approach, the successful elements of which are expected to be scaled-up under the proposed World Bank-supported Sustainable Livelihoods Project.

Decentralization in practice

Mongolia is a unitary state with a central government and three levels of sub-national government: aimags and the capital city (Ulaanbaatar) have provincial status; next down the hierarchy fall sums (rural districts) and duuregs (urban districts of the capital city); and lowest of all are bags (rural sub-districts) and khorooos (urban sub-districts). Total population is 2.4 million people, one third of whom live in Ulaanbaatar (NSO 2001). Of the remaining two-thirds of the population, aimags have an average population of around 75,000; sums around 5,000; and bags less than 1,000. There is an elected assembly or khural at each of the three tiers of sub-national government, with the exception of the bag in which the khural comprises all residents who have reached the age of majority. The bag is not formally a territorial or budget entity. Each sub-national level also has an executive administration headed by a governor who is appointed by the next highest level. Aimag governors, for example, are appointed by the Prime Minister.

Although Mongolia has made significant strides since 1990 towards creating a decentralized democracy, the system of inter-governmental transfers currently in place has not created politically or fiscally autonomous (self-governing) sub-national governments. Powerful governors at aimag and sum levels are the key actors in local space, but have little downward accountability to their local constituencies. The primary accountability of governors is upwards to the central state. While aimag and sum-level assemblies (khurals) are elected, their actual role as oversight bodies is very limited. Their functional jurisdiction is vaguely defined and they appear to be more a forum for airing views than decision-making bodies. This is unlike the State Great Khural (national parliament), which is empowered to initiate or amend legislation, and has a constitutionally defined space in which it must approve and legislate on certain decisions before the executive branch of government can act.

A highly imbalanced pattern of decentralization prevails in Mongolia, compared with a sample of 14 other developing countries (see Figure 1). Measured against a set of standardized criteria developed by the World Bank for this purpose, contemporary Mongolia can be characterized by substantial though incomplete political decentralization, but little administrative decentralization and virtually no fiscal decentralization (McLean 2001). Administrative decentralization follows a deconcentrated pattern in which governors and their staffs report upwards to the next highest level of government. There is little opportunity for elected assemblies to exert any influence over technical department staff and quality of service delivery at their respective level of government, and therefore little incentive for local populations to express their views to their elected representatives. Evidence from the Mongolia Participatory Living Standards Assessment 2000

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3 The Decentralization Assessment Module was developed by Hans Binswanger, Andrew Parker, Johan van Zyl, Suzanne Piriou-Sall, Keith McLean, Graham Kerr, and Melissa Williams as a product of the Decentralization, Fiscal Systems, and Rural Development research project. Analytical framing for this research was provided by Manor (1999).
(PLSA) reveals that community members are widely dissatisfied with the extent to which local governors take account of their interests (NSO and World Bank 2001).

Fiscal decentralization is very modest. Financial autonomy of sub-national governments is currently restricted under the budgetary process and the General Taxation Law (2000), which subjects all major taxes to state legislation, including payment for use of ‘state resources’ such as mineral deposits, land, timber, and water. Sub-national governments have the right to levy user fees for the use of certain natural resources (e.g. natural plants other than timber, mineral springs), but these revenue sources are totally insufficient for local budgetary needs which leads to extreme fiscal dependence on central government. Revenue and expenditure autonomy of sums and bags is negligible, and accounts for less than 1 per cent of all budget revenues and expenditures in Mongolia. Local khurals can levy taxes on local enterprises but in practice virtually all enterprises are registered in Ulaanbaatar and a few other urban centers. Inter-governmental transfers are also subject to political bargaining. Horizontal inequities between sub-national jurisdictions are striking, and reflect wide variations in their populations and tax bases.

![Figure 1 National Decentralization By Dimension In Mongolia And 14 Other Countries](source: McLean (2001))

‘De facto’ decentralization of pasture land management

Institutional arrangements governing pasture land management have undergone profound transformation over the past decade, in ways that can be said to amount to ‘de facto’ decentralization. This is in contrast to earlier periods in modern Mongolian history – most notably during collectivization over the 1950s-80s – in which apparently radical changes at the formal level took more syncretic, adaptive forms in practice (Mearns 1993b, Fernandez-Gimenez 1999). While important changes in pasture land management practice were introduced under
collectivization, including investments in water supply, winter shelters, hay and fodder production, and transportation for making nomadic moves; and species-specialization in livestock production at the herder camp level – some of which undermined to some extent customary forms of collective action in herding – these changes generally had the net effect of restricting seasonal nomadic moves within *bag* (then known as ‘brigade’) territories but not changing the basic seasonal rhythm of pasture land management practice. In many respects, pasture land management under collectivization was marked by the dual control of formal and informal regulatory institutions (Mearns 1993a, 1993b; Fernandez-Gimenez 1999). Nominal control of decisions concerning who would graze where and when was transferred from individual households to managers of pastoral collectives and state farms, but in practice the outcomes varied little from customary tenure patterns.

Over the 1990s, with the onset of economic transition, several important shifts in pasture land management practice were brought about. Their practical consequences for rural livelihoods and the environment are discussed below. This section considers in what ways they may be judged to constitute ‘de facto’ decentralization. One of the most striking features of change in rural Mongolia in the early 1990s was the re-emergence of the *khot ail* as the primary unit of social organization among herders in all but the most arid regions of Mongolia (Mearns 1993b, 1996). The *khot ail* is a group of herding households that cooperates in livestock and pasture management, notably to take advantage of labor economies of scale. It appeared in the early 1990s that strong *khot ails* might have the potential spontaneously to ‘federate’ upwards into informal grazing associations, and perform an important function in regulating access to seasonal pastures, mimicking the formal process of ‘time-partitioning’ of pasture use that prevailed under the collectives. This potential was generally not realized, however, as a result of other driving forces that limited the extent to which herding communities could operate as self-governing grazing associations.

Limited livelihood opportunities outside the livestock sector during the harsh economic conditions of the early to mid-1990s led to a doubling in the number of herding households, which increased as a share of total population from 17 per cent around 1990 to around 35 per cent by the mid-1990s. As rural communities swelled in size, they also became more heterogeneous. The gains from the privatization of state and collective assets were unequally distributed, and inequality in livestock holdings began to increase dramatically. Older established and new herding households had divergent interests and levels of skill and experience in livestock production, which both contributed to rising inequality and reduced the likelihood of successful collective action in pasture land management (Mearns 1996).

Newer herding households tended to be formerly non-herding state employees made redundant by economic liberalization, and were more likely to remain sedentary for much of the year in locations close to settlements where access to markets and social services was more assured. In many places they were often marginalized in the distribution of winter shelters, which rendered them more vulnerable to livestock mortality during harsh winter conditions, and more dependent on social connections with established herders with more secure claims over winter camp sites and associated pastures as a means of gaining access to pasture. The net effect of changes of this sort was a marked decline in pastoral mobility, and an over-concentration of grazing pressure around settlements and close to roads. As argued below, this decline in mobility has emerged as one of the principal threats to the sustainability of pastoral livestock production.

While these changes may not give the appearance of decentralization, a decentralization of sorts has taken place as the state has retreated from a direct role in regulating pasture land allocation and use. In the institutional vacuum that has prevailed, it is often unclear what sets of rules or
claims take precedence in determining who grazes where and when. Although a new land law was enacted in 1995 that appears to provide a permissive or enabling framework for sustainable pasture land management, local governors and other key actors received little guidance as to how to interpret and apply the law in practice, and as a result, widely varying approaches to adjudicating claims and resolving pasture land disputes have been adopted in different jurisdictions (Mearns 1997, Fernandez-Gimenez and Batbuyan 2000, Hanstad and Duncan 2001, Erdenebaatar and Batjargal 2001).

A further source of ambiguity concerns the definition of the term ‘common land’ in the land law and other legislation. While pasture land is constitutionally protected from privatization, the ability of herding communities to use the law to underwrite controlled-access commons is compromised by a deeply rooted ethic of open access among Mongolian herders. This prevents communities from being able or willing to use the full extent of the law to deny ‘outsiders’ or non-members of their communities from gaining access to local pasture. By the late 1990s, many observers in Mongolia had come to the conclusion that controlled-access pastoral commons in Mongolia would be unworkable in the absence of flexible implementation guidelines to allow self-governing herder groups the right to jointly possess pasture land for use during each season and to exclude non-members, subject to negotiated and reciprocal rights of access to other groups during declared times of drought or winter stress.

**Actors in decentralization of pasture land management**

At the central level, the key actors with respect to pasture land management are the Ministry of Nature and Environment (MNE) and the Ministry of Food and Agriculture (MFA). Significant tensions exist between these executive bodies. Briefly stated, the role of the MFA has been in decline throughout the 1990s while MNE has been in the ascendancy, at least as far as control over land management is concerned. MFA, and its counterpart for pastoral collectives the Supreme Council of Negdels, enjoyed considerable power throughout the collective era, and were jointly responsible for all policies and planning decisions regarding agricultural land use. Responsibility for land management was transferred to MNE in the early 1990s, and under the growing influence of western notions of environmental management a series of environmental laws was enacted, including the 1994 land law (effective in 1995) which was regarded as a tool for conservation-oriented rather than production-oriented land management. MFA’s role in land management subsequently disappeared, along with any budget for land affairs, but this loss of influence remains contested within the MFA and its constituent agencies. Some actors within and associated with MFA, for example, have attempted to draft a law specific to pasture land tenure, although their efforts have been poorly coordinated with other initiatives related to the further development of land law.

For present purposes, the principal actor with respect to pasture land management rests at *sum* (rural district) level, in the person of the *sum* governor. The aimag (provincial) administration is much less involved in pasture land management, except (in principle) in setting aside land for use as inter-*sum* grazing reserves during times of drought or *dzud* hazard. During the collective era, the *sum* governor was also the director of the eponymous collective (*negdel*); the territorial boundaries *sum* and the *negdel*, at least by the end of the 1980s, were coterminous. Known as the *sum darga* (‘boss’), s/he enjoyed considerable discretionary power within his/her jurisdiction.

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4 *Dzud* is the Mongolian term for a range of winter weather conditions that have the effect of making forage from natural pastures inaccessible to domestic grazing animals. There are many types of *dzud*, including ice or deep snow covering pastures, but also including the absence of snow from winter pastures without wells in which herders depend on snowfall for watering their animals.
while being upwardly accountable only to superiors at the aimag level. Following
decollectivization around 1991-92, and the privatization of the assets of the collective, many sum
dargas were retained as the managers of the companies and cooperatives that typically acquired
the lumpy assets (equipment, buildings, inventory) of the former collectives, and there was often
significant continuity in management style and content. Even the upwards accountability was
retained, as the now ostensibly private companies and cooperatives maintained their federal
structure at the national level through membership in the National Association of Mongolian
Agricultural Cooperators (the successor to the Supreme Council of Negdels). Land management
practice in many of these sums continued for a time much as it did during collective era, albeit
driven to generate profits through trading rather than to meet the production quotas of central
planning. Other sum dargas were quickly appointed as the new sum governors.

*Sum* governors currently have considerable discretion to interpret and enforce the land law as they
see fit. This leads to considerable local variation in resolving claims to winter camp sites, often
regarded as the key to obtaining secure access to winter pasture (which in turn is an important
determinant of success in pursuing a pastoral livelihood strategy). For example, in one *sum*, the
governor may declare that in privatizing the winter shelters created under the collective (negdel),
preference would be given to the claims of those herders who were most frequently allocated
those shelters during the collective era. In another, perhaps even adjoining *sum*, the governor may
declare that preference would be given to the claims of those who could claim some birth-right to
the site, perhaps by virtue of their own or their father’s residence there prior to the establishment
of the collective. Little or no guidance is offered or available to *sum* governors from the center in
resolving such competing claims, and in areas where winter shelters and camp sites are in high
demand and short supply (depending on local ecological and topographic conditions and rates of
in-migration following decollectivization) this can be a serious and continuing source of land

**Nature of powers devolved**

The key powers in question that are transferred from central to sub-national levels concern the
setting of rules to govern the allocation of camp sites and associated sets of pastures among local
herders, compliance with those rules, and the adjudication of disputes. The principal mechanism
for the transfer of these powers is the 1994 land law. At the same time, central government has
transferred to local governments primary responsibility for drought- and *dzud*-preparedness, but
without the budgetary resources needed to ensure that this responsibility will be met adequately.

Chronic under-provisioning of local efforts to support pastoral risk management (e.g. through hay
and fodder preparation and distribution) throughout most of the decade of the 1990s led to
massive livestock mortality in the two consecutive *dzud* years of 1999/2000 and 2000/2001,
amounting to a total loss of around 17 per cent of the national herd. In early 2001, Government
passed Resolution 47 concerning measures to ensure better drought- and *dzud*-preparedness, and
specified roles of each tier of public administration in establishing an effective and coordinated
national system for pastoral risk management. At the time of writing it remains unclear whether
the resources required to implement such a strategy will be provided for in the medium-term
framework for national budgeting.

Under the 1994 land law, a ‘deconcentrated’ arrangement of powers and responsibilities is
envisioned whereby land disputes arising at any one level of administration are to be passed up to
the next highest level for administrative resolution. No clear role is envisaged for other actors
such as civil courts. Considerable ambiguity also exists in practice in specifying the distinct roles
of different levels of administration. *Sum* governors appear to believe they have little scope for
discretionary decision-making, while in practice they are seen to exercise considerable residual power in the absence of clear guidelines for the interpretation and implementation of the law (Fernandez-Gimenez and Batbuyan 2000).

At the time of writing, a series of significant amendments to the 1994 land law have been drafted, and are due to be discussed in the next session of the State Great Khural, having already been through parliamentary committee stage. One of the most critical of the proposed provisions concerning pasture land management is the further specification of the concept of land ‘possession’. Under the 1994 law, certain types of land (including urban and arable land but specifically excluding pasture land and other types of ‘common’ [open access] land) may be possessed by individuals or groups, and these rights may be transferred only through inheritance. Under the proposed amendments, possession rights would also become subject to transfer by sale, opening up the possibility for the first time in Mongolia of an open land market. There is also some dispute as to whether at least some types of pasture land (e.g. winter pastures) could be subject to the same provisions. Some actors in Mongolia, including an independent group of civil society organizations (an intellectual think tanks, environmental NGOs, and certain professional associations of livestock specialists), are promoting the notion that group possession rights could offer strong promise for clearly defined groups of herders to create their own rules for self-governance of the sets of pastures they customarily share. Other actors remain vehemently opposed, on the grounds that pasture land must remain open to all.

In early 2001 the Ministry of Nature and Environment at central Government level opened up an important channel for downwards accountability by agreeing with a civil society lobbying coalition to host a national level public forum for discussion on the content of the draft amendments of the land law. It is not clear why MNE acted in the way that it did, other than being persuaded by leading champions within the coalition of lobbyists. Whatever the origins of the initiative, however, a discussion draft of the revised law was released, comments were invited from the public via print media, a national-level public workshop was held and a televised debate took place, collectively representing an unprecedented step in Mongolian legal history. It remains to be seen to what extent the amended law, once passed, reflects this public consultation process, but there is little doubt that it represents a significant step forwards in promoting downwards accountability in legislative development. Many observers, however, would now argue that the major obstacle to transparent and accountable governance of land management, including pasture land management, lies in implementation rather than in the promulgation of new legislation (Hanstad and Duncan 2001).

**Accountability of local institutions to their constituencies**

Herders themselves, recognizing the ambiguity that exists in public administration with respect to pasture land management, are increasingly likely to take matters into their own hands, and to act unilaterally in pasture land use decisions. The increasing heterogeneity of herding communities also makes individual as opposed to collective action more likely. Different types of herders have developed complex strategies to exploit the opportunities open to them, depending on their distinct social and economic positions.

Wealthier herders, with large herds and, typically, better endowments of adult family labor, are likely to employ strategies of family splitting to ensure that they can guard their valued winter camp sites and associated pastures against out of season trespassing by others. At least one family member may remain resident all year round at the winter camp, and a permanent wooden structure may be constructed in some areas to reinforce the visibility of the claim being exercised. In such cases, winter shelters (though not the land surrounding them) are now commonly
privately owned, with documented evidence of possession rights. Serious conflicts may still emerge if competing claims to the surrounding pastures are made by two herders with equally large herds. Herders with small herds will usually be tolerated even if they camp close to the winter pastures claimed by a wealthy herder, since a certain level of ‘free riding’ is unlikely to undermine the prospects for sustainable pasture land use (Mearns 1996).

Poorer herders, who are often those with lower levels of skill and experience in herding, and often with large families including small children of other dependents, have tended to become increasingly reliant on wealthier kin for survival where they continue to pursue livestock-based livelihoods. A form of labor market has emerged, albeit involving in-kind rather than market-based transactions, in which poorer herders will work as laborers for wealthier herders in arduous tasks such as clearing out winter shelters, herding, or looking for lost animals, in return for the right to join the khot ail of the wealthier herder and thereby gain more secure access to grazing for the few animals they do own. Those poorer, ‘new’ herding households without such resources of ‘social capital’ to draw on often failed at herding within a short space of time, and having ‘eaten away’ the assets of animals they received at the time of privatization in the early 1990s, returned to live in sum or aimag centers, usually dependent on limited social welfare payments (NSO and World Bank 2001).

In this context of divergent livelihood strategies among herders within the same rural communities, the downwards accountability of local governors in matters of pasture land dispute resolution is far from symmetrical and transparent. Wealthier herders frequently enjoy better relations with local governors, and are both able and willing to invest considerable resources in hospitality when the darga visits, in order to keep open informal channels to encourage the governor to ‘turn a blind eye’ or to resolve disputes in their favor. Such opportunities to exercise informal influence are not generally available to poorer, more marginal herders, particularly if they have migrated into the area in question from another aimag. Inter-regional migrations of this sort became a recognized livelihood strategy in the later 1990s as those able to do so would move to take advantage of the better household-level terms of trade in more central, market-accessible parts of the country.

Against this rather depressing background, in which a ‘tragedy of open access’ has emerged in the institutional vacuum created by incomplete decentralization, some local civil society groups have sought to explore whether opportunities can be exploited to enhance the downward accountability of more receptive sum governments in pasture land management. Some of these groups are beginning to facilitate pilot projects, with donor support, to field-test approaches to group-based pasture land tenure and management. In some cases, with the moral backing of the local administration, they have been able to go beyond the limits proscribed in the land law to confer possession contracts on groups of around 10-20 herding households over all sets of pastures customarily used by those groups. Many questions remain to be resolved concerning the representativeness and legitimacy of such groups among other, non-group members in the same districts; the concurrence or otherwise of social group and territorial/ resource-unit boundaries; the degree to which such initiatives remain dependent on donor financing; and the operational rules for negotiating reciprocal rights of access to non-group members during times of drought or dzud. However, these pilot projects should be recognized as advancing a positive reform agenda that seeks to achieve more environmentally sustainable and socially inclusive outcomes in pasture land management through efforts to increase the transparency and downwards accountability of local governors’ offices and sum-level technical staff.
Outcomes of decentralization and transition: effects on livelihoods and the environment

Many of the consequences of ‘de facto’ decentralization of pasture land management for pastoral livelihoods and for the environment have been touched on in earlier sections of this paper. This concluding section therefore serves as a summary of some of the issues raised by this case study. In the absence of alternative livelihood opportunities following post-socialist transition, the 1990s saw a dramatic re-assertion of the importance of pastoral livelihoods in Mongolia. The number of herding households more than doubled, and herders once again comprise around a third of the national population. While Mongolia may offer valuable lessons to other countries in which pastoralists form a significant share of the population, this trend should not be regarded as an entirely positive one. Economic ‘transition’ is something of a misnomer; indeed, in relation to natural resource governance, the notion of an institutional vacuum is more fitting. Both rural and urban livelihoods throughout the 1990s were marked by rising vulnerability, and pastoral livelihoods in particular become increasingly vulnerable to natural hazards, in the absence of supporting reforms that would match devolution of responsibilities to sub-national governments with the budgetary resources to carry them out, and accountability reforms that would subject the actions of local governments to public scrutiny from their constituents.

Many other changes took place in rural livelihood strategies and livelihood dynamics. Distinct patterns of inter-regional and rural-urban migration emerged in response to changing livelihood/market-access opportunities, according to which very different opportunities arose for better-off herders than for poorer, more marginal groups in rural society. These patterns had profound consequences for the distribution of grazing pressure, and have already had a readily observable (short-run? Perhaps also long-term) and adverse impact on the pastoral environment, notably in shrub vegetation communities in the Gobi-steppe transition zone. At the same time, large areas of good grazing remain under-utilized in more remote areas for want of investments in water supply, social service provision, and transportation infrastructure.

The 1990s has also seen a breakdown of the long-standing forms of dual formal/informal regulation of pasture land management that had persisted throughout era of agricultural collectivization. Some of the principal sources of pressure also relate to changing livelihood dynamics, including: rising levels of asset inequality (notably in livestock holdings) combined with limited options for livelihood diversification; population concentration around settlements, roads/markets, and points of social service provision; and emergent labor markets in rural areas, among other coping and adaptive strategies, that have had important consequences for social capital. The rising vulnerability of more marginal groups has resulted from various combinations of declining asset holdings and adverse household terms of trade, and reduced access to common-pool grazing and benefits from increasingly exclusionary forms of social capital.

To what extent are these outcomes attributable to the ‘decentralization’ attributes of economic and political transition, and to what extent to the consequences of transition for livelihood opportunities more broadly? Arguably many of these outcomes may be attributed to incomplete decentralization, or to what has been characterized here as the institutional vacuum of ‘de facto’ decentralization. Some of the more promising avenues for future policy and other forms of intervention highlighted in the paper include: (i) promoting public access to information regarding the content of land legislation and actions and responsibilities of local governments more generally; (ii) supporting pilot initiatives that seek to explore what increasing the downwards accountability of local governments in pasture land management would look like; (iii) supporting ongoing public consultation in the development of national land legislation; and (iv) more importantly, supporting the development of flexible, context-sensitive implementation
guidelines and manuals for use by local governors and their staff in applying the land law in transparent and accountable ways.

References


