

**Title VIII Research Scholar Program – Final Report**

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*Land Reform, Pasture Management, and Livestock Mobility in  
Tajikistan's Rasht Valley<sup>1</sup>*

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Rasht District and Dushanbe, Tajikistan

**Research Abstract**

The vast majority of Tajikistan's population lives in rural areas, and roughly 75% of rural households depend on raising livestock for income and food. Since the country gained independence in 1991 after the fall of the Soviet Union, broad changes to the country's economy and property systems have drastically impacted livestock-based livelihoods. In the face of sweeping land reforms, decollectivization of livestock, and enormous cuts in government support, how have herding communities' pasture access rules, migration routes and livestock management strategies changed? How are these adaptations affecting and affected by rural livelihoods, local politics, and ecosystems? To answer these questions, I conducted a multi-scalar analysis of the pasture sector, from the large scale of national pasture-related legislation and regional development projects to the finer scale of the lived experience of mountain villages in two sub-districts of the Rasht Valley. The Title VIII grant funded three months of research to complete my dissertation fieldwork begun in 2016.

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<sup>1</sup> This document is a working paper summarizing a fieldwork period funded by the U.S. Department of State Title VIII Program through American Councils. All findings are very preliminary and should be treated accordingly. Please do not cite without first contacting the author at kgillin@wisc.edu.

## Research Goals

Seasonal livestock migration has existed in Tajikistan for centuries and was supported during the Soviet era by collective property systems. Post-Soviet economic transition brought about the privatization of many pastures which were previously held as common resources, creating in some places a fragmented patchwork of pastures, each with a different single owner with legal rights to deny access to anyone else. As a result, livestock migrations have declined in the last 25 years. Though these general trends are widely accepted, there are scant empirical data on the actual state of livestock mobility, pasture management strategies, and pasture access negotiations. Current academic research on livestock mobility and pasture management in Tajikistan has focused exclusively on the Gorno-Badakhshan province, which cannot be easily extrapolated to the rest of the country because of the sparsely populated province's status as an autonomous region, its high desert climate, and its culturally distinct Pamiri and Kyrgyz populations.

Given the scant extant academic work on the topic, my research has the very broad aim of gaining a better understanding of how pasture access rules, migration routes and grazing patterns have been altered and what factors (e.g. new laws, labor availability, economic changes, or lack of government support) and institutions (governmental or non-governmental) are behind these changes. One set of questions, then, concerns the creation of and rationales behind formal state law crafted by a combination of government officials and professionals in foreign development organizations. What information has been used to identify problems in pasture management and develop solutions to these problems? Who has been involved in creating and revising the law, and what priorities and knowledge do they bring to the table? How do the knowledges and priorities manifest in the Law on Pastures compare to those of land owners and land users? Another set of questions involves the lived experience of livestock owners and land

owners. How have pastoralist livelihoods actually been affected by land reforms and post-Soviet economic transformations? Is pasture use dictated by the laws on the books, laws and norms of the Soviet era, novel local practices that fill the regulatory void caused by non-enforcement of extant laws, or some combination of these three? What effects have post-Soviet legal and economic changes had on land use, especially with regard to pastures and land used for growing fodder plants for animals?

### **Research Activities**

My research took place in two primary locations. In the capital of Dushanbe, I interviewed academics, central government officials, and development professionals. I also collected primary source documents and conducted library research there. In the Rasht Valley, I conducted group interviews with a sub-sample of average village residents and targeted individual interviews with key informants.

In Dushanbe I conducted formal interviews and had informal conversations with relevant professionals. I targeted three specific groups: 1) people directly involved with designing and implementing specific livestock- and pasture-related development interventions, 2) individuals who engage on a broader level with pasture-related policy issues either by crafting legislation or managing relevant central government programs, and 3) academics who have a more disinterested perspective on the state of pasture issues in the country and who could speak to the state of extant data and for the sector that is used or ignored in decision-making. These latter two groups consisted exclusively of Tajikistani citizens, and many of them could also speak to the evolution over time of the pasture sector and compare and contrast the management and monitoring of the Soviet era to today's current situation. These individual interviews were

conducted anonymously and provided useful insight into not just the “what” of the current state of the pasture sector in Tajikistan, but also the “how” and “why” of what happens in the early stages of policy development and why certain elements of national pasture policy are either abandoned or embraced in the final versions of legislation that are released to the public. Several individuals were also able to provide me with detailed documentation of legislative processes and difficult to find government records.

A number of interviews that I hoped to conduct in Dushanbe were impossible to organize. I attempted to go through formal channels in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to schedule meetings with representatives of government ministries, and my requests were denied. While some interviews were possible because I had made a number of relevant contacts over my years in Tajikistan, a number of officials either directly declined to meet when I contacted them and others simply did not show up for the meetings we organized and did not return phone calls. Several attempts to meet with elites with large livestock holdings were also unsuccessful.

The majority of my time was spent in two sub-districts (*jamoat*) of the Rasht Valley, where I lived full-time in a mountain village of forty households. From this home base I made short trips over two months to eight different villages. In these villages, I conducted 18 group interviews with a total of 56 people about livelihoods, owning and marketing livestock, accessing pasture and fodder-growing land, land use, herding methods, and fodder production and use. Half of these group interviews focused more on fodder—cultivation, land availability, provision, purchase, sale, and rationing—and the other half focused more on livestock ownership, herding practices, and pasture access.



Two villages flanking a mountain lake in Rasht district. Above the village are summer pastures used by non-local herders who travel for a month with sheep and goats from distant lowland districts.

Focus villages were selected to prioritize villages where livestock was a comparatively more important livelihood strategy and high elevation areas where there was more interaction with non-local herders who come to Rasht in the summer from Khatlon province, while also capturing a set of villages across the elevation gradient from highest village to valley floor. Within villages, I selected informants who were neither especially poor nor especially wealthy and who owned livestock stratified by sample by neighborhood (*mahalla*) and extended family group (*avlod*). Interviews were recorded for later transcription.

In addition to these general interviews—designed to complement my 2016 survey of 20% of the study area’s households—I carried out 16 individual interviews with key informants such

as major livestock owners, large pastureland owners, village heads, individuals with special knowledge of current or historical herding systems, and government officials at the district and sub-district levels. Because of these informants' reluctance to be interviewed, these conversations were often not recorded.

Lastly, I conducted participatory mapping exercises in five of the villages across the elevation gradient. One to two key informants with especially intimate knowledge of the current and historical land use of the village would draw on laminated high-resolution satellite photos to delineate which areas were used for cultivated agriculture, fodder production, spring-fall grazing, summer grazing, or some combination of those. Areas of post-Soviet land-use conversion (e.g. from cultivation to pasture or vice versa) were also identified. In three cases I had little confidence in the informants' ability to interpret the satellite photos we were to draw over, so we spent the day walking around the village while I asked them about what we were seeing in order to create the map myself. These maps will eventually be analyzed in conjunction with government "geobotanical" maps and cadastral records, when available.

While these deliberate research activities structured my field period in the Rasht Valley, the majority of my time was spent *between* interviews: visiting friends, interacting with the members of the family I lived with, answering the endless questions of guests to the home, reciprocating their visits by going to their homes, and attending requisite celebrations for holidays, birthdays, or deaths. Though ostensibly my "down time," these moments were invaluable for helping me understand more fully the micro-politics of villages and extended families and the primary difficulties and preoccupations that people were facing. People spoke more frankly when they weren't suddenly prompted by my questions: they were both more open

and their statements were more trustworthy, as they came spontaneously and not while searching for a response to a query they had never before considered.

### **Important Research Findings**

I am still in the very earliest stages of transcribing and translating my interviews and analyzing my survey data, so my most important research findings are not yet clear. As these ultimate findings will likely be of greater interest to scholars of pastoralism, common property theory, and socio-legal studies, I will instead summarize those findings which already seem fairly clear and which specifically lead into the policy implications described in the next sub-section.

#### *Unintended Consequences of Land Reforms*

USAID has been the primary force behind land reform in Tajikistan for over a decade. Despite the fact that the reforms they have engineered have drastically affected pasture land—the vast majority of the “agricultural land” governed by their reforms is, in fact, pasture—USAID has not undertaken any of their reforms with pastures in mind. While the land privatization and individualization that they have been pushing appear, thus far, to be beneficial to crop agriculture in Tajikistan, these are the precise practices that scholars of pastoralism have long shown to be deleterious to pasture-reliant livestock economies. Indeed, as a result of land reform laws such as the multiple iterations of the “Law on Dehqon<sup>2</sup> Farms,” a huge percentage of pastures has been legally fragmented to private owners, giving owners the right to exclude livestock owners from pastures they have grown accustomed to using for years and turning previously contiguous pastures into a patchwork of private grasslands that overlay a web of property boundaries across establish herding routes.

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<sup>2</sup> Often written as “Dehkan Farms” by people transliterating from Russian rather than Tajik language.

This has been an oversight of the somewhat myopic land reform legislation rather than something that has happened by design. Luckily, as will be discussed below, the property boundaries that exist on paper are often not observed in reality, so the deleterious effects of pasture fragmentation have been largely avoided so far. However, the threats are clear and have created problems in places where wealthy individuals have enclosed large areas of private pasture. Those working in the pasture sector have tried to rectify the situation through newer pasture-specific laws and through NGO-led programs to form pasture user unions who can apply for deeds to own pasture collectively. In other words, development organizations who work closely with pastures are trying to create new laws and institutions to combat the harm done by laws created by development organizations focused on markets for cultivated land. To this day, there is insufficient coordination between these groups, as pasture issues are often siloed in “environmental” portfolios rather than integrated into broader agriculture and land reform initiatives.



A patchwork of land uses in the high villages of Rasht district: cultivated agriculture, fields of naturally occurring fodder grasses (recently cut and placed in piles dotting the landscape), and grazing land.

*Data Availability and Scales of Analysis*

As mentioned earlier, there is a dearth academic literature on pasture-related issues in Tajikistan. This lack of reliable information is a much more general problem—nobody has a clear sense of the state of pastures in Tajikistan—that leads the government and development organizations to make semi-blind plans and decisions based on a cobbling together of limited and decades-old data by Soviet-era scholars, isolated and non-representative information gathered from regionally clustered project sites, and pure guesswork. Despite this knowledge gap, professionals are asked to write authoritative-sounding reports which often just repeat unsubstantiated claims, and as this practice continues the repetition of baseless data leads to its acceptance. A good example of this is the ubiquitous claim that the vast majority of Tajikistan’s pastures are severely degraded. Conversations with Tajikistan’s foremost experts on pasture dynamics—in fact, the very people who are consulted for matters regarding pasture assessment—have made clear that no data exists that could possibly confirm this claim. Reports from development agencies routinely use a single observation to diagnose degradation despite the fact that degradation, by definition, is a deleterious *change* in pasture condition and changes require at a minimum two observations to compare.

The degradation narrative is also illustrative the fact that the pasture and livestock sectors in Tajikistan are problematically discussed at a national scale. That is, rather than identifying the unique problems or characteristics of these sectors in each of Tajikistan’s different regions, the extant white literature on pastures and livestock routinely treats the country as uniform. Even the briefest glance at a topographic map will show how misguided this is—pasture management in the dry and more densely populated lowlands is much different from that of the more sparsely populated mountainous areas—and this simple diversity of elevation is multiplied by differences

in local social, political, and economic relations. In some cases, organizations with pilot programs in a few villages in one small section of the country have extrapolated national characterizations from local particularities, and then used such mischaracterizations to inform national policy that would, if implemented, affect very different contexts. In fact, my research has shown that even villages that are just a half-mile away from each other face significantly different problems because of their landscapes, microclimates, and local politics.

In short, all widely available data about pasture use in Tajikistan should be met with skepticism, and any national-level characterizations should be considered irrelevant to any given area until confirmed by smaller-scale observations.

*On-the-Ground Legal Knowledge and the (Ir)relevance of Formal Policy*

Unlike some other countries with weak governments, the formal legal apparatuses in Tajikistan *does* play an important role when it comes to land ownership and land access, but the legal system does not operate according to the laws and policies that are on paper. This is because of a combination of corruption, a serious lack of government capacity and funding, and also because of poor legal knowledge among both regular people and local government officials. To be fair, Tajikistan's land laws are fairly complex, but a surprising number of people don't know for sure if they have land certificates or if they hold shares for collective land, and they don't know what rights are associated with these forms of landholding. Many who *do* have land certificates do not know where major swaths of their holdings are actually located. Because of this, many land-related relationships end up being dictated by local informal agreements, but the distinction between the formal and informal is frequently unclear or even non-existent for many people.

The country's Law on Pasture, ratified in 2013, has more or less not been implemented in any perceptible way in the areas where I conducted field work. Some local land administrators had never even heard of such a law, and those who had were unable to articulate any ways in which the law's ratification had affected pasture governance on the ground. This law, which was created by an all-Tajikistani working group, but in close consultation with several international NGOs, appears to be most relevant in areas where development projects are actively implementing the law themselves by using some of its provisions to advance their interventions.

### **Policy Implications and Recommendations**

Land reforms in post-independence Tajikistan have mostly been driven by concerns related to crop cultivation and creating an active land market. This has led to some oversights in land reform that have led to problems with respect to natural resource management, particularly with pastures and, to a lesser extent, forests. As USAID continues to fund land reform projects in Tajikistan and craft new laws, it is imperative that they realize the major role that they have played and continue to play in changing pasture governance, even if have been unaware that they are doing so. Rather than silo-ing land reform and natural resource management projects and reforms into distinct portfolios, there needs to be more consultation and cooperation with these projects. Very importantly, everyone working in land reform needs to be aware of the fact that the majority of “dehqon farm” land is actually pasture, so *any law that pertains to that legal category of land is very much a law about pasture.*

Major effort—likely beyond the scope of a quick and dirty scoping study for an individual project—should be put into understanding the diversity of pastoral systems across Tajikistan's different regions and especially in monitoring pasture condition across time and

space. Many oft-reported descriptions of pastures in Tajikistan—especially statements related to land degradation—are unfounded, and the simple frequency with which they are reiterated should not be proof of their reliability. Policies should not be crafted based on these abstract narratives, and when policy decisions need to be made before good data is available, it is important that the decisions be malleable and will not create significant changes in livelihoods. Currently, the best sources for data on pasture condition are probably the individuals using the land, with a couple of caveats: 1) especially in mountainous areas, land condition and land use arrangements are highly localized, so while anecdotal evidence is important, it should not be extrapolated from without careful attention to the way in which such evidence was sampled; and 2) diagnoses of land degradation require at least two—ideally more—data points.

Reading Tajikistan’s laws and interviewing ministry officials is not sufficient to understanding the actual institutional and legal landscape of land relations, in general, and especially pasture ownership and access. Several notable reports exist that try to do just this, and while any summary of the “situation on the ground” will necessarily lead to abstractions and leave out nuances, these documents—by making the assumption that policies are implemented or legal distinctions on paper also exist in reality—end up with characterizations that are extremely misleading. A first step to understanding land administration in Tajikistan is to not assume that the written law is relevant. This has two key policy related implications: 1) conversations with land users and land owners are necessary to understand how land is actually administered in Tajikistan, and 2) the best way to effect change related to land, agriculture, and natural resource management is not necessarily through legislation.

## **Co-Curricular Activity**

I met with numerous professionals, academics, and government officials with related interests both as a part of my research but also to share what I had learned in the field and to forge productive relationships that may eventually be mutually beneficial.

I had meetings with five professionals working with USAID in Tajikistan. Three of these meetings resulted in substantive exchanges of information based on each of our experiences in the country related to land reform, agricultural pest control, and pasture access. I had considerable contact with professionals working with other development organizations, where they explained the implementation of their projects and I shared how these interventions were affecting people on the ground. I assisted in the creation of an agenda for a meeting of pasture sector stakeholders.

Two meetings with government officials generated ideas for possible collaboration in the future which could lead to both valuable academic research and improved data for government decision-making. Meetings with government officials involved in pasture-related legislation allowed me to explain how recent legislation is being interpreted by local governments and how it is viewed by livestock-dependent village households.

I met with four academics from three different institutions. I shared publications with them, taught them improved methods for finding and accessing relevant publications online, and brainstormed collaborative future research projects with them.

## **Plans for Future Research Agenda/Presentations/Publications**

The end of the Title VIII grant period marks the end of my dissertation field work. In the coming year, this research will be written up in my doctoral dissertation, which will be freely

available online. In addition, three to four of the dissertation chapters will be crafted into articles to be submitted for publication to peer-reviewed academic journals. Some of the research has already been written up as part of a co-authored article that has almost made it through the peer-review process of the French academic journal *Études Rurales*.

Earlier fieldwork for this project was presented at the 2017 Annual Meeting of the American Association of Geographers (AAG). Information gathered as part of the Title VIII research period will be presented in the November 2017 convention of the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies (ASEEES). This research will be presented at future meetings of the AAG and area studies conferences.

As mentioned above, I am trying to coordinate research projects collaborating with the Botanical Institute in Dushanbe and the Pasture Trust of the Ministry of Agriculture of the Republic of Tajikistan by integrating data that they have gathered during their field expeditions with my own satellite remote sensing analysis.