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Author: Satybaldieva, Elmira

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Making a Living in Uncertainty: Agro-Pastoral Livelihoods and Institutional Transformations in Post-Socialist Rural Kyrgyzstan

By Bernd Steimann. Human Geography Series Vol. 26. Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan and Zurich, Switzerland: University of Zurich, 2011. xxi + 245 pp. Free download at http://www.zora.uzh.ch. Hardcopy: CHF 25.00. ISBN 3-906302-09-1.

Bernd Steimann's work is a timely contribution to the scholarship on postsocialist transformation and provides a much needed microlevel analysis of postindependence institutional changes and their implications for agropastoral livelihoods in Kyrgyzstan. Often the scholarship on Central Asian postsocialist development focuses on macroinstitutions, such as the economy, geopolitics, and national elite networks, and neglects local actors and processes at the microlevel. As a result, the postsocialist transformation is poorly understood, and the academic community lacks the conceptual tools to explain many developments in the region. Steimann uses an actor-centered approach to examine local processes of transformation in rural Kyrgyzstan. The study focused on agropastoral livelihoods and institutional and organizational context, which embeds these processes of production, to explore transformational processes at the household level.

The book consists of 3 key sections and 12 chapters. Section 1 evaluates key theoretical approaches on postsocialist development and offers its own conceptual framework, which draws upon new institutional economics, property rights theory, and legal pluralism. In being critical of the transition paradigm, Steimann also uses a set of sociological concepts, such as path dependency, hybridity, bricolage, and uncertainty, to interpret postsocialist developments in rural Kyrgyzstan. In addition, this section discusses the research methodology, which integrates qualitative and quantitative methods, to evaluate the socioeconomic status of households and their livelihood strategies. The empirical evidence is based on household surveys and semistructured interviews carried out in 2 villages in Naryn region between 2006 and 2009. The study compares how household livelihood strategies vary in the 2 villages, which have different levels of resources.

Section 2 presents the results of the household survey data of the 2 villages, which show significant socioeconomic disparities among the households. The study finds that the rich households constitute no more than 3% in both villages, and they own large tracts of land and livestock. Most households have little or no livestock, and are unable to generate cash income and are dependent upon state welfare. Steimann argues that the socialist legacy is partly responsible for the socioeconomic disparities, because the soviet kolkhoz introduced inequality in the agricultural economy. Although the path dependency can account for the first decade of social inequality into postindependence Kyrgyzstan, the introduction of ill-conceived neoliberal reforms in the agricultural sector in the 1990s exacerbated existing inequalities, because existing elites exploited the privatization process.

Section 3 illustrates how socioeconomic disparities have had a considerable impact on people's property rights and their use of property. Livestock breeding, land cultivation, and access to pastures are dependent upon household assets, including cultural and social capital (such as practical knowledge, negotiating skills, networks, and bargaining power). Affluent households often abuse local regulations on land and pasture use to accrue economic wealth, a process referred to as "forum shopping." Most households cannot undertake sustainable farming because of high cultivation costs and inadequate institutional support in the form of credit or machinery, and are forced to abandon cultivation. They lack the resources and capabilities to be efficient and sustainable. This section illustrates how the neoliberal agrarian reforms failed to transform most actors into market participants.

Steimann argues that there are 2 livelihood trajectories in the context of institutional hybridity and uncertainties of rural Kyrgyzstan. The majority of poor households are trapped in a negative livelihood trajectory, unable to secure their property rights, and dependent upon state welfare and affluent households for their survival. The minority of rich households operate on a positive livelihood trajectory, able to develop long-term coping strategies. This difference in the rural trajectories, Steimann argues, "provides a good example of the continuing impact of the neoliberal shock therapy of the 1990s on rural livelihoods and institutions up to the present day" (p. 227). Steimann suggests that poor households' negative livelihood trajectory can be changed either by reducing their uncertainties or by improving their negotiating power. But he seems to be unclear on how to achieve such empowerment or to reduce uncertainties. In the conclusion, he states that the introduction of new institutions, such as communal resource user associations, is unlikely to reduce institutional uncertainties and might even exacerbate existing social inequalities.

This book is essential reading for academics and practitioners who specialize in the region or postsocialist developments. Few studies examine the emergence of socioeconomic disparities and their implications on livelihood trajectories. This book is of particular benefit to international policy-makers and donors, who are engaged in democratization and

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development projects in the region. Often they lack sufficient understanding of the local context and are guilty of introducing development programs that disregard unequal power relations on the ground and of weakening local state institutions that protect citizens' rights.

Overall, this book provides both rich empirical evidence and theoretical discussion on postsocialist transformation. But it does suffer from some weaknesses. The study lacks a deeper analysis of the nature of social inequality in rural Kyrgyzstan. This is a survey of rural livelihoods rather than a comprehensive examination of the causes of socioeconomic inequalities and the forces that produce them. Steimann provides some insights for the emergence of socioeconomic disparities (such as path dependency and neoliberal reforms) but does not explain why they continue to persist. I would have liked to see more discussion on the role of state and international institutions in shaping rural livelihood trajectories and socioeconomic disparities.

AUTHOR

Elmira Satybaldieva
elmira.satybaldieva@uef.fi
Karelian Institute, University of Eastern Finland, 80101 Joensuu, Finland

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