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## RESEARCH NOTE

# The Co-Management Network Governance System for Sustainable Natural Area Tourism in Kyrgyzstan

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Photo: Jason Sheldrake

### Introduction

The natural environment of Kyrgyzstan is a significant tourism attraction, particularly the country's mountains which account for a high proportion of the country's land mass. It is these mountains which have been the focus of an ongoing research project, centred upon commercial mountaineering on Lenin Peak, since 2017 (see Komissarov and Taylor, 2019; and Komissarov, Taylor, and Turova, 2021). Central to this research is the issue of the sustainability of tourism activities on Lenin Peak and the requirement for an effective system of governance to oversee these activities.

As will be explored below, this requires a complex response to a complex situation! This short article briefly outlines the key components of the *co-management network governance system* (CNGS) that can be adopted and applied for the governance of natural area tourism in Kyrgyzstan's mountains and beyond! This is based upon the author's doctoral research (Taylor, 2016) which developed a governance system oriented towards the sustainable development of natural areas within the context of UK national parks.

### The challenge

Lenin Peak, like the other mountains in Kyrgyzstan, is effectively a common pool resource (CPR) which is freely available to many different users. These usages may conflict e.g., tourism versus livestock farming and the effective oversight and control of user activities might be extremely challenging. Recognising

this diversity of usage and seeking to reconcile their inherent conflicts – within a framework of sustainable development – is the issue to be addressed by an effective system of governance of natural areas. Traditional solutions are typically *either* state control *or* privatisation. However, these ‘solutions’ typically do not provide for adequate involvement of all stakeholders in *actual* decision-making. For example, many traditional state-based national parks systems utilise the mechanism of consultation to involve stakeholders. The problem with this is that ‘consultation’ is just that... *it is not direct involvement in actual decision-making*.

What is proposed here is a system of governance that directly includes key stakeholders in the decision-making process and one that embraces the principles of *deliberative democracy* whereby participants actively engage with the positions of others and seek to devise optimal solutions that ultimately reflect the collective interests of everyone – the ‘common good’. So, it is not just a *structure* of governance but one which embodies a *philosophy* of governance that challenges participants to work with others to devise solutions with the widest range of acceptability and which appropriately considers the central issue of sustainability. Here the focus is upon what are called *integrated responses*.

### **The need for integrated responses (sustainable development)**

Sustainable development involves two conflicting demands. In ‘simple terms’, this is addressing both the protection of the natural environment (ecosystems) and the interests and well-being of humans through its development. Humans primarily see the natural environment as a resource to be used – be it for farming, mining, tourism, or some other usage. Clearly, these human interests and uses can conflict with one another, and all can conflict with the issue of landscape protection (preservation). Effective integrated responses, or decisions, regarding landscape uses therefore must balance the competing and typically, conflicting interests, of these human uses and the preservation of the environment.

In effect, these *integrated responses* require to recognise and address the diversity of views that exist from the level of the local community right up to national government and across the broad range of users of the natural resource in question, be these farmers, tour operators, other commercial users, or the tourists themselves. The issue then becomes, what sort of governance solution has this type of capacity and capability? As will be highlighted below, the proposed solution places a heavy emphasis upon *governance processes* and the requirement for participants to *actively embrace* the goal of achieving integrated responses.

### **An effective governance system aligns structure and function**

Given the plurality (the broad range of views) likely to be inherent in the governance of natural areas, the structure proposed here for an effective governance system is that of *co-management* which involves the use of networks and partnerships to draw together the key stakeholders from different levels of government, the private sector and civil society – what is, in effect a polycentric solution. The ‘secret’ however, is to not think of co-management as a structure, but rather as a *process of continuous problem-solving*. That is, to focus upon its function.

Central to this function is effective communication. This involves the creation of a *co-management network governance system (CNGS)* involving multiple actors from multiple levels and multiple sectors. Representatives of all the key stakeholders are full members of the CNGS (i.e., decision-makers) as this involves governance processes that go way beyond the traditional top-down consultations typically adopted. It also requires that participants commit to a process of *active collaboration* whereby there is the consideration of local priorities and interests and the wider regional, national (and beyond!) concerns in respect of both conservation and development.

This active collaboration process involves participants from both the conservation and development 'camps' pursuing the creation of a greater level of shared knowledge and understanding of the agendas of each other and seeking to develop a *common dialogue* and the capacity for dynamic learning to undertake a process of iterative problem solving. It is this which empowers the diverse parties involved to make the integrated decisions necessary to address both the conservation and development pressures. However, to be truly effective, it requires that this process of active collaboration is aligned with another process, namely that of *analytic deliberation*.

### **Developing an informed perspective across key stakeholders**

The process of analytic deliberation involves two movements. The first being the analytical one, the second, the deliberative one. Thus, an effort must first be made to collect and analyse all the relevant data concerning a decision to be made that will impact on the landscape in question. This should be followed by the deliberation process which entails all the key stakeholders (actors) communicating and collectively considering the information available.

This deliberation is an active process whereby the various actors share their interpretations and views with each other to better understand the issue at hand with a view to agreeing on an optimal (informed) decision – i.e., an integrated response which addresses both the development and sustainability considerations – that reflects the consensus of the stakeholders. This underlines that the CNGS must actively embrace its social and political nature, something which the analytic deliberation process addresses directly. Thus, while a diversity of views – frequently conflicting – are likely to exist, this process is an effective mechanism for addressing the subjectivity of actors in a productive and enlightened manner. Ultimately, this second building block (analytic deliberation) and the first one (active collaboration) are co-dependant and effectively locates the co-management network in a *democratic process*.

### **Co-management involves *deliberative* democracy**

Establishing *effective* democratic relations (through adopting our two building blocks above) between the actors (stakeholders) in the co-management network, provides the potential for policy decisions which are not only integrated responses, but also are: inclusive; participatory; broadly representative of different societal interests; transparent and accountable. In short, more effective, in so far as they are more likely to reflect the *common good*. Of course, this does mean that decision-making is likely to be a less efficient and a more protracted process!

The active participation of stakeholders in the co-management network necessitates the creation and maintenance of multiple centres of power (interests). However, this needs to be aligned, not to the *traditional adversary democracy* process whereby the more powerful actors assume greater power and influence, but rather a *deliberative model of democracy* whereby (drawing upon the processes of active collaboration and analytic deliberation) through a process of debate and reciprocal reason-giving, stakeholders seek to achieve a rational consensus, or to at least identify substantive areas of disagreements, and ultimately, move towards appropriate compromises. That said, the underlying commitment remains to developing a shared understanding – and an agreement – of which decision outcomes regarding the landscape best represents the common good (i.e., = an integrated response). Ultimately, this reflects an understanding that actors need to actively embrace and consider the interests of others and, above all else, the protection of the landscape.

### **An effective governance system needs rules**

We have identified that our effective governance system requires the participation of the key actors (stakeholders) from across all the levels (local, regional, national, and international) and from all the sectors involved (private, public, NGO); plus, the use of the two crucial building blocks – active collaboration and analytic deliberation, and these need to be embedded in a process of deliberative democracy and the creation of multiple centres of power. To this we can add the need for rules.

There are three categories of rules which concern us. The first is that of *constitutional rules* which effectively establishes and specifies the co-management network's structure, its membership, and their respective roles. Second, we have the rules concerning how the decision-making process will be conducted (*collective choice rules*). The third, and final, category are those which shape the general *operational rules* of the CNGS. This latter category of rules is wide ranging and includes:

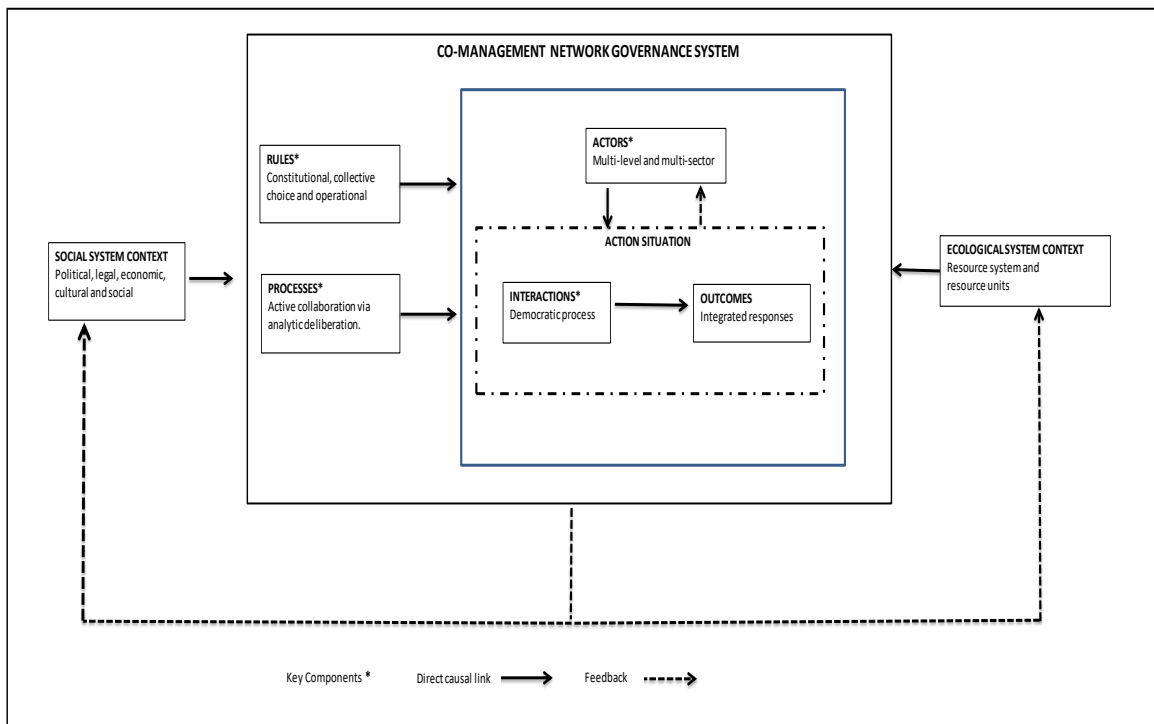
- who has access to the landscape resources (*boundary rules*)
- the geographical and functional coverage (*scope rules*)
- the actions actors must, or must not, take (*choice rules*)
- the levels of control individual actors have regarding any given action (*aggregation rules*)
- the amount of information made available to actors (*information rules*) and finally,
- the incentives and costs for actors concerning specific actions and outcomes (*payoff rules*).

As this demonstrates – there *are* lots of operational rules – but this simply reflects the complexity of the governance situation and the necessity of ensuring that there is no ambiguity for stakeholders as to how the landscape resource is to be used.

### **Final thoughts**

As indicated, the governance of natural areas is both challenging and complex. Accordingly, a sophisticated system for delivering sustainable development is required that meets the needs of all stakeholders and protects the landscape. Central to this system is the willingness of participants to

work together to identify, agree and achieve the common good. Thus, the CNGS very briefly outlined above, and summarised in Figure 1 below, is as much a philosophy about managing landscapes as a structure. Without this approach the essential, valuable (and valued!) qualities of the landscape involved – be it Lenin Peak or some other natural area tourist attraction – will ultimately be destroyed.



**Figure 1. The Co-Management Network Governance (CNG) System**

## References

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