

***Topic: Women as Leaders and Leadership Development***

## **Capacity Building of Women in Kyrgyzstan: an Example of International Cooperation<sup>1</sup>**

### **Background to Kyrgyzstan and biodiversity conservation**

The Kyrgyz Republic is a central Asian country bordering Kazakhstan to the north, China to the east and Uzbekistan and Tajikistan to the west. With a population of some 5 million people, 65% of which live in rural areas, the country covers an area of 198,500 km<sup>2</sup>. The mountain range of the Tien Shan venerated by Chinese and Central Asians alike runs as a spine across the country. Rainfall in these mountains provides fresh water supplies throughout the Central Asian steppes through rivers, which once fed the now shrinking Aral Sea before their waters were channelled for irrigation of cotton fields. Kyrgyzstan's fresh water is very important to the neighbouring countries.

Kyrgyzstan is situated at the heart of the Great Silk Road linking the East and the West. For centuries, the unique features of the region have fascinated travellers. Marco Polo passed through Kyrgyzstan on his way to China and was struck by the unique and plentiful wildlife (such as the wild sheep, which bears his name today). Since ancient times, travellers have been enchanted by the colourful cultures of the region: the nomad's felt tents – yurtas pitched in lush meadows, the shepherds watching their horses and sheep grazing nearby, the hunters with their eagles trained to target the eyes of their prey and the bards reciting the epics of the hero Manas and his battles against the invading hords dating back 1000 years.

Kyrgyzstan is dominated by mountains with over 94% of land lying above 1000 m (the highest peak is Pobeda at 7439 m). The country is extremely rich in biodiversity for its size with some 2% of the world's flora and 3% of the world's fauna. A range of endemic plant species can be found in Kyrgyzstan, such as tulips and aliums and a wide range of wild relatives of fruit and nut trees. The fauna is equally diverse with species such as the snow leopard (*Uncia uncia*), the golden eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*), the mountain goat (*Capra sibirica*), the argali (*Ovis ammon*), the Marco Polo sheep, a unique species of Menzbier's marmot (*Marmota menzbieri*), and the Himalayan griffon vulture (*Gyps himalayensis*). However, some of these species are threatened with extinction.

The spectacularly varied terrain and climate provide for a diversity of habitats, from rocks and glaciers to forests, pastures, steppe and deserts and, as a result, there are 22 ecosystems in Kyrgyzstan. Mountains serve simultaneously as a forge for new species and as a shelter for those adapted specifically to high altitude conditions. The mountains continue to grow today, as evidenced by frequent earthquakes in these areas. There are now many relic and endemic

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<sup>1</sup> All information provided in this report comes from Bashat (Community and Business Forum), Fauna & Flora International and Snow Leopard Trust's documents, articles and reports.

species, especially invertebrates, which survive from past epochs and cannot be found outside the region. In some groups, endemics are more than a half of all species found in the area.

The uniqueness and diversity of biological resources with high concentration of species and degree of endemism in Kyrgyzstan have been noted by many researchers. Indeed, Kyrgyzstan belongs to one of the most ancient botanical and geographical centers of the origin of cultured plants. Specific populations of wheat, peas, chickpeas and lentil emerged here. Initial forms of carrot, onion and alfalfa first appeared and were cultivated here. This region is famous as the secondary center of a variety of fruit crops: apricot, walnut, pistachio, almond and peach. The variety of wild forms of cherry-plum, pear, apple, black-currant and raspberry is great.<sup>2</sup>

Biodiversity has an inestimable value for the people of Kyrgyzstan, whose spiritual development is deeply rooted in their nomadic culture. A close relationship with wild nature is a distinct feature of this culture. The traditions of nomadic people were tightly bound to nature. Since nomads did not possess permanent capital such as buildings they greatly depended on nature and therefore treated it with respect. The Kyrgyz people believed that all animate and inanimate things had mysterious characteristics, properties or spirit-protectors given to them by God. Living in close harmony with nature is an inextricable part of Kyrgyz culture. The Kyrgyz people believed that they could communicate with nature if they needed rain and understand the language of animals. Thus, the forms of land management, which had been developed over centuries, were in harmony with nature. People took no more from nature than they really needed.

Biodiversity conservation is very important for the sustainable development of Kyrgyzstan. It provides a range of direct and indirect benefits to people, including food, fuel, physical environmental protection and medicines. Degraded, impoverished or anthropogenic ecosystems cannot fulfil the same functions. Until recently most conservation activity has concentrated on establishing protected areas under the Soviet system and since independence, by the protection of plant and animal species in botanical and zoological collections. More recently the work of national and international NGOs, including Bashat (Community and Business Forum), has focused on community based conservation and on species protection outside protected areas and gardens.

A key issue for conservation in Kyrgyzstan is the lack of resources to fund conservation initiatives. The poor economic and social situation in Kyrgyzstan is the source of many of the threats to biodiversity and forms some of the main constraints to the long-term viability of conservation efforts. The situation has increased people's reliance upon natural resources, especially the rural poor, where biodiversity potentially provides important subsistence and income opportunities. The focus for conservation organizations is increasingly to seek financial sustainability in projects and to link conservation with economic development.

### **Introduction to Bashat (CBF) and Its Activities**

Bashat (CBF), formerly known as Community and Business Forum, was first established in 1999 in response to local and international concerns about the operation of the largest business operation in Kyrgyzstan – the Kumtor Gold mine (a Kyrgyz-Canadian joint venture). Following a spill of cyanide into a local river, which feeds in to Lake-Issyk-Kul, local communities became

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<sup>2</sup> A.D. Hudaibergenov and G.G. Vorobyev, Geneticheski modifitsirovannye organizmy v estestvennoi srede: potentsial i mify, regionalnye nadezhdy i riski. Problemy biobezopasnosti i gennaya inzheneriya, (Bishkek, 2004), p. 19.

very concerned about the potential social and environmental impacts of the company's activities. Supported by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the International Finance Corporation (part of World Bank group), a British conservation organization Fauna & Flora International (FFI) based in Cambridge, UK, helped local communities and the NGOs that represented them to improve dialogue and engagement with Kumtor, its investors and other key stakeholders. Out of this initiative Bashat (CBF) was born.

Today, Bashat (CBF) occupies a special place within the community of non-governmental organizations in Kyrgyzstan. It is the only national organization advocating for environmental safeguards and sustainable development of mountain communities. Bashat's (CBF) activities concentrate on two major issues: prevention of environmental degradation and mountain community development problems by reviving and preserving traditional knowledge on land and natural resources' management. Bashat (CBF) is different because in its work it takes into account historical, social and cultural factors.

Bashat (CBF) has the following mission: *Bashat (CBF) promotes the sustainable development of mountain communities in areas with rich wildlife through conservation programs, the restoration and application of traditional natural resource use and improvement of socio-economic conditions of rural population.*

Bashat (CBF) recognises the material, ethical and aesthetic imperatives for biodiversity conservation, and is particularly aware of the central role that biodiversity has in the lives and livelihoods of the country's poorest and most disadvantaged people. The organization is committed to building the capacity of governmental and non-governmental agencies in the country to carry out effective conservation and we emphasise the importance of partnerships. Conservation cannot succeed in the long term if it is perceived as contrary to the interests of ordinary people in economically poor countries and nor can it rely forever on the activities of external agencies. There is a vital need to develop constituencies of support and institutional frameworks capable of delivering good conservation *within* poor mountain communities. This is only possible if conservation goals are aligned with developmental aspirations.

Since independence from the Soviet Union, the people of Kyrgyzstan have faced widespread unemployment, loss of state support systems and high levels of poverty, especially in rural areas where over 50% of the population lives below the poverty line. Currently, there is little assistance for disadvantaged groups and few prospects for new employment or income generating opportunities. Women in particular are bearing the burden of these changes and are frequently discriminated against by potential employers. They also suffer from increased abuse within the family, partly as a result of the rapid growth of alcoholism.

Social and economic decline has also resulted in environmental damage, thus further lowering living standards, at a time when there are few funds for ecological management. Moreover, acute socio-economic pressures underlie many of the current threats to biodiversity within Kyrgyzstan. Bashat (CBF) realizes that a favourable economic environment is a necessary requirement to sustained, broad-based growth, and sustained growth is essential for poverty alleviation. Thus, it actively cooperates with government agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), community based organisations (CBOs) and other stakeholders to provide better services to the targeted audience. In partnership with FFI and Snow Leopard Trust (SLT) based in Seattle, USA, Bashat (CBF) have used an integrated multi-sectoral approach to conservation adapted to the local context to empower local communities and develop leadership potential, particularly among women, to improve the quality of life in remote mountainous regions of Kyrgyzstan.

### **Bashat (CBF) Projects Implemented in Partnership with FFI**

FFI first started working in Kyrgyzstan in 1997, and is among the first international conservation NGOs to operate in the country. FFI has since worked with government, NGOs and the private sector on a range of projects. These have included the preparation of a transboundary project for protected areas in the Western Tien Shan Mountains; working with the government of Kyrgyzstan to produce its National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan; leading the development of a local NGO forum; production of national guidelines for sustainable tourism; and development of Bashat (CBF).

At present, Bashat (CBF) is an important element of FFI's Eurasia Program, and the lessons learned are being applied to community and small grant programs in other areas in the region. FFI is looking to strengthen the operation of Bashat (CBF) in Kyrgyzstan over the coming years, and will explore opportunities to develop similar schemes in other parts of Central Asia, where rural and pastoral economies are suffering similar social and environmental problems.

FFI and Bashat (CBF) realize that serious socio-economic problems are the root cause of the current threats to biodiversity in Kyrgyzstan. Isolating biodiversity issues from the overall socio-economic picture will weaken the long-term efforts aimed at achieving local ownership and sustainability. Under the circumstances of poverty and social deprivation it would not be right to give wildlife priority over people. That is why it is necessary to apply a comprehensive multi-sectoral approach to conservation, which is suitable for the local conditions and enable local communities to achieve solid and sustainable livelihoods. Although there are a number of projects supported by international donor organizations, few of these projects are coordinated by NGOs and public awareness at a community level is rather limited. For this reason, Bashat CBF believes that it is necessary to support the development of more independent projects at the grass roots level.

Since 2000 FFI and Bashat (CBF) have been working in Kyrgyzstan to support local initiatives aimed at solving problems and needs of local communities and socially unprotected groups. The Small Grants Program (SGP) administered by FFI and implemented by Bashat (CBF) with generous support of the Sigrid Rausing Trust, UK, has had significant impact on rural communities, women and other vulnerable groups in Naryn and Issyk-Kul Oblasts of the republic. Since 2002 the SGP has supported a total of 149 projects. The program helped to establish 102 local NGOs and has enabled each one of them to implement projects providing first-hand benefit for local residents in approximately 95 villages.

The SGP supported NGOs are having a diverse range of livelihood impacts, each one focussing on a particular angle of the multiple dimensions of poverty facing rural communities in Kyrgyzstan. Some provide benefits to a few disadvantaged groups or individuals, whilst others bring wider benefits to the whole community. The SGP has been particularly successful at identifying and supporting social entrepreneurs in poor, isolated rural communities. These social entrepreneurs - the majority of which are women - are active leaders within their communities. They have developed innovative approaches to solving social problems and exploiting new market opportunities.

The SGP has helped empower these leaders, for instance many of them have been recently elected to their village parliament. Leadership of projects by community members has ensured that they address community priorities and are locally-owned. Many of the projects are successful social enterprises which are generating their own revenues and successful at using local and national networks to leverage further financial and technical support. The SGP's approach of providing close ongoing support to grantees has also enabled small and new

community groups in isolated villages to establish their projects and ensure their successful implementation. These groups are often not able to access support from other grant programs for NGOs in Kyrgyzstan.

The SGP has paid special attention to women and their needs. Many of the projects supported by the program are led by women and focus on women's issues. Thus, 39 projects were dedicated to women's issues, such as: improvement of women's health and access to medical services – 7 projects, awareness raising on women's rights and protection of their rights – 9 projects, teaching handicrafts production and other skills – 18 projects, assistance to needy and vulnerable women – 5 projects. The majority of projects have been aimed at practical needs of women (for example: providing income to families), although there were several projects that raised issues regarding the needs of strategic and legal nature (for example: providing information on land use and bride kidnapping).

Over a four year period, the total number of projects led by women is 70; whereas the number of women leading SGP projects is 81 since some projects have more than one leader. The SGP has actually helped to enhance the role of women as leaders and persons concerned with social problems and setting examples worth following. For example, from the start of the program, 9 women – the SGP leaders have been elected as Deputies to village councils: 7 women Deputies in Naryn Oblast and 2 women Deputies in Issyk-Kul Oblast.

The SGP has been particularly supportive of small and new NGOs in deep rural communities. Many of the new NGOs supported by Bashat (CBF) are in more isolated rural communities, away from the urban centres such as Naryn and Karakol where much of the support to NGOs is focussed. Furthermore, community members feel a strong sense of ownership for SGP-supported projects. In interviews with NGO leaders and members, they made it clear that these projects were identified and managed by them, and had been supported by the SGP. They also recognized that they had responsibility for ensuring that the project continued after SGP support had ended.

The direct livelihood impacts of the SGP projects are diverse; improving people's access to human, natural, physical, financial and social capital. Many projects were providing a range of benefits through a single project. Benefits fell into four broad categories: provision of information and advisory services, often provided alongside other services; provision of public services formerly provided by the state, e.g. kindergartens and health services; improvement of household income, often through adding value to commonly produced commodities such as fruit, wool and wood; environment projects, particularly tree planting.

Still, many recently established NGOs require both grant and technical assistance provided by FFI and Bashat (CBF). It would be unrealistic to expect continuous financial and technical support to local initiatives. For this reason, it is important to provide for sustainability at a local level. With this idea in mind, FFI and Bashat (CBF) promoted joining up of NGOs – the SGP recipients and establishment of two regional associations: Issyk-Kul Bashaty and Naryn Bashaty. These associations are developing the skills and resources they will need to provide daily technical assistance and support to local NGOs.

In 2007, Bashat (CBF) and FFI are expanding the SGP into two new regions of Kyrgyzstan: Jalal-Abad and Osh Oblasts. Bordering Uzbekistan and Tajikistan these two Oblasts are considered poorer than Issyk-Kul and poverty levels are comparable to Naryn Oblast. The position of women is especially difficult here due to the socio-cultural influences of neighboring countries. Very few women participate in elections and local governance and civil society is almost exclusively male dominated. There are no NGOs focusing on women's rights or

improving livelihood in rural areas. Such issues as alcoholism, domestic violence, awareness raising on women's rights, in addition to community development and environmental issues will be targeted by the SGP.

Thus, in 2008 Bashat (CBF), with continued support from FFI, would like to provide further support to the Naryn and Issyk-Kul Regional Associations so as to better enable them to support the NGOs on a daily basis. Furthermore, following the successful example of the SGP work in Naryn and Issyk-Kul, Bashat (CBF) would like to bring its work in the southern regions of Kyrgyzstan to a comparable level and alleviate local women's status and livelihoods.

In addition to SGP, there are a number of other projects implemented jointly by Bashat (CBF) and FFI in Kyrgyzstan. These include: a project on Institutional Capacity Building for Biodiversity Conservation in the Kyrgyz Republic (Sarychat-Ertash State Reserve and communities residing close to the reserve) funded by EBRD, IFC and Kumtor Operating Company; Institutional Capacity Building of Bashat (CBF) funded by The Christensen Fund, which also includes a pilot project "Sacred Sites of Kyrgyzstan"; and a project on Community Conservation of Fruit and Nut Forests in the Kyrgyz Republic funded by the Directorate General for International Cooperation of the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

### **Bashat's (CBF) Cooperation with SLT**

Snow leopards and their prey are under extremely high pressure in Kyrgyzstan and there is a substantial risk that they will be extirpated from large parts of the country. These animals are an integral part of the Tien Shan ecosystem, and are a national cultural treasure for the Kyrgyz Republic which must be conserved for future generations. The root cause of many threats to snow leopard population is human poverty and lack of awareness. Economic conditions in rural areas are so dire that poaching and sale of wildlife is one of the few viable sources of income for poor families. In many cases those people are not even aware of the illegality of their actions, or of the many reasons for conserving wildlife. Recognizing poaching as one of the major threat to snow leopard population in Kyrgyzstan SLT and Bashat (CBF) launched snow leopard conservation program in 2002. This conservation program consists of three components:

1. Research and monitoring of snow leopard population and its prey species using SLIMS (snow leopard sign surveys):

Sarychat-Ertash State Reserve was selected as a pilot site for monitoring snow leopard and its prey population. The Reserve was established in 1995 to protect snow leopard population and the mountain ecosystem they depend on. Our Research and Monitoring component is aimed at estimating population size and trends for both snow leopards and their prey, including argali and ibex. In 2002 a research team was formed, which received special training in field methods and data analyses. This component is very important in deciding where conservation programs should be implemented, and then observing the impacts of those programs. Research and monitoring has now expanded to the Naryn Reserve and we look toward expanding to other key snow leopard sites in the country.

2. Snow Leopard Enterprises (SLE) – a community-based conservation programme:

Community-based conservation component (SLE) involves local communities, living in snow leopard habitat. This component is mainly focused on income generating activities in two villages Ak-Shyirak and Inilchek situated close to the reserve's periphery. Felt handicrafts produced by the villagers, who are mainly rangers' wives, are marketed through zoo stores and

other retail outlets in USA. Each year Conservation Contracts are signed with local communities, which says they will not poach on snow leopards and SLT will pay a bonus of 20% of their goods' sale, in return. Regular trainings on handicrafts production with involvement of designers from Bishkek are provided in the target villages. Local women are trained in improvement of their products' quality, new designs and colour combinations, as well as methods of felt dying.

3. Environment education and awareness programme for schoolchildren and local communities living close to the habitat of snow leopard:

Environmental education and public awareness program started in 2003. The main aim of the component is to raise awareness in local communities about snow leopard conservation issues. Within this component workshops and trainings are organized for local communities; a manual for schoolteachers on snow leopard conservation was published for children and women in Ak-Shyirak and Inilchek villages. In addition to the manual, articles and booklets are published; a photo-exhibition about snow leopards and an eco-camp for children from local communities are organized.

An effective conservation program can succeed when it includes as many aspects as possible which are affecting conservation issues. Conservation efforts can be efficient only when nature's and people's needs are met, when local communities, educational institutions, and other conservation and research organizations are involved in this process. Bearing this in mind, in April 2006, Bashat (CBF) with support of SLT and the Small Grants Program of GEF/UNDP has begun implementation of the project "Snow Leopard and Mountain Eco-systems Conservation by Local Communities of Issyk-Kul and Naryn Oblasts through Development of Their Economic Capacities".

The goal of the project reads as follows: *To develop sustainable ecotourism involving local communities to provide them with alternative sources of income with the aim of decreasing poaching level on snow leopard and its prey base and conserving its habitat.*

The project is built on the scheme of already existing projects. Thus, it consists of the following three components: 1) conducting research; 2) organizing public unions – shops engaging local communities in production and sale of felt products; 3) increasing awareness of local communities about nature conservation; and a new component – 4) developing ecotourism in local communities as a new type of income generating activity attracting local and foreign tourists.

The first component is aimed at training local residents how to conduct basic wildlife research using the standardized SLIMS field methodology. Local residents trained in this methodology can use the skills gained in their work with tourists. They can teach tourists interested in snow leopards how to look for their sign (footprints, scrapes, etc.) and even how to fill in field data forms. Local people thus participate in conducting surveys of snow leopard signs and receive profit from this activity. Data obtained as a result of such cooperation is also of scientific value and will be entered in the database maintained by Bashat (CBF).

The second component helps establish shops producing felt items, and includes training of local residents on how to make felt products, which will later be sold at foreign markets. Revival of traditional handicrafts will provide local communities with the opportunity of sustainable development. Tourists visiting these communities will be able to take part in the process of product making for a fixed price. They can learn how to make felt, dye it, cut out and sew products of it. Usually, the whole process takes 1 to 1,5 hours and costs around 250 soms, which is not a bad income for local residents.

According to the third component, trainings and seminars among the local people on raising their awareness about local and global ecological problems, importance of biodiversity, and, in particular, snow leopard for global and local eco-system, will be conducted. As a result of participation in training seminars about environmental protection, people living on and near the territory of the reserves will gain new attitude to wild nature, its value and importance in eco-system and their own lives. Lessons about snow leopard will be taught in schools and ecological camps for rangers' children.

In addition to the three components stated above, a new development on ecotourism will be developed in the areas of snow leopard habitat. The ecotourism component includes workshops and training seminars on ecotourism with attraction of specialists of tourist agencies, as well as research on SLIMS methodology. This component plans to develop local tourist infrastructure. Tourists will participate in research activities, e.g. making snow leopard transects, observing or taking immediate part in production of handicrafts items, watching local nature and local people's way of life, etc. There are also planned recreational activities, when tourists come to see the nature. In this case, they will be able to watch and participate in games on horse back and other cultural events. Tourists will be able to visit local sights, such as sacred sites, historical burial sites, etc. This will also bring some profit to local residents.

Currently, there is lack of information about snow leopards in Kyrgyzstan. In order for the program on nature conservation to be effective, local people should be interested and empowered to protect their natural wealth, such as snow leopard. Bashat (CBF) and SLT have extensive experience in conducting a number of projects on nature conservation in cooperation with local residents, on snow leopard population recovery and revival of ecological integrity at landscape level. Both organizations believe that it is very important to increase economic potential of local people and provide them with the opportunity of finding a source of income for their livelihoods in order to decrease their impact on the environment, including snow leopard hunting and decline in the number of its prey species.

Project activities implemented by Bashat (CBF) and SLT address the root causes by offering trainings, alternative income sources, and awareness raising activities in exchange for assurances that snow leopards and their prey will not be killed. All these measures should help local people understand the need to conserve snow leopards.

### **Conclusion**

The overall economic and social situation in Kyrgyzstan endangers biodiversity conservation and its viability in the long run. The people, especially those residing in remote rural communities, have increased the use of natural resources for their existence, not realizing that their practices are not always environmentally friendly.

Bashat's (CBF) community-based conservation programmes will allow local communities to support themselves through the development and implementation of environmentally friendly income-generating activities. Furthermore, the development of eco-educational programs and organization of public awareness campaigns will help communities to learn and adopt sustainable methods of use of biological and landscape diversity.

Bashat (CBF) anticipates that by involving local communities in the process of restoring cultural traditions, promoting livelihoods, establishing an effective network of community based biodiversity conservation NGOs, and helping to educate and assist local communities' capacity building, pressure on natural resources use will be decreased.



The experience of Bashat (CBF) and its partner organizations FFI and SLT over the last few years has demonstrated that given the opportunity, women can become successful local community and project leaders and in doing so, they can make significant improvements to their own and their community's socio-economic and local environmental conditions.