



Is there decentralization in North Korea? Evidence and lessons from the sloping land management program 2004–2014



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ABSTRACT

In the 1990s, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) suffered from severe food shortages and large-scale deforestation, which triggered a stage of rural conservation reform. Since 2004, with support from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), North Korea's Ministry of Land and Environmental Protection (MoLEP) has implemented a Sloping Land Management Program (SLMP). The SLMP established sloping land user groups and granted these groups the right to use marginal land for agroforestry development. This devolution of land rights from state control onto local groups is a landmark in North Korea, and this decentralization initiative has now expanded to over eight counties to involve thousands of households. It has also led to the launch of a National Agroforestry Policy and Strategy. Drawing from both qualitative and quantitative data collected from 2008 to 2014, this paper documents the process and effects of the SLMP. It argues that the decentralization reform in land management has contributed to not only food security with increased food crop diversity and productivity, but also notably forest recovery through an expansion of tree plantations and agroforestry practices on degraded sloping lands. However, an insufficient power transfer in the form of a lack of timber rights granted to the local user groups has hampered the effectiveness of the SLMP. There are also institutional and geopolitical challenges that are limiting further scaling-up of land-use decentralization across the country. The policy implication calls for more international investment as well as national land-use policy reforms in order to promote and facilitate further decentralization of sloping land management and to secure greater use rights for sloping land user groups.

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1. Introduction

Over the last two decades, decentralization has become a policy instrument to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of natural resource management worldwide (Manor, 1999; WB, 2000; WRI, 2003). Rich international literature has developed on the myriad forms and intents of these policies and their impacts on rural development. Among the many motivations of governments to decentralize, one of the most common is a desire to improve the efficiency of government administration and delivery of public services (Rondinelli and Nellis, 1986; Rondinelli et al., 1989; Manor, 1999; Larson and Ribot 2004). Many governments also believe that decentralization can reduce central government costs and alleviate

financial burdens on the public purse (Thornton, 2007). Decentralization is also promoted by international donor agencies and United Nations organizations as a natural complement to economic liberalization and the imposition of fiscal discipline (Faguet, 2014). In developing countries, decentralization has been widely pursued for sustainable natural resource management (Ribot and Larson, 2005; Larson and Soto, 2008; Colfer et al., 2008; Hartter and Ryan, 2010) and now increasingly for coping with climate change (Adger et al., 2011; Phelps et al., 2010; Larson 2010).

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea) is, however, an exception. Since its founding in 1948, the country has maintained state control of natural resources based on the Soviet Model (Noland, 2004; YNA, 2014), where the state owns all resources and primary production is achieved through collective farms and cooperatives. Agricultural returns are allocated by the state through a ration system known as the Public Distribution System (Katona-Apte and Mokdad, 1998). Under this system of state marketing and distribution of grain, any forms of private

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production and trade were prohibited (Noland et al., 2001). However, such a centralized system suffered dearly after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the ensuing radical changes in geopolitics and economy (Hippel and Peter, 2007). During the 1990s, North Korea's economic decline and extreme weather conditions involving floods and droughts catastrophically reduced agricultural production and compromised the central government's ability to supply food to the nation's rural people (Xu et al., 2012). In the late 1990s, the country was famished and it has since battled an on-going food crisis that has been exacerbated by adverse weather events and geopolitical shocks (Noland et al., 2001; Haggard and Noland, 2009). Severe flooding occurred across the country during 2006 and 2007, and also in 2006 external aid was cut following the government's controversial missile and nuclear tests (Haggard and Noland, 2009).

The food and energy shortages pressured people to cut trees for fuelwood and to cultivate steep slopes for food production (Tang et al., 2010; Pang et al., 2013). Recent studies show that forest cover in North Korea declined from 74% to 57.7% between 1980 and 2000, while agricultural land increased from 16.9% to 23.2% (Kang and Choi, 2014). Intensified clearing of forests and marginal land for food, timber and fuelwood production has led to upland degradation, resulting in reduced rural productivity, food insecurity, damage to natural resources and watershed services, and losses to biodiversity (Lee et al., 2005). The North Korean government responded in 2002 with a large-scale afforestation program and upland reform to engage local people for improved management of steeply sloping land. Lacking adequate fertilizer, seed stock and appropriate species, these efforts failed to halt the degradation of sloping lands (Xu et al., 2012; He et al., 2015). The central government felt the urgent need to reform the agricultural sector to solve the environmental degradation issues and improve the country's food security.

In 2004, the North Korean Ministry of Land and Environment Protection (MoLEP) and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) (an international aid agency) began collaborating to implement the Sloping Land Management Program (SLMP). The SLMP introduced agroforestry to North Korea through a pilot program. Differing from conventional humanitarian aid, which had provided food and tree seedlings only, the SLMP established sloping land user groups that obtained land-use rights for afforestation through agroforestry. By devolving land-use rights from the state onto small groups of local people, this initiative marks the beginning of a tentative but significant shift from centralized to decentralized natural resource management in the highly centralized country of North Korea. Internationally, this move towards decentralization in North Korea is something that is both little understood and barely documented.

This study examines the budding land-rights reforms in North Korea that are delegating sloping land management to user groups, which is consistent with decentralization and Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) paradigms. The paper documents the process of the SLMP's development and implementation, explores the outcomes of the reform from environmental, socioeconomic and policy perspectives, and analyses how these outcomes were achieved. Our research also reveals the institutional and geopolitical challenges that may hamper the decentralization on a nation-wide scale. As such, the paper contributes to existing literature on CBNRM and decentralization of natural resource management elsewhere and fills the gap in this particular topic in the North Korean context with three key contributions. Firstly, it is one of the first empirical and grounded analyses documenting decentralization reform in North Korea. Secondly, it employs quantitative and qualitative strategies to document both the environmental and social outcomes of decentralization, whereas many studies on decentralization are confined to a political perspective. And thirdly, the study contributes to the geopolitical debates on

North Korea in order to improve the effectiveness of international aid to this country.

To set the context for the research, we next review the literature on decentralization with a particular focus on CBNRM before providing the background to the SLMP. Details of the study sites and research methods are then provided. In the following combined results and discussion section we sketch the context of emerging user groups and the actors and governance processes in the SLMP, as well as the environmental, socioeconomic and political outcomes of the decentralization reform. This section also discusses the key limitations of the SLMP and challenges for its expansion. The paper concludes with policy recommendations.

2. Decentralization in context of CBNRM

Decentralization usually refers to a power transfer from central authority to lower levels in the political-administrative and territorial hierarchy (Crook and Manor, 1998; Agrawal and Ribot, 1999). From the administrative perspective, decentralization passes "responsibility for planning, management, and allocation of resources on from the central government and its agencies to field units of government agencies, subordinate government units, semi-autonomous public authorities or corporations, regional or functional authorities, or non-governmental private or voluntary organizations" (Rondinelli and Nellis, 1986:5). In natural resource management, decentralization generally refers to the transfer of control over resources from the state to local communities and from central to local governments (Tacconi, 2007; Agrawal et al., 2008). In many cases, in order to improve effectiveness and efficiency of sustainable management, the central government will change laws and regulations, redefining the legal rights of local people and state bodies with respect to natural resources (Agrawal and Ostrom, 2001; Agrawal et al., 2008; Larson, 2010; Bixler, 2014).

In practice, the decentralization of natural resource management has been initiated in the light of global efforts towards CBNRM and with financial support from international donors and non-government organisations (NGOs) (Leach et al., 1999; Agrawal and Gibson, 1999; Tacconi, 2007; Toole, 2010). Across the world, CBNRM has been implemented in different forms: in the establishment of community forestry in Nepal (Thoms, 2008), in setting up joint forest management in India (Agrawal and Chhatre, 2006), in promoting popular participation in forest management in Africa (Ribot et al., 2010), in strengthening collective action in China (Plummer and Taylor, 2004) and in improving indigenous rights over natural resources in Latin America (Stocks et al., 2007). The common characteristic of CBNRM is to create new political openings through which communities can articulate their rights over land and resources, partly ensuring that resource-dependent peoples have their relative rights and responsibilities to govern natural resources recognized by neighbours, civil society and the state with support from NGOs or other international donor organizations (Dressler et al., 2010).

Through decentralization in the form of CBNRM, the secured rights and local control over natural resources can provide a great incentive for sustainable management, leading to improved local livelihoods and positive ecological outcomes (Agrawal and Gibson, 1999; Klooster, 1999; Agrawal and Ostrom, 2001; Larson, 2005). For example, in Nepal, use-rights granted to local communities has enabled local access to forest benefits and provided incentives for forest conservation, resulting in forest recovery (Thoms, 2008). In India, the forest condition has been significantly improved after joint forest management initiatives devolved forest rights to local communities (Agrawal and Chhatre, 2006). Positive outcomes in both livelihood and forest management have also been documented in Africa after forest rights have been granted to local

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