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MountainPlatform

The University of Central Asia's Mountain Societies Research Centre (MSRC)

UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL ASIA
MOUNTAIN SOCIETIES RESEARCH CENTRE

The University of Central Asia (UCA) is committed to addressing sustainable mountain development through the design and implementation of its academic programs and in its operations. In June 2011, UCA launched its first university-wide, interdisciplinary research center—the Mountain Societies Research Centre (MSRC).

University of Central Asia: a mountain development university

The University of Central Asia (UCA) seeks to promote the social and economic development of Central Asia, particularly of its mountain societies, while at the same time helping the different peoples of the region to preserve and draw upon their rich cultural traditions and heritages as assets for the future. UCA is an institution born of a forward-thinking treaty among the governments of Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and the Kyrgyz Republic, and His Highness the Aga Khan, for the benefit of a region that has often been denied opportunity because of its mountain geography and history. UCA's commitment to mountain development is reflected in the decision, arrived jointly with the three host governments, to locate its campuses in economically depressed mountain communities in the three countries.

UCA began operations in 2006 with its School of Professional and Continuing Education. More than 40,000 individuals have subsequently earned internationally benchmarked certificates aimed at improving skills and employability. In 2008, UCA began its Central Asian Faculty Development Program and has since supported more than 40 individuals to pursue PhD degrees at partner universities around the world. Faculty development fellows will return to Central Asia to serve as UCA's founding faculty at the commencement of UCA's degree programs. UCA's core undergraduate and graduate degree programs, targeted to begin in 2016, will include interdisciplinary, place-based programs focusing on core competencies and application to local, regional, and global challenges (Figure 1).

Research is also central to UCA. In 2011, UCA launched 2 research units: the Institute for Public Policy and Administration and the Mountain Societies Research Centre (MSRC). This article introduces the Mountain Societies Research Centre and summarizes the centre's initial outputs.

Research for the development of mountain societies

The MSRC is a university-wide, interdisciplinary research center dedicated to supporting and enhancing the resilience and quality of life of mountain societies through sound research on the sustainable development and management of their physical, social, economic, and cultural assets. The centre has five objectives:

1. Generate and disseminate relevant knowledge though sound research.
2. Build Central Asian capacity to conduct research relevant to mountain societies.
3. Inform the policy and practice of sustainable mountain development through evidence-based research.
4. Serve as a knowledge hub in Central Asia for scholars, development practitioners, and policy-makers.
5. Support the development of relevant UCA academic programs.

Developing a contextualized and application-focused research agenda

Through consultations with regional and international sustainable mountain development experts, 6 broad thematic areas were identified as initial areas of focus for MSRC's research agenda:

1. *Mountain economies,* including high-elevation agriculture and pastoralism, mountain market chains, labor migration, small and medium-sized enterprises and microfinance, and nature and culture-based tourism.
2. *Environmental change and natural resource governance,* including sustainable land management, climate change and adaptation and mitigation practices, and biodiversity conservation and the equitable sharing of its benefits.
3. *Natural hazards and disaster risk management,* including risk and vulnerability assessment, mitigation, and preparedness.
4. *Health status and services,* including food security, nutrition, health care access and provision in remote and severe environments, and ailments prevalent in or unique to mountain societies.
5. *Energy in mountain areas,* including alternative and renewable sources of energy, energy-related economic opportunities, and social and environmental assessment of energy production.
6. *Cultural heritage,* including documenting, preserving, and advancing the study of mountain society heritages and examining the relevance of cultural heritage to mountain societies today.

Using these broad and interconnected themes as a guide,

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FIGURE 1 Kyrgyz government and civil society members participate in a Rapid Rural Appraisal training organized by UCA's MSRC and Mountain Partnership. (Photo © University of Central Asia/Mikhail Romanyuk)



MSRC is developing a series of background papers that aim to (1) identify the particular challenges and opportunities of Central Asian mountain societies, (2) assess the state of knowledge on identified challenges and opportunities, and (3) assess the lessons learned from previous attempts to apply scientific knowledge to action in these areas. The final outcome of the background papers is a contextualized research agenda based on critical gaps and clear links to policy or implementation practice. A synthesis of MSRC's first background paper, on Central Asian mountain pastoralism, is featured in the MountainNotes section of this issue of MRD (Kerven et al 2012). The full version can be accessed in English and Russian at http://msrc.ucentralasia.org/events.asp.

Working with national and international partners

In its inaugural year, MSRC successfully laid the foundation for its role as a regional facilitator of research, information exchange, and action by scholars, practitioners, and policy-makers on critical issues faced by mountain societies in Central Asia. MSRC was designed as a collaborative effort, and the centre is working closely with universities, other institutions, and individual researchers to create important networks and partnerships to further its mission.

MSRC serves as a regional focal point for key international networks and agencies, including the Mountain Partnership and the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) North-South, and has been a key player in international advocacy efforts to ensure that issues of concern to Central Asian mountain societies are well represented at international forums such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP17) and the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20 Summit).

Closer to home, MSRC has engaged in joint research efforts and has produced resources and guidelines to support efforts by Central Asian mountain communities as they harness their unique natural and cultural resources to address emerging issues (Figure 2). Following are a few examples of MSRC's first outputs. Additional information on these and other outputs can be found on the MSRC website.

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FIGURE 2 A UCA Central Asian Faculty Development fellow conducts field research. (Photo © Zheenbek Kulenbekov)



Symposium on mountain pastoralism: MSRC's inaugural event, cohosted by the NCCR North-South, was an international symposium on pastoralism in Central Asian mountain areas attended by 140 researchers, practitioners, and policy-makers from more than 20 countries. The event included scientific and implementation-focused presentations, policy roundtables, and a 3-day field visit based from UCA's facilities in Naryn, Kyrgyzstan. Participants also provided structured feedback on a draft version of MSRC's first background paper on mountain pastoralism.

Herders' manuals: Also in collaboration with the NCCR North-South, MSRC produced herders' manuals for Kyrgyzstan and the Western Pamir region of Tajikistan. Drawing on local expertise of Central Asian herders, the manuals provide a combination of traditional knowledge about key pasture plants and current scientific knowledge about sustainable pasture management, livestock production, and health management. The manuals are designed for on-the-job training of livestock herders, village pasture committees, and other village-level pasture management and monitoring organizations. They are available in the English, Russian, Kyrgyz, and Tajik languages at http://msrc.ucentralasia.org/Herders-Manual.

Preparatory meeting for government climate change negotiators: Jointly organized by MSRC and the Mountain Partnership in collaboration with the government of Tajikistan and with support from the World Bank, MSRC hosted a regional technical meeting on Climate Change Impacts, Adaptation, and Development in Mountain Regions. Thirty-five experts from Tajikistan, Kyrgyz Republic, Azerbaijan, Iran, Nepal, and Mongolia came together to strengthen regional inputs for climate-change negotiations and to integrate concerns over potential impacts of climate change and adaptation options in mountain ecosystems into international processes, including COP17 and the Rio+20 Summit.

Progress report on sustainable mountain development since 1992: MSRC also served as the focal point for a Central Asian regional assessment of progress related to the 1992 Earth Summit goals specific to the sustainable development of mountain areas (Chapter 13 of Agenda 21). With support from the Swiss Agency for Development and Corporation, the MSRC, Mountain Partnership Central Asia Hub, and

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Zoi Network facilitated a process to identify and consolidate trends, developments, lessons, and opportunities for action in Central Asia. Fifteen case studies were compiled on activities by stakeholders including nongovernmental organizations, government agencies, and Mountain Partnership member organizations in Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, and Tajikistan. The regional assessment—which was presented at the Lucerne World Mountain Conference—contributed to a global synthesis report used by delegates during the Rio+20 Summit and relevant regional events.

Special issue of MRD: Finally, this special issue is another important outcome of MSRC. The publication of this theme issue supports MSRC's objective to raise the standard and visibility of Central Asian mountain societies research and researchers.

Looking ahead

With a rapidly expanding staff of researchers and solidification of local and international partners, MSRC is enhancing its capacity to advance sound research for sustainable mountain development in Central Asia. Through its series of background papers, a clear research agenda is being developed to practically address issues facing mountain societies in Central Asia, and as UCA's academic programs progress toward full operation, MSRC will also work to ensure that these academic offerings are grounded in recent and relevant research. MSRC is well positioned within UCA and the region to make a significant contribution as an intellectual hub to improve the quality of life and resilience of Central Asian mountain societies through action-oriented research that will enhance relevant policies and practice.

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