

COMMONS FORUM *RESPONSE*

Response to: [Exploring New Approaches to Community Governance](#), by David Brunckhorst

Applying Community Governance for Local Benefit: The Case of the High Atlas Mountains, Morocco

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As an ethnobiologist, what Brunckhorst describes in his article is very relevant to what I have been working on. What seems to be prevalent in all areas of development whether landscape development, natural resources management or biodiversity conservation, is a the key issue of true representation of local actors. I strongly agree with Brunckhorst when he states in the lead essay that “concepts and applications of property and policy are influential drivers within landscapes and regions.” To this I would add, “how to ensure that the right decisions and policy applications are applied in the right measure for beneficial future outcomes?” This is indeed a difficult task. I will cut through the theoretical framework that has been presented in the article and come straight to the context that applies to my work. The place where I am currently researching, the High Atlas Mountains of Morocco, certainly confirms these issues at stake. In this, what I ask myself is what will be the long-term consequences and what kind of impact will ensue from the decisions applied now?

In this particular location, customary law, the traditional Jama institution gave the right to local people to harvest medicinal plants and to collect wood for cooking and building purposes. On one hand, this practise has greatly contributed to the erosion of the local natural resources; but on the other hand, it has permitted the local population to fulfil their basic needs and to bring a valuable cash income to the household, especially as regard the local aromatic plants. In the last few years however, the local population has become increasingly aware of the potential economic value of the resources as well as the sustainability issues. It is relevant to point out that this population is illiterate, living in a non-monetary system, and living in what I would call chronic poverty conditions.

Over the past three years, a project to distil essential oils has slowly emerged. This initiative is high on the development institutions’ agenda, that of targeting poverty, natural resource erosion and out-migration of the area. This decentralized distillation project is the only one in the region and represents a significant economic opportunity for local people. However, the villagers have never taken part in any major commercial venture before. Furthermore, lack of secure tenure to the areas where the plants are gathered, together with lack of political representation and empowerment, are key obstacles to sustaining this economic opportunity. A handful of external agents are implicated in this operation, the local Department of Water and Forestry being one of them. Over time, this particular Department has assumed ownership over most of the land and

while under the new agreement in connection with the project, local people will hire the land from the latter for the purpose of harvesting the aromatic plants. To this effect, a contract will be signed between the parties. This is an instance where the representation of community interests that Brunckhorst refers to is of vital importance.

Following the point that Brunckhorst has made regarding the role of property concepts, applications and policies and their possible resulting negative impacts over resource management and biodiversity conservation, it would seem appropriate to question the long-term effects of implementation of the current agreement. What is even more relevant in this case is not only will the land access for harvesting the aromatic plants strongly depend on this agreement, so will the resulting income issued from the transformation of these raw resources.

To date, the local villagers have collected the aromatic plants in an unofficial manner, therefore getting a more or less strong income from the collection of these aromatic plants. Although this source of income is only spread over a period of two to three months, it is a vital economic support for the household.

Tine De Moore has clearly made the point (2007 *The Commons eDigest*) that “negative impacts of human interactions do not become apparent for some time;” one may question the long-term repercussions of this policy implementation. I would add to this that additional parallel systems should be developed to buffer unseen circumstances and (or) unpredicted outcomes.

This enterprise initiative is of vital importance to the local population of this valley. The “eco-civic regionalisation” that Brunckhorst has described does, in my view encapsulate in theory the principles of good local governance and what could be a true representation of the local actors. For this project in the High Atlas Mountains, a major step has been achieved and that is the partnership and “integration” of local political-governmental institutions into development initiatives. Where I remain skeptical is the long-term results and impacts of such implications. My position on this and to conclude, is that although these institutions will play an important role in promoting and supporting development, local actors remain the vital and most suitable elements and must occupy a prime place in any development policies.

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