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Can the green economy enhance sustainable mountain development? The potential role of awareness building

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ABSTRACT

Mountain socio-ecological systems produce valuable but complex ecosystem services resulting from biomes stratified by altitude and gravity. These systems are often managed and shaped by smallholders whose marginalization is exacerbated by uncertainties and a lack of policy attention. Human–environment interfaces in mountains hence require holistic policies. We analyse the potential of the Global Mountain Green Economy Agenda (GMGEA) in building awareness and thus prompting cross-sectoral policy strategies for sustainable mountain development. Considering the critique of the green economy presented at the Rio + 20 conference, we argue that the GMGEA can nevertheless structure knowledge and inform regional institutions about the complexity of mountain socio-ecological systems, a necessary precondition to prompt inter-agency collaboration and cross-sectoral policy formulation. After reviewing the content of the GMGEA, we draw on two empirical cases in the Pakistani and Nepali Himalayas. First, we show that lack of awareness has led to a sequence of fragmented interventions with unanticipated, and unwanted, consequences for communities. Second, using a green economy lens, we show how fragmentation could have been avoided and cross-sectoral policies yielded more beneficial results. Project fragmentation reflects disconnected or layered policies by government agencies, which inherently keep specialized agendas and have no incentive to collaborate. Awareness makes agencies more likely to collaborate and adopt cross-sectoral approaches, allowing them to target more beneficiaries, be more visible, and raise more funds. Nevertheless, we also identify four factors that may currently still limit the effect of the GMGEA: high costs of inter-agency collaboration, lack of legitimacy of the green economy, insufficiently-secured smallholder participation, and limited understanding of the mechanisms through which global agendas influence local policy.

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1. Introduction

Mountains provide a range of unique services, both ecological and cultural. They are home to high biological diversity as a result of vertical climate and biome stratification (Ning et al., 2014). However, the management of mountain landscapes involves numerous challenges and trade-offs due to environmental variations along altitudinal gradients. Hence, the interaction of people and the environment across mountain ecotones greatly increases policy and planning complexity compared to socio-ecological systems elsewhere (Ning et al., 2014; Rahim et al., 2011).

This study analyses the pathway from a global agenda – in this case, the green economy – to local policy. It does so by examining the role of *awareness building* on decisions by government agencies to adopt cross-sectoral policies, and by examining the consequences of not doing so. In this paper, *awareness* refers to the flow of information and knowledge that has been organized, structured, and disseminated, and that can change the perception of issues beyond the usual scope of a specific field. Awareness can have various forms and scales; it does not occur all at once, but requires a process of *building*. Awareness may trigger a process of consultation in which government agencies collaborate and implement cross-sectoral policies involving a wider array of stakeholders and targeting more beneficiaries.

We argue that the Global Mountain Green Economy Agenda (GMGEA) can support sustainable development and marginalized communities in mountain regions. By structuring knowledge and calling for a holistic approach, the GMGEA can build the aforementioned awareness needed to trigger an incentive for government agencies to work towards cross-sectoral policy collaboration. Policies that are not cross-sectoral are fragmented, meaning that they address only specific issues with less consideration for consequences beyond the scope of an intervention. Fragmentation also denotes a situation in which donors and agencies intervene in isolation and/or compete in the same area or issue (Frot and Santiso, 2010). Fragmentation largely results from a lack of coordination among donors, lack of ownership by local stakeholders, and lack of dialogue between government agencies running specific and divided agendas (Cabral, 2009). Cross-sectoral approaches are intended to be more holistic, intervene at landscape or system level, and hence target more beneficiaries in more integrated ways (Cabral, 2009; OECD, 2008; IFAD, 2006). Bryson et al. (2006) define cross-sectoral collaboration as: “*The linking or sharing of information, resources, activities, and capabilities by organizations in two or more sectors to achieve jointly an outcome that could not be achieved by organizations in one sector separately.*” Fragmentation in mountain development remains the norm and cross-sectoral approaches the exception, largely due to lack of awareness (ICIMOD, 2012).

We posit that efficient cross-sectoral initiatives are contingent on awareness because these initiatives can occur only if government actors are aware (i) of the complexity of mountain socio-ecological systems, (ii) that cross-sectoral approaches yield more results than fragmented ones (Bryson et al., 2006), (iii) that cross-sectoral policy is unlikely to occur

without inter-agency collaboration (Rayner and Howlett, 2009). The demand for inter-agency collaboration is also likely to increase with growing awareness (Ansell and Gash, 2007).

The above is elucidated by analysing whether two long-term development interventions in the Hindu Kush Himalayas of Pakistan and Nepal have failed because of lack of awareness, and whether applying the guidelines given by the GMGEA would have potentially delivered superior outcomes.

The next two sections present, respectively, the methods used, the outlines of the green economy principles, and the GMGEA. This is followed by a review of two case studies. In the discussion, we analyse why a specialist approach is inherent to government agencies, and how the GMGEA provides an incentive towards cross-sectoral approaches through awareness.

2. Methods

Descriptive and qualitative approaches were used to analyse two case studies in the Himalayas of Pakistan and Nepal. The case studies were selected for their long-term (ca. 30 years) processes of failed development despite various adjustments. They were underway before the green economy agenda existed. The case study in Pakistan was based on three years of intensive field work and observations among herder communities, and exchange with government agencies and NGOs. The case study in Nepal was based on literature reviews and interviews with a key resource person who has published extensively on the food crisis in the region.

The two case studies are first described historically. Using the GMGEA guidelines presented below, ex-post analyses are used to identify where both cases showed failed development outcomes ranked against the GMGEA guidelines.¹ In Pakistan, a real situation observation analysed how the GMGEA guidelines built awareness and triggered formulation of a cross-sectoral policy. In Nepal, ex-ante analysis was used to anticipate the potential effect of the GMGEA guidelines in triggering awareness and cross-sectoral policymaking.

Lack of awareness as a cause of failure is identified when actors have elaborated policies that exclude certain communities and their well-being, and there is evidence of policy fragmentation. Nonetheless, lack of awareness is surely not the sole cause of development failures, as political decisions and complex bureaucracy may also play a role. As we were unable to isolate lack of awareness from other factors such as political and economic, we describe all potential factors. Through observation and accounts by actors, we provide evidence of the impact of lack of awareness.

2.1. Green economy and sustainable development in the mountain ecosystem context

According to UNEP, the green economy aims at “*improved human well-being and social equity, while significantly reducing environmental risks and ecological scarcities*” (UNEP, 2010). It is

¹ The case studies preceded formulation of the GMGEA guidelines of Kohler et al. (2012).

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