The salience of local labor organization in Morocco's high atlas

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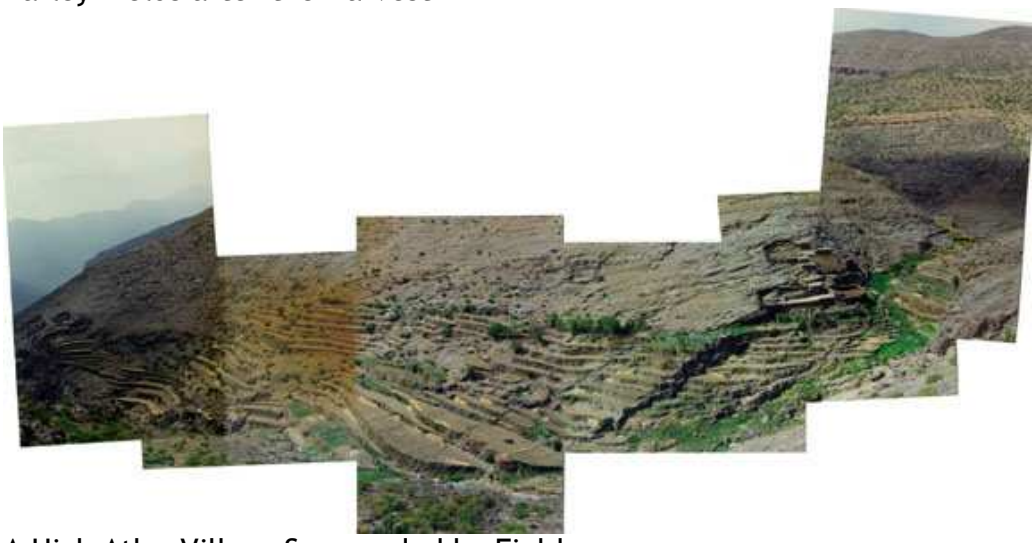
2002

Keywords: highlands, environmental degradation, poverty, livelihood, Morocco.

Images:

Barley Fields after the Harvest



A High Atlas Village Surrounded by Fields

A Map of Morocco indicating the study area, the Agoundis Valley

Introduction

The High Atlas Mountains of Morocco evince many of the "poverty and livelihood" issues found among mountain communities generally (Rasmussen and Parvez 2002). In particular, High Atlas communities are experiencing environmental degradation that is both a cause and a consequence of acute rural poverty. The mountains are not isolated from the rest of the country, of course. Remy Leveau writes that in 1998 Morocco "ranked 125th in the world on the United Nations Human Development Index. It comes a long way behind Algeria and Tunisia, and even behind Egypt and Syria, looking at the statistics for schooling, health care and per capita GDP" (1998). As bad as the wider social situation might be, things are worse in the countryside, where, for instance, 50% of the population resides but only 10% of the education budget is spent (Khandker et al. 1994). There are few statistical measures specifically of Morocco's mountain areas, though they certainly do not fare any better than the rural case in general.

A key government, and international, response to poverty and environmental degradation in one part of the High Atlas (immediately south of Marrakech) involves an attempt to increase tourism to the region while bringing under control certain local extractive practices such as grazing and wood gathering. As part of the World Bank funded "Morocco Protected Area Management Project" (World Bank 1997), the area around Jebel Toubkal, the highest mountain in North Africa, is receiving special attention as a national park. Fourteen months of anthropological research in a village on the borders of this park suggests several challenges facing the Project, some of which seem

common to other mountain areas, and some of which are particular to the Moroccan, and High Atlas, context. I suggest that research aiming to outline and implement "sustainable livelihoods" for mountain communities usually models the relationship between environmental and economic factors well, but too often ignores important social dimensions of sustainability. Human/environment interactions are always mediated through social groups, and at least in the High Atlas economic decisions cannot be understood outside of the households, lineages, villages and irrigation collectives in which they are embedded. The complex, interpenetrating nature of local social forms defies easy categorization, and renders general policy recommendations difficult.

The Social Context of Environmental Degradation: An Example

The Berber-speaking villagers with whom I worked sustain themselves growing barley, almonds and walnuts in terraces of carefully irrigated fields. The canal system is complex and fragile. Seasonal water flow varies tremendously flash floods are not uncommon and the canals are built of little more than mud and rock. Tremendous amounts of physical labor are necessary to survive, and women in particular emphasize the difficulty of their lives. Women must trek for hours into the mountains in search of cooking wood and the terrain is so rugged that women gather fodder and bring it to the family cows because the animals cannot navigate the precipitous trails down to riverside grazing areas. Men generate income by grazing sheep and goats in the high pastures, and migrating for wage labor. Population density per arable acre is extremely high, and seems to be exceeding carrying capacity another incentive for migration (Miller 1984:115, Bencherifa 1983). Some families report yearly cash income as low as US$50, with which they buy shoes, tools, medicine, clothes, tea, sugar, spices, soap, candles and sometimes propane.

The fundamental social unit of both production and consumption is the household, the takat, which literally means "hearth" or "oven." These households have lifecycles, beginning as childless couples living within another extended family, then growing into a freestanding unit, and finally declining until the children and grandchildren take control of the household land. The lifecycle of the households their changing labor resources in relation to fixed amounts of land insures that larger social agglomerations are necessary, especially for communal projects. Households at vulnerable points require assistance from those with more labor, and this assistance can only be paid back over the lifecycle of the households and the humans who constitute them. These intricate, long-term networks of reciprocation are fundamental to coordinated social action.

Canal system maintenance, for instance, cannot be tackled by individuals or individual households, and is instead organized by social groups ideally based on lineage relatedness. In the primary village where I did research, there are three patrilineages or “bones in the local language. These cannot function as

labor organizations, however, because their dendritic organization and demographic inequality renders them highly unequal. One biological lineage has eighteen households while another only has four. The local solution to this problem has been to maintain the ideology of lineage relatedness while organizing households not into three bones, but into five "balanced" labor groups, or fifths. Each fifth provides four laborers for the village for the duration of any communal project, and negotiations over which four men will work are kept within each of the fifths. Since the fifths are thought to be social institutions like lineages, each contains a core of senior men who have "natural" authority over the sons and nephews grouped with them. Thus sons and nephews are pressed to work with the hope that some day they will become senior men and will be in charge of, rather than charged with, laboring. In this way "equality" between senior men is maintained; none of them needs have authority over another.

This recondite and continually renegotiated system is of more than anthropological interest. This division by fifths functions not only for the necessary maintenance of the canal system, but also for labor on development schemes funded and partially implemented from outside. At the time of research there were a dozen projects lined up for the village, though much of the work was only beginning. Local social arrangements designed to allow for the transfer of labor across household boundaries and across temporal scales far longer than any particular project were being put to work for a variety of relatively short-term, exogenously conceived endeavors, such as a potable water system and the construction of a school. Outside agencies make use of the indigenous labor division system, but may not be aware of the ramifications.

In particular, agencies may not take account of the complex ways that power inequalities work in the fifths. The division by fifths contains many elements that are "fair," such as the way some poor households with no excess labor power are incorporated into larger groups who compensate for them. There are also strikingly unfair aspects, however, such as the way the most powerful families manage to group themselves into a single fifth and thus contribute a much smaller percentage of their total household labor than some other families. The labor freed under the system of fifths for the elite households can be put to work elsewhere, for instance shepherding in the high pastures, working for cash in the city that is returned to the village or, in the future, perhaps working with tourists. The way some families manage the "balancing" of the fifths, and the use of the fifths for various kinds of projects, may in fact serve to increase power and wealth differentials in the village.

Moreover, if we conceive of overgrazing as the product not only of excess numbers of animals in the highlands but also of an adequately supported number of shepherds available to watch over them, it is clear that village labor divisions bear directly upon environmental use. The pastures near Jebel

Toubkal are utilized primarily by the richest and poorest families of the villages that surround the national park. The richest have labor to spare for shepherding because they are advantageously positioned in the village labor system. (The very richest even hire shepherds from outside to watch the herds.) The poorest families have so little land that the senior men must do the lonely, difficult shepherding to survive. If the Morocco Protected Area Management Project restricts grazing, this will certainly improve the physical environment by decreasing erosion. It may also improve tourism. However, the social effects of grazing restrictions stand to impact the two ends of the social spectrum the best off and the worst off villagers and this will touch the politics of labor organization that are central to village life.

Conclusions

The Morocco Protected Area Management Project has at least two worthy goals: halting the environmental degradation of the mountains by overgrazing and wood extraction and increasing cash opportunities for local communities through tourism. My contention is that social factors will be critical to realizing such goals. Human relationships are integral to the economy/environment nexus in the High Atlas, and these are difficult to ascertain and more difficult to generalize. Changes to social life go beyond altering gender relations (Rasmussen and Parvez 2002), and in fact touch on the very fabric of rural life, the reproduction of social organization through which people have been eking a living from an unforgiving environment for many hundreds of years.

Social factors stand to be the most likely obstacles to alleviating poverty and creating sustainable livelihoods in the Moroccan mountains. Many people have noticed this, and some important work has been done recently to provide the rich sociological data necessary to understand the issues involved. In addition to overviews by Funnel and Parish (1995) and Bencherifa and Swearingen (1996), empirical work by Mahdi (1999), Rachik (1993), Benabid (1996), Bencherifa (1983, 1988), Bencherifa and Johnson (1991), and Amahan (1998) has expanded our understanding of local situations considerably. A whole issue of the Revue de Géographie Alpine was given over to the "development and protection of the Moroccan mountains" (1996 Number 4) that focused specifically on the issue of mountain tourism. Such studies offer hope that the dynamic social base of environmental and economic processes can be adequately grasped and the findings integrated into policy frameworks.

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Notes to readers

This paper is a case study on Sustainable Livelihoods and Poverty Alleviation. A Mountain Forum e-consultation for the UNEP / Bishkek Global Mountain Summit. 23-28 April 2002.

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