The distribution of ecosystem services in Southern Transylvania: equity implications

Andra Milcu*1

1Leuphana Universitaet, Lueneburg – Scharnhorststraße 1 D 21335 Lüneburg, Germany

Abstract

Literature on the linkages between ecosystems and human well-being unanimously acknowledge the contribution of ES (ecosystem services) to human well-being. However only a few studies reveal who actually benefits, while others point to an unequal distribution of benefits and the emergence of winners and losers. Likewise, community perspectives on equity are seldom examined in the development literature. To address this gap and target a disaggregated perspective on humans and their wellbeing, we addressed the themes suggested by Daw et al. 2011, by looking at the equity implications of development in Southern Transylvania, Romania. We agree that aggregated analyses may neglect crucial aspects such as access mechanisms, individual contexts or cash and employment conceptualized as ES benefits. Our aims were to understand how the benefits derived from ES are shared by different groups of people in the region of Southern Transylvania, and how this may change in the future.

Following five pilot focus groups in Southern Transylvania, we disaggregated ES beneficiaries into five groups. Groups were established using as main criteria locals’ livelihoods (main source of income) and their socio-economic status: major famers, minor farmers, non-farmers, officials, poor people. Using representatives of each of the five groups, we held small focus groups in five villages from Southern Transylvania, a region that has experienced drastic institutional changes and socio-economic shocks over the last few decades. Focus groups were followed by numerous discussions with various locals.

Preliminary findings suggest that people who are long-term leaseholders or owners of large surfaces of land, or that own a large number of cattle are the ones who benefit most from nature in Southern Transylvania. Dynamic mechanisms of access underlying the current distribution of benefits usually revolve around personal history, power (understood as money and/or authority), social relations, access to information and education. Main perceived sources of inequity are caused by ES or resources that relate to raising livestock, especially the trespassing of pastures, hay meadows, the management of subsidies, the organization of markets, and water access. With respect to the most highly scored ES benefits, many of them were linked to the provision of money or employment; for example, depending on the number of livestock, the benefits of using a pasture were strongly linked to the encashment of subsidies. Finally, one of the most surprising findings is that poor people are perceived to be among the least dependent on nature’ benefits given their inability to adapt to the local ruling norms of hard work and agriculture as a livelihood strategy. Poor people are perceived as having low aspirations, capabilities and needs. Opinions about the future of equity in the region differed greatly with an emphasis on the deepening of the gap between winners.

*Speaker
and losers (be it major local farmers or foreign businessmen). To counteract this tendency, focus groups suggested improving farming supporting policies, education, meritocracy, work morale and social capital. Accounting for different groups’ perceptions on equity ensures that ecosystems are being managed fairly and inclusively.

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