



Tropentag, October 5-7, 2011, Bonn

“Development on the margin”

Developing Away from the Land : Non-farm Economy and Social-ecological Resilience in Southern Morocco

YANN LE POLAIN DE WAROUX, ERIC LAMBIN

University of Louvain, George Lemaître Center for Earth and Climate research, Belgium

Abstract

While globalisation is a threat to marginal environments in some places, it may also be opening up new venues for conservation in others. The last few decades have witnessed a shift in many rural areas around the world from a predominantly agrarian economy towards an economy dominated by remittances and non-farm activities, sometimes associated with a release of pressure on local nature resources. This recent phenomenon has implications for development and environment policies in marginal areas that have not yet been fully comprehended.

The present case study is based on original field data collected in 2009–2010, and aims at understanding social-ecological dynamics in a marginal area of Southern Morocco in the context of globalisation. It integrates change detection by remote sensing with a comprehensive retrospective household survey on land use and livelihoods from a series of villages in the argan woodlands of the Suss region.

In the argan woodlands of Southern Morocco, fuelwood sales traditionally acted as a buffer against drought, because wood was the only nature resource available to households in cases of harvest failures. Our data show that fuelwood over-harvesting was partly responsible for an important decline in woodlands density between 1970 and 2007. New labour opportunities in Morocco and abroad have progressively helped to replace this buffer by another, that of wage labour and remittances. The role of local resources in livelihoods has decreased drastically. Livestock numbers have decreased, marginal land has been abandoned, and the number of households selling wood for a living is now close to zero. The reliance on non-farm activities and remittances has shifted the object of vulnerability from climate to markets, as most people now depend on the availability of wage labour, which is not constant. Meanwhile, development and environment policies still focus on nature resource-based livelihoods and resilience to drought, overlooking the new opportunities and threats opened up by this transition to non-farm activities. Our study suggests that supporting and strengthening the shift toward the non-farm economy may do more in some places for development and conservation than improving agricultural productivity.

Keywords: Deforestation, drylands, Morocco, non-farm, policy, remittances