COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF GOVERNANCE MODELS IN MOUNTAIN AREAS. INSIGHTS FOR ASSURING SUSTAINABILITY AND RESILIENCE

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Abstract

The main aim of the article is to explore essential aspects of mountain governance, with a particular emphasis on the principles of Good Governance. This includes emphasizing soft skills, knowledge, innovative solutions, and the allocation of necessary resources. The core concept centres on adopting a community-focused governance model, which establishes a structure for proactive stakeholder engagement and sustainable conflict resolution. The primary audience includes practitioners, communities, businesses, and others, providing them with potential strategies to enhance their involvement in the decision-making process. The paper aims to offer pertinent insights into effective practices within European mountain governance. The goal is to extract distinct experiences and glean valuable lessons, evaluating both the potential and constraints for their applicability in varied geographical contexts. The methodology used includes identifying comparative study cases – studying good and bad lessons to be learned – from Europe, and their analysis based on how much the community the contributed to build governance. Commencing with detailed contextual backgrounds, objectives, and developmental trajectories, these practices undergo comprehensive analysis, considering the essential elements outlined earlier. It was observed a large variety of governance models, and there were examined in details 6 of them (2 from Romania, 1 from Spain, 1 from Bulgaria, 1 from Ireland and 1 from Portugal). The results emphasised that the specificity of each mountain is of a major importance for a resilient governance, and the replicability of each governance is possible only on certain conditions, including a real bottom-up and participatory approach, flexibility and local adaptability, but, also, conserving the traditions and landscape.

Key words: *community participation, replicability, participatory approach, competences*

INTRODUCTION

In Europe, a mountain region has no universally accepted definition, although it is usually determined by administrative, topographical, and geological factors. If more than half of the land is covered in snow or if half of the population resides in mountainous areas, Eurostat designates mountain regions as NUTS level 3 regions [10]. In addition, throughout earlier Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) programming periods, nations that are members of the European Union have designated mountain locations that have

difficult climatic conditions, restricted growing seasons, and steep slopes that require expensive machinery and equipment.

Mountainous areas present unique governance challenges [42] that require a proactive, inclusive strategy [18]. This distinctive feature is a result of specificity of the requirements for efficient government in mountains, emphasizing the value of stakeholder interaction [17], dispute resolution [1]. and community involvement [43, 34, 24, 44]. In such a way, it is a real challenge to offer insights into effective techniques and their possible applicability in a variety of contexts across Europe.

Scholars agreed that soft skills are important in order to promote cooperation among stakeholders [40], as any effective governance requires interpersonal, communication, and conflict resolution skills. Also, for a well-informed decision-making, a thorough understanding of socioeconomic processes, cultural quirks, and mountain ecosystems is essential [13, 19].

In order to tackle the intricate problems of mountain administration, innovative methods and flexible tactics are crucial [8]), while to support governance initiatives and maintain long-term results a sufficient deployment of financial, human [27], and technological resources [15] is required [6].

Some insights on the concept of the community-oriented governance framework focused on active stakeholder participation [2, 26, 46], by looking how practitioners, companies, and local communities are included in decision-making procedures increases accountability and advances sustainable development [48, 36] and on sustainable conflict management, exploring how the use of cooperative dispute resolution techniques reduces hostilities and encourages the development of consensus amongst a range of stakeholders [31, 41, 4, 11].

The importance of studying diverse forms of governance, especially in the mountain areas, is due to see their possibility of sustainability [28], and resilience [16] and of their replicability on other areas [5, 21]. At the same time, innovative approaches are required to determine the potential novel governing

models and techniques that have the potential to be replicated in many mountainous regions [29].

However, the issue of assuring the replicability of governance models is far too complex [37], involving the need to correctly evaluate its internal elements, including flexibility, scalability, and local contextualization, as the base of successful replication.

Applying general sustainability concepts to ensure that governance initiatives that are duplicated are viable over the long run is advisable [14], but sustainability itself is seen as an elusive concept [20].

This article intends to emphasize how crucial community-oriented governance is to overcome the difficulties associated with mountain government. It seeks to support the continuous growth and improvement of successful mountain governance techniques, eventually promoting sustainable development in mountainous places worldwide, by examining successful European practices and identifying and addressing research gaps.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A number of 6 studies cases (2 from Romania, 1 from Spain, 1 from Bulgaria, 1 from Ireland and 1 from Portugal - as seen in Figure 1) of mountain governance have been identified, documented and analysed to provide a valuable basis upon which to formulate conclusions concerning the possibility of utilizing creative strategies to guarantee sustainability and replication in the governance of mountains.

The examination of case studies for research is widely used [30, 25] as they offer contextual details as are the goals, development, and contextual elements [39] and so is the case effective mountain governance approaches in Europe.

Extensive analysis of the case studies is critically [47] in light of the issues encountered and the key components that have been discovered [30, 32].

Fig. 1. Location of the study cases
Source: authors' own work.

The community's involvement - the so-called bottom-up approach - was seen to be the most sensitive aspect affecting sustainability and governance in the mountain area. In this view, the identified governance models were compared based on the level of involvement of the community on creation, implementation and run of each governance model.

The six study cases have been ordered hierarchically based on this criterion, with the study case that is more relevant to the community being approached last (and thus at the bottom of Figure 2). On this view, the selected cases are:

6.Mountain Law for the 're-organisation' of mountain area governance (Romania)

5.Barroso Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems – GIAHS (Portugal)

4.Camin de la Mesa LAG in Asturias region (Spain)

3.Upland Commonages (Ireland)

2.Smart Villages (Bulgaria)

1.EcoMuseum of Apuseni Mountains (Romania).

The variety of the selected case studies, which include a range of geographic, socioeconomic, and environmental situations, makes it possible to conduct a thorough analysis of governance approaches designed for particular mountainous regions. Adaptive management approaches, technology-driven solutions, and cooperative decision-making procedures involving stakeholders and local communities are all examples of this.

These case studies give particular insights and lessons learnt from actual instances of effective governance techniques applied in various mountainous locations. Through a thorough analysis of these situations, we can pinpoint shared components of efficient governance as well as creative solutions that have proven replicable and potentially sustainable.
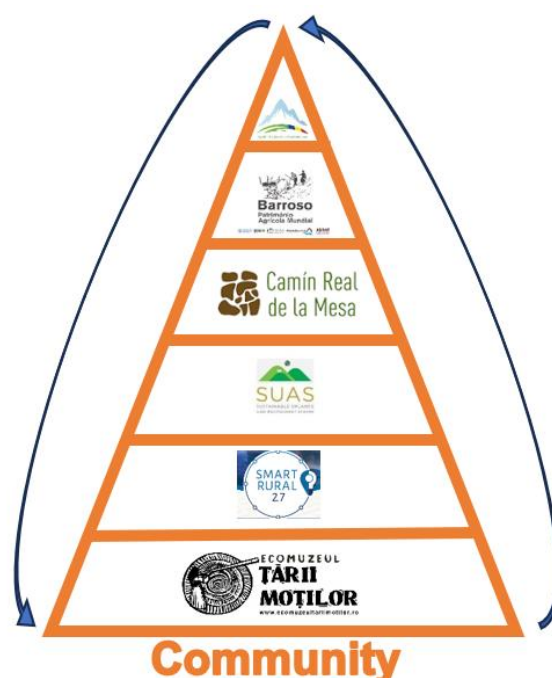

Fig. 2. Governance models position to bottom-up approach (community involvement)
Source: authors' own work.

Taking into account both opportunities and restrictions, important lessons and insights are extracted, as recommended by scholars [45], for possible replication in other geographic locations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

There are different models that may be used to design, think through, and use resilient and sustainable forms of government in mountainous areas. The cultural, social, political, economic, and environmental aspects of the area are strongly ingrained in these models. All of the models presented are examples that have worked well in a certain

place, at a certain time, and with a certain set of conditions that might not be totally replicable in other places. The creation of governance models for mountainous regions can be influenced by the insightful and instructive lessons they provide, both positive and negative.

Mountain Law for the 're-organisation' of mountain area governance (Romania)

According to the Mountain Law, Romania's mountainous areas cover 91,336 km^2, or 38.3% of the country's total area, and are home to about 4.8 million people, or 25% of the country's total population. Encouraging inclusive and sustainable development in Romania's mountainous regions is the main goal of the Mountain Law [33]. The restructuring of governance in mountainous regions into nine different "mountain groups" or massifs, each representing a cohesive physical, economic, and social entity with similar features, is a noteworthy feature of the strategic framework defined in the Mountain Law. Nevertheless, there are no particular measures in the 2018 Mountain Law that would increase community involvement in the management of Romania's hilly regions, either directly or indirectly. This omission constitutes a serious shortcoming in the current statute and calls for its amendment, similar to recent initiatives in France. The creation of a new Integrated Development Strategy for Mountain Areas was started in 2022 by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, with assistance from the European Social Fund and the World Bank [23]. The objective of this approach is to improve the overall effectiveness of mountainous area development and significantly increase the present level of support for it.

Barroso Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems – GIAHS (Portugal)

Traditional agricultural systems thrive in various regions, providing vital elements like food security, agrobiodiversity, local knowledge, cultural values, and distinctive landscapes. Recognizing their significance, the United Nations designates them as Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems (GIAHS). These encompass diverse landscapes, from village-level home gardens to regional mountain rice terraces and traditional hunting-gathering systems. Primary stakeholders in preserving GIAHS are the local traditional farming communities. Support from local and national levels should enhance governance processes and economic activities like eco-tourism and niche markets. These efforts aim to address challenges while maintaining agroecosystem integrity. GIAHS play a crucial role in territorial development, ensuring resilience to challenges like aging territories and climate change. Through sustainability, proximity, and governance, they remain relevant and sustainable for the long term [12].

Ireland's Upland Commonages (Ireland).

In Ireland's uplands, grazing on state or privately-owned commonages is regulated by specified livestock units, but governance structures among shareholders are lacking, leading to individual management practices. These commonages cover around 420,000 hectares managed by 15,000 farmers, mainly in the western seaboard. The aim is to establish effective governance and modernize management for sustainability. Without this shift, declining environmental, economic, and social conditions may worsen conflicts and inequalities. Effective governance is crucial for meeting stakeholders' needs and ensuring sustainable land management. Currently, individual land management practices are insufficient, lacking community involvement and conflict management mechanisms. Embracing communal resource management and adopting participatory methods are necessary for improvement. Transitioning to regenerative practices, including the reintroduction of transhumance, is vital for positive environmental and economic outcomes [38].

Camin de La Mesa Local Action Group (LAG) in Asturias region (Portugal)

The Camin Real de la Mesa region features predominantly high mountain terrain and is served by Local Action Groups (LAGs) in Asturias with broad competencies, including diversification aids and primary sector support. These LAGs encompass various mountainous territories, fostering a

comprehensive understanding of the region. Effective governance requires surveying defined territorial scales, transcending administrative barriers, and maintaining a balanced social and territorial dimension. The Camin Real de la Mesa LAG serves as a nexus for managing funds, promoting collaboration, and ensuring diverse representation. Initially focused on the LEADER program, the LAG has evolved to administer various programs and projects, enhancing its credibility and partnerships. Community participation is organized through representative collectives, facilitating conflict resolution and promoting inclusivity. Despite the complexity of mountain territories, LAGs serve as inclusive structures, fostering collaboration and addressing depopulation through initiatives like the Nuevos Pobladores project [3].

Smart Villages (Bulgaria)

The concept of "Smart Villages" aims to establish a comprehensive ecosystem involving diverse stakeholders to improve rural quality of life and surroundings. Smart Villages encompass rural communities regardless of administrative boundaries or population size, with a primary focus on enhancing development opportunities in mountainous regions through EU funding [22, 35]. While the concept is relatively new in Bulgaria, its implementation is seen as crucial for fostering rural development. This approach necessitates engagement from various actors, including governmental institutions, businesses, academia, and rural representatives. Key elements include capacity building, participatory decision-making, and effective management structures, with organizations in rural areas playing a vital role as catalysts for social innovation [9]. Sustainable governance networks and support for local entrepreneurship are essential for long-term success. Ultimately, Smart Villages offer a strategic opportunity to integrate policies for rural development, environmental conservation, and regional connectivity.

EcoMuseum of Apuseni Mountains (Romania)

Over the past thirty years, external grants have fuelled numerous projects aimed at bolstering local community development, focusing on bridging socio-cultural and economic gaps with neighbouring regions. Initially cantered in the Apuseni Natural Park, designated as Natura 2000 sites, the Ecomuseum aims to preserve local identity and resilience amidst socio-economic shifts, including land abandonment and gentrification. This bottom-up initiative involves all local stakeholders, requiring certification through agreements between the park administration and participating communes [7], The Ecomuseum operates with community involvement, its own regulations, and management structures, aiming to resolve internal issues internally and external disputes legally. Stakeholders contribute resources within legal limits, with specialized staff training. The overarching aim is to ensure community resilience, with management coordinated among the park administration, local governments, and residents.

The analysis, in terms of their impact on resilience and sustainability, of the governance models presented above, offered the chance to observe important insights into both excellent and bad organizational management and governance approaches, which led to the success and, consequently, to the failure of the analysed governance.

Positive aspects to be implemented

- Bottom-Up Approach: By giving stakeholders a say in decision-making, incorporating bottom-up participation in governance promotes inclusivity and increases success.

- Participatory Approach: International recognition and stronger ties are fostered by decision-making procedures that involve engagement with pertinent parties, including locals.

- Flexibility: Introducing adaptable types of government, such rotating representatives, strengthens community leadership and unity.

- Local Adaptability: Integrated decision-making processes are ensured by governance frameworks that are tailored to social, cultural, and economic conditions.

- Traditions and Landscape Conservation: The resilience of local communities and ecosystems is enhanced by the sustainable use

of natural resources and landscape conservation.

- Replicability: Establishing workable frameworks for regional socioeconomic growth makes it possible to replicate the results in adjacent communities and other localities.

Challenges to be avoided

- Lack of Predictability: Strategic development and cooperation may be hampered by stakeholder vision disparities.

- Excessive Dependence on One Sector: Distinctive systems' sustainability may be jeopardized by an over-reliance on one sector.

- False Leadership: Collaboration and inclusion may be hampered when a single leader monopolizes decision-making.

- Spatial Inhomogeneity: Places with artificial layouts may be less effective and cause imbalances.

- Ignoring Diversity: Various community requirements are not met by governing models that are designed to accommodate all situations.

- Individual Governance of Common Resources: Sustainability depends on the collective management of common resources.

- Lack of Governmental Support: The implementation of innovative governance is hampered by representatives' lack of enthusiasm and knowledge.

There isn't a perfect governance model that can be implemented everywhere, although flexible approaches have showed potential in a number of hilly areas. Effective models combine conventional relationships with cutting-edge governance techniques, such as community involvement and participatory decision-making procedures, especially for underrepresented populations. It is important to overcome obstacles such as entrenched conventional structures and political resistance. Effective implementation requires soft skills like empathy and communication, as well as ongoing community involvement and education to sustain support for governance goals. In order to ensure the viability of government systems, dedicated external resources are required to bridge gaps between urban and rural communities, particularly mountain regions.

CONCLUSIONS

The identification of knowledge gaps and areas in need of more research in order to develop mountain governance is a major research need. Ideas that are timely: suggestions for upcoming breakthroughs, such as technology-driven fixes, interactive approaches, and multidisciplinary teamwork.
The paper identified a number of important further research topics, such as using a true cost model of public goods to conduct cost-benefit analyses of various regions and examining the limits of intensive economic exploitation - which includes modern forestry, agriculture, tourism, and other industries - in mountainous areas. It is also possible to discuss the identified research needs that come from actual observations in the field. These needs include figuring out what inspires young people to return to mountainous areas and actively participate in maintaining local governance, evaluating the need for soft skills education for locals living in mountainous areas, and promoting cross-border exchange of best practices and experiences.

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