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Should mountains (really) matter in science and policy?

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Abstract

This preface to the special issue “Frames on the move: Regional governance in mountain areas” has the following aims. First, it introduces governance in mountain regions as a special and instructive case of regional environmental governance in terms of territorial scaling, policy integration, and actor diversity. Second, the preface elaborates three themes that resonate throughout the articles in this special issue, namely the important role of global agenda setting, the status of mountains as a category of regional knowledge and action, and the dynamics and consequences of policy diffusion. The third aim is to provide an overview of the nine articles. Finally, the preface summarizes what can be gained from examining mountain governance.

Keywords

Mountains; Regional environmental governance; Sustainable development; Framing

1. Introduction

This special issue of *Environmental Science & Policy* titled “Frames on the move: Regional governance in mountain areas” brings together 20 authors working in multiple disciplines at 12 different institutions in 8 countries. Following the 2009 publication of a special issue in the *Journal of Alpine Research/Revue de Géographie Alpine* (Debarbieux, 2009), this volume is the most comprehensive overview of mountain governance in journal form to date (for book-length treatments, see for example Debarbieux and Rudaz, 2015).

The contributors to this volume share a common interest in mountain governance from the local to the global level. Since mountain ranges typically cross jurisdictional boundaries, their interests typically concern some kind of regional governance. Notwithstanding the material properties invariably associated with mountains, what constitutes a (mountain) ‘region’ is to be understood as a fundamentally social construction. Although Paasi (2010, 2296–7) suggests that this view is “nowadays almost axiomatic”, we emphasize the constructed nature of regions not only because all mountain regions result from social processes leading to some kind of objectification, but also because this constructivist perspective constitutes an important point of entry for comparison with other types of regions, as elaborated below.

Much of international environmental governance has always been a regional affair (Balsiger and Debarbieux, 2011; Balsiger and VanDeveer, 2010; Balsiger and VanDeveer, 2012; Balsiger and Prys, 2014). Compared to global approaches, initiatives with a regional focus may benefit from enhanced commonalities in a particular sustainable development challenge, greater familiarity among key actors, and the ability to tailor action to a smaller than global constituency (Conca, 2012). The rationale for this special issue derives in part from the global

commitments to international cooperation at the regional level and to fostering concerted efforts to promote sustainable mountain development in the regional context. The significance of the regional level has been recognized in the Outcome Document *The Future We Want* of the 2012 Rio+20 Conference, which “acknowledge[s] the importance of the regional dimension of sustainable development” and suggests that “[r]egional frameworks can complement and facilitate effective translation of sustainable development policies into concrete action at the national level, [... and] “encourage[s] coordinated regional actions to promote sustainable development.”

Regional cooperation can be characterized using the three criteria of coordinating agency, territoriality and sectorality (Balsiger and VanDeveer, 2010). Respectively located on a continuum, coordinating agency can range from purely intergovernmental to multi-actor cooperation; territoriality can range from jurisdictional to ecoregional application areas; and sectorality can range from single-issue agreements to a cross-sectoral focus. Although recent trends have shown a tendency away from intergovernmental, jurisdictional, single issue governance, the more challenging multi-actor, ecoregional, sustainable development agreements are still the rarest kind. Regional governance in mountain areas in many ways fits this rare class of regional governance, both in terms of what is promoted through the global agenda and what is often found on the ground. In stark contrast to most other issue areas with ‘their own’ Agenda 21 chapter, however, scholars have barely begun to address mountains as a policy domain deserving concerted analysis. Could a closer look at mountain governance tell us something about regional governance in other issue areas?

At first glance, chances of cross-fertilization are limited because scholars working on mountain governance often begin their analysis by noting the specific, if not exceptional features of mountain regions. They point to features that distinguish governance challenges in mountain areas from other regions, including topological and climatological complexity, water and biodiversity richness, climate sensibility, isolation, marginality, inaccessibility, and diverse cultural heritages. Mountains are said to make up 24% of the world’s land area, to be home to 20% of the world’s population, to provide 60–80% of the world’s freshwater, and to harbour 50% of globally recognized biodiversity hotspots (SDC et al., 2012). The Rio+20 outcome document reiterates that “the benefits derived from mountain regions are essential for sustainable development,” particularly because they “play a crucial role in providing water resources to a large portion of the world’s population,” and stresses that “continued effort will be required to address poverty, food security and nutrition, social exclusion and environmental degradation in these areas.”

At second glance, other types of regions are frequently approached with a similar framing. As seen in the case of mountains, one way this is done is by making reference to the share of the earth’s territory that is covered by such ecoregions. Wetlands, to take one example, are said to “occur everywhere, from the tundra to the tropics, [...] making up roughly 6% of the Earth’s surface (UNEP-World Conservation Monitoring Centre, cited in Ramsar Convention Secretariat, 2013, 8). Transboundary river basins, to take another example, are estimated to cover 46% of the globe’s terrestrial surface (UN Water, 2013). To highlight the importance of integrated coastal zone management, the European Commission notes that 40% of European citizens live near coastlines, stretching from the North-East Atlantic and the Baltic to the Mediterranean and Black Sea (European Commission, 2012). To establish the exceptional importance of a certain ecoregion, promoters begin by citing how widespread they are.

A second way to frame ecoregional exceptionality is to highlight actual and potential benefits to humans. To return to the same examples, wetlands are said to be “among the world’s most productive environments [, ...] cradles of biological diversity, providing the water and primary productivity upon which countless species of plants and animals depend for survival [, ...] important storehouses of plant genetic material [, ... hence] access to safe water, human health, food production, economic development and geopolitical stability are made less secure by the degradation of wetlands” (Ramsar Convention Secretariat, 2013, 8). Similarly, coastal zones are considered “among the most productive areas in the world, enjoying high ecological and economic value” (European Commission, 2012).

If all else fails, special sensitivity to global warming is a very useful framing device for attracting policy attention. To illustrate, it is argued that “the ability of wetlands to adapt to changing conditions, and to accelerating rates of change, will be crucial to human communities and wildlife everywhere as the full impact of climate change on our ecosystem lifelines is felt” (Ramsar Convention Secretariat, 2013, 8). According to the European Commission, coastal zones are considered “among the most vulnerable areas to climate change, [... hence] it is essential to make use of long-term management tools, such as Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM), to enhance the protection of coastal resources while increasing the efficiency of their uses” (European Commission, 2012).

The larger point of this introduction is that just as mountain (and other types of) *regions* are not just out there to be discovered but are instead political objects constructed in social relations, claims of regional specificity are similarly socially constructed. What emerges, paradoxically, is that the principal feature that is special about mountain governance is that it is not so special after all, precisely because the process of creating mountains as objects for governance – through global agenda setting, creating mountains as categories for regional knowledge and action, and circulating mountain governance models and practices – is a social process that can be observed in all regional governance. Mountain governance is thus both generic (as a governance process) and specific (as a concrete manifestation of a governance process). This in turn opens the door to comparing with and learning from other regions.

2. Key themes in regional mountain governance

The proposed special issue addresses three analytical themes: global agenda setting, mountains as a category of regional knowledge and action, and policy diffusion.

2.1. Global agenda setting

International concern for environmental and sustainable development issues in mountain regions has been building up for fifty years (Debarbieux and Price, 2008; Rudaz, 2011). The origins of these concerns can be found in major scientific conferences (Munich in 1974; Mohonk in 1986) and research programmes (UNESCO Man and the Biosphere Project 6 on mountain ecosystems and arid and semi-arid lands) from the 1970s. Building on scientific knowledge generated through these activities, policy entrepreneurs since the 1990s have shaped the political agenda by means of intense lobbying at the UN and its specialized agencies, resulting in Chapter 13 of Agenda 21, the designation of 2002 as the International Year of Mountains, and a mountain section in the Rio+20 outcome document *The Future We Want* (United Nations General Assembly, 2012).

In addition to the analytical importance of the actors and processes of agenda setting, the contributions to this special issue also address the linked theme of dominant discourses, which

have evolved from the characterization of mountain regions as fragile and threatened by deforestation and water mismanagement to include broader topics such as poverty alleviation, economic development, and threats to religious, linguistic and, generally speaking, cultural diversity. Indeed, mountains have become a global issue in two meanings of the phrase: first, mountains are increasingly the focus of analysis and policy-making at the global level; second, the state of world mountains has increasingly been described as a concern for all of humanity and terrestrial ecosystems.

2.2. Mountains as a category for regional knowledge and action

The rise of mountains on the global agenda has been paralleled by numerous attempts to regionalize mountain issues. Several major national and transnational ranges (or ‘massifs’) such as the Alps and the Carpathians came to be seen as major ecosystems representing good opportunities for promoting an ecoregional approach to environmental management. This was especially the case in Europe, where regional mountain institutions emerged both to coordinate political action and to organize scientific activity. Even some of the global institutions created during the two decades following the 1992 Earth Summit (e.g., Mountain Partnership) adopted a more regional agenda, thereby further enhancing the relevance of the regional scale among scientists and policy-makers.

Yet regional cooperation in mountain areas entails a series of scalar challenges with respect to the production of knowledge and the definition and implementation of policies – issues relating to the question how regional is regional governance (Debarbieux, 2012). If mountain areas are to be approached as transnational regions, how well suited are traditional approaches to the organization of data collection and analysis as well as the production and dissemination of knowledge? Similarly, special challenges may arise from conceptualizing and putting into practice programmes and projects in regional contexts that are inextricably embedded in multilevel governance systems.

The scientific and political framing of mountain issues increasingly connects global, regional, and local scales, sometimes as a complement to national issues in countries where national debates and laws have led to the adoption of mountain policies. Yet mountain issues have also emerged in other contexts and institutions, for example in the case of protected areas (and sometimes networks of protected areas), especially where protected area management has involved a scientific agenda (see as an illustration the new journal, *eco.mont*, entirely dedicated to this field of knowledge), or in the case of river basin management, where topographic and climatic conditions in the mountainous parts increase the risk of natural hazards (landslides, floods, etc.). Consequently, several contributions to this special issue examine the tendency for a growing number of environmental (and development) science and policy issues to be framed in terms of a distinction between mountain and non-mountain regions or milieus.

2.3. Policy diffusion/mobility

The co-evolution of regional mountain initiatives around the world raises the question whether these phenomena are disconnected or linked in some way. In other words, have we witnessed individual regions independently reacting to some common challenges, or has the idea of addressing such challenges with a territorial focus on mountains spread in some concerted way? Prior empirical work has shown countless instances of the flow and exchange of ideas and experiences between key actors linked to global and regional mountain agendas

(e.g., Debarbieux et al., 2013). This special issue follows up on such evidence and mobilizes ideas of policy diffusion/ mobility (Bennett, 1991; Elkins and Simmons 2005; Cochrane and Ward, 2012) in order to generate new insights into the interplay of concerned actors, processes, contents, and outcomes.

Several related issues follow from this perspective. One concerns the growing importance of networks (of scientists, of practitioners, etc.) as such, which are active in the processes of diffusion and regionalization (e.g., Rudaz, 2013). Established scientific networks and institutions of different types are found in almost all mountain ranges, where they perform a range of activities. Several of these networks are in close contact, sometimes directly and sometimes via third parties such as UNEP. Another issue concerns the general diversification of the set of stakeholders as well as the resulting complexities for cooperation and coordination. Not only are there more and more intergovernmental organizations and global non-governmental organizations with some stake in the mountain agenda, the growing trend towards national policies and specialized administrative units mobilizing some kind of “mountain rhetoric” has dramatically increased the number of diffusion channels, thereby amplifying the prospects both of joint action and controversy.

Finally, the multiplication of actors has been accompanied by the growth of increasingly overlapping initiatives (and competition between them) and complex arrangements with combinations of subnational, national, transnational, and supranational programmes and projects. On the one hand, this trend has defied the validity of simple top-down or one-to-one views of policy diffusion. On the other hand, it has generated more and more standardized mountain discourses, demonstrating the worldwide mobility and circulation of models and visions.

3. The special issue

The three themes outlined above appear in various guises throughout this special issue, lending it coherence despite the conceptual and empirical diversity of the articles.

3.1. Functional regulatory spaces and policy diffusion

Balsiger and Nahrath for the first time expand the framework of functional regulatory spaces (FSR) – socio-political fields that “emerge politically in order to tackle, support or solve problems concerning several policy sectors in different institutional territories and at different levels of government” (Varone et al., 2013, p. 320) – to include notions of policy diffusion. Their analysis of transboundary mountain governance in Europe (Alps, Pyrenees, Jura, Carpathians, Balkan Mountains, Dinaric Arc, Caucasus) suggests that the FSR framework is a valid tool and demonstrates support for a number of exploratory hypotheses linking it to the spread of mountain governance. More specifically, the authors find that the more a given mountain governance initiative approximates an ideal-type FSR with respect to the combination of intersectorality, transterritoriality, multilevel governance, and degree of formalization and institutionalization, the more central is its role as a source of diffusion. This places the Alps closest to an ideal-type FSR and the Southeast European initiatives (Dinaric Arc, Balkan Mountains) furthest.

However, a more detailed look at the individual FSR dimensions shows considerable variation and points to two different governance trajectories. The first is an ‘institution- building oriented’ trajectory, where progress in transterritoriality and multilevel governance takes precedence over intersectorality (Alps, Jura, Pyrenees). The second is a ‘problem-oriented

trajectory', where the pursuit of coordinated intersectoral solutions outpaces the formalization and institutionalization of transterritorial and multilevel governance arrangements (Dinaric Arc, Balkan Mountains, Caucasus). While Balsiger and Nahrath conclude that the link between the FSR framework and policy diffusion merits more in-depth studies, they also sound a word of caution with respect to the very notion of an ideal-type governance arrangement, since transaction costs may eventually outweigh the benefits of continued integration of sectors, territories, and levels of governance.

3.2. Melting law

Where Balsiger and Nahrath approach mountain governance as political scientists, Perrier and Levrat are legal scholars interested in the ways transboundary mountain regions in Europe matter as normative spaces at the intersection of territorial and environmental governance. In their view, these regions have become 'natural laboratories' for the evolution of cross-border law because such mountain areas represent meeting points of different national legal orders under the umbrella of international regimes. Perrier and Levrat trace the nature and probe the normative dimension of such legal environments by means of a conceptual innovation in the form of 'melting law': a tool for analysing the recombination of different conventional, national, international, supranational, and interregional normativities. The notion of melting law suggests that 'hard' (national) laws soften in the context of transboundary mountain regions as a legal category. This softening occurs as a result of the encounter and compounding of national, international (or EU), and interregional norms.

Drawing on an in-depth review of legal approaches to the category of mountains and to cross-border cooperation, the authors situate the emergence of melting law in the legal framework for and impact of working communities in the Alps, Pyrenees, and Jura as well as the development of the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (a legal mechanism created to facilitate cross-border cooperation) for the Pyrenees-Mediterranean Euroregion. Ultimately, Perrier and Levrat conclude that the notion of melting law as evidenced in European transboundary mountain regions reveals how the difference between borders as means of separation and borders as means of cooperation is reduced.

3.3. Local and regional institutions in Hindu Kush Himalaya

What the European Alps boast in terms of international and transnational organizations and initiatives, the Hindu Kush Himalaya mountain region makes up in terms of local and regional (subnational) institutions. Tiwari and Joshi examine such actors in Nepal and northern India in the context of environmental governance. The authors find that local and regional institutions have made important contributions through generating and disseminating knowledge, mobilizing resources, and through addressing marginality and regional environmental fragility. However, Tiwari and Joshi also identify numerous key challenges that local and regional institutions have so far failed to address in comprehensive ways, including issues of poverty, livelihood, food security, gender inequality, education, and social marginalization.

The inability to successfully engage these challenges has in turn affected the entire environmental governance process. In particular, a pervasive lack of interlinkages within and between local and regional institutions has undermined inroads with regard to community access to and involvement in critical socio-economic sectors such as infrastructure and health and education systems and corresponding governance processes. Tiwari and Joshi point to capacity building and the development of partnerships as critical needs. Progress in these

areas, they suggest, would facilitate improved access to new knowledge and technologies and thus foster increased flows of financial resources to local levels.

3.4. Scientific collectives

Students of the history of regional environmental governance have consistently noted the importance of scientific actors, especially in agenda setting and monitoring (Haas, 1990; VanDeveer, 2004). More generally, the last thirty years have witnessed a growing demand for so-called ‘evidence based policy making’, which has reinforced the mobilization of scientific cooperation for addressing environmental issues, including at the regional scale. Debarbieux, Balsiger, Djordjevic, Gaberell, and Rudaz argue that despite the growing interest in the role of science and scientists in environmental governance – initially in the framework of the ‘epistemic community’ concept but later in more varied ways – previous work has neither systematically addressed different regionalities embraced by scientific actors, nor investigated readily observable variation in the relationships between political principals and scientific agents. The purpose of their article is to address this lacuna in the context of the institutionalization of mountain regions in Europe, where regional scientific cooperation can be observed from the Pyrenees to the Carpathians and beyond to the Caucasus and Central Asia.

The authors propose a new typology for characterizing the interactions between regional scientific cooperation and regional governance and for understanding current trends in transnational mountain regions: (1) specialized scientists operating independently of regional governance initiatives, (2) scientific collectives established as counterparts of regional governance initiatives, (3) scientific collectives established to be counterparts of planned or abandoned regional governance initiatives, and (4) techno-scientific networks established to meet data specific information demands of regional governance initiatives. The authors’ examination of 12 scientific collectives, of which the Alpine and Carpathian cases are considered in greater depth, shows that while nearly all regional political institutions call for regional scientific expertise, they rarely have a precise idea about its structure. Indeed, experience shows that scientific collectives often “tend to develop their own agendas, cultivate a scientific identity and engage in the building of regional publics independent of their political counterpart.” Conversely, regional political institutions often end up seeking technical expertise outside the scientific collectives they helped set up. As a result, envisioned partnerships between scientists and policy makers frequently fail to materialize.

3.5. Mountain national parks

The contribution by Arpin and Cosson continues on the theme of mountains as a category of knowledge and action but shift from the transnational scale to national parks in the mountainous areas of France. The authors note that throughout history the category of mountain has been used to legitimate the establishment of national parks as key instruments for environmental knowledge and action. However, the way mountains were framed changed over time. A first shift took place during the era of nature conservation culminating in the early 20th century, when a ‘register of representativeness’ (Humboldt’s notion of mountains as microcosms of the globe) was replaced by a ‘register of exceptionality’ (mountains as the last refuges for significant species and ecosystems) enacted by field staff and implemented through the separation of parks into relatively untouchable core zones surrounded by often intensely used buffer zones.

According to Arpin and Cosson, a second shift occurred with the emergence of climate change and biodiversity discourses during the 1980s, which undermined the register of exceptionality and led to growing criticism of national parks. In particular, the all-encompassing notion of biodiversity made exceptionality a liability rather than an asset: remote and isolated parks gradually came to be viewed as myopic approaches to the broader challenge of “biodiversity stewardship”. The authors demonstrate how park managers responded by creating a ‘register of sensitivity’ (to climate change) and legitimating mountain national parks by combining the new register with notions of representativeness and exceptionality. In this way, Arpin and Cosson conclude, the category of mountains has continued to constitute a situated and constructed resource maintained over time by means of social skills and competences.

3.6. Alpine identity

In Del Biaggio’s article, the category of mountain is analyzed from the perspective of collective identity formation in the Alps, where the signing of the Alpine Convention in 1991 prompted the creation of regional networks of local political actors. While pan-Alpine networks of political actors have been identified as the “ambassadors of the Alpine Convention” (Götz and Rohrer, 2011), Del Biaggio asks why local actors chose to join these networks? More specifically, she raises the question whether this new way of linking people and ideas beyond national borders could result from a common Alpine identity and adherence to the principles enshrined in the Alpine Convention?

Evidence Del Biaggio gathered through field work shows that some municipalities indeed sought to generate solutions for pan-Alpine issues and to foster sustainable development via membership in pan-Alpine networks of local actors aiming to solve local problems. However, she finds that this pan-Alpine organizing did not necessarily lead to strong identification among municipalities and that other local problem solving strategies exist. By means of an in-depth analysis of three Alpine municipalities, Del Biaggio shows that identities are a matter of choice and that a municipality’s geographical location does not automatically determine a particular political or social identity. Instead, identities are found to evolve over time and socio-political actors embrace multiple identities. In this context, pan-Alpine networks contributing to the emergence of a transnational governance system do create an association of certain local political actors with a transnational “Alpine community of problems”, but they are but one source of identity formation.

3.7. Large landscape conservation in North America

In most European mountain areas, regional mountain governance involves some intergovernmental cooperation (or attempt at cooperation) between national and/or subnational governments alongside regional mobilization of civil society and scientists. Chester’s analysis of the North American Yellowstone to Yukon (Y2Y) initiative represents a stark contrast to the European model in that public actors are largely absent from mountain governance. At the same time, social processes generating categories of regional knowledge and practice that focus on mountains have played a key role. Chester traces the emergence of Y2Y, which attracted a significant audience in the conservation world due to the strong resonance of the terms Yellowstone and Yukon with notions of wildness, wilderness, and wildlife.

Today, Y2Y is recognized as one of the earliest transboundary “large landscape” conservation initiatives. The label Y2Y label simultaneously evokes a landscape vision, a geographic region, a conservation mission, a network, and an organization, but Chester questions the degree to which Y2Y has constituted a form of mountain governance. He notes that Y2Y has linked a community of conservation practitioners and conservation supporters, has focused scientific attention on the needs of far-ranging wildlife, and has successfully strengthened norms and actor coherence regarding the need for landscape connectivity. Yet, Y2Y’s influence on public policy making has been mostly indirect. Some decision makers have formally recognized Y2Y, but Chester suggests that the initiative’s success in mountain biodiversity conservation says more about conservation biology than about governance. Indeed, as Y2Y is slowly institutionalizing, notably through the creation of the Y2Y Conservation Initiative as a non-profit organization registered in both Canada and the US, and as the early networking services are becoming less important, more traditional governance challenges are coming to the fore.

3.8. Green economy

At the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), green economy and the institutional framework for sustainable development were the two core themes (Kohler et al., 2012). Rueff, Inam-ur-Rahim, Kohler, Mahat, and Ariza address the relevance of the first of these for mountains, both in terms of the substantive links and the ways in which mountain regions can contribute to green economy approaches. Echoing the exceptionalist register analyzed in Arpin and Cosson, Rueff and colleagues recall that mountains as socio-ecological systems stratified by altitude and gravity produce valuable but complex ecosystem services, that these systems are typically maintained by marginalized smallholders, and that holistic policies are needed to address human – environment interfaces in mountain areas. The main aim of the authors is to assess the potential of a Global Mountain Green Economy Agenda (GMGEA) for raising awareness and fostering cross-sectoral policy strategies for sustainable mountain development. The guiding principles of such an agenda would include a call for mountain-specific strategies; transboundary, upstream– downstream, and urban–rural cooperation; governance involvement of local institutions; compensation of mountain communities for the provision of ecosystem goods and services; balance between conservation and development; and coherence with principles of international cooperation.

Despite some controversy surrounding the concept of green economy, the authors argue that a GMGEA could make important contributions to sustainable mountain development. They illustrate this potential by drawing on two empirical cases in the Pakistani and Nepali Himalayas, where lack of awareness has fragmented interventions and led to unanticipated, and unwanted, consequences for local communities. A green economy lens, they suggest, could have avoided such fragmentation and fostered more cross-sectoral policies. Rueff and colleagues conclude by identifying four factors limiting the impact of a green economy agenda: significant costs of inter- agency collaboration, insufficient legitimacy of the green economy, inadequate smallholder participation, and limited understanding of how global agendas influence local policy.

3.9. Assessing progress in mountain governance

In the final contribution to the special issue, Price takes stock of the last twenty years of mountain governance. He argues that although few transnational governance mechanisms

specifically relating to mountains exist, issues intimately connected to mountains (water, sustainable development, biodiversity, climate change, and peace and security) are subject to numerous regional governance arrangements that include mountain areas. Price then uses the three axes of the Balsiger and VanDeveer (2012) framework – territoriality, intersectorality, and coordination – to review specific progress in the areas of biodiversity conservation and sustainable development.

Regarding biodiversity, he identifies regional protected area networks and initiatives, connectivity conservation, and peace parks as signs that mountain governance often does target ecoregionally defined perimeters. With respect to sustainable mountain development, there is great geographic variation in terms of the actors involved, but it appears that mountain governance has long extended beyond public actors and included international organizations, civil society, local communities, and individuals (especially scientists). Price concludes that successful implementation of transnational governance in mountain regions takes time; requires broad participation for developing a shared vision and avoiding (the appearance of) domination by the interests of one country, organization, or constitutional level; and “should recognize that both the rural and urban parts of mountain regions, and the people who live in them, are inextricably linked to wider communities in a complex set of interactions, benefits, and services.”

4. Towards regional mountain governance in a comparative perspective

The contributions to this special issue demonstrate that regional mountain governance, however defined, is a widespread phenomenon. This recognition alone is an important reason for why scholars and policy makers should take an interest in mountain governance. Every day, governance practices in mountain regions generate insights into how diverse actors at local, national and transnational levels face a host of challenges in the broader context of sustainable development. The global mountain agenda, now in existence for more than two decades, has simultaneously shaped the context in which these experiences emerge, and been shaped by these very experiences, a process facilitated by complex pathways of diffusion and circulation.

As noted in the introduction, however, the question of what can be learned from mountain governance not only concerns scholars and practitioners involved in mountain governance. Mountain regions are social and political constructions in the same way that river basins, metropolitan areas, or coastal seas are framed for governance purposes. Are the processes of social construction the same or similar among, say, river basin scholars and practitioners? In the words of Arpin and Cosson, do they also draw on registers of exceptionality, representativeness, and sensitivity? What is the relationship between global river basin management agenda setting and regional governance initiatives? What mechanisms of policy diffusion and circulation exist?

It is our contention that the three themes we selected for this special issue—global agenda setting, mountains as a category of regional knowledge and practice, policy diffusion/circulation – are not just germane to regional mountain governance but can usefully be mobilized as a comparative framework. We hope this special issue will serve as an invitation to undertake such work in the future.

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