


## CHARACTERIZATION OF RURAL ORGANIZATIONS IN A FOREST-BASED ECONOMY: A SOCIO-INSTITUTIONAL APPROACH

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### ABSTRACT

We used a socio-institutional approach to characterize rural organizations in forest-based communities in North West Tunisia. This approach builds on the imperatives of a social system, the conservation of rural capital, and the role of social capital. The resulting model was used to characterize rural organizations based on key socio-institutional attributes. The paper used a Participatory Rural Appraisal (focus groups mainly) to conduct in-depth analysis in nine forest communities. Results reveal the following : 1) in Development Committees there is a strong belief in state intervention and moderate natural capital appropriation, weak conflict management, weak capacity to sanction, and low trust in the organization; 2) in active Agricultural Development Groups there exists a strong potential for conflict management, trust in the organization, and natural capital appropriation, but a lower level of degradation responsibility and capacity to sanction; and 3) in the Inactive Agricultural Development Groups there is the strongest perception of state intervention and overall weak performances in terms of conflict management, trust in organization, and degradation responsibility. These features indicate the organization's attributes for sustainable local development and specifically for common forest resources management.

**Contribution/Originality:** This study contributes to the existing literature of common natural resources management. Its original approach aims to understand how realities on the ground have shaped the wider context of local development. It is shown that rural communities integrate a complex social system and have aspirations that go beyond personal interest.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The vast majority of common property research, which we refer to as traditional common property research, is focused on understanding the emergence of collective institutions for the improved management of common resources (Johnson, 2004; McCay, 2002; Monterroso & Larson, 2013; Ostrom & Basurto, 2011). Several other commons scholars (Agrawal, 2007; McCay, 2002) have put forward opposing arguments, contrasting the traditional

approach with the need for greater attention to contextual, historical (Larson & Ribot, 2004; Lund, Rutt, & Ribot, 2018; Monterroso & Larson, 2013), and power issues.

Since the 1980s, the transfer of natural resources management to local communities has been central in global strategic reforms (Markelova, Meinzen-Dick, Hellin, & Dohrn, 2009). These reforms have resulted in the creation of natural resources user associations (Springborn & Sanchirico, 2013). This management transfer has taken many forms. It could be done partially by favoring co-management between local associations and the public administration. However, these cases are often not clearcut, with most involving some form of interaction between the state and local communities. This first option has been particularly favored in the Middle East and North Africa regions (Vermillion & Sagardoy, 1999). The transfer process has been studied to understand the link between the approach and these associations performances. Markelova et al. (2009) thus explained the failure of several experiments in the transfer of natural resources management to local communities, by the lack of attention given to understanding the conditions of emergence and the maintenance of collective action. Suhardiman and Giordano (2014) stipulate that “understanding how field-level realities shaped the wider context of local development is one promising path away from decades of disappointing results”. Theories about common pool resource regimes are based on assumptions of rationality and self-interest, as well as isolation of these regimes from the rest of the world. This is not useful because rural people are part of a complex social system and have aspirations that go beyond self-interest. Several factors, in the literature, are cited to analyze the performance of any institutional arrangement for development in a specific social system. These factors were differently summarized by Castle (1998); Agrawal (2001); Ostrom (2010); Ostrom and Basurto (2011); Long, Tu, Ge, Li, and Liu (2016); and others in a set of three categories: 1) the characteristics of the resources (natural and physical capital); 2) the characteristics of the group depending on these resources (human and socio-institutional capital); and 3) the environment of each arrangement (political, institutional, cultural, and economic).

First, we refer to the model of Castle (1998) to set the resources' characteristics. That model assimilated the rural system to a specific system consisting of four types of interconnected capital: physical, human, natural, and social. Castle defines social capital as "the organization of groups that makes the actions of individuals more productive". Trust, reciprocity, capacity building, ethnic and cultural heritage, common beliefs, and other factors all affect social capital in any organization type (Coleman, 2000; Putnam, 2000; Woolcock, 2001). Second, recent studies have shown how social and cultural factors, rather than biological or physical, tend to influence the success or failure of common natural resources management for development (Ahn, Ostrom, Schmidt, & Walker, 2003; Chu, Strand, & Fjelland, 2003; Gächter & Herrmann, 2009; Glaeser, Laibson, Scheinkman, & Soutter, 2002; Putnam, 2000). However, fewer studies have assessed organizations' social capital in relation to local development (Delgado & Marín, 2013; Isham, 2000; Liu & Besser, 2003; Onyx & Bullen, 2000; Platteau & Abraham, 2002; Shrestha, Cameron, Cavaye, & Coutts, 2014).

The actors' actions in local forest development are the result of their human capital (their competence) and social capital (the capacities of individuals as a group). It is argued that the social capital within communities most strongly supports the use and management of natural capital. We argue that collective action for development is an institutional arrangement that is determined by social/human capital attributes which, in turn, determine the natural/physical capital management. Market, the whole community, and the state, respectively, represent the economic, cultural, and institutional and political environments (or imperative external functions, in Parsons (1970)) of the rural system. Our approach provides an understanding of the institutional arrangement that is affected by external factors, which has consequences on human behavior but that is not reducible to either. Power disparities and the visibility of better solutions to organize society may each have powerful consequences for actors' perception of the rural system and how to manage its commons (Cariás Vega, 2019). Actors' beliefs about the most appropriate rule will differ from actor to actor, leading to social learning. Community-based resources management is unlikely to be sustainable without “a process of social learning between the internal and external actors” (Wulandari & Inoue, 2018). Our approach points towards an account of new institutional arrangements building the possibility of innovation into the theory, by showing how it is likely to be influenced by network structures in a given collectivity.

Failure of natural resources management in rural Tunisia is attributed to deficient institutional arrangements involving local communities. Throughout history, several types of local development organization have emerged, ranging from collectivism to the state-led development of common natural resources. Both politics and policies have overlooked the connection between natural capital and the other components of rural capital. Since 1992, agricultural policies have given a strategic role to local organizations to manage natural resources. Successive plans have designed and implemented a top-down approach to serve and strengthen the ruling party's control over local communities (Elloumi, 2011).

The rationale of this paper is to: 1) identify additional factors contributing to the performance of common natural resources management in a local context and 2) explicitly test social impact on management performance. The underlying assumption of the study is that local development is likely to be successful if there is socially controlled rural capital interconnection leading to a better perception of development initiatives.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 describes data collection and data analysis, including the list of attributes to scale. Results are displayed in section 3, and the final section provides concluding remarks.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

### 2.1. Data Collection

Agricultural development groups (GDAPs) are formal, non-profit, autonomous rural organizations managing the protection and exploitation of natural resources within rural areas (Elloumi, 2011). They were created at the end

of 2007 after evolving from one institutional form to another. Although some of them are active, non-operational GDAPs are, from an administrative point of view, those that have not scheduled their annual meeting or submitted their minutes for the current year. This leads us to consider non-operational GDAPs as being different from operational ones. Informal organizations were also created: these are extensions of the administration and remain under the close control of their initiators (in relation to different development projects) and disappear from the organizational landscape when financial and legal support is withdrawn. Statistics show that the current local organizations operating in the forest-based economy have a high rate of non-functionality, with more than 60% non-operational agricultural development. The proliferation of informal organizations (44 Development Committees (CDs)) testifies of this failure. Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) techniques have been widely used in development studies and are recognized as supporting a new development paradigm (Chambers, 1994) based on timely participatory feedback from the relevant local communities. Focus groups were organized in March 2017. The study region (Beja and Jendoubagovernorates) accounts for more than 60% of total development organizations in the North West. A representative sample of 10% of total organizations was randomly selected (9 organizations out of 90) in 9 different sectors.

The selection was stratified based on the number of organizations within each sector, with the help of administrative experts. Three different types of organization were selected: 1) Development Committees (CD), 2) Non-Operational Development Group (NOP GDAP) and 3) Operational Development Group (OP GDAP). Ten to 15 participants were invited to every PRA workshop. In sum, 100 participants were selected from 1) organization members, 2) active organization members and 3) socially non-involved residents.

## 2.2. Data Analysis

Participants were asked to give their perception of the rural capital interconnection: 1) common natural resources (natural capital), 2) organizational economic performance (physical/financial capital) and 3) socio-institutional performance or capital. Next they were asked to give their perception on rural organizations' political and institutional environment. The focus group guideline is displayed in Appendix A.

Several attributes were provided to participants via a focus group guideline. They were asked then to score the most important perceived attributes on a Likert scale (0 (nil) to 4 (very high)). Scores show the importance and required level of each identified attribute.

Human and physical assets were not considered relevant in perception of organizations. Age, household size, and financial assets were not found to significantly characterize heterogeneity among communities. We considered the accumulation of physical capital in forest economies as very precarious. Physical capital substitutability with natural capital is unclear. Growth is based essentially on the exploitation of natural capital that leads, meanwhile, to its degradation. The poorest and market-isolated households were more likely to clear forest than were those with medium to high asset holding. Table 1 presents the key attributes perceived differently by communities. Natural capital assets (natural capital appropriation and degradation responsibility), institutional capital assets (state intervention and legal system intelligibility), and social capital assets (capacity of sanction, conflict management, and trust in organizations) were the key assets considered for organization characterization.

Table-1. Main attributes identified during PRAs.

Attributes	Scale
Natural capital appropriation	0-4
Degradation responsibility	0-4
Capacity of sanction	0-4
Conflict management	0-4
Trust in organizations	0-4
Legal system intelligibility	0-4
State intervention	0-4

Note: Nil = 0; weak (limited) = 1; fair (fairly) = 2; high = 3; very high = 4.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

CDs are characterized by a strong belief in state intervention and moderate natural capital appropriation. They have weak conflict management and trust in the organization. They don't have any capacity of sanction because of their informal status. The underlying belief in this system is typically fueled by the status quo offered by public authorities. Changes within this system are all incremental. Development is still designed for punctual operations for which information can always be provided. Further diversification of development actions is not planned. This system seems to "safely" manage subsistence and individuals still seek government intervention. This system could be labeled "social laggards" because laggards are a group of people who avoid change and may not be willing to adopt or create a new product until all traditional alternatives are no longer available (Gilles, Thomas, Valdivia, & Yucra, 2013). They are typically not interested in higher content, but rather in readily available services. They have no notorious status and low social mobility. In many cases, their low income prohibits them from getting the required financial resources to spend on innovative services. Rural communities are composed of individuals looking for state assistance first and foremost. Their activity depends on

guaranteeing forest longevity . It was not difficult for these communities to accept the “terms and conditions” of ownership imposed by the state to access land.

Non-operational GDAPs have the strongest “perception” of state intervention. They rely on state intervention to manage natural capital for development. Non-operational GDAPs have an overall weak performance in terms of trust in the organization. Conflict management is absent for these organizations. Indeed, these organizations don’t consider the legal system intelligible. Laws are not clear. Despite moderate natural capital appropriation, they don’t consider they are responsible for its degradation. People within these communities excessively mine their natural resources but they consider it as a given right to escape poverty. The underlying belief in this system is typically fueled by private rationalities. The second system seems to develop extended relations with the external environment. This system implies “human multifunctionality” beyond territory, agriculture, and citizenship with the state relying on weak performance. Most of the people here have faced considerable difficulties in adapting their livelihood practices to dependence on forestry-related activity. It is a conflictual “adaptation” between members who have different visions and interests. Some members have accepted the transition to common forest management only to benefit from the accessible area. Others continue to pressure and convert forests with the hopes of convincing the government to expand their rights for agricultural activities.

Operational GDAPs have good potential regarding conflict management, trust in the organization, natural capital appropriation, but a lower level of degradation responsibility and capacity of sanction. Indeed, they perform relatively better in comparison to other organizations. But they remain relatively inefficient . The legal system remains more or less intelligible to them, which influences both conflict management capacity and sanctioning capacity. Nevertheless, although these organizations enjoy a high degree of trust in comparison with others, they cannot fully win the trust of the entire community. The responsibility for degradation seems to be a common attribute among organizations with a higher, but not optimal, degree of consciousness for operational GDAPs. We wonder about these organizations’ sustainability under such perceptions of natural capital degradation and appropriation. This system responds to immediate shocks rather than to long-term stresses. Its strengths are primarily observed at the regulatory level (a willingness to include new goals and promote new management approaches). However, weak mechanisms to implement rules, particularly when it comes to making the necessary trade-offs, decelerate goal achievement. This system focuses mainly on modernizing the existing processes and mechanisms of natural capital management (enhancing profits, redistributing wealth, integrating excluded categories, etc.) collectively without effective state intervention. They are mainly state-independent and socially embedded communities. Figure 1 summarizes the main identified attributes that most characterize rural organizations regarding local development under rural communities’ point of view:

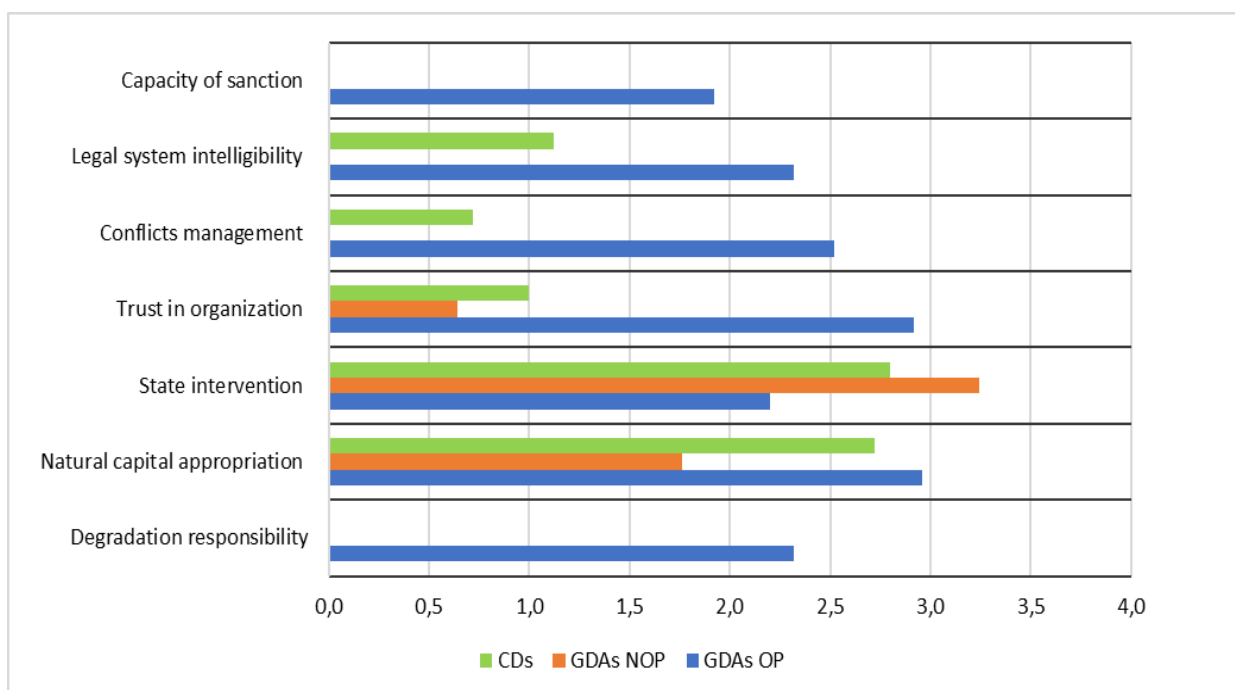


Figure-1. Organizations’ main attributes.

Beyond the traditional views of common natural resources management, this indicates additional factors contributing to the analysis of local organizations’ management of common natural resources from an endogenous rural point of view. The characterization of local organizations helped us detect suitable attributes that render them more effective and legitimate based on the proposed conceptual framework. Organizations perceive the role of the state as diametrically opposite in the local development process. This leads to the central question of natural capital appropriation. Seemingly the conception of rights over natural capital guides most of the



organization's performance. We are left with contrasting perceptions regarding the appropriation and responsibility for the degradation of natural capital. The regulatory framework seems to have a direct affect on the performance of organizations. Confusion over organizations' status impacts directly on their legitimacy and, consequently, on their systemic social function that is based essentially on trust, the capacity of sanctioning and conflict management. To reflect on what was initially proposed, the various institutional arrangements are effectively impacted by external factors that have consequences on human behavior but that are not reducible. Power disparities and the possibility of better solutions, or new ideas on how to organize each collectively, have powerful consequences on actors' perception of the rural system. One obvious implication of this work is the differentiated socio-institutional change that occurs under different circumstances and in individuals with significantly differing beliefs about both the institution (as rule or/and organization) and natural capital. The "formal" organization is only a dictated transposition of community behavior. Left to their endogenous preferences, people create arrangements that materialize both their own and social interests far from the "stereotypical" organization. The organization should no longer be "technically" evaluated. This is a new balance to be identified separately from the standards of political and technical evaluation.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Using PRA techniques, we characterized local development organizations based on communities' perception of socio-institutional attributes. Taking into account similarities in natural, physical, and human capital, the differences are particularly noticeable in both social and institutional capital, which differ in small measure from one another. Legal system intelligibility, trust in the organization, natural capital appropriation, state intervention, conflict management, and sanctioning capacity were all investigated. One obvious implication is that we should open the door to a new ways of thinking about differing patterns of local development and how they relate to institutional arrangements.

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**Appendix A: Focus group guidelines**

<b>I- Common natural resources perception (natural capital)</b>	
1-	Do you know your territory area really well?
2-	Do natural resources in your territory constitute a potential for development?
3-	Do you have good knowledge of the state of degradation of your resources?
4-	Do you feel responsible for the current state of degradation?
5-	Are you ready to participate in the local development process?
6-	Are you ready to protect the resources in your territory in order to achieve development?
<b>II- Economic performance perception (physical capital)</b>	
7-	Income increase
8-	Cost decrease
<b>III- Socio-institutional capital perception</b>	
9-	Does absenteeism influence management capacity?
10-	Does information asymmetry exist?
11-	Does the presence of the organization increase trust?
12-	What are the trust's attributes?
13-	What are the principal conflict sources?
14-	Does the organization have the capacity to manage conflict?
15-	Is there any new form of coordination in the organization?
16-	Is cooperation the best form of resource management for development?
17-	What could hinder this form of coordination?
18-	Does the presence of unbalanced power hamper the proper functioning of the organization?
19-	Does the organization constitute the perfect relational network in your area?
20-	Is the legal system clear as applied?
21-	Does the organization have the capacity to sanction ?
<b>IV- Organization's environmental perception</b>	
22-	Do the resources on your territory belong to you?
23-	Is wealth distribution in your territory egalitarian?
24-	Do you decide, among others, on this distribution?
25-	How much do you tolerate the state's partnership in managing resources in your territory?
26-	Is there any partner for development in this area? What is its nature?