

Reaction paper Elisa Jaramillo

“Problems of Governance”

In this chapter Ronald Brunner uses the example of the Yellow Stone National Park bison management plan dispute to discuss some of the notable problems with governance and the positive alternatives offered by the community-based initiatives. The ideas though oriented around a natural resource issue apply to all areas of policy development and governance.

1. The problems of governance as expressed in the reading:

The Federal bureaucracy system developed in the last century in the U.S. means that there an increasing number of institutions, each with different mandate, interests and jurisdictions (federal, state and local governments versus non-governmental institutions and interest groups). The number of institutions continues to increase as modernization generates new demands, new interest groups and conflicting issues/interests become more complex. This proliferation of groups in the public and civic sectors makes it more difficult to define a common interest and to integrate this interest into public policies. This is aggravated by the fact that communities now do not have fixed boundaries and a local policy proposal may conflict with the common interest of a larger national or international community.

It also promotes an increasingly more bureaucratic process as there is a multiplication of the number of contacts and complicates the mutual understanding needed for cooperation. Central authorities are finding it more difficult to meet public expectations while citizens find it more difficult to identify the remote officials that should be held accountable for policies that affect their interests. The result is an erosion of trust in governance and a tendency to use litigation against official procedures and plans. Also, interest groups frustrated with the bureaucratic process may try to maximize the political effectiveness of their limited resources by committing to narrower demands from their constituencies. The wedge that divides different interest groups gets bigger and bigger (e.g. industry versus environmental interest groups).

2. The current trends with respect to governance:

Because the structure of governance is becoming more complex, democratic accountability and protection of the common interest through the “administrative management paradigm” (traditional bureaucracy) is less evident. Effective policy decisions require by balancing the pressures not only from central management agencies but from arising from other sides. One such pressure is being exerted by the community-based initiatives that integrate different interests of small communities into consensus on policies in the hope of advancing a common interest.

3. The goal with respect to governance should be for public agencies and officials to seriously consider and evaluate the proposals from community-based initiatives and to support initiatives that are sound while rejecting those that are not in the common interest. Proposals refer to a common interest that is procedural, substantive, practical and reconsidered according to changing circumstances. Additionally, persons should participate selectively in decisions where they have higher stakes and preferably a minimum level of competence.

4. The community-based initiatives are an important element in governance. They are an effective alternative (by bringing together local expertise and knowledge about the specific circumstances) to finding a common interest among a group of different, sometimes adversarial, perspectives about a place-based issue. My concern is that the availability of resources by itself and not a defined and justified need may be the only motivation for the creation of such initiatives. Furthermore, these initiatives may be still driven by the more powerful interest groups and therefore may not necessarily be democratic.