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formerly known as ***The Common Property Resource Digest***

NO. 6 QUARTERLY PUBLICATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE STUDY OF THE COMMONS Summer 2008

Welcome to the Summer 2008 edition of the *Commons Digest*. This issue is organized with the 2008 IASC biennial meetings in Cheltenham, England in mind, and highlights one of the conference themes: Collective Action and Common Property Theory. ***David Bray*** opens the *Commons Forum* with an inspiring essay showing how traditional commons management can evolve to exploit market opportunities in the world economy. ***Kathrine Hilario***, bringing in her perspective from work in Honda Bay, the Philippines, highlights the importance of community organizing for collective action. The next response comes from ***Naya Sharma Paudel***. In her essay, Naya provides a contrasting case of collective action and forestry to David's and ponders why successful forestry entreprise can be seen in one area and not another. Next, ***Kusum Athukorala*** brings her perpective as a practitioner to advocate for commons research which actually benefits the people and communities we study. ***Ahswini Chhatre*** closes the forum with a call for looking at not only the evolving and changing nature of institutions, but also reminds us that institutions are more than simply cause and effect; institutions thesmselves co-evolve with the outcomes we are interested in mapping.

This is the last *Digest* issue before the IASC biennial meetings begin in Cheltenham, England the 14-18 July. The programme is packed full of exciting panels, policy seminars and field trips; hope to see you there! ***Enjoy!***

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COMMONS FORUM: Collective Action, Communities, and Common Property Theory

Commons Forum *Commentary*

Collective Action, Common Property Forests, Communities, and Markets

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Collective action theory seeks to understand how groups of individuals are able to cooperate to overcome social dilemmas, assuming that being a self-interested, short-term maximizer is the default position. The behavioral approach to collective action begins with an evolutionary argument: human beings have evolved the capacity to learn cooperation norms and social regulations which have enhanced the success of groups. In this view, individual rational action is just one of a suite or a continuum of behaviors from the very individual to the very social which human beings exhibit and which can be adaptive in different circumstances. It further suggests that the default position may be cooperation, which can then be withdrawn if there is no reciprocity. Whether cooperation or individual actions dominate depends heavily on the social context. However, the need to build a universal theory of human collective action has lead to a continued emphasis on individual self-interest as the starting point of analysis even among theorists focused on the role of social norms. A major missing component even in behavioral collective action theory focused on common property dilemmas is "community" as a

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bearer of norms, as rich institutional environments. An exception is Singleton and Taylor, who have argued that communities, which they define as "communities of mutually vulnerable actors", dramatically lower the transaction costs of collective action. In addition to reducing transaction costs, some communities show a remarkable and consistent capacity to control the "rational egoists" among them and enforce a strict norm of community service. In the reach for the most general principles, the term communities is seldom used analytically as the agent of collective action in formal studies, the starting point of analysis is always "groups" as in "groups of self-organized principals" or "forest user groups", not communities as such.

Yet, particularly in communities in rural areas of the less-developed countries, the favorite field subject of students of common property, community is the overwhelming social reality and source of norms that defines what constitutes cooperative behavior. Community is by far the most important arena where mutual commitment and trust are developed, norms are created and enforced, and where group identity is formed. In laboratory studies based on experimental games, researchers have found that in the study populations (mostly university students) fall into behavioral categories that Ostrom calls "conditional cooperators" and "willing punishers" , i.e. "norm-using players" who under the "sparse institutional environment" of the laboratory can assert cooperation norms that can convince "rational egoists" towards greater cooperation. Growing up and living in a relatively isolated rural community with millennial traditions is to play a game with extremely well-defined and time-tested rules. A strong culture of cooperation and reciprocity in traditional communities emerges, not as an inevitable tendency, but because they are also well aware of the problem of the "rational egoists" in their midst. In Mexican rural communities, where I carry out research and action projects with colleagues, norms of community solidarity, consensus, and harmony are emphasized because communities have also seen and experienced what happens when these norms are not sufficient to control powerful individuals. In the Mexican context, these individuals are known as *caciques* who use their networks of family and friends to advance their own interests above those of the community, with consequences for the levels of tension, violence and disharmony in a community.

But when the conditional cooperators in a community are able to consistently place the conditions on social behavior, drawing on a reservoir of culture and rules from varying historical periods, and when that community is given full legal access to a very valuable natural resource, remarkable things can begin to happen at the interface between collective action, community, forest common property, and markets. The case of Mexican indigenous forest communities of the Sierra Norte of Oaxaca, which reflects realities elsewhere in Mexico and where I am currently conducting research with colleagues, provide a powerful example of the role of community in building and enforcing social norms and how those norms can then be channeled towards institutional innovations that can allow communities to use forest resources compete in competitive markets. It also shows that when traditional communities are given full legal ownership of a large, valuable, forest resource, the incentives for collective action are so great that community collective action can not only manage common properties for subsistence production, but can be a foundation for community forest enterprises that can compete in international markets.

The forest communities of the Sierra Juarez, like many others in Mexico and elsewhere, are not just groups of "self-organized principals", but individuals who have experimenting with how to get along with each for hundreds of years, under a variety of political forms that have sought to control them for their own purposes. The institutions of community governance which have evolved in the Mexican case are based on a political syncretism of pre-conquest, colonial, and 20th century Mexican agrarian laws. The Mexican Revolution (1911-1918) led to a process that lasted through most of the 20th century of land and forest distribution and the definition of a legal community of rights holders to a territory that in that process ended up turning over valuable forests to communities within a strong legal framework. These forest communities then had to conduct historical struggles against government concessions, allied with activists and government reformers to gain effective control of their forests, since the legal framework still defined the government as the ultimate owner. But constitutional reforms in 1992 gave them full ownership, with forest extraction regulated by the environmental laws of Mexico, and with substantial autonomy in their internal institutional arrangements for how they manage their natural resources.

In this sense, Mexico is an advanced historical case of the decentralization of natural resource management now occurring elsewhere in the world, having passed from state-dominated community forestry to community-dominated community forestry with all resource rights. They have achieved full operational and collective-choice governance, and share constitutional choice with the environmental laws of Mexico. This is, as Camille Antinori has termed it, the "community as entrepreneurial firm". The results of marrying traditional communities with strong governance and social capital and valuable forest resource that cannot be optimally exploited by individuals are striking. A recent study showed that 2,300 communities in Mexico had had logging permits in the last ten years. A closer study of the ten most important forest states with 1,730 community forestry enterprises (75% of the total), showed that 163 communities (10 percent of the ten states) had achieved levels of collective action and forest industrial integration that enabled them to establish and manage sawmills, no small feat of industrial administration. Another 436 communities (around 25% of the total) had acquired some level of extractive equipment, from skidders to logging trucks. Thus, nearly 600 communities were managing forest industries at varying levels of vertical integration, with the remainder selling timber on the stump, but normally under community control. Some of these communities are now defining their enterprise strategies to cope with the competition in furniture production from China. While whether they will succeed is not clear, it shows that common property forms of governance cannot only rationally manage natural resources, but can also allow community enterprises to position themselves in globally competitive markets.

These communities have had to learn how to adapt their existing community political institutions to create enterprise governance institutions that organize industrial production processes and compete in the market. Communities with smaller forests tended to place forest industries under the direct control of the elected community authorities. But larger operations, with millions of dollars in assets, have had to develop a supply of new governance institutions that can mediate between the democratic participation of the community General Assembly and the need for a more hierarchical control for enterprise efficiency. However, particularly

in communities with less valuable forests, a large variety of institutional arrangements and divisions of the forest stock and flow have occurred.

The most sophisticated Mexican forest communities have also undergone a distinct cultural evolution. After several decades of developing their forest industries, and with a three-year rotation of responsibilities for many positions in both the political and enterprise governance systems, most legal members of the community have a working knowledge of the problems and issues of industrial forest production. In some cases the force of the fusion between community and enterprise has been so noteworthy that new cultural forms of community have been created. Mexican anthropologist Claudio Garibay, who has studied in detail two of the most successful community forest enterprises, has argued that "in a complex political process of social reengineering a new social order has been constructed". A pastiche of political governance institutions from different historical periods has combined with the demands of forest industries to create new levels of community welfare and the communal provision of the public good of healthy, productive forest ecosystems.

For benefits from forest commons management to be spread equitably, it is important that the community as a whole manage the forest commons for timber as a whole. Bhim Adhikari has shown for Nepal that poor households benefit less than wealthier households from use of the forest commons, mostly for subsistence products, suggesting that common property resource management can exacerbate distribution problems. However, in Mexico, the unity between community, enterprise, and timber flows, and the practices of distributing benefits either as public goods in infrastructure or directly as profit sharing in equal parts to all legal community members, appears to reduce inequality within the communities.

The Mexican case suggests that communities with strong traditional forms of enforcing behavioral norms of cooperation, when given forests valuable for their commercial timber, can evolve institutional innovations that allow them to use political governance practices as a platform to develop internationally competitive forms of indigenous enterprise management. The "network density" of conditional cooperators in traditional rural communities can potentially give them a head start in collective action that other "groups" may have to strive to obtain.

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COMMONS FORUM *RESPONSE*

Revolutionizing Community-based Approach: Collective Action in Community-Based Coastal Resource Management (CBCRM)

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As a development practitioner and social researcher, I can completely relate with David Barton Bray's argument that collective action should not be remote from the concept of community or communities. I appreciate his assertion that the community is an important level of analysis, where community can be bearers of social norms and institutional arrangements as it constitutes cooperative behavior and collective action. In response to Bray's argument, I wish to flesh out the concept of community organizing which

fundamentally relates to the dynamics of collective action. I will highlight the important contribution of community-based approach from a community-based coastal resource management (CBCRM) project in the fishing community of Honda Bay in Puerto Princesa Philippines, as a result of the community's collective action.

CBCRM is essentially based on the inherent capacities and practical experience of the community to collectively address their needs and problems in commons management. CBCRM programs in the Philippines have emerged from Robert Chambers' idea of people's participation and empowerment, and have been inspired by the movement for greater community control and democratization of access to natural resources. According to Ferrer and Nozawa, CBCRM effectively employs community organizing (CO) as its core strategy to ensure that participation is fostered on a collective basis so that the majority of the members of the community, if not all, will have equal opportunity in decision-making and project benefits.

In Honda Bay, the community effort and the collective action of fisher folks in organizing themselves into people's organization have effectively increased their legitimacy in matters relating to the management and sustainable use of natural resources. Honda Bay is a home to rich and diverse flora and fauna found in both land and sea. Until now, there are sporadic sightings of rare and endemic species such as seacows, dolphins, whale sharks and green marine turtles in Honda Bay which tourists and divers enjoy. Because of the beauty of the island, the Department of Tourism (DOT), Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), City Tourism Office (CTO) in cooperation with boat operators, resort owners, real estate developers and other private business groups, formulated a master plan to develop the island as one of the major ecotourism destinations in the country.

However, the influx of eco-tourism and the commercialization of the island have caused distress among the marginal communities in the island. The national plan for real estate development and private investment have resulted in land tenure issues, violation of community property rights and human rights. The increasing amount of waste due to the commercialization of the city, and the inappropriate location of the sanitary landfill in Honda Bay contributed to excruciating water and land pollution in the area. Other environmental concerns in resource use also afflicted the village of Honda Bay, such that of mercury contamination resulting from mining activity, and water siltation due to illegal quarrying. The tragedy of the environment not only endangered the health of the community, but also damaged the traditional fishing grounds at Honda Bay, forcing the local fishermen into the open sea to sustain their livelihood.

The fishing village of Honda Bay encountered immense livelihood difficulties. This situation motivated the community members to organize themselves against the development plans for the island. The community members of Honda Bay worked with a local NGO, the Environmental Legal Assistance Center (ELAC), for developmental legal assistance and they lobbied for proper consultation by the city government to regard alternative livelihood for marginal fishing communities. The strategies of the local NGO have involved local people's participation in community development work, public and policy advocacy and capacity building for establishment of co-management structures in community resources management. Through community organizing strategy, leadership formation and core groups were organized and later expanded into peoples' organizations. The community has increased their capability and confidence in forming organizations and in institutionalizing participatory governance mechanisms to manage its natural resources.

Community mobilization in Honda Bay has empowered the community to influence structures and processes toward achieving economic, political, and social transformation. The fisher folks found themselves in the ELAC office writing letters to the City Council members, preparing speeches for city council meetings, and reviewing drafted ordinance of the City Tourism Office. The community organizing initiative, and the increased participation of the community towards CBCRM also started the establishment of community managed marine sanctuaries, watershed system, livelihood-support projects, regular fish catch monitoring activities and continuous lobbying and advocacy work at the community level and city level planning for policies that support marginal fisher folks agenda.

Furthermore, the city government also recognized the community fisher folks as Volunteer Community Paralegals (VCPs). They have been acknowledged as a co-management structure of the Local Government Unit (LGU) in matters relating to the management and sustainable use of natural resources. The VCPs have been authorized to apprehend environmental law violators. They have taken part in the documentation of

the impact of mining, tourism and commercial activities to biodiversity and have worked with government agencies to stop illegal quarrying operations in affected communities. People's collective action provided the community a vital ground with which to establish their tenure in the area, making the municipal government's recent attempts at relocating residents politically unfavourable and highly questionable.

The organizing effort of the fishing community in Honda Bay enhanced the capacities of community groups to develop environment-friendly systems, establish networks with other communities, groups and partners in order to advance its vision and goals, and eventually manage their resources for the benefit of the greater majority through collective action and pursuit of common interests. The experience of Honda Bay has shown that community organizing and collective action can facilitate the creation of community institutions, structures, programs and systems which are important elements in commons management. However critiques have been raised about the limitation of community-based approaches in addressing more complex ecological and socio-political relationships, such as resolving disputes that extend beyond the community's territory, particularly conflict of interests within national, regional and international levels. This implies a challenge to scale up community participation and people's collective action at a global level.

Co-management and collective governance of common property resources are analogous terms providing a framework for common property theory. The idea of collective action based on communal property, which begins with a set of priorities and specific issues within a small and geographically defined community is an important level of analysis in looking at access and control of common pool of resources. Collective action does not occur where there is no organized body that sets the rules concerning resource management and resource use. This may also be identified by a community of users. The process in CBCRM, according to David Korten, concerns a group of people with common interests in creating mechanisms to reach consensus in management of conflict, community control and management of productive resources, establishing local systems or mechanisms in utilizing available resources, local accountability and broadly distributed participation of stakeholders in community-based management. A concern for global governance needs to be replicated from CBCRM by expanding collective action and developing networks that will allow exchange of information or dialogue in commons management.

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COMMONS FORUM *RESPONSE*

Challenges for collective action in community forestry enterprises

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David's argument in favor of primacy of cooperative behavior against self-interested rational choices in the context of community forestry enterprises sets an important scene for advancing the debate about commons. His observation of the community enterprises in Mexican community forests clearly supports the claim that community institutions are strong enough to compete in the global market. His conclusion provides a strong optimistic message to many of the rural poor in forested areas in developing countries who have set their future on the realization commercial value of their forests.

My response to David's argument is based on my analysis of the evolution of community institutions under

the community forestry in Nepal, particularly the emerging challenges related to increased commons-market interface. Nepal's community forestry is a well-known example of a modern community institution that has successfully reversed the deforestation in the Himalayan region and turned barren hills into forested areas. Apart from enhancing ecosystem health, these institutions are serving as a vehicle for rural development including providing services on health, education and local infrastructure. Moreover, these institutions are regarded as the most conflict resilient since they were the least affected and were functioning fairly well during Maoist led armed conflict.

Following David's point, the local community's role in protecting and rehabilitating degraded hill forests can largely be attributed to the historical harmony, cooperation, mutual trust and care. After handing over the management responsibility, the local communities put strong sanctions and surveillance for any offences that discouraged any egoistic activities. They see their shared prospects in improving the forest condition and take caution against any short term vested interests. Even the powerful local elites had little opportunity to subvert the community enthusiasm. In fact, as argued by David, these well defined and time-tested rules have proved to be more effective than the government's formal legal system that adopted the fine and fence approach to protect forests. The local communities as the great reservoir of tolerance, peace, mutual respect and care are able to develop resilience against the political unrest and violent conflict that raged the country for over a decade.

In recent years, particularly after the adoption of liberal economic policy by the Nepalese government, community forestry management is increasingly coming at the interface with market. Community based enterprises have become the dominant discourse so that local communities are shifting their priorities towards exploiting commercial value of forest resources. Many have established community enterprises on collecting, processing and trading timber and NTFP (non-timber forest products) products. There are however, little encouraging examples. Although it might be too early to conclude it as many of these enterprises are in their early stage, the nature of challenges for these enterprises are quite visible. From the present state of community forestry enterprises it can be fairly concluded that community forestry institutions are less equipped to handle the governance complexities in the enterprising mode though institutions have successfully managed the forests for subsistence purposes. The complexities associated with the enterprises are new set of technologies, a large number of actors along the value chain, critical attention required to ensure quality products and the system for fair distribution of costs and benefits among the members. As a result, it has not been able to exploit the full commercial potential of the forest products and services. Despite well recognized successful story of over 27 years, community forestry in Nepal has appeared weak in the face of market intervention.

What could be the plausible explanation of the contrasting experience between the successful community forestry management in a subsistence mode and the failure stories of community enterprises? One of the arguments could be that communities need entirely new sets of institutional arrangements and expertise to deal with the complex situation in the global market. An enterprise oriented management must embrace competition and profit as the fundamental principles which are at odd with principles of harmony, cooperation and mutual care that are at the core of community forestry. As they have to deal with customers and other market agents based on the market principles it is likely that those principles get reproduced within their internal relations. Unfortunately these issues are not adequately addressed in David's paper.

Secondly, in contrast to the Mexican case, the weak community tenure, particularly the regulatory restriction on trade and enterprises of forest products in Nepal, may have inhibited these initiatives. Many of the reviews have highlighted negative impacts of constraining government provisions in limiting market transactions. If this is the case then we can argue that these state impositions undermine community autonomy that ultimately encroaches to the unique characteristics of the commons. A complementary argument is that there is huge gap in access to information, entrepreneurial culture, and supportive environment for rural communities. They are too weak in front of the national and global market networks.

The increasing commons-market interface, particularly community forestry enterprise is an emerging issue in forested areas of developing countries. New innovations are required to find solutions on how communities can run viable forest based enterprises. The discussion above leads to the conclusion that though rural communities function as a rich reservoir of rules, norms and practices

to manage the commons for subsistence use, there are critical gaps in their capacity to run enterprises. Strong tenure security over resources, relaxed regulatory mechanism and supportive macro environment may create conducive environment for community enterprises. However, in the context of global market, communities cannot successfully run forestry enterprises without major changes in the existing institutional arrangement, particularly the repressive state institutions, exclusionary community processes, and ineffective service delivery systems, etc. In other words, there is a need for redefining relationships between local communities and the structured state, market and civil society. This will also include redefining many of the characteristics of success in traditional communities that we have acknowledged and appreciated for long in the new context of market economy.

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COMMONS FORUM *RESPONSE*

The Study of Commons - for whose benefit?

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David Bray's essay makes reference to a success story in Mexican forest communities in accessing and governing common property resources. It is interesting and infact energizing reading; most of the cases of commons study do not highlight the level of success attained by the Mexican forest communities who are now empowered to become global players. Most studies of the struggle for common property rights do not end "happily ever after." Far from it.

Read the final paragraph of Ignazio Silone's Fontamara (also woven round a water transfer out of agriculture, now an escalating phenomenon issue affecting common property resources) which reflects the common fate of the affected communities… "After so much strife and anguish and tears, and wounds and blood, and hatred and despair – what are we to do?"

Fontamara captures the hopelessness of a community, like a deer caught in the headlights, when the collective mafia of property developers, concession holders, corrupt politicians and crass bureaucrats "legally" invade and take over a traditionally community owned community governed common property resource (be it forest resources , water or mineral wealth) which the community is deemed "unable to manage" (despite several centuries of management!). The community is well able to manage, but not to exploit as it views the resource as an ongoing means of sustainable livelihood.

The reader is informed in advance that this document is written from a practitioner perspective and does not presume to comment on the theoretical underpinnings. Having said so it will not be a surprise that I feel that since this essay is appearing in the Commons Digest, (whose readers are presumably the cognoscenti) the long theoretical preamble seems to be have taken up valuable space which could have been used to shed light on some of the following intriguing, and from a personal perspective, the more interesting questions which are raised briefly but not dealt with fully (possibly due to lack of space).

The following intriguing questions are raised by mainly from the perspective of one who has little familiarity with the Mexican context and the history of its struggles regarding the commons.

> What are the socio-cultural factors which led to the success stories in the forest communities in Mexico?
>
> What was the actual role of the activists in supporting the communities attain a greater measure of self governance of resources?
>
> What were the constraints within the legal systems which needed to be overcome by the government based reformists?
>
> Has the "new social order" which has evolved through "a complex political process of social reengineering" also promoted new internal inequities? Has it perpetuated old inequities?

Within this "new social order" which groups continue to receive minimal benefits or continue to be marginalized? For example what would be the access of marginalized groups such as female headed families who may lack the strength to ascertain their right to the benefits?

Bray writes "Growing up and living in a relatively isolated rural community with millennial traditions is to play a game with extremely well-defined and time-tested rules. A strong culture of cooperation and reciprocity in traditional communities emerges, not as an inevitable

tendency, but because they are also well aware of the problem of the "rational egoists" in their midst.

Threats to the commons is not only due to the internal "rational egoists" who break rules; most threats more often come from the external forces who do not know or accept the "rules" at all.

A study that I carried out some time ago in the North Central Province of Sri Lanka comes to mind. Sri Lanka has a centuries old hydraulic civilization where irrigation through manmade reservoirs (called tanks) have withstood the ravages of time and continue to be the source of livelihood for rural peasantry in the to Dry Zone. Many of these tanks are now being tapped to provide drinking water supply for the urban sector. In one such case observed in Sri Lanka, the Purana (ancient village) of Thuruwila, the community was faced with a water transfer to the neighboring city and pilgrimage centre "played the game" in accordance with a 2500 yrs old tradition and Buddhist principles of nonviolence. They supported, as did the Mexican forest communities the "norms of community solidarity, consensus and harmony." They did not oppose the transfer as giving water to pilgrims is a meritorious act according to Buddhism. The perceived threat for them came from external sources that did not "play the game "or else shifted the goal posts. The external players (state and private sector) are usually better connected, better funded and more savvy in negotiating the rules of wider context can harness the support of the "rational egoists" as they did in Thuruwila. The community was forced to "play "according to the externally imposed rules and go to the Supreme Court for redress, a long time consuming and stressful process . The "network density" of conditional cooperators cannot always with stand the onslaught of external forces (as Bray terms them "the variety of political forms that have sought to control them for their own purposes.") The forest communities of the Sierra Juarez have been successful in maintaining or enhancing their independence in access to forest resources. The main reasons given are the building up of an enabling environment supportive of such a development. Another factor is that the forest communities in Mexico had successfully allied with activists and government reformers to gain effective control of their forests, since the legal framework still defined the government as the ultimate owner. Most community struggle to gain control over community resources depend on an alliance of external forces, social auditors, legal activists, socially conscious religious groups who bring in with them an array of action resources. Increasingly, the commons battles are fought on websites. The third factor is the importance of constitutional reforms (1992) which gave them full ownership, "with substantial autonomy in their internal institutional arrangements for how they manage their natural resources." Some in-depth insights into the legal and institutional process which led to the greater autonomy ("full operational and collective-choice governance,") and thereby paved the way for forest communities becoming global players would have been welcome reading.

Bray's study comments as follows on the rise in sophistication of the community leaders and presumably their enhanced coping skills. "After several decades of developing their forest industries, and with a three-year rotation of responsibilities for many positions in both the political and enterprise governance systems, most legal members of the community have a working knowledge of the problems and issues of industrial forest production." In some cases of study of commons, it is also observed that the community leaders with enhanced skills, the so-called gate openers could also become the gate keepers. Farmer organizations set up to enhance community wellbeing have in some cases become a stepping stone to local politics where the primary aim of enhancing community gains becomes subsumed in the more political gains for "rational egoists." The example quoted from Adhikari in Nepal indicates that poor households continue to be losers- "common property resource management can exacerbate distribution problems." This issue has been very lightly touched upon in the paper which goes to say that the process has" appears to reduce inequality within the communities." Some how one is left with the impression that the writer sees all are winners, in some way or the other in the Mexican case. And this is a little difficult to buy.

The Mexican case suggests that communities with strong traditional forms of enforcing behavioral norms of cooperation, when given forests valuable for their commercial timber, can evolve institutional innovations that allow them to use political governance practices as a platform to develop internationally competitive forms of indigenous enterprise management.

What is of particular interest to the practitioner is the mention of the coalition of reformist, community and activist in Mexico which facilitated the turn around ,

enhancing the Mexican forest resources to full operational level. The positive which resonates most is the implied comment that the researchers in the Sierra Norte have provided through their studies a cross fertilization of ideas and actions to the ongoing community struggles which supports community building and strengthening governance of the commons.

This says much about the current need for a researcher and activist nexus, translating academic work into positive action for the communities themselves. Too many academic ventures lack an advocacy perspective which refuels supportive initiatives within the communities they study. As a researcher I myself have received hospitality, security and acceptance from the communities I worked in. I wish I could be sure whether my work always had reciprocal benefits for the communities. One of the more interesting books I read recently was Water conflicts in India: a million revolts in the making which has a number of cases where collective action was undertaken by Indian communities where not all cases had a satisfactory ending- happily, if not "ever after" for the community.

In the global crisis the threats stress and tensions embattled communities face in maintaining their traditional right and access to common property resources should not only be a source of research studies for conferences but have a practical value of defusing tensions, upholding community rights and supporting preservation of commons. I think we need to question the research which ends in conference papers and is not translated into action in preserving the commons and the rural communities they study. Commons researchers need to decide – is it to be study of commons for the sake of enhancing knowledge or for building a researcher activist continuum for defending the communities who are currently faced with the million local battles, skirmishes and encounters to save their heritage and livelihood? I hope that in the forthcoming IASC conference in Cheltenham there will be time and space to debate this issue.

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COMMONS FORUM *RESPONSE*

Communities, institutions and institutional trajectories

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The crucial element in David Bray's arguments is 'innovation.' Armed with cultural, legal, and economic resources, communities in Mexico described by Bray have 'evolved' to exploit market opportunities without losing internal cohesion. However, the language we use to understand, or even describe, this process has lagged behind. David Bray takes an important step towards correcting that gap by moving beyond 'conditional cooperators' and 'dominant strategies' in the essay. My response seeks to push it a little bit further. Institutions are most commonly understood as equilibria. This conceptualization, borrowed from game theory, has dominated the theoretical literature on collective action and common property, with good effect. It has helped us understand the internal dynamics of groups, and to predict success and failure (variously defined along many dimensions) within a broad range of initial conditions. But institutions-as-equilibria alone does not help us in investigating change. An evolutionary game-theoretic perspective, such as the one pioneered by Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, for example, also only takes us so far in understanding the nature and direction of institutional change. We know institutions change in response to specific stimuli but we are still at a loss for words to theorize the relationship of this change to outcomes we are interested in, such as equity and/or sustainability. The language of institutions, which constrains us to think of institutions as either the cause of sustainability or the effect of inequality, gets in the way. There may be cause-and-effect relationships; I do not wish to deny their importance. But there may be more to institutions than just causing this or being the effect of that. A crucial dimension is missing. I want to suggest that institutions not only evolve, but they co-evolve with the outcomes we are interested in. In a simple, but hopefully not simplistic, portrayal, institutions mediate the influence of macro-processes such as demography, markets, and technology on outcomes on multiple dimensions. Following the call for simplicity, let us assume there are two dimensions of interest – equity and sustainability.

These could be environment and development, or within-group and over-time distribution; the point is the same. After mediating the influence of macro-processes, institutions themselves change in response to the new outcomes. This is the pathway of institutional change, working through the reconfiguration of the preferences of the agents. We could just as well call them identities or subjectivities instead of preferences; they relate to how agents interact with each other under constraints defined by the rules of the game (or institutions!). Over a long period of time, institutions co-evolve with the outcomes, a movement which can be described as a trajectory. Some of these institutional trajectories will be characterized by improvements in both equity and sustainability, while others would describe improvements in one or neither. The communities described by David Bray, if I interpret correctly, would fall into the first category, which could be labeled as sustainable development under certain circumstances. Our task is to compare institutional trajectories that correspond to such positive and not-so-positive outcomes on multiple dimensions of interest, and identify the conditions that facilitate positive outcomes. The missing part in David Bray's essay, perhaps of future interest, is a comparison with the failures. Clearly, the institutional trajectories described by Bray are not the same, and neither would be the outcomes. Therein lays a fruitful source of comparison. David Bray's essay begins the process of describing the trajectories of institutional change in Mexico.

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Practitioner's Profiles

The *Diges*t will soon begin running a column profiling commons-related networks, organisations, and/or individuals. Please submit submissions, questions, and thoughts to the editor at ad@ifm.dk.

Commons Collaboration

The Digest will also run a column, **Project Profiles**, highlighting projects which emphasize collaboration in commons research. If you would like your project profiled, or if you seek collaborating partners, please contact the editor: ad@ifm.dk

Call for Papers

Policy Forum: Scaling Up Conservation Practices for Natural Resource Commons in Africa

A Regional Meeting of the International Association for the Study of the Commons

20 – 22 January 2009 Breakwater Lodge, Cape Town, South Africa

Hosted by the Programme for Land and Agrarian Studies PLAAS at the University of the Western Cape

The objective of this Policy Forum is to share existing research and experiences in the governance of large scale natural resource commons across different ecosystem types in Africa. These include among others: coastal zones; arid grasslands; forests; savannas and forest patches; and floodplain ecosystems. The Policy Forum brings together researchers and policy makers to examine existing research on commons governance. Experience with governance in one type of commons generates lessons of value to the governance of other types of commons as well as for integrated governance The Policy Forum takes as its starting point the insight that addressing natural resource degradation in Africa means finding ways to identify reproduce and encourage existing positive practices of commons management across wide scales. The dual challenge of governance is to meet large scale problems with large scale solutions that are rooted in local practices.

Meeting Themes Within the broad area of the governance of multiple types of natural resource commons we place our emphasis on the presentation of the policy relevant research on the commons that African and other scholars are currently carrying out. Therefore the following themes are meant to be suggestive rather than exclusive:

1. Knowledge, power, economic transformation and existing commons practices.
2. Building on existing practices to achieve effective commons governance across extensive scales.
3. The African Commons and Tourism.
4. The African Commons and redressing historical discrimination, particularly in respect to race and gender.
5. Recent challenges to management of the commons such as HIV/AIDS and climate change.
6. Traditional institutions and the governance of African commons.
7. The contribution to food security of the African commons.
8. Implications of urbanisation and commercialisation for the African commons.

Practical Details Submission of **Abstracts: 15 September, 2008** to **i.malasha@cgiar.org**

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