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Discussant's Comments, Governance Stream

From the set of governance panels at this conference, we carry away some important insights related both to some of the key questions with which we started the conference and the problems and puzzles addressed within the governance panels.

- Fikret Berkes warned us that it was easier to predict failure than success.
- Jim Scott stressed that creating uniform languages frequently created substantial benefits while at the same time increasing the capabilities of large- scale governmental and corporate control over all of our lives.
- Evelyn Pinkerton urged us all to think about how issues of scale affect the design principles we can use in governing diverse commons.
- A question on one of the hallway posters related to the continuum of meanings that individuals in different disciplines bring to the study of common property and asked how can we draw on and relate to these multiple languages and approaches.

From the governance panels themselves, there were three major themes:

DIVERSITY
MULTIPLE SCALES
BALANCE

Governance has to do with humans trying to find ways of making decisions that reduce the level of unwanted outcomes and increase the level of desirable outcomes.

While all common-pool resources share some common attributes - just as all trees and all rivers share some common attributes - they also are characterized by an incredible diversity. Thus, the natural and human-made resources themselves that are the focus of our interest, are diverse. AND, the people using these resources are also diverse in terms of their languages and ways of

relating to one another and to resources themselves, in terms of their history and the meaning they bring to diverse events, in terms of the legal systems they use, and in terms of their skills, political power, and current resources they possess.

Given this diversity, efforts to impose uniform forms of governance will be bound to fail. Uniform charters for turning over irrigation systems, forests, or inshore fisheries to "User Groups" - while based on the evidence that common property scholars have amassed that local users can frequently be quite successful in their efforts to self-organize to govern and manage local resources well - are blueprints for failure in many of the locations where officials impose these uniform policies on local diverse circumstances.

Multiple scales also present a challenge to the design of all governance systems. Governing a small irrigation system in the hills of Nepal has consequences for the forests and people living immediately below the irrigation system, for how a series of ever larger watersheds are able to generate environmental services, and eventually for the lowlands and inshore fisheries of India and Bangladesh. Yet, while we can see an ever larger set of scales of events effected, if governance is limited to only the largest scale, many of the diverse problems and opportunities of smaller or medium scale are not perceived - legible - by those who govern. Alternatively, if governance is restricted only to the smallest scale, externalities and conflict over access to resources can continue unabated. Thus, the presence of diversity and of multiple scales, leads us to recognize the need for balance.

Governance systems that have some chance of overcoming the general preponderance of failure have to balance the need for some uniformity in constitutional principles with the diversity of ways of governing local resources within diverse cultural, lingual, legal systems. They need to balance the need for controlling effects at small scale with the need to control other effects at a large scale.

And, as academics and practitioners, we need to use balance. We need the contributions of all of our disciplines, and of all of the people we study, and of all of those who struggle to improve our governance. That means that we can never achieve one ruling theory that will provide all of the answers to all problems in a grand scheme. On the other hand, we need the balance to recognize that not all theories are equally good for explaining events in the world. We cannot just live with an "anything goes" philosophy. There are design principles that we can point to - not blueprints - general principles including the need to have nested governance systems that take into account diverse scales of organization - that do seem to hold up to repeated empirical testing.

Thus, while the study of governance will not lead to a single set of blue prints for how best to govern all of this diverse world, we can build on the research and action of many individuals to achieve a much more balanced explanation of the diversity of the world toward a cumulative set of frameworks, theories, and design principles that can help a self-organizing and self-governing set of peoples reduce the likelihood of repeated failure that Fikret so rightly pointed out to us.