

# The Common Property Resource Digest

NO. 68 QUARTERLY PUBLICATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE STUDY OF COMMON PROPERTY March 2004

## CPR FORUM RESPONSE

### Moving Beyond Case Studies

Heidi Wittmer

Center for Environmental Research (UFZ),  
Leipzig, Germany

In using theme 5 of the 10th Biennial Meeting of the IASCP (August 2004) as a starting point for her commentary, Prof. Poteete points out that there must be agreement on concepts before methodological innovation can take place. Theme 5 has the goal to explore two directions for future research within IASCP: Analytical tools and theoretical questions. I would like to draw attention back to the underlying purpose of this theme. In my opinion, both point to areas where IASCP still has as yet unrealized potentials.

The core message of theme 5 is to move “beyond case studies” that have dominated IASCP’s discussion and have been extremely helpful in discovering relevant issues, amplifying the debate and understanding mechanisms, especially on how collective action works at the community level. However, as the overall theme of the Conference suggests, in the context of global transition there is a need to shift the analytical focus from the internal structures and processes of communities to their relations with other actors and institutions – state agencies at the different levels, NGOs and the private sector. The emerging debate on governance implies such a change in perspective. The state is no longer to be considered only as an “external factor” in analyzing the management of common-pool resources, it is rather the interplay of different actors in decision-making and implementation, which needs to come into the focus of the analysis. Why is this debate helpful? By focusing on the interaction of communities, the state, NGOs and the private sector, contested concepts such as legitimacy, participation, indigenous rights, decentralization, globalization and community can be explored from different perspectives. Even though considerable advances have been made in analyzing the relations between communities and the state, especially with regard to co-management in the fishery and forestry sectors, we still lack a consistent understanding of the role of communities within new decision-making arrangements, on the legitimacy of alternative decision-making processes, and on how institutions for sustainability can be created at the regional, national and international level.

In view of such a shift in the analytical focus, theoretical concepts and analytical tools that have not yet been fully explored in commons studies offer a new explanatory potential. In analyzing diverse management arrangements, Transaction Costs Economics can help to explain what governance structures between the state, communities and other actors are comparatively more efficient, depending on the type of resource and the transactions involved. Despite some applications especially to co-management, more empirical work, especially in different resource systems and contexts, is required to further the debate. Transaction Costs Economics is just one example. A distinctive advantage of IASCP is its interdisciplinary composition, which makes it possible to bring explanatory approaches of different disciplines together. Concepts of legal pluralism, constitutional law and deliberative democracy are other examples of approaches that can offer fresh insights for debated issues of stakeholder involvement in public decision-making. The increasing relevance of multi-stakeholder decision-structures in fields where decisions are complex and characterized by uncertainty also calls for the development of decision-support tools. Agent-based modeling and participatory multi-criteria decision support tools are promising examples.

IASCP seems to me an ideal forum for a critical debate on the relations between communities, the state and other actors in the context of global transition – a forum where analytical concepts and tools are also used to identify problems created by hierarchies and power relations at different levels, such as problems of elite capture in devolution processes and questions of legitimacy with regard to decisions that have global consequences. This, I think, will place concepts like participation and community in a broader context and might contribute to solve some of the issues with an ambiguous or uncritical use of concepts that Amy Poteete has pointed out in her contribution.

For further reading:

Birner, R., B. Jell, and H. Wittmer (2002): Coping with Co-management - A Framework for Analysing the Co-operation between State and Farmers' Organisations in Protected Area Management, in: Environmental Co-operation and Institutional Change - Theories and Policies for European Agriculture, ed. by K. Hagedorn, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, pp. 46-65.

Special Issue of Land Use Policy (forthcoming): New Strategies for Resolving Environmental Conflicts: Potentials for Combining Participation and Multi-criteria Analysis.

Heidi.Wittmer@ufz.de