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 theco unities 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 inthe 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.

For further reading:

Athukorala, Kusum "Water Transfers out of Agriculture: towards a Win Win Solution ? A case study of Thuruwila" in Integrated Water Resources Management Global Theory, Emerging Practice and Local Needs, SaciWATERs Water in South Asia Volume 1 Sage India 2006.

Ignazio Silone, *Fontamara,* Penguin Books 1934

K J Joy, Suhas Paranjape, Biksham Gujja, Vinod Goud and Shruti Vispute (eds.) Water conflicts in India: A million revolts in the Making, Taylor and technology on outcomes on multiple dimensions.
Francis books India Pvt. Ltd 2007.
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