

COMMONS FORUM *RESPONSE*

Response to: Institutions for the Management of Common Pool Resources in African Floodplains: The AFWeP Research Project, by Tobias Haller

Disputing African Floodplains: Comparison and Conclusions from AFWeP Case Studies

Tobias Haller and Jürg Helbling
Department of Social Anthropology, Zurich

The AFWeP conference papers show that Common Pool Resources have been managed primarily by institutions developed by local ethnic groups: concepts of territoriality had developed already in pre-colonial times, often linked with specific techniques. Ethno-professional groups have been the basis of the institutional set up defining where fisher groups, pastoralists and hunters were entitled to use which resource during what time in a season. This is the case in Mali where the Bozo and the Somono fishermen as well as the nomadic pastoralist groups had their specific space of resource use according to technique and season. The same is true for the different ethnic groups in the Rufiji area and for local groups in the Okavango Delta. In other areas, such as Cameroon and Zambia, one finds indigenous groups establishing resource rights under villages and more or less centralised regimes. In many of the cases, religious ideology was an important aspect in the customary institutional set up: First-comers mostly established a kind of spiritual ownership over the CPRs, which is still seen in parts of the researched areas as the legitimacy behind CPR usage and regulation. Interestingly, many of the traditional access rules do not exclude outsiders but regulate the conditions under which they are given and open the way for reciprocity. Another important aspect is that local institutions have not been developed in order to protect nature but rather solve coordination problems, formalise access rights under dynamic conditions and try to restrain use for better gains (i.e. waiting to fish out ponds in order to have bigger fish). Therefore, at best, conservation might be a non-intended by-product of specific constellations of resource users.

The institutional changes in these areas are linked to political and economic developments in international markets and at the national level: After independence most of these countries, irrespective of who their colonial rulers had been, had the same background: the State claimed CPRs as its own property. Formal law regulated CPRs, and by issuing permits and licenses and by establishing game reserves and national parks, gave more control to powerful outsiders who were able to influence the state actors. In addition, it must be stressed that environmental changes affecting institutional change also stem from technological and infrastructural developments in these areas: Since independence, floodplains are used to generate hydropower and to introduce large-scale irrigation programmes. In most of the cases, people are affected in one or another way by these changes as they alter water availability and inundation patterns.

In four out of the five countries studied, however, the State's ability to control CPRs is weakening as it battles with severe debt crises and adjustment programmes because export prices have declined in the last 10 to 20 years. Therefore, State revenue is decreasing, resulting in reduced capacity to finance the control of CPRs. Less control, as well as increasing poverty, are making the use of CPRs more attractive because it is less expensive to get access and their relative price (compared to other goods) is rising. What people are facing then are open access constellations in which the politically stronger individuals and outsiders get the biggest share, fish with forbidden gear, do not accept closing times for fishing and for hunting, ignore rules of access to pasture and cut timber without restrictions. Less powerful actors are the losers or are forced to use the CPRs even more intensively and to start diversifying their livelihood strategies.

Differences in bargaining power for CPR access are legitimised by different ideologies used to justify open access to or privatisation of CPRs: Outsiders coming into the area argue that they are citizens of the state and, in a democratic setting, cannot be denied access, even if they do not follow the rules of the state (except Botswana). The major problem in this context is that the state is present ideologically but absent practically, unable to monitor and prevent misuse of CPRs. This constellation has been called “the present absence of the state”. On the other hand, some local powerful actors try to keep, revitalise or transform some of the traditional institutions because these rules give them power and access to CPRs for commercial reasons. These can be constellations in which stakeholders make reference to the old tenure system, which they have transformed, in order to be able to harness all the profit (for example, Masters of the Water in Mali, supporter of a headman giving out cattle camps in Zambia). Or, for example, through accidents with hippopotamuses and crocodiles, the old view of the powerless, that the spiritual world is not happy with the situation, can be revitalised (Rufiji in Tanzania, Zambia).

But this latter view strengthens the local actors only temporally and does not change the main political context or the position otherwise. Therefore, in some areas not only open access constellation, but as well as privatisation, occurs, through which we are faced with the tragedy of the former commoners (Zambia, Tanzania, Mali, Cameroon). In many of the cases, State administrators, who are not well paid, play a crucial role by profiting from the more powerful resource users and therefore helping them to gain open access to CPRs. Game scouts, fishery and forestry officers as well as village governments imposed by the State make CPRs part of their livelihoods by profiting from trade network of game, fish and timber and extracting a kind of “rent” (Mali, Cameroon, Zambia, Tanzania). More concretely, in Cameroon, administrators are not interested in solving conflicts between sedentary fishermen, agriculturalists and pastoralists. On the contrary, they have an interest in increasing conflicts because they are able to charge the ones they declare guilty and profit from those they declare the victims.

In all of the areas studied, there are different levels of conflicts, which break out because CPRs are diminishing or their availability is not secured. Such conflicts can be minor but can escalate and become violent. Sometimes they can take an ethnic shape (Zambia, Cameroon). But scarce resources and conflicts are also a chance. In the pre-colonial times the emergence of some institutions could be traced back to conflicts and conflict resolution. The case studies show that even today some of the first signs of collective action and self organisation of interest groups emerge from problems (Tanzania, Zambia), and we tried to explore the conditions under which such local initiatives can be successful. This does not mean that the state does not play a major role in the management of CPRs but the question remains, at which level state intervention is adequate and possible. In some countries, a participatory approach of co-management is used by the governments and by NGOs, which mostly fails because the state and NGOs often do not understand local political settings and the political and economic interests of all the stakeholders. Nevertheless, “what are good conditions for co-management?” must be debated.

During the workshop, it became clear that the major exception is the Botswana case because of its strong national economy: Botswana generates enough revenue to redistribute locally and nationally. Neither locals, nor newcomers, are interested in CPR-extraction for commercial reasons. Differences of external factors seem to be very important. However, it will be the differences in national and internal factors between the other case studies, which will allow the team to define conditions conducive for collective action either for developing new institutions or for maintaining old ones. A first step in the comparison has been taken up at the workshop by defining basic issues for comparison and by analysing the types of conflict, ideology used and power constellations in all the cases. The team plans to contribute major conclusions for development and conflict resolution issues in Africa.

hallerto@yahoo.com