

COMMONS FORUM *RESPONSE*

Response to: Knowledge for Commons Management: A Commons for the Commons, by Doug Wilson

Traversing Across Knowledge Domains

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When the knowledge of people is neither fully understood nor properly interpreted, it is unlikely to be used for making decisions that help the same people. This is obvious. But to suggest that people's knowledge, because it is oral, may not thus be abstracted or conserved may not be very accurate description of reality in certain parts of the world. Doug is right when he observes, "holding tacit, oral, or anecdotal knowledge rather than discursive, written, or systematic knowledge can mean real disadvantages" for the people. But then sometimes disadvantage is mutual. The pressure under which scientists have to declare a given state of fisheries in an uncertain world as stable, is neither systematic, nor discursive. It is simply opportunistic. And opportunism is not some thing that only local communities thus indulge in.

Anecdotal knowledge can help in scaling up the context enormously which analytical perspective might just miss. In *Honey Bee* newsletter, we published an article by Huntington based on his experience in interacting with a community in the Arctic Circle about how did they deal with beluga whales.

The external researcher wanted to know about the behavior of beluga whales and local communities went on explaining about the behavior of salmon. After a while, the expert got exasperated. He said, "Look I am asking about beluga and you are talking about salmon, why not tell me just about beluga?" the local elder then replied, "Sorry, my dear friend, you do not understand. When beavers make a dam, the salmon can not go upstream. Beluga then do not get enough salmon to eat, and thus move away". To understand beluga, one needed to understand the salmon and beaver behavior— all described through anecdotes.

Local knowledge can thus be understood in all its richness and underlying systematics if it is seen as apart of local epistemology which searches the same questions of truth, validity and relevance through a different semantics than used by formal science. Mobilizing local knowledge, pooling the best practices, and sharing this back with local communities in local language and with due credits, indeed empowers the people, as has been demonstrated by Honey Bee Network for over sixteen years in India and several other parts of the world.

The knowledge however, is not held just in commons. It could be covered by private, common and public domains (Gupta and Sinha, 2002) just as the resources could be covered by similar three domains. The interplay between resource and knowledge domains generates interesting dynamics of rights, entitlements and reciprocities constituting a local community and its pool of shared meanings. Will scientists reciprocate the rules of sharing that local communities observe? This is a legitimate question.

Power relationship between scientist and researcher are neither stable nor fixed. Local communities or individuals can sometimes wield enormous power expressed by silence or eloquent denial of the meanings that scientists may have derived. But it is true that farmers or fishermen or women generally do not get the same respect accorded to the scientists. But things are changing. The Council of Scientific and Industrial Research, signifying excellence in formal research, signed a memorandum of understanding

with the National Innovation Foundation to pursue research in four areas of indigenous knowledge, innovations and practices.

The Indian Council of Medical Research has also initiated a dialogue with NIF about a systematic research program to analyze the non-codified, non-classical folkloric traditional knowledge systems. Here both the individual as well as community aspect of the knowledge is dealt with. We do not believe that all the knowledge that communities possess evolves only in commons. It could not just be so. After all, dissent and discontinuity at individual level provides the spur for tens of thousands of grassroots innovations that NIF has documented over the years. While it is true that much of the knowledge exists in common, the scope of proprietary knowledge is not insignificant. Even here, while many in the community might know, not all have equal capacity or expertise in practicing the given knowledge. Thus being aware is not the same as being able to put into practice. And being able to practice is not always same as being able to explain.

During the recent Tsunami induced human disaster, it was after all, a tribe in Andaman (and not any scientific institution or community) which anticipated the scale and intensity of disaster and thus escaped all damage almost completely. Their knowledge is now being sought by scientists to be transformed for recalibrating their own understanding of oceanic behavior. So much for the damage that mobilization of local knowledge might bring about. Elements of different kinds of knowledge systems when woven or bundled together in various portfolios of institutional meanings and support structures, provide the basis of survival for several communities in environmentally stressed regions. The knowledge commons can become even more crucial when climate changes become more frequent and individual capacity of each formal or informal community might get impaired or weakened by the lack of sharing of survival strategies. How will such sharing take place? Our contention is that respect for local individual knowledge experts is as crucial a link in this knowledge chain as the recognition of the knowledge commons and the viable public domain.

Doug has raised several interesting questions in his lead article. We compliment his leadership and support to the *CPR Digest* all these years precipitating debate and dialogue across boundaries of disciplines and regions. In this response, we particularly appreciate the seeds of doubt that he has sown in the minds of those who had believed that accountability and transparency was possible only among shared realm of meanings. We add that even with incongruent meanings, dialogue is possible; transformation can take place by blending formal and informal knowledge systems. Time has come to go beyond just one domain of knowledge and thus traverse across private, common and public domains with facility and faith in local ingenuity. The precautionary principle justifies genuine engagement and respect for ecological integrity. But it can also be an alibi for inertia because in the absence of new interventions, old interventions do not get de-legitimized. The damage by the ongoing practices of resource management must be taken into account while evaluating the likely consequences of new technological interventions. The situation becomes more complex when the benefits and costs of existing interventions and new technological change are not symmetrically distributed over space, season, sector and section of societies. In the absence of scientific assessment of the way these costs are distributed, the precautionary principle can sometimes be a means to perpetuate status quo, no matter how unsustainable that may be. The need is there for balancing the interests of transparency, accountability and sustainability while negotiating the choices across knowledge and resource domains. History, after all, is always written by those who survive, some how!

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