Common Pool Resources, Natural Resources, and Indigenous Peoples

Natural resource management planning has become a central activity in the management of resources across all levels of agency. Increasingly, management plans are being called for to secure rights to, and guide management of resources used or held by, indigenous people in less developed regions. A problem that is being encountered in the development of natural resource management plans and indigenous peoples is the differing understandings and perspectives each stakeholder has towards natural resources. While natural resource planners often break up a resource into its constituent parts, indigenous peoples often view them more holistically. This is especially true when it comes to what are known as common pool resources (CPR) and customary resource use norms associated with those natural resources.

In the context of common pool resources (CPR) that are used by indigenous communities, the development of natural resource management plans often involves formalizing the customary resource use norms or "unwritten rules" held by the local indigenous peoples. By documenting them in a format recognizable to non-indigenous professionals and government resource management bureaucracies such as through a management plan, a local resource management code, or a local ordinance the management of those natural resources can take on a collaborative dynamic with the local indigenous peoples. Likewise, the study of CPRs and common property management regimes has helped to advance understanding of indigenous and traditional resource management systems by recording and analyzing informal rule systems that govern resource use and management, and by proposing "design principles" associated with successful management regimes for CPRs.

Some have criticized this approach for neglecting the social and cultural dimensions of common property, especially the ways in which use and management of the commons are embedded in social relationships and in cultural systems of symbol and meaning. Others have pointed out that the rule-based approach to analysis and design of common property institutions fails to grasp the nature of management regimes, which are often based on more loosely constituted, implicit, and dynamic norms of behavior, rather then explicit rules for resource use. Particularly troublesome is the assertion that the institutional design approach may actually prove counterproductive where management regimes are norm-based and deeply embedded in existing social networks.

If formal resource management plans or codes are not the preferred solution, what alternative approaches might offer a way for indigenous peoples to address local resource management problems? According to the recent work of Maria E. Fernandez-Gimenez, John U. Hays, Jr., Henry P. Huntington, Regis Andrew, and Willie Goodwin (2008) three possible approaches have been put forth: education, strengthening existing institutions, and investing in new relationships and networks that offer "safe" venues to discuss old problems.

Education

The approach of education has several dimensions. One is education about the resource and its importance to the community. Another is education about proper practices and management techniques. The third dimension is education about traditional values, especially the value of respect. The erosion of respect – self-respect, respect for elders, for community, for tradition, and for the land and animals – is often the perceived cause underlying the failure of individuals to abide by customary norms. Education in the form of socialization and acculturation in a particular community is the process through which resource use norms are conveyed and internalized. By emphasizing education, indigenous people indicate their greater comfort with an approach that emulates the traditional way that socially appropriate behavior is obtained from new community members. Similarly, education can strengthen existing resource use norms and revitalize customary institutions.

Strengthen Existing Institutions The second approach is to strengthen existing institutions by reinforcing their positive aspects instead of formalizing them in a plan. For instance, community events help maintain reciprocal inter-village relationships, as well as strengthening intra-village ties. A solution focused on delineating clear boundaries between village or community resources would jeopardize these relationships rather than strengthening them. Instead, means must be developed to emphasize the positive, cooperative attributes of these social exchanges and diminish their potentially divisive influence.

Invest in New Relationships   Finally, new organizations and institutions may help communities build new relationships and networks, forging linkages with individuals and organizations outside the community's immediate social sphere. These new institutions may offer more neutral venues where community members can discuss sensitive local issues in ways that do not jeopardize relationships. These new venues and networks also give communities greater access to new information, expertise, government programs, and other technical and financial resources.

Fernandez-Gimenez, Maria E.; Hays, John U.; Huntington, Henry P.; Andrew, Regis; and Goodwin, Willie. 2008. Ambivalence Toward Formalizing Customary Resource Management Norms Among Alaska Native Beluga Whale Hunters and Tohono O'odham Livestock Owners. *Human Organization*, 67(2):137-150.