

COMMUNAL LABOR AS A COMMON PROPERTY RESOURCE:
HOW SMALLHOLDERS WORK TOGETHER

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IASCP Fourth Annual Common Property Conference
Manila, June, 1993

In specifying the forms of common property that members of a Mexican irrigation association held, Robert Hunt (1991) listed the dam complex and canals, possibly the water rights, and assets including labor and cash. A common pool resource such as a grazing ground, a forest, or a water source must be improved, maintained, protected, and defended if the members of a common property organization are to derive continued benefits from it. In return for the right to subtract some of its renewable value, a member must add work and/or money. The contribution is expected, its amount is determined by the group, and it is obligatory. In the case Hunt describes, each member must make an annual cash payment per hectare owned, and failure to pay results in the imposition of Wittfogel's iron (or aqueous) law--access to water is denied, and ultimately ownership of land may be alienated. The same holds true for the annual duty of cleaning the 24 km canal with thousands of man hours expended in less than two weeks. Labor proportional to land owned is supplied by the member or a paid surrogate, in default of which a fine is charged. The managerial time of officers may also be part of the common property.

Communal Property Rights in Work and Money

The hours of labor and cash contributions of the corporate group have much in common with the design principles that that perspicacious designing woman, Lin Ostrom (Ostrom 1990:90; McGinnis and Ostrom 1992; Taylor 1992), applied to the common property institution.

(1) The expenditures come from a group with clearly defined boundaries. The members are the users of and rights holders in the common property resource. The group has a continuing corporate existence--it is not ad hoc or ephemeral, and its members have legitimate rights in some property or estate like a lineage territory, a fishing beach, a spring, or a mountain pasture. The Burgerrecht or Bauernzunft (citizenry or peasant corporation) of the 15th century Swiss village of Torbel took in new members only when the entire group agreed and the candidate donated a festive meal, significant cash, and barrels of wine to the community (Netting 1981:78-79). Non-citizen residents of the village, even outsider men who had married village women, were (and are) beyond the pale, with no rights to alp grazing or forest firewood.

(2) Labor provision rules are like appropriation rules, specifying the time, place, type, and quantity of work as related to local

the differential benefits that each user derives from the resource. But the distribution of costs and duties in a robust common property organization must be closely related to the distribution of benefits and rights (McGinnis and Ostrom 1992). In the Swiss village, the communal vineyard that produced wine for civic purposes was cultivated by a representative of each household, and each household was required to bring a pack basket of manure, duly recorded by a monitor from the town council, to fertilize the grapes. On the other hand, the days of work spent on cleaning springs, raking litter, and rebuilding avalanche-damaged walls on the alp were proportionate to the number of animals each family sent to the alp for summer grazing (Niederer 1956:75). That also determined the dues paid by each member to hire herdsmen, milkers, and cheese makers.

(3) The collective choice arrangements for making operational rules apply to scheduling labor and collecting cash. There may be a formal assembly with officers as in the Swiss annual meeting of the citizen livestock owners or merely a noisy group of Kofyar neighborhood men whom I watched that summer in Nigeria as they, without any central direction, hauled logs to restore a washed-out motorcycle bridge. The group itself defines the task or sets the level of money collected, and authority does not emanate from outside the group as it would in the case of a state-sponsored corvee.

(4) Compliance with labor and cash requirements is monitored by the users themselves or by agents that they delegate. In Torbel, the Wasserhuter, or water guard, an employee of an irrigation association that served two villages, patrolled the 10 km open ditch every day to see that there were no breaks and summoned help immediately if the canal sprang a leak or caused a landslide. In the Tehuacan Valley of Pueblo, Mexico, each major canal has its own organization with a charter, officers-president, secretary, treasurer, messengers (to tell members about meetings or work projects)-and captains for each of the subcanals (Enge and Whiteford 1989:108).

(5) The graduated sanctions for violating operational rules such as misuse of common property resources are also imposed on the "free-riders" who neglect labor duties. When a Kofyar household does not send its expected workers to a work party on someone's farm, the others in attendance discuss the failure at the beer drink after work and fine the miscreant (in jars of beer, of course). For persistent refusal to appear for communal work, a household head can be publicly ostracized. Fines for non-performance are predictably common among the commoners.

(6) Conflict over work is also expectable. In the dry conditions of the Sonoran desert in northern Mexico, some members of an irrigation association may allow their fields to stay fallow and then be reluctant to help with emergency repairs when the August

abuse as he attempts to allocate water and get members to maintain the system. On the other hand, cooperation well lubricated with home-made liquor, wine, or beer may serve to hold in check even long-simmering personal feuds and political antagonism. As one Swiss farmer told me about his bitter enemy after an amicable day's labor on the communal alp, "Well, he's all right to work with!"

(7) The labor and money expended on communal projects is usually quite independent of large owners, government functionaries, and state control. The Swiss may still refer to Thursday as Frontag, a compulsory labor day for a feudal lord or a church tithe, but since the medieval period, the communal work has been done on a vineyard or grainfield whose wine or bread was set aside for common ceremonial consumption. The Mexican government has a policy of non-intervention in the canal and the galeria (qanat-like water tunnel) associations of Tehuacan. Though other kinds of property were nationalized in the past, the federal government recognized that the "ownership of water is based on customary law and enforced by popular support" (Enge and Whiteford 1989:184). There was also pressure on the association to resolve conflicts locally because participants did not want to bring in the courts and the state ministries.

(8) Even nested enterprises are seen when labor must be pooled or access to resources scheduled as in the subak "water villages" of Bali that occupy the same watershed and time their activities by reference to a single, temple at the headwaters and subsidiary shrine celebrations at each major off-take channel (Geertz 1972; Lansing 1991). The Dutch waterschappen or waterboards which long ago substituted taxes for each farmer's upkeep of the part of the dike that adjoined his property are another example of control and coordination in local, regional, and main systems (Raadschelders 1991) .

Classifying Communal Expenditures

It is no particular achievement to show that the social resources of members' labor and finances are as much a part of common property institutions as the natural resources that are used. But like every classification, this has a tendency to blur the edges and become a taxonomic fuzzy set. It may help to introduce some distinctions among the various objects or venues of common property expenditures, namely productive commons, civic services, and private holdings, and between routine and emergency demands (Table 1).

Routine expenditures of labor time or money are based on predictable annual events like ditch cleaning before the irrigation season begins or marking trees in the communal forest for felling in the spring so that they will sufficiently dry to use as firewood in the following winter. A number of other events that demand

to appropriate parts of the commons. Under such circumstances of a local ecosystem undergoing stress, both existing corporate groups and the settlement as a whole may be summoned or extraordinary payments may be levied on members.

Both routine and emergency activities relate to a productive commons from which the members derive material goods that benefit them directly. Contributions are generally proportional to the private returns, as in number of animals pastured or hectares of land irrigated, but emergency situations demand the maximum available labor to combat a danger that threatens an entire resource endowment. Those who carry out official duties as officers of the communal association may serve on a rotating basis or may be chosen for their political skills, wealth, or influence.

Civic services support a commons of social interest rather than economic goods that are of immediate use by individual members or households. Roads and public rights-of-way may of necessity be open access, but the community must protect them from infringement by private land owners (Netting 1981:61), and those local residents who use them most frequently for travel and transport must build and maintain them. The investment necessary for modern, hard surface roads that accommodate motor vehicles means that higher levels of government take them over as state-property, but rudimentary systems of paths and bridges in a frontier area like that settled by the Kofyar are still a responsibility of the local community. Kofyar neighborhoods formed by families who are almost all nominal Roman Catholics also construct a local chapel that serves both as a place of worship and a center for civic activities. Similarly Portuguese peasant hamlet councils call out labor teams for the repair of community property such as meadows, walls, the cemetery, and the water-powered grain mill (O'Neill 1987:136). The produce of common property may be explicitly dedicated to the underwriting of communal social and religious activities. The Gemeindereben, a communally tended vineyard in the Swiss village, yields wine that is given to those who provide community service including laborers on the alp, the fire brigade on their training day, the choir and fife and drum corps who march in religious processions, and the town council after its meetings. All citizens receive wine at the traditional annual Burgertrunk celebrations, and families can purchase the wine for a funeral wake in the community room. A volunteer fire department, a militia, or a deputized posse might also be thought of as an emergency response by the commons.

More problematic, perhaps, is the status of a group that assembles to work for one of their number but without a contract or a wage. So-called festive labor (Erasmus 1956), where the host provides food, drinks, and possibly entertainment for those who do a task on his private holding, is widely present in small communities. It may be different from the usual labor exchange

an extra stimulus. The Kofyar designate such work parties, lang long, "depending on the chief," not because they are summoned by the chief but because they are seen as obligatory, with each household sending workers in proportion to its number of adults. The host must publicly schedule the event well in advance and brew abundant millet beer. The group which takes part sanctions non-attenders with fines and social censure that may lead to ostracism. Though not a rule, there is a prevailing sentiment that no one can call on the neighbors for such help more than once or twice a year, regardless of his wealth. Irregular events or projects may also call on communal labor. The Swiss community incorporated in its 1517 written charter the requirement that any citizen building a house could call on the able-bodied males from 15 to 60 to carry the squared timbers and erect a log house (Netting 1981:62; Niederer 1956:56). Amish barn raisings have a similar organization. Emergency work parties of this sort might also be held to farm for a sick neighbor or to rebuild fire-damaged structures.

Is Common Property in Labor on the Ash Heap of History?

Communal labor and cash contributions like common property itself may be thought of with nostalgia as quaint anachronisms from a simpler past now ground down by the inexorable engines of selfish individualism and a monolithic impersonal state. But where communities of smallholder agriculturalists persist, they maintain a significant and salutary presence. The Sonoran water commune of 36 users had 27 days of labor in 1981, 11 of them repairing flood damage in the month of August (Sheridan 1988). I can remember a small group of Torbel men arguing as they cleaned an irrigation ditch about whether all such labor duties would vanish because the rate of return in paid jobs was so much higher. Certainly the cash nexus tends to replace labor by members, but common property associations can come to represent considerable investments while not sacrificing their democratic participatory heritage or their "design principles." The group of friends and relatives who associate themselves to build an expensive and risky underground galeria irrigation system in Tehuacan, Mexico, must collect cash on a monthly or weekly basis to purchase shares worth one hour of water each. These shares are marketable with other association members having first rights to purchase. Wealthy members buy more shares than others, and if a galeria has a high production, shares might be worth as much as 100,000 to 180,000 pesos in 1977 (Enge and Whiteford 1989:112). Despite inequality among the farmer owners (in 1973, 20 percent held 57 percent of the shares), there was no major redistribution of shares among the 215 members of four associations over a 28-year period, and smallholders were not forced to sell out to big owners (Enge and Whiteford 1989:115-116,

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may not be as common as they once were, but where their communities still thrive, so does institutionalized cooperative labor and financial pooling.

Table 1

Object of Communal Labor and/or Cash	Type of Communal Expenditure	
	Routine	Emergency
Productive Commons	Irrigation construction, maintenance; water distribution	Repair of dams and canals damaged by floods
	Grazing ground clearing, cleaning and improving stock water sources, removing stones, spreading manure	Restore avalanche- damaged walls, paths
	Forest guarding, culling timber	Fire fighting
	Official duties of administering commons organization, staffing, allocating, adjudicating, monitoring	Defending against trespass, catching thieves Mounting legal defenses
Civic Services	Road building, maintenance	Rebuilding damaged roads, washed-out bridges
	Public facility building, care of churches, clinics, schools, town halls, sports fields, cemeteries, mills, ovens	Volunteer fire department Disaster relief, search and rescue
	Food and drink for public feasts, civic observances, communal vineyard, grainfields, cellars	Militia, crisis law and order
Private Holdings	Agricultural seasonal bottlenecks; forest clearance; transplanting, harvest, threshing	Farming for sick Rebuilding wind, fire, flood damaged

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