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Features

Legitimizing common property in Africa and the Nobel Prize

Korir Sing

' Oei

2009-11-10, Issue

457

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While the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to Barack Obama has understandably enjoyed the lion's share of media comment, Elinor Ostrom's success in jointly receiving the economics prize with Oliver E. Williamson may well prove of greater significance for Africans, writes Korir Sing'Oei.

Much time has already been spent in justifying or dismissing President Obama's selection for this year's Nobel Peace Prize. In contrast, little attention has been paid to the other Nobel

awardees, particularly Elinor Ostrom, the 73 year old woman professor of development economics at Indiana University, who together with Professor Oliver E. Williamson, shared the 2009 Nobel Prize in Economics. I argue here that the choice of Ostrom for this important award is perhaps more significant for Africa's poor than the recognition bestowed upon president Obama, our collective pride for the latter's international respect notwithstanding.

Since the 1960s, the predominant policy prescription for ensuring the sustainable exploitation of land resources in Africa has been the individualisation of land held under custom. This move was largely driven by neoclassical economists led by Garrett Hardin, who called his famous 1968 essay on shared resources 'The tragedy of the commons'. Hardin persuasively argued that a shared village grazing pasture would tend to get overused and eventually destroyed because more people utilised the common grazing ground without paying for the cost of maintaining it, a phenomenon known in economics as free-riding. This view has inspired a variety of land reforms with a general trend toward market-oriented access to, and the privatisation of, land through private entitlement. The premise was simple: individualised tenure offers the best certainty in land rights, which provides incentives for sustainable use and facilitates access to credit for investment in agriculture and natural resources, hence contributing to increased productivity and improved natural-resource stewardship.[1] Evidence now suggests that this individualisation of common property has neither yielded the economic and environmental returns envisaged nor improved living standards for those affected. For instance, according to Rutten, a Dutch scholar who undertook extensive research work in Kajiado - one of the three Maasai districts in Kenya where the individualisation of title was pursued through the establishment of group ranches with

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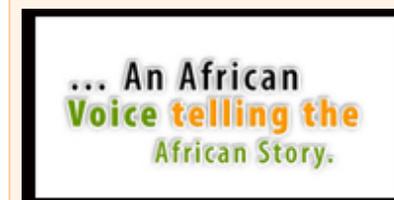
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funding from the World Bank and DfID (UK Department for International Development) - grazing land had reduced by well over 40 per cent over the period 1982 and 1990, leading to increased vulnerability and destitution of pastoralists,[2] not to mention accelerated wanton environmental degradation.

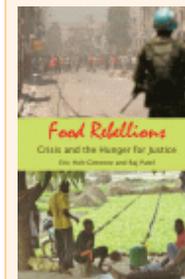
By awarding Ostrom the prize, the Nobel Committee has peradventure indicated that a paradigm shift has occurred and that in fact Hardin's famous tragedy of the commons theory should no longer be treated with reverential deference. Consequently, the developmental superstructure based on Hardin's theory must yield to more cooperative property regimes. Ostrom's research suggests that far from a tragedy, the commons can be managed from the bottom-up for a shared prosperity, given the right institutions. In her study 'Governing the commons: the evolution of institutions for collective action' (1990), based on numerous case examinations of user-managed fish stocks, pastures, woods, lakes and groundwater basins, Ostrom observes that resource users frequently develop sophisticated mechanisms for decision-making and rule enforcement to handle conflicts of interest, and she characterises the rules that promote successful outcomes. On this premise, she proceeded to propose eight 'design principles' of stable local common pool resource management, most of which principles are not too dissimilar to those already in place in pastoral commons in the Sahelian regions of Africa.[3] These Sahelian common property systems, now codified as 'pastoral codes' for instance, allow for the surveying, mapping and recording of 'all forms of existing and practiced land rights, such as they are perceived and presented by the holders of these rights themselves'.[4] Ostrom's proposals suggest that while markets can organise production and consumption pretty efficiently, they can only do so when supported and nurtured by networks and communities. In Ostrom's thesis therefore, private associations often, unaided through the instrumentality of state legislation, have managed to avoid the tragedy of the commons and develop efficient uses of resources.

The recent adoption by the African Union (AU) of the 'Framework guidelines on land policy in Africa' under the guidance of the late Professor Hastings Okoth Ogendo and the ongoing attempts by UN-OCHA (United Nations-Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs) and the AU to formulate a continental policy on pastoralism suggest increasing macro-policy recognition of the importance of common property regimes and, implicitly, the fact that standing on Hardin's postulates is no longer holy ground. Similarly, the current emphasis on participatory forest management points to the importance of local community cooperation as the singular logic in sustainable environmental resource use. This is in contrast to the individual-responsibility models of the last three to four decades post-independence. Coming hot in the heels of these developments, Ostrom's Nobel prize should serve to catalyse efforts aimed at the protection and promotion of indigenous systems of resource utilisation in Africa.

Because the resilience of indigenous systems of land management have time and again proven that commons do not have to end in tragedy, Ostrom's Nobel is well-deserved. More importantly though, her prize is deserved because the utilisation of her economic theory will unlock the potential of common-property regimes which, if better deployed, could serve to ensure a more people-centred face of national development in Africa. Such a shift will protect vulnerable communities and individuals from the unchecked market and environmental shocks that presently imperil their existence and threaten global food security.

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* Please send comments to editor@pambazuka.org or comment online at [Pambazuka News](#).

NOTES

[1] Economic Commission for Africa, Land Tenure Systems and their Impacts on Food Security and Sustainable Development in Africa (2004), p 15.

[2] M.M.E.M., Rutten Selling wealth to buy poverty : the process of the individualization of landownership among the Maasai pastoralists of Kajiado district, Kenya, 1890-1990 (1992, Verlag breitenbach Publishers, Saarbrücken, Fort Lauderdale)

[3] Volker Stamm Darmstadt, 'New Trends in West African Land Legislation? The Example of Cote d'Voire and Mali' available at <http://www.iied.org/publications>>

[4] Id.

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