

New Era for Commons-based Development in Africa?

Ostrom's Nobel validates cooperative strategies for land management.

By David Bollier

Could Professor Elinor Ostrom's Nobel Prize for Economics betoken a shift in development policies used in Africa? Korir Sing'Oei, an international human rights lawyer with a focus on indigenous and minority rights law and policy, believes Ostrom's Nobel could have a significant impact on Africa's poor.

Sing'Oei is co-founder of CEMIRIDE, the Centre for Minority Rights Development in Kenya. Writing in the Pambazuka News, a pan-African website, Sing'Oei points out that Garrett Hardin's "tragedy of the commons" parable was responsible for spurring the privatization of land rights over the past generation. Development authorities favored access and use of agricultural lands under market-based policies. Sing'Oei writes:

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. 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.

Sing'Oei cited a Dutch scholar who studied the privatization of land titles in Kenya and found that the amount of grazing land declined by over 40 percent between 1982 and 1990, "leading to increased vulnerability and destitution of pastoralists] not to mention accelerated wanton environmental degradation."

Ostrom's Nobel Prize could betoken a paradigm shift in development policies, says Sing'Oei, suggesting that Hardin's tragedy theory will "no longer be treated with reverential deference." Instead, there is likely to be more emphasis on cooperative property regimes where resources are "managed from the bottom-up for a shared prosperity, given the right institutions."

Already, many of the design principles for successful commons can be seen throughout Africa. Sing'Oei notes that the "pastoral codes" used in the Sahelian regions of Africa 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'. 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."

Here is Sing'Oei's commentary at Pambazuka News

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