

CPR FORUM COMMENTARY

Critiquing the Commons: Missing the Woods for the Trees?

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Generally speaking, scholars of the commons have been concerned with understanding what makes institutions for the management of common-pool resources emerge and function successfully. In a recent contribution to *World Development*, Arun Agrawal begins by choosing institutional durability as a proxy for success and then makes essentially two points. First, he feels that we are some distance away from a comprehensive theory of what makes commons institutions durable. This is because we have paid little attention to how the large number of causal factors identified so far are linked to each other and also to key contextual factors such as demography, markets, state policies and resource characteristics. Second, he argues that the literature is clogged with case studies, whereas what is actually needed is comparisons across purposively chosen case studies and statistical analyses using large-N studies.

Agrawal's criticisms are important, but we believe that there are deeper issues. We are particularly concerned with Agrawal's notion of institutional success. Agrawal acknowledges that outcomes should really be measured in terms of efficiency, equity and [ecological?] sustainability. Yet, he uses the excuse that most studies do not explicitly measure these variables and the even more facile assumption that most commons scholars are implicitly concerned about all three aspects to justify his defining success simply in terms of durability. Are the outcomes of institutions not more important than their persistence? Would two equally persistent institutions necessarily be identical in, say, the levels of social equity they generate?

The assumption that there is a shared set of values amongst scholars studying common-pool resource management is inaccurate. As we have argued at length elsewhere, there are at least three distinct strands in the natural resource management literature, broadly corresponding to which of the three values—efficiency, ecological sustainability and social equity—is of greater concern. One strand, which emerged as a direct response to Hardin's prediction of Tragedy and which is perhaps the dominant strand in the global commons literature, focuses on demonstrating that when win-win situations exist in the long-run, communities can and do self-organise. The notion of "success" here is thus more in the sense of Pareto efficiency: tragedies are averted, everybody is better off, but little reference is made to whether the distribution of benefits was fair. Farmers may cooperate in the maintenance of traditional or modern canal irrigation systems, but users at the head end often get the lion's share compared to those at the tail, and the landless get nothing at all. Self-initiated community forest management institutions can be equally insensitive to the needs of poor fuel wood head loaders or of women. Similarly, this mainstream commons literature is often too sanguine about ecological sustainability—use is assumed to be locally sustainable, and off-site effects are not on the table.

Another strand overlaps with the conservationist literature, which is primarily concerned about ecological sustainability. This is defined in two ways: sustaining the resource itself for current and future local users, and (perhaps more important but often less explicit) sustaining the flow of other benefits to off-site stakeholders, be they downstream farmers, urban wildlife lovers, or the global community concerned with climate change or biodiversity loss. Local-level common property institutions are considered appropriate either by those who believe that local communities are always keen on ecological sustainability or by those who consider it more efficient to involve local communities because of their superior ecological knowledge and proximity to the resource. Note that a significant fraction of the conservationists in fact do not hold these beliefs, and hence advocate strong state control over common-pool resources. And even those conservationists who believe in involving communities are generally not too concerned about intra-community inequities.

The third strand, perhaps more strongly articulated in developing countries, emphasises social equity. It explores aspects such as the extent to which common property institutions act as a buffer for the poorer sections of rural communities (e.g., Jodha's work in South Asia) or the manner in which community ownership may reduce the tendency towards accumulation and hence differentiation (e.g., the ejidos of Mexico). This is not simply a matter of some studies paying greater attention to the "relationship between the poverty of the users and their levels of exploitation of common-pool resources". Nor is it simply a case of looking at "heterogeneity" (a euphemism that confuses horizontal difference with vertical differentiation and exploitation) as a variable that affects institutional performance. Rather, Jodha and others started with a concern for poverty and equity, and explored whether and to what extent common property resources might offset the effects of an inequitable distribution of private agricultural landholding.

From this perspective, the focus of the mainstream commons literature on Pareto-improving outcomes is greatly limiting. It would, for instance, ignore the possibility of distributing water equally across all households regardless of their landholding or physical location in the irrigation system—an approach actualised in the Pani Panchayat model in parts of central India. Similarly, the tendency to look at the "positive aspects" of "heterogeneity" is disturbing—again a case of privileging institutions over outcomes.

A recognition that scholars working on the commons do not in fact share common values is an important first step in better commons research. This should be followed by conscious incorporation of this wider set of values—efficiency, ecological sustainability and equity—in all assessments of institutions for common-pool resource management and in weighing alternative policy prescriptions regarding them. We should recognise that disagreements about which institutional arrangement works "better" are sometimes disagreements over objectives rather than over theoretical or empirical ones over the arrangement-outcome relationship. We would thus avoid being seen by the broader policy community as trapped in our own notions of desirable outcomes, and we would be able to reach audiences that hold different values.

Using broader, multi-dimensional definitions does not, of course, finesse the problem of understanding factors responsible for success or failure. Here, Agrawal has rendered signal service by highlighting the need to abandon explanations based on single causes and to move towards those based on multiple causes. But this is easier said than done. Incorporating 'market pressure' and 'population pressure' as additional explanatory variables in hypothesising causal links and subsequent multiple regressions may be methodologically speaking a first step towards multi-causality. But such an atheoretical approach is not likely to take one very far. Markets don't simply penetrate and populations don't simply explode—there are likely to be reasons for these phenomena, some way in which micro actions can and do

shape these macro factors. Similarly, states do not simply centralise or decentralise control over natural resources—the extent and manner are likely shaped by grassroots pressures as well as extra-local concerns. And it is not as if micro-behaviour is completely explained by the theory of rational choice either! Competing explanations include cultural ones, such as eco-feminist theories of patriarchal behaviour and Gandhian ones about the debilitating effects of materialist pursuit.

Needless to say, “unifying” different social science theories is much harder than picking up a few variables from each and running a multiple regression. (We have hardly been able to achieve such unification in our own work!). But we believe that a concerted effort in this direction is long overdue. Such unification will not, however, happen as long as solving of specific puzzles posed by our narrow disciplines gains precedence over the big picture. The push for unification will only come when our analysis is tightly linked to real world outcomes, the complexity of which demands that we get out of disciplinary compartments and get back to our original enterprise of understanding how human society works. In this age of post-modern thinking, we are old-fashioned enough to believe that big theories matter; what is required is getting them out of their rigid boxes and merging them. The functioning of commons institutions would then have to be understood in, for instance, the larger context of changes in modes and relations of production, on which there is a rich and rigorous literature.

Another dimension of this integration is the incorporation of ecosystem characteristics and rigorous understanding of the natural sciences into our theories. Given that ‘common-pool’-ness of a resource is fundamentally a result of the physical attributes of “non-excludability” and “subtractibility”, the commons literature should give attention to how characteristics of the resource affect the ability of institutions to manage them, and create ‘demands’ for different kinds of institutions. Beyond Agrawal’s reference to mobility and storage characteristics, one must consider characteristics such as spatial and temporal variability, renewability, complexity, and biological and use-diversity.

One characteristic seems particularly important—one-way non-local externality. This is the effect of the unidirectional nature of many ecosystem processes such as flow of water in a river basin and wind-driven flow of air pollutants, or the patchy distribution of globally valued resources such as biodiversity. It results in local use of a resource affecting the well-being of communities that are located far away from it and that cannot participate in its use or modification. This characteristic provides a legitimate rationale for supra-local regulation of local use, and renders the “pure community control” position as meaningless as the “pure state control” one. The debate urgently needs to move towards how to structure a multi-layered system of governance.

In our efforts to refute Hardin, we seem to have mistaken the trees of local institutional durability for the woods of fundamental social concerns, viz., the efficiency, equity and ecological (and social) sustainability of outcomes. Using an explicit but broad normative framework and integrating competing social science theories along with a rigorous ecological understanding will take us much further along the road to understanding and informing the social use of common-pool resources.

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