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Protect The Commons

By Marianne de Nazareth

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The 13th Biennial Conference of the International Association for the Study of the Commons (IASC) 2011 held in the heritage city of Hyderabad from the 10-14th January 2011 was an eye opener with regard to the critical role that the commons such as forests, water bodies, and grazing lands play in sustaining the rural economy in any country in the world including India. The reason Andhra Pradesh was chosen as the venue was because the government is piloting a regional programme that will integrate the development and restoration of what is known as common lands in the implementation of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) and the Community Forest Management arrangements in AP are also path breaking in terms of scale, initiative and institutional design. In urban minds, common lands are treated as ‘waste lands’ but they are most often the only means of livelihood to the poor.

“ Often commons face neglect or are unappreciated for discussions around them, and fall between the cracks in our reductionist approach to understanding natural resources. While in reality strikingly similar issues are faced by forests, water, pastures and other common regimes. To address a diversity of issues across resources and across disciplines there are eleven panel series around seven sub-themes planned. Some of which are : The commons, Poverty and social exclusion; Globalisation, commercialisation and the commons,” said Jagdeesh Rao Puppala the Co-chair of the conference.

At the opening ceremony on 10 January at Shilparamam, the guest of honour was Jairam Ramesh, Minister of State for Environment and Forests and the Keynote address was made by Dr. Elinor Ostrom, Nobel laureate in Economic Sciences (2009).

Minister Jairam Ramesh in his signature green jacket over a white kurta was the star of the evening saying

that ministers have a hard job bridging the gap between the academic world and the real world. Academics measure anything they do slowly in years while he has to work in months, maybe days, to take decisions. When asked what is standing in the way of implementing the laws of the land when it comes to managing common pool resources, Ramesh explained that archaic laws in the country need to be re-examined. “The Indian Forest law came into force in 1927. We have not challenged that intellectual edifice and we should. Unless you have the local forest community given an economic stake in the forest to look after them at a local level you cannot be successful. At the moment forest dwellers are looked at like criminals.” The statement drew a round of applause from an audience with representatives from 69 different countries.

“All our laws to do with the environment are national, therefore if anyone asks me about pollution or forests or water, I say ask that particular state government. We need to have split responsibilities only then we can come to grips with problems.” The minister felt that the country needed to give recognition to those states that implement environment laws seriously so that they are lauded for their efforts. The biggest constraint he felt was in the mindset of the people implementing the laws. He felt if that changed, everything would change.

In her keynote address Dr. Ostrom, explained that “ In forests across the world people who use it, monitor it better than government agencies. One can find a synergy between the local people and the great job of carbon sequestration by the forests. If they are made responsible to handle the rules governing the forest, it will work.” She felt Collective Action theory was at the core of social sciences and policy making. Collective Action Theory seeks to understand how groups of people are able to cooperate to overcome social dilemmas.

Ruth Meinzen-Dick, the President of the IASC and Herman Roza Chavez the new minister of the environment of El Salvadore delivered the key note addresses on the second day. Dick revealed this was her dream to come back to India where she grew up in Tamil Nadu and did her thesis on tank irrigation. But today she looks back in analysis of how not an individual, but a group like the IASC can make an impact made on governing the commons equitably.

“Today the commons has been given recognition only because of the work of Dr. Elinor Ostrom, Nobel laureate in Economic Sciences (2009). It is because of her work and the Nobel prize that the commons are being recognised and laws are being enacted to save them.” In November 2010 there was a meeting in Berlin on the new commons which include urban digital and electronic and any other shared resource that is commons or a common pool resource. New areas of commons such as culture, health and global resources are also being explored. She felt the collective expertise that the association can mobilise from over 90 countries fuels policy debates of global significance. Whether the issue is intellectual property, network neutrality, global warming, land reform, legal empowerment of the poor, or reforming the international financial system,

the association strongly believes that research and lessons from working in and with commons regimes are important in shaping governance systems that will benefit as many people as possible, simultaneously preserving resources at hand for future generations.

Then the newly appointed minister of the Environment and Natural Resources in El Salvadore, Herman Roza Chavez, in his address said, “ I also have a strong sense of urgency at the problems affecting our planet and our developing world countries. I have newly been appointed and the expectations of change by my countrymen are very high. I also have to be careful and look at risk reduction rather than threaten the growth of our economy. Risk reduction is the only way forward and I try to use the knowledge community’s research in my work. El Salvadore is just a small country of 2 million hectares which is a perfect laboratory for Professor Ostrom, to consider!”

Quoting from *Ecosystems and Human Well-Being: A Framework For Assessment* (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment Series) by Gretchen Daily, he said, and that all ecosystems provide critical eco services for human well being. In El Salvadore builders are given guidelines to minimise impacts and corporate responsibility goes beyond just green washing he said. In conclusion he requested fervently that Elinor Ostrom help him and El Salvadore make the right policy decisions which were paramount for the environment.

The third day of 13th Biennial Conference of the International Association for the Study of the Commons began in Hyderabad with the key note speeches made by David Bollier and Bina Agarwal. David Bollier is a journalist, activist and consultant from the US.

According to Bollier there are two general types of commons. The finite and the infinite- the twin area of neo liberal economic policy says Bollier are scarce commons which are air, water and land which are treated as infinite. And limitless commons which are creative works, which are treated as scarce due to copyright and patent laws. Bollier talked of the commons as being the new political culture. Mankind has to look at a new narrative to reclaim what is free and unfettered and belonging to all. “The attitude towards the commons should be- this land is our land and let us fight to regain the commons. We have to build better public policy to build a better commons. The state and market look at how they can exploit the commons, and many common pool resources are being privatised. Some people talk about privatisation but enclosure is the right way to describe it,” he said.

Bollier revealed that he is going back into the history of the commons which is forgotten. “Without legislature it is hard for commoners to argue in court about the commons, so we want to regenerate a body of common

laws and I am convinced that recognition of the history of the commons can help us understand the victims of enclosure and those who depend on the commons for subsistence,” he explained.

He ended his lecture with urging scholars and activists to support and strengthen each others work. “ Let us step away from the fringes and open new conversations and build new alliances,” he urged the gathering.

Bina Agarwal the second speaker is the Director and Professor of Economics, Institute of Economic Growth, University of Delhi. In her address she said, “Economists studying environmental collective action and green governance have paid little attention to gender. Research on gender and green governance in other disciplines has focused mainly on women's near absence from forestry institutions. In my newest book, Gender and Green governance, I ask if women's inclusion in forest governance, undeniably important for equity, also affect decisions on forest use and outcomes for conservation and subsistence,” she said.

Bina talked about her work and how it showed that if women were given more responsibility of looking after tracts in the forest those tracts would fare better than the others in a year. She revealed that women allow limited extraction, they would patrol forests with more vigilance and women’s knowledge of species and extraction without denuding a resource was all superior to men. By allowing some forest extraction it is beneficial to remove incendiary undergrowth which prevents forest fires and leads to a win- win situation she said. As a result, according to Bina, this leads to a positive outcome, with a thicker forest canopy, rather than a patchy one, which is more effective to control Green House Gas emissions.

The floor was then thrown open to questions and it led to a lively debate which included climate change and its effects on the commons.

The fourth and final day of 13th Biennial Conference of the International Association for the Study of the Commons began with Ashish Khotari as the key note speaker. Khotari is the Founder member of Kalpavriksh, a 30 year environmental research and action group in India which is involved in people’s movements against destructive development projects including the Narmada dams.

“ My first lesson about the commons was 25 years ago when I walked in the Himalayan foothills along with the Chipko movement, which was a resistance to the destruction of forests in the ‘70’s and ‘80’s. That was my first lesson about how the common man can galvanise positive action to safeguard the commons.”

He went on to say that the commons are becoming increasingly uncommon and there is a continuous erosion of the commons due to various reasons. Khotari is concerned that the juggernaut of ‘development’ will erode them over the next few decades until we as humans dig in our heels and reassert our rights over the commons.

There is no accurate answer as to when the revival may begin, but it a question we have to mull over and discuss he said. From 1985 to 2000 there has been a doubling of the forest area under community ownership and governance which is helping to bring back a lot of the bio-diversity that we have lost. It is the indigenous people who have now begun to save wetlands, mountain areas and forests by reasserting their spiritual connection with nature and their historical rights over decades. He reiterated that this was a more 'grass roots' democracy which is more effective than bureaucracy.

An increased voice in retaining control and regaining what was lost with colonial policies or government exclusion is an important global trend which has been strengthened by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples adopted by the assembly in 2007. Movements to encourage reassertion of common rights are growing he said. Mongolia opened up pastoral rights to shepherds in 2007, Dalit women working toward reasserting rights on seed production critical to the poor and marginalised in India, El Salvador's repatriation of 250 different varieties of potatoes in Peru, pastoralists in the Niger claiming a million hectares of land for pastoralism were some of the actual successful empirical examples he cited.

To conclude Khotari asked if there was hope for the commons? He stated that all the fake new market mechanisms like bio-fuels, geo-engineering and REDD could cause a lot of erosion of the commons and the eco labels put on them are not the real solution. Instead he urged people to look at decentralization and get the local communities embedded in managing the landscape. This would bring back a sense of responsibility to the human race, towards the planets resources, a radical ecological democracy where we value reciprocity and non- violence and go by the principles of equity and sharing.

The conference concluded on a more positive note since the Indian minister of environment showed a willingness and an enthusiasm to work towards a more inclusive commons in India.If handled right these commons could reduce poverty levels of the marginalised and the poor who depend on them for their livelihood and sustenance.

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