

A Modest Homage to Elinor Ostrom

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*We must learn to be wise gardeners
of our own biological diversity.*

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The announcement, in October of 2009, of the winners of the Nobel Prize in Economy, which was first promoted by the Bank of Sweden as a memorial to Alfred Nobel, constituted for many of us a more than pleasant surprise. The first reason for the pleasantness of the surprise was that, for the first time, a Nobel in Economy was awarded to a woman, breaking decades of a masculine—and mostly white—club of recipients of the award. The second was that the woman receiving the prize was not an economist! She was “only” a political scientist... the third reason, and surely the less important, but nonetheless the most pleasurable for all of us who have had the privilege of interacting with her, is that she is a woman that has a profound social sensibility and an invaluable human quality. Prof. Elinor Ostrom’s life-long work analyzing the economy, governance and management of common properties mostly by rural groups outside the orthodoxy of established markets, was duly recognized with the prize. Prof. Ostrom’s studies have supported the idea that it is necessary to arrive to alternative solutions to those proposed by the theoreticians of the privatization. Her long-time studies are particularly relevant nowadays when we are faced with the unprecedented global environmental problems and the various efforts to try to reach some kind of global international agreements among governments.

Prof. Ostrom’s work is also particularly relevant for Mexico and many of us who are interested in the land tenure-natural capital-utilization in the country, and with whom Prof. Ostrom has interacted in different degrees, in her various visits to Mexico. Actually her influence has served to develop a school of thought closely related to her approach to resource utilization in communal lands at the Institute for Social Research (IIS) at the National University of Mexico (UNAM). The international recognition that the Nobel Prize confers to her studies is particularly relevant as support for the ideas of a number of academics in Mexico who think that the rural and indigenous communities, owners of a large proportion of the forested areas but belonging to the most marginalized and poorest fifth of Mexican society, have a key roll to play in the conservation of biological diversity. These communities can, within a favorable context of internal social organization and with a modest initial economic support, become successful entrepreneurs of their natural capital, not only generating economic benefits that will be fairly shared within their communities, but also maintaining the integrity of their forests as functional stable ecosystems in the long run. However, in my opinion one fundamental change for the owners of the forests would be the adoption of an entrepreneurial attitude that will provide the members of the community with a sense of empowerment on the definitions about their future. Many of us have insisted that the government, at the federal and state levels should promote more community owned, managed, and certified forests. This would be the only viable way to protect the natural capital represented by the natural ecosystems of the country.

In Mexico, as in many other biodiversity rich countries, where rural populations are widely scattered in their territories and depend on the resources of natural ecosystems for their livelihood, having a system of natural protected areas like the one existing in Mexico—and which

incidentally is exemplary in the World—is important but also quite limited. Between 11% and 12% of the Mexican territory is now protected within the National System of Protected Areas; however, the large majority of biodiversity represented by endemic, endangered species as well as by unique ecosystems lies outside the protected portion of the territory: most of it is within the land owned by ejidos, rural and indigenous communities. We have to work with them to adopt, adapt and develop a number of sustainable and diversified processes of utilization of our natural capital, as real and durable alternatives to the conservation of that natural capital.

It would be wrong to assume automatically that land tenure systems such as ejidos or communal lands constitute, by themselves, successful models for the rational and ecologically sound use of natural resources. There are many examples in Mexico where social land tenure structures remain, but the basic cultural traits have disappeared or have been seriously eroded through political maneuvering for votes, heavy emigration of adults, mostly males, to cities or abroad.

The 1992 constitutional changes in Mexico that partially modified the regime of social land tenure never addressed some of the crucial problems associated with ecosystem deterioration, various negative impacts on the environment such as land erosion, loss of biodiversity, amongst others.

The extremely limited horizontal integration of policies in relation to their impacts on the environment is another major factor that exacerbates the effects of the agrarian changes made to the Constitution in the early '90s. This constitutional reform was apparently conceived under the assumption that “efficiency” and “productivity” would result from implementing more “corporate” models of land tenure and management, in total ignorance of the need for understanding and count with knowledge about how to manage an enormously diverse and complex set of ecosystems in the landscape; a knowledge that is not taught in the business administration or engineering schools in universities.

The recognition of Prof. Orstom’s work must also be interpreted as a recognition to the substantial value of human capital represented by the indigenous and rural communities inhabiting a country, which possess their own forms of social, political, and productive organization. Her work addresses the question of why such human resources and their social values are not brought into the mainstream for the development of a country. For us in Mexico, it is also an extremely valuable stimulus to reinforce our work with her ideas and to continue searching for ways to combine the conservation of our biological patrimony and, at the same time, helping conserve the social values of knowledge and organization of the rural and indigenous sectors of our society. Both resources constitute a fundamental richness for this country.