

IASCP 2004: *Reports from Oaxaca*

Some Comments

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Let me first indicate that it was very exciting, almost intoxicating, to be in Oaxaca for the 2004 meeting of the IASCP. As someone who participated in the Annapolis meeting in 1985 and has participated pretty steadily in IASCP events through the years, it is great to see the number of members rising, the number of countries represented increasing, and the number of disciplines involved also growing. It was wonderful to see all the young scholars in Oaxaca. No academic approach can succeed if they do not recruit, young scholars. It looks to me like the IASCP has a vigorous future, and I am looking forward to our next meeting in 2006.

In terms of future challenges, I do think that it is time for some real efforts at theoretical synthesis. I think we now have a number of important insights related to specific resources and specific regions. We have now demonstrated for the world that Hardin over-generalized and that many resource users have contrived ingenious institutional arrangements which they have adapted over time and do their own monitoring and enforcement. We have also demonstrated that when external authorities do not recognize these institutional arrangements and impose their own rules on a locality, that this is a big challenge to the long-run survival of indigenous institutions. Other challenges also exist including good economic opportunities – which may improve the livelihoods of those who would have otherwise been in a subsistence relationship with a resource system.

Some critics think that all scholars interested in common property institutions limit their attention to showing the inadequacy of theoretical papers written before 1970 and to the threats to long-term survival of indigenous institutions. We can do much more than this! As the National Research Council (2002) report on *The Drama of the Commons* demonstrates, there are many theoretical advances. In the last chapter of this report, several causal models were presented that are being tested by multiple authors related to diverse resources in multiple countries. As shown in Figure 1, the outcomes for a resource are affected by a chain of causal processes starting with key attributes of resources users (their ease of exit, the size of the group, their homogeneity, their communication patterns and networks of relationships, and their practices of reciprocity) as well as attributes of the resource (stability, storage, and type of boundaries). These jointly affect intermediate variables that in turn affect the resource over time (see also Dietz, et al., 2003).

It is important that more of our work moves on to further develop our theoretical frameworks and models (see Anderies, et al., 2004) and then to use multiple methods for testing our theories including large N studies, experiments, agent-based models, as well as case studies that help address specific theoretical questions. Case studies that examine a similar ecology divided by institutional jurisdictions are particularly valuable – as are the reverse – a similar jurisdiction covering more than one ecological system. I hope that the Program Chairs for the next several meetings will really push to have some panels that overtly review the “state-of-the-art” related to

specific theoretical questions. Two questions that need a lot more work relate to the impact of size of group and heterogeneity of group on the likelihood of a group of resource users organizing in the first place and their sustainability in the second (see Bardhan and Dayton-Johnson, 2002; Platteau, 2004; and Poteete and Ostrom, 2004 for some recent efforts to examine these questions). We really need to dig into the theory related to the composition of groups as it impacts the strategies members choose and the likely outcomes.

Another suggestion is to involve more resource lawyers in our work. I think that law professors interested in environmental questions could learn a lot from us and that we could learn a lot from recent work on how informal institutions can be legalized without taking away their vitality, the level of trust that individuals have established and their norms.

For Further Information

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