

Multiple-Use commons, collective action, and platforms for resource use negotiation

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Abstract:

This is a guest editorial for the September 1999 issue of *Agriculture and Human Values*.

Article:

In June of 1998, the International Association for the Study of Common Property held its 7th conference in Vancouver, British Columbia. Association conferences are an exciting mix of practitioner reports from the field and academic research; the two approaches are often combined in individual works and on the panels. We have always had valuable theoretical work at this conference, but that interest became institutionally explicit at the Berkeley conference in 1996, when a group of people interested in theory met in a stuffy basement room at 9:00 p.m., with most of us sitting on the floor. At the Vancouver conference two years later, we had more than a dozen panels on theory and explicit theory discussions in full-conference plenaries. We dealt with topics such as analytic frameworks for multiple-use commons, heterogeneity, cultural factors, holistic management, and the role of language. We discussed agency theory, power, leadership, problem definition, and cultural imperialism – the fine old panoply of social science constructs.

A great deal of valuable work and theory advancement was accomplished at the Vancouver conference. In my remarks during the closing plenary, I made the following observations about the theory panels and panel discussions.

First, we still need to work to clarify definitions. For example, we have several ways to use the word "community." Thus, when we hear papers that challenge communities as appropriate action arenas in terms of watershed management or as unwitting agents of the state, it is not clear that the "communities" are the same. We need to continue to develop *common vocabulary*. Otherwise, we talk past each other and fail to make use of each other's insights. Publication of papers developed from the panels is an encouraging step in working toward this common vocabulary.

Second was the issue of *scale*. There was a new level of interest in units of analysis beyond "user pool" or "community" or "individual" on such panels as multiple-use multiple-user CPRs, platforms/forums of representation, peak associations, regional or state level management systems, and ecosystems. This shift partially explains the increased confusion on terminology.

Third, no longer were the majority of theory panels driven primarily by the Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) framework that until now has been the dominant analytic approach to common pool resource analysis. The field of common pool resources (CPR) is expanding. Even two or three conferences ago we had a common intellectual foundation, but now the language of the conference is increasingly multi-disciplinary. Our conference content is also expanding. Several panels were very interesting intellectually and theoretically but they were not primarily about common pool resources: CPR was simply the example used to illustrate the theory.

Fourth, I was reminded yet again that *substantive areas* matter. There was a great deal of verbal deference to knowledge of time and place but few answers to “So what?” For example, CPRs dealing with fugitive resources such as fish are analytically different from watersheds (which have geographical logic independent of human living patterns) and public housing projects (which have no extractable resources). To further our development of theory, we need to begin to structure analytic categories, or, perhaps more accurately, we need to return to consideration of useful categories upon which we can agree.

Finally, a large gap in our regular discourse is discussion of bureaucratic behavior. We reify the state and government agencies. We see them as black boxes and make little or no attempt to explain factors such as incentives, organizational norms, or ethics as they affect government agency decisions. Bureaucrats are not agents of Lucifer. They are generally hardworking, well-intentioned, underpaid people in very difficult jobs. We’d do well to spend a little more time incorporating their institutional imperatives into our analyses. This would increase the power of our theory and, to be a little instrumental, would also make it easier to provide information in a form they can use to help us achieve our own goals. [An editorial aside: after I made these remarks, a conference participant touched my shoulder in passing and said “I’m a bureaucrat. Thank you!” I wonder how many good people we have offended with our bureaucrat-bashing?]

The papers in this volume of *Agriculture and Human Values* are a result of a panel developed by Nathalie Steins and Victoria Edwards as part of the “theory” stream of panels at the Vancouver conference. This is, to my knowledge, the first panel to be published, although at least one other is under review. The panel, “Multiple-Use Commons, Collective Action and Platforms for Resource Use Negotiation,” was structured to provide a coherent set of papers with a common theme. Panelists wrote their papers in response to a conceptual paper prepared by Steins and Edwards. This gave the authors a common vocabulary and analytic framework summarized in the five discussion statements presented at the conclusion of the first paper in this volume:

- platforms for resource use negotiation in multiple-use CPRs must consist of representatives of the different user groups;
- platforms must be physically and culturally accessible to representatives of all user groups;
- platform performance depends on the level of organization of individual user groups within the platform, the relations between the various user groups, and the strengths and skills of the representatives of the user groups;
- new platforms must not be built on existing forums for single-use resource management; and
- platforms must be facilitated by a third party to coordinate user group activities, to ensure continuity, and to reduce or to absorb transaction costs.

Ravnborg and del Pilar Guerrero use the case of watershed management in the Andes to explore three of the discussion statements developed by Steins and Edwards: ensuring representation of all stakeholders in the resource system; exploring problems that arise when new platforms are built on existing forums rather than developing new forums; and the importance of third party facilitators. They discuss methods for comprehensive stakeholder identification and how stakeholder identification aids in the development of new, comprehensive platforms. The researchers were actively involved in the case used in the paper and became the third party facilitators; the paper concludes with a discussion of the importance of their participation in the watershed management process.

The paper by Maarleveld and Dangbégnon addresses four of the discussion statements presented in the conceptual paper: membership of platforms, accessibility, organization and skills of stakeholders, and evolution of platforms. They note that resource management systems are not static systems, and they ask whether a social learning perspective to analyze and catalyze collective decision making can facilitate adaptive management. Using cases from fisheries management in Lake Aheme (Benin) and watershed management in Gelderland (The

Netherlands), they show that their social learning perspective identifies limitations in existing management systems and helps point the way for new adaptations.

Meinzen-Dick and Bakker explore the development of a multi-user platform to help manage the irrigation system in Kirindi Oya (Sri Lanka). They find that the existing Project Management Committee is a natural base for negotiating multiple water uses (and thus a new platform specifically for the multiple-use common is not necessary) but they confirm that *all* stakeholders must be represented in the platform and that the power and abilities of each stakeholder affect the performance of the platform.

Röling and Maarleveld note the analytic problems that arise from using neo-liberal economics, empirical science, positivism, and actor-oriented sociology to explain collective action strategies. They examine the feasibility of using narratives such as religious faith, communicative action (Habermas), adaptive management (Holling) and the “soft side of land” (Röling) as alternative explanations for collective action. Their paper confronts the existing paradigm for current CPR research head-on and is a intriguing challenge to the IAD framework mentioned above.

In the final paper, Steins and Edwards re-examine their five discussion statements in light of the cases and arguments presented in the other four papers – a daunting task! In part they conclude that each CPR scenario is unique and should not be forced into any pre-conceived notions of platform constitution and facilitation; they are, in the best traditions of CPR research, acknowledging the critical importance of “time and place.”

Taken as a whole, these papers stimulate discussion of the problems of multiple-use, multiple-user commons. In these CPRs, the needs and desires of each group of stakeholders must be balanced, negotiated and re-negotiated, and the resulting agreements enforced. These papers are a provocative contribution to the emerging debate on complex resource systems.