

# **Common Property Resource Management: New Directions and New Cul-de-Sacs**

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## **SUMMARY OF A LECTURE**

### **1. Rehearsal of recent developments.**

Common property resource management (CPRM) had long been studied by colonial authorities in Africa, Asia and elsewhere, although the articulation of property rights were seldom, if ever recognised and described rigorously. Recent renewed interest in CPRM therefore has tended "to put old wine in new bottles". However new initiatives (BOSTID, 1986) and the founding of the CPR network have brought together different disciplines in a creative way. An economic approach to property regimes has also given rigour. A resource regime can be defined as "a structure of rights and duties characterising the relationships of individuals with respect to a resource". Non-private resource regimes were mis-allocated to open access regimes (Hardin's "tragedy of the commons" and the "Prisoner's dilemma"). Since Hardin's paper, the concept of property has been developed involving descriptions of constellations of rights, duties and exposure of rights to others, membership, and institutions to establish sanctions and incentives. The categories of property regime: state, private, CP - and non-property: open access.

The importance of CPRs to users has also been acknowledged. They involve rangelands, forests, wildlife, land, water, trees and artisanal fisheries and have been documented as being central to the livelihoods of pastoralists and farmers in Africa, Asia and Latin America as well as to the Inuit.

The problems of CPRMs have clearly multiplied. Changing patterns of access and control of resources and of rights and duties through commercialisation and differentiation have tended to increase the transaction costs involved in CPRM. Also there is a "transition of trust" from local to distant (state) management.

The increasing interest in these issues has been brought about by the development of a neo-populist paradigm of rural development and peasant studies. Also the recognition of project failure in which the complexity of CPRM institutions had not been grasped and where privatisation was the implicit norm.

## 2. Explanations for CPRM institutions.

The first set of explanations for CPRM institutions (and their failures) involve the nature of society in which they are set. Notions of the moral economy (right to subsistence for all the community, access to resources in times of stress and solidarity under conditions of inequality) are important. Also CPRM as a risk avoiding or risk sharing institution has been considered important. Where resources are ephemeral or natural hazards particularly frequent, private ownership of livelihood resources may not ensure the survival of individuals. In Rajasthan for example, there is a saying "when it rains, one horn of the cow is dry and the other wet". Also the costs of privatisation may be prohibitive to poor communities (fences, guards, and legal titling, etc).

Social change in many societies has been identified as the major set of reasons for CPRM failure. However many studies thereby assume that CPRM institutions are somehow "traditional" and therefore outside history, and representing some archetype of feudal authority or even "merry Africa". Examples include M Watts Silent Violence and southern African institutions such as the Kotla and dinaga, and the impact of land reform upon feudal management of CPRs in India.

The second set of explanations for CPRM institutions concern the nature of the resource. Usually this is of secondary importance

although Wade (1986, 1992) emphasises the importance of the resource itself and its technical management requirements in explaining why villages in south India had common management of some resources but not for others. Clearly, the technical management requirements are important in framing the day-to-day running of the resource. For example, there are two major type of resource that have different management demands. The first are those with well defined boundaries and/or a stable group of users (eg. forests, agricultural land, demersal fish), and the second are those which are stochastic in location (grass for cattle in semi-arid areas, pelagic fish).

### **3. Lessons from three case studies.**

a) Grazing schemes in Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe. Here, CPRM institutions have been reified. Appearances suggest successful range management through technologically successful rotational grazing requiring the formation of local CPRM institutions. However, reality is very different. Larger cattle owners in communal areas are taking the opportunity of free wire provided by outside agencies to define communal grazing grounds and thereby enclose them for corporate use - often at the expense of less alert neighbours. This is a case of corporate enclosure rather than, as in 17th century Europe, private enclosure.

b) Conflict and property regimes in eastern Sudan. Here enormous confusion in land rights exist forming a "layer cake" of mutually conflicting rights. There is considerable evidence of degradation including disappearing acacia forest, cutting of gum arabic, and the ploughing up of re-seeded trees. There exists chronic uncertainty that a farmer can expect to hold onto land in the future and also there is armed conflict between large mechanised farmers, local farmers, pastoralists - and any government official unwise enough to get involved.

#### 4. Lessons for future research.

a) CPRM institutions are often political tools of expedience - they are used by powerful groups to articulate rights over resources; or as a preemptive and temporary alliance to protect resources against outside threats. They are in a process of constant decay, death, birth, renewal and change. In no way can they be considered merely as traditional or residual.

b) The understanding of CPRs must be linked with private property resources (PPR). CPR-PPR links are essential and can often be best analysed using a farming systems approach to establish flows between resources managed under different regimes.

c) The recent rigour introduced by economists into CPRM research has been progressive, but it has tended also to be reductionist and has distorted and detached CPRM institutions from the society in which they are located. There is much more than merely "rights and duties" in establishing who has access to resources and how they are managed.

d) There are serious problems in comparing standards of environmental management under different property regimes. If it is done a priori, the arguments tend to degenerate into articles of faith (eg. tragedy or no tragedy?). If it is done ex post and empirically, it is unlikely that like is being compared with like, since private property tends to be established around more valuable resources like better soils, areas with more rainfall and lower slopes, etc while CPRs nearby are those that have not been subject to encroachment and increasing privatisation. Therefore environmental outcomes may be explained more by variations in physical factors than in differences of property regime.

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