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Making it last? Analysing the role of NGO interventions in the development of institutions for durable collective action in Indian community forestry

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ABSTRACT

Commons scholarship seems preoccupied with *self-governance*. It focuses on showing that common pool resource (CPR) appropriators do not always need outsider-assistance in order to stay clear of the tragedy of the commons. However, at the same time we observe the presence of a large number of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that consider community organisation – i.e. the organisation of collective action in community institutions – their core business. In this research we firstly develop and apply a framework to analyse the activities of 20 NGOs in India and compare these to indicators for collective action in a community-led CPR governance context, derived from the commons literature. Secondly, we assess variation in NGOs' approaches to institutional change, by developing and applying a typology that distinguishes between (i) perspectives that see institutional change as predominantly determined by *structure* (institutional design) or *agency* (institutional crafting), respectively, and between (ii) perspectives that perceive institutions as either subjective or objective to the institutional change agent, respectively. Our results show that NGOs do not get involved in activities aimed at influencing *functioning* collective action such as crafting or designing rules. They do involve themselves in activities aimed at strengthening *durable* collective action such as forest management trainings. Furthermore, all NGOs show a predominantly *subjective* approach to institutional change. Their long-term focus puts the communities themselves firmly in the institutional change agent position. The results along the design–crafting dimension show more diversity and dynamicity. Eight NGOs in our sample take a strong institutional *crafting* approach to their work, whereas only three focus predominantly on institutional *design* and nine show elements of both crafting and designing. The majority of the NGOs highlighted how their approach can change depending on the stage in the intervention. Our results highlight the dynamic and diverse institutional settings the NGOs operate in which both moderates their approach to institutional change and determines their choice of specific activities.

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1. Introduction

In the commons literature, governing the commons is to a large extent seen as synonymous with self-governing the commons. This literature has shown that when self-organised communities manage to develop their own institutional arrangements to regulate the use of common pool resources (CPRs, such as forests) they often outperform government or market solutions to unsustainable commons governance (e.g. Van Laerhoven, 2010; Pretty and Ward, 2001; Ostrom, 1990; Poteete and Ostrom, 2004; Sunderlin et al., 2005). It is largely comprised of theoretical and empirical studies exploring the critical conditions under which communities are able to self-organise and develop durable community institutions.

However, at the same time we observe the presence of a large number of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) ranging from local community based organisations to international organisations that consider community organisation – i.e. the organisation of collective action in community institutions – their core business (Mitra and Patnaik, 1997; Chomitz et al., 2007; Pretty and Ward, 2001). Some initial studies suggest that the presence of NGOs can have a positive effect on the success of community institutions (e.g. Springate-Baginski and Blaikie, 2007).

The preoccupation with self governance and the ensuing lack of attention for situations in which external actors (such as NGOs) work with communities, leads us to argue that commons scholarship is missing an opportunity to provide the kind of knowledge which could be useful for NGOs endeavouring to support community institutions. Whilst there is a rich body of literature dedicated to studying the most important factors influencing self-governance of CPRs, we do not yet know which of these factors can and are being manipulated by NGOs, nor how they attempt this in their interventions. Such a mismatch between the knowledge being provided by science, and the knowledge required by society has been noted elsewhere (Cash et al., 2003; Kueffer et al., 2012).

To some extent, the commons literature recognises this discrepancy. Agrawal (2001) notes the relative negligence in the commons literature for understanding the influence of external actors on local institutions. Likewise, Andersson (2013) observes that although previous studies have identified the importance of external organisations in supporting local efforts to self-govern forest resources, there have been relatively few empirical analyses that show what works when.

According to Ostrom and Nagendra (2006), understanding what types of interventions will help support or create local institutions to protect current forests and encourage positive local forest transitions is one of the key challenges in current forestry research. Firstly, our research takes up this challenge

by giving central stage to the activities of NGOs working in community-led CPR governance.¹ NGO activities are partly determined by how they view their role in institutional change processes. Therefore we secondly draw on institutional change literature, and specifically the distinction made between institutional crafting and institutional design (Cleaver, 2002; Alexander, 2005) in order to enrich our discussion on the approaches NGOs take to working with communities.

Our objective is to (i) analyse the types of activities NGOs working in this context report to carry out and why, (ii) to compare these findings with the commons literature and (iii) to analyse the approaches to institutional change taken by the NGOs. Our twofold analysis encompasses both the specific NGO activities and their general approaches to institutional change. To this purpose, we engage in the following analytical steps:

- *Step One:* We map out the range of activities NGOs across three states in India employ when supporting local level community-led CPR governance, specifically within the field of community forestry.
- *Step Two:* We analyse which of the manipulable indicators for collective action in a community led CPR governance context identified in the commons literature the NGOs claim to target with their activities. As part of this analysis we explore the reasons given by NGOs as to why they choose to employ certain activities and refrain from others.
- *Step Three:* We develop a typology of NGO approaches to institutional change. We use this typology to draw from our analysis of the specific NGO activities (steps one and two), the general approaches to institutional change employed by the NGOs.

Our analysis of NGO approaches to supporting community-led CPR governance can assist commons scholars in their attempt to expand their reflections to include situations in which pure self governance of the commons is not the reality – we suspect that the number of such situations is significant. It also provides a first step towards bridging the gap between the knowledge being generated in the commons literature (supply driven science) and the knowledge which could assist NGOs in successfully supporting communities with governing their commons (demand driven science).

2. Literature review

2.1. Forests as commons: the state, the market or do-it-yourself?

Forests can be framed as CPRs when they have a high level of both subtractability and excludability. CPRs are vulnerable to collapse because individual users gain the full benefits of using the resource but only bear a portion of the costs resulting from overuse and under-investment. According to Hardin (1968), this ‘tragedy of the commons’ can only be avoided either by privatising the resource or by making it subject to government regulation. Since the 1980s, a vast amount of empirical research has successfully challenged

¹ We recognise the heterogeneity of the category ‘NGOs’. The broad UN definition of NGOs as “any non-profit, voluntary citizens’ group which is organised on a local, national or international level” places NGOs in a residual category (Uphoff, 1993) which includes small community based organisations alongside international professional organisations with a large paid staff base such as WWF or Oxfam.

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