



Social movements as key actors in *governing the commons*: Evidence from community-based resource management cases across the world

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ABSTRACT

The international research on the benefits of community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) regimes for sustainable development has raised concerns about the vulnerability of said regimes to globalization, shortsighted government regulations, marginalization, and other global political economy threats. This paper addresses the question of whether and how social movements contribute to the organization and robustness of CBNRM in the advent of those threats. To accomplish this, we carry out a qualitative meta-analysis of 81 cases worldwide. Our evidence shows that one of the most important effects of movements on CBNRM is the promotion and defense of community use and management rights against certain government decisions or actions by global corporations. We also find that movements can generate positive effects beyond the reaction to specific threats. Those effects include the democratization of communities' collective choice processes, the reinvigoration of identity ties and local ecological knowledge, the promotion of economic development and autonomy, and the creation of nested user organizations. Exploring such potentially longer-term effects is a promising next step towards further connecting the social movement and CBNRM scholarships and better understanding the robustness of local management regimes in the context of global change.

1. Introduction

The international research on the benefits of community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) regimes to achieve sustainable development has come along with concerns about the vulnerability of said regimes to globalization, shortsighted government regulations, marginalization, intensified land competition from commercial interests for resource extraction, and other global political economy threats (Baynes et al., 2015; Blaikie, 2006; Notess et al., 2018; Salvanes and Squires, 1995). Increasing attention has been paid to the participation of local communities in social movements against those threats (Anguelovski and Martínez Alier, 2014). Communities' capacity to manage natural resources via CBNRM regimes and mobilize for the promotion or defense of said regimes are two sides of the same collective action phenomenon (Scholtens, 2016); however, they have so far been studied rather separately by scholars. Little is known, therefore, about whether and how mobilization contributes to better CBNRM. In this paper, we address that question via a meta-analysis of 81 cases around the world. The research questions of the study are:

How do social movements affect CBNRM? What insights can we gain about the emergence and robustness of CBNRM regimes by looking at social movements?

Social movements have an important role as watchdogs and promoters of transformative sustainable development agendas, e.g., UN's 2030 Agenda. Many of these movements are global in their discourses, strategies, and networks (Martinez-Alier et al., 2016; Sikor and Newell, 2014); however, they also have strong roots in local environmental conflicts and resource-management practices. Local environmental justice conflicts are indeed an endemic phenomenon of our societies, with more than 2000 instances registered (Temper et al., 2015), and potentially thousands more unregistered all over the world. Many of those conflicts involve communities that have self-organized to manage local resources via customary or formal common property regimes. Although initially disrupting, such conflicts and movements have great potential to strengthen community-based management regimes, creating new such regimes, and generating more supportive policies (Cronkleton et al., 2008; Diegues, 1998; Verzijl et al., 2017).

In a review of the state of CBNRM studies and the theory of the

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commons, Dietz and Stern (2002) argued that one of the understudied themes in this literature was the role of social movement organizations in influencing commons governance. They concluded that “[t]hese organizations have asserted the right to participate in institutional design; their assent may be necessary for institutions to function...they are linked across scale and place in ways which may help to spread design innovations.” (p. 476). Social movements have also been analyzed by political ecologists concerned about the vulnerability of commons to neoliberal policies (Goldman, 1997; Peet and Watts, 1996). Unfortunately, efforts to integrate empirical insights about movements into the theory of the commons have been rather marginal (see Cronkleton et al., 2008; García-López and Antinori, 2018; Kashwan, 2017; Scholtens, 2016 for inspiring exceptions). This, among other factors, has reinforced the dominance of a narrative of commons initiatives and their robustness that emphasizes self-organized cooperation and institutional design from a rather static perspective, and downplays the historical, political and dynamic aspects of said initiatives (Agrawal, 2001; Johnson, 2004; Leach et al., 1999). This paper is inspired by the aim to integrate the critique with the valuable insights from the theory of the commons. Far from denying the explanatory capacity of the theory, our ultimate goal is to further test it by bringing in the marginalized topic of contentious politics to its core.

To accomplish the above, we focus on community institutions for governing the commons, as measured through Ostrom’s design principles (Ostrom, 1990); and explore whether and how they are strengthened (or weakened) by social movements. The Design Principles theory explains the institutional robustness of CBNRM regimes and is one of the cornerstones of current CBNRM knowledge (Cox et al., 2010; Ostrom, 1990). We broadly define social movements as “processes of collective action that are sustained across space and time, that reflect grievances around perceived injustices, and that constitute a pursuit of alternative agendas” (Bebbington et al., 2008, pp. 2892). In this paper, most of the movements studied correspond to environmental justice movements. We diverge, however, from the traditional definition of environmental justice movements (EJMs) and its dominant focus on the health-related grievances of poor citizens and communities of colour in Western urban contexts. Instead we focus on the rural, Global South version of such kind of movements, which centres around the resistance of local resource users and indigenous populations to bear the resource scarcity and degradation costs created by actors large extractive activities, the government or other actors (Anguelovski and Martínez Alier, 2014; Goldman, 1997; Peet and Watts, 1996; Scheidel et al., 2018).

To address our research question, we carry out a systematic review (meta-analysis) of 78 case study publications referring to 81 cases that directly or indirectly address the topic. After an introduction to CBNRM and EJMs scholarship and the methods, the paper proceeds with a presentation and extended discussion of the results.

2. Literature background

2.1. CBNRM theory and political ecology critiques

Traditional economic analyses of common-pool resources (CPR) such as forests, irrigation systems, and fisheries prescribed the collapse of those resources unless they are managed through private or government-controlled property right systems (Hardin, 1968). Those diagnoses were based on the assumption that resource users were unable to cooperate and use their shared resources sustainably. As evidence began to question that assumption, attention turned to exploring the resource, social and institutional conditions under which groups of users can manage shared resources collectively through common property and other collective governance regimes (i.e., community-based management). One of the most robust pieces of the resulting scholarship (CBNRM scholarship) is Ostrom’s Institutional Design Principles theory (see Table 1 and also Appendix A). According to

Ostrom’s theory, cooperation in CBNRM regimes has higher odds of emerging and being sustained over time when a number if not all of those principles are present (Ostrom, 1990). As illustrated by several reviews, a good number of single, comparative and large-n studies support the theory (Agrawal, 2001; Baggio et al., 2016; Cox et al., 2010; Ostrom, 2009; Poteete et al., 2010).

The consolidation of the design principles as a theoretical cornerstone of CBNRM studies has raised new questions and revamped old ones. There is still rudimentary understanding about the relative relevance of the principles, whether different sub-sets of principles may be sufficient to guarantee sustainable management depending on the context (Baggio et al., 2016), or whether they apply to larger-scale political/governance settings (Fleishman et al., 2014). Additionally, there is still the question of how the principles (and CBNRM regimes more generally) emerge and become robust to changing social and ecological conditions (Agrawal, 2001).

More generally, CBNRM theory has been criticized for its relative inattention to how historically-shaped patterns of power, conflict, the ‘state’ and the broader political-economic context shape the access to and uses of common resources, and CBNRM regimes (Johnson, 2004; Ribot and Peluso, 2003; Saunders, 2014). Political ecology scholars have shown the constraints imposed onto local common-pool resource governance systems by states’ recentralization policies (Ribot et al., 2006), ‘fortress’ conservation policies (Brockington, 2002), or elite capture and inequalities (Blaikie, 2006; Persha and Andersson, 2014). Thus, the tragedy of the commons that Hardin had so popularized is not just the result of commoners’ individualistic behavior but may well also stem from the acts of more powerful, profit-seeking actors (Scholtens, 2016). It is more adequately labeled as a “tragedy of the land-grabbed commons” (Dell’Angelo et al., 2017), a “tragedy of enclosures” (Beitl, 2012), or a “tragedy of the commoners”, i.e. resource-dependent communities which are expelled continuously by state or private interests from their lands for speculation, large infrastructural projects or ‘development’ schemes (Diegues, 1998; McCay and Acheson, 1990). This critical scholarship emphasizes that benefits and costs of resource management are unequally distributed and shaped by power relations and political-economic structures, and that these conditions may lead to social movements and conflicts (Veuthey and Gerber, 2012). Indeed, it has been argued that the history of commons has always been one of struggles between the dynamic of enclosures (i.e., dismantling of CBNRM institutions), driven by the systemic need for capital accumulation, and that of movements to defend and reconstitute commons (De Angelis, 2012).

2.2. Social movements and CBNRM

Political ecology and environmental justice scholars have paid increasing attention to how social movements may shape the trajectories of resource access and use. Peet and Watts, 1996 “liberation ecologies” proposal invited scholars to analyze socio-ecological movements as the basis for the protection of the commons from the forces of capitalist accumulation and the associated processes of enclosure and commodification. Since then, some works have highlighted the intricate connections between social movements (such as those against extractive industries or large conservation areas) and the formalization of customary community-based management regimes (Alcorn et al., 2003; Gerber, 2011; Kashwan, 2017; Perreault, 2001; Veuthey and Gerber, 2012); the recognition of collective territorial rights (Conde and Kallis, 2012; Kurien, 2013); and the reinvigoration of local indigenous practices and knowledge (Armitage, 2005; Poole, 2005). Underlying these works is the understanding that local resource-dependent communities may “organize and fight for preserving their means of livelihood in the name of social justice, defence of customary territorial rights, health, or sacredness”, a process which could “eventually allow them to renegotiate power distribution” (Veuthey and Gerber, 2012, p. 612). These grassroots movements have been termed as “environmentalism of

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