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Delocalizing Communities: Changing Forms of Community Engagement in Natural Resources Governance

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Summary. — Across both the developing and developed worlds, community engagement has become a key strategy for natural resource management. However, a growing number of studies report that community-based approaches are experiencing formidable challenges, with limited outcomes in terms of livelihoods, decentralization and sustainability. Yet, policies continue to focus attention unduly on “community participation”, ignoring the ways in which the “community” is itself embedded in a wider social system. Recent studies have shown that local communities are more complex than previously assumed, with local community actions being heavily shaped by wider social and environmental contexts. Yet, scholarly research tends to focus on reporting such cross-scalar dynamics, with little explanation of how and why they occur. This paper advances a framework to understand how local communities interact with the wider world, through what we term “delocalization of communities” in natural resource management. Using Bourdieu’s theory of social field, we present an approach to analyze various trajectories of delocalization involving the exchange of, and struggle for, a variety of resources valued in specific fields of natural resource governance.

We extend the work of several researchers who have been critical of the conventional view of the community, and argue that a new model of delocalized “community” needs to be envisaged, one that emphasizes the interactions among actors within and between spatial scales and levels of political organization. While such a cross-scalar view is not novel, we deepen social field approach to assess how cross-scalar processes unfold in the course of “delocalization” of communities in the context of rapid social and environmental change. We draw on evidence from five different case studies from three continents that demonstrate specific aspects of the delocalization phenomenon.

The cases selected are from Australia, Indonesia, Mexico, Nepal, and Papua New Guinea. We demonstrate through these cases that increasingly diverse interests in natural resources such as forests have served to *delocalize* communities beyond “local” domains. We conclude that local community is not a localized entity, and there are multiple cross-scale networks which need to be recognized, as these have profound implications in community-based natural resource management. In such situations, open and exploratory approaches - moving away from blueprint interventions - are required to facilitate context-specific fields and spheres of local democracy, nurturing diverse, flexible, and networked models of community participation, along with the recognition of political and economic influence coming from the wider domain.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Management of natural resources increasingly involves a form of social organization widely known as “community”, which can take a variety of forms from place-based groups to interest-based alliances (Agrawal & Gibson, 1999; Berkes, 2004; Blaikie, 2006). Today, there is hardly any country in the world without some form of policy and practice related to community engagement in natural resource management. This has been, in part, triggered by the recognition that this approach can yield more satisfactory results compared with individualized or classical firm-based market arrangements or state-based management approaches (Agrawal & Gibson, 1999; Ostrom, 1990). The confidence placed in community-based solutions rests on a number of expected socio-environmental benefits, such as more effective environmental stewardship based on collective action (Ostrom, 1990), the potential for absorbing risks and creating safety nets for vulnerable members and strengthening human capacity to adapt to climate risks (Adger, 2003; Ayers & Forsyth, 2009), and

delivering economic benefits to the poor through social enterprises (Peredo & Chrisman, 2006). The challenges of climate change and poverty in the developing world are further increasing expectations from local communities (Adger, 2003; Ayers & Forsyth, 2009); in part, this has been driven by the 2008 global economic crisis, which triggered more community-oriented thinking in order to overcome social

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inequality exacerbated by market triumphalism (Grosh, Bussolo, & Freije, 2014).

However, the expectation from community organizations to deliver these outcomes has often remained unfulfilled. Critics argue that community-based natural resource management has at times become merely a discursive weapon to legitimize other strategic actions of development agencies (Blaikie, 2006), state organizations or even the dominant market players, with local community actions increasingly shaped by outside forces instead of internal collective action (Berkes, 2007; Ojha, 2014). Community organization is also seen as problematic because it focuses attention unduly on the local level, ignoring the ways in which the “community” is embedded in a wider social system (Cleaver, 2012). As will be shown in this paper, underlying drivers of such changes vary across regions but generally include technological advancement, social and cultural dynamics (including migration), rapid urbanization, globalized markets for goods and environmental services, exposure to an increasing array of environmental risks, and the increasing networking of society through electronic communication and social and conventional media. Despite such drivers *delocalizing* communities, they are commonly portrayed as being inextricably linked to place with clear spatial boundaries, usually ethnically and culturally homogeneous with shared norms and being in harmony with a local, stable environment (Leach, Mearns, & Scoones, 1999). This portrayal of community has prevailed in the policy discourse despite the rapid transitions happening in the real world of natural resource management.

A growing body of research shows communities are more complex than previously assumed, and heavily shaped by their wider social and environmental contexts (Berkes, 2004; Cleaver, 2012; Stone & Nyaupane, 2014). In this paper, we extend the work of several researchers who have been critical of the conventional view of the community and argue that a new model of delocalized “community” needs to be envisaged, one that emphasizes the interactions among actors within and between spatial scales and levels of political organization. While such a cross-scalar view is not novel, we aim to more fully describe how cross-scalar processes unfold in the course of “delocalization” of communities in the context of rapid social and environmental change, drawing on evidence from five different case studies from three continents that demonstrate diverse trajectories of the delocalization phenomenon. The five cases cover various aspects of forest and natural resource management—timber and biodiversity management in an Australian rural setting, community forestry in Indonesia and Nepal, community-based forest enterprises in Mexico, and the emerging shifts in forest management in Papua New Guinea. These cases demonstrate how diverse community-related forms and functions, which extend beyond local and place-based communities, play out in natural resource management policy and practice.

In order to explain these delocalizing dynamics, we draw on Bourdieu’s (1998) concept of “social field”, which emphasizes dynamic interactions between individual and the social environment for understanding social practices. This concept has been useful in framing our analysis of delocalization as cross-scalar politics of material and symbolic resources in the domain of natural resource governance. Our approach to analysis also resonates with views emphasizing social embeddedness of community action (Cleaver, 2002), external political drivers of community management (Blaikie, 2006), and the importance of socio-environmental context in resource governance practices (Nightingale, 2003). Following the social field approach, we posit that local-level human collectives and

communities have increasingly become a part of larger dynamics of social exchange, demonstrating that community action is both constitutive of, and shaped by, the wider politics around power, resource access and recognition. We highlight that, in the contemporary context of “glocalization” (Robertson, 1995; Wellman, 2002), local communities in many parts of the world are being rapidly integrated into multilevel networks, resulting in the reconfiguration of the geographical boundaries and institutional arrangements that previously defined local communities. Our intention is not to criticize community based approach, but to demonstrate the ways in which local communities are being delocalized in the real world, thus pointing to the new policy challenges, usually not recognized within the domain of community based management systems. Moreover, we do not reject the possibility that small-scale place-based groups will remain functional in local domains in areas that are less subjected to wider change; instead we emphasize that a continued focus on the localized view of a community is not helpful in understanding contemporary socio-environmental challenges associated with community-based resource management.

The paper is organized as follows. In the next section, we review related literature to show how communities are represented in dominant world-views, and then outline a social field oriented framework to understand delocalization and multi-scalar networking of communities beyond local-level collectives. In the third section, we present five case studies (as mentioned above) to illustrate different facets of our argument. We then synthesize, in the fourth section, different components of delocalized models of communities as reflected in the case studies to illustrate theoretical underpinnings of this approach. Finally, we conclude that a conceptual shift toward recognizing the delocalization of local communities is needed to capture emergent forms of networks and interactions at different levels of political organization, which can help better understand and explain the process and practice of natural resource governance. The central contribution of the paper is thus to advance a theoretical discussion to differentiate *local communities* from *delocalizing communities*, and then stimulate discussions on how local and non-local processes can be integrated in environmental policy, development practice, and natural resource management.

2. DELOCALIZING COMMUNITIES AND THE EVOLUTION OF SOCIAL FIELD: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In this section we define key terms and provide a framework for the analysis of different cases of delocalization. By “delocalize” we mean the process through which local communities become intimately connected to the actors outside of the local domain. We use “community” to mean a group of actors that, while not necessarily sharing a common geographic space, act together for some common goals. The adjective “local” introduces a geographical element. So, for example, the term “local community” is used to denote what community-based natural resource management policies and programs usually refer to—group(s) of people sharing a common geographic space and having common goals around the management of natural resources. The process of “delocalization” refers to the development of complex, cross-scalar social dynamics wherein local communities become connected to or are influenced by a variety of external forces, resonating “social field” in Bourdieu’s sense. We also outline the gradual evolution of thinking from “local community” to social field, demonstrating important

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