

Rapporteur's Report on Reimagining Commons and Governance: Pathways to Institutional Innovations

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I

INTRODUCTION

The theory of management of commons is both complex and deeply rooted in the history of debate on commons management. A central point of the debate stems from Garrett Hardin's 1968 essay, "The Tragedy of the Commons," which argued that shared resources are destined for depletion if not regulated, as people prioritise their own gain over larger community interest. This idea can be traced back to ancient philosophy, reflected in Aristotle's observation that "which is common to the greatest number has the least care bestowed on it" (original not seen). Yet, a counter-narrative exists in ancient literature which recognises the importance of common property and its collective management in rural development, occasionally with some official backing. Over time, critical re-examinations have questioned Hardin's generalisation about commons management, noting that not all common property resources follow this tragic path of resource degradation. Traditional examples, such as community-managed sacred forests, illustrate successful resource conservation; however, even these long-standing systems are now under threat (Chandrakanth et al. 1991). Ciriacy-Wantrup and Bishop (1975) offered a crucial clarification, distinguishing between unregulated open access and institutionally managed common property. This distinction was further developed by scholars such as Bromley (1989), Runge (1986), and Oakerson (1986). Elinor Ostrom's work (1990, 2001) later demonstrated that effective commons management requires defined boundaries, collective decision-making processes, and effective monitoring. Insights on conditions for cooperation were also provided by Olson (1965) on group size and collective action and Oakerson (1986) on the technical attributes of resources.

Building on Ostrom's research, the concept of the commons evolved to be viewed as a social construct, shaped by the continuous interactions and practices of its users (Euler, 2018). The success of this dynamic process depends on the collective, and cultural, practices of those involved in resource use and its governance (Ribot and Peluso, 2003). The scope of the commons has expanded over time, from ancient texts like Kautilya's writings on common pastures to contemporary intangible resources such as digital spaces. Modern commons management must now navigate complex socio-ecological factors and the livelihoods of dependent communities, integrating ecological knowledge with social practices to achieve sustainable use.

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The decline of traditional governance structures, often caused by the expansion of state and market power, can lead to resource degradation and the marginalisation of local communities (Marothia, 2024; Singh, 1994; Pearce and Turner, 1990). This problem necessitates an integrated approach that formally and functionally incorporates traditional institutions into modern governance systems. Such an approach must combine scientific and ecological expertise with the social and cultural insights of local people to align conservation goals with socio-economic needs, thereby protecting vulnerable groups from exploitative practices (Jodha, 2001). This integration is especially vital because common resources are crucial for rural livelihoods and serve as a safety net, particularly for the poor (Jodha, 1986; Iyengar, 1989, 2000; Marothia, 2002, 2024).

Reimagining commons governance offers a pathway to more sustainable, equitable, and resilient resource management that empowers communities. A multidisciplinary approach is required to reflect the multiple interests at play (Dixon, 1989). A central challenge is the effective and legal integration of traditional institutions into modern governance without undermining them (Marothia, 2002; Singh, 1994). The success of such collective action depends on factors like potential gains, social cohesion, and group size (Olson, 1965). This reimagining of commons governance is especially critical today, given modern challenges like global markets, rapid technological shifts, and rising inequality.

For the conference theme, "Reimagining Commons and Governance: Pathways to Institutional Innovations," 31 research papers were received. Some thorough submissions, however, could not be included due to a lack of their direct link to the theme. Additionally, the Keynote Address on the theme by Sudarshan Iyengar is an empirically elaborate, philosophically rich and intellectually provocative contribution addressing the complex issues of commons governance for sustainable and equitable commons management. Given that commons are critical not only in the local context but also for the larger landscape due to their ecological, socio-economic, and cultural impacts, the keynote Address very rightly emphasises the importance of the ethical and moral dimensions of commons governance. The Address emphasises working towards realising the "promise of commons". The other papers selected for discussion, which cover various aspects of the commons using diverse datasets that examine social, ecological, political, and cultural angles, are organised into four sections, as outlined below, for this report.

II

GOVERNANCE, INSTITUTIONS, AND MANAGEMENT OF COMMONS

Of the research papers considered under this head, four relate to difficult areas or regions of India. These studies, while highlighting the importance of common-pool resources in high-altitude areas of Ladakh and the Khasi Hills, emphasise the crucial

role that commons play in the economies of these remote areas. While indigenous institutions are seen to be under stress, customary laws remain important in the governance of commons; however, at times, conflicts arise between centralised administrative policies and customary rights, which undermine indigenous governance systems. It is noted that indigenous commons management systems, such as the *goba* (Village Head) and *churpon* (Water Master) systems in Ladakh and the *dorbor shmong* in the Khasi hills, remain relevant in the management of commons. The Ladakh study compared changes in people's dependence on commons over time and found that the dependence decreased from 90 to 66 per cent during the thirty years under study. Rotational grazing and rejuvenating scrub lands are important management strategies for common lands. The paper also provides estimates of ecosystem service values for different service categories. The Khasi hills study, which focused on institutional innovations in community-led water management with small-scale irrigation structures for tackling water and water use issues, further highlights the success of hybrid governance models. The study also estimates the profitability of different irrigation technologies being used in the area, which can serve as an incentive to manage water resources sustainably. Two further studies from the remote northeastern region of the country again emphasise that traditional customary laws and community-based land tenure systems dominate, with traditional Village Councils playing a central role in commons management. Still, common-pool resources are facing challenges of control, resource depletion, and a lack of clarity in tenure within the system. Forests, grazing lands, and water bodies are important common property resources and *jhum* or shifting cultivation is dependent on these commons. The author believes that common-pool resources in the region are under increasing pressure from demographic shifts, government policies, a lack of legal protection, and inefficient management. However, despite challenges, communities have historically demonstrated successful collective action in managing common pool resources. One study discusses the types of commons in the northeastern region. It is noted that crop cultivation, livestock rearing, and forest resource utilisation are all community-governed and overseen by the *nokma*, the village chief. Water management again is community-managed. The paper summarises the customary laws and community institutions governing CPRs in the region. The studies emphasise the need to legally and functionally integrate traditional institutions into a modern governance framework.

One of the next three studies considered under this sub-theme analyses the role of social institutions in the ecological restoration of common-pool resources in Thana, Rajasthan. The study uses institutional analysis and development as the analytical technique. The paper acknowledges that community institutions can be vulnerable to "elite capture", where powerful local people disproportionately benefit from the commons. The study presents a strong argument for the central role of robust, locally rooted institutions, such as Van *Suraksha Samiti* and *Charagah Vikas*

Samiti, as well as secure tenure, in the successful restoration of common property lands. It is shown that the ecological conditions of the sites improved where communities had clear rights.

In a study spanning four Indian states—Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, and Rajasthan—the author points out that women are intricately related to common-pool resources and possess in-depth knowledge of these resources. However, there is a feeling and also evidence that women are typically excluded from decision-making processes. Despite legal quotas, true empowerment is often not achieved due to deep-rooted patriarchal norms, with many women in leadership positions seen as acting proxies (e.g. *sarpanch pati* cases). Social norms also come in a way and put women, particularly from marginalised groups, at a disadvantage. However, the study also found cases to the contrary where many women leaders, both formally and informally, participated and often spearheaded the protection of commons, particularly in Odisha and Madhya Pradesh. Here, women were involved in creating rules for forest use and in patrolling to prevent the illegal harvesting of trees. The conflicting results suggest the need for further research in this area in terms of the underlying factors that promote or discourage effective women's participation in commons management.

Another important aspect of common-pool resource governance is the effective transfer of traditional local knowledge about managing these resources to young people. It is believed that local institutions would lose significance if there is a discontinuity in the flow of information from the older generation to the younger generation, either due to a lack of interest among youth or their out-migration to urban areas. In this regard, a study conducted in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh indicates that rural youth are losing interest in farming and have a preference for even low-paying non-farming jobs. The major reasons given are the low pay and high risk associated with agriculture. Furthermore, the author(s) suggest that with the increasing migration of youth from villages, the traditional intergenerational transfer of knowledge and responsibilities for local common-pool resources is being disrupted. The study emphasises the need to engage youth and find roles for them in the governance of commons. Seen in the light of current developmental processes that are biased towards material growth, it seems traditional knowledge and approaches may need to be inclusive to allow tested technical and other inputs.

The central theme of the discussion of research studies here is local governance and its effectiveness in managing common-pool resources. In this context, Iyengar, in his keynote Address, discusses the Mendha-Lekha village experiment, exemplifying Mahatma Gandhi's vision of Gram Swaraj or village self-rule. Here, the Gram Sabha operates on a consensus basis, ensuring that decisions taken reflect the collective will of the villagers to address their diverse needs. The

underlying premise of the approach is that nature is sacred and its rules are to be respected. A holistic approach, considering the “trinity” as cited in the keynote — soil, soul, and society — can integrate ecological, spiritual, cultural, and societal values for sustainable living.

III

SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL DYNAMICS AND LIVELIHOOD

The papers discussed in this section address various products and services derived from common property resources, including fish production, extraction of non-timber forest products, soil conservation, and ecosystem services. Additionally, the keynote Address emphasises that beyond environmental degradation, the ecological impacts resulting from the negative externalities of fossil fuel use are also alarming, and suggests a paradigm shift where commoning is not just a physical governance arrangement. A study carried out in Chilika Lake – a large brackish tidal lagoon in Odisha, India, shows that fishing has been deeply embedded in the culture and economies of artisanal fishers, providing livelihoods to people. However, the Chilika ecosystem has undergone significant socio-ecological changes, impacting local livelihoods. The expansion of commercial agriculture led to local elites dominating the field and encroaching on fishing grounds, causing conflicts and disrupting the livelihoods of small-scale fishers. The interplay between the large-scale changes and local conditions has made artisanal fishers vulnerable. The study also analysed environmental changes in fresh and brackish water across different seasons and noted that salinity fluctuations altered the local ecology and impacted species composition in the lake. Furthermore, the study highlights the trend of occupational shifts resulting from declining fishing resources.

Reflecting on the role of forests in the local community's livelihoods, a study conducted in the Wayanad district of Kerala specifically analyses this role with respect to the use of non-timber forest products (NTFPs). The study area is rich in forest resources and has a high concentration of the tribal population in the region. The study emphasises that it is important to analyse NTFPs as instruments for sustainable development and social equity within tribal economies, given their high contribution (20-40%) to local incomes. About 40 per cent of households were found to depend on NTFPs for income. However, people face different marketing challenges and expect support in this regard. Another study, conducted in eastern India, analysed the land use and land cover (LULC) changes in four selected study sites. The area under agriculture has increased, and there has been a drastic decline in fallow lands. Forest area is also going down. The study assesses ecosystem service values resulting from land use and land cover changes in four selected sites in Odisha. An equivalent factor of one-seventh of the gross crop income is used to estimate ecosystem values, although justification for the same is not there. However, author(s) rightly observe that the results cannot be generalised as ecosystem services vary significantly by location.

Another study conducted in Meghalaya, in the northeast region of India, looks into the influence of CPRs in the adoption of soil conservation. The practice of shifting cultivation has resulted in the depletion of lands, particularly as the *jhum* cycle has decreased to 3-5 years from the traditional 15-20 years. These lands are being rejuvenated by bringing them under soil conservation programs, such as terracing and contour bunding, and these initiatives have generated higher income and employment. Adopters of soil conservation programmes had more equitable incomes and generated more employment (approximately 48 more mandays) compared to non-adopters of the programme. Additionally, CPR lands hold a special place in the region, as some of these areas are designated as sacred groves (*Law Kyntang*), which serve as natural conservation modules. The study reveals that factors such as age, education, income, and access to credit positively influence the adoption of soil conservation activities among users. Tenure status is also shown to affect soil conservation efforts, as most adopters were located in communal lands or adjacent to sacred groves. The study found that secure tenure and community-led restoration and governance of commons can contribute to improving the biomass, biodiversity, and hydrological regime in the watershed.

The author of a study conducted in Kalyanpura, Rajasthan, also emphasises that there are dynamic interactions between social and ecological systems, and that the linear extraction mode, which neglects social and ecological interactions, needs to be avoided, as this increases the vulnerabilities of the marginalised stakeholders. To gauge this, the study examined changes in the floral and faunal composition of the area and noted a fivefold increase in aboveground biomass and carbon stock during the study period. The water table was also reported to increase, as was the fauna. The author discusses rules-in-use for common land management in the study area.

The next study considered in this section relates to the Satkosia Gorge Wildlife Sanctuary in Odisha and shows that there is an increasing pressure on natural habitats due to population growth and developmental activities. Industrialisation and mining activities are adversely impacting forests, resulting in soil erosion and water pollution. There is an urgent need to strike a balance between conservation and human needs in shared landscapes. The study also explores how shifting land use patterns and anthropogenic pressures reshape human-wildlife interactions, and uses the term 'human-wildlife interactions' (HWI) rather than 'conflict' to emphasise the full range of relationships. The study highlights the tension between economic growth (driven by mining and industrialisation) and the substantial environmental and social costs. Land use and land cover changes, as primary drivers of ecological degradation and impacts on livelihoods, are also discussed.

Finally, a study concerned with the increasing fallow lands, with Rayalaseema, Andhra Pradesh as the study region, also shows a trend driven by interconnected ecological, economic, social and institutional factors. The study notes

that traditionally, abandoning agricultural land was once a social stigma, but this is no longer the case. Declining soil fertility, lower reliance on farming for self-food security (where the public distribution system also plays a role), increased human-wildlife conflicts, youth disengagement from agriculture, and the declining importance of agriculture are among the factors responsible for the increase in fallow lands. Furthermore, on a social level, another contributing factor is the lower marriage prospects of farmers compared to those holding jobs in cities. It is believed that the adoption of climate-smart agricultural practices, such as Natural Farming and Conservation Agriculture, can play a crucial role in addressing these challenges.

IV

LEGAL, POLICY AND MARKET

Managing commons cannot be left solely to the state or the market because of the social and cultural complexities of people's dependence on these resources. Also, as Iyengar discusses in his keynote Address, the nexus between private players and the state is evident in India in cases where private players are facilitated to have control over common pool resources. This section discusses the research contributions that focus on legal, policy and market issues. The first research paper under review in this section examines the evolving role and significance of village ponds in the study area of Bhilwara district, Rajasthan. There is a significant reduction in pond water volume and quality due to factors like land use and land cover changes. The results, the author believes, reflect broader trends across India, where ponds are being degraded due to encroachments, pollution, and inadequate maintenance. The study highlights that ponds in the area contribute to irrigation during the rabi season, with varying impacts on water users at different ends. The ponds also support diverse livelihoods, including agriculture, livestock, and pond maintenance activities, all of which contribute to household incomes. The study emphasises the need for community involvement in pond maintenance and management through ensuring equitable benefit sharing. The paper also discusses the data and policy gaps, as well as the importance of data in managing these resources.

Iyengar, in his keynote address on the theme, also highlights the Gandhian concept of trusteeship, which was experimented with by Vinoba Bhave through Bhoodan and Gramdan schemes, and which emphasises the collective resource management through Gram Sabhas. A similar research contribution discussed in the section also analyses the legal and policy pathways for governing commons by examining the system of Gramdan, the gifting of a village, in line with the Bhoodan (land gifts) movement of Acharya Vinoba Bhave in the 1950s. The study is a comparative analysis of Gramdan legislation in six Indian states: Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Maharashtra, Odisha, and Rajasthan, using statutory review and archival research. It is noted that the movement declined due to socio-political shifts and flaws, such as the donation of unproductive or wasteland areas. The paper draws lessons from the model's architecture to propose a new framework that features

policy reforms, considering evolving social and environmental challenges. It also draws comparisons with international models, such as community land trusts in Kenya, Brazil, Puerto Rico, France, and the United States. The paper demonstrates that, despite its merits, *Gramdan's* legal institutional framework remained largely static, which limited its capacity to respond to evolving challenges, such as shifting land use patterns, socio-political dynamics, and climate change. The study proposes a model, *Gramdan 2.0*, that addresses these challenges and aims to reposition *Gramdan-inspired* models as a viable alternative to community land governance.

With a specific focus on non-forest commons in Andhra Pradesh, India, another study considered here examines the role of administrative and informal mechanisms in providing perceived land tenure security for indigenous people and local communities. It is felt that, in India, despite the immense ecological and livelihood importance of non-forest commons like pastures and wetlands, they are stuck in a “governance vacuum”. The author (s) feel that in the absence of clear statutory rights and customary tenure systems, other interim policy tools become crucial. The study analyses the Prohibitory Order Book (POB) as a case study for such administrative mechanisms. While not legally conferring ownership, the POB strengthens community claims and offers a form of perceived tenure security – the subjective belief that the community's land access is secure. POB functions as a registry that identifies, records, and regulates land designated for communal purposes, revenue wastelands, village sites, pasturelands, and other similar areas, and prevents their diversion to private or alternative uses. The study highlights how intermediate administrative instruments can compensate for the lack of formal protection and help promote sustainable resource management and conservation.

V

EQUITY, INCLUSION AND MAPPING OF COMMONS

Papers discussed in this section address the issues of equity and inclusion. A study on the role of caste in access and appropriation in two Telangana villages is a good commentary on these roles. The author notes that the caste system is a fundamental structural force that has historically enabled the appropriation of commons by dominant caste groups. The study emphasises that ignoring the equity implications of caste undermines sustainable management and harms marginalised communities. It is noted that previously, encroachments on commons were primarily for agricultural purposes, but now real estate is the priority. Digitalisation of land records is proposed as a path to greater transparency and accuracy in estimating land availability.

Among the various components of CPR-based livelihoods are non-timber forest products (NTFPs). Women in rural and tribal areas are vital stewards of forest commons, possessing deep traditional ecological knowledge. Despite this knowledge, it is noted that women are often excluded from forest governance bodies, such as

Community Forest Rights Management Committees (CFRMCs), due to restrictive socio-cultural barriers. The author of this second paper analyses the action research project from Dhenkanal district in Odisha, the results of which validate women's superior ecological knowledge and the longer time they spend in forests compared to men. The project also included sensitisation programmes for male leaders and monthly women's meetings to build solidarity. The results of the study suggest that exclusion of women from forest governance leads to inequitable rules that neglect women's needs and increase their hardships.

Researchers highlight the critical role of commons (forests, grazing lands, and waterbodies) in rural livelihoods, food security, and cultural practices. However, as pointed out by Iyengar in his keynote address, commodification and consumerism hinder the sustainable use of these resources through overexploitation. Another researcher feels that traditional top-down approaches to managing commons have led to their degradation and have failed to recognise valuable local knowledge. The study advocates for community-based participatory monitoring for sustainable resource management. The Socio-Ecological Health Assessment Tool (SEHAT) is discussed to link local knowledge to a formal governance structure for effective restoration efforts. It is noted that for this tool to gain traction, evidence will need to be built up gradually, demonstrating that the information emerging from communities is both credible and helpful for decision-making. The author further believes that the evolution of the tool signals that, rather than imagining monitoring as a technical process governed by outsiders, it reimagines it as a shared practice based on local knowledge and local context.

The next study, based in Odisha, identifies a persistent gap in the Indian literature on common property resources (CPRs), specifically the lack of integration between micro-level insights on village dynamics and macro-level policy assessments. It is pointed out that existing research tends to focus either on localised community governance and livelihood dependencies or on aggregate spatial and economic trends, often ignoring to bridge the two scales. The author(s) propose a methodological framework to address this, utilising large-scale secondary data to analyse and aggregate the status of CPRs from the village to the state level. The research applies this methodology to quantify long-term changes in Odisha's land commons, operationalised as forest and grassland/pasture systems, between 2001 and 2022. A key finding is that granular mapping, particularly when integrated into administrative dashboards, can significantly reduce the transaction costs of adaptive management by providing routine, village-scale ecological signals for action. This shifts the conservation mandate from a generalised directive to a set of context-specific interventions.

A study conducted in Katriyasar village, Bikaner, Rajasthan, discusses *Oran's* contribution to the community's culture and livelihoods, especially for marginalised groups who depend on it for fodder, fuelwood, and other resources. *Oran* is a

traditional sacred grove, protected and managed by rural communities for their socio-religious and livelihood needs. The community's strong traditional beliefs that these sacred groves belong to their deity have helped in protecting them from extractive pressures. Beyond providing resources, the sacred groves offer important regulating and cultural ecosystem services, including air quality regulation, carbon sequestration, and biodiversity preservation. However, it is pointed out that this system is now threatened by a lack of secure land tenure, the erosion of traditional institutions, and increased groundwater extraction. The study points out that though the recent court rulings have directed the state to classify sacred groves as "deemed forests" and "community reserves", this also raises concerns among locals about potential loss of access and restrictions on traditional practices if control shifts from the community to the Forest Department. The paper concludes by emphasising the need for secure community rights and stronger governance structures to preserve sacred groves.

A mapping study on the spread and use of common lands uses data from multiple sources, including the 2011 Census of India, Household Census data, and spatial datasets to analyse common lands in India. The author recognises limitations in data availability, particularly concerning the regulation and support of ecosystem services in the commons. Therefore, the study focuses on a selected set of uses and dependencies, primarily on provisioning services such as fuelwood, fodder, and grazing. The common lands are not uniformly distributed but are spatially spread across the country, often with multiple types of commons existing within a given area. By focusing on quantifiable dependencies, such as grazing and fuelwood extraction, the study demonstrates how quantitative measures can be constructed to better understand the value of commons. It offers crucial insights into the spatial distribution of common lands, highlighting their role in both livelihoods and biodiversity conservation. The author points out that, given the nature of the data required for assessing dependence on commons, the analysis does not represent the full range of benefits that rural communities derive from commons. However, it helps demonstrate that quantitative measures can be constructed to gain a better understanding of the value of the commons.

VI

ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

- 1) Based on the review of papers submitted on the theme and the issues raised in the Keynote Address, the following research and policy issues, along with some resource-specific points for focused attention, are listed for discussion.
- 2) What institutional frameworks are necessary to integrate indigenous water management mechanisms with modern solutions?
- 3) What is the extent of marginalised communities' dependence on sacred forests, and how can the tension between formal conservation mechanisms and established community governance of sacred forests be effectively managed?

- 4) How can the problem of elite capture of community institutions be minimised to ensure equitable resource access?
- 5) How can communities effectively balance/blend tourism infrastructure development with the preservation of cultural heritage and land resources?
- 6) How can women's long-term leadership in commons management be sustained, and how can successful female leadership models be replicated?
- 7) How can predictive models for ecosystem resilience be effectively communicated to policymakers and local communities to inform and guide proactive land management decisions?
- 8) What are the underlying drivers of change in common property resources, and how can these be identified and managed to ensure resource sustainability?
- 9) If parts of the CPR lands are diverted for development, can compensatory investments improve the productivity of the remaining resources, and how can such efforts be financed?
- 10) What approaches would be feasible for internalising the social and environmental costs of unsustainable fishing while ensuring traditional fishing communities have legitimate access rights?
- 11) What market models are necessary to ensure profits from non-timber forest product (NTFPs) value chains equitably benefit tribal communities?
- 12) How can a robust framework for valuing ecosystem services, especially non-market benefits, be developed and promoted, and what methodologies and data are needed to ensure that ecosystem value coefficients in use accurately reflect current ecological dynamics?
- 13) How strong are the contemporary and historical effects of the caste system on the equitable access to, and management of commons, and can digitalisation of CPRs help to address these issues? How far is it maintainable that preserving commons without addressing social hierarchies may perpetuate inequality?

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