

Preparatory Plans for a 'Commons Initiative' to host the International Biennial Conference on Commons 2011 Foundation for Ecological Security, India

Background

Over 2.5 billion people across the globe depend directly or indirectly, on Common Property Resources (CPR) such as forests, grazing lands, irrigation systems, tanks, pastures, inland fisheries and coastal fishing. Apart from the tangible natural resources, traditional (and modern) knowledge, seed/genetic resources, grandmothers' cures also come under the category of commons.

Common Property Resources are generally managed by local users, and through mutually accepted arrangements. CPRs play a significant role in ensuring food security and cushioning the livelihood strategies of the rural poor, dalits, tribals and other marginalized sections of the society. In addition to fulfilling the religious, cultural and recreational needs of the community, these resources are of significant importance for meeting various needs and safeguarding the livelihoods of poor and marginalized sections of the society.

Criticality of commons for the poor and marginalized

Common Property Resources (CPR) in India are important sources of livelihood to rural households. In the context of villages in India, the commons provide wide-ranging contributions to village economy - from food, fodder and timber to farming systems, animal husbandry, resource conservation, and recharge of ground water. Their contribution to people's livelihood is well accepted by the government and others who work to conserve and develop such resources. Jodha's study of 1986 based on data from 82 villages from 21 districts in the arid and semi-arid zone of the country leads several studies that have now established beyond doubt the relevance of the commons to India's rural economy at large and its importance as a 'safety net' to the poor in particular. The 54th round of the National Sample Survey clearly highlighted the importance of CPRs to household income, livestock sustenance; more importantly, to strengthen community solidarity. As per the report, the poor derived 54 % of their total income from the commons.

That the character of this access of the commons is complex and stratified by agro-climatic zone, class, caste, occupation and gender is important. An analysis of the NSSO data throws light on CPR use across agro-climatic zones. The percentage of households across various agro-climatic landscapes collecting CPR products ranges from 73 in the Eastern Plateau and Hills to 13 in the Western dry region forming a national average of 48%. CPR contributions to rural economy are multi faceted. 75% of India's farmers are marginal or small and in most cases, particularly in the semi-arid zone, follow a mixed farming system where agriculture is supplemented by animal husbandry. Fuelwood remains rural India's predominant source of domestic energy. And the commons contributes 58% of fuel wood consumed by rural households. The percentage of households

collecting fuel wood from CPRs is as high as 70.7 in the Eastern plateau and Hills.

Fodder contributions from CPR are also significant across the country in terms of both feed and pasture lands; The fodder needs of two-thirds of India's livestock keepers, who are small, marginal farmers and landless labourers, are met from diverse sources including CPRs such as village pastures and forests. 25% of fodder needs across the country are met from the commons the percentage of households grazing livestock on CPRs at a high of 55 in the Western Himalayas; Jodha's study reports as much as 80% of rural fodder needs being met from CPRs. The study points out that maintaining animals without the support from CPRs would mean diversion of almost 48-55% of croplands from food and cash crops to fodder crops. Besides which, the alternative of reducing the number of animals proportionate to the availability of one's own fodder resources would imply a 68-76% loss of draught power and upto 43% loss of farm yard manure.

Ecologically, the commons play a vital role in maintaining ecological balance while providing important resources that sustain life - maintenance of hydrological cycles, conservation of biodiversity, serving as sinks for greenhouse gases (Quereshi and Kumar, 1998, World Resources-2005). Some benefits are perceived locally, as in the availability of water supplies and nutrients to local agriculture while others such as biodiversity benefits are perceived at a global level. In many parts of the country, commons function as 'buffer' zones catering to the natural resource needs of the community. This has insulated many reserve forests from pressures of acute use.

Decentralization and governance of the commons

In India the rural landscape lies divided into multiple resource categories administered by different departments and being managed with different objectives. The land resources, be they forests, wastelands or grazing lands also cut across the administrative boundaries and often cover more than one habitation or village. The rural communities, particularly in dry land areas, who derive their sustenance from the natural resources, often find their appropriation-provision relationship with the resource without legal recognition. The legal provisions available for recognizing community involvement in natural resource management also differ, with revenue wastelands available for lease to village cooperatives, grazing lands being in the custody of Gram Panchayats and forestlands being accessible for community management under the Joint Forest Management (JFM) arrangement and the recent 'Forest Rights Act' (FRA). This results in different sections of the landscape being managed virtually independent of each other without synergy between them. In most cases the efforts to bring different land categories under community management result in creation of new institutions at habitation, revenue village or higher levels. All of these bypass the Panchayati Raj Institutions (73rd Constitutional amendment), which as bedrock of local self-governance has constitutional mandate and where every adult citizen automatically becomes a member of the Panchayat Gram Sabha. Therefore, for optimal management of different components of the landscape, the habitations

level institutions need to be nested within a larger institution that is linked to the local governance of the region.

Social inclusion and commons

The poor and marginalized communities suffer the most from social stratification, which positions them at the bottom of the graded village hierarchy. The poor and marginalized negotiate social and economic transactions in many spheres of their lives from this dis-advantaged, inherited position at the base, while in other spheres they are being continuously marginalized from the dominant paradigms of development. While commons are not the only grounds where contestations of the poor may come into play, the incremental gains from a better commons is sometimes all that the landless get and this is mostly irreplaceable and therefore invaluable. Working on common lands, mistakenly called wastelands, provides a unique opportunity to act through a singular platform on issues of poverty alleviation, social justice and improving ecological health. Commons also provide the physical, social and political space to interface with issues concerning equality and fairness. By strengthening institutions for collective action around the commons, there is need to build spaces that enable the poor and marginal groups to engage with dominant groups on equal footing. Attempts aimed at ecological restoration and collective management of natural resources founded on designing spaces of structure, time and access for the underprivileged, in particular, can enable the poor and marginalized to assert their claims and entitlements on common properties.

Knowledge Systems

The knowledge systems around commons generally 'fall in between the stools' as academic pursuit and policy frameworks are woven around disciplines and resources and miss out on the inter-connectedness. It is surprising however that within such a dominant system, the scholarship around commons promoted a systems thinking. The new knowledge around commons is progressing into man-environment interactions, human and natural systems, systems dynamics, knowledge and commons, to name a few. Though some universities and academic bodies are also promoting the developing holistic understanding and views by offering interdisciplinary education, the vast scholarship and experience in the field of common properties both in the North and South continues to be largely ignored. There is a strong need to bring the historical and contemporary understanding on commons into public domain, which is easily accessible to all including academicians, policy makers and practitioners. In order to begin influencing policy and programmatic action, such archival and contemporary knowledge must be strengthened with documentation of enduring examples on commons as 'best-fit' situations clearly outlining the context and the trajectory under which they survive and succeed. In the Indian context there is a need to develop further understanding on the legal perspective under which commons could be surfaced, institutional arrangements for the decentralization and effective management of resources, economic evidence for remonstrating their criticality of the commons to the poor and ward off other land-use options that work against their interests.

Emerging opportunities

In the recent years the Government of India has increased its attention to issues of food security, restoration of land and water resources, decentralization of decision-making and improved access to information on government programmes and policies. Though the 73rd amendment of the Constitution was passed in 1992, several steps have been taken only in the last couple of years to give panchayats a better say in the implementation of programmes and channeling of funds. Though initiated hesitantly in early 90's the Joint Forest Management arrangements are now spread over 10 million villages and covering as much 29% of the total forest area of the country. Further, the recent enactment of the Forest Rights Act gives a much needed clarity on the tenure of forest land in favor of individual and community claims (of local tribals and others) enabling better land use planning based on land use capability and channeling programmes for the development of these lands. The recently announced Common watershed guidelines enable working on large contiguous patches of land and also envisage habitation level institutions for natural resource management which are nested within the Panchayats. Except for the JFM, the NREG, FRA and Watershed Programmes envisage a greater role for panchayats thereby fostering a physical setting in which issues of improved local governance can play out. Moreover all these programmes are being planned to bring convergence of various rural development and land development programmes. The JFM, Watershed programmes, (most of the) NREG, FRA provide an opportunity for reviving the functioning of commons at a biophysical plane and the decentralization of decision making to panchayats and further downwards provides ample opportunity to build on the socio-institutional aspects of commons and local governance in general.

Government of India has also been discussing the need for having a National Policy on Common Property Resource lands since 2002. There has been a specific mention to the same in the report of the Ministry of Environment and Forests for the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), 2002. In 2007, the "National Council for Land Reforms" was constituted under the Prime Minister to lay down broad guidelines and policy recommendations on agrarian relations and land reforms.

The Government of India constituted a Committee in this regard to look into the State Agrarian Relations and Unfinished Tasks in Land Reforms, with a sub-committee to exclusively look into issues of Common Property Resources – Identification, management, development and Land use aspects (particularly agricultural land) and recommend measures to prevent conversion of agricultural to non-agricultural purposes consistent with development needs. The report of the committee was submitted to the National Council for Land Reforms in October 2008, which recommended the need to put in place a land use policy and revival of the land use boards at the district level to ensure proper use of agrarian land and access of poor to common property resources (CPR).

The 13th Biennial Conference of IASC

Foundation for Ecological Security (FES) has been involved in assisting the management and governance of Common Property Land Resources since 1986. FES has been an institutional member of the International Association for the Study of Common Property (IASC) since 1999 and has been regularly participating in the biennial conferences since 1998. FES is recognized for its activities around commons as it has been working over the last two decades with 1500 village institutions that manage and govern commons in diverse ecosystems spread over six states in India.

The hosting of the conference is not intended to be a one-time event, but a key piece in a longer process of raising attention to the commons. By placing the conference agenda in the ongoing discussions on agrarian distress and rural livelihoods, social inclusion, decentralization and local governance, environment and development and climate change, the conference shall be an interface between policy, practice and theory; developing and developed world; and local and global issues. To be held in South Asia for the first time the conference would further boost the momentum towards decentralization and devolution of natural resources and provide a voice to those lobbying for community rights over natural resources, given that over 2.5 billion people across the globe depend directly or indirectly, on common property resources such as forests and grazing lands. The diversity and innovative approaches in this part of the world could both benefit from and contribute to the institutional and policy design in the other parts of the world.

The opportunity to host the conference in India is timely to counter and dispel notions where common lands are being projected as 'wastelands' and are being diverted for alternate land use. Increasingly common lands are being viewed as sites for biofuel cultivation, corporate contract farming and industrial zones. The ecological role of common lands in conserving biodiversity, improving soil moisture regimes, recharging groundwater and transferring nutrients, is hardly discussed. With 80 % of the drinking water requirements being met from groundwater mining and groundwater depletion reaching alarming levels, the role of community institutions in managing ground water (and surface) as common properties requires much attention. Moreover the role of CPR institutions in enabling a code of locally agreed behavior that both, energizes proactive steps and keeps undesirable individual action in check, is unrecognized and undervalued in a world that is largely moving towards privatization of natural resources and atomization of the rural (and urban) societies.

The Government of India has recently constituted a Committee 'to look into the State Agrarian Relations and Unfinished Tasks in Land Reforms' with a specific sub-committee 'to look into Access of Poor to Common Property and Forest Resources and Agriculture Land Use'. The Government of Andhra Pradesh is piloting a regional programme of reviving the management and governance of common lands and is considering convergence of the programme with National

Rural Employment Guarantee Schemes (NREGS),¹ with has plans to spread it across the state.

Bringing in a Practitioner's Perspective

Over the next year and a half, we aim to bring together practitioners working on issues of common properties at regional and national levels and work towards highlighting the issues, experiences and paths forward during the conference and also sustain the discussions beyond the conference. The conference would help bring to fore the re-emergence of CPRs through programmes like NREG, Forest Rights Act, Watershed Development, Joint Forest Management/Community Forest Management, Water User Associations, Participatory Irrigation Management, etc. Special sessions on Protected areas, Ground water, Fisheries, Lagoon Commons, Coastal Commons, Irrigation Systems, pastoralism and livestock, etc would help bring the practitioners' perspectives into the conference discussions. On the other hand, their participation in the build up towards the conference would help hone their perspective on commons in their ongoing domain of activities.

Influencing the 'common' mindset on Commons

The 'common' perception of the urban mind be it a bureaucrat, a politician, a business man, a housewife or a student on commons is typically the hyped metaphor of 'Tragedy of Commons' and 'everybody's property is nobody's property'. In order that we highlight the critical value of commons in the rural economy it is as much necessary to question the urban mindset on this very assumption. A discussion in the urban mainstream society would expose the fallacy and hollowness and help create an open environment to reconsider and highlight the value of commons in rural economy. Needless to say the urban citizen stand to benefit as much in managing urban commons as commons and not relegate them to open access regimes or state control. Well-defined media plans; fellowships, school level competitions, etc could question this much entrenched beliefs and trigger rethinking on managing and governing commons and create or explore it as a way of managing resources.

Building a discussion on the need for Policy on Commons in India

We plan to pitch the Conference as an interface of policy, theory and practice; inviting contributions from countries with functioning policies, legal and institutional frameworks etc so as to influence the discussion on the need for Policy on Commons at the national level and at the State level. We are in discussion with few state governments so as to initiate catalytic processes well before the conference, leading to a larger consultation during the conference and follow up with policy and programmatic agenda thereafter. This could help in developing policy and programmatic action on management of common property resources in the 12th Five Year Plans (2012-2017).

¹ The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA, also known as National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, NREGS) is Indian legislation enacted to provide a legal guarantee for one hundred days of employment in every financial year to adult members of any rural household willing to do public work-related unskilled manual work at the statutory minimum wage. This act was introduced with an aim of improving the livelihoods of the rural people, primarily semi or un-skilled work to people living below the poverty line in rural India.

Partnerships

The conference would be held in collaboration with the International Association for the Study of Common Property (IASC). The International Association for the Study of Common (IASC) is devoted to the understanding and improving institutions for the management of environmental resources that are (or could be) held or used collectively by communities in developing or developed countries with the following goals to encourage exchange of knowledge among diverse disciplines, areas, and resource types; to foster mutual exchange of scholarship and practical experience; and, to promote appropriate institutional design for governance of the commons.

In India, the Department of Land Resources, Government of India and the Department of Rural Development, Government of Andhra Pradesh have agreed to be a partner in organizing the Conference in January 2011. There have been preliminary discussions with the Planning Commission and the Ministry of Environment and Forests who have also shown keenness and willingness to support the conference. The conference would serve the opportunity of reflecting on the programmes and policies of the States and help improve them.

Expected Outcomes

Mostly conferences end up as one-time events limited to academic discourse. Considering the momentum already generated by vast programmes on watershed development, joint forest management, participatory irrigation and overall decentralized governance, we deemed it necessary to enrich the Conference by bringing together practitioners, decision makers and scholars to a common meeting place. Instead of limiting it to an event preparation we plan to trigger processes that would aim for a better recognition and governance of commons at least in select states and feed into the 12th Five Year Plan preparation process.

The initiative would -

- Act as knowledge exchange platform, by bringing practitioners, academicians and policy makers from South Asia to share and learn from experience in collective action and local self governance initiatives of natural resource management (NRM) and rural development, uncovering the importance good governance of commons, including user-managed fish stocks, pastures, forests, lakes, and groundwater basins, etc. Practitioners would observe implementation of evidence-based practices used to advance protection and equitable distribution of CPRs within and among communities, with an overarching emphasis on poverty alleviation.
- Influence government programmes and policies on natural resource management and institutional design of local self governance on aspects such as watershed development, JFM, Participatory irrigation management (PIM), fisheries, etc where institutional design principles are essentially based on collective action and resources.
- Help in influencing policy and programmatic action at the National and a few select States. Policy on commons would help favourable policies on tenure and in improving access of the poor to the common lands and other natural resources resulting in assured livelihood security.

- Bring to the fore attention on issues concerning social justice and food security and provide alternate views, options and examples that offer promise of devolved structural arrangements to enable inclusion of the marginalized and holistic management of natural resources.
- The community, especially the poor, would be expected to benefit from such discussions by improving their access to commons, rights over usufructs, better control and devolved powers for management of their local resources such as forests, grazing lands, water bodies, fisheries etc.
- Draw interstate appreciation enabling action from states (and countries) that are lagging behind and promote a healthy competition as well as concrete legal, policy and programmatic options for adoption.
- Provoke and sensitise the (urban) mainstream society on drawbacks of processes of atomisation and privatisation and the merits of collectives and community stewardship. Highlight the critical value of commons in the rural economy and the dependency of urban society on the rural hinterland and appreciate a rural urban continuum.
- Attract the ongoing movements and initiatives in the subcontinent working on the rights of dependent (local) communities in accessing natural and collective resources such that the event piggybacks on their strengths and their involvement helps hone their perspectives on 'commons' and integration in their ongoing pursuits and agenda.
- The fundamental principles for collective action that demonstrate managing local commons could contribute rich lessons and principles for designing arrangements for managing global commons such as issues concerning climate change or international waters. Moreover commons such as village forests could directly contribute to both mitigation and adaptation to climate change.
- Lead to further research findings and evidences that would help establish the significance and value of commons thereby drawing more policy and programmatic decisions for improved control of local communities over their natural surroundings and their lifestyles.