
Theme II: Reimagining Commons and Governance: Pathways to Institutional Innovations

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One of the three themes of this year's Annual Conference of the Society focused on the common property resources management. CPRs have traditionally been an integral element of people's livelihood options, particularly for rural population. It is estimated that common property land resources (CPLRs) account for about fifteen percent of India's geographical area. These CPLRs include common lands like community pastures, village forest lands, woodlots, and others. A number of studies have shown that these commons, especially forests, are fundamental to livelihood safety-nets of the rural poor, most importantly in tribal regions. These are equally critical for the ecological stability of a region. However, over time, the increasing anthropogenic pressures have stressed these common land resources, and which is blurring the well-established, and well respected, local cultural norms of commons use.

The meaning of the terms property and resource is well understood by all, particularly the socio-economists and ecologists, but it still is complex phenomenon to understand when seen in the light of commons element. The 'commons' aspect of CPRs is what requires a deeper understanding of it. This is because human society is ever evolving in respect of various societal aspects, like cultural and economic ethos, and with this the meaning and context of CPRs also keeps on evolving. This is, to an extent, reflected in broadening of the concept or definition of commons to now include urban spaces, digital resources and to an extent some forms of markets, and other such areas. It is imperative to dwell deep into different aspects of commons to have meaningful policies and institutions for commons management; of course, drawing heavily from the experience of traditional commons governance across the globe. It was in this light that the Society decided to dedicate a session to discuss 'Reimagining Commons and Governance: Pathways to Institutional Innovations'. The theme attracted well researched papers, apart from an intellectually and philosophically thorough Keynote. A panel discussion on the theme was also held. Apart from many related issues

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discussed, the panel also highlighted the need for comprehensive research efforts to develop appropriate methods to address the issue of managing global commons. In all 34 research papers were received, though a few could not be considered for lack of their direct link to the theme. Papers discussed during the Conference focused on the sub-themes of (i) governance, institutions and management of commons (ii) socio-economic dynamics and livelihood (iii) legal, policy and market and (iv) inclusion and mapping of commons.

The issue of tenure and governance in commons was highlighted by most of the speakers. It was suggested that linking tenure reforms to improved local governance, with flexible tenure systems that can accommodate changing livelihood systems, would be helpful. Presentations using socio-economic frameworks suggested that where local institutions (like *Panchayats*, *Charagah Vikas Samitis*, and *Van Suraksha Samitis*, etc.) function well, improvements in vegetation and water availability lead to higher agricultural productivity and improved livelihoods. Speakers highlighted that “one-size-fits-all” approaches do not work in commons governance. Researches also drew attention towards the importance of careful analysis of concepts, classification and sources of data to arrive at meaningful conclusions about trends, extent and ownership of commons. Different case-based presentations discussed the actual community-based land use and the legal status of different commons; often with dual realities of formal ownership and actual use. Another key theme discussed was the conflict and coexistence in human-wildlife landscapes. Suggestions included improving communication among stakeholders and paying closer attention to the degree of human-wildlife interactions while designing interventions. Another interesting theme, biodiversity as commons, highlighted the high species richness in the study area, yet there are knowledge and accessibility gaps and institutional weaknesses in managing biodiversity. The role of women and youth in managing commons ran as a common theme, directly or indirectly, across many research presentations. The presentations highlighted the youth out-migration and their limited engagement in village commons which can threaten the commons governance. A few papers also highlighted the need for comprehensive planning models based on comprehensive surveys, mixed analytical methods, and also emphasized making spatial analysis more accessible to non-specialist audiences. The detailed discussions resulted into the following recommendations and areas for future research endeavours on the theme.

Recommendations

- Conduct micro-level studies to map commons for meaningful aggregation of data for effective policy making.
- Rigorously evaluate the policies to strengthen community-led commons management.
- Conduct policy research to find ways to actively engage youth in commons management.
- Further explore the possibilities of making *Gramdan*/ other forms of land pooling as a mass movement.
- Due care be taken in using data from different sources for comparability, and definitional incompatibility of terms.
- Explore further the possibility of using biological control of invasive weeds to reclaim infested commons.
- Conduct causal analysis to identify factors responsible for declining forest, grasslands, water bodies and other commons.
- Strengthen research into developing methodologies to evaluate the ecosystem services of CPRs for their true valuation.
- Arrange serious academic deliberations on outlining the conceptual boundaries of commons for their better understanding in the present global context.
- Explore further as to how digitization and other technology can strengthen community rights and collective ownership, and at the same time check digital land grabs.
- Strengthen agencies and processes for socio-economic data collection for equitable benefit sharing by all sections of the community.

Future Research Areas

- Research on leveraging the role of technology (e.g., digitization of records, scientific irrigation systems) in enhancing effective CPRs governance while safeguarding community rights.
- In-depth examination of the relationship between social capital, social diversity, and the outcomes of collective action in CPRs management.
- Dedicated analyses to study challenges and governance models applicable to urban commons, such as community gardens, public spaces, and shared infrastructure.

- Investigating the extent to which markets can be considered commons and how collective governance principles might apply to them in true sense of commons.
- Analyzing the historical development and implementation of land reforms to understand their impact on the decommunization of CPRs.
- Integrating gender studies and socio-economic data to ensure equitable participation and benefit-sharing for marginalized groups in resource governance and benefit sharing.
- Documentation of traditional knowledge about management of different common property resources (sacred forests, water bodies, pastures etc.) for integration with modern conservation strategies and climate adaptation plans for optimal results.
- Evaluation of existing policies for analysing the impacts, utilities, and lacunae in existing policy initiatives for promoting tenure security for comprehensive policy making.
- Analyze effectiveness of existing policies and programs in supporting and scaling-up successful community-led networks of institutions for effective commons governance.