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Editorial: Towards an effective commons governance system in Southern Africa?

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Abstract: This special feature presents several papers generated under the EU-funded 'Cross Sectoral Commons Governance in Southern Africa' (CROSCOG) project. The feature builds on knowledge generated in case studies which explored existing integrated resource knowledge and governance practices of rural people living in Southern African commons. In earlier generations, especially during the pre-colonial periods, most Southern African societies developed quite effective indigenous institutions for the management of entire landscapes and their component ecosystems, when this was in their interest. Few of these integrated Southern African systems are effective today as they have gone through massive changes, for example due to colonial influences, the increased role of the market and/or conflicts over use and access to natural resources. Meanwhile, most efforts to rebuild or affirm (the management of) the commons through various initiatives, have been specific to certain resources or localised areas. Conversely, the smaller number of ecosystem-wide land use planning initiatives that sought to enhance overall environmental health have been dominated by technical, anti-political approaches that failed to understood the differential roles of resources in the spectrum of local livelihoods, and failed to achieve the required broader reinforcement of local governance. This introduction and the papers it introduces

explore opportunities and challenges with respect to integrating scale – landscapes, ecosystems, and governing systems – into the local commons.

Keywords: CPRs, cross sectoral commons governance, scaling up, Southern Africa, sustainable livelihoods

1. Introduction

Since the early nineties the mainstream study of the commons has been fairly consistent in its focus and concept definition. Most scholars in this academic field agree with the definition by Swallow and Bromley (1995: 100), who consider a common property regime "to be a set of institutional arrangements that define the conditions of access to and control over a range of benefits arising from collectively used natural resources". Jodha (1995a: 3279) defines common property regimes (CPRs) as "institutional arrangements evolved by communities to collectively manage and use their natural resources". Subscribing to a similar definition McKean and Ostrom (1995: 5) define common property or common property regime as "property rights arrangement in which a group of resource users share rights and duties towards a resource". Central to this definition is communal ownership and management where no member has exclusive rights over the resource. This is what (usually) distinguishes common property from other types of property.

Throughout the world the commons have been observed to be declining in size and in productivity (Jodha 1992, 1995a,b; Leach and Mearns 1996). The circumstances which historically favoured CPRs have been replaced by those that disfavour them, in particular due to trends of privatisation and commodification under conditions of neoliberalism (McCarthy 2005). In many Sub-Saharan African countries it was believed (especially by colonial powers) that CPRs which were based on traditional leadership were flawed systems which caused natural resources degradation. This became received wisdom (Leach and Mearns 1996) and was combined with the 'tragedy of the commons' thesis to legitimise state intervention in management of the commons (see Hardin 1968). The hallmark of this intervention was a zeal for reform entailing mainly privatisation and nationalisation of communal resources (see e.g., Swift 1991; Runge 1992; Quiggin 1993; Steins and Edwards 1999; Magole 2003, 2009). While communal land tenure and other traditional natural resources management arrangements were condemned as being inherently destructive to the resource, state and or individual (or small groups in some cases), privatised natural resource control was favoured and believed to be able to provide better custodianship for the resources. To this end, policies, regulations and attendant institutions were developed and enacted. Enclosures of many kinds were set up, ranging from ranches, protected areas and game reserves, limiting access to land and resources for many peasants and rural people.

Against this background, scholarship critical of the tragedy of the commons thesis and its real-world effects has burgeoned. Indeed, as Michael Goldman

has argued, the 'epistemic world of the commons scholars' has not only tried to 'reinvent' the commons, but also practically 'defend' it against a host of destructive influences and unjust assumptions (Goldman 1997). This, he shows, has led to three 'tendencies' in the 'anti-tragedy' school, which he identifies as the 'human ecologists', the 'development experts' and the 'global resource managers':

> "the human ecologists (…) demonstrate the complexity of the commons from a local culture- and territory-based perspective; the development experts programmatically show how to restore the degraded commons, strengthen weakened social institutions, and 'modernize' the Third World poor; and the global managers explain how the commons are not just local or the problem of the poor, but contribute to global ecological crisis" (Goldman 1997: 4).

Interestingly, he adds that "although their collective self-image is one in opposition to the facile tragedy model, in fact, their assumptions and instrument-effects are quire similar" (Goldman1997: 4). A decade later, this sentiment is echoed by Mansfield (2007: 68), who argues that commons scholars see in the 'tragedy of the commons' really a 'tragedy of open access'. She argues that much of the commons scholarship endorses the same general logic that constitutes the tragedy of the commons thesis in that they all "link forms of property, economic rationality, and environmental outcomes". The question usually becomes 'how to get the institutions right' so that common property systems 'start functioning properly' and generate the desired social and environmental outcomes (see also Agrawal 2002).

Obviously, many scholars go beyond such a simplistic view of the commons. Yet, the dangers of retaining the underlying assumptions that also characterise the tragedy of the commons remain. In fact, in trying to marry insights into issues around knowledge, political economy and power in relation to the commons with a hope at 'promoting effective governance of the Southern African commons at scale', the current paper and the contributions to the special feature it introduces are not always able to avoid these either. It does, however, provide an important snapshot of where current commons research in Southern Africa stands. Place-specific and rich in empirical detail, the contributions to the current special feature of the *International Journal of the Commons* hope at the very least to contribute to McCarthy's (2005: 24) call to be specific about why in many cases "a common property regime is expected to lead to better social and environmental outcomes than state or private ownership". Hence, while we admit that commons systems and scholarship have their own problems, the current authors and the contributors all share the same practical and political agenda of the need for *affirming* the commons (Turner 2004). Affirming the commons is not the same as trying to optimalise CPR institutions through interventions. Rather, it is to first and foremost acknowledge that CPRs continue to exist in the face of adverse circumstances and are in many cases the only feasible option and lesson for sustainable natural resources management. This is what the contributions to the special feature have in common and what the current paper hopes to spell out and introduce in more detail in the Southern African context.

2. The commons in Southern Africa

Research has shown that in earlier generations, some Southern African societies developed relatively effective indigenous institutions for the management of entire landscapes and their component ecosystems, when this was in their economic (and sometimes political) interest. The Lozi of the Zambezi floodplain in western Zambia are a well-known example of this indigenous integration of livelihoods and natural resource management in a local governance system (Munalula 2000). Papers in a recent special issue of *Development Southern Africa* (2009, volume 26, number 4) upon which this special feature builds, also outline some of the virtues of pre-colonial resource management systems. They also point out that few of these inherently integrated resource management systems of Southern African remain operational today.

The common conclusion is that indigenous commons governance has been inherently weakened in terms of the adherence to rules and regulations, protection of natural resources, conflict resolution and protection of access rights and livelihoods. In many of the cases it was found that a colonial legacy which was later inherited by post-colonial governments set up a governance system which ignored indigenous knowledge and commons practice (Haller and Chabwela 2009; Magole 2009a,b; Mhlanga 2009). In some cases it was found that indigenous management regimes were replaced by sectoral or fragmented systems that focused on technical, 'anti-political' rationales (Büscher 2010). In yet others it was found that unequal power relations were less and less counter balanced by traditional CPR rules and institutions, making it ever more difficult for so-called 'stakeholders' to negotiate their 'stake'. Overall, however, and in line with Brockington et al.'s (2008) argument related to protected areas, new institutional arrangements for natural resources management were found to be empowering to some and disempowering to others; hence distributing fortunes and misfortunes unevenly.

In the Southern African commons therefore, resource management is now almost always formally in the hands of the respective governments, whose resource management agencies operate in various degrees of cooperation with local communities, and/or traditional decision making authorities. Extensive research has found that this degree of cooperation is itself a critical determinant when it comes to the functioning of commons management (Blaikie and Brookfield 1987; Bromely 1992; Jodha 1992; Ostrom 1992; Mckean and Ostrom 1995). Recent research in fisheries management, for example, has found that a community perception that the government efforts are responsive to their concerns are critical for general support for biodiversity conservation, while the participation of the traditional authorities is the key to the effective enforcement of management rules (Wilson et al. 2006). However, this necessary element is not sufficient. Exacerbated by extreme poverty and low literacy levels, in many cases biodiversity conservation efforts involving local communities in Community Based Natural Resource Management (CNNRM) arrangements have not been

successful, leading some to argue for a return to 'fortress conservation' that seeks to exclude local people from resources in order to ensure their conservation (see Hutton et al. 2005; Büscher and Dressler 2007). This is not, however, a strategy that can be successful over larger ecosystem scales. As Turner (2004) argues in reference to terrestrial ecosystems, the problem has often been that conservation efforts take the form of focused projects when the real problem is how to strengthen existing or potential resources management practices across wide areas in order to achieve more sustainable rural development.

3. Scholarship, policy and practice in sustainable rural development

Applied social science has made many contributions to strategy and policy for 'sustainable rural development', but scholarship has been particularly prominent in debates and action for governance of the commons in Southern Africa. Here, academics and researchers have been central to much of the debate and strategic development, with particular emphasis on the emerging concepts of community-based natural resource management and sustainable use. At the heart of these efforts have been the Centre for Applied Social Sciences (CASS) at the University of Zimbabwe and its first director, Marshall Murphree, who inspired not only Zimbabwean scholars of the commons but many others across the region. CASS served as a model for the Programme for Land and Agrarian Studies (PLAAS) at the University of the Western Cape in South Africa, and from 1999 to 2006 these two institutions ran a joint programme of applied research on CBNRM. Murphree's career has been marked by the ability to span academic and policy work. Chair of the board of Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife from 1991 to 1995, he was central to the development of that country's Communal Areas Management Programme for Integrated Resources (CAMPFIRE – see Murphree 1997). Like him, scholars at CASS, PLAAS and many other academic centres across the region have actively engaged in efforts to encourage the residents of communal areas to participate in the management and protection of natural resources for livelihood gain.

These efforts to apply social science in combating poverty and loss of biodiversity in Southern Africa focused initially on CBNRM and related themes such as co-management, 'people and parks' and ecotourism, and generated a substantial literature while underpinning much of the strategic development of programmes like CAMPFIRE, Living in a Finite Environment (LIFE, Namibia), Administrative Management Design (ADMADE, Zambia) and Training and Support for Natural Resource Management (TRANSFORM, South Africa) (see, e.g., Hulme and Murphree 2001; Fabricius et al. 2004; Dressler et al. 2010). Possibly the closest integration of academic and applied effort has been manifested in the work of the Southern Africa Sustainable Use Specialist Group (SASUSG) of the World Conservation Union's Species Survival Commission. Through years of often contentious debate and programmatic experimentation,

this group has promoted the still controversial notion that "landholders should be the primary beneficiaries of biodiversity conservation, and that conservation is an important component of, and contributor to, livelihood and economic strategies" (SASUSG 2009). CBNRM spans all landscapes of communal tenure (and can also be applicable to group-owned areas under private tenure). Sustainable use work has focused more on protected areas. But there are close conceptual and working relations between the two fields of effort.

Since the 2000 conference of the International Association for the Study of the Commons (IASC) in Bloomington, there has been increasing recognition of the overlaps between the concepts of CBNRM and of the governance of the commons in developing countries. The two fields of scholarship have effectively merged, and CBNRM research from Southern Africa and elsewhere has been amply represented at subsequent IASC conferences. This special feature of the *International Journal of the Commons* represents that merger, offering some of the outcomes of a two-year work programme by scholars of the Southern African commons that were initially presented at the 2008 biennial conference of the IASC in Cheltenham and at its 2009 African regional conference in Cape Town.

Looking back over the heritage of our scholarship – from the involvement of Murphree and others in programmes like CAMPFIRE and LIFE to more recent work with initiatives like the Okavango Delta Management Plan – we should pause to ask ourselves what these efforts at applied social science are really worth. What can scholarship actually contribute?

At the most basic level, it is obvious that – as in countless other fields of endeavour – scholarship of the governance of the Southern African commons makes a major contribution by enhancing our understanding of the process. It records, describes and explains how it is practised, where it is considered 'effective', where it is not and by whom and why. It assesses the roles and resources of the various participants in the process and analyses the power relationships that are key to any kind of governance.

It is generally assumed that this better understanding is converted into better policy for commons governance – that is to say, policy that makes more realistic assumptions about the various actors' motivations, roles and resources, that makes the best use of existing or potential new institutions' usually limited capacity, and that is dedicated to outcomes congruent with most commons scholars' values: equity, sustainable resource use, the conservation of biodiversity and the alleviation of poverty. Obviously, in reality this is often not the case, as ethnographic work on development and environment policy by David Mosse has shown (Mosse 2005). He argues that often,

> "policy goals come into contradiction with other institutional or 'system goals' such that policy models are poor guides to understanding the practices, events and effects of development actors, which are shaped by the relationships and interests and cultures of specific organizational settings" (Mosse 2004: 663).

Nonetheless, 'policy' is a comfortable point at which many applied social scientists' personal value chains seem to stop. 'Better' policy for the governance of the commons must surely be a decent outcome for scholarship. But more fundamentally, we need to consider how much of a difference policy actually makes in the current political and institutional frameworks of Southern African states. Whether it is a national constitution or an agreed approach to the management of wetlands, policy has only theoretical value if it remains disconnected from the political and institutional processes that precede and come after it. What the papers generated by the CROSCOG team repeatedly show – and could be demonstrated in countless other cases from across the Southern African commons – is that the interlocking political, economic and institutional problems in the region today prevent many policies from being understood and implemented in the manner that was intended – or being implemented at all (see also Mosse 2004; Magole 2008). The 'gap' between policy and practice is often wide and getting wider (Büscher and Dressler 2007).

Policy is not solely the mandate of the state and its agencies. One of the contributions of scholarship of the commons is to emphasise the roles of other actors and institutions. Research can contribute to enhanced policy for local government bodies, traditional leaders and community structures too. But the same critical question remains essential – is it easier said than done? How realistic is our analysis in finding ways to make better policy result in better practice – more effective governance of the commons that responds to the kinds of values identified above?

One answer to this challenge – adopted by some of the authors in this special feature – is to move beyond the conventional research stance into a more participatory engagement with the commons governance processes they seek to understand and enhance. It may not be helpful to describe such engagement as 'action research' – an elastic and sometimes vacuous concept – but what we see from efforts like those of Chabwela and Haller to support the development of resource management by-laws in a Zambian wetland is reminiscent of earlier decades of academic engagement in programmes like CAMPFIRE and LIFE. It is beyond the scope of this introduction to discuss the operational implications of this kind of scholarly engagement with the governance of the commons; but readers are invited to consider these questions as they review some of the outcomes of the last two years' work on cross-sectoral commons governance in Southern Africa.

4. Cross sectoral commons governance

The Cross Sectoral Commons Governance in Southern Africa (CROSCOG) project aimed to share existing research and experiences in the governance of large scale natural resource commons across different ecosystem types – including marine and other large water body coastal zones, arid and semi-arid grasslands, savannas and woody patches, and floodplain ecosystems in Southern Africa. The project was organised in two themes. Theme one explored case studies, while theme two,

which is the subject of this special feature, goes further to explore how countries can build on the existing integrated resource knowledge and governance practice of rural people to achieve more effective governance across natural resources sectors (coastal, floodplain, grass, savanna and forest patches) and scales (small to large). The following discusses the two themes in some more depth.

4.1. Theme one: knowledge, political economy and power: understanding the governance of the commons in Southern Africa

This theme set the framework for the development of comparable commons management case studies across resource sectors in Southern Africa. It also set out to facilitate a process of sharing experiences and lessons in ways that can usefully inform development and conservation policy and programmes. Under the theme, case studies were required to assess the roles played by knowledge, power and political economy in the governance of the commons in Southern Africa with particular reference to the three ecosystem sectors of coastal zones, forest and grasslands patches and floodplains.

With regard to *knowledge*, cases sought to answer the following questions: What is the condition of indigenous environmental knowledge and management skill? Is it robust, or dying out with the older generation? How is it distributed across age, gender and economic groups in rural society, and what social, cultural, spiritual or political factors influence its use or sharing by and among these groups? How are indigenous technical knowledge, management skills and approaches perceived by external agencies including and especially by the state? The main question being considered by the case studies with regard to *political economy* was; to what extent and why are there private rights to 'commons' resources – who holds them, and what are the economic consequences for the rest of local and national society? To come to a common understanding of *power* in the governance of the commons in Southern Africa cases attempted to answer the following questions: What is the state of society across the nation within which a specific Southern African commons is located? Is it dominated by centrifugal tendencies, by ethnic difference, by rapid demographic change, by the collapse of indigenous culture and institutions, by rapid commodification, by political strife, by elite exploitation or by various combinations of the above? Who are the winners and losers across national society in the politics of commons rights, use and management?

While a comprehensive presentation of theme one cases of the project is not within the scope of this introductory paper, it is necessary to provide a very brief overview of the cases per each of the fore mentioned commons resource sectors which as stated above lay the foundation for work under theme two. Three flood plain cases were studied under theme one. These were the Lake Chilwa floodplain fisheries case in Malawi; the Kafue Flats and their surrounding areas in Zambia where mixed resource use is practiced; and the Okavango Delta flood plains case where CBNRM is commonly practiced. The main lesson from the flood plain cases

is that common-pool resources are increasingly managed by agencies located far from the floodplains. These agencies possess neither the necessary knowledge nor experience that the local communities possess. In the process local indigenous knowledge is lost.

Four grasslands and woody patches cases were studied. These were the commons on the southern shores of Lake Kariba in Zimbabwe where historically mixed use of the commons existed; the Eastern Okavango forest patches where until independence the indigenous San communities practiced their hunting and gathering livelihood strategies; the Lake Ngami (South West of the Okavango Delta region) where the Ovanbendero community have for years practiced their traditional pastoral system; and the Dwesa-Cwebe area of the South African Eastern Cape coast where local people have been banned from using forest resources for many years. The main lesson emerging from the grasslands and woody patches studies is that people are marginalised by broader economic interests and broader definitions of sound environmental management and also along ethnic lines.

Lastly, three coastal zones cases dealing particularly with fisheries were studied. These included the Kapenta fishery on Lake Kariba and the case of the dynamics of policy evolution in Southern African fisheries featuring studies in Zimbabwe and South Africa. In these two cases economic and power plays were most prominent. Lastly the case of Lake Chilwa in Malawi shows how traditional institutional arrangements for governance were steadily disrupted by government regulation.

4.2. Theme two: promoting effective governance of the Southern African commons at scale

Having established a broader, consolidated understanding of the Southern African commons through the first stage of its work (theme one), CROSCOG moved in to its second stage, to a fundamental challenge for scholars, policy makers and practitioners in the region: How can effective governance of land and natural resources be built back up to scale across the communal areas of Southern Africa? Enormous resources and huge effort have been poured into 'focused' or project-based CBNRM in various localised areas over recent decades, but the majority of the region's communal area landscapes and societies have not directly benefited from this effort.

Across most of the communal areas of the region, as CROSCOG studies have demonstrated, the state and its policies and laws are more absent than present, despite pretence to the contrary. Many common property regimes are drifting into open access. Others are being steadily privatised, typically by extra-legal means that benefit a richer minority and further impoverish the poorer majority – leading to accelerated resource degradation on remaining communal lands. The most widespread systems for governing the commons today are those elements of indigenous frameworks that have persisted despite the oppression or neglect of the colonial and post-independence eras. Guided by the principles

of those indigenous frameworks, some communities and their traditional leaders continue to achieve a degree of coordinated governance of their natural landscapes – with scant support from the outside world of policies and projects.

The fundamental question, then, is whether it is worth working to sustain the commons as a mode of resource tenure and governance for Southern Africa. The answer must be yes. This is not because the commons are *inherently* morally, ideologically or economically superior to other types of ownership. Rather, we and the other CROSCOG partners believe that *practically* the commons work out to be more morally, economically and ecologically feasible and, in the strained economic circumstances currently afflicting the region, they are also the most cost-effective means of sustaining livelihoods and natural resources. Moreover and importantly, it is because they provide alternative ways of imagining relations between humans and nature within a wider political-economic framework that often aims to reduce these relations to narrow commercial or technocratic ones. Hence, common property regimes do and will continue to have a vital role to play. Instead of allowing the commons to fragment and decay, Southern Africans must revive, reinforce and affirm them.

The CROSCOG programme therefore identified dual policy and research challenges:

> *The dual policy challenge on the Southern African commons now is to achieve a practical understanding of the livelihood roles of the various resources in these ecosystems, and to build enhanced and integrated governance of these resources into reinforced and legitimate local government systems at scale across the region. This challenge cannot be effectively tackled through conventional project approaches, which are typically limited to environmental sub-sectors or localised areas. Instead, policy must build on the indigenous foundations of integrated environmental management that many rural societies still struggle, imperfectly, to practise. It must focus not only on the specialised challenges of natural resource management, but on the general challenges of building effective local government in rapidly changing rural societies. The dual research challenge is to support these policy imperatives. We need to generate more evidence about the differentials, integration and trends in livelihood dependence on ecosystems and their effective management. At the same time, research needs to explore effective ways to build enhanced natural resource management into enhanced local government in and by rural communities.*
>
> Institute for Fisheries Management et al. 2006: 32.

Following the comparative, synthetic reviews of its first phase, the second phase of CROSCOG's work tried to address these challenges more directly. The team of researchers sought evidence and inspiration from each other's work in various terrestrial, aquatic and wetland ecosystems across selected Southern African

countries, in the hope of being able to identify lessons that could be more broadly applied in reinforcing the governance of the commons at scale – breaking out of the project mould and striving for sustainable livelihoods and resource use across whole landscapes. Some of the outcomes of this effort are presented in the papers that follow. Although the programme aimed to find elements of success that could and should be replicated, it is hardly surprising that the cases we report have little to recommend it. Even those cases, however, offer lessons about what the better ways forward may be.

5. The contributions to the special feature

Focusing on Zambia, Chabwela and Haller recount the complex resource management history of the Kafue Flats wetlands. Here, resource abundance and reportedly effective governance of common pool resources by indigenous institutions have been replaced by conflict and competition between local and immigrant resource users and between indigenous and state institutions. Fisheries and other resources are degraded and overused. Various project interventions and exogenous institutional initiatives have proved unsustainable. Since 2004, in an important example of the committed, engaged research discussed above, researchers have helped to facilitate new and more inclusive debate about more effective resource management, leading to consensus about fisheries by-laws that would be passed by District Councils. This is an attempt to replace the present-but-absent role of central government with what is hoped will be a more effective role for local government.

In their analysis of fisheries co-management institutions in Southern Africa (focusing on Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia) Wilson et al. came up with three conclusions. The first is a general confirmation of what has long been an insight from qualitative research that a more responsive management institution is also seen as a more effective one. The second is that co-management institutions that are made up mainly of fishers are seen as more effective than ones that try to incorporate a broad range of other stakeholders. The third is that seeing local conservation efforts as generally effective and making a positive contribution to village life is not related to seeing co-management institutions operating as rule enforcement mechanisms. Management implications here are that in light of failed state interventions resource users are best placed to manage the resources and their interaction with them.

Nyikahadzoi et al.'s work on the political economy of transformation and governance reform in industrial fisheries focuses on the experiences of transformation and reform of governance in the pelagic fisheries of South Africa and Zimbabwe. The two countries have had similar experiences as they undergo post-apartheid political and socio-economic transformation. Like in other areas of the political economy of these countries the pertinent special feature to address within pelagic fisheries was the racially motivated inequalities in access to the fisheries. The study demonstrates that reliance on market mechanisms as the

main driving force for change in both countries has merely reinforced the skewed ownership patterns and power relations, with a limited number of strategically positioned black elites benefiting. Neither the state nor the market place has been able to secure equitable distribution and the creation of an inclusive governance system. This paper like others in this volume concludes that the solution could be found in innovative approaches to transformation and governance that genuinely include the players without undermining the economic viability of the industry, rather than the use of conventional top-down state and free market interventions.

Scaling up is hardly a new concern in rural development debate. Southern African governments and their international partners are well aware that local success stories make only a limited contribution to the general enhancement of livelihoods and natural resources. They are constantly concerned to achieve the sustainability of their interventions, even at the local scale, and their replication. All too often, neither goal is attained. Without getting into a detailed discussion here about the vertical and horizontal dimensions of scaling up technical and institutional innovations, this introduction to the second phase of CROSCOG's output can at least identify some typical scenarios, all of which our researchers have encountered in their own search for ways to move out from the local to the broader landscape.

Broadly speaking, the experience of the Southern African commons suggests three (sometimes overlapping) scenarios in which the prospects for scaling up or replicating successful governance arrangements can be assessed. In some cases, as the designers of CROSCOG hoped, there really are promising elements of success whose broader application seems feasible. The idea of working through local government bylaws is not new, but is being rediscovered by the present generation of rural people, analysts and planners in the Kafue Flats case that Chabwela and Haller describe in their paper. Though not discovered through a CROSCOG case study there are similar initiatives to enhance governance of the Lesotho commons through Community Council bylaws (Turner 2006). As noted above, Zambian fishers, chiefs and officials have shown how co-management can work sustainably – but because co-management normally focuses on high value, relatively localised resources, it is not a mode of commons governance that can be scaled up across the broad, lower value landscapes where better resource management is also urgently needed.

In a second scenario, despite CROSCOG's ambitions, the cases revealed more problems than progress, and the lessons for broader application are negative rather than positive. This is certainly the case in the Kariba area of Zimbabwe described by Mhlanga (2009). One would not wish the fragmentation and dysfunctional institutional overlaps afflicting that area to be spread more broadly (see also Hughes 2010). Nevertheless, such scenarios can point the way forward if feasible means to redress the weaknesses can be identified. How practicable it is to reintegrate state resource management institutions with each other and with indigenous structures we must leave it to the reader to judge. An unanswered

question, but again a possible potential, lies in a stronger and more equitable role for local government structures.

The third scenario is clearest in Botswana, although it exists in Lesotho too and arguably in Mozambique and Zimbabwe. Here, the scaling up has already happened. Across the whole country, or at least across all its communal areas, local government institutions are in place with a clear land and natural resource management mandate. There are three challenges in such cases. The first is to redress the evident weaknesses of commons governance by local government where such arrangements have been in place for some time. This is the case in Zimbabwe and Botswana. The second is to build new local government structures into effective agents of commons governance – as in Lesotho and Mozambique. The third challenge cuts across both the other scenarios. It is to make local government more local. District Councils, Community Councils and similar structures typically administer large areas comprising many communities and landscapes. Effective governance of the commons requires more localised structures to interact with formal local government bodies. One such arrangement is when user groups develop and enforce by-laws with and on behalf of a local government council. In other variants of this co-management by 'local government' and truly local structures, traditional leaders or village councils could do the day-to-day governance of the commons.

CROSCOG researchers' review of the state of Southern African commons governance identifies cases of all three of these scenarios. The programme's papers presented in this special feature and elsewhere, also describe a number of key trends and themes that are relevant across the region. Not surprisingly, they repeatedly identify the degradation of the natural resources comprising these commons, and of the institutions that are supposed to govern them. They report the pressures of (typically extra-legal) privatisation that many communal areas face. The clear conclusion is that communal tenure arrangements and institutions need to be reinforced in a number of Southern African states, although current attempts to do this in South Africa and Lesotho have proved confused and ineffective so far.

Two other broad trends which are neither the focus of this paper nor the CROSCOG project in general are worthy to be mentioned as they help to frame all the challenges of commons governance in Southern Africa. One is the shifting livelihood roles that the commons play. Migrant labour from the communal areas has been a reality for a century across most of the region, constraining and reshaping the roles of common pool resources in the livelihoods of the rural poor. More recent economic, demographic and social trends in many areas have further reduced dependence on the commons, or introduced new commercial market incentives for unsustainably heavy use of some commons resources. Typical results include a decreasing dependence on the commons for substantial numbers of communal area residents; more specialised use of some commons resources by sub-sectors of the rural (and urban) population; and increased dependence on dwindling or degrading resources for the poorest people – especially female-headed households (Matose 2009).

Another broad trend, concerns the 'degradation' of local governance and attempts to redress it. Although they have proved the most durable of local government institutions, traditional leaders are now often unable, for various reasons, to be as effective in commons management as they used to be. Many of the local government structures introduced by colonial regimes and independent states have foundered in poverty, incapacity and corruption (Magole 2003, 2009; Haller and Chabwela 2009; Matose 2009). Whatever legislation may say, they are no longer effective or equitable in the governance of the commons or anything else. Nevertheless, as argued above, the most promising way forward for promoting effective governance of the commons at scale in Southern Africa is to link the truly local scale of resource users and managers into the legal authority and possibly stronger capacity of reformed local governance institutions.

Any such approach implies a stronger differentiation between the 'state', which much analysis assumes to mean central government and its field agencies, and local government and their links with other governance structures. Some Southern African constitutions, notably that of South Africa, make it crystal clear that there are different, coequal spheres of government, and set out the respective roles and powers of the central and the local spheres. Yet, even in South Africa, the governance roles between government and other players are often not clear.

Elsewhere, the distinction between these two forms of government is not so clear in either general administrative practice or in planning and analysis for enhanced commons governance. The current dysfunctional situation, common in many parts of the region but most clearly described from Zambia by Chabwela and Haller (this special feature), is that the state is both present and absent. It is present in its ideological claims of resource ownership and management authority, but is largely absent in terms of effective, competent resource management – although its police and game scouts show up just often enough to frustrate, destabilise and impoverish resource users with their levies, sanctions and penalties. These weaknesses of the state mean that, although there certainly are cases of successful co-management to report, that mode of commons governance must be approached with caution – even in those limited, localised, high resource value settings referred to above.

6. Conclusion

The CROSCOG programme was not entirely successful in identifying strategies to build from successful local experience of commons governance across ecosystems and at broader scales. Nevertheless, some basic building blocks for more effective commons governance can be identified from the cases described in the papers below. The first two building blocks have ancient roots. Indigenous environmental knowledge still has an important role to play, but outsiders should avoid any romantic assumptions about how widespread or accurate it is in rapidly changing

21st century livelihoods. Indigenous resource governance systems, as CROSCOG has emphasised since its launch, are often still the only resource governance happening at all – however fragmented or imperfect they may now be.

A third kind of building block for any effective modern governance of the Southern African commons is economic interest. Once again, particularly in a neoliberal context, the nature of that interest is increasingly diverse as rural livelihoods lose their earlier uniformity and fragment into multiple socio-economic sub-sectors and strategies. Whatever the nature of that evolving livelihood diversity, however, it is clear that commons governance strategies must provide equitably balanced incentives to what should be the full range of economic interests represented in rural resource-using society. The fourth and fifth kinds of building blocks for commons governance have been discussed above. They are local government institutions and central government institutions: district councils, for example, with their legislative authority and representative mandate, and central state structures like departments of fisheries, forestry and wildlife. The challenge, of course, is to assemble these last two kinds of building blocks into a structure that will stand and function in the long-term at an affordable cost to society.

7. Ways forward for scholarship of the Southern African commons

The CROSCOG programme was a limited, two years effort. Its ambitions were modest, but the resulting papers (published here and elsewhere) suggest that it has had at least some success in achieving the intended integration of scholarship and useable findings from work across ecosystems that emphasised the promotion of effective commons governance at larger scales. Readers reviewing the programme's outputs are invited to consider what signposts it suggests towards further work by scholars of the Southern African commons. From programme participants' perspective, the following suggestions can be made.

As we believe CROSCOG has shown, researchers can add value to their work by thinking – if not working – at broader scales. In the social science of developing countries, there has been a tradition of focusing on case study or local areas and seeking to understand and explain it in detail. Laudable as this is from many points of view; the urgent need now is for researchers to integrate their understanding and explanations across ecosystems and, to the extent that their data support it, across larger areas (see also Ferguson 2006). The student of wetlands management and the researcher of range management, for example, should share their insights and challenges more thoroughly. In assessing a particular community, forest or nature reserve, scholars should make maximum effort to extrapolate, to seek similarities and variance with comparable and different communal areas in their own countries and elsewhere in the region.

It is for the reader to judge from the following papers how successfully the CROSCOG team worked to this end. In any event, it should be clear that this

programme has striven to deliver applied social science that can make a practical difference to the challenges of poverty and resource degradation that are so widespread on the Southern African commons. This introduction has emphasised that applying social science is not necessarily simple. The old assumption that research would feed policy and that policy would make the desired difference is no longer valid (if it ever was). In seeking to make a practical contribution, scholars must understand policy processes and how effective they really are, and not be afraid to speak out of the box, to challenge 'received wisdoms' and approach matters in ways that are perhaps less common to the 'policy world'.

Researchers can take a further step. They can engage themselves more actively (without necessarily calling themselves 'action researchers') in the work of enhancing commons governance, through regular direct interaction with key stakeholders. This may involve periodic reports to government departments or community forums, membership of supervisory or advisory structures like steering committees, boards or reference groups, or service as resource persons to agencies or groups that are seeking to reform natural resource management. Any such step implies medium to long-term involvement with the cases or institutions under study. The well-known academic value of longitudinal studies in this sort of social science can thus be matched by enhanced practical value. Many of the commons scholars whose work is described in the following papers certainly hope to be able to continue their research and their contributions in these ways.

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