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Slide #1: Making Common Property Serve the Poor in a Globalized World

I have long been an admirer of Elinor Ostrom, Dan Bromley, Arun Agrawal, and the others that have championed the cause of common property, and I feel honored to have the opportunity to address you.

From the very beginning, the work on community property has focused mostly on what happens to the resources. Its central thesis being that collective ownership does not always lead to Garret Hardin's world of open access, where free riders destroy everything.

Although the focus has never really been on poverty, as such, the work *has* had a strong pro-poor message.

By showing that poor people don't always destroy their environment, it has helped make the case for letting them control their resources. And thanks to those efforts many governments have adopted policies that are better for the poor.

My talk today doesn't focus so much on what happens to natural resources. That is clearly a key issue, and is of central concern to the center I direct, but it is not enough. I will be talking mostly about what's happening to the hundreds of *millions* of people that depend on common property resources and what globalization means for them.

I will also talk a little about ethics and about our responsibilities both as scientists and human beings.

Slide #2: Poor people in fragile environments

If we look at common property from a poverty - rather than a resource - perspective, the first thing that hits you is the large portion of the world's poorest people that live in places with a lot of common property resources.

Just look at these figures from last year's World Development Report. Over 1.3 *billion* people live in arid, hilly, and forested areas and areas with very poor soils.

And while a lot of families have migrated *away* from these regions, they still have twice as many people today as they did fifty years ago.

It's no accident that common property is so important in these types of areas. They are places where the resources are constantly migrating or fluctuating or

spread out over large distances. Places ignored by governments, where markets don't work well, where indigenous peoples have taken refuge.

To survive in places like that people *need* wild plants and animals that are either common property or open access resources.

Farming alone is simply not enough. And those that *do* farm often have to shift constantly from one place to another.

Slide #3: Things are not getting much better

Not only are there a lot of poor people in these areas where common property is so important, for most of those people things aren't getting better.

Even in countries with economies that have been growing very fast, like China and India, there is still an incredible amount of poverty in these marginal areas. 80% of China's poorest counties are mountainous and forested, and the fabulous successes in the cities and lowlands have largely left them behind.

And as we saw from the recent elections in India, many rural families *there* have yet to see the shining light. While much of the country has prospered, poverty in the drier and more forested regions has barely budged.

Needless to say, things are no better in Africa, where just about everyone is having a hard time. In most of the continent's less favored areas people are worse off today than they were twenty years ago.

Even here in Oaxaca you can find an awful lot of farmers in the mountains who are still waiting for all the great things promised when Carlos Salinas brought Mexico into NAFTA and the OECD.

Slide #4: Life is good in the digital universe

Perhaps the most troubling thing of all is that no one really seems to care. For the most part, these days rural people are out of sight and out of mind. You won't find them in your local shopping mall or on MTV. We can all go to sleep satisfied that no one goes hungry in the virtual digital universe.

And on those rare occasions when you do see poor people on TV they are usually faceless victims – not mothers and fathers, story tellers and healers, friends, or neighbors.

Just about every country in the world signed on to the Millennium Development Goals of reducing hunger, sickness, and illiteracy. The reality, however, is that the 600 people the terrorists killed last year got a whole more attention than the tens of *millions* that died of malaria, tuberculosis, and diarrhea.

Even here in this association, it seems much sexier to talk about the digital commons than about people who live in dusty places where they can't even take a bath.

Slide #5: Globalization, common property, and the poor

Arun Agrawal has made the interesting point that generally speaking the work on common property has not focused much on external factors like markets, politics, and migration.

And even though globalization and global change have been official themes of the association's conferences both here and in Zimbabwe not that many of the conference papers really focus on those issues. But if we want to stay relevant, those trends are simply too important to ignore.

Not only are things changing fundamentally, they are changing very rapidly, and local institutions are finding it hard to keep up. Fifteen years ago, supermarkets in Latin America handled only ten or fifteen per cent of the region's food sales. Now they control over half. Those are *very* big changes in a very short time.

Just as a parenthesis, let me also say that from a purely intellectual standpoint, the whole question of how global market forces affect resource management is really fascinating. I have the general sense that markets tend to strongly re-enforce things that were already going on. Where people manage their resources well, strong markets and higher prices make it easier to continue. But where you have open access, weak social capital, or no real sustainable options, market forces and higher prices can only make things worse. At least, that is my impression.

Slide #6: Declining terms of trade

In any case, most poor people out there in the forests, mountains, and grasslands don't have to worry too much about how to react to higher prices. They usually produce very little that markets really want. If they were companies, most would go bankrupt and disappear. But since they are not, they do what they can.

To make matters worse, as you can see in this chart, those poor farmers that *do* have things to sell are getting lower and lower prices each year. Thanks to massive subsidies in the north, new technologies, and global markets, world agricultural prices have been declining for over forty years.

The farmers working on dry or hilly lands with poor soils can't adopt most of the new technologies, but they have to compete with farmers that do. They may wear Michael Jackson t-shirts and have a daughter working in the cities, but that does not mean they are full participants in the global economy.

Falling prices can have all sorts of effects on how people manage their resources. Some families move away entirely or live off remittances. Others hang on and collect more from the wild. And the truth is we still have no *clear* idea about how all these responses add up.

Slide #7: Liberalizing forestry imports

One case where globalization has clearly harmed poor families trying to manage their natural resources is the liberalization of forest product imports.

Small foresters in China and India now have to compete with all sorts of cheap imports. That makes it much harder for them to manage their forests. They may be able to sell fuelwood or poles, but imports have pushed down the prices of pulp wood and sawn wood and just about everything else.

And ever since NAFTA, Mexico's community enterprises have seen *their* markets flooded with cheap wood from Chile and the north.

Slide #8: Privatizing the commons

There are also cases where global markets have led outsiders to come in and claim collectively owned lands, fish, and forests. We have seen this lately with the logging companies in the Congo, trawlers encroaching on communal fishing, and mining and oil companies in indigenous territories.

Fortunately, these things are not as common as they used to be – thanks in part to the global outcry against them – but they still happen.

Slide #9: The ideology of greed

Really though the *biggest* problem with what we have come call globalization is not so much trade liberalization, privatization, or the workings of global markets. It is what I call the ideology of greed. Simply put, the message that is being sent out there is that nothing matters but money. There is no statesmanship or civic duty. Not being corrupt seems stupid and idealism is even worse.

NGOs are nothing but a way to make a living, and you no longer need professionals, only consultants.

With thinking like *that*, how could anyone *possibly* expect governments to serve the poor, or expect village leaders to protect their natural resources?

In one way or another, we have all bought into that. And we have become increasingly cynical about any suggestion that people might make sacrifices, respect their cultural heritage, perform their civic duties, or act in solidarity.

And since institutions are all about expectations, and we *expect* people to behave like free riders, it has become a self-fulfilling prophesy. As someone schooled in neoclassical economics, I would be the last person to argue that that perspective has nothing to offer. But without realizing it, we have turned a useful tool into a blueprint for the wrong kind of society.

Slide #10: International solidarity and fair trade

The *good* news is that there *are* still people out there that *haven't* bought into the global ideology of greed.

That has allowed a completely different kind of globalization to emerge. The globalization of human solidarity.

The last twenty years have witnessed a truly remarkable growth in the natural resources that communities own and manage. In the Amazon Basin alone, indigenous people have received titles to an area larger than Bolivia. Guatemala now has community forestry concessions, Brazil has its' extractive reserves, and India, Nepal, and the Philippines have made real progress.

In each of these cases international activists, foreign donors, and researchers have done a great deal to move these processes forward. By providing funds and information and calling attention to abuse, they have made a big difference.

So has the rise of corporate social responsibility. Things like fair trade coffee, Max Havelaar, and the Forest Stewardship Council have been harnessing global markets to reward strong communities. And banks and export credit agencies are starting to feel the heat for lending money to companies that grab other peoples' land and forest.

And a whole lot more could be done in that direction if communities had more information and support.

Slide #11: Pro-poor research

That is where we come in. As researchers, scientists, and human beings we cannot be satisfied with simply being the chroniclers of human suffering or demonstrating our great capacity to show exactly why the world is going to hell.

Both those things are undoubtedly needed, but we also need to devote more time and attention to research that can actually help to improve what happens on the ground.

That can mean a lot of things. It can mean research that identifies which approaches really work, research that provides clear evidence to support pro-poor positions, research that responds to specific requests from grassroots organizations, and research that reminds people about what is really going on.

In this process, it is important not to simply romanticize. We all know, but sometimes forget, that poor people and communities are neither saints nor homogenous. Being pro-poor and pro-community doesn't have to mean being naïve or unrealistic, and need to avoid coming off that way.

Slide #12: Supporting old traditions, creating new ones

One of the biggest challenges for managing common property resources is that many of the old institutions are being eroded, while new ones are hard to build.

A number of years ago, I was struck by a piece by Michael Richards that showed how market forces, migration and national policies were gradually eroding the social capital in Latin America's indigenous communities and breaking down many of their institutions for managing common property.

Meanwhile, the initiatives trying to create a *new* set of more modern institutions were finding it hard to build social capital fast enough. Rome was not built in a day, and most places where we find institutions that work the history goes way back.

For us researchers, who are here today and gone tomorrow, and work on short projects, it's not easy to figure out where we fit into these longer-term social processes. We face a huge challenge in trying to work quick enough to make a difference.

Slide #13: Helping community based enterprises compete

One particular area where this issue comes up is what to do to support community – based enterprises. Most of those enterprises lack the technical knowledge, marketing skills, and management experience to effectively compete in a globalized world. As researchers and professionals we always have a strong tendency to step in and show them how to do things. But it is very difficult to do that without displacing the communities themselves. Technical assistance projects and NGOs kill as many grassroots organizations and local institutions as they create.

Hopefully some solid research could help us think this whole issue through.

Slide #14: Helping the media get the message

We also need to take the conclusions from pro-poor research to the media – to create new images and policy narratives – to bring pro-poor messages into the digital universe. It is good to write journal articles for a couple of friends and colleagues, and it will certainly help to get tenure, but it's not enough. Unless we can create a real political space for a new approach to managing resources we will never get the results we need.

Most policymakers don't read policy briefs - much less journals - but they do watch CNN.

The press likes research, but only if it's delivered in ways that they can use. Turning complex issues into five second sound bites is not always easy. But it's the only way to get the message out.

Slide #15: Defending alternatives to greed

It's also time we went back from material interest to moral economy, and to focus less on finding ways to rationalize unacceptable situations, and more on how to change them.

In framing these issues we shouldn't be afraid to talk about religion, feminism, friendship, and solidarity.

Social capital is the very essence of common property, and social capital is all about the long-term relations that bind us to one another as people.

Slide #16: It is not un-scientific to care

That leads me to my last point. Science is not simply some sterile system designed to produce publications. Nor is it white coats and meaningless jargon. And it certainly should not be just a way to get a pension.

It is about searching for answers, and using what we find to make things better. Applied science implies commitment.

Poor communities should not be the only ones that engage in collective action and manage their resources responsibly. As long as we are human, we have an obligation to do so also.

Thank you.