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**PERSPECTIVES ON ACCESS TO AND MANAGEMENT
OF NATURAL RESOURCES**

A DISCUSSION OF SELECTED LITERATURE

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Introduction

Environmental degradation affects poor people's livelihoods and in efforts to secure a living poor people exploit natural resources in an unsustainable way – it is a vicious circle. This is what students used to be taught in development studies. Today we know that there is no such simple equation (Forsyth, Leach et al. 1998; Leach, Mearns et al. 1999; Ravnborg 2003; Easterly 2007). Adding to this, the concept of sustainable development – sought to capture the complex relationship between natural resources and poverty – is now by many thought to be too loose to be of much conceptual usefulness.¹ No other single concept has replaced it and natural resource studies and policy making today employ a variety of conceptual approaches, many of which are shared with other fields of study.

This paper seeks to take stock of 'where we are today' in the study of inequality in access to natural resources and the management of them. It aims to give a critical overview of some of the existing approaches to analyzing access to natural resources and to the main natural resource management approaches.

The paper is divided into two main parts. The first part discusses approaches to understanding inequality in access to natural resources: theories of access and entitlement, different conceptual approaches to institutions, and new global changes and political ecology. The second part looks at management approaches to natural resources. Again three approaches are discussed: community-based natural resource management, decentralization, and right-based frameworks.

Inequality in Access to Resources

Why do some people have access to certain natural resources while others do not? What shapes inequality in access?

A number of studies have been concerned with answering this. Below I will discuss three sets of literature. The first one theorizes access and entitlement. The second one examines

¹ See Moser, C., A. Norton, et al. (2001). *To Claim our Rights: livelihood security, human rights and sustainable development*. London, ODI: 67..

institutions as a key concept for exploring people's access to natural resources. The third one – global changes and political ecology, focuses on new developments and how outside forces restrict or change local people's access to natural resources.

ACCESS AND ENTITLEMENT

In 'A Theory of Access' Ribot and Peluso (2003) point to the frequent use – yet inadequate definition – of the term 'access' within property and natural resource studies. Their concern is to move away from more traditional property debates on property rights and legal ownership in recognition of the complexity of ways in which access to resources is determined. They point out that a number of other mechanisms than legal rights are at play in shaping access, such as access to technology, capital, identity, networks etc.

To Ribot and Peluso (2003) access 'is the ability to benefit from things – including material objects, persons, institutions, and symbols' (p.153). Access depends on the 'bundles of powers' that individuals hold,² which are the means in which actors gain, control and maintain access to resources. They explain:

“Different people and institutions hold and can draw on different “bundles of powers” located and constituted within “webs of powers” made up of these strands. People and institutions are positioned differently in relation to resources at various historical moments and geographical scales. The strands thus shift and change over time, changing the nature of power and forms of access to resources.” (p.154).

Ribot and Peluso (2003) further distinguish between two sets of mechanisms by which access is gained, controlled or maintained. One is 'rights-based access' (including illegal access) that refers to access sanctioned by law, custom or convention. The other is 'structural and relational mechanisms' of access which include access to technology, to capital, to markets, to

² This is similar to Bebbington and Perreault's (1999) notion of social capital. See Bebbington, A. and T. Perreault (1999). "Social Capital, Development, and Access to Resources in Highland Ecuador." *Economic Geography* 75(4): 395-418.

labor and labor opportunities, to knowledge, to authority, through social identity and access via the negotiation of other social relations.³

The merits of Ribot and Peluso's framework are primarily the conceptual shift *away* from a prime focus on legal rights and their valuable efforts to point out the varied and multiple mechanisms by which people gain access and the underlying power relations shaping these. As a *theory* however, Ribot and Peluso's approach several weaknesses.

The distinction between 'rights-based' and 'structural and relational' mechanisms of access is understandable given Ribot and Peluso's departure from property relation and is clearly a recognition that law-based means of access 'still matter' even though a number of other mechanisms matter as much or even more. However, the distinction is imprecise, I would argue. First, rights are – if anything – structural mechanisms too. Second, it is unclear what is 'relational' about the 'structural' mechanisms and not the 'right-based' mechanisms. Is access to technology more relational and less structural than legal (or illegal) access? This obviously depends on what is meant by relational and this is not entirely clear in Ribot and Peluso's article. If what is meant is that mechanisms interact with other mechanisms of access rights-based access is as relational as other mechanisms, not least as right-based mechanisms are defined very broadly by Ribot and Peluso namely as those which are sanctioned not only by law, but also by custom or convention.

The notion of 'bundle of powers' is a redefinition of property theorists' notions of 'bundle of rights' and 'bundles of owners' thus stressing that gaining access has to do with power relations and not only with law-based rights and ownership. To Ribot and Peluso the particular 'bundles of power' that individuals, groups and institutions hold and can draw on are made up of the various mechanisms of resource access.⁴ Their conceptualization of power is, however, confusing. Is power created through negotiations or is it possessed by the individual? Despite arguing in certain places in the article that the nature of power changes over time and place and between individuals – and drawing on Sara Berry in this – they also categorically state: "One individual may hold a bundle of powers whose strands include

³ For arguments of similar access mechanisms see Crow, B. and F. Sultana (2002). "Gender, Class, and Access to Water: Three Cases in a Poor and Crowded Delta." *Society and Natural Resources* 15: 709-724.

⁴ They say: "...the various mechanisms of resource access form the constitutive strands of bundles of power from which resource benefits are gained over a lifetime of resource production, transformation and end use." (p. 172)

various means of controlling and maintaining access. This person will be in a dominant position with respect to some actors and in a subordinate position to others” (p. 179). This leaves little room for power shifting between individuals, for the ‘less’ powerful pressing things through (Villarreal 1994), for some individuals to have authority over certain actions (and not actors) and not over others. In short, for the fluid and changing power relations they also argue for.

In conclusion, Ribot and Peluso (2003) makes a valuable contribution to understanding access to natural resources by specifying the many different types of mechanisms of access – and to the degree that the space allows it – in giving examples of how these mechanisms shape access. As a theory, however, it falls short because of a number of short-comings and inconsistencies, primarily around the conceptualization of mechanisms and of power. The result is – despite the intention – a rather structural approach to access which does not adequately theorize agency.

It is notable that Ribot and Peluso (2003) have very little reference to Sen’s entitlement work, which also seeks to theorize access and control. Sen’s theorization springs from efforts to try to explain how famines occur in places with aggregate sufficient food availability. His concern was to understand how a person’s endowments (such as land, labor etc.) are transformed into entitlements (command over resources) and how this improves the person’s capabilities and welfare.⁵ Leach, Mearns et.al. (1999) point to some shortcomings in his approach: Sen has an overarching concern for how endowments are transformed into entitlement but pays little attention to how people *gain* endowments, and he focuses almost exclusive on command over resources through market mechanisms based on legal property rights. In this sense Sen and Ribot & Peluso share similar weaknesses: a lack of conceptualization as to how people gain endowments (how resources are distributed) or get involved in different forms of ‘access mechanisms’.

Leach, Mearns et al. (1999) argue for a redefinition of Sen’s entitlement approach, whereby endowments refer both to the *rights and resources* that actors have, entitlements refer to the

⁵ See for instance Sen, A. (1981). "Ingredients of Famine Analysis: Availability and Entitlements." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 96(3): 433-464.

*legitimate effective command*⁶ over alternative commodity bundles, and where capabilities refer to what people *can do or be* with their entitlements (p.232). Leach, Mearns et al.'s take their argument a step further when they argue that the outcome of each of these levels (endowment, entitlement, capability) are shaped by institutions. Institutions to them are not 'the rules of the game' as they are commonly defined but 'regularized patterns of behavior that emerged from underlying structures or set of "rules in use"'. This entails that "rules" are constantly made and remade through people's practices (p.237). Change in institutions take place when people's behavior alters – by choice or necessity – but because of the embeddedness of informal institutions, change may be slow even when formal institutions such as legal frameworks change rapidly (p.238).

INSTITUTIONS

What both Leach, Mearns et al.(1999), Ribot and Peluso (2003) and others point to is the importance of understanding the mediating role of institutions in poor people's access to natural resources. Formal institutions such as the legal and political systems, including courts, the police, various decentralized units of local governments, titling systems, and water management boards are clearly important in shaping access. Sometimes these institutions overlap or even contradict each other. Informal institutions, however, may sometimes carry greater weight than formal institutions. Broegaard (Submitted) shows how land titling through the state system is too costly for the poor in the central-northern part of Nicaragua. Furthermore, legal titling in itself does not necessarily mean protection of rights due to widespread corruption that benefit the non-poor mainly. Not surprisingly, legitimacy in ownership among poor people is to a large extent obtained by other means such as inheritance or land market purchase. The particular system used to secure 'rights in practice'⁷ depend on individual actors' social, political and economic resources and the particular negotiations taking place. Berry (1997) also shows how land in Kumawu, Ghana, is best secured through

⁶ Entitlements are an outcome of negotiations involving power relations. 'Effective' command highlights that resource claims are often contested and some claims are likely to prevail over others and that certain social actors may not be able to mobilize their endowments. 'Legitimate' refers not only to sanctions by a statutory system but also by customary rights of access and control and other social norms. Leach, M., R. Mearns, et al. (1999). "Environmental Entitlements: Dynamics and Institutions in Community-Based Natural Resource Management." *World Development* 27(2): 225-247.

⁷ For an overview of the specific constraints and problematics around women's ownership to land see Razavi, S. (2003). "Introduction: Agrarian Change, Gender and Land Rights." *Journal of Agrarian Change* 3(1): 2-32.

participation in negotiation processes rather than seeking formal tenure (See also WorldBank 2006).

The strength of informal institutions compared to formal ones may also have a negative effect when the former serve the interests of the non-poor. Informalization expressed in alliances between elites, political networks and corruption is likely to undermine formalization processes of the state to establish rights to all citizens (where of course state elites are often part of informal elite alliances too). The relationship between informal and formal institutions is thus often competing and at times fuelling conflict (Bejaminsen and Lund 2002), with actors maneuvering within both fields.

Individuals often draw on and invest in a variety of institutions to defend or access resources now or in the future (Metha, Leach et al. 1999; Metha, Leach et al. 2003). Cleaver (2002) argues that this is best termed ‘institutional bricolage’. She argues that bricolage is an authoritative process where some ‘bricoleurs’ possess more authoritative resources than others and where people may draw on a number of attributes – such as economic wealth, official position, marriage etc. – to justify position or influence (p. 19).

In her 1997 article ‘Tomatoes, Land and Hearsay: Property and History in Asante in the Time of Structural Adjustment’, Berry (1997) takes it a step further and argues that institutions must be understood as processes rather than structures. This is a significant shift away from both the classic notion of institutions as ‘rules of the game’ but also departs from Leach, Mearns et al.’s (1999) definition of institutions as ‘regularized patterns of behavior that emerge from underlying structures or set of “rules in use” (p.237). There is nothing regularized or patterned about Berry’s notion of institutions, quite the contrary:

“Thinking about institutions as processes begins with movement and interaction. For example, one might conceptualize social institutions, such as household, family, community etc., not as clearly bounded, consensual social entities, but rather as constellations of social interactions, in which people move, acquire and exchange ideas and resources, and negotiate or contest the terms of production, authority and obligation. People interact, within and across various social boundaries, in multiple ways and relations among them are constituted less through the uniform application of written or unwritten rules, as through multiple processes of negotiation and contest which may occur simultaneously, or in close succession, but need not be synchronized or even mutually consistent.” (p.1228).

This means, Berry (1997) further argues, that membership in institutions provides opportunities to struggle and negotiate, rather than secure a guaranteed outcome (p.1228).

While Leach, Mearns et al. argue that informal institutions often change slowly, Berry says that “ If African societies and cultures have exhibited great diversity and fluidity over time, as much recent scholarship suggests, it is appropriate to shift our analytical focus from structures to processes, from rules and outcomes to on-going negotiation and debate.” (p. 1229).

Depending on the scale (local, global) and the inequality at stake one may see big changes or persistent inequalities. By ‘looking local’, I would argue, Berry and others see changes which they would not see if they looked at the bigger picture. Berry’s approach easily means that small changes are given more attention than larger inequalities persisting amidst change. It puts actors and agency in the forefront, at the expense of the structures. It looks for movement and changes, shifting positions and practices, at the expense of repetitive (at times unquestionable) practices that both constrain individuals’ in their possibilities – often largely depending on class, gender and race – but which may also give meaning, identity and a sense of security to people lives. An example of the latter is the endurance of the gender division of labor throughout the developing world. Although negotiations and significant shifts in tasks and roles take place in certain places, it is still remarkable how ideas and practices of the male breadwinner and women as ‘mothers’ and household care-takers dominate.⁸

Furthermore, for analytical reasons it is problematic to conceptualize institutions as processes. First because processes are everything – every action, every movement, every verbal interaction – which means that institutions become everything and the concept loses its meaning. Second, when everything is a process a practical and conceptual question becomes what processes to study – which are the important ones and which to leave out (given that one cannot study everything)? Third, a focus on processes tends to exaggerate agency and ignore that which constraints or enables, implying (almost) that actors are free-floating self-

⁸ On different perspectives of how to conceptualize continuity and change - and thus the role of agency and structure - in gender relations see Connell, R. W. (1995). *Gender & Power*. Cambridge, Oxford, Polity Press, Bourdieu, P. (1999). *Den Maskuline Dominans*. Copenhagen, Tiderne Skifter. On a discussion of these perspectives see Koch, J. (2001). The Power of Partnership: The Impact of Women's Work on Gender Relations among Low-income Urban Couples, La Paz, Bolivia. *International Development Studies Centre for Development Research*. Roskilde and Copenhagen, Roskilde University. PhD: 401.

choosing individuals.⁹ Fourth, examining processes of debates and negotiations – as Berry argues for – has a danger of paying over-due attention to discourses at the expense of practices (including how practice is embedded in discourse).

Nuitjen (1998; Nuitjen 1999) argues that the term ‘institutions’ should be supplanted by the term ‘organizing practices’. Organizing practices are ‘different action patterns’ including those fragmented in nature. They do not assume a common goal between individuals or that they share key interests, which means that conflicts and tensions often are an integral part of them. She says:

“When we study these apparently loosely structured organizing practices in relation to specific problems or resources over a longer period of time, we may discover certain forms of patterning and regularities. This patterning can refer to ways in which access to resources is usually arranged, but also to forms in which accountability normally takes place, the way in which conflicts are dealt with, and so on....In relation to the patterning of organizing practices and the force fields that develop we can distinguish actors with different roles, and different access to resources. For that reason it is important to distinguish the central resources at stake, processes of domination, and the different categories of people with specific positions and interests....In relation to these structured organizing practices and forms of domination, languages of differing rights develop. Reflexive talk and story-telling by different categories of people refer to these differing forms of access and processes of domination.” (Nuitjen 1999, p. 5)

Noticeably Nuitjen talks of ‘patterns’ and ‘regularities’ in a similar vein to Leach, Mearns et al. (1999)¹⁰ which is an important step away from focusing merely on ‘processes’. She also points to structural inequalities in access to resources and how these to a large extent are based upon people from different social categories. In essence then, one may argue that Nuitjen takes an actor-oriented approach to structures: what she is advocating for is to examine structures as

⁹ This is no doubt taking it further than Berry (1997) would agree to, but I would nevertheless maintain that this is the implication of taking on this position in full.

¹⁰ Nuitjen (1997/8) is concerned with different patterns in specific socio-economic context, which mirrors Leach, Mearns et al.’s (1999) concern with rules and underlying structures, although this is difficult to completely determine as neither of the two elaborate on ‘context’ and ‘structures’.

reproduced by actors, starting not with the structures themselves but with how they are reproduced through practice.

Clearly the studies mentioned in this section have made a considerably advance in our conceptualization of how people maneuver, invest and negotiate to access resources including natural resources, expanding on the starting point of Ribot and Peluso that law, including customary law, is not all that matters in shaping access. In contrast to more structurally oriented approaches that tend to emphasize the ways in which international and national markets and policies affect local resource use and access (e.g. Redclift 1989), the studies have in common an emphasis on the role of actors and their everyday dispositions. Important conceptual differences exist though, with Berry focusing on processes of negotiations and struggles and Leach, Mearns et al. and Nuijten insisting on forms of patterning or regularity in practices. The latter argument avoids the trap of voluntarism that actor-oriented approaches sometimes fall into, focusing on opportunities (what actors can do and choose to do) and ignoring constraints (that which they cannot do or limits to their maneuvering). Arguably, what also need attention is why some people do not have access to natural resources at all, why certain groups have more access than others, and what mechanisms are at play that constrain access for some.

GLOBAL CHANGES AND LOCAL CONSEQUENCES

A third set of literature deals with global changes and the effects of this at local levels. One group associates itself with ‘political ecology’, another group is more empirical and theoretically diverse dealing with a vast number of topics that range from climate change over new security challenges to biotechnologies developments. These topics could merit a paper on their own, and below I will only point to some of the key arguments.

Clearly, the world is becoming increasingly interconnected by means of the media, new forms of global governance and international alliances, and economic globalization. Changes are complex and rapid (Metha, Leach et al. 2003).¹¹ One may argue that this is not only a ‘context’ that studies of local people’s access to natural resources should take into account but that

¹¹ See also Adger, W. N. (2003). Governing natural resources: insitutional adaptation and resilience. *Negotiating Environmental Change: New Perspectives from Social Sciences* F. Berkhout, M. Leach and I. Scoones. Cheltenham, Edward Elgar Publishing: 193-209, Berkhout, F., M. Leach, et al. (2003). Shifting perspectives in environmental social science. *Negotiating Environmental Change. New Perspectives from Social Science*. F. Berkhout, M. Leach and I. Scoones. Cheltenham, Edward Elgar: 1-31.

these are new realities whose consequences for poor people's livelihoods are in need of examination.

These global developments appear to have contradictory expressions. Inter-state corporation such as global summits are designed to strengthen international commitment to combating global warming (through agreements on the reduction of CO₂), yet these forms of cooperation – some argue – reinforce an unequal playing field where the South has less of a say. Also, with these initiatives the nation-state's control over natural resources and the environment within its own national borders is diminishing (Vogler and Jordan 2003) while at the same time schemes to increase local participation in natural resources management are flourishing (Metha, Leach et al. 1999). New alliances across borders are emerging, such as indigenous movements' alliances with Northern NGOs in their fight against timber companies (see Brosius 1999) or resistance to adoption of genetically modified (GM) crops (see Berkhout, Leach et al. 2003). Technological development¹² – at times promoted with the aim to eradicate poverty – such as GM or other forms of bio-technology, are highly contested – sometimes with national institutions successfully resisting new technologies to the detriment of the poor (see Engelyng 2000). Structural economic reforms of privatization and decentralization shape local economies and mediate global economic changes with consequences for poor people's access to natural resources.

A set of studies of global-local relations associate themselves specifically with the term 'political ecology'. Early political ecology was influenced by Marxist concerns for the negative consequences of capitalism and focused upon structuralism and materialism. Today most work within the umbrella of 'political ecology' is more actor-oriented (Bebbington 2006). In the words of two of its promoters, Hvalkof and Escobar (1997), political ecology is: "Defined as the study of manifold constructions of nature in contexts of power, political ecology scrutinizes the ecological in ways that incorporate into the inquiry human decision making, political strategies, preferences and choices, cognitive mapping of the social and the natural, as well as operating at various scales and domains." (p. 426).

¹² Berkhout and Gouldson (2003) argue that technology has four roles when it comes to natural environments: 1) measuring environmental changes and diffusing information, 2) motivating growth and economic change, 3) influencing the exploitation of natural resources and 4) mitigating environmental impacts of human activities and natural processes as they impact on human activities. See Berkhout, F. and A. Gouldson (2003). *Inducing, shaping, modulating: perspectives on technology and environmental policy. Negotiating Environmental Change. New Perspectives from Social Science.* F. Berkhout, M. Leach and I. Scoones. Cheltenham, Edward Elgar Publishing Limited: 231-259.

There are several 'strands' within political ecology. Below I concentrate on two central ones: 1) discursive constructions of nature (and the implications of this) and 2) social movements and environmental identities. Common to these is a concern with how power relations shape discourses, how discourses are drawn upon and re-moulded strategically by different actors such as social movements, governments, and donors to push agendas through, how global and local discourses and practices interact, and how capitalist development creates new forms of resistance. Political ecologists examine resistance, conflicts or 'frontiers'¹³ mainly from a local perspective perceiving social movements to 'enact a different politics of representation and practices of nature' (Hvalkof and Escobar 1997 p.441). Accordingly, social movements promote an alternative form of development than that based on western constructions of nature and local people. Hvalkof and Escobar (1997) state: "They are not movements for development and the satisfaction of needs, even if economic and material improvements are important for them....For them, the right to exist is a cultural, political, and economic question. They necessarily open up to certain forms of market exchange and technoscience...while resisting a complete capitalist and scientific valorization of nature." (p.442). Social movements are thus a reaction to economic structures and global discourse that seek to essentialize and naturalize for instance indigenous people or the rainforest. But local social movements may also draw on Northern alliances and discourses in their resistance, in some cases with much success (see for instance Brosius (1999) on struggles over the Malaysian rain forest).

These strands of political ecology contribute to understanding access to natural resources: It is emphasized that local realities can only be understood by looking at the interrelationship between the local and global – what Bebbington (2006) calls the 'glocalization of environmental governance', attention is paid to the transformative potential of social movements and how conflicts are played out and resolved to the benefits of local people's control over natural resources, and it is pointed out that discourses are used to push through agendas (in contrast to seeing the world as discursively constructed).

The strengths of this approach are also its weaknesses. A focus on social movements and resistance or conflict misses out on poor people's every-day relations of negotiations – including various forms of *collaboration* – to secure their livelihoods. Furthermore, Hvalkof

¹³ See Hvalkof, S. (2007). Colonization and Conflict on the Amazon Frontier: Dimensions of Interethnic Relations in the Peruvia Montaña. *Frontier Encounters: Indigenous Communities and Settler in Asia and Latin America*. D. Geiger. Zurich, University of Zurich.

and Escobar's insistence that these movements are about culture and rights and not (capitalist) ideas of development and needs, per definition excludes those movements advocating the latter and leaves out the possibilities of movements strategically drawing on discourses of 'difference' and 'culture' exactly to obtain political power and economic well-being. Finally, with a focus on social movements as actions of resistance 'against' there is a danger of treating 'local people', 'community', 'social movement' as undifferential entities with common interests. This points to the need to examine critical issues of 'whose interests are represented': to what extent are social movements local elite projects? Who defines the agenda? Who are excluded – are women's interests for instance represented?

In conclusion, political ecology does not necessarily tell us much about the people who are not part of movements of resistance and how resource and discourse struggles affect different groups of people's access to natural resources. However, whereas the previous approaches discussed focus on the local level only, the main merits of political ecology is that it recognizes that the local and global are interconnected with consequences for local people's access to natural resources. It pays attention to the power of discourses in shaping opportunities and constraints, and shows that struggles over access to natural resources are often profoundly embedded in discourses.

According to Metha, Leach et al. 1999, new global developments sketched out in the beginning of this section, are associated with a world of increasing uncertainty (Metha, Leach et al. 1999; Metha, Leach et al. 2003). They argue that the world is increasingly uncertain in four ways. First, there are *ecological uncertainties*, as 'ecosystems are increasingly characterized by variability and unpredictability across time and space' (Metha, Leach et al. 1999, p.11). Second, we are seeing new forms of *livelihood uncertainties*, affected by unpredictable environmental events, fluxing and uncertain economic systems, and an uncertain and complex social world of heterogeneous actors and institutional pluralism. Third, there are *knowledge uncertainties*, as expert knowledge is being questioned and debated, often clashing with local knowledge, and there is an increasing recognition that knowledge is partial, incomplete and plural. Fourth, we see new *social and political uncertainties* with changing sociopolitical configurations, multiple forms of political action and development intervention.¹⁴

¹⁴ This fourth dimension of uncertainty is the least developed in their work and does not figure in the early paper from 1999. See Metha, L., M. Leach, et al. (2003). "Editorial: Environmental Governance in an Uncertain World." *IDS Bulletin* 31(11): 1-9.

How does a world of increasing uncertainty affect poor people's access to natural resources? Metha, Leach et al. do not give any answers to this but call for 'a more ethnographic approach to resource use' looking at 'process, practice and agency' and 'power dynamics, negotiation and contestation' in examining this (Metha, Leach et al. 2003, p.8). Li (2001a), however, points to problems in how to deal with such uncertainties. First, calls for ethnographic studies to understand complexity and uncertainty contradicts with policy needs for general solutions across larger scales. Second, while management is premised on the reduction of uncertainty fact is – she argues – that managerial/policy interventions often intensify uncertainty.

How to manage natural resources then? This is the focus of the next part of the paper.

Management of Natural Resources

This first part of the paper has examined three different perspectives on access to natural resources each with their own strengths and weaknesses. The next part twists the discussion by turning to *management* approaches to access to and conservation of natural resources. Three approaches are discussed here: community-based natural resource management, decentralization and right-based approaches.

COMMUNITY-BASED NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

Community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) is an approach advocated for by many donor organizations, including Danida.¹⁵ It centers on the idea that communities themselves manage local natural resources in a way that is beneficial to both the community and the environment. Ideally CBNRM projects will reduce poverty, conserve the natural resources at stake and promote participation. There is however little evidence that CBNRM projects are actually successful in all three aspects (Treue and Nathan 2007). In fact, a recent review of a number of studies concludes that CBNRM projects have seldom been a success in large parts of Africa: "...a generalized conclusion may be fairly confidently made that

¹⁵ Danida's 'The Strategy for Denmark's Environmental Assistance to Developing Countries' sees CBNRM as a means to achieve sustainable development in terms of poverty reduction, improved equity and resource conservation (Treue, T. and I. Nathan (2007). Community Based Natural Resource Management, Danida: 24.). On the historic developments of CBNRM see Blaikie, P. (2007). "Is Small Really Beautiful? Community-based Natural Resource Management in Malawi and Botswana." *World Development* 34(11): 1942-1957.

CBNRM programs in central and southern Africa have substantially failed to deliver the promises to both communities and the environment.” (Blaikie 2007, p.1947).

Such gloomy conclusions are not necessarily replicable everywhere as CBNRM projects are often varied in their actual management structures and practices. However, they tend to rest on some common and problematic assumptions. First, the ‘community’ is often treated as a static and homogeneous entity with clear boundaries and shared norms, to which some people are ‘insiders’ and others are ‘outsiders’. Inherent in much the community literature is a vision of the market and the state impinging upon communities from the outside (Li 2001b). A lot of recent work, however, has shown diverse values and priorities within communities, power relations that shape marked inequalities around class, gender, ethnicity etc., and practices that cut across administrative boundaries and spatial belongings. (Mosse 1993; Guijt and Shar 1998; Agrawal and Gibson 1999; Leach, Mearns et al. 1999; Meinzen-Dick and Zwartveen 2001; Li 2001a; Nuijten 2005).¹⁶ As Li (2001b) argues, boundaries around communities are more imagined than anything else: even so-called ‘subsistence’ economies are often heavily related in market transactions and communities are entangled with state practices, for instance when the local population engage in decentralization practices or resist territorialization processes.

Second, CBNRM projects build on simplistic assumptions about the environment and the management of it. The thinking is that since communities have long term needs for natural resources and they possess more knowledge about them, they are the best managers (Agrawal and Gibson 1999). These assumptions are problematic as local people may be inappropriate managers of natural resources for a number of reasons: local people may rely more on other important livelihood assets, such as wage work, which gives them little incentive to conserve the environment on a longer-term;¹⁷ over-exploitation may be a means of survival for some; and small communities may be too small to manage geographically spread resources beyond

¹⁶ Newer approaches to CBNRM are not unaware of this criticism, and in Danida’s Technical Note, citing Agrawal and Gibson (1999), it is recognized that: “Communities are rather characterized by dynamic relations of: (i) multiple and somewhat conflicting interests, (ii) different actors attempting to influence decision-making, and (iii) internal as well as external institutions shaping decision-making processes”(p.2)

¹⁷ As Li (2001) points out: “It seems likely that it also accords with many rural people’s experience of living in the world, where prices, wages, remittances, the comings and goings of kin, school exam results, national election campaigns, taxes, policemen, and identity cards figure at least as large as earth and plants.” (p. 158)

the communities (Agrawal and Gibson 1999).¹⁸ Adding to this, ecological changes are more complex than just being 'fixed' or maintained by those who live 'close' to the earth. Leach, Mearns et. Al. (1999), stress the transformation of landscape through 'histories of disturbance events' and 'nonequilibrium processes' where it is '...less the outcome of a predictable pattern of linear succession, but more a result of combinations of contingent factors, conditioned by human intervention, sometimes the active outcome of management, and often the result of unintended consequences.' (p. 232).

The general problem appears then to be that CBNRM leans on ideas of new institutional economics where global processes, local politics, history and every-day power relations are ignored and where focus instead is on 'reducing transactions cost' to improve efficiency of CBNRM in bounded and closed economic and social systems (Engberg-Pedersen 1997; Metha, Leach et al. 1999).

If CBNRM rests on such problematic assumptions, why is it continuously being promoted? Like other popular areas within the development field (like 'participation', 'gender', 'rights', and 'decentralization') CBNRM is caught up in the popular language of 'technofixation' and 'getting institutions right'. The argument here is that if one simply gets the different elements right, it will work (see Blaikie, 2007, for various researchers' suggestions of conditions that need to be present to achieve success).¹⁹ Another probable reason for its success is that it links closely with the popular good governance and decentralization approaches where focus too is on promoting participation and reducing poverty. Lastly – and this is Blaikies' main argument

¹⁸ Agrawal and Gibson point out: "In fact, some community characteristics considered important to collective action may actually thwart conservation efforts. Small sized groups may be unable to defend their resources in the face of strong external threats, or be unable to manage resources if they are spread over large areas. Strongly held norms may support exploitative behavior or be resistant to outside attempts at their modification." (p. 636). This may be remedied however. Ravnborg and Westermann (2002) argue that stakeholder identification and negotiation processes can be a useful tool for fostering joint learning and collaboration around transboundary natural resource management problems. See Ravnborg, H. M. and O. Westermann (2002). "Understanding interdependencies: stakeholder identification and negotiation for collective natural resource management." *Agricultural Systems* 73: 41-56.

¹⁹ Blaikie (2007) argues that rather than focusing on what conditions need to be present in terms of the community and the environment, two sets of interfaces should be examined: those between donors and recipient states and between the state (especially the local state) and CBNRM projects at the local level. See Blaikie, P. (2007). "Is Small Really Beautiful? Community-based Natural Resource Management in Malawi and Botswana." *World Development* 34(11): 1942-1957.

– CBNRM is being promoted because the donor community presents it as an success or – as Cornwall, Harrison et al. (2007) would say – a ‘myth’:

“...”success” is reproduced within a network of multi-lateral and bi-lateral agencies, international NGOs, in-country NGOs and a limited number of senior government officials in recipient countries. The discursive power of the theoretical benefits to the environment and community of CBNRM, the need to proclaim success to other international audiences and the diffusiveness and range of the social and environmental objectives, all lie behind representations of this “success”. Success, in turn, is defined in ways that will allow it to be found. Success stories prevail against criticism that comes from other quarters (particularly local people who have experienced CBNRM, and independent commentary from scholars). CBNRM is porous, can absorb all manner of different agendas, and is rich in the variety of benefits it promises, and there appears to be “something in it for everybody.” In this way, theories about the benefits of CBNRM are judged less by their predictive value than their appeal to the various different constituencies of different international financial institutions.” (Blaikie, 2007, p.1954)

DECENTRALIZATION

CBNRM is often situated within processes of decentralization and good governance. Good governance – as the term itself suggests – has strong normative connotations and is promoted at various levels: globally, nationally and locally – even within small NGO organizations. Batterbury and Fernando (2006) suggest that there are six underlying principles to good governance: openness, participation, accountability, effectiveness, coherence and civic peace. Decentralization is a significant cornerstone in the good governance framework. Its merits lie in the promise to make local governments more responsive to citizens’ needs and wishes, and therefore more equitable and more efficient in delivering services through the mechanisms of participation and accountability (Larson 2002; Ribot 2002). Participation facilitates citizens’ input into local government decisions based on experiences and priorities. Accountability means that people can hold local governments accountable on issues that affect them (Blair 2000).

Decentralization and CBNRM share the notion that effectiveness in administration and responsiveness to the needs of the poor (and the environment in the case of CBNRM) are best reached through local management. In the CBNRM literature however, focus in on the

community with little attention to local governments, whereas the decentralization literature focuses on local government authorities, with remarkably little attention paid to the natural resource sector (Larson 2002). Clearly, however, decentralization is an attractive alternative to the CBNRM project-based approaches by focusing on legalized and institutionalized mechanisms for participation and management (Ribot 2002).²⁰ Two aspects in particular make decentralization of natural resources different from decentralization of social services, infrastructure and production. One is that natural resources have significant revenue potentials through taxation, administration of user-fees and licenses, and sale. The other is that natural resources such as water shed often crosscut local administrative boundaries, making it difficult and at times impossible for local governments to administer.

Just as with CBNRM however, in general decentralization has not (yet) lived up fully to expectations, with problems clustering around two sets of issues: 1) limits to participation, poverty reduction and accountability 2) inadequate devolution of decision-making and funds.

One set of problems revolve around participation and the assumption behind the decentralization logic that participation leads to representation fostering empowerment and through that benefits to all and thus poverty reduction (Blair, 2000). A central issue is local elites 'capturing' power – sustaining or further skewing inequalities by gender, class and ethnicity. Examining decentralization processes in six countries (Bolivia, Honduras, India, Mali, the Philippines and the Ukraine), Blair (2000) finds that where female presence is not mandatory, women are generally not represented to any large degree. While decentralization has brought empowerment to some ethnic groups, when it comes to women, Blair argues, this does not seem to have happened to any great extent.

In the six countries under investigation the evidence is mixed when it comes to distribution of benefits reaching a wide majority of citizens, including the poor: in some places and instances benefits accrue local citizens, in others they do not. Overall Blair concludes: "...there is little evidence so far that DLG [democratic local governance] initiatives can do much directly to

²⁰ The distinction in the literature between CBNRM and decentralization is not necessarily always so neat, and what some may consider decentralization of natural resources others would term CBNRM. Treue and Nathan (2007) note that at one end of the spectrum CBNRM refers to participation in decision-making on protection of a national park but without management responsibilities, and at the other end of the scale it refers to a complete handover of ownership of land and natural resources from the state to communities. Treue, T. and I. Nathan (2007). Community Based Natural Resource Management, Danida: 24.

reduce poverty, at least in the short run. The main reason for this short-term pessimism is that when governance is decentralized, local elites get most of the power and steer benefits to themselves, or at least maintain the existing distribution patterns (which largely benefit them, anyway).” (p. 25. See also Batterbury and Fernando(2006) and Cleaver (2002)).

This situation is possible when sufficient and effective accountability measures are not in place. Accountability can be reached through a number of mechanisms: through elections, via opposition political parties, via strong civil society organizations, through the media, by means of public meetings, formal grievance procedures such as an ombudsman-system and opinion surveys. Blair (2000) shows how the six different countries employ a mix of means of accountability where one mechanism can substitute for another if it fails, although to date none of the accountability measures in the six countries are working satisfactorily (for a similar positive conclusion, see Ribot, Agrawal et al. (2006)). Two other related aspects appear crucial too. One is *security* of power transfers. Too often local representatives are accountable to central authorities who can strip them of power (including dismissing them) at a whim (Ribot 2002). The other is *adequate* power transfers.

Ribot, Agrawal et al. (2006) examine decentralization of forest resources in Senegal, Uganda, Nepal, Indonesia, Bolivia and Nicaragua and find a number of general problems that center on insufficient or inadequate devolution of power and funds: lack of control over revenue, in particularly the fate of high-valued resources such as forest, lack of information to local governments about new reforms, devolution of management responsibilities without corresponding funds, lack of territorial control of local governments, and ambiguity in reforms. All this gives local government very little room for maneuver when it comes to forest resources, in part due to general shortcomings in the decentralization processes in these six countries, in part due to the state’s preoccupation with retaining control over valuable natural resources.

Despite such negative conclusions there are positive experiences too of decentralized natural resource management. In Bolivia, Cameroon, Nicaragua and Zimbabwe decentralizations have led to greater inclusion of marginal groups in decisions over forestry. In Zimbabwe, India, Indonesia, Bolivia, Nicaragua and Cameroon increased local revenues have been generated through decentralization. And in some places in Bolivia and Nicaragua decentralized forest management has led to protection of forests against outside commercial interests (Ribot 2002). And – as Larson (2002) slightly ironically points out: “So far, it appears that municipal governments are at least no worse at managing natural resources than central governments...” (p.19).

Where does this leave institutional set-ups for local control over natural resource management? Although more than 60 countries in the world have decentralized some aspects of natural resource management, central governments generally resist implementing appropriate and sufficient power for effective decentralization of natural resource management, Ribot (2002) argues. One conclusion to be made is that natural resources are highly contested. They are valuable to the state, to the elite and to poor people, and it is naïve to assume easy collaboration around their management and that institutional quick-fix can overcome problems. In fact, even with perfect accountability and representation mechanisms, exploitation of natural resources may take place if it is profitable (Ribot 2002)²¹. Clearly the design of these institutions matter. But what matters as much, perhaps, are the political processes shaping them and the local realities within which they are embedded. Ribot, Agrawal et al. (2006) show how decentralization has come about in very different ways in different countries and often more as a result of donor pressure than commitment on the part of the national governments themselves. Once decentralization policies are in making different political actors have different interests in retaining or gaining control over resources and power, and bargaining takes place at different levels. For instance state employees often successfully resist control over terms of employment being transferred to local governments (Blair 2000). At the local level, as we have seen, there is a tendency for power relations to be reconfirmed and perhaps even further skewed to the detriment of the poor. The local, however, is not an isolated spatial or political unit. Local elites are often part of the national elite too, making alliances not only within local governments and CBNRM projects but also outside it. And poor people's livelihoods are influenced not only by local politics but also by global governance structures, discourses and economic changes that affect oil prices, practices of public management and civil society movements, all of which constrains and/or give opportunities to local people in their efforts to secure access to natural resource management.

²¹ Environmental agencies in some Southern countries have argued that too much decentralization cause damage or overexploitation. For decentralization to work effectively a strong central state is needed. See Larson, A. M. (2002). "Natural Resources and Decentralization in Nicaragua: Are Local Governments Up to the Job." *World Development* 30(1): 17-31, Ribot, J. C. (2002). Democratic Decentralization of Natural Resources. Institutionalising Popular Participation. Washington, World Resources Institut: 31.

RIGHTS

'Rights' is a very popular and powerful global discourse.²² A focus on rights has shifted attention away from people's *needs* to their *rights* to water, food, shelter etc., and away from providing services to focusing on the capacity of poor people to claim rights and the role of the state (and other duty-bearers) to provide these.

On a closer examination, what exactly a rights-based approach entails is somewhat blurred, however. Some development agencies take a legalistic human rights perspective based on international conventions, while others use rights in a more broad-based normative framework (Nyamu-Musembi and Cornwall 2004). When referring to rights, Moser et al.(2001) therefore suggest that the following distinctions are made:

- *Rights as legitimate claims*: Rights are widely characterized as legitimate claims that give rise to correlative obligations or duties
- *Rights regime*: A rights regime is a system of rights which derive from a particular regulatory order or source of authority. In a given society several may co-exist – all with distinct normative frameworks and means of formulation and enforcement, for example customary law, religious law and statutory law.
- *Individual rights*: these are subset of right-obligation relationships where the rights-bearer is an individual person; group rights would not fall within this subset of rights.
- *Universal human rights*: This can be characterized as an individual right with a universal domain – that is, an individual right that applies to all human beings equally, irrespective of their membership of particular families, groups, religions, communities, or societies.

One of the merits of a right-based approach is that it is a useful entry point to address the power imbalances that exclude some people from accessing assets to a secure livelihood (Moser, Norton et al. 2001), by examining why certain rights are not being fulfilled and what it takes for them to be so. Metha (2005) distinguishes between rights that are not being realized due to 'sins of omission' and those not realized due to 'sins of commission'. The former is about rights not implemented due to various forms of constraints, such as lack of resources, limited institutional and legal capacity and the like. Sins of commission are when rights are

²² On origins of a right-based discourse and how various international donor agencies use it, see Nyamu-Musembi, C. and A. Cornwall (2004). "What is the "rights-based approach" all about? Perspectives from international development agencies." *IDS Working Paper* 234: 53.

knowingly put at risk due to lack of commitment to rights, often in the name of ‘development’ such as for instance large scale dam projects that infringe on people’s rights to livelihood, land and water. In certain places over certain periods one of the two may dominate, although often there are overlaps between the two and blurriness between policy and practice (p. 22).

A right-based approach can help to put focus on accountability of (particularly state) institutions to ensure inclusiveness and effectiveness in issues relevant to poor people’s livelihoods. The focus is thus on the institutional *relations* between the state and the individual citizens. The overarching focus on state-citizen relationship is, however, also one of the weaknesses of the approach as it leaves open the role of other actors. Furthermore, notably ‘collapsing’ states have little accountability to offer citizens. (Moser, Norton et al. 2001).

At a discursive level rights are strong claim-making devices. For this reason non-state actors have a clear interest in presenting their interests as rights and having these rights recognized as such by the wider society and in particular the state. States equally may have an interest in ‘holding’ back on rights because rights equal obligations to provide. Water, Metha (2005) argues, is usually spoken about as an economic good rather than a human right with few exceptions. Because of the revenue potentials that natural resources have, states are often keen on retaining a significant control over them at central level (Bejaminsen and Lund 2002; Ribot, Agrawal et al. 2006), although in many places some degree of management rights of local natural resources are granted to local governments under decentralization frameworks, as we have seen. There is a difference then between individual rights to *access* and communal or local government rights to *manage* natural resources – the latter leaving (part of) the access, use and the conservation to the local population/local government.²³

This raises questions as to whether rights to natural resources matter to poor people and make a difference to poverty. At the global level the rights discourse has without doubt politicized the claims which can be made by citizens and the responsibilities of states. How this turns into practice is another matter (Scoones and Wolmer 2003): the extent to which rights-claiming by the poor take place and whether this is effective and has turned into tangible benefits for the poor, are still questionable. Metha (2005) shows how the constitutional right to water in South Africa has had little effect for the country’s poor people for several reasons: the water policy focuses on domestic water supply only and disregards water for farming purposes

²³ In practice a communal right to management is limited by legislative structures of how this must be managed, such as decentralization policies.

which is key to reducing poverty, District Municipalities lack financial and institutional resources to implement the policy of 25 liters of free water per person per day and in some places poor people are unaware of their rights.²⁴ In short, rights do not necessarily equal access.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed two sets of literature: access to natural resources and natural resource management.

In the first section concepts of access and entitlement were discussed, and it was argued that these two concepts alone do not give us an adequate picture of inequalities in access to natural resources. Institutions are central as individuals draw on – and invest in – a number of different institutions at any given time, in a context where multiple, overlapping and at times contradictory informal and formal institutions exist. Scholars do not agree on what ‘institutions’ are, however. The classic – and perhaps most common – definition refers to institutions as ‘rules of the game’ whereas more recent approaches perceive institutions as ‘regularized patterns of behavior’ or simply ‘processes’. These differences reflect different perspectives of agency and structure, and continuity and change over time and space. But despite different conceptual understandings of institutions, there appears to be consensus about the importance institutions play in mediating people’s access to resources, and the need for placing studies of inequality in access to natural resources in a local context where the role, strengths and nature of institutions vary.

Studies of global changes and political ecology take an all-together different approach to access to natural resources. They recognize that the pace and scale of change is more speedy and wide-ranging today than ever, with the emergence of new global political agendas and technologies. Within this field of literature much effort is going into defining the new changes, yet comparatively little attention is paid to how they affect poor people’s access to natural resources. Some ‘strands’ within political ecology are an exception to this. They look at how

²⁴ It also needs to be recognized that different actors may have contesting claims to rights. In fact, sometimes rights-claiming categories of people are made up for the specific purposes of claiming rights. See Moser, C., A. Norton, et al. (2001). *To Claim our Rights: livelihood security, human rights and sustainable development*. London, ODI: 67.

global discourses and practices impact upon the local level and (in part) how resistance to this takes place. And they do what studies of institutions often do not: they go beyond the local. Ironically, this also becomes a weakness: in departing from global changes and focusing on impact and resistance, the diverse power aspects of every-day local life are ignored, such as various forms of collaboration and strategizing to secure natural resource access. The latter is pertinent, not least because poor people today are facing new forms of uncertainty not seen before, some scholars argue.

Judging from criticism, management approaches seldom fare well with uncertainty and complexity. The perhaps most widespread management approach is community-based natural resource management (CBNRM). In CBNRM the local –represented in the concept of community – is inadequately conceptualized, in part because the social diversity and spatial fluid boundaries of communities are not accounted for and in part because the community is – wrongly – conceptualized as distinct from the market and the state. Furthermore, communities may not be the best administrators of natural resources. Most CBNRM-projects are in fact implemented in contexts with decentralized governance. At a policy level this necessitates coordination to enhance synergies between community projects and local government efforts rather than competition and overlapping efforts. But just as with CBNRM-projects, decentralization of natural resources has not been without problems. Natural resources are valuable to the state, business interests and the poor, which makes them highly contestable. This makes decentralization structures and regulations about who decides *on* – and access and control *what* – resources crucial. Generally, decentralization problems cluster around two sets of issues: on the one hand limits to participation, poverty reduction and accountability, and on the other hand inadequate devolution of decision-making and funds.

Of the three management perspectives discussed in this paper, the right-based approach is the most recent and perhaps also the most popular approach, at least from the perspective of civil society. Many – if not most – (Northern) NGOs nowadays take a right-based approach to their work. What exactly that means is at times confusing as the term ‘rights’ have many different uses and connotations. One of the main merits, however, is the focus on state-citizen relationships. In this sense a right-based approach neatly fits with decentralization efforts, and can help strengthen relevant institutions and clarify the roles of the local government authorities and local people respectively. While rights are often presented as absolute and categorical (one has a right to something which is either fulfilled, partially fulfilled or not fulfilled), political processes are usually complex and ‘messy’, pointing to the need for policy to pay attention not only to who should receive and who should provide, but also to how

decisions are to be taken, by whom and with what degree of participation of different civil society groups. Pending questions include: Does a right-based approach help poor people in making claims to access resources? How can it aid in institutionalizing roles and responsibilities in decentralized natural resource management?

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