Representing Communities: Histories and Politics of Community-Based Natural Resource Management

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Recent years have witnessed the emergence of a loosely woven transnational movement, based particularly on advocacy by nongovernmental organizations working with local groups and communities, on the one hand, and national and transnational organizations, on the other, to build and extend new versions of environmental and social advocacy that link social justice and environmental management agendas. One of the most significant developments has been the promotion of community-based natural resource management programs and policies. However, the success of disseminating this paradigm has raised new challenges, as concepts of community, territory, conservation, and indigenous are worked into politically varied plans and programs in disparate sites. We outline a series of themes, questions, and concerns that we believe should be addressed both in the work of scholars engaged in analyzing this emergent agenda, and in the efforts of advocates and donor institutions who are engaged in designing and implementing such programs.

Keywords collective rights, community-based natural resource management, conservation, development, environmental discourses, environmental justice, legal pluralism, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), participation

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This article is a somewhat revised version of a prospectus for a conference entitled Representing Communities: Histories and Politics of Community-Based Resource Management. This conference, supported by a grant from the Ford Foundation, was held at the Unicoi Lodge in Helen, GA, 1–3 June 1997. We provide this revised prospectus to readers of *Society and Natural Resources* in the hope that those with an interest in community-based resource management—whether scholars, policymakers, activists, or others—will find the questions we have posed here of some interest as they contemplate their own particular forms of engagement (research, advocacy, project implementation) with such programs and initiatives. At present we are preparing an edited volume of papers from the conference, with the hope that the issues raised here, as well as those raised during the conference, are carried into future discussions of community-based resource management.

In recent years, the separation between advocacy for nature and advocacy for people has been criticized in attempts to demonstrate the relationship between environmental degradation and issues of social justice, rural poverty, and indigenous rights (Bonner 1993; Broad 1994; Gray 1991; Gadgil and Guha 1993; Guha 1989; Hitchcock 1995; Kemf 1993; Kothari and Parajuli 1993; Peluso 1993; Shiva 1993). A loosely woven transnational movement has emerged, based particularly on advocacy by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) working with local groups and communities, on the one hand, and national and transnational organizations, on the other, to build and extend new versions of environmental and social advocacy which link social justice and environmental management agendas. One of the most significant developments has been the promotion of community-based natural resource management programs, policies, and projects—that is, forms of local resource management that might support and be supported by emergent transnational goals of social justice, environmental health, and sustainability (Berkes 1989; Korten 1986; Poffenberger 1990; Western and Wright 1994).

Community-based natural resource management programs are based on the premises that local populations have a greater interest in the sustainable use of resources than does the state or distant corporate managers; that local communities are more cognizant of the intricacies of local ecological processes and practices; and that they are more able to effectively manage those resources through local or "traditional" forms of access. In insisting on the link between environmental degradation and social inequity, and by providing a concrete scheme for action in the form of the community-based natural resource management model, NGOs and their allies have sought to bring about a fundamental rethinking of the issue of how the goals of conservation and effective resource management can be linked to the search for social justice for historically marginalized peoples. At the same time, the successes of disseminating and implementing this paradigm have raised new challenges and dilemmas as concepts of community, territory, locality, conservation, and customary law are worked into politically varied plans and programs in disparate sites.

Community-based natural resource management is imagined differently by different advocates. Conservationists, both indigenous and foreign, hope to involve local people in transnational conservation and resource management goals as a means of protecting biological diversity and habitat integrity (Kakabadse 1993; McNeely 1995; World Wide Fund for Nature 1993). Development organizations, driven in part by vigorous criticism of socially and economically oppressive resource development projects that they have supported, aim to promote local participation in "conservation and development" (Jodha 1992; World Bank 1996). Populist activists hope to empower local groups in their conflicts with state resource management agencies and national and transnational capital (Colchester and Lohmann 1993; Hecht and Cockburn 1989). Indigenous peoples'

spokespersons argue for a new respect for local rights, knowledge, and culture (Clay 1988; Croll and Parkin 1992; Durning 1992).

During the past decade, community-based natural resource management has become much more than an abstract idea. Community boundaries are being mapped and experiments in local or decentralized resource management are in progress in many areas of the world (Poole 1995a, 1995b; Western and Wright 1994). International financial institutions such as the World Bank, as well as the international donor community, have invested in the efforts of both local and transnational NGOs to promote community-based natural resource management regimes.

The purpose of the present essay is to encourage discussion of the challenges and dilemmas of community-based natural resource management, through the varied histories and political struggles that have developed in the process of advancing and implementing this emerging model. In particular we wish to stress the need for dialogue between those who are positioned as advocates and planners of community-based natural resource management, on the one hand, and those who are positioned as scholars of communities, conservation, and development in the Third World, on the other.

We find such an undertaking to be particularly urgent because of a growing divergence in advocate and scholarly projects for understanding the situation of marginalized communities: advocates have found concepts of *indigenous, community, custom, tradition,* and *rights* useful in promoting possibilities for local empowerment in national and transnational policy discussions, while scholars have become increasingly aware of the fragility, mutability, hybridity, and political variability of these concepts (Li 1996; Zerner 1994). While some advocates are concerned about the political consequences of deconstructionist scholarly agendas, some scholars are concerned about the potential political and legal consequences of community-based advocacy programs in which rights to territory, resources, and governance are linked to concepts of ethnicity, space, and indigenous identities.

There is hope and danger in both trajectories. The idea of community-based natural resource management offers great promise for addressing the link between concerns about social justice and environmental destruction. At the same time, there are also potentially problematic legal, political, and cultural complexities embedded in community-based programs. For the movement to flourish, both advocates and analysts must remain alert to the contested and changing variety of cultural and political agendas and contexts in which these programs are being imagined or implemented. What is particularly needed is discussion of critical case histories examining the development, applications, and consequences of community-based natural resource management projects.

In a planning workshop held at the University of Georgia in February 1996, scholars and advocates agreed that we have common interests in understanding the histories and politics of varied projects intending to promote community-based natural resource management in specific sites and historical contexts. A problem common to both scholarly and advocate agendas might be described as "genericization." Advocate model-building can too easily become embroiled in implementing management regimes in which concepts such as *community, territory, rights, resources, management, indigenous,* and *traditional* are used generically without regard to local contests and wide-ranging political stakes in these terms. To the extent that these terms carry legitimacy in international forums, they can be used coercively to create local resource management plans in ways that may or may not empower local people. For its part, scholarly analysis can too easily glorify an ironic and critical stance in and for itself, evading the problems of the positioning of this kind of knowledge within conservative political agendas. "Generic" scholarly crit-

icism may reduce the dilemmas of defining community-based natural resource management to a philosophical problem of essentialism.

To avoid both top-down management models and view-from-nowhere criticism (both in disguise as local empowerment), workshop participants agreed that we need to learn more about the specific historical projects in which community-based natural resource management has been planned and implemented. Only through the explication of specific histories and political dynamics can we begin to address the problems and prospects of community-based resource management. Thus, for example, workshop participants were worried about the dangers involved as multilateral lending agencies capture the rhetoric of community-based resource management for coercive development projects. We were excited by the possibilities of building national movements for democracy and social justice through issues of community-based natural resource management. We agreed that we needed to begin by sorting out these and other examples of the deployment of this set of terms and ideas in particular contexts and histories.

In the following, we articulate a series of what we believe to be key conceptual themes, questions, and concerns about the idea of community-based natural resource management. The first set—Building Models of Community-Based Natural Resource Management—focuses on the need to learn more about the histories of specific projects in which models of community-based natural resource management have been formed, promoted, and institutionalized by local, national, and transnational organizations. The second set—Technical Questions/Political Dilemmas—focuses on the technical apparatus of creating community-based natural resource management regimes, in an attempt to elucidate the varied ways these tools have been used politically. The third set—Unequal Contests—contrasts situations in which community-based resource management forms part of an international management initiative, on the one hand, or a populist and/or nationalist-democratic mobilization, on the other.[1] The fourth set—Other Questions—reflects a more general set of concerns that we recognize arise from our position as scholars. These themes are intended to stimulate discussion of the range and diversity of political contests in which community-based natural resource management has become an inspiration, model, tool, and catalyst.

Building Models of Community-Based Natural Resource Management

International Organizations and the Mandate for Community-Based Natural Resource Management

Part of the history of community-based natural resource management is to be found in the way it has been sponsored by international organizations: multilateral lending agencies, donor institutions, and conservation organizations. It is important to develop a deeper understanding of the histories of the projects sponsored by particular institutions, especially with regard to the ways in which concepts of community-based natural resource management were adopted, developed, circulated, and promoted within specific organizations and beyond them, in global and local circulations.

We are particularly interested in how specific organizations (or individuals within organizations) became convinced that local participation in environmental conservation or resource management was important, and how these organizations turned their concerns into projects, funding arrangements, legislative initiatives, or political negotiations. What set of problems were specific community-based natural resource management projects supposed to address? What kinds of sites (e.g., small-scale irrigation in the Philippines, land stabilization in West Africa, biologically diverse forests in Kalimantan) became

models of discussion within the organization? What debates or critiques shaped the ways community-based natural resource management did or did not become an organizational concern? What international-to-local interactions directed the timing and placement of community-based natural resource management-related organizational priorities? To what degree, or in what ways, did such initiatives become entangled with organizational or governmental administrative and regulatory apparatuses? In what ways have such institutionalizations affected the relations among implementing organizations, national governments, local communities, or social movements? In short, we are interested in how institutional histories have intertwined with particular local or national concerns in the creation of new concepts of conservation, community, equity, and development.

Proliferating Models of Community-Based Natural Resource Management

Some community-based natural resource management projects, initially developed under particular local conditions, have become models that are widely emulated. It is important to understand the local, national, and transnational dynamics of this process of proliferation, particularly by tracing specific projects. One example of this is CAMPFIRE, a community-based wildlife management program in Southern Africa (Derman 1995; Matzke and Nabane 1996; Metcalfe 1994; Murphree 1994). How did the CAMPFIRE program emerge? In what ways has it been used as a model for other programs? How, why, and for which institutions did CAMPFIRE become a community-based natural resource management model? What were the organizational and political processes that contributed to its emulation and proliferation? What elements of the CAMPFIRE model were identified as particularly worthy of emulation, by whom, and on what basis? What kinds of negotiations between different actors—community leaders, national bureaucracies, international organizations—produced certain dynamics in the process of proliferation? Why and how are CAMPFIRE programs spreading across national borders? What kinds of lessons can be learned from diverse stories of CAMPFIRE's implementations in particular sites?

In focusing on questions such as this, we are interested in the more general question of how particular community-based natural resource management projects come to be promoted as community management "icons." When a project attains the status of a model or icon, one touted as a success and worthy of study and emulation, its portrayal is informed by the rhetorics, needs, debates, and plans of project-building contexts and purposes (i.e., development, conservation, state power). Multiple stories develop as the model is fitted into new contexts and used in different ways. What is the process by which one project comes to be held up as an exemplary model of community-based natural resource management? How do such community-based natural resource management icons work their way into institutions that then seek to replicate that model? How does the idea of a "model" create or restrict opportunities for experimentation in the face of local contingencies? In addition to CAMPFIRE, what other icons have been produced by the community-based natural resource management and community-based conservation movements? What are their key points of difference? What are the dissonances, incongruities, and slippages that arise as generic community-based natural resource management models are applied in different environmental and cultural contexts?

Technical Questions/Political Dilemmas

Mapping Against Power

The production of maps has, historically, been dominated by the interests of governments, industry, and local elites, thereby legitimizing and emphasizing the claims of these

agents as against the needs, practices, and claims of local communities for the control of natural resources (Harley 1988; Vandergeest and Peluso 1995). In recent years, however, various countermapping procedures, generated by NGOs or local communities, have been used to redescribe social and natural communities in forests, coasts, and seas as a means of asserting local community control over natural resources (Brody 1982; Peluso 1995; Poole 1995a, 1995b; Zerner 1992).

Local and regional cases in which collective claims to land and resources are being made through mapping need to be examined, in order to explore the ways in which mappings of community and environment have been articulated in specific environmental, political, or legal contexts. How do particular maps fulfill their strategic goals, and what features of these maps fit particular legal, environmental, or political-historical contexts?

It is particularly important to address the national and international political forces, as well as the local initiatives, that shaped decisions to employ particular mapping strategies and techniques. What is the logic by which specific tactical choices were made in mapping and how did these choices fit the situations in which they were deployed? We want to draw attention to the diversity of mapping strategies that have been used and their relationship to a range of political challenges, thereby focusing on the intersection of technique, purpose, and context. Of particular interest might be relatively technical descriptions of how and why particular kinds of mapping were used, and their relation to the challenges of community organizing, land rights claims, political identity claims, and land use debates.

Attention needs to be focused both on success stories, in which local maps were used to establish local claims, and on the problematic aspects of such projects. For instance, what are the larger potential legal and social implications of linking ethnicity to territory (Malkki 1992)? How do maps function as an instrumentality leading to recognition of ethnically linked claims to territory? Community-linked maps are not always homogeneously accepted. How might they precipitate or focus disputes? How might they lead to reification of cultural identities or ethnic boundaries? What kinds of rights and forms of authority are being proposed for communities within mapped territories? What tensions are there between images of community, ethnicity, and space, on the one hand, and aspirations to citizenship, mobility, and participation in national life?

Legal Strategies for Community-Based Natural Resource Management

Discussion of community-based natural resource management has, in a number of cases, led to concrete steps being taken to recognize local communities as legal entities for the management of resources (Fox 1993; Lynch and Talbot 1995). A need exists for comparative assessments of the legal strategies through which local groups have struggled to gain recognition of their rights to resources and territories. This might entail attention to the question of how particular legal initiatives emerged, as well as the relationship between legal frameworks and national political cultures, histories, and institutionalizations of law.

It is important to learn more about the legal bases for community-based natural resource management by posing questions derived from particular contexts. One such case is the Philippines, where national legislation has provided several avenues for the recognition of community rights. How has the project of legal recognition of community management in the Philippines become linked to environmental conservation and sustainable development discourses and projects, including integrated conservation and development programs (ICDPs) (Brown and Wyckoff-Baird 1993)? What are the unexpected ironies, contradictions, and complexities of how legal recognition struggles have played themselves out in the Philippines among communities of highland migrants, indigenous peo-

ples, and in conservation areas? More broadly, how have rights recognition and territorial delineation processes been used by local groups, regional NGOs, multilateral funding and conservation institutions, and the private sector? What are the legal categories and legal institutions involved? What does this have to do with the administrative and regulatory apparatus with which these initiatives have become entangled?

Unequal Contests

Community-Based Natural Resource Management and the International Development Apparatus

Within the last decade, biodiversity conservation and land stabilization have become major priorities among multilateral lending agencies and other development institutions. As a result, as with the case of international development in the past, a large institutional apparatus is establishing itself as the primary agent for many forms of environmental intervention. For instance, in Africa, national environmental action policies (NEAPs) are driving government planning and funding, placing environmental imperatives at the forefront (Greve et al., 1995).

An issue of key importance is the way in which the rhetoric of community-based natural resource management has become part of a strategy for bringing nations into line with global natural resource management initiatives (Neumann 1995). How has the rhetoric of participatory conservation been used as a disciplinary tool for national and regional planning by the international development apparatus? The language of community and conservation has, upon occasion, served to help shift resources away from local strategies for livelihood and empowerment toward resource management that serves powerful institutional interests, whether corporate, scientific, military-administrative, or Northern consumer-oriented (Schroeder 1995). How have multilateral institutions and bilateral lending agencies influenced national governments to enforce community-based natural resource management by decree?

It is critical that we develop some understanding of how community-based natural resource management has been adopted, adapted, funded, and implemented by a variety of powerfully positioned international agencies. We are also interested in understanding the effects—both material and discursive—that these adoptions have had upon national governments, government agency priorities, funding, budget allocations, and programs. How have multilateral and bilateral environmental aid projects focusing on community-based natural resource management affected the dynamics of national governance as well as local social practices and environmental management "on the ground"? What are the strategies that large institutions use to exert pressure on countries to adopt such initiatives? What are the regional and local processes of expropriation, reallocation, and management in which political and economic inequalities are established and reinforced by programs legitimized through the language of participatory resource management? In what ways does such a top-down approach distort the possibilities for effective community-linked social and economic justice and environmental agendas?

Social Movements, Community-Based Natural Resource Management, and the Struggle for Democracy

The causes of environmental conservation and sustainable development have, in some places, been linked to movements and emancipatory discourses on minority rights and

cultural rights, on the one hand, and democracy and social justice, on the other. We need to understand more about the significance of struggles for the recognition of local territorial and resource rights, as well as resource management prerogatives, in particular environmentalist social movements. Such movements have reached out to a greater variety of rural peoples and places than earlier populist movements: tribal minorities, commercial foragers, and marine resource users are included in environmental alliances, together with the core peasant farmers that have been mobilized in earlier movements. How have concerns about the environment brought cosmopolitan national activists into alliances with rural villagers to create visions of national democracy that include political participation from the countryside as well as the city?

To pursue these questions we need to trace histories in which concerns with community resource rights and/or participatory conservation have become central to nationally based progressive social movements. How have these movements been shaped to respond to particular political cultures and cultural politics at the national center and in global political debates about conservation, environment, and indigenous peoples? How do community-based natural resourse management programs shape a new cultural and political terrain in which social justice and rights are linked to saving trees and biodiversity, on the one hand, and respecting the cultures, rights, and *livelihoods* of minorities and other marginal populations, on the other? How are these movements, in turn, shaped by the historical, political, and religious contexts in which they are situated? In what way have social movements/NGOs used the language of community-based natural resource management not only to secure rights for local communities, but as part of a broader effort to create a political space for grassroots efforts in broader national struggles toward democratization? How is the language of community-based natural resource management used to critique and transform national political cultures?

Other Questions

Institutional Appropriations of Community-Based Natural Resource Management

To the extent that efforts to implement community-based natural resource management regimes represent attempts to renegotiate the terms by which political agency has historically been exercised or to curtail abusive resource extraction regimes, they are subject to challenge, appropriation, or manipulation by transnational authorities, national governments, and local elites. How are powerful institutions, including multilateral financial organizations, bilateral aid agencies, national and transnational conservation organizations, and private-sector actors appropriating community-based natural resource management projects and policies to advance their own diverse, sometimes intersecting, interests? To what extent do various forms of institutionalization constitute appropriations in and of themselves, or make possible other forms of manipulation? What are the political, cultural, environmental, and economic consequences of these appropriations and manipulations?

Traveling Concepts

The discourse of community-based natural resource management has emerged in a range of regional contexts and under various guises. Its popularity has fostered the expansion of efforts at implementing management regimes in ways that might genericize how local institutions are defined by external agents. How are concepts such as *community, territory, indigenous,* and *traditional* used to confer an aura of authority on minority cultures and to

assert the authenticity of local management practices? These terms are often deployed to build images of coherent, long-standing, localized sources of authority tied to what are assumed to be intrinsically sustainable resource management regimes. They are also used to legitimize, and to render attractive, programs of decentralization of state authority over local lands, waters, and forests. How are traveling concepts such as *community* applied across (a) different regions or continents, and (b) different sectors (coastal, irrigation, forests)? What are the genealogies of these concepts, and what has been the process of their amplification and projection?

It is important to address both intraregional and interregional comparisons in the deployment of community-based natural resource management, particularly in (and between) Southeast Asia, Africa, and Latin America. How have these different contexts for the development of community-based natural resource management created specific possibilities as well as problems? In what ways have regional initiatives moved from regional contexts into a broader transnational community-based natural resource management discourse? How, in turn, has the geographically decontextualized rhetorical traffic in community-based natural resource management moved from the transnational realm into regional contexts?

Imagining Communities

While community-based natural resource management regimes are intended to empower local communities, the representations deployed in constituting those "communities" remain largely unexamined.[2] What kinds of images of community are being produced in community-based natural resource management projects, programs, and policies? To what extent do community-based natural resource management discourses produce images of cultures, communities; and resource management practices that are essentialized, timeless, and homogeneous?[3] In their role as advocates of local resource management regimes, NGOs acting on behalf of local communities may, in part, be constituting the entities whose interests they claim to represent. To what extent might such instances of the "invention of community" have positive or problematic consequences? To what extent, and how, do these representations reflect local concerns, NGO preoccupations, or the interests of transnational conservation, human rights, and environmental donors? How have descriptions of local communities, culture, law, and environmental management been creatively shaped to fit larger institutional interests? What are the disjunctures between local conceptions of community and resource use, and the ways in which those communities and resource-use regimes are described by NGOs, multilateral lending agencies, and donor institutions?

Collective Rights

Conceptual problems in the representation of local communities and practices are inevitably linked to problems and questions in the world of practice and policy. Should collective rights be elevated to a privileged status, rather than individual rights? What is the impact of granting, for example, collective titles to land (vested in village elders or "traditional community leaders") on relatively powerless or voiceless groups and members of the community—the less affluent and women?

Sovereignty and Citizenship

Community-based natural resource management movements, sometimes associated with indigenous peoples movements and programs, are often linked to various proposals for

forms of political decentralization and local autonomy. To what extent do such proposals and projects envision cultural, territorial, and legal spheres of autonomy? What relationships are implied both among distinctive "communities" and between these communities and the state? What kinds of rights and forms of authority are being proposed for these community spheres? To what degree, and along what axes, are local communities to be treated as sovereign powers? Is it possible that the conflation of the "native" with the "natural," and the reification of this realm of "natural natives" within a territorial perimeter, might lead to an accentuated sense of ethnic difference, and possibly to intensification of community or ethnic conflict? What are the consequences of recognizing community autonomy for larger visions of pluralist civil society? When "natives" become privileged, are other social groups marginalized? What space is there for mobility, migration, and the movements of both rural and urban poor? What tensions are there between images of community, ethnicity, and space, on the one hand, and aspirations to citizenship, mobility, and participation in national life, on the other?

Community Diversity and Statutory Uniformity

The establishment of effective community-based natural resource management regimes in particular national contexts requires some degree of statutory uniformity for purposes of legal recognition. As such, we must examine whether it is possible to specify uniform concepts of community, land tenure, or management in ways that still allow recognition of community diversity. A paradox of community-based natural resource management movements is that they are caught in a bind of creating relations to the state through state/elite forms of legal textualization in order to assert local claims. Is it possible to develop concepts having legal force that provide latitude for variation and diversity? What are the tensions between the aim of drafting generic statutes applicable to all communities, and the concern for community or ethnic plurality? Is recognizing the rights of "communities" necessarily the same thing as recognizing community differences? What are the consequences of legal pluralisms that include uniform national land law as well as a multiplicity of local customary regimes regulating rights to resources and territories?

Notes

1. These are not the only two alternatives: For example, community-based natural resource management can form part of the extension of a national administration, or part of struggles for indigenous "national" rights against the nation-state.
2. However, see Peters (1996).
3. See Ortner (1995).

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