P198 / The Politics of Uncommoning: Public Policy, Institutional Interactions, and the Making of Distributed Enclosures

Topic : Politics, Institutions and Political Regimes

Chair : Smriti Das (XLRI Delhi-NCR Campus)

Second Chair : Lavanya Suresh (Birla Institute of Technology and Science)

Third Chair : Niharika Tyagi (Council on Energy Environment and Water)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Commons are central to livelihoods, ecological resilience and struggles over development and resource justice. Scholarship has long examined how commons are enclosed, appropriated and dispossessed, and how institutions and collective practices sustain or rebuild them. A question remains for public policy research: how do interacting policies and institutions transform commons, even where individual policies recognise collective rights or pursue legitimate aims such as conservation, restoration and climate mitigation?

By commons, we mean resources such as forests, grazing lands, wetlands, lakes, fisheries, water systems and urban spaces that are used and governed collectively. In the commons literature, they are marked by difficulty to exclude and subtractability, and depend on shared rules (Ostrom, 1990). Three further features guide the panel's scope. They serve multiple uses, such as grazing, fuel, water and fishing (Jodha, 1986). They are not held by a single owner: rights of access, use and management are layered among communities, individuals and the state, and may be customary, formal or both (Schlager & Ostrom, 1992). And they are sustained through stewardship, meaning shared care for the resource and its users (Bennett et al., 2018). The panel covers commons whether or not they are formally recognised or owned by the state, and focuses on land, water and urban commons rather than knowledge or digital commons. Because ecological conditions and institutions shape each other, we treat commons as social-ecological systems (Berkes & Folke, 1998; McGinnis & Ostrom, 2014).

Building on studies of how states make resources legible and governable (Scott, 1998; Li, 2007, 2014) and how access and authority are negotiated (Ribot & Peluso, 2003; Sikor & Lund, 2009), the panel explores two working ideas. Policy-produced uncommoning describes how policy framings, legal classifications and administrative routines change the recognition and use of collective resource relations. Distributed enclosure describes the gradual loss of access, authority and benefits when policies, institutions and actors interact, without any single decision to enclose or privatise. Both sit within existing work on enclosure, decommonisation, dispossession and commoning. Our working hypothesis is that such loss often arises less from any single policy than from the interaction of several, each pursuing its own aim.

The panel sets 3 questions in the context of these dynamics in forest governance, pastoral landscapes, wetlands, urban commons and land transitions linked to renewable energy and infrastructure:

1. How do policy framings and institutional arrangements transform commons?
2. When do interacting policies, institutions and actors produce cumulative enclosure, and how is it different from policy inconsistency, implementation failure or isolated dispossession?
3. How are these changes distributed and contested, and when can collective action and institutional reform sustain or rebuild commons?

We invite conceptual, comparative and empirical contributions linking commons scholarship with public policy theories of institutional change, implementation, policy interaction and power, attentive to differences of caste, class, gender, ethnicity, occupation and livelihood dependence, and to the possibility that institutional change and commoning can also strengthen collective resource governance.

CALL FOR PAPERS

Why do commons lose collective access, authority and livelihood functions even where public policies formally recognise community rights, environmental protection or participatory governance? How do interactions among policies, institutions and actors reshape the resources, relationships and claims through which commons are governed?

This panel invites conceptual, comparative and empirically grounded papers on how public policy transforms commons, understood as collectively used and governed resources, whether or not formally recognised or state-owned. We welcome contributions on forests, grazing lands, wetlands, lakes, fisheries, water systems, urban commons and similar resources. Relevant policy settings include conservation and restoration, climate and energy transitions, infrastructure, urbanisation, decentralisation, resource markets and rights-based governance.

We particularly welcome papers investigating:

• How policy framings, legal classifications and administrative practices make commons and collective claims visible, invisible or governable.
• How interacting policies, mandates, property regimes and implementation practices cumulatively change access, authority, benefits and collective governance.
• When enclosure occurs beyond formal privatisation, and how it can be distinguished empirically from policy inconsistency, weak implementation or isolated dispossession.
• How caste, class, gender, ethnicity, occupation and livelihood dependence shape recognition, participation, exclusion and compensation.
• How commoning, collective action, legal mobilisation and institutional reform challenge or reproduce exclusion.
• How public policy theories of institutional change, implementation and power can advance commons analysis.

We encourage contributions from India and other parts of Asia, Africa, Latin America and beyond, including comparative work across resource systems and governance scales. Papers need not adopt the panel's concepts of policy-produced uncommoning and distributed enclosure; contributions that test, refine or challenge them are equally welcome.

The panel aims to build a comparative public policy agenda that moves beyond explanations centred on policy failure or market capture. It seeks to identify the mechanisms through which commons are transformed, and the conditions under which collective resource governance can be sustained, rebuilt or contested.