Challenges to Community -Based Sustainable Development

Dynamics, Entitlements, Institutions

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For all the emphasis given to community-based approaches within recent environment and development policy debates, results in practice have often been disappointing both from the perspectives of implementing agencies, and of certain sections of the 'communities' concerned. This article suggests that among many possible reasons, key problems relate to shortcomings in the underlying assumptions about 'community', 'environment', and the relationships between them which inform current approaches. An alternative perspective, forwarded here, starts from the politics of resource access and control among diverse social actors, and sees patterns of environmental change as the outcomes of negotiation, or contestation, between social actors who may have very different priorities. As we go on to show, the notion of 'environmental entitlements' encapsulates this shift in perspective. Specifying people's entitlements and the ways they are shaped by diverse institutions offers, we suggest, a useful approach to the analysis of situations with which community-based sustainable development attempts to engage.

1 Community-Environment Linkages in Current Policy Approaches

At least superficially, recent approaches to community-based sustainable development appear as diverse as their varied implementing agencies and natural-resource settings. Yet they rest, we suggest, on a set of common assumptions about community, environment and the relationship between them.

One fundamental assumption is that a distinct community exists. While definitions vary, approaches commonly focus on 'the people of a local administrative unit...of a cultural or ethnic group...or of a local urban or rural area, such as the people of a neighbourhood or valley' (IUCN/WWF/UNEP 1991:57). Such communities are seen as relatively homogeneous, with members' shared characterisics distinguishing them from 'outsiders'. Equally fundamental is the assumption of a distinct, and relatively stable, local environment which may have succumbed to degradation or deterioration, but has the potential to be restored and managed sustainably. The community is seen as the appropriate unit to carry out such restoration and care, and is envisaged as being

capable of acting collectively towards common environmental interests. For instance 'Primary Environmental Care', a term coined to encapsulate a range of operational experiences in the field of community-based sustainable development, has been defined as 'a process by which local groups or communities organise themselves with varying degrees of outside support so as to apply their skills and knowledge to the care of natural resources and environment while satisfying livelihood needs' (Pretty and Guijt 1992: 22).

A common image underlying these approaches is of harmony, equilibrium or balance between community livelihoods and natural resources, at least as a goal. Indeed, frequently, the assumption is made – either implicitly or explicitly – that such harmony existed in former times until 'disrupted' by other factors. Assumptions, in this way, are linked together within what Roe (1991) has termed development narratives; stories about the world which frame problems in particular ways and in turn suggest particular solutions.

Frequently, the narrative focuses on population growth as the key force disrupting sustainable resource management. Indeed, many of the analyses of people-environment relations which inform community-based sustainable development conceive of the relationship as a simple, linear one between population and resource availability, affected only by such factors as level of technology (cf. Ehrlich and Ehrlich 1991). Population growth is seen as triggering generalised resource over-exploitation, leading to generalised poverty and further environmental degradation, which feed each other in inexorable downward spirals (e.g. Durning 1989, etc.). Other versions of the narrative modify this Malthusian model, seeing a functional community as having once regulated resource use and technology so that society and environment remained in equilibrium. But various factors – whether the breakdown of traditional authority, commercialisation, modernity, social change and new urban aspirations, the immigration of stranger populations, or the intrusion of inappropriate state policies – may have weakened or broken down the effectiveness of such regulation. In either case, what is required is to bring community and environment back into harmony: 'policies that bring human numbers and life-styles into balance with nature's capacity'

(IUCN/WWF/UNEP 1991). This requires either the recovery and rebuilding of traditional, collective resource management institutions, or their replacement with new ones; for instance by the community management plans and village environmental committees so often associated with community-based sustainable development strategies.

There are undoubtedly important elements to this type of community-based sustainable development analysis (and in the more sophisticated and nuanced versions linked to particular cases). However, as we show below, the assumptions about community and environment which they rest on are basically flawed, as is the resulting image of functional, harmonious equilibrium between them. This is not to suggest that such images have no value from a policy perspective. As Li (1996) argues, they can serve a strategic purpose for agencies and practitioners concerned to counter other narratives which are both more dominant and more harmful to poor people's livelihoods. In this respect, images of consensual communities should be judged more in relation to the policy discourses which produce them and which they serve, than against empirical reality. We pursue this point further in the concluding article to this **Bulletin.** But whatever the broad strategic value of such narratives, their generality and the flaws in their assumptions mean they serve as poor and misleading guides for actual translation into operational strategies and programmes.

2 Difference, Distribution and Dynamics

An alternative starting point begins from the recognition that 'communities' are not, of course, bounded, homogeneous entities, but socially differentiated and diverse. Gender, caste, wealth, age, origins, and other aspects of social identity divide and cross-cut so-called 'community' boundaries. Rather than shared beliefs and interests, diverse and often conflicting values and resource priorities pervade social life and may be struggled and 'bargained' over (e.g. Carney and Watts 1991; Leach 1994; Moore 1993). Now commonplace in social science literature, and long integral to the critique of 'community development' approaches in development studies more generally (e.g. Holdcroft 1984), serious attention to social difference and its implications has been remarkably absent from the recent wave of

'community' concern in environmental policy debates.

Absent, too, has been attention to power as a pervasive feature of social relations, and to the ways that institutions, which might appear to be acting for a collective good, actually serve to shape and reproduce relations of unequal power and authority, marginalising the concerns, for instance, of particular groups of women or poorer people (e.g. Kabeer and Subrahmanian 1996; Goetz 1996). And the assumption that resource use is, or could be, regulated unproblematically by 'community structures' reflects outdated social theory, contradicted by more recent perspectives and empirical evidence of people's action and agency in monitoring and shaping the world around them (cf. Long and Long 1992; Giddens 1984).

Equally, recent work in the natural sciences has challenged many of the static, linear and equilibrium perspectives on ecological systems which underlie so much community-based sustainable development, altering the assumptions that can be made about patterns and determinants of environmental change. Whether we are talking of theories of vegetation succession, ecosystem functioning or species-area relationships, each have equilibrium assumptions at the core of their models and, not surprisingly, their findings and applied management recommendations (cf. Botkin 1990; Worster 1990; Zimmerer 1994). Thus, for example, succession theory has emphasised linear vegetation change and the idea of a stable and natural climax. Since Frederick Clements' early work in the United States (Clements 1916), this has become the guide for managing rangelands and forests, the benchmark against which environmental change is assessed. In the Ghana case study, for instance, semi-deciduous forest has been seen as the natural climax vegetation, and its restoration as a key management aim.

While there have always been disputes within each of these areas of theory, the period since the 1970s has seen a sustained challenge from the emergence of key concepts making up non-equilibrium theory and, more broadly, what has been termed the 'new ecology'. Three themes stand out. First, an understanding of variability in space and time, including an interest in the relationships between disturbance regimes and spatial patterning from patches to landscapes. Second, non-equilibrium perspectives suggest an exploration of the implications of scaling on dynamic processes, leading to work on hierarchies and scale relationships in ecosystems analysis. Third, a recognition of the importance of history on current dynamics has lead to work on environmental change at a variety of time-scales.

These ecological themes have prompted increased interest in understanding dynamics and their implications for management. For example, recent thinking in ecology helps our understanding of the key relationship between savanna grassland and forest areas. In both the Ghana and South Africa sites this is an important issue, as different products and different environmental values are associated with forests and grasslands. Conventional equilibrial interpretations of succession theory sees forests as later successional forms, closer to natural climax vegetation, and the presence of grasslands as evidence of degradation from a once forested state. This linear interpretation of vegetation dynamics has a major influence on the way such landscapes are viewed by policy makers and others (Fairhead and Leach 1996). But in some areas, forest and savanna may be better seen as alternative vegetation states influenced by multiple factors. As the articles by Afikorah-Danquah and Kepe suggest, despite powerful environmental narratives to the contrary, there is strong evidence, in both the forest transition zone of Ghana and the coastal grasslands of the former Transkei in South Africa, that certain forest or woodland areas have been enlarging over the century timescale as a result of a combination of disturbance events. Changes in soils, shifts in fallowing systems, manipulation of fire regimes, alterations in grazing patterns and climatic rehumidification have combined to change the relationship between forests and grasslands. This dynamic interaction is thus less the outcome of a predictable pattern of linear succession, but more due to combinations of contingent factors, conditioned by human intervention, sometimes the active outcome of management, often the result of unintended consequences.

With people viewed as differentiated social actors, and with the environment viewed as disaggregated and dynamic, a very different set of questions about people-environment relations arises from those

which normally frame community-based sustainable development policies. We need to ask, for instance, which social actors see what components of variable and dynamic ecologies as resources at different times? In particular, those with different modes of livelihood, or who carry different responsibilities within divisions of labour, may need to draw on very different environmental resources and services, and hold different views of what constitutes environmental degradation or improvement in that context. We need to ask, too, how different people gain access to and control over such resources, so as to use them in sustaining their livelihoods. And we need to ask how different people transform different components of the environment through their resource management or use.

Indeed, a view of ecology which stresses spatial and temporal variability, dynamic, non-equilibrial processes and histories of disturbance events suggests a very different view of environmental transformation from those underlying community-based sustainable development approaches.Environments come to be seen as landscapes under constant change, emerging as the outcome of dynamic and variable ecological processes and disturbance events, in interaction with human use.

Seen in this way, the environment both provides a setting for social action and is clearly also a product of such action. People's actions and practices may serve to conserve or reproduce existing ecological features or processes (e.g. maintain a regular cycle of fallow growth or protect the existing state of a watershed and its hydrological functions). But people may also act as agents who transform environments (e.g. shorten the fallow, alter soils and vegetation, or plant trees in a watershed). Such transformations may involve precipitating shifts of ecological state which push ecological processes in new directions or along new pathways. While some actions may be intentional, constituting directed management aimed at particular goals or transformations, others may be unintentional, yet still have significant ecological consequences.

Over time, the course of environmental change may be strongly influenced by particular conjunctures, or the coming together of contingent events and actions. Practices and actions carried out at one time may leave a legacy which influences the resources available for subsequent actors. For instance, the farming practices of one group of people may enduringly alter soil conditions, and subsequent inhabitants may make use of these in their farming of different crops, whether or not acknowledging them as the legacy of past farmers. Equally, past actions influence the possibilities for agency open to subsequent actors. As present practices build on the legacies of past ones, so the causality of environmental change may need to be seen as cumulative, sequential or path-dependent.

3 Environmental Entitlements

The discussion in the previous section has important implications for the lenses through which environmental problems are viewed. Whereas Malthusian perspectives, and conventional approaches to community-based sustainable development, tend to frame problems in terms of an imbalance between overall society/community needs and overall resource availability, an emphasis on social and environmental differentiation suggests that there may be many different, possible problems for different people. In mediating these differentiated relationships, questions of access to and control over resources are key. Hence, the perspective shifts to focus on the command which particular people have over the environmental resources and services which they value, and the problems they may experience should such command fail.

The notion of entitlements is helpful in clarifying this shift of emphasis. The entitlements approach was first developed by Amartya Sen to explain how it is that people can starve in the midst of food plenty owing to a collapse in their means of command over food (Sen 1981). Undue emphasis on aggregate food availability, Sen argued, diverts attention from the more fundamental issue of how particular individuals and groups of people gain access to and control over food. Thus: '..scarcity is the characteristic of people not *having* enough... , it is not the characteristic of there not *being* enough.. While the latter can be the cause of the former, it is one of many causes' (Sen 1981:1). Just as with the food and famine debate, the environmental debate has, as we have seen, been dominated by a supply-side focus, often giving rise to Malthusian interpretations of resource issues. But as noted by Sen, absolute lack of resources may be only one of a

number of reasons for people not gaining access to the resources they need for sustaining livelihoods. It is important not to polarise this distinction too far, however, since resource availability and access are often interconnected. Conflicts over access often intensify when the resources in question become scarce in absolute terms.

The entitlements approach can also be mobilised in a more specific sense into a set of analytical tools which can assist the tracking of particular actors' access to, use of and transformation of environmental goods and services. Some of the implications for practical research methodologies are explored in the next article in this Bulletin, while the articles by Ahluwalia, Afikorah-Danquah and Kepe all apply such a specific 'environmental entitlements' approach to their case studies. As we have described in detail elsewhere (Leach, Mearns and Scoones 1997), the central elements of such an approach can be derived from Sen's work, although certain significant adaptations are needed to address environmental questions.

In explaining how command over food, rather than overall availability, is key in explaining famine, Sen emphasised entitlements in the descriptive sense. The term entitlements therefore does not refer to people's rights in a normative sense – what people *should* have – but the range of possibilities that people *can* have. In Sen's words: 'the set of alternative commodity bundles that a person can command in a society using the totality of rights and opportunities that he or she faces' (Sen 1984: 497). Entitlements arise through a process of mapping, whereby endowments, defined as a person's 'initial ownership', for instance of land or labour power, are transformed into a set of entitlements. According to Sen, entitlement mapping is 'the relation that specifies the set of exchange entitlements for each ownership bundle' (Sen, 1981:3). In Sen's work, these entitlement relations may be based on such processes as production, own-labour, trade,

inheritance or transfer (Sen 1981:2). Sen's concern was therefore to examine how different people gain entitlements from their endowments and so improve their well-being or capabilities, a descriptive approach to understanding how, under a given legal setting, people do or do not survive.[1]

Some elements of Sen's otherwise useful framework are too restrictive in the environmental context, however (cf. also Gasper 1993; Gore 1993; Devereux 1996). First, at least in his early work, he focuses almost exclusively on entitlement mapping – how endowments are transformed into entitlements – and pays limited attention to endowment mapping – how people gain endowments. Instead of assuming that endowments are simply given, an extended framework would focus on how both people's endowments and entitlements arise, a possibility recognised by Sen in later work (Dreze and Sen 1989: 23). Second, Sen is principally concerned with command over resources through market channels, backed up by formal legal property rights. Although in later work (eg. Sen 1984, 1985, Dreze and Sen 1989: 11), the idea of 'extended entitlements' is introduced, it is unclear whether the concept is restricted only to mechanisms governing the intra-household distribution of resources or whether it also includes other institutional mechanisms. In our view, Sen's version of 'extended entitlements' does not go far enough. Since there are many ways of gaining access to and control over resources beyond the market, such as kin networks, and many ways of legitimating such access and control outside the formal legal system, such as customary law, social conventions and norms, it seems appropriate to extend the entitlements framework to the whole range of socially sanctioned, as well as formal legal institutional mechanisms for resource access and control (cf. Gore 1993).

Given these concerns, we adopt the following definitions of key terms[2]. First, **endowments** refer to the *rights and resources that people have*. For

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[1] But within this descriptive framework, Sen had a broader agenda, deriving from particular moral philosophical concerns, which point to the injustice in a legal system which can legally permit people to starve (Sen 1981). In order to highlight this moral point, Sen did at times refer to 'entitlements' in a normative sense, and initially restricted the notion of entitlements to command over resources through formal legal

arrangements, thus downplaying other extra-legal, informal means of gaining access to resources (Gore 1993).

[2] These differ in certain respects from earlier work on environmental entitlements (Leach and Mearns 1991; Mearns 1995, 1996), which did not effectively establish the distinction between environmental endowments and entitlements (Gasper 1993).

example, land, labour, skills and so on. Second, **entitlements**, following Gasper (1993), refer to *legitimate effective command over alternative commodity bundles*. More specifically, **environmental entitlements** refer to *alternative sets of benefits derived from environmental goods and services over which people have legitimate effective command and which are instrumental in achieving well-being*. The alternative set of benefits that comprise environmental entitlements may include any or all of the following: direct uses in the form of commodities, such as food, water or fuel; the market value of such resources, or of rights to them; and the benefits derived from environmental services, such as pollution sinks or the properties of the hydrological cycle. Entitlements in turn enhance people's **capabilities**, which are *what people can do or be with their entitlements*. For example, command over fuel resources – derived from rights over trees – gives warmth or the ability to cook, and so contributes to well-being.

There is nothing inherent in a particular environmental good or service that makes it *a priori* either an endowment or an entitlement. Instead, the distinction between them depends on empirical context and on time, within a cyclical process. What are entitlements at one time may, in turn, represent endowments at another time period, from which a new set of entitlements may be derived.

The phrase 'legitimate effective command' refers to a number of dimensions of entitlement mapping which often prove to be crucial in the situations which community-based sustainable development addresses. An emphasis on the 'effectiveness', or otherwise, of command over resources highlights first, that resource claims are often contested; within existing power relations some actors' claims are likely to prevail over those of others. Second, certain people may not be able to mobilise some endowments (e.g. capital, labour) to make effective use of others (e.g. land).

The notion of 'legitimacy' refers not only to command sanctioned by a statutory system such as state land tenure frameworks, but also to command sanctioned by customary rights of access, use and control, or by social norms. In some cases, these sources of legitimacy might conflict, and different actors may espouse different views of the legitimacy

of a given activity. As Kepe shows, for instance, hunters living in the vicinity of Mkambati Nature Reserve on South Africa's Wild Coast are prevented by State law from hunting within the reserve. Yet groups of men do so regularly, justifying their actions by calling on customary rights, termed *ukujola*, based on historical claims predating the gazetting of the protected area.

Figure 1 presents a diagram showing how these analytical tools of environmental entitlements analysis might be linked together, and connected with the concepts of differentiation and dynamic environments discussed earlier. The upper ellipse represents an 'environment' disaggregated into particular environmental goods and services. Their distribution, quality and quantity are influenced by ecological dynamics which are in part shaped by human action. Through processes of 'mapping', environmental goods and services become endowments for particular social actors; ie. they acquire rights over them. Endowments may, in turn, be transformed into environmental entitlements, or legitimate effective command over resources. In making use of their entitlements, people may acquire capabilities, or a sense of well-being.

As we shall see, several of the articles in this **Bulletin** structure their arguments around this type of diagram. It provides, in this sense, not a rigid analytical framework, but a guide for the external analyst in linking up the elements derived from a diverse set of methods. As will also become clear from the case study articles, the main value of such an analytical approach in particular situations is not its focus on the particular endowments, entitlements and capabilities of a given social actor at a given moment. These represent only a snapshot in time. Instead, analysis focuses mainly on the dynamic 'mapping' processes which link each set; in other words, on the multi-staged processes which structure resource access and control, and by which particular people derive benefit from particular components of the environment. As indicated in the boxes to the right of Figure 1, it can be useful to consider these processes in relation to the institutions which structure them.

Figure 1: The Environmental Entitlements Framework
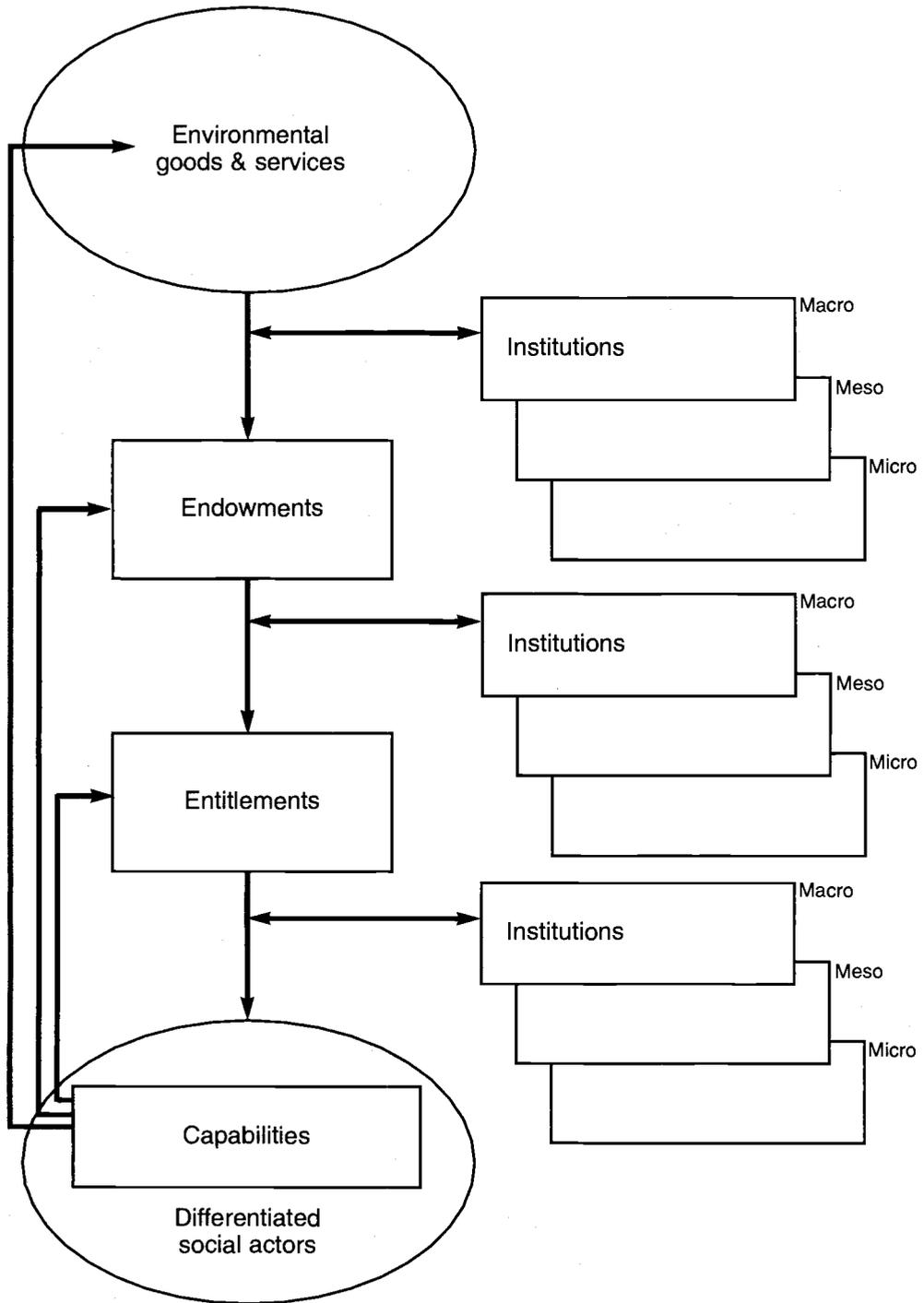
4 Institutions

A focus on institutional arrangements, then, provides a further, useful analytical tool for understanding the links between differentiated environments and differentiated communities. Such a focus contrasts with conventional approaches to community-based sustainable development, where institutions generally either do not figure (for instance, in Malthusian analyses which link people directly with resource availability), or are equated with the type of 'community organisation' with which such approaches have typically found it convenient to work: the village management committee, the watershed development committee, and so on. The articles in this **Bulletin** take rather a different approach to institutions, grounded both in their empirical evidence and in certain discussions in recent social science debates.

First, institutions are distinguished from organisations. If institutions are thought of as 'the rules of the game in society', then organisations may be thought of as the players, or 'groups of individuals bound together by some common purpose to achieve objectives' (North 1990: 5). Organisations, such as schools, NGOs and banks, exist only because there is a set of 'working rules' or underlying institutions that define and give those organisations meaning. Many other institutions have no single or direct organisational manifestation, including money, markets, marriage, and the law, yet may be critical in endowment and entitlement mapping processes.

The perspectives emerging from the case studies do, however, render it problematic to define institutions as 'rules' themselves. The distinction between rules and people's practices is rarely so clear. Institutions are better seen as regularised patterns of behaviour that emerge, in effect, from underlying structures or sets of 'rules in use' (cf. Giddens 1984), and are maintained by people's practices, or indeed their active 'investment' in those institutions (Berry 1989, 1993). It is such regularised practices, performed over time, which come to constitute institutions. Yet as they consciously monitor the consequences of past behaviour and the actions of others, different social actors may choose – or be forced – to act in irregular ways. Over time, perhaps as others similarly alter their behaviour, institutional change may occur. But owing to the embed-dedness of informal institutions, institutional change in society may be a slow, 'path-dependent' process, even if formal institutions such as legal frameworks or macroeconomic policies change quickly.

There are also many situations in which behaviour appears to contravene the rules. In an insightful critique of Sen's narrow view of the rules of entitlement, Gore (1993) draws on Fraser to refer to such behaviour as 'unruly' social practices, emphasising the ways that different forms of protest and resistance challenge legal rules governing people's ability to gain command over commodities. But such unruly practices may well be bound by different sets of moral/informal rules (Gore 1993: 446); such situations thus exemplify instances of competing notions of legitimacy, in which actual entitlements are influenced by the interplay of these competing rule sets in the context of prevailing power relations. Such an approach recognises that the law necessarily operates within a particular social context, whereby, for example, the judiciary is able to bend the rule of law to favour selective class, gender or ethnic interests, particularly in weak states.

Second, several articles also draw on the particular insights of new institutional economics concerning transaction costs in reflecting on institutional change, and the interactions between institutions at different scale levels in relation to the environment. For example, the high costs to the Rajasthan State Forest Department of overseeing and enforcing regulated access to state forest land in the Aravalli hills in India has, it is argued, led to high levels of commercial exploitation and subsequent deforestation, suggesting that other types of institutional mechanism with lower transaction costs would be more appropriate if maintaining forest cover was a major objective. Similarly, in the former Transkei, South Africa, the type of tenure regime associated with different types of grazing can be related to the relative costs and benefits of managing exclusion. In high value grazing sites, institutional forms with relatively high transaction costs may persist, whilst for low value, highly variable grazing resources the opposite is most likely.

Third, rather than the single, local institution focus which characterises so many programmes and projects, it is clear that people's resource access and

control, or the 'mapping' processes by which endowments and entitlements are gained, are shaped by many, interacting institutions. Some are formal, such as the rule of state law, requiring exogenous enforcement by a third party organisation. Others are informal, upheld by mutual agreement among the social actors involved, or by relations of power and authority between them. Multiple involvement may – as argued in the burgeoning literature on 'social capital', trust and networks of civic engagement (Gambetta 1988, Putnam *et al.*1993) – promote mutual assurance among different social actors, promoting co-operation and collective action. Yet it is also clear that different institutions may carry very different meanings for different social actors, not least because of the power relations inherent in them (cf. Bates 1995). Many institutions, for example, patently do not serve a collective purpose, even if they may once have done and as we suggested earlier, different actors' perception of the 'collective good' depends very much on their social position. Equally, rather than benign complementarity, involvement in some groups may be a response to inequities in others. Women's investment in resource-sharing networks with neighbours, for instance, may relate to their lack of power within intra-household resource allocation arrangements. To understand how different actors' practices are embedded in – and help to shape – such a range of formal and informal institutions necessitates an actor-oriented approach to understanding institutions (cf. Long and van der Ploeg 1994; Nuitjen 1992), one which takes an analysis of difference and an appreciation of power relations seriously.

Fourth, it is clear that institutions at various scale levels interact to shape the resource claims and management practices of different social actors. At the international level, for example, the policies of donor agencies play an important role not only in directly shaping local approaches to community-based natural resource management, but also in influencing domestic macroeconomic policy and governance in ways that cascade down to affect local natural resource management. At national or state level, government policies and legislation are of key importance, including land tenure reform policies, or approaches to forestry and wildlife conservation and tourism. And institutional dynamics at these levels intersect with the local institutions which influence rural livelihood systems, intra-household dynamics and so on. As the case studies will illustrate, it is frequently the interactions between institutions which lead to conflicts over natural resources, or to competing bases for claims. Yet it is also in the potential to shape or alter such interactions, our concluding article will suggest, that some of the most fruitful ways forward for policy lie.

5 Conclusion

In place of the attempts to link static, undifferentiated 'communities' with 'the environment', which have characterised so many past analyses informing community-based sustainable development, this article has presented a different perspective. As Jenkins has put it, this situates 'a disaggregated (or "micro") analysis of the distinctive positions and vulnerabilities of particular [social actors] in relation to the "macro" structural conditions of the prevalent political economy' (Jenkins 1997: 2). The relationships among institutions, and between scale levels, is of central importance in influencing which social actors – both those within the community and those at some remove from it – gain access to and control over local resources. And this perspective uses the insights of landscape history, and of historical approaches to ecology, to see how different peoples' uses of the environment in this context act, and interact with others' uses, to shape landscapes progressively over time.

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