

The limits of the Commons: The case of the Pacific

The Common Pool Resources studied by Elinor Ostrom (Governing the Commons, 1990) have two fundamental characteristics. Firstly, they are managed by small communities and are located in a single country. Secondly: a Common Pool is defined by the existence of limits which make it possible to clearly define the frontiers of the common resource in question (a lake or an aquifer, for example). These two observations suggest that a Common Pool *a priori* has relatively small dimensions. The possibility of more extensive Common Pools has been addressed very little by Ostrom, or in cryptic fashion: “*When a common-pool resource is closely connected to a larger social-ecological system, governance activities are organized in multiple nested layers*” (Beyond Markets and States, 2010). It is likely that the broadening of the notion of the Common to immaterial goods (culture, heritage, free software, etc.) subsequently overshadowed the subject, giving everyone reason to believe that the concept had a global relevance... But up to what level can the concept of a physical Common be extended? This post seeks to shed light on this question by comparing, using a few examples taken in the Pacific, the issues raised at local level then at ocean level.

At local level

In terms of fisheries resources, in the Pacific, there is at least one example of sustainable management: Alaskan wild salmon, fished in US territorial waters by US-flagged boats, is a renewable resource and benefits from “Sustainable Fishing” certifications from several control bodies. The certifications today concern several associations, each comprising hundreds of fishing boats, as well as onshore processing companies. We may consider that it is both an environmental Common – the resource is preserved by the restricted access, rules on fishing techniques, self-monitoring by users – and commercial Common – the Sustainable Fishing label is an effective selling point.

On a smaller scale, elsewhere in the Pacific there are traditional fallow fishing systems which are related to the Commons (such as the *Rahui* in the Polynesian cultural area). An extension and modernization of this principle could be considered at the level of the islands. The conservation of lagoons, which most of the Pacific islands have, could, for example, benefit from this. Many of these lagoons are today subject to strong anthropogenic pressure and are experiencing a fragile environmental situation. This is often the case of lagoons used for pearl farming. The farms produce a lot of waste, which builds up on the seabed. An excessive density of farming depletes the nutrient capacities of waters or causes algae blooms, which leads to a decline in all the farms on an island. In other cases, it is poorly controlled tourism development that causes a process of diffuse urbanization, in which neither solid waste management nor liquid sanitation are given attention. Freshwater aquifers are overexploited and become polluted or brackish. The well-defined nature of a lagoon and its environmental

ID4D tag: **Commons**, Natural resources, Waste, Asia, World
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vulnerability make it a potential Common, but a complex Common, as it concerns economic actors with different or even opposing interests: fishermen, farmers, pearl farms, diving clubs, tourism service providers, accommodation establishments, etc. These actors paradoxically often disregard the environmental situation of the lagoon, whereas the sustainability of their activity is dependent on it. The concept of the Common can therefore be a powerful tool to raise awareness among all stakeholders. To achieve this, in places where it is not precluded by local law, it could even be possible to give lagoons a legal personality, as the New Zealanders have done with the Whanganui River.

The ocean level

We should remember that the Pacific covers a third of the surface area of the planet. It has some twenty independent island States and territories with various statuses. It is bordered by some fifteen countries, including the world's two leading powers, the USA and China. There are intense power struggles between these two countries, along with Japan, Russia, Australia and New Zealand, throughout the ocean area. These struggles take place at all levels: frontiers, military, economic, political and cultural. While confining ourselves to the themes which we are looking at here, it should be pointed out that this context does not facilitate interstate cooperation on natural resources and the environment.

For our purposes, we shall focus on two of the environmental issues which affect the Pacific: the overexploitation of fisheries resources and the build-up of waste.

Regional fisheries regulatory organizations have not yet managed to ensure the sustainability of the tuna industry. The difficulties in particular lie in the fact that some of the fleets are not from the Pacific (they are from the China Sea or Europe, for example) and consequently show little concern for the preservation of resources. In addition, several Asian fleets, which are among the largest, are notorious for participating in mafia systems. They use slavery and forced labor. They deliberately operate illegally. They have absolutely no desire to cooperate. Finally, for them, as for the others, there can be no control in international zones, and there is no means of coercion (two other prerequisites stated by Ostrom in her principles for the conception of a successful Common).

In terms of waste, no region or supraregional entity has yet tackled vigorously the alarming subject of the storage of plastic waste, which is estimated at several million tons and continues to increase every year. Part of this waste is concentrated in the immense vortex of plastic soup in the North Pacific (which is also called the 7th continent), the remainder is disposed of everywhere else. Today, we know that this plastic in suspension is one of the causes of the decline of corals, in conjunction with global warming and water acidification. Riparian and island countries are the source of this waste and, to a lesser extent, maritime traffic. Consequently, in this case, it is not a question of reaching an agreement between the users of a resource, as with a Common Pool. It is, on a different level, a question of putting an end upstream to a polluting production (waste and its discharge into the sea) by a huge

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number of actors. This objective requires international action and the implementation of public policies coordinated at the level of all States.

Conclusion

At local level, as might be expected, the concept of a Common Pool is relevant. It is possible for a governance mechanism with multiple nested layers to increase the scale covered, but the encompassing unity would remain governed, as a Common Pool, by the restrictive principles of conception (particularly in terms of frontiers) set by Ostrom.

In contrast, at ocean level, as we have seen through the cases addressed here, the concept of Common Pool is unsuitable and ineffective. To address the ills affecting the Pacific as a whole in a practical way, there is no alternative to an operational international agreement between all the riparian countries and island States, jointly with institutions from the United Nations system. This holds true for all the aspects of an action plan (design, implementation, controls, coercion...) and also, last but not least, for the mobilization of the billions required for such a plan.