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ABSTRACT

Power seems to be one of the basic dimensions of all human interaction whether at the interpersonal, group, or societal level. Yet power is hardly ever at the centre of analysis in studies of collective action in natural resource management. The thesis "Power in the Commons" is a first attempt to elaborate how power - probably one of the most contested concepts in the social sciences - can be analyzed in studies of decentralized natural resource management institutions. The empirical studies include water management institutions in Chile and Sweden.

The arguments elaborated in this thesis are two. First, it discusses how differences in social and economical power affects the creation and maintenance of institutions designed to manage commonly used natural resources. The thesis argues that previous studies often ignore the fact that certain actors have the ability to affect the distributional outcomes of natural resource management institutions to their own benefit. Second, the thesis elaborates how this capacity is structured not only by the actual economic and social resources actors possess, but also by the "history of play" and what is denoted "external institutions" such as existing legislation and central government incentives.

As the empirical studies in both countries indicate, power does indeed matter in the commons. In Sweden, this results in river based water management institutions that are unable to adapt to chronic water related environmental problems. The main reason seems to be that the required institutional change is blocked by less ambitious actors. This is shown both by case studies and by reanalyzing quantitative data on decentralized water management institutions in the country. In Chile, this means that water management institutions dealing with the resolution of water conflicts seriously disadvantages poor water users such as peasant farmers. This result is supported by interviews with government officials and experts, media archive searches and a case study. Differently put, the empirical studies in the thesis provide evidence for that even if water users have managed to create decentralized water management institutions, these institutions seem to be skewed to the advantage of certain actors.

The thesis should be of interest not only to scholars studying decentralized natural resource management institutions, or to the increasing body of neo-institutionalists, but also to those interested in how power relations are institutionalized in social systems.

Key words: water policy, collective action, power, Sweden, Chile, institutional theory.