

THE COMMONS

THIS LAND IS OUR LAND

Who controls the land: private individuals, the government, or the community? Without private ownership, people have little incentive to invest. But community-managed commons are vital for billions of people.

In the developed world, most of the land – at least in settled areas – belongs to someone. Private ownership comes with certain rights; the owner can use the land to grow crops and raise animals, sell it, pass it on to his or her heirs, build on it (with permission from the authorities), and put a fence around it to stop others from trespassing.

But most of the world is not parcelled out in this way. Formally, the land may belong to the national government, but it is managed collectively by the people who use it. They graze their animals on it, hunt, collect wood and water, and even build houses and grow crops. Common land is a vital source of livelihood for many of the world’s poor: according to the International Land Coalition research group, up to 2.5 billion people live or rely on the commons.

It is difficult to obtain exact figures, but 8.5 billion hectares, or 65 percent of the earth’s land surface outside Antarctica, can be regarded as common land. Protected areas such as national parks cover about 1.7 billion hectares, leaving 6.8 billion hectares, or 52 percent, for common use. These commons cover extensive areas of dryland and forests, as well as much of the world’s deserts. They are unevenly distributed across the globe; most are in sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and Europe. But the world’s population is also unequally spread, so the biggest common areas per rural inhabitant are in Oceania and the Americas.

An essay by the American ecologist, Garrett Hardin, in 1968 drew attention to the “tragedy of the commons”. He argued that anyone who uses the commons has an interest in extracting as much as is possible. That, he said, leads to increasing overuse and eventually to irreversible degradation.

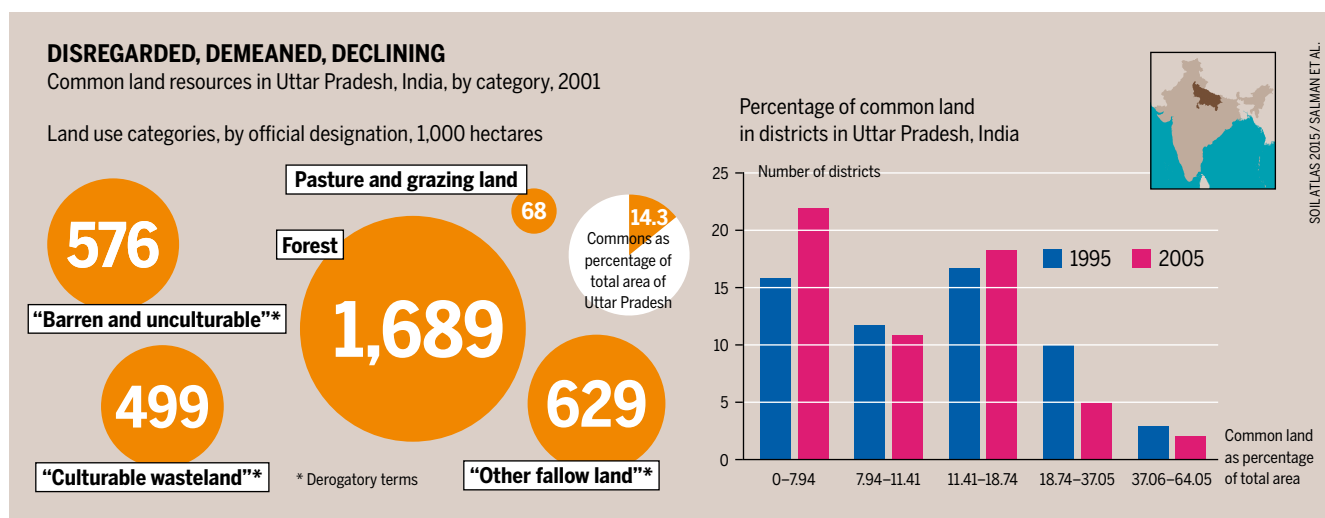
Later, the Nobel Prize-winning economist, Elinor Ostrom, showed that this was not as prevalent as expected. Locals often come up with ways to prevent overuse, and the benefits of collective management may outweigh its disadvantages. Problems often occur when outsiders come in and the traditional management methods are no longer used.

Nevertheless, governments and companies are pushing for the privatization of the world’s remaining untitled lands. Timber companies want to cut down trees; miners want to dig up minerals; investors want to turn apparently “idle” land into ranches and plantations.

The people affected are fighting back. They organize themselves, refuse to vacate the land, and campaign for their rights. By re-claiming the commons, rural social movements are re-claiming control over how their traditional lands are used, managed and shared. They are asserting various alternative property regimes that are not necessarily capitalist, public or private. At the same time, they are strengthening or re-establishing the public acceptance of the commons.

The commons are the focus of public debate, especially in India where they cover 49 million hectares, or nearly 40 percent of the country’s 120 million hectares of arable land. As many as 70 percent of the population rely on them for food, fodder, fuel, grazing and building materials. But India’s rush towards development seems to leave no space for the commons. New factories and roads, burgeoning cities, some 500 new “special economic zones” and expanding biofuel plantations are eating into the common land; approximately 2 percent are being lost every 5 years. Groups that rely almost entirely on the commons for their livelihoods are especially vulnerable; these include historically disad-

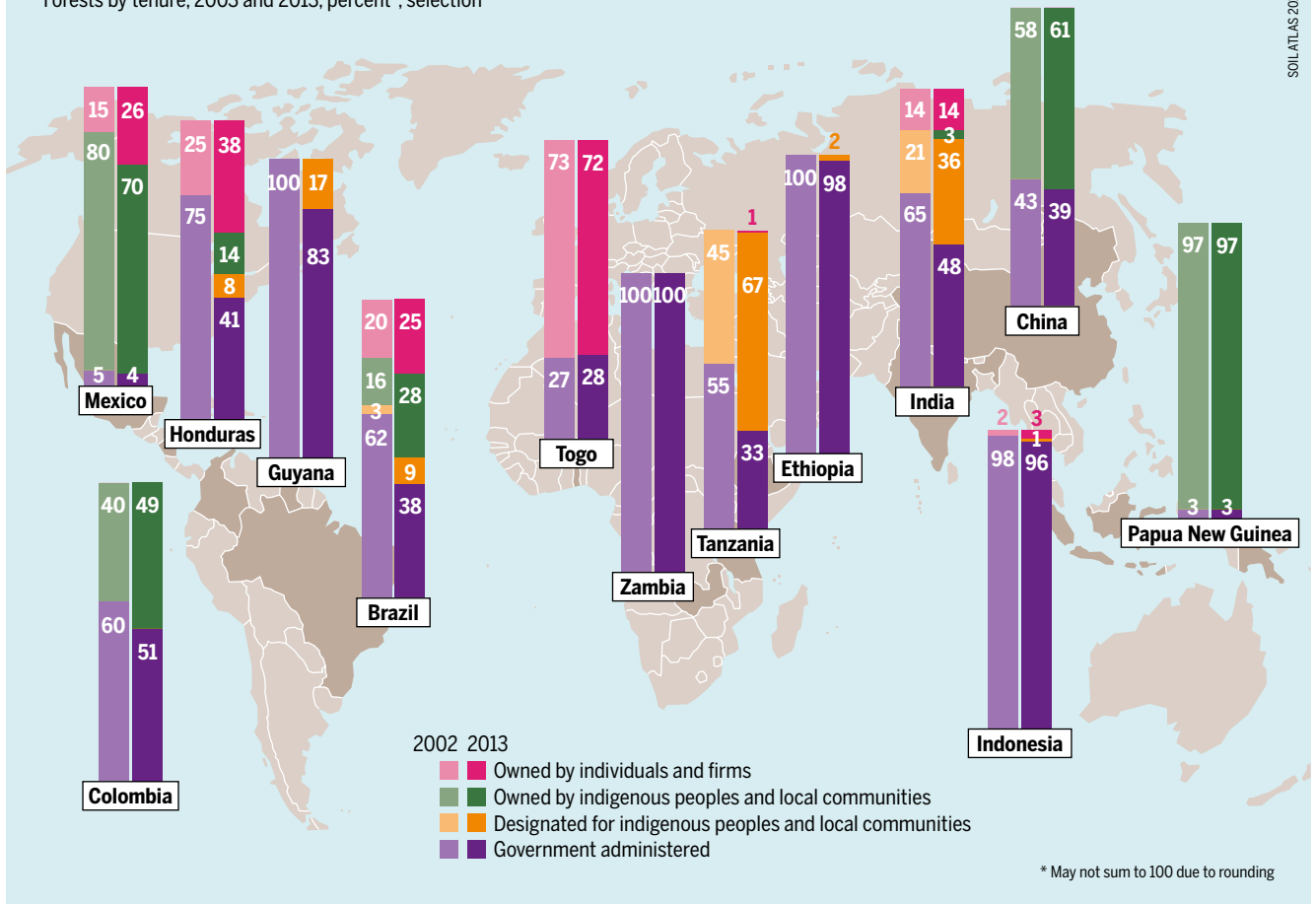
The size of the United Kingdom, Uttar Pradesh in India has 200 million inhabitants. Its common land covers an area as big as Wales and Northern Ireland combined



SLOWLY BREAKING THE LOGJAM

Forests by tenure, 2003 and 2013, percent*, selection

SOI.LATLAS 2015/IRRI



Forest ownership varies from country to country. Indigenous inhabitants often have few or no rights; only a few countries grant them a significant degree of control

vantaged tribes, pastoralists and fisherfolk who make up 24 percent of the population.

The problem has deep roots. Under British colonial rule, the land and forest laws did not recognize traditional rights; they were regarded as “concessions”, “privileges” or “facilities”. Following India’s independence, the government did not revise these laws to meet the needs of the communities but instead increased its own stranglehold. Governance and management of the commons still rests largely with the state. Laws and policies ignore the principles of optimal use and equity; they promote corporate ownership of natural resources. This is one of the key reasons for the conflicts that have affected nearly 200 of the country’s 676 districts.

One of the world’s largest rural movements, Ekta Parishad – Hindi for “unity forum” – is a non-violent umbrella group in the Gandhi tradition consisting of over 10,000 community organizations. It has staged a series of mass rallies to push for change. After a rally in 1999/2000 with 25,000 marchers, some 350,000 land titles were distributed

Indigenous peoples live in and from the forests. They do not cut them down. The carbon stays stored in the trees and the soil

to landless households, and the Forest Department dropped 558,000 charges against tribal people for violations of forest use. In 2012, 60,000 people participated in a 350 km “march for justice” to Delhi and came to a triumphant halt after just one week, when the government agreed to the marchers’ demands. The most far-reaching of these was to establish a joint task force on land reforms. Politics in India is complex and progress can be slow, but these marches keep up the pressure for meaningful change. ●

INDIGENOUS CLIMATE PROTECTORS

Forest losses and carbon sequestration inside and outside indigenous lands in the Amazon, 2000–12

SOI.LATLAS 2015/AVRI

