1 Ostrom's legacy of robustness and the 'Swiss commons lab'

Introductory reflections on change and power in commons studies

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1.1. Introducing this book

Discussions on the commons have resulted in a very rich and sophisticated literature, originating with the work of Garrett Hardin (1968), through the reactions summarised and synthesised by Elinor Ostrom (1990) 30 years ago. This has ranged from local studies of resource management, broad comparative studies and topics such as collective action and experiments (Ostrom et al. 1994; Dietz et al. 2002; Poteete et al. 2010) to approaches involving the political ecology of the commons in a 'glocal' world (see, for a newer example, Haller et al. 2019). These research strands are also reflected in the International Association for the Study of the Commons (IASC), as well as in many publications in the *International Journal of the Commons* and other journals with related interests. The commons are also debated on several levels: from the local regulation of common-pool resources (CPRs) such as fisheries, pasture, forests and wildlife, to state, international and global levels such as those involving the sustainable development goals (SDGs). There is a focus on what can be called global commons, such as biodiversity and climate as issues related to collective ownership and governance on the global scale of a capitalist, neoliberal and sustainability-related state order. While some approaches see commons rather as patterns of 'commoning' (Bollier and Helferich 2015), which are to be understood as a collectively organised alternative to capitalism in practice, there are also views suggesting that 'commoning' hides that we are dealing with an individualised and a mostly challenging endeavour if power structures are not considered (see, for instance, Schläppi and Gruber 2018).

So, where is this book to be placed? It is based on the results of the interdisciplinary research project SCALES (Sustainable Commons Adaptations to Landscape Ecosystems in Switzerland), funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF), and looks at the more 'classical' commons as regards continuity and change in the management of CPRs such as pastures and forests in Switzerland. The main focus of the project is the differences and similarities

between local common–pool resource institutions (rules and regulations) and forms of commoners' organisations (corporations of citizens, corporations). We show that these organisations have been managing the common property of CPRs, especially alpine pastures and forests, for several centuries, and have shaped the cultural landscapes of Switzerland. The fact that this volume deals with comparative and historically grounded research in Switzerland, however, will be particularly interesting to an international audience for an important reason: a Swiss case study by the US social anthropologist Robert Netting in the Swiss Alps (Törbel) – published under the title *Balancing on an Alp* (1981) – had a major impact on the global debate around Elinor Ostrom's book *Governing the Commons* (1990). For that book, which celebrates its thirtieth anniversary in 2020, she received the Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel. *Balancing the Commons in Switzerland* builds on Netting's work but traces the local histories of the commons in Switzerland back to the Late Middle Ages, and examines changes from that time to the present day. We thus closely examine the notion of robustness in Swiss commons and its challenges, in both a comparative and interdisciplinary way. Therefore, the book not only provides new insights into what has been seen as empirical proof that common property can be sustainable and that Swiss common property institutions show a high level of robustness; it also tries to unpack the power relations and diversity in the development of local commoners' organisations in a national context, in which common property rights are accepted by the Swiss civil code (and recognised in some cantonal legislations) (Knoepfel and Schweizer 2015) and state subsidies are provided in order to maintain the work undertaken by the commoners.

This unique situation, which we call the 'Swiss commons lab', will be of interest for all commons scholars in understanding this globally unique case and what it means for global studies of the commons. Our main hypothesis is that the robustness of Swiss commoners' organisations depends on their ability to balance between market (declines in the value of the CPRs and rising costs of maintenance) and the state (how to harness and adapt to state subsidies and policies). This balancing act depends on their bargaining power related to the state, the canton and the municipality, and the ability to be resilient to economic and social pressures. We also argue that members of commoners' organisations do not pursue a purely economic logic but try to maintain the overall common property.

External political, economic and institutional changes in the last 300 years, especially in the second half of the twentieth century, created important structural transformations that threaten the existence of the commoners. The growing complexity of policy interventions, overall loss of value for agricultural and forestry products and uncertainty about the interest of future generations as appointed successors have increased pressure on the management of CPRs, especially alpine pastures and forests, via common property. How did local commoners react to these changes by adapting and transforming common property institutions? This research question is not solely of interest to the

Swiss, but also to international scholars in the field of commons studies and natural resource management.

The authors are an interdisciplinary group of researchers from human geography, history, political science and social anthropology, focusing on five alpine regions and their commoners' organisations in the German- (Uri, Grisons, Obwalden), French- (Valais) and Italian- (Ticino) speaking areas of Switzerland. They have gathered data regarding the robustness, change and innovations of commons institutions. The main focus is the local emic perception of common property, the perception of structural changes and how institutions have been reproduced, adapted and transformed.

The edited volume further highlights how institutional changes in the management of the agricultural and forestry commons at the local level are embedded in the public policies of the respective cantons (provinces) and the state. It shows the very different paths that local collective organisations and their members have followed in order to try to cope with the loss of value of the commons and the increased workload required for maintaining common property management. On the one hand, the authors argue that without public financial support from the state via subsidies, the communal management of the common property of pastures and forests would no longer be possible. This would also mean the loss of cultural landscape ecosystems in mountain areas that are key to providing for ecological and related services (biodiversity, protection against natural hazards, water maintenance, landscape quality and food security). On the other hand, the presented chapters suggest that subsidies
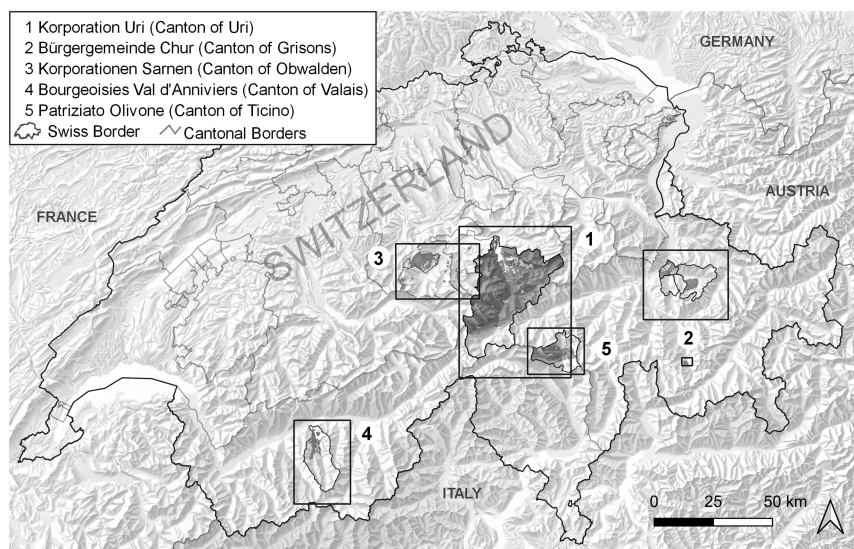

Figure 1.1 Overview: SCALES–Project Study Regions. Source: Map design and compilation by Sarah Baumgartner, University of Bern; hillshade: © swisstopo; geodata source: see maps of the project study regions.

are not an easy fix, as commoners are still grappling with market pressure, generational gaps, high workload and the lowered bargaining power of CPR users within corporations and externally (on the level of municipalities, cantons and the state). This contributes to increasing the costs and decreasing the power of the commoners.

The case studies show how the various common property organisations cope differently with these challenges, and the way they are innovative or fragile, vulnerable or resilient to these changes. It also shows how different local contexts, even on a microscale, matter, and the diversity of the responses and adaptation strategies, as well as innovations. It becomes evident that an analysis also needs to refer to discussions about the work of Ostrom, and that – although recognising its great merit – there is a need to critically contextualise her work and set it in a wider context, which is the underlying basis of this research.

1.2. Ostrom, the 'Swiss commons lab' and critical theoretical reflections beyond

In studies of the commons, we have been trapped in attempts to (over)simplify complex political, social, economic and ecological realities since the polemic text of Garrett Hardin (1968), and paradoxically also since the empirically and comparatively grounded work of Elinor Ostrom (1990). Hardin's view of environmental issues and population growth with its symbol of pasture being overused as a result of open access – which he mislabelled as the commons – and its huge uptake, is a path-dependent legacy in the debate. Interestingly, the academic impact of the paper was not a discussion of 'unlimited' population growth, as intended by the author, but the sustainable use of CPRs. The key issue here is that both the problem statement and the remedies were based on simplistic modelling: one-size-fits-all arguments lead thousands of scholars and policymakers, as well as economists, to find legitimacy in relatively new forms of institutions for the governance of resources – state and private property. The widespread but unproved narrative of the overused common pasture and the simple solution to fix this simple problem did work well, despite any empirical evidence. The imagination on which it was based was so powerful that no one could escape its simplified structure, and it became *the* symbol of the mechanic truth of overexploitation.

Second, this legacy was – paradoxically – taken over by Ostrom, although she wanted to do the opposite, especially regarding the issue of simplistic views. Her take was to reject the panaceas implying either state or private property as solutions for all problems regarding the degradation of natural resources. Following the order of rational choice approaches (game theory), methodological individualism and frameworks of collective action, she needed to deal with the path-dependent request for simplicity. This binary thinking of simplicity vs. complexity and the listing of one, two, three or more solutions as a counter-argument to Hardin's oversimplifications did work to a certain extent.

It gave the illusion of a large heterogeneous data set provided in an easily accessible form to create outcomes that were also simple. The Swiss case in particular was a convenient narrative (Netting's description of Törbel as a key model, see the prologue by Jon Mathieu in this volume) showing robustness, as if it were fallen from the sky of collective action. It offered the relief of *proof* – and no one would question the Swiss about their seriousness in institution building – that collective action can work and that this does – like an invisible hand – lead to good outcomes for all. Herein lies the legacy of the simplicity of Hardin's work for Ostrom: one of the major problems here is that history in this sense is presented like an instant vacuum: it just happened and is also frozen as the platform for the future. No one really deals with the debates regarding the power relations and negotiation processes leading to the development of common property institutions and the issue of "Who is in and who is out?" of common property. This inclusion-and-exclusion aspect shown by the empirical cases of CPR management, which Ostrom used to develop her design principles, resemble so-called 'club goods' with the mentioned exclusion rules for CPRs. Nevertheless, Ostrom's great achievement was to show that the collective ownership of resources can be sustainable, but it is the neglect of historically related power issues that is the pertinent failure, leading to the problematic legacy of simplicity.

We thus need to go not just beyond panaceas, but specifically beyond the panacea of collective action, and analyse what we have at hand regarding the asymmetric bargaining power of actors in a series of what Ostrom rightfully called action arenas (Ostrom 2005). But again, there are more variables affecting these action arenas than she proposed, including, for instance, the path-dependent developments of local and immigrating people in a specific topography, the power forces that shape commodification processes in a specific context, and the local and external actors, who again have different bargaining power. As our comparative research on Swiss commoners' organisations shows, it is the history of the emerging commons and conflicts that triggered the formation and adaptation of common property institutions, and not just collective actions. We argue that what is needed is a detailed historic ethnography of the commons in a specific context, and then, as a next step, a comparative approach that includes power relations within commoners' organisations and their power relationships with non-commoners, the market and the state. Questions need to be asked such as: did elites and market conditions exist *before* what we call the structural adjustments following industrialisation? How did they shape the structure of commoners' organisations? We also argue that the way Ostrom was trying to leave the simplicity legacy with her design principles, and also later on with the Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) framework (Ostrom 2005), did not really help to further commons studies. It did not help us to understand the way local actors react to internal and external changes, and how this furthermore shaped the future of the governance of these resources. We need studies that tell the story of social interactions and negotiation processes in the sense of looking at power

relations under conditions of change. This is important in order to understand the balancing act of governing the commons and who values what in which context, how this valuation needs to be negotiated (who has what power to do so) and how the subsequent selection process of institutions, their shaping and the production of legitimacy for the final choice, is determined, and by whom, and on which narratives and discourses it is based.

1.3. Multi– and interdisciplinary approaches and methodologies

The SCALES project on which this book is based was inspired by an inter-disciplinary and multi-disciplinary approach to gathering data for the five case studies between 2017-2020. Historians helped to understand the past and path dependencies, which are still visible, using archive and literature research, and they developed a two-dimensional temporal structure from the Late Middle Ages to the present. Political scientists helped to explain the new actors, such as the state and other organisations, which provide a source of legal and institutional pluralism and influence the strategic action of actors and actor groups by analysing legal texts and conducting expert interviews. The economic and social logic of the commons explains the main tenure and distributional effects. This kind of study is then enhanced with the heterogeneity of local views and the way people act today in real life situations, insights provided by social anthropology, human geography and agro-economy with participant observations, open and structured interviews, focus group discussions and a common questionnaire (see below).

Going beyond Ostrom's legacy also meant not just discussing Ostrom's design principles in all cases but first understanding the diversity of the cases. On the one hand, trying to get the disciplines working separately provided a basis for the cases as shown above; but on the other hand, creating a dialogue between the disciplinary approaches was also necessary. One important common issue in this context was the study of power relations between actors in this field, which is why we adopted the strategy of examining different levels in order to move up and down the scales. This mostly helped to collect qualitative data on the actor's perspectives regarding their different bargaining power and the different challenges that the commoners' organisations have to balance between the market and the state. One theoretical framework allowing the integration of history and political science as well as environmental issues is the combined approach of New Institutionalism as outlined by anthropology (see Ensminger 1992; Haller 2013) and political ecology (see Robbins 2004). In this combined approach, historical, environmental, structural and political external factors have an impact on the valuation of resources and resource contexts. These then lead to the transformation of local power constellations of actors, their selection and the transformation of institutions, as well as forms of organisation and ideologies (narratives and discourses). The latter are chosen for the production of the legitimate selection of an institutional order (Haller 2019).

In terms of research procedure, the team decided that each of the five case studies should be undertaken by one researcher, irrespective of their discipline. In order to control for a potentially strong disciplinary bias, the research team, in collaboration with the project leader, compiled a common thematic questionnaire that helped to gather comparable qualitative results relevant for all the disciplines in each case study. The interviews were conducted, among others, with representatives of the commoners' organisations, and included themes such as economy (issues of property production and distribution), politics (relationships with municipal, cantonal and state actors), common-pool governance (focusing on alpine pastures and forests), local forms of organisation, and issues of knowledge and identity. This provided comparable qualitative data regarding the kind of links that can be detected between communal ownership institutions embedded in history, public administration and power relationships, and exposure to economic pressure. These variables were then used to define a specific type of commoners' adaptation, institutional change and innovations for governing CPRs in the diverse cultural landscape ecosystems. The research team also gathered data on factors that contribute to conflict constellations, the loss of local bargaining power and resilience, as well as the increased vulnerability of the commoners' organisations in today's economic and political context.

In addition, the team collectively attended one- to two-day field trips to all the five case study areas that included meetings with representatives of commoners' organisations. Martin Stuber and Rahel Wunderli organised two conferences, where the results of SCALES were discussed with an international expert group: in Altdorf (2018) in cooperation with the *Association internationale pour l'Histoire des Alpes*, the Swiss Rural History Society and the *Korporation Uri*, in Bern (2019) in cooperation with the IASC.

Under the direction of Tobias Haller (University of Bern), Peter Finke (University of Zurich) and Stefan Mann (Agroscope, Zurich), several BA and MA research projects in social anthropology were undertaken in connection to the SCALES project in order to gather more data based on participant observation of local perceptions regarding economic and institutional change, the development of innovations, and gender issues. In the field of history, under the supervision of Mathieu Leimgruber (University of Zurich), Christian Rohr (University of Bern), Martin Stuber (University of Bern) and Rahel Wunderli (University of Bern), several student qualification papers on our case studies were written. In the field of geography, one MSc research project was undertaken under the supervision of Stephan Rist (University of Bern) and Karina Liechti (University of Bern).

A final comment in this section is related to the issue of diversity. Local terms and meanings used by local groups varied substantially, and so the English term 'commoners' organisation' was used in order to make the very different cases in three language areas comparable. The local names of the respective organisations (such as *Bürgergemeinde* or *Korporation* in German, *bourgeoisie* in French and *patriziato* in Italian) are set in *italics* in the chapters, with further explanations on their sub-categories and local specificities.

1.4. Overview of the book

After this introduction, the book continues with an outline of the three different disciplinary approaches and theories. In Chapter 2, entitled 'Transformations of common pastures and woodlands in Switzerland: a historical perspective', Martin Stuber and Rahel Wunderli illustrate the way local resources in the 'agrarian society' were contested, how the pressure of modernisation in the 'industrial society' unfolded, and the polarised utilisation of the commons in the 'age of ecology'. They outline the development of the Swiss commons landscape in four phases (formation in the Late Middle Ages; consolidation in the Early Modern Period; transformation in the nineteenth century; adopting new roles in the twentieth century). Chapter 3 on 'How do the commons meet the state? a political science perspective' by François-Xavier Viallon and Stéphane Nahrath contributes to the debate on the interactions between commoners' organisations and the state. The authors describe three modes of interaction between commoners' organisations and the state. These modes may allow the strengthening of commoners' organisations, and/or the reinforcement of the coherence of state intervention. They argue that analysing these interactions is crucial to our understanding of why and how commoners' organisations emerge, perpetuate, and collapse in complex legal settings increasingly shaped by public policies. Finally, in Chapter 4, 'Commons and peasant studies: insights from social anthropology, human geography and agrarian economics', Tobias Haller, Karina Liechti and Stefan Mann discuss socio-cultural, economic and space-related systems and take an interdisciplinary social science perspective on the institutional change of the commons. They offer a broad overview of relevant approaches related to Swiss rural societies and commons studies in anthropology, human geography and agro-economics. They explain the role that New Institutionalism plays in the analysis, outline the work of Netting and Ostrom, and subsequently focus on institutional change and the role of bargaining power and ideology elaborated by Jean Ensminger (and revised by Tobias Haller), as well the way power can be analysed from political ecology perspectives. They conclude by outlining the relevance of non-economic and identity utility for the maintenance of the commons, and reflect on resilience, vulnerability and bottom-up institution building (constitutionality) in the 'Swiss commons lab'.

These theoretical reflections have affected the structure of the five case studies that we have selected from the three Swiss language regions, and that reflect different structural and institutional constellations, such as a strong commoners' organisation within a cantonal system (*Korporation* Uri, canton Uri), an urban commoners' organisation in the alpine area (*Bürgergemeinde* Chur, canton Grisons) and the four diverse Sarnen *Korporationen* (canton Obwalden). This is followed by the cases from the French-speaking area, the *bourgeoisies* and *consortages* of Val d'Anniviers (canton Valais) and the Italian-speaking *patriziato* in Olivone (canton Ticino) (see Figure 1.1).

In the first of the five case studies (Chapter 5), Rahel Wunderli outlines the history of the *Korporation* Uri, under the title 'Scopes and challenges of a huge corporation over time: the case of the *Korporation* Uri (Canton Uri)'. The *Korporation* Uri is one of the biggest common pool organisations in Switzerland, with property covering about 70 per cent of the canton of Uri. The basis of this specific organisation lies in the Early Middle Ages, when the *Landleute von Uri* started to organise themselves on a regional scale in order to regulate transport routes and the cooperative use of pastures and forests. Later on, this union grew into a political entity and was able to take over legislative and juridical competences from foreign and resident lordships. Until the nineteenth century, the *Allmendgenossenschaft* was identical to the state. In the course of the nation-building process, the two elements were separated, and in 1888 the Corporation was withdrawn from the state authorities. Since then, the organisation has met the challenges required to keep its position within the canton, to expand its economic base, to adapt the use of its forests and pastures to changing contexts, and to adjust to issues such as women's civic rights and modern state requirements. Today, the Corporation finds itself in a condition of financial strength, with a lively organisational structure, but also several issues, among them the growing number of citizens that are not involved in agriculture and make different demands towards the organisation.

In Chapter 6, 'Urban commons in Alpine areas: the case of the *Bürgergemeinde* Chur (Canton Grisons)', Martin Stuber shows how the community of Chur developed in the Late Middle Ages when it was emancipated from the bishop and constituted itself as a guilds city. In the *Ackerbürgerstadt* (agrarian city) the extensive forest was not only used for the supply of wood, but also for cattle and pasture farming. A cross-border system of transhumance developed from the sixteenth century onwards, with Chur acquiring extensive alps at Arosa. Only citizens were entitled to make full use of the common property, and the increasing number of *Hintersassen* (socmen) only had limited access. In 1840 the Guilds Constitution was dissolved, and in 1875 municipal dualism was created to include a *Bürgergemeinde* (Corporation of Citizens) and a *Politische Gemeinde* (municipality of residents). The property of collective forests and pastures was given to the *Bürgergemeinde*, while the use of collective forests and pastures was attributed to the *Politische Gemeinde*. The focus was no longer on securing a sustainable supply of natural products but on creating the maximum sustainable yield (financial return) for the municipality's finances. With the change in relative prices from the 1950s onwards and state contributions, economic conditions changed fundamentally once again.

In Chapter 7, 'Transformation, diversification, partnerships: the case of the Sarnen commoners' organisations (Canton Obwalden)', Karina Liechti discusses transformational change in four different commoners' organisations. She shows that these commoners' organisations have not only adapted to a changing societal, political and economic environment but have transformed themselves in order to remain important players in the local context. She points out that due to the diverse structures of the four corporations, they are more or

less resilient or vulnerable to change. Transformation processes, for example, require, among other things, the reproduction and adaptation of ideology in order to reproduce legitimacy. Legitimisation pressures differ between corporations that have significantly changed their economic base on the one hand, and those whose main economic base comprises 'traditional' resources on the other. By acting collectively and by positioning themselves as reliable partners, the Sarnen corporations are providing locally adapted and grounded means of dealing with contemporary ecological and societal challenges.

In Chapter 8, 'Weak commons management, strong identity: the case of Val d'Anniviers (Canton Valais)', François-Xavier Viallon traces the historic transformations of commoners' organisations back to the thirteenth century, when *bourgeoisies* and *consortages* were central actors of local political and economic life. The chapter shows how commoners' organisations progressively lost their legal competencies and transformed into village-based organisations contributing to the preservation of local heritage, and allowing local and outside members to bind to their familial origins. Looking at the recent changes in the state of common pool resources, this chapter identifies a set of current strategies adopted by *bourgeoisies* and *consortages* to manage their resources, which mainly comprise a civic hall, forests, pastures, and vineyards. In the case of forests, commoners carry out market-based activities to secure income and maintain resource use. The creation of a cantonal forest association representing the interests of commoners strengthens their role as intermediaries in the policy implementation process. Further, there is a strong tendency for the use of pastures to be privatised, coupled to the preservation of symbolic management structures. Despite strong public support, agricultural activities in the valley continue to diminish, and put the preservation of the landscape ecosystem at risk.

Finally, in Chapter 9, 'Fragile balance: the case of pasture and forest management in Olivone (Canton Ticino)', Mark Bertogliati outlines the current properties of the Patriziato Generale of Olivone, Campo, Largario (PG-OCL), which cover some 8,500 hectares and, after Airolo, comprise the biggest corporation of the canton Ticino in territorial terms. During the Middle Ages this alpine community passed through a crucial stage characterised by expanding control over forest, pastures and roads, intertwined with Italian urban development. Collective resource management and internal organisation evolved in a structured and dynamic system consisting of different institutional levels (village corporations, *degagne*, *vicinanza*). This "multi-layered community" was the result of different local needs, negotiations with other communities and 'empowering interactions' with state authorities. From the second half of the nineteenth century institutional, demographic, economic and socio-ecological changes on a broader scale required new approaches, and complex arrangements of traditional uses of forests and mountain pastoralism. The subsequent long process of transformation on the path to modernity highlights the adaptability of this community, but also its fragile balance in the management of resources and internal decision-making processes. There are several issues of vulnerability and low resilience, such as subsidy systems that do not match local

needs, price changes for milk and cheese, and a decline in the bargaining power of commons users in the *patriziato*, as well as the fragility of its members and the issue of central actors of very high age managing the commons.

In the synthesis (Chapter 10), the research team presents a comparative summary dealing with the wide variety of case studies. They propose several key theses for comparison that are also relevant for the international debate:

A) It is not just collective action but elites and markets that have shaped the historical commons. Managing local cultural landscape ecosystems was a political and space-specific process based on common property institutions that have shown robustness and economic resilience despite high resource-specific and political pressure since the nineteenth century.

B) Commoners' organisations faced important challenges during the energy change from wood-based fuels to fossil fuels, and the societal structural change in the industrialisation era. This process has led to a reduction in the economic value of CPRs, and has thus reduced the bargaining power of commoners' organisations, albeit in different ways.

C) Differences in the bargaining power of commoners' organisations can be explained by their size and political power, the different types of resources they own, the use they make of available resources, and the skills they use to engage in new activities and balance themselves against the market.

D) Commoners' organisations try to adapt to the decline in market value of natural resources by internally cross-subsidising the maintenance of alpine farming and forestry through new activities such as housing or hydropower.

E) Commoners' organisations are situated in a field of tension between new responsibilities and regulations (e.g. nature protection) and the persistence of traditional structures.

F) Commoners' organisations need to balance their relationships with state actors and subsidies policies: their relationship with state actors is shaped by the state acknowledging the important role of alpine pasture and forest use and management, as well as the maintenance of landscape services; however, while state support is what makes the sustainable use of commons possible, it does not cover all costs and is not always shaped in a participatory way.

G) In order to mitigate such challenges and to find locally adapted solutions in a kind of 'Swiss commons lab' based on guaranteed property rights and subsidies, locally adapted strategies are made possible from bottom-up. The range of these local institutional innovations, as well as their success, depends on the way they can be locally developed, incorporating all local actors in a participatory way. Such participatory processes lower the vulnerability and strengthen the resilience of commoners' organisations.

H) Participatory and transformation processes depend on the external view of the commoners' organisations and the way it is shaped. The narrative that commoners receive a large amount of subsidies and related legitimacy

issues is counteracted by the local commoners' narrative that there is a great deal of unpaid work involved in resource use and landscape maintenance. This is guaranteed based on the strong positive 'identity utility' of the commoners. By this we mean that, as opposed to a pure economic utility, identity utility also accounts for a positive identity value of a form of alpine agrarian lifestyle in this context. This also includes a strong social structure and cohesion in the commoners' organisations.

I) Advantages of commoners' systems include their long-term perspective due to a focus on maintaining resources rather than purely generating profit in order to keep the resource base for future generations of commoners. Their relatively fast reactivity/responsiveness due to straightforward small structures and organisational freedom, and their acting as a brake on changes that are too fast and too fundamental, are also assets.

J) When positioning themselves as reliable partners in both maintaining ecosystem and landscape services, and in societal matters, commoners' organisations can contribute to sustainable development by maintaining a dynamic diversity of structures and providing locally adapted and grounded means of dealing with today's ecological and societal challenges.

K) Due to the large areas of land they sustainably manage (60 to 90% of pastures and forests in the study areas) and their local knowledge, commoners' organisations could play a vital role in the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Switzerland.

These theses show, on the one hand, that there are differences between the Swiss commons and many other commons systems on a global scale. But on the other hand, Swiss commons also demonstrate that given the freedom to self-organise, and if there is the ability to level economic pressures, new vital forms of commons governance are possible. Commoners' organisations in Switzerland differ in their power constellations, however, and we argue that this can make them more or less resilient and vulnerable. This also means that an important lesson to be learned from the Swiss cases for the global debate is that only guaranteeing common property, despite it being an important precondition, will not solve all the challenges to commoners crafting their institutions. They have to position themselves in a state- and market-specific context; and they have to fight to retain their own way of governing and to reach a locally acceptable level of redistributing the costs and benefits.

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