

Survival in the past - survival in the future? Past and present challenges of community-based management of alpine pastures in the canton Graubünden, Switzerland

by Gabriela Landolt, Institute of Social Anthropology, University of Bern, Switzerland

ABSTRACT

Community-based and common property institutions are able to sustainably use common pool resources. In Switzerland, this insight goes back to the research of Robert Netting (1981), who described the historical development of the common property resource (CPR) institutions in Törbel and their sustainable adaptation to ecological and social conditions. The case study of the mountain village Sumvitg in the canton Graubünden presented in this paper illustrates another case of sustainable CPR regime that managed to adapt to various disturbances over time.

INTRODUCTION

Community-based and common pool resource (CPR) institutions are able to sustainably use common pool resources. In Switzerland, this insight goes back to the research of Robert Netting (1981), who described the historical development of the CPR institutions in Törbel and their sustainable adaptation to ecological and social conditions. Since then, studies about CPR institutions in Swiss alpine communities have been increasingly focused on transition processes identifying persistent, decaying and abandoned common property structures but without providing a history focused in depth case study (Kissling-Näf et al. 2002, Stevenson 1991, Thomi et al. 2008) or only focusing on history without relating to common property research (Condrau 1958, Mathieu 1992, Weiss 1942). Looking at the international commons literature, de Moor (2009) equally observes that historical processes in the development of common property institutions and their adaptive responses to change have so far been neglected. This fact stays in contrast to the few authors, which have pointed out that historical processes are important in explaining institutional change, collective action to deal with changing conditions and the present state of common property arrangements and resources (Agrawal 2003, p. 244; Haller ed. 2010, York and Schoon 2011, p. 390). The social-ecological system framework developed by Ostrom and scholars (Ostrom 2009) has integrated a historical component, namely the history of use (U3), however, without expressing its importance.

The objective of this article is to show the relevance of historical processes in explaining institutional change. Based on anthropological research, a CPR institution to manage common pastures in Sumvitg, a mountain village in the canton Graubünden of Switzerland, is presented, which succeeded in upholding its common property management system over a long period of time. Following the written regulations since 1800 it becomes clear that the farmers and users of the CPR were willing and able to adjust their management to social, economic, legal, and political changes in order to maintain the primary function of the alpine pastures, also called “alps”: to enable the farmers to enlarge their fodder base provided by the privately owned or rented meadows in the valley by the collectively used summer pastures on the alps. The persistence of the CPR system over centuries suggests that the CPR institution is robust, in the sense that it has proved institutional flexibility, to be able to cope with internal and external disturbances while maintaining its performance (see Fleischmann et al. 2010, p. 10). In the case study the farmers of the commune were able to establish institutional arrangements that limit access and protect the alpine summer pastures from overuse. However new challenges arose from structural change and the functional shift from a common property