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ORGANIZED SYMPOSIA: GAMES FOR TRIGGERING COLLECTIVE CHANGE IN NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT, AUGUST 27, 2021

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Description

This symposium will discuss the innovative use of experimental games from behavioral economics as a tool for not only learning about collective action in natural resource management, but also as an intervention to trigger collective behavioral change. The session draws from collaboration among CGIAR centers (IFPRI and ICRISAT), an Indian NGO (Foundation for Ecological Security), and German and Ethiopian universities to pilot and then scale up the use of games as part of social learning tools to strengthen the management of common pool resources. The session will use a panel discussion format to present the conceptual foundations, lessons from past use of games in India and Ethiopia, challenges of scaling up the application of such experiential learning, and of measuring the impacts on individual and collective mental models, rules, and behavior. Participants will be offered manuals on how to implement such an approach for a variety of resource management challenges, and invited to discuss applicability to other situations.

As resource users interact and impose externalities onto each other, institutions are needed to coordinate resource use, create trust, and provide incentives for sustainable management. This is particularly true of common pool natural resources, such as water, forests, or pastures.

Coordinated collective action can play a key role in enabling communities to manage natural resources more sustainably. But when such collective action is not present, what can be done to foster it? Intensive community facilitation approaches have been used, but are difficult to scale up. Moreover, sustainable resource management frequently fails to emerge or breaks down after the project ends.

There is a growing body of behavioral games used to study cooperation patterns of communities. Recently, games have been adapted as learning and stakeholder engagement tools to improve management of the commons, strengthen self-regulation of resource use, and enhance constructive interactions among resource users. Combining games with other interventions and tools and facilitated discussions offers a promising approach to improve collective action institutions through experiential learning — a classic approach in education.

This symposium will discuss experiences with using behavioral games for institutional capacity development at the community level in India as part of the Promise of Commons initiative that aims to strengthen collective governance of 30 million acres of common lands.

This will be followed by presentation of key lessons from four case studies using games to ultimately shaping behavior of local actors with regard to making investments in water supply and use of water and forest products in India. Two of the games thereby address the great challenge of better managing water demand. The cases will highlight trade-offs in the design of tools, e.g. with regard to the accuracy and complexity of the framing of tools or the payments in learning game exercises.

The third presentation will discuss the challenges and lessons from adapting the groundwater game for use in Ethiopia, where competition for the resource is not as advanced as in India.

Based in the conceptual deliberations as well as the previous intervention experiences, in the fourth presentation we will hear from our NGO partners on the the challenges of scaling up the interventions and of measuring the impact created by playing games. We learn that the local context plays a critical role in the potential of games to create impact, but the need to contextualize can run counter to large-scale scaling efforts. The Promise of Commons initiative is a good example illustrating that as large scale impacts are intended to be achieved, more structured and less time consuming tools are required. So far, learning impact of playing games has mainly been measured in terms of attitude changes directly after games have been played. First promising results indicate that games can indeed support the intended changes, but more rigorous evidence of their impact, under different conditions, can help convince development agents and policy makers to make stronger use of the instruments.

While games alone will not be the solution to all natural resource management challenges games can provide a structured and therefore replicable approach for influencing behavior. They can also improve system understanding, raise awareness, influence norms, facilitate dialogue, train for crisis response, and increase legitimacy of decisions.