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Power in Practice: A Force Field Approach to Natural Resource Management

Monique Nuijten, *Associate Professor,*
Rural Development Sociology Group, Wageningen University, the Netherlands
E-mail: Monique.Nuijten@wur.nl

Abstract: *This article argues that in development studies, power is one of the most important, but at the same time most badly theorized topics. In most of the literature a 'property-notion' of power is used assuming that people or groups have more or less fixed interests and levels of power.*
In this article a force field approach towards power is proposed that conceives of power as 'relational' and the result of the working of multiple, intertwined institutions. Examples from agrarian communities in Mexico and Peru are given to show how overlapping institutions and the resulting force fields determine local power relations. Special attention is paid to the methodological implications of such an approach for studies on natural resource management. Attention is paid to: following the flow of action, paying attention to ideas and reflective talk and the quantification of specific sets of data on natural resources.

Key words: Force fields, institutions, Latin America, methodology, power, organizing practices

1. Introduction: Power in Development and Natural Resource Management

In development studies, power is one of the most important, but at the same time most badly theorized topics. Existing power relations are often mentioned as a hindrance to effective, sustainable and equitable natural resource management or, on the other hand, as something to be taken into account, changed or encouraged. The aim to change existing power configurations becomes particularly clear in the notion of 'empowerment', in which power is perceived as a 'property' that persons or groups can 'possess' and consequently 'enlarge'. This notion of power is also reflected in the many stakeholder approaches that (implicitly) assume that people or groups can be attributed more or less fixed interests and levels of power. Yet, this 'property-notion' of power ignores the fundamental fact that power is always 'relational' and the result of the working of multiple, intertwined institutions.

Obviously, a more sophisticated approach to power is difficult to use in quick intervention-oriented studies where there is no time for in-depth research and one has to deliver rapid recommendations for intervention and change. Yet, in the light of the failure of so many development efforts, it would be worthwhile to use more refined forms of analysis of power in natural resource management.

2. Power, Organization and Institutions

Following Lemke (2003) and adapting some of his ideas, I identify three types of power relations,

power as strategic games, institutional power and structural power.

'Power as strategic games is a ubiquitous feature of human interaction, insofar as it signifies structuring possible field of action of others. This can take many forms, e.g. ideological manipulation or rational argumentation, moral advice or economic exploitation.' (Lemke 2003: p. 5). Power as strategic games can be perceived in the many daily interactions between individual people and groups.

Government or institutional power refers to more or less systematized, regulated and reflected modes of power (a "technology") that go beyond the spontaneous exercise of power over others, following a specific form of reasoning (a "rationality"). It refers to "the regulation of conduct by the more or less rational application of the appropriate technical means" (Hindess 1996, p. 106, Lemke 2003, p. 5). These political rationalities help 'to create a discursive field in which exercising power is "rational"' (Lemke 2003, p. 8).

This is similar to approaches to governmentality (Rose and Miller 1992, Rose 1999) that argue that power works through the constitution of defined subjectivities (such as citizens, civil servants) through discursive rituals and administrative practices.

Domination or structural power 'is a particular type of power relationship that is stable and hierarchical, fixed and difficult to reverse. Domination refers to those asymmetrical relationships of power in which the subordinated persons have little room for manoeuvre because their "margin of liberty is extremely limited" (Foucault 1988, p. 12, Lemke 2003, p. 5).

Obviously, the three forms of power are closely linked and cannot be seen separately from each other. For example, technologies of government account for the systematization, stabilization and regulation of power relationships that may lead to a state of domination (Lemke 2003, p. 5). In the same way, 'individual power' is always part of wider institutions and structural processes. For that reason, power relations can only be studied and analyzed in the context of institutions and the practices of organization. Wolf pointed this out in his article *Facing power; old insights, new questions* (1990):

'Organization is key, because it sets up relationships among people through allocation and control of resources and rewards. It draws on tactical power to monopolize or share out liens and claims, to channel action into certain pathways while interdicting the flow of our action to others. Some things become possible and likely; others are rendered unlikely. At the same time, organization is always at risk. Since power balances always shift and change, its work is never done, (...) Even the most successful organization never goes unchallenged. The enactment of power always creates friction - disgruntlement, foot-dragging, escapism, sabotage, protest or outright resistance...', (Wolf 1990: p. 590)

It is on the basis of studies 'on the ground' of the use and distribution of and access to natural resources that one can arrive at conclusions concerning individual power, institutional power and domination. In the next section, this approach will be developed further.

3. Power and Force Fields

I use the notion of force field to refer to more structural forms of power relations, which are shaped around the access to and use of specific resources. Force fields cohere around certain problems and resources and lead to forms of ordering in which socio-political categories with differing positions and interests define themselves. As force fields are always in flux, it is not possible to 'freeze' them in terms of social or territorial boundaries. Yet, they can have a certain stability for a period of time.

The existence of multiple force fields explains that power relations are diversified and that, for example, the relation of peasants to the state cannot be reduced to a general vertical model. Also at the local level, the socio-economic divisions and power dynamics that are important differ according to the resources at stake. These different force fields and modes of socio-political ordering have consequences for the resulting forms of governance, power relations and space for action for the different parties involved. In some force fields people have much room for manoeuvre and are in a relatively powerful position vis-a-vis others in relation to certain resources, while in others they have little individual influence (see Nuijten, 2003, 2004). The concept of force field helps us to analyze the weighting of different kinds of socio-political networks, the influence of law and procedures, the role of formal organizational

structures, the role of various discourses and different positions of power.

In any force field, particular forms of dominance, contention, and resistance develop, together with certain regularities and forms of ordering. In this view, the patterning of organizing practices is not the result of a common understanding or normative agreement, but of the forces at play within the field. The patterning of organizing practices is accompanied by the distinction of different social actors with specific roles, different access to resources and differing rights. This is closely related to forms of inclusion and exclusion of socio-political categories. This also explains that organizing practices are related to the production of meaning, or in other words to the development of 'structures of feeling' (Williams 1977, p. 132). The reflective talk, irony, self-reflection and dialogue of the people involved express struggle, contention and resistance in relation to existing organizing practices and relations of power. These dialogues reflect power relations and a continuous active engagement of social actors with the world around them (Pigg 1996, Tsing 1993).

My notion of force field most resembles Bourdieu's notion of a field (1992, pp. 94-115). According to Bourdieu, the field is the locus of relations of force and not only of meaning. Every field has its own logic, rules and regularities which are not explicit and which make it resemble the playing of games. However, it always remains a field of struggles aimed at preserving or transforming the configuration of forces. These struggles and activities in the field always produce differences. In Bourdieu's field, agents and institutions constantly struggle, according to the regularities and the rules constitutive of this space to appropriate the specific products at stake in the game. Those who dominate in a given field are in a position to make it function to their advantage but they must always contend with the resistance, the claims, the contention, of the dominated. The coherence, ruling, and regularities that may be observed in a given state of the field, or even its apparent orientation toward a common function, emanate from conflict and competition, and not from some kind of immanent self-development of the structure.

In talking about the production of meaning in force fields shaped through relations of power and dominance, one comes close to notions of hegemony (Gramsci 1971). More recent approaches have 'taken a focus on the partiality, the eternally incomplete nature of hegemony, with its implication of the cultural as a contested, contingent political field, the battlefield in an ongoing 'war of position" (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, p. 5 commenting on recent interpreters of Gramsci like Williams (1977) and Stuart Hall (1986)). Roseberry also proposes to 'explore hegemony not as a finished and monolithic ideological formation but as a problematic, contested, political process of domination and struggle' (Roseberry 1994, p. 358). He proposes to use the concept to understand 'the ways in which the words, images, and symbols, forms, organizations, institutions, and movements used by subordinate populations to talk about, understand, confront, accommodate themselves to, or resist their domination are shaped by the process of domination itself. What hegemony constructs, then, is not a shared ideology but a common material and meaningful framework for living through, talking about, and acting upon social orders characterized by domination' (ibid., p. 361).

4. Power and Organization in the Debate on Natural Resource Management

Local organizations and communities have always had a special role in studies on the effective and equitable management of natural resources (Berkes 1995, Baland and Platteau 1996, FAO/UNDP 1998). However, despite substantial academic advances, naïve ideas about the degree of co-operation possible and unrealistic views on power still prevail in great part of this work (Shepherd 1998, p. 13). One central difficulty is that many authors talk about natural resource management in terms of groups of people who should act together in pursuit of common goals. In addition, it is argued that by introducing organizations with clearly defined collective aims, democratic forms of decision-making, and procedures which secure transparency and accountability, the whole group is empowered. In this view, power holders with formal responsibilities can be effectively controlled and the decision-making remains with the majority.

Yet, the reality of power in organizations and institutions is more complex. Morgan points out that although "we are usually encouraged to think about organizations as rational enterprises pursuing goals

that aspire to satisfy the interests of all, there is much evidence to suggest that this view is more an ideology than a reality. Organizations are often used as instruments of domination that further the selfish interests of elites at the expense of others" (Morgan 1986, pp. 274-275). There are elements of domination in *all* organizations and communities, as well as forms of differentiation, struggles, and distinctions between different categories of people.

Hence, in contrast to their official objectives, organizations may become important instruments of control and domination and will not necessarily lead to more power and freedom for the "excluded" or the "poor". As Ostrom argues, many models that social scientists tend to use for analyzing common property resources problems "have the perverse effect of supporting centralization of political authority" (1995, p. 216). So, we should be careful with the notion of collective goals. Although it is true that in formal terms most organizations are defined in terms of collective goals, in reality the different members of an organization often have different goals and interests.

The focus on formalized collective projects that should result in 'empowerment' of the groups or the community is understandable as it makes interventions clear-cut. Yet, this focus distorts the view on existing practices. The reality is that people often prefer to work in loose personal networks instead of common projects, or that villagers work in continuously changing constellations instead of in more enduring groups. In some regions it may be more important for rural households to be involved in diverse constellations of social networks rather than in "local collective organizations". More formalized collective actions may imply political dangers and risks instead of empowerment. For that reason, villagers may be reluctant about involvement in collective projects. For example, in the context of a state bureaucracy that has a history of establishing special contacts with influential well-placed people; it may be much wiser not to be organized in a formal "local" or "community-based" organization. There is a high risk that the leaders or representatives of these organizations will establish personal relations with the state bureaucracy and "there is in fact a danger that the elites may regroup and become re-empowered" by the creation of village development committees (Singh 1988, p. 44). Pretty also points out that "in highly stratified societies, it cannot be assumed that existing institutional arrangements are equitable" (1995, p. 134). Nor can we expect newly introduced institutions to be equitable and change power structures. In this atmosphere it also seems very reasonable to be reluctant to put money and energy in a local community enterprise. So, although many studies in natural resource management stress the importance of building self-reliant community organizations to empower the local people and give them more control over their resources, there are many situations in which it can be important for people to remain outside more formalized forms of organizing, whether these are governmental, non-governmental, local, or community based. This also explains the wide array of already existing informal forms of organizing through personal networks, patron-client relations and customary institutions. As Ostrom points out, "the institutions that individuals may have established are ignored or rejected as inefficient, without examining how these institutions may help them acquire information, reduce monitoring and enforcement costs, and equitably allocate appropriation rights and provision duties" (1995, p. 216). Hence, a central weakness in the debate on power and natural resource management is the naive ideas about the workings of institutions and the community. Some approaches even tend to ignore the multi-dimensional differentiations among the poor or rural people themselves based on economic differences, gender, age, and ethnic identities. As Leach, Mearns and Scoones argue community-level organizations are assumed to regulate the use of relatively homogenous environments in the community's interests. Yet, local communities may be shown to be internally differentiated, and the natural-resource claims of social actors positioned differently in power relations may be highly contested (1997, p. 5). Later on, the same authors complain "it is striking the degree to which simplistic notions of community are being reinvented in the context of practical efforts towards community-based sustainable development" (Leach et al. 1997, p. 11).

In order to analyze power relations in natural resource management, one should first of all come to grips with existing forms of organizing around the use and distribution of the resources, whether these be informal or informal, or 'well-organized' or a 'mess'. The ultimate aim of such a study is to understand the logics of these forms of organizing

in the specific socio-political context and to examine existing power relations. Only when we understand the logic of existing situations, can we think about ways to improve the management around natural resources.

Another limitation of many studies of natural resource management has to do with their belief in the 'magical' attributes of intervention and the 'capacity' of the law, in other words, their faith that new forms of organizing and fresh rules can make a dramatic difference to the lives of the people and the management of resources. Yet, intervention efforts and new rules generally have very modest and unintended effects. As Stiefel and Wolfe point out "processes of legal and institutional reform by themselves probably have little chance to sustain a democratic process and prevent new authoritarian structures from emerging" (Stiefel and Wolfe 1994, p. 200). All rules and procedures may be used and abused in many different ways as organizations are always embedded in wider force fields. Official rules and procedures may influence existing organizing practices and power relations in many different and often unpredictable ways. Although rules and formal structures may influence established practices, many studies have shown that they can never control or transform them in planned ways (see also Benda Beckmann 1993, Long 1988, Long and Long 1992, Long and van der Ploeg 1989).

5. Power in 'Ill-functioning' Organisations

In many research settings, a formal organization exists that is responsible for the management of natural resources. The organization can have officially recognized members, statutes, formal aims and objectives. They will probably have an executive board for the daily management and a general assembly of all members, which is the highest authority at the local level and takes decisions by majority voting during the meetings. The executive committee represents the organization towards outside agencies and in relation to government programs.

Although the above-mentioned model is quite well-known, it is equally common that in practice the organization does not function according to this model. Everybody acquainted with organizational issues in development contexts knows the frustrating or surprising experiences this can give rise to. Sometimes organizations appear to exist only on paper. Many people who follow official organigrams are confronted with the fact that whole divisions do not exist, or that people within the organization do not have a clue about the official structure. It is also quite normal to hear people give totally different views on what the formal structure is. The same can happen with other dimensions of the organizing process. For example, it is common that meetings are seldom held, few members attend the meetings and few matters are discussed on these occasions. On the other hand, although meetings are seldom held and decisions are seldom taken on these occasions, things are always going on in the community and suddenly seem to have been decided somewhere by some people. In a similar fashion, information concerning the community always seems to circulate in small undefined circles. Thus, there is a lot of organizing taking place in - what appear to be - informal and changing settings.

Even as it is quite usual that organizations do not operate according to formal models, development studies offer hardly any conceptual tools for the analysis of these situations. There is a strong tendency in the literature to label organizations as described above, which do not operate according to the principles of so-called 'accountable' management, as corrupt. Furthermore, there is a general belief that if the rules are not followed it must be because some powerful agents are behind it and determine what will happen. However, even 'powerful people' with 'influential connections' and 'wealthy resources' are based in a force field which operates according to certain 'rules of the game', 'implicit agreements', or 'customs'. This puts certain limits and conditions to their actions.

This became clear in my study of the *ejido* La Canoa, in western Mexico. The *ejido* is a form of corporate landholding that was established during the Mexican agrarian reform in the 20th century. The *ejido* La Canoa was established in 1938 and officially include 97 members or *ejidatarios*. Every three years the *ejidatarios* elect a new executive committee and a new commissioner. The *ejido* commissioner is responsible for the daily management of *ejido* affairs, but the general assembly of all ejidatarios is the highest authority at the local level. However, in La Canoa it is common that the commissioner takes decisions on his own without consulting the general assembly of

ejidatarios. As this has been a common phenomenon throughout Mexico, many authors have concluded that *ejido* commissioners in Mexico are very powerful figures.

Yet, my study of La Canoa showed that while the *ejido* commissioner indeed has developed a high degree of autonomy in his decisions, at the same time he has little power and authority (Nuijten 2003). Although he takes many decisions on his own, he has very little room to operate in. Little scope exists for abrupt changes of established routines. He can decide on minor issues without informing the assembly and he may take some advantage of his position, but he cannot decide to evict somebody from an individual *ejido* plot. *Ejidatarios* have several ways to fight abuses and effective forms of accountability exist outside the formal channels. If a commissioner goes too far in his abuses or damages the interests of certain people, they will let him know and he will be stopped. He is not stopped so much by people speaking up at a meeting, but by their talking to him in private, their use of regional political networks, gossip and the exclusion of his relatives from other village activities. The politics of honor also plays an important role in the room commissioners create for themselves and in the way they are judged by others. So, the 'autonomy' of a leader does not necessarily mean that he is 'in control' and has much power.

Another point is that in many 'illegal' or 'informal' arrangements we can distinguish certain regularities. We find a certain pattern in the way in which illegal transactions are settled and in these arrangements peasants, officials, organization leaders etc. play specific roles. So, this patterning of organizing practices in unexpected and often 'invisible' ways can often be distinguished in the apparently 'disordered', the 'corrupt' and the 'chaotic'. In other words, these organizing practices 'arise from particular combinations of ideas, material circumstances, and interactional potentials and have patterning as their consequences' (Barth 1993, p. 4).

Hence, instead of using bi-polar models of the 'democratic, transparent, accountable organization' against the 'clientelistic, corrupt organization', more attention should be paid to the wide variety of organizing practices linked to a broad set of mechanisms of checks and balances and their implication for relations of power. In La Canoa the *ejidatarios* often reflect on the organizational characteristics of their *ejido* and struggle with several contradictions in their own reflections. This talking about the organizational characteristics of the *ejido* occurs at the *ejido* meetings but also in private talks. To a certain extent this dialogue is induced by outsiders. Officials always say to the *ejidatarios* that they should accept their responsibilities, follow the formal rules, and organize themselves better. This places the *ejidatarios* in a dialogue between their "practical knowledge" and a "modernist organization discourse". For example, many *ejidatarios* say that they know that it is their duty to attend the *ejido* meetings but at the same time they can explain to you why they often prefer not to go. They argue that important decisions are not taken at the meetings anyhow. This talking shows that they are in a critical, reflective dialogue with the world in which they live, with themselves and with government officials (see Pigg 1996).

However, most of the time the *ejidatarios* do not mind about the lack of accountable management and lack of control. Nor do they mind about the fact that in the view of outsiders their *ejido* is so "disorganized". The fact that the *ejido* does not function according to the official model gives them a lot of freedom in their operations and means that nobody interferes with their illegal land transactions. Furthermore, they have considerable security of land tenure. So, most of the time there is no reason for the *ejidatarios* to want the *ejido* administration to work differently and in a so-called modern, democratic, accountable way.

6. The Mexican *Ejido*: Force Fields with Different Power Configurations

The argument of this article is that the management of natural resources develops within multiple force fields with differing dynamics, rather than within one over-arching field. This means that we should focus on the resources and the forms of ordering that develop around them instead of the formal structures and rules. In different force fields we can distinguish socio-political categories with differing positions and interests. Yet, as said, these socio-political divisions are not always the same. Around the different resources and problems in Mexico one finds, for example, *ejidatarios* pitched against landless villagers (village projects, the commons), *ejidatarios* against *pequeños propietarios* and officials (the "lost land"),

and divisions based on age and gender (inheritance questions).

This also means that in relation to certain resources a specific group of people may have relatively much power, while around other resources they have little influence. At the same time, force fields are always in flux. For instance, because of the increasing occupation of common lands in La Canoa, the force field around this land is changing in that differences in the interests of *ejidatarios* and landless families are becoming more pronounced, and interference from different state agencies is growing (Nuijten and Lorenzo, forthcoming). This will certainly lead to changes in the organizing practices and the power constellation around the commons in the future. The concept of force field helps us to analyze the weighting of different kinds of socio-political networks, the influence of law and procedures, and the role of the state bureaucracy.

The patterning which develops in management practices and the accompanying forms of domination and struggle are related to active dialogues, self-reflection, irony, and the production of multiple meanings through imagination and the work of interpretation. Yet, the meaning of these expressions can only be analyzed in relation to other types of data on the use of resources. For example, in my research local people tended to say that caciques (local bosses) monopolized the land in the community. This remark was often made and it was difficult for me to judge the significance of this opinion. However, the genealogy of plots of land that were elaborated showed a much more nuanced picture from the one presented by the local people. In 1942 almost all 71 households in the village had access to at least one plot of land. In the first years after the establishment of the *ejido*, the official rule which prohibited the renting out or abandoning of *ejido* plots was used to take land away from *ejidatarios* who left the *ejido* for a long time. These dispossessions and the re-distribution of these plots were indeed influenced by local power relations. At that time, the value of the land was low, and people had no resources to fight a powerful *ejido* commissioner. Several migrants were dispossessed without fights being made about it. However, with land becoming more valuable with the irrigation in the 1960s and *ejidatarios* acquiring more resources and experience, the practices changed. Land became a scarce resource in a region with hardly any other sources of income and *ejido* land gradually turned into a valuable commodity. Nobody let the land be taken away from him or her anymore without a fight. This meant that in order to dispossess an *ejidatario* of his or her land a long and dirty struggle had to be followed in which the SRA (Ministry of Agrarian Reform) would become involved and the outcome was never clear. This was not a pleasant prospect even for local power holders. Land became scarcer and *ejido* land possession became more and more a form of private property and land was never taken away from migrated *ejidatarios* anymore.

7. Agrarian Communities in Peru: The Complex Interweaving of Institutions

Peruvian highland communities have often been analyzed as culturally anchored in a specific Andean world vision, reflected in strict local codes with respect to land tenure and jurisdiction and well known institutions such as labor exchange and reciprocity. Here I will discuss the complex interweaving of different (land tenure) institutions and the resulting force fields in the central Andes in the Department of Junín, near the Mantaro valley.[a]

All the villages in this region are organized in *comunidades campesinas*. These *comunidades campesinas* (before: *comunidades* indígenas) are organized around land property rights and fall under the *ley de comunidades campesinas*, meaning that they are entitled to a certain self-regulation, with respect to local organization and legislation. The *comunidad* campesina is organized by an executive committee, with the president as head. The highest local authority in the *comunidad* is the communal assembly consisting of all *comuneros*. Next to this institution, there are political authorities, the gobernador and the judge (juez de paz). The gobernador is in charge of keeping order and is the person with whom the police co-ordinates in case of trouble. The juez de paz falls under the Ministry of Justice. Contrary to the president of the community, the gobernador and the juez de paz receive a state salary. Several *comunidades* together form a district, where we find the alcalde and his regidores, the municipality. They are elected by the member *comunidades*.

Adult villagers who fulfill certain requisites (differ from *comunidad* to *comunidad*) can decide whether they want to become comunero or not. Becoming a

member of the *comunidad* means that one develops rights to land but in exchange one has to participate in communal work parties (*faenas*) and fulfill public responsibilities. The so-called no-*comuneros* are people who live in the *comunidad* (village), but who do not belong to the community institution. They have no access/rights to community land, do not participate in communal works, and have no vote in community matters. Yet, this distinction remains difficult as in many issues, the *comunidad* deals with issues that concern all the people at the local level, not only the *comuneros*. In many matters the *comunidad* has authority at the local level, also over people who are not members of the *comunidad* and who have no land rights. This issue of overlapping and interlinking institutions has become even stronger after the eighties.

During the 1980s and 1990s Peru was struck by a civil war due to the insurgence of the Maoist movement of *Sendero Luminoso* (shining path). The period of most political violence lasted from 1980 to 1992, when the leader of the movement Abimal Guzman was finally captured. The guerilla of Sendero Luminoso was especially present in the Andean Highlands. During this insurgence by Sendero Luminosos, local self-defense groups, *Comites de Autodefensa Civil* (CAD) were created to combat Sendero and to defend their own area. Especially in the years that Sendero increased its violence against the rural population. Many of the CADs have been created autonomously by the *comunidades* and later asked support of the army. At a later stage the army itself started organizing local CADs and they were recognized by law in 1991 during the government of president Fujimori. By law, the CADs are entitled to possess and use weapons in order to defend their community. Officially the army is in charge of the Comites. However, in many places the local CADs also worked as a defense against the army itself.

It is interesting to see, what type of situations this gave rise to. The CADs were created next to already existing institutions. Contrary to the *comunidad*, they represent the whole population and not only the *comuneros*. As was said, the CADs fall under control of the army. Although their prime objective, the combat against terrorism, has been fulfilled, many CAD's remained in existence after the termination of Sendero. Their present task consists in taking care of the security together with the other authorities, a kind of police. At the same time, the image of the Comites de autodefensa civil as an organization within the *comunidades*, which have defeated the subversion has led to a strong position and status in those places where they still exist. Peru witnessed a proliferation of NGO's after the years of violence and by some NGOs the CADs are seen as one of the rural institutions, which can create more autonomy and space for the campesinos.

The president of the *comunidad* is the highest authority in land matters. However, in security matters the local CAD now forms the highest authority. Although there is a police station in the region, they are hardly ever asked for assistance (bad reputation for abuse of authority, asking money and threatening), and the CADs are asked for the maintenance of the public order in general and during festivities in particular. The CADs in Tulumayo have assumed the task of administrating justice, although this is not their formal function. One of their tasks is to go out and guard the livestock against thieves. The punishments they can give vary from a fine, to a beating and banishment from the *comunidad*. During the communal assemblies, the president of the local CAD informs the *comunidad* about the discussions during their monthly meetings. In this way, the *comunidad* and the CAD are separate institutions that work closely together. Yet, the new force field that has resulted from the interlinking of different institutions (local authorities (*comunidad*), political authorities (governador, juez de paz), CADs) implies new power relations. This becomes clear in the following example taken from Tümer (2000, p.75):

"A mother whose husband had abandoned her complained to the juez that he did not support her child. After which in a fiesta the juez encountered the husband, drunk and made him sign a document promising that he would pay a monthly sum. The following day the husband went to the juez to tell him that he had been drunk and could never pay such a sum at which the juez simply replied that the document had been signed. After this, the husband went to the president of the CAD, who organized a communal assembly in which the document was made invalid as the man had been drunk and not aware of what he was signing. Another document was made in which the man had the obligation to pay a monthly sum to his ex-wife for alimentation but a sum in accordance whit his ability to pay."

So, the *Comités* in these areas have acquired new functions, namely the execution of sanctions, a task that formally belongs to the administration of justice through the *jueces* and *gobernadores*. This is also having consequences for the management and resolution of conflicts around land in the *comunidad.*[b] In the next section the focus turns to the research methods that are especially useful for a force field approach.

8. Methods Used in a Force Field Approach to Natural Resource Management

The concept of force field is a purposely abstract notion that makes us aware of the existence of historically developed relations of power without determining in advance the main actors or the central dimensions of these power relations in specific situations. The precise characteristics of these relations have to result from the research.

The best methodological approach for the study of power in relation to organizational processes and institutional dynamics is not to start from the perspective of official models but instead working 'from the ground'. As Barth puts it, 'I am in no way arguing that formal organization is irrelevant to what is happening - only that formal organization is not what is happening' (Barth 1993, p. 157). Barth points out that 'it is by attending systematically to people's own intentions and interpretations, accessible only if one adopts the perspective of their concerns and their knowledge of the constraints under which they act, that one can start unraveling the meanings *they* confer on events, and thereby the experience they are harvesting' (ibid., p. 105). Working 'from below' means postponing theoretical closure, and searching for other modes of interpretation and explanation which do not privilege key actors or formal systems.

The official representation of an organization may offer valuable information, yet, often not in the way we expect them to. So, even in situations where many things are not managed according to the official procedures, it can be important to study the formal part of organizations. The central point is to refrain from analyzing these phenomena in terms of a "dysfunction" (messy organization) or a "lack" (of organizational capacities) but find alternative ways to analyze them. For example, if no official list of members exists, but the head of the *ejido* knows all the members by name with the amount of money they owe, the *ejido* and the numbers of cows they possess, this can be an indication of strong forms of social knowledge and control. Hence, there are innumerable ways in which one can study formal parts of an organization in a non-functionalist way. It only means that one postpones analytical closure and searches for other modes of interpretation and explanation.

These examples should not lead to the conclusion that the formal structure and official administrative rules are unimportant. Official rules and procedures can become very important in serious conflicts when the "formal game" has to be played towards outside agencies. By way of a conclusion to this section, the study of the formal aspects of organizations can be very interesting, fruitful and important, and can show us many things, even though in many situations they do not stand for what really is going on.

Following the Flow of Action

A good suggestion by Wolf (1990) is to do research by looking at the 'flow of action', to ask what is going on, why it is going on, who engages in it, with whom, when, and how often' (Wolf 1990, p. 591). This suggestion is extremely useful for research as long as the researcher makes clear decisions about which actions to focus on. One should decide upon the most relevant resources, events, projects, conflicts and people to study the 'flow of actions' around natural resources. The working of institutions and power relations can only be identified by making detailed case studies of the forms of organization around resources, conflicts or village projects.

Detailed studies of access and distribution of resources over time are central as in this way the complexity of different organizing processes and power relations can be revealed. It is also important to find areas of contention, struggle, and conflicts around resources. The focus on conflict is important because conflictive situations give insights into the central issues at stake, and the power struggles and practices which develop around them. The study of conflicts shows how social actors organize themselves, what is important for different categories of people, and how they talk about this. In this way it provides a point of entry for the study of organizing practices, ideological processes, power relations and forms of ordering which develop in certain force fields.

Another important methodological focus of study is public events. In many situations important questions and conflicts are hardly ever spoken about or settled at the official meetings and many issues are resolved in more private settings. However, although official meetings may have little to do with their formal function, they may be illuminating in other respects. First of all, formal meetings may give important clues about what is happening 'behind the scenes', from the ironic remarks, the conversations and discussions in the back of the room, and the discussions afterwards. Furthermore, these public meetings show the ways in which matters are formalized. They may show how issues that have been resolved informally are formally presented, challenged, and negotiated. Public debates give an indication of the most powerful political or administrative discourses (see Bloch 1975 and Parkin 1984 on political language). Meetings can also be analyzed as dramas in which different actors play different roles. Being a drama, it can also be used to explore the relationship between language and action that constitutes social life (Czarniawska, 1997, p. 31). For that reason it is important to study the relation of these official events with other kinds of gatherings and encounters.

The interactions between officials and *ejidatarios* form a different object of study. Long (1989) introduced the notion of the interface in order to analyze the encounters between different groups and individuals involved in the processes of planned intervention. The interface reflects different types of power relations and different patterns of negotiation between, for example, peasants and government officials. According to Long such interactional studies offer a middle-ground level of analysis which reveals specific aspects of state-peasant relations. Long argues that development interface situations are the critical points at which not only is policy applied but at which it is 'transformed' through acquiring social meanings that were not set out in the original policy statements' (Long 1989, p. 3). The study of direct interactions between bureaucrats and 'clients' can be especially interesting in situations of new government programs and changing institutional contexts. These interfaces reveal, for example, the role of institutional discourses, the expectations and perceptions of officials and *ejidatarios*, and the different contexts and processes of negotiation. In these interfaces, we can also study the role of professional jargon and if, for example, legal language indeed 'renders powerless the ordinary language of the uninformed' (Parkin 1984: p. 360).

Following the Flow of Ideas and Reflections

Much attention has to be paid to people's ideas and representations. Social theorizing, reflexive talk and story telling by social actors are central to organization and power. Therefore, we can add to Wolf's point about the importance of following the 'flow of action', the necessity of following the 'flow of ideas'. It is argued that the creation and re-creation of stories are a way of ordering the world around us and are central to any organizing process (Reed 1992, p. 114, Law 1994a, p. 52). The continuous dialogues and discussions we have with people on their courses of action, decisions or events should not be meant to provide material for decision-making models. Instead, these reflections should be used to show 'how people's consciousness engages with the world precisely within the incomplete processes of everyday social practices' (Smith 1996, p. 7). This is a point that Rosaldo also elaborates forcefully when arguing that 'not only men and women of affairs but also ordinary people tell themselves stories about who they are, what they care about, and how they hope to realize their aspirations' (Rosaldo 1989, pp. 129-130). In fact, people everywhere are in a critical, reflective dialogue with the world in which they live, with themselves and with the researcher (Pigg 1996, 1997). An important implication of this perspective is that one does not fear inconsistencies and contradictions in the stories and versions people present. On the contrary, 'shifting, multistranded conversations in which there never is full agreement' may show important areas of contestation and struggle (see Tsing 1993, p. 8). Tsing argues that we should situate local commentaries within wider spheres of negotiation of meaning and power while at the same time recognize the local stakes and specificities (ibid., p. 9). Hence, story-telling, reflective talk, and imagination are essential for the analysis of the force fields in which organizing occurs.

In my view, discourses are the product of processes of domination in society. They reflect the symbolic order and influence the formation of identities. However, because of the existence of multiple force fields, discourses are never totally consistent. Rather

than being the executor of the symbolic order, the subject subjectivizes himself by showing the inconsistencies of the symbolic order. This explains that subjects are shaped but not 'captured' within discursive formations. Discourses do not necessarily shape human minds and cognitive processes in a fixed way (see Said 1978, Bhabha 1991 and Spivak 1987 for an interesting discussion on the effects of colonialism on the subjectivity of colonial subjects). Others have illustrated the hybridization of authority and decentring of discourses from their position of power and authority (Bakhtin 1981). Hence, the use of powerful and influential discourses does not mean that they automatically shape people's consciousness. Instead, situated social actors in their use of differing discourses show the inconsistency of the symbolic order.

Continuous critical reflections by human agents, their theorizing, and their story-telling around different forms of organizing can reveal much about the underlying dynamics. In several organization theories it is argued that the creation and re-creation of stories are a way of ordering the world around us and are central to the organizing process (Reed 1992, Czarniawska 1997). Law (1994a, 1994b) talks in this respect about the many organizational narratives which can be found in every organization. Law shows how participants in an organization may present very different and contradictory narratives about what the organization is about and/ or should be about. These narratives can be contrasting and inconsistent. These narratives can deal with particular conceptions of agency, self-interest, activity, opportunism, and performance. According to Law these manifold narratives of organization show the decentered nature of organizations as no narrative can completely capture the dynamic of the organizing processes. All narratives are true and incomplete at the same time. In this approach, the forms of discourse available to and used by social actors in assessing their organizational situation are a central object of study. Hence, the study of organizational stories and discourses and the manifold contrasting views we may find, should be used for the analysis of organizing practices in relation to the wider force field.

As Cohen points out, 'we could begin by paying attention to the ways in which people reflect on themselves, and then see in what ways these reflections are indicative of social and cultural context, or require such contextualization to be intelligible to us' (Cohen 1994, p. 29). We can look for theories people construct about history, society, and the things that happen around them. We can analyze the way in which villagers tend to express themselves about themselves, the history of their community, and other topics they may come up with themselves. Attention should also be paid to expressions which are frequently uttered, standard ways of talking about certain themes, and distinctions and categories people employ. One should also pursue the more difficult task of distinguishing differences in expressions people use in different settings, topics which are avoided, and parts of reality which are made invisible by their way of talking (see Silverman 1993, Alasuutari 1995). It is important to stress that the significance of certain ways of talking can only be determined in relation to other research material. For example, only in relation to the rest of the research material may one draw conclusions about, why villagers always mention certain rules and not others, why officials always start talking about corruption in the institutes they work for and at the same time stress the importance of formal procedures, and why officials and peasants use completely different languages when they talk about the same land conflict.

The researcher should not be afraid to loose a critical distance and to become a sort of discussant for them, someone who is not party in the petty and hard struggles but who is, nevertheless, to some extent part of the picture' (de Vries 1992, p. 70). It may be fruitful to engage in critical dialogues with the research population. For example, challenging people on certain ideas they hold and deliberately confront them with contradictions in their statements and actions can lead to important insights. It can be interesting to see how the research population reacts to the researcher's theories and doubts and to exchange personal views on the matter.

Quantification of Data on Natural Resources

Although the above-mentioned methodology is primarily of a qualitative nature, the quantification of certain data on natural resources is indispensable. This more quantitative material is crucial for the contextualization of some parts of the qualitative field material. It is also necessary for the analysis of the meaning of discursive material. An additional

methodological advantage of working on a more quantitative data basis is that it can be an excellent way to make people talk about topics that in other settings might be quite sensitive. Although these databases can be very labor intensive they give invaluable insights about people, natural resources and the control over it.

In my own research I worked on several data-bases: a census, genealogies of families of the village and genealogies of land plots of the *ejido*. There were several reasons for this. First of all, kinship relations seemed to be very important but at the same time extremely confusing. Genealogies helped me to disentangle these webs of kinship relations and to estimate the role that kinship relations played in social life and politics. Secondly, with respect to land plots one can find out more precisely what has happened with the land over the years. In the end, the more quantitative material is crucial for the contextualization of the qualitative field material. In combination they give invaluable insights about land and power relations.

9. Conclusion: Power and Natural Resources

Power is a difficult and for that reason much neglected topic of study in development studies in general and in natural resource management in particular. Although much reference is made to the topic, power is generally addressed in an unsophisticated manner as property that one can possess and accumulate. In this article a practice-force field approach to power was proposed that takes distance from these simplistic notions by focusing on three different dimensions of power: strategic games, institutional force and structural power. It is argued that a focus on these different manifestations of power will result in an improved analysis of the distribution, use and management of natural resources.

This multi-dimensional approach to power means that one needs a research methodology that starts from practices "on the ground" without favouring any formal models and ruling beforehand. A valuable research strategy is to follow the "flow of action" and the "flow of opinion" around a specific set of resources for a longer period of time. Other important research methods are the analysis of conflicts around natural resources and case studies of specific projects. In this way it is possible to combine, for example, the study of strategic power games during official meetings, with the analysis of institutional power embedded in standardized rules and regulations, with conclusions about structural power defining hierarchical differences and forms of subordination.

Two examples were presented in which the practice-force field approach, including this multi-dimensional perspective of power, was used for the study of land property relations under communal tenure regimes in Mexico and Peru. In the case of a Mexican *ejido* it was shown how forms of land distribution developed over the years as a consequence of growing land scarcity and higher standards of living. The force field around *ejido* land changed in such a way that communal land possession became in practice a form of private property with much tenure security for smallholders. Contrary to the past, local strongmen no longer were in the position to take land away from poor *ejidatarios*. In the example of Peru, we saw how local self-defense groups that were established during the years of violence in the 1980s and which were meant to fight the subversion under the control of the army, afterwards became part of the local force field in which land matters were settled, in this way changing the power relations around the land.

Although this practice - force field approach implies the postponement of theoretical closure and demands rigorous methodological framing during fieldwork, it is argued that the result is a more realistic analysis of power in natural resource management.

Notes

a This discussion is to a large extent based on research by Nuray Tümer; Empowering rural institutions through local self-defence groups in the central highlands of Peru. (2000, Wageningen: MSc. thesis)

b M. Nuijten and D. Lorenzo (2005): *Moving Borders and Invisible Boundaries: a force field approach to property relations in the commons of a Mexican ejido. In:* F. and K. von Benda Beckmann and M. Wiber (Eds.): Properties of property. New York, Oxford and Berghahn Books. Pp. 347-381

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