



# Managing African Commons in the Context of Covid-19 Challenges

MANAGING AFRICAN  
COMMONS IN  
THE CONTEXT  
OF COVID-19  
CHALLENGES (GUEST  
EDITOR: E. MAPEDZA)

EVERISTO MAPEDZA 

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The idea of a Special Issue focusing on managing the African Commons was ignited as a result of the IASC 2020 Virtual Conference on African Commons held from 13 to 27 July 2020, which generated momentum on the need to better further dialogue on the African Commons. Marco Janssen organized the virtual events. Due to the debates generated and in consultation with the editors of IJC, it was felt that African Scholars should be encouraged to publish through Special Issues focusing on Africa. At that time, it was also envisaged that the Special Issue would strongly link on the governance of the commons to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The global Covid-19 pandemic is one of the major defining moments for development. In Africa, the syndemic, which the Global Landscape Forum refers to as a 'synergy of epidemics' impacted the continent. Whilst Covid-19 started as a health crisis, it has cut across all facets of life. The special issue initially aimed on discussing within this multifaceted crisis and drawing the implications for the common natural resources in Africa such as atmospheric commons (climate), land, water, forests, fisheries, pastoralism, urban and knowledge commons whilst also using a gender lens.

The thrust on Covid-19 was later muted as the special issue progressed due to authors not having made a strong linkage with Covid-19 implications for the commons governance. More papers were also anticipated but a number of presenters had presented some materials, which were already being considered for publication elsewhere with some even requiring more time to publish. After the review process, three webinar and paper presenters during the Africa Virtual events were available to provide full papers, which form part of this special issue (Akamani, 2023; Murombedzi and Chikozho, 2023; van Koppen, 2023). The special issue papers neatly links the global themes on gender within the water commons, climatic commons and the co-creation of forestry commons through co-management.

In the first paper, van Koppen (2023) engages on scholarship centering on restoring the commons through engendering water tenure within Sub-Saharan Africa. The paper starts by articulating how water resources are a commons resource whose trajectory starts at the local level extending to the global hydrological cycle. The author argues that customary tenure based on the everyday practice has received very little attention on research scholarship, legal frameworks and within the policy arenas. The author endeavors to conceptualize the lived experiences of customary water tenure. The author argues that segmentation of water into silos is an invention of external experts, as the

#### CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

**Everisto Mapedza**

International Water  
Management Institute (IWMI),  
South Africa

[E.Mapedza@cgiar.org](mailto:E.Mapedza@cgiar.org)

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local communities tend to manage water resources in a holistic manner.

Taking the gendered domestic and productive water needs and using it as starting point, the author notes how communities' collective investments in water infrastructure to meet these needs, is often managed as commons. The author alludes to what Coward (1986; 1983) calls hydraulic property creation, where such joint investment in water infrastructure will result in creation of water rights. However, the process of hydraulic property rights creation often is based on a hydro-masculinity foundation (Zwarteveen, 2008) which sees this as the arena to be dominated and controlled by men. Hence, investments in water infrastructure for irrigation tend to further marginalize women who, moreover, tend to have less access and control over land. Even in instances where customary rules enable land access for irrigation to women, as was the case in South Africa, such rights can be easily withdrawn where they are deemed to be competing with demand from grazing land by men (Tapela (2015).

Customary water tenure also defines the normative frameworks governing the sharing of the surface and groundwater resources that flow into infrastructure. Invariably, as the author argues, in customary tenure these nature-given resources are respected as a commons to be shared with all within a community but also to be shared out with neighboring customary communities. However, in the sharing out of water resources with powerful third parties, colonial legacies and the ongoing insertion of the role of the post-colonial state imply that the legal frameworks prioritize and protect their formal water rights. In cases where the customary water rights are recognized, they are often regarded as inferior where contests between the different rights are adjudicated upon. The more recent land grabs, which increased after the 2008 food crisis, have seen customary water rights losing out to large-scale land investments, which entails large-scale water abstraction to support the large-scale agricultural ventures.

This paper articulates customary water tenure and how the interaction of formal and customary water commons has been contested and has resulted in the configuration and re-configuration of the water commons in Africa. This paper further demonstrates the importance of understanding gender as a key pillar in determining agency, access and control over both the domestic and productive water commons.

The second paper (Murombedzi and Chikozho, 2023) is on the atmospheric commons and it dovetails well with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Convention of Parties 27 (COP27), which was labeled as the African COP, as it was held in Egypt from 6 to 18 November 2022. Through the lens of the Kyoto

Protocol and the 2015 Paris Agreement, the paper situates the challenges of national sovereignty arguments and how it plays out in managing global climatic commons. The national economic interests, the authors asserts, offer pervasive incentives which act against collective action (Murphree, 1998). Such Westphalian economic interest logic, unfortunately, aligns with the tragedy of the commons as it is most likely to result in increased global climate warming as the IPCC reports have confirmed (IPCC, 2021). The paper reflects on what climate change perspectives imply for the climate change dialogue from an African perspective in the context of hegemonic and neo-hegemonic power inequalities within the global commons. This speaks well to the mandate of the African Group of Negotiators Experts Support (AGNES), which has been actively engaging on amplifying the African voice in climate change negotiations. The authors go on to demonstrate a ray of collective action hope, which has seen collective action emanating from some nationally determined contributions (NDCs) actions despite the presence of vested interests by some of the countries. The authors further reiterate Ostrom (2009) argument that the global efforts to reduce global greenhouse gases calls for collective action at various scales in order to address the challenge of free riding though a shift from open access to global commons (see also Edenhofer et al 2013). Polycentricity seems to be yielding some bright spots of climate action as countries are acting on mitigation and adaptation measures instead of waiting for global consensus on climate change global regime.

The authors clearly state that Africa is in a precarious position in the sense that it has contributed less towards global climate greenhouses yet it is being negatively impacted whilst being least capable to adapt to climate change. The authors, however, note that Africa still has agency and can make use of the weapons of the weak (al la Scott, 1985).

The final paper by Akamani (2023) focuses on how initiatives to sustainably manage forests through co-management between the state and the local communities have been playing out on the African landscape. The ongoing paradigm shift from an emphasis on government to governance is redefining the state-local relationships within the forestry sector (Akamani and Hall, 2019; Mapedza and Mandondo, 2002; Ribot, 2002). This reconfiguration of the institutional architecture for resource management is envisaged to result in a number of positive outcomes such as equity, efficiency, effectiveness of resource decision making, resource sustainability and community resilience (Akamani and Hall, 2015; Cinner et al, 2012). The author argues that realization of the benefits of co-management of forest resources at the local level

requires an understanding of the factors that influence community responses to changing forest policies and other drivers of change.

The paper seeks to address this knowledge gap by engaging with the existing community resilience literature that has been used to explain communities' capacity to maintain and enhance their well-being in the event of shocks from various drivers of change (May, 2021; Folke et al., 2010). Using a proposed community resilience model (Akamani 2012) as an analytical lens, the author employed a qualitative research approach to generate data on the responses of two forest-dependent communities in the Ashanti region of Ghana to the implementation of Ghana's collaborative forest management program. The author, building on the previous research, further advances scholarship in this endeavor by attempting to understand how the process of change happens. Consistent with the community resilience model, the results of the study showed that drivers of change, community capital assets (especially human and social capital), institutions (including traditional institutions), and arenas for interaction played critical roles in the responses of the two communities to the implementation of the collaborative forest management program. These roles comprised creating awareness, providing incentives, enhancing access to resources, and providing opportunities for community collective action. Moreover, the results of the study clearly highlights the importance of path dependence in community responses to drivers of change. The findings on path dependence highlights the need to pay attention to community history and context in the implementation of conservation policies. Importantly, the author calls for further research aimed at understanding the complexity of forest-dependent communities in order to inform policies that contribute to sustainable and resilient communities.

The research papers offers a glimpse of the scholarship on the African Commons and more articles especially on the continuities and changes on the African landscapes as a result of Covid-19 and other drivers of change. The International Association for the Study of the Commons' Biannual Conference, which will be held in Nairobi, from 19–24 June 2023 (the second time in Africa after Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe in 2000), offers an excellent opportunity from a follow-up Special Issue advancing commons scholarship which should promote especially the young and emerging scholars.

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## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

## AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Everisto Mapedza  [orcid.org/0000-0001-8334-3495](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8334-3495)

International Water Management Institute (IWMI), South Africa

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