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Poverty, environment and natural resource use: introduction to the special issue

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A growing population and growing per capita consumption threaten the environment and the natural resource base. Where natural resources are at risk, the livelihoods of many are at risk as well. In May 2006 the Environmental Economics and Natural Resources Group of Wageningen University organized a conference on 'Poverty, Environment and Natural Resource Use' with the aim of contributing to a better understanding of the links between poverty and the natural resource base. The state of the environment affects people's living conditions – and poverty affects environmental quality. Environmental policies cannot be designed and natural resources cannot be managed without appropriate consideration of local people's reactions to those policies and management decisions.

This Special Issue of *Environment and Development Economics* presents a selection of papers from the conference. It includes two of the keynote papers, two contributed papers and two papers that closely link up with the conference topic. The papers have been selected because they put forward models to foster our understanding of good governance and the role of the institutional environment for the functioning and effectiveness of policy measures. Although the papers are motivated from different observations in agriculture, forestry, fisheries or wildlife management, the recurrent issue in these papers is institutional design: how ill-defined property rights and lack of enforcement – already classical topics – but also institutional coherence and spatial structure, drive the use and overuse of resources.

Daniel Bromley shows how otherwise well-managed commons may fail if they operate in a deficient institutional environment. Stefanie Engel and Ramón López show how third-party interventions for protecting the environment and helping the poor may fail when property rights are contested. Even if property rights are well-defined, they are useless without enforcement. The functioning of enforcement mechanisms is discussed by Wisdom Akpalu for the case of fisheries and by Elizabeth Robinson for wildlife. Alejandro López-Feldman and James Wilen show how the spatial

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dimension may upset the effectiveness of otherwise successful resource management schemes. Douglas Brown shows that improving access to land may not be an adequate response to unsustainable agricultural intensification in shifting cultivation.

All papers selected for this special issue develop their insights for institutional design from theoretical models capturing individual responses to incentives. Some papers go beyond this and present data and empirical analysis to back up theory. Clearly a small selection of six papers cannot possibly cover the full range of topics in the domain of 'poverty and natural resource use'. In order to set a focus we have excluded papers that approach the topic empirically or by presenting case studies. A selection of those contributions can be found in a companion volume to this special issue edited by Rob Dellink and Arjan Ruijs.[1]

[1] See Dellink, R.B. and A. Ruijs (eds) (2008), *Economics of Poverty, Environment and Natural Resource Use*, Berlin: Springer.

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