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Common Properties and Municipalities: institutional relations in forest environmental services provision. A case study in an Alpine Region

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Abstract

In recent historical periods, Italian Common Properties have faced some attempts to weaken their institutional role, because of their assumed inability to promote technological and economic development in the forestry and agricultural sectors. More recently, both national and regional institutional reforms led to a renewed recognition of their position in rural development. In North-East Italy the Veneto Region undertook a set of initiatives to sustain such a policy process, and new Common Properties, managing mainly forest and range lands, have been created when local citizens have been able to demonstrate their original tenure rights before the Napoleonic land property reform.

However, the real commitment to the ambitious requests of the regional law and the actual forest management activities carried out by Common Properties are a matter of discussion: contrasting results emerged from recent surveys organized within the EC-funded NEWFOREX and INTEGRAL projects, with different levels of environmental services provision. Efficiency, inclusivity, transparency of new Common Properties are affected by patchy and different local dynamics. In some cases institutional conflicts exist between Municipalities and Common Properties and a better coordination between these local institutions should be promoted.

This paper presents the results of a comparative analysis of motivations and concrete actions of Common Property leaders, collected through a semi-structured questionnaire proposed to the representatives of those Common Properties located in the same areas where a recent parallel survey has been conducted for Municipalities. The degree of cooperation between Municipalities and Common Properties is therefore assessed, trying to understand whether reported institutional conflicts can be considered sporadic or more structural situations.

Keywords: Common Property, Municipality, institutional coordination, forest management, Veneto Region

Introduction

Since the 19th Century, the institutional role of Italian Common Properties in rural areas has been progressively weakened by past governmental action, on the grounds of their alleged inability to promote technological and economic development in forestry and agriculture. Particularly, the fascist regime tried to abolish the common regime and its own collective peculiarities, and Common Properties (CP) were placed under Municipal Administration (MA).

Today, a new wave of devolution and institutional reorganization puts new focus on the role of forest CP in ensuring environmental conservation and supporting socio-economic development of mountain areas (Favero et al. in press; Gatto et al. 2012).

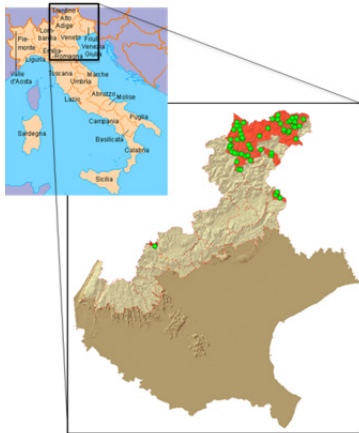


Figure 1. Veneto Region and location of the Common Properties

In the North-East of Italy the Veneto Region undertook a set of initiatives to sustain a policy process of renewed recognition of the CP role in rural development. As a consequence, 'new' CP managing forest landscapes have been restored when local citizens succeeded in providing evidence of their original tenure rights, set in place before the Napoleonic land property reform and other consecutive hostile legislative initiatives. Figure 1 shows the location of the CP within the regional boundaries. Meaningfully, the first clause of the regional law (Regione del Veneto 1996), enacted to reform the discipline on Common Properties, states that *'the Veneto Region recognizes Common Properties as mountain organizations concurring to the environmental protection and to the socio-economic development of mountain territories'*, and

the Region *'[...] promotes the reconstitution of ancient CP, in order to foster policies aimed to stimulate investments in the agriculture and forest sector'*.

Despite the new formal acknowledgement of their institutional and statutory autonomy, and the relevant responsibilities delegated to the CP, the socio-economic environment of mountain areas has greatly changed compared with the past. At least until the early 1950s, forest resources were under more intense harvesting regimes than today, as they played a fundamental role in ensuring the basic means of subsistence to mountain communities. In the following years, radical socio-economic changes occurred throughout the country, including in the Veneto region, with the increased role of the industrial and tertiary sectors, the urbanization process and emigration from marginal areas. Consequently, forests progressively lost their essential role in ensuring livelihoods of the mountain rural population. Thus, whereas forests expanded and almost doubled at a national level, pastures and range lands decreased, along with the traditional grazing activities: in several cases, they even ceased being a peculiar trait of rural landscapes. In parallel, forest production value dropped over the time: industrial roundwood supply lessened, only partially and recently counterbalanced by increasing fuelwood removals (Ciotti and Pettenella 2005). Whereas the role of timber supply reduced, other environmental services (ES) and products progressively gained relevance within the Italian forest sector (Pettenella and Secco 2006): these include, protection from natural hazards (>90% of Italian forests extend over high hydro-geological risk areas), biodiversity protection, water cycle regulation and carbon storage, and nature-based recreational activities. Although in the Veneto mountain area (i.e. the Dolomite region, now a UNESCO site) vast uneven-aged high spruce, fir and beech forests now have high potential for industrial roundwood supply, wood removals count for less than 30% of the net annual increment and winter and summer tourism is by far the main source of income for the local population.

In this radically changed context the real mandate defined by the regional law to the old and new CP and their response in terms of land management activities are a matter of discussion. On this point, Gatto et al. (2013) argued that *'the traditional tools which the communities have given themselves to manage their resources might today not always be sufficient to adapt to external change and disturbances'*. Among the other external changes and disturbances, the recent inflow of newcomers (retired people, non-EU immigrants, distance workers, commuters,

young urban “alternatives”, etc.) appears of real importance (Figures 2 and 3), as it seems capable of reversing the demographic decline in many mountain areas, due to emigration and an ageing population. Thus, the commitment and management options of CP in relation to the objectives and responsibilities that the regional law entrusts them with, is worth assessing.

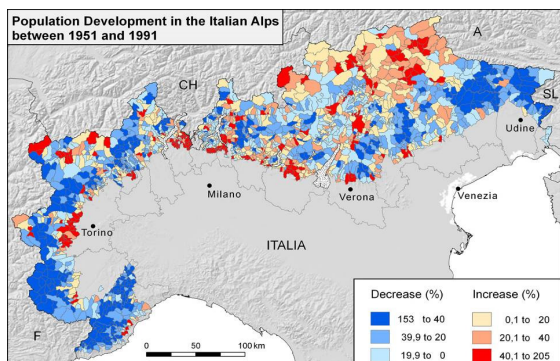


Figure 2. Population development in the Italian Alps between 1951 and 1991. Modified from Steinicke et al. 2014

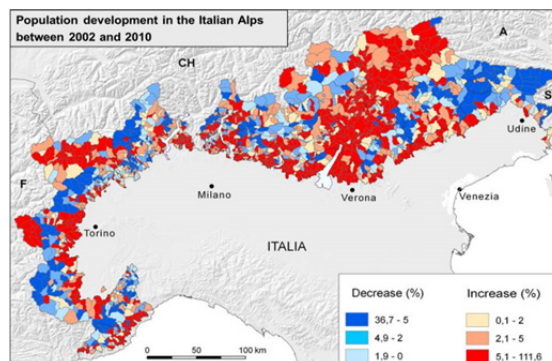


Figure 3. Population development in the Italian Alps between 2002 and 2010. Modified from Steinicke et al. 2014

Objectives and Methodologies

This survey firstly aimed to evaluate whether the outcomes of the re-assignment of former municipal forests to CP can be considered positive in terms of improved forest management practices and ES supply. The MA and CP commitment and attitude towards the provision of ES other than wood, have therefore been assessed and compared. The following ES were selected: biodiversity protection, carbon storage, soil protection and water quality regulation, tourism promotion and support to recreational activities. Interviews were based on a semi-structured questionnaire. In particular, it has been assessed whether CP and MA explicitly consider the selected ES among their current multi-functional forest management practices. The assigned priority to ES supply was also tested analysing whether they consider such provision as a primary or secondary forest management objective. Finally, respondents declaring no or secondary commitment to ES supply were asked to indicate whether they would be potentially interested in strengthening their attitude towards ES provision, and under what conditions. Within the regional boundaries, face-to-face interviews were conducted with private, public, and CP forest owners and managers. The total number of respondents equalled 197, randomly selected from among the whole regional forest owners' population. Of these, 18 interviews were selected first, those with CP representatives – mostly Presidents or Secretaries (out of 53 regional CP units; coverage: 34%). Interviews with municipal representatives were then selected, according to a geographical closeness criterion linking Municipalities with those CP lying within their administered areas. 11 interviews with municipal representatives were considered, whereas 12 others were excluded as no information on CP had previously been collected in the surrounding areas. It should be stressed that data collection followed the research design and methodology suitable for and connected to the EU-FP7 Newforex Project (New Ways to Value and market forest externalities), which encompassed a variety of objectives and research questions going far beyond the aims of this paper (see www.newforex.org/ for further information). Data collection and sampling methods were therefore not specifically designed to cover the regional CP population, introducing some degrees of statistical error in data elaboration. Having proved that no other similar surveys had previously been conducted on the same topic, a qualitative and explorative approach was preferred in the results analysis. The main findings were also cross-checked with data collected

during other surveys, briefly described hereinafter. Any statistical inaccuracies do not therefore seem to be causing any misrepresentation of the main figures and results.

The second research aim was to evaluate the degree of cooperation between MA and CP, trying to understand whether reported institutional conflicts can be considered sporadic, or more structural situations. In fact, some Authors suggested that the coexistence of these institutions is based on a weak equilibrium (Florian 2004; Carestiato 2008; Hampel 2012), thus possibly hindering CP capability to supply 'new' ES. Institutional relationship patterns between CP and MA have therefore been assessed, comparing their representatives' positions, collected through semi-structured questionnaires. This research step took advantage of the EU-FP7 Integral project activities (Future-oriented integrated forest management of European forest landscapes, see www.integral-project.eu for further information). The sampling selection method was rather comprehensive and accurate: all CP-affected Municipalities were contacted, and the response rate was 82% (14 out of 17 MA), covering ~70% of the whole regional CP population (37 out of 53 CP lying within their administered areas). Respondents were identified among the officers mainly responsible for the institutional contacts with local CP (10 times the Mayor, twice an alderman, one municipal secretary and one office manager). Representatives of the CP were also contacted. Globally, 18 representatives of different CP were approached and interviewed. Sampling criteria were the following: (i) geographical area (vicinity to the already contacted MA), (ii) year of establishment, with both long-lasting and new CP re-established after L.R. 26/1996, (iii) results emerged from previous data collection and (iv) political and economic significance of the CP (avoiding very small and irrelevant CP). 13 of the contacted people were CP presidents, once the vice-president, 4 times the administrative assistants. The person in charge of institutional contacts was identified, the stability and qualitative patterns of this relationship, and which difficulties mainly hinder the institutional dialogue and cooperation. Recurrence of legal disputes was explored, along with the perceived level of institutional constraints due to their compulsory administrative relationship. Overlapping competences potentially triggering institutional contrasts were also evaluated. Finally, municipal interviewees were asked to evaluate CP effectiveness in promoting tourism, economic and social development of mountain areas, environmental protection and forest management. CP representatives operated the same self-evaluation. Such data were helpful to integrate and cross-check information collected in the previous desk-research phase.

Results and Discussion

Interviewees were asked to indicate whether they considered the provision of ES other than wood compatible with the ongoing forest management practices, along with their inclusion in the current management goals and their assigned 'priority level'. Table 1 shows the related results. Interestingly, almost all the interviewees, both CP and MA representatives, were convinced that current forest management practices are compatible with the supply of selected ES. A few municipal representatives gave negative answers referring to carbon storage (9.1% of times conflicting with current forest management actions) and soil protection (20.0%). The judgment was clearer concerning the inclusion of investigated ES within the current forest management goals and plans: somehow, ES are always taken into consideration, with the only exception being carbon storage (6.7% of negative answers among municipal representatives). Nonetheless, MA and CP representatives' positions differed considerably with reference to the assigned 'priority' given to provision of each single ES. In fact, in many cases MA representatives designated such ES as 'main' forest management objectives; on the contrary, CP interviewees often described them as subordinate to wood supply. This particularly applies to tourism and recreational activities and carbon storage.

Other figures confirmed a rooted CP commitment to wood supply: timber selling revenues have been described as representing almost the entirety (71.4% of times), or a relevant share (21.4%),

whereas MA representatives described them as 'not very relevant' (28.6%, opposed to 7.1% for CP), or 'negligible' (71.4%) if referred to the whole municipal financial budget.

Table 1. Compatibility between ES provision and ongoing forest management practices, ES inclusion in the current forest management goals, and related assigned 'priority level

ES types	Organization	ES supply compatibility with current forest management		ES supply embodied within current forest management goal		ES supply priority (main or secondary forest management goal)	
		No	Yes	No	Yes	Main	Secondary
Tourism and recr. activity	MA	0.0%	100.0%	0.0%	100.0%	88.9%	11.1%
	CP	0.0%	100.0%	0.0%	100.0%	14.3%	85.7%
Biodiversity	MA	0.0%	100.0%	0.0%	100.0%	90.0%	10.0%
	CP	0.0%	100.0%	0.0%	100.0%	66.7%	33.3%
Carbon storage	MA	9.1%	90.9%	6.7%	93.3%	50.0%	50.0%
	CP	0.0%	100.0%	0.0%	100.0%	7.7%	92.3%
Soil protection, water quality	MA	20.0%	80.0%	0.0%	100.0%	80.0%	20.0%
	CP	0.0%	100.0%	0.0%	100.0%	66.7%	33.3%

Interviewees declaring no ES inclusion within current forest management objectives, or who assigned secondary relevance to such services and objectives, were also asked to indicate whether they were potentially interested in strengthening their commitment to supply such services, and under what conditions. Table 2 shows the related results. Uncertainty prevailed with reference to tourism: most interviewees, both MA (100%) and CP (66.6%), demonstrated that they do not know how recreational activities could be better linked with forestry interventions. Notably, 26.7% considered the proactive increase of biodiversity levels not applicable within their forest areas, or were not interested in such a commitment (13.3%). However, many interviewees were potentially favourable to further focussing on biodiversity even without direct earnings, simply by adjusting their forest management actions. On the one hand, interviewees broadly considered carbon storage compatible with current forest management actions, but they definitely saw it as secondary to timber provision; on the other hand, many stated that they would commit themselves to provide higher carbon storage levels only if associated to direct earnings (50% among MA and 40% among CP), and many others considered this goal not applicable to their forest areas (40% MA and 33.3% CP). Differently from the other ES, in the vast majority of cases soil protection and water quality were described as primary forest management objectives, and highly compatible with current forestry practices. Nonetheless, the future interest in higher proactive ES supply levels followed similar trends to those for carbon storage, that is little interest in doing more without direct payments.

Table 2. Potential interest in supplying higher ES levels, and under what conditions. Question targeting respondents declaring no ES inclusion within current forest management objectives, or assigning them secondary relevance

ES types	Future ES supply (attitude)	MA	CP
Tourism and recreational activities	Yes, with direct earnings	-	16.7%
	Yes, also with no direct earnings	-	-
	Yes, with indirect profits	-	16.7%
	No, I think it is not applicable	-	-
	No, in any case	-	-
	I don't know	100.0%	66.6%
Biodiversity	Yes, with direct earnings	10.0%	20.0%
	Yes, also with no direct earnings	60.0%	26.7%
	Yes, with indirect profits	-	6.7%
	No, I think it is not applicable	30.0%	26.7%
	No, in any case	-	13.3%
	I don't know	-	6.7%
Carbon storage	Yes, with direct earnings	50.0%	40.0%
	Yes, also with no direct earnings	-	-
	Yes, with indirect profits	10.0%	-
	No, I think it is not applicable	40.0%	33.3%
	No, in any case	-	-
	I don't know	-	26.7%
Soil protection, water quality	Yes, with direct earnings	33.3%	40.0%
	Yes, also with no direct earnings	33.3%	13.3%
	Yes, with indirect profits	-	13.3%
	No, I think it is not applicable	22.2%	33.3%
	No, in any case	-	-
	I don't know	11.1%	-

MA representatives were then asked to evaluate CP effectiveness in promoting social and economic development, tourist promotion and environmental management within their administered areas. Figure 4 shows the results, displayed in ascending order from left to right, from the worst to the best overall evaluation. Likewise, CP representatives were asked to rate their own effectiveness (self-evaluation); the results are shown in Figure 5.

The most positive evaluations concerned the CP environmental management impacts: MA representatives often admitted that forest management has improved since CP took over this responsibility, given that it constitutes the CP *core business*, whereas MA also have many other fields of interest to deal with. However, along with some favourable comments, some MA representatives stated that the entrepreneurial attitude of some CP seems far from being fully realized, i.e. mainly limited to timber selling. Negative opinions prevailed in relation to tourist promotion: they observed that commoners are often still tied to old mentality and behaviour, closely related to forestry and pasture management, therefore not oriented towards new strategies of territorial marketing, landscape management and rural tourism development. The

most critical judgments concerned CP capability to promote social development: 78.5% of given answers were negative opinions. In fact, interviewees mostly stressed four critical issues: (i) difficulties of non-commoners in entering CP and being accepted as CP members, even if they have been living in the local area for decades; (ii) exclusion of non-rights holders from some common resource benefits (e.g. access to grants for young newly married couples, to scholarships, to building subsidies, etc.), thus creating some social contrasts; (iii) some commoners' hostile attitude towards outsiders, namely tourists and people living elsewhere; and (iv) absent or weak gender balance, given that in some cases females are still not allowed to represent their household in the CP Assembly.

The most obvious gap between commoners' point of view and municipal representatives' opinions occurred with reference to the social issues. In fact, commoners asserted that their effectiveness in promoting social development is secondary only to the environmental management. In fact, they mainly stressed that CP induce social cohesion within local communities, reinforcing their identity as members of the community, which is particularly important for small and isolated mountain villages. They also argued that the provision of some products and services is also granted and extended to non-commoners, even though high variability exists among CP Statutes, with quite a patchy geographical situation. In addition to their assumed ability in uniting the local community, commoners also recalled their proactivity in the organization of several events and public initiatives – ranging from cultural, enogastronomic, to religious ones – where the whole community is encouraged to participate. Finally, some of them admitted that in the past contrasts between commoners and non-rights holders led to some conflicts, also including some forms of exclusion, but they also observed that most of the time such 'past issues' have been overcome and solved. Apart from social development, commoners sorted the other issues in the same descending order as that chosen by municipal representatives, i.e. environmental management, economic development and tourist promotion. Nonetheless, and as expected, they were slightly inclined to assign higher scores to their own actions.

The collected data revealed a high recurrence of legal disputes between MA and CP, mainly concerning the definition of property rights over land, assets or buildings. Litigations were often triggered by the inaccuracy of cadastral information. In some cases such controversies have already been solved, but many are still ongoing. Other institutional conflicts concerning the formal allocation of some particular responsibilities, e.g. issue of permits to access forest roads, also came to light. The severity of such institutional frictions was mainly described as reasonable (57.1%), whereas it was considered relevant or heavy by 14.3% and 28.6% of interviewees respectively. Figure 6 summarises the occurrence of legal disputes and institutional conflicts between MA and local CP.

The regional law designates CP as a subject '*concurring*' to the management and development of mountain areas, and it also sets some mandatory mechanisms of institutional coordination with MA. In fact, on the one hand, Municipalities hold the overall administrative authority within their municipal boundaries, on the other, CP often own the vast majority of forests and farmlands lying outside the urban centres. Thus, both CP and MA representatives were asked to indicate how severe they perceive the limits and constraints connected to such legislative requirements on their own management. Figure 7 displays the related results. Unexpectedly, the opinion prevailed that a 'compulsory' coordination does not pose heavy limitations to each one's autonomy and ordinary management.

Finally, the results demonstrated that CP are always represented within the local municipal Assembly. In fact, in every Town Council at least one Councillor, Alderman or even the Mayor (9 times out of 14) is also a commoner, or alternatively a commoner's offspring who usually participates in the CP Assembly on behalf of the head of the household. It often resulted that

one single municipal representative is responsible for maintaining formal contacts with local CP (5 times the Mayor, once the Deputy Mayor), whereas in four other cases one Alderman or the Deputy Mayor reinforce the Mayor's role. In only 3 cases the institutional contacts originate from a collegial effort, through the involvement of the whole Town Council. On the CP side, a main role is played by Presidents (17 out of 18 cases), eventually supported by the Vice-President (6), Secretaries (5), or Administrative Board members (6).

All in all the creation of new CP can be considered a positive process in terms of both increased provisioning services (wood harvesting), with the related positive impacts on the local economy, and in the supply of public or common ES. Some problems of the CP are related to their social inclusiveness; in a territory with remarkable demographic change this is a traditional "half empty or half full glass" issue: CP are able to keep their traditions and rules in land management, preventing any land use change, but at the same time they exclude the newcomers, with their innovative ideas and programmes.

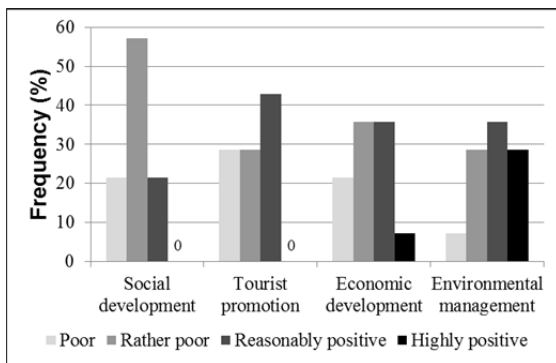


Figure 4. Municipal representatives' assigned rate to CP effectiveness in promoting social and economic development, tourist promotion and environmental management

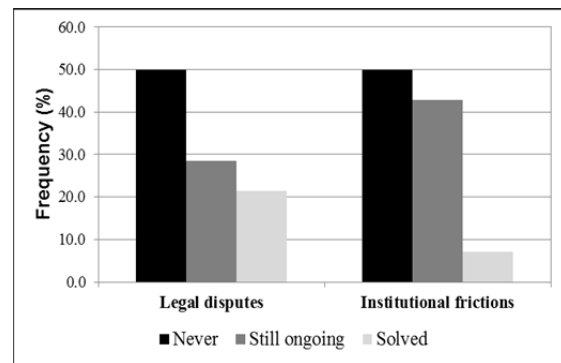


Figure 6. Occurrence of legal disputes and institutional contrasts between MA and local CP

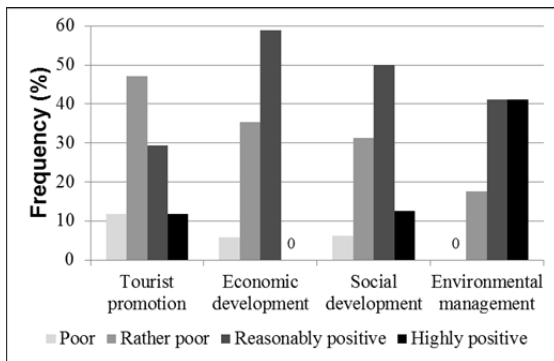


Figure 5. Self-evaluation of CP representatives of their own CP effectiveness in promoting social and economic development, tourist promotion and environmental management

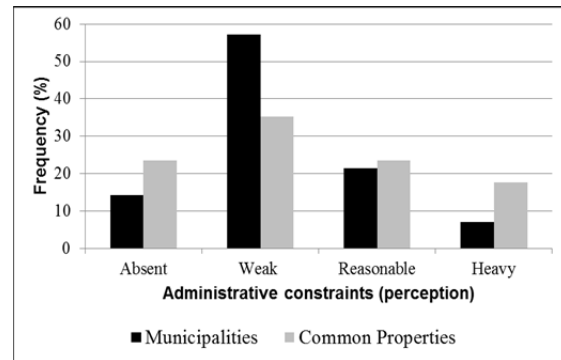


Figure 7. Perceived severity of limits and constraints on each one's ordinary management, and ascribable to compulsory mechanisms of institutional coordination

Conclusions

Results suggested that CP seem more committed to traditional forest management than Municipalities, thus the re-establishment of 'new' CP may reinforce the main provisioning services, i.e. wood harvesting. However the dichotomy "CP focussed on market-based activities vs. MA focussed on ES provision" does not hold for at least two reasons: (i) in the highly regulated Italian forest sector, MA tend to abandon or to make a more extensive use of their forests, actively managed for centuries and now ageing and thus increasingly vulnerable, resulting in a reduced provision of some ES. On the contrary, active CP forest management more oriented to wood production can indirectly support the provision of some ES (landscape conservation, carbon storage, soil stability). (ii) because of institutional arrangements and, especially, of constitutional rules of CP, only 10% of profits deriving from forest management activities by MA are reinvested in the forestry sector, while in the case of CP almost all profits have to be reinvested in land resources improvements.

Interviewees mainly perceived forest-related tourism as not really included in the existing forest management plans, and forest landscapes are simply thought to be the essential *substratum* needed for local tourism. Differently, no evident trade-offs between wood provision and carbon storage service appeared. Biodiversity was perceived as a sort of forest management spill-over, not necessary to be further proactively fostered through *ad hoc* interventions. On the one hand, soil protection appeared to be a sort of forest management pre-requisite, on the other, it was described as an implicit management side-line.

Strongly different opinions on CP ability to promote social development have been registered between CP and MA representatives. Whereas a new open attitude recently began to prevail, CP still remain quite effective in mainly catering for the interests of commoners and protecting the *status quo* in forest land use. In a changing society with a lot of newcomers, perhaps CP should commit themselves to promoting social models as 'inclusive' as possible. It is likely that new demographic trends will lead Common Properties to develop new rules and criteria to possibly accept new members within the CP Assembly.

Institutional conflicts are frequent. Nevertheless, a mutual willingness to reach friendly agreements has recently prevailed. Resolution of litigations has been revealed to be a relevant driver for cooperation and establishing more sound institutional relationships. Such resolutions should therefore definitely be pursued by both the contending parties. Interestingly, CP representativeness within the municipal administration is not a discriminating feature in setting up positive or negative institutional relationships, even though it represents a positive integration of these two local Institutions. Rather, formal mechanisms aimed to enhance and support mutual cooperation are needed: indeed, the results suggest the importance of formal and informal contacts being between more than just one municipal and CP representative. Otherwise, if the institutional relationship is reduced to individual and personal contacts, the robustness of the whole institutional relationship may suffer from any worsening of these 'private' contacts. To this end, mechanisms to enforce stable, robust and enduring cooperation (e.g. joint declarations of interest, procedural and/or economic memoranda and agreements, etc.) are worth implementing.

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