

Beyond Borders: Rethinking Global Citizenship Through Common Land, Collective Belonging, and the Politics of Ecological Participation

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Abstract

Can global citizenship be fully understood without grounding it in land, access, and shared belonging? Contemporary conversations often frame citizenship in terms of mobility, rights, and global ethics—but tend to overlook the material and ecological foundations that shape how people live and participate in the world. This paper argues that common lands—such as forests, pastures, and water bodies—are not just resources but political spaces where citizenship is negotiated and lived. Drawing on political theory and historical struggles over access and autonomy, the paper reframes citizenship as a practice rooted in place, ecology, and collective responsibility. It challenges the assumption that global citizenship must be disembodied and universal, instead highlighting how deeply local practices of stewardship, mutual obligation, and land-based identity offer alternative models of participation and justice. The paper also reflects on how leadership over commons often resists formal state authority, emerging through customary norms, dialogue, and shared use. By focusing on land as both a right and a relationship, this work contributes to reimagining citizenship in a time of ecological uncertainty and political fragmentation. It invites a rethinking of what it means to belong, to lead, and to collaborate in a shared world.

Keywords: global citizenship, common land, ecological participation, political ecology

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Introduction

When people enact citizenship by working together as a community to manage their forestlands, resolve issues with common pastures, and defend ancestral lands against the threat of forced displacement, how do we conceptualise citizenship? Three major ideas related to citizenship are currently central to contemporary research on this topic. First, mobility between national borders; second, universal human rights, and third, a cosmopolitan moral obligation to act ethically in relation to distant others (Santamaría-Cárdaba et al., 2024). While these concepts offer people the opportunity to conceptualise and articulate a sense of solidarity that transcends national borders, they have consistently ignored a critical factor: the material and environmental foundations that shape how people live and politically participate.

Citizenship emerges as communities negotiate, contest, and enact their claims through shared commons, including forests, pastureland, and water. However, they are more than mere resources to be governed and utilised; as such, they are also places of day-to-day political engagement for all citizens.

Studies on commons governance across many different geographic locations have shown that for the vast majority of the world's people, the capacity to remain on ancestral territory, to continue to practice livelihoods based on the use of collectively held resources, and to influence decision-making about those resources represents the basic experience of political existence (Ostrom, 1990). These experiences are overlooked in studies of citizenship. Their primary focus remains on how the ecological and material aspects of political life have been relegated to the periphery by theories that focus on movement and universal rights (Samanta, 2021).

This paper rethinks the concept of citizenship. It looks into it as a practice deeply rooted in place, ecology, and collective responsibility. Those within the commons negotiate who belongs, what authority should be exercised, and what constitutes justice through their collective actions. Practices at the local level of stewarding land and governing territories provide both knowledge (epistemology) and models of participation; however, these have been obscured from view by universalist approaches to citizenship. To understand the nature of citizenship, one must consider how communities around the world use their political agency to manage shared lands.

The Universalist view obscures the distribution of injustice to different territories and communities. It ignores multiple forms of legitimacy and authority that communities have developed over their long-term stewardship of a territory (Pellow, 2000). Additionally, by ignoring the long-term development of community-based legitimacy and authority, this view fails to recognise that communities fighting for their right to resist displacement and assert control over commons are among the most important political battles of today (Dobson, 2006).

The paper unfolds in seven sections. In the next part of the paper, interrogate why mainstream citizenship discourse has rendered land and the familiar good invisible. The third part develops a theoretical argument that links common-pool resource management to citizenship practices. The fourth and fifth parts list case studies of how commons can practise citizenship through commoning; the sixth part explains how power, knowledge, and other ways of knowing (alternative epistemologies) influence how people govern their commons. The seventh part provides an overview of the implications of the proposed framework for how we think about global citizenship. Finally, the conclusion suggests a new direction for the development of

global citizenship by orienting it toward ecological justice and place-based participatory engagement.

The Incomplete Nature of Disembodied Citizenship

Mainstream Citizenship Theory's Claims & Omissions

Three main areas have become the focal point of contemporary citizenship studies: scholars focus on individuals' ability to cross borders between nations, to exercise their universal human rights, and to develop cosmopolitan ethics toward "distant others" (Reysen et al., 2020). Although these are valuable for generating an understanding of solidarity beyond territorial bounds, they are incomplete.

Scholars of citizenship overlook land access and resource governance as basic forms of political engagement (Tully, 2008). Instead of seeing territory as part of the fabric of politics, mainstream theory views it as a backdrop to political activity. Therefore, instead of looking at mobile subjects who can cross borders, scholars tend to look at communities based on location, where community members' political agency emerges through governing the familiar places they share resources. Histories of enclosures and displacement are secondary to the histories of citizenship, or do not fit into the history of claims made for citizenship (Pellow, 2000).

Citizenship theory based on Universalism imagines individuals as "free floating", able to create new forms of membership based on their own imagination rather than geographic location (Benhabib, 2004). In doing so, this perspective does injustice to the billions of people whose basic needs depend on access to land and its natural resources (Tully, 2008). As a result, scholars ignore the material aspects of their lives in their theories and actively marginalise the communities that exercise political agency by protecting the common resources needed for collective survival.

Materiality of the Commons

Political existence depends upon control of the land; communities need to share resources to live. For example, forests provide fuelwood, pastureland provides fodder and medicinal plants; grazing lands support migratory livestock; and water supports both agriculture and drinking (Agrawal & Gibson, 1999).

Commons are sites of political struggle, not neutral or value-free resources. The decision regarding whether one has a right to participate in the commons determines who is entitled to be a part of the community. Determining the authority a community will have over the commons determines the rights its members will have. Collective action by a community to decide what constitutes justice through common activities demonstrates how the everyday practices of making rules, enforcing compliance, and resolving conflicts constitute political agency (Hailwood, 2005). Political agency is demonstrated by linking individual claims with the well-being of the collective (Agrawal, 2001).

Citizenship has little substance without a connection to tangible physical realities. Universally applied citizenship theories emphasise community participation and involvement, yet they ignore the fact that participation depends on having the resources to do so. Citizens within a community can determine who is a legitimate stakeholder, as can the law. Authority and

belonging in a commonwealth are created through an ongoing commitment to engage with a territorial area (Nagahama et al., 2022).

Ecological crises, including climate change, biodiversity loss and land degradation, will severely impact all of the commons globally. The universalist approach to citizenship creates a veil of ignorance as to how environmental injustices affect territories and communities unequally (Pellow, 2000). The adverse effects of ecological damage are disproportionately felt by marginalised populations even though they were not responsible for causing them (Bullard, 2005).

Fragmentation is a political process that depends on how different forms of legitimacy and authority are conceptualised. State institutions fail to function; centralised systems of governance have failed and will continue to do so; local communities develop their own institutions through the collective management of resources over multiple generations (Ostrom, 1990), which coexist with those of the formal political system.

Communities that resist dispossession illustrate that citizenship is an outcome of the struggle for the right to be recognised as citizens. Indigenous peoples, pastoralist societies, and forest-dependent communities are fighting to preserve their territorial spaces against state appropriation; they are also challenging the State's enclosure of the land on which they depend for grazing or for livelihoods derived from the forest. All of them have been framing citizenship as a political struggle to claim rights; therefore, it is no longer just a matter of having legal status but of making claims for rights they believe are legitimate (Agrawal & Chhatre, 2006). This way of framing citizenship brings together the theoretical with the practical. It links the theory of citizenship to people's political participation, and through commons governance, we see practices of democracy, accountability, and justice. Therefore, to address today's crises, mainstream frameworks must integrate these material dimensions of citizenship (Schlosberg, 2004).

Citizenship Through Commons Governance Theory

As a way to practice citizenship, shared governance is an act of citizens participating together in the management of shared resources, and therefore practising citizenship as a form of environmental citizenship.

One way people can exercise their citizenship is through shared governance — that is, by collectively managing shared resources. Thus, shared governance is one way to express the idea of environmental citizenship. To do so requires possessing virtues such as responsibility and the capacity to engage in deliberative processes with others (Connelly, 2006). Similarly, communities also express their citizenship through contextual justice, which concerns relationships and territorial membership based on location rather than the universalism of abstract concepts (Carens, 2000).

Additionally, Green Republicanism frames citizenship within a Constitutional framework that incorporates ecological limits and the political-economic realities of society. Therefore, green republicanism positions the state to protect and promote the ecological well-being of all citizens (Barry, 2008). As such, citizenship and the environment are now the same. The citizen has environmental obligations, which are among their most basic civic duties, in addition to their fundamental rights (Dobson & Bell, 2006).

Land as Right and Relationship

Commons governance is a model that views land as a legal right to standard resource systems, but also as a social-ecological relationship that defines how individuals have access to land, how they can use it, manage it, and exclude others from using it (Schlager & Ostrom, 1992), and simultaneously forms the identity of an individual or group through their sense of belonging to the land, and their understanding of the ecology of the land (Manzo, 2003).

Communities view land ownership as contradictory to faithful stewardship. Stewardship prioritises ecosystem health over time while sustaining the livelihoods of dependent communities. Citizenship based on the principles of the commons emphasises the need to integrate these two elements so that citizens can maintain their political agency and achieve justice (Gavin et al., 2018).

How Citizenship is Enacted Through the Commons

Commons communities are responsible for enacting their own citizenship in a commons by developing the “deliberative” aspects of citizenship through shared governance, including rule-making, monitoring, and stewards to the commons. The assemblies that make up the commons will develop, implement, and modify the standard rules that govern the commons (Andersson & Ostrom, 2008).

A “Rule-Making Process” is the creation or modification of standard rules for governing the commons (in this case, how many gallons of water a person can withdraw from the well per day). The Rule-Making Process may also include developing specific rules to meet each member of the commons’ individual needs while ensuring the long-term sustainability of the commons. After the Rules are developed, they need to be enforced by monitoring all users to ensure they comply with the established rules of the commons. If a user does not comply with the Commons’ rules, there will be consequences based on the degree of non-compliance (i.e., sanctions). These sanctions provide enforcement mechanisms to encourage users of the commons to comply with the commons’ rules (Guttman, 2021).

Additionally, leadership within the commons will develop when individuals demonstrate the ability to resolve conflicts among members of the commons and commit to the long-term, sustainable management of the commons’ resources. Leadership in the commons will also emerge when individuals build trust with other members over time (Baldassarri & Grossman, 2011). Therefore, membership in a commons community means being a citizen of the commons and having a sense of collective responsibility to actively maintain the commons and its resources, rather than simply being a member with a legal right to use the commons (Bird et al., 2025).

Case Studies That Illustrate Environmental Governance as an Example of Embodied Citizenship

Ogiek People of Mount Elgon, Kenya

Ogiek live in the montane forest regions of Mount Elgon in Kenya and Uganda. They are a hunter-gatherer community and therefore totally reliant upon the availability of forest resources. Approximately 20,000 Ogiek people inhabit the Mount Elgon forest region (Kenrick et al., 2023).

The Ogiek possess customary governance structures to manage their forest commons. The Chepkitale Ogiek Governing Council is responsible for governing decision-making regarding the use of forest resources. Decisions made by the Council establish customary regulations on honey collection, medicinal plant gathering, and grazing practices. Members of the Ogiek community monitor forest activity, and those who violate the Council's regulations will be subject to sanctions, such as warnings or temporary exclusion from accessing forest resources. The Kenyan Government has repeatedly forced the Ogiek people off their ancestral land under the guise of "conservation" goals. After the Ogiek were removed from the land, commercial logging companies gained access to the forest. They extensively harvested trees, causing severe damage to forest ecosystems. Furthermore, the Kenyan government created the Plantation Establishment and Livelihood Improvement Scheme (PELIS) to replace native forests with non-native plantations (Kenrick et al., 2023).

The repeated loss of ancestral land through eviction has caused an ongoing struggle for the Ogiek to recognise their land ownership rights legally. A report on conservation by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) stated that, in addition to protecting the integrity of forests, recognising the Ogiek's rights to land titles would help prevent forest degradation. The IUCN report further found that customary governance systems produce superior conservation outcomes than state-based systems; therefore, securing Ogiek property rights will serve as a strong incentive to protect their shared-use forestland (IUCN, 2016).

The Ogiek claim land ownership based on their historical occupation and continuous use of Mount Elgon forests. The Ogiek have continuously lived in these territories and developed extensive knowledge of the forest ecosystems. Customary law systems implemented by the Ogiek govern the regulation of forest resource extraction to ensure it does not occur at unsustainable rates and to protect the forest from degradation. The customary law systems employed by the Ogiek effectively demonstrate their ability to manage the commons (Claridge, 2018).

The experience of the Ogiek illustrates that citizenship arises through territorial stewardship—the Ogiek exercise governmental authority by developing and enforcing rules related to resource utilisation. The customary law system used by the Ogiek links an individual's utilisation of resources to the overall well-being of the ecosystem. The Ogiek's efforts to secure property rights to their ancestral lands constitute a claim to political authority grounded in their management of the commons and their place within it. Maintaining property rights to their lands is crucial to ensuring both the continued livelihoods of the Ogiek and the sustainability of the forest ecosystem.

Netarhat Indigenous Movement, Jharkhand, India

Since the 1980s, indigenous peoples of Netarhat, Jharkhand, have been resisting the State takeover of their common forestland. Thirty-plus indigenous tribes joined forces under the name Jan Sangharsh Samiti to stop the military use of their ancestral lands; an Indian government firing range was established on almost 1,500 km of forestland managed by the indigenous peoples of Netarhat. Adivasi people of Netarhat serve as environmental warriors in their fight to protect the forest from State militarism and commercial exploitation. The State was granted title to all forests through colonial legislation, which removed Adivasi people from the land they had environmentally managed for generations. The present-day Adivasi resistance, such as the movement at Netarhat, is an explicit challenge to the colonial legal

structures that have been used to suppress customary rights and the Adivasis' role in ecological stewardship (Singh, 2024).

These communities do not rely on the State to recognise their history or territorial claims. The Netarhat communities are examples of how Indigenous peoples can identify politically as both Indigenous and democratically governed simultaneously (Basu, 2024).

Collective ethnic identity has served as a base for claims to territorial autonomy in Jharkhand since the colonial period. The Netarhat movement unites ethnic identity to claim control of their territory and self-governance (Prakash, 1999).

In assemblies held by the Jan Sangharsh Samiti, communities make decisions on the management of natural resources and the strategy of resistance through democratic processes. The leadership role rotates among community members who demonstrate the ability to mediate conflicts and protect the resource. In addition, women's groups play a very active role in enforcing customary laws against illegal logging and wildlife trafficking.

Forest struggles in post-colonial India represent claims to human rights and territorial justice. Communities seek to remove State control over forests and claim that access to forest commons is a fundamental human right, necessary for survival and the continuation of culture (Singh, 2022).

The communities have employed long-term non-violent resistance using legal petitions and organised protests. Despite the State demolishing the communities' villages and restricting their movement, the communities rebuild and continue their resistance. The fact that this type of resistance continues underscores that citizenship is a form of continuous political struggle grounded in territorial defence and collective governance.

For the communities involved, territory, culture and political existence are united. Losing land represents losing livelihood, culture and autonomy. The communities' continued resistance and governance represent that they are exercising citizenship as an active process of claiming place and ecological stewardship.

Conclusion

Governance of the commons represents a form of citizenship, embodied in action towards common spaces. Political authority is exercised in both cases through customary law and/or collective decision-making processes, and both have the capacity to enforce their decisions through monitoring and applying sanctions to those who breach them. In doing so, both forms of political authority connect individual use to collective well-being.

Hawthorne and Alabaster (1999) define environmental citizenship as active citizen participation in ecological decision-making processes. Citizens actively engage in managing environments through "practical stewardship", rather than through formal institutions. The Ogiek demonstrate this model through the application of their Forest By-Laws. Similarly, the Netarhat communities demonstrate the Hawthorne and Alabaster model through the territorial defence assemblies they hold.

Huttunen et al. (2020) identify environmental citizenship as being based in particular locations and communities. In this context, citizenship develops from a combination of territorial

relationships and social relationships. The Ogiek govern their territory on Mount Elgon through their indigenous knowledge of the area, while the Netarhat communities coordinate resource management through community networks established during their assemblies.

Schild (2016) has also examined environmental citizenship within the context of political theory. Within this context, citizenship concerns power, authority, and justice within an ecological framework. The Ogiek customary councils challenge the state's authority over forest conservation. At the same time, the Netarhat resistance against the Indian army's appropriation of their land asserts political agency through their stewardship of the land as commons.

Ostrom (1990) identified eight design principles for effective governance of the commons. Communities need to develop rules that reflect local circumstances, monitor compliance, and apply graduated sanctions when breaches occur. Also, leadership will emerge from individuals who have demonstrated competence. The Ogiek customary councils and the Netarhat assemblies operate under these principles.

According to Dobson and Bell (2006), our environmental responsibilities represent a key aspect of our obligations as citizens. They are thus a central element of what it means to be a citizen. In this view, being a citizen includes both rights and responsibilities related to ecology.

Collective resource stewardship, such as commons governance, may help fulfil these responsibilities by enabling the shared management of the natural resources upon which we depend for our livelihoods and ecosystems.

The scale of current environmental disasters calls for citizenship frameworks that reflect material realities. While most theories of global citizenship have failed to adequately address how environmental injustices are distributed throughout the world's territories, they tend to ignore long-term stewardship systems that govern natural systems. The development of a commons-based model of citizenship addresses both of these gaps.

Comparative research has shown that the Ogiek forests have maintained better ecological conditions than comparable state-managed areas, and that customary governance has prevented the degradation of the forests resulting from commercial logging. Similarly, the Netarhat communities have protected their forests from destruction by military activities through collective resistance. In both cases, the communities have achieved better outcomes than they would have had they relied on state institutions or centralised conservation programs that displaced Indigenous stewards.

In many instances, centralised conservation policies displace the customary managers of natural resources. State appropriation of lands that are home to Indigenous people can destroy forest commons. Therefore, commons governance offers an alternative for communities seeking to exercise legitimate authority through demonstrated stewardship practices.

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