Journal of Business and Management Studies
ISSN: 2709-0876
DOI: 10.32996/jbms
Journal Homepage: www.al-kindipublisher.com/index.php/jbms

JBMS
AL-KINDI CENTER FOR RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

| RESEARCH ARTICLE

AI-Augmented Commons Governance: Ethical Rulemaking and Enforcement for Sustainable Resource Management in Rural Areas

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| ABSTRACT

Artificial intelligence (AI) is emerging as a potentially transformative tool for addressing complex challenges facing the governance of common-pool resources (CPRs) in rural communities. Building on Elinor Ostrom's design principles and drawing on the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 13, 15, and 16, we argue that AI technologies such as natural language processing, remote sensing, and machine learning can support participatory rulemaking, efficient monitoring, and proportional enforcement of local institutions in the commons. Through case studies from Kenya, Peru, and India, we show how AI can democratize decision-making and enhance local institutions if designed in ways that reflect human oversight and community co-design. We offer a conceptual framework for applying AI to commons governance, drawing on principles of ethical AI design, data sovereignty, and implementation within the contexts of the commons. We conclude that AI can be a valuable technology for common governance, but only when it augments, rather than displaces, the judgment and agency of the commons communities.

| KEYWORDS

Commons Governance, Common-Pool Resources (CPRs), Rural Resource Management, Artificial Intelligence (AI), Participatory Rulemaking, Monitoring and Enforcement, Sustainable Development, Ethical AI, Explainability and Transparency, Human Oversight, Community Consent, SDG 13: Climate Action, SDG 15: Life on Land, SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions.

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 01 August 2025 **PUBLISHED:** 30 August 2025 **DOI:** 10.32996/jbms.2025.7.5.2

1. Introduction

Small towns have common-pool resources (CPRs) such as recreational areas, internet connectivity, local job opportunities, healthcare services, and shared infrastructure which are increasingly at risk of ecological degradation, socio-economic inequality, and pressures on local ecosystems. These resources are commonly managed by local communities without much support from formal institutions, making them prone to overuse, misuse, and breakdown of governance. A significant body of work by Elinor Ostrom and others has demonstrated that local communities can manage their commons effectively, given the opportunity and means to self-organize.

Meanwhile, AI has become a disruptive technology across finance, healthcare, agriculture, and public policy sectors. Natural language processing, machine learning, remote sensing, and anomaly detection are among AI technologies that are being increasingly applied to issues related to environmental governance, which has given rise to excitement and concern. Can AI empower rulemaking and enforcement in CPR governance in rural areas, or does it exacerbate centralization, lack of accountability, and distrust in the community?

This paper explores the possibilities of AI-augmented governance frameworks in CPR management in rural areas to make a case for how rulemaking, monitoring, and enforcement can be facilitated with the help of AI. We examine how AI can be connected to

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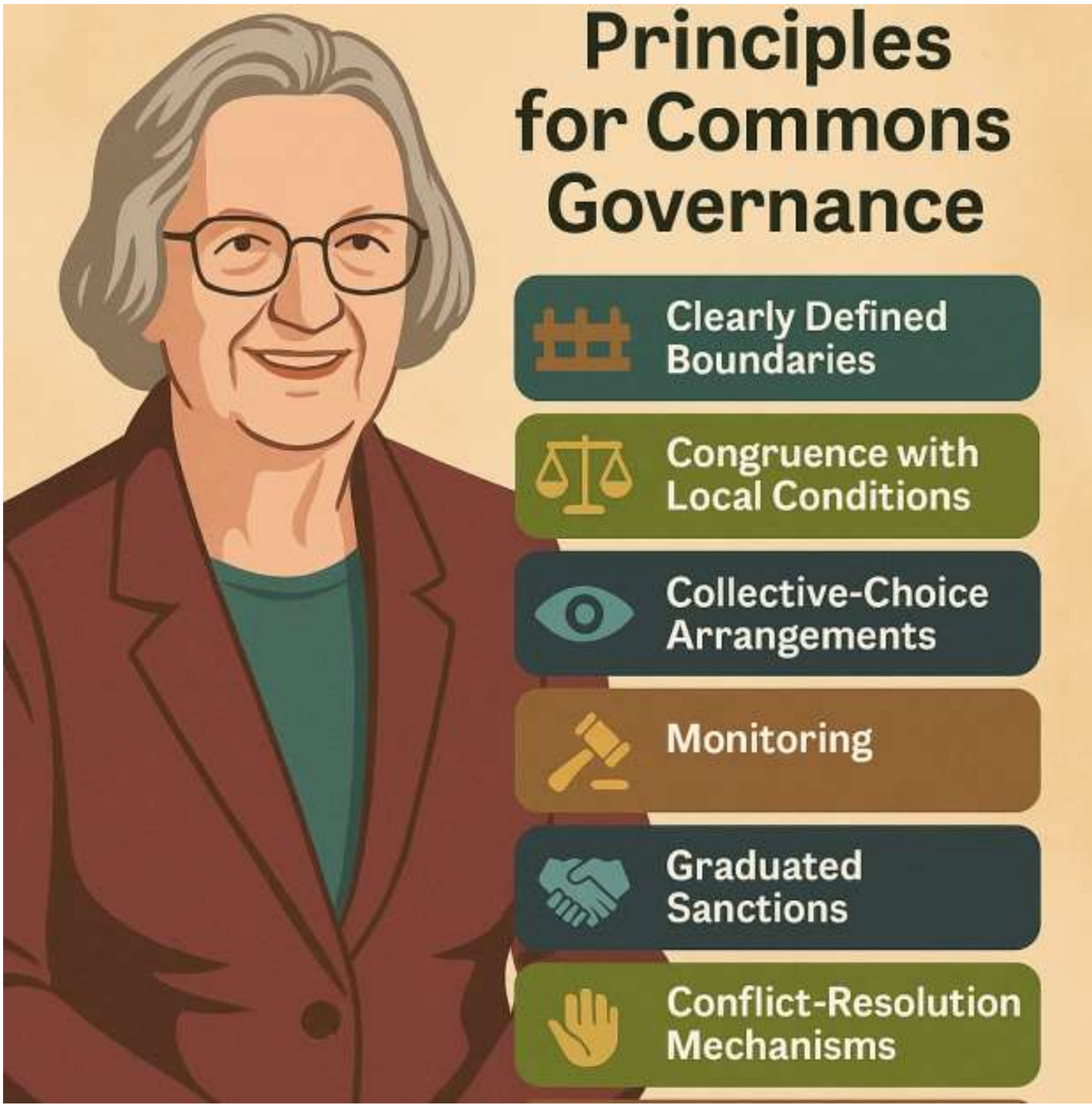
Ostrom's design principles for long-enduring commons institutions and how it can be in line with or against the values of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDG 15 (Life on Land), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions).

This work draws on environmental governance theory, AI ethics, and development policy, and creates a conceptual model for community-empowered, ethically oriented, and context-sensitive AI in CPR management. Through examples and critical examination, we outline both opportunities and threats, suggesting that AI should be designed as a complement rather than a substitute for participatory governance.



2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Elinor Ostrom's Design Principles and Commons Governance

Elinor Ostrom has pioneered research on the governance of common-pool resources (CPRs), challenging the "Tragedy of the Commons" theory, and demonstrating that human communities are capable of organizing themselves to develop enduring and self-organizing governance systems. In her seminal research on common pool resources, Ostrom identified eight design principles shared by successful common pool resources institutions: (1) clearly defined boundaries; (2) congruence between rules and local conditions; (3) collective-choice arrangements; (4) monitoring; (5) graduated sanctions; (6) conflict-resolution mechanisms; (7) minimal recognition of rights to organize; and (8) nested enterprises in larger systems.

These design principles serve as the basis for a polycentric governance system, where rules are defined, monitored, and enforced by those who use and rely on the resource. These principles have since become pillars of theory in disciplines ranging from political economy to sustainability science and provide a solid benchmark for evaluating the potential opportunities and challenges of emerging technologies, including AI.

Table 1. AI Support for Ostrom's Commons Governance Principles

Ostrom Principle	Potential AI Application	Benefits	Risks
1. Defined Boundaries	Satellite imagery + ML segmentation	Accurate, real-time boundary mapping	Data ownership concerns; reliance on external tech
2. Collective-Choice Arrangements	NLP from community meetings	Synthesized rule proposals from public input	Excludes non-digital participants; language bias
3. Monitoring	Drones + IoT sensor fusion	Real-time alerts and scalable oversight	Privacy invasion; risk of surveillance overreach
4. Graduated Sanctions	AI-calibrated penalties based on behavior data	Fair, proportional enforcement	Context misinterpretation; algorithmic bias
5. Conflict Resolution Mechanisms	AI-supported mediation tools and simulations	Visual aids, unbiased facilitation	Lacks emotional nuance; distrust in AI "judges"
6. Recognition of Rights to Organize	Blockchain for codifying community-created rules	Transparent, tamper-proof records	Technical access barriers for rural users
7. Nested Enterprises	Federated data systems powered by AI	Improved coordination across governance levels	Complexity; uneven data access and literacy

2.2. Artificial Intelligence and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

AI can potentially accelerate the realization of some of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Three of the SDGs are of particular importance for commons management:

SDG 13 (Climate Action): "Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts." Improved commons governance can help protect forests, maintain water resources, and prevent land degradation.

SDG 15 (Life on Land): "Protect, restore, and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, halt and reverse land degradation, and halt biodiversity loss." Ecosystems depend on effective institutions to manage CPRs.

SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions): "Promote peaceful and inclusive societies, provide access to justice for all, and effectively combat corruption." This is aligned with Ostrom's emphasis on participatory, rule-based governance.

AI has the potential to advance progress on these SDGs—but only if it respects, rather than undermines, community agency and governance structures.

2.3. Artificial Intelligence in Governance: Uses and Risks

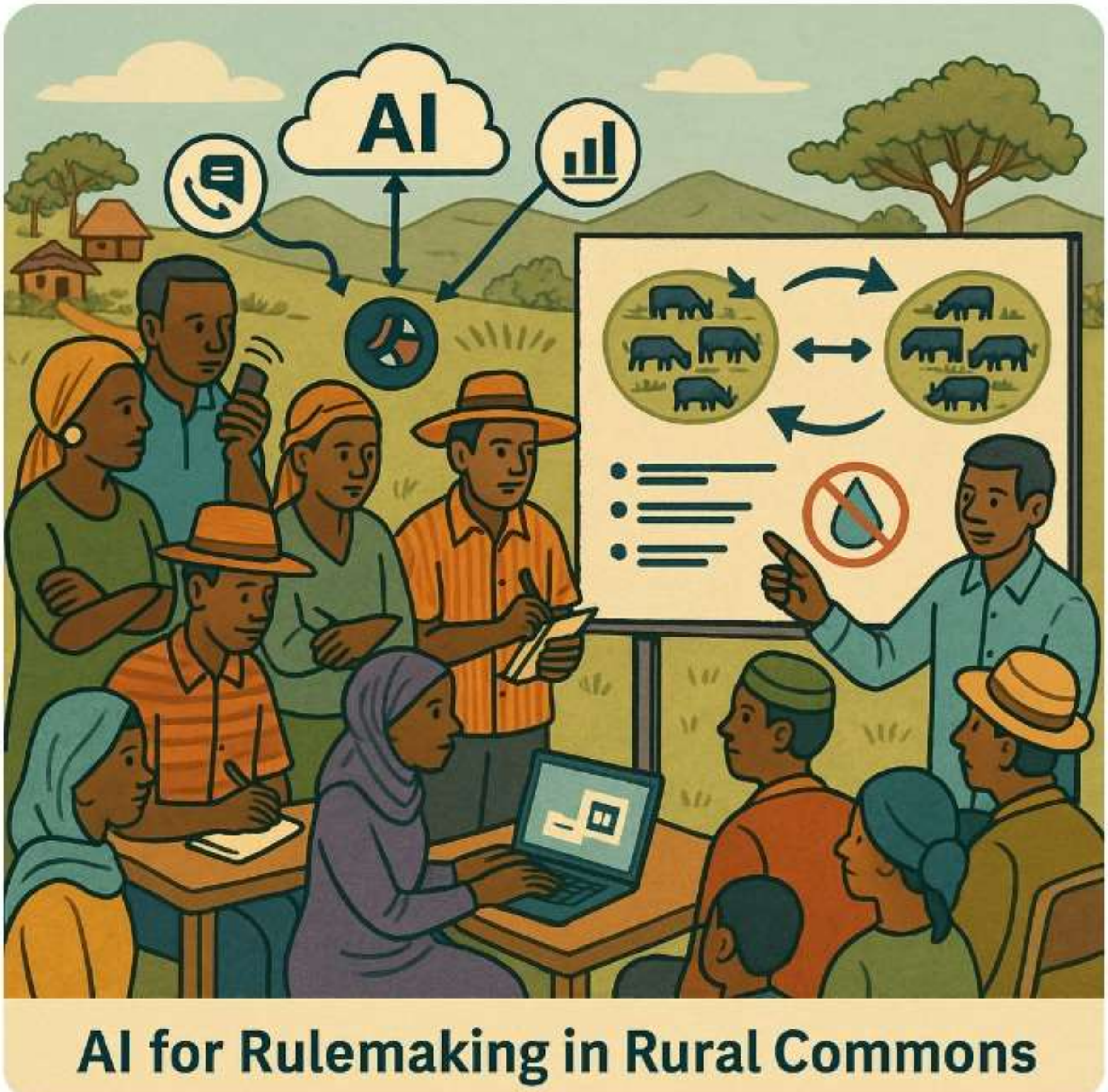
AI is being used for a wide range of public-sector decision-making, including predictive policing, fraud detection, land use planning, and policy simulation. In the field of environmental governance, AI could be used to monitor illegal activities (e.g., use of satellite imagery to identify illegal logging), create rules (e.g., to help understand the data generated by community feedback), and improve enforcement (e.g., to inform the calibration of fines).

There are also risks associated with AI in governance: opacity of algorithms, bias in training data, overreach in surveillance, and the displacement of local knowledge and participatory processes. AI tools can exacerbate inequalities if deployed in low-tech rural areas with limited literacy and digital connectivity.

In commons governance, AI needs to be based on the principles of explainability, accountability, and local control. These are principles that are gaining support from the community of AI ethics scholars and the OECD, UNESCO, and the European Commission.

2.4 Conclusion of Framework

This article uses Ostrom's design principles as an evaluative lens to assess AI's compatibility with sustainable, participatory commons governance. In doing so, it proposes that any AI intervention in rural commons must be context-sensitive, community-empowering, and SDG-aligned, or risk undermining the very foundations of self-governed sustainability.



3. AI for Rulemaking in Rural Commons

Rulemaking is a critical pillar of sustainable common governance. In Ostrom's institutional framework, effective institutions allow users to jointly design rules that regulate their resource system. These rules must be relevant, perceived as legitimate, and responsive to evolving conditions. Yet, in many rural settings, rulemaking is limited by language barriers, administrative capacity, and access to scientific or spatial data. Artificial Intelligence (AI), especially Natural Language Processing (NLP) and machine learning, can be valuable tools if leveraged appropriately.

3.1 Participatory Rule Design with NLP

In multilingual or low-literacy areas, public deliberation can be undermined by exclusion or communication asymmetry. NLP tools can parse inputs from varied sources—oral recordings, survey responses, SMS messages—and summarize them into structured records or identify patterns of consensus. For instance, a community's oral deliberations on grazing limits can be transcribed and summarized with AI to show shared values or points of contention.

AI can help as a complement rather than a substitute for collective decision-making, helping to minimize information overload and foster inclusion. This facilitates Ostrom's principle of collective-choice arrangements, enabling users to influence operational rules.

3.2 AI-based Simulation of Rule Effects

Another role for AI in rulemaking is simulation and forecasting. Machine learning models can predict how new rules—say access limits, rotation schedules, or penalty thresholds—would affect user behavior, ecological indicators, or conflict rates. With local data and AI-driven learning, agent-based models can demonstrate how alternative governance options would affect a community before they are adopted.

This is particularly important in high-risk commons (e.g., shared irrigation or forest access), where rule changes can have unintended consequences. For instance, in arid areas, water-sharing rules can be simulated under different climate scenarios to evaluate long-term resilience.

3.3 AI-augmented Drafting and Visualization of Rules

AI systems can help local leaders or councils draft written rules in plain language and translate them across languages. Generative AI models can suggest neutral wording, incorporate legal constructs (e.g., if-then enforcement clauses), or visualize rules using icons or charts to facilitate community understanding.In pilot projects in Southeast Asia and East Africa, AI tools have been used to summarize rotational grazing agreements or forest access permissions in visual formats, which are then reviewed and approved in village assemblies.

3.4. Mini-Cases: AI for Rulemaking in Rural Commons

🐃 Case 1: AI-Supported Rulemaking in Pastoral Commons – Narok County, Kenya

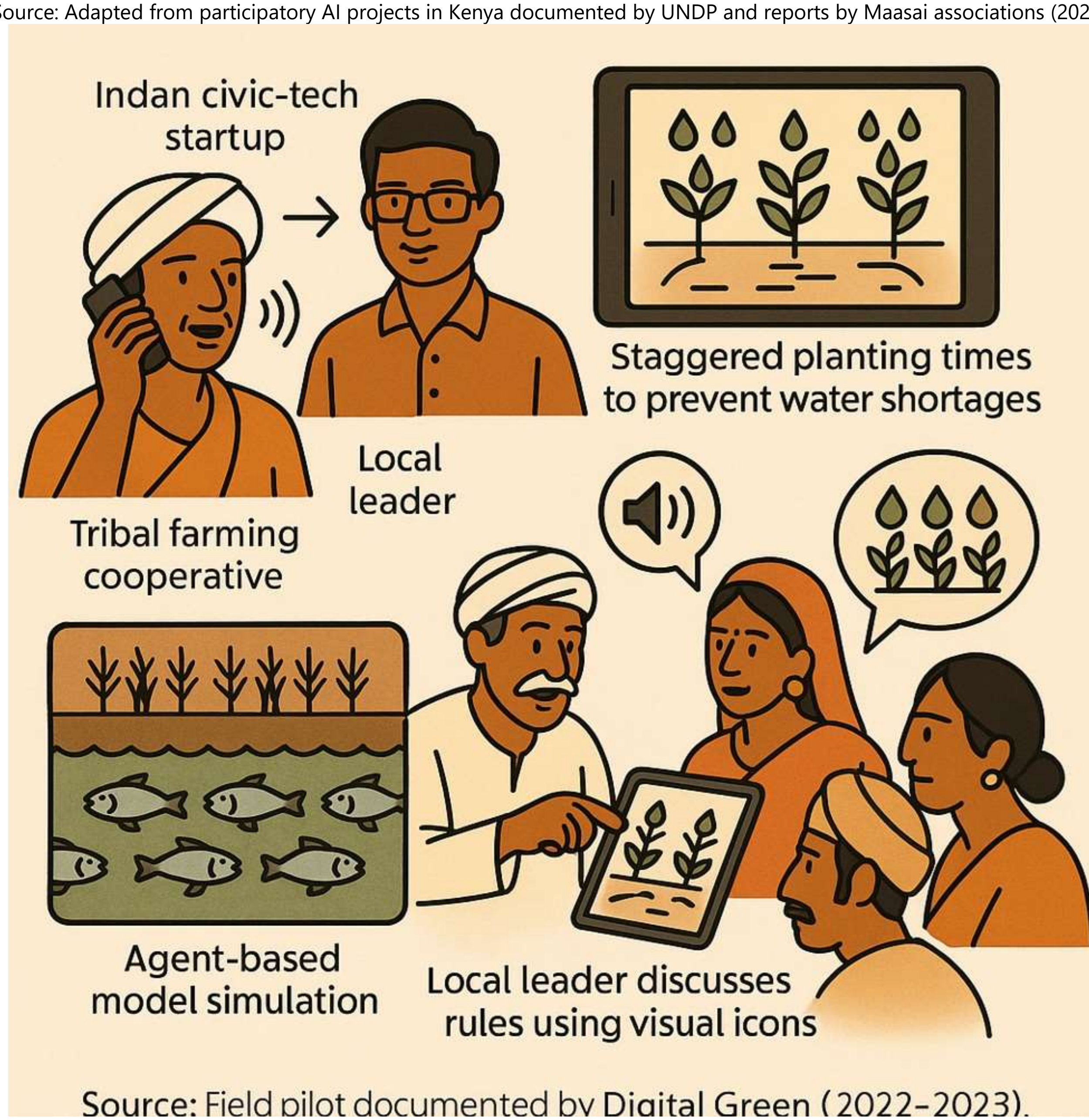
For centuries, the Maasai herders of Narok County in Kenya have traditionally managed seasonal grazing of rangelands through an assembly of council elders. Recent pressures from changing ecology and shortened rainy seasons, however, have led to conflicts between clans about timing and intensity of grazing.

In 2023, a pilot project, led by a local NGO and a university-based AI lab, introduced community participatory rulemaking technology enabled by Natural Language Processing (NLP). Over 100 community members (including herders, clan elders, and dairy trading women) recorded their suggestions in Maa and Swahili. Their inputs were then processed by an NLP model trained on the local dialects to generate a summary of the most frequently mentioned changes, such as seasonal grazing cycles and limits on livestock numbers.

Local translation services helped generate a set of visual icons and short narrated videos to convey the summary findings back to the community. The icons and videos were presented as a neutral set of inputs to the community village assemblies for discussion. Although the rules were officially confirmed by traditional oath-taking ceremonies among elders, the new AI tools helped surface the voices of younger and female herders that were otherwise not heard.

Trust concerns remain, but the project also produced fewer conflicts over resources and more widespread ownership of the rules.

Source: Adapted from participatory AI projects in Kenya documented by UNDP and reports by Maasai associations (2023).



🌾 Case 2: Machine Learning for Crop Sharing Rules – Chhattisgarh, India

In Chhattisgarh, tribal farming communities have traditionally managed communal rice paddies irrigated with rainwater using seasonal water allocation rules. Conflicts about planting times and water shares arise during drier seasons.

In 2022, an Indian civic-tech startup and a local farmer cooperative co-designed a rule-design tool based on community input and rainfall data. Farmers submitted their preferences for planting times through mobile voice messages in Chhattisgarhi and Hindi. These messages were transcribed and analyzed by NLP and clustering algorithms to identify common preferences (such as staggered planting times to prevent water shortages).

A fish agent-based model simulated the impact of different rules and shared the results through visual icons and narrated audio on tablets during community meetings. Local leaders and farmers discussed and refined the planting times for the upcoming season using these visualizations.

Outcome: The project reduced water stress and improved compliance with planting times. Farmers were especially happy with the visualizations, and women in the community could more easily participate through audio-based technologies.

Source: Field pilot documented by Digital Green (2022–2023).

🐟 Case 3: Participatory Fisheries Management – Lamongan, Indonesia

In the coastal fishing communities of Lamongan, Indonesia, local fishers have historically used customary rules to govern access to fishing grounds. Conflicts between villages over their fishing grounds and a lack of cooperation led to declines in fish stocks and ecological health.

A project, led by a regional university and an international marine NGO, introduced voice-based AI tools in 2021. Fishers recorded their observations and suggestions in Javanese through a community radio station. NLP tools translated and categorized the input into themes (such as no-fishing zones, seasonal closures, and catch limits).

Rule options were proposed by community councils using a generative AI model trained on similar community fisheries regulations. The rules were discussed, refined, and finalized through town hall meetings using visual maps of the rules displayed at the harbor and on mobile phones.

Outcome: Community participation improved, fish catches stabilized, and compliance with seasonal closures improved. Younger fishers and women were recruited as tech facilitators to promote digital skills in the communities.

Source: Adapted from the AI4Fisheries pilot, University of Surabaya & Rare Indonesia (2021–2022).

3.4.1 Key Takeaways

AI tools can support participatory rulemaking processes by improving transparency, inclusion, and legitimacy.

Success depends on culturally sensitive facilitation, low-barrier interfaces (such as icons, voice-based inputs), and community approval of final rules.

Privacy, representation, and ownership concerns need to be addressed early and openly.

Visual and oral outputs can be especially valuable in multilingual and low-literacy contexts.

These mini-cases show that AI is most effective as a mediator—not an arbiter—in rural commons governance. The best outcomes come when communities retain control and adapt the technologies to their values, capacities, and local traditions.

3.5 Ethical Considerations and Constraints

While AI tools can democratize rule design, they raise concerns. AI models trained on external data can fail to represent cultural nuances or amplify bias. Algorithms can contribute to power imbalances if used uncritically or undemocratically. To avoid this, the use of AI must be designed as part of participatory processes, and ultimate authority over decision-making should be retained in human deliberation.

Finally, digital divides—whether in access, literacy, or infrastructure—can empower elite users or other outside actors. A key guardrail is co-design of AI systems with community members and ensuring the system's explainability, fairness, and community control over data and decisions.

3.6 Conclusion

AI is promising for participatory, adaptive, and inclusive rulemaking in commons management. When appropriately designed, it can supplement existing governance systems, rather than replace them. The next section discusses where AI can be applied to monitoring, enforcement, and sanctioning, and where risks of misuse are highest.


AI FOR MONITORING AND ENFORCEMENT IN RURAL COMMONS
PERMITTED ZONE
RESTRICTED AREA
Remote Monitoring through AI-Enhanced Tools
Detection of Rule Violations and Pattern Recognition
Graduated Sanctions and Data-Informed Responses
Ethical Risks and Social Resistance

4. AI for Monitoring and Enforcement in Rural Commons

As long as resource use is regulated, a commons' durability hinges on the ability to monitor and enforce the rules. Monitoring and enforcement are often a big job for human labor, inconsistent, or rely on social pressure. Here, AI—especially when paired with drones, remote sensing, and low-cost sensors—can provide scalable solutions to monitoring. But it also raises immediate ethical, logistical, and equity concerns.

4.1 Remote Monitoring through AI-Enhanced Tools

Remote monitoring through AI-enhanced tools uses drones, satellite imagery, and ground-based sensors to monitor use patterns. These tools can catch livestock movements, deforestation, or water capture much more effectively than human patrols, especially in larger or more remote commons.

For example, convolutional neural networks (CNNs) can analyze high-resolution images to identify illegal deforestation or livestock movements outside of designated areas. In places where the environment is changing, it can detect signals of environmental stress (e.g., tree loss or soil moisture loss) and link them to human activity.

4.2 Detecting Rule Violations and Pattern Recognition

Pattern recognition by machine learning can detect behavioral patterns of rule violation, such as repeated use of a specific water source or grazing corridor. When combined with data from sensors (e.g., RFID tags on livestock, water flow sensors), these systems can flag possible violations and alert community monitors or leaders.

Some systems also use geo-fencing, where areas are defined virtually and any tagged animal or vehicle movement across the line triggers an alert. This is still consistent with Ostrom's principle of monitoring, provided it is done by or on behalf of the community—not by external authorities imposing top-down surveillance.

4.3 Graduated Sanctions and Data-Informed Responses

Informed responses by AI can also support graduated sanctions, a core part of Ostrom's governance model. For example, if a rule violation is detected (e.g., more livestock on the restricted pasture), an AI system can suggest an appropriate response based on:

-frequency of previous violations,
-cooperation history,
-environmental impact.

This can provide fairer, evidence-based enforcement, reducing the possibility of capricious punishment and boosting the legitimacy of the system. It can also automate fairness, but without human discretion and empathy.

4.4 Ethical Risks and Social Resistance

AI can have operational advantages, but also poses social risks. Communities can see drone monitoring as intrusive or feel powerless in the face of algorithms they can't understand. There's also a risk of enforcement being punitive rather than restorative, especially if managed by outsiders (governments, NGOs, or private firms) who don't understand local norms.

Key to the integration of AI in commons enforcement is transparent design, community consent, and human oversight. Enforcement decisions must be rooted in relationships, not just data.

4.5 Mini-Case: Drone Monitoring and AI Sanctioning in Forest Commons – Madre de Dios, Peru

The Madre de Dios region of the Peruvian Amazon is home to community-managed forests where local cooperatives harvest timber, Brazil nuts, and medicinal plants for their livelihoods. Despite having legal rights to manage the land, outsiders continue to illegally log and encroach on the forests.

In 2022, a local conservation group, a tech startup, and the forest user association started a pilot project to increase forest monitoring using drone-mounted cameras and AI image classification. Twice per week, drones flew over 20,000 hectares to capture high-resolution images. A machine learning algorithm, trained on labeled images, identified signs of recent logging, increased footpath development, or encroachment into restricted areas.

When a suspicious pattern was identified (for example, new tree stumps near a community boundary), alerts were sent to the forest monitoring committee via SMS and radio. Along with GPS coordinates, alerts included a confidence score, prompting on-site visits by elected monitors. If confirmed, the AI-assisted report was used by the committee to make graduated decisions about sanctions, from warnings to temporary resource restrictions.

However, the community had a say in the rules governing drone flights, the violations that were monitored, and how alerts were interpreted. Training sessions were held to explain how the AI worked, and the final decision on enforcement was left to a human committee, not the algorithm.

The results included reduced external encroachments, faster responses to rule violations, and increased involvement of youth in monitoring. Some concerns remained: some older residents did not like "flying machines" watching them, and there was continued debate about the lasting power of AI logs in disciplinary records.

Lessons learned: This case shows how AI-assisted monitoring and community-based enforcement can work together to improve commons governance. When done with consent, clear accountability, and human judgment, technology can support—not replace—human stewardship.

Source: Adapted from ACOMAT community drone surveillance pilots in Madre de Dios (2019–2022) by the World Resources Institute and the Environmental Prosecutor's Office of Peru (FEMA). See: WRI Peru Forest Monitoring Report, 2022.

4.6 Conclusion

AI-based monitoring and enforcement can reduce costs, increase coverage, and make for a fairer system—but only when it's aligned with community norms, open to review, and supported by human discretion.

5. Embedding AI in Community-Based Governance

While AI tools may have the technical capabilities for rulemaking, monitoring, and enforcement, successful adoption in rural commons is contingent on their alignment with local institutions, values, and capacities. Technology alone cannot solve the problems of governance; if deployed without community input, trust, or control, it can actually make things worse. This section discusses how to embed AI into commons governance systems without displacing the social relationships and institutional memory that make them resilient.

5.1 AI as a Complement, Not a Replacement

Ostrom argued that diversity of institutions and polycentric governance are key where rules are made and enforced at multiple, overlapping levels. AI, when designed appropriately, can enhance this diversity by strengthening, not standardizing, local decision-making. For example:

An NLP system surfaces conflicting views within a community, helping clarify values rather than force a consensus. A drone alert prompts a dialogue, not a punishment.

In short, the critical principle is that humans retain final judgment. AI should increase transparency, reduce friction, and lower the cost of monitoring—but not serve as a top-down enforcement authority.

5.2 Community Ownership of Data and Decision Processes

One of the greatest risks of deploying AI is that data from rural communities—e.g., grazing patterns, drone images, voice records—are stored, analyzed, or monetized by outside actors. This undermines trust and can result in what some call "data extractivism." Instead: Communities should own and control their data, with explicit protocols for access, consent, and erasure.

AI systems should be explainable in local terms, so users can understand how decisions are made and when to challenge them.

Community "data charters" or tech agreements can define these boundaries, ensuring that AI aligns with social norms and local law.

5.3 Building Local Capacity and Digital Literacy

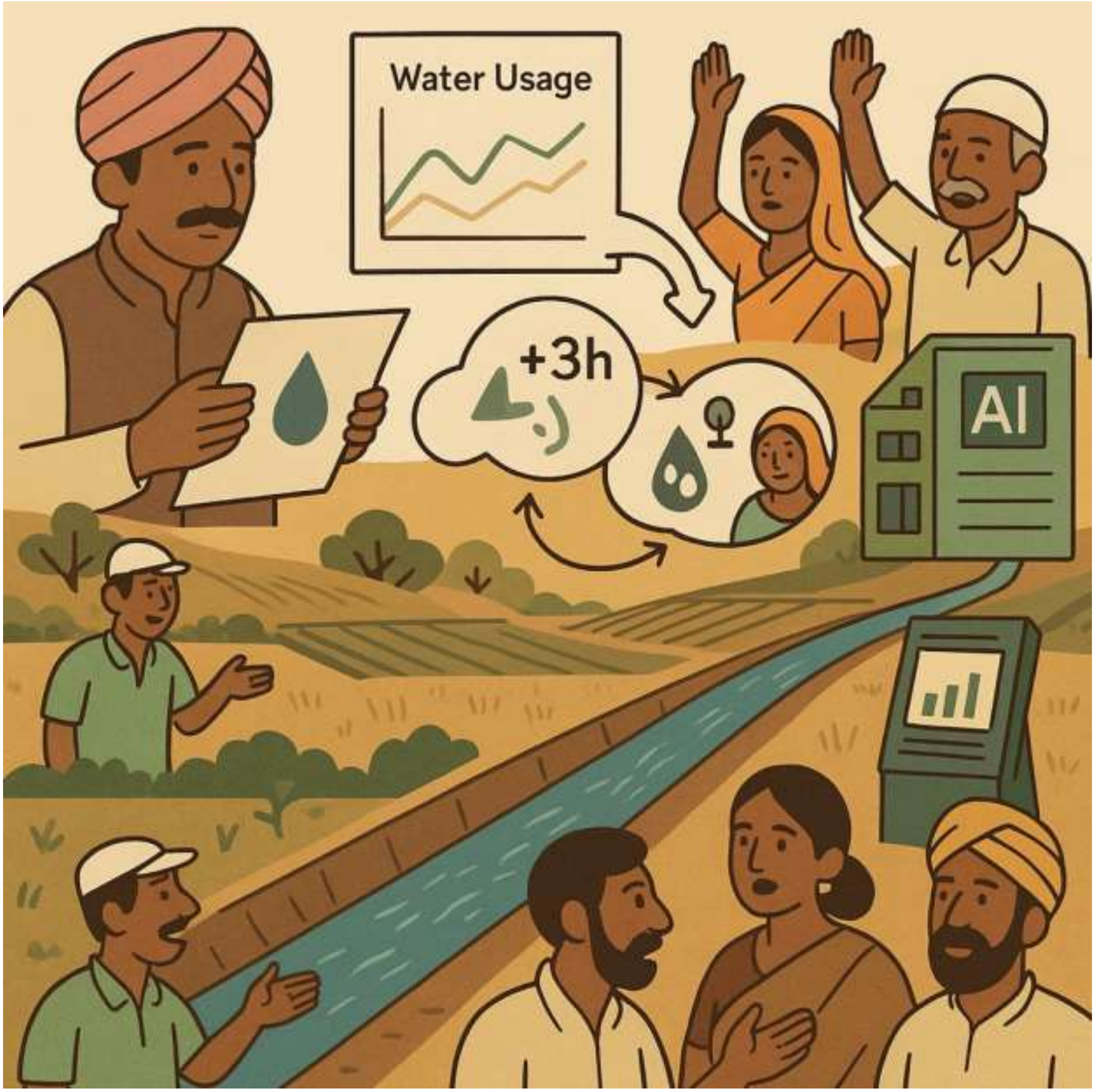
Embedding AI requires more than infrastructure—people who can engage meaningfully with the technology. This includes:

- Youth and local leaders being trained on how the systems work.
- Technical outputs (e.g., confidence intervals, risk scores) being translated into meaningful formats for local use.
- Community "co-design" workshops where members help shape how AI is used and what problems it addresses.
- These are not secondary investments—they are essential to ensuring long-term sustainability and equitable use of AI tools.

5.4 Avoiding One-Size-Fits-All Solutions

Rural commons come in all shapes and sizes, structures and cultures, with wildly different conflict dynamics. What works in a pastoralist community in northern Kenya might not work in a coastal fishing village in Indonesia. AI systems should be flexible, modular, and responsive to feedback—not programmed with assumptions about what fairness or efficiency looks like.

Embedding AI within nested governance structures—local councils, regional associations, national frameworks—can ensure alignment with broader policies while respecting community autonomy.



5.5 Mini-Case: AI-Assisted Water Sharing in Maharashtra, India

In drought-prone districts of Maharashtra, some smallholder farmers rely on shared irrigation canals to survive seasonal water shortages. In response to repeated failures of top-down schemes, the state introduced MahaAgri-AI Policy 2025–29, allocating ₹500 crore to deploy AI technology aimed at improving water distribution transparency and equity thehansindia.com+1timesofindia.indiatimes.com+1.

Pilot programs combine sensor-based water-use data with machine learning dashboards, enabling farmers to track and visualize usage patterns in local languages. These systems support "what-if" planning—examining scenarios like shifting irrigation times by a few hours or prioritizing tail-end users—using AI-generated forecasts during community meetings for decision-making support.

Data remains accessible on local servers and community kiosks; facilitators help translate results for low-literacy participants. This approach fosters equitable bargaining: women and marginalized farmers, supported by objective data, gain a stronger voice in rulemaking. Outcomes include more predictable water availability, reduced disputes, and deeper trust in resource governance.
Key takeaways:

- Co-design ensures AI tools serve governance—not replace it.

- Transparent data and community-controlled systems increase trust and inclusion.
- Embedding AI within local institutions enhances adaptability and legitimacy.

5.6 Conclusion

AI has the potential to augment the capacity of rural communities to govern their resources more fairly, efficiently, and sustainably. But this can only happen if AI systems are built to fit—and evolve with—their institutional, cultural, and ecological context. In the next section, we summarize key policy implications and propose principles for ethical, SDG-aligned AI design in the governance of commons.

6. Policy Implications and Recommendations

As AI technologies become more accessible, rural communities and development actors face a new challenge: how to harness these tools to strengthen—not weaken—self-governance, equity, and sustainability. This section synthesizes key insights and offers a set of actionable principles and policy recommendations for researchers, practitioners, and governments looking to deploy AI in the management of common-pool resources (CPRs).

6.1 Policy Principles for Ethical AI in Commons Governance

Principle Guideline

- Human-Centered Design AI systems should support—not replace—community decision-making.
- Transparency and Explainability AI processes and outputs must be understandable to non-expert users.
- Data Sovereignty Communities should own, access, and control the data used in AI systems.
- Participatory Co-Design Communities must be involved in shaping how AI tools are built and used.
- Context Sensitivity Avoid one-size-fits-all models; tailor tools to ecological and social realities.
- Nested Accountability: Embed AI systems in multi-level governance frameworks for oversight.

6.2 Recommendations for Implementation

For Governments and Policymakers:

- Support open-source AI tools adapted for low-connectivity, multilingual, and rural environments.
- Include AI governance in environmental policy and commons management frameworks, aligned with SDG targets 13, 15, and 16.
- Promote capacity-building initiatives in digital and data literacy for rural governance actors.

For NGOs and Development Agencies:

- Act as intermediaries to facilitate community-led AI pilots in commons management, with local voice and legitimacy.
- Advocate for inclusive data governance charters, especially where resource users are vulnerable to displacement or exploitation.
- Encourage interdisciplinary partnerships between tech developers, environmental scientists, and community leaders.

For Researchers and Technologists:

- Design AI tools that respect traditional governance mechanisms, such as oath-taking ceremonies, tribal councils, or consensus assemblies.
- Develop low-cost, explainable, and open-access AI models that rural communities can adapt and modify.
- Develop metrics that evaluate both the technical performance and social legitimacy of AI-enhanced commons systems.

6.3 Global Opportunity: Aligning AI with the SDGs

The responsible use of AI in commons governance offers an opportunity to accelerate progress across multiple Sustainable Development Goals:

SDG 13 (Climate Action): Strengthening adaptive local governance for climate resilience.
SDG 15 (Life on Land): Supporting sustainable forest, pasture, and water resource management.
SDG 16 (Strong Institutions): Reinforcing the rule of law, transparency, and community participation.

However, realizing this potential will depend on treating AI not as a silver bullet, but as one tool among many in a broader institutional ecosystem. The greatest innovations will come not from the technology alone, but from how communities creatively use it to govern themselves more fairly and sustainably.

7. Conclusion

With resource degradation and economic change posing increasing challenges for rural communities, the need to govern common-pool resources fairly and effectively has never been greater. Elinor Ostrom taught us that resilient commons management is not only possible—it is often more effective from the bottom up.

In this essay, we have argued that with thoughtful and ethical design, artificial intelligence can be a valuable tool for governing common-pool resources. It can help users design better rules, manage resources more efficiently, and enforce agreements more fairly. But its success is not in the cleverness of the technology, but in its alignment with local institutions, participation, and trust. When designed with human-centered principles, AI can enhance the very types of collective governance that sustain rural ecosystems—and the people who depend on them. The future of rural commons is not only about rules and resources—it is also about data, dignity, and democratic design.

Funding: This research received no external funding
Conflicts of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest
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