

COMMENT

Managing the global commons

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We need to facilitate the self-governance of local commons, but provide safeguards at various levels

This year is defined by a pandemic, record-breaking forest fires, floods and droughts in various places, and the rapid melting of Arctic ice. The disruption of our environment is one of the main factors causing these events. To cope with these events, we need to increase our efforts in managing our interactions with the environment on a global scale.

Governing shared resources

When we want to manage shared resources, we need to balance both private and public interests. Each individual farmer may benefit from turning on the pump to irrigate his/her land, but on a larger scale, it contributes to declining groundwater levels and electricity blackouts. In 1968, biologist Garrett Hardin popularised the notion of the tragedy of the commons, which implies that communities cannot manage their shared resources and require governmental interventions to regulate resource use or privatise the resource. In 1990, political scientist Elinor Ostrom published her landmark book on governing the commons that demonstrated that communities can govern on their own their shared resources, often better than imposed, well-intended solutions from outside. Ostrom was recognised in 2009 for her work by the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences.



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Global commons refer to shared resources that cannot be managed within national jurisdictions. The spread of zoonotic diseases like COVID-19; greenhouse gas emissions; biodiversity reduction; overfishing; and the accumulation of plastic waste are some of the problems within the scope of global commons. Although we have a good idea of what kind of governance might be successful at the local community level, these insights do not directly address the challenges we face on a global scale. The consequences of human activities on a global scale are only being recognised in recent times.

The appropriate scale of governance of global commons is a highly debated topic. Some argue that top-down governance with binding agreements is the only effective solution for problems of a global scale. Multilateral negotiations on climate change and other global commons over decades have had limited success. Others have emphasised a more decentralised multi-level or polycentric approach that builds on the observed successes of local solutions.

Coordinated activities

There is no panacea to solve this problem. We need to have coordinated activities at different scales. For example, local irrigation communities could monitor the state of infrastructure and water use and adapt their watering scheme or cropping patterns to changes in water availability. Community members may have more knowledge about the local ecological and social context, but they could also lack expertise, may be ruled by powerful factions within the community, or may not

perceive sufficient incentives to sustain the local commons. Empirical research also demonstrates that well-intended solutions imposed on community members are typically short-lived.

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To manage our global commons, we need to facilitate and accommodate the self-governance of local commons, but provide safeguards at different levels to avoid exploitation and manage risks. If we facilitate rural and urban communities to self-govern their shared resources, there will be risks involved for which cities and nations need to accept responsibilities. At the local levels, initiatives and solutions could be developed that fit the local context. When expertise is not available, higher-level organisations could facilitate learning from peers in similar conditions. Failures will be inevitable if we stimulate local-level experimentation, and higher-level authorities need to provide insurance for those cases. If local initiatives are successful, higher-level authorities need to provide insurance that the outcomes of those successes will not be grabbed by outsiders. Governing the global commons is the defining challenge for current and future generations.

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