Our Global and Local Commons: The New Narrative for Justice, Peace, Environmental Security and Shared Prosperity for All

What are the Commons? Our Shared Wealth

"The commons are the web of life", says Vandana Shiva. Actually, the commons are the webs of life in... natural, social, cultural and digital spheres. When we talk about commons we talk about quality of life, about our future and the future of our children.

Some of the groundbreaking theorizing on the commons has been done by Elinor Ostrom [Nobel Prize in Economics, 2009]. She and her colleagues insist, that there is no "master inventory" or single definition of commons. Each commons is the product of unique historical circumstances, local culture, economical and ecological conditions and so on. What we can do instead is examine what all commons have in common. What has the defense of biodiversity in common with the struggle for free soft- and hardware? Why is the struggle for access to knowledge and culture the same struggle as for access to water and against climate change? The commons allow us to unify in thinking what is separated in our mind but belongs together.

Wolfgang Sachs says in his simple but strong message: "When we talk about the commons, we talk about 'a hidden secret of prosperity'." Commons are everywhere; the problem is they are often invisible and may then get lost or forgotten. The real "tragedy of the commons" (referring to the famous metaphor coined by G. Hardin) is that we only think of the indispensable value of the commons when it's about to vanish. (Silke Helfrich, from her speech, World Commons Forum, 9/29-30/09, Salzburg, Germany)

These Core Ideas Underpin the Shift to a Commons-Based Society: (Helfrich, Ibid)

All commons share a function: All are essential to us.
Natural Commons - necessary for survival - forests, oceans, watersheds, fisheries, agriculture, soil, seeds...
Social Commons - ensure social cohesion - health & education systems, labor relations, neighborhoods...
Culture/Knowledge Commons - required for self-directed passion - ethnicity, sacredness, art, info access...

All commons have architecture and are based on three generic building blocks:

First building block of a common architecture: Common Pool Resources [or Common Goods]
CPR is the first fundamental element of a commons architecture. Example: biodiversity, water, our genetic code, [the atmosphere, etc.] Underlying principle: "All of us have the same right to use these resources."

Second building block: The Community, the group of people who share a common pool resource (eg., **the atmosphere,** where the group is all of humankind, **a watershed,** where multiple communities depend upon the environmental services provided by the natural systems of the watershed, and **a local fishery** that a community depends upon for economic survival)

Third building block: A set of self-ordained rules. The community trusts each other to abide by agreed-upon rules or individuals face specific consequences set by users. A commons-based society will be based on rules that automatically maintain and recreate the commons.

Public, Private and Common Goods
• private goods are produced and sold by businesses to consumers
• public goods are regulated by governments for their citizens
• common goods are preserved or produced for the use of everyone

(www.globalcommonstrust.org)

Table Comparing the Present Paradigm with the Commons Paradigm
By Silke Helfrich

Design Framework:	Present Paradigm	Commons Paradigm
Purpose:	GDP/Accumulation	Social Prosperity
Main Actors:	Economic player/ State	Communities/Citizen/Civil Society
Decision Making:	Hierarchical	Horizontal/Peer-Review Processes
Decision Taking:	Judgment/Command	Constructive Criticism/Participation
Condition:	Control (Proprietary Standards)	Openness (Open Standards)
Incentive for:	Profit & Accumulation	Creativity & Innovation
Results:		
On the Resource Level:	Erosion, Enclosure	Reproduction, Fair-share
On the Social Level:	Dependence	Interdependence within Community Autonomy
On the Level of Rules:	Acceptance Enforced by Power, by Money or by Law	High Level of Acceptance Users Monitor for Transgression
Dominant Strategy:	**Out-Compete**	**(Out-)Cooperate**

Core Idea of the Commons:
Sharing resources and innovating together

Helfrich says new ideas are urgently needed for the 21st Century and "Contribution to the commons can occur in many ways by focusing radically on:

• Decentralized production using new levels of networking with digital tools
• Cooperation at local and global level
• Diversity of resources, communities, designs and rules
• Relationality (corresponds to "I need others and others need me.")"

All contributions to the commons are valid. Everyone can take commons into possession, as long as they don't them take away from others, nor from future generations! (Helfrich, Ibid)

How do people arrive at the commons? What are the triggers that lead to the naming of a resource a commons? ...They all have a sense of "sharing" and joint ownership. Six common entry-points are: (A.) the need to protect a shared resource from enclosure, privatization, or commodification; (B.) the observation or action of peer-production and mass collaboration primarily in electronic media; (C.) evidence of new types of tragedies of the commons; (D.) the desire to build civic education and commons-like thinking; and (E.) identification of new or evolving types of commons within traditional commons; and (F.) rediscovery of the commons. (Charlotte Hess, hess@indiana.edu, Mapping the New Commons, 6/19/08)