

# Commons Examples

Our lives today are threatened worldwide by crises on all fronts. Commons Action for the United Nations – a group of people from all walks of life – and the Commons Cluster for the UN--a network of UN ECOSOC accredited NGOs—believe that applying the principles of a *commons* approach will enable us to resolve these crises at their very core.

People all over the world are already benefitting from one or more commons. Together, the diverse types of commons complement and support one another and are already forming a framework for a global community in which all can thrive, including and *especially*, nature.

## What is a Commons?

Because of its characteristics, a commons empowers people, encourages them to take care of the fruits of society and nature entrusted to their care, and builds a sense of belonging and community.

Examples of commons have existed for many centuries. Within village settings, for example, the commons consisted of a central green area where villagers allowed livestock to graze. Or, they could access forests owned by a nobleman or king where they had free access to hunt, fish, and gather berries and firewood.

According to Elinor Ostrom who won the Nobel Prize for Economic Sciences in 2009, a commons minimally consists of:

- 1) **Commons Goods**: those fruits of nature and society that everyone needs to survive and thrive. These include our atmosphere, oceans and forests, biodiversity, all species of life, natural systems, and minerals; our food, water, energy, art, cultural, technology, healthcare and spiritual resources; and, also, a free news media, and the trade and finance systems we use.
- 2) **Commoners**: Groups of people who share the resources (users, producers, managers, providers).
- 3) **Commoning**: inclusive, participatory and transparent forms of decision making and rules governing access to, and benefit from these commons resources. Decisions are made by those directly responsible for the resource (according to the principle of subsidiarity).

A commons has **boundaries**, specifying community membership and the extent of the resource; and, **value**, created through the preservation or production coming from these commons goods and resources.

There is the **recognition** that the Earth is a living system of interconnected components on which all life depends. (UN Resolution 65/164 on Harmony with Nature.) This enables commons members to deal with problems that are interconnected like food, water, energy and climate change, for instance.

According to Annie Leonard who wrote *The Story of Stuff*, “the commons is also an orientation; it is about how we do things, how we work together as much as the assets that we all share. It is the act of figuring out solutions together and ensuring diverse voices are

engaged in planning processes. It is a commitment to collective action, collective wellbeing ...It is the realization that no one is as smart as everyone...that we all do better when we all do better...

Shared public resources means less resources consumed overall, less waste generated, less money spent and more time chatting with our neighbors – building community.[ My community has a]Tool Lending Library as part of the public library system. Rather than every household needing to own a power drill and jackhammer, we can just borrow them for the few times a year we need them. This could be extended to include all sorts of things... Recognizing and nurturing the commons makes my life sweeter, easier, richer, lighter, happier. I end up with less stuff and more friends.

- See more at: <http://www.kosmosjournal.org/articles/anne-leonard-and-the-commons#sthash.6adCvQJO.dpuf>

Participants in the commons listed below support and complement one another where their actions and activities follow – in practice – the “all-win principle.”

### **The All-Win Principle**

*We live in a world in which all people and nature are part of an integrated whole. Therefore, the more we empower one another and nature to flourish – without causing harm – the more we create an all-win universe.*

## **Commons that Adhere to the All-Win Principle Are Beginning to Form the Building Blocks for a Commons-Based Economy Centred on the Well-Being of All People and Nature**

Commons exist worldwide. They range from the local to global levels. Most commons are run by commoners—people as opposed to governments--but many governments work with their peoples using commons approaches. There are also commons created and managed under the auspices of the UN: Outer Space, Antarctica, The Sea Bed administered according to the Law of the Sea Treaty.

Now a Commons Abundance Network (CAN) is being formed to enable commons at all levels to learn from one another, network, plan and act in unison, so that they can begin to form a commons-based economy in embryo centred on the well-being of all people and nature.

## **Examples of Diverse Commons**

### **Local Communities**

We will look first at commons that deal with our most basic needs. In the next section, we will show how other commons can support these communities so that they ultimately can become the building blocks of a commons-based global community.

**Commons are as old as humanity itself.** In early times, family and tribal communities lived in harmony with nature and made communal decisions because each person played a vital role in the survival of the community. Today, indigenous communities which have largely maintained a commons approach continue to exist worldwide.

The commons approach has more recently been applied by communities wishing to live in greater harmony with nature and other people. They also seek to develop ways of resolving the economic, social and environmental crises that exist. Here are just a few of the many varied examples.

**The Global Ecovillage Network (GEN)** founded in 1995 has helped to develop an estimated 1,000 ecovillages (500 self-identified). The Network's training program ([www.Gaiaeducation.net](http://www.Gaiaeducation.net)) is helping many thousands of others to get started in countries ranging from China and Japan to the Brazilian slums. In Brazil, ecovillages consist of at least 1,500 people, 50 percent of whom cannot read or write.

These communities have developed housing with all the modern comforts. Their houses conserve energy and water and recycle all their waste. Decisions are made by all members of the community. Some work for the community while others work outside.

Recently, the Government of Senegal agreed to use the ecovillage design to transform 14,000 traditional villages into ecovillages. They have an Ecovillage Ministry that is working with this model to build sustainable communities where economy is just one aspect. In addition, the Global Ecovillage Network is now also working closely with the Transition Towns movement which has some 300 Transition Towns which are developing ways to live without oil.

Other sustainable communities include the 1,800 villages of the Sarvodaya network in Sri Lanka and a growing number of green-focused co-housing communities, including:

- Geovillages, a project of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) that encourages villages to become sustainable and to share best practices;
- The participatory local Agenda 21 sustainable community planning processes where interested stakeholders help to develop a plan for the community to become as sustainable as possible;
- Transition Towns, where community groups explore and implement ways of living without oil and oil-based products as a way of preparing themselves for a time when oil reserves will have become depleted. ([transitionnetwork.org](http://transitionnetwork.org))

These communities use a wide range of other resources.

### **Participatory Budgeting in New York City.**

New York City is experiencing a new kind of democracy. Through Participatory Budgeting, residents of eight Council Districts are directly deciding how to spend at least \$10 million of public money. From September 2012 to April 2013, community members are exchanging ideas, working together to turn ideas into project proposals, and voting to decide what proposals get funded.

### **Commons Within Local Communities Can Include**

**Bike Lanes, Community Gardens, Parks, the Murals in San Francisco, Women who help children accros the street after school, litter clean up organized by citizens.**

## **Food Production and Water Conservation Commons**

**Permaculture** is a form of agriculture based on an ecosystem approach. Foods are grown together in such a way that all plants and animals support one another. Plants form food and habitat for one another and for animals (chickens, for instance) and the waste generated by each species fertilizes the soil and/or provides food for other species. Vegetation can hold moisture and serve to conserve water supplies. The system keeps going as long as the food is harvested without disturbing nature's balance.

Permaculture can be used on rooftops, on city lots and even in small gardens where food is grown vertically along walls, up tree trunks, and in multileveled barrels. It is suitable for all types of soils since the types of plants and animals used in a system will depend on what types of living things a specific type of environment can support.

Decisions as to which types of food can be grown are ultimately determined by nature – the type of soil, climate, etc. in a specific place. So people and nature can be seen as managing and making decisions together.

**The Slow Food and the Community-Supported Agriculture** movements are commons that are concerned with organic quality, both of the food itself and the land on which it is grown.

**There are thousands of successful commons groups for managing fisheries, forests and irrigation.** Such groups have existed since humans first inhabited the planet. Other examples are the ejidos in Mexico where the government promotes the use of communal land shared by the people of the community. Also, there are the acequias in Spain, the Andes, northern Mexico, and the modern-day American Southwest – community-operated canals that carry snow runoff or river water to distant fields.

**Farmers Markets** are commons organized by farmers. These can be used by communities to sell food not needed by their members. Profits from the sale of foods would be used to enhance food production as needed to finance other community needs. A small part could go to a global fund administered by the UN (possibly a Trusteeship Council) to support the global commons (earth, air and water quality outside of local or other jurisdictions). Funds could also be used to provide a basic income for all people.

**Community managed city/school gardens and food co-ops** are further examples of commons activities involving food production and sharing.

Such commons can make use of low-cost products that allow us to live comfortably without harming the environment, such as the honey provided by the honey bee.

Like-minded individuals, innovators, farmers, scholars, academicians, policy makers, entrepreneurs and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in more than seventy five countries over the last twenty years have documented more than one million ideas, innovations and traditional knowledge practices.

While being careful to fully acknowledge and reimburse the source, they make this information available for others to use. An example is a fridge made of wood and cloth that uses the cooling characteristics of water to keep products cold in hot weather; or a solar oven made of cardboard and aluminum foil. Both are run on the free energy from the environment. (<http://www.sristi.org/hbnew/aboutus.php>)

## **Healthcare**

Doctors, nurses, and staff with the same or diverse specializations make collective decisions in a clinic setting in order to optimize working conditions and services for their patients.

## **Education**

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Art 26 b, states that each human being has the right to an education for the full development of his/her personality.

A current phenomenon that appears to be growing rapidly sees colleges and communities providing excellent education both for their teachers and their students for free. All that is needed is access to the Internet.

Harvard professors who would give seminars to just 20 students find that they can have thousands of students from countries all over the world when the students listen to or watch lectures and study in clusters using the Internet. OpenCourseWare, an online program operated by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), offers free lecture notes, exams and videos for more than 2,000 courses studied at the school (<http://ocw.mit.edu/about/>).

Other examples include:

- Thousands of scholars and academics who share their work with colleagues and the public at large;
- Open Educational Resources, an initiative which provides teaching and learning materials online for everyone to use;
- Many millions of online texts, videos and musical works
- Open access to public speakers and use of academic journals.

CSOs are closing the information technology divide by providing cheap computers where these are needed. They are also improving computer software and making it freely available using a variety of innovative licensing modalities.

Students, faculty and staff of educational institutions can participate in a type of commons when they help to decide the running of the school together. For example, there is the approach designed by A.S. Neil and implemented first at Summerhill and then in many other schools including the 15<sup>th</sup> Street School in New York City.

At Union Graduate School/Union Institute and University, students helped to decide who could be accepted by the university. Two fellow students sat on each student's doctoral committee to ensure that the quality of work for which a doctorate was approved was up to the level they wanted for their university. When the university encountered financial difficulties all students were called together to discuss solutions.

## Information and Discussion

Using the Internet, the world's largest digital commons, a person can freely access millions of web sites which provide virtually everything one wants to know about almost every topic. Literature, works of music and art, advice on health and legal matters and many, many more subjects are all available with the click of a mouse.

The web site, Flickr, is a commons that makes photos available for free download while YouTube allows people to share their films worldwide.

Free meeting and planning modalities exist via Skype, Gmail, WillYou.TypeWith.Me, Flashgroups, and the commons-based free software technologies which enable people to meet, share ideas and plan no matter where they live.

## Security

Examples of a commons approach to security:

- Neighborhood Watches;
- Red Berets on New York subways;
- Volunteer groups where citizens add to the resources of local police forces to increase the safety of communities;
- The unarmed protection of civilians and peace in international settings (See: [www.nonviolentpeaceforce.org/](http://www.nonviolentpeaceforce.org/); and [www.peacebrigades.org/](http://www.peacebrigades.org/))

## Waste management

Some examples of the commons approach to waste management include:

- Full cycle industrial processes (Cradle to Cradle) where the materials that go to make up all products can be easily separated for direct recycling and reuse as building materials for other products;
- Also, Entrepreneurial Clusters where groups repurpose/upcycle waste into new products (e.g., REculture);
- U.S. artists cooperatives tapping land-fill gas for production energy needs or for materials for they can use for their art;
- Brazilian Recycling Co-ops where marginalized people who sort garbage can be empowered to organize through *Participatory Sustainable Waste Management* models for income opportunities;
- Recycling food wastes for compost for local production.

## Mining

Minerals are depletable. When minerals are commons goods, it is a matter of removing them sparingly and restoring the earth where it is damaged. Citizens play direct roles in ownership, management and system success in sustainable mining. (See: "Whole Mine, Whole Community, Whole Planet Strategies" - Ivan Webber)

Communities managing and maximizing natural resources:

- Mining commons use a sustainable systems approach to energy, land, water, jobs including probable futures. Example: Eco Industrial parks. Clusters of collaborating industries located together for superior energy, material and water efficiencies and reducing environmental impact. At mine sites, renewable energy production plant, water by-product recovery plants to recover metals and salts, green houses and aquaculture to propagate plants appropriate for landscape restoration.
- Chartered Mine Trusts: Communities develop rules for safety, environmental social and economic practices for mine operations.
- Mining communities these determine who will mine and monies go back to restore the land and back into the communities; Mining run as cooperatives with possibly mines rented out for corporate use. Renewable energy production
- Global/National regulation mechanisms for sharing the costs and benefits.
- Alaskan Fund – all Alaskans share in the profits made from oil production by the State.

### **Housing and Financial Co-operatives**

More than one billion people are already members of various types of co-operatives. All of these groups use forms of collaborative decision making, planning and implementation by community members. As well, the benefits from such processes are equitably shared by all members of the community.

In the Netherlands, for example, there are housing co-ops for low-income singles. The residents share common areas and run them as a commons. Other examples include food and cultural co-ops (where artists, for example, share and manage exhibit space jointly).

Some examples of a commons approach to finance:

- Insurance and banking cooperatives;
- Alternative currencies have been used in communities where people do not have regular money. These currencies allow people to exchange goods and services. They can call their currency by any name.
- Local exchange trading systems (LETS), also known as LETSystems, are locally initiated, democratically organised, not-for-profit community enterprises that provide a community information service and record transactions of members exchanging goods and services by using the currency of locally created LETS Credits. In Utrecht, Netherlands, they use “stars”; in Amsterdam they use “noppes”.
- Time-sharing groups;
- Barter systems;
- The Participatory Budget Process that was initially developed in Porto Alegre;

### **Stewarding Natural Systems**

Much of our land/soil, water, and, of course, all of our air, is interrelated and global in nature. These resources must be managed/stewarded/cared for by humanity as a whole. What is needed are types of global commons where the UN, for example, could oversee these resources. Much of the framework for this type of commons is already in existence as

enunciated in such things as the Law of the Sea, the Antarctica Treaty, the Outer Space Treaty, and the Black Sea Alliance.

## Links to Commons Resources

### Miscellaneous

- *Digital Library of the Commons* – The Digital Library of the Commons (DLC) at Indiana University is a gateway to the international literature on the commons. The DLC provides free and open access to full-text articles, papers, and dissertations. The site contains an author-submission portal, an Image Database, the Comprehensive Bibliography of the Commons, a Keyword Thesaurus, and links to relevant reference sources on the study of the commons – <http://dlc.dlib.indiana.edu/dlc/>
- *On the Commons* is a citizens' network that highlights the importance of the commons in our lives and promotes innovative commons-based solutions to create a brighter future – <http://www.onthecommons.org/>
- *Commons Rising* – Written for the Tomales Bay Institute, this report on the growing commons movement has two purposes: first, to celebrate the seeds that are already emerging, and second, to suggest how, taken together and multiplied, they can grow into something powerful enough to change the world. <http://onthecommons.org/commons-rising>
- *The State of the Commons* is an introduction to the commons and its distinct dynamics. It takes inventory of the assets that belong to us and assesses their value and how well they are being managed. <http://www.onthecommons.org/state-commons>
- *Shareable* is a nonprofit online magazine that tells the story of sharing. It covers the people, places, and projects that bring a shareable world to life. <http://www.shareable.net/>
- *International Association for the Study of the Commons* is a nonprofit association devoted to understanding and improving institutions for the management of resources that are (or could be) held or used collectively by communities in developing or developed countries – <http://www.iasc-commons.org/>
- *Genes, Bytes and Emissions: To Whom Does the World Belong?* Silke Helfrich, editor (Heinrich Boll Foundation) – <http://www.boell.org/web/148-576.html>
- *Kim Klein and the Commons*, a blog with contributions from commons-oriented sources – <http://kimkleinandthecommons.blogspot.com/>

### Community Life

- *City Repair* is an organized group action that educates and inspires communities and individuals to creatively transform the places where they live. <http://cityrepair.org/>
- *Community-Wealth*'s goal is to provide the web's most comprehensive and up-to-date information resource on state-of-the-art strategies for democratic, community-based economic development – <http://www.community-wealth.org/>
- *The E. F. Schumacher Society*, founded in 1980, aims to promote the building of strong local economies that link people, land, and community. To accomplish this, it develops model programs, including local currencies, community land trusts, and micro-lending; hosts lectures and other educational events; publishes papers; and maintains a library to engage scholars and inspire citizen-activists. <http://smallisbeautiful.org/>



- *The Forum Organizing Project* is creating a national Community Forum network that seeks to revive community entertainment, education and connection. It organizes resources, offers technical support, builds partnerships with speakers and film distributors, and connects Forums with each other – <http://forumorganizing.org/>
- *Ogallala Commons* is a nonprofit community development network offering leadership and education to reinvigorate the commonwealth that forms the basis of all communities, both human and natural. Ogallala Commons country covers about 174,000 square miles across parts of eight Great Plains states in the United States. <http://www.ogallalacommons.org/>
- *Project for Public Spaces (PPS)* is a nonprofit planning, design and educational organization dedicated to helping people create and sustain public spaces that build stronger communities – <http://www.pps.org/>
- *Rebar* is an interdisciplinary studio based in San Francisco and operating at the intersection of art, design and activism. Its work encompasses visual and conceptual public art, landscape design, urban intervention, temporary performance installation, digital media and print design – <http://rebargroup.org/>
- *West Marin Commons* is dedicated to the practice of community in West Marin, California in order to sustain and enrich the social and natural environment. It seeks to establish, preserve, and enhance both common spaces and the life that occurs in them and to create social infrastructure for resource sharing, conservation, and learning. <http://www.westmarincommons.org/site/>

## **Economics and Politics**

- *In the Public Interest* is a Resource Center on privatization and responsible contracting. It is committed to equipping citizens, public officials and public interest groups with the information, ideas and other resources they need to ensure that public contracts with private entities are transparent, fair, well-managed and effectively monitored, and that those contracts meet the long-term needs of communities – <http://www.inthepublicinterest.org/>
- *The New Economics Institute* is working to make the new economics, one which supports people and planet, mainstream in the United States. It is helping people imagine the kind of economy that is designed to enhance human well-being and ecological health – <http://neweconomicsinstitute.org/>
- *The New Rules Project*, a program of the Institute for Local Self-Reliance (ILSR), proposes a set of new rules that builds community by supporting humanly scaled politics and economics – <http://www.newrules.org/>
- *Privatization Watch*, a joint project of the Center for Study of Responsive Law and Essential Information, was founded in 1982 by Ralph Nader. Essential Information is a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization involved in a variety of projects to encourage citizens to become active and engaged in their communities. <http://privatizationwatch.org/>
- *Wealth for the Common Good* is a U.S. network of business leaders, high-income households and partners working together to promote shared prosperity and fair taxation – <http://wealthforcommongood.org/>

## **Environment and Health**

- *The Blue Planet Project* is an international civil society movement begun by The Council of Canadians to protect the world's fresh water from the growing threats of trade and privatization – <http://blueplanetproject.net/>
- *Our Water Commons: Toward a New Freshwater Narrative*, is a Council of Canadians report written by Maude Barlow, National Chairperson of the Council and Senior Advisor on Water Issues to the President of the General Assembly of the United Nations. It is part of an effort to address the global water crisis by naming and reclaiming the freshwater commons.  
<http://www.canadians.org/water/publications/water%20commons/index.html>
- *Cap and Dividend*, a project of On the Commons, is a simple, market-based way to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions without reducing household incomes. It caps fossil fuel supplies, makes polluters pay, and returns the revenue to everyone equally.  
<http://capanddividend.org/>
- *ETC Group (Action Group on Erosion, Technology and Concentration)* is dedicated to the conservation and sustainable advancement of cultural and ecological diversity and human rights. To this end, ETC Group supports socially responsible developments of technologies useful to the poor and marginalized and it addresses international governance issues and corporate power – <http://www.etcgroup.org/>
- *Food & Water Watch* works to ensure that food, water and fish is safe, accessible and sustainably produced – <http://www.foodandwaterwatch.org/>
- *The International Center for Technology Assessment (CTA)* is a non-profit, bi-partisan organization committed to providing the public with full assessments and analyses of technological impacts on society – <http://www.icta.org>
- *Our Water Commons* seeks to transform societal decision making for water stewardship towards participatory, democratic, community-centered systems that value equity and sustainability as a strategy – <http://ourwatercommons.org/>
- The *New Mexico Acequia Association*. Acequias are the historic communal irrigation systems that support the culture and livelihood of thousands of families in New Mexico. The Association works to sustain their way of life by protecting water as a community resource and strengthening farming and ranching traditions.  
<http://www.lasacequias.org/>
- *The Trust for Public Land (TPL)* is a national, nonprofit, land conservation organization that conserves land for people to enjoy as parks, community gardens, historic sites, rural lands, and other natural places, ensuring livable communities for generations to come – <http://www.tpl.org/>
- *Waterkeeper Alliance* has nearly 200 Waterkeeper Organizations on six continents defending their communities against anyone who threatens their right to clean water—from law-breaking polluters to unresponsive government agencies.  
<http://waterkeeper.org/>

## **Information, Creativity and Culture**

- *Creative Commons* develops, supports, and stewards legal and technical infrastructure that maximizes digital creativity, sharing, and innovation.  
<http://creativecommons.org/>
- *iCommons* is a registered U.K. charity that promotes collaboration among proponents of open education, access to knowledge, free software, open access publishing and free culture communities around the world – <http://icommons.org/>

- *The Foundation for P2P Alternatives* functions as a clearinghouse for open/free, participatory/p2p and commons-oriented initiatives. It aims to be a pluralist network to document, research and promote peer to peer alternatives – <http://p2pfoundation.net/>
- *Public Knowledge* is a Washington, D.C.-based public interest group working to defend citizens' rights in the emerging digital culture. Its first priority is to promote innovation and the rights of consumers while working to stop any bad legislation from passing that would slow technology innovation, shrink the public domain, or prevent fair use – <http://www.publicknowledge.org/>

### **Political Commons**

Democracy  
Globalism

### **Aspirational Commons**

We are all global commoners and help to create a future full of possibilities. And so hope, passion, dedication to the well-being of all.