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What are the commons?

Ikshaku Bezboroa, Lawyer and Consultant, Dakshin Foundation

This module is part of a series of learning modules centred around commons, created and published for internal circulation among the researchers of Dakshin Foundation. Information contained in these modules is collated from publications of various scholars. While these are not exactly ‘commons for dummies’, we have tried our best to simplify the concepts :)

Introduction

This module attempts to introduce the reader not only to the phenomenon of commons, but also the mind-set and approaches required when engaging with this unusual body of work. The stress on approach rather than components is of some significance. The way one thinks of this subject informs the way one applies commons in one’s lives and in one’s work. For instance, those already working with the commons may feel the need for models to apply by way of commons-thinking. In reality, though, there is no one answer or ready solution on how to apply commons thinking that works across the board. That is because the very nature of commons imbues within it subjectivity, contextualisation and inter-personal relationships and shared meaning.

Therefore, in the spirit of assisting us to think like ‘commoners’, this module is conceptualised as a starting point to the idea of ‘commons’. Herein, we capture an incomplete knowledge through the parameters of purpose, genesis, subjectivity and meaning. Broadly speaking, the module is categorized into exploring

- the definition and components of commons
- the goals of commons-thinking
- where the idea comes from
- specific contexts where commons exist

- why commons is valuable
- to whom it is useful
- how it may be applied

Understanding Commons

More than just resources

Commons have been often described as resources existing in nature. The first instinct is to think of ‘commons’ as another category of resources like private or public goods. Some relate it with no-man’s property - such as certain wild forests, pre-colonised Australia or unoccupied land between nation-boundaries. No-man’s land or ‘res nullius’ includes anything that can be owned but are not yet subject to any law. Others consider ‘commons’ as ‘things in common to mankind’, ranging from objects like fish, outer space and the continent of Antarctica. Things in common to mankind or ‘res communis’ are things already owned by all.

However, the ‘commons’ is not about resources or nature alone. Rather, it is embedded in a broader ideology. The notion certainly includes resources but it is much more than just that. The commons includes people living in a community, their relationship with those resources, and the rules they come up with. Therefore, to understand the commons requires first the un-learning of our way of thinking about things around us.



“Fishing Boats. Mumbai, India” The fish in an ocean are considered ‘res communis’ or belonging to all. However, it takes close coordination and collaboration between local fishers to manage these resources for themselves and therefore engage in commoning.
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Commons takes into account the community, the protocols and values held by communities and the natural phenomenon that influence these protocols. It encapsulates sets of relationships that people have with their surroundings, and their social relationships with one another.

A verb rather than a noun

Humans do not always interact with their surroundings in a co-operative or a sustainable manner. Entities as diverse as lands, animals, ideas and even human beings are divided, labelled, distributed and fenced off by nation-states, private companies and individuals. The private property regime does not encourage communal ownership and shared usage or responsibility.

Treating entities as commons requires actually engaging with these entities in specific ways, beyond just as resources. It takes the form of an approach or behaviour. It requires active participation, including maintaining, sharing and protecting. In fact, people who implement ‘commons’ thinking are called ‘commoners’. The behaviours of people

in sharing the usage and responsibility of their surroundings are called ‘commoning’. Indeed, it is said that there are no ‘commons’ without ‘commoners’ or ‘commoning’.

Therefore, commons are more than the sum of its parts, and can be considered as an ongoing entity. Where there are people, and they use a resource or set of resources like land or knowledge, by sharing it, through mutually developed protocols designed to sustain and grow it, a commons emerges.

A popular analogy in the literature surrounding commons is the idea of the water molecule. Think of commons as one would a water-molecule. A water molecule is certainly a combination of two hydrogen atoms and an oxygen atom. Yet, it is more than just that. Water is water because of the specific properties of that system of atoms, and the ways in which the atoms behave with each other and with other elements. In the same way, commons is more than just the sum of resources, communities and rules (Bollier and Helfrich 2015: 792). It is said that there is no commons without commoning behaviour. What this implies is that there is active participation- hence it is more of a verb than a noun (Bollier 2011).

Examples of commons

The following are some examples of existing commons-based systems in the world around us.

Guifi.net

This is a successful community-shared community telecom network. While it is located within the internet which is privatised, the project of Guifi.net is itself connected to the internet through a strategic bottleneck. It is a bottom-up project with the objective of creating an open and socially accessible telecommunications network. It began as an effort of rural folk in a county in Spain using their own wifi-routers and radio-links to build a network to interconnect different locations like houses, farms and offices. Today, through the cooperation of a vast community participating through volunteering, employment or associations, the network is available without discrimination in an affordable manner.



Installation of a “supernode” of Guifi.net’s network in the neighbourhood of Sant Pere i Sant Pau in Tarragona. This image by Lluís tgn is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0

Smart grids

Smart grids are used for decentralised energy production. Formerly, electricity simply flowed from producer to consumer in these grids. The amount of electricity generated had to be about the same as the electricity being taken out. If the supply failed, as it did when sustainable sources like solar energy were used, or if the demand slacked, there would be problems like power outages or wastage. Consumers also often paid for more energy than they used.

The solution was the development of the smart-meter. These are meters fitted with sensors that gather and transmit data, allowing users to measure and adjust the energy that

flows into their homes. When the grid communicates with the meter, a smart-grid develops. For instance, appliances turn on and off automatically depending on electricity availability (Delabie 2017).

What’s more, grid-users have started developing their own energy through self-production from solar-panels or wind and other renewable energy. Smart grids allow users to feed their own energy into the system, helping reduce dependency on traditional fuel sources. In areas where power-networks are missing, stand-alone user-fed micro-grids are peer-based projects that run entire neighbourhoods.

While electricity may be seen as the common good, the entire system exists as a commons, because this would not be possible without the existence of cooperative commoners who develop systems and rules to encourage energy producing/sustaining commoning behaviours.

Open networks

These refer to hosting infrastructure for digital commons. They provide accessible, low-cost digital spaces for people to devise their own forms of governance, rules, social practices and cultural expression. That’s why the Internet has spawned so many robust, productive commons: free and open source software, Wikipedia and countless wikis, more than 10,000 open access scholarly journals, the open educational resources (OER) movement, the open data movement, sites for collaborative art and culture, Fab Labs that blend global design with local production, and much else.

Local money

The Bangla-pesa is a contemporary local currency that has become a medium of exchange in Kenya, in areas with high Bangladeshi immigrant populations. The nature of slum economies is volatile, where demand and supply boosts and falls. Workers’ revenues are also dependent on this pattern. For example, for a rickshaw-operator during the lean season, low demand directly means low daily earnings. If he cannot buy vegetables, the grocer who travels around the area will also have less business (Ruddick 2015).

The way Bangla-pesa works is that it creates an informal subaltern economy nested within this broader money-based system. Bangla-pesa is a voucher or token-based idea with fixed values. Every participating member is entitled to a fixed number of these vouchers. The vouchers are not exchangeable for conventional money, and so members are

expected to honour the trade of vouchers alone. This ensures that goods and services continue to flow within an economy, through the cooperation of participating members.

Here are some reasons the Bangla-pesa phenomenon is one of commoning.

-The pesa is an instrument of a community's wealth and is backed by the common pool of goods and services. It represents neither more nor less than existing real wealth.

-Rules exist - members can accept as much of the bangla-pesa as they need for one day.

-There is an upper cap per individual, so absurd accumulation of wealth is not allowed.

-It is like a voucher, and is not convertible into mainstream currency. In fact, it cannot be used outside the community; hence it operates within that paradigm. As a result it cannot create poverty.

-It fosters social interactions, and trade.

Distinguishing the idea of Commons from other concepts

Dominant approaches

The following represent some of the dominant concepts in relation to commons that influence the way things are ordered at present:

Language of enclosure

A process by which individuals or corporations take natural resources out of their natural contexts, unitize them, privately own and control them and try to trade them in order to collect wealth (Bollier 2014: 37). For example, once a plot of land is enclosed off, it commands higher rent, enables control over farming techniques, and hence boosts production through intensive farming. Enclosing has also been termed a sanctified process of exclusion (Attie 2011).

State - industry nexus

Since the days of European colonisation, trading companies and governments have worked together to promote mutual interests resulting in greater enclosure of the commons. Despite a shift towards social-liberalism in post-World War years, the primary motivating factor for both sectors

of power has been the generation of wealth. The Mining Act of 1872 in the USA, and Land Acquisition Act in India are examples of legislative instruments that formalize this kind of relationship. The laws are effectively a brutal act of appropriation wherein resources that belong to everyone or to specific local communities, are grabbed through an abuse of power and violent coercion (Bollier 2014: 40).

The Tragedy of the Commons

The example used by Hardin to explain his theory of the tragedy of the commons was the pastureland where people graze cattle. Hardin asked his readers to imagine a pastureland where herdsmen commonly graze their cattle. His assumption was that an open access arrangement may well work for those years when warfare, disease and poaching keep populations of both cattle and herders well below the carrying capacity of the land. However, one day, each herder would ask himself "what is the most gainful course of action for me?", and concluded that the rational course of action would be to add one more animal to his herd. According to Hardin, this automatically leads to a situation of tragedy because every herdsman thinks the same way, and the overall population of the animals overruns the capacity of the land. Applying the same logic to matters of pollution, Hardin claims that every man finds it more lucrative to deposit waste into the ecosystem rather than spend money in cleaning it up (Hardin 1968).

Prisoner's Dilemma

Jurists justified the tragedy of commons logic of overuse, using the 'prisoner's dilemma' argument. The question was whether people could cooperate, or whether self-interest would prevail when it came to people's engagement with resources. In the Prisoner's Dilemma it is assumed that people will always prefer to secure their own interest rather than cooperate for the common good. In the realm of property, this implies that privately holding property is the best solution because there is no incentive to prefer collective action.

The prisoner's dilemma is a game in which two 'rational' people might choose not to cooperate with each other, even though it would be in their best interest to do so. The basic premise is that there are two criminal accomplices being held in separate cells and interrogated. Both prisoners have the option to cooperate and keep their mouths shut or to defect and say the other guy did the crime.

Based on whether neither prisoner talks, one does and the other doesn't, or both do, the two prisoners will face

sentences of different lengths. The chart below shows the

THE PRISONER'S DILEMMA

		B stays silent (cooperates)	B betrays A (defects)
A stays silent (cooperates)	Both serve 1 year	A serves 3 years, B goes free	
A betrays B (defects)	A goes free, B serves 3 years	Both serve 2 years	

four outcomes in the game:

The dilemma emerges because while the overall best outcome is both prisoners keeping their mouths shut and thus both only serving one year sentences, if both prisoners act rationally to minimise their own terms, they will both defect. If you defect, you're better off regardless of what the other player does than you are if you stay silent.

The prisoners' dilemma misses out on certain incentive structures that would enable cooperation.

Alternative Approaches

Critiques of the Tragedy of the Commons theory

An analysis of successful case-studies of communal resources management has demonstrated some conclusions that fly in the face of Hardin's Tragedy of the Commons theory. Nobel Laureate, Elinor Ostrom did significant work on such case-studies to prove that all over the world, successful commoning has been possible. The findings of all these case studies find fundamental flaws in the notion of the Tragedy of the Commons.

For one, Hardin had assumed that the opposite of a private property regime was one without any property rights, or an open-access situation. The difference is one of regulation; an open-access situation can indeed lead to over-exploitation. However, commons are regulated regimes and therefore the fear of over-exploitation or over-use is unwarranted.

Secondly, individual interest is very much influenced and constrained by institutional arrangements. People make choices based on heavily imposed protocols and social

pressures.

Thirdly, Hardin had assumed that local resource users cannot cooperate mutually. In fact the prisoner's dilemma assumes that the players in that model do not communicate or cooperate, or have any shared history or future together (Hardin 2014: 25).

Fourthly, the solutions offered by Hardin's model of privatisation and exclusion are very limited in safeguarding such spaces.

Incentives to cooperate

In standard common-pool resource systems, the prospects for achieving efficient cooperation are very low. However, this is not the case if an institutional set up allows for communication and sanctions. In a situation where cooperation and communication are encouraged, there is less selfish appropriation of common pool resources.

Another factor is that subjects act conditionally on what other subjects do. If others are nice or cooperative, they act cooperatively as well, but if others are hostile, the subjects retaliate.

The institutional setup is also very important. If there is no institutional rule that externally enforces cooperation or that allows for sanctioning possibilities, the interaction of selfish and conditional subjects frequently leads to non-cooperative outcomes. If, on the other hand, commoners include sanctioning possibilities, they are able to discipline selfish members. As a consequence, more cooperative outcomes will emerge.

This approach goes beyond the standard economic conception, because it assigns institutions a much more important role. In an ecosystem of reciprocal as well as selfish subjects, institutions determine the type of economic environment (Falk and Fehr and Fischbacher 2002:157-192)

Patterns rather than models

While the practical need for models and tools is understandable, scholarship on the commons is still evolving, and conflicting contexts are being unearthed. Creating workable solutions for applying commons is therefore a work in progress. It is for this reason that scholars suggest thinking in terms of 'patterns'. The patterns-approach helps us to see this as a platform rather than a model. They say that "a pattern language is necessarily incomplete knowledge, but still it represents the best knowledge that we have and it can be further developed

jointly as needed” (Bollier and Helfrich 2015: 914).

In fact, the way people approach a situation determines the patterns that will eventually develop around it. For example, if more people use private cars to get to work, less priority is given to developing public transportation services, and so the cost of getting to work goes up (Bollier and Helfrich 2015: 835). Similarly, if the education system is incentivised by the market to prioritise grades and test scores, the holistic education of the person suffers (Bollier and Helfrich 2015: 843).

Therefore it is for all of us to reorient our fundamental premises about the commons. This will be the basis for working cooperatively, and incorporating the vested interests of everyone.

Where commons thinking comes from

The history of commons is complicated and ancient. The various stories that exist point to two things:

-Commons systems have existed within a range of power-structures as diverse as feudalism, totalitarianism, communism and capitalism.

-Human beings have cooperated for millennia, and have found ingenious ways to do so.

Evolutionary biology and the case for cooperation

A strong case exists for the argument that cooperation rather than competition has helped animal species to survive and propagate; including *Homo sapiens*. The classical Darwinian constructs of ruthless self-interest and survival of the fittest is challenged by a new line of thinking (Harari 2015). Fundamentally, it is argued that cooperative behaviours and social bonds have helped groups of humans to survive whereas other less social species like Neanderthals have disappeared. Historical research has added that the propensity to cooperate is something that in fact transcends the biological selection level, and manifests at the group level (Bollier 2014: 79-96). The way this manifests is in our ability to create, believe in and sustain collective myths. Over many years of human evolution, our myths have ranged from gods and biblical stories, to democracy, neoliberalism and even Amazon- so it is only natural that if we are able to believe in the “myth” of the commons together, we would be able to cooperate as commoners.

Women and commons thinking

Since early days, women have relied on communal natural

resources more than men have (Federici 2014). They have also been instrumental to maintaining cooperative relationships with one another, while men have waged wars or competed for power and authority. Some authors attribute the survival of the human species to the commoning practices of womenfolk (Harari 2015). Yet, with the advent of neoliberalism and renewed divisions of labour, it has been women who have suffered the most from privatisation, and also committed the most to the defence of commons.

An explicit example of the suffering of women at the hands



“Rebecca Lolosoli, co-founder of Umoja, with friends” Umoja village is a village run by, for and of women. Such havens from patriarchal violence are misrepresented in mythology and history as covens run by witches. However, these covens are often sources of imaginative self-organization, commons based economies and mutual commoning. Image credits: Kate Cummings, Umoja Uaso, Kenya. Partner: Vital Voices. 2009 Licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

of privatisation is the phenomenon of witch-hunting. Back in sixteenth-seventeenth century Europe and North America, and today in contemporary rural India or Africa, women who possess socio-economic resources, are targeted by society through an elaborate process of social ostracism. These women usually have no living husband or male relative, and are branded as witches, before being driven to live on the edges of villages. Naturally, commons become their only means of subsistence, but even their defending this way of life has only drawn the ire of village-folk. The alienation has often grown, with superstition forming a convenient excuse, and the result has often been stoning or hanging of the ‘witch’, amongst other atrocities.

Despite adversities and pressures from the forces of privatisation, there are direct examples of women establishing autonomous self-reliant systems that operate outside the system of banks and industry. There are communally owned farms in public lands in African towns where corn, beans and other foods are grown to assist in the

subsistence of local livelihoods.

In India, the village of Erakulapally in Tamil Nadu has been at the centre of the phenomenon of farmer suicides over several years. Economic instability born out of monoculture and cash-crop farming had led to drought like conditions in previous years in this place. Yet, the women of the village cooperated and applied almost long-lost traditional knowledge to discover old crops that are better suited to the semi-arid landscape of the area. Through speaking to mothers and grandmothers, digging through forgotten archives of seeds, careful collective organization and cultivation, the women managed to revive a mixed-crop agricultural practice. This now is an eco-insurance for the area, and whatever the condition of the market or rains, a family growing these crops always has some food to eat (Bollier 2011).

A commodifying model does injustice to women's labour and caste-based labour because it values only certain kinds of work and reiterates the culture of unequal distribution of wealth. Commoning on the other hand has the potential to undo this negligence and advocate for a more proportionate distribution of returns commensurate to the scale of the society.

Defining Commons

Characteristics of commons spaces

In the previous section, we have seen how commons is not just about resources, and that there can be no commons without commoning. Logically, commons cannot therefore pre-exist in nature, but requires active participation to bring it into effect.

Having understood what commons is not, we can refer to leading scholars to find what commons is about, in essence. Some of the elements that comprise a commons include (Bollier 2011):

A social, self-organized system

Seeing the commons as a system helps in understanding it as

- a) complex with multiple inter-related elements and
- b) dynamic and ever-evolving.

The aspect of 'social' and 'self-organized' within the definition of the commons implies that:

-there is democratic participation of members of that society

-communication and co-operation is necessary

-the system responds to feedback

Community management of resources

When the community manages resources, they actively participate in the way the resources are used, replenished or controlled. They have a vested interest and stake in their own resources. Accordingly, they come up with their own rules and protocols about how to manage these.

Minimal reliance on market or State

The forces of the market encourage the maximization of profit, rather than the maintenance of an ecosystem. Profits are controlled by some individuals, and so the market operates in ways that benefit few people at the cost of many.

On the other hand, the State, by its nature, implements rules and regulations in a top-down manner. Given that many liberal economies are controlled by a nexus between the State and capitalists, it is often local interests that get sacrificed to satisfy market interests.

Therefore, a commons is possible only when the local economy is mostly independent of these profit-motivated, top-down forces. Following from this, the commoners of a commons are able to work towards egalitarian distribution of resources, and also ensure sustainability (Bennholdt-Thomsen 2014).

Long-term stewardship with sustainable ends

On the point of sustainability, the aspiration is that we must be able to meet our current needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Collective wealth includes the gifts of nature, civic infrastructure, cultural works and traditions, and knowledge (Brundtland 1987: 43).

With individuals taking responsibility for their shared resources, stewardship implies a degree of care towards resources which are understood to belong to others as well. The distinction is important because stewardship implies a different form of care than that extended to resources owned by one-self.

Preservation of shared values and community identity

It does not therefore matter whether a lake or the internet is a commons or not, but rather whether people living there are motivated enough to come up with the protocols to organize the same (Bollier 2014: 15).

Generation of values in ways unforeseen or jeopardized by market-state

Rational, self-interested individuals bargaining in a market place is not the only way to create wealth. If wealth is considered more than just money, and is used to refer to community and social relationships, the commons can be highly productive and contemporarily relevant as well (Bollier 2014: 13).

Characteristics of common-goods

Having understood some broad tenets of spaces that are routinely recognized as commons, it is worth understanding common-goods. Although the term is used loosely, common-goods in the context of commoning have certain necessary characteristics.

One must emphasise that these characteristics of common goods have little to do with inherent properties of the goods or things themselves. In other words, commons goods aren't special kinds of goods that are different from most of the things that exist around us naturally.

Therefore, water, land, data, fruits and publications can all be treated as common goods or as private goods or any other kind of good. It is about the treatment rather than the inherent nature of things that distinguish commons goods from other kinds. The point made earlier about commoning is all-important.

In a study (Berkes and Feeny and McCay and Acheson 1989) which attempted to study the characteristics of commons, certain sample case-studies were chosen on the basis of shared similarities. The choice for the shared similarities formed a sort of 'control' to the sociological experiment. Therefore, these chosen similarities form a useful place to understand what commons regimes are like.

Non-excludable

For one, the resources in these case-studies were not excludable. This means that the resources cannot exist in purely private-property regimes which prevented

others from accessing or using them. Excludable property treatment occurs, for instance, when a corporation takes ownership of land including a river. A river by itself can be a shared resource that everyone can enjoy. Within a private-property framework, however, it is possible that the corporation fences off the land and dams the river, thereby preventing those without permission from actually using it.

Subtractable

Another feature of common-property resources is that each user is capable of subtracting from the usage of others. This characteristic of a limited resource, such as water from a well, is called subtractability. This means that the more one person uses a resource, the less there is available for other users.

The reason for this is simply because commons exist where commoners have to work together to manage and share a limited resource. People do not (usually) have the need to develop systems and cooperate to share resources that are available infinitely.

If resources were not subtractable, they would not be identifiable as commons-goods. For example, oxygen in the air is not traditionally and by itself thought of as a common good. This is because air is all around us and every one can access it. The more one person consumes or uses it does not (usually) hinder the usage by another.

However, air may also be considered in a commons-sense if it becomes scarce or limited. Consider the case of deep-sea diving. Divers take parcels of compressed air with them on explorations of ocean floors. The diving community has also developed protocols to help co-operate within the oxygen-depleted depths. One such practice is that of sharing air or buddy-breathing, wherein divers running out of air share their oxygen with one another while in the midst of an underwater dive.

Mixed-systems

A third important characteristic of a successful commons, is that the resources are held in an overlap of open access, private property, communal property or State property (Baden and Noonan 1998: 78). If a computer is owned completely by one individual, she may not allow others to work upon it. A purely state-owned plot of land, on the other hand, may exclusively be used to conduct defence-exercises or training, and prohibit any residential usage. Therefore, to be able to treat a resource as a commons there has to be multiple stakeholders stewarding the resource (Nightingale 2019).

Urban spaces are a good example. Cities are comprised of private property in the form of residential homes, government property such as municipal buildings, public buildings like schools and also shared spaces like pavements, bus-stops and subway trains. Commons may emerge in the form of community gardens that operate alongside free-market systems.

Characteristics of commoning

Ostrom is a leading scholar known for countering fundamental premises of the 'tragedy of commons'. She is also known for in-depth research of case situations across the world where she was able to demonstrate that people are able to cooperate and come up with solutions for local issues (Ostrom 2015).

She identified firstly that not every resource or domain can be parcelled into circles and squares; as demonstrated by people who first conceived outer space. Moreover, her work shows that there are indeed multiple ecosystems within which norm-based cooperative models have been established. In fact, real incentives exist for resources to be managed in a common manner rather than in a private property style. It is possible to have self-governance of resources, not by State or market but by a community of users that self-governs the resources.

This can be done through -

- institutions that it creates
- norms
- values
- practices

Accordingly she devised eight principles for commoning:

1. The common-pool of resources has clearly-defined boundaries (effective exclusion of external unentitled parties)
2. There is congruence between the resource environment and its governance structure or rules
3. Decisions are made through collective-choice arrangements that allow most resource appropriators to participate
4. Rules are enforced through effective monitoring by monitors who are part of or accountable to the appropriators
5. Violations are punished with graduated sanctions

6. Conflicts and issues are addressed with low- cost and easy-to-access conflict resolution mechanisms

7. Higher-level authorities recognize the right of the resource appropriators to self-govern

8. In the case of larger common-pool resources: rules are organized and enforced through multiple layers of nested enterprises

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