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Understanding the pre-conditions of commons governance: The role of network management

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ABSTRACT

The institutional analysis and development framework helps analyze and understand the common property governance arrangements and dynamics. In setting out the IAD model Ostrom advocates a ‘polycentric’ approach to commons management involving oversight ‘at multiple times’. As Ostrom’s work notes, however, self-organization is only possible if there are means of building trust through communication and the creation of a setting in which individuals or groups are able to extend reciprocity to others. In fact, she argued, the ‘capacity of CPR users to govern themselves is often a necessary condition for overcoming the temptations involved in a CPR dilemma’ (Ostrom et al., 1994, 328). However, the IAD framework itself does not explain how such a pre-condition emerges or under which conditions capacity is built. The article argues that understanding the dynamics of the origins of ‘governance of the commons’ requires going well beyond the self-organizing cooperative structure suggested by Ostrom. Specifically, it points to the merits of framing the issue of commons governance in network terms and examining in detail the key role played by “network managers” in applying, maintaining and enforcing Ostrom’s eight principles of commons governance. Examples from the Australian climate change network are used to illustrate this point.

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1. Introduction

In her discussion of commons management, Ostrom highlights several crucial problems communities have when dealing with issues involving the local, national or global commons. This can be illustrated by the case of climate change, which has become a global issue through international treaties and meetings, such as the ones in Kyoto or Copenhagen,¹ but is also in need of localized solutions within

those global benchmarks. This creates a nested system of local, regional, national and global units that interact to create outcomes (Ostrom, 2009b; IRIN, 2012). Responses to these environmental developments have taken the form of treaties and agreements between governments at different levels and from different understandings and actions undertaken by local communities (Ostrom, 2001, 2005; Pahl-Wostl, 2009). In the search for lessons concerning the appropriate institutional arrangements to address such a multi-level issue, many works in the IAD tradition argue these

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¹ In Kyoto (Japan), the Kyoto Protocol was adopted on 11 December 1997 and entered into force on 16 February 2005. It is a binding international agreement linked to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. The so-called Copenhagen accord recognizes the scientific case for keeping temperature rises to no more than 2 °C, but document is not legally binding and does not contain any legally binding commitments for reducing CO₂ emissions.

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can emerge more or less spontaneously from community-level organizations and focus on the nature of favourable rules for cooperation to occur across levels while applying Ostrom's eight principles of commons governance to the design of their structure (Ostrom, 1990; Goldsmith and Eggers, 2004).² *On the contrary, we argue that in order to create trust and reciprocity within a community, there needs to be a network leader, who operates within the system and complements it through directed management activities aimed at its membership.* Such a leader enables communication among heterogeneous actors for building social capital and exchanging knowledge. A manager of this kind can also mobilize new and valuable participants as well as attract funding opportunities. Overall, this type of leadership can be governmental- or community-based, but in either case builds trust and long-term cooperative structures in a way which is not self-forming or auto-poetic.

The paper addresses this issue of the 'pre-conditions of commons governance' by looking at it from a network theory perspective, utilizing a case study of Australian efforts to deal with climate change adaptation and mitigation. The example will show that network leadership is different from direct government involvement or networking on the ground. Instead, it is an additional layer in the middle of a polycentric system, balancing hierarchical and horizontal dynamics. A network manager is able to minimize the costs for potential network members and create collaborative structured based on trust. The paper begins by establishing a conceptual framework on the role of networks and network management in commons governance, pointing towards the characteristics of network settings and the importance of leadership for effective institutional designs. Australia's Flagship initiative then serves as a case study to highlight the role of a network structure and cluster managers in creating such capital.

2. The governance of the commons as the creation of social, intellectual and political capital

Partners build trust by sharing information and knowledge, demonstrating competency, good intentions, and follow through; conversely, failure to follow through and unilateral action undermines trust (Folke et al., 2005; Arino and de la Torre, 1998; Merrill-Sands and Sheridan, 1996). Trust and reciprocity are core determinants of collective action according to Ostrom (for an overview of Ostrom's work, see Araral, 2014). Thus, improving communication in commons governance helps to foster trust-building practices.

² The eight principles of governing the commons by Ostrom (1990) are: (I) Define clear group boundaries. (II) Match rules governing use of common goods to local needs and conditions. (III) Ensure that those affected by the rules can participate in modifying the rules. (IV) Make sure the rule-making rights of community members are respected by outside authorities. (V) Develop a system, carried out by community members, for monitoring members' behaviour. (VI) Use graduated sanctions for rule violators. (VII) Provide accessible, low-cost means for dispute resolution. (VIII) Build responsibility for governing the common resource in nested tiers from the lowest level up to the entire interconnected system.

In the IAD framework, the creation of trust is continuously emphasized as an important feature or pre-condition of commons government. Once different stakeholders arrive at the table, communication and continued interaction build trust (Ostrom et al., 1994; Araral, 2014). The setting needs to generate 'sufficient information about the likely behaviour of others to be trustworthy reciprocators who will bear their share of the costs' (Ostrom, 2009a, 432). Trust in the actions of others is one pre-condition but in order to create knowledge-building exercises, stakeholders must also have trust in information. Many sustainability issues are connected to conflicts over scientific information. 'This information must be obtained and processed by an actor to formulate strategies for action, and so trust or mistrust in this information is also an important driver of conflict and consensus in commons governance arenas' (Henry and Dietz, 2011, 194; see also Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993). According to Goldsmith and Eggers (2004) a way must be found to establish dependability, fairness and goodwill among the organizations.

Overall, trust in actions and information can be said to be the basis of sustainable commons governance. Once trust is established, the risks of networking, such as free-rider problems or the 'weakness of loose ties' (Orton, 1990), which are caused by a missing hierarchical governance elements in such arrangement, can be compensated for by community-level coordination (Urbaniec and Gerstlberger, 2011).

Building trust is closely related to investments in social capital. Several authors have regarded social capital as the 'glue for adaptive capacity and collaboration' (Folke et al., 2005, 111). And while social capital creates the potential for fruitful discussions to take place among otherwise conflicting stakeholders, the trust in actions or 'intellectual capital' provides a common basis for problem definition and agreements. Intellectual capital can be defined as the relationships, innovation efforts, infrastructure, knowledge and skills of network members – basically any intangible resource that can generate value in the future without having a physical or financial form (Hormiga et al., 2011; Sullivan, 1999; Lev, 2001). In other words, intellectual capital combines human, structural and relational capital, which define the available knowledge through network members, the strategic vision for a network and the set-up for knowledge exchange.

On top of these first two, according to Innes et al. (1994), there is a third type: political capital. This kind of capital takes the form of 'alliances and agreements or proposals that provide mutual gain creat[ing] the possibility that proposals will be adopted' (ix). This implies that consensus-building has a positive effect throughout the whole policy cycle. If larger networks have agreed upon a problem and how it is defined, seeking a solution becomes easier and faster in the formulation and decision-making phase. It also makes it easier to monitor results in the evaluation phase as the realization of the policy is framed on the ground (Howlett et al., 2009). This is supported by research that suggests the readiness to accept new ideas largely depends on the stability of existing dominant coalitions of actors (Benz and Fuerst, 2002). Further, the incentive to participate in common solution-finding and knowledge-sharing becomes even stronger in some cases after a critical mass of committed and important players was achieved, along with some first-stage agreements (Innes et al., 1994).

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