

COMMONS LAB ANTWERP

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<http://new-commons.blogspot.com/p/wat-is-een-common.html>

What is a common?

A common is a platform for doing things together. A common is not just an encyclopedia, a windmill or a farm, but one that you decide together how it is created, what it looks like and what it serves for. It is therefore about people who manage something together by means of good agreements. All three elements are equally crucial. It is the combination that ensures that the whole is more than the sum of the parts.

Why would you create a common or a common good?

Because the whole is almost always more than the sum of the parts. If you go fishing separately in a lake, it will be fished out more quickly. If you agree with each other how much each may fish, it is an endless source of food.

How does it work?

A common is created as soon as you, together with a few others, define a piece of the world and agree on new rules. That part can for example be a farm, or a nature reserve or a fish pond. But also a digital encyclopedia like Wikipedia. Anything as long as the whole is more than the sum of the parts. To ensure that there can be cooperation, game rules are necessary. The rules set the rights and duties of the users of the common. Rights such as who gets access, who can harvest when and how much and who can take which roles; obligations such as doing repairs and sanctioning offenses against the rules.

What are the benefits of commons?

Why do we need commons if we already have markets and governments to lay down rules for cooperation? The special thing about a common is that it is not organized from the outside. A common is a kind of island that you make. You decide for yourself what happens, why, how and with whom. The rules are made, followed and enforced by the users of the common self. This has some important advantages compared to market and state:

1. Autonomy: Commons give us control over our world at a time when the rules for our daily life only seem to be determined on the G8, the financial markets or in Europe. It reaffirms us in our human dignity because we do not have to live in function of the structures, but the structures are there for us. Even though the electricity from your own windmill may be a bit more expensive, or you have to get up at night to watch for it or keep it in the storm, at least it's your current that you've determined how it's generated, what it's used for and what happens to the profit.
2. Subsidiarity: A second advantage is that the users of the common self have the most information about the specific local context and can also follow that context from day to day while using it. We all know the blind spots of the financial markets that do not take account of negative externalities such as psychological

and environmental costs and the lulls of governments that drive political cow traffic are often not hindered by deep knowledge. Because in a common the users themselves are the regulators, the decisions are taken at that level that is best suited for this.

3. Sustainability: A third advantage of the coincidence of users and regulators is that users are intrinsically motivated and external regulators are not. For the users, the purpose of the rules of the game is nothing other than the maintenance of the common self. Governments and market parties are not intrinsic but extrinsically motivated: the purpose of the rules for the common lies outside of that common, especially in obtaining votes and making financial profit respectively. This often leads to misplaced and short-sighted rules.

What are the pitfalls?

Everyone can create a common. Because it turns on itself, there is really only one condition, namely that it must be able to maintain itself. That is not always easy.

1. The rules must be designed so that everyone continues to benefit from maintaining the common. The whole is more than the sum of the parts, but if some get so little that they could get more out of them separately, the common runs the risk of falling apart. The rights and duties must therefore be distributed in a balanced way.
2. The users themselves must ensure that the rules are respected, because it makes little sense to agree on game rules if nobody follows them.
3. The rules must also be able to be adjusted as the situation changes. No matter how good a rule is, if it can not be changed, it will sooner or later go wrong.

In short, good rules are balanced, enforceable and adaptive.

Why are commons suddenly so hip?

The key to creating commons is communication. Due to the limited communication possibilities, setting up commons was only possible with small groups that lived close together and knew each other well. Due to industrialization, our society became so large that everyone could not possibly communicate enough with each other. Markets and states flourished because they had the important advantage that voters and buyers do not have to communicate with each other to organize themselves; in fact, the secrecy and the perfect market require that every citizen acts as an individual. Thanks to digitization, there has been a revolution in our communication options and it is suddenly feasible to make agreements with large groups of people. In this way commons get a future again, and a new kind of commons is created on a scale that was previously inconceivable. For example, Wikipedia, the digital internet encyclopedia that is structured and maintained by the same people who use it.