

The Commons in a Wellbeing Economy

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Introduction

In this WEAll Briefing, we invite you to explore the idea of the commons, a millenia-old concept which has recently gained interest as a potential foundation for a transition to a Wellbeing Economy. Because of the incredible range of ideas and systems that fall under this umbrella, we'll start by offering three helpful ways to conceptualise what the term "commons" means.

1) The first way to think of the commons is as an alternative system of resource governance¹, separate from the two currently dominant systems, the market and the state. Commons-based resource governance systems are designed by communities, democratic, non-hierarchical, and constructed specifically to share resources in ways that meet the needs of community members.

2) The second way to think of the commons is as an entity. This is what people mean when they refer to something like a park as "a commons." When thought of as an entity, a commons has two pieces: a shared resource, and community governance structures created around the resource. No resource is a commons on its own - as the saying goes, there are no commons without commoners (Bollier, 2016).

3) The third - and most abstract - way to think of the commons is as an alternative social paradigm or way of thinking, which is based on the acknowledgement of our connectedness, shared heritage, and shared responsibility for ensuring the wellbeing of future generations (Weber, 2013). Many commons scholars believe that commons thinking can not only help restructure our economy, but that it can redefine the way we imagine our relationships with each other, our communities, and with nature.

In this paper, we'll primarily focus on this first understanding of the commons - as a system of resource governance. We'll explore how the commons differs from state or market-led resource governance systems and provide examples of different ways commons are being used today. Through this exploration, we'll see how the commons can solve many of the problems inherent to other systems of resource governance and foster a more equitable, sustainable, and caring economic system. Finally, we'll put forth a number of actions communities, governments, and businesses can take to help expand and support the commons.

"Resource governance" sounds dry and economic, but in reality these systems determine fundamental dynamics of our economy, including how we determine our collective priorities, how we create value, and how we distribute it.

We envision a Wellbeing Economy that uses commons to: 1) transition economic power from corporations and the state to communities and the people; 2) create value in versatile, non-hierarchical, and cooperative structures; and 3) make our wealth of collective knowledge and resources accessible to all of humanity, rather than just the privileged few.

Envisioning the Commons

The commons today includes an incredible array of systems throughout many aspects of life. As Walljasper (2010) notes, commons can be used as a method of managing natural resources, labour, money, data, knowledge, culture, and just about anything else.

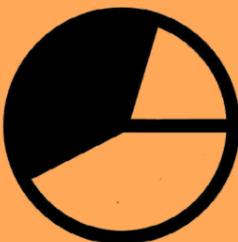
Commons-based resource governance can be most easily understood in contrast to other resource governance systems. As discussed in the introduction, resource governance systems are used to allocate decision making power for how a resource will be used and how to distribute value generated from that resource. To envision this process in action, let's think of a forest. This forest is situated near a community of a few thousand people, who want to use it for harvesting timber, foraging, recreation, wildlife conservation, and cultural significance. Collectively, they know there has to be some kind of system in place to decide who can do what, or else the forest could be in danger of degradation. Therefore, the community has a few options.²

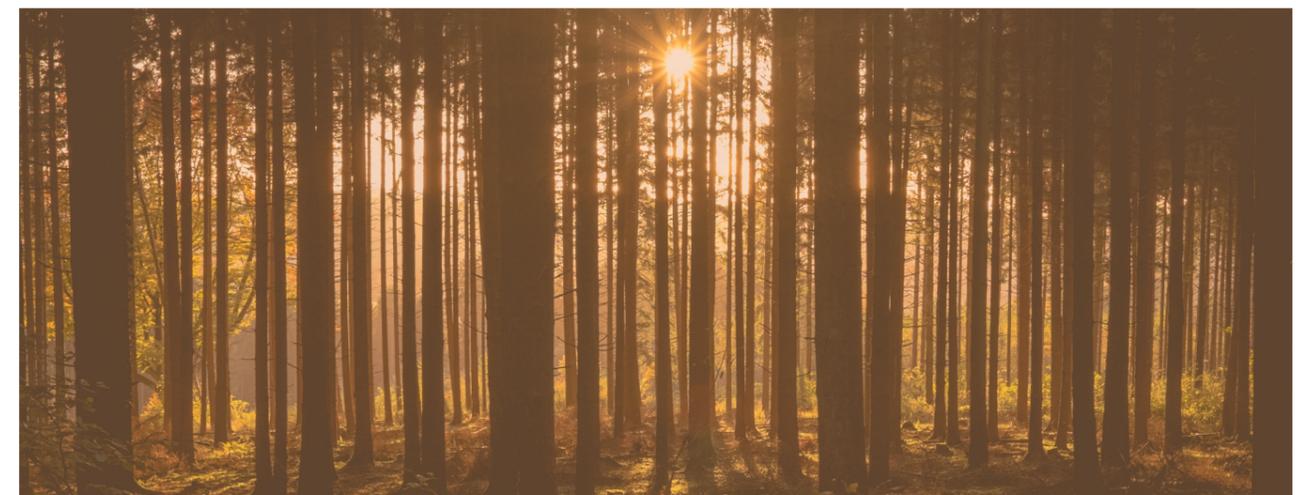
Each of these options has benefits and drawbacks. Using a market system allows the community to avoid the difficult task of designing and maintaining its own resource governance system, but risks the forest's value leaving the community and environmental degradation. Using a state approach allows the distribution of value from the forest beyond its immediate community; for example, to other communities with more limited access to natural resources. However, state control means the community cannot directly control the resource, and governments do not always act in the interest of the people they represent. Finally, a commons approach can be effective at sharing value generated by the resource and protecting it at the same time, but commons are difficult to manage and require large amounts of cooperation and effort. We'll return to these tradeoffs later in the paper; for now, we'll keep our focus on building a greater understanding of the commons.

Naturally, managing different types of resources as commons looks very different. The commons that comes together to manage a global open-design platform looks very different from the commons that organises a local park into a shared cultural space, both in terms of the communities that design and manage them, and the type of rules those communities create. This type of diversity is a fundamental characteristic of commons, because they are inherently designed to be context-specific (Ostrom et al., 1999).

However, there are a number of characteristics shared by all commons-based systems. In a commons, rule making is participatory and democratic, often directly involving all members of the relevant community, whether that community is based in a physical locality or distributed globally online. Commons are organised using horizontal, networked structures, naturally leading to opportunities for co-production (when people produce value working together as peers, rather than in a hierarchy). Commons are also based on systems of indirect reciprocity - everyone does their part and then shares in the benefits - rather than on direct transactions, and are specifically designed to meet the needs of community members, rather than to achieve some outside goal, like making a profit.

Three Ways of Managing a Forest

Markets Approach	State Control Approach	Commons Approach
		
First, they could privatise the forest and use a market system. In this case, segments of the forest would be sold off or awarded to individuals or corporations, who would be essentially free to use that land however they want. The private or corporate owners may or may not live near the forest, but they would be the ones who benefit from the value the forest creates. The ecological health of the forest would rely on the good will of whoever purchases the land.	Second, they could decide to govern the forest through the state ³ . In this case, some level of government - whether local, regional, or national - would decide what types of activities the forest will be used for and who gets to use it. Community members could push for certain policies, but the government would have final say. The state would be responsible for distributing value generated by the forest, as well as catching and punishing rule violators.	As a third option, citizens could manage the forest as a commons. In this case, the community would be responsible for coming up with their own rules about who is allowed to do what and how rule violators will be punished. The value the forest produces, both as an economic and cultural resource, would be shared throughout the community, and the community would also be responsible for monitoring the condition of the forest and dividing responsibilities for its care.



One final characteristic of commons is that they tend to overlap. A commons created around a lake doesn't just allow a community to share fish; it offers a shared space for leisure activities, a chance for community members to pass on centuries of accumulated knowledge, and a home for a culture and people.

Well-organised commons can be incredibly effective resource governance mechanisms (Ostrom, 2010), and for thousands of years, commons were a primary method of resource governance used to manage shared natural resources around the world (Wall, 2014). The Indigenous communities of the Menz in the Gausa area of Ethiopia managed shared grasslands as a commons for over 400 years; the Bisse de Saviessse irrigation system in Switzerland was maintained successfully as a commons by local communities for over 700 years. Commons scholar David Bollier estimates that today, subsistence commons - like forests, farmlands, and fisheries - meet the everyday needs of two billion people around the world (Bollier, 2011). Still, in the past few hundred years we have seen a dramatic decrease in the global prevalence of commons.

What happened?

The Tragedy and Its Undoing

The decline of commons has been driven by centuries of ruthless privatisation (Reid & Taylor, 2010), compounded by an established belief in the now-disproven "Tragedy of the Commons" narrative. From the British Parliament's appropriations of thousands of acres of commonly held grasslands from peasants in the 18th century, to today's repressive intellectual property regimes used to privatise innovations built on millennia of common knowledge, the last few hundred years have seen governments and corporations privatise what was once held as common, enabling them to profit off of what was once shared wealth.

Driven by an economic model that requires perpetual growth, this seizure of common resources has been rationalised by Garrett Hardin's 1968 publication *Tragedy of the Commons*, which argues that humans are bound to exploit any collective resource to gain short term personal advantage. Therefore, to protect our resources, we must either make them private property or have access regulated by the state. It has since been widely acknowledged that Hardin was not describing a commons -a governed system -but in fact an unmanaged, open-access resource (Cox, 1985; Forsyth & Johnson, 2014; Morrison, 2019). Despite this fact, the legacy of Hardin's work has been undeniable. Bromley & Cernea (1989) defined Hardin's tragedy of the commons narrative as: "the dominant paradigm within which social scientists assess natural resource issues."

Hardin's critique is important because it acknowledges the dire consequences of failing to properly govern open-access resources, consequences we have seen as unprotected resources around the world have been ruthlessly exploited by individuals and corporations. But these challenges can be overcome, as demonstrated by the extensive work of American economist Elinor Ostrom. Ostrom was awarded the Nobel Prize for Economics in 2009 for conclusively debunking Hardin's theory that a market-state duopoly⁴ was the only effective way to manage shared resources (Wall, 2018). She was able to demonstrate that commons could not only work as a decentralised governance system, but are a viable option, often outperforming both market and state alternatives (Ostrom, 2010, Tarko, 2016).



Commons Today

Today, despite the continued pressure of widespread privatisation, commons-based resource governance is enjoying a resurgence. Foundations laid by Ostrom - combined with new digital technologies that allow people to co-produce and freely share knowledge across the globe and the emergence social movements protesting growing privatisation - have inspired communities, businesses, and governments to expand four key types of commons: natural resource commons, urban commons, digital commons, and financial commons. These four types of commons illustrate the diversity of systems that fall under the umbrella of the commons and show how commons have the potential to be the bedrock of a Wellbeing Economy.

Natural Resource Commons

Commons have historically been used most frequently to manage what Ostrom calls “common pool resources”: resources that are depletable but for which it is difficult to regulate access. Natural resource commons are local in scale, require dense personal relationships among users, and need strong rules and enforcement mechanisms to prevent overuse of the resource (Ostrom, 1994). While these commons have existed for millenia, in recent years new natural resource commons have sprung up as communities around the world have asserted their right to reclaim what was once shared land.

Examples of natural resource commons:

[Kyrgyz Republic pasture reforms](#) (Kyrgyzstan)

- A government initiative to support the rights of communities who wanted to return to commons-based systems of management as a post-Soviet state. A significant number of the population were not willing to adopt market or state regulations because they found their traditional lifestyles were better suited to the health of their land.

[Community Resource Management Area Policy](#) (Ghana)

- This policy was introduced to provide a framework for participating communities to gain full authority to control, access, and harvest resources within a 200,000 hectare forestry area.

[GAIA \(Grupo Autónomo para la Investigación Ambiental\)](#) (Mexico)

- Provides sustainable agricultural options, promotes ecological restoration practices, and protects the production of coffee, honey, corn, and beans produced by local communities.

[Rare](#) (Global)

- Operates in over 60 countries to work with communities on regional and national scales to better manage their natural resources through the use of locally designed and led solutions.

[The Great Lakes Commons](#) (North America)

- Initiative organised by local citizens and indigenous groups who now employ historic legal traditions, which have allowed local communities to regain influence and become responsible for the stewardship and protection of the lakes.



Urban Commons

Urban commons have recently sprung up in cities around the world in reaction to the increasing commodification of public spaces and infrastructure (Spigarolo, 2017). Through public-commons partnerships, citizen-led initiatives have converted city spaces into affordable housing, cultural venues, community gardens, renewable energy projects, and other projects designed to meet the community’s needs. Some city governments have begun to see these commons initiatives as integral to their cities’ success and created long term plans for working with inhabitants to support these projects.

Examples of urban commons:

[Baan Mankong Programme](#) (Thailand)

- The Thai Government’s Baan Mankong (Secure Housing) program helps revitalise slums by converting them into collectively-owned commons. Communities purchase the land through the legal structure of a housing cooperative and become responsible for creating their own system for managing and developing it. This program has been extremely effective; as of 2018, it has supported the construction of 103,538 houses in 343 cities and towns across the country. Many of these communities also develop systems of collective finance, collective welfare, and collective physical planning, a perfect example of how commons projects create an infrastructure of cooperation that communities can build on.

[Ghent as an Urban Commons](#) (Belgium)

- Ghent is an example of a city that has whole-heartedly embraced the idea of public-commons partnerships to support citizen commoning initiatives. The city is currently home to over 500 commons projects, 10 times the number there were a decade ago. Different citizen-led projects help [produce local, organic food](#), [offer affordable housing](#), [expand access to renewable energy](#), and [create shared cultural spaces](#). The increase in commoning in Ghent is no accident; the city government actively looks for ways to support new commoning initiatives, and Ghent even has a [Commons Transition Plan](#) on its website.

[Bologna Regulation](#) (Italy)

- Passed by the city of Bologna in 2015, the Bologna Regulation for the Care and Regeneration of Urban Commons reconceptualises the city as a collaborative social ecosystem made up of citizens and communities capable of caring for and generating value from shared spaces (Bauwens & Niaros, 2017). It provides a legal framework for the creation of new commons in the city and makes the city government a key collaborator in that process. The regulation has led to the creation of hundreds of commons projects in all aspects of life in the city.

Digital Commons

Digital commons are in large part fueling the excitement around the commons movement today (Benkler & Nissenbaum, 2006, Guitors, 2017). Since digital resources are easily shareable and reproducible, these commons can operate globally with no limit to the number of users. To deal with the challenge of managing all of these contributors, many digital commons are backed by a non-profit that coordinates cooperation between users, while still leaving decision making power to the community of contributors. Digital commons started with knowledge sharing platforms like Wikipedia and open-source software projects like Linux. Now, open-design communities are co-creating designs for products and tools that address key needs (i.e. affordable housing, sustainable farming, medical technology) and can be manufactured locally at minimal cost to the environment.

Examples of knowledge commons:

[Wikipedia](#) (global)

- Probably one of the most well known digital commons, Wikipedia is a multilingual open-source online encyclopedia created and maintained by a community of volunteer editors.

[Traditional Knowledge Digital Library](#) (India)

- A shared database where traditional people's knowledge of medical remedies and treatments are documented to prevent bio-piracy and inappropriate patents.

[The System of Rice Intensification](#) (SRI) (global)

- An agro-ecological system for improving the productivity of irrigated rice by changing the mix of plants, soil, water, and nutrients. It is self-organised online by farmers across the world, helping to boost yields by 20 to 100 percent, to reduce the seed required by 90 percent, and to reduce water usage by up to 50 percent. The project is notable for blending the use of online platforms with physical resource management.

Examples of open source software:

[Blender Institute](#) (Netherlands)

- Non-profit that orchestrates a global network of open-source enthusiasts to create HD and 3D films, video games, and visual effects.

[LibreOffice](#) by Oracle (global)

- A commons-based software project that provides a free and comprehensive office suite.

Examples of open design communities:

[Wikihouse](#) (UK)

- Open-source platform that allows people across the globe to design and share blueprints for easy-to-assemble houses.

[Farm Hack](#) (global)

- Global community of farmers that make knowledge

Financial Commons

While money is not traditionally thought of as a common resource, new projects are challenging that notion. Communities around the world are now experimenting with alternative, commons-based systems of money and finance, based on commons principles like community-driven design, horizontality, and building community wealth. There are many variations of commons-based money and finance systems, including mutual credit systems, complementary community currencies, crowdfunding, and commons-based virtual banking.⁵

Examples of financial commons:

[WIR Franc](#) (Switzerland)

- A community currency that is locally initiated, democratically organised, not-for-profit and provides community members with the means to exchange goods and services.

[Goteo](#) (Spain)

- An open-source crowdfunding site created to support commons that creates public dialogue about proposed projects to drive the most effective outcomes. So far, Goteo has raised over €10 million for commons projects.

[Enspiral](#) (New Zealand / global)

- Enspiral is an open cooperative whose members contribute time, skills, and money to support commons projects. Part of Enspiral's structure is a commons-based virtual bank, created as a non-hierarchical distribution network. Members are able to share funds with one another free of cost, and collective funds are allocated using a transparent democratic process called Cobudget.



Benefits of a Commons Approach

Commons-based solutions are transformative in part because they solve problems inherent to our current systems of resource governance. Here, we lay out eight ways that commons-based resource governance brings us closer to a Wellbeing Economy; the first four benefits apply across various types of commons, while the last four are specific to the four key types of commons we just mentioned - natural resource commons, urban commons, digital commons, and financial commons.

1 | Shifting from extractive resource governance systems to building community wealth

Our market-based resource governance systems are extractive. This means value generated from resources, whether the resources are physical or digital, often doesn't feed back into the communities that create that value. Instead, wealth is siphoned off into the pockets of multinational corporation owners across the globe. This process drives inequality, keeping poor communities poor and allowing the rich to get richer (Bridge, 2008). State governance of resources can be less extractive, but all too often, wealth raised by the state goes towards funding tax breaks for the wealthy, environmentally damaging projects, and costly and unnecessary wars.

Commons-based resource governance solves this problem by ensuring that wealth generated from a community resource becomes accessible to and stays within the community, whether that community is local or geographically distributed (e.g. the global community of rice farmers). Because the resource in a commons is communally owned, all members of the community benefit from the value it creates. This can be seen in an environmental commons that ensures all local citizens have access to a shared natural resource while protecting the resource for the future benefit of the community (Cox, Arnold & Tomás, 2010); in urban commons that create cultural centres for citizens to benefit from the shared knowledge of the city (Iaione, 2015); and in commons-based complementary currencies that keep money circulating within the local economy (Meyer & Hudon, 2019).

2 | Shifting from transactional relationships and competition to indirect reciprocity and cooperation

Market- and state-based resource governance systems tend to limit opportunities for cooperation. Market-based resource governance creates primarily transactional and competitive relationships; because everyone is buying, selling and competing, there is little room for sharing and working together. State-imposed regulations, which essentially force

people to share, have actually been shown in some cases to crowd out voluntary human cooperation (Ostrom, 1994). Both forms of governance often result in weaker communities and more isolated individuals (Bowles & Gintis, 2002).

Commons are based on indirect reciprocity, helping to build non-transactional relationships. This means that everyone collectively does their part in maintaining and curating the resource, and as a result everyone shares in the benefits (Vosselman & Van der Meer-Kooistra, 2009). This process encourages commoners to support and care for one another and their shared environment. This kind of care and cooperation is evident in digital commons, where participants share knowledge largely out of desire to help one another out. The mutual support structures that evolve around urban commons, like the Thai housing model described above, and natural resource commons, like those that have formed around America's Great Lakes, also build a spiritual attachment to the land and long-lasting bonds between local communities.

“Commons-based resource governance solves this problem by ensuring that wealth generated from a community resource becomes accessible to and stays within the community..”



3 | Shifting from one-size-fits-all solutions to solutions designed to match local conditions

Market and state governance of resources often produce one-size-fits-all solutions, with little attention to the complexity and diversity of local needs (Bakker, 2007). Markets are, in a sense, their own one-size-fits-all solution. State solutions are often imposed top down, with little input from local communities, or are driven by pressure from specific lobby groups with an agenda which might be less holistic and diverse.

In contrast, commons-based resource governance systems are created by communities - whether local or digital - to meet challenges regarding specific resources, address local needs, and mesh with their culture and customs. A key principle of commoning is that, under the right conditions, human beings can design effective systems that match local context and allow everyone within to benefit from a shared resource, while taking care of the resource at the same time (Weston & Bollier, 2013). This process can look very different. Sometimes those decisions have been made through years of social custom, while other times, the process is highly formal; however, in both cases, rule making in commons stems from the bottom up. In almost all cases, communities are better at designing solutions that meet their own needs than markets and bureaucrats are.

4 | Shifting from decision making and power concentrated among an elite few to everyday democracy for the many

In both state and market resource management, decision making and power are concentrated among the elite few (Dahl, 1982). It is corporation owners and politicians who make decisions about how all resources - from natural resources, to knowledge, to money - should be managed. And while politicians claim to represent the people, in many countries today they more closely reflect the interests of the ultra-wealthy (Mattei, 2011).

In contrast, commons give decision-making and power directly to communities. Rule-making in a commons is participatory and democratic, and includes most, if not all, relevant community members (Kelly, 2012). Commons are also based on non-hierarchical structures, so while some groups may appoint individuals or smaller committees to oversight positions, everyone involved in a commons generally has equal authority, and people relate to one another as peers, rather than superiors and inferiors (Helfrich, 2013). This kind of democratised decision making restores power to communities and also encourages people to become more involved in the democratic process, a major benefit in a time where faith in democracy is eroding around the world (Wike, Silver & Castillo, 2019).



5 | Shifting from environmental degradation to sustainability and flourishing eco-systems

State and market governance systems fail to properly account for the harm they cause the environment. Market systems often make minimal efforts to incorporate environmental externalities, unless they are forced to do so by the state (Nicolaisen & Hoeller, 1990). The widespread environmental degradation we see around the globe today is primarily due to the actions of profit-seeking corporations with minimal regard for local ecosystems (Bliss & Edgler, 2020). Many governments claim to

protect the environment, and in some cases they do; policies like South Africa's biodiversity tax incentive help to hold companies accountable for environmental degradation (Stevens, 2020). However, the government-sanctioned fossil fuel drilling and burning that happens all around the globe is clear evidence that governments are often more concerned with private interests and GDP than with protecting local communities.

A commons approach changes the relationship between natural resources and the people managing them. Because the people governing the resource live in close proximity to the resource and depend on the resource for meeting their needs, environmental costs naturally become a core part of any decision making process. Ostrom refers to this as the principle of non-dualism (2008), which means learning to think about an environmental resource and the surrounding community as an inseparable whole rather than opposed and separate entities. This mindset creates deeper ties between people and nature and eliminates incentives to harm nature for community gain.

“Allowing citizens to directly govern shared spaces prevents enclosures by private companies, and ensures the kind of context-specific, needs-based solutions that bureaucratic city governments can sometimes struggle to offer.”

6 | Cities that exacerbate inequality → Cities that heal inequality

Cities are remarkable for the incredible number of person-to-person interactions they facilitate and the opportunities for collaboration those interactions bring. Yet in the past few decades, cities around the globe, once engines of unity and opportunity, have become increasingly segregated and unequal (Tiboris, 2016). This trend is largely due to the privatisation of once public spaces, limiting access to those able to afford it, and austerity-driven cuts to public services (McGurick, 2015).

Fixing cities will undoubtedly require major reinvestments in public, government-run services and infrastructure, including cleaning up and beautifying public spaces, and providing access to affordable housing, energy, and good public schools. However, the effectiveness of these investments can be compounded by embracing public-commons partnerships. Allowing citizens to directly govern shared spaces prevents enclosures by private companies, and ensures the kind of context-specific, needs-based solutions that bureaucratic city governments can sometimes struggle to offer. Commons also fuel cooperation and sharing among citizens, breaking down the barriers of our current isolating system. Growing urban commons around the world are showing how we can restore the promise and vitality of our cities, and offer more equitable opportunities for all.

7 | Privatised knowledge and intellectual property → shared knowledge and digital co-creation

Unlike traditional commons built around a limited, bounded resource (such as a forest), digital information and knowledge commons represent an opportunity for unlimited sharing and co-creation. However, state and market governance regimes often encourage an enclosure (privatisation) of this information. This process of enclosure allows an elite group within a society an opportunity to personally profit from the work and learnings of previous generations (Linebaugh, 2014). This dynamic creates societies full of unequal power relationships, as those who control the flow of knowledge can decide who can access information and when. This is evident in laws that eliminate traditional public fair use rights to share information, strictly control the flow of information into private benefit, and allow copyright industries to stifle competition and prevent innovation.

In contrast, systems like new digital commons based on open knowledge sharing and peer-to-peer production provide an opportunity for large groups to collaborate, create, and provide information and knowledge that can be shared freely without restrictions from the market or state (Benkler & Nissenbaum, 2015). These systems can empower individuals, particularly marginalised peoples, and substantially increase opportunities for collective co-production, as well as enable more personalised and demand-driven public services (Lember & Nurkse, 2018).

8 | Money system that concentrates wealth → Money system that shares prosperity

Our current privatised money system prevents us from moving towards a wellbeing-centred economy. Most money (97%) in circulation in “advanced economies” is created by private banks through loans with compound interest; repaying these loans requires either that the economy continuously grows, or individuals accumulate more and more debt (McLeay, Radla & Ryland, 2018). The former is destructive to our environment, and the latter creates immense financial pain for low-income families and communities. Allowing banks to direct money creation also starves commons and community-based projects of funding. Money spent in local communities rarely stays there; instead, it is most often recirculated to speculation on financial markets, which does little to promote solidarity amongst communities or improve collective wellbeing (Eisinger, 2000).

Money and finance based on commons principles (like community-based design, horizontality, and building community wealth) have the potential to mend many of these flaws and serve as a foundation for an economy based on solidarity. These systems are already in use in communities around the world; continuing to innovate, experiment, and build on them is essential for building a more sustainable and commons-friendly economy.

“Money and finance based on commons principles (like community-based design, horizontality, and building community wealth) have the potential to mend many of these flaws and serve as a foundation for an economy based on solidarity.”

Debates about commons

There are a number of ongoing debates regarding the best use of commons as a positive and progressive influence. We identified two key areas of discussion that will play formative roles in shaping any future developments of commons.

What should be managed as a commons?

Earlier in this paper, we established that essentially any resource can be governed as a commons. But how should we decide what resources to govern that way? Should it be based on the ethical entitlement all people have to our planet’s shared resources? Should it be just in the situations where a commons-based government proves more efficient than market and state alternatives? Or should people just be allowed to vote on it and decide for themselves? Answering this question is crucial in deciding the role commons will play in a Wellbeing Economy.

How should commons-generated value be distributed?

If a resource is designated as a commons, a fundamental question that must be answered is who should be included in the governance of the commons and who should receive the benefits it generates. Take, for example, the Amazon rainforest. Some people might feel that the resource belongs to the local Indigenous people; others might argue that it belongs to all of Brazil or to humanity as a whole. Does living somewhere give you a greater right to local resources? What about a country where some areas have resources that generate massive amounts of wealth, while others do not; how much redistribution should occur? These questions are notably much more relevant to finite natural resource commons than they are for many of the infinitely usable digital commons of today; however, they are still important questions that any commons must consider.



Creating more Commons

Given the positive benefits of commons approaches, how can we move towards implementing these systems more widely? Here are some ideas for key actions communities, governments, and businesses can take.

Communities, Citizens, and Civil Society

Creating new commons centres primarily on the efforts of communities and individuals who want to govern certain resources as a commons. While having the support of the state and co-operation from businesses is certainly helpful, it is a community's responsibility to create and manage new commons. Here are a few steps communities can take to promote commoning.

“While having the support of the state and co-operation from businesses is certainly helpful, it is a community's responsibility to create and manage new commons.”

- **Create new commons embedded within our current systems.** One of the most exciting aspects of commons is that they do not require outside support or system change to come into existence; they can be created by community members mobilising themselves to share and maintain a resource together. Communities and civil society groups can create all sorts of commons on their own, from little projects like community gardens and book sharing clubs, to more ambitious ventures like complementary currencies and community-owned housing. Many commons advocates believe that this bottom-up process of communities creating new commons must be the primary driver of a transition to a commons-based economy.
- **Create broader commons movements.** While creating commons within the current system is certainly progress, it is also important for communities to lead larger commons movements that challenge our current systems of resource governance. An example is [The Landless Workers Movement of Brazil](#) (De Almeida, Sánchez & Hallewell, 2000), who are a collective social movement formed by rural workers in 1984 that has since been able to secure over 2,500 plots, amounting to over 7.5 million hectares, for communities to manage as commons. The movement has also provided aid and support for around 370,000 families, including building new schools, offering credit for agricultural production and cooperatives, and providing access to health care. A similar movement is [The Indigenous peoples alliance of the Archipelago](#), which represents over 2,300 communities across Indonesia, with a population of 17 million. The alliance is responsible for multiple grassroots programs for community engagement, renewable energy, education, and culture that support and protect Indigenous people. Other major commons movements are taking a more traditionally political route. In 2015, a number of [municipal coalitions](#), created by commons-supporting citizens, were able to win elections in cities across Spain, and in 2016, commoners

from across Europe created a [European Commons Assembly](#) and presented their vision before European Parliament. Movements like these are crucial to driving systemic change on a larger scale.

Governments

While commons are governed directly by local communities, they are also always embedded in a larger political structure. As a result, in order for commons to flourish, governments need to make space for commons and provide both legal and financial support structures. Here are a few ways that can be done.

- **Create broad initiatives to support commoning.** The most powerful action a government at any scale can take to support commoning is coming up with a plan to support the widespread creation of commons in that society. The efforts in Bologna and Ghent we described earlier are great examples. This kind of ambitious redesign of society can also start at the national level, as shown with the [FLOK Society Plan](#) in Ecuador (Barandiaran & Vila-Viñas, 2015). This project, launched in 2013, created a concrete plan to transition Ecuador to an economy based on free and open knowledge commons.
- **Provide legal structures that support commoning.** On a more narrow scale, governments can create legal structures to empower communities to create commons. This is in some sense what the Bologna Regulation did, although that was accompanied by a broader effort to promote urban commoning. Legal frameworks can also be helpful in increasing the legitimacy of complementary currencies and creating more commons-friendly intellectual property regimes (the [Creative Commons](#) and [CopyFair](#) licenses are two examples of licenses designed to support commoning).
- **Provide financial support to commons projects.** Finally, governments can financially support commons projects. This can be through grants or through affordable loans provided by public banks. Given how difficult it is for commons projects to get funding within our current monetary system, this kind of support can be crucial for getting these projects off the ground. One example of this was Twin Trading for Fair Trade in the UK (bought by Sustainable Housing in 2019). Twin Trading was a cooperative finance institution that secured £75 thousand in seed capital from the state to get started. Twin Trading turned over £35 million annually until the Sustainable Housing takeover, but this seed capital was crucial in getting the operation off the ground (Bollier & Conaty, 2015).

Businesses

Businesses as currently structured - private and for-profit - are inherently anti-commons, extracting value from our shared resources, without returning anything back (Philipsen, 2020). [The Commons Transition Primer](#) is a resource created by commoners to help envision a transition to a commons-based economy. It offers principles of a new model for businesses that can not only co-exist with commons, but help the commons thrive: **aim to be generative, not extractive, design global, produce local; and embrace new commons-based business structures.**

Conclusion

We hope this briefing paper has provided a thought-provoking overview of the diverse, multifaceted movement known as the commons and offered a glimpse into how commons are actively contributing to the goal of realising a Wellbeing Economy.

There are a multitude of examples showcasing that the commons are an effective replacement to extractive market or state based alternatives, ranging from the WIR Franc community currency in Switzerland used for localised goods and services exchanges to the historic commons of the Guassa Community Conservation Area, which has supported communities and the local biosphere for over 400 years. A commons approach has the potential to improve the way we govern shared resources as it provides more localised, context appropriate solutions that not only consider the long term effects on communities, but of the wellbeing of the planet as well.

However, to continue to cultivate commons and resist the increasing pressures from our current economic system, we must individually and collectively approach the world's challenges with a fresh perspective. A perspective that sees opportunity to engage in collective action and resolve unequal power relations, increase sharing and cooperation, create new forms of value, embrace complexity, improve social prosperity, and promote environmental justice. A perspective that sees opportunities for the creation and sustained prosperity of the commons.

We encourage readers to look through the kaleidoscopic lenses of the commons, see where they can engage within their local communities, and become part of the global community trying to make the wellbeing of people and the planet the number one priority.



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Key Institutions & Notable People

- <https://commonstransition.org/a-commons-transition-plan/>
- <https://community-wealth.org/>
- <http://www.bollier.org/>
- <https://commons.blog/>
- <http://commonsstrategies.org/>
- <https://iasc-commons.org/>
- <http://labgov.city/>
- <https://p2pfoundation.net/>
- <https://neweconomics.org/>
- <https://thenextsystem.org/>
- <https://centerforneweconomics.org/>
- <https://www.boell.de/en>

Endnotes

- 1 Resource governance systems allocate decision making power for how resources are used and dictate how value generated from a resource is distributed.
- 2 In reality, communities are very rarely given the choice of which of these systems they would prefer to use. Decisions about resource governance tend to be made by governments, which frequently are heavily influenced by private interests (Bütte & Mattli, 2013).
- 3 The benefits and challenges of state-based resource governance vary depending on whether the government involved is local, regional, or national. In almost all cases, though, governance is indirect, as opposed to the direct democracy of the commons.
- 4 The “market-state duopoly” refers to the belief that common resources must be managed by either the market or state to avoid being destroyed.
- 5 Commons-based money and finance can be difficult to conceptualise. This essay by David Bollier provides a helpful overview of the topic and the variety of commons-friendly money systems being used today.

Commons in a Wellbeing Economy



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