

WHAT MAKES A COMMUNE THRIVE?

What can Ostrom's eight design principles contribute to understandings of intentional community living?

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KEY TERMS

A **common-pool resource (CPR)** is a resource shared between many users where **one person's use of the resource depletes the resource for others**. Without proper governance, there is risk of over-extraction and degradation (e.g. over-fishing in a lake) or the utilisation of resources without adequately contributing to them (free riding). This has encouraged traditional economic thinkers to encourage privatisation or state-control of CPRs. In the 1990s, **Elinor Ostrom challenged this and proved that CPRs could be effectively governed by the collective**. She noticed that there were **eight 'design principles'** required for a common governed by the collective to thrive. SEE TO THE RIGHT!!

An **intentional community, or commune**, is a group of people who decide to live together in shared housing. They share the domestic tasks and responsibility for growing food collectively. Decisions for the community are made collectively in weekly meetings. **Just like in a CPR, there is a risk of 'freeriding'**, where members of the community benefit from the resources (food, a clean house etc) without contributing to the maintenance of resources (cooking, cleaning, growing food). **This risks an ineffective community.**

AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

My project aimed to understand whether **Ostrom's eight design principles** for governing the commons can be used as **a tool to better understand how intentional communities function** and prevent **freeriding**.

The data that has shaped my findings was based on two four day visits and 10 interviews, in two intentional communities: Oakhouse and Redberry Community. As I only visited two sites, and for a limited amount of time, this work doesn't necessarily reflect all intentional communities, especially given their diversity.

FINDINGS

Ostrom's eight design principles are closely aligned with the systems that both communities used. Problems that the communities were having could be directly linked to a failure to follow a particular principle. I have highlighted some principles that were particularly challenging for the communities to effectively follow.

Design principle 4. Monitoring.

Within intentional communities, the appropriators of the common (residents) are also the monitors. Monitoring other people's use of the commons occurs easily through everyday activities. For example, whilst making a cup of tea a resident will see that the person who signed up to do the washing up, is in fact doing the washing up.

Monitoring is challenging when residents place different value on different types of work. Emotional labour (e.g. building strong social bonds), domestic work and work completed outside of the community spaces (e.g. completing spreadsheets rather than farming) becomes 'invisible labour' - under appreciated. This meant that certain residents might accuse other residents, who exclusively cook and clean, for example, of freeriding.

Design principle 5. Graduated sanctions.

Without clear clarity on what 'work' on the commons is, sanctioning is rare. This is problematic as it allows freeriding to continue which creates hostility between those freeriding and those working.

Design principle 7. Recognition of rights to organize.

Whilst both communities had no direct challenge to their form of governance, the English legal framework shaped both their purpose and operation. Oakhouse, for example, was a registered charity, which meant it had a trustee board (who were mostly not residents) who make decisions based on the charity not the residents, decreasing resident autonomy.

OSTROM'S EIGHT PRINCIPLES

In order for a common to function, Ostrom argues these principles must be followed.

1. Clearly defined boundaries to the CPR
2. Adaptation to the local environment and specific resource
3. Collective-choice arrangements. Those affected by the rules can adapt the rules.
4. Monitoring. Monitors of the CPR are accountable to the appropriators or are the appropriators.
5. Graduated sanctions. Appropriators who violate operational rules are likely to be assessed graduated sanctions
6. Conflict-resolution mechanisms
7. Recognition of rights to organize collectively are respected by external authorities
8. Nested principles



CONCLUSION

The systems behind thriving intentional communities are often opaque. Ostrom could serve as a tool to help disentangle these systems, especially as her principles are able to highlight the typical problems that intentional communities face. This could encourage the proliferation and successes of similar communities.

