

Elinor Ostrom

”Collective Action and Local Development Processes”: A Response to the Comments

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“Collective Action and Local Development Processes”: A Response to the Comments

by Elinor Ostrom

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It is a great honor to have three distinguished social scientists comment on my article especially since the comments are all extremely interesting and of high quality. Let me turn first to *A Call for More Structure in Collective Action Theory* by Luigi Curini. Curini stresses the importance of developing a structured theory of collective action. Too frequently scholars have treated all forms of collective action – from neighbors deciding how to clean up a vacant lot to international negotiations over cross-boundary river systems – as if they were the identical in structure. While collective action problems share some features, that does not make them all the same. Even more dangerous is that many scholars doing policy analysis call for the *same* solutions to all collective action problems without considering their spatial or temporal scale, whether they involve common-pool resources or public goods, or any of the many attributes of participants that affect behavior in a collective action situation. Professor Curini pushes all of us to be careful that we develop a theory of collective action that will explain diverse phenomena, predict results, and be useful.

The September 25 issue of the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States* contains a Special Feature on “Beyond Panaceas” [Ostrom, Janssen and Anderies 2007]. In my Perspectives article for that Special Feature [Ostrom 2007], I call for a multi-tiered, structured framework to be applied to the analysis of social-ecological systems (SESs). Some of the problems facing SESs are social dilemmas, but others are not. The tiered framework that I present there is, I hope, the beginning of a cross-disciplinary effort to develop more structured theory in general for systems in which there are humans interacting with resource systems. We simply must know the attributes of the resource system such as their size, clarity of boundaries,

equilibrium properties, and predictability as these impact on the kinds of problems that humans face in trying to use any resource system. Further, we need to understand who the users are and their attributes. The size of a group, its heterogeneity along a diversity of indicators, leadership, knowledge, shared values, and many other attributes of the users of a resource also impact on their immediate behavior as well as on consideration of changes in rules and other structural attributes so as to improve performance over time. There really is an opportunity in these early years of the twenty-first century to build better structured theories so that we can become effective diagnosticians rather than preachers of particular pet solutions.

Carlo Donolo points out that the concept of a commons may be applied to a variety of resources. Solutions to the problems of the commons also require some form of commons. The second form are present in the sense that individuals share a set of rules and complementary norms for how to relate to a physical resource. Thus, as Donolo points out, current "tragedies of the commons" are frequently the result of the failure to solve earlier "tragedies of the commons" by creating new commons in the form of rules and norms well-matched to a particular situation.

All too often, scholars presume that the solutions to resource commons must be imposed by "the state." Professor Donolo stresses the importance of federalism and of Vincent Ostrom's work on federal systems. It is nice to report that several of Vincent Ostrom's book are being published in new editions. Both the *Political Theory of a Compound Republic* and the *Intellectual Crisis in American Public Administration* will be available to readers very early in 2008 [V. Ostrom 2008a; 2008b].

If citizens rely entirely on the fiction of "the state" to solve problems, they will not achieve the learning that Donolo points out is essential to facilitate the process of struggling with the problems we all face. We must build more effective democratic theory based on a sense that the range of talents of citizens and of their public officials is similar. If citizens wait for all solutions to come from public officials, we will lose our democratic traditions and move toward new tragedies of immense orders. Instead of our heavy focus on voting as the key aspect of citizenship, we must develop a sense that citizenship involves problem solving in diverse social arenas all the way from the small neighborhood through to national and international governance arrangements. I do hope that scholars planning to write textbooks of the future will take Professor Donolo's thinking very seriously as well as the work of Amartya Sen [1977; 1981; 1989; 2002] as he recommends.

Part of the second type of commons that Donolo examines include the rules that Guglielmo Wolleb discusses in his excellent set of comments. I am so glad that he points out the connection between the rules that humans devise for themselves and social capital. While many have questioned whether the concept of social capital is a

useful concept, I agree with Wolleb that the rules that humans devise for themselves are an important part of social capital.

Let us turn for a moment to the concept of capital more generally. Scholars have for many eras recognized that when humans spend time, energy, and other resources in building facilities that enable them to have a higher return in the long run, they have built a form of capital. Unfortunately, many scholars think of capital only in terms of roads, buildings, machinery, and other physical representations of capital. The crucial aspect is that individuals have deferred immediate consumption today in order to increase the probability of sustained or higher levels of consumption in the future. We do that when we invest in education as a form of human capital. We certainly do that when we spend time and energy devising rules that we can share to solve problems today, tomorrow, and long into the future. What Wolleb urges us to do is recognize rules as a form of social capital so that we do not assume that rules are always pronounced by external authorities. Rules must be built and rebuilt over time by those who are dependent on having effective rules. Or they will find that free riding, conflict, and poor results dominate their life. We should all recognize that building local economic development is “neither simple nor impossible.”

I am deeply appreciative of the understanding of my work demonstrated by these three colleagues. I only wish that we had an opportunity for several days of extended discussions. I have the sense that the social sciences are at a crucial juncture where sufficient evidence has been gleaned from hard empirical work in the field and the lab to enable us to take a great leap forward. The leap will lead us to a more finally structured sense of the many levels of human organization that occur. Biologists and ecologists have recognized for several centuries the multi-tiered nature of their phenomena. We are moving toward a more common view that is not so segregated into the highly protected disciplinary homes that prevail in all universities. We have a lot to do to develop a real community of understanding rather than quibbling with one another unnecessarily over academic territory.

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“Collective Action and Local Development Processes”: A Response to the Comments

Abstract: This article is a response to the excellent comments made by Luigi Curini, Carlo Donolo, and Guglielmo Wolleb on my earlier article on *Collective Actions and Local Development Processes*. In my response I have addressed the key questions raised by these three distinguished social scientists. I also discuss the multi-tiered, structured framework useful for analyzing patterns of interactions and outcomes obtained in a diversity of social-ecological systems (SESs). I hope this tiered framework is the beginning of a cross-disciplinary effort to develop more structured theory in general for systems in which there are humans interacting with resource systems.

Keywords: collective action; social-ecological systems (SESs); inter-disciplinary research; multi-level development; sustainability.

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