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Nobel Laureate Elinor Ostrom on Why Climate Change Solutions Work Best When They're Local

***1. Dr. Ostrom, congratulations on your award. Thank you for taking the time to talk to Solutions. The Nobel judges cited your work as challenging the conventional wisdom that there are only two options when managing resources: for the state to be in charge or privatization. You're credited with showing how the solution more often lies within the local community and that individuals can and do cooperate and share scarce resources. Tell us: when and where did you first begin to notice that this was the case?***

I got started doing my dissertation on groundwater in the early 1960s and didn't know I was studying the tragedy of the commons. I saw a very tough problem of groundwater management slowly but surely being worked through. I went on to study other groups, including the police. Eventually, I became aware of a vast literature of successful self-organization by individual groups.

***2. What was one of the first cases that caught your eye?***

One was the work of Dr. Robert Netting, a very distinguished anthropologist who studied Swiss alpine colonies with a long recorded history.

***3. What you are saying really goes against conventional wisdom of the last 20 years, doesn't it?***

Yes, for many it is against conventional wisdom, especially for traditional economists, resource economists, and environmental economists, but there were people out there doing research for many years not knowing it was about a commons. Scholars have described how people were coping with pastoral areas in Africa, Asia, and the Alps, as well as with inshore fisheries and irrigation systems. They didn't know that what they observed was being called impossible by others because historians, anthropologists, engineers, political scientists, and some economists were all writing then about different kinds of resources in different regions. There were three big divisions: discipline, resource, and region. And so even people studying Africa, who studied pastoral people, didn't know about irrigation in Africa researched by someone in a different discipline.

**4. Yes, it seems there are so many walls put up between departments and academic institutions. How can we begin to increase collaboration between disciplines?**

One way is to have academic journals that try to do that. We at Indiana University have an interdisciplinary research center; we call it the Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis. We use the term 'workshop' because it's more collaborative than 'center.' We don't hire people for teaching. People voluntarily work with us. That makes a big difference. We've had colleagues originally in economics and political science, but now we have those two core disciplines and also anthropology and geography, as well as colleagues in ecology, law, and sociology.

**5. I imagine you followed the discussions in Copenhagen. You advocate for the problems associated with limited resources to be handled by a "community of individuals." Could you say more about this and how it could relate to tackling global warming?**

The problem with global change is that everyone wants to focus only on the international level. Fortunately, more and more people are recognizing that we can and should do a lot at local and regional levels. If we just sit around and wait, it'll be a total disaster. We can organize locally and then go to our neighbors and say, "look what we're doing, you could do this too." Then we can begin to network successful systems and learn how to run them.

**6. This sounds great, but how do we get people to think globally but act locally, especially given the impediments to cooperation that you yourself acknowledge, such as free-riding?**

It's how do we get people communicating and talking with one another. Some dorms on some university campuses are now beginning to compete with one another in energy usage. We can use competition between communities, groups, or dorms to see who does the very best.

**7. Yes, at the University of Vermont there's discussion of a ban of all plastic water bottles on campus.**

Yes, there are things of that sort that one can do. And then if meters are installed that show electric or heating use, people can compete on who is doing better about shutting their heating off when they are not at home. And some people will say, "it won't make a difference." Well, not if it's just one dorm at one university. But what if one starts it and gets someone else interested and then someone else? For example, there's a private utility in Sacramento that puts together a random sample of customers and then sends a note with a smiley face if you're below average for energy use and a frown if you're above average, telling you "you're using more energy than your neighbors." And that is reducing power usage.

**8. What new institutions do we need to create in order to solve our current common property management problems such as managing the atmosphere, oceans, and soils?**

There are so many. How do you help small groups who live around a lake meet together to figure out what they can do so the lake doesn't become polluted? If you go up to Wisconsin there are thousands of lakes, and if you try to manage them all from the state capitol of Wisconsin, well everyone has a slightly different problem. But if you figure out ways to enable people to manage them lake-by-lake and then create a Wisconsin Lake Association—and that is slowly but surely happening—then they're sharing their experiences. And once a group has seen a lake go cloudy, they have a real incentive not to see that happen again. Ecologists have learned to study patches inside subsystems inside subsystems inside subsystems. We've not done that enough in the social sciences.

**9. What can we learn from the design of successful common property institutions in other cultures that may be helpful in designing new institutions for our current situation?**

Well, one of the crucial things is how you grow trust. And finding ways that people meet and learn what is commonly expected. And they must monitor one another. This is one factor that makes the most difference. Whether it's government- or community-owned or private. Sometimes the formal institution doesn't matter as much as what's going on on the ground.

### **10. Can you elaborate on that? Could you give us an example?**

Take the State of Maine lobster fishery, it was almost destroyed in 1920, but fishers realized what was happening, and they got together and looked at a variety of things they could do. Over time, they have built a special way of allocating space so you can monitor who is using what space to put down his lobster trap. Then you can create rules such as: don't ever keep a lobster that is an egg-bearing female. An egg-bearing female has berries on her belly, and if you pull up a female, you can put her back down without killing her. So lobsters have some very nice attributes that make management quite easy. Each bay is self-organized and develops its own broad set of rules, and they do monitor each other.

### **11. It's quite an accomplishment to be the first woman to receive the Nobel Prize in economics. When you were working on your PhD in the 1960s, did you think something like this was possible?**

No, of course not. (Laughing)

### **12. You hear stories about no female bathrooms in the departments.**

No, there weren't in the department in 1965! We had to take an all-male bathroom and put two pegs on the door and a sign to indicate if a woman was in there or a man was in there. We had to figure all that out indeed.

### **13. To what do you credit the rise of women in the field of economics?**

Slowly but surely, more women doing noticeable work. Affirmative action at one point was very important because at least it made people think about this issue very overtly.

What is happening now is that we don't have to take formal 'affirmative' action. We have more and more women admitted, and coming along, and publishing. It used to be thought that just because a woman had a child she couldn't be an academic for 20 years, and that's a big hangover that took a long time for people to recognize, but now sometimes men are given paternal leave so they help. And there's a much greater sense of sharing. We've had to shift an immense number of views over time. We're doing it, but even more could be done.

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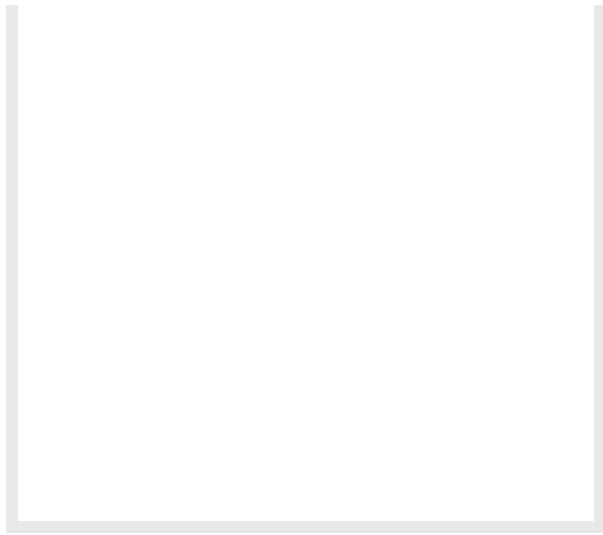
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