

The NORA Knowledge Base of the Commons Abundance Network

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Abstract

Today, we seem trapped in an economy that offers us no alternatives to a market that values only scarce resources and therefore creates incentives to make things scarce – at the cost of individual freedom, social equity, and environmental sustainability. But alternatives exist; it is of critical importance that knowledge about them is widely disseminated and shared. The Commons Abundance Network, co-founded by the speaker, is building a database called NORA (Needs, Organizational forms, and Resources for Abundance) which allows “approaches toward abundance” to be searched according to the needs to be met, the types of organizational forms to be adopted, or the resources to be managed sustainably. This provides a framework for the organization of case study material, while also providing a gateway for practitioners to access useful information and contact and collaborate with helpful people and organizations. We thus hope to help build bridges among academics as well as people involved in diverse initiatives on the ground.

Economics of Scarcity and of Abundance

Our present economy is a scarcity-based economy – that is, only scarce commodities are believed to have economic value. A thing is a commodity if it can be offered for sale in a market, and it is scarce if potential demand exceeds supply. If something is not a commodity, or if it is not scarce, the market assigns either a zero or a very low price to it, and hence it is considered of no economic importance; efficiency then demands that this unimportant thing be wasted (thrown away, discarded, taken for granted, degraded, dismissed, denigrated) so that we can economize on those things that carry a high price tag. Among the things that are treated by our economic system as worthless are vital common pool resources such as the atmosphere, the hydrosphere, and the biosphere (as well as parts thereof, such as lakes and wildlife habitats), as well as such intangibles as human relationships, trust, and knowledge.

The fact that only scarce commodities are valuable creates incentives to make things into scarce commodities; first by converting non-commodified things into commodities, and second by ensuring that the demand for these commodities exceeds supply (by manipulating either supply or demand, or by creating bottlenecks between the two). The power to respond to this incentive is not equally distributed, however – for example, unskilled laborers are usually unable to make their labor into a scarce commodity (e.g., through strikes), skilled workers can do so more successfully, while professions that require an expensive educational degree in order to qualify can often keep their qualifications scarce and thus command high incomes. Most of the job market in most countries works in such a way that jobs are the scarce commodity, not labor.

Since this economics of scarcity disregards the very basis of human life on Earth, it leads us to unsustainable resource use and ecological disaster. Furthermore, because it is primarily elite groups who control the mechanisms of scarcity generation for their own benefit, the economics of scarcity leads to polarization of wealth, social conflicts over unequally distributed resources, and to lack of freedom because people are forced to commodify their labor, skills, knowledge, and productions in order to make a living. Choosing other kinds of lifestyles is either impossible, or punished by poverty.

While we are told by mainstream economists and politicians that “there is no alternative,” alternatives to any socially constructed system are available. What we need is an economics of abundance, which actually values the abundance of vital resources, and creates social institutions that reward the generation of this kind of abundance (see Hoeschele 2010). This involves reversing the separation between “buyer” and “seller” of various commodities. Thus, for example, sellers of goods seek to increase demand while controlling supplies, while buyers search for the lowest possible price. In a competitive market, this tends to lead companies to lower their costs by underpaying their workers and externalizing as many environmental costs as possible, while planned obsolescence leads to increased consumption of throwaway goods. In labor markets, if the same amount of product can be produced with a smaller number of labor hours, the consequence is that the “buyers” of labor cut down on the number of workers hired (rather than reducing the hours of work for each employee), which tends to force the “sellers” of labor to lower their wage expectations – or the state to use tax revenues in order to support unemployed workers. Full employment is then only possible if the economy continues growing rapidly, implying accelerated consumption of natural resources.

An economy of abundance would substitute many of these adversarial institutional arrangements with ones that are more cooperative. For example, if the consumers of electricity in a service area own their own electric utility, they have a financial interest in cheap and reliable power, as well as energy efficiency, and are thus likely to find ways to provide all these things. At the present juncture, the best way to achieve this is to get out of fossil fuels (which are becoming increasingly expensive), to avoid nuclear power (the most expensive option), to build up smart grids based on distributed renewable energy sources, and to invest in energy efficient homes and appliances. To create incentives for all of this if power is provided by regulated private utilities is very difficult to do (see for example Heiman and Solomon, 2004), and presents challenges even with public utilities, but should be straightforward with electric cooperatives (it would only be necessary to inform them of effective business models). Some of the greatest successes in promoting renewable electric generation have indeed involved customer-owned wind or solar generation capacity (see for example Breukers 2006). In effect, what we need in order to propel rapid changes toward the use of renewables in power supply are “patterns” of electric utility ownership, governance, pricing structures, and renewable energy and smart grid technologies, that all need to be connected in effective ways.

An electric utility operating according to such a pattern would be a kind of commons. Commons ensure that a group or community of people act as the collective managers, owners, and users of a resource. Very often these are people who know that their descendants will also depend on that resource, meaning that they have future generations in mind as they make their decisions. This makes commons different from many public assets, in which the “owner” is supposed to be the entire people of a country, but the asset is managed by the state, and users consist either of individuals or businesses in a particular region. Too often in such instances, the state regulatory agencies are coopted by powerful special interests, and therefore do not effectively safeguard sustainable and equitable resource use. The separation between owners, managers and users can lead to intractable management issues, where nobody has both a strong incentive to preserve the resource, and the power to act upon that incentive. As shown by Elinor Ostrom and many researchers who have followed her lead, carefully designed commons management methods can overcome that separation and create incentives that align individual interests with those of the larger public good.

Networking for Change

Although an immense range of alternatives exist in practically every sector of the economy, people tend to be unaware of them or think that they are not practical. One reason for this state of affairs is that the alternative methods are not sufficiently well networked. A single enterprise that works according to a different business model will find it difficult to survive within a system that is based on scarcity generation. It has to obtain numerous goods and services from other companies, while selling in competition with companies that externalize many of their social and environmental costs. Even well networked groups such as the Mondragon cooperatives in the Basque country of Spain have to grapple with this reality all the time (see Kasmir 1996, Gibson-Graham 2005, Johnson 2013). No business or organization can do everything, so a socially and environmentally responsible enterprise (whether for profit or nonprofit) needs to be networked with other similar enterprises in order not to be exploited itself. It is thus a vital need of an economics of abundance to build up networks among relevant enterprises and initiatives.

Economic networks facilitate the exchange of knowledge and information along with goods and services. In fact, one cannot exchange any goods and services without first having obtained knowledge of who has what to offer, and how the exchange is to happen. One also needs to establish some level of trust to facilitate the exchange. Even more exchange of information is needed to build collaborative relationships, of working together to create something – be that a research project, a technical or social innovation, or some material good. It is this kind of networking that we are hoping to support at the Commons Abundance Network.

The Commons Abundance Network (<http://commonsabundance.net>) launched its website in early 2013, with a mission statement that states:

The **Commons Abundance Network (CAN)** is an emerging co-learning, research, innovation and action network operating both offline and online as an incubator or laboratory for transformative action towards commons based abundance.

It offers discussion fora as well as various means for online collaboration. Here, however, I will focus on the wiki, referred to as NORA: Needs, Organizational forms and Resources for Abundance. As stated on the website,

A knowledge base, the NORA, [is] an educational project and a resource for addressing the manners in which the **Needs** of humans and other living beings can be met while using **Resources** sustainably, through the choice and further development of appropriate **Organizational forms**, processes and practices, resulting in **Abundance**. It emphasizes the interlinkages among these elements in a systems perspective, to highlight interdependencies, and where synergies among diverse efforts are possible.

The purpose of the knowledge base is to enable numerous people who have knowledge of one or a few pieces of the puzzle how to build a sustainable economy contribute those pieces, and explore the knowledge base in order to understand how these pieces fit into a larger picture, by following their interlinkages. This can then help them do their own work more effectively, and find collaboration partners, including partners to do thing that they hadn't even thought of before. That is, to find potential synergies, often in a serendipitous way.

The “pieces of the puzzle” can be referred to as “patterns” in the sense of the architect Christopher Alexander. Alexander has described how cities used to grow organically, without an overall plan, where every new building was placed by its builder in a relationship to existing buildings and to the topography and the paths along which people walked. If each new building was placed with sensitivity to its local context, the entire structure emerged as an organic whole, or as what Pietro Toesca (1985) has referred to as a work of art created by all the residents of the city. Similar processes can be observed at the scale of individual buildings and rooms; in the 1970s Alexander et al. (1977) developed a “pattern language” to help build and design cities, neighborhoods, buildings and rooms that enhance the aliveness of the people who live there. Each pattern provides a way of looking at a particular situation, and offers potential solutions to the particular problems created by that situation. For example, many of Alexander’s patterns address how one can create urban spaces where people like to linger and chat, where they feel at ease.

By the early 2000s, Alexander (2002) had broadened the scope of these ideas to talk about how to create greater aliveness at all scales, aligned with the ways that living, natural systems grow. Pattern language ideas have also been adopted in software development and other fields. What we are now trying to do is to offer patterns toward sustaining the abundance of life, to reverse the suicidal tendencies of our present civilization.

The main avenues to finding such patterns of abundance in the knowledge base are “Needs,” “Organizational forms” and “Resources.”

The Needs come first – the purpose of an economy is to satisfy human needs. Economy in its original meaning refers to the household, or *οικος*, that is to the provisioning of a household according to its needs. This definition does not focus on scarce resources, but rather on how best to meet the household’s needs with whatever resources happen to be available. This definition also means that literal households are the core part of the economy; this “economy” does not revolve around money, but around meeting the needs of people. It also recognizes that we cannot meet the needs of present and future generations of people without also respecting the needs of other living things, and so we must take those needs seriously.

In a needs-oriented economy, it is of key importance to develop a good list of needs of people and other living things, and an understanding how different needs may conflict with each other, in order to develop a coherent set of priorities. For example, the need of a worker in a weapons plant for a stable livelihood cannot take precedence over the need of other people to live; it is therefore not ethical to promote weapons manufacturing for the sake of “economic growth.” On NORA, we have a provisional list of needs to work from, which we consider as important needs for virtually all people, and that can at least in theory be satisfied without depending on the domination or exploitation of other people, or the destruction of the natural foundations of life. These needs are consistent with the goal of a greater abundance of life, in the sense that people feel more alive, and the ecosystem of which we are a part sustains a greater diversity of life forms.

With this list of needs, we can then assess to what extent they are satisfied for different people and other living things in various situations, and look for methods to meet the needs. Different methods are needed to satisfy different needs; for example, water provisioning in a city requires a different type of distribution system than does food provisioning in a village. The maintenance of supportive human relationships, and the protection of habitats require yet other social relations or institutions. We cannot assume that one size fits all, and in fact it is easily demonstrable that one size does NOT fit all. We also need to take all types of needs seriously, not only those that can be conveniently satisfied through market mechanisms. A strong empirical base of an economic science that deserves that name does not ignore all these differences, but instead explores them in detail. In NORA, we are building up information about patterns how a variety of needs can be successfully addressed, and provide access to the pioneering work of others via literature references and links to other websites.

The “O” in NORA refers to Organizational forms. These are organizational forms that respond to the needs of the people and other living things that they serve, and range from informal self-provisioning through community solidarity, sharing and free knowledge to commercial and market-based modes of interaction. We even have a “coercion and denial of choice” category, not because we think that these modes of interaction should play a predominant role in our society, but because for one thing they exist, and for another some degree of policing and armed defense is surely necessary. Since one size does not fit all, the site looks at each of these organizational forms as a method that can work to satisfy certain kinds of needs in certain contexts; we need to understand

the limitations of each method, where it creates unwanted feedback effects and is not responsive to the needs of important stakeholders, and how it needs to be changed in order to create greater abundance and the right kinds of innovation (Helene Finidori, co-founder of our network, has a special interest in this area). As everywhere else in the knowledge base, we create links to innovative work by people in each area, to facilitate the exchange of knowledge and ideas.

The “commons” is a sort of cross-cutting dimension across organizational forms. For example, we need commons institutions in order to regulate markets in such a way that they do not lead to the rich getting ever richer while the poor never escape poverty. Self-provisioning depends on a larger context in which individuals and households have access to common assets. Free knowledge is based on a knowledge commons. The sharing economy is based on a sense that we hold certain things in common, if not legally then at least in our moral obligations to each other and to nature. Thus, even while the word “commons” doesn’t occur on every pattern created on the site, it is implied practically everywhere.

The “R” in NORA refers to resources – whatever we do, we need to draw on both tangible resources such as air, water, land, energy and living things, and intangible resources such as knowledge and trust. Each resource has its own characteristics that must be respected if that resource is to be maintained into the future both in quantity and quality. Despite the claims of modern alchemists that any resource can be substituted for any other resource merely because any resource can potentially be exchanged for money, it is essential that every resource essential for life be maintained. Thus, while we may contemplate depleting mineral stores of copper or petroleum, we have to ensure that soils remain fertile, biological diversity (species diversity, genetic diversity within species, diversity of habitats) is maintained, rivers and oceans continue to support life, the atmospheric system is not disrupted, and our own human cultural and knowledge traditions continue to thrive and develop, facing up to new challenges. It is therefore of vital importance to assess the quality and quantity of resources available to us, and to create feedback loops (through our organizational forms) that ensure that we adequately respond to any changes in resource availability.

An essential part of NORA is that these three aspects, needs, organizational forms, and resources, are effectively interlinked. In any economic activity, we try to satisfy some need, use some resources, and organize ourselves in some way (even self-provisioning is an organizational form that depends on networks we have formed with others). Hence, each NORA page provides links to other complementary NORA pages. The extreme separation and specialization of knowledge and economic activity has led individuals as well as businesses, civil-society organizations, and government agencies to each focus on one or a few issues, while ignoring others. This is supposed to create greater “efficiency,” but only if that efficiency is measured in very piece-meal ways. For example, industrial agriculture tends to focus on maximizing yield of a single commercial crop per hectare of land and per unit of labor time. Its efficiency in the use of farm labor is indeed enormous. However, the impacts on the long-term fertility of the soil, on water bodies, on ecosystems, on

human health, on atmospheric carbon balance and so on never enter into the efficiency equation, making that equation essentially useless for good decision-making.

Even organizations that try to reform our industrial agriculture may only look at some parts of the picture while ignoring others – for example, they may focus on methods of organic agriculture or agroecology, without deeply analyzing the market mechanisms that continue to act as a major barrier to change. After all, nobody can do everything, and in the complex system we have created, it often appears that for anybody to do anything, everybody has to do everything! Our aim is to help network people in such a way that everybody can do something, in such a way as to support related efforts for change, while avoiding the inadvertent creation of new problems. For example, we hope to develop NORA into a knowledge base where people promoting alternative agricultural techniques can, within a couple of mouse-clicks, find useful analyses of the market mechanisms that hurt their efforts, as well as organizations that offer better methods of exchange and market regulation, and that work to put them into practice. Then, the people in these respective organizations can identify synergies, so that each can work on what they know best while relying on others for essential support in other areas. We hope that synergies will emerge from this that we ourselves cannot predict.

Let me illustrate by means of a possible navigational route through the site. I will start with somebody looking at the page about the “Need” for Food (<http://commonsabundance.net/wiki/food/>), which summarizes many of the social and ecological problems of our current food system, and provides links to NORA pages that delve into more specific aspects of sustainable food production and consumption. Among the “approaches to creating greater abundance” section on that page, the user finds a link to a pattern about “agroecology” (<http://commonsabundance.net/wiki/agroecology/>). This page explains how agroecology can contribute to more sustainable food production. Near the top of the page, the user notices a link to “natural resource management” (an organizational form), and clicks on that in order to read about this larger context for agroecology (<http://commonsabundance.net/wiki/natural-resource-management-cluster/>). Here, there is a discussion about different types of property arrangements (private, public, commons) and how they affect resource use in a number of different contexts; the page lists “agrarian reform” among the approaches to creating greater abundance (see <http://commonsabundance.net/wiki/agrarian-reform/>). After gathering information about several patterns of agrarian reform, the user may follow a link to the resource of “land,” and read about causes of unsustainable land use and unequal distribution of land (<http://commonsabundance.net/wiki/land/>). This journey has begun on a needs page and has led to pages on organizational forms resources, offering a variety of patterns how to create greater abundance; each of these pages also provides links to relevant organizations and literature that might help that user connect with other people and learn from them or collaborate with them. Each user can follow his or her unique pathway through the knowledge base and piece together some combination of patterns, connections, people and organizations to explore further.

At present, this knowledge base exists essentially as a prototype; only a very small part of the content is there as of yet, and we intend to add additional navigational features that show visually how the pages are connected with each other in a network, i.e., how the pages link to each other, which pages have common tags or categories, and which pages are the “parents” or “children” of other pages in nested series. We hope to build collaborative relationships with many others to build this network to the point that it can actually realize this vision.

As we build a new, sustainable economy of abundance and the commons, we need to be aware of how we interact not only with our direct and visible neighbors, but also with distant others. At the same time, we somehow have to deal with the information overload if we try to address all problems at once. We hope that the Commons Abundance Network can help people address this double challenge.

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