Facilitating Self-governance:
Possibilism and Pluralism in Citizen Co-creation

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Abstract. This paper explores opportunities to facilitate the development of self-governance within feasible pathways for institutional change. Self-governance happens when people have the power to make decisions, on their own or in partnership with other organizations. Possibilism emphasizes the need to search for and create feasible reforms, exploring the "adjacent possible" space of what may be achieved. Co-creating institutions involves trying to communicate about and accommodate diverse values. Frequently used methods for supporting self-governance include community organizing by facilitators; rapid appraisal techniques; workshop processes; cost-sharing and other subsidies; information; and enabling legal authority and dispute resolution mechanisms. Supporting self-governance requires going beyond critique to explore practical pathways, engaging with the diversity of values and value systems as citizens of co-evolving communities co-create their worlds.

Introduction

How can outsiders support self-governance? This paper reflects on several questions about facilitating self-governance by communities. It is a preliminary, and still rough, attempt to think about some of the issues involved in promoting collective action. When

people come together to act collectively in governing commons they act as institutional artisans (V. Ostrom 1980), as citizens co-creating their worlds (Boyte et al. 2014)

The literature on commons has documented the capacity of communities to govern shared resources such as forests, fisheries, rangelands, and irrigation systems (E. Ostrom 1990). Researchers have examined how factors such as heterogeneity and group size may influence collected action (Agrawal 2003). For specific situations, many of the factors are difficult or impossible to change. There has been less attention to the options that can be changed in how outsiders work with communities to promote collective action. One of Elinor Ostrom's institutional design principles (E. Ostrom 1990; Cox, Arnold, and Tomás 2010) points to the importance of at least minimal recognition of local organization. However, this mainly seems to be a matter of not disrupting local collective action, but says less about different options for intervention.

Much research on commons governance has concentrated on the seemingly simpler cases of long-enduring commons that are independent or largely autonomous from any larger system of governance. This is fruitful for understanding what communities may be able to do on their own. However, even historically communities were often heavily influenced by external changes, and expansion of state control in the twentieth century means few communities are free of external influence (Wolf 1983; Scott 2009). This makes it increasingly important to try to understand the implications of different kinds of intervention, not only by governments, but also by non-government organizations, including different kinds of people's alliances, federations, and other institutions that may link different communities. Such external intervention to induce participation or local action differs in important ways from spontaneous self-organization (Mansuri and Rao 2005; Mansuri and Rao 2012).

For self-governance within the context of large modern societies, the case of groundwater governance in southern California is notable as an example of bottom-up initiative within a system of polycentric governance (William Blomquist 1992; W. Blomquist 2009). This does suggest options beyond top-down organization, including providing information, such as geological research, and an enabling legal framework, such as dispute settlement agreements given legal force by equity courts.
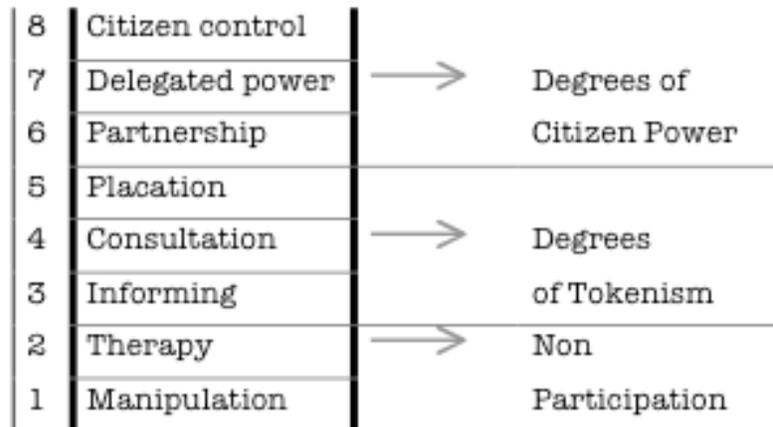
The paper begins by talking about how self-governance can be defined in terms of levels of community participation. The second section looks at Albert Hischman's concept of Possibilism; the potential for discovering or creating feasible pathways through which people can work together to improve their lives. The third section discusses implications of value pluralism for diversity and dialogue. The fourth section outlines some of the main methods for facilitating self-governance.

What is self-governance?

Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Citizen Participation provides one way to define what is meant by self-governance, as compared with participation where citizens have little or no control over outcomes. Arnstein puts citizen control, delegated power, and partnership at the top of her scale, as shown in Figure 1. These are situations where citizens govern

themselves, or work together with others while retaining a veto over decisions. Arnstein took a skeptical approach to lesser levels of participation, critically concerned with how they could become tokenism and manipulation.

Figure 1. Ladder of Citizen Participation (Arnstein 1969)

8	Citizen control		
7	Delegated power	→	Degrees of
6	Partnership		Citizen Power
5	Placation		
4	Consultation	→	Degrees
3	Informing		of Tokenism
2	Therapy	→	Non
1	Manipulation		Participation

Subsequent participation scales have paid more attention the ways in which activities such as making information available, listening to comments, and engaging in dialogue may still represent useful forms of participation, as may more extensive involvement and collaboration. Conversely, within the scope of empowerment, and citizen control, outside organizations may still provide support such as through information or an enabling legal framework with little or no control (Bruns 2003).

What is feasible?

Albert O. Hirschman (#### Bias for Hope) talks about possibilism as a way of looking at what may be feasible, what practical alternatives might be reached starting from the current situation. In contrast to an emphasis on deficiencies and structural obstacles, the attempt is to find opportunities for improvement and feasible pathways. Such a view is incrementalist or reformist, in that it tends to assume that drastic changes on political configurations and policies are likely to be difficult or impossible, or at least much rare than more constrained situations. Even where there are major shifts in political power, making changes in social institutions is complicated, and prone to difficulties and results that often achieve less and turn out differently than expected.

Stuart Kauffman's concept of the "adjacent possible" is derived from chemistry and molecular biology, looking at the nearest possible set of changes, but can be applied more broadly (S. Kauffman 1995; S. A. Kauffman 2002). It provides a way of thinking about possibilities, starting from a particular situation, circumstances that depend of a particular historic pathway, which makes some options easier and others more difficult.

Game theory models of social dilemmas, such as Prisoner's Dilemma, offer a simple example of how changes may be surrounded by potential solutions. Researchers have concentrated on how repeated play enables evolution of co-operation, for example through tit-for-tat strategies that reward cooperators and punish defectors who pursue short-term gains (Axelrod 1984; Nowak and Highfield 2011). It may also be possible to "change the game" to make cooperation more rewarding or impose penalties on those who do not cooperate, which, for example can change a Prisoner's Dilemma into a Stag Hunt (Bruns 2012).

What is desirable?

In his discussion of value pluralism, Isaiah Berlin (#### Proper Study) analyzes some of the implications of multiple goals, and values which may be inconsistent and whose application in practice often leaves much room for debate and learning. The damage wrought by those who have sought to impose their values on others highlights the dangers of assuming there is a single, consistent, and correct system of values. Focusing on a single value, such as equality or liberty, can be a fruitful source of critique and stimulus about what might be better. However, even for a single value, there may be diverse views of what it means, and what might make a difference. Furthermore, there may be conflicts between different values, as well as opportunities to pursue changes with multiple advantages, creating a need to consider uncertainties and tradeoffs. Value pluralism reinforces the need for deliberation, considering a range of views, and for learning about what may be feasible.

Values may be multiple, and at least partially conflict, even for a single individual. For social action, legal pluralism usually prevails, as people are influenced not only by formal national laws laws, but also by ideas from religion and philosophy, everyday (customary) practices, and other sources. If moral choices cannot be simply derived from a universally agreed framework, then mutual learning and discussion about values is essential for citizens to work together in creating new arrangements for governing themselves. While this may lead to mutual understanding and agreement on some points, it may also involve "agreeing to disagree" and coming up with compromise "second-best" solutions.

Such conversations may occur not only within single separated communities but also within a wider "patchwork quilt of co-evolving communities" (Norgaard 1994). Much of the efficacy of "network governance" (Carlsson and Sandström 2008) may occur not so much through specific advocacy or agreements, as through exchange of ideas and mutual learning within epistemic communities (Haas 1993), which leads people to reframe their understanding of situations and options.

How to support self-governance?

A huge variety of techniques are used by those seeking to induce collective action. Many of these are variations on a few key approaches, which occur in various efforts to support self-governance:

- *Facilitators*. Community organizers (under various names) act as agents to help people come together an act, typically beginning with informal discussions and

then proceeding to more coordinated efforts and formal organizational arrangements. Interventions in participatory irrigation management and community forestry applied ideas from earlier community development and organizing activities to specific technical domains (Alinsky 1989; Korten and Siy 1988; Bruns 1993).

- *Participatory Rapid Appraisal.* A variety of methods are available to quickly gather and analyze information, including transect walks (walkthroughs), sketch mapping, constructing calendars (timelines), and comparing alternatives (for example through matrix ranking). These can make collective action assessing situations, considering alternatives, and preparing plans interesting and accessible for a range of community members.

- *Workshops.* Meetings that combine small breakout groups and plenary discussion provide a way of including ideas from a broad range of participants, so that most people can actively take part, while allowing points of agreement to be identified. These range from highly structured processes, such as ZOPP to very informal meetings, with varying degrees and kinds of specialized facilitation (Weisbord and Janoff 2007).

- *Subsidies.* Interventions, particularly those funded by governments, international development agencies such as the World Bank, and large non-government organization usually offer substantial support in the way of money or goods. This brings a serious risk that collective action is largely motivated to acquire immediate benefits, and may quickly fade away, although cost-sharing and other mechanisms may help to reduce such risks (Coward 1986; Bruns 2010).

- *Enabling policies.* To promote self-governance that is more locally-directed and sustainable, more general interventions may be crucial. Provision of technical information, and convening occasions for sharing experience may be particularly valuable. There are also a range of ways in which laws and policies may better recognize local organizations and enable them to obtain additional authority and backing from government agencies, for making credible commitments, enforcing rules, and resolving disputes (E. Ostrom 1990).

- Other techniques, such as appreciative inquiry ((Cooperrider and Srivastva 1987; Whitney, Trosten-Bloom, and Cooperrider 2010) and the study of positive deviance (#### Positive Deviance) may be particularly useful in understanding what possibilities may be feasible and desirable, the space of the adjacent possible.

Conclusions

Self-governance can be defined in terms of situations where communities can make decisions, either on their own or jointly. In contrast with other kinds of participation where they simply have an opportunity to influence decisions over which others have final control, self-governance occurs where people power have to choose or to veto.

Possibilism points out the importance of unique solutions to social problems. Possibilism emphasizes the importance of looking at what kinds of social changes are actually feasible, particularly as demonstrated by what people are already putting into practice. In contrast to critique, or advocacy aimed at top-down decisions, possibilism pays more attention to the room for maneuver that exists even without major changes in laws and policies, and the need to start exploring opportunities (which may be accompanied by continuing advocacy of broader changes). Rather than focusing only on social regularities, replicable changes, possibilism highlights the need for creatively finding new pathways, searching for irregularities.

Social science generalizations may be very useful for understanding situations, including factors that may favor or impede collective action to improve governance. However, such general knowledge needs to be accompanied by the ability to come up with customized answers, identifying and exploring opportunities, crafting coalitions, and devising solutions to fit specific situations. Natural experiments, particularly examples of positive deviance and appreciative inquiry into what people value about what they have now and would like to have, may be very helpful in understanding what may be possible, as would be synthesis for more general patterns for institutional design that reflect experience and good practice. Nevertheless, there is a need for both arts and sciences of association, knowledge of regularities, and ability to improvise irregular solutions adapted to particular cases.

Attempts to facilitate self-governance occur within contexts of contesting values and multiple institutions. Even for individual, values may pull in different directions, and cannot necessarily be resolved into a single consistent system, and this is even more true when many people are involved. Value pluralism provides one of several lines of reasons for pursuing change through dialogue and deliberation, through learning together. Rather than assuming there is a consistent underlying set of goals, and one best way to achieve them, there is a need to consider not only uncertainties and the need for learning, but also the role of each person on taking part in decisions about their own lives, and considering the implications of various values.

Agreement on values, definitions, and the framing of issues is not something that can be assumed, but instead may sometimes be achieved, or may be finessed through agreement on particular measures, with a diversity of understandings of what they mean. Legal pluralism illuminates ways in which even somewhat systematic bodies of though about social ordering may interact in complex and sometimes surprising ways. Polycentric governance creates opportunities for those concerned with a particular problem to work together, at appropriate scales, and with supportive institutional mechanisms that may enable and facilitate their action. Thus, "top-down" action can support "bottom-up" efforts not only through specific interventions, such as provision of facilitators or funding, but also through creating a favorable environment.

There are a huge variety of methods that may be useful for facilitating self-governance in which people act as institutional artisans. Many of them are variations on a generic workshop format of convening stakeholders with plenary and breakout groups to

encourage listening, dialogue and agreement, which is a robust approach. Similarly, the basic community organizing process of building personal relationships and promoting informal discussion of issues of common concern, followed by more concerted action, and perhaps formal organization, can be applied in many circumstances. Holding meetings to elect officers and approve an organizational charter is relatively easy to replicate, but turns out to be vulnerable to resulting in reproducing patterns of privilege, and organizations that don't survive well. Participation scales can be useful in thinking through the options in terms of sharing information, dialogue, or joint decisions, and as a reality check on how much power different participants have or are willing to share.

Methods for supporting self-governance include:

- facilitation by community organizers,

- rapid appraisal techniques,

- workshop processes with small group and plenary discussions,

- subsidies in cash or kind, and

- enabling frameworks that provide information or legal authority.

Supporting self-governance requires going beyond critique to explore practical pathways, engaging with the diversity of values and value systems, applying appropriate methods to work with citizens of co-evolving communities as they co-create their worlds.

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