

Measures To Eradicate Poverty Using a Commons-Based Approach

Suggestions for the post Rio UN agenda from Commons Action for the United Nations and the UN Major Group Commons Cluster-- a network of CSOs which includes the Institute for Planetary Synthesis and the Association of World Citizens.

Converging crises around the world are escalating poverty and social inequity. As a result, a rapidly growing number of people have been showing their concern in demonstrations everywhere. ***This can be changed!***

This brief focuses on measures that can be taken to restore and regenerate nature, alleviate poverty, and mobilize people worldwide to help bring about an economic and social shift ***from the bottom up***. Such a ***commons-based economy*** would give all people fair access to commons goods – the fruits of nature and society all of us need to survive and prosper. This brief expands on the measures discussed in the brief ***Measures to Shift to a Commons-Based Sustainable Economy***; and UN Documents E/2010/NGO/29: People and commons: global partnerships, missing links; and E/2011/NGO/126: Education for world stewardship.

We are calling on Governments to create an international (High Level or UN) Panel of Experts to develop a step-by-step plan for the creation of a worldwide commons-based economy and global community. This panel would consult with Governments, and relevant IGOs, CSOs, Major Groups and other stakeholders.

Making this change ***now*** is essential since both people and nature are the building blocks of every economy. If we don't move quickly and thoroughly we threaten the very fabric of our society.

What is a Commons?

According to Elinor Ostrom who received the 2009 Nobel Prize for Economic Science, a commons consists minimally of three basic elements:

- 1) a community or loosely connected network of people (***called commoners***) who steward, manage, produce and/or care for
- 2) fruits of nature and society such as the water, earth, biodiversity, local economies, information, health, security and culture, needed for them to thrive (***commons goods***), using
- 3) open, transparent, participatory and inclusive forms of decision making so that the interests of present and future generations are ensured. This is termed ***commoning***.

Commons can form harmonious building blocks for a global commons-based economy to the degree participants in these communities also live according to the ***all-win principle***. This states that ***since each of us and nature are parts of one integrated whole, the well-being of all people and all of nature are essential to us all.***

Commons-based economies *already* exist in millions of locations worldwide in almost every sphere of social interaction. In the brief, *Measures to Shift to a Commons-Based Sustainable Economy*, we mentioned communities that use alternative local currencies to enable local exchanges and trade to restore flagging local economies (e.g. <http://www.gmlets.u-net.com/>) and those which counter environmental and social degradation by experimenting with commons-based lifestyles.

These include indigenous communities where there is a sacred bond with nature, 15000 Sarvodaya communities (See (<http://www.sarvodaya.org/>); ecovillages (See ecovillage.org), transition towns (See transitionnetwork.org); and cooperatives (one billion people are already officially members).

Another notable example is a project of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). Called GEO-Cities, one of its main objectives is to establish an integrated environment assessment process that acknowledges the links between environmental conditions and human activities. (See: http://www.grid.unep.ch/activities/assessment/geo/geo_cities.php)

Other ways the commons approach is thriving:

- The Slow Food and the Community Supported Agriculture movements, community gardens and farmer's markets;
- Insurance and banking cooperatives;
- Neighborhood Watches and volunteer groups where citizens add to the resources of local police forces to increase the safety of communities;
- The unarmed civilian protection of civilians and peace that functions often internationally. (See: www.nonviolentpeaceforce.org; www.peacebrigades.org/);
- Hundreds of successful commons groups for managing fisheries, forests and irrigation;
- The acequias in Spain, the Andes, northern Mexico, and the modern-day American Southwest--community-operated canals that carry snow runoff or river water to distant fields;
- The ejidos in Mexico where the government promotes the use of communal land shared by the people of the community;
- Wikipedia, the Internet open encyclopedia with almost four million entries in over 160 languages;
- Flickr, the Internet photo management and sharing application where people show off millions of their favorite photos and videos to the world;
- More than 6000 open publishers;
- Open Educational Resources, an initiative which provides teaching and learning materials online for everyone to use;
- OpenCourseWare, an online program operated by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), offers free lecture notes, exams and videos for over 2000 courses studied at the school;
- Many millions of online texts, videos and musical works provided under Creative Commons licenses that enable easy sharing; and,
- The free and open source computer software community that creates and provides a large and varied software marketplace.

These are just a few of the millions of examples of commons that exist worldwide that can be used as a starting point for a commons-based economy, using the measures listed below and in our other briefs. It would be an economy for “the 99 percent” AND the “one percent.” It would alleviate poverty and mobilize people from the bottom up to restore and regenerate nature and give all people a say over and access to the goods and services they need to develop their unique potentials.

A commons-based economy would have the following advantages:

- 1) It would reach into all levels of society with the potential to alleviate poverty and produce resources needed by communities *at the local level*, thus also lessening the need for costly transportation.
- 2) Local, regional, national and global businesses would benefit because the population *as a whole* would be prospering.
- 3) The care of commons goods would be in the hands of those who are most invested in preserving them for present and coming generations – countering exploitation by individuals and corporate entities.
- 4) People would be encouraged to adopt sustainable lifestyles because they would have a sense of shared responsibility and an awareness of the way their lives impact others.
- 5) Working together as commoners would generate creativity, community cohesiveness, and constructive relationships among community members, resulting in greater harmony and political stability.
- 6) Where governments are limited by national jurisdictions, regional conflicts for resources could be resolved by commons functioning across national boundaries.
- 7) It would lead to the fulfilment of all of the rights contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It could also give people freedom and a sense of inner peace. This will help to overcome the challenge of both spiritual and material poverty which, in turn, is also a precondition for establishing a sustainable green economy.
- 8) There would be little or no impetus for people to take to the streets to demonstrate because they would be empowered wherever they live to produce in their own unique ways those goods and services they need to live sustainably. Also, International Monetary Fund austerity measures would not be necessary and the uprisings now taking place as a result of them would cease.

Measures to Empower the “Grass Roots” to Alleviate Poverty and Gain Social Equity

The following measures build on those mentioned in our brief, *Measures to Shift to a Sustainable Commons-Based Global Economy*. They focus specifically on the mobilization of people for poverty alleviation and greater social equity.

Measures for Capacity Building

- 1) Shifting from current economic indicators measuring production and consumption to ones measuring the well-being of people and nature. This could include the Gross Happiness Index used by Bhutan and similar approaches being implemented by China and under consideration by the UK, France, the US, and others. (See Brief on the Economic Shift)

- 2) Implementing a global footprint to assess economic performance in all sectors and at all levels, including corporations. (See also: www.footprintnetwork.org) and our first email)
- 3) Initiating an Ecosystem Health Index which would reflect the indigenous value for planning for many generations into the future. If the Ecosystem Health Index is high in an area then we can expect the Human Development Index to be high and improving.
- 4) Replacing unequal power structures with forms of governance by and for all people. This would involve implementing Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (people shall be the basis of authority of government). This would require establishing more reciprocal input between citizens and governments to communicate best practices and to ensure citizens' support for controversial governmental decisions.
- 5) Opening all UN meetings to input by relevant stake-holders and measuring each meeting with a Democracy Index reflecting the percentage of time allowed for governments representing the world's peoples in proportion to total population. Here indigenous governments must be included.
- 6) Implementing the all-win principle in all governmental decision-making which emphasizes that *the well-being of all people and all of nature are essential to us all*. (See above and also: www.worldcitizensaction.com)

Measures to Help Develop a Firm Foundation for Peoples Participation in a Commons-Based Economy

Many see the commons as subject to natural law. Measures to expand its legitimacy include:

- 7) Establishing – where appropriate – common property rights held by local communities over resources on which they depend. These would include forests, grazing lands, bodies of water, groundwater, and fisheries. This would ensure that the people who have a long-term stake in the preservation of these resources would have control over them, obtain benefits from them, and internalize any externalities.
- 8) Encouraging the creation of Social Charters to affirm the sovereignty of human beings over their means of sustenance and well-being arising through a customary or emerging identification with an ecology, a cultural resource area, a social need, or a form of collective labour. These charters are covenants and institutions negotiated by commons communities for the protection and sustenance of their resources. They use a commoning approach to ensure that community access to — and sovereignty over — their own commons is maintained and that the interests of all stakeholders are represented.
- 9) Since a commons approach to sustainable development requires that all people have access to those fruits of nature and society that they need to survive and prosper, commons goods would be managed and equitably shared among all people, as follows:

- A strictly enforced cap would be placed on the use of depletable commons goods and resources.
- Trusts would then be established to oversee the caps and manage the resource.
- The amount of each cap would be determined and set by the stakeholders of each resource. These trusts would be located either within a state or be trans-border depending on the extent of both the resource and the community of interest;
- Permits for the use of what is available once the cap has been put in place would then be auctioned at source enabling the cost to be spread among all subsequent users and avoiding the complex task of pricing each depletable resource;
- Income from these commons resources would then be used to protect and restore the resource and reimburse those negatively affected by their use;
- A small percentage would go in part to the government to invest in a trust to transition to a sustainable future, and in part to a global trust to restore any damage to the global commons (air, water, land), and/or to provide a basic income for all people.

Broadly speaking, the assessment of commons rent by trusts around the world would require three significant changes:

- Governments would shift their primary emphasis away from issuing corporate charters and licensing the private sector and, instead, move toward approving social charters (see #8 above) and open licenses for resource preservation and social and cultural production processes through commons trusts managed by those who would cultivate and protect commonly held resources.
- Commons trusts would exercise a fiduciary duty to preserve natural, genetic and material commons (such as minerals, natural systems, water, air, land, and biodiversity) and to protect, create or regenerate solar, social, cultural and intellectual commons (such as YouTube, Wikipedia, and the Internet itself), yet may also decide to rent a proportion of these resource rights to businesses.
- Businesses could then rent the rights to extract and produce a resource from a commons trust (governing, say, a forest, land, or lake, etc.), thus creating profits and positive externalities through innovation, competitive products and services, and adjustment of the market to the actual costs of resources. However, consent to the use of a commons would first have to be granted by those who are protecting and/or depending upon a commons resource.
- Profits made by businesses can be taxed by Governments.

10) Fostering cost-efficient sustainability and the self-sufficiency of commons communities dedicated to sustainable living by encouraging communication and collaboration between them and linkages with free or cost-effective commons initiatives, including the use of:

- alternative currencies to revive flagging local economies; and,
- the Internet, Wikipedia and YouTube to exchange inspirational practices and foster constructive and informed communications between commons groups. The more that constructive communications exist between commons groups

from local through global levels, the more commoners will be empowered to combat poverty.

Measures to Expand Education to Promote Effective Grass Roots Participation

(Please also refer to UN Doc. E/2011/NGO/126: Education for World Stewardship for the Benefit of All. This provides a more comprehensive list.)

Measures include:

- 11) Embedding the commons and commons approaches at all levels of education to ensure that commons principles are also implemented by future generations. This would require universally adjusting curricula and taking steps to provide:
 - understanding and application of the all-win perspective which emphasizes that – since all people and nature are parts of an integrated whole – the well-being of all people and of nature are essential to us all;
 - tools for deep listening and peaceful conflict resolution;
 - resources for individual empowerment to bring about creative and constructive change;
 - means of providing all levels of government and the United Nations with constructive feedback on the needs and creative solutions of people.

In order to build a strong foundation for a commons based economy at all levels which is capable of eradicating poverty, the Commons Abundance Network (CAN) is just now being developed. Its objective is to provide diverse ways for commons worldwide to learn from one another, network, think and work together for mutual empowerment. CAN will help to implement as comprehensively as possible the measures we have suggested in our various briefs, including how the Commons Empowers both the Private and Public (Governmental) Sectors. CAN seeks to foster collaboration between the commons and the UN.

Signed:

Association of World Citizens; Institute for Planetary Synthesis; Commons Action for the United Nations; Global Commons Trust; the All-Win Network; Zambuling Institute for Human Transformation; Earth Rights Institute; Kosmos Associates; International Association for the Advancement of Innovative Approaches to Global Challenges; Climate Change Network; Peter Earth.org; and, Keepers of the Waters.

For more information and to request copies of documents mentioned above, please contact:

**Dr. Lisinka Ulatowska info@worldcitizensaction.com,
Rob Wheeler robwheeler22@gmail.com.**