

Elinor Ostrom On Climate Change

[The governance of natural resources like land, the oceans, rivers and the atmosphere, can affect the impact of some of the world's biggest crises caused by natural events like droughts and floods. How best to manage those resources has been at the heart of the work by Nobel Prize winner (economics) Elinor Ostrom.

She has been looking at how communities across the world, from developing and rural economies like Nepal and Kenya to developed ones like the USA and Switzerland, manage their commonly shared resources such as fisheries, pasture land and water sustainably.

Ostrom's faith in the ability of the individual and community to be able to trust each other, take the right course of action and not wait for governments to make the first move is pivotal to her thinking.

Ostrom works with the concept of "polycentrism", which she developed with her husband Vincent Ostrom. She advocates vesting authority in individuals, communities, local governments, and local NGOs as opposed to concentrating power at global or national levels.

Ostrom recently suggested using this "polycentric approach" to address man-made climate change. She talked to IRIN by email about "polycentrism", Rio+20, climate change, trust and the power of local action. Excerpts :]

Q: You have suggested a polycentric approach as opposed to single policies at a global level to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Could you explain how that would work? Do you think a similar approach would work to get all countries and their people to believe in, and adopt, sustainable development?

A: We have modelled the impact of individual actions on climate change incorrectly and need to change the way we think about this problem. When individuals walk a distance rather than driving it, they produce better health for themselves. At the same time that they reduce the amount of greenhouse gas emissions that they are generating. There are benefits for the individual and small benefits for the globe. When a building owner re-does the way the building is insulated and the heating system, these actions can dramatically change the amount of greenhouse gas emissions made. This has an immediate impact on the neighbourhood of the building as well as on the globe.

The solutions that are evolved by local people have a chance of being more imaginative and better ways of solving these problems...When cities and counties decide to rehabilitate their energy systems so as to produce less greenhouse gas emissions, they are reducing the amount of pollution in the local region as well as greenhouse gas emissions on the globe. In other words, the key point is that there are multiple externalities involved for many actions related to greenhouse gas emissions. While in the past the literature has underplayed the importance of local effects, we need to recognize - as more and more individuals, families, communities, and states are seeing - that they will gain a benefit, as well as the globe, and that cumulatively a difference can be made at the global level if a number of small units start taking action. We have a much greater possibility of impacting global change problems if we start locally.

Q: The earth is our common resource system - yet many countries including China and India feel they also have a right to grow, burn coal to get to where the developed world is - how do you get them out of that frame of mind without compromising the question of equity?

A: We may not be able to convince India and China of all of this. Part of my discouragement with the international negotiations is that we have gotten riveted into battles at the very big level over who caused global change in the first place and who is responsible for correcting [it]. It will take a long time to resolve some of these conflicts. Meanwhile, if we do not take action, the increase to greenhouse gas collection at a global level gets larger and larger. While we cannot solve all aspects of this problem by cumulatively taking action at local levels, we can make a difference, and we should.

Q: Do you think sustainable development did not gain much currency as it was directed at governments and a top-down approach? You think the world is about to repeat that mistake (if you would call it that?) at Rio+20? What would you do - would you ever call such a gathering of governments?

A: Yes, I do think that directing the question of climate change primarily at governments misses the point that actions that reduce greenhouse gas emissions must be taken by individuals, communities, cities, states, residents of entire nations, and the world. Yet, it is important that public officials recognize that there is a role for an international agreement and that they should be working very hard on getting an agreement that establishes international regimes that has a chance to reduce emissions across countries.

Q: You are a great believer in ordinary people's ability to organize and use their commonly shared resources wisely, but I take it that does not work all the time? But ultimately collective action at the grassroots can force change at the top?

A: I am a believer of the capabilities of people to organize at a local level. That does not mean that they always do. There are a wide variety of collective action problems that exist at a small scale. The important thing is that people at a small scale, who know what the details of the problems are, organizing, rather than calling on officials at a much larger scale.

Officials at a larger scale may have many collective-action problems of their own that they need to address. They do not have the detailed information about problems at a small scale that people who are confronting those everyday do have. Thus, the solutions that are evolved by local people have a chance of being more imaginative and better ways of solving these problems than allowing them to go unsolved and eventually asking a much larger scale unit to solve it for them. □□□