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# Commons: Towards a New Narrative on Development Policies and Practices?

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## **Commons: Towards a New Narrative on Development Policies and Practices?**

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### **Abstract**

Narratives feed into development policies. They are the outcome of complex interactions between political and economic contexts as well as scientific findings and practices. Narratives are a way to build converging discourses, to rally actors and give meaning. As early as the 2000s, a discourse emerged around Global Public Goods in parallel to the one on Sustainable development. Upon facing increasingly alarming planetary challenges, we believe that commons, both as institutional processes and as a philosophy, are vectors for change. This article looks at the intellectual and operational potential provided by commons on development policies. What do commons refer to? To what extent do they invite development actors to take a step aside and renew their policies, strategies and practices?

**Key words:** Commons, Public goods, Development, Governance

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## **I. Introduction: Foundations and Narratives behind Development Policies**

The history of development aid and policies is long and winding. Official Development Aid (ODA) is defined by the OECD as “government aid that promotes and specifically targets the economic development and welfare of developing countries” (OECD, 2018). Whether planned or market-based, development relies on the idea that the Western experience of economic “takeoff” can be reproduced, based on the growth of Southern economies and on the accumulation of capital. Conceptually, ODA and development policies have been described as resulting from three complex, sometimes diverging “foundations” or forces: compassion-based and ethical, geo-strategic and economic (Severino, 2001).

### *A short history of development policies and its underlying foundations*

Development policies as a vector for a compassion-ethics process, to ensure the swift development of countries faced with decolonization issues, collapsed at the end of the 1970s. Aid fatigue then constituted a breeding ground for liberal economic practices that flourished in the 1980s, carried out against a backdrop of widespread debt. During this decade of so-called structural adjustment, development policies operated as tools to partially refinance the debt, mainly feeding on economic concerns. Conditionality and donor advice gradually shaped the “Washington Consensus” whose principles were based on market deregulation, privatization of State monopolies and companies, and the protection of private property (including intellectual). In the 1990s, these adjustment policies were recognized to have failed. Donors withdrew, both due to budgetary constraints, loss of a political and strategic vision following the end of the Cold War, and a growing weariness with regard to development assistance deemed ineffective (Jacquet, 2006).

The adoption of the eight Millennium Development Goals by the UN in 2000 however renewed development policies’ legitimacy in terms of compassion and ethics as a tool for poverty reduction. This trend was further enhanced by the reaction to the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001, which also pulled on the geo-strategic string as a foundation of development policies. In parallel since the end of the 1980s, the notion of sustainable development had begun to emerge in the context of the Brundtland Report commissioned by the United Nations (UN) and presented at the 1992 Rio Summit. The rise of a discourse on Global Public Goods at the turn of the century constituted a paradigm shift. Focused especially on climate change and on the AIDS pandemic, it provided a framework on how to set sustainable development into motion, and legitimized development policies on the economic front.

### *The power of narratives*

According to the interaction between their compassion-based and ethical, geo-strategic and economic foundations, development policies have voiced their actions around different narratives. Such narratives are ways to bring together very diverse actors around converging

views and interests. They aim to fuel collective action towards broad and shared societal projects. Narratives give meaning. They may succeed one another or overlap. As overarching frameworks, they seek to legitimize the rules of the game and the player-institutions. Narratives are a resource both for interpretation and for argumentation (Rumpala, 2010). While they are not the product of a single author, public donor agencies and governments have been identified and analyzed as the sources of different narratives (Voituriez et al., 2017). Such affiliation is the complex result of each donor nation's history and political actions. The study of these narratives highlights strong differences between actors' justification of their development agendas. They are the outcome of complex interactions between political and economic contexts, scientific findings, and their interpretation by public actors and donors.

In the backdrop of the narratives taken up by the French Development Agency (AFD), this paper discusses the shift from Global Public Goods (GPGs) to commons. **It aims to demonstrate the intellectual and operational potential of development policies fueled by the study of commons, both as concrete local dynamics and more broadly as a political philosophy.** It will first review the emergence of GPGs as a narrative, assessing its successes and failed opportunities (part II). Second, it will introduce the concept of commons and offer an analysis of its power as a complementary and alternative narrative for development policies (part III). Finally, it will provide insights on how this narrative can be set into motion by actors such as the AFD through its funding and practices (part IV).

## II. GPGs, a Narrative on Globalization and Interdependencies

At the turn of the 21st century, the notion of GPGs emerged within international debates and in the field of development (Marniesse, 2005). While discussions on their definition and scope have been frequent, GPGs can be said to extend the traditional neoclassical typology of goods. GPGs refer to “public goods” - whose use is non-rival and access non-excludable (Samuelson, 1954) - that additionally present two criteria: territoriality and temporality (Kaul et al., 1999). In this sense, they are public goods that have global benefits and concern future generations.

### *A narrative towards the “production” of GPGs*

This definition of GPGs “by essence”, meaning by the nature of a good, soon shifted towards a different rhetorical meaning. In the preface of the founding work on GPGs carried out by Inge Kaul, Isabelle Grunberg and Marc A. Stern (Kaul et al., 1999), UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan called for the “production” of GPGs such as peace or the protection of the environment. In 2005, an international working group launched by France and Sweden to clarify the concept described them as “issues that (i) are deemed to be important to the international community; (ii) cannot, or will not be adequately addressed by individual countries acting alone; and therefore (iii) must be addressed collectively on a multilateral basis by both developed and developing countries”. The production of GPGs thus became a mandate, an injunction. Such GPGs included security, the control of pandemics, climate, natural resources such as the ocean or biodiversity, but also commercial openness, international financial stability and knowledge

(Marniesse, 2005). According to the narrative that then unfolded, these non-commercial goods and services required the effort of the international community. Such a community relies on the principle of solidarity and on the existence of shared moral imperatives. It is embodied by States' common expression of shared concerns.

As GPGs both challenged and garnered conceptual interest, their production became a key objective in France's narrative on development policies (Voituriez et al., 2017, Marniesse, 2005). An analysis set on the discourses between 2011 and 2015 identifies them as one of the most important components of the French development narrative (Voituriez et al., 2017). They highlighted the interdependencies between the fates of OECD and developing countries in the context of globalization. They were set up as objects whose financing could counter global market failures. GPGs thus implied that North-South dialogue, and with it development policies, are key to solve the problems shared by the international community.

In addition to bringing new impetus to the work of development actors, GPGs also presented them with a two-fold advantage. First, GPGs used the language and concepts of the dominant economic theory (indivisibility, non-rival consumption, externalities, etc.) with which these actors were familiar. Second, they implicitly introduced the issue of equity into the traditional debates of economic theory. Both the World Bank and the UN Development Programme (UNDP) made it the central theme of their development reports (UNDP, 2005; World Bank, 2006). Equity has since been considered as a variable that explains poverty reduction, economic growth and even democratization.

### *The limits of the GPG narrative*

GPGs contributed to reviving interest in development policies. By becoming a narrative, GPGs however underwent a conceptual extension which made them broadly encompassing. No longer strictly limited to the definition's initial framework, they succeeded in drawing attention towards a wide array of "goods" or objects, from water to knowledge, satellites, the ozone layer, peace, health, etc. In the case of the French Development Agency, GPGs constituted a specific vector: they drove the expansion of operations to new regions of the world and towards emerging issues such as climate change, which were to become central in the new discourses. Described as abstract and sometimes suspicious (Marniesse, 2005), GPGs became an umbrella-concept that could be seized and influenced, weakening its initial analytical power (Coussy, 2002).

Despite the efforts put in the last decade into the production of GPGs, the issues that they rightfully address persist and are of increasing concern. Climate change, the erosion of biodiversity, freshwater use, land-system change and biogeochemical flows are examples of environmental pressures for which safety boundaries have been passed (Steffen et al., 2015). The current failure to globally address such challenges has been underlined and is frequently condemned. Non-environmental GPGs such as financial stability or peace have also suffered during the first decade of the 21st century, whether in the case of the 2008 financial crisis, or as highlighted by the wars and conflicts leading to refugee displacements in different regions of the globe.

The apparent deadlock faced by the international community with regard to these global issues is perhaps one of perception and of scale. GPGs have identified and brought to attention issues whose degrees of concern were not always consensual. Today, many of these issues can no longer be ignored and the question, rather than “what”, is “how”. As a response to this, GPGs have paved the way for the coordination of global public policies. They have especially focused on this global policy scale. This opens the door for new narratives to complete the steps made by GPGs in the field of development policies. In this regard, the commons approach is, we believe, especially insightful.

### **III. Commons, a Narrative about Scales, Actors and Equity?**

While drawing increasing attention, the concept of “commons” is referred to less often than that of GPGs in the semantic field of development policies. This is especially due to the latter’s long-standing conceptualization and application in a wide array of topics. Authors sometimes mistakenly use the terms interchangeably. They both feed on certain similar fundamental elements: reference to a humanity that cannot be equated to the sum of divergent interests, the need to affirm common values, as well as the imperative to preserve resources (Gabas and Hugon, 2001). Commons are however the result of a very different story and carry the potential to distinctively renew the development narrative.

#### *A dynamic research field and a wide spectrum of illustrations*

Commons find their roots in a specific theory: that of “common-pool resources”, in the tradition of the works which awarded social scientist Elinor Ostrom (Ostrom, 1990) with the Nobel prize in economy (2009). They have fueled research all over the world in a variety of fields, especially covering the management of natural resources in Asia, Africa and Latin America. The concept has propagated in many directions and been used in many ways, including by political and social leaders. This makes it complex and polymorphous (Bollier, 2014).

Ostrom’s founding work demonstrated, through a rich empirical approach, that the management of “common-pool resources” –often corresponding to natural resources at local scales- could be carried out sustainably by communities empowered to set up common rules and pursue a shared objective. Ostrom identified as a “common” the dynamic system made up of a resource, a community using or interested in this resource, and the framework of rules decided upon by the community to reach its objective. Ostrom’s research is compelling in that it empirically contradicts the “tragedy of the commons” theoretically exposed by Hardin (Hardin, 1968). Indeed, Hardin had argued that common goods, understood as such in the traditional economic sense (rival in use but non-excludable in access), face the inevitable tragedy of overuse and extinction if not taken up by the State or the market. This is not what Ostrom and her teams from the Bloomington School of Political Economy observed in many cases. As a consequence, she shifts away from the traditional neoclassical framework which separates goods into a typology according to the nature of their use and access. Instead, she advances that the “common” feature ascribed to a good, and which she captures in her common-pool resources, originates from the

regime in sharing, accession and circulation of these goods (Fondation Heinrich Böll, 2009). Goods are thus not common in nature but in usage. By referring to “commons” rather than to “common goods”, authors further aim to shift the focus from goods to their governance models, as triads made of resources, communities and rules.

In the lineage of Ostrom, commons can first be understood as pragmatic governance models or social constructs set by a community around a resource to reach a specific objective. Such commons can be observed and are analyzed through an institutional lens. Their object varies greatly. The nature of the resource matters little and the community’s goal depends on the situation. Objectives can range from the preservation of the quality or quantity of a limited resource, often the case for natural resources, to the expansion of a resource in the case of intangible, informational commons, such as open-access encyclopedias (Coriat, 2015). They can also aim for the production of a good or service in the context of a failing public service. For many authors, what is at play is not (only) whether or not the resource is limited, but the fact that an access that was (or should have been) open is closing under market or State pressure. Researchers working in the field of commons are proactive in taking a stand to limit this so-called enclosure phenomenon, while seeking effective forms of management. Although such commons have especially been analyzed at local levels, questions on scaling up and issues with global commons have sparked increasing interest in the overall commons research landscape (van Laerhover and Ostrom, 2007; Dorsch and Flachsland, 2017).

A second trend in the study of commons, inspired from the first, has turned the telescope around. Instead of analyzing the unique institutional models of commons, it inspires itself from these experiments to look at and question the State – its coercive power, bureaucratic apparatus at the service of citizens, models of decision-making and representation. Some authors further use the lens of commons to question capitalism and the dominant economic model as it has evolved for nearly half a century (Bollier, 2014; Dardot and Laval, 2014). This approach presents commons as “the things worth being done together” (Cordonnier, 2012). Commons capture the objectives set by communities. Resources become secondary as compared to goals, which can encompass health, protection of biodiversity, quality food, decent work, etc. As such, commons become eminently political and pave the way for a political philosophy. They question various underlying mechanisms of the liberal order, including private property at the source of enclosure phenomena (Boidin, 2015) and the values used to capture the performance of systems such as price and GDP (Bollier, 2014). As opposed to a view of individuals as *homo economici* maximizing their personal utility through rational thought, commons present new conceptions of wealth based on humans’ ability to live together (Bollier, 2014). They highlight the creative practices built by communities when faced with a problem, as coined by the term “commoning” (Linebaugh, 2008). Such commons imply that citizens are empowered, active, and at the heart of democratic efforts (Bollier and Helfrich, 2015). They constitute a paradigm shift in which cooperation and equity are of paramount concern.



### *A new narrative on the process rather than the object*

How can these two readings of commons contribute to shaping a new narrative that feeds into development policies? To what extent do they complement the previous narrative on GPGs? Commons first seemingly deviate from GPGs in the question that they ask and in the scale at which they operate. While GPGs are concerned with identification and coordination of GPGs in order to enhance their production, commons are especially interested in the “commoning” process. They do not revolve around goods or experiments that are by nature commons or common goods, but by the governance models and/or objectives at the heart of successful social and environmental enterprises. This brings the narrative to a different level and allows commons to provide complementary insights on “how” issues identified as GPGs can be tackled in a variety of ways. Further on this line, commons question two fundamental pillars of the GPG narrative: the regulation of fundamental goods and the models of growth. In this sense, they pave the way for a narrative with distinct public policy implications (Alix et al., 2018).

Commons provide a very different version of how to act regarding the regulation of “goods”. The GPG theory places itself within the traditional economic framework. It counts on a global governance and coordination that relies on an international community represented by States as the solution. This implies that global mechanisms can orchestrate regulatory and economic tools that apply to all actors. While UN processes are indeed a unique stage for action and negotiation, dear to developing countries, the last twenty years have however shown their difficulty to tackle binding global regulations. A “reality schism” has appeared between the considerable human, political and financial investment drawn to address global problems on one hand, and their weak impact on the other (Aykut and Dahan, 2015). Commons are compelling in that they add to and supplement this “top-down” GPG approach. They position local and regional actions at the center of global efforts, resulting in “bottom-up” solutions. They allow local policies and the institutions that carry them to be organized and taken up by “communities”. In the case of large complex commons, they open the way for “polycentric governance” models in which independent centers of decision within a single overarching framework succeed in managing common resources (Ostrom, 2010). In addition, commons place actors who use a resource, or voice their concern, at the center of attention. This focus on local stakeholders allows to screen the challenges faced by societies through the lens of actors, social ties and cohesion. Commons thus propose multi-level and multi-actor forms of regulation that imply fundamental changes in development policies and practices.

Second, commons diverge from GPGs by allowing us to consider questioning the existing growth model. GPGs refer to a global agenda to universally deal with the challenges of growth and sustainable development. They propose a rearrangement and more rational organization of all human activities through optimization to limit the negative impact of such activities on ecological and social equilibriums. GPGs rely on traditional economics by assuming that the performance of organized systems is based on the economic rationality of actors. In addition, they do highlight the premises of conflict between this standard economic approach revolving around efficiency and ethical considerations (Boidin et al., 2008). In its 2006 report, the World Bank however tackles equity through an “individualistic” approach characterized by the primacy of freedom and of responsibility; and not by addressing social ethics directed towards others. Commons outwardly assume this conflict by setting forth values that diverge from those of the

current growth model. They place equity as a central concern along with sustainability, strong social ties, capacities for collective action, a decrease in transaction costs thanks to trust and a desire for shared well-being.

#### **IV. From theory to practice: the role and position of a development agency**

Commons constitute a complementary narrative to GPGs by setting light on how to regulate “goods” and address global challenges in a different manner, through more bottom-up, innovative governance based on local stakeholders and communities. It goes beyond the GPG narrative by questioning the status quo and current models of growth. Commons set equity and the ecological and social transition at the heart of development policies. While this in itself holds intellectual potential, how can a development agency set this narrative into motion? To what extent does it intrinsically question its practices and what opportunities does it represent?

##### *A longstanding support towards local commons*

Development agencies have through their financing long been providing support to help foster and structure new commons. Examples in development projects<sup>‡</sup> span across a wide array of sectors. Work revolving around the preservation of local commons based on natural resources are a first set of examples. They may include projects that support the securing of land rights, the management of groundwater facing overexploitation risks, or the integrated management of water resources, with concerted management of surface water on the scale of catchment area or coastal zone. They may also deal with the transfer of exploitation or conservation rights in forest zones, development plans for agro-sylvo-pastoral systems, or protected areas. Such projects may as well address hunting reserves or the management of “bushmeat”, pastoral hydraulics or fisheries. Here again, the object or sector is secondary, and the commons nature of such projects resides in the management models and implication of communities set up and/or supported.

A second set of projects may target local commons revolving around the production and management of infrastructures and services. Such commons include user associations for the exploitation and maintenance of water points, of decentralized production systems or of hydro-agricultural infrastructure. Development policies may also support the emergence of national commons based on the production of services, such as mutual-aid benefit and inclusive microcredit, or fairer social protection systems that use mutual-benefit or a non-contributory approach. Last but not last, they may accompany commons at a supranational scale that deal with access to essential medicines, freeware or healthcare platforms. These examples are not

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<sup>‡</sup> Development policies finance projects that spark activities in order to respond to specific objectives (access to services, protection of natural resources, structuring of the private sector, food security, etc.). They address themselves to beneficiaries through “counterparts” in charge of implementing the activities. Such activities include means (budget, time frames) and are organized in components: infrastructures and supporting measures (human, technical and financial support) that must pave the way for a successful implementation and for the sustainability of the financed infrastructures.

exhaustive and serve to illustrate the wide spectrum of objects and objectives that commons may help address.

### *Operational challenges and opportunities*

While holding strong potential, the support to and production of commons intrinsically challenge the practices of development institutions. These latter are poorly suited to complex, non-linear processes that require a time often longer than that of project cycles and whose impacts may be challenging to monitor and evaluate. Historically, development institutions have also mainly worked with States in a spirit of North/South cooperation. The support towards commons may also raise questions of legitimacy, as commons are endogenous processes and therefore seem difficult to produce exogenously. Commons more broadly question agencies' practices based on institutions, statutes and their integration within the traditional institutional landscape. These questions reveal recurring points of tensions between the values set forth by commons and a bank's imperative towards financial results, volumes of activity, commitment and disbursements, as well as its set framework of annual operation cycles. Such tensions are however not new and are inherent to institutional and technical cultures, of which they also constitute a strength. Regardless of development agencies' capacity to reform such practices, commons also hold potential risks, and the question is not to grant them with unconditional support. These risks lie in the structural weaknesses underlying collective action as well as in the external weaknesses related to the divisive nature of commons process (unfavorable regulatory frameworks, external shocks, etc.).

Commons are nonetheless an opportunity to set forward relevant questions and pave the way for new practices. They are a powerful vector of global regulation through local channels by focusing on social dynamics and highlighting ways in which actors outside of the State or market can build decisions. Commons allow an accumulation of knowledge via trial and error, suitable for local social and ecological systems (Chanteau and Lambrousse, 2013). In this way, supporting a wide variety of commons leads to meaningful learning through experience. While commons as a political philosophy question the status quo, commons as pragmatic governance models constitute a variety of concrete operational management cases. Such experiences propose a space between the State and the market where communities can make up for the shortcomings of public or private services. These experiments constitute an extremely fertile breeding ground for technical, institutional and legal innovation. They invite cooperation agencies to concentrate on the process of constructing public policies, on the way in which decisions are developed, and on balances of power. Whereas development policies have, out of effectiveness or neutrality concerns, often sought refuge behind technical and technocratic discourses, commons highlight the importance of actors and their interactions as the ground for policy thinking.

In many ways, commons find echo in the 2030 Development Agenda adopted by the UN in 2015 and whose framework lies within the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Although the SDGs do not move away from the existing growth model, calling for "inclusive" and "sustainable" growth (Egil, 2015), they insist on the need for all actors, including private ones and civil society, to gain momentum. To reach this agenda's goals, States are stakeholders among

others. As previously stated, commons allow citizens to re-appropriate local challenges. They imply a shift in decision-making, organization and crafting of local policies towards “communities”. In this sense, they are tools that can help address very different objectives set forth by the SDGs. They also directly feed into SDG 16 relating to governance, that aims to “promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels”.

**To conclude**, the commons approach carries great intellectual and operational potential to feed into a new narrative on development policies. It completes the past narrative on GPGs by bringing insights on how to address global issues through more bottom-up, innovative governance based on local stakeholders and communities. It goes beyond the GPG narrative by questioning the status quo and current models of growth. Commons set equity and the ecological and social transition at the heart of development policies. The power of commons as a narrative lies in its ability to provide an empirically-founded analytical framework that can be declined into concrete, innovative development practices. Commons are not a rigid ideology but a flexible change matrix, accessible to different cultures and societies (Bollier and Weston, 2013). They are relevant for the global development agenda while opening up doors to question existing models and business-as-usual. But beyond this, commons also help move away from a one-way North-South relationship. A lot can be learned thanks to commons experience in developing countries, where their diverse, spontaneous and innovative uprising has been widely observed. Commons can in this way be meaningful examples of reverse innovation. Perhaps, even prior to the support of existing commons or the production of new ones, development policies have a “responsibility of perception”. They carry a duty: to be aware of, safeguard and to learn from these Southern commons. Only then can a narrative inspired by the commons approach set itself into motion within renewed development policies and practices.

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