

# TEXT POLYCENTRIC MANAGEMENT or POLYCENTRIC GOVERNANCE

## **Elinor Ostrom's theory of polycentric governance and the depletion of common goods**

The problem of the depletion of common goods and natural resources is one of the most pressing challenges facing modern society. Examples include fish stocks, forests, water reserves and the atmosphere.

Traditionally, this problem was often described using the concept of the 'tragedy of the commons', whereby individuals, acting in their own interests, overexploit collective resources until they are depleted. However, countering this pessimistic view is the work of Elinor Ostrom, who demonstrated that communities are capable of developing sustainable forms of management themselves.



Her theory of polycentric governance offers an alternative to both full privatisation and central state control.

## **Ostrom's theory**

Polycentric management refers to a system in which multiple overlapping levels of government and actors are involved in the management of resources. Instead of a single central authority, there are various decision-making centres that interact with one another. These can range from local communities to regional and national institutions.

Ostrom argued that communities dependent on a shared resource often develop their own rules to manage it sustainably.

The polycentric model recognises that complex problems, such as climate change or overfishing, cannot be effectively resolved by a single actor. Instead, cooperation between different levels is essential. Local actors possess detailed knowledge of their environment, whilst higher levels of government can provide support and coordination.



## **The tragedy of the commons reviewed**

The classic theory of the tragedy of the commons assumes that individuals act rationally to maximise their own utility without regard for the collective consequences. This leads to overuse and, ultimately, the depletion of the resource.

Ostrom criticised this view because it is too simplistic and fails to take into account social norms, trust and cooperation. According to her, people are not exclusively selfish, but capable of cooperative behaviour when the institutional context supports it. Polycentric management creates precisely the context in which cooperation is encouraged.

## **Advantages of polycentric governance**

A key advantage of polycentric governance is flexibility. Local systems can adapt quickly to changing circumstances, such as fluctuations in resources or ecological changes. Furthermore, it fosters engagement and a sense of responsibility among resource users, leading to better monitoring and compliance with regulations.

Another advantage is resilience. Because there are multiple levels of governance, the system is better able to cope with shocks. If one level fails, other levels can step in. This makes polycentric systems more robust than centralised systems.

Finally, this model encourages innovation. Different communities can experiment with different solutions, allowing successful practices to spread.



## **Examples of polycentric governance**

### **1. Community-based forest management in Nepal**

In Nepal, local communities have taken over the management of forests from the central government. User groups draw up rules governing logging, reforestation and monitoring. Thanks to this approach, many forests have been restored and deforestation is being combated. This example demonstrates how local knowledge and involvement can lead to sustainable management.

## **2. Fisheries management in Norway**

In Norway, fisheries are managed through a combination of national regulations and local involvement. Fishermen's organisations work together with the government to set quotas and monitor compliance. This polycentric system has contributed to the conservation of fish stocks and a stable fishing industry.

## **3. Water management in Spain (huertas)**

In parts of Spain, such as Valencia, irrigation systems managed by local farmers have existed for centuries. Water rights, distribution and disputes are regulated through local institutions such as water courts. These systems still function effectively and demonstrate the sustainability of self-organisation.



### **Criticism**

Although polycentric governance offers many advantages, it is not a panacea. It requires strong social cohesion, trust and effective communication. In situations characterised by significant power imbalances or conflicts, cooperation can be difficult to achieve. Furthermore, global problems such as climate change cannot be solved exclusively at the local level.

That is why a combination of local initiatives and international cooperation is necessary. Polycentric governance should be seen as a complement to, rather than a replacement for, other forms of governance.

## **Conclusion**

Elinor Ostrom's theory offers an optimistic and realistic alternative to the traditional view of the depletion of common-pool resources. By demonstrating that communities are capable of self-organisation and sustainable management, she challenges the notion that only markets or states can provide solutions.

Polycentric management emphasises the importance of cooperation, local knowledge and institutional diversity. In a world where natural resources are becoming increasingly scarce, this approach offers valuable insights for developing sustainable and equitable solutions.

The three examples discussed demonstrate that this theory is not merely theoretical, but can be successfully applied in practice. It is therefore of great importance that policymakers, researchers and communities continue to invest in forms of polycentric governance in order to meet the challenges of the future.