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## Sustainable legacy: Elinor Ostrom shaped sustainability research

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# The Current Column

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## Sustainable legacy: Elinor Ostrom shaped sustainability research

Bonn, 18 June 2012. On 12 June 2012 the political scientist and environmental economist Elinor Ostrom lost her battle with cancer at the age of 78. She was the first and, so far, only woman to be awarded the Nobel Prize for economics, which she shared with Oliver Williamson in 2009. Her passing is an immeasurable loss for sustainability research.

Elinor Ostrom achieved fame with her book *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (1990), in which she considered the use of commons – natural resources managed jointly by various users, such as alpine pastures, forests, fishing grounds and irrigation systems. She refuted the assumption that the shared use of natural resources was bound to lead to a “tragedy of the commons”, whereby competition for their use inevitably led to overexploitation. Her analysis of numerous case studies enabled her to prove that many local communities use commons sustainably over the long term. In these cases, the users have usually agreed on a set of clear joint rules. It is important that the boundaries of the resource and access rules are clearly defined and that the provision and use of the resource are adapted to local natural conditions. Most successful examples feature mechanisms for mutual monitoring, the possibility of sanctions being imposed when rules are broken and means of resolving conflicts. What is always important is that the users themselves are able to adapt the rules and institutions to changing circumstances. Ostrom’s empirical research thus reveals the conditions under which local natural resources can be used sustainably.

Elinor Ostrom’s research on the commons also made a ground-breaking contribution to the

analysis of self-organised collective action, showing that there is often a third and possibly superior mode of governance besides the state and the market. In later studies she demonstrated the critical importance of communicative processes and the reciprocity of trust for successful societal cooperation. She thus laid further important foundations for the integrated analysis of social-ecological systems. The link that her genuinely interdisciplinary research forged between the social and natural sciences can be regarded as Ostrom’s outstanding academic achievement. Against that background she was also particularly successful in giving a significant boost to policy advice in the areas of environment policy and the management of natural resources. At the same time, Ostrom pointed out time and again that there is no panacea and that the scope for applying the design principles she identified for the management of local commons is limited.

A major, complementary contribution made by Ostrom was therefore her more recent work on polycentric approaches to overcoming problems associated with collective action, which have an impact at various spatial scales and political levels – local, regional, national or global. She argued that climate change, for example, is defined as a global problem to an extent that sidelines scope for promising action at sub-global levels. An international climate policy pursued only at the global level therefore falls short of what is needed. Instead, she called for a more complex, polycentric multi-level policy. She believed the strength of this approach lies in the possibility of many different strategies and measures being put to the test synchronously at many different levels. Nonetheless, she did not have an answer to the question

whether a climate policy of that nature might contribute to a reduction in global greenhouse gas emissions that would be consistent and fair and, above all, timely.

Elinor Ostrom was an extraordinary member of the research community. She helped to bring about paradigm shifts in the social sciences by influencing our thinking on policy, governance and institutions and on the relationship between the social and natural sciences. She inspired generations of students and researchers, devoting a great deal of time and energy particularly to promoting young researchers in developing countries. We found her on various occasions to be a very sincere, open and accessible person who had dedicated herself to scientific progress with passion, humour and steadfast optimism. For her, scientific celebrity was not an end in itself, but a result of intellectual curiosity and the desire to make the world a more sustainable and therefore more equitable place.

This was true until the end, as was evident from her moving appearance as Chief Scientific Advisor to the Planet under Pressure conference held in London in late March, when over 3,000 environmental scientists from various disciplines of the social and natural sciences congregated to weigh in on the negotiations in the run-up to the UN Conference on Sustainable Development by putting forward empirically based recommendations, entirely in keeping with Ostrom's teachings. Should the Rio+20 conference this week be successful, with the world's states and governments at last taking practical decisions to overcome the putative conflict between environmental protection and socio-economic development, it would be for Lin, as she was known to friends and colleagues, a more fitting acknowledgement of her life's work than the innumerable obituaries, to which this Current Column, too, can but add a further expression of gratitude.



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