

Remembering Elinor Ostrom

KANCHAN CHOPRA, NILANJAN GHOSH, VIKRAM DAYAL

Vol. 47, Issue No. 25, 23 Jun, 2012

Kanchan Chopra (kanchanc136@gmail.com) was formerly the director of the Institute of Economic Growth, New Delhi. Vikram Dayal (vikday@gmail.com) is with the Institute of Economic Growth, New Delhi. Nilanjan Ghosh (nilanjan.ghosh@gmail.com) is with Research and Strategy, Multi Commodity Exchange of India Limited, Mumbai.

Nobel laureate Elinor Ostrom's passing away is a major loss to academia and for all those committed to the idea of the "commons".

In the passing away of Elinor Ostrom on June 12, academia has lost a towering figure and the world, a multi faceted persona. Elinor Ostrom, who received the 2009 Nobel prize for the Economic Sciences, is known, first and foremost, for her work on the commons. She worked on both foundational theoretical issues and applications, criss-crossing between theory, field observation and use of multifarious techniques. She proved conclusively that to focus on just two organisational forms, the market and the state did not do justice to the wide variety of institutional designs that humans create. She went far beyond the public-private goods dichotomy to understand the evolution of societal frameworks and develop an institutional and development framework. This was used to develop a coding manual for the meta- analysis of common pool resource studies of user managed irrigation and fisheries systems in different parts of the world. Her work has demonstrated that large, centralised and essentially top-down government management systems tended to underperform, with lower rates of return on investment than systems where incentives to engineers were aligned to those of local farmer-users with their active participation.

This institutional analysis and development (IAD) framework has implications in much broader social and political settings. In a very recent communication, Elinor posited that when individuals, facing a social dilemma, agreed on their own rules and used graduated sanctions, this was more likely to have robust solutions over time. This position challenged the contention of "punishment" being the solution for social dilemmas, as argued by some. Further, in her seminar in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 2011, she analysed how different levels of governance including market signals, public policies and collective action can reinforce each other in complex polycentric social systems. It led analysts to ask the question, "Are the commons a metaphor for our times?"

It is perhaps correct to say that the Nobel awarded to her brought into the limelight the relevance of her work in the context of the environmental issues facing humanity today. As

the nations of the world, constituting the so called “global village” interact on modes of limiting green house gas emissions which endanger the global commons, both at Rio De Janeiro (Rio +20 summit) and elsewhere, we find many similarities between their characteristics and those of the complex polycentric communities that occupied Elinor Ostrom’s attention. Will the elders of this ‘global village’ be able to exhibit foresight and wisdom in solving their problems? The details of Elinor Ostrom’s work will remain very useful to them and to humanity in addressing this task.

In recent years, Elinor directed her attention to the development of a general framework for analysing sustainability of social-ecological systems. In this context, her motivation, as stated in her own words was “... scientific disciplines use different concepts and languages to describe and explain complex social-ecological systems . Without a common framework to organize findings, isolated knowledge does not cumulate”. To bridge this gap, Ostrom devised a general framework to identify various subsystem variables that affect the likelihood of self-organisation in the efforts to achieve sustainable socio-ecological systems.

Insurmountable Loss

Elinor Ostrom is no more. The loss is insurmountable. Yet, the legacy continues. The *Workshop on Political Theory and Policy Analysis*, founded in 1973, has emerged as an extraordinary forum for productive deliberations from evolving associations of researchers thereby producing a wealth of theory, empirical studies and experiments at the interface of political economy, social anthropology, economics, political science, and policy studies. In a very characteristic fashion, the “institutionalist” Elinor, thereby, ensured the continued existence of an “institution” by way of which the next generation of researchers and thinkers could emerge and flower.

At this workshop, students are like apprentices, learning the craft through close interaction with researchers and scholars across disciplines at informal seminars held twice a week. The workshop reflected her warmth and openness and visitors would feel at home easily. She listened intently to all and was generous in her appreciation; her remarks often punctuated with booming laughter. That laughter shall resonate in the minds and hearts of scores of her students and colleagues, spurring them on to higher levels of endeavour in searching for answers to real life problems in approaches rooted both in theory and practice.