# Reclaiming the Commons

## A Systematic Literature Review of Theoretical Foundations and Contemporary Debates

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### Abstract

This article offers a systematic literature review of the evolving concept of the commons, with a focus on its theoretical foundations, contemporary critiques, and application in development contexts, particularly within the Global South. The commons have expanded beyond natural resources to include urban, digital, knowledge, and feminist commons, becoming a contested site of governance, resistance, and ethical practice. Drawing on the PRISMA methodology, the review synthesises peer-reviewed literature from 2000 to 2026 across disciplines such as political ecology, institutional economics, feminist theory, and decolonial thought. It addresses four guiding questions concerning the definition and theorisation of the commons, the major schools of thought, its application in justice-oriented development, and emerging critiques. The review reveals key trends, including a shift from resource-based to relational conceptions of the commons; the rise of feminist, intersectional, and decolonial critiques; and growing concern over the neoliberal appropriation of commons discourse. Significant gaps are identified, including the under-theorisation of justice and power, limited Global South-centred theorising, neglect of urban and digital commons in development literature, and methodological fragmentation. The article concludes by advocating for a repoliticised, plural, and justice-driven understanding of the commons that centres epistemic diversity and collective autonomy. It aims to provide conceptual clarity for scholars and practitioners, while laying the groundwork for future contributions to the *Commons, Justice and Development Journal*.

*Key words: Commons; Justice; Development; Decolonial Theory; Global South; Feminist Commons; Urban Commons; Knowledge Commons; Power and Governance; Systematic Review*

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## 1. Introduction

The concept of the commons has re-emerged in academic and activist discourse as a compelling alternative to dominant models of resource management, governance, and development. Traditionally associated with natural resources held in common, such as forests, grazing lands, and fisheries, the commons have evolved into a complex and pluralistic idea, encompassing digital spaces, urban infrastructure, knowledge production, and even social and cultural practices. This conceptual expansion has been accompanied by a renewed interest in the commons as a political and ethical project that challenges the logics of enclosure, privatisation, and exclusion that have marked capitalist and colonial modes of governance (Bollier and Helfrich, 2012;). One corollary of the growing attention paid to the commons is that the term itself remains open-ended. For the *Commons, Justice and Development Journal (CJDJ)*, the term *commons* is not only foundational, but also demands clarity. As a journal that aims to promote scholarship from and for the Global South, it is imperative to interrogate how the commons are theorised and mobilised in ways that either reinforce or resist dominant development paradigms. This article responds to that need by conducting a systematic literature review of academic scholarship on the commons, with a particular focus on their intersection with justice and development.

The review is guided by four core questions:

1. How has the concept of *Commons* been defined and theorised across disciplines?
2. What are the major schools of thought and theoretical traditions informing commons scholarship?
3. How is the concept of *Commons* applied in development contexts, particularly in relation to questions of justice, access, and equity in the Global South?
4. What critiques, gaps, or emerging perspectives are present in recent commons literature?

To answer these questions, the article adopts the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) methodology to ensure rigour and transparency. A wide search was conducted across key academic databases, including Google Scholar, Scopus, JSTOR, and Web of Science, focusing on peer-reviewed literature from 2000 to 2026. Foundational texts prior to this period were also included to contextualise contemporary debates. The review includes both theoretical and empirical contributions, with attention to diverse domains such as natural commons, urban commons, digital and knowledge commons, and social and feminist commons.

Each selected source was analysed using a coding matrix that mapped its contribution to the four research questions, its regional or disciplinary focus, methodological approach, and conceptual framing. The matrix also enabled us to identify recurring themes and underexplored areas, particularly the justice implications of commons governance in settings marked by inequality, colonial legacies, and contested sovereignties. By systematically synthesising existing literature, this article aims to clarify the conceptual terrain of *commons* for both scholars and practitioners, especially those concerned with questions of justice and development. It also lays the groundwork for a shared vocabulary and intellectual orientation for future contributions to *CJDJ*, and proposes a framework for more context-sensitive, equity-driven, and decolonial engagements with the commons.

## 2. Theoretical origins and evolution

The term *commons* has a double genealogy. It echoes the Latin communis (“shared”), yet in Roman legal reasoning “the common” is first of all a qualification of certain things, a regime of public/common things whose use is conceived as generally open, rather than the juridical expression of a clearly delimited collective subject. In Yan Thomas’s reconstruction, what matters is less who holds the thing than the specific legal status that makes some things inappropriable (or not monopolisable) while remaining usable in ways that are not mediated by membership in a defined group (Thomas, 2002a, 2002b). Building on this Roman frame, later scholarship argues that res communes should not be equated with contemporary commons: the former presuppose an undifferentiated horizon of entitled users, whereas modern commons typically depend on an identifiable plurality that actively constitutes and governs shared access through ongoing practices of “commoning” (Dalla Massara and Schiavon, 2021; Partelow and Manlosa, 2023). Focusing on the collective action entailed by the appropriation from a common-pool resource lies at the core of the more modern development of the concept of the commons, of which the term commoning represents only the latest and most current phase. Before this, Elinor Ostrom's seminal work (1990) is foundational. She laid the groundwork for the institutional analysis of common-pool resources, offering a systematic inquiry into the

mechanisms underpinning both the failure and the success of managing a shared and interdependent resource. By examining how locally crafted rules, monitoring arrangements, and collective decision-making processes shape outcomes, Ostrom challenged deterministic accounts of inevitable overexploitation and demonstrated the capacity of users to self-organize and govern commons sustainably.

One of our hypotheses is that both the study of the commons and their concrete management as practitioners constitute two factual elements that propel the evolution of the concept. This is discernible in Ostrom herself, whose own line of thought and analytical approach underwent an evolution that was not merely lexical. From the late 1980s onward, she progressively complemented terms derived from institutional economics and rational choice theory, such as *users* and *co-appropriators*, with that of *communities*, marking a move from a predominantly individualistic, action-theoretical vocabulary toward a relational and socially embedded understanding of collective action. To grasp this evolution, we must interrogate the dilemmas to which commons thinking seeks to respond: those of collective management and resource preservation. These twin issues have sustained a persistent and growing interest in the field, precisely because humans have not yet learned how to address them adequately. The escalating risk of ecological disaster serves as a constant reminder of this unresolved condition.

### *2.1 The tragedy and its challenge: Hardin versus Ostrom*

Despite the differences from the Roman tradition, the concept has historically continued to refer to resources such as pasturelands, forests, and fisheries. The constitutive element that connects such diverse resources is that they are potentially usable by a plurality of actors; that these actors are not undifferentiated subjects, but are instead socially connected to the resource itself; and that their use and management are organized through arrangements that do not correspond to traditional public or private property regimes. Precisely because they are accessed and used by multiple actors, the condition of interdependence that emerges also entails potential conflicts over use and management. Garrett Hardin (1968) centered his critique of the commons on this issue. In his essay *The Tragedy of the Commons*, he argued that the basic motivation driving overexploitation is straightforward: while the positive externalities of increased exploitation are concentrated on those who choose to intensify their use of the resource, the negative externalities generated by overuse are distributed among all users. This dynamic encourages free-riding behavior and competitive pressures, leading individuals, acting in rational self-interest, to inevitably deplete shared resources.

Hardin's model posited a need for either privatisation to prevent ecological collapse. This framing, grounded in neo-Malthusian assumptions, cast commons as inherently unsustainable, a position that went largely unchallenged in mainstream discourse for decades. However, Hardin's perspective failed to consider that this same condition of interdependence could also foster cooperative attitudes. As Elinor Ostrom later pointed out, a key limitation of Hardin's model lies precisely in its assumption that cooperation is excluded by the presumed inability of users to communicate with one another and to collectively agree on shared rules governing resource use. She introduced empirical evidence of communities around the world that successfully managed common-pool resources through locally designed institutions and collective rules. Elinor Ostrom's Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) framework, together with her eight design principles, showed how commons can be governed effectively when rooted in local knowledge and reciprocal trust. These principles include: clearly defined boundaries; rules adapted to local conditions (ensuring proportionality between appropriation and provision); collective-choice arrangements enabling users to participate in decision-making; monitoring of resource use by accountable actors; graduated sanctions for rule violators; accessible and low-cost conflict-resolution mechanisms; recognition by external authorities of the right to self-organize; and, for larger systems, governance organized through nested enterprises. Ostrom's legacy has been monumental, earning her the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences in 2009. Yet her work has also drawn critiques for its rational-choice assumptions and relative neglect of historical power asymmetries, colonial legacies, and social inequalities (Peluso and Ribot, 2020). Although Ostrom's emphasis on self-governance remains influential, it is now increasingly complemented by critical approaches that locate the commons in broader systems of political economy and epistemic power.

### *2.2 Expanding the theoretical terrain*

The scope of commons theory expanded significantly in the early 21st century. Scholars began speaking of "new commons", domains beyond land and water, such as knowledge commons, digital commons, urban commons, and climate commons (Hess and Ostrom, 2007; Bollier, 2014). Sharing one resource rather than another is not a neutral act; it is, in many respects, performative. The very concept evolves alongside the practices it seeks to describe. In the cases most extensively studied by Elinor Ostrom, collective management often appeared as the (re)discovery of peculiar modes of governance, residual in relation to state and market logics, persisting within specific communities, or standing as virtuous yet exceptional institutional arrangements. In other cases, however, the issue is not the endurance of such governance forms, but their very possibility: governance is not given, but must be claimed and constructed through struggle. At this point, the resource itself becomes an object of contestation.

A paradigmatic example is that of water resources. While already present in Ostrom's work, water was primarily approached in relation to the specificity of certain institutional arrangements, such as the governance of water basins in the Los Angeles area, rather than as a site of open political conflict. A significant shift occurs when processes of privatization transform water into a terrain of political struggle across diverse contexts. A key turning point is represented by the Cochabamba Water War (Swyngedouw, 2005; Bakker, 2007), followed by further mobilizations around water as a common good, including those culminating in the Italian water referendum 2011 (Marotta, 2025), and relevant cases in Spain (Dona Geagea, Maria Kaika, and Jampel Dell'Angelo 2026). This turn marked a shift from resource-based definitions to function- and process-oriented definitions, recognising that commons are not just things but also practices of commoning, the ongoing social reproduction of shared life.

A useful way to grasp the point is to follow the trajectory of critiques directed at Ostrom's approach. While her contribution remains widely recognised as foundational, one line of critique concerns its reliance on the dominant naturalistic framework of standard economics (Dardot and Laval, 2014). Drawing on the institutional economic tradition of Paul Samuelson (1954) and Richard Musgrave (1959), Ostrom defines common-pool resources as goods that are rivalrous and non-excludable. From this perspective, being a commons appears as an intrinsic property of the resource itself, rather than as a quality emerging from the social relations that confer meaning upon it (De Angelis, 2017). Here, the very act of sharing begins to acquire a specific significance, one that becomes as analytically and politically central as that of the commons themselves. It was informed by theorists such as Peter Linebaugh (2008), who insisted that "there is no commons without commoning", and by Silvia Federici (2011), who positioned commoning as a feminist and anti-capitalist practice rooted in care, reproduction, and solidarity. In these accounts, commons are not merely goods but sites of relationality, resistance, and reproduction of life, in stark contrast to commodification and enclosure. The motivations underlying commoning constitute a further step of transformation. Once the resource itself becomes an object to be reclaimed for shared use, the communities engaged in such struggles, and, in some cases, successful in instituting forms of sharing, also undergo a conceptual shift. Rather than mere appropriators, commoners emerge as political subjects who posit the act of commoning as a form of political action. Within this perspective, commoning can be understood as a type of resource, a set of governance arrangements, a social practice, or a political principle (Dardot and Laval, 2014; Micciarelli, 2018), each interpretative strand carrying its own assumptions and limitations.

This critic to the "reification" the commons connects to a broader analytical frame centred on questions such as: why do commons succeed or fail, and what counts as success or failure? In Ostrom's account, the answer is relatively clear: success consists in the efficient use of the common-pool resource by a defined community, coupled with its long-term sustainability. Conversely, failure is primarily attributed to shortcomings in governance arrangements, including inadequate institutional design or the erosion of community autonomy under state intervention or market pressures. Here, however, a major divergence emerges with the newer generation of more radical theories. As argued by Massimo De Angelis (2017), while Ostrom and her collaborators tend to explain failures in terms of internal coordination problems—such as flaws in design principles or changes in group composition, these approaches are insufficient to account for the broader dynamics shaping the fate of commons. Rather, the persistence or dissolution of commons must be understood in relation to wider asymmetries of economic and political power. In this view, class relations, processes of capitalist expansion, and forms of coercion enacted through enclosure play a decisive role, factors that Ostrom's framework tends to underemphasise. Accordingly, the endurance or destruction of commons depends not only on institutional design, but also on the labour demands of dominant capitalist forces and on the capacity of commoners to mobilise solidarity and political power in resistance. In this direction, a growing body of

scholarship has called for greater attention to questions of justice, power, and context. In particular, postcolonial, feminist, and decolonial perspectives have emphasised that commons governance cannot be disentangled from the socio-historical injustices and power asymmetries that shape who is able to access, define, and benefit from the commons (Banerjee and Bell, 2007; Scheidel, Temper, Demaria and Martínez-Alier, 2018).

An even more marked line of conceptual development shifts the focus from commons as plural resources to the common in the singular. The key reference points here are the *commun* elaborated by Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, and the notion of the commonwealth developed by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. In this perspective, the Common (with a capital "C") is not simply a resource to be governed, but the terrain of a political project that seeks to move beyond both private and public property, reimagining institutions on the basis of shared production, access, and cooperation (Hardt and Negri, 2009). In substance, these critiques converge, more or less explicitly, on one point: Ostrom's framework, while innovative, ultimately remains anchored in a liberal paradigm and does not challenge the structural logics of capitalism and the state (Dardot and Laval, 2014). The Common thus appears as the antechamber to a much broader transformative process: a form of revolution grounded in a "concrete utopia" of organizational forms, as articulated, for instance, in *Assembly* (Hardt and Negri 2017), and modes of production (Vercellone, 2015; Giuliani and Vercellone, 2019). Within this framework, it is the struggles of commoners, prior even to their institutional arrangements, that constitute the true conceptual and political core. Rather than positioning themselves in opposition to Ostrom's work, other strands of scholarship—especially those engaging with her later writings—have interpreted her contributions through a more explicitly radical lens. For instance, in *Ostrom's Rules for Radicals*, Derek Wall reconnects Ostrom's empirically grounded findings to forms of knowledge embedded in local and Indigenous communities, portraying her as an ecological thinker, an advocate of cooperation, and a subverter of the idea of exclusively private property (Wall, 2017).

### *2.3 Towards critical, feminist, and decolonial readings of the commons*

While earlier models of commons theory often remained within Eurocentric and liberal frameworks, recent scholarship has embraced decolonial, postcolonial, and Global South epistemologies. These perspectives question the assumed neutrality of commons discourse and highlight how notions of property, resource use, and governance have been historically shaped by colonial conquest, racial capitalism, and extractivism (Escobar, 2008; de Sousa Santos, 2014). For instance, indigenous commons systems, such as usufruct rights in African pastoralist communities or *ayllu* systems in the Andes, have been marginalised or misinterpreted within dominant theoretical models. Recent work argues for the recognition of epistemic justice, calling on commons scholars to valorise subaltern knowledge systems and their contributions to sustainable governance (Shiva, 2016). Decolonial approaches go beyond simply adding non-Western case studies to existing frameworks. Instead, they challenge the very categories through which commons are understood, such as "resource", "property", "efficiency", and "stewardship", arguing that these terms carry hidden colonial genealogies. For example, the classification of communal lands as "unused" or "wasteland" by colonial administrations was not a neutral administrative act but a legal fiction that enabled dispossession. Postcolonial states sometimes reproduced this logic, renaming commons as *public land* subject to state control, thereby displacing customary governance without necessarily improving access for marginalised groups (Alden Wily, 2018). A decolonial reading of the commons thus requires attending to how legal categories, mapping practices, and development discourse have historically erased or criminalised collective forms of tenure.

Furthermore, decolonial scholars advocate for a pluriversal understanding of the commons, one that does not seek a single universal model but instead recognises multiple, co-existing ontologies of land, water, and knowledge. In many Indigenous worldviews, land is not a "resource" to be optimally allocated but a living territory inhabited by human and non-human beings, ancestors, and spirits. Commons governance in such contexts is inseparable from ritual, reciprocity, and intergenerational obligation (Walsh, 2018; de la Cadena, 2015). This has practical implications: development interventions that impose participatory forest management templates derived from Ostromian design principles may fail precisely because they ignore spiritual authority structures or seasonal governance practices that do not map onto Western notions of rules and monitoring. Elinor Ostrom's "design principles" are widely celebrated, yet they were derived largely from case studies in liberal property regimes and rely on assumptions about bounded rationality, property rights, and formal rules. These assumptions may not resonate with communal cosmologies that conceive of land as ancestral, non-proprietary, or spiritually governed. In many African and Latin American societies, commons are embedded in relational ontologies, not resources to be managed, but living landscapes co-inhabited by humans, ancestors, and non-human beings. Decolonial scholars thus advocate for a pluriversal commons, one that

accommodates multiple worldviews and respects epistemic diversity. This also involves recognising and redressing the historical violence through which many commons were enclosed, dispossessed, or misrepresented. As part of this agenda, some propose re-indigenising commons governance and prioritising territorial autonomy, collective memory, and healing practices within commoning frameworks (Shiva, 2016; Walsh, 2018).

Alongside decolonial critiques, feminist and intersectional scholars have drawn attention to the gendered dynamics of commoning, highlighting the labour of care, invisible governance, and gendered dispossession often overlooked in institutional models. Commons scholarship, they argue, must foreground questions of who governs, who benefits, and who is excluded, thereby re-politicising the concept in ways that align more closely with the ethos of justice and equity. Feminist critiques also expose how mainstream commons theory tends to treat the community as a homogeneous unit, ignoring internal differentiations of power based on gender, age, caste, ethnicity, and marital status. For instance, women may be responsible for collecting water or firewood, making them highly knowledgeable about resource conditions, yet excluded from formal decision-making bodies. When development projects create user committees based on existing village councils or male-dominated customary structures, they risk formalising rather than challenging gendered exclusion (Agarwal, 2010; Nightingale, 2011). Feminist scholars challenge the rational-choice assumptions of earlier institutional models and argue for a more embodied, affective, and relational understanding of commons governance (Federici, 2011; Gibson-Graham et al., 2016).

Moreover, feminist commons scholarship has reconceptualised commoning itself as a practice of social reproduction. Silvia Federici's work insists that commons are not just about access to material goods but about reproductive labour and the social conditions of life-making. In her view, the commons must be reclaimed as feminist spaces of resistance against both capital accumulation and patriarchal domination. From this perspective, the labour that sustains commons, resolving conflicts, maintaining shared infrastructure, transmitting knowledge across generations, caring for the sick or elderly, is as essential as the regulation of extraction rates. Yet this labour is often unpaid, feminised, and rendered invisible in institutional accounts focused on rules and sanctions. Federici (2011) argues that the enclosure of commons historically went hand in hand with the devaluation of reproductive work and the subordination of women. Reclaiming the commons today therefore requires not only defending material resources but also revaluing care, rebuilding solidarity networks, and challenging patriarchal divisions of labour within commoning groups.

Intersectional approaches further complicate this picture by showing how gender, race, class, and caste interact to shape access and exclusion. Intersectional approaches have called attention to how race, class, caste, and age shape people's ability to participate in or benefit from commons governance (Rocheleau et al., 1996; Nightingale, 2011). In South Asia, for example, lower-caste women may face double marginalisation in commons governance: excluded both by caste-based hierarchies and by gendered norms of public speech. In Latin America, Indigenous women's movements have articulated a vision of comunalidad that links territorial defence with feminist and anti-racist struggles, refusing to separate environmental from social justice (Levy and Celiberti, 2024). These perspectives push commons theory beyond institutional design toward a politics of recognition, redistribution, and transformation. These critiques emphasise that commons are not inherently inclusive and can reproduce inequalities if issues of voice, recognition, and historical harm are not addressed. As such, feminist commons scholarship calls for governance models that are not only democratic but also ethically grounded in care, reciprocity, and mutual dependency.

Decolonial and feminist critiques do not simply add nuance to existing models; they fundamentally reframe the questions that commons scholarship should ask. Instead of "what rules lead to sustainable outcomes?", these approaches ask: "sustainable for whom, and at whose expense?"; "which forms of knowledge are legitimised, and which are silenced?"; "how do historical injustices shape present-day capacities to common?"; and "what would it mean to govern commons not only efficiently but also reparatively?" Addressing these questions requires methodological openness, epistemic humility, and a willingness to decentre Northern frameworks without abandoning rigorous analysis. These critical perspectives have profound implications for how commons are understood and applied in development contexts, especially in relation to justice and governance in the Global South.

## 3. The legal grammar of the commons

A significant part of scholarship calls for the elaboration of a legal grammar of the commons exceeding the mere identification of the bundle of rights attributed to co-users of common-pool resources (Marella, 2017). Ostrom had

already indirectly shown that, where commons are embedded within broader governance systems, the role of binding legal arrangements becomes more central. In such contexts, the bundle of rights associated with a single resource becomes more complex, as it is embedded within a wider spectrum of urban uses, public and private powers, and overlapping jurisdictions that directly or indirectly affect the commons. In this sense, the terrain of conflict is no longer limited to resource management but more properly concerns governance itself.

### *3.1 From Rodotà to fundamental rights*

The connection between commons and law becomes more salient as a plurality of public and private actors interact around resources claimed as commons In this context, two main issues are at stake. On the one hand, a critique is directed at the extension of proprietary powers: in the private sphere, this concerns the possibility to dispose of a good even through its non-use, up to abandonment; in the public sphere, it relates to the increasing orientation towards the alienation or economic valorisation of public assets, often privileging profit over their social function. On the other hand, a second issue concerns the emergence of a novel connection between commons and fundamental rights. Moving beyond proprietary paradigms, this approach interrogates how legal forms, categories, and institutional arrangements can be reconfigured to recognize practices of collective use, shared governance, and non-exclusive access that do not fit within the classical dichotomy of public and private property. In this sense, the question of the commons also entails a renewed connection with fundamental rights, insofar as these practices are often grounded in, and oriented towards, their exercise and protection. One of the main figures in this legal turn is Stefano Rodotà, who, in his role as chair of the Commission for the reform of the Italian Civil Code in the domain of public property, in 2007-08, proposed an innovative definition of commons as those goods whose utilities are functional to the exercise of fundamental rights (Rodotà, 2012; Mattei et al 2010). This perspective introduced an explicitly political dimension into the legal theorisation of the commons, an element largely underestimated in Ostromian approaches. In this framing, the question of the commons is also a question of constitutional democracy: certain goods, such as water, air, or cultural heritage, cannot be fully owned or commodified because their use is necessary for the very exercise of personhood and citizenship.

### *3.2 Urban commons: shared administration and civic use*

A further and decisive development of the legal debate emerges with a shift in focus toward the field of urban regeneration. Within this trajectory, new objects of inquiry become central to commons scholarship, namely urban commons: former abandoned or underutilised spaces that are reclaimed and reactivated as sites of commoning by activists, production-oriented collectives, associations, and active citizens. In these cases, the core issue concerns the identification of legal tools capable of accommodating collective governance, defining appropriate property regimes, and securing the social use of such assets. Since most of the goods claimed for common use are publicly owned, this configuration has opened a new phase of negotiation and contention between local administrations and organised civic actors. These actors often structure themselves either as social movements that both inherit and rework the legacy of earlier social centres, or as civic and associative networks characterised by a strong community- and neighbourhood-based orientation (Vesco and Busso, 2024; Locorotondo, 2026).

Although the discourse on urban commons presents specificities related both to the nature of the assets involved and to the kinds of relationships that commoners are able or willing to establish with the institutions that formally own them, it nonetheless develops along surprisingly similar trajectories across different geographical contexts, from Latin America (Goni Mazzitelli, 2024; Levy and Celiberti, 2024) to Australia (Williams, 2016). Reinterpreted in Southern contexts, these struggles take the form of demands for spatial justice and democratic participation, including informal settlements, street vending zones, community-managed sanitation, and open public spaces. In cities such as Nairobi, Lagos, and Bogotá, these commons operate as survival infrastructures, enabling access to housing, livelihoods, and mobility where formal services are inadequate or exclusionary (Appadurai, 2001; Mitlin and Satterthwaite, 2013). To illustrate the complexity of these dynamics, exemplary cases can be found in Catalonia (Sánchez and Lain, 2023), more broadly in Spain (Méndez de Andés, Harmou and Aparicio, 2021), as well as in Italy.

In the Italian context in particular, two major institutional tools stand out. The first, and most widespread, is the so-called shared administration (*amministrazione condivisa*). Based on a model regulatory framework initially

developed in Bologna, this approach enables public administrations to grant the temporary use of public assets, while offering legal and administrative solutions to the many issues ranging from financial accountability and liability risks to maintenance obligations and insurance requirements (Arena, 2022; Iaione, 2016). The second instrument is that of urban civic and collective use (uso civico e collettivo urbano), which was developed in Naples. This experience is distinctive in that it emerged in a context closely linked to social movements, particularly those involving workers in the arts, culture, and performing arts sectors, who were struggling both for the right to self-govern spaces in which to collectively organize artistic means of production and against the privatization of public assets (Cirillo, 2014). In this case, it was the commoners themselves, often intersecting with a new generation of young researchers, who produced a legal-political innovation by transforming the occupation of eight buildings into a recognized form of governance. (De Tullio, 2018; Capone, 2016) A central element of this process is the drafting of a Declaration of Civic and Collective Use, written by the commoners and formally recognized by the public entity that owns the asset as a form of public–community regulation. In this arrangement, the public owner remains responsible for structural integrity and general accessibility, while the commoners assume responsibility for the activities carried out within the building (D'Andrea and Sciarelli, 2024).

The Neapolitan experience points toward a broader strategy that can be described as political and legal hacking (Micciarelli, 2022). This approach aims to transform existing law by intervening, depending on the context, in both public and private legal frameworks. Rather than seeking autonomy from the state or simply demanding that the state protect commons, legal hacking involves commoners actively reshaping legal categories through practice, conflict, and negotiation. This shifts the commons from a governance paradigm to a transformative political methodology. This strategy has given rise to the concept of public-common partnerships (PCPs), a hybrid institutional form that overcomes the conventional divide between state- and market-based governance. PCPs give rise instead to models of joint ownership and governance in which the two principal parties are a state agent (such as a municipal council) and a common association (such as a mixed cooperative or community interest company) (Milburn and Russell, 2023). As strategies aimed at taking back control of key resources and infrastructures, PCPs are integral to broader political projects. This underpins the strong connection between commons and new municipalism, and helps explain why the urban grammar of the commons consistently brings commoners and local institutions into relation, whether in collaborative or antagonistic forms (De Tullio and Micciarelli, 2026). In this sense, the legal grammar of the commons is not a fixed code but a living, contested terrain where institutions are pressed to transform from within.

## 4. Commons and Development

The intersection of commons and development is increasingly recognised as a site of both possibility and contestation. In the face of widening inequality, ecological degradation, and political disenfranchisement, scholars and practitioners have turned to the commons as an alternative framework for imagining and enacting development that is more inclusive, participatory, and sustainable. However, the relationship between commons and development is far from uniform. It is shaped by local contexts, historical power asymmetries, and institutional arrangements that determine who participates, who benefits, and under what conditions.

### *4.1 Traditional, indigenous, and gendered commons*

Across Africa, Asia, and Latin America, forms of common resource governance have long predated the state or market as dominant institutional frameworks. These include pastoral commons in East Africa, water-sharing systems in South Asia, and forest governance models among Andean and Amazonian communities. In these contexts, commons are deeply embedded in customary norms, kinship relations, and spiritual worldviews, making them more than mere management systems, they are central to social identity and collective survival (Ribot, 2004; Agrawal, 2001). However, development interventions, whether in the form of conservation programmes, land reforms, or extractive industries, have often disrupted or overwritten these systems. Colonial administrations frequently reclassified commons as "vacant" or "unproductive" land, while postcolonial states continued this logic under nationalisation or modernisation agendas. In Namibia, for instance, communal land rights among indigenous groups were eroded under colonial regimes and later codified in ways that favoured elite capture during post-independence land reform (Werner and Kruger, 2007). Such dynamics illustrate that development cannot be approached neutrally; it involves the reconfiguration of access and control over resources, often under the guise of efficiency, productivity, or conservation. In these cases, the commons are not “managed” but rather contested, and development becomes a terrain of struggle over rights, recognition, and redistribution. Yet even within these struggles, access to and authority

over commons are rarely evenly distributed. Who belongs to "the community"? Who speaks for it? One of the most significant contributions from feminist scholarship on commons is its emphasis on gendered access to resources and the invisible labour that sustains commoning. In many development contexts, women are primary users and stewards of resources like water, firewood, and land. Yet their rights to participate in decision-making or own land are often limited by patriarchal customs, formal legal exclusions, and project designs that ignore local power relations (Agarwal, 1994; Rocheleau et al., 1996). For example, in Uganda's forest-dependent communities, women perform most of the daily resource collection but remain largely absent from local forest committees. Development projects that focus on formal representation often fail to translate into substantive empowerment or equitable resource control. Moreover, the labour of sustaining commons, such as conflict resolution, collective maintenance, and care, remains under-valued or unpaid. These insights underscore the need to reframe commons governance in ways that integrate social reproduction, intersectionality, and relational justice, moving beyond technocratic approaches that privilege institutional design while ignoring the lived experiences of marginalised actors. Nevertheless, focusing only on internal community dynamics risks obscuring the larger forces that dispossess communities in the first place. If gendered exclusion weakens commons from within, extractivism, driven by global markets and state-backed concessions annihilates them from without.

### *4.2 Commons, extractivism, and resource justice*

Where feminist critiques expose the hidden hierarchies within commons, political ecology and environmental justice scholarship reveal the external pressures that enclose, degrade, or destroy them. In extractive regions of Latin America and Africa, the concept of the commons has been mobilised to challenge resource extraction models that prioritise export-driven growth over local livelihoods. Movements for resource justice invoke the commons to oppose mining, oil drilling, or agribusiness operations that degrade the environment and displace communities (Gudynas, 2011; Temper et al., 2020). These struggles often draw on indigenous cosmologies, land-based spiritualities, and communal territorial claims to assert alternative visions of development rooted in reciprocity and care. Extractivism is not simply about the physical removal of resources; it is a political and economic logic that treats land, water, and biodiversity as inert commodities to be exploited for global markets (Venditto and Kamwanyah 2025). This logic systematically undermines commons in multiple ways. It physically encloses territory removing land from collective use. Then, it pollutes or depletes shared resources, rendering them unusable for communities whose livelihoods depend on them. Lastly, it fragments social institutions by co-opting local elites, criminalising resistance, and displacing customary governance structures. In many cases, states actively facilitate this process by reclassifying commons as *strategic reserves* or *underutilised land* available for investment, echoing colonial legal fictions (Gudynas, 2011; Acosta, 2013). The consequences are unevenly distributed. Women, pastoralists, indigenous youth, and landless households often bear the brunt of extractivist expansion, not only because they rely most directly on common resources but also because they have the least political power to contest enclosures. Feminist political ecologists have argued that extractivism is not only an environmental but also a reproductive justice issue: when commons are destroyed, the labour of coping, finding alternative water sources, walking longer distances, treating pollution-related illnesses, is disproportionately absorbed by women, often without recognition or compensation (Bury, 2005; Jenkins, 2015).

Despite these pressures, resistance movements have successfully reclaimed or defended commons using legal, political, and direct-action strategies. The Zapatista territories in Chiapas, Mexico, offer a long-standing example of autonomous commons governance rooted in indigenous principles of tequio (collective labour) and usos y costumbres (customary norms), explicitly rejecting both state development programmes and extractive capital (Mora, 2017). In West Africa, the Movement of Peasants and Fishermen of the Gulf of Guinea has resisted oil extraction and industrial fishing zones by asserting customary water rights and reviving community-based fisheries management systems. In Kenya, the Ogiek people's successful legal battle at the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights affirmed their right to live in and govern the Mau Forest, a ruling that recognised indigenous commons not as a privilege granted by the state but as a pre-existing territorial order (African Court, 2017).

In Ecuador and Bolivia, indigenous organisations have advanced the concept of *Buen Vivir* (Sumak Kawsay / Suma Qamaña) living well in harmony with nature, as a counter-framework to extractivist development. These principles have been partially incorporated into national constitutions, though implementation remains deeply contested since indigenous federations such as CONAIE have insisted that Buen Vivir cannot be realised without prior consultation, free consent, and an end to extractivism (Walsh, 2010). Similarly, in South Africa, communities resisting water

privatisation in townships and rural areas have invoked the commons to demand public control and equitable distribution, drawing on both constitutional rights to water and customary tenure systems undermined by apartheid and post-apartheid land reforms (Bourblanc, & Banchon, 2019). These cases demonstrate how the commons serve as both a language of resistance and a tool for reimagining development that centres ecological integrity, cultural sovereignty, and intergenerational justice. But they also reveal a recurring dilemma: legal victories and constitutional provisions do not automatically translate into transformed power relations.

Resource extraction often continues regardless of court rulings or policy commitments, especially when states face debt pressures, international investment agreements, or geopolitical competition over critical minerals. This has led some scholars to argue that a truly decolonial commons framework must move beyond defensive struggles, protecting remaining commons from enclosure, toward recommoning: the active rebuilding of collective governance on lands already degraded or privatised (Kothari et al., 2019; Escobar, 2018). Recommoning involves restoring soils, reforesting watersheds, recuperating traditional seed varieties, and reconstituting community institutions, a slow, patient, and deeply relational process that contrasts sharply with the rapid extraction logics of global capital. Moreover, extractivism is not confined to rural or resource-rich regions. Urban extractivism takes the form of land grabs for luxury housing, logistics infrastructure, or data centres that displace informal settlements and commons. Digital extractivism extracts data from users, disproportionately in the Global South, without returning value or control to communities. A comprehensive resource justice framework must therefore address multiple, intersecting forms of enclosure across rural, urban, and digital terrains, recognising that struggles over water, land, minerals, data, and knowledge are not separate but connected through shared logics of accumulation and dispossession.

## 5. Contemporary Debates and Critiques

As the scholarship on the commons continues to expand, it has become clear that the concept is neither static nor universally applicable. Rather, it is deeply situated, shaped by competing ideologies, disciplinary lenses, and socio-political commitments. While the early literature often framed commons governance as a functional solution to collective action problems, more recent work has moved toward critical, relational, and emancipatory interpretations. This section explores three additional areas of contemporary debate: the neoliberal appropriation of the commons discourse, the challenge of evaluating the value of commons, and the emergence of the digital and data commons.

### *5.1 From resistance to co-optation: The co-optation of the commons*

One of the most prominent critiques of contemporary commons discourse concerns the risk of neoliberal co-optation. As the language of the commons has gained popularity in policy circles, some scholars argue that it has been stripped of its radical content and repurposed to serve technocratic governance models or market-friendly interventions. Terms such as “participatory governance,” “community management,” or “stakeholder engagement” are often deployed in development projects without addressing the underlying structures of exclusion or dispossession (Caffentzis and Federici, 2014; Sakah, 2013). These forms of commons washing are, moreover, preceded by earlier dynamics of “washing” (Micciarelli, 2021). From this follows the risk of commons co-optation, namely the instrumentalisation of commons whereby they, and their communities, are made to work for capital rather than for the reproduction of the commons themselves. (De Angelis 2012; Bianchi et al 2022). The key issue, then, is how to subvert them, while remaining aware that the success of a concept, and of the practices associated with it, inevitably entails the risk of its appropriation and instrumentalisation. This risk manifests itself differently across different latitudes. For example, in some community forestry projects in Africa and Asia, commons governance models are celebrated for increasing local participation, but closer inspection reveals that control over revenue, land rights, or decision-making remains concentrated in elite hands. In such cases, the commons become a governance technique, not a transformation of power relations. Critics warn that unless the commons are grounded in collective autonomy, redistributive justice, and political resistance, they risk legitimising the very systems they originally sought to oppose.

Urban commons both reflect and resist dominant development paradigms, while at times also being instrumentalised within subsidiarity-based governance models, developing low-cost forms of service provision that are typically delegated to the third sector and non-profit actors (Marella 2013). This may result in distortions whereby active citizens are implicitly tasked with maintaining or enhancing neglected urban spaces, such as gardens or abandoned areas, only for these to be reappropriated or reassigned once their value has been restored. By a form of heterogenesis of ends, the success of a commons, particularly in urban contexts, may thus contribute to the emergence

of dynamics such as the local trap (Purcell 2017) or processes of gentrification. Policies such as land titling and slum upgrading may formalise access to land, while simultaneously displacing marginalised populations or dismantling informal governance systems that had previously ensured more equitable forms of use.

### *5.2 Economically invaluable, Socially essential: The Value of the Commons*

Another key issue concerns how to economically evaluate the activities of commons. While activists would often prefer to avoid such forms of assessment, for public administrations, and also for private entities granting access to assets, this dimension is essential. Without some form of economic justification, there is a risk of incurring liabilities, including potential claims of financial mismanagement, for having allocated resources, often at reduced rates or even free of charge, without adequately substantiating their public value. This adds to another fundamental problem, namely the difficulty of assessing the economic value of the social outcomes produced by commons. Evaluation indicators in this field are particularly complex. On the one hand, they are often designed for non-profit social accounting frameworks, which impose a significant organisational burden on commons initiatives. On the other hand, even more advanced metrics, such as Social Return on Investment (SROI), remain inadequate to fully capture the specificities of commons-based practices.

Moreover, commons often exhibit a certain resistance to the monetisation of social value, as their contribution lies not only in the services provided, but also, and perhaps more importantly, in processes of mutual exchange, social reproduction, and political empowerment, which tend to escape standardised measurement tools. Finally, there is a further risk: public administrations may instrumentalise these evaluation frameworks to legitimise forms of low-cost welfare provision, effectively shifting responsibilities onto citizens and commons initiatives. Possible strategies, in this respect, may involve, on the one hand, recognising and enhancing the relational value generated through processes of commoning (Vittoria, 2020), and on the other, developing frameworks capable of accounting for forms of civic profitability (Micciarelli and D'Andrea, 2020).

### *5.3 Digital and data commons: New frontiers or false promises?*

The expansion of the commons discourse into the digital sphere, what is often called the "knowledge commons" or "data commons", has opened new arenas for both innovation and concern. On the one hand, open-source software, Wikipedia, and Creative Commons licensing have enabled collaborative production and global sharing of knowledge. On the other hand, the digital realm is also marked by massive asymmetries in power, access, and control, often dominated by corporate platforms and algorithmic governance. Critical scholars argue that digital commons risk replicating the same colonial extractivism that afflicted natural resources, where data is extracted from users, monetised by tech companies, and shielded from democratic oversight. The question is no longer just whether a resource is "shared," but who owns the infrastructure, who sets the rules, and who benefits from the data economy (Birkinbine, 2020; Couldry and Mejias, 2019). Additionally, calls for "data for development" or "open government" can inadvertently obscure new forms of surveillance, dependency, and technocratic enclosure, especially in the Global South. These critiques suggest that without political safeguards and cultural reflexivity, digital commons may become a myth of openness masking new forms of control.

In light of these critiques, scholars and activists increasingly argue for a repoliticised and justice-oriented understanding of the commons. This means shifting from a focus on efficient governance or scalability to questions of redistribution, representation, and reparation. It also entails confronting the structural conditions, colonial legacies, gender hierarchies, capitalist imperatives, that shape commoning possibilities in different contexts. Far from undermining the idea of the commons, these critiques enrich and deepen it. They call for a transformative common, one rooted in plurality, dignity, and mutual care, a vision that resonates with the broader goals of *Commons, Justice and Development Journal* and the communities it seeks to serve.

## 6. Knowledge Gaps and Future Directions

While the scholarship on the commons has expanded dramatically over the past two decades, it continues to be shaped by conceptual biases, disciplinary silos, and geopolitical blind spots. As this review has shown, existing literature offers rich insights into commons governance, institutional design, and resource use. However, serious gaps

remain, especially in relation to justice, historical context, epistemic diversity, and transformative development practice. This section outlines key gaps and proposes pathways for future scholarship, with special attention to contributions that can emerge from, and be relevant to, the Global South.

### *6.1 Under-theorisation of justice and power relations*

A recurring limitation in mainstream commons literature is the insufficient theorisation of justice. Much of the early work, particularly in institutional economics, focused on operational efficiency and rule design, often at the expense of grappling with deeper questions of distributional fairness, procedural equity, and historical dispossession. While feminist, political ecology, and postcolonial scholars have made important strides in this regard, their insights remain marginal in core frameworks and rarely integrated into policy-oriented commons discourse. There is a pressing need for commons research to go beyond formal governance structures and examine how power circulates through social norms, property regimes, kinship hierarchies, and development interventions. This entails moving from a "who manages what" model to a more critical approach that asks, "who gets to define the commons", "who is recognized", and "who is rendered invisible".

This process, embedded within practices of commoning, contributes to the development of broader trajectories of depatriarchalisation in politics because "placing 'care' at the center helps to erase the machista and sexist relationships within the movement (Geagea and De Tullio 2024,198). However, such transformations remain particularly difficult to implement in practice, as conflictual dynamics and hegemonic forms are not confined to commons-based initiatives, but permeate all political experiences within a deeply patriarchal society. As a result, they tend to reappear, even within those political processes that seek to oppose them. In Foucauldian terms, resistance is always, at least in part, shaped by the very power it seeks to contest. In this sense, feminist approaches can be mobilised to foster networks of care and practices of collective learning. More specifically, this entails adopting a feminist perspective on collective learning that places commoners and scholars on the same horizontal plane, thereby enabling forms of reciprocal care, not only among participants, but also toward their respective knowledges (Ragozino et al. 2024).

### *6.2. Emerging and necessary commons*

The development of urban commons has generated a profound connection with a relatively new type of commons, namely those constituted by groups of citizens and activists who seek to reuse abandoned or underutilised assets for social purposes, thereby directly influencing public policies of urban regeneration. However, within this expanding dialogue between movements and institutions, and in parallel with the growing linkage between commons and fundamental rights, the risk of losing sight of the centrality of collective governance, and of its connection with Ostromian insights, has become significant. One way to address this tension is to introduce a distinction between *necessary* and *emerging* commons. The former refers to natural or material goods that are intrinsically connected to the exercise of fundamental rights and, for this reason, should be governed through participatory arrangements. Such arrangements may either reinforce existing forms of public governance or open up innovative configurations, including within privately owned assets as in the case, for instance, of housing and forms of collective or cooperative tenure. By contrast, *emerging commons* designate goods that do not qualify as commons by virtue of their inherent characteristics or pre-existing social recognition, but rather become such through practices of collective use and governance. These may include both material and immaterial resources, such as a building within an urban neighbourhood, whose status as commons is produced through direct management and collective organisation. Through this distinction, it becomes possible, on the one hand, to preserve the link between commons and fundamental rights, while grounding it in participatory governance arrangements, and, on the other, to account for the emergence of new commons beyond pre-defined categories, recognising the constitutive role of collective practices in bringing them into being. In this sense, also the urban commons are not pre-existing entities but emergent practices that reconfigure power relations in the city.

### *6.3 From Urban Commons to Commonification: Pathways to New Municipalism*

Commons relate to urban space also within a broader perspective, in some ways as inheritors of struggles around the right to the city, a concept popularised by Henri Lefebvre. Urban theorists have drawn attention to forms of civic infrastructure, framing urban commons as counter-hegemonic spaces that reclaim public resources for community use

(Anguelovski and Connolly, 2021; Stavrides, 2016). These interpretations form part of a broader approach that conceives the city itself as a commons, interpreted through the lens of legal pluralism, which emphasises the interaction between statutory, customary, and informal norms in the governance of shared urban resources (Foster and Iaione, 2016). Doing the commons in the city is always a political act: communities resist evictions, negotiate access to land, and reclaim abandoned buildings, while public institutions are, in one way or another, inevitably involved, sometimes even as leading actors, in these processes. For Ostrom, the challenge of governing commons lies in organising the efficient use of resources in contexts already situated beyond both market and state logics. Two different directions can thus be identified. According to one perspective, the state–market dichotomy in fact operates as an alliance against the commons, which should be countered by fostering spheres of autonomy for commons, for instance through the use of private law instruments (Mattei 2011). According to others, the subsequent politicisation of the concept reframes this "beyond" not merely as a functional space of governance, but as a site of critique and transformation of both state and market. These latter interpretations are particularly compelling, as the most significant achievements in the field of commons are those that, in one way or another, compel public actors, above all, to transform their rules and practices under the pressure exerted by commons. In this sense, the approach, and methodology, of the commons shifts toward a strategy of *political and legal hacking*, aimed at transforming existing law by intervening, depending on the context, in both public and private legal frameworks (Micciarelli 2022).

If the scholarship on urban commons represents one of the most substantial recent developments in commons studies, it also points toward a further evolution: the extension of the commons framework to public goods and services, increasingly managed, through varying degrees of involvement, by community and associative actors. It is within this shift that a further strand of literature introduces the notion of commonification: a process through which social relations, institutions, and resources are actively reconfigured as commons, not simply managed as such. Commonification thus foregrounds the constitutive, conflictual, and transformative dimensions of commoning, emphasising that commons are not given entities but outcomes of ongoing struggles over access, control, and the reproduction of collective life. These approaches point to a broader institutional shift in which the boundaries between state and commons are reworked, giving rise to mixed configurations that depart from hierarchical governance. In such arrangements, public institutions are reoriented toward collaborative practices, socially embedded goals, and forms of decision-making that open space for direct involvement by non-state actors. (Bianchi 2023) This transformation of the public domain can be understood as a process through which state structures are progressively reshaped in a commons-oriented direction (Méndez de Andés, Hamou and Aparicio, 2021).

This argument becomes especially challenging in domains where commons inevitably intersect with public institutions and policy frameworks. Areas such as housing and welfare, often seen as key frontiers of contemporary commons, bring these tensions into sharp relief. (Lenna forthcoming; Ferreri and Vidal 2021). An example of this approach is the attempt to complement the traditional category of public–private partnerships, often, in practice, quite distant from the perspectives and practices of commoners, with an alternative framework of public–common partnerships (PCPs). These can be understood as a hybrid institutional form that overcomes the conventional divide between state- and market-based governance, giving rise instead to "models of joint ownership and governance, in which the two principal parties are a state agent (such as a municipal council) and a Common Association (such as a mixed cooperative or community interest company)" (Milburn and Russell, 2023). As strategies aimed at "taking back control" of key resources and infrastructures, PCPs are therefore integral to broader political projects. This underpins the strong connection between commons and new municipalism, and helps explain why the urban grammar of the commons consistently brings commoners and local institutions into relation, whether in collaborative or antagonistic forms (De Tullio and Micciarelli, 2026).

### *6.4 Expanding the frontiers: Epistemic diversity, methodological pluralism, and the political horizon*

Despite the fact that many of the most vibrant and long-standing commons exist in the Global South, the theoretical paradigms that dominate the field have largely emerged from the Global North. While Elinor Ostrom and her collaborators documented empirical cases from diverse regions, the conceptual categories and analytical assumptions of their frameworks often remain embedded in liberal property theory and rational choice logic. There is an urgent need to develop commons theory from within the epistemic traditions of the Global South, drawing from indigenous cosmologies, African communalism, Latin American pluriversality, and Asian spiritual ecologies. Such approaches could generate a more grounded, culturally resonant, and politically relevant body of commons scholarship, particularly in contexts where colonial histories and ontological differences shape resource relations in fundamental

ways. This epistemic gap is compounded by methodological fragmentation. Commons research often suffers from disciplinary silos, with institutional economists, legal theorists, anthropologists, and activists rarely in meaningful dialogue. This limits the field's ability to address complex questions that span ecology, governance, culture, and technology. Moreover, dominant methodologies — such as game theory models or institutional case studies — often lack the tools to analyse subjectivity, narrative, memory, and affect, all of which are critical to understanding commons as lived, embodied, and contested practices. Future research should therefore embrace methodological pluralism, including participatory action research, life histories, feminist ethnography, community cartography, and other approaches that redistribute epistemic authority to those who inhabit and sustain commons. Such methodological innovation is not merely a technical adjustment but a political and ethical commitment to decolonising knowledge production within commons scholarship.

Nonetheless epistemic and methodological expansion alone is insufficient if the *objects* of study remain narrow. Much of the literature on commons remains land-centric or resource-centric, with insufficient attention given to urban commons and digital/data commons in relation to development. This gap is particularly notable given the rapid urbanisation of the Global South and the growing digitisation of services, knowledge, and public life. Urban commons, such as informal housing, public transport routes, waste systems, community gardens, and shared public spaces, are often overlooked by both commons theory and urban planning, despite their centrality to everyday survival and citizenship in cities. Similarly, digital commons are typically framed through narrow technological or legal lenses (e.g., open-source software, Creative Commons licensing), with little engagement from development studies, political economy, or feminist technology scholarship. Critical voices have warned that without political safeguards and cultural reflexivity, digital commons may become a myth of openness masking new forms of surveillance, dependency, and technocratic enclosure, especially in the Global South. Integrating these domains into development discourse requires new interdisciplinary alliances and methodological innovations. For instance, combining ethnography, digital sociology, and spatial justice approaches can illuminate how commons are shaped and contested across urban and digital terrains.

Finally, there is a further, more fundamental gap that underpins all the above: the tendency to treat the commons as a technical solution rather than a political project. This risks diluting the radical potential of the commons and narrowing its application to managerial reforms. As this review has shown, the commons can serve as a normative horizon for rethinking development itself, not as economic growth or institutional reform, but as the pursuit of dignity, autonomy, relationality, and ecological stewardship. Reclaiming the commons as a language of collective possibility is especially urgent in regions where communities face the compounded pressures of climate change, land grabs, and extractivist development. The commons must be understood not only as *what* is shared, but also as *how* we share, *who* decides, and *what values* animate our sharing. Pushing beyond disciplinary comfort zones to engage more fully with justice, power, and plurality will not only deepen the conceptual robustness of commons research but also ensure its relevance to the urgent development challenges facing the world today. For *Commons, Justice and Development Journal*, this means nurturing a scholarly community committed to epistemic openness, critical reflexivity, and context-grounded inquiry, a commons of ideas as much as of resources.

## 7. Conclusion

This article has undertaken a systematic review of scholarly literature on the concept of *commons*, with the aim of clarifying its theoretical foundations, tracing its evolution, examining its application in development contexts, and engaging with its most pressing critiques. What emerges is not a single, unified definition of the commons, but rather a diverse and contested conceptual terrain, one that reflects the richness of the debates and the multiplicity of traditions, geographies, and struggles it encompasses. However, this limitation must also be addressed at the scientific level. On the one hand, the expansion of the commons discourse signals the capacity of a commons grammar to articulate and connect a plurality of struggles, something that more rigid taxonomies would risk obscuring or excluding. On the other hand, it is important to avoid stretching the concept to the point where it loses analytical precision: as Rodotà warned, if everything is defined as a commons, then nothing truly is. This peril of conceptual inflation, while politically understandable as a way to align diverse struggles, should not become a justification for labelling every socially relevant good as a commons, nor every bottom-up political practice as commoning. What should remain central is the specific configuration of goods and relations that make commons analytically and politically distinctive: resources that are situated, non-excludable yet potentially rival, embedded in relations of interdependence, and

governed through arrangements that operate beyond the conventional boundaries of state and market. It is precisely in this configuration that the distinctive richness of the commons resides.

We began by revisiting the foundational theories that have shaped commons scholarship, especially the institutionalist tradition led by Elinor Ostrom, which shifted the discourse away from Garrett Hardin's tragic pessimism and toward a more hopeful vision of self-governed resource management. However, while Ostrom's work provided a robust toolkit for analysing collective action, its normative limitations became evident in contexts marked by deep inequalities, colonial legacies, and gendered exclusions. At the same time, a parallel strand of scholarship has sought to reinterpret Ostrom's later work through a more radical lens, emphasising her attention to cooperation, local knowledge, and self-organization as openings toward non-capitalist and ecologically grounded forms of governance (Wall, 2017). In this perspective, rather than being reduced to a liberal framework of resource management, Ostrom's contribution can be read as containing latent elements that resonate with broader projects of commoning and democratic transformation. These debates have also intersected with a growing body of legal scholarship that has sought to move beyond the Ostromian focus on bundles of rights toward the elaboration of a broader legal grammar of the commons. In the Italian context, Stefano Rodotà advanced a foundational proposal linking the commons to goods whose utilities are functional to the exercise of fundamental rights, thereby introducing an explicitly political and constitutional dimension into the debate. At the same time, however, subsequent developments in the field of urban commons have shown that the legal institutionalization of commons does not follow a single model. In particular, the experience of Naples has taken a partially different path, grounded less in the classification of goods and more in the recognition of practices of commoning emerging from social movements.

Taken together, these trajectories highlight a broader transformation: as commons extend beyond bounded resource systems into complex urban and institutional environments, the focus shifts from resource management to governance. In this context, *necessary commons*, linked to fundamental rights, and *emerging commons*, arising from practices of commoning, intersect within dense configurations of public and private powers. Commons thus appear less as stable objects than as sites where legal grammar becomes a terrain of contestation and innovation. In this context, the institution of civic and collective use has enabled the formal recognition of self-governed spaces through a legal-political process in which commoners themselves actively contributed to the production of norms, most notably through the drafting of Declarations of Civic and Collective Use. This arrangement reconfigures the relationship between public authorities and commoners, distributing responsibilities between the public owner, responsible for structural integrity and accessibility, and the community of users, responsible for the activities carried out within the space. Other strands of commons scholarship incorporate feminist, postcolonial, and decolonial perspectives, foregrounding forms of structural and epistemic injustice often overlooked in mainstream theory. In development contexts, especially across the Global South, commons are not merely governance models but arenas of contestation. They are shaped by historical dispossession, cultural practices, and political struggle. As the review has shown, commons can function both as tools for survival and as vehicles for resistance, whether in pastoralist land use, urban housing, feminist care networks, or anti-extractivist movements. These commons, however, are vulnerable to co-optation, enclosure, and marginalization, particularly when development is pursued without regard for justice, recognition, or autonomy.

Contemporary critiques have thus challenged commons scholars to repoliticise the concept, to root it in ethical commitments, and to expand its theoretical reach beyond Northern paradigms. Calls for a pluriversal understanding of the commons, one that embraces multiple ontologies, epistemologies, and relationalities, are especially urgent in the face of climate breakdown, widening inequality, and epistemic exclusion. Looking ahead, the review identifies five key directions for future research:

1. Deeper integration of justice-oriented frameworks into commons theory;
2. Greater emphasis on Global South epistemologies and ontologies;
3. Inclusion of urban and digital commons in development discourse;
4. Adoption of methodological pluralism, particularly participatory and narrative approaches; and
5. Recovery of the commons as a transformative political horizon, not merely a governance mechanism.

For *Commons, Justice and Development Journal*, these insights provide a foundational lens through which future contributions might engage the commons, not as a static category, but as a living idea shaped by struggle, care, and

collective imagination. Authors are invited to situate their analyses within this evolving tradition, to make explicit their ethical and political commitments, and to ground their work in the specificities of place, history, and lived experience. Ultimately, to speak of the commons is to speak of shared life, of how we live together, how we take responsibility for one another, and how we envision futures not built on extraction or exclusion, but on dignity, reciprocity, and justice. It is in this spirit that this article has sought to clarify, critique, and reanimate the commons for a world in search of more humane and sustainable alternatives.

**Declaration of Conflict of Interest**
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

**Declaration on the Use of Artificial Intelligence**
During the preparation of this work, the authors used generative AI (DeepSeek) for minor language editing and paragraph restructuring to improve readability. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the final published version of this article.

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