INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH AND INNOVATIVE STUDIES

ISSN: 2820-7157
www.ijsrisjournal.com

April 2024 Volume 3 Number 2 109-117

Received Date: 25 February 2024 Accepted Date: 12 March 2024 Published Date: 17 April 2024

Coherence as a Commons: Why Inter-Institutional Alignment Erodes Rather Than Accumulates

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Abstract

Public agencies charged with attracting and retaining investment routinely proliferate coordination devices — joint committees, one-stop shops, framework conventions, digital platforms — and just as routinely fail to deliver the seamless institutional experience these devices promise. The dominant explanations attribute the shortfall to design flaws or to insufficient political will. This article proposes a different diagnosis. Drawing on Ostrom's institutional analysis and extending it, as Hess and Ostrom did for knowledge, to an intangible resource, it argues that the *coherence* investors encounter across institutions is neither an organisational capability nor an aggregate of individual performances, but a **common-pool resource of a peculiar kind**: collectively produced, appropriable by none, freely enjoyed by all who did not contribute, and — this is the analytical payoff — *subject to erosion rather than depletion*.

The distinction matters. A depleted commons is one that has been over-harvested; an eroded commons is one that has not been maintained. Coherence is not consumed by use: it decays through neglect. Three provisioning dimensions are specified — collective participation, shared appropriation, and institutional learning — and the argument is advanced that the third is systematically the weakest, for reasons internal to how public agencies are evaluated. Where learning is absent, coherence is regenerated from scratch at every transaction, which is precisely what makes it appear to work while never accumulating.

The article contributes a vocabulary and a set of diagnostic questions to a literature on collaborative governance that has theorised the *conditions* of collaboration extensively and its *durability* hardly at all. It also returns something to commons scholarship: an intangible, institutionally produced resource whose tragedy is not the crowd but the amnesia.

Keywords: commons; collaborative governance; institutional coherence; erosion; institutional learning; Ostrom.

1. Introduction

There is a familiar sequence in the governance of territorial investment. A shortfall in coordination is diagnosed. A device is created to remedy it — an inter-agency committee, a single window, a regional investment centre with a mandate to convene. The device is duly established, meets, produces minutes. And the shortfall persists, often in a form barely distinguishable from the one that prompted the device in the first place. The response, more often than not, is to create another device.

That sequence is not a story about incompetence. It is repeated across jurisdictions with widely different administrative traditions and levels of capacity, which suggests something structural is at work. This article proposes that the structure in question has been misidentified, because the object that these devices are meant to produce has been misconceived.

That object can be named: **coherence**. Not coordination — the observable articulation of procedures — but the property that makes an investor's passage through a set of institutions feel like a passage through *one* institution: the same information given twice, commitments that survive a change of interlocutor, decisions in one office that are not quietly undone in another. Coherence is what a territory offers when its institutions, whatever their formal independence, present a unified and predictable face.

The claim advanced here is that coherence has the structure of a **commons**, and that recognising this changes what one can say about it.

The claim requires care, because coherence is not obviously commons-like. It is not subtractable in the classical sense: my enjoyment of a predictable administration does not reduce yours. Nor is it a natural resource with a stock that can be measured. It appears, at first pass, to be a public good rather than a common-pool resource — non-rival, non-excludable, and therefore susceptible to the standard free-rider problem and nothing more.

This first pass is wrong, and the reason it is wrong is the substance of the article. Coherence is subtractable, but along an axis the standard typology does not capture. It is not consumed by *use*; it is consumed by *non-maintenance*. Each institution that participates in a collaborative arrangement while withholding the costly part of participation — the surrender of interpretive autonomy, the acceptance of a shared reading of a case, the transmission of what was learned — draws on a stock of coherence it does not replenish. Nothing is visibly taken. But the resource degrades, and it degrades in a way that is invisible until it fails, because the formal devices continue to function throughout.

Hess and Ostrom (2007) made a comparable move for knowledge, arguing that a resource which is not physically depletable can nonetheless be under-provisioned, enclosed, or allowed to decay, and that the Ostromian toolkit applies to it once the mechanisms of degradation are correctly specified. The present article performs the same operation for institutional coherence, and specifies its mechanism of degradation as **failure of institutional memory**.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 establishes what the collaborative governance literature says about coordination and where it falls silent. Section 3 makes the case that coherence satisfies the analytical criteria for a common once those criteria are properly interpreted. Section 4 specifies three provisioning dimensions and argues that one of them — institutional learning — fails systematically, for reasons that are not accidental. Section 5 derives the erosion mechanism and distinguishes it from depletion and from under-provision. Section 6 sets out the diagnostic and design implications. Section 7 concludes on what commons scholarship gains in return.

2. What the Literature Has Established, and What It Has Left Alone

2.1. Collaborative governance: a mature literature about beginnings

The collaborative governance literature is, by now, substantial and internally coherent. Ansell and Gash's (2008) synthesis established the canonical set of starting conditions — asymmetries of power and resources, prior antagonism or its absence, incentives to participate — and specified the process variables through which collaboration is sustained: face-to-face dialogue, trust-building, commitment to process, shared understanding, intermediate outcomes. Emerson, Nabatchi and Balogh (2012) generalised the framework beyond the public-manager-convened case, and Bryson, Crosby and Stone (2015) revisited the cross-sector variant after a decade of accumulated evidence. Klijn and Koppenjan (2016) supplied the network-management complement, and Provan and Kenis (2008) the governance-form typology that made the field tractable for comparative work.

What unites these contributions is a preoccupation with **entry conditions and process design**. The animating question is: under what circumstances does collaboration occur, and how can it be made to occur where it does not? This is a legitimate and productive question, and the literature has answered it well.

It is not, however, the question that a territory with a fully equipped collaborative apparatus and no coherence needs answered. That territory has satisfied the entry conditions. It convenes. It builds trust, in the limited sense that its officials know each other. It produces intermediate outcomes. And the investor still tells the same story to four different agencies.

2.2. The silence

The literature has surprisingly little to say about what happens *after* collaboration is established — specifically, about whether what collaboration produces persists.

Two exceptions deserve acknowledgement. Emerson and Gerlak (2014) address adaptation in collaborative regimes and come closest to the question of durability, though their concern is with the regime's capacity to change rather than with the decay of what it produces. Sørensen and Torfing (2011) treat the institutional design of collaborative innovation and gesture at the problem of institutionalising gains. Neither, however, poses the question in the form that matters here: *is the output of collaboration a stock or a flow, and if it is a stock, what maintains it?*

The silence is not an oversight. It follows from a conceptual choice made early and rarely revisited: the treatment of collaboration's output as a **capability** — something an organisation, or a network of organisations, comes to possess. Capabilities, in the resource-based tradition from which the metaphor derives, are durable by construction. They are built, they persist, they confer advantage. If coherence is a capability, then the analytical work is done once one has explained how it was built.

The alternative proposed here is that coherence is not possessed at all. And a resource that no one possesses cannot be maintained by anyone's self-interest.

2.3. What institutional theory adds, and where it stops

Sociological institutionalism supplies what the collaborative literature lacks: an account of why formal devices and actual practice can diverge indefinitely without anyone acting in bad faith. Meyer and Rowan's (1977) decoupling remains the canonical statement, and DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) isomorphism explains why the devices themselves converge on a common form across contexts where their function differs entirely. Scott's (2014) three-pillar architecture allows one to see that a regulative arrangement may be fully in place while the normative and cultural-cognitive supports that would make it operative are absent.

Applied to our sequence, this yields a first, partial explanation: the coordination device is adopted because adoption confers legitimacy, and its ceremonial adoption is sufficient for that purpose. The device need not work; it needs to exist and be seen.

This is right as far as it goes, and it goes further than the collaborative literature does. But it stops short of the question at hand, for a simple reason: decoupling explains why a device does not produce coherence. It does not explain why coherence, *where it is genuinely produced*, fails to accumulate. And it does get produced — this is the observation that the decoupling account cannot absorb. Officials do, sometimes, achieve genuine alignment. Investors do, sometimes, encounter an institutional face that is unified and predictable. And then, at the next case, the alignment must be achieved again from nothing.

That is not decoupling. That is erosion. And it requires a different theory.

2.4. Polycentricity names the structure but not the failure

A third body of work sits closer to the problem than either of the first two, and it is worth saying precisely where it stops. Ostrom's (2010) account of polycentric governance describes exactly the configuration in which our sequence unfolds: multiple centres of decision-making, formally independent, that must nonetheless produce a coherent collective result without a single hierarchical authority to impose one. Polycentricity is the structural fact of the situation. A territory's investment institutions are a polycentric system by construction — no one commands the others, yet the investor requires them to act as one.

What the polycentricity literature establishes is that such systems *can* produce order without central command, through mutual adjustment, overlapping jurisdiction, and the gradual accretion of shared rules. What it does not adequately theorise is the *fragility* of the order so produced — the conditions under which mutual adjustment, having produced coherence, ceases to reproduce it. Polycentric order is generally presented as an achievement to be explained, not as a stock to be maintained against decay. The literature tells us that coherence among independent centres is possible; it does not tell us that, once achieved, it leaks.

This is the gap the commons framing fills. Polycentricity supplies the structure — independent centres, no hierarchy, coordination-by-adjustment. The commons framing supplies the dynamics — a stock, a provisioning problem, and a characteristic decay. The two are complementary: coherence is the *good* that a polycentric system must provision, and its erosion is the failure mode that the polycentric literature's optimism about self-organisation tends to obscure. Reading coherence as a common is thus not a departure from Ostrom's programme but a continuation of it into territory the programme mapped structurally without following dynamically.

3. The Case for Coherence as a Commons

3.1. Four criteria, properly interpreted

Ostrom's (1990) analytical achievement was to identify a class of resources that neither market nor state manages well, and to specify the conditions under which the users of such resources manage them successfully by themselves. The class is defined by two properties: **difficulty of exclusion** and **subtractability of use**. A resource that is hard to fence and whose use by one diminishes its availability to another is a common-pool resource, and it is subject to a characteristic failure mode — over-appropriation and under-provision — that self-governing arrangements can, under specifiable conditions, avert.

Does institutional coherence qualify? Consider each property in turn.

Difficulty of exclusion. Straightforward. An agency that contributes nothing to the alignment of institutional discourse nevertheless benefits from it: the investor who arrives having been well handled elsewhere arrives calmer, better prepared, less litigious. No agency can be excluded from the coherence produced by the others, and none would know how to try.

Subtractability. Here the standard reading fails and must be replaced. Coherence is not subtracted by consumption. Ten investors experiencing a predictable administration do not leave less predictability for the eleventh. If subtractability is read as rivalry-in-consumption, coherence is a pure public good and the Ostromian frame does not apply.

But this reading is too narrow, and Hess and Ostrom (2007) had already shown why. Knowledge is not rival in consumption either, yet knowledge commons fail — through enclosure, through under-contribution, through the decay of the infrastructures that make knowledge findable and usable. The relevant question is not whether use diminishes the stock but whether the resource **has a stock that can diminish**. Knowledge does: a body of shared understanding can be lost. So does coherence.

The subtraction, for coherence, occurs on the **provisioning side**. Every institution that participates while withholding the costly component of participation — that attends the committee but does not surrender its interpretive autonomy, that signs the convention but does not transmit what it learned handling the last case — appropriates the benefit while declining the cost. The stock does not fall because it is used. It falls because it is not fed.

3.2. What kind of stock

The stock in question is not a substance. It is best understood as an **accumulated shared interpretation**: a body of settled meanings, precedents, and reciprocal expectations that allows an official in agency A to anticipate, without asking, how agency B will read a given case.

This is what makes an investor's experience feel unified. Not that the agencies have identical procedures — they never do — but that they share a reading. When the reading is shared, the second agency does not need to be told what the first decided; it can infer it. When it is not, every interface must be renegotiated, and the investor becomes the messenger between institutions that do not understand each other.

The stock of shared interpretation is built through cases. It is depleted when cases are handled and their lessons not deposited anywhere. And it is this deposit — the transmission of interpretation from the case to the collective — that constitutes provisioning.

3.3. Three consequences that follow immediately

Reading coherence as a common is not a rhetorical flourish. It generates three propositions that neither collaborative governance theory nor institutional theory delivers on its own.

First: no agency can produce it. A common-pool resource is by definition not the product of a single appropriator. This dissolves a question that occupies a great deal of practitioner attention — *which agency should be responsible for coherence?* — by showing it to be malformed. Designating a coordinating body does not solve the provisioning problem; it relocates it, and typically converts a collective-action problem into a principal-agent problem, which is harder.

Second: rational agencies will under-provide it. Each institution faces the standard structure: the benefit of coherence is diffuse and shared; the cost of contributing to it — time, autonomy, the discomfort of a shared reading one did not choose — is concentrated and immediate. Olson's (1965) logic applies without modification. Under-provision is not a failure of goodwill; it is the equilibrium.

Third — and this is the argument's centre of gravity: it does not merely stagnate when unprovisioned. It decays. Section 5 develops this.

3.4. Why the design principles do not already cover this

A reader versed in Ostrom's work will ask whether the eight design principles — clearly defined boundaries, congruence between rules and local conditions, collective-choice arrangements, monitoring, graduated sanctions, conflict-resolution mechanisms, recognition of rights to organise, and nested enterprises — do not already supply everything needed to manage coherence, making the present argument redundant.

They do not, and the reason is instructive. Every one of the design principles presupposes a resource whose *appropriation* is the problem to be governed. Boundaries define who may draw; congruence matches withdrawal rights to conditions; monitoring and graduated sanctions deter over-withdrawal; the whole apparatus is built to prevent a subtractable stock from being over-harvested. The principles are, in essence, a technology for restraining appropriation.

But coherence is not over-appropriated. No agency withdraws too much predictability from the pool. The failure is not excess taking but insufficient *feeding* — and the design principles, exquisitely tuned to the first problem, are largely silent on the second. There is no design principle that reads “ensure that what is learned in use is deposited back into the stock,” because in a fishery or an irrigation system the stock replenishes itself: fish breed, rain falls, the resource regenerates without the appropriators having to *contribute* anything beyond restraint. Coherence has no such natural regeneration. It regenerates only through deliberate provisioning, and a governance technology built to restrain taking has little to say about how to compel giving.

This is the precise sense in which coherence is a common of an unusual kind, and why it needs an addition to the Ostromian toolkit rather than merely an application of it. The design principles govern the down-slope of appropriation. Coherence fails on the up-slope of provisioning, and its management requires principles the original set does not contain: not appropriation rules but *deposit* obligations, not monitoring of withdrawal but evaluation of contribution, not graduated sanctions for taking too much but incentives for giving anything at all.

4. Three Dimensions of Provisioning, and Why the Third Fails

If coherence is provisioned rather than produced, the provisioning has structure. Three dimensions are proposed. They are analytically distinct, empirically separable, and — the article contends — unequally satisfied in practice.

Table 1. The provisioning of institutional coherence

Dimension	What it consists of	What its absence looks like	Typical status
Collective participation	Institutions show up, allocate staff, engage the process	Empty chairs; delegation to junior staff; ritual attendance	Usually satisfied
Shared appropriation	Institutions accept a common reading of the situation and treat the outcome as theirs	Parallel readings; the collective decision is complied with, not owned	Partially satisfied
Institutional learning	What was learned in handling a case is deposited, retrievable, and used in the next	Every case starts from zero; competence resides in individuals, not institutions	Systematically absent

4.1. Participation is the easy one

Participation is observable, auditable, and cheap. It is also what oversight bodies measure. The consequence is predictable: participation is the dimension that gets satisfied, because it is the dimension that gets counted. Attendance registers are full. This is why collaborative arrangements so often present, to an external evaluator, an appearance of health that their outputs do not corroborate.

4.2. Appropriation is harder, and partially achieved

Shared appropriation requires an institution to accept that a decision reached collectively is *its own decision*, and not a constraint imposed on it by others. This is costly in a way participation is not: it consumes interpretive autonomy, which is the resource institutions guard most jealously, because it is the resource from which their distinctiveness — and thus their budget — derives.

Appropriation is therefore achieved unevenly, typically in inverse proportion to an institution’s confidence in its own mandate. Bodies with a secure mandate can afford to share a reading. Bodies whose mandate is contested cannot, and will comply without appropriating — which is indistinguishable from appropriation on any attendance-based measure, and entirely different in effect.

4.3. Learning is the one that fails, and its failure is not accidental

Institutional learning is the deposit of interpretation. It is what turns a case successfully handled into a resource available for the next case: a documented precedent, a revised protocol, a shared reading that outlives the officials who forged it.

It fails almost everywhere. And the reason it fails is not that officials are careless, but that **nothing in the architecture of public-agency evaluation rewards it**.

Consider what an investment promotion agency is measured on. Projects attracted. Investment announced. Time-to-permit. Every one of these is an *entry* metric, and everyone is satisfied by successfully handling the case in front of you — not by depositing what you learned handling it. The official who resolves a difficult land-tenure problem through three weeks of informal negotiation with a colleague at the land registry has produced coherence, and has produced it well. Nothing in the system asks her to write down how. Her performance is recorded as one project facilitated. The interpretation she built dies with her posting.

This is not a defect of implementation. It is what the incentive structure prescribes. Learning is costly, invisible, and unrewarded; its benefit accrues to a future case handled by someone else, quite possibly in another institution. It is, in Olson's terms, the purest collective good in the system — and it is accordingly the least provisioned.

5. Erosion: Why Coherence Decays Rather Than Merely Stagnating

Here the argument reaches the claim that distinguishes it.

A conventional under-provision story would predict **stagnation**: contributions are below the optimum, so the stock stays low, but it stays. Nothing forces it down. Free-riding depresses; it does not destroy.

Coherence does not behave this way, and the reason is the nature of the stock. A stock of shared interpretation has three properties that make it perishable:

It is embodied. Interpretation is carried by people. Officials transfer, retire, are promoted, leave for the private sector. Each departure removes a fragment of the stock, and — where learning is absent — removes it permanently, because it was never deposited anywhere but in the person.

It is context-bound. Shared readings are forged around cases, and cases change. A reading that aligned four institutions on the treatment of automotive suppliers in 2019 does not transfer to renewable-energy projects in 2026 without work. Absent the work, the reading does not become obsolete gracefully: it becomes *wrong*, and its confident application produces the very incoherence it was meant to prevent.

It is displaceable by its own substitute. This is the subtlest and most damaging mechanism. Where the stock of shared interpretation is thin, institutions substitute **procedure** — written rules, formal channels, documented approvals — because procedure does not require interpretation. Procedure is coherence's prosthesis. And like a prosthesis, it atrophies what it replaces. Each additional procedural layer reduces the occasion on which officials must forge a shared reading, and therefore reduces the rate at which the stock is replenished. The device introduced to compensate for the absence of coherence accelerates the absence.

That is the mechanism, and it closes the loop opened in the introduction. The proliferation of coordination devices is not a failed remedy. It is a **symptom that deepens the disease**. Each device is adopted because coherence is lacking; each device, by substituting procedure for interpretation, ensures that less coherence will be produced next time; the resulting deficit prompts the next device.

Figure 1 presents the cycle.

Figure 1. The erosion cycle of institutional coherence

Thin stock of shared interpretation → Institutions substitute procedure → Fewer occasions to forge shared readings → Lower replenishment rate → Thinner stock → *(new coordination device adopted; loop repeats one level up)*

Exit condition: a deposit mechanism that converts case-level interpretation into a retrievable collective resource — i.e., institutional learning.

Table 2. situates erosion against the two failure modes already named in the common's literature.

Failure mode	**Mechanism**	**Classic instance**	**Remedy indicated**
Depletion	Over-appropriation of a subtractable stock	Fishery collapse (Ostrom, 1990)	Appropriation rules; monitoring; graduated sanctions
Under-provision	Rational free-riding on a collective good	Under-maintained irrigation infrastructure	Contribution rules; selective incentives
Erosion *(this article)*	Non-maintenance of an embodied, context-bound stock, aggravated by procedural substitution	Institutional coherence	Deposit mechanisms; learning obligations; evaluation of transmission

The remedies are not interchangeable. This is the practical stake of the distinction. Appropriation rules — who may draw, how much — are irrelevant to a resource nobody draws down. Selective incentives to participate address a dimension that is already satisfied. What erosion requires is something the collaborative governance toolkit does not currently contain: an obligation to *deposit*, and an evaluation regime that notices whether one has.

6. Scope Conditions: When the Erosion Account Applies, and When It Does Not

A conceptual claim earns its keep partly by specifying its own boundaries — the conditions under which it holds and those under which it does not. An account that purported to explain every failure of every collaborative arrangement would explain none. This section states the scope conditions of the erosion account, both to make it falsifiable and to prevent its over-extension.

6.1. The account applies where coherence is embodied and unrehearsed

The erosion mechanism depends on the stock of shared interpretation being *embodied* — carried in persons rather than deposited in retrievable form. Where that condition fails, erosion does not operate. Two limiting cases make this concrete.

Consider, first, an arrangement in which coordination has been genuinely codified: the shared reading of recurrent cases is written into a living protocol, updated as cases arrive, consulted before decisions, and owned by a custodian who ensures its currency. Such an arrangement has converted the embodied stock into an institutional one. The departure of any individual no longer removes a fragment of coherence, because the coherence resides in the protocol, not the person. Here the erosion account predicts *stability*, not decay — and if decay were nonetheless observed, the account would be wrong. This is the clean test.

Consider, second, an arrangement so simple and so stable that the shared reading never changes: the same cases, handled the same way, by a workforce that does not turn over. Here erosion is latent but unexpressed, because neither of its triggers — turnover or contextual change — is present. The stock is embodied and unrehearsed, so the account applies in principle; but its predicted decay does not manifest until a trigger arrives. Such arrangements are fragile without appearing so, and the account's contribution in these cases is precisely to identify a fragility that observation alone would miss.

6.2. The account does not apply to coordination that never required interpretation

Some coordination problems are genuinely mechanical: the articulation of procedures that require no shared reading because the cases are fully specified in advance. A system that routes standardised applications through a fixed sequence of checks needs no accumulated interpretation, and therefore has no interpretive stock to erode. The erosion account is silent on such systems, correctly. It is an account of coherence in the face of *non-routine* cases — cases whose handling requires judgement that must be shared across institutions — and it makes no claim about the routine.

This boundary matters because it prevents a category error. Not every coordination failure is an erosion of coherence. A failure of standardised routing is a failure of procedure design, remediable by better procedure. Erosion is specifically the decay of the *shared judgement* that non-routine cases demand, and it is remediable only by provisioning that judgement's transmission. Misdiagnosing the first as the second would prescribe deposit mechanisms where better forms would do; misdiagnosing the second as the first — the more common error — prescribes more procedure where only transmission would help, and thereby, as Section 5 showed, deepens the very decay it means to cure.

6.3. Two objections, and what they concede

"Turnover is the real problem; the commons framing adds nothing." An objector might grant that departing officials take coherence with them and conclude that this is simply a human-resources problem — retain staff, and coherence persists. The objection concedes the mechanism while misreading its remedy. Retention slows erosion; it does not stop it, because the second trigger, contextual change, operates regardless of turnover: a stable workforce applying an obsolete shared reading produces incoherence without anyone leaving. And retention is anyway a palliative, not a cure — it makes the institution *more* dependent on the irreplaceable individual, which is the fragility, not its resolution. The commons framing adds precisely what the human-resources reading omits: the recognition that coherence must be moved *out* of persons, not merely kept *in* them.

"If coherence can be codified, the whole problem dissolves." An objector might argue that the account defeats itself: if deposit mechanisms work, coherence stops being a fragile embodied stock and becomes a robust institutional one, so the erosion account describes only a *pathology* that good management already avoids. This is half right, and the half it gets right is the article's own prescription. But it underestimates how rarely codification is achieved, and why. Section 4 established that the codifying activity — institutional learning — is the systematically unprovisioned dimension, because nothing in the evaluation of public agencies rewards it. The objection amounts to saying "the problem dissolves if agencies do the one thing their incentives prevent them from doing." That is true, and it is exactly why the problem persists. The account describes not a pathology that good management avoids but the *default* that prevailing incentives produce.

7. Implications

7.1. For diagnosis

The framework yields a small set of questions that can be put to any collaborative arrangement, and that are not currently asked:

1. When an official who has handled a difficult case leaf, what remains? If the answer is “nothing,” the stock is not being provisioned.

2. Does the second institution need to be *told* what the first decided, or can it infer it? Inference is the observable signature of shared interpretation.

3. What is the ratio of procedural steps to interpretive occasions, and which way is it moving? A rising ratio is the erosion cycle in progress.

4. Is anyone evaluated on transmission? If not, transmission will not occur, and no exhortation will change that.

These questions discriminate. An arrangement can score well on every conventional measure of collaborative health — attendance, satisfaction, procedural compliance — and fail all four.

7.2. For design

Three design implications follow, each of which cuts against current practice.

Stop adding devices. The instinct to respond to incoherence with a new coordinating body is not merely ineffective; Section 5 establishes that it is iatrogenic. Before any new device is authorised, the burden should fall on its proposers to show that it will increase, not decrease, the number of occasions on which officials must forge a shared reading.

Build deposit mechanisms. These need not be elaborate. A structured post-case debriefs, retrievable and read; a standing obligation to record how a non-standard resolution was reached; a shared case repository with a designated custodian. What matters is not the technology but the obligation, and the fact that someone checks.

Evaluate transmission. This is the hard one, because it means adding a metric that no political principal currently wants: one that measures what an agency leaves behind rather than what it brings in. But an incentive structure that rewards only entry will produce only entry, and the erosion will continue whatever is said about the importance of learning.

7.3. For collaborative governance theory

The field’s implicit model of collaboration’s output is a **stock that accumulates**. The argument here suggests it is a **stock that leaks**, and that the leak rate, not the inflow rate, is the binding constraint in mature arrangements. This reorients the research agenda: away from the conditions of collaboration’s emergence, which are well understood, and towards the conditions of its persistence, which are not.

8. Conclusion: What the Commons Literature Gets Back

This article has argued that inter-institutional coherence is a common, that its provisioning has three dimensions of which one fails systematically, and that its characteristic failure is erosion rather than depletion or under-provision — with the aggravating twist that the standard remedy, procedural coordination, accelerates the decay it was adopted to arrest.

The argument was made without data, deliberately. It is a conceptual claim, and it should be judged as one: on whether the criteria are correctly applied, whether the mechanism is coherent, and whether the diagnostic questions of Section 7.1 discriminate between cases that other frameworks conflate. Empirical adjudication is the work of companion studies, and the framework is offered in a form that makes such adjudication possible.

What commons scholarship gains in return is worth stating. Ostrom’s programme was built on resources that are physical, bounded, and slow — pastures, fisheries, forests, irrigation systems — and extended, by Hess and Ostrom, to knowledge. Institutional coherence is a further extension, and an uncomfortable one, because it lacks the properties that made the original cases tractable. It has no boundary, no measurable stock, no observable appropriation. What it has instead is a mechanism of decay that the original cases did not exhibit: **it disappears when it is not remembered**.

The tragedy of the commons, in its canonical form, is a tragedy of the crowd. Too many hands on a finite thing. The tragedy identified here is of a different order and, in institutional settings, a more common one. It is a tragedy of amnesia — a resource that no one takes, that no one destroys, and that vanishes nonetheless, because nobody was asked to remember it.

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