



European  
Open Source  
**Academy**

# Sustainable Business Models in Open Source & Commons

*Part 1 of 2*

Wouter Tebbens · Free  
Knowledge Institute

Day 1 · 11:30–13:30



Funded by  
the European Union

## TODAY'S SESSION

# Session outline

|          |                                         |                                                                  |
|----------|-----------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>A</b> | <b>Opening</b>                          | Big picture – (un)sovereignty, dependency, unsustainability      |
| <b>B</b> | <b>Sustainability &amp; open source</b> | What is sustainability, and how about open source                |
| <b>C</b> | <b>What is a commons</b>                | Resource + people + rules; how it relates to open source         |
| <b>D</b> | <b>The Five Pillar Framework</b>        | The vocabulary the case studies will use                         |
| <b>E</b> | <b>Three full cases</b>                 | Linux, Wikipedia, Coop Cloud Federation — all five pillar lenses |
| <b>F</b> | <b>Some brief cases</b>                 | Arduino, CommonsCloud, Blender                                   |
| <b>G</b> | <b>Zoom-in: Mobilising resources</b>    | Income strategies, non-monetary contributions & fund raising     |
| <b>H</b> | <b>Q&amp;A</b>                          | Questions, answers, debate                                       |

## OPENING



Zuckerberg, Bezos, Pichai en Musk bij Trumps inauguratie.

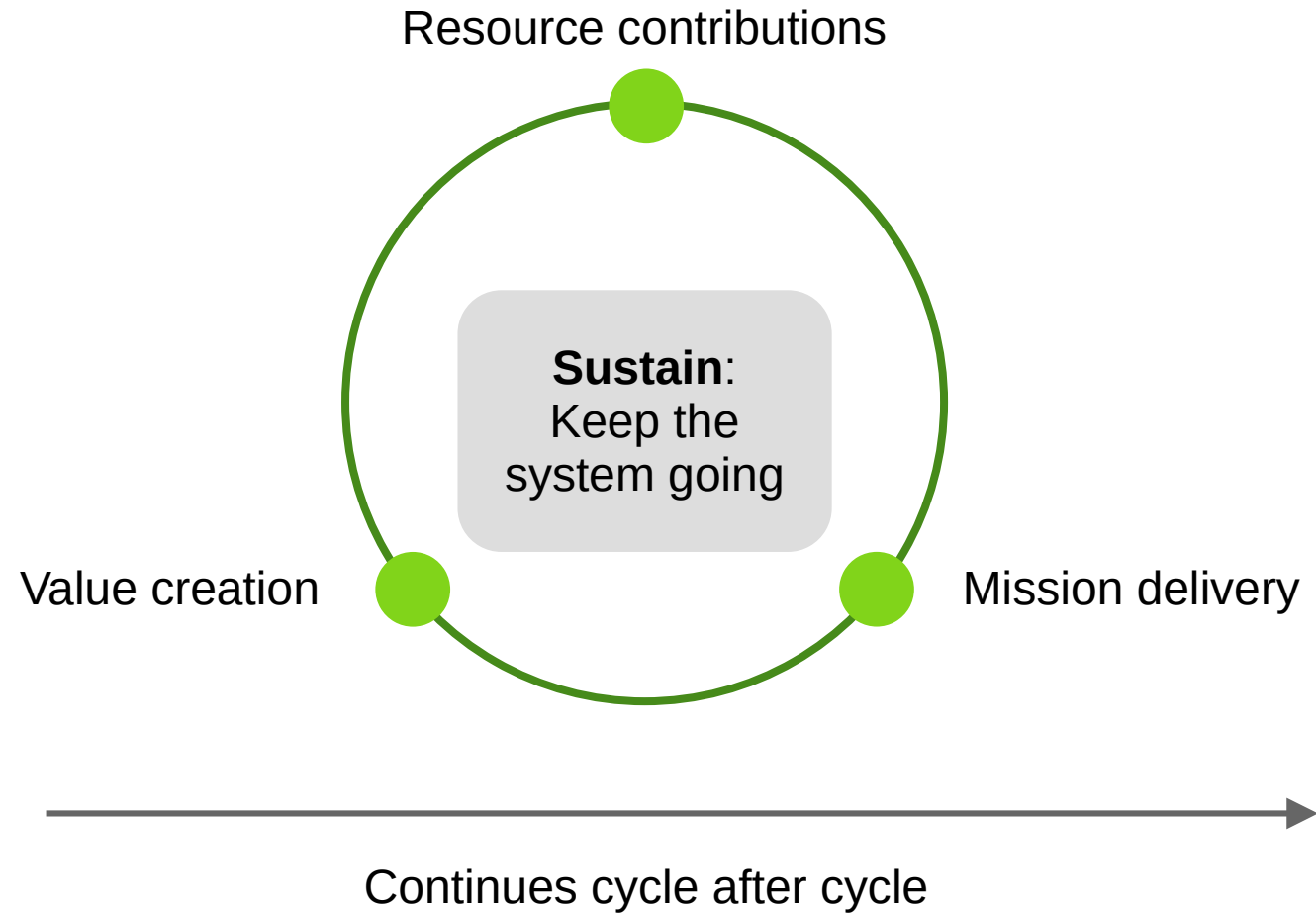
Foto Julia Demaree Nikhinson / Reuters



**MMAGA**



# What is sustainability?



# Open Source & sustainability?

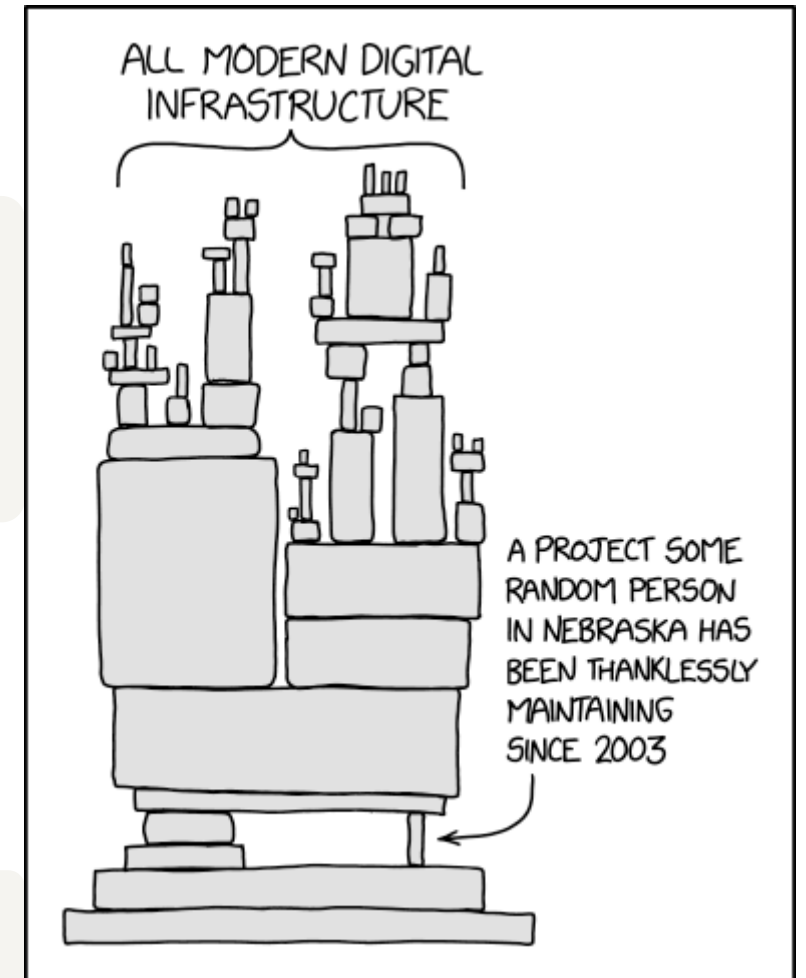
**Open source is a very successful, collaborative development methodology**

Millions of projects run the world's infrastructure, built by many volunteers and relatively few paid maintainers.

The code is free. The labour to keep it alive rarely is — and that mismatch is where projects burn out, get abandoned, or quietly become dependent on a single company's goodwill.

**Sustainable, only if enough contributions**

Challenge: to align the mission with people's needs/interests so they contribute and together keep the project alive



XKCD: Dependency

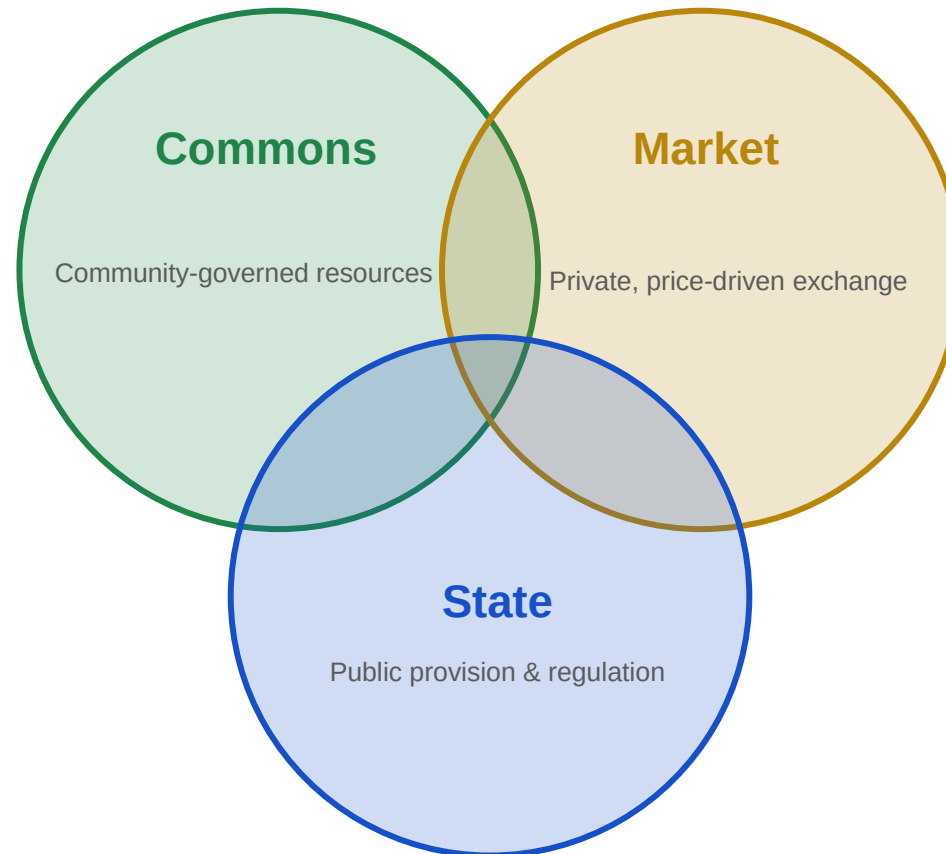
# On Commons & Sustainability Models

A brief introduction to shared resource systems

## WHAT IS A COMMONS

# A third economic model

Elinor Ostrom (Nobel Prize in Economics, 2009) distinguished three ways of organising the economy — the commons is not a variant of the market or the state, but a model of its own.



## WHAT IS A COMMONS

# A social construct, not just a resource

The commons is a social construct built on a resource of natural or cultural value — it exists only through the people and the rules that sustain it.

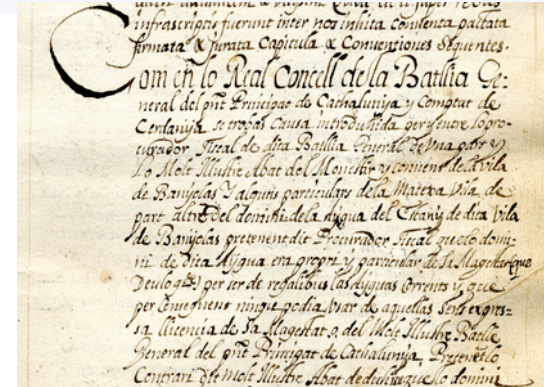
### Resource



### + People



### + Community regulations



### Case: Lake of Banyoles — communal use of water

Since at least 1685, the Document de Concòrdia has governed shared use of the Banyoles lake waters — an early written record of community rules over a shared resource.

“

*When we speak of the commons we point to a resource, but also to the rules governing its use, and to the active community that develops those rules and the labour needed to sustain the resource and its governance.*

— Rubén Martínez et al., La Hidra, 2016

# Not every open source project is a commons

Resource

+ People

+ Community regulations

**Open source code is often necessary for a commons, but it isn't sufficient.**

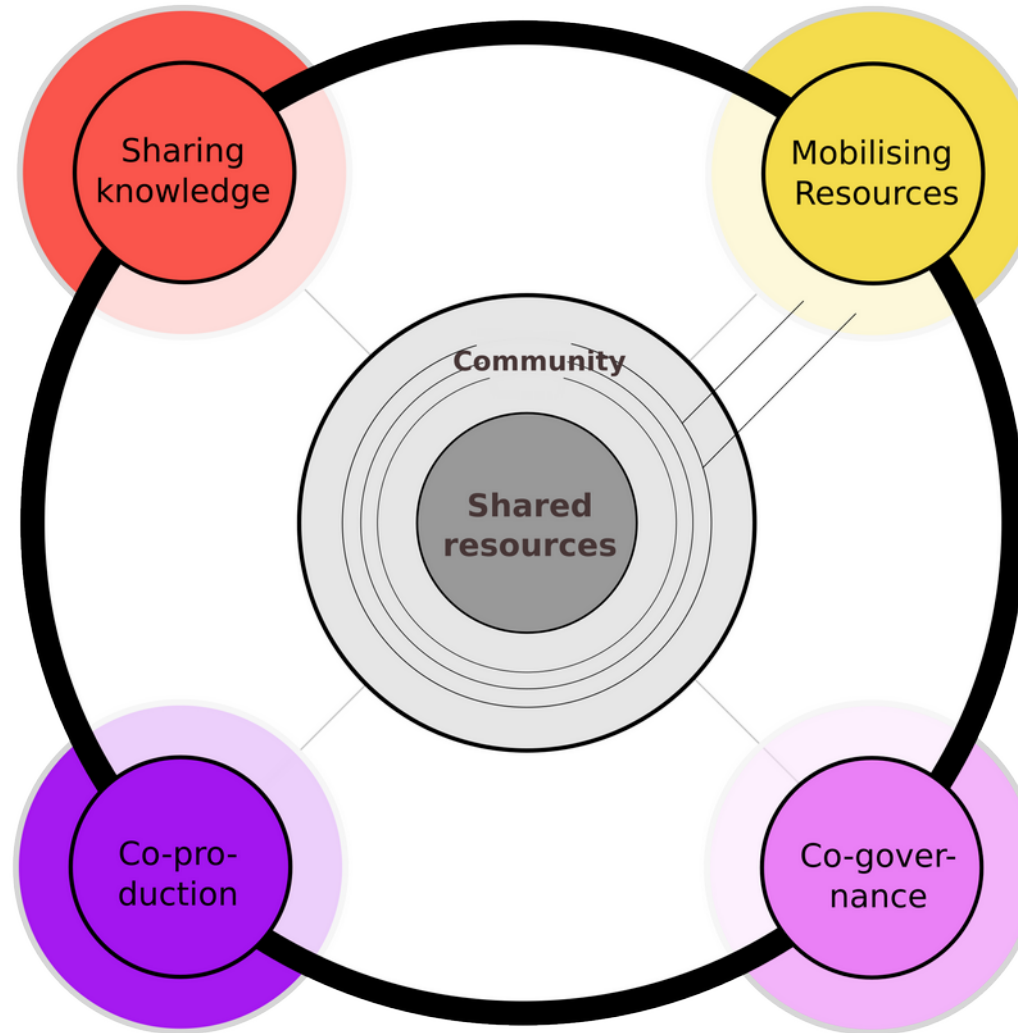
A commons exists only when a community actively governs shared use of a resource — the code alone, sitting in a repository nobody maintains together, is not one. Plenty of “open source” projects are really just one company's product with the source visible.

“

*The commons is a social construct on a resource of natural or cultural value - it exists only through the people and the rules that sustain it.*

## THE FIVE PILLAR FRAMEWORK

# A shared vocabulary for what follows



Developed by  
the Free Knowledge Institute & femProcomuns

What's shared · sharing knowledge · resource mobilisation · co-production · co-governance

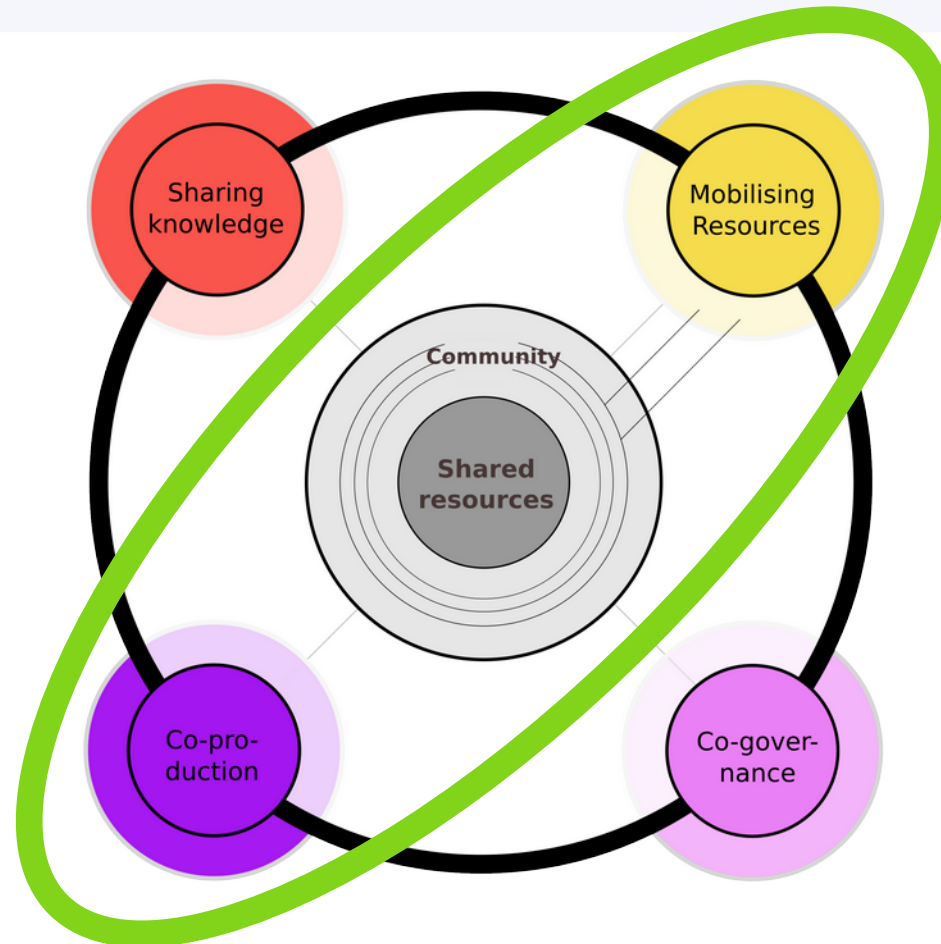
Free Knowledge Institute <http://freeknowledge.eu>  
femProcomuns SCCL <http://femprocomuns.coop>



## THE FIVE PILLAR FRAMEWORK

# Co-production and resource mobilisation must align

*What you ask people to produce has to match the resources you can mobilise for them — and what you mobilise should reflect what production actually needs. Out of step in either direction, and the commons strains.*

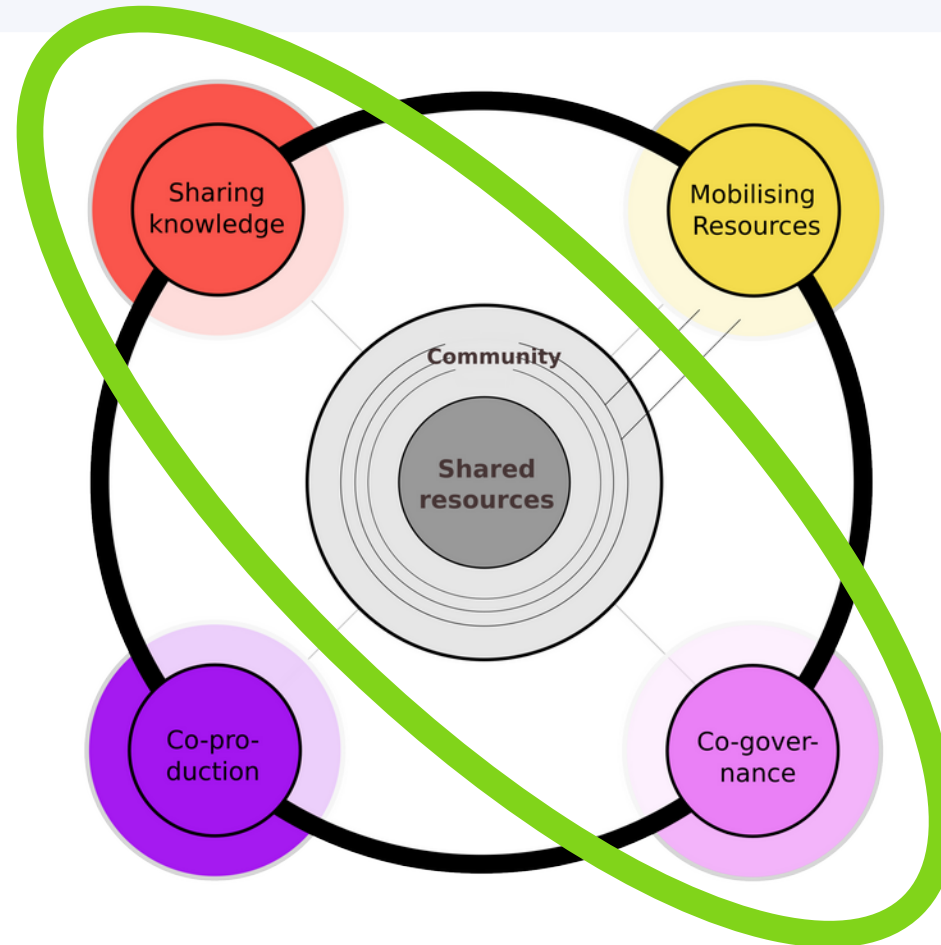


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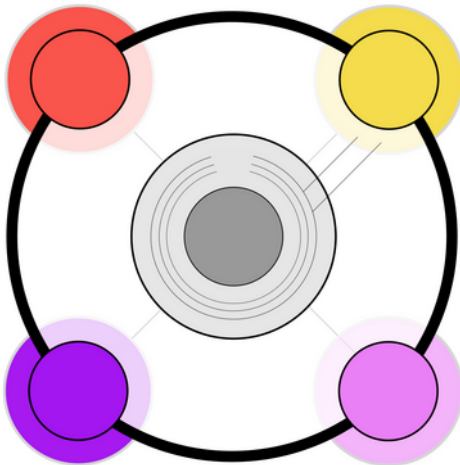
# Sharing knowledge and co-governance must be in balance

*The more openly something is shared, the more governance is needed to keep it healthy — without it, openness invites free-riding or drift. And governance with no real openness isn't really a commons at all.*



## THE FIVE PILLAR FRAMEWORK

# All five pillars, in sync



**A commons only really prospers when all five pillars move together.**

Too much production without the resources to sustain it burns people out. Too much resource mobilisation without a place to put it to work goes to waste. Too much sharing without governance dilutes the community. Too much governance without sharing isn't a commons at all.

The imbalance always shows up somewhere else in the wheel — which is why we look at all five together, not one at a time.

# Some Cases

Linux, Wikipedia, Coop Cloud Federation — read through all five pillars

## FULL CASE

# Linux

*The kernel at the centre of the industry, maintained collectively.*

### What is shared

The Linux kernel source code, released under the GPLv2.

### Sharing knowledge

Public mailing lists, open patch review, extensive kernel documentation.

### Resource mobilisation

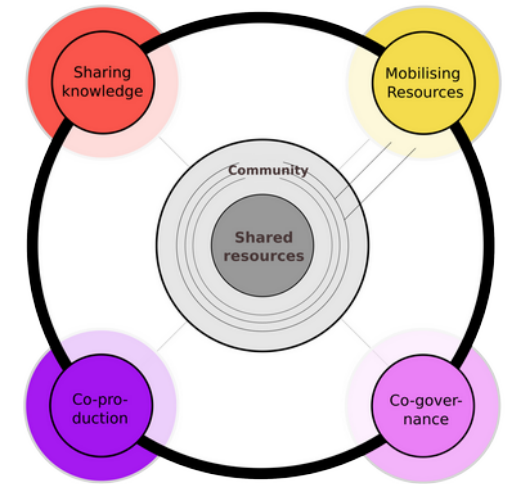
Mostly paid engineers, sponsored by Linux Foundation member companies.

### Co-production

Thousands of contributors organised through per-subsystem maintainer hierarchies.

### Co-governance

Torvalds and subsystem maintainers steward the code; the Foundation coordinates funding across the industry.



*Starting points — adjust and deepen with what you know firsthand.*

## FULL CASE

# Wikipedia

*A free encyclopedia, written and governed by its community.*

### What is shared

Encyclopedic content, freely licensed for anyone to reuse.

### Sharing knowledge

Open guides and mentoring for new editors; a fully open edit history.

### Resource mobilisation

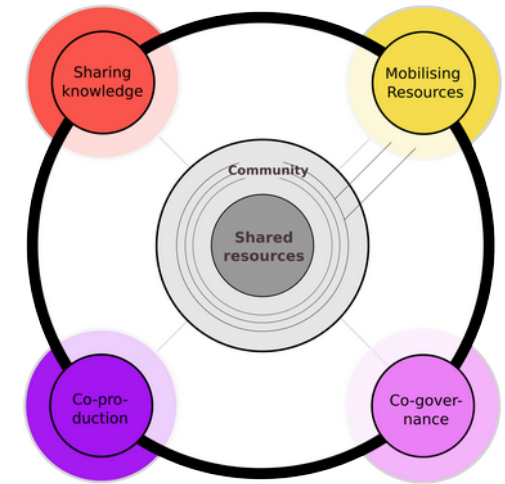
Donations to the Wikimedia Foundation; volunteered time as the core resource.

### Co-production

Volunteer editors and bots, working under open editing and review norms.

### Co-governance

Community-written policies, elected committees, and the Wikimedia Foundation board.



*Starting points — adjust and deepen with what you know firsthand.*

## FULL CASE

# Coop Cloud Federation

*A federation of tech co-ops self-hosting shared infrastructure together (a “configuration commons”).*

### What is shared

Standardised recipes and tooling (e.g. abra) for self-hosting common applications.

### Sharing knowledge

A shared recipe repository, documentation, and mutual-aid support between member co-ops.

### Resource mobilisation

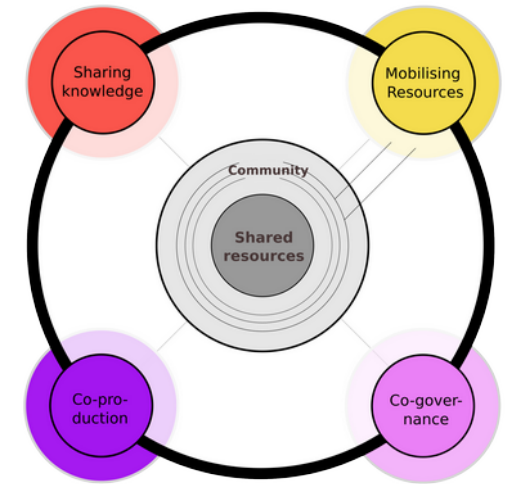
Each co-op funds its own hosting; shared tooling costs are pooled across the federation.

### Co-production

Independent tech co-ops jointly maintaining shared recipes and tooling, rather than one central team.

### Co-governance

Federated, non-hierarchical decision-making across member co-ops — no single controlling foundation.

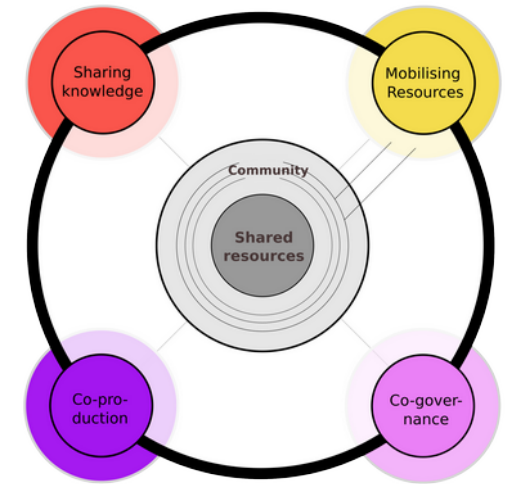


## BRIEF CASE

# Arduino

*Open hardware designs plus open software, sold and cloned in parallel.*

- Hardware designs open under CERN OHL; the Arduino IDE is open source software.
- Official boards sold commercially, while the open designs are freely cloned by others.
- The Arduino Foundation now stewards the commons alongside the commercial entity.



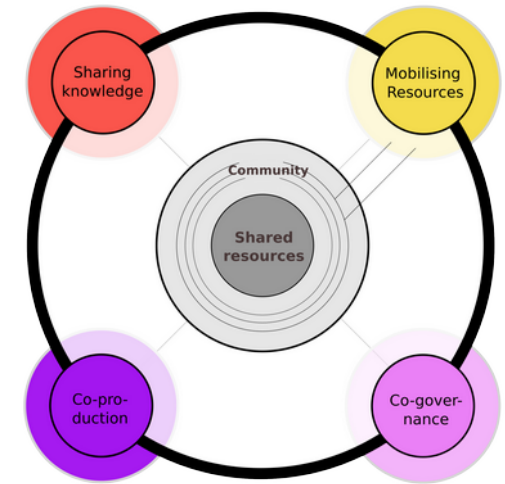
*Space for your group's own mapping — fill this in on the day.*

## BRIEF CASE

# CommonsCloud

*A cooperative cloud-services platform built for the commons economy.*

- Built and run by femProcomuns for cooperatives and collectives in Catalonia.
- Subscription and membership fees from member organisations fund shared infrastructure.
- Wouter can field detailed questions on this one directly in the plenary.



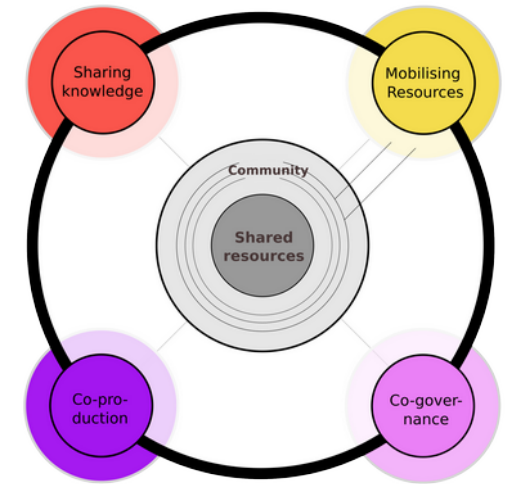
*Space for your group's own mapping — fill this in on the day.*

## BRIEF CASE

# Blender

*An open source 3D suite with a hybrid, foundation-backed revenue model.*

- GPL-licensed 3D creation software, developed by the Blender Foundation.
- Blender Cloud subscriptions and the Blender Development Fund provide recurring revenue.
- Corporate members (e.g. Epic Games, Ubisoft, NVIDIA) sponsor development directly.



*Space for your group's own mapping — fill this in on the day.*

## Map a case across the five pillars



Pick one case — or your own project — and map it across all five pillars. Where is it strong? Where is a pillar missing or weak, and what does that put at risk?

Arduino · CommonsCloud · Blender

CERN Open Hardware (public-research infrastructure) · Apache Software Foundation (foundation-as-governance-layer) · Meet.coop (cooperative online meeting service; Wouter is co-founder — ask directly), LaSuite.coop (cooperative online workspace SaaS), Mastodon, Peertube, Bonfire...

# Mobilising revenue & resources

Fifteen to twenty minutes in your groups, then we come back together for a plenary discussion and Q&A.

**Bring back: where the pillars held up, and where they didn't.**

## Diverse income strategies

- Services
- Product sales
- Subscriptions
- Donations
- Crowdfunding campaigns
- Public / private grants

## Mobilising non-monetary contributions

- Donated hardware
- Donated data centre capacity
- In kind contributions of work
- Other in kind contributions

## Some example fund raising options\*

| Geography | Government                                                                                              | Private                                                                                                                  | Collective                                                                                |
|-----------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| EU        | EC Horizon Europe<br>DC-EDIC<br>STF-EU**<br><br>NLnet (EC)<br><br>Sovereign Tech Fund<br>Prototype Fund | <br><br>Prototype Fund<br>Switzerland | Open Collective<br><br>Nivenly Fdn<br>LiberaPay<br><br>Goteo<br><br>DemocraticTech.Fund** |
| US        |                                                                                                         | FLOSS.fund<br>Open Tech Fund                                                                                             |                                                                                           |

\*) A very short selection of gift-based grant money to illustrate the differences. Apart, there's also investment funding, not mentioned here.

\*\*\*) Under construction

# Over to you

Questions, Answers, Debate

Slides by Wouter Tebbens, CC BY-SA

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## From pledge to co-governance



### A circular model, not a funnel

People move through stages of engagement — and, unlike a one-way funnel, the strongest communities cycle people back through it at deeper levels rather than losing them at the top.

1

#### **Pledge**

A first signal of interest or support

2

#### **Contribution**

Actual work, however small

3

#### **Recognition**

The contribution is seen and valued

4

#### **Participation / co-governance**

A voice in what happens next

