

PAYING CLOSER ATTENTION / ESSAY

DEMOCRACY NEEDS SOMEWHERE TO LIVE

Civic infrastructure, commoning, and the shared capacity to act

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We often speak about community as though it were already there, waiting to be called upon. When institutions fail, services retreat or crises arrive, communities are expected to organise, care and respond. Yet the places, relationships and resources through which people learn to act together have steadily been weakened. We ask more of community while investing less in its capacity to exist.

We keep asking community to appear

The language of community becomes especially visible when established systems are under pressure. We are told that communities must become more resilient, volunteers must step forward, neighbourhoods must look after their own and local solutions must fill the gaps. There is truth in the value of local action. But community is not an emergency resource that can be summoned after years of neglect.

People need somewhere to meet, time in which to participate, knowledge they can access, relationships they can rely upon and some meaningful ability to influence what happens next. Without those conditions, an appeal to community can become a transfer of responsibility from institutions with resources to people already carrying too much.

Over time, many of us have been repositioned as customers, service users, tenants, submitters and occasional voters. Decisions about the systems that shape everyday life are made elsewhere, while participation is often reduced to being consulted after the important boundaries have already been set. We may live beside one another without having many places in which to understand our shared needs, make binding decisions or build the habits of acting together.

Civic infrastructure is what helps make that collective life possible. It includes visible places such as halls, libraries, kitchens, gardens, workshops and public spaces. It also includes less visible capacities: trusted relationships, local memory, practical knowledge, shared rules, ways of resolving conflict, access to tools and information, and the time and resources required to participate. Food networks, cooperatives, local media, catchment groups and community-controlled services can all become part of it.

Civic infrastructure is what allows shared concern to become shared capacity.

A hall is an asset. It becomes civic infrastructure when people can use it to gather, organise, learn, make decisions and care for one another. A garden is a piece of land. It becomes civic infrastructure when knowledge is shared, responsibilities are distributed, nourishment is accessible and relationships can continue beyond a single season. A library does more than store books when it protects a common space for knowledge, curiosity and encounter.

Infrastructure, in this sense, is what makes certain forms of action repeatable. It carries memory from one gathering to the next and makes it possible for new people to enter without beginning again from nothing. It allows a response to become a practice, and a practice to outlive the people who first initiated it. This is also a grounded form of collective sovereignty: the ability to recognise shared needs, make judgments and act together rather than waiting for every answer to arrive from somewhere else.

This does not make the state unnecessary, nor does it mean every need can be met locally. It asks a different question about the public role. Are institutions simply delivering services to passive recipients, or are they also helping people develop the power and capacity to participate in shaping the conditions of their lives?

A commons is made through practice

The language of the commons helps clarify what civic infrastructure is for, but it can also be used too loosely. A commons is not simply something publicly owned, freely accessible or available to everyone without limit. Nor is it a resource with no rules. It is a relationship among something that matters, a community of stewardship and the practices through which access, care, responsibility and restraint are negotiated over time.

This is why commoning is better understood as a verb. It is the work of noticing, deciding, contributing, maintaining, sharing, limiting, teaching, disagreeing and repairing. It asks who may use a resource, who must care for it, how benefits and burdens are distributed, how damage is recognised and what happens when commitments are not met. Ownership may matter, but ownership alone does not create a commons.

I have spent much of the past decade trying to understand these questions through practice. Roimata Food Commons began as an attempt to explore how publicly managed land could become a source of nourishment, ecological care and communal life. Working bees, shared harvests, workshops, tree plantings and outdoor cinema events created different reasons for people to gather. A successful effort to stop herbicide spraying in Radley Park showed that consistent care could build enough trust to alter how a public institution managed the land.

The most important changes were not always the easiest to count. People learned from one another. Children picked food directly from plants. Neighbours contributed labour, stories and knowledge. Repeated gatherings created familiarity and safety. What might look from outside like gardening was also the slow construction of a relational web through convivial labour: useful work carried out together in a way that made room for enjoyment, learning and belonging.

Toha Kai extended the inquiry into food provisioning. It sought to connect people with affordable, local, seasonal food while reducing plastic, supporting ecological production and keeping more value within local relationships. The planned farm was an attempt to bring production and distribution closer together and to treat nourishment as a shared foundation of health rather than only a commodity moving through a market.

Both projects made another way of relating visible. They also revealed how difficult it is for a small initiative to carry intentions that the surrounding system does not share. Toha Kai remained dependent upon suppliers, prices, energy costs and decisions made elsewhere. Roimata could invite broad participation while the less visible work of administration, fundraising, relationship management and creative direction remained concentrated.

I understood the importance of participation long before I understood the institutional work required to distribute responsibility. Consistent leadership helped people trust the invitation and made contribution easier. But that same consistency could conceal how dependent the

work had become upon a small number of people continuing to carry it. People may gather around a shared project without acquiring meaningful authority over it or accepting responsibility for its continuity.

Goodwill is not governance. Participation is not shared responsibility. A commons carried by one exhausted person is not robust.

This is not a criticism of those who came, contributed or cared. People's capacity is shaped by work, housing, health, family obligations and financial pressure. The disruption of the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis made that especially visible. It is an institutional lesson: if a project depends upon forms of participation that people do not have the time, security or authority to sustain, aspiration alone will not make it collective.

From participation to shared responsibility

Most community initiatives eventually encounter the question of structure. A charitable trust may be needed to sign an agreement, employ staff, receive funding or carry legal responsibility. That can make important work possible. It can also create distance between trustees, workers, participants and the people whose lives are affected. A legal entity can hold an asset while the practice of governing it remains neither widely understood nor genuinely shared.

Other forms offer different possibilities. A cooperative can connect contribution with membership and decision-making. A multi-stakeholder cooperative can recognise that workers, producers, users, stewards and community partners hold different but related interests. Community land trusts can protect land from speculation. Public-common partnerships can combine enduring public support with forms of local stewardship and democratic control. A participatory trust can open governance beyond a self-replacing board.

None of these names is a guarantee. A cooperative can concentrate influence. A trust can become unaccountable. A community organisation can reproduce exclusion. A public partnership can offer participation while retaining all consequential power elsewhere. The structure matters because it shapes what is possible, but its value depends upon the relationships, rights, duties and resources that it makes durable.

The revealing questions sit beneath the organisational label. Who sets the agenda? Who controls the land, money, information and assets? Who performs the daily work, and is that work properly resourced? Who can challenge a decision or refuse a harmful direction? How are leaders replaced? Can knowledge and responsibility survive their departure? What prevents a shared asset from being enclosed, sold or redirected once political or financial pressure arrives?

The structure has to carry the purpose, distribute the burden and protect the possibility of correction.

This is where the distinction between efficiency and robustness returns. Efficiency tends to remove spare capacity, consolidate responsibility and treat overlapping roles as waste. Commoning often needs what efficiency tries to eliminate: time to deliberate, more than one person who knows how something works, overlapping relationships, local discretion, patient handover and room to learn through mistakes. These can look like friction until the central person leaves, the supply chain fails or conditions change.

Robust civic infrastructure distributes knowledge, authority and practical capability. It does not require uninterrupted agreement, but it must allow disagreement without making every conflict terminal. It needs memory, accountability and pathways to repair. It makes cooperation reasonable rather than heroic. This requires financial support as well as goodwill. A gift of time freely offered can nourish a commons; a system designed around endless unpaid care extracts from the very people it celebrates.

Local capacity is not enough on its own. A small locality can also exclude, hoard benefit or pass ecological costs elsewhere. Civic infrastructure must therefore be nested within wider relationships and obligations. Local autonomy needs regional coordination, public guarantees, enforceable standards and ways of sharing knowledge and resources across places. The aim is not self-contained islands of community, but multiple centres of agency able to cooperate without all power being drawn upwards.

Whose common?

In Aotearoa, the word common cannot be treated as politically innocent. Land and resources described as public may sit within histories of confiscation, alienation and Crown control. Declaring something to belong equally to everyone can erase the particular authority, whakapapa and rights that were displaced in order for it to become public in the first place.

Recommoning cannot mean placing a new universal language over Māori relationships with whenua, wai and taonga. Mana whenua are not simply another stakeholder to be invited into a community project. The constitutional work of Matike Mai helps us attend to where authority sits, where tino rangatiratanga remains distinct, what properly belongs within kāwanatanga, and where matters affecting shared living systems require a genuinely relational sphere.

From a tangata Tiriti position, the immediate responsibility is not to define how Māori should common. It is to ask how Crown and public institutions must change their own behaviour: where power must be returned or shared, how authority is recognised and resourced, which extractive mandates must be restrained, and how consent and the protected capacity to say no become more than symbolic inclusion.

Different standing does not prevent shared work. It prevents equality from being confused with sameness. People may participate in the care of a catchment, foodshed or piece of civic infrastructure through whakapapa, statutory responsibility, livelihood, residence, use, knowledge or practical care. A credible arrangement makes those forms of standing visible and brings them into relationship without allowing the most numerous or best resourced participants to dominate the rest.

The living world must also be more than the setting within which human interests are negotiated. Civic infrastructure ultimately depends upon soil, water, energy, biodiversity and stable ecological relationships. If governance distributes human voice while leaving an extractive purpose intact, it has not changed enough. The question is not only who participates, but what the institution is required to sustain and whether future generations and more-than-human life have meaningful standing within that purpose.

The question is not simply who has a seat at the table, but what the table is for, whose authority it recognises, and whether the living world has standing within it.

Somewhere democracy can live

Democracy is often imagined as a set of formal decisions made in Parliament, council chambers and elections. Those decisions matter. But democratic capacity is built elsewhere too: wherever people learn to listen, interpret evidence, negotiate difference, accept responsibility and remain in relationship after a decision has been made. Without places to practise these things, democracy becomes episodic. We vote, submit and react, but have little experience of exercising collective power together.

Civic infrastructure gives democratic attention somewhere to gather and endure. It allows lived experience to meet technical knowledge, local memory to survive staff turnover, and a concern to become a continuing practice rather than a moment of outrage. It can hold relationships between elections and retain capacity between crises. It is where participation becomes more than being heard because people also acquire responsibilities, resources and some real influence over what happens next.

Paying closer attention helps us notice what has been hollowed out. Collective attention makes knowledge and experience available to one another. Civic infrastructure gives that attention somewhere to gather and endure. Commoning is how responsible participation becomes a shared practice.

We do not need to wait for a complete institutional redesign before beginning. We can pay attention to the places and organisations already around us. Where can people gather without first becoming customers? Which public assets remain inaccessible to meaningful participation? Which groups are being carried by one person? What knowledge would disappear if they left? Which essential needs could be met through stronger local relationships? What authority, funding and structure would allow that work to become genuinely shared?

Nor should we romanticise what follows. Commoning involves limits, disagreement, maintenance, administration and difficult decisions about belonging and responsibility. It can fail, become enclosed or reproduce the inequalities it hoped to challenge. The response is not to abandon the idea, but to make power more visible, build safeguards, resource participation and treat correction as part of the practice.

I no longer judge Roimata Food Commons or Toha Kai only by whether they endured in their original form. They changed land, meals, relationships and imaginations. They showed that people can experience food, work and public space differently. But their fragility is also part of the evidence. They taught me that creating a commons is not the same as building the civic infrastructure that allows it to outlive its founders.

That distinction matters far beyond these two projects. We cannot keep asking communities to carry growing social and ecological burdens through goodwill alone. If we want people to participate in shaping a shared future, then time, land, knowledge, finance, authority and responsibility must be organised so that participation can become durable. The capacity to act together is itself something that must be cultivated, protected and passed on.

Democracy needs somewhere to live. Not only in the institutions that represent us, but in the places where we practise sharing authority, caring for what sustains us, staying with disagreement and handing responsibility from one person to another. We will not vote our way into collective capacity if there is nowhere to practise it. The work of commoning is to make those places real - and robust enough that none of us has to carry them alone.