

A FOUNDATIONAL ESSAY

What It Means to Act in Common

Practices and signposts on the path towards a more equal world

Michael Reynolds • Aotearoa New Zealand • August 2026

If paying closer attention is the invitation, what should follow from what we begin to notice?

Once we see the relationships between inequality, ecological disruption, insecure access to the foundations of life and the concentration of political and economic power, attention alone is no longer enough.

We have to ask what it might mean to respond.

I do not believe the answer can be reduced to making better individual choices. Personal responsibility matters. The ways we work, consume, invest, travel, care and participate all have consequences. But individual action takes place within systems that shape what is available, affordable, rewarded and sometimes even imaginable.

We cannot shop our way out of systems built around ever-increasing consumption. We cannot recycle our way out of an economy designed to extract more materials and energy every year. We cannot resolve structural inequality through personal generosity. Nor can we build genuinely democratic societies simply by asking isolated individuals to become more informed voters.

The scale and nature of the conditions we face demand something more than individual virtue.

They require us to recover our capacity to act in common.

This does not mean that individuality must disappear into the collective. It does not require everyone to think alike, live alike or surrender their autonomy to a central authority.

Acting in common means recognising that much of what makes a dignified life possible is created, sustained and protected collectively.

None of us produces the conditions of our life alone.

We inherit languages, knowledge, institutions, infrastructure and relationships that were built by people before us. We depend upon systems of care, transport, communication, education, sanitation and public health. We rely upon soil, water, climate, pollinators and countless other forms of life that cannot be reduced to individual property or personal achievement.

Even the most apparently self-made life rests upon an immense foundation of collective and ecological provision.

The question, therefore, is not whether we are dependent upon one another.

We already are.

The question is whether the systems through which we organise that interdependence are democratic, equitable and capable of caring for the living world upon which they depend.

This is where the idea of the commons becomes useful.

A commons is sometimes imagined as a resource that belongs to everyone: a park, a forest, a shared waterway or an area of land open to public use.

But a commons is not simply a thing without an owner. Nor is it a resource that anyone can take from without limit.

A living commons is better understood as a relationship between a community, something it depends upon, and the practices through which that community cares for it.

Those practices include deciding who has access, establishing limits, sharing benefits, accepting responsibilities, maintaining what has been inherited, resolving conflict and protecting the capacity of the commons to support life into the future.

This is why it can be more helpful to speak about **commoning**.

Commoning is something people do.

It is the ongoing work of taking responsibility for shared conditions. It involves learning how to make decisions together, how to distribute power, how to recognise different forms of knowledge and how to prevent shared wealth from being captured by those with the greatest existing advantage.

It can take many forms.

A community garden can be a form of commoning. So can a cooperative, a community land trust, a public library, a mutual aid network, an open-source knowledge project or a locally governed energy system.

Some public services might also be understood as commons when the people who depend upon them possess meaningful rights, voice and responsibility in their governance.

But none of these organisational forms is automatically equitable simply because it carries the language of community, cooperation or public benefit.

A cooperative can exclude people who cannot afford to join. A public institution can become remote and unaccountable. A community project can rely upon the exhausted labour of the same small group of carers and volunteers. A shared resource can still be dominated by the loudest voices or captured by those with the most time, confidence or social power.

Commoning should not be romanticised.

It is not the assumption that communities are naturally harmonious or that bringing people together will dissolve differences of interest, power and experience.

It is the more difficult practice of creating arrangements through which those differences can be acknowledged and negotiated without allowing some people to dominate the lives of others.

This is why equality matters.

Equality does not require that everyone receive precisely the same thing or make identical contributions. People have different needs, abilities, histories and responsibilities.

A more equal society is one in which everyone possesses the material and civic foundations needed to live with dignity, while no one possesses so much concentrated power that they can determine the conditions under which everyone else must live.

This means we have to pay attention not only to how wealth is distributed, but also to how power is distributed.

Who owns the land?

Who controls the infrastructure?

Who decides how investment is directed?

Who has time to attend meetings, learn the systems and influence decisions?

Whose knowledge is treated as authoritative?

Who performs the work of care and maintenance?

Who receives the benefits, and who is expected to absorb the risks and consequences?

These are common questions because they reveal the relationships beneath apparently neutral systems.

They also remind us that we are not beginning from equal ground.

Some people and institutions already possess far greater access to land, money, political influence and legal protection. Others are carrying the accumulated effects of colonisation, dispossession, discrimination and economic exclusion.

Inviting everyone to participate equally within profoundly unequal conditions does not, by itself, create equality.

Those with the greatest existing power may still be able to speak most loudly, remain involved for longer, employ specialist advice and withstand delays or failures that would exhaust everyone else.

Commoning must therefore involve more than opening the door.

It must consider what people need in order to walk through it, remain in the room and exercise genuine influence once they are there.

In Aotearoa, this requires particular care.

The language of making land, water or knowledge “common to everyone” can repeat the logic of colonisation if it ignores mana whenua, whakapapa and tino rangatiratanga.

Shared does not mean ownerless.

Nor does it mean available to whoever arrives with the most capital, legal authority or good intentions.

A just approach to commoning in Aotearoa must honour Te Tiriti and recognise relationships of authority and obligation that do not originate in European ideas of property, government or public ownership.

Māori collective institutions and practices have their own whakapapa. They should not be casually absorbed into a generic language of the commons or treated as inspiring examples available for others to adopt without relationship or responsibility.

This is not a qualification to be added at the edge of the conversation.

It changes how we understand belonging, authority, stewardship and the histories from which our present arrangements emerged.

If acting in common is to help us move towards a more equal world, we will need ways of recognising whether we are actually changing direction.

There will be no single model that can be applied everywhere. The right arrangements for a neighbourhood garden will not be the same as those required for housing, electricity, public health, a river catchment or a national transport system.

But there are signposts we can look for.

The foundations of life become more secure.

A more equal path would progressively reduce the extent to which access to housing, food, energy, healthcare, education, transport and communication depends upon personal wealth.

These are not ordinary consumer products. They are foundations from which people participate in society and exercise meaningful freedom.

When access to them is insecure, people are more easily controlled by employers, landlords, lenders, service providers and circumstances beyond their control.

Commoning these foundations does not necessarily mean that every service must be provided in exactly the same way. It means treating secure access as a shared responsibility rather than a prize allocated primarily through purchasing power.

The measure of success is not simply whether a service exists. It is whether people can rely upon it without being impoverished, humiliated or made dependent upon the goodwill of someone more powerful.

Decision-making power moves towards those who live with the consequences.

Consultation is not the same as shared power.

People are frequently invited to comment upon decisions after the important assumptions, boundaries and options have already been determined. They may be heard without possessing any meaningful authority to influence what follows.

Acting in common requires more than gathering opinions.

It means creating ways for the people affected by decisions to participate in defining the problem, developing the options, allocating resources and evaluating the results.

This does not mean every decision must be made locally or that expertise becomes irrelevant. Some systems require coordination across regions, nations and generations.

The signpost is whether authority sits at the most appropriate level and whether those living with the consequences have a genuine pathway into the decisions that shape their lives.

Shared wealth circulates rather than accumulating in fewer hands.

Every community creates value collectively.

Businesses depend upon educated workers, functioning infrastructure, public institutions, stable communities and the ecological systems from which energy and materials are drawn.

Yet much of the financial value produced through these shared foundations is extracted and accumulated privately.

A more equal path would keep a greater proportion of that value circulating within the communities and systems that helped create it.

Surpluses might be reinvested in shared infrastructure, ecological repair, affordable services, secure livelihoods and the long-term capacity of communities to care for themselves.

The question is not only whether an initiative produces value.

It is where that value goes.

Does it increase the capacity of many people to live well, or does it strengthen the power of a small number of owners to accumulate more?

Stewardship begins to displace extraction.

Much of our economy rewards people for extracting value from land, labour, knowledge and relationships while transferring the resulting costs elsewhere.

A forest can be profitable while being ecologically diminished. Housing can generate wealth while making secure shelter less affordable. Employment can produce financial returns while exhausting the people performing the work. Technology can create convenience while weakening local knowledge, autonomy and repair capacity.

Commoning asks a different set of questions.

What must be cared for so that this system can continue to support life?

What limits must be respected?

What obligations accompany the right to use a resource?

What condition will we leave it in for those who follow us?

Stewardship does not mean preserving everything unchanged. Living systems change, and communities must adapt. It means accepting that use carries responsibility and that ownership cannot provide an unlimited right to diminish the conditions upon which others depend.

Care and maintenance move from the margins to the centre.

Societies often celebrate innovation, growth and construction while overlooking the quieter work that keeps everything functioning.

Food is grown. Children are raised. Older and disabled people are supported. Buildings are repaired. Soil is restored. Relationships are tended. Knowledge is passed on. Conflicts are mediated. Public spaces are cleaned and protected.

Much of this work is underpaid, unpaid or treated as an inconvenient cost.

It also falls unevenly, frequently upon women, whānau, volunteers and communities already carrying significant pressures.

A commons cannot survive without care and maintenance.

A more equal path would recognise this work as foundational. It would distribute it more fairly and ensure that those who perform it possess the time, security, resources and recognition required to do it without sacrificing their own wellbeing.

Care cannot remain an invisible subsidy that allows the rest of the economy to function.

The idea of enough begins to place limits upon excess.

Equality requires more than raising the floor beneath those who have the least.

It also requires us to ask whether there should be limits upon how much wealth, land, energy, material and political influence any one person or institution can command.

In a finite living world, unlimited accumulation by some inevitably restricts the possibilities available to others.

The language of enough can sound like a demand for sacrifice. But enough is also a form of security.

It means knowing that the foundations of life will be available when they are needed. It means freedom from the relentless pressure to compete, accumulate and protect ourselves against abandonment.

A culture of sufficiency does not deny pleasure, creativity, aspiration or difference.

It asks whether those things can flourish without depending upon excess consumption, exploitation or the insecurity of others.

People gain the capacity—not merely the permission—to participate.

Collective governance requires time, knowledge, confidence and places in which people can meet.

Someone working several insecure jobs, caring for relatives or struggling to meet the cost of housing does not have the same capacity to participate as someone with financial security and professional familiarity with institutional processes.

If participation is expected only after people have completed all the work required to survive, shared governance will remain dominated by those whose lives already provide them with time and access.

Civic participation therefore needs infrastructure.

People require understandable information, accessible meeting places, skilled facilitation, childcare, transport, translation, education and sometimes financial support for the time they contribute.

Democracy cannot depend indefinitely upon spare evenings and unpaid labour.

Creating the capacity to participate is itself an act of commoning.

The circle of responsibility extends beyond the present human community.

The living world cannot attend a meeting, submit feedback or vote against its own destruction.

Future generations cannot defend their interests within decisions being made today.

If our institutions recognise only the immediate preferences of present-day participants, they will continue to transfer ecological damage, debt and diminished possibilities into the future.

Acting in common means finding ways to represent those relationships within present choices.

It means asking whether a decision restores or diminishes the capacity of soil, water, climate and living communities to support life. It means refusing to count environmental destruction as prosperity simply because the financial benefits appear before the consequences.

Human needs matter deeply.

But they cannot be secured over the long term by destroying the systems through which those needs are met.

These signposts do not provide a blueprint.

An organisation might perform well in one area while reproducing inequality in another. A community enterprise might circulate wealth locally while excluding particular groups. A national public service might provide universal access while offering people little voice in its governance. A local initiative might be highly participatory but lack the resources needed to endure.

The purpose of the signposts is not to sort every initiative into categories of pure or impure.

They help us ask whether an arrangement is moving in a more equal, democratic and ecologically responsible direction.

Is power becoming more distributed or more concentrated?

Are people gaining security and agency?

Are shared foundations being strengthened?

Are benefits and burdens being allocated more fairly?

Is care being supported?

Are ecological limits being respected?

Can the arrangement learn, adapt and remain accountable?

These questions can be applied to a community garden, a housing development, an electricity network, a workplace, a local authority or an entire economic system.

They also reveal that the commons cannot be confined to one political scale or organisational form.

Some commons will be local and relational. Others will require regional coordination, national guarantees or international cooperation.

Public institutions can protect and resource commons. Cooperative organisations can create shared ownership. Markets can sometimes support bounded forms of exchange. Communities can hold knowledge, land and infrastructure in trust across generations.

The task is not to force every part of life into a single model.

It is to prevent any one model—particularly private accumulation through the market—from determining the terms upon which all life must be organised.

I have seen glimpses of commoning wherever people move from asking, “What can I get from this?” towards asking, “What are we responsible for here?”

It appears when people choose to maintain something they may never personally own.

It appears when knowledge is shared so that others become more capable rather than more dependent.

It appears when a group creates rules that constrain its most powerful members as well as its least powerful.

It appears when conflict is treated as something to work through rather than a reason to abandon collective effort.

It appears when people accept that belonging brings obligations as well as rights.

These practices can seem small beside the scale of the crises we face.

But large systems are also made from repeated practices, expectations and relationships. The institutions we inherit tomorrow will grow partly from what we learn to do together today.

Commoning will not eliminate disagreement, scarcity or uncertainty.

It will not guarantee that every collective decision is wise.

It may be slower, messier and more demanding than handing decisions to markets, managers or distant authorities.

But efficiency is not the only quality a society should pursue.

We also need systems that can retain trust, distribute knowledge, withstand disruption, correct mistakes and draw upon the diverse capacities of the people within them.

We need arrangements that are robust enough to continue caring for life in a world that will not remain stable.

The purpose of acting in common is not to create a perfectly harmonious society.

It is to build our collective capacity to live with difference without allowing difference to become domination.

It is to create greater security without demanding endless accumulation.

It is to share power without pretending that power has disappeared.

It is to meet human needs while remaining answerable to the wider living systems that make human life possible.

This work will not begin from a blank page.

Commons already exist around and between us, although we may not always recognise them. Some have endured for generations. Some survive inside public institutions. Others are being rebuilt in neighbourhoods, workplaces, digital networks, farms, marae, cooperatives and movements throughout the world.

They are incomplete, vulnerable and sometimes contradictory.

They are also evidence that human beings are capable of organising life around more than competition and private gain.

Paying closer attention helps us see how deeply our lives are joined.

Acting in common asks us to take that interdependence seriously.

The commons is not a finished destination.

Commoning is the practice of learning how to share power, responsibility and care.

A more equal world will not arrive through one grand solution.

But we can learn to recognise the direction in which we are travelling.

When power is being distributed rather than concentrated;

when the foundations of life are becoming more secure;

when shared wealth is being restored rather than extracted;

when care is supported rather than exploited;

when enough begins to place limits upon excess;

and when human arrangements learn to belong within the living world—

we will know that we are beginning to move towards a future held more fully in common.