

PAYING CLOSER ATTENTION / ESSAY

WHEN THE COMMONS IS CARRIED BY TOO FEW

On participation, responsibility and the invisible work beneath community abundance

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Community initiatives are often photographed at their moment of abundance. A table covered in food. Children picking berries. Volunteers planting trees. Neighbours gathered beneath an open sky.

What the photograph cannot show is the structure holding that moment together: the messages answered after dinner, the funding applications, the relationships maintained, the decisions that cannot be deferred, and the responsibility that gradually settles upon those most willing to carry it.

We celebrate community action without always paying attention to what makes it possible - or to whom it is costing the most.

Two experiments in commoning

Roimata Food Commons began in 2017 on six acres of public land in Woolston, Ōtautahi. It was conceived not simply as a community garden, but as an experiment in returning land, food and participation closer to the commons. People planted trees, gathered for working bees, learned, shared food and encountered a public place differently. The work sought to replace habits of ownership and control with care, relationship and shared nourishment.

Toha Kai followed in 2021. It supplied affordable local and organic produce boxes, sought to reduce waste and plastics, and later began developing a small farm. Its intention was to connect food justice, ecological care, nutrition, energy and local provisioning rather than treating each as a separate concern.

Both initiatives created real value. Neither changed the food system on its own, but that was never the only measure of their worth. They created experiences through which people could taste, sometimes literally, a different relationship with food, land and one another.

We cannot expect that singular small scale initiatives, like Roimata Food Commons and Toha Kai, will change the world. However, that does not limit the unseen changes that occur within communities and families.

I wrote those words in a reflective piece called Agents of Change, about what the projects had taught me about food, sovereignty and commoning. I still believe them. But time has added another layer to the story. Toha Kai is no longer operational. Roimata Food Commons is currently dormant. The question is not only what they achieved, but what their trajectories can teach us about the conditions collective work needs in order to endure.

A wide community of participation, a narrow community of responsibility

Many people contributed to these projects. They planted, harvested, packed boxes, attended events, bought food, offered encouragement and shared knowledge. That participation was genuine and mattered enormously. To say that the organisations came to be carried by too few is not to erase those contributions.

But participation has different depths. Attending a planting day is not the same as ensuring an organisation can meet payroll. Buying a food box is not the same as navigating relationships with landowners, suppliers or funders. Expressing support is not the same as accepting legal responsibility, resolving conflict or making sure the work can continue next week.

A project may have a wide community of participation while possessing only a very narrow community of responsibility.

Over time, much of the operational, relational and emotional responsibility came to rest with a small committed group. Within that group, some responsibilities became more concentrated still. This pattern is easy to fall into. The people who know how to do something are asked to keep doing it. Those who respond reliably receive more requests. Urgency makes it faster to complete a task than to teach someone else. Knowledge and responsibility accumulate together.

From the outside, this concentration can look like efficiency: a small group gets an extraordinary amount done with few resources. From the inside, it is fragility. When one or two people become unwell, exhausted, financially stretched or simply need to step away, essential knowledge and relationships can leave with them.

Looking honestly at my own part

This is not an account of everything other people should have done differently. There are decisions I would reconsider, responsibilities I could have shared sooner, and conversations I would approach differently if I were beginning again.

Founders can unintentionally reinforce the concentration of responsibility that eventually becomes unsustainable. Commitment can begin to resemble control without anyone consciously choosing it. When a vision is held deeply, delegation can feel like a risk to its integrity. When time is short, sharing knowledge can feel slower than continuing to carry it. Capability attracts expectation, and the habit of stepping forward can make it harder for others to find a meaningful way in.

I am certain there are things I could have done better. That recognition matters. But self-reflection does not remove the shared organisational question. If similar initiatives repeatedly become dependent upon small groups of highly committed people, we need to pay attention not only to the personalities involved, but also to the patterns that make concentration feel necessary, sensible and even virtuous until it becomes unsustainable.

Consistency carries more than the workload

Community participation is often measured through numbers: how many people attended, volunteered or received support. Numbers tell us something about reach, but little about continuity. Fifty people appearing once cannot necessarily provide what five people returning regularly can.

Consistency develops practical knowledge. People begin to notice what needs doing without waiting to be asked. They understand the seasons and rhythms of the work. They gain enough confidence to make decisions, provide cover and teach others.

It also develops relationships. Trust rarely emerges from a single successful event. It grows through repeated encounters, small promises kept and the experience of working through difficulty together. People learn not only how the project operates, but how one another respond when plans change or pressure increases.

Consistent participation is not only a source of practical labour. It is part of the relational infrastructure of a commons.

This should not become a criticism of people who can participate only occasionally. Work, income, health, transport and caring responsibilities shape what people can offer. The lesson is not that everyone must give more. It is that an initiative needs enough people able to return often enough for knowledge, trust and responsibility to become shared - and it must make that consistency possible rather than simply hope it appears.

Coherence without conformity

Consistency alone is not enough. A group can meet regularly and still pull in several directions. A commons also needs coherence.

Coherence is not agreement on everything, nor does it require people to think alike. Healthy collective work should be able to hold disagreement, adaptation and multiple forms of knowledge. Coherence means that those differences remain in meaningful relationship with a shared purpose. People understand what the work exists to protect or create, whose needs it serves, which principles cannot be casually traded away, and how their own contribution relates to the whole.

Without that coherence, an organisation can remain busy while its kaupapa fragments. Different people may relate only to the part they personally value. Decisions become a sequence of compromises made under pressure. The founding group may become increasingly protective of the vision, while others experience the work as already decided.

A coherent vision allows responsibility to be distributed without the mahi losing its direction.

The vision cannot live only inside a founder or an original group. It must become a shared practice of interpretation: something spoken about, tested against decisions and renewed through participation. Coherence is not inherited once and for all. It is maintained through attention.

Consistency and coherence therefore reinforce one another. Repeated participation gives people the relationships and context through which a shared purpose can become real. A coherent purpose gives repeated participation meaning, helping people understand why the ordinary and sometimes invisible work matters.

When responsibility remains implicit

In Agents of Change, I wrote:

In hindsight, one of the biggest challenges we haven't known we needed to overcome is the need for separate structures of governance and leadership.

At the time, I was trying to name a difficult tension. Conventional governance could feel distant from the community and the daily life of the work. Yet bringing leadership and governance closer together did not, by itself, spread responsibility. Informal and relational ways of working could leave obligations undefined. Everyone might care, while a small operational group continued to fill the gaps because the work still needed to happen.

The lesson I carry now is less about choosing between formal and informal arrangements than about making responsibility visible. Who is holding which relationships? Who can make which decisions? Who notices when the load has become too heavy? Who is able to step in? These questions sound ordinary, but leaving them unanswered allows responsibility to concentrate quietly.

A role written on paper is not the same as a responsibility held in practice. What mattered was whether enough people remained close enough to the mahi, consistently enough, to understand its pressures and act together when something changed.

What remains

Roimata Food Commons and Toha Kai should not be reduced either to success stories or to failures. They were lived experiments in commoning. They produced food, relationships, ecological restoration, knowledge and moments of genuine abundance. They also exposed how easily visible participation can coexist with invisible concentration of responsibility.

I also want to express my deepest gratitude to everyone who attended or participated in the many working bees, workshops, shared meals and outdoor cinema nights; who walked through the park; or who shared the experience with friends and whānau. The ways we participate in a commons vary greatly in form, depth and duration. Each of those contributions mattered, even though not every form of participation carried the same responsibility. Together, they created experiences of a community becoming more coherent, cohesive and consistent.

For me, the most useful response is neither self-exoneration nor self-blame. It is attention: to what I would do differently, to what others genuinely contributed, and to the organisational patterns that none of us can overcome through goodwill alone.

The question is not how to find more heroic people willing to carry impossible loads. It is how to make room for participation to deepen into stewardship; how to develop consistency without demanding sacrifice; how to hold a coherent purpose without making it the property of a founder; and how to ensure that responsibility is carried widely enough to survive change.

A commons cannot be sustained by commonly held values alone. Its responsibility must also be held widely enough to endure.

That leaves a further question. If consistency and coherence need to live in relationships rather than only in constitutions or mission statements, what kinds of social architecture might help groups hold them - within each group, and between groups over time?