

Title: Natural Capital Accounting versus the Commons:
The Most Sustainable Solution for the Future?

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To the memory of Patrick Lydon who sadly passed away in January 2022, whose ethos of inclusivity and community led to the vibrant community spirit that is Callan today.

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INTRODUCTION

With each United Nations Climate Conference that takes place, it is becoming more widely accepted that global warming and its effects on all planetary life including human existence is an emergency of monumental proportions. There is an urgent obligation to change the current model relating to the world's natural assets and how people operate in the world in order for humankind to have a sustainable living that is equitable with each other and the environment. But how can the world collectively achieve this objective? One possible method is to combine science and economics in the form of Natural Capital Accounting (NCA). According to the United Nations System of Environmental & Economic Accounting, NCA is an accounting framework to systematically measure and financially value natural assets in recognition of their worth and importance to society (2021). This involves looking at these assets through a capitalist or business methodology but this may have risks attached. Another possible method is much older and that is commoning or the commons, where a community share and self-govern all of their resources without private ownership (International Association for the Study of the Commons, 2021). This thesis will look at Natural Capital Accounting principally in relation to natural assets and how they can be valued in this system. It will then look to the commons in its less tangible form relating to community and the value of human relationships, followed by a case study on Workhouse Union, a working practice with a strong commons ethos, based in Callan, Co. Kilkenny. Throughout it will compare and contrast aspects of each method in terms of practicality and sustainability.

Chapter 1 considers the value of natural resources and the prospect of using Natural Capital Accounting to put a worth on these assets that perform their services for free. It also looks at the collection of financial and broader data and how this could provide valuable information previously unknown and thus inform issues around sustainability. This is further examined through the Natural Capital Laboratory in Scotland, a project where land is being re-wilded and monitored using high tech equipment in order to develop a system to record and quantify environmental and social changes. For the purpose of this thesis, Chapter 2 looks at the commons in terms of a community and shared knowledge and compares it to capitalism. It examines the difficulties with defining such commons and recognises the possibility of unintended enclosures being formed via a form of privatisation similar to

capitalism. There is then the possibility of a transitional or hybrid model between capitalism and the commons but it may be that capitalism is so widespread and powerful, it will subsume the commons rather than merge with it. In chapter 3, given the excellent reputation of Workhouse Union and its Creative Director, Rosie Lynch, the author conducted a semi-structured interview with Lynch. Based on this interview and ancillary information provided, this chapter looks at the origins and background of their commons ethos based enterprise, and discusses the practice through a number of their projects in relation to public engagement, what their values are and what they consider to be their assets. It will also consider the challenges of this working model and how it compares to a capitalist model. To conclude this thesis and based on the results of research, the author will reconsider the question regarding which method is the better option for sustainability; valuing natural capital in financial terms or applying a commons model.

Natural capital refers to the living and non-living components of ecosystems – other than people and what they manufacture – that contribute to the generation of goods and services of value for people’ (Guerry et al, 2015, p. 7349).



Fig. 1: Helen McLoughlin, Ash Trees displaying Crown Shyness, 2019

The Value of Natural Capital

In the world as we know it today, every ‘thing’ or asset appears to have a monetary value. However, up until relatively recently, this was not necessarily true. One possible reason for this is that we consider we are back in the “real world” when we leave nature, and only the real world can be valued as it is man-made and extracted or processed by humans. The artificial world is more convenient and takes less effort (Trevors, 2010, pp. 37-38). However, with the increasing awareness of climate change, there is a growing appreciation of the value of nature which is further amplified by the Covid-19 pandemic. Anecdotally during lockdown, people felt the birds were singing more, there were more flowers, and more wild animals visible. Perhaps closer to the truth is that people had the time to revisit the same area regularly and more often, and therefore they became more aware of their surroundings generally. Natural assets such as those relating to the production of

oxygen, the purification of air and water, the sequestration and detoxification of human and industrial waste and the services they provide for the human population were not previously accounted for in a meaningful way, that is, they were not given a measurable value. These assets perform their services for free and while humans can develop sophisticated technology, we cannot replicate the natural systems and certainly not without cost (Hawken et al. 2010, p. 152-3). Such eco services are essential to human existence. For example, trees (fig. 1), while generally acknowledged as a natural asset, have not been valued as a natural capital asset, that is, they had no economic value attached except where the timber was harvested for industry (Bullock, Hawe, 2013, p. 4). Since the time of the Industrial Revolution, there has been an explosion of economic activity, a period when humans have had far greater impact on the natural world than up to that period. While this activity improved the living standards of many, the effect on 'free' natural resources was overlooked; the view was short term.

There is a fundamental asymmetry at the heart of economic systems that rewards short-term production and consumption of marketed commodities at the expense of stewardship of natural capital necessary for human well-being in the long term. (Guerry et al. 2015, p. 7348).

This period marks the beginning of consumerism and the drive for progress, where progress can be measured as financial gain as opposed to progress in terms of a more equitable world for all. There is further urbanisation which, while preferable to spreading developments across the rural, may be responsible for a disconnect from nature (Turner et al. 2004, p. 588). If people cannot see and feel nature, how can they comprehend its value? But if there is a monetary value assigned, worth is implicit. In 2005, the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MA), as well as providing strong evidence that human activity was seriously damaging ecosystems, emphasised the importance of natural capital and ecosystem services in relation to human wellbeing (Guerry et al. 2015, p. 7349). Very often, something that is free is less valued, less respected, and taken for granted; there is the sense that supply is endless. So how can natural capital be assessed?

Natural Capital Accounting

"You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete" (Fuller, nd). Perhaps it is time to make the old model obsolete and build a new model. Over the past 20-30 years, there have been developments in many countries in terms of ecosystem accounting. The aim of this is to broaden the range of considerations taken into

account with regard to policy making and to better understand the interdependencies between the economy and the environment (European Environment Agency, 2011, p. 7). However, there are issues with putting a value on such variable entities and difficulties with quantifying same. Whether counted in tonnes or carbon units, or surface area, so long as the information is captured and recorded, it is recognising the value of the asset. The United Nations has developed the System of Environmental-Economic Accounts (SEEFA) which standardises this information, further enabling policy makers to understand how the environment works together with the economy (Natural Capital Ireland, 2021). According to Lange et al (cited in Schaefer et al. 2015, p. 1), the fact that natural capital may be the source of almost one third of the wealth of developing countries is directing more attention to conservation and sustainable development. This in itself is evidence that putting an economic value on natural resources will be of benefit to the environment. Analysing all of the constituent parts and their interrelatedness provides a wealth of information which further feeds into policy making, which may be key to halting climate change. This is supplemental information which would have been previously unavailable in relation to economics.

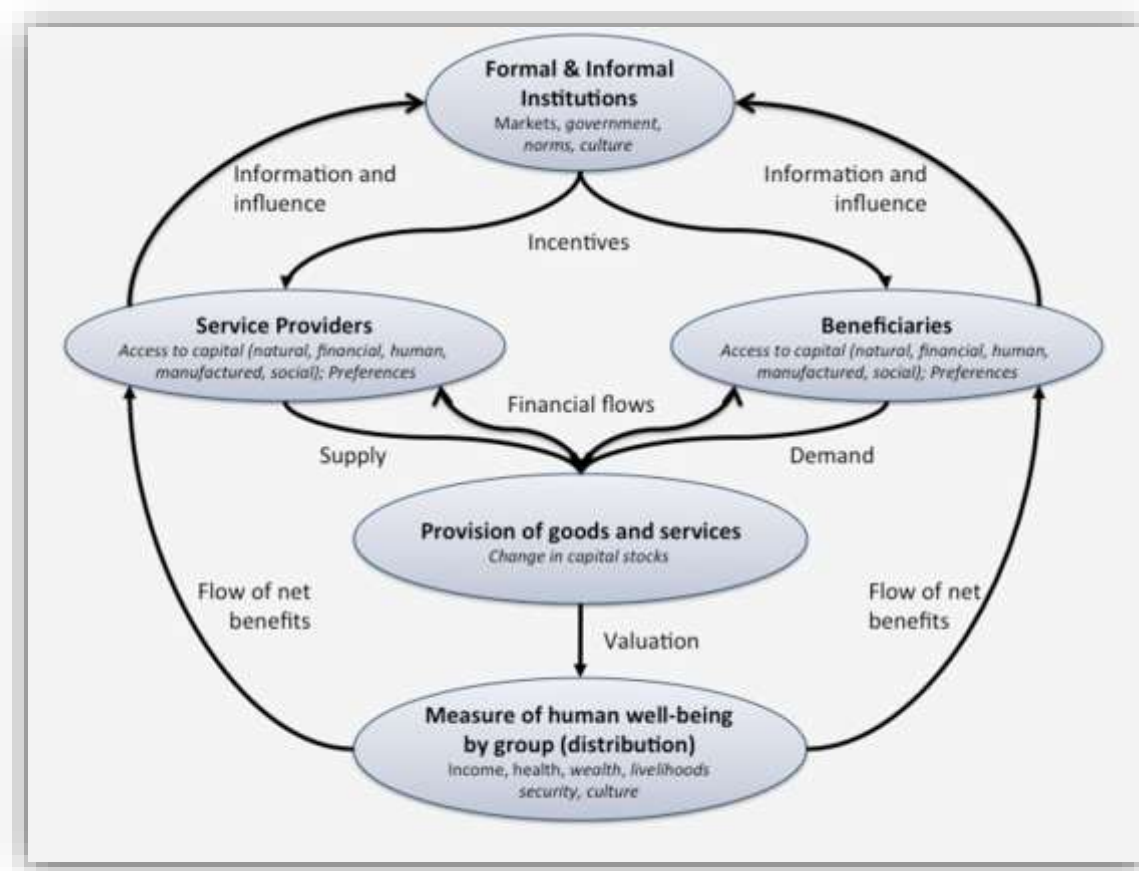


Fig 2: Guerry et al. (2015) Framework for including natural capital in the broader context of formal and informal decision-making institutions along with other forms of capital: financial, human, manufactured and social.

Sustainability

With this accounting model (fig. 2) which amplifies the value of natural capital, there is closer monitoring of waste with an eye to sustainability and repair. According to a report prepared for Woodlands of Ireland 2013, native woodland has an economic value range of €100-143m/year, relating to aspects such as amenity use, international tourism and carbon sequestration. Such woodlands provide valuable eco systems; habitat, landscape, water quality, erosion control and flood mitigation all of which have value as natural capital. Significantly, non-native conifer plantations have lower natural capital, in that they are a monoculture with little or no diversity growing alongside due to dense shade, as well as clear-felling for timber production (Bullock, Hawe, 2013, p. 3). With the advent of more frequent severe weather events such as flooding, there is a very strong argument for investing in more native woodlands, therefore an investment in natural capital. 'Humans cannot survive by stomping on all the others' (Tsing, 2015, p. vii). The anthropocene is known as the period when homo sapiens are said to have significantly impacted the environment, but while humans have attempted to master nature, nature has other ideas (Natural History Museum, 2021). Extraction, forest clearance, water pollution are the ugly and detrimental signs of the industrial age – all carried out as a version of human rights to use the land to create jobs and money. On the other hand, human obligations and our responsibility to leave a sustainable world behind can perhaps become possible if we learn to value these assets and have an appropriate formula going forward.

Natural Capital Laboratory

The term natural capital was first introduced to me on seeing a BBC TV programme called Countryfile (2021) relating to the Natural Capital Laboratory. This laboratory is a 100 acre site in Scotland which was previously a commercial timber plantation; the owners' original idea was simply to re-wild the site, but since 2019 it has been developed into the Natural Capital Laboratory Project (fig. 3). This is a collaboration between the owners, Emilia and Roger Leese, NGO - The Lifescape Project, environmental consultancy firm - AECOM and the University of Cumbria. The project will monitor the site using a multi-disciplinary team including scientists, academics, conservationists, and economists, where it will be re-wilded, mapped and tracked over a period of 5 years. In addition to rewilding and protecting the site, the aim is to develop a 'capitals accounting framework' (fig. 4) that records, quantifies and values the environmental and social changes on the site (The

Lifescape Project, 2021). This will be achieved using high tech equipment such as artificial intelligence (AI), drone technology, earth observation data, GIS data, and thermal imaging (AECOM, 2021). Already, with the benefit of field study and technology, a 14 hectare peat bog not shown on any existing maps has been discovered, and now plans can be made to repair where necessary and protect this important resource. The ultimate aim is that research on this project will move the field forward so that the information and methods can be shared; science in tandem with economics (Countryfile, 2021). This sharing of information could be considered a Commons in the sense that this information is used for the collective good.



Fig. 3: AECOM, Natural Capital Laboratory, 2021

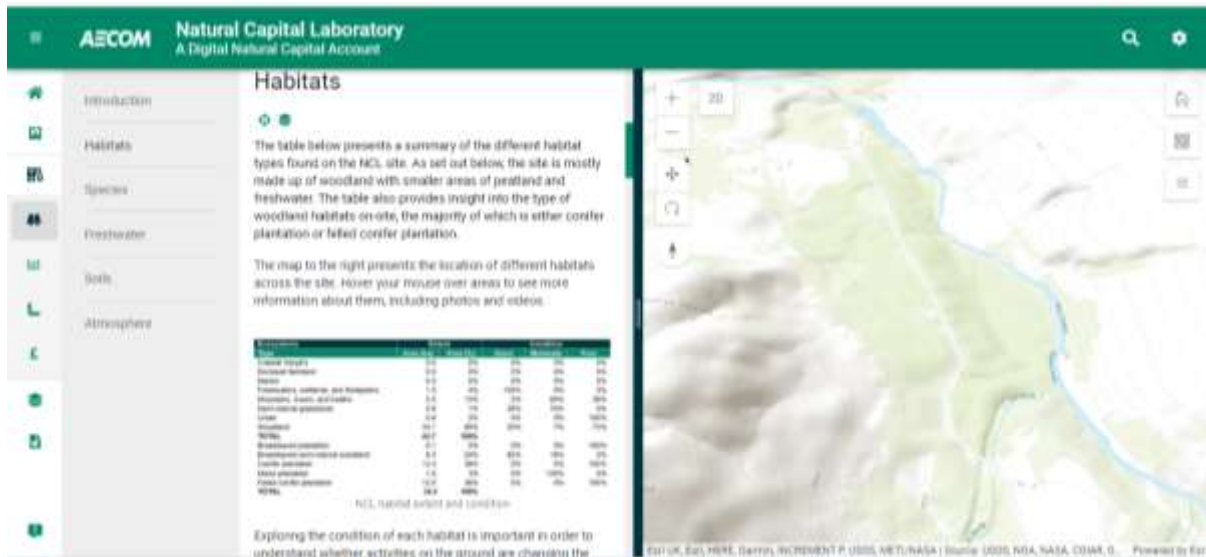


Fig. 4: AECOM (2021) Plan Engage UK, Screenshot from Digital Natural Capital Account

However, could putting a monetary value on natural assets be a risky strategy? The Natural Capital Laboratory is backed by AECOM, a publicly traded company and as such, this global company must return a profit. On the 'Fast Fact' section of their website (fig. 5), the first fact states 'Approximately \$13.2 billion of professional services revenue during fiscal year 2020', and the second fact relates to their position on the Fortune 500. While other facts refer to being #1 in the Top 200 Environmental Firms for 2020 and being named one of the World's Most Ethical Companies for 2021, there is a sense that perhaps environmental issues are another area from which to profit [AECOM, 2021]. Another example of this facet appears on the reviews page of the book, *Natural Capitalism: The Next Industrial Revolution*, where former US President Bill Clinton comments 'Natural Capitalism basically proves... that there are presently available technologies... which will permit us to get richer by cleaning, not by spoiling, the environment' (Hawken et al. 2010, flyleaf). This further illustrates the emphasis on profit in relation to this model, as well as a primarily capitalist way of thinking. On the other hand, in order for any business to be sustainable, it does need to turn a profit and enormous funding is required for projects such as Natural Capital Laboratory. This funding has to originate somewhere, but monitoring of the motivation and methods used must be considered also.

Fast facts

- Approximately \$13.2 billion of Professional Services revenue during fiscal year 2020
- Listed at #189 on the Fortune 500 as one of America's largest companies
- Ranked #1 in *Engineering News-Record's* 2020 "Top 200 Environmental Firms"
- Ranked #1 in Transportation and General Building in *Engineering News-Record's* 2020 "Top 500 Design Firms"
- Named one of *Fortune* magazine's "World's Most Admired Companies" for the sixth consecutive year
- Named one of *2021 World's Most Ethical Companies* for its commitment to integrity and making a positive impact by Ethisphere



Fig 5: AECOM (2021) Fast Facts

However, there exists an alternative system for valuing and sharing natural resources; that is the Commons or Commoning.

The term commons originates from the way communities managed ‘common’ or shared land in medieval Europe. Over time, the term expanded to include natural resources such as forests and water. More recently, it has grown to encompass less tangible shared assets such as knowledge, digital and cultural commons (International Association for the Study of the Commons, 2021). In terms of physical resources, it could be said that the commons in its early definition relates to natural capital. However, the commons additionally embraces the human contribution in terms of community and shared knowledge and that is the aspect looked at here.

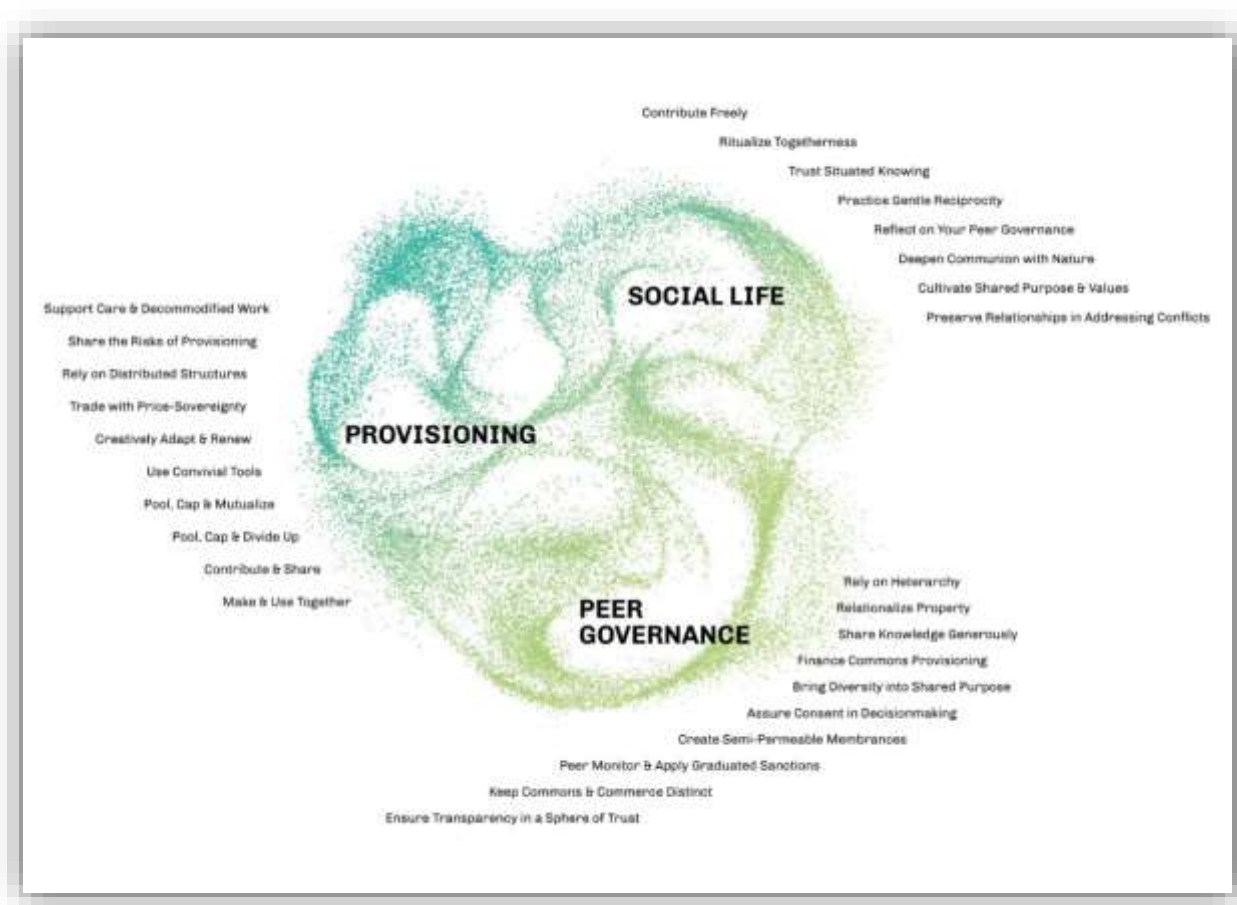


Fig. 6. Bollier D and Helfrich S, Triad Framework. 2019

The Commons and Community

The commons can be seen as a community with obligations as well as with entitlements; those that belong must contribute in order to benefit themselves and the whole (Federici, Caffentzis, p. 93). However, once a commons is framed as a community, it can be more difficult to define and therefore the assets are more intangible. These less tangible assets incorporate human relations and social engagement. In the Provisioning segment of Bollier & Helfrich’s Triad Framework

(fig. 6), Make & Use Together suggests a connection and understanding between the maker/designer and the end user (Bollier, Helfrich, 2019). This points towards a potential flaw in the conventional economic model where the producer and the consumer are seen as entirely separate entities. However, in the community ethos of the commons, there is a shared interest and relationship between these two parties in that the object being made should be of use to all. In this sense, the maker is designing from a moralistic standpoint, making something that they would like to use themselves and could see being of benefit to others in their community. There is also an onus on them to meet the expectations of their community. This can be seen in the development of open source software known as peer to peer (P2P) where a community of developers build software together in a commons model and it is free for all to access without cost (Bauwens et al, 2019, p.1). Each participant shares and benefits from the learnings of others. On the contrary, when it comes to the capitalist model, the end goal is to make a commodity that as many people as possible will want to buy, and therefore turn a profit for the business owner. The makers/designers are a means to a financial end, or perhaps even a commodity themselves.

A community unified by a common interest or concern is crucial in order to manage a commons (Cangelosi, 2014, p. 15). As the areas of interest can vary widely from say a simple urban vegetable garden project where people share in the labour and the produce, to a local village hall where there may be a cash income from renting out the space, there is a need to tailor the organisation and management of these commons on a case by case basis (Ostrom in Cangelosi, 2014, p.9). This suggests that there cannot be a 'one size fits all' prototype, which points to the complexities involved in commons thinking. It may be problematic that some people involved in commoning projects such as urban gardens may not be aware of the debates around this issue, or the theory of the commons itself (Cangelosi, 2014, p. 3). While these individuals may understand the ethos of community in relation to their own project, would they benefit from having a greater knowledge of the philosophy behind the subject which is largely written about in academic terms? There is much debate about the blurred differences between the basic forms of collective property and how this may relate to a community (Quilligan, nd). Achieving clarity is challenging but it is possible that greater awareness of the commons as a way of thinking would push this debate forward and further any endeavours for legislation. Though, it is not

recognised as a legal category¹, proposing the commons as a third classification alongside private and public could provide a more holistic world view in relation to human rights, responsibility to future generations and prevailing use over property (Cangelosi, 2014). It is the contention of the author that recognition and legal standing of the commons in relation to policy making could assist communities in self-government, thereby making this a more viable option going forward.

The Commons and Privatisation

Privatisation can be defined as the transfer of jurisdiction from the public domain to a constrained group or individual where the control of the resource is based on market relations (Partelow et al, 2019). Common property can sometimes be seen as a form of privatisation because in spite of the common aspect, there may be the facility for individuals or the group to transfer or sell the property. This potential aspect of the commons can lead to a form of unintended enclosure of somewhat homogenised members. For example, home buyers may seek a secure neighbourhood in which to live. While this is an understandable desire, it can result in a kind of gated community which is more about keeping others out (Federici, Caffentzis, 2013, p. 91). At the outset, this may have appeared to be an inclusive and shared space where home owners co-operated regarding the upkeep of common areas, yet there is an air of exclusivity at play here. Could this exclusivity be deemed a form of privatisation?



Fig. 7. Guardian News & Media (2011) Occupy Wall Street

¹ No legal category at 2014, and the author found no evidence of legislation being implemented since 2014.

There is also the *Occupy Movement*, an international social & political movement protesting against social inequality, where demonstrators temporarily take over public spaces (fig. 7) (Library of Congress, 2011). Notwithstanding the principled aims in mounting such protests and drawing attention to societal injustice, the fact of 'taking over' a public space could be considered an enclosure keeping others of opposing views out. It can be difficult to find a balance and care is required from the outset to clarify what the aims are and how these will contribute and benefit all of society, as opposed to creating an exclusive group, a 'them' and 'us'. From the findings of my research, this is juxtaposed by the view of Lynch in Chapter 3 relating to the formation of intentional communities such as Camphill Communities of Ireland whose ethos is centred around inclusion and access for those with disabilities. The aim here is to ensure that the residents mix and connect with the wider community rather than keep them enclosed but separate from the rest of society (Lynch, 2022).

When it comes to the capitalist model, a rationale for privatisation is stereotypically based on the economic principle that limited resources need to be controlled, though this could be considered a disguise for the desire for power and profit (Partelow et al, 2019). In fact, enclosure and privatisation of the commons may be essential to the advancement of capitalism, particularly in relation to natural resources.

Contemporary theorization has by extension tended to concentrate on further losses of the commons under neoliberalism, as water and other natural resources have been privatized, as more of the natural environment has been commodified, and as everything from cultural histories, ecological wonders and musical inventiveness to patents on genetic materials has become big business (Harvey, 2009, p. 258).

Privatisation may indeed be the next frontier for capitalism. Protection of natural resources from self-serving private interests is a strong motivation for policy making around the commons, as well as ensuring that the needs of all sectors of society are included and considered.

Transitional Model

While new genres of commons such as the advent of open source software continue to be generated, it can be difficult for these commons to prevail in the face of neoliberal values. Can two such conflicting models live side by side? In order to live sustainably both in terms of protecting the environment and yet having enough

money to live, characteristics of both capitalism and the commons may need to be merged. Federici and Caffentzis contend that “capitalist development requires the destruction of communal properties and relations” (2013, p. 85). Given the fundamental differences between working for the greater good or making a financial profit, perhaps it is necessary to consider the commons as a third space on a level with the Market and the State (Federici, Caffentzis, 2013, p.91). This could recalibrate authority and provisioning in more non-discriminatory ways (Bollier, Weston in Federici, Caffentzis, 2013, p. 91). Attempting to combine such disparate systems is a challenging prospect, but perhaps this triarchy could be simply condensed to the abolition of private property (Marx & Engels in Hardt, 2010)? As well as being unrealistic, this is too reductive, for what exactly is defined as property if the commons now comprises natural resources as well as the outcomes of human labour and creativity? At first, it seems possible to understand property in the basic physical sense as a ‘thing’ like coal in a mine - that is, until you introduce natural and unquantifiable resources like the air or the oceans. Then there are the even less definable, non-physical properties resulting from human labour and creativity (Hardt, 2010). And yet if all of this ‘property’ could be measured, perhaps it would bring us closer to creating a model combining elements of capitalism together with the commons. It is possible that the more attempts that are made to quantify this range of resources, however tangible or intangible, the farther a transitional model moves away from the commons ethos. But is there a middle ground?

Origins & Ethos

Based in Callan, Co. Kilkenny, Workhouse Union is located in a former workhouse, originally used for housing the poor during the late 1800s and early 1900s; their facilities include an office, print studio, research room and library. This building is owned by Camphill Communities and many of those involved at the outset of Workhouse Union had in common a Camphill Communities ethos of income-shared and life-shared where there is a strong commitment to sharing all of the social, economic and physical resources of a community. These roots informed Workhouse Union's foundational philosophy, and their method of operation developed through a collaborative art and architectural project called *Commonage* during 2010-12 (Lynch, 2022). The first year of *Commonage* year saw an architectural exhibition – a collaboration of architects and artists - radically exploring the built environment of Callan and included works situated in civic public spaces of the town (Culturestruction, 2022). Considering art as 'a bundle or relations in the world' can further extend the scope of such qualitative research (Bourriaud in Lennon, 2020, p. 2). This socially engaged approach of involving people and communities in debate and exploring commonly shared value systems underpins Workhouse Union. With this commons ethos of co-design and co-production – they work collaboratively with artists, designers, crafts-people and architects on projects examining housing and civic infrastructure.

Public Engagement

In the sphere of co-design and co-production where every stakeholder has an input, qualitative research is key and requires time and sensitivity. Because of its complexity, this is an area where local authorities often retain Workhouse Union to lead a public engagement process. For example, if a local authority is building a new park, while there would be public consultation, they understand that this could miss the voices of groups who need assistance to engage in this process. In Lynch's experience, the planners support and understand the benefit of engaging Workhouse Union (2021). This engagement can be seen in *Youth and Skate Park 2017* where Kilkenny Recreation & Sports Partnership connected with Kilkenny County Council and commissioned Workhouse Union to design and plan a new of garden in Kilkenny. In collaboration with Todo Por La Praxis, a Spanish architects collective, Workhouse Union facilitated a youth-led process involving young people

in the design of the area, as well as engaging them in critical thinking around public space in the city which is largely used by young people (Workhouse Union, 2022). Workhouse Union are well placed with their expertise, knowledge and contacts to do such a study and make it more accessible to all. This commons approach of community consultation engendered in the process allows a more equitable outcome (Federici, Caffentzis, p. 93). Time was given to qualitatively consult with the young people whereas capitalist models typically seek and operate on quantitative information.

Value of Lived Experience

Integral to qualitative research is the assistance of the local community, as well as community leaders and groups. These are the people who have commitment to the area coupled with a lived experience and this must be respected. Lynch finds this to be a humbling experience where the commons can be seen at play and the tension between the ground up, top down approach is apparent. It is about bringing in the lived experience on the same level as the expert knowledge (Lynch, 2021). It is problematic to try and economically value the lived experience compared to hourly rate expert advice. As a kind of broker engaging in the middle space, Workhouse Union can promote deference between both knowledge bases to produce a more sustainable outcome. *Nimble Spaces* is a citizen-led project with an inclusive approach to housing needs in Callan, exploring how new housing patterns can be developed. The project grew out of earlier research on how to enable people with disabilities to articulate their needs in a home. This research phase was part of the previously mentioned *Commonage* when LiD Architecture developed the “Enabling Space Game” as a means to aid spatial and design collaboration for less abled participants from Camphill Communities (fig. 8) (LiD Architecture, 2022). This innovative game allowed these participants to express their needs physically which would not have happened in other engagement processes. Ultimately, 26 houses will be built across 3 separate locations and nine of these homes will be for members of Camphill Communities. In this project, Workhouse Union act as producers, alongside the future residents, artists and architects (Lynch, 2020). Their work facilitates a range of engagement on many levels, starting with the more creative process, then working with architects and planners through to the stage now where they have full planning permission. It is the contention of Lynch that when leading public engagement, intentionality is very important. It must be clear from the outset of a project that everyone is working with intentionality; they know why they are

there, what their involvement is and where they are going (2021). This exposure to mixed abilities and an ethos of inclusion that permeates the town has built greater awareness overall.



Fig. 8 LiD Architecture (2018) Enabling Space Game

Assets/Challenges

In terms of the assets of Workhouse Union, relationships are key. As well as those forged locally, relationships with artists, architects, planners, local authorities are fostered throughout the county, nationally and internationally. This provides a large community of practice working across many different disciplines. The fact that Workhouse Union are committed to place, having been in Callan now for 10+ years, provides a local community of support, as well as trust from local public authorities. Lynch believes they would be 'very poor' without these relationships which give them the ability to act as enablers in their projects (Lynch, 2021). However, while this is clearly an essential and respected element, it is both difficult to quantify and value financially. It is intangible. 'Placemaking', a term used by architects, planners and urban designers to describe the creation of spaces for people to live and work, is seen through a phenomenological lens by Hannah Arendt as the relationality of experience concerning the public realm and society (Lennon, 2020, p. 3). This phenomenological approach may better describe these intangible assets, though it does not assist in valuing them. Perhaps the closest comparison in the economic/business sense is a designer's 'little black book' with details of their best contacts for any given job. This is vital information which enables the designer to

work better, and in the same sense, the relationships which Workhouse Union has built, also enable them to produce better outcomes.

A related asset which is equally unquantifiable is the dynamic energy that comes from these relationships and the synergy created from a wide range of skill sets. As evidenced in *Nimble Spaces*, many different people have worked on this project over the years and it continues to be in dynamic flow in the sense that the skill and knowledge base of those involved is constantly 'refreshing and renewing'. Naturally, the Workshop Union team are fundamental to this dynamism and as such are an intrinsic asset of the organisation. They are also fortunate to have many local arts organisations skilled in diverse disciplines which on occasion provide additional support to the team. For example, if a performative element is required, it can be farmed out to Asylum Productions who have the relevant expertise (Lynch, 2021). Considering all of the assets listed, the dominant theme is human interaction and collaboration. It is essential to have co-operation suited to the local ecosystem so that users of the service understand its legitimacy (Ostrom, 2008, p. 17). Over the years, this association has evolved with its location and engenders co-operation and respect within the community, which in turn become additional strengths of Workhouse Union.

However, working in this middle space can be problematic as roles are difficult to define and can be fluid. At the start of a project, it is important for all stakeholders to understand the ethos underpinning the work. While Workhouse are recognised as a trusted partner, it can be challenging to define their work process. Therefore, they are currently drafting a set of principles outlining their approach to ethics, care and participation, to be used as a basis for discussion at the project outset so that the more intangible aspects of their work are fully understood (Lynch, 2021). Given the complexity of the Commons ethos, this document should ensure that roles and aims are clear from the start. Providing "*institutional infrastructure is an essential investment to increase the effectiveness of internal operations within a commons as well as link any particular resource and its user to larger regimes*" (Ostrom, 2008, p. 18). While fluidity is important in how Workhouse Union works, there is also the need for guidelines to provide clarity. Another project that they are currently consulting on is *Ballykeeffe Amphitheatre* which is a successful outdoor entertainment venue developed in a former quarry (fig. 9). This has been run on a solely voluntary basis for many years and due to its success, has reached the stage

where they need to have some paid staff (Lynch, 2022). This transition from a voluntary commons model requires the expertise of Workhouse Union in mediating how this can be done without losing the spirit of community that Ballykeeffe has built up over time. This highlights the difficulties around combining their community ethos with a sustainable model where staff can earn a living.



Fig. 9 Ballykeeffe Amphitheatre, 2019

Over the past ten years, Workhouse Union has evolved from an artists' collective model to being a Company Limited by Guarantee (CLG). This structure is typically used by charitable organisations and clubs. It has taken a long time to reach this more sustainable juncture where two employees are now on permanent wages but this slow growth has allowed them to become more complex and learn from a vast range of experience (Lynch, 2021). Additional funding, often project-specific, comes from organisations such as The Arts Council of Ireland or local authorities. While tools are developing for analysis of natural resources, there is still a difficulty around valuing social interaction and community resources. These assets of the Commons require continuing experimentation and trialling of approaches into the future in order to ensure sustainability (Ostrom, 2008, p. 19).

CONCLUSION

In an attempt to find the better prospect for sustainability of the environment and humankind, this thesis compared the proposition of putting a financial value on natural resources against the commons philosophy of valuing human relationships in terms of community engagement. While these facets are quite different to each other, what they share is an intangibility particularly in terms of being measurable. Chapter 1 looks at the value of natural resources and how Natural Capital Accounting can be used to assess their worth, as well as gathering additional information through projects such as the Natural Capital Laboratory which is backed by a publicly traded company. Chapter 2 examines the commons in terms of community and shared knowledge, the difficulties in its definition as well as the risks of privatisation and considers it in relation to capitalism. Chapter 3 looks at the ethos underlining Workhouse Union and their socially engaged projects, and what assets and challenges they have.

From my research, given the benefits and challenges of both models, I believe that taking a little from Natural Capital Accounting and embedding this in a commons ethos may be the way forward. Looking first to Natural Capital Accounting, it is a positive that this method combines two areas of expertise, science and economics. Without the involvement of science, this could be a very one-dimensional approach of financially valuing assets, though it must be acknowledged that applying a financial value to such resources may be beneficial in increasing public respect and awareness. Furthermore, with the advent of high tech and a multi-disciplinary approach, Natural Capital Accounting produces additional scientific information, much of which has not been gathered previously. This information has the potential to become an open source commons with lessons in terms of sustainability of natural resources and monitoring of waste which could inform future policy making. It is noted that Natural Capital Laboratory state their intention to share this information. However, this system requires significant funding and the fact that the partners on this project, AECOM, are a publicly traded company listed in the Fortune #500, puts their motivation in question. Protection of natural resources from self-serving private interests is a strong incentive for policy making around the commons. Therefore, in order to avoid the danger of capitalist enterprise taking over or privatising such resources, I believe that policies to monitor the source and motive behind such

funding would be essential, together with governmental oversight. This is an area that would need further specialist research. While this possible way forward has elements from both sides, there is something missing in that it does not account for human relationships, community and the ethos of working for the greater good. In the commons approach, community and relationships are key; there is an awareness and mutual respect for each other and the environment. This can be a difficult space to manage due to the variety of types of commons communities. Even for Workhouse Union which is a very successful operation, it has taken many years to reach a point of sustainability where some of the team are now on salaries, and it must also rely on outside funding. This is where legislative acknowledgement of the commons would have a place in recognising it as a third space beside private and public. As well as the benefit of providing structure, I believe that this legal recognition would promote more debate around commoning and open up discussion on the theories underpinning it to a wider audience outside of academic journals. I contend that this would put it on more of a level playing field with capitalism and therefore, it would gain more traction.

My hopes going forward are for a society that truly values and respects natural resources, as well as community and humanity, in order to provide a sustainable future. However, I believe that further investigation is required into how Natural Capital Accounting projects are financed, as well as looking at new ways in which to value and protect community. Returning to the words of Buckminster Fuller that you never change things by fighting the existing reality (Fuller, nd), I believe that capitalism is here to stay and the future is about how aspects of it can be manoeuvred and utilised to facilitate a more inclusive and holistic society.

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Interview Transcript

Rosie Lynch, Creative Director of Workhouse Union

Interviewed by Helen McLoughlin

14 January 2022

HMCL: In terms of a commons, how does Workhouse Union operate on a day to day basis?

RL: From a commons perspective?

HMCL: I'm thinking, community. So it's a community really, isn't it?

RL: Yes. Well, I'd have to go back a little bit. Yeah, that's a good point. Because actually, Callan Workers Union is now a CLG, a company limited by guarantee. We would have a very normal organisational structure now. We're 10 years into practice and we've gone through lots of iterations. But we would be very influenced in terms of how we work from the Commons, so if I go back and start at the beginning. In Ireland, we don't have that many organisational structures, beyond a not for profit, like in England, you have a Community Interest Company, it's halfway between a private enterprise and a not for profit, that can support social enterprise in a more Co-Op sort of way. So, we would be looking at lots of different models, but we have become a CLG. What's more important is what our values are, and how we approach work. I've been working in Callan since 2010, and our first artistic product WHU came out of was called Commonage. And we were looking at the spaces of the commons in the town of Callan through art and architecture, and we were invited in by Patrick Leyden who had started KCAT and who, I don't know if you're familiar with Camphill.

HMCL: I understand.

RL: I grew up in Camphill and I suppose that's radically Commons in in that people live in Camphill both income shared and what's called life shared. So, it was based on a very strong kind of commitment to sharing all of the social, economic and physical resources of the community. So I suppose that's kind of our heritage and

my lived experience, but also quite a number of people working Workers Union have kind of come through a Camphill or at least a Steiner background. We wouldn't preface it on our website or anything but it's a shared value system. The Commons is such a huge, huge area. Through the Commonage project, I would have looked at a lot from theoretical backgrounds, I would have done a lot of reading, a lot of engaging with other projects internationally, that were engaged with the Commons, very much looking at the Irish perspective of land through commonages, and then also the kind of co-op movement and all of that. But I suppose how it influences our work now, is how we engage with people and place, and everybody that we work with. We very much ground our work and ideas of co-design and co-production. So we kind of broadly come from this concept of the Commons so for example. Dunamaggin is going through a kind of process of village renewal and looking at ways of improving its community assets, and the urban realm, but how do we embed the Commons in those processes? It's through this kind of co-design and co-production, which is bringing ALL stakeholders in on an equal footing. And not going into those binary positions of whether you're a funder and you're the local authority, and these are the kind of marginalised community which is creating a very push and pull but by using the Commons, it is very much that concept that is beyond private and public, it's this other thing. Maybe in our community development and artwork, it's about our shared humanity rather than our positions. That way of working, would be very influenced by an architect called Ted B Cruz, an architect from Guatemala, but working in San Diego, which is on the Mexico-US border. And he very much speaks to this idea of artists and architects not working outside the system as a provocateur or the other, so that a kind of socially engaged art practice or collaborative architecture happens as a special thing disconnected from the Civic. You know, everything else that say happens in a city or a town or a community, but rather, as artists, architects and activists, we need to engage in the middle and bring the bottom up and top down together. And thinking of Commons in terms of land and nature, but then I think if we think of Commons in terms of human interactions, it's finding that balance in bringing people together in that middle space. Because I think there's a lot more opportunity to really move on that and that's what's happening Callan in that there's been a lot of community and activity and engagement but then a lot of projects have come to fruition through very good collaboration with the local authority or through Leader. And I think it's working in that space of the commons because none of it you can be purely defined as public or private. It is a sort of messy space. It's much easier as an artist to say I'm going to

do my social engage practice over here and it's going to be very much within a community context and I'm not going to engage with authorities or with funding – but that's being very superficial. And then in terms of how workhouse union kind of engages on a day to day level, we definitely all have roles. We would have worked much more as a collective maybe six years ago. But actually, I think all of us found that getting better defined roles and responsibilities actually made our work easier. So in that sense, we wouldn't work as a traditional kind of Art or architecture Collective, we definitely have a team with assigned roles and responsibilities and all of that. So it's organised in that sense. Yeah. And roles defined?

HMCL: What are the assets then of Callan Workhouse Union? I'm not necessarily talking about the building. What I was looking at was putting financial value on natural assets. And comparing that to what you're doing? It's a social value, I guess. So I suppose, what would you see as the assets of the Workhouse Union?

RL: Yeah, that's a really good question. I think probably our relationships would be our biggest asset, the relationships that that we have with a wide group of people that we work with in Callan but in Kilkenny, and even across Ireland, so I think that's what I see as our network or our web; our community of practice is quite large. And it's because we work across so many different disciplines. So, I think that we and in a sense, Workhouse Union, are like enablers. Without all of those communities of practice, and people that we engage with, we would be very poor. It's not like one of us has this kind of dynamic practice, you know, it's quite different. Reputationally, that's spread across so many different people in so many projects, rather than there being this kind of superhero or a reputation it's hinged on to.

HMCL: When you're saying relationships, that it's the skills of those people?

RL: Yes, the skills but also the dynamic energy that goes between those projects, so let's say for one of the big projects were very involved in, a project called Nimble Space, it's a housing project. And we've been working with lots of different people on that project over years. And because it's so complex, we constantly have to be refreshing, it hasn't been built yet. There's planning for it, but it's, you know, still very much in in a dynamic flow. And so we're constantly learning, it's a sort of a sort of figure of eight, you kind of go at it, you're refreshing, and renewing your skill and knowledge base, and also, all of those connections give a huge amount of sense of,

we're on the right track, we're part of other projects. So that's, I think one - our relationships. Then that also means that because our work is so unique, we're not very easily defined in terms of what kind of organisation we are. So, our team is very important. The people who, who work in the core team, and, you know like our research producer left in June, and it was this voyage, you know, like, it wasn't just like, oh, we'll find another Sinead. It was like - Sinead was more than that. And I would say, I mean, I could go on and on. I mean, that's maybe enough, you know, enough. You don't want too much.

HMCL: So then, in that sense, just it's kind of a quick question really, and it's answered itself, I think it's not really quantifiable your assets as such, because they're intangible really.

RL: They're intangible, but I would also say, we're doing a strategic plan this year. And we're also working with a social research professor from the University of West Lancashire, Ali Roy, and we are partnering with Visual Carlow on this piece of work. And we're looking at creating an approach to ethics care and participation in our work. It's really just a set of principles that we can discuss with people when either working with an artist or architect or community or funder. Because those things are very shared in our team and with a lot of people we work with, but they're often not when go out a little bit. Because maybe when you're saying intangible, we need to be able to better define what those intangible values are, assets, because otherwise it's misunderstood.

HMCL: So people need to know, in advance before you before you talk to them.

RL: Yes, and then there can be a conversation and it's not like these are going to be fixed in policies. But, you know, for instance, the work that probably we were best known for - we would be invited by local authority or leader company or community group to work with them. That's how most of our work happens. And then also, some of our work is funded through the Arts Council, and it's that balance that I love, because the Arts Council work is very creative, but it's very driven by artistic ambition, and then our work with communities and, and in government agencies is we're delivering, but it's that dynamic that I really like. So what we get asked to do a lot from a kind of a local authority or government agency perspective is to lead public engagement processes. So let's say a new park is being developed, and there might

have been council would have done a big kind of open public consultation, but they realise that they missed maybe the voices and experiences of groups that would need to be supported to engage in those kind of statutory processes. So it could be people with disability, or mental health, or traveller communities, and we'd have a very specific idea of and we really respect those processes. So we need to make sure when we're engaging that we're not, this is what we do this, this is how it's valued. Mostly there is a shared understanding, but there's always a fear that we could become just doing these very superficial tech boxy sexy looking public engagement that has nice graphics that isn't quality driven.

HMCL: Do you think then, because obviously, say the county council has a specific aim, that your approach is equitable, more inclusive of that people who aren't usually heard? How do you even choose who you speak to?

RL: Yeah, that's the norm though it's totally different for each project. I think it's, it comes down to resources. So people in the planning department in the County Council, they understand the work that we do, it's not like it's from a different universe. They're often planners who may have explored all of participatory planning, but just within their budgets and their resources, they can't do the level that we can get to. So that's why they bring us in, because they want that more qualitative, we don't do quantitative. It's more qualitative and also it's arts led. So we use a lot of creative approaches and bring in designers, artists and those processes too. So the question you asked was, is it more equitable? It's obviously on a smaller scale and it's much more qualitative. And we give the time and space.

HMCL: Maybe I should have used the word accessible more than equity?

RL: Yeah. I think accessible. Yes. Often in that work, we're almost given a brief from the County Council that they're often very aware of the communities and people that they're missing that they haven't heard from. Then sometimes it's much more open. And when we can really engage, but I think one thing we have learned, and it's been a real humbling experience is that we have to work with community groups and community leaders and organisations on the ground for our work to be effective. So our work does not work if we think or imagine that Workhouse Union has the traction to meet all those requirements and get the word out - we don't. So we always have to work in very close partnership with the web of people on the ground

who are working in this area every day. So that's humbling, and I suppose that's where I really see the Commons at play. It's always that tension between the ground up and the top down approach to community development.

HMCL: And in terms of people who you would consult with or engage with, do you think they have a respect for what you do in the sense that they know where you're coming from? Do they understand it? Because, as you say, the Commons is a difficult model and your own model is an unusual model to understand. So are people a little suspicious, do local organisations think you're trying to take over, take their job?

RL: Yeah. I totally see what you mean, I think that what we do, and this has been a learning process on its own, we've developed through projects going wrong projects going right. You know, the failures are also always really important in terms of learning, but we now are very clear that what we do is create support structures or approaches that will help community groups with their work, so we're not in any way trying to fill that gap. A very good example is this incredible Ballykeeffe, Amphitheatre? Do you know it?

HMCL: I do. I've been there, it's wonderful.

RL: So we've been working with them all this year, on their feasibility study. So they're just superstars in terms of community, you know, a phenomenal community led thing. So then all we're doing is bringing our skills, helping them to get to the next stage of development. And we were really lucky this year that we got Arts Council funding. So on top of the work we were doing, we were able to bring young architects in for three of our projects, which was Dunamaggin, Ballykeeffe and a town renewal process in Ballyragget. And then those groups of young architects, we did an open call. And those young emerging architects, it doesn't have to be young, but just people really wanting to explore co-design and community engagement. And they were then mentored by Martin Rafter, who's the Assistant CEO of our local Leader company, and Evelyn Graham, who's the Kilkenny County architect. And what was fantastic was that because that was the way we were bringing people in, you're coming really supported by people who can how to do this work, who are really committed, and into these community processes that are really embedded and deep, that there was so much learning on both sides. Rather than architects or

artists feeling like they had to create this kind of spectacle at the site, within a community context. Does that make sense?

HMCL: Yes, it does.

RL: I mean that's just what we do. We would work with some of our organisations. I mean, that's the other great thing is that Callan has so many different arts organisations. We've all come out of the mothership of KCAT. And so there's Asylum Productions, a theatre company in Callan and they do these phenomenal, large scale community theatre pieces. And we're often involved in a civic community engagement work, but we would never bring a project of that scale. That's not what we do, which is great. That's brilliant thing about Callan. Because there's so many of us, it's very clear who does what best and we can bring in other organisations.

HMCL: Can I just ask if, and in all the different projects I guess it's slightly different. So while in a Commons everyone may be answerable to each other? So, who are you answerable to? How do you review projects even though I imagine you always review them afterwards amongst yourselves anyway? But who are you answerable to really? Are you answerable to a body, the County Council, the Arts Council, depending on who's funding?

RL: Yeah, it's a really good question. It's different and obviously depends on different projects, but let's say Ballykeeffe Amphitheatre. We have to deliver a feasibility study for them, we're just wrapping that up now. It's funded by Kilkenny Leader Partnership and then the town ecologies part is funded by the Arts Council. I would feel in that we are most beholden to the Ballykeeffe committee. In that if we fail, or if we screw up, they're the people that really have invested so much of their time and energy working with us over the year, that it would be just a complete energy waste if we don't do a really good job. But then do have funding requirements that we have to meet. So obviously, there's a lot of paperwork to meet Leader requirements. So that's back-end stuff. And then with the Arts Council, again, we have to make sure that we're meeting their requirements. Then say for the Ballykeeffe process, we have the Uncertain Futures architects, heritage consultant, biodiversity specialist, Jenny Moran from luncheonette NCAD, she did a whole piece around creative entrepreneurship. So there was quite a few more people involved in the process. So we have to make sure that we're meeting their expectations. I suppose drilled

into all our projects is concept at the beginning of a project, making sure that everybody has clear expectations. That we're clear on everyone's expectations for their role within a project, but also that we express our fears and our reservations and our hopes, so that in any project, we're not just a cog. We're seeing that, obviously, for example, Jenny, why do you want to be involved this project? How do you want to grow as well? And it's the same for the Committees that it's not that they just have to engage in workshops. And so that is where it's complex. And then there's our team. Now that we are a CLG, we also have a board, so you know, who am I answerable to? That's on the kind of governance level there. We have a board of directors now.

HMCL: So that is ultimately who you're answerable to then.

RL: Yes. I don't know if you thought we were a co-op but we're not.

HMCL: If people want to get involved, every person has to have something to offer in terms of a Commons. I presume everyone has to have some sort of skill set or knowledge, something to offer. Would that be true to say? Whatever project you're doing?

RL: Yes, something that's very important is intentionality. Being very clear on embarking on any project that everyone is doing it with intentionality, so we know why we're there, we know how we're involved and we know where we're going. We've got away from maybe a didactic approach – that's another social engaged practice approach; lots of conversations, leaving things open ended, leaving things to process. I think I've learnt that that is, in terms of accessibility and inclusion, limiting. So we've grown out of KCAT here which is led by artists with disability; we have a lot of people with disability involved in different parts of our projects. So if you are someone who needs support to go to a workshop, you have to be clear that the workshop is meaningful and you'll get something out of it. We've grown to realise that providing very clear parameters for our work actually helps and it makes it more inclusive.

HMCL: What are the advantages and disadvantages of how you work?

RL: Maybe I'll start with disadvantages. That we don't on purpose identify ourselves with a field, so we're across architecture, art, community development, design – you know, all these different spheres, so we don't comfortably fit into one of those areas. So it's not like we're championed by say architecture, or planners, you know. I find that very liberating because it means we're not. I think it means we've grown much slower. We're not sort of the darlings of our over kind of over fields. And that's also meant that we can, I think, become more complex and learn from different approaches. Maybe another disadvantage then is our complexity that, you know, it's taken a long time and probably this year, we're only now kind of financially sustainable. Two of us are on permanent wages, we've kind of got to the point where we set up a structure that's equitable for everybody. That's taken a long time, because we very much came out for the artist collective model, which wasn't that business focussed.

HMCL: You have to be able to live

RL: Yeah, but just also that you can't have, you know, a collective of five people draining off one project. It's just actually you then get into the, you know, the tragedy of the commons. So it's just not there's not enough sustenance for everybody. Again, kind of creating the boundaries of the Commons is actually I think, a positive thing, or an intentionality around it. And the advantage I say is definitely, our commitment to place, that we have been working in Callan now for 12 years. So our community of support is massive. So we now know who we are, and from a kind of local authority or leader - they trust us now, we could still be doing the same thing again and again.

HMCL: Yeah, I can understand.

RL: Yeah. Yeah, and again, that wider additional asset that I spoke about our relationships, you know, they've become stronger. And maybe we have kind of grown away from some other connections we would have had, because actually for instance, we wouldn't be that connected to the visual arts kind of community, even though we work a lot of artists. And that's fine. You know, I mean, I think it was trying to kind of do exhibitions. Well, Visual – we have a big connection to Visual and do a lot with them – maybe about every three years, maybe we do something with them.

But, you know, that was a kind of a space that was exhausting to constantly be tending trying to do exhibitions and trying to keep into that.

HMCL: Okay. Yeah, that's a job in itself, I guess. Yeah. But I think what I imagine is also an advantage is your access to expertise, that if you have a project, you know, you mentioned a biodiversity specialist. I just think that would be so amazing, because you then you can bring work so much farther when you have access to expertise.

RL: Maybe, just that kind of to be clearer in the beginning when I was talking about co-production, You know, and what we think it is bringing, it's about bringing in lived experience and expert experience on the same level.

HMCL: Okay, equal value?

RL: Yeah. Yeah. So we had a wonderful example this summer. We had the biodiversity specialist who was working on Ballykeeffe because the committee wanted to understand the site from a biodiversity perspective. The biodiversity specialist had been spending the morning with Teddy who's the kind of person who kind of keeps the grounds of Ballykeeffe in order. We arrived on-site and he said, Oh, for God's sake, Rosie, you know, you're lucky didn't find Deborah dead behind the shed. She told me I had to stop spraying Roundup!

HMCL: Oh, I had a feeling Roundup was going to come into this!

RL: Deborah was laughing her head off, they were having a real giggle. He said, well if Deborah can give me the money to pay for weeders... Because actually, they sprayed to keep all the seats weed free. But, you know, you just don't think about that, it was a really brilliant moment where are you looking at these areas, then there are the tensions. That's why we do this work. Because you have the expert knowledge, the policies, especially in terms of environmental change and what's going to happen, and you have the reality of lived experience of communities that, you know, in order to keep a place weed-free. It's very difficult, people expect all the pathways and all that stone to be clear. It was just one of those things, you know, and I suppose that is the area that I love working in.

HMCL: Yeah, it's really interesting.

RL: So that's probably, that's what I've tried to explain and it can sound a bit theoretical, but that's what I mean –that's what you're bringing, and you have to listen. And not saying to Teddy that you have to really listen to Deborah because she knows what she's talking about. But she was flummoxed. She's like, yeah, I don't know what you do. Ballykeeffe, I would think of as an exemplar, let's face it, I mean, it's run by volunteers. None of them are paid. You know, one of the reasons that we are working with them is because they need to have some paid people in their team, and they're very nervous about shifting from being all volunteers to one or two being paid. Again, that tension and that's what we are working with.

ENDS