Mutual Aid and the Commons

By Yu Yen King

> “A politics of belonging, an economics of sufficiency, where we can have enough, we can have our needs met, we don't have this endless cycle of more material production and more consumption. It's about finding ways to de-commodify wealth so that it can be shared more broadly.”
>
> — Mr David Bollier, on the significance of the commons

On 25 May, the Institute of Policy Studies’ (IPS) Policy Lab held the first panel discussion of the 2022 Transforming the Non-Profit Sector (TNPS) conference series. Over 80 non-profit practitioners, researchers, funders and policymakers came together to exchange views on the topic of mutual aid and how communities can create and self-manage commonly shared resources to serve their needs.

Dr Justin Lee, Senior Research Fellow at IPS set the context by discussing the risk of how overly centralised administration can inadvertently bureaucratise voluntary organisations as they try to scale and expand their operations. He invited the attendees to consider ways to protect community-led initiatives, and how to ensure professional services and community initiatives complement one another.

David Bollier: Creating, Managing and Protecting Commonly Shared Wealth

Mr David Bollier, Director of the Reinventing the Commons Program at the Schumacher Center For New Economics, defined the “commons” as shared wealth that is collectively managed by the community. Referring to the seminal empirical studies conducted by economist Elinor Ostrom — who helped debunk the “tragedy of the commons” myth that humans will always overexploit shared resources — Mr Bollier posited that communities are capable of relating to one another and the Earth in interdependent ways that protect instead of deplete the common wealth.

Mr Bollier pointed out that many of the things that enrich our lives are not, and rightly should not be monetised in the market economy. These include care-giving, cultural traditions, gifting, knowledge sharing, lending and borrowing et cetera. While the commons have a long history, it is important to recognise their value in modern society and learn how to grow them.

Examples of contemporary urban commons include local slow food movements with community-supported permaculture, urban[1] citizen self-organised spaces, care networks and data systems. There are also platforms that can help communities capture more of the value they create and generate productive exchanges, such as alternative currencies like Berkshares, which are traded in the region of Western Massachusetts. The web is also an important hosting infrastructure for commons such as Wikipedia, open-source software and hardware that can be made in FabLabs, Creative Commons licenses, and many more given how the Web has low barriers for people to self-organise and collaborate.

Mr Bollier noted that the verb form "commoning" might be more helpful in underscoring how commons are about symbiotic relations, cooperative practices and peer governance. A participant asked how trust can be built in a heterogeneous society like Singapore and Mr Bollier responded that it depends on the "patterns of commoning" — forms of ritualised togetherness where people do things together, create shared experiences over time, and ultimately develop a shared culture. The good news is these can often be celebratory and fun in nature. He noted that building community and trust is often seen as difficult with the assumption of self-interested individualism in contemporary market societies, but the commons can help people develop and practise horizontal social connection, a sense of belonging, a sense of identity, a sense of stewardship and responsibility for shared wealth, and these would help build the kind of sense of security and trust that we need more of in modern life.

Mr Bollier further explained that commonly shared wealth and resources require long-term stewardship for stability and continuity, and commoning requires a different understanding and approach from the state policies and economics used to regulate and distribute labour, commodities and finance in markets. He posited that as global supply chains become more volatile, problematic and carbon-intensive, local commons are often a more stable, ecologically benign way of providing for people's needs. He also urged the participants to consider that the dense social and ecological relationships, rich collective wisdom and trustworthy feedback loops can help make small local commons more resilient than large bureaucracies in corporations and states. Thus, he argued that the state and the market should not be seen as the only effective or dominant forces for governance and meeting our needs. While the government can help with providing infrastructure, legal support or finance, commons are bottom-up efforts by communities and their modes of organisation differ from bureaucratic administration.

While formally organised groups that contribute to the commons may become more significant political players in the future, the commons can exist regardless of legal or organisational formalities. For instance, there are community-managed housing commons that are run as limited liability partnerships because the current laws cater more to individual rights and the market economy. He argued that we are living agents who have creative adaptive roles to play, and what is important is experimenting with and adapting the design principles or

[1] More examples of urban commons can be found at the Co-Cities - Commoning.

frameworks for governing commons in our particular contexts, including rules for fair use, conflict resolution, decision-making and so forth.[2]

The commons is always under threat or being privatised or marketised. He cited how it could be possible for a business to collude with a corrupt or failed government to seize land that was used as commons and turn them into private market assets. Such dispossession can be broadly termed as enclosure, and the colonising of commons can risk destroying cultural identities, communal ties and cooperative norms. Mr Bollier shared that the solution to enclosure is creating alternative commons-based circuits of value that de-commodify our relationship and give us greater peer governance and control.

The commons has potential to function as an efficient, stable and satisfactory parallel economy where people have a sense of sufficiency and belonging without endless material production and conspicuous consumption. Mr Bollier ended his sharing by contending that "the next big thing will be a lot of small things" that are brought together and loosely coordinated with each other to meet needs in their very particular circumstances. This insight ties into the Transition Towns movement[3], which has been described as "a local response to a global problem".

Will Ruddick: Community Inclusion Currencies

Community currencies are a type of economic or service commons, as they provide financial access for the community and they support local production by circulating only within the community. Mr Will Ruddick, founder of Grassroots Economics, explained that community inclusion currencies are vouchers or credit obligations created by communities rather than an elite authority, and they are redeemable for community goods and services. Community inclusion currencies allow communities to see and map their own abundance and revive their local economic systems in times of crisis such as during the COVID pandemic.

As a non-profit organisation, Grassroots Economics has helped marginalised communities in Kenya co-develop their own currencies. Mr Ruddick shared about the importance of mutual agreement and trust in the process of creating credit obligations, whereby the service providers have to get a witness to validate that their voucher is backed by real goods and services, such as future provision of energy, and these obligations are recorded in a distributed, public-access but immutable ledger. Ensuring that the vouchers are backed by real, specific things means that it will not be possible for people to keep minting more money, driving inflation and an eventual collapse of the system if there is no future capacity to fulfil the obligations. For people who are not as familiar with each other and may not have yet built trust, Mr Ruddick shared that the design features of community currencies can allow some informal credit scoring, such as public ledgers where anyone can see every transaction that has ever happened and see public endorsements of that voucher. He noted that community currencies are generally more stable when people de-risk their individual failure to redeem credits by

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[2] David Bollier has written many guides to commoning, which can be found at Bollier.org and freefairandalive.org.

[3] Dr Rob Hopkins, co-founder of the Transition Network, shared his insights on how social change scales at the Learning Journey in the Transforming the Non-Profit Sector (TNPS) conference series on 17 June 2022. The TNPS conference series reports can be accessed at Solutions that Help Us Help One Another (nus.edu.sg).

coming in as a group, as a church or community group or group of businesses with existing trust relations.

The specific features of the currency can also be intentionally designed to serve a community purpose. For example, demurrage — a charge for holding the currency rather than spending it — helps exchange and disincentivises wealth accumulation. Demurrage charges can even be used for a community fund that people can decide to put towards a basic income scheme. Mr Ruddick also assured the participants that there are affordable servers for mobile phones and open-source systems that can be used for community inclusion currencies.

Mr Ruddick shared how other non-profit organisations have also supported community inclusion currencies. For example, there are networks of trainers that go into communities and facilitate exercises such as resource mapping for timebanks or role-playing local market trade with created vouchers. Some aid organisations have conducted cash transfer programmes by buying established community vouchers with the national currency. Beyond redistributing these pre-ordered goods and services to people in need, they create multiplier effects by injecting more liquidity into the local economy. Others have indirectly contributed to the community inclusion currency by supporting capacity building for businesses within the community; Mr Ruddick cited the example of how organisations training people in syntropic agroforestry has successfully increased their capacity to sell their future services from farms and created more new community vouchers that can be backed by this service.

In response to a question about whether the government's support is required to start community inclusion currencies — especially when the currencies are on a larger scale — Mr Ruddick shared that there should be no issues in terms of legality as utility vouchers redeemable for goods and services currently exist in many societies, with tickets to board buses being one such example. He described how creating liquidity for these instruments does not necessitate government intervention, as decentralised exchanges with blockchain and demurrage design can allow growth to the scale of local markets. In cases of debt whereby a service provider cannot allow vouchers issued to be redeemed with the promised service, Mr Ruddick mentioned that groups in Kenya deal out graduated sanctions in different ways without external state intervention; the parties generally first have a mediated conversation with village elders and then work out whether the debt can be paid in other goods or services or forgiven in particular circumstances. Harking back to how rules and obligations have to be designed in place for any commons, he shared that a framework has also been created with the Grassroots Economics Commons License that communities can opt into.

During the breakout session, participants and Mr Ruddick discussed the costs and funding for the work of developing community currency platforms, and whether it is possible to use existing online infrastructure or local exchange trading systems (LETS) for running community currencies. Mr Ruddick shared that Grassroots Economics has developed its own system and decentralised its database to reduce dependency on servers or LETS that have stagnated or stopped working. Participants expressed interest in local vouchers that have emerged in Singapore to ensure spending in local businesses, but these vouchers do not circulate beyond the transaction between those who are first issued the vouchers and the eligible businesses. Mr Ruddick mentioned that in Italy, there are tax credits that are tradeable and circulate with community currencies.

Mr Ruddick concluded by encouraging everyone to employ their agency in creating different forms of credit contracts and engaging in exchanges. He illustrated that such processes can change relationships; for example, workers who sell their credits for future service to their employers might then see that their employers are clients of their service.

Yu Yen KING is a Research Assistant at IPS.

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If you have comments or feedback, please email ips.update@nus.edu.sg

Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy
National University of Singapore