commoning pods

Bridging material realities and collective futures

DEEP COMMONS: Cultivating Ecologies of Solidarity and Care beyond Capitalism, Patriarchy, Racism and the State

27.10.22

LA TERRE INSTITUTE
for Community and Ecology
Bayou La Terre, Mississippi, USA

ENOUGH!

Ollscoil na hÉireann
National University of Ireland

This doc is based on the workshop for Deep Commons conference 27.10.22. There were some things Gehan tried out (to avoid pitfalls in previous conversations) that didn't help comprehension as intended - perhaps being too close to an idea. This doc tries to amend some of that and so it follows a slightly different sequence from the workshop.

the invitation

We're deeply grateful to Deep Commons for this opportunity - and excited to share our path of enquiry to date.

The invitation as you encounter Commoning Pods is to bring your curiosity and your playfulness. We invite you to join us in an experiment - mapping out the terrain of what's possible around an idea. Perhaps we are cartographers of uncharted territories. In our own fashion, we will be world makers - our imaginations will be unbound; free from constraints, current paradigms or even our own sense of competence. At least that'll be our intention.

To bring a 'beginners mind' we invite reflection on our competence. How does it feel when we remember times when we felt supremely competent? We all enjoy feeling competent. And for good reason. We experience our capability to contribute, we feel valued, appreciated, seen, respected. All perfectly understandable and human needs. And what about situations where we felt wholly incompetent. These situations conjure up entirely different feelings. In these situations... we're unsure how to contribute. Perhaps even the word has connotations of shame? We might begin to feel we don't matter. We might be tempted to shift the situation to more familiar ground, to more comfortable territory. Or categorise something too quickly.

Now this might sound counterintuitive but we're inviting you to stay with some of that discomfort - to bring something of a *beginners mind* to how you encounter Commoning Pods. Seek not to reach for familiar topics or neat ways to categorise what you think 'this' is. See if you can stay curious, stay with the trouble, stay with a little discomfort.

If this seems a little odd... it's that we wanted to avoid what's happened when we've previously tried to discuss Commoning Pods with people encountering this for the first time so far... people would naturally respond with thoughts like - "oh, yeah - I know, you mean a coop/time bank/cohousing project" - "this is x, y, z".

Charting the terrain of the possible

So now perhaps we're prepared to enter the terrain of commoning pods... what Birgitta Jónsdóttir (of Iceland's Pirate Party) calls "talking about things when they still feel weird".

Lineage and a little about some of the many influences we've drawn on in coming to this work. There have been many starting points. Too many to share in a short workshop.

But let's start with John Holloway's *Crack Capitalism.* Let's start with this quote:

> *"We are presented with a pre-existing capitalism that dictates that we must act in certain ways, and to this we reply "no, there is no pre-existing capitalism, there is only the capitalism that we make today, or do not make". And we choose not to make it. Our struggle is to open every moment and fill it with an activity that does not contribute to the reproduction of capital. Stop making capitalism and do something else, something sensible, something beautiful and enjoyable. Stop creating the system that is destroying us. We only live once: why use our time to destroy our own existence? Surely we can do something better with our lives.*

> *Revolution is not about destroying capitalism, but about refusing to create it."* Holloway, 2010

This led to ongoing reflection on this sense of struggle as existing between 'doing' and labour (rather than labour and capital). But particularly this notion that we either make capitalism or do not make capitalism through our everyday actions. This persisted as the nagging question - **what would it look like to wake up in the morning and choose not to make capitalism?** This question came up repeatedly over months, possibly years. It seemed that other than "going off grid" - which was unlikely to gain mass appeal anytime soon - available alternatives weren't sufficient to stem our role in making and remaking capital through our waged work, through our purchasing and consuming patterns, no matter how ethical they were. The spaces and practices where we do not make capitalism - the community gardens, the convivial interactions with friends or the like-minded tend to happen in the "in between" spaces - in and around work or studying for work, or avoiding welfare benefits being sanctioned because you didn't complete enough job search hours. The less time we have - the less choice. The same is true of our activism, our campaigning or other change work. It seems overwhelming - the extent to which we are hidebound to the grind culture of capitalism through our everyday choices (or lack of them) and the manner in which even the most intimate areas of our daily lives have been commodified.

These thoughts slowly collided with other thoughts. Thoughts about some of the work of Enspiral, a new way of organising the work we love/believe in with the work we can get paid for (their tagline once read "*More people working on stuff that matters*"). Thoughts about the livelihood pods emerging in the peer to peer community - established by small groups of freelancers to mutually ensure some protection against the unpredictability of their paid work. How might they extend to forming small groups to collectivise broader needs and risks? Also in this mix was Rich Bartlett's article - *5 Reasons To Build a Network of Small Groups Rather than A Mass Movement of Individuals*. Among other things Rich is currently developing microsolidarity as a practice.

And then it's also worth mentioning GalGael, where we have stood alongside marginalised individuals for over the past twenty five years, learning from their lived experience and our own observations. Over time, this fused with the strands of inquiry around livelihood pods or choosing not to make capitalism. Multiple tensions inherent in GalGael's work added to the conditions for fusion; tensions between what it means to be a charity and or to be in solidarity; between paid and unpaid work. The disconnect between the individualising pathologies inherent in funders criteria or well-meaning policies and a structural analysis of poverty or addiction or depression. Or between the onetime political rhetoric of 'social inclusion' and 'cure-all' employability agendas - listening to stories of decades of alienating work that had made people physically or mentally unwell, it was clear quite how far from reality the rhetoric was. Others, some with long term health challenges, were actively choosing not to engage in the labour market and did not want to be "socially included" (a buzz word now thankfully fallen from use) but would engage in tremendous efforts to make, mend, cook or care for others in our community. Holloway's 'doing' and much of this succinctly problematised in Ruth Gilmore Wilson's work on the "non profit industrial complex". But what did doing something else look like?

These and numerous other influences cohered as Commoning Pods a few years ago and we have met sporadically within Enough to explore this as a potential social practice. We wanted to sketch out some of our path of inquiry so far and how it created this problem space to step into - as part of broader efforts to explore alternatives capable of meeting basic needs as more people/areas are sacrificed by markets, capital and the monetary economy.

[this section is a bit of an expansion of what we were able to convey in the workshop. We then moved to situate Commoning Pods alongside other practices/thinking but with hindsight, we'll come to this later. As mentioned above the order/flow around has been altered from the online workshop, just in case you're using this to accompany the recording]

Charting the terrain of the possible

So let us share with you some of the 'clues' we've gathered over the last year or so - clues being characteristics of commoning pods that feel somehow essential but not set in stone. Our enquiries have not been overly scholarly - some of us are scholars but that has not overly shaped our approach - we're not striving to achieve some kind of mastery of a topic, rather bring radical imagining to explore what's possible.

We don't want to downplay the thought that's already gone into this - some things are clearer than others - and yet we hold a real desire to let it be shaped by people as they encounter it. We're playing with the limits of theory and the limits of practice but also we don't want to ignore the outermost possibilities of theory or the most utopian possibilities of practice.

We want to be suggestive, rather than prescriptive - in a way that invites thought - to help shape what's possible. So *we've woven a bit of narrative* from those clues to suggest what a pod could be, and the collective potential networks of pods could fulfil. (*Please excuse the clunkiness of this as a piece of prose - this is not our natural skillset but a way to weave together some of the key points in a suggestive way*)

Commoning Pods - a story from the terrain of the possible

It had been a decent summer. Not that there weren't some pretty extreme weather events but our pod had managed a reasonable harvest with one thing and another. The beetroots hadn't really come on but someone said they weren't sure how old the seed had been. Thank goodness Ed's nan had been part of our pod or we might have done much worse. She was a treasure of growing know-how. With a better year, we might be able to transition more of us out of paid work.

It was now September 2025 and the blackberries were littering the edges of the old spare ground. We had arranged to go picking on Tuesday. One of the families had a plum tree that was overburdened with fruit too. We'd swing by to help with picking on the way back. We were still getting the hang of the best preserving techniques and quite a way off from producing enough to last us through winter. But we were brewing some ideas as to how that might be possible. And anyway some of the

disruptions in global distribution networks and supply chains made us nervous enough to think that, with mounting uncertainty and crises, we couldn't rely on shops anyway. Buying dry goods in bulk was one way to go and helped to keep our costs down. And we had recently made some links with a farmer on the outskirts of Glasgow.

Our pod had formed 18 months ago, but we were still very much finding our way. We'd suspected that the tendrils of capitalism ran deep in our beliefs and behaviours. But perhaps we hadn't quite bargained for just how tough the work of 'reverse engineering' ourselves out of social relations generations in the making would be. Just when we thought we were getting the hang of this, something else would crop up - some other pattern of relating to unlearn or deeply held belief to overturn. This stuff took time. But there was something about the context of a pod that created a space where we could be more vulnerable, to do some collective healing.

The cultural taboos around money were some of the first we needed to shake off. About three quarters of the adults in our pod 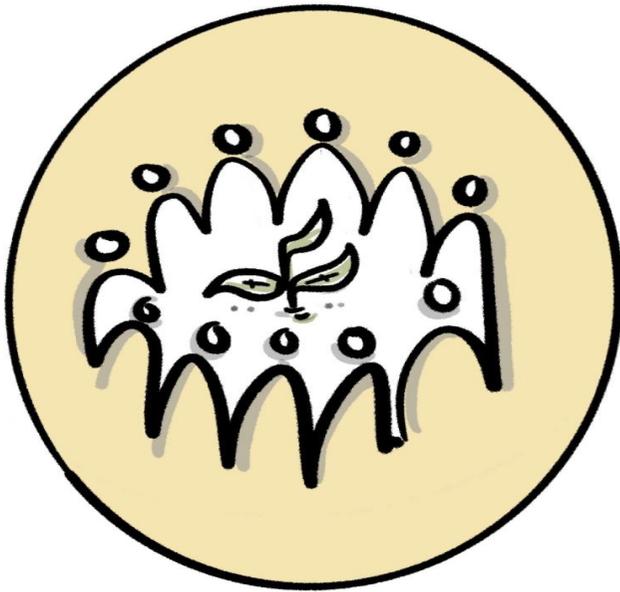were in paid employment. We met once a month to agree how to share out work to meet the needs of the pod directly and to agree what we needed to buy - there were still plenty of things we needed to pay for that we weren't yet able to produce. And then there was rent to pay and mortgages. Some thought that if pods scaled we might collectively find some way to take property off the market - a bit like Rolling Jubilee are doing with debt. As it was, inflation rates were playing havoc with mortgage repayments, while rent in Glasgow had gone through the roof. Crazy money. AirBnB and the student accommodation market were key drivers and property costs were a major hurdle to meeting more of our collective needs outwith the market.

Those of us who didn't sell our labour to employers spent time making, mending or growing for the pod. Or sharing care work for elders or kids. It gave us more protection in the workplace too. Ed was able to walk out of an exploitative zero hours contract because the pod was there to support him until something else came along and find ways that he could contribute to meeting our needs directly. His self taught electrical engineering was helping us find ways to keep our energy costs down.

Pilot pods had trialled some basic agreements that gave us a basis for putting certain things in place. Some of them needed to be tweaked or adjusted to work for us but that was encouraged. I mean I guess if you think about it, this is a radical reimagining of the economy from the ground up - so it's not like we're going to get this right first time. Sharing learning about what worked and what didn't would help successive iterations find their way with this. Often our learning was the result of some disagreement, discussions that became heated at times - but we were coming to understand that this was part of the process - not just producing and consuming differently, collectively - but of being in real community with others. We were having to regrow our collective muscle after decades of hyper individualism. And somehow the conflict was generating trust - extending our connections beyond the nuclear family 'consumer unit'. If that kind of family hadn't been problematised by abolitionists or feminist economist then it had been certainly been compromised by the inequalities exposed by the pandemic, with spikes in domestic violence.

A few more pods had started to develop around Glasgow and we hoped that pretty soon we'd be able to exchange surpluses. That gave us a bit of a sense of reassurance - that networked together we could find more resilience. Some hoped that if this caught on it could become a way to restore the commons - recommoning resources from behind paywalls - all that had been commodified for private gain... There was some who thought that commoning pods at scale could even be a way of reworking a fairer economy without needing to make demands of "those in power" and wait for top-down change - a new form of political economy at its most granular. But anyway, with nation states increasingly run by oligarchs and megalomaniacs that were sacrificing whole sections of society - what did we have to lose? This felt like its own form of insurance policy - a form of mutually assured social protection... just as the insurance industry was in total meltdown from payouts to cover damages from catastrophic flooding down south the year before. Anyway, I liked the idea of creating more choice... after decades feeling hidebound to remaking capitalism. What was that Holloway quote...? "Revolution is not about destroying capitalism, but about refusing to create it."
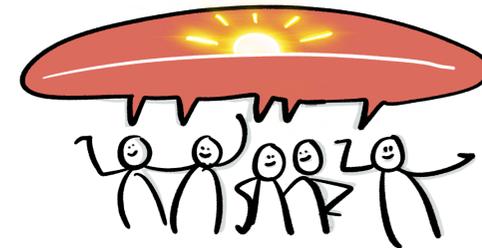
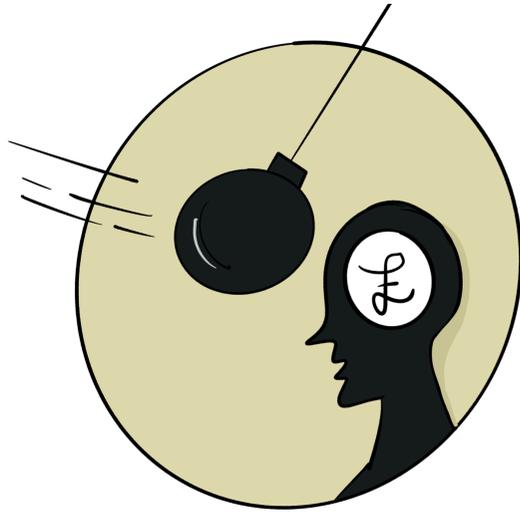**So commoning pods are** (or could be)

and also...

- a space in which new social relations can be enacted/practised

- sites of inter-class, inter-race coalition/solidarity across health inequalities

a group that pools income and other resources

a radically different way to organise how our needs are met

a form/alternative unit of collective production and consumption

Commoning pods are also (or could be)

a means to deconstruct the
capitalist core logic of 'jobs'

a form of social protection against illness and
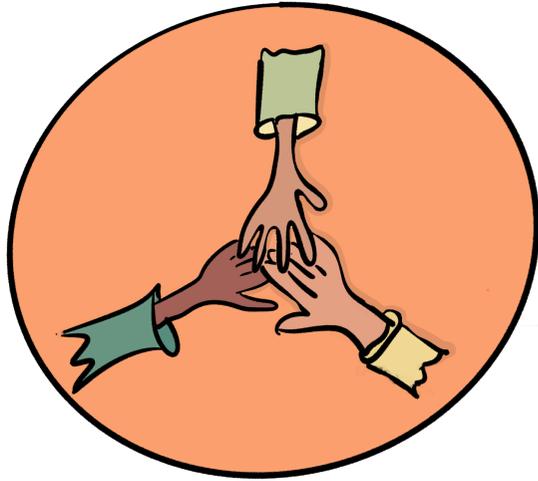unemployment (not reliant on employers or the state)

and also…

an expansion of the nuclear family (Harraway's oddkin?)
and a new articulation of community, rooted in place (not
interest) and visceral connections created through
interdependence for collective survival;

a means to distribute care and other
reproductive work
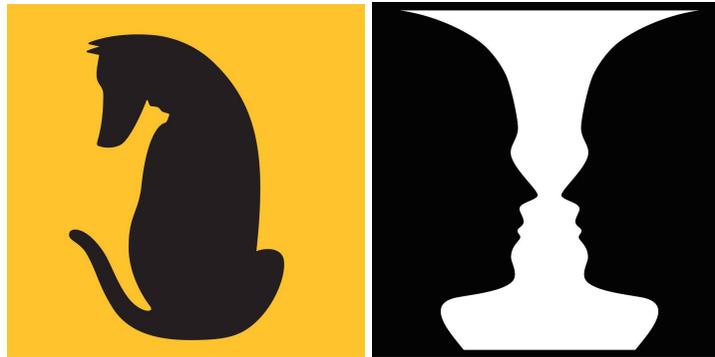
Collectively, pods are (or could be)

- networked for resilience and scale in the face of growing uncertainty and collapse;

- a bridge between current structural realities and future possibilities

- a means to reduce our dependence on the market and to extract ourselves from remaking capitalism;

- facilitate more unpaid work on the things that matter (care work, activism, or change work of various kinds, experimenting with other post-capitalist practices)

- effective at every level (not requiring widespread take up to deliver real/material benefits and protections)

- a mode of reorganising society and political economy. A form of weaving a viable economic system from the most granular level up - that doesn't require political change at the "top level" first;

- a viable economic system at its most granular
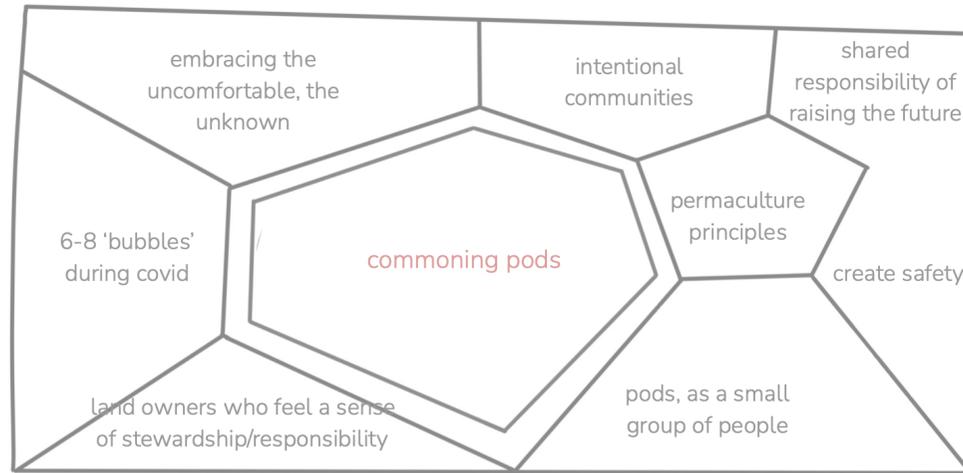
Situating Commoning Pods

When people come across commoning pods for the first time, we've noticed that we have got snarled up for a good proportion of the time with finding ourselves saying "no, that's not it… that's not what we imagine commoning pods to be", as if there are many things that can get in the way of a 'weird conversation'. So perhaps it would help to situate this idea. We thought an analogy might be useful. So we wanted to bring in the notion of *negative space*. We're probably familiar with those images where the object is framed by other objects or shapes. Images where it is the "space in between" that invites our curiosity or attention.
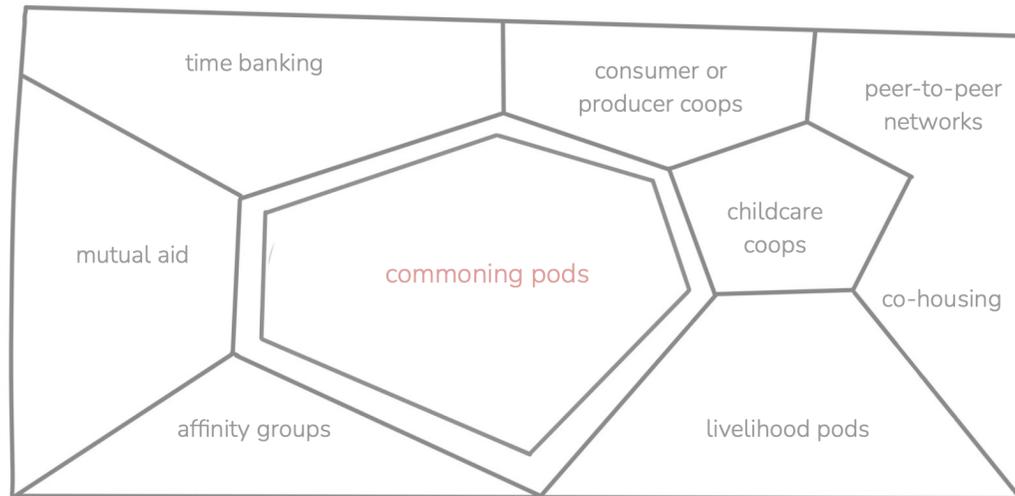

We might think of commoning pobs as bounded by more familiar practices, like a childcare co-op or time banking. To have more generative conversations that explore more of what's possible, we thought we'd map the "terrain" of commoning pods as bounded and informed by similar or adjacent practices. (Perhaps these are fields where we have some experience or where we feel more competent?) We want to borrow from these - some overlap with the practice of commoning pods more than others. We want pods to be informed by relevant practices but we don't want to be constrained by them either. We might see adjacent terrains (or practices) as a way to situate the terrain of Commoning Pods and stretch the shape of what else is possible.

We mapped some of these during the workshop:

"New questions become possible in the midst of topographical shifts" Bayo Akomolafe

embracing the uncomfortable, the unknown

intentional communities

shared responsibility of raising the future

permaculture principles

6-8 'bubbles' during covid

commoning pods

create safety

land owners who feel a sense of stewardship/responsibility

pods, as a small group of people

This map is how we've heard the terrain suggested in other conversations we've had:

time banking

consumer or producer coops

peer-to-peer networks

mutual aid

commoning pods

childcare coops

co-housing

affinity groups

livelihood pods

It's likely that commoning pods will have characteristics or practices that borrow from many if not all of these. And it is something more

5. Storying the terrain

At this point in the workshop, people had the chance to play with this idea in smaller groups - in breakout rooms. We asked people to imagine that they were forming a Commoning Pod. Or consider how they might approach designing a pod.

Prompts: *Some of the prompts we offered were; What does a week look like? What do you need to know? You might want to think about some of the tensions you're working with. Do you want to think more about how you might organise around certain needs; like food or childcare? What are the risks involved? If you are considering joining, what hurdles do you anticipate? What kind of things could go wrong? What are the most compelling questions you have about this? And we asked people to share back: a possibility that surprised you, a challenge or hurdle you came across, a compelling question you're left with*

6. stories of the possible

Some points raised throughout the workshop and from the shareback from the breakout rooms.

"we can only really handle coordination with seven people at a time" *...questions of scale and individual relationship capacity* "you need the peas before you have the pod; commonalities and values - ensure that we have a common understanding of what people's needs are"; tending to particular needs within each pod such as neurodivergence

spaces for unlearning and vulnerability... "there are lessons from surviving the global pandemic where small groups formed and allowed for more vulnerability"; "small groups where we can raise more trust, create bonds strong enough so they're not going to be lost in separation, when conflicts arise, when capacity is low - as crisis gets more and more scary. Create safety."; "a space to not be alone" A place to unlearn patriarchy and racism.

culture "a culture of care - reciprocal relationships"; "opening up to unknown and uncomfortable... otherwise we just repeat old known things with new vocabularies." Some of the practices they're exploring and experimenting with within Nonviolent Global Liberation might be applicable to Commoning Pods, such as Impact Sharing as a practice that leads to more intimacy within groups and the role of explicit agreements.

shared responsibilities "permaculture principles for interdependence and shared sense of responsibility"; "the shared responsibility of raising the future - raising kids"; "what would it be like to have an extended family of community or friends that are actually committed to the long term effort of child rearing? It's a matter of both social and literal reproduction"

dynamic "Social and material context count - what resources and spaces are available?" "ultimately, because these things are always sort of dynamic, there probably isn't an actual end. It's a lot of experimentation"

networking and scale "How do you network with other pods, without removing autonomy?"; challenges of achieving self sufficiency in small groups; "As it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a village to grow crops. a pod for materialising potential"; "differences between pods ...could be both a strength but also a source of tension"; "transformation at different scales, both within the personal and the small pod collective, whilst focusing on a broader system of change."

"as it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a village to grow crops - a pod for materialising potential"

these prompted further clues...

Pods wouldn't require a commitment to share housing or be co-located (unlike intentional communities) lowering the threshold for initial commitment - people could join a pod from where they're currently situated.

Pod members would need to be located in close enough proximity to share productive and reproductive work like caring. And each pod would be focused on the full range of needs of that pod (rather than just one need, or pods forming around one need).

Pods would create context of relative safety for unlearning deep cultural patterns such as patriarchy and racism

Collective productive work generates culture; including cultures necessary to sustain a pod. Unalienated work for those you're in relationship with is deeply humanising.

Pods want to be something that starts to take root or something with the viral quality of the Industrial Revolution. "Ideas that chime with mass culture …ideas that strike a chord and feel doable." (from a conversation with Jonnet Middleton, March '21)

Closing thoughts

So in closing we thought we'd share a little of what we (think) comes next for this work.

We'd like to build on some of these kinds of *conversations* to help shape the potential for commoning pods. We plan to use these to *design some smaller scale, lower stake experiments*. This will *inform the 'basic architecture' for some pilots*. We anticipate sharing these so that people can trial this arrangement, sharing learning to inform future iterations - kind of crowd source development. Beyond that, we're still on a path of enquiry and we'd love to continue this conversation with those interested.

We don't profess to be experts in this, so also send us links to practices that are more than adjacent, examples you're aware of that we could learn from. We would love to hear from you if you're open to / already experiment/ing with this idea in your/another context. Or if you'd like us to stay in touch to let you know how Commoning Pods are developing.

Who are we:

Gehan Macleod: *I'm based in Govan, a post industrial ship building community in Glasgow, Scotland. I work with Enough Scotland - a collective working with practices of degrowth and decolonisation. My background was originally 90s activism including an anti motorway protest camp - Pollok Free State that went on to become the other org I work with; GalGael Trust where we create the conditions for people from marginalised communities to reclaim health and agency through working with their hands. I met Kate when through a research project for Govan Together while she was at Glasgow University. @gehan_macleod*

Kate Driscoll Derickson: *Kate is an Associate Professor in the department of Geography, Environment, and Society at the University of Minnesota. Her work engages political economy, critical race theory and feminist epistemology to explore the politics of knowledge production and the relationship between scholarly knowledge and emancipatory social change. Among the many communities she works alongside are the Gullah Geechee people based in the coastal areas of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and Florida. Descendents of African slaves, the Gullah Geechee have a "unique culture with deep African retentions that are clearly visible in the Gullah Geechee people's distinctive arts, crafts, foodways, music, and language."* https://create.umn.edu/gullah-geechee-collaboration/

Luke Devlin: *Luke is a human ecologist and researcher working with Enough Scotland and Centre for Human Ecology in Glasgow. He is one of our co-conspirators with Commoning Pods @geopoetic*

Svenja Meyerricks: *Svenja has also been collaborating with us on Commoning Pods but work to devise and deliver the Degrowth Course meant she wasn't able to participate in the workshop design for Deep Commons. As well as her work with Enough Scotland she is a researcher, human ecologist, activist and mama. She is also a co-operative member of the Centre for Human Ecology. @krautwild*

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