

PAYING CLOSER ATTENTION / ESSAY

COHERENCE HAS TO LIVE SOMEWHERE

The social architecture of a commons

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A constitution can name a purpose. A trust deed can protect an asset. A cooperative can distribute formal ownership. None of these, by themselves, can make people return, build trust, share judgment or accept responsibility for one another.

These things have to live somewhere. They live in relationships: in small groups of people who know one another well enough to notice what needs doing, speak honestly when something is wrong, and remain connected when the work becomes difficult.

When the Commons Is Carried by Too Few ended with a question: if consistency and coherence need to live in relationships rather than only in constitutions or mission statements, what kind of social architecture might help a commons hold them over time?

This essay explores what that architecture might involve: small groups capable of holding trust and responsibility, connected through wider structures that preserve coherence without concentrating control.

The legal structure can hold the institution. It cannot, on its own, hold the relationships that make the institution alive.

The limits of the legal container

Community initiatives often begin their structural thinking with a legal form. In Aotearoa, that may be a charitable trust, an incorporated society, a cooperative company or an arrangement with an existing host organisation. The choice matters. Legal structures determine who owns assets, who carries liability, how decisions are formally made and what happens when people leave.

But legal form and lived organisation are not the same thing. A board can meet every legal requirement while remaining distant from the everyday work. A cooperative can give every member a vote while only a handful participate between annual meetings. An informal collective can feel relational and egalitarian while allowing responsibility to remain vague and power to accumulate around whoever has the most knowledge, time or confidence.

The problem is not that these structures are useless. It is that we ask them to perform work they cannot perform. A constitution can specify authority, but it cannot generate trust. A policy can describe accountability, but it cannot ensure that people will tell one another the truth. A mission statement can name a kaupapa, but it cannot keep that kaupapa coherent through hundreds of ordinary decisions.

For that, an organisation needs a social architecture as well as a legal one.

Small groups as the basic unit

Richard D. Bartlett's work on Microsolidarity offers a useful starting point. Its emphasis is not primarily on designing a large organisation. It begins with structures for belonging: small groups, often called crews, in which a handful of people can develop trust, mutual support and the capacity to act together. Those crews can then be held within a wider congregation that helps new groups form and supports relationships between them.

I am not suggesting that community organisations simply adopt Microsolidarity as a complete model. Its value here is more fundamental. It treats the small group, rather than the isolated individual or the mass meeting, as a serious unit of organisation.

This matters because groups of three to eight people can do things that a room of forty often cannot. They can know who has been absent and ask why. They can recognise when someone is carrying too much. They can develop a shared rhythm, remember decisions and build enough trust for disagreement to become useful rather than threatening. Responsibility becomes visible because the relationships are close enough for avoidance, overload and uncertainty to be noticed.

The small group is where participation can become relationship, and relationship can become shared responsibility.

Small groups can also make participation more accessible. A person entering a large organisation may struggle to understand where they belong or how to contribute. A bounded group with a clear purpose offers a comprehensible place to begin. People do not need to understand the entire institution before they can take part meaningfully in one part of it.

Coherence within the group

Proximity alone does not create coherence. Small groups can become confused, dependent, inward-looking or dominated by a confident member. They need practices that help them hold a purpose together.

That might mean beginning with a clear area of responsibility; meeting at a predictable rhythm; making commitments visible; rotating facilitation; reflecting on workload; and creating ordinary ways to raise tension before it becomes conflict. It also means returning regularly to the kaupapa: not reciting a mission statement, but asking how the group's choices express the purpose of the whole.

Coherence is strengthened when people can explain the purpose in their own words and still recognise one another's account. It does not require identical language or complete agreement. It requires enough shared orientation that difference can produce learning rather than fragmentation.

Cohesion matters too, but it is not the same thing. Cohesion is the felt experience of belonging and mutual commitment. Coherence is the relationship between what a group says it is for and what it repeatedly does. A cohesive group can still lose its direction. A coherent group without cohesion may understand its task but lack the trust needed to carry it together.

Durable commoning needs both: relationships strong enough to hold difference, and purpose clear enough to give that difference direction.

Coherence between groups

A single small group may hold responsibility well, but it cannot carry every dimension of a living commons. As an initiative grows, the familiar answer is to enlarge the meeting: more people, longer agendas, more information and a growing distance between those speaking and those doing. Eventually, participation becomes exhausting and important decisions migrate back to a small informal centre.

A groups-of-groups approach offers a different possibility. Instead of treating the organisation as one large undifferentiated community, it can be understood as several small, purposeful groups connected through deliberate relationships. One group may care for land and ecology, another for food distribution, another for gatherings and learning, another for finance and administration. Some may be temporary; others may hold long-term responsibilities.

The wider organisation then becomes more than the sum of these groups, but it does not require everyone to be involved in everything. Each group has enough autonomy to act within its area, while representatives, linking roles or regular cross-group gatherings carry information, tensions and learning between them.

Coherence is held most consistently within groups, and across the relationships between groups.

The phrase 'groups of groups' can sound technical, but the principle is simple. Human beings relate most deeply at a small scale. Durable institutions need ways for that depth to travel: not by making every relationship equally close, but by creating trustworthy connections between places where close relationships already exist.

The danger of becoming a collection of islands

Small-group organisation has its own risks. Groups can protect their own priorities, withhold information or become attached to a local identity at the expense of the wider kaupapa. Personal loyalty can shield poor practice. Informal representatives can accumulate influence without a clear mandate. Newcomers can encounter a landscape of established relationships that feels impossible to enter.

A groups-of-groups structure therefore needs more than goodwill. Boundaries must be clear enough for responsibility to be understood and porous enough for knowledge and people to move. Decisions affecting the whole need an agreed place to be made. Groups need ways to ask for help, challenge one another and escalate issues they cannot resolve alone. Linking roles should be supported and accountable rather than becoming another invisible burden carried by the most reliable person.

The wider purpose must also remain available to everyone. If only a central group understands the whole, coherence has again become concentrated. Each group needs enough context to locate its work within the larger system and enough voice to influence how that system evolves.

This is not decentralisation as abandonment. It is distributed responsibility held within active relationships of mutual accountability.

Strong governance is not concentrated governance

Distributing responsibility does not make governance less important. It makes capable governance more necessary. A commons composed of multiple groups still needs ways to hold a shared purpose, make legitimate decisions, allocate resources, address conflict and remain accountable across the whole.

But strong governance is not the same as concentrated governance. Strength does not come from returning authority to a central board, founder or manager whenever coordination becomes difficult. It comes from making authority clear, developing the capacity to exercise it at the appropriate level, and maintaining trustworthy ways for decisions affecting the whole to be made and reviewed.

In a groups-of-groups structure, governance therefore has to exist within groups and between them. Each group needs enough authority to act and enough accountability to remain answerable for what it does. The wider commons needs the capacity to see across the parts, respond when responsibilities collide or gaps appear, and protect the kaupapa without taking ownership of it away from participants.

The aim is not weaker governance, but governance strong enough to coordinate without dominating.

Where the legal and social architectures meet

The legal container becomes useful when it protects and enables this living pattern rather than attempting to substitute for it. It can hold land or other assets, preserve the purpose across changes in membership, define ultimate duties, employ people, enter agreements and provide a lawful way to resolve decisions that carry significant risk.

The groups provide something different. They carry practical knowledge, participation, trust, feedback and the daily interpretation of purpose. They are where the institution senses what is happening and develops the capacity to respond.

Between them sits stewardship. Stewards connect the formal and relational worlds: translating legal obligations into workable practice, helping information travel, supporting groups to form and mature, noticing gaps, and ensuring that responsibility has not quietly fallen back onto one or two people. Some stewardship may be voluntary, but sustained coordination of a complex commons is real labour and should be resourced accordingly.

Protected purpose and assets. Robust groups of groups. Supported stewardship. Each carries something the others cannot.

This combination does not require three separate organisations. Nor does it prescribe a charitable trust, cooperative or any other universal form. The legal arrangement should follow the nature of the assets, risks, relationships and Te Tiriti responsibilities involved. The social architecture should follow the scale and rhythm at which people can build trust and act well together.

What matters is that neither is mistaken for the whole. Legal design without living groups produces an institution that may persist on paper while participation thins out. Strong groups without an adequate legal container may create rich relationships while leaving assets, obligations and continuity exposed. Both without supported stewardship may still depend upon heroic coordination.

Not a blueprint, but a proposition

I do not know whether Roimata Food Commons or Toha Kai would have endured under this kind of architecture. It would be too easy to apply a new idea backwards and imagine it resolving every difficulty. Different structures would not have removed funding constraints, interpersonal tensions, exhaustion or the pressures people carried from the rest of their lives.

But the proposition feels worth testing. Perhaps the durable unit of commoning is not the committed individual, the charismatic founder, the board or even the organisation understood as a single whole. Perhaps it is the small group, connected to other small groups, supported by governance capable of holding purpose, authority and accountability across the whole.

This changes the questions we might ask when beginning again. Not only: What legal entity should we form? But: Where will people build the trust to carry responsibility together? How will that trust extend beyond one group? Where will coherence be renewed? How will decisions affecting the whole be made, challenged and reviewed? Who will tend the relationships between the parts? What will protect the kaupapa and its assets when particular people leave?

Legal structure plus robustly organised groups of groups may offer the beginnings of durable civic commoning infrastructure.

The word 'beginnings' matters. No architecture can make a commons permanent, remove the need for care or guarantee that power will be shared well. Structures do not eliminate politics; they give politics places to become visible and practices through which it can be worked with.

Coherence cannot live only in a document. It cannot live only in a founder. It cannot live only in occasional gatherings of a community too large for its members to know how responsibility is actually being carried.

It has to live somewhere closer: within groups that meet, act and learn together; between groups that remain answerable to one another; and inside institutions designed to protect that living capacity rather than consume it.

Influence: Richard D. Bartlett's Microsolidarity, particularly its distinction between small crews and wider congregations. This essay draws on that distinction rather than presenting the full framework.
microsolidarity.cc