The Social Commons:
Transformational Thinking on
Social Solidarity for the 21st century

[A Working Monograph from the Marvyn Novick Legacy Group]

Re-awakening Our Social Commons

June 2020

Our Subject and Purpose

Marvyn Novick, a leading thinker and contributor to the social policy field in Ontario and Canada passed away on June 21, 2016. Although retired after a distinguished career in the social planning field in Toronto and as Dean and teacher at the Ryerson School of Social Work, Marvyn remained actively engaged as a contributor to the social policy work of the Social Planning Network of Ontario and to CAMPAIGN 2000. Marvyn's friends and colleagues joined with his family to memorialize his life and career in the fall of 2016. Subsequently, forming the Marvyn Novick Legacy Group, we have continued to pursue the ideas and policy directions to which he was committed. We are producing an anthology of Marvyn's writingss over a forty year period with reflective commentaries by his contemporaries on their relevance to the conditions that we face in Canada today and in the years to come.

In November 2019, the Legacy Group organized a public lecture and an invitational conference focusing on the theme of the Social Commons, a subject to which Marvyn was giving some attention in his later years. Dr. Francine Mestrum, international researcher and activist on social development, served as guest speaker to spark discussion on the relevance of a Social Commons framework in a number of policy areas, which were discussed with expert panellists by the more than 100 participants in attendance.

The event was very enthusiastically received as reflected in commentaries in words and video at [web site]. Still, there was a clearly expressed wish for a more complete understanding of the concept of the Commons and Social Commons in a Canadian context. This monograph based on the research and many discussions of the Legacy Group members in the first half of 2020 is an attempt to respond to that interest. We see it as a "Working Monograph" for discussion in the field and to be revised as necessary after others have shared their thinking with us. We invite you to indicate your interest and provide commentary to pclutterbuck@rogers.com . A web site is under construction to invite wider feedback.

The Marvyn Novick Legacy Group members are identified at the end of the monograph.

The Challenges We Face: Revelations amid the Turbulence

As we contend with the ravages of a global pandemic in 2020, Canadians have discovered, as in other times of crisis, what we could expect of each other as individuals, families, communities and nations. We have witnessed the value of collective action in local self-organizing acts of

mutual support, which a columnist in *The Guardian* suggested reflects a power shift "from both market and state to another place altogether: the Commons."[1]

We have also observed government action at all levels guided by the knowledge and expertise of public health officials, and importantly, the consent and cooperation of the population within and across communities to successfully deal with the crisis at hand. Before the people and the people's mandated democratic institutions, private capital has stood down, an unimaginable suspension of our market-dominated society. This has enabled us to act together to control and end an existential threat to our community health and social well-being.

The pandemic has laid bare just how precarious so much of our social and economic life really is. It has also demonstrated how much of what we take for granted depends on a solid foundation of public and community infrastructure in health care, education, child care, communications, public transportation, and safe and secure housing.

We live in turbulent times. Rarely in history have we faced such deep divisions and the need for a profoundly different path. Our political and economic institutions appear to lack a moral compass grounded in protecting and extending human rights. Our market dominated economy creates greater concentrations of wealth and income inequality while people's most basic needs are left unmet. The choices we make in the next decade will determine our success in creating a world of peace, prosperity, and health for all that is ecologically sustainable for future generations.

This will demand new ways of thinking, acting, participating, and governing. We suggest that the core tenets of this transformation in this millennium are:

- A strong foundation of human rights that incorporates protections for individuals within a clear understanding of our collective responsibility to each other, to future generations and to the planet.
- An economy focused first and foremost on meeting the human needs of everyone rather than primarily satisfying the wants and privileges of the more affluent.
- A strengthening of community life and institutions grounded in principles and practices of inclusion, trust, respect for diversity, equality, and social justice.
- An enabling and supportive role for governments in re-creating community and civic life.

It is time to re-balance and strengthen community engagement and local action through appropriate and supportive provincial and national public policy frameworks. We need to create an economy designed to meet human needs, and regulated to ensure adequate and secure incomes offering decent employment[2] as well as a fair return on capital investment. This reflects the social contract that emerged following World War II, which, as French economist Thomas Piketty's research shows, resulted in the lowest levels of inequality in the Western world for a

[1] George Monbiot, The horror films got it wrong. This virus has turned us into caring neighbours. *The Guardian*, London, UK, March 31, 2020.

[2] Anthony Giddens (2001). *The Global Third Way Debate*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press. Giddens discusses decent work in terms of employment allowing people to contribute to social well-being and giving them the chance to make something of their lives.

thirty year period until 1980.[3] Post-pandemic we need a new social contract establishes both the moral case and the economic argument for meeting our responsibility to each other now and to future generations.

Since the 1980s the postwar social contract with its system of social protections, along with the right to justice, to knowledge, to the arts, and to the natural environment has been "plundered" by neoliberalism, intensifying a long history of capitalist and imperialist practices of commodification, privatization, and colonialization of resources common to all, our collective Commons.[4] Today, our times, locally and globally, are marked by high levels of inequality that ravage the souls of people and their communities.

It is time for embracing civic democracy in which communities are supported to make decisions that determine their own health and well-being within national public frameworks of solidarity grounded in values of equity, inclusion, dignity and respect for all. Inherent in a vision of the Commons is that community life and supportive, enabling government action are inextricably linked. It is this connection that we wish to explore in reimagining and framing our understanding of the Commons for a post-pandemic Canada.

Re-Discovering the Commons: A Transformative Way of Thinking

We are deeply appreciative of the thinkers and researchers who are building a body of literature on the topic of the Commons as documented in the appended Selected Resources. This growing body of work informs our own thinking here in Canada about the potential of the Commons as a paradigm to guide the shaping of a new social covenant for the 21st century. This is especially true as we emerge from a pandemic, which, because of its devastation to our communities, has led us to question how we wish to re-organize our economy, social relations, and democratic political institutions in order to create a society of equity, justice and shared opportunity for all.

Although coming from different backgrounds, thinkers and writers on the Commons are fairly consistent in the core of the concept while reflecting some variation in emphasis.

Francine Mestrum, international researcher and activist on global social development, defines the Commons as "all those things that people in a political community or society – at whatever level – decide to see as a common, because they belong to the whole of the group. This process includes the rules for governing, regulating and monitoring the use of these commons. . . . The common will always be the result of a conscious shared activity in order to institute it."[5] Mestrum cautions that we think of the Commons as "more than just a thing; it is also the process leading to the creation of things as commons and it is the conceptual framework in which we can conceive of the things that we want to share and want the whole community to use."[6]

[3] Thomas Piketty (2020). *Capital and Ideology*. Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
[4] See Selected Resources (appended) for the work of: Linda McQuaig, Francine Mestrum; Guy Standing; David Bollier; Silke Helfrich; Margaret Wheatley; Anna Coote; David Harvey; Thomas Piketty.
[5] Mestrum, *op.cit*., p. 108.
[6] Mestrum, *loc. cit*.

David Bollier and Silke Helfrich, leading scholars and activists on the subject, talk of the Commons as living social systems through which people generate the necessities of life essential to sustainability and address their shared problems in self-organized ways in their communities. The Commons in any particular setting take shape by processes of engagement in governance, provisioning, and social practice.[7]

Guy Standing, British scholar and international advisor on labour and social policy, describes the Commons as a collaborative way of living, concerned with the reproduction of resources for sustainability not their depletion. He depicts the Commons as the equitable pooling of resources, collectively governed for fair access for all.[8]

The Commons embraces a profound change and re-balancing in humankind's relationship with each other and with all life in the natural environment. They model relationship, belonging, participation, sharing in common and a sense of connection to community. Archbishop Desmond Tutu's words capture our shifting human identity as humankind moves from *I to we*.

> We exist in a bundle of life, we say, "A person is a person through other people" It is not "I think therefore I am [but rather] I am human because I belong. I participate, I share.

This reflects the South African saying "*ubuntu*" meaning "humanity to others", translated directly as "I am who I am because of who we all are."[9] Also, the Commons reflects values consistent with the Indigenous worldview that sees us as responsible for the life and well-being of seven generations to come.[10] This is further reinforced in Standing's discussion of the British economist John Hartwick's rule of inter-generational equity where people can extract useable materials from the earth but that 'rents' (profits) from non-renewable resources are continuously re-invested to preserve such resources for future generations rather than used for consumption (wealth generation) in the present.[11]

Canadian writer Heather Menzies reminds us that "commoning" and the Commons are part of our collective history in this country. She observes that commoning was a way of life for most of our ancestors. It was a way of understanding economics as embedded in community life as guided by sustainable practices and local democracy. It is easy to forget that as recently as 1961, nearly four in ten Canadians lived on farms or in rural communities of less than 1,000 people. Though motivated by self-interest, they were also immersed in the rhythms of connection to

[7] David Bollier and Silke Helfrich (2019). *Free, Fair and Alive. The Insurgent Power of the Commons*. Gabriola Island, B.C.: New Society, p. 17
[8] Standing, *op. cit*., pp. 28-29
[9] Margaret J. Wheatley (2017). *What Do We Choose to Be?: Facing Reality, Claiming Leadership, Restoring Sanity*. Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehleer Publishers, quoting Archbishop Desmond Tutu, p. 223.
[10] The Seventh Generation Principle is based on an ancient Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) philosophy dating back to between 1142 and 1500AD. Indigenous Corporate Training, Inc. (May 2020) found at: https://www.ictinc.ca/blog/seventh-generation-principle
[11] Standing, *op. cit*., pp. 53-55.

place, mutual obligation, shared experience, and protection of the Commons for future generations.[12]

The paradigm of the Commons strongly repudiates the limited calculus of global capitalism, its neo-liberal doctrine with its corresponding policies of austerity; all supported by the market-dominated state where primacy has been given to economic growth and corporate profits for the last forty years. The global economic system and austerity measures have resulted in growing inequality, economic precarity, and ecological destruction that are worldwide phenomena today. There is growing pushback mirrored by increasing dissatisfaction, anger, unrest, and organized resistance across the globe. We ask the questions: What is our path to greater social and environmental justice? Will that path address our enduring human needs for home, for community, for economic security, for contribution, and for good work?

These questions compel us to ask how well our current political and economic institutions recognize and reflect our inherent humanity, and meet those shared human needs common to all. Universal values underpin our strong human bonds to each other based on mutual respect and dignity evident across all cultures. They include: inclusion, trust, respect for diversity, equality, and social justice.[13] These values assert our obligations to each other in terms of ensuring freedom from want and fear and sharing abundance fairly. They underlie and motivate relationships, systems of caring, collaborative community work, democratic decision-making, shared success and accountability and the co-creation of the path to the future.

To respond to these questions, we turn for guidance to the universal values intrinsic to our humanity as articulated in multiple declarations of individual, social, and environmental rights.

Universal Values and Collective Human Rights

The 1948 UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a major touchstone for answering these questions. The preamble of the Declaration recognizes "the inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family." These rights are an articulation of universal basic human needs, calling for the "advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want…".[14]

Several of the articles in the Declaration give meaning to "freedom from fear and want". For example:

Article 23: 1) Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment; 2) Everyone, without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work; 3) Everyone who works has the right to just

[12] Heather Menzies (2014). *Re-Claiming the Commons for the Common Good*. Gabriola Island, B.C.: New Society, pp. 1-4.
[13] This is a not an exhaustive list.
[14] The Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (December 10, 1948) New York, NY: United Nations. Found at http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/index.shtml

and favourable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family,[15] an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection; and 4) Everyone has the right to form and join trade unions for the protection of his interests.

Article 25: 1) Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control; 2) Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children… shall enjoy the same social protection.

Article 26: 1) Everyone has the right to education. [It] shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages and shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit; 2) Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms…

Article 27: Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits…

Article 28: Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized. ….[16]

The international community further defined the core human rights articulated in this bedrock Declaration of 1948 over the following sixty years through a series of UN conventions and covenants: the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966), the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) and the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007).

The post-1945 context for this unprecedented recognition of "the inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family" is very significant, especially in the current situation of a global pandemic. Having vanquished the forces of oppression and fascism in WWII and recalling the failure of a lasting post-WWI peace, the victors looked to create a new world order focused on human rights as articulated in the Declaration.

Although the original and subsequent declarations and conventions have never been fully realized in practice, national governments in the western world did assume leadership in framing a social contract with private capital and labour founded on full employment and public provision for a thirty year period until the 1980s. As Piketty notes, in the 40 years since then, the neo-liberal agenda has made governments the servants of corporate interests and reduced many of the rights and values of the Declaration and the subsequent conventions and covenants to words on a page. This is the moment to restore these fundamental protections and re-imagine their meaning for the 21st century.

[15] More appropriately expressed in our time as "themselves and their families" and similar change to the exclusive use of the male pronoun in subsequent sections.
[16] The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, *op. cit.*

Asserting the recognition of individual human rights, the Declaration provides a vision of a just, decent and secure future for all. It is our conviction that individual human rights must be embedded in social rights inherent in our collective experience in society. We are challenged to create and implement a system of social protection guaranteeing universal access to policies and programs that meet human needs.

Further, we believe that human and social rights are intertwined with a third level of rights, environmental rights, designed to protect all life on the planet, including preserving natural habitats of non-human animals. Environmental rights and obligations related to the broader notion of a "Global Commons" are being recognized starting with the Law of the Sea (1982), and expanding to agreements related to the atmosphere, the ozone layer, climate change, protection of natural species, treaties on the polar regions, as well as outer space. Today there is extensive debate regarding net neutrality and the need to protect cyberspace as a global social commons.

This multi-dimensional, interdependent understanding of human rights carries with it individual and collective obligations and responsibilities to each other, to the planet and to future generations. Such obligations must form the basis of both political decision-making and economic activity. This vision and understanding of rights and their reflection in how we meet human needs brings us to the paradigm of the Commons, a different future based on human rights, human interconnectedness, and the sustainability of all life on our planet (nature).

Our Current System Is Failing Us

Neo-liberalism is an ideology that puts the full apparatus of the state and the institutions that should be there to safeguard human rights, provide social protection and ensure ecological sustainability, largely at the service of global capital. This enables the development of a more extreme and less accountable form of capitalism that threatens collective well-being and our ultimate survival.

The post-War solidarity that gave rise to the commitment to full employment joined with a protective social safety net has been severely eroded. Social solidarity, human dignity, decent living and working conditions, the right to housing and environmental sustainability have been pushed aside, falling from the agenda of the state. This vacuum has enabled neo-liberalism to thrive by internalizing rewards to capital investment while externalizing the risks to communities and governments.

Neo-liberalism promotes competition among individuals for jobs and livelihoods at the expense of the collective by disconnecting us from others and the shared resources of community life. It encourages and rewards the actions of some individuals who are driven to maximize their own wealth with little regard for the implications on others.

Also, we are witness to how neo-liberal doctrine has reduced our social safety net through the 'politics of austerity', focusing our social services increasingly on the most marginal people in society-- the poor, the mentally ill, the homeless, the sexually assaulted, while offering lower

taxes to middle and upper income groups. It is an oppressive system of control rather than a system of human rights, universal social protection, and respect for human dignity.[17]

Fallacies of Global Capital and the Neo-liberal Creed

There are three destructive fallacies that underlie global capitalism's current economic growth mindset:

a) that we can continue and even accelerate the damage to our eco-sphere and natural habitats upon which all life on this planet, including human life, depends without exhausting the earth's finite resources potentially within decades;[18]
b) that the free flow of financial capital internationally to jurisdictions with low taxation, low labour costs, and reduced workplace and environmental standards produces global economic progress and improved living standards rather than labour exploitation and austerity policies that only increase inequalities in income and wealth; and
c) that future creativity, innovation and cultural and scientific advances are best propagated through a system of proprietary accumulation, which buys up and hoards intellectual property and discoveries, and limits access to knowledge for current and future generations rather than seeing knowledge as an inter-generational cultural inheritance, encouraging the free flow of ideas and allowing accumulated knowledge to be the springboard of creativity, innovation and future prosperity.

Neo-liberalism claims that social, health, cultural, educational, and environmental expenditures create public deficits and increase public debt. As a result, austerity measures have been enacted that affect the well-being of people and undermine our social solidarity by:

- slashing social spending to fight deficits and public debt;
- downloading public services to municipalities, community and the nonprofit sector without the appropriate funding;
- eroding universal policies with broad public support for the benefit of all while favouring minimalist and targeted approaches that trap the poor in despair and destitution;
- privatizing human services such as child care and senior care while offloading "unprofitable" service areas to an often under-resourced, generally low-wage non-profit sector;
- suppressing collective action and solidarity systems (social insurance programs, labour rights) which previously joined people at all income levels to a shared standard of decency in everyday life;

[17] As explained in Francine Mestrum (2015). *The Social Commons. Re-thinking Social Justice in Post-Neoliberal Societies. Brussells: Global Social Justice Network*, pp. 23-24, neo-liberalism has successfully enlisted progressive elements of society in a more limited agenda focusing on minimalist protections for the poorest and most marginalized rather than on the social, economic, and environmental rights of all citizens.
[18] Nafeez Ahmed (Mar. 14, 2014). NASA-funded study: industrial civilization headed for 'irreversible collapse'? London, UK: *The Guardian*.

- emphasizing minimal cash transfers that commodify human needs instead of investing in the provision of universal, high quality public services in health, education, and other essential forms of social care;
- denying access to justice to low income and marginalized people by the cost of legal advocacy, the abolition of tribunals, disproportionate legal punishments, a limited legal aid system, and an antiquated and overcrowded prison system;
- commercializing the arts, controlling innovation and what is displayed and presented as cultural expression;
- viewing nature as an economic resource for exploitation and commodification leading to devastating global warming with polar ice caps melting, sea levels rising, raging forest fires and the extinction of species.
- cutting taxes for the richest, turning a blind eye to off-shore tax havens, and depleting the public revenue base for needed social programs.

The assumptions underlying this last claim are false. In the case of Canada, it ignores the fact that government spending in Canada is about 15% lower today as a share of GDP than it was in 1980. It conveniently ignores the fact that since the early 1950s, corporate taxes as a share of government revenues have dropped from roughly 30% to about 17%. Personal Income and sales tax revenues by comparison have grown from roughly 40% to 73%.[19] In 2018, for every dollar paid by corporations, individual tax payers are paying about four dollars. It makes no mention of the fact that tax avoidance schemes, including off-shore tax havens cost Canada the equivalent of between $6 - $10 billion/year.[20]

The fallacies of global capital in combination with the austerity measures implemented under neo-liberalism are a path to a dystopian future. We require a new way of thinking that recognizes the centrality of addressing human need over corporate greed. We must consider:

- changing development practices and consumption patterns focused on reducing ecological damage that threatens the survival of life on this planet;
- focusing political and economic activities, first and foremost, on ensuring that everyone can meet the basic necessities of life, and further, has access to sufficient resources and opportunities to achieve an acceptable community standard of living;
- reversing policies that promote, accept, sanction or condone distributions of income and wealth that allows corporations, and the people who hold controlling interest in them, to amass vast wealth while many of the earth's inhabitants lack many of the necessities of life, are denied fundamental human rights, are prevented from voting in elections, and are denied decent jobs and working conditions; and
- an end to appropriating the cultural and scientific knowledge of past generations, and to buying up intellectual property that the purchaser had no direct role in creating, and thereby excluding access to it for current and future generations.

[19] Historical Statistics of Canada, Series H1-18 and Federal Fiscal Reference Tables 2012-2017.
[20] M.C. Oved, Toby A. A. Heaps, and M. Yow (December 14, 2017). The High Cost of Low Corporate Taxes, (Toronto Star and Corporate Knights) as presented in *Toronto Star*.

Re-Animating the Commons

The Commons represent a visionary and transformative framework for thought and action that interweaves old and new threads of thinking, of policy and of acting in community. It foresees a different future where the top 10% of income earners in the population do not control the lion's share of wealth, including property, financial resources but also cultural and knowledge assets.[21]

Guy Standing in his book, *Plunder of the Commons: A Manifesto for Sharing Public Wealth,* identifies five spheres of the Commons, all interconnected and interdependent, all essential for human well-being. Illustrating the breadth of the Commons,[22] they are:

1. Natural Commons: the right to use and live in harmony with natural resources such as land, water, air, forests etc., which as finite resources are protected and maintained for the present and the future. Humankind is of nature.

2. Social Commons: the right to create relationships, activities, systems of social protection and support through which we respect and help each other participate and flourish. The social commons build on the many services of the welfare state.

3. Civil Commons: the right to justice that is universal, proportionate, and based on due process and equality before the law. Access to a system of justice to resolve disputes and to retain counsel within the reach of all people.

4. Cultural Commons: the right to cultural resources such as art, music, literature, theatre, public architecture, libraries, mass media. The arts "can widen horizons, expand perceptions, question presumptions, and encourage empathy as well as pleasure and delight."[23] Art degraded into a commodity corrupts its social role.

5. Knowledge Commons: the right to access information, education, ideas, science, and knowledge. A Knowledge Commons support the development of ideas that are freely generated and shared and where all can learn and expand their capacities.[24]

We suggest a sixth – the Economic Commons: the creation of an economy for people and their needs, which cultivates, extracts, harvests, processes, transforms or reproduces resources in a manner that ensures that they meet the basic needs of all people, are replenished and sustained, and not depleted in pursuit of economic growth and higher profits.

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[21] Thomas Piketty in his *Capital and Ideology* (2020) documents centuries of history across all continents in which the disproportionately concentrated ownership of property and wealth held by elites consistently produced high levels of inequality for the common people.

[22] Guy Standing (2019). *Plunder of the Commons. A Manifesto for Sharing Public Wealth*. London: Penguin Random House, p. ix. Francine Mestrum, David Bollier and Silke Helfrich, and Anna Coote also address these forms of the Commons. Our grasp of the Commons will continue to evolve as we learn from other diversities and practices.

[23] Standing, *ibid.,* quoting playwright David Edgar, p. 230.

[24] See Adelphi Charter on Creativity, Innovation and Intellectual Property, 2004 and Copyright for Creativity, 2010.

While ever mindful of the full breadth of the Commons as described above, our focus is primarily on the Social Commons, which are the social resources that we share and that sustain us as individuals as we live collectively in our communities and across communities and throughout our nation. Francine Mestrum contends that the central objective of the Social Commons is to enhance the health and well-being of all people and to contribute to the sustainability of life, identifying three dimensions that are important to transformational change essential to social and environmental justice. They are:

i) to ensure social and economic reproduction to preserve society and social relations at different levels;
ii) to promote social integration and make relationships among people and with nature harmonious; and
iii) to give individuals economic and social security and an adequate standard of living, through income guarantees, individual and collective rights, equal opportunities and sharply reduced inequalities.[25]

Emerging from the heightened consciousness of human rights in the mid-20th century, the welfare state established a strong base for applying a Social Commons framework in the particular social, economic and political conditions that we are confronting in the 21st century. As the United Sates did with Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal to fight the Great Depression in the 1930s and the Beveridge Report did in the early 1940s to propose social welfare reform in the United Kingdom in response to "Want, Disease, Ignorance, Squalor and Idleness", Leonard Marsh's Report on Social Security for Canada (1943) set the purpose and scope of the welfare state for Canada in the post-war period.[26] The values and principles of these landmark statements gave impetus to the formulation of human rights and dignity for all as expressed in the UN Declaration by decade's end, reinforced by government policy action in health, education and social insurances reflective of these commitments.

Francine Mestrum contends that the concept of the Social Commons can guide us in that purpose. She proposes that "social protection [social welfare] needs to be expanded, strengthened and reconceptualised."[27] In that respect, the Social Commons include the following public resources provided through federal, provincial, regional and local governments as well as civil society as illustrated in the chart below. Senior levels of government often provide funding and policy frameworks, as well as common characteristics and standards setting. Regional and local governments generally oversee disbursement to organizations, as well as overseeing standards, application of regulations, and service provision to specific communities, households and businesses.

[25] Mestrum, *op. cit*., pp. 115-118.
[26] Leonard Marsh (1943). *Report on Social Security for Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. Subsequently published as *Report on Social Security for Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975. In the introduction to this edition by Alan Moscovitch, he points out that Marsh's thinking was strongly shaped by the League for Social Reconstruction, a circle of Canadian intellectuals formed in the early 1930s, ahead of their time in developing and advocating radically progressive social and economic reforms and political education.
[27] Mestrum, *op. cit.,* p. 112

Multi-Level Engagement for a Robust Social Commons

Federal and Provincial Government Led	**Regional and Local Government Led**	**Civil Society Led**
Food Security (Adequacy, Nutrition)	Water and Sewage Treatment	Food Hubs, Food-Co-ops, Food Banks, Community Gardens
Safe, Affordable Housing	Rent-Geared-To-Income Housing (Operation/Management)	Non-Profit and Co-op Housing Projects/Groups
Health Care (Prevention, Chronic, Acute)	Waste Management/Garbage	Household and Neighbourhood Level Re-Cycling
Income Security (Adequacy without Conditions)	Policing/Fire Protection (crime prevention, community policing, arrests, fire services, safety)	Charitable Giving/Self-Help Initiatives
Education (Primary, Secondary, Post-Secondary)	Social Services (individual and community support services, newcomer settlement, child protection)	Mutual Aid Groups/ Peer Networks
Child Care/Development (safe, affordable, accessible)	Parks and Recreation (playgrounds, green space, programs, equipment	Clothing Exchanges/Food Cupboards/Toy Libraries
Employment (stable jobs, fair wages, safe conditions, benefits)	Building and Planning Approvals	Community Economic Development Projects
Seniors Care (home and alternative settings)	Boards of Health/Local Health Integration Networks	Friendly Visiting/Seniors Co-ops/Inter-generational Projects
Civil and Criminal Justice (courts, tribunals, corrections)	Public Libraries	
Environmental Protection (clean air, water, conservation, emergencies	Conservation Authorities	Community Clean-Up Days/ Clean Water Advocacy Groups/ Local Ecology Groups
Communications/Energy Distribution Infrastructure (Telecommunications, Electrical Grid, Pipelines)	Local Utilities (Hydro, Water)	Local Alternative Energy Projects/Passive Solar Energy Open Source IT/Software Communities
Transportation (Airports, Railways, Highways, Canals/Ports, Inter-City Transportation)	Public Transit/Parking/ Bikeways (accessible public transportation, traffic planning & management)	Cycling and Walking Clubs/ Efforts to promote non-motorized transportation

Civil society is also a major part of the Social Commons through formal community-based non-profit organizations and informal civic action. They are frequently engaged in the development and delivery at the community level of many of the services and supports shown above.

Community members often take the initiative to develop local capacity that addresses their own issues and meets their own self-defined needs. Community capacity-building, citizen participation and civic engagement are well-established social practices in the community development field in Canada. Within the Commons framework, we believe these processes can also be referred to as "commoning," although the concept is much more fully developed in the Commons literature.

"Commoning": Engaging Community in Transformative Change

Commoning is the process of people acting collaboratively in participative activity to share equally and fairly in co-creation for sustainable and decent lives.[28] Commoning is based on dense interpersonal connections and interdependencies, and social trust, representing a profound rejection of the individualism and materialism of neo-liberalism.[29] Through commoning shared meaning and purpose are created, allies are identified, and coalitions, partnerships, and broader networks are established as a means to change.

Mestrum contends that commoning is '[w]hat makes social commons different from social protection", since it "is in the very first place the participatory and democratic construction of it."[30]

Elements of commoning are embedded in our active engagement with each other to improve community life outside of the government sphere of activity. We join Commons theorists and thinkers in arguing that commoning should be an intentional and recognized expression of local autonomy and self-determination. Commoning should be generated out of civic dialogue and participatory practices in communities, rather than administered through mandated formal structures.[31]

Engaged people are central to the work of co-designing and of co-creating the Commons in the settings in which they live, work and recreate. Commoning within and across communities epitomizes a paradigm shift in power relations at the ground as people move to self-managed, participatory, deliberative decision-making.[32]

While commoning has obvious attractions and benefits to local community members, it also creates the cultural base for strengthening democratic politics in support of the values, rights and principles of the Social Commons. All forms of democratic dialogue and practice are nested in values embodied in rights, evidence, expertise and common experience. It would be a waste and inevitably highly inequitable to focus on the mobilization of social resources only at the local community level. Horizontal linkages across communities promote innovation and sharing and prepare the ground for broader supportive public policy frameworks at the provincial and

[28] Standing, *op. cit.,* p. 2, 28.
[29] Bollier and Helfrich, *op. cit*., p. 41.
[30] Mestrum, *op. cit.,* p. 115.
[31] Bollier and Helfrich, *op. cit*., p. 291.
[32] Mestrum, *op. cit.,* p. xx.

national levels.[33] This begs the question of the role of the state and its public policy-making function in enabling the Social Commons.

The Role of the "Emancipatory State"

To be transformative, the Commons require a paradigm shift to new ways of thinking, new language[34], and expanded concepts of governance and democratic decision-making.[35] We believe that the Commons must be supported through what Francine Mestrum calls the "emancipatory State", arising from democratic choices made intentionally through deliberative dialogue engaging diverse interests and sectors at all levels of community.[36] It is clear that neither global capital nor a neo-liberal State will support a re-animating of the Commons or an equity striving Social Commons. Rather, it will ignore them or systematically undermine, even oppress them, through practices of enclosure (commodification, privatization, colonialization, economic sanctions, global financial and trade agreements).

The "emancipatory state" would be the steward of people's rights and a partner in creating the social, economic, and environmental conditions for the respect, endorsement, and enactment of these rights. The State is a partner in the initiatives of society, setting standards, allocating resources, and ensuring equitable access to both resources and the decision-making processes. New forms of more direct democratic process are called for in a Social Commons framework.[37]

Much of the literature on the Social Commons is primarily focused on enabling and facilitating the agency of people living in communities to make decisions on meeting local needs, while protecting both disadvantaged groups and the natural world from exploitation and subjugation by central governments or corporate interests. Yet, such protections must almost certainly be safeguarded through agreements with and across governments. In Canada, our federal political system divides power between two orders of government and organizes a third municipal tier for a good deal of service delivery. Canadians are more than familiar with the complexity of creating and enforcing national standards of equity and access in critical areas of care, as the COVID-19 crisis in long term care has demonstrated most recently. Since the Social Commons are focused on community life, the challenge is to figure out the critical intersection of

[33] Linking and sharing across local communities is important but commoning also recognizes the value and power of connecting diversity within and across communities of identity, affiliation and interest as well.

[34] Language is an indispensable force for re-imagining the world and for socially constructing the society to which we aspire. We can no longer use the language of the old paradigm of the "free market", of "targeted social services" for "risk management", and of "liberal democracy" to co-create the Commons. A new world view, demanding new categories of thought and new ways of acting, also calls for intentionally new language.

[35] Mestrum, *op. cit.,* p. 134 argues that the Social Commons require a state "that mirrors class relations and gives more influence to the silent majority of today than to the vociferous minority of the population"; Bollier and Helfrich, *op. cit*., pp. 119-162 propose and provide models of peer governance for democratic decision-making; Piketty, *op.cit*., p. 497-498 writes that co-determination (worker participation on private firm boards in Germany and Nordic Europe) has been a key measure for lowering levels of inequality in those countries.

[36] Mestrum, *op. cit*., p. 22.

[37] In Canada, Dave Meslin (2019) has suggested different and more direct democratic decision-making models in his *Teardown. Rebuilding Democracy from the Ground Up*. Toronto: Penguin.

community with the political and economic structures and institutions that will ensure that laws and societal conventions are designed in a way that supports the Social Commons.

Also, Canada's federal government is engaged with other nation states in a variety of bilateral and subcontinental structures, and our economic systems are often constrained by global agreements related to financial transactions and international trade. A Social Commons should be the guiding framework for Canada's relations with other states in the international community with respect to global protection of human rights, including the right to income security, housing, food and water, health services, employment and education, all well beyond community level actors.

In summary, the Commons provide a justice framework for rethinking social, economic and environmental policies and actions which are transformative and participative. Growing the Commons in these times signifies a sustained effort to redress the power imbalance that the last two or three generations promoting enclosure, commodification and privatization have created and that imperils the sustainability of life on this planet. In contrast to the present trajectory, the Commons envisions a future with:

a. People reimagining a more politically engaged future
b. People in control of their lives, and able to claim what should be theirs by right
c. Promoting and supporting local collective action, and neighbourhood self-government
d. Commons resources available to and shared by all
e. Commons resources and assets shaped through shared values, articulated rights, deliberative dialogue and democratic decision-making
f. Collaborating with and supported by the State in co-generating local plans not distant from and dependent on the State
g. Living systems that evolve, adapt over time and allow for local self-expression and creative solutions in promoting sustainability

Beginning the Conversation: A Transformative Social Commons Agenda

Suggesting a comprehensive discussion and a fully fleshed out Social Commons agenda on the policy areas indicated previously would be a large undertaking. Our recent experience with the pandemic, however, points to several critical areas to begin a policy discussion.

Income Security and Employment. Federal, provincial and municipal governments moved in lockstep in shutting down those parts of the economy not identified as essential services to help control and reduce community spread of COVID-19. The impact on unemployment was almost immediate with the loss of more than 1,000,000 jobs in Ontario alone and the need to make provision for income support to a range of diverse groups (waged workers in manufacturing and retail who could not work out of their homes, self-employed contractors, small business owners, students). Essential workers were discovered in traditionally low-paying sectors such as grocery and food services, drug stores and personal support work leading to provisions for wage top-ups and subsidies.

The question of how to transition to economic recovery arises, presenting the challenge of confronting the typically underpaid and poor working conditions of many of these employment sectors. Basic income has been a growing area of public debate for several years now, and advocates see the current crisis as the moment to advance public and political support for a Basic Universal Income.[38] Others emphasize strengthening commitments to universally accessible public services and decent wages and working conditions.[39]

Given this very real forced common economic experience in 2020, how should we think about the relationship between income security, essential public services and paid employment from a Social Commons perspective?

Affordable Housing and Homelessness. People who are homeless and street involved are at particular risk during the pandemic. They have limited access to the safeguards most of us have within a safe and secure home. Those relying on shelters are placed in close contact with large numbers of strangers who, like themselves, are precariously housed. Low income tenants, including many who have recently lost jobs, face the prospect of evictions once the pandemic ends, and they struggle to manage debts, food insecurity and housing needs. There was a time in Canada when governments were strongly committed to creating affordable housing and to ending homelessness. From 1946 through to the late 1980s, nearly half a million units of public and non-profit housing were completed under the *National Housing Act*.[40]

Since the 1990s, this has not been the case. Despite the lofty goals of the current federal government's National Housing Strategy, investment levels and commitments fall well below those of the 1970s, let alone addressing the massive crisis in affordable rental housing caused by a generation of indifference and neglect.[41] The Commons asserts that as part of the human community every household has the right to safe and secure housing.

Can the seriousness of this pandemic, and recognizing the inter-dependent nature of our collective health, force us out of our complacency and help us to renew our commitment to end homelessness and provide safe, secure housing for all? At the policy and resourced allocation level, what could this mean in terms of a federal-provincial agreement to set targets and timelines for eliminating homelessness? How could communities be supported to design their own affordable and safe housing solutions that, in the spirit of the Commons, would emphasize community rather than individual family home ownership?

Child Care and Child Development. Universal, quality, safe, and publicly supported child care lessens the inequalities among children created by the social conditions into which they are born and shapes their journey through life. Also, these supports are essential to a national commitment to end the ravages of systemic racism and child and family poverty. In signing the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), Canada committed itself to creating a national

[38] Chandra Pasma and Sheila Regehr (2019). Basic Income: Some Policy Options for Canada. Report prepared for the Basic Income Canada Network.
[39] Anna Coote (2017). *Building a New Social Commons. The People, The Commons and The Public Realm*. London, UK: The New Economic Foundation.
[40] Ann Mcafee (2009, revised 2015). Housing and Housing Policy. On-line article, *The Canadian Encyclopedia*.
[41] Ibid.

child care policy by implementing national standards and making long-term investment in communities to foster a diversity of responsive and flexible local programs reflecting community needs.[42]

The Covid-19 pandemic, however, has exposed once again the failure of our non-system of child and family care. This state of affairs neither nurtures the development and learning of children nor supports families, especially women. This failure perpetuates the historic crevice and deep wound of gender inequality in Canada. The evidence is uncontestable. As a 2017 IMF study documents, women's labour force participation increases GDP, not only enough to compensate for a universal child care program but also to generate revenue for other programs.[43]

The pandemic reveals how critically important this service and its predominantly female workforce (96%) are as temporary child care arrangements were organized and fully funded to maintain an essential worker labour force in the health sector and also the low wage food services sector. [44]

The Social Commons create the opportunity for a collaborative partnership joining national leadership with local insight, participation, and initiative to provide community-based child care that recognizes the needs of children, of women, of families, and of communities. Funding would flow from established over-arching policy within broader collective standards of equity, quality, and access set to protect the well-being of all children. Supported by this framework, it is the acts of commoning in local communities where co-design and engagement of families and community members will create the essential child care programs to meet their needs.

Will this vision and opportunity to act hold in the return to a post-pandemic Canada? What would the intersection of a Social Commons policy framework and commoning look like in child care?

Seniors Care. Eighty-percent of the lives lost in this pandemic has occurred in long term care facilities, a scandalous shame for public authorities and private sector providers but reflective of a societal neglect to advocate for the basic needs of our most vulnerable populations. The congregate living, institutional model of care is fundamentally contrary to the concept of community care and, hence, to the core values and principles of the Social Commons. There is no question that the pandemic experience will increase vigilance and heighten enforcement of standards in the long term care industry.

Reform, however, is not transformation. There are many tested and proven home and community-based elder and disability care models for even the most frail and medically involved that challenge the values reflected in maintaining an institutionally-based system.[45] As families

[42] United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, as adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on November 20, 1989.
[43] Bengt Peterson, Rodrigo Mariscal and Kotaro Kshi. (2017) Women Are Key for Future Growth: Evidence from Canada. International Monetary Fund. Working Paper No. 17/166.
[44] R. A. Malatest and Associates Ltd. (December 2017). *Workforce Study for Early Years and Child Care Employees*. Final Report. Ontario Ministry of Education, pp. 12, 14.
[45] Laura Joszt (April 30, 2018). Hospital at Home Models Can Improve Care Delivery and Reduce Unnecessary ED Care. AJMC Exchange.

discover the risks of placing their aging members into institutional care, more living options are being explored to for enabling aging at home and in community.[46]

How could Social Commons policy frameworks on elder care facilitate local engagement and responsiveness to implement user-centred design to make the transition to a model of public and non-profit support that reflects circles of care and an aging-at-home focus? Does a Social Commons approach not necessitate the elimination of profit-making service models in eldercare as in other essential human service areas? Could a Social Commons approach supporting community action within strong national care standards enable a 10-20 year timeframe for reducing institutional care in favour of home-based and community care models?

The Civic Commons. As stated previously (p. 12), Mestrum emphasizes the importance of "the participatory and democratic construction" of the Social Commons. The tradition of active citizen participation in civic affairs, albeit for non-slave men only, was established in Athenian democracy 2500 years ago. Participation was considered a civic duty. Much has changed since. While today the level of civic engagement is often taken as a measure of the social health of a democracy, apolitical thinking and action is no longer considered a shameful neglect of civic duties. While, the Social Commons is grounded in a conviction to recognition of human rights, it also asserts the imperative of civic responsibility.

The moral core of the Civic Commons speaks to the active engagement of people from all walks of life as individuals or groups to address issues of public concern. Such an orientation could emerge as a powerful alternative to the still dominant free market paradigm which places individual self-interests over the common good.

The rights of citizen and civic duties define citizenship both as a status and as a practice.[47] Understanding this practice as Civic Commons is one of the grand challenges we face today. It would require a fair and just balance between individual rights and social responsibilities, recognizing that given existing power relations, the balance may be tipped in one or the other directions. To do so at the practical level presents a formidable but unavoidable undertaking.

The practice of the Civic Commons as participatory politics offers a different paradigm of the ways we currently live and work together. The powerful bond of our common humanity provides the crucial foundation for the democratization of the hierarchical bureaucratic institutional and organizational structures that define societies, including our own around the world today.

Conclusion

Canadian Federation of Nurses (Oct. 2017). A Safe Model for Home Care. Designing a hospital without walls.

[46] Tracy Hanes. Living together and also apart. Multi-generational housing is a growing trend that's back with a new twist; independent spaces that can be isolated. *Toronto Star*, June 20, 2020.

[47] Adrian Oldfield (1990). *Citizenship and Community: Civic Republicanism and the Modern World*. London, UK: Routledge.

We consider our own reflection on the value of the Commons framework in general in the Canadian context and the usefulness of the Social Commons lens in re-thinking the priority issues above as opening a discussion, not as a definitive or prescriptive approach. Our interest is in engaging stakeholders in community development and social policy in the discussion at the broadest level and/or focused on any of the priority issues identified.

Finally, there are any number of other pressing issues for exploration of the connection between community experience and policy frameworks using the Social Commons lens. And, of course, in applying the Commons concept, there is much interdependence and overlap among the different spheres presented earlier (social, natural, cultural, civil, knowledge, economic). Others with a primary focus on any one of these spheres may wish to examine the potential for the Commons to serve as a framework for both community action and policy development. While our primary interest is to start the discussion about the Social Commons, we invite others to join in the conversation in their own particular areas of interest.

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