

Towards a Rural Commons Manifesto. Investigating emerging commoning practices, engaging communities, exploring design approaches through an itinerant and transregional Festival.

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Introduction

Commons, collective action and practices, shared rules and models of organizing to take care of the elements of a region and the community are often overlooked by the capitalist and extractivist economic doctrine on regional development. Commons are often invisible economic practices, which cannot be accounted for in the current performance indicators of development, such as the GDP. Current economic recession, inequitable revenues and resource sharing, unfair organization of work, destruction of ecosystems, anthropogenic climate change, made even more explicit by the current Covid-19 pandemics, pave the way for the need for new frameworks for imagining and building the future of regions of the world. Commons are one of the possible frameworks available to transform the habitats and the future of regions into more sustainable, equitable and resilient ones.

Commons can be defined as a collective response to shared needs and desires expressed by a community. Practices that promote more inclusive habitats and communities, which self-regenerates and takes care of their own territory and landscapes, made of people, other human beings, resources, spaces, goods and services for the community. This concept might refer to different fields such as local economy, landscape, architecture, environmental design, social sciences and be connected to topics like community, habitat, spatial, social, cultural and natural resources, built heritage, just to mention a few. Research has been conducted on the relevance of the commons for societies and economies of rural areas, from different perspectives and using different approaches and concepts. For this reason, there is the need to link and create synergies among the various academic fields and the non-academic and practitioner world, to enable a concerted recognition of the commons for the present and the future of rural and mountain regions.

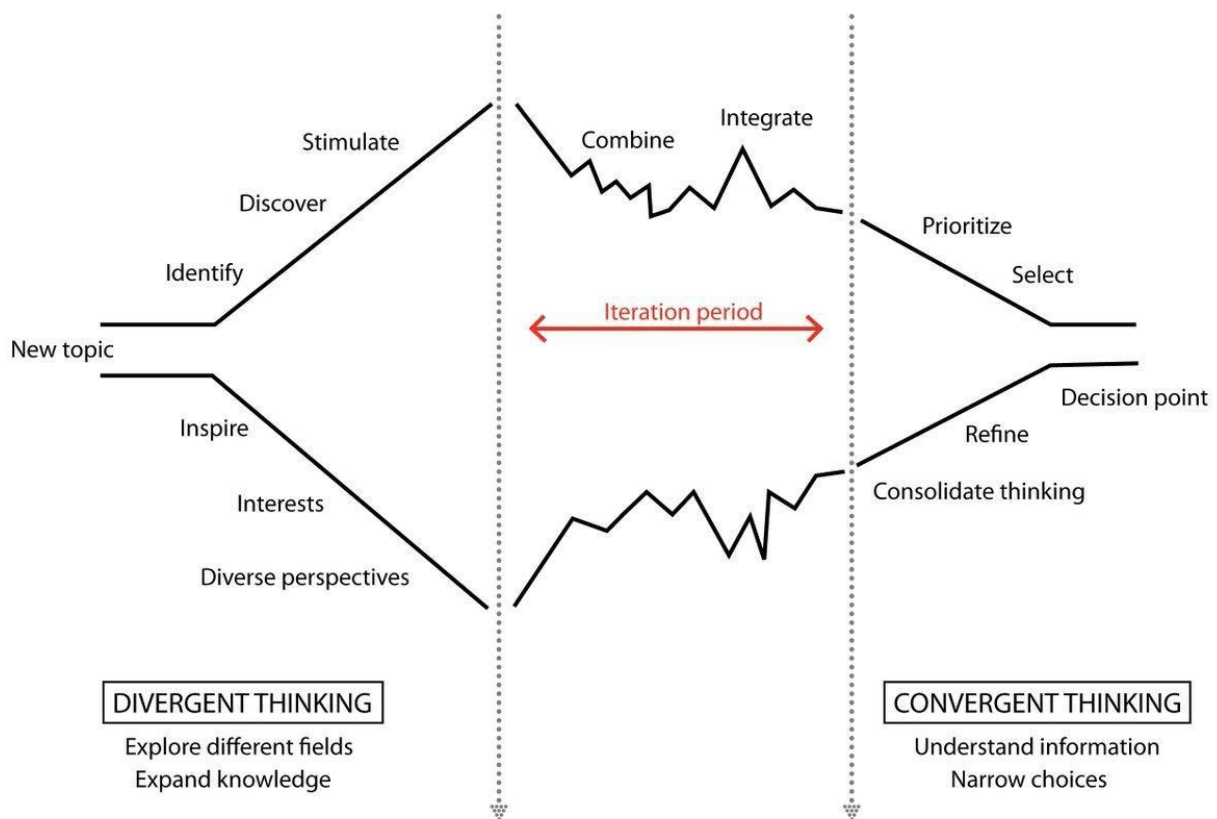
With this paper and the methodology adopted in the research activities, we aim to raise imaginaries on how commons enable desirables and equitable presents and futures in rural areas. We have adopted a research by design, interdisciplinary approach, based on the engagement of collective action groups in the conceptualization, design and organisation of the first Rural Commons Festival and a literature review, which together contribute to pave the way towards a Manifesto for the Rural Commons. What are emerging commoning practices in such regions? What are resources, ideas, needs, services and goods that should be taken care of

through the commons? Which pillars and values should commons be based on, in order to contribute to such vision?

With this paper we aim to contribute to the common scholarship with new methods and a new interdisciplinary and explorative approach, based on the engagement and co-design with community groups, and a transmission approach to commons thanks to the adoption of two tools: the festival and the manifesto. We also aim to contribute with a specific framework, definition and exploration of cases/examples in rural and mountain regions.

The theoretical framework

The framework that guides us through the investigation process has been conceptualized in order to allow the creation of synergies among the different disciplines and backgrounds from which we, authors, come from, as well as to welcome the diversity brought in by the actors involved in the process of investigation. We conceptualized the process, embedding also a *design thinking approach*, based on the phases of diverging, iteration and converging, and a trans-scalar idea of commons as connected to larger systems of immaterial and material relationships.



Divergent and convergent thinking in design thinking processes (Source: [Kyury Kim](#))

The “New topic” we started from is finding a framework for innovating and emerging commons, commoning practices in rural and mountain areas. As we authors come from different disciplines and backgrounds such as architecture, landscape, and planning, eco-social design,

environmental economics and regional development, the “divergent thinking” phase was crucial for exploring different fields linked to commons and expanding the knowledge. This phase resulted in the conceptualization of three tracks/threads of research: Rural commons & resources: rethinking values and innovating collective institutions, Rural commons & community economies: creating practice and theory relays, Rural commons & heritage regeneration: collective design approaches for new forms of habitat. The tracks/threads enabled and framed the exploration phase/iteration period in the field during the conceptualization and co-design of the first edition of the itinerant and transregional Rural Commons Festival, located in three rural valleys of the Province of Trento (Italy), in three weekends across May and June 2021. Finally, the “convergent thinking” phase was dedicated to building a common language integrating concepts of community and diverse economies, invisible practices, landscape view, architectural resources, and built heritage. We thought that a Manifesto for the Rural Commons would be a useful tool and output for this phase.

Currently, the framework is not complete, as the disciplines considered are not exhaustive. They base on the background of the involved researchers. They are an initial step towards the creation of a think tank/network on the rural commons which seeks to involve and integrate many other disciplines. The continuous work in the writing of a Manifesto is intended to be the tool to involve and integrate new disciplines in seeking to find a common knowledge on commons that could enhance the adoption of the framework in dealing with regional development and territorial futures.

Methodology

The methodology adopted for the investigation mirrors the framework described in the previous paragraph, and it can be described as interdisciplinary and trans-sectoral. A literature review was conducted on commons in the different disciplines to derive the state of art and research direction and knowledge gaps. A large part of the investigation was then dedicated to working on the field, conceptualising the itinerant and transregional Rural Commons Festival. In the field work we involved three rural and mountain territories in the Province of Trento (Italy) where we identified local collective action groups through a stakeholder analysis, previous research experience in the territories and a snowball sampling. In a trans-scalar approach, we involved these groups in the co-design and co-identification of emerging commoning practices. Thanks to the organization of a research symposium during the festival, we also involved an international network of practitioners and researchers/scholars in the commons, selected through a peer reviewed call for contributions. We proceeded in collecting and categorising emerging commoning practices through: experiential walks to visit emerging commons and commoning practices in the territories, the research symposium, self-construction workshops and conceptual workshops bridging practitioners and research worlds. The methodology takes inspiration from art-related techniques for methodological entanglements in the fields by Jungnickel and Hjorth (2014). Through the interdisciplinary process, they seek to push boundaries between traditional and non-traditional modes of making, presenting and transmission to the audience.

Such experimental and inventive methods are hard to be justified as conventional research. The accountability issue is very important as it inevitably structures what is intended to be good research. The methods used in the investigation bring some randomness in the approach to interdisciplinary research and in the process of participatory knowledge making on commons. The messiness of this approach brings to light a range of challenges in the context of what is

considered a research output and a process happening in the field (Jungnickel and Hjorth 2014, p. 11). However, as our aim is to develop a new framework for regional development by means of an interdisciplinary approach to commons and commoning practices, there is the need to broaden investigation methods and to examine inventive methods. For this reason we considered adopted methods such as the festival and the manifesto, which aim “to introduce answerability into a problem” (Lury and Wakeford 2012). Moreover, as the commons by definition deal with collaborative practices and collective action, suitable investigation methods are those “by which the social world is not only investigated, but may also be engaged” (Back 2012, p.6).

The 3 research tracks/threads

Rural commons & resources: rethinking values and innovating collective institutions

The issue of innovation and transformability of collective resource management is not yet receiving all the attention it deserves, especially in relation to its many potential in natural resource management, rural development, social inclusion and innovation. Rural commons, under certain circumstances and transformations (Gatto and Bogataj 2015, Gatto 2017, Oliverio 2018), could represent an efficient and viable model of resources management (Ostrom 1990, Ostrom et al. 1999) that offer society opportunities for inclusive access to natural resources and for regional development (Lemos and Agrawal 2006, Nygren 2005). The main hypothesis that guides this strand is that only if they innovate and transform, rural commons will be able to be resilient systems and promote sustainability in resource use, community engagement and regional development. What innovations and transformation enhance sustainable collective governance of resources and improve quality of life in the region?

Rural commons & community economies: a practice and theory exchange

In this track, we explore how rural commons and rural community economies are being and can be mobilised in order to create irresistible futures for as many living beings as possible (Gibson-Graham et al. 2013). We especially focus on how feminist (Federici 2012, brown 2017, Helfrich and Bollier 2019), decolonial (Gordon Nembhard 2014, Araujo 2016, Hossein 2018) and post-humanist thinking (Tsing 2015, Gibson et al. 2015, Haraway 2016, Puig de la Bellacasa 2017), and practice can nourish the ways in which rural spaces are (re)produced and lived. As rural places don't stand for themselves, we engage with the interdependencies between rural and urban spaces and how these can become empowering for actors working towards eco-social transformation along all the rural-urban continuum (Massey 2004, Marston 2005). This strand especially welcomes practitioners and researchers with an interest in feminist, decolonial and posthumanist approaches to commons, community economies and rural spaces.

Rural commons & heritage regeneration: collective design approaches for new forms of habitat

The track explores the effects of commoning practices on the built and natural heritage of rural settlements. In this line of argument, heritage is not meant as an extraordinary landscape, a listed building or a protected structure, but it also embeds ordinary architectures and common spatial resources that are part of the everyday life of the rural community (Konstakis and Bauwens, 2014, Stavrides 2016, Gretter et al. 2018, Alexander 2019). Through research findings, examples, and case studies we aim to shed a light on numerous collective practices, design approaches, and operative actions that are significantly transforming our territory,

unveiling experiences of spatial transformation and dynamics of innovation (Schroeder et al. 2018) in rural and mountain contexts that can perhaps suggest other ways to shape, manage, and enhance sustainability of our habitats.

The festival¹

The rural commons festival in its 2021 and first edition, is entitled “From West to East”, and develops on three rural mountain territories of the Southern part of the Autonomous Province of Trento (Italy), which in the last years have shown a cultural and community ferment in the topic of commons, in forms of associations, enterprises, informal groups. Between May and June 2021, the Festival will stop in Giudicarie, Vallagarina and Terragnolo Valleys.

The Rural Commons Festival is conceived as a collector of initiatives and ideas, in all its phases: from conceptualization, through implementation and to reflection. It will explore the open concept of rural commons by sharing competences and experiences in different fields. It will investigate rural and mountain areas of Italy and Europe, which have a long tradition of collective management of natural and built resources and of cooperative models of economy. These areas are also showing emerging collective practices of care for the communities, economies and habitats. With this multi-disciplinary and multi-sectoral perspective, the Rural Commons Festival aims at becoming a moment of encounter and exchange, especially in this time of forced distance due to the pandemic. The idea is to reconnect old and new practices, to learn by doing, to explore new methods and tools of a collective care of different mountain areas, and to investigate new design approaches to regenerate buildings and settlements as common resources. The festival will be a journey from the Western to the Eastern mountain valleys of Trentino in Italy.

Expected results of the exploratory phase/iteration period

As for expected results of the investigation, around 14 local commoning initiatives are explored, around 30 contributions (case study analyses, projects, prototypes) on rural (but also urban) commons from outside the festival territories are explored. Moreover, we expect that a number of new ideas will emerge through the festival workshops and laboratories. All these will be analysed and categorised around following categories: commoning practice/commons, what needs seeks to tackle, resource/good/service/idea cared for, organizational model, impact on livelihood, inclusion, sustainable resource management.

Towards a Manifesto for the Rural Commons

From the analysis and discussion of the results of the investigation process (integrating together disciplines, literature review, exploratory commoning practices collected and stimulated through the festival), we will derive claims integrating-deepening those already identified on the innovation of commons to create desirable and equitable presents and futures in rural and mountain regions:

1. Re-embedded commons in the economy, community and space as enablers of diverse and community economies for sustainable and inclusive futures of regional development

Commons tends to be either devalued or idealised (Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen 2001). Commons should instead be re-embedded in a form of economy that suits them and fits the changing socio-economic and environmental context. One could be the diverse and community

¹ <https://www.ruralcommonsfestival.com/home>

economy model. Among the many aims of community economies, those more related to commons are: habitat maintenance to meet basic needs, support mutual wellbeing, consuming sustainably; self-refuelling by distributing natural and social surplus to enrich social and environmental health, caring for the natural and cultural commons, investing wealth in future generations of all earth's beings so that they can live well. In this perspective, the boundaries of negotiation are extended also to non-humans co-living in a community (Gibson-Graham et al. 2016).

2. A feminist approach on the commons as “invisible” but valuable practices for sustaining livelihoods in rural regions

Women tend to be excluded from decision making processes in the commons, although they contribute a lot in the care and management of community resources, in contribution and creation of livelihood opportunities in rural and mountain areas (as also elsewhere). This is because mainstreaming economic models do not allow the emergence and valorisation of invisible practices of care. A feminist approach to commons framework enables the identification and valorisation of invisible practices of care as sustaining livelihoods in rural regions, such as educational communities and communities of care, care for the land and for the raising of children who can relate to their natural environment.

3. Re-definition of the community of reference of a commons and re-design of commoning processes / rules of the game for the enhancement of inclusion and access to resources and for the adaptation to changing rural contexts and needs.

The assumption at the base of the commoning reasoning is that there are no commons without community that perceives the resource as necessary for its survival or subsistence and takes care of it (Mies 2014). This perspective on the commons allows the redefinition of the community of reference of a collective resource around those who recognize the needs of managing it as such, i.e. new stakeholders. The resulting concept of community of interest (Means and Evans 2012) can help in delinking property rights and actual uses and needs around a collective resource in a commons. The consequent introduction of some transformation in rules of access and rights in the commons, the re-design of commoning processes and rules of the games, besides reducing potential inequalities between members of the commons and newcomers, allows the incoming of new ideas, new resources and new engagement, which is at the base of the collective management of a resource (Dalla Torre et al. forthcoming).

4. Commons for the care of the community and the creation of a new proximity within and beyond the community

Commons offer a framework to tackle crises like Covid-19 pandemics through the creation/distribution of services, goods and spaces for the community, as community forms of resource governance and community organizing are more flexible and adaptable to respond promptly to criticalities and needs. The creation of a new type of proximity can be seen both within the community of the commons but also beyond, in the form of new networks of collaboration among commons, that in turn create larger scale commons to tackle common challenges and needs as well as common opportunities.

5. Commons encourage active citizens in co-designing spaces and co-producing services

With the lens of design and architecture, namely of spatial transformation, rural commons can be linked to commoning practices that operate on available spatial resources for the community, marginal places in peripheral contexts, built and natural heritage that, even if not listed, represent an added value for the community.

6. Commons practices develop synergistic strategies to create shared, high-quality, and beautiful spaces through regeneration

Marginal spaces, as collective resources, can be reactivated through design with creative and community-led practices of reappropriation, also with the goal of an overall regeneration process of the entire village. Lately, these new common spaces can be collectively managed to enable a just and equitable use of the recycled spatial capital.

Conclusion

The idea proposed in this contribution is to investigate the interdisciplinary and trans-sectoral interplays of the definition of commons as specifically related to the rural and mountain areas. For their natural, social, economic, and settlement conditions, these contexts represent a challenging environment. Here, different issues overlap that might threaten the collective management and care of territories, but also create opportunities for stronger relationships and collective frameworks within the communities, which from one side are supported by century-old sedimented practices, from the other side by the possibility to create some new management ideas. With the festival and the manifesto, we try to explore these liminal spaces, these boundaries between disciplines and also between research and action, science and practice, conservation and transformation, with the aim to respond to some of the questions that arise along this journey from West to East.

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Abstract

Commoning practices that take care of elements of the community in a region are often overlooked by the mainstreaming economic doctrine on regional development. Commons are often invisible economic practices, which cannot be accounted for in the current performance indicators of development. Current crises and trends pave the way for the need for new frameworks for imagining the future of regions of the world. Commons are one of the possible frameworks available to transform the future of regions into a more sustainable, equitable and resilient one.

Commons can be defined as a collective response to shared needs and desires expressed by a community. Practices that promote more inclusive habitats and communities, made of people, other human beings, resources, spaces, goods and services for the community. This concept might refer to many different fields and be connected to different topics. Research has been conducted on the relevance of the commons for societies and economies of rural areas, from different perspectives and using different approaches and concepts. For this reason, there is the need to create synergies among the academic fields and the non-academic and practitioner worlds, to enable a concerted recognition of the commons for the present and the future of rural and mountain regions.

With this research, we aim to raise imaginaries on how commons enable desirables and equitable presents and futures in rural areas. What are emerging commoning practices in such regions? What are resources, ideas, needs, services and goods that should be taken care of through the commons? Which pillars and values should commons be based on, to contribute to such vision? To reply to these research questions, we have adopted a design thinking, interdisciplinary approach, based on a preliminary literature review, the engagement of collective action groups in the conceptualization, design and organisation of the first Rural Commons Festival. Through the Festival we expect to collect around forty commons initiatives and commoning practices both from research and practitioners' worlds, which will be analysed and categorised. All previous steps together contribute to pave the way towards a Manifesto for the Rural Commons, a collection of claims integrating-deepening those already identified.

With this paper we aim to contribute to the common scholarship with new methods and a new interdisciplinary and explorative approach. We also aim to contribute with a specific framework, definition and exploration of cases/examples of commons and commoning practices in rural and mountain regions.

Keywords: commoning practices, rural areas, care, inventive, imaginary, festival, manifesto, collective resources