GARDEN MIND

An eco-system view of change and a different role for the state

Sue Goss

Compass

#BuildBackBetter

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By Sue Goss

About the author:

Sue Goss is a gardener, long-standing member of Compass and Co-Chair of the Compass Council. Following a doctorate in politics from Sussex University, she became a Labour councillor in Southwark, and went on to work at Labour HQ under Neil Kinnock. For the past 30 years she has worked as a coach, strategic advisor and facilitator to leadership teams in local government, the civil service and the health service. She has written widely about systems leadership, partnerships and coalitions, and the relationship between the state and communities. Her latest book is Open Tribe.

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About Compass

Compass is platform for a good society, a world that is much more equal, sustainable and democratic. We build networks of ideas, parties and organisations to help make systemic change happen. Our strategic focus is to understand, build, support and accelerate new forms of democratic practice and collaborative action that are taking place in civil society and the economy, and to link that up with state reforms and policy. The meeting point of emerging horizontal participation and vertical resources and policy we call 45° Change. The question we are trying to help solve, as we endeavour to #BuildBackBetter, is not just what sort of society we want, but, increasingly, how to make it happen?

Watching helplessly as the government's handling of the coronavirus pandemic shifts from inept to chaotic to frightening, it's easy to marshal anger against the individuals, to blame their inexperience, their ideology and the seeming lack of care that comes from a selfish sense of entitlement they have been taught from an early age. But UK governance now is not just a good system run by 'bad' people. The underlying dynamics of our economy, our system of government, our institutions and our mindset have, over the past fifty years, created the unequal, brittle, dangerous world we now live in.

For more than a hundred years we have set out to shape our society as if it was a machine. The economic assumptions that underpin capitalism treat us as 'machines for delivering value', simply inputs in a vast money-making enterprise. But beyond that, our government institutions, our corporate organisations, our assumptions about 'how things work'; our rules and regulations all reflect a 'machine mind'. In public services, as in the corporate sector, we structure organisations using engineering diagrams. We write business plans like car manuals. Our welfare state was built in the 1940s and 50s, a time of mass industrial manufacture, and created alongside nationalised industries. Since then welfare services have been raided, scaled down, attacked and diminished, but never reconceived.

In the UK, we have one of the most centralised government systems in the world. Our system is not only unkind and uncaring, but unsafe. We are learning, to our cost, that cutting such a system to the bone creates a fragility that cannot withstand the challenges of Covid 19, let alone what is to come.

As we try to Build Back Better, we are developing ideas about a better, more caring, safer society. But we can't adopt these using conventional implementation systems. We won't succeed using machine mind. If we want humans to thrive, if we want human connectedness, and want people to feel free to use their creative energies and be fully themselves, we won't get there through policies that treat them like cogs in a machine.

Alongside thinking about 'what' we want a better society to be like[1], we are having to rethink 'how' we make change happen.

This paper tries to explore how, if we adopt a different mind-set, we might find a way to make the democratic changes that have always eluded us.

Systems thinking, living systems and resilience

During the 19th and 20th centuries, the western industrialised nations convinced themselves that for-profit and technocratic solutions would fix the world's problems, and through colonialism and neo-colonialism, imposed these systems on the world. Now we see the consequences of

western consumerist capitalism, but we see also the impact of chilling 'socialist' machine-thinking through the 20th and 21st centuries, imposing centralised technocratic programmes on their people that paid no attention to human misery and planetary destruction. In the past few generations, humans have tried, and failed, to 'super-control' the environment through industrialised farming and the destruction of wilderness and have destroyed and wasted precious natural resources. Millions have been lifted out of poverty, but we have created a new sort of poverty. Our centralised, programmatic solutions are dangerously fragile in this new world of environmental dislocation and disturbance. We are discovering that in our rush to progress, we have neglected resilience.

We are having to question our goals, and our desired future state. We can no longer take for granted that we can grow our economies out of inequality and poverty. Whatever we now do to mitigate the harms we have already created, we may for the future face global environmental problems that will not go away. 'Machine mind' assumes that we can build something to 'fix' the problems and continue as usual, that we can always 'progress our way' out of trouble.

Movements such as the 'Vivir Bien'[2] in Latin America challenge this. They reach back to their own histories, and to more ancient ways of thinking and explore the need to shake off colonial mindsets and reclaim concepts such as 'pacha', the interconnected world of the planet and its animals. Pablo Solon, the director of Fundacion Solon and former Bolivian Ambassador to the United Nations, talks about humans becoming 'caretakers, guardians and facilitators' of both ourselves, and the planet.

Ironically, the most modern, path-finding science re-connects us back to older ways of thinking, to the philosophies of indigenous peoples and ancient civilisations across the globe.[3] Instead of seeing humans as controlling and exploiting our surroundings, we begin to see ourselves as animals in a wider, interdependent system. Instead of the western idea of linear progress, climate change prompts us to reconsider older, cyclical ways of seeing, where everything exists alongside its opposite. There is a down-side to every up-side. The aim is to see the complementarity, and the need to co-exist with these tensions. This thinking recognises multi-polarity; many ways rather than one way. It puts emphasis not on winning or losing but on inter-relating. The more we work together, the more we collaborate and share understanding, the greater the resilience of each and all. The aim for the future could be, not progress, growth, or permanent development, but equilibrium.

> "The objective is not to arrive at a perfect equilibrium without contradictions, as such does not exist. Change always has consequences, growth creates upheaval – everything moves in cycles, is a point of arrival and departure for the new imbalances, for new and more complex contradictions and complementarities."[4]

Equilibrium is not achieved through doing nothing, it is a dynamic, constant process of struggle of adjustment to recreate balance.

Faced with 'wicked problems' that can't be easily 'fixed', we are turning to systems thinking, understanding how things are through relationships and inter-dependencies. System thinking has been around for a long time, but for much of this time the 'systems' metaphors have been drawn from engineering: blockages, time-lags and feedback loop. In the 21st century, we are learning through newer sciences such as ecology, to see ourselves as existing within a living eco-system:

> "a complex of living organisms, their physical environment and all their inter-relationships in a particular bit of space."[5]

In eco-system terms, formal politics is only one dimension of the world we have to change and is shaped by our wider environmental, economic, social and personal relationships, by the way we think, our symbols and metaphors, the way we organise work, what we value, how we behave, our expectations of leaders and of each other, and by what is allowed to grow and what is dismissed or destroyed.

If the Covid-19 pandemic teaches us anything, it is that we are organisms, highly interdependent and connected inexorably to the other organisms around us. We are not super-heroes, or robots, we are animals living in an eco-system that shapes us as much as we shape it.

Changing the system dynamics of the economy

In her admirably clear book *Doughnut Economics*, Kate Raworth describes how the way we think about the economy is hopelessly out of date for the 21st Century. Citizens of the future are being taught by "an economic mindset that is rooted in the textbooks of the 1950s, which are in turn rooted in the theories of 1850."[6]

She shows how the engineering metaphors and diagrams of Victorian economics continue myths, flawed assumptions and blind spots which stop us seeing the possibilities for a different world.

By presenting the economy as a doughnut with concentric circles, Kate is trying to change the way we see the economy, from something that people must serve, to a system that supports people.

The doughnut has an inner layer "a social foundation of well-being that no-one should fall below," and an outer layer; an ecological ceiling of planetary pressure that we should not go beyond."[7] If we try to match our economy to our needs and the needs of the planet, we shift from thinking about growth, to thinking about balance.

Crucially, she proposes that instead of battling to deliver welfare services to mitigate the harms caused by capitalism, we should work to shift the underlying dynamics of the economy to "an economy that is distributive by design, where the dynamics disperse and circulate value as it is created" and to an "economy that is regenerative by design,"[8] enabling our efforts to fully participate, not in doing less harm, but in regenerating Earth's life-giving cycles. This is not wishful thinking but sets out the practical immediate work that needs to be undertaken.

This work will need a different mindset. Raworth uses the image of a shift from 'machine brain' to 'garden brain'. Economists need to:

> "discard the engineer's hard hat and spanner and pick up some gardening gloves and secateurs instead"[9]

We should see the role of the state as to 'tend' rather than to control. She talks about replicating natural ways of innovating by setting up small-scale experiments to test a variety of interventions, quickly stopping those that don't work and scaling up those that do. She proposes ways to create a policy environment that strengthens and supports tendencies to redistribute and regenerate.

From 'machine mind' to 'garden mind' - a different role for the state

If we adopt a changed way of seeing, a 'garden mind,' able to tend our complex eco-system, we can reconceptualise the role of the state. We need a resourceful, powerful state if we are to make change happen, able to redistribute wealth, to organise resources and prevent harm. But we need it to do different work.

We need politicians and civil servants, and public service managers to become Pablo Solon's 'caretakers, guardians and facilitators.'[10] Instead of struggling to control and 'drive' our economy and our society – we ask them to become gardeners.

20th century reformers such as William Beveridge and Clement Atlee envisaged public provision that was generous and supportive, with support 'as of right', liberating working people from the cold humiliation of charity. Even then, the idea of 'garden mind' had been seeded:

> "Socialism, like the garden is always changing. The image of 'gardening' enables us to see the need, as well as tending and nurturing, to control the growth of rapacious accumulation and greed, and the spread of suffocating corporate mono-cultures – Each plant, and the garden itself, is in a state of becoming…The gardeners work is never done."[11]

But after 1945 vast national services created industrial scale bureaucracies bringing with them rules and constraints. Bureaucracies need rules to prevent corruption and to ensure equity, but unchallenged, these rules proliferate. Techniques borrowed from industry turn hospitals and schools into factories while in job centres and benefits offices the 'computer says no' without human interaction. The search for private-sector style efficiency has down-graded and diminished human contact. Public services have become inspected and regulated to raise standards and prevent abuse, but the cost has been the crushing of autonomy and the removal of judgement from front line teachers, social workers and nurses.[12]

As neoliberalism has shrunk our welfare state, these rules have tightened to reduce eligibility and measure need, using privatised companies to run computer assessments and respond with fixed scripts. A world of assessment and sanctions is used to exclude people from help, instead of welcoming people in. Care workers, doctors and nurses and public servants are trying to care within an over-bureaucratised and over-centralised system. Donald Schon's 'reflective practitioner' of the 1980s, working alongside service users to co-create solutions, would struggle, now, for the freedom to do so.[13]

These things are not inevitable. If we challenged the belief that humiliating and punishing systems were needed to 'keep people out' we would be able to treat benefit recipients as dignified human beings; (a basic human right[14]) to respond to people in vulnerable circumstances with love and kindness; to encourage creative expression; and to respond to people as individuals instead of 'units of service.'

How does 'garden mind' work?

If we stop to think about what gardeners do, they spend a lot of time observing and noticing. They take time to understand the seasons, the soil, the environmental conditions, the cycles that life moves in. They attract the wildlife that helps to maintain equilibrium. They encourage diversity. They begin by creating a rich soil, in which everything can thrive. Then they work with the plants, finding them the conditions they need and protecting them from harm. Sometimes, discovering happy accidents of extraordinary beauty, they simply look, and smile. But gardeners, as well as tending and nurturing, also move firmly to control the growth of rapacious weeds and to prevent the spread of suffocating monocultures.

'Garden mind' would involve creating conditions in which everyone could build their capabilities in order to thrive, offering the support we all need to make our way in the world, for example, a basic income, education continuing into adulthood, universal healthcare, the equivalent of a good rich soil. It would mean paying attention to the needs of those in the most vulnerable circumstances and providing the support that enables them to live the lives they choose. It would involve allowing creative responses to grow,

supporting innovation, sharing knowledge and holding the system open to change. And sometimes, it would mean taking firm regulatory action to stop greed from disrupting the sustaining dynamics.

Machine mind engineers a solution and expects it to work every time. Garden mind knows that every solution is a compromise, with potential downsides and difficulties, and is alert to the need to constantly recreate balance. Gardeners don't make a perfect garden and leave it alone. We try things, we fail, we learn, we move things around. With garden mind we don't expect things to work easily or comfortably, we understand the compromises that have been made, and are vigilant and attentive to the things that can go wrong.

Life is a process of constant observation and adjustment, constant mitigation and maintenance. We will 'tinker' a new world into existence, not deliver a blueprint.

Devolved government

It is the local state that finds this shift the easiest, where connections to local communities are strongest, and distances are shortest. Not always, but sometimes, local politicians and staff can sit down with community groups and listen, and between council officers, service users, teachers, social workers and community leaders find new solutions that build on everyone's wisdom and experience. Local government-led projects have continued to innovate as national government initiatives have failed.

Returning decision making and services to local level would create a more resilient system of government, with solutions connected to local circumstances and based on an understanding of local needs. To make this possible we would need, at the very least, to return to local government the resources they could once rely on. Government funding of local authorities has fallen by 50 per cent in the last ten years, at a time when demand has risen sharply. The resulting cuts have not fallen evenly on local communities but have hit the poorest areas hardest.[15]

Despite this, local government has often learnt to be creative enough to survive. Collaboration is uneven but growing. The landscape at local level is no longer of individual councils sitting within their own boundaries, but a criss-cross of networks and partnerships. Devolution of greater powers in transport, environment, job creation, benefits, even health could be to regional and sub-regional partnerships working alongside specialist agencies.

We need to be able to govern at scale in order to redistribute resources. We need national and international leverage. All the state's capacity to regulate and control will be needed to prevent a culture of corporate greed from blocking and overturning socially useful and constructive change. A democratically elected government provides legitimacy that cannot be rep-

licated in other ways. Resource choices have to be made and decisions have to be enforced. The challenge is to create a society that can make meaning and purpose at a very small scale but can also wield the democratic power that can respond to nationally and globally organised forces.[16]

Devolution is not an alternative to working at scale but a different way to get there, building connections from the ground up and creating the national governance that works to support them.

The role for democracy is to create the conditions for a conversation about the right balance. What should we do nationally, and what locally? How radical do we want to be? What are baseline services for all and where will we accept local differences? What will we pay for and what should be free? How much support do we want to pay for through taxation? What do we want to control and regulate? There is a downside to every solution. The role of democratic process is to debate and explore these possible trade-offs and build a social consensus for a way forward. Our current democratic processes are all but useless in this work.

The commons

> "If our politics could reach outside its sectarian interests and start to engage with people in a meaningful way, it would discover the public are a huge resource of ideas, expertise, skills and lived experience that could lead to far more effective decision-making".[17]

Simply devolving power to localities would not, on its own, change enough. We need to change the relationship between the state and citizens, the state and community.

An alternative to state bureaucracy has always been 'the commons'[18] an ancient reference to self-organising in the UK from Anglo-Saxon times and before. In some societies and communities around the world, it never went away. Garden mind assumes that ideas, activities, and solutions will emerge and thrive without government.

After all, the state's role in welfare is barely a hundred years old. In the late 19th and early 20th century, working people created a vast independent network of friendly societies, women's co-operative guilds, trades unions, trades and labour societies, co-operative societies, providing food, funerals, adult education, lectures, dances, schools, benefits and health care. At that time, a different image of a socialist society was imagined and created, one of collectively organised and decentralised working peoples organisations co-operating at a national level.[19] Slowly, however, the centralised, industrialised model of state provision gained ground, until, for some on the Left, voluntary and community self-organising is seen as suspect and somehow less 'socialist' than bureaucratic state provision. For others, there is a concern that community organisation is less competent, more fragile and less

dependable than the state.

We know that the most creative ideas emerge from community organisations and the voluntary sector; that self-organising offers a dignity, a space for self-realisation, and an ability to give meaning to our lives that receiving state services does not. The emergence, in the Covid-19 pandemic of new mutual aid-groups, the rush to volunteer, the strength of mutual support has shown us that we have always had the capacity to self-organise.

But the way we behave, as citizens is conditioned by the system in which we find ourselves. As the state has taken over more and more of the organising and regulating of our lives, we have become more quiescent and more conformable. The voluntary sector itself has become increasingly a client of, and dependent on, government grants and government action. We are so used to being 'done to' that our behaviours often reflect that. We are used to being ruled and regulated.

Of course, there are many areas of our lives where we want the state to provide, and we don't need to be engaged. We don't usually feel the need to be involved in emptying the bins or repairing the roads. In other areas we want a voice, but we need professionals to lead, in education, policing and healthcare. We have limited time and resource. We want to concentrate it on things that interest us. But one in five of us has volunteered through the Covid-19 pandemic. Garden mind is about allowing, enabling and encouraging networks and communities to lead where they want to, and providing where they do not.

Garden mind also enables us to recognise the downsides and difficulties faced in community organisations. Identity can become narrow and excluding. Self-organised community groups can be racist, or sexist, or intolerant. The far Right self-organises too. Groups can become inward looking and self-congratulatory, unwilling to exchange or learn from others. Leaders can become burnt-out and exhausted, with no-one to follow on, or at the other extreme can become too bound up with their leadership role and power and unwilling to let others in. Individuals or groups can behave badly, greedily or aggressively, can be unwilling to do their fair share or want to take over.[20] It can be very frustrating when trying to organise at a community level, when the absence of regulation and compulsion means that those who are mean or aggressive often get their own way, and others have to propitiate or work round them. Lack of skill or knowledge can mean that things are done poorly or incompetently. People can feel bewildered having taken on too much and lacking the resources to tackle the problems they face. Too many small groups can lead to complexity and duplication wasting energy and resource.

These are the inherent environmental conditions of self-organising, but 'garden mind' enables us to see them as situations that require attention and where balancing interventions may be needed rather than 'reasons to stop'. How do we protect democratic decision making? How do we respond to trolling? Do we need sanctions? What sorts of behaviours work best?

Alongside a supportive 'guardian' role for the state, we need a mindset and a set of skills that enable all of us in civil society to make judgements collectively about how to respond when things go wrong, and the sorts of balancing actions that will be able to recreate effective working.

> "Ultimately the key to social transformation lies with the capacity of commoners to build a different modernity with balance, moderation and simplicity at its centre."[21]

We need to develop the capacities and skills within civil society to self-organise safely and generously, with stronger networks, sharing resources and less competition. Could we recreate the scale of working people's organisations that existed at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century with the self-sufficiency that allowed? We need to build confidence in our ways of working and organising, so that we can push-back against over bureaucratisation and 'clientism' from government. We need shared values so that we can tackle selfishness and self-serving behaviours – and skills to 'tend' to our own difficulties and tensions. But there will be times when we also need help – the help that can come from democratic legitimacy.

45° Change in action

It is striking how quickly mutual-aid organisations have felt the need to turn to local government when situations become tricky or complex. Local authorities like Camden, Barking and Dagenham and Islington have been quick to engage with their local mutual-aid groups, listening and responding to emerging needs. Voluntary groups, responding to the Covid-19 crisis, need access to community buildings as distribution centres, and help with supply chains. They are already having to deal with theft, bullying, and scamming. This is where the Compass idea of 45° Change can be seen in action[22], in the moment where the state meets civil society in day-to-day work. When community projects find themselves in trouble, official intervention can put financial support behind faltering organisations, it can remove obstacles, find grants, offer specialist advice, provide guidance. It can offer training and make connections. It can take action to prevent discrimination or bullying.

Too often, though, the state wants to take over. Machine mind introduces complex governance structures and application processes, time scales slow down, 'computer says no', motivation evaporates. Eileen Conn, back in 2011, explored the interrelationship between two systems, an ordered authority system and a free association system – often seen as 'top-down' or 'bottom-up.'[23] In authority systems, relationships are vertical and hierarchical. In community systems, relationships are horizontal and collaborative. Habermas, the German philosopher has talked about the two different action logics as 'system' and 'life world'. The system (both state and corporate) is rule-governed, bureaucratic and morally neutral at best; while

the life-world encompasses family, love and friends, and is messy, emotional, needy and energetic.[24] For Habermas, the danger is the 'colonisation' of the lifeworld by the system, but it is important to recognise that it is in the lifeworld that crime, domestic violence and child abuse takes place. The cautious process-governed state is needed precisely because in communities and homes there can lurk violence and harm. The police and the courts are necessary for all of us.

But what is important is that the state recognises the validity of collaborative process as well as rule-governed process. Currently, the vertical authority system often assumes that the 'free association system' needs to adapt to 'machine mind.'

> "The institutions of the state implicitly assume primacy over the citizens and communities they aspire to serve. They thoughtlessly impose their modus vivendi on associations that speak a quite different language."[25]

Community organisations tend to be used instrumentally by the public services rather than treated as independent participants. Voluntary organisations are 'contracted' to provide services rather than treated as partners. And, as Eileen Conn put it:

> "life can be tough at the interface between the two relational systems"[26]

Hierarchical organisations find it hard to listen to people from community settings who don't 'represent' anyone – but just want to talk about their experience. Individuals from community organisations trying to work with local or national government find themselves getting detached from their natural soil and roots. They learn the language of jargon and the strange ways of the committees but become silenced. Local government officers and civil servants that work alongside local activists find themselves treated with suspicion by their employers when they return with new ideas and ways of seeing. Conn says that:

> "the two relational systems cannot be fitted together as one machine-like system – but continue to co-exist alongside each other interacting and co-evolving in one shared eco-system."[27]

The organisational forms, processes and relationships that work in the 'space of possibilities' in the community world cannot just replicate those that work in the vertical world. In a democracy, the interaction between the state and civil society can and should be reciprocal. Yes, the state can offer protection and a rule-governed calm when things get out of hand. But we should also challenge government to rethink their own ways of working, to respect difference and diversity, respond with kindness to match the excitement, energy and speed of communities on the move – and to work round obstacles. The exchange between the two action logics can be a cre-

ative one.

> "the role of the state should not be organiser and planner of society as a whole, but one more factor that contributes to the empowerment of the community and social organisation"[28]

The state could come to recognise the value of voluntary energy and commitment, and the community sector to recognise when state resource and power is needed – so that both can reflect on when creativity and innovation involves risk – and when and whether controls, measurement and governance appropriate.

It is not simply that the 'ordered authority system' should not crush the 'free association system'. Nor even that the state should realise how much it has to learn from the dynamics and creativity of self-organising. By recognising the two systems and their need for co-existence we can create language and tools for co-creating a sustainable equilibrium which neither can achieve alone.

Behaviour and leadership

To do this work, we need to become skilful. We need to change our assumptions about what we expect of leaders and of ourselves. Leaders implies followers. But in a collaborative world, we are not following, we are co-creating, fully engaged, participants. Leadership becomes a choice, a moment of taking responsibility. It might not be permanent, it might be for a meeting, or a month, or a year. It requires energy and motivation and we don't all have that all the time. But when we feel strong, and motivated, we can lead. Nor do we expect one leader to emerge and issue directions. Several different sorts of leadership may be needed simultaneously. Different people may play different and complementary roles.

Research into leadership in collaborative systems, suggests that leaders do three kinds of work:[29]

Sense-making: Leaders observe and listen to build a picture of the situation, understanding the environmental context and what it makes possible, but also attentive to the ideas we are drawing on, and the meaning-making that is going on. What are the mental maps and assumptions being used? How are we thinking about the problem? Sense-makers create a narrative – a sense of a different possible future, and a 'call to action'. But sense-making needs to be pragmatic as well as inspirational. Dreams need to be able to come true. Ellis and Boston, social psychologists, describe leadership in complexity as requiring cognitive capacities to see the world from different perspectives; to challenge assumptions, exploring the value of opposing arguments; and to recognise their own tendencies and pre-occupations.

Relationship-building: System leaders don't try to provide all the answers but create the conditions for collaboration that will 'fill in the detail'. Their work is to create a climate of inclusion and openness that makes sure new ideas can emerge and thrive – to make links and connections that bring more and more people into the work and to build a sense of trust that will lead to a shared endeavour. Leaders build networks and relationships that bring people together. Hilary Cottam talks about relationships mattering more than anything else, "change happens where there is a shift in the dynamics of power and relational work models this shift"[30]

Organising action: To shift into action, we need organising capacity – to marshal resources and deploy them effectively. Leadership here is about orchestrating the choice of where to start – clarifying the question to be resolved, so that everyone is working to a shared plan. Hilary Cottam uses a clear design method to move from theory to practice. In *Shift the Power*, there is a helpful Framework for Action; which sets out a ten stage process: choosing the domain; finding the right people to work with; creating a network; identifying agency; developing a plan; embracing conflict; forming a narrative; formalising a network for delivery; developing a resource plan; enlarging the network and reviewing progress.[31]

Throughout all these stages, it is important to pay attention to all three areas of leadership – and to keep asking, how are we thinking about this? What is the quality of our relationships? Have we got the resources to act? Too often the creative thinking and trust built in early stages gets abandoned in a rush to implementation – or ideas that stay vague never make it to action.

Change through experiment

Margaret Wheatley and Myron Rogers in a fascinating book called A Simpler Way, argue that if we study how living creatures change, life is showing us other ways to be. Life uses messes, redundancy, fuzziness dense webs of relationships and unending trials and errors to find out what works. Everything is in a constant process of discovery and creation.

> "Life self-organises. Networks, patterns and structures emerge without external imposition or direction."[32]

They notice that evolution doesn't find the one 'right' answer, but many ways of doing things. Life creates more possibilities as it engages with opportunities. Nor is each solution found in isolation 'everything participates in the creation and evolution of its neighbours'. The rules for life are simple – a move through experiment and mess towards order. Ecologists and systems thinkers have adopted a term from Levi-Strauss, 'bricolage' to describe the process through which organisms constantly adjust and change to solve unending problems – 'organisms are tinkerers, with skills but no plans – exploring opportunities rather than working to a design'.[33]

If we think of ourselves as living creatures, rather than as 'machine-builders', we might recognise the need to be less serious and yet more purposeful in our work and our lives. We might give greater value to experimentation. Experiments teach us, and others, what is possible. We change ourselves by doing. People own what they create. Sloshing around in the mess is exactly how science advances, and how we work in art, theatre, music, creative writing. We start with a spark, a clue, an idea and then mess around until something emerges. Ironically, when we write up innovation case studies we leave out the uncertainty, the redundancy, the false starts, the failed sponsorships and the poorly attended meetings – we jump to the bit where it starts to come together and write up the plan that emerged at the end. But it is the beginning where all the hard work happens.

At any one time, there are hundreds, perhaps thousands of experiments in the UK that explore a different way of working – and many thousands more across the globe.

Compass has been involved in some of them, and has tried to share learning about others, for example:

- The Wigan Deal is a reciprocal relationship between council and residents. The council has pledged to offer help and support, and asked residents in response to play their part in saving resources. They have invested in local voluntary organisations and created a culture that permits staff to redesign how they work in response to the needs of individuals and communities - moved towards an asset-based way of working.[34]
- Barking and Dagenham have made a commitment to 'building an individual's capacity to cope with challenges and moments of crisis' through supporting citizen projects and creating a platform and alliance of dozens of local voluntary and community organisations – which has been a springboard for action during the Covid-19 crisis. The aim is a 'a different kind of civil society, one in which we integrate our services with support for the community'.[35]
- In Islington, Brent and Camden, councils are putting their energies behind mutual-aid groups during the pandemic – with regular zoom calls to listen to local groups, and lots of practical help to support them. Local groups and councils are already beginning to work together to explore issues such as climate change, 'the community centre of the future', ways to address poverty etc.[36]
- Greater Manchester is returning to its co-operative roots by creating a network of co-operatives across the city – housing, business, retail and social.[37]
- Citizens UK have been active for 20 years, building people power through showing how citizens can organise, and there are many thousands of community projects, thousands of experiments over the country.[38]
- 'Community organisers' train people in community organising with over 1000 member, and is launching the National Academy of Community Organisers – to create new practitioners of citizen

centred grass-roots work.[39]

- A group of independent community activists in Frome decided to create a new, inclusive democracy, starting from the grassroots up, without the corrosive effects of party divisions – they now hold all the seats on the town council and are continuing the radical experiment.[40]
- There are many experiments in deliberative and dialogic democracy include citizens' juries and citizens' assemblies. The constitutional convention that deliberated and co-created the new Scottish government remains an exciting example of what is possible. Citizens' Assemblies are debating climate change, social justice and local issues across the country and the Climate Assembly was recently convened by six Select Committees of the UK Parliament.[41]

Some of the most exciting recent experiments in the UK have been those led by social entrepreneur Hilary Cottam, that set out to tackle social problems where conventional public services fail. These experiments - re-thinking support for families in difficulties, working alongside troubled young adults, supporting the long-term unemployed to find their own route back into work, supporting elderly people to contribute and thrive – are a revelation. Her book *Radical Help* tells the story of these experiments, and of the possibilities to build different sorts of social solutions.

Hilary argues that it is through human relationships that deep change is created and transmitted – we change because people we care about change – we listen because these are people who matter to us. Her approach starts with listening:

> "We started by asking families what sort of life they would like to lead and then we supported individuals in taking change of their own lives, growth and development."[42]

This work recognises the structural inequalities, exploring the realistic possibilities for people to find work, live healthily, turn their lives around. It is inclusive, welcoming people in instead of 'gate-keeping' them out. It works alongside families and networks rather than individuals. It fosters people's core capabilities so that everyone can thrive. It is not about meeting needs but changing the quality of our lives, offering a sense of freedom, of purpose, of having something to give and being connected to each other.

This should not be revolutionary, but it is. It reverses everything that currently happens in state welfare services – it removes the assessment, the gatekeeping, the form-filling, the complex procurement and service commissioning. It challenges assumptions about what professionals should do and how they should behave. It puts emphasis on listening, caring, helping, chatting, on kindness and love. In doing so, it is seen as threatening and often dangerous – and several of her projects have been closed down because of professional opposition, concern that they cost too much, that they un-

dermine regulatory and bureaucratic process and cause disturbance. And yet disturbance is what we need.

Thankfully, the people involved in experiments that don't succeed go on to try other experiments. They learn and try again. More and more people come into contact with these ways of working. Relationships are built, networks are formed.

This sort of change is different, because it is created by the people who will be living it. It fits local circumstances, because they were always part of the experiment, it enables relationships to shift as needed through the shared work of finding solutions, and it enables the people who will be working in new ways to learn to think differently about what they are trying to do. In solution-finding networks, the most important questions are 'who needs to be in the room?' 'how much access do we have to each other?' 'what do we need to know?' 'How much trust exists between us?'

The shift to national scale?

Through these experiments we know a lot about what works. They are connected to a place, they draw on the energy people have about the things that really matter, engaging people in practical work, they are exploratory, open-minded, trustful and generous.

We know this works at local level. But as soon as policy shifts to a national scale, the tendency has been to abandon this learning and revert to top-down centralised solutions. "We need to move fast", politicians tell themselves, "we need pace, drive, quick results". Even well-meaning and compassionate government initiatives fail. Delivery is centralised, but sub-contracted, often to the private sector. The central team works separately from all the other teams delivering all the other policies. The public is not involved. Targets are set, financial incentives are attached. The obstacles and problems are ignored. Attention is focussed on the targets, which are relentlessly reported up. The wrong things are measured. The minister changes. Motivation wanes. The public is not involved. Seldom do these initiatives succeed at anything but barely perceptible change. If failure matters, it is seen as a sign that someone messed up – heads roll. The intelligence, the creativity, the human capabilities of local managers, of staff on the ground, of service users and the public – are left out of the process. The adaptations that might have overcome the obstacles and problems are never made. The scheme is shelved. Nothing is learnt.

The hunt for efficiency has led to the current highly specialised, centralised and fragile system. But there is nothing efficient about a system that fails. Distributed power is not only more democratic, but more resilient. Distributed systems reduce the impact of any error and offer different solutions that may work in different circumstances. Some redundancy and parallel running may be expensive in the short-term but may be more efficient in

the long-term.

We live in a complex, technological, global world. But we need to change the system dynamics. We need to find the things that really work, instead of the things that are supposed to work. In the workplace this would mean allowing staff to find their own solutions to problems, listening to them, instead of controlling them. It would mean more employee owned companies and more social entrepreneurs – it might mean shorter working hours, more time to think, and greater productivity. It would mean decentralised and devolved government, engaging people in decisions that affect them. It would mean a different way of exploring social problems and finding solutions. In social care and welfare, it would start with listening to people's needs, and contributions, instead of assessing them for pre-determined services. It would mean putting the power and resources of the state behind community and voluntary effort – rather than in competition with it.[43]

The way we get to the future shapes the future

If we want to create a different world, we can't get there with machine mind. If we believe, as Leninists did, that socialism requires a bigger and better machine, then that is what we will be condemned to live in. As Terry Pratchett memorably wrote:

> "You can't go around building a better world for people. Only people can build a better world for people. Otherwise it's just a cage."[44]

Change is already underway. We are already in the middle of many experiments. There are many parallel paths to the future. We can, in our work, put 'garden mind' into practice.

In Compass, in local groups and in campaigning organisations we are having to find ways – as we work – to resolve the tensions that we are discovering: balancing relationships at a very local level with working at scale, balancing the heartbeat and energy of self-organising with the democratic legitimacy and resource-power of the state. We will have to be self-aware enough to understand ourselves and our preoccupations and experiences and how that limits us – and to reach out to hear, understand and engage with as many different ways of seeing as we can.

One of the ways we can strengthen the links in our movement, is to begin to set out the principles that we share, that guide our work. Here are some suggestions:

- We work on the dynamics of the system - exploring ways to create self-balancing, distributive, create self-balancing sustainable systems.
- We create space for self-organising and conditions for it to flourish.
- We shift mindsets, including our own. If we approach complex

problems with 'machine mind' we will recreate the same failures. But shifting mindset is not easy. We will need to learn to 'catch' our assumptions and examine them – become better at hearing criticism and welcoming it – using it to make our thinking more resilient.

- We make relationships and then make more – human relationships are how deep change is created and transmitted – connect everyone to everyone – keep on connecting – engage one another in exploring purpose – taking time to reflect together.
- We experiment – set up support and fund experiments and innovations that use a human relational approach – embrace messiness – start with an idea and follow it everywhere
- We identify existing experiments, tell stories about them, make them well known, listen to them, learn from them connect the innovators to each other. We create symbolic stories that show what is possible, share and nourish ourselves with information.
- We educate the public about alternative ways of thinking and acting, and encourage colleagues in the media to use radio, TV, podcasts and online journalism to explore alternative ways to make decisions and solve problems. Dialogic democracy on TV?
- We make space for people to use the values and principles in their own way in their own space – we don't try to control but support and help out.
- We use the design principles set out by entrepreneurs like Hilary Cottam to find a practical way of moving from an idea to a solution.
- We encourage parallel solution finding, and exchange ideas freely.
- We engage with alternative sources of resource and power - local government, regional government, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland – parishes and town councils – universities, social enterprises – connect multiple sources of resource.
- We develop different sorts of leadership skills in us all, the ability to create different sorts of teams, but also the ability to challenge ourselves and each other.

For Compass we need to find ways to seed these thoughts and hand on our ideas. But there are a few things that Compass could do that come from the gardening example:

- Open-source democracy: We could create an open-source 'encyclopaedia' of how to solve democratic problems in civil society – examples of things that go wrong and ideas about how to tackle them – how to respond to difficulties and the skills we need to manage them exploring problems and how to solve them. In horticulture we have free, open and generous advice about how to tackle every gardening problem known to humans; how to deal with weeds, nurture weak plants, tackle dodgy soils, deal with difficult weather; could we do the same for self-organising and democracy?
- Knowledge commons, to exchange learning about experiments. We could create a way of connecting together all the experiments,

and share learning. In horticulture for each plant species there is a 'holder of the national collection': someone who knows more about that plant than anyone else, and to whom we can turn when we need help. Could we do something like that? So that we know who to turn to for help with different issues?

- We could find funding for one or two of our own experiments – following the energy of Compass members.

Endnotes

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