

Realigning practices of care and environmental governance: findings and reflections from a transdisciplinary research project in Wales (UK)

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Abstract

This article presents findings from a transdisciplinary research project on collaborative practices for the sustainable management of natural resources (SMNR) in Wales. Here, the legislation establishes that the national well-being agenda and the principle of SMNR in environmental governance must be achieved through collaborative and participatory practices, across sectors and organisations, including within the public sector. However, neoliberal and hyper-bureaucratic governance structures, characterised by a risk-adverse nature, do not allow public sector institutional actors to experiment and engage with such practices in their everyday work. This article discusses a collective experience of reflecting on, and challenging such oppressing neoliberal structures, through experimenting with alternative ways of *doing* and *being* together. The emerging community at the heart of this experience is composed of policymakers, practitioners, artists, and academics (including the authors), who together carved out a 'site of negotiation' to contest techno-managerialism and mere rational approaches to (natural resources) governance. In the course of this research, these actors began to collectively create and shape new and shared meanings of doing collaborative and cross-boundary work (as required by the Welsh legislation), based on relationships of trust, reflexivity, embodiment, and relationality. Reflecting also on our own experience (and interpretation) of working alongside them, we believe that such emergent processes of collective meaning-making have the potential to transform neoliberal (environmental) governance structures into 'lived' and 'owned' institutions. Inspired by relational, integrative and caring forms of democratic governance, we argue that professionals in public sector organisations can realign governance structures in ways that meet the challenge of enabling the rapid and wide sustainability transformations that are so desperately needed.

Keywords: Care, environmental governance, transdisciplinary, collaborative practice, sustainability transformation

Résumé

Cet article présente les résultats d'un projet de recherche transdisciplinaire sur les pratiques collaboratives pour la gestion durable des ressources naturelles (SMNR) au pays de Galles. Au pays de Galles, la législation établit que l'agenda national du bien-être et le principe de SMNR dans la gouvernance environnementale doivent être atteints grâce à des pratiques collaboratives et participatives, dans tous les secteurs et organisations, y compris au sein du secteur public. Cependant, les structures de gouvernances néolibérales et hyper-bureaucratiques, caractérisées par une nature hostile au risque, ne permettent pas aux acteurs institutionnels du secteur public d'expérimenter et de s'engager dans de telles pratiques durant leur travail quotidien. Cet article traite d'une

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expérience collective de réflexion et de remise en question de ces structures néolibérales oppressives, à travers l'expérimentation de façons alternatives de *faire* et *d'être* ensemble. La communauté au cœur de cette expérience est composée de décideurs politiques, de praticiens, d'artistes et d'universitaires (y compris les auteurs), qui, ensemble, se sont taillés un «site de négociation» pour contester le techno-managérialisme et les approches rationnelles simples de gouvernances. Au cours de cette recherche, ces acteurs ont commencé à créer et à façonner collectivement des significations nouvelles et partagées du travail collaboratif et transfrontalier (comme l'exige la législation galloise), basées sur des relations de confiance, de réflexivité, d'incarnation et de relationnalité. En réfléchissant également à notre propre expérience (et interprétation) du travail à leurs côtés, nous pensons que de tels processus émergents de la création de sens collectif ont le potentiel de transformer les structures de gouvernance néolibérales (environnementales) en institutions «vécues» et «possédées». Inspirés par les formes relationnelles, intégratives et bienveillantes de la gouvernance démocratique, nous soutenons que les professionnels des organisations du secteur public peuvent réaligner les structures de gouvernances de manière à relever le défi de permettre les transformations durables rapides et étendues qui sont si désespérément nécessaires.

Mots-clés: *Care*, Gouvernance environnementale, transdisciplinaire, pratiques collaboratives, transformations durables

Resumen

Este artículo presenta los resultados de un proyecto de investigación transdisciplinario sobre prácticas colaborativas para la gestión sostenible de los recursos naturales (SMNR) en Gales. Aquí, la legislación establece que la agenda nacional de bienestar y el principio de SMNR en la gobernanza ambiental deben lograrse a través de prácticas colaborativas y participativas, entre sectores y organizaciones, incluso dentro del sector público. Sin embargo, las estructuras de gobernanza neoliberales e hiperburocráticas, caracterizadas por una naturaleza adversa al riesgo, no permiten que los actores institucionales del sector público experimenten y se comprometan con tales prácticas en su trabajo diario. Este artículo analiza una experiencia colectiva de reflexión y desafío a tales estructuras neoliberales opresoras, a través de la experimentación con formas alternativas de *hacer* y *estar* juntos. La comunidad en formación en el centro de esta experiencia está compuesta por formuladores de políticas, profesionales, artistas y académicos (incluidos los autores), quienes juntos crearon un "lugar de negociación" para cuestionar el tecnogerencialismo y los enfoques meramente racionales para la gobernanza de los recursos naturales. Durante el curso de esta investigación, estos actores comenzaron a crear y a dar forma colectivamente a significados nuevos y compartidos de trabajar de manera colaborativa y transfronteriza (como lo exige la legislación galesa), basados en relaciones de confianza, reflexividad, conocimiento encarnado y relacionalidad. Reflexionando también sobre nuestra propia experiencia (e interpretación) de trabajar junto a ellos, creemos que tales procesos emergentes de creación colectiva de significado tienen el potencial de transformar las estructuras de gobernanza (ambiental) neoliberal en instituciones 'vivas' y 'poseídas.' Inspirándonos en las formas de gobernanza democrática relacionales, integradoras y de los cuidados, argumentamos que los profesionales de las organizaciones del sector público pueden realinear las estructuras de gobernanza de modo que enfrenten el desafío de permitir las transformaciones de sostenibilidad rápidas y amplias que son tan desesperadamente necesarias.

Palabras clave: Cuidado, gobernanza ambiental, transdisciplinario, pratique collaborative, transformaciones de sostenibilidad

1. Introduction

The mainstream neoliberal approach so often entrenched in practices of adaptive (co)management of social-ecological systems serves to systemically commodify and undermine the complex and vital web of relationships that constitute them (e.g., Castree, 2008; Fletcher, Dressler & Büscher, 2015; Kenis & Lievens, 2015). The same neo-liberalist logic contributes to maximising the exploitation of our natural environment, deploying (short-term) techno-fixes and managerial solutions in an attempt to disguise its long-term destructive and detrimental effects on both nature and human health. It simultaneously promotes a denial of the politics and plurality of human-nature relations, and thus undermines the diversity of knowledges, perspectives, worldviews, needs and aspirations embedded in people-nature relationships which are at the very core of the concept of sustainability.

This article uses the lens of a feminist and democratic ethics of care to contribute to establishing an opposing approach to such depoliticization and 'technocratization' of human-nature relationships. It draws on, amongst others, the work of feminist political ecologists (FPE) (e.g., Bauhardt & Harcourt, 2018; Clement *et al.* 2019; Dombroski *et al.* 2018; MacGregor, 2006; Rocheleau, 2016; Tummers & MacGregor, 2019), who discuss and critique the ways in which care epistemologies come to be "consigned to the backseat of technocracy and rational managerialism" (Elmhirst & Resurrección, 2021, p. 223) and with what consequence.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which exploded in February 2020 across the globe, highlighted how such a reductionist and exploitative vision of human-nature relationships is behind the irreversible degradation of our natural environment. Experts who gathered at the IPBES 'Workshop on Biodiversity and Pandemics' (2020) concluded by calling for: "*transformative change*, using the evidence from science to re-assess the relationship between people and nature, and to reduce global environmental changes that are caused by unsustainable consumption, and which drive biodiversity loss, climate change and pandemic emergence" (2020, p. 9, emphasis added). This article is an attempt to respond to this pressing call for transformative change. It is guided by a rationale that such a change requires a collective shift of mindsets to include "more pluralistic ontologies" (Elmhirst & Resurrección, 2021, p. 224) and post-humanist approaches which foreground an ethics of caring – *with each other*; with fellow human beings, as well as more-than-human beings (Bauhardt & Harcourt, 2018; Büscher *et al.*, 2021; Gómez Becerra & Muneri-Wangari, 2021). It does so by exploring how a democratic and feminist approach to care can contribute to strengthening the capacity of collaborative forms of environmental governance to achieve socially and ecologically just sustainability transformations. Drawing on a transdisciplinary study of collaborative practices of Sustainable Management of Natural Resources (SMNR hereafter) in Wales, UK, we argue for the value of re-formulating the governance of SMNR as a "caring-*with*" practice.

An ethics of caring-*with*, which sits at the heart of Joan Tronto's *Caring Democracy* (2013) (see also Bond & Barth, 2020; Moriggi *et al.*, 2020; Power, 2019), is the main theoretical building block of this article. In brief, taking as our starting point Fisher and Tronto's (1990) theorization of care ethics (and its subsequent further development by Tronto (2013), we interpret caring-*with as a practice* that involves reclaiming and exercising (social-political) responsibility in our *everyday doing*, as a means of repairing and nurturing connections between both humans and the more-than-humans "to ensure the future for coming generations" (Ack *et al.*, 2001, p. 121). Acknowledging the interdependence and fundamental relationality of all beings and things on Earth, leads to seeing caring-*with* as a necessary practice for survival and collective thriving, as a practice "in which responsibility is located not in the abstract universals of justice, but rather in the recognition of our intersubjective being" (Popke, 2006, p. 507). *Caring* is thus grounded in the concrete everyday making of relationships and relationalities, rather than in moral norms (McEwan & Goodman, 2010).

The concept of caring-*with* thus challenges the mainstream neoliberal paradigm, which is based on an individualized conception of human life and responsibility, on a depoliticization of environmental discourses and a commodified reification of relationships (human-to-human and human-to-nonhuman) (see also Bond, *et al.*, 2020; Chatzidakis *et al.*, 2020; Massarella *et al.*, 2021; The Care Collective, 2020). Caring-*with*, instead, foregrounds trust, solidarity, and reciprocity in caring relationships (Tronto 2013). These foundational elements are co-constituted and performed by the caregivers *with* the care receivers, not simply *for* them. Moreover, interwoven with this interpersonal dimension of caring-*with* is "its broader significance as a practice of communal solidarity" (Power, 2019, p. 764), of distribution, exchange and reciprocity (Gómez Becerra & Muneri-Wangari, 2021). Upon this reading, caring-*with* represents a socio-political vision that refuses individualism, efficiency, competition and "a right price for everything" type of approach. Instead, it foregrounds care as a public and democratic responsibility that is distributed and shared equitably amongst citizens (Power, 2019).

Attending to the political value of care – and especially of caring-*with people and nature* – allows us to critically contribute not only to the wider debate around sustainability transformations, but also to further unpack challenges to socially and ecologically *just* transformations, by means of democratic and inclusive processes. Through this article, we join other activists and academic feminist political ecologists who give particular attention "to the everyday practices, social relations and spaces of creativity and social reproduction where people come, share and act together" (Clement *et al.*, 2019, p. 2; see also Federici, 2019). We do so by

embracing in our work more pluralistic ontologies, which "deepen the analyses of care to explicitly re-include ecologies and the non-human in relations of care, establishing connections that market-based approaches to gender and the environment have erased" (Elmhirst & Resurrección, 2021, p. 224).

The evidence base supporting our contribution was compiled using a research methodology inspired by principles of participatory action research (PAR) and Appreciative Inquiry. The data set encompasses the experiences and perceptions of a relatively wide variety of people (namely, community groups, third sector organizations, civil society, and governmental officers) on what is required to embed, deepen and maintain over the long term, collaborative SMNR practices across a range of different scales and settings. We are guided in our analysis of their experiences by the following research questions:

1. What might a caring-*with* approach to collaborative SMNR look like? How can it contribute to achieving more meaningful, inclusive, and just cross-boundary collaboration in practice?
2. What are the challenges of embedding such *caring-with* practices into the governance of SMNR as a basis for transformative change?

Our findings suggest that the collective creation of *time* and *caring spaces*, along with building mutual capacity, skills and knowledge, is fundamental to establishing "thickened" relationships of trust and reciprocity, built on everyday caring maintenance. Here, "thickened relationships" are pivotal to enabling a plurality of citizens to participate in open-ended *meaning-making* processes, which are at the core of cultural and democratic transformations, and together underpin caring-*with* approaches. By listening deeply to each other's needs and aspirations, embracing the irreducibly vulnerable and interdependent nature of our lives on Earth, we can shape collective visions around the socially-ecologically just futures we want, and fairly distribute (collective) responsibility to act on them.

2. Conceptualizing collaborative SMNR as caring-*with* practice

The Ecosystems Approach as promoted by the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (2004), defines SMNR as "(a) strategy for the integrated management of land, water and living resources that promotes conservation and sustainable use in an equitable way" (Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, 2004, p. 6). The Ecosystem Approach requires *adaptive management* which focuses on learning to navigate non-linearity, complexity and uncertainty through an ongoing, iterative process of adjustment of management interventions and ecological changes (Armitage *et al.*, 2009; Olsson *et al.*, 2004).

In the field of international development, collaborative management or co-management of natural resources has been adopted as a way towards the empowerment of marginalized groups, *i.e.*, to build "capacity to engage local-level governing elites – and, more generally, to shift power relations" (Gibson & Woolcock, 2008, p. 152) (see also Chambers, 1983). Collaboration between different entities (governments, civil society and private sectors) is commonly referred to in an SMNR context as collaborative management or co-management, which has been defined in a variety of ways. Carlsson and Berkes (2005, p. 66), for example, depict co-management as the sharing of power, responsibility, rights and duties between the government and the local users, who are included in a governance system made of decentralized decision making and accountability in a way that combines the strengths and weaknesses of each. Borrini-Feyerabend *et al.* (2007) refer to it as a "partnership by which two or more relevant social actors collectively negotiate, agree upon, guarantee and implement a fair share of management functions, benefits and responsibilities for a particular territory, area or set of natural resources" (2007, p. 69).

The emphasis on institutional configurations, expert administration and consensus within collaborative, adaptive governance arrangements have, however, been criticized by others (including FPE scholars) for a number of reasons. For instance, Cleaver and Whaley (2018) highlight the need for "'thicker', contextualized, and power sensitive understandings of how adaptive governance works in practice" (p. 1). Critiques of this widespread approach often concern a lack of attention towards (different) cultural values, historical contexts, socio-cultural processes and relations, ethical standpoints of the actors involved in such management practices

(e.g., Cote & Nightingale, 2012; Stringer *et al.*, 2006). Moreover, tokenistic forms of participation have failed to meaningfully and inclusively give voice to communities' concerns and aspirations in relation to their local environments. As commented by Franklin and Marsden (2015, p. 942) "far too often when participation is adhered to by local government because it is a mandatory requirement placed upon them, it occurs in the form of consultation." Characteristic of such an operating context is a willingness for devolution of responsibility and cost, but without an accompanying transfer of power, adequate financial resourcing, consideration of broader social-economic inequalities or even the aspirations of those involved (e.g. Agrawal & Gibson, 1999; Armitage, 2005; Berkes, 2010; Curtis *et al.*, 2014; Nightingale *et al.*, 2022).

Furthermore, other scholars have called attention to the risk of "de-politicization", *i.e.*, the phenomenon occurring when representations and discourses around our social reality are emptied of the essence of this very reality: conflicts, (unequal) power relations and decisions around societal values and priorities (Kenis & Lievens, 2015). Adaptation processes are "part of the dynamics of societies rather than simply being a technical adjustment to biophysical change by society" (Eriksen *et al.*, 2015, p. 524). These are, therefore, political processes that prioritize some interests, perspectives and needs over others. In fact, such processes are imbued with power: we are all involved in "multi-scalar politicised relationships" (Eriksen *et al.*, 2015, p. 524) – be it at the household level or at the global scale – as we continuously negotiate priorities, values and interests within the various social contexts and relations that we are all shaped by. The systematic depoliticization of social-ecological discourse and of human-nature relationships has thus contributed to the neglect of "multi-scalar politicised relationships", and of the power inequalities enmeshed within them, further complicating the pursuit of truly democratic and inclusive pathways towards sustainability.

Throughout this article, the concept of power is understood as existing in action, in relations. Here, the dimensions of both *power to*, and *power with* (Gaventa, 2006, 2021) become of utmost importance to the practicing of *caring-with*. Specifically, we are interested in these two dimensions because they force us to look at, on the one hand, both the access to and control over resources (material, financial, human, natural, social) and the "ability factors" (Fisher and Tronto, 1990) – including time, skills and knowledge – which fundamentally enable or hamper the act of caring; and, on the other hand, the processes and relations that influence the capacity to power *with* others, to achieve collectively transformative SMNR. If *power to* represents the capacity to act, to exercise agency (Gaventa, 2006), *power with* emphasizes the generative and relational dimension of exercising power. This leads to a liberty, as noticed by Stout and Love (2018), that is an explicit "freedom to become, to engage" with one another (instead of freedom from coercion or domination), making political action a co-creative act.

Re-politicizing care (at the core of FPE endeavors) entails reframing it as an everyday, embodied and relational practice. It also means acknowledging the structural power inequalities underpinning care, which can lead to potential tension and conflict over the needs and aspirations of people for just sustainability transformations. At the same time, the need to re-politicize, re-claim and re-appropriate the debate around SMNR can ultimately contribute to better understanding what (material) conditions and processes hinder, or facilitate, a more democratic, inclusive and meaningful engagement of people in collective and distributed adaptive co-management actions and practices. This article brings together these aspects by means of analyzing SMNR practices in Wales through the three dimensions composing the act of care (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017): ethico-political involvement, maintenance work and affective engagement.

Three dimensions of a caring-with approach to environmental governance

Tronto's (1990; 1993, 2013) theorization of care goes beyond a moral stance towards embracing an "integrated act of care" (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 4). That is, "a politics of care engages much more than a moral stance; it involves affective, ethical, and hands-on agencies of practical and material consequence" (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 4). Both Tronto and Puig de la Bellacasa stress the intrinsic tensions and ambivalences attached to care as a three-dimensional concept made of maintenance work, affective engagement, and ethico-political involvement: "caring can be both so rewarding and so exasperating" (Fisher & Tronto, 1990, p. 41). Such an approach is far from an idealized, 'innocent' or essentialist conception of care as something necessarily and inherently 'feminine' or 'good' (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017; Tronto, 2013). Instead,

the doings and works of care aim to nurture an ongoing and hands-on process of re-imagining and re-creating "as well as possible" relations. This extends also to the emotional labor required to perform caring in all its forms. Such emotional labor is by no means just "positive affectivity": as Puig de la Bellacasa (2017, p. 5) points out, such affectivity can be an "oppressive burden, joy or boredom." Thus, care requires attention to emotions and affective relations "...because of the complex ways in which power is embedded within them" (Lawson 2003, p7). Moreover, affective labor is extremely energy consuming. If we want to create and maintain a form of "sustainable collective caring" (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 163), we need to maintain resources, including one's own energy, to avoid affective and material burnout.

The specific attention afforded to ethico-political involvement further offers a way to ultimately reclaim care as a means to foster solidarities, reciprocity and trust (Gómez Becerra & Muneri-Wangari, 2021) amidst unavoidable tensions and conflicts, while experimenting with more just ways of being and doing, *i.e.*, of "caring-*with*" (Tronto, 2013) humans and more-than-humans. In promoting a care-full politics at the base of an ethico-political rationale for radical democracy, Bond (2019, p. 16) highlights how, through "a more collective ethos of care and responsibility" it is possible to open up collective and political 'spaces' that can represent 'sites of negotiation' in which to challenge and re-define the relationship between institutional conditions and people's needs and desires, in a manner which circumvents the neoliberal focus on "individualized responsibility, blame, and liability" (*ibid.*).

A crucial question that remains to be answered, however, is how practices of caring-*with* and a sense of collective responsibility and engagement are better supported and enabled in practice. Here, we are especially interested in addressing this applied question within the context of collaborative forms of SMNR. Accordingly, we turn now to our case study of Wales. Beginning with an overview of the research methodology and study context, we then zoom into a series of grounded examples of practitioner attempts at materializing principles of caring-*with* into the governance of SMNR. These examples are offered as "possible points of reversal or switches, whereby potential openings for struggle and contestation occur" (Bee & Sijapati Basnett, 2017, p. 7973) while creating new opportunities for transformative change to materialize.

3. Methods and study context

Wales, a devolved nation of the UK, is committed to pursuing Sustainable Development through two forward-looking pieces of legislation: the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act (2015) – hereafter WBFGA – and the Environment (Wales) Act (2016). Together, these two pieces of legislation provide a framework for managing Wales' natural resources and improving the social, economic, environmental, and cultural well-being of Wales for present and future generations. The WBFGA places a duty on all the public bodies in Wales to work towards the achievement of the seven so-called "Well-being Goals", through the so-called *new ways of working*, *i.e.*, Integration, Collaboration, Long-Term, Prevention and Involvement. The sustainable management of the natural resources (SMNR) is the guiding principle within the Environment Act (2016) and represents the translation of the WBFGA into the environmental management realm. It acknowledges that a place-based and collaborative approach to the governance of natural resources is critical to achieve the Well-being Goals and necessary sustainability transformations. This potentially transformative legislative setting – and the challenges attached to the implementation of such an ambitious policy framework – led to the development of the research project upon which the first author based her doctorate. It is the research findings from this three-year in-depth study (2018-2021) which also form the basis for this article.

In undertaking the field work, Giambartolomei adopted an in-depth qualitative approach, based on principles of PAR (e.g., Reason & Bradbury, 2008) as well as of transdisciplinary (e.g., Lang *et al.*, 2012) and embodied research (Horlings *et al.*, 2020). The basic aim was to investigate and advise members of the Welsh Government on challenges and opportunities for enabling collaborative practices of SMNR in Wales. The approach involved closely engaging with participants from a variety of backgrounds, along three interrelated strands of fieldwork.

The first strand involved an in-depth, participatory-inspired place-based study through engagement with Project Skyline – a feasibility study run by a third sector organization in three communities in the South Wales Valleys (*i.e.*, Treherbert, Ynysowen and Caerau), with the aim to explore the potential for community

stewardship of the land. The Valleys are a typical example of a post-industrial landscape that local people have been struggling for sixty years to regenerate and restore. They were sparsely populated until the mid-1700s, when this part of Wales became central to the British economy for its production of iron. However, what shaped the history of the Valleys up until today has been the discovery of vast and deep coalfields and the transformation of these landscapes through lucrative and dangerous coal mines since the second half of the 1800s. Whilst in 1959, the coalmines of the Valleys still employed 93,000 people (spread across 141 collieries owned by the National Coal Board authority), only ten years later, in 1969, as few as 55 collieries were left and the number of employed people had dropped to 40,000 (Johnes, 2012, p. 247). Prior to the gradual closure of the biggest collieries, communities in the Valleys were "strong communities with a semi-rural outlook" (2012, p.122). Chapels, unions and political organizations played a key role in contributing to shape "a distinctive way of life and culture" (*ibid.*). From the 1940s, a gradual sense of decline and uncertainty became pervasive in the region. Job opportunities were dispersed and relocated elsewhere, with the people of the Valleys not only losing their collieries (and the mining communities attached to them), but also never seeing an adequate replacement with alternative employment opportunities (i.e., new businesses or industries). Delocalization of jobs, therefore, "undermined the physical, social and emotional unity of the urban working-class communities" (Johnes, 2012, p.122). Since the UK's entrance into the European Economic Community in 1973, Wales has been always the poorest part of the UK, and until its exit in 2020, the Valleys (together with West Wales) were classified amongst the poorest regions of Europe, categorized as 'less developed' (Bird & Phillips, 2018).

The first author's involvement in Project Skyline lasted over one year (May 2018- July 2019) and also included semi-structured follow-up interviews with 27 participants, ranging from residents of Treherbert, Ynysowen and Caerau, to facilitators from three organizations (Skyline employed one for each community, namely Larks and Ravens, Cynnal Cymru, and Peak), as well as professionals of involved third sector organizations such as Shared Assets, the Wildlife Trust, Stephens Scown LLP, and the Sustainable Places Research Institute at Cardiff University.

The second strand of fieldwork comprised of a long-term, transdisciplinary collaboration (2017-2020) with two pan-Wales Institutions, Welsh Government and Natural Resources Wales, and included organization of and participation in workshops centered around supporting collaborative and place-based working (see table 1 below). Both, those workshops co-organized and the ones the first author joined only as participant, involved practitioners and professionals from across sectors and from organizations involved in sustainable environmental management in Wales, including farmers, farming organizations and landowners. Examples of such workshops are "What success looks like for the sustainable management of natural resources?" in 2018; and then, in 2019, "Professional development in sustainable place making", "Sustainable Management Scheme – monitoring and evaluation workshop", and "Working together to evaluate nature-based solutions in Wales."

The third strand of fieldwork involved undertaking a series of semi-structured interviews with collaborative landscape partnerships funded through the Sustainable Management Grant Scheme of the Welsh Government. Twelve landscape partnerships were researched, with a total of 23 participants interviewed in 2019. Most of the interviewees were also participants in the workshops mentioned above. The interviewees were reflective of the diversity of funded partnerships and belonged to a mix of backgrounds including farming, third sector organizations' officers and facilitators, civil society organizations, governmental organizations, landowners. They were selected as spokespersons for their respective SMS partnership either because of their role as Project Officers of a selected partnership, or because of a previous acquaintance through the workshops above.

In the majority of cases, the semi-structured interview component of the data collection was undertaken by the first author only. Exceptions included the attendance of first and second authors in a semi-structured interview with one of the lead members of Project Skyline, and the second author in approximately one third of the landscape partnership interviews. In addition, all authors regularly attended meetings with members of Welsh Government and the second author was further informed by her own longitudinal engagement with a lead member of Project Skyline and several individuals within Welsh Government as part of her own wider program of research into collaborative environmental action (within Wales). Similarly, whilst the first author also took the lead with the initial coding (NVivo) and thematic analysis (comprising of both inductive and

deductive rounds), extended discussions of the emerging findings involved the regular and ongoing involvement of all three authors.

Although the research was not focused on intersectionality, the Table 1 shows the gender and age of the participants to the workshops analyzed in the results section of this article, i.e., 'To the Moon and Back.'

To the Moon and Back – residential workshops – May 2019 - number of participants disaggregated by age and gender (TOT= 44)		
Age Band	Male	Female
22-39	4	6
40-59	13	15
60-75	3	3
Total	20	24
To the Moon and Back – online workshop - April 2020 - number of participants disaggregated by age and gender (TOT = 21)		
Age Band	Male	Female
22-39	1	3
40-59	5	10
60-75	1	1
Total	7	14

Table 1: To the Moon and Back (residential workshop): Overview and disaggregation of participants.

The selection of the empirical evidence is inspired by an Appreciative Inquiry approach (e.g., Johnson, 2013; Ludema & Fry, 2008; Zandee & Cooperrider, 2008). Specifically, it follows an "ethos of appreciation" as outlined by Zandee and Cooperrider (2008) and recently further deepened by Moriggi (2022). According to these authors, taking an appreciative stance allows us to be "free to choose and develop methods of inquiry that illuminate and create the fullest life-nourishing potential of human systems in the larger world" (Zandee & Cooperrider, 2008, p. 196). Notably, Appreciative Inquiry, and more specifically an ethos of appreciation, does not equal to "being positive" and ignoring the dark sides of highly complex and multifaceted realities. It rather inspires to being guided by "wonder, curiosity, imagination, heartfelt openness" (*Ibid.*). Guided by Appreciative Inquiry, the empirical examples are informed by such a 'generative' and 'appreciative' approach towards seemingly mundane and emergent practices, events and conversations. They all have transformative potential, therefore paving the way to a caring-*with* approach.

4. Results: what does "applying a caring-*with* approach" mean in practice? Three examples from Wales

The empirical sections of this article are primarily structured around two of the three dimensions of care practice delineated above: affective engagement, and maintenance work. The third dimension of ethico-political involvement is presented more as a golden braid, woven across each of the examples provided. We draw on examples from each of the three strands of fieldwork to explore further (in accordance with our opening research questions): what a caring-*with* approach might look like when applied to a collaborative SMNR; how caring-*with* can contribute to strengthening collaborative forms of environmental governance while supporting democratic and inclusive transformations towards sustainability; and, what are the challenges

that actors from civil society, governments, third and private sectors encounter in pursuing transformative change by means of doing collaborative SMNR inspired by a caring-*with* approach?

Fostering affective engagement through the creation of convivial and safe spaces

This section provides empirical evidence concerning the ways in which caring-*with* practices have been put in place, by means of nurturing the dimension of affective engagement. The first example is drawn from data collected throughout the long-term transdisciplinary collaboration with WG and NRW. Specifically, we discuss the experience of 'To the Moon and Back', a 2-day residential workshop that occurred in May 2019. For this workshop, Welsh Government employed Emergence, a Wales-based organization led by Fern Smith and Philip Ralph, which provides professional facilitation and ceremonial practice services, focusing on supporting processes of sustainability change, using creativity and art to foster dialogues. The workshop – of which the first author was both a participant and a member of the organizing team (see Giambartolomei, 2022) – was designed to stimulate deep, personal reflections around vulnerabilities, fears, dreams, needs, and less focused on the professional lives of the participants. The aim was to enhance the skills and capacity of SMNR practitioners across Wales to become trusted intermediaries and change agents who are able to champion meaningful and transformative collaborative practices across sectors and organizations. To do so, the organizing and facilitation team of the workshop agreed on the need to emphasize learning about one another and the practice of deep-listening (to one another and to ourselves), and of open and honest communication based on a shared basis of compassion and empathy. Using Theory-U (Scharmer, 2018) as a guiding framework for an embodied, practice-based learning, Phil and Fern creatively guided participants in their 'journey along the U' to collectively develop the skills of 'learning-by-doing', of co-production, of collaboration and of prototyping new ideas.

At the core of this two-day journey ('to the moon and back' depicting the sense of an 'impossible task', akin to the extreme difficulty of a collective endeavor such as tackling climate change and stopping biodiversity loss to ensure the survival of our species) was the aim to discover inner and structural blind-spots of leadership, to enable collaborative practices, and wider system change. To do so, space and time were created to purposefully look inwards and outwards, through a new pair of lenses (*i.e.*, Theory U). From the outset, it was made clear by the facilitators that we would potentially be entering an uncomfortable space that would lead us to face vulnerability, uncertainty, fears and a sense of being lost amidst a process of conscientization (Freire, 1970) and empathetic self-awareness. A key element of Theory U is the focus on embodiment: the process of gradually unravelling the institutional (structural) barriers, as well as the inner ones, to fully embrace transformative change which requires an open will, an open heart and open mind. Thus, for the workshop, participants were asked to meet just as human beings. As some of the participants said in their feedback form, it was "powerful being just a person."

During the course of the two days, present with ourselves, we had the opportunity to encounter each other, to feel connected and to propagate a deeper appreciation of acting in relation to one another, as human beings. Being aware of our inherently relational nature, of being and doing together, implies being reflexive, in turn, about the nature and dynamic of interdependence. A core part of the journey along the 'U' was in fact to fully embrace the truth that one is not separate from the system. However, the more we recognized our interdependence, the more vulnerability, fears and a certain (possibly uncomfortable) intensity of emotions emerged. For example, some of the participants reported the following as personally challenging: "Being vulnerable to others", "looking inwards", "emotions, much to absorb, tired", "a long and mentally intense day", "being emotionally honest", "being uncomfortable, yet feeling safe", "opening up and talking about personal feelings, honestly, fear of judgement."

As the words of the participants highlight, emotional labor (*i.e.*, the dimension of *affective engagement*, required to perform care) is by no means just "positive affectivity." As Puig de la Bellacasa points out, affective labor can range from being joyous, to boring, to burdensome and energy-consuming. Though not straightforward, the emotional and affective engagement part of care doings holds transformative potential, as Moriggi *et al.* (2020) argue. These authors, drawing on Pulcini (2009), contend that (some exceptions being Grenni, Soini, & Horlings, 2020; Ives *et al.*, 2020) for agency to become transformative, "imagination and moral

sentiments should be actively nurtured" (2020, p. 9). In fact, emotions and emotional awareness can act as a "compass of morality" and trigger motivation towards action (*ibid.*). However, the long-standing undervaluation and neglect of emotions and emotional involvement in public social relations has led to a widespread 'unlearning' of what it means to publicly enact being human, to acknowledge being deeply embedded in a web of (caring) relations with human and more-than-human worlds, which is inherently necessary for our survival and thriving. In contrast, a care-based perspective "accepts emotions, context, and concern for particular others as comprehensible reasons. Instead of being excluded from the moral discourse, caring feelings are considered as valuable complements and legitimate arguments." (Jax *et al.*, 2018, p. 25).

Moreover, as recently discussed by Nightingale *et al.* (2022, p. 7), emotions and affects present "ways of learning, experiencing, and responding to socio-natural change." They represent a way of getting to know, but also to re-imagine and re-build our relations with the more-than-human world, while challenging the prevailing anthropocentrism that has so much contributed to the tragedy of climate change. With this in mind, we draw our second example from the place-based, in-depth participatory study conducted through Project Skyline to illustrate an attempted grounded practicing of *caring-with*; here we give particular attention to *affective engagement*.

Launched in 2018, Skyline is a 'third sector' led project established with the aim of exploring the potential of community land transfers to achieve ecological, social and economic sustainability in the south Wales Valleys. The south Wales Valleys have experienced high levels of deprivation and disconnection from the surrounding natural landscape for over 50 years, especially after the end of its major economic activity, coal mining. From the outset, the Skyline project has pursued a much more horizontal approach, rooted in empowerment, deep listening and collective meaning-making. This is in contrast to the primarily top-down, often paternalistic, and technocratic approach to regeneration and human and ecological wellbeing historically witnessed by this area via government-led schemes.

One exemplary event we consider here as illustrative of the overall approach of Project Skyline is the "Festival of Ideas", which was organized in the town of Treherbert in October 2018 by one of three sets of artist-facilitators employed by Project Skyline. This event brought together more than a hundred people to share food, a walk in the woods, and their stories as well as their aspirations regarding their town, its landscape and their interconnected futures. The artists facilitating the Festival of Ideas, Owen Griffiths and Melissa Appleton, part of the social enterprise [Ways of Working](#), developed a full-day program that emphasized the interconnected nature of the everyday and emotional dimensions of life together with broader concepts of societal relevance, such as culture, economy, climate change and ecology. By bridging the everyday (inclusive of our relationship with nature as well as our jobs, families, friends) with the broader cultural, economic and ecological contexts within which we operate, participants were stimulated to reflect upon the connection between climate change and culture, 'entering' a meaning-making process. These reflections were prompted by a range of activities (e.g., walks, open and facilitated conversation moments) and materials. The latter included the presence of a long sheet rolled over the tables where people were sharing lunch. Written on this sheet was "Climate Change is Culture, and Culture is Ordinary." In a place where detachment and (emotional) distance from the landscape was repeatedly mentioned by its people as a major issue, the opportunity to re-think this relationship by exploring memories, personal and collective stories, dreams and imaginaries was very powerful.

In her *Caring Democracies*, Tronto asks "Who will watch the kids while the adults deliberate?" (2013, p. 27). This is a key concern in the work of re-imagining human-nature relationships through a *caring-with* lens. There are in fact real barriers, and real and material challenges that affect people's agency and capacity to participate. In the case of Treherbert, such barriers deeply undermine, first and foremost, their very own capacity to imagine a different relationship with the woods and the land surrounding their villages, for themselves and for their children. An interviewee articulated the implications of this issue incisively:

What space do you have, emotionally, physically, intellectually for dreaming about the skyline? And engaging with what has been, but shouldn't be, a largely middle-class concern with the environment? (...) When your daily life is based on trying to exist, it's very often difficult to look

up at the Skyline. (...) It's not a lack of interest, it's certainly not a lack of ambition, but I'd say a lack of physical, emotional and intellectual *space* – I don't wanna use the word capacity, as it's got a different connotation, but you know, *they don't have that space in their life*. (Interviewee #1, emphasis added)

To deal with such material, "practical" barriers and a lack of "space" to imagine and dream about the landscape, the Festival of Ideas' artist-facilitators developed a few, but key, *hosting* and *convivial practices* such as collective walks in the woods, and food preparation and sharing. Such activity can be considered "a form of social action; engaging citizens in cooking and eating together can become an act of conviviality" (Marovelli, 2019, p. 191). The power of conviviality lies in its relational nature, *i.e.*, in the potential of *relational becoming* to pave the way for deeper (and transformative) sustainable futures, because it allows "open encounters": "convivial atmospheres are related to a sense of 'becoming with' that allows an open encounter." (*Ibid.*, p. 193). The power of open encounter can be considered a way to nurture power *with* one another, to encourage the "synergistic and generative" power that emerges from the very relating of one *with* another which, ultimately, strengthens "the capacity to act" (Gaventa, 2006, p. 24). That is, it fosters power *to*.

During the Festival of Ideas, a convivial "atmosphere and affect" contributed to open up conversations with and amongst the community and to "create a space where people could connect to some of the language and some of the concepts" (Interviewee #11) that were central to Skyline. Prompting questions included: What does stewardship mean to you? What role does the landscape, its ecology, have in your lives, and in the ones of your children and grandchildren? Throughout the event (and the whole Skyline Project), considerable emphasis was placed on creating *space* to initiate conversations and dialogues. Through these, big and potentially distant issues such as 'ecology', 'economy' and 'culture' could assume meaning and a deeper, more embedded relevance to people's everyday life. "Everydayness" here refers to "the intimate and interpersonal, between friends and within families" (Dempsey & Pratt, 2019, p. 278), that can act as a "disruptive force", because "it is a way of perceiving and engaging in the world which does not necessarily stem from the expression of an underlying continuous or coherent logic. *It works through bodily powers like affect*" (Hunter, 2015, p. 175 emphasis added). As Hunter (2015, p. 176) continues, everydayness is "a space of productivity", and a "space of hope" because it is a *generative*, an emergent space that is built and constantly shaped, not only rationally, but also through embodied, emotional and relational engagements, that require the participation of our *full selves* (*i.e.*, our heads, hearts, hands and feet).

Allowing room for affective and emotional dimensions to emerge and to be shared was fundamentally important because it allowed people to reconnect to their personal and collective shared history. But even further, It prompted people to connect (also) on an affective dimension, and to "thicken" their relationships, triggered the transformative and generative potential of emotions (Moriggi *et al.*, 2020) that can strengthen the capacity to imagine a different future, for the South Wales Valleys and their (present and future) people. The intention here was to encourage recognition amongst participants of our own interdependence, including our future generations, thereby paving the way to develop a caring-*with* type of approach over the long term.

The importance of everyday caring maintenance work for transformative futures

A year after the first, in person, 'To the Moon and Back' workshop, the Welsh Government-Natural Resources Wales joint program organized a follow-up event, with more or less the same participants attending. Again facilitated by Emergence, the aim was to consolidate the relationships and the ways of *doing* and *being* together that we experimented with in the first residential workshops. This included the creation of a more solid and easily accessible forum for dialogue, sharing and learning together around SMNR practices and projects in Wales. Occurring at the end of March 2020, just a few days after the first national lockdown across the UK was enforced to contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, the meeting took place on an online meeting platform.

A key aspect of collective inquiry during this meeting was understanding if, and on what basis, was it possible and desirable to build a "community of practice" (hereafter CoP) made of practitioners, policymakers, community groups, farmers and all the people involved in SMNR, working on the ground, across Wales.

During an exercise of imagining what our ideal CoP would look like, a strong emphasis was given to the importance of a "caring" space: people highlighted "kindness", "compassion", "authenticity", "trustworthiness", "supportiveness", "magnanimity" and "empathy" as fundamental dimensions of such a CoP, to be able to share and feel vulnerable in a "non-judgmental" space that "supports making mistakes" while learning and experimenting with diversity and possibly conflicting views. "A place which nurtures and nourishes", "where there is mutual enabling and encouraging", an "empowering environment" that "allows for the range of human stuff": a space where "it's not necessarily about 'solving' but listening", where people are encouraged "to ask why" and make "questions and having 'spiky' conversations" (such as those between farmers and third-sector environmental organizations, which often hold very different positions on SMNR matters).

The participants envisioned such a *caring* space, thus, to support the creation of "long-term common visions", through "perseverance and commitment", "determination and tenacity" while being "comfortable with not-knowing the answers", and "making time for listening and observing." The aspirations for the CoP presented by the workshop participants, thus, shed light on the importance of a caring space "where it's safe to have difficult conversations"; a space not necessarily to solve problems, but where it is alright to be vulnerable and open to learn, reflect and share, where to "re-frame 'failure' as learning – honesty and openness." The relevance of learning and making mistakes as a way to build stronger relationships, as well as to improve organizational *modus operandi*, are a fundamental part of the idea of adaptive management (the very core of SMNR). One of the interviewees did not miss the opportunity to stress how this aspect has been overlooked for too long, both within and outside governmental institutions. They highlighted the importance of acknowledging and somehow 'celebrating' failure and mistakes too, as part of an adaptive and learning-by-doing approach:

I think there's got to be that willingness to review and change and let it evolve and adapt. I think again, the partnerships that don't work are the ones that are very rigid and set in their ways. Admitting that we have done something wrong: When do we hear that? How good are we at talking about things we're doing well, of things we want to do. But we rarely actually acknowledge things that haven't gone so well. And what we've learned from it. I think we just need to accept that we make mistakes. So let's acknowledge the mistake. Let's talk about the mistake, what went wrong, and just learn from it and move on. I think we need to get a lot better at that, at the idea of reflective learning. (Interviewee #14)

The inspiration of interviewees and workshops' participants deeply resonate with the "*spaces of experimentation and imaginations*" envisioned by Dieleman: "Even though spaces of experimentation and imagination are organized around problematic situations, their purpose is not to "solve the problem" in a narrow sense but to "engage in the situation" (Dieleman, 2012, p. 51). However, the creative, spontaneous dimension of an approach based on relational, emergent and embodied practices is severely constrained by the conditions imposed by a whole system wanting people operating within it (from top managers to on the ground officers) to achieve pre-determined and standardized results. The common pattern within a paternalistic and managerial type of approach is that governmental bureaucracies implicitly impose on their officers and professionals a standardized approach, assuming to know what tools they require to face everyday challenges. With the words of the same interviewee #15:

Civil servants are not allowed to have a purpose! Civil service is a blank slate (...) these are interesting, highly qualified people who were being treated like machine operators, often used to sit there and look at the wall behind their screens during these briefings. (...) You've got very little, and you exist in a way to create argument, create arguments and justifications (Interviewee #15).

A stifling and managerial approach that does not leave much *time* and *space* for relationship building and creative engagement, which characterizes the ways in which most governmental bureaucracies work, is visible also in the last example we provide, drawn from interviews carried out with actors involved in the Sustainable Management Scheme ("SMS" in short). The SMS is a Welsh Government grant scheme to support landscape partnerships that promote collaborative SMNR initiatives and projects across Wales. In line with the evidence discussed above, the majority of the interviewed SMS scheme participants highlighted the importance of investing time and resources into deepening and thickening the relationships with their project partners. One of them emphasized the importance of holding several meetings to keep "closely in touch": "I would always be present in those meetings too. It's a lot of work. It's a lot of meetings. It's a lot of organization, but it does keep us very closely in touch with what's going on the ground" (Interviewee #16).

Another respondent highlighted how, by investing time and energy to create a partnership, the SMS scheme had allowed them to *start* conversations with and between stakeholders historically labelled as 'enemies.' They recounted past times when communication between these adversary groups had been so challenging that face-to-face dialogue could only happen in the presence of an external mediator. Mentioning these episodes, they stressed how a project like the SMS, despite providing only three years of funding, can contribute to adopting a perspective for a long-term *repair* of decades of damage and lack of collaboration. Specifically, it can enable the *maintenance* of the relationships of trust, underpinned by the creation of a common vision for the use of the landscape: "It's actually twenty years. We're undoing twenty to fifty years of damage" (Interviewee #11).

In such contexts that are often characterized by historical conflict, a "lack of understanding" (Interviewee #16) of each other's needs and perspectives was mentioned by more than one interviewee as an element that has further slowed down and hindered the process of getting to know and trust each other. Whilst in the case of interviewee #16 a "lack of awareness and sympathy with what everyone else was trying to do" was identified as being part of the problem, others highlighted the fact that sometimes people can just be fully focused on their own needs and aspirations, lacking (mental and perhaps spiritual) *space* to stop and reflect on those of others (as already discussed in the section above dedicated to the Skyline Project):

When I started working with local authorities, it was a challenge because each local authority had its own interests, its own core objectives, its own strategy to deliver. And whilst they were all signed up to the partnership, for managing the river x, they all came at it from slightly different directions. So, my job there was to sort of coordinate, all three or four aspirations and, and try and deliver this, this single x service. So that took a lot of meetings, you know, it took a lot of regular communication. It took a lot of understanding of each partner's needs. (Interviewee #14)

Although recognizing and integrating stakeholders' needs and perspectives are amongst the key factors widely acknowledged by the literature on adaptive co-management in socio-ecological systems (e.g. Armitage *et al.*, 2009) as well as by policy, the implications of such integration are not always quite as clear. For instance, unbalanced power relations amongst actors participating in SMNR might lead to a lack of capacity or opportunity to effectively structure and communicate needs, aspirations and perspectives in decision-making arenas (see e.g. Turnhout *et al.*, 2019). This underplays existing challenges and limitations to the capacity of people to express their own needs as well as to understand the ones of others. This situation leads to overlooking a fundamental link in the caring-*with* approach to SMNR applied in this article: identifying needs (or having "need talks" as Tronto writes [2013, p. 162]) and allocating responsibility to meet them. This is key to building "thickened relationships", at the core of caring-*with*. However, as one of the study participants also astutely noted, the definition of needs and the discussion around 'how to' collectively meet such needs, especially in deprived and exhausted communities, represent a very delicate matter: "Need is a funny thing, isn't it? If you're hungry, you know, you are hungry. But sometimes if you're socially deprived, you don't know what the problem is. If someone asks, you can't put your finger on it (...)" (Interviewee #10).

As with the above reflection, many of the experiences that interviewees shared with us provide evidence of the complexity of care-fully identifying and meeting needs in situation of disadvantage. The tendency of parachuting short-term projects into communities and places risks only exacerbating a more 'careless' approach, failing to recognize the importance of time and attentiveness to such complex mix of issues:

That's the trouble with all this other funding: they just helicoptering in with this project: "Oh, nobody wants to do it, what a waste of time! We'll go." Because the people weren't ready then. They've got to be here all the time. And so when people come into us with an idea, or a need, we'll think "all right, we could do like the lunch. That's how the lunch club started. Somebody wants to learn how to cook. All right then. And then that says it's built up from that. And now two of them have gone for food hygiene course. And that has taken months and months to do it at their pace, and we're here to do it, at their pace. (Interviewee #21)

Being attentive and responsive to the needs and aspirations of the people we work with, thus, is part of the "everyday caring maintenance" mentioned by Puig de la Bellacasa, a fundamental aspect of SMNR as a caring-*with* practice. Similarly, this is valid for ecosystems maintenance. For example, one of the interviewees emphasized how important it is that environmental third-sector organizations are supported in providing basic maintenance of environmental (Sites of Special Scientific Interest) sites, given the poor conditions that many sites across Wales experience, due to the current lack of everyday maintenance:

[This is] not just about looking after them [SSSI sites and other sites], but monitoring conditions, enforcing everything and basically looking after them. And yet the bulk of sites in Wales are in an unfavorable condition. They're struggling, and it's because the day-to-day management isn't always done on them. But it's because there's nobody to do it. You know, because the money's been taken away from it – the duty is still there, but the money has been sucked away from them. (Interviewee #14)

These words support an important argument within the framing of SMNR as caring-*with* practice: third sector organizations (as many other organizations and people working directly on the ground) provide the everyday care which is fundamental to the most basic functioning of ecosystems and of places and that lies at the heart of collaborative working for SMNR. However, this type of work is regarded by some respondents to be systematically undervalued. One reason that was given for this under-valuing is the tendency towards praising 'innovation' over everyday practice:

It certainly devalues the need for basic maintenance. Because if we always strive into the innovative, day-to-day maintenance feels very undervalued. Which is bonkers [sic.] really, because that's what we need to keep things at steady baseline. [...] The important thing is that we learn to do both rather than trying to just innovate everything, because what that means is we're distracted from the day job, as well. *We miss things and we forget about things and things fall into disrepair.* While we're all trying to be innovative. (Interviewee #14, emphasis added)

The views of this respondent deeply resonate with the words of Puig de la Bellacasa (2017): "Foregrounding the importance of care, maintenance, and repair to the very material sustaining of the world is a step in challenging teleological progressive shiny ideals of innovation" (p. 210). As Puig de la Bellacasa goes on to explain, in a system characterized by an "innovate or perish credo", valuing and investing time and resources in these basic yet fundamental caring activities is a "kind of resistance" towards the "productionist ethos" underpinning "progressive timescapes of anxious futurity" (*Ibid.*). The disruptive and potentially transformative potential of care and caring practices is therefore embedded in the very action of 'reclaiming' time, *making time*, for "a series of vital practices and experiences that remain discounted, or crushed, or simply

unmeasurable" in the neoliberal and "productionist" system within which we all live (*Ibid.*). As Fisher and Tronto's (1990) definition of care also reminds us, the very act of reclaiming time to care, and especially to care-*with*, thus, foregrounds the relevance of affective engagement and building (and maintaining) relationships of trust in our (potentially transformative) everyday ways of being and doing.

5. Conclusions

This article offers an empirically grounded analysis of the criticalities and critical factors that affect the ways in which collaboration can actually evolve and deepen, being imbued with (often unequal) power relationships that operate in the context of SMNR practices. We have argued that, in order to guard against collaboration being practiced in a manner akin to a mere techno-fix, far greater acknowledgement, but also valuing, needs to be afforded to the intricate and complex world of relationships, emotions, vulnerability, as well as the politics attached to any type of human relation. This has started to be visible in the situated practices and ways of working of professionals (both within and outside governmental institutions), analyzed and discussed in this article.

Caring-*with* activities in the context of collaborative SMNR involve the participation of citizens – ranging from community members to governmental officers – in activities that aim to foster collaborative approaches and SMNR, *over the long-term*. These include a combination of different activities such as attending meetings, events, carrying out practical and technical work on (natural) sites, promoting wider community and stakeholder engagement through communication, co-production and dissemination of knowledge and information, practical sessions, workshops, laboratories to build capacity for monitoring and evaluation, and other activities that allow for pro-active, collaborative, and meaningful citizen involvement in SMNR.

This is the 'ground', the foundation of (potential) collaboration that needs to be built, nurtured and *maintained*, so that *meaning-making processes* occur. Such 'ground', especially in place-based working as we have shown, is a *space of possibility*, a 'space of negotiation' to prefigure alternative sustainable futures, alternative ways of doing and being together, of collaborating, of caring-*with* each other. *Caring spaces* where needs and aspirations of people are care-*fully* listened to. In such spaces, an initial shared *meaning-making process* can be triggered: a process through which the needs and the aspirations of SMNR practitioners and professionals have the opportunity to emerge, in order to explore shared understandings of institutions and norms. In the specific case of our research, we delved into the ways in which SMNR principle and the *new ways of working* set by the Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act, have been gradually gaining traction by securing *meaning* and *legitimacy* in people's everyday life.

The three examples provided from the case study of Wales suggest that important conversations have occurred around the investment in terms of time, (emotional) energy and vulnerability for building trust. Similarly, 'failing' is a learning and experimental process, even within organizational settings. This prefigures an important *cultural transformation* within institutional and governmental organizations: the potential for everyday caring practices to also be practices of resistance against omnipresent neoliberal and patriarchal systems (Tronto, 2017), and for a radical move towards transformative and caring environmental governance.

As Hammond (2020) argues, cultural transformations are about "broadening society's imaginative space" (Hammond, 2020, p. 3). The diversity of meanings generated through the encounter of a variety of needs, aspirations, perspectives, and everyday experiences results in a polyphony that holds transformative potential: "For the more diverse the meanings and ideas that come together in societal processes, the more transformative processes are sparked, and cultural transformation is advanced" (Hammond, 2019, p. 69). By introducing vulnerability, failure, deep listening, and overall "the range of the human stuff", often delegitimized and neglected within everyday discourses of both SMNR professionals and policy makers, we as society can broaden the understanding of cross-boundary 'collaboration', imagining and shaping new meanings for it. However, it is paramount that powerful actors (*i.e.*, those who have *power* to participate, and have access to *ability factors*), like academic and governmental institutions, enable the participation in meaning-making processes, starting with unlocking *time* and *space* for people to care-*with* each other.

The article has shown some of the potential of 'social artistic practices' and 'social engaged art' to enable opportunities for guided experiences of caring-*with* encounters, helping people broadening their imaginative space, by disrupting the status-quo and stimulating critical reflection, and through embodied and emotional involvement. The active presence of social artistic organizations such as Emergence and Ways of Working in Wales indicates the growing interest of artists in being involved in the collective building of alternative approaches to deal with the socio-economic and climatic crises of our times. Wales's small size, combined with a historic and cultural sense of interconnection and community still present in many parts of the country, can facilitate the challenge of fostering alternative and relational approaches with the help of social artistic practices. Wales is "small enough to be inventive" (Davidson, 2020, p. 36) and can leverage the rooted networks of people, communities and organizations that are active across the whole nation. This includes facilitating contact and exchange between governmental officers, practitioners, and artists, as the collaboration between Welsh Government and Emergence demonstrates. This long-term and slow process of 'convergence' between institutional actors and social art practitioners is a recent phenomenon, still in its embryonic phase, with Emergence and Ways of Working only recently established. It is not possible to foresee what directions it will take, and whether it will become an established practice, in Wales and beyond.

Some artistic practices generate discomfort and emotional challenges. But they are powerful when they are aimed at hosting *caring spaces* for deep encounters, focused on building trust and sharing needs, stories and aspirations of people from all walks of life. They enable the emergence of 'spaces of possibility.' Concerted action between artists, communities, policymakers, practitioners and researchers can contribute strongly to building an "affirmative" and "generative praxis" (Stout & Love, 2018, p. 261), aimed at defeating unproductive cynicism and skepticism, while nurturing hope, gratitude and a truly caring society.

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