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Caring-with People and Nature: Exploring social-ecologically just transformations through a lens of feminist and democratic caring

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By

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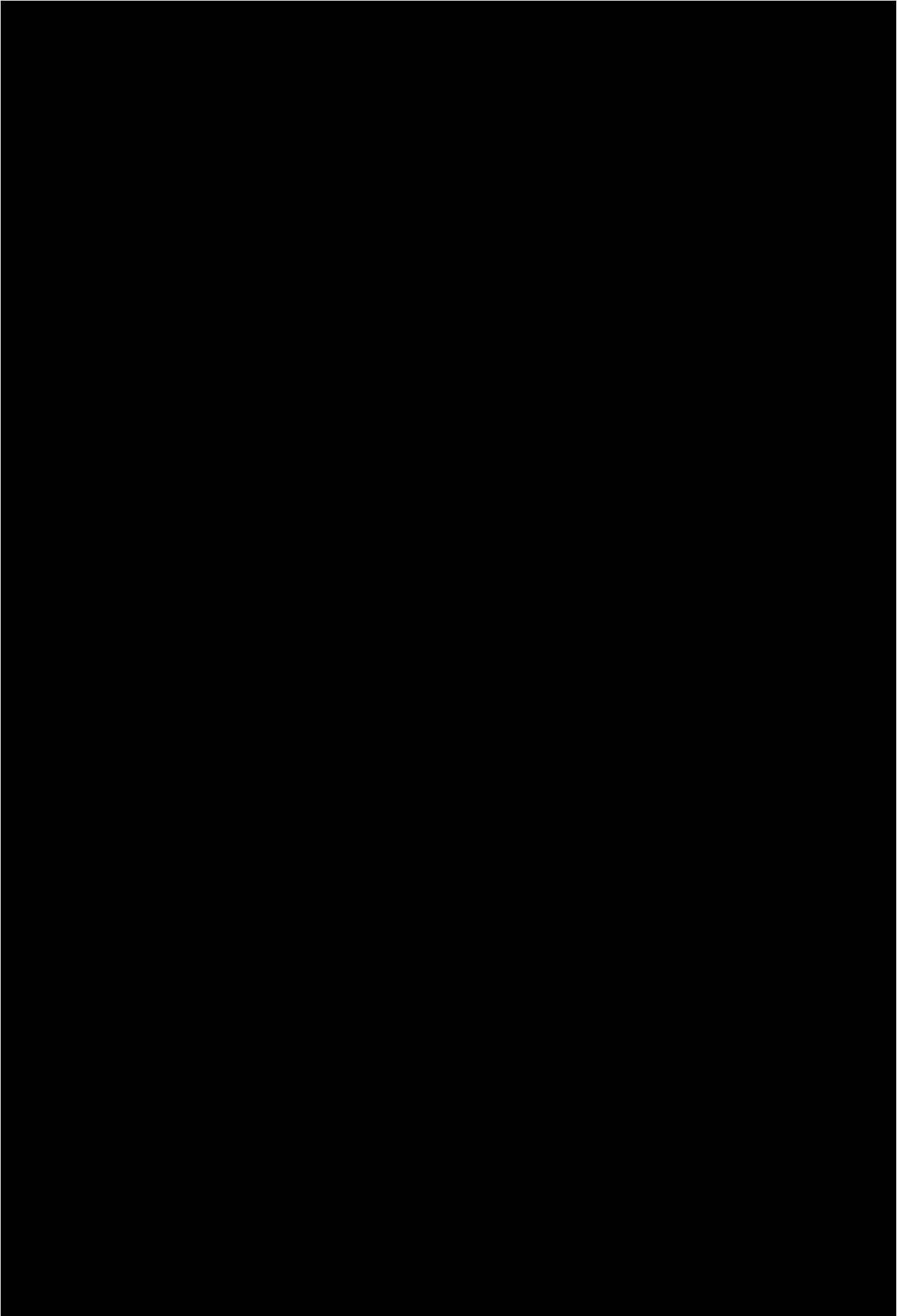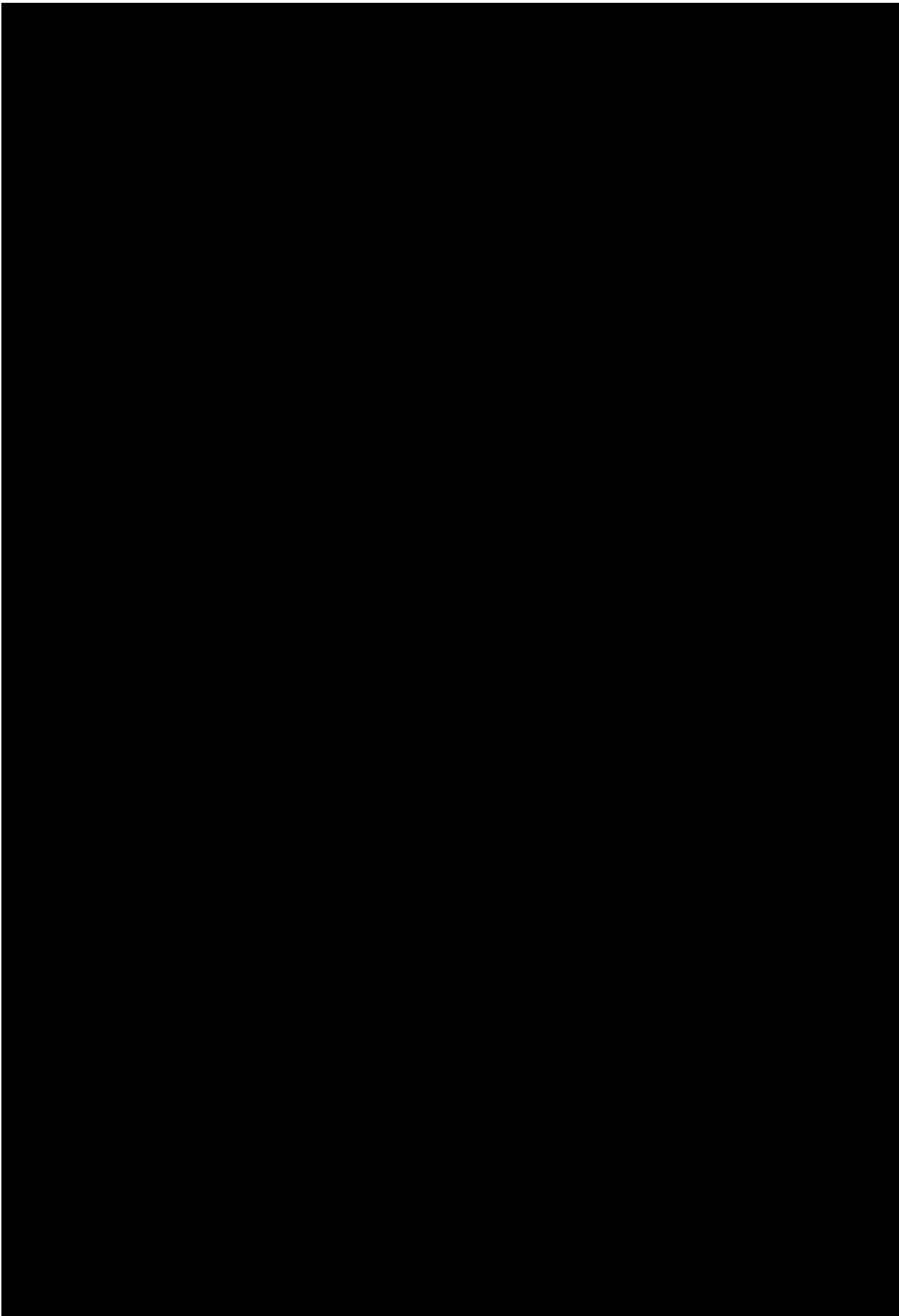
"Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anaemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love."

— Martin Luther King Jr.

Abstract

This research originates from a transdisciplinary collaboration between members of Welsh Government (WG) and Coventry University in which the need was identified to investigate collaborative approaches to governing the sustainable management of natural resources (SMNR) in Wales, UK. Despite their widespread take-up, feminist and radical (human) geography scholars have criticised collaborative forms of SMNR governance for their entanglement with neoliberal assumptions, including the commodification of nature and perpetuation of structurally unequal power relations. In this study, care theory is drawn upon as a means of tackling such structural inequalities and enabling a radical paradigm shift towards sustainability. SMNR governance is framed as requiring a deep commitment to caring-*with* at both an individual and institutional level. Caring-with is understood in this study as involving a fair and democratic definition and allocation of caring responsibilities towards others (human and more-than-human), based on principles of mutual interdependence, solidarity and reciprocity. Specifically, this study investigates the material and political dimensions that affect the *capacity* (i.e., time, resources, skills, knowledge) to care-*with* (in this instance, with regards to collaborative forms of SMNR). The research is informed by a qualitative mixed-methods approach, combining transdisciplinary, ethnographic, participatory and experimental methods, adopted over a period of three years (2017-2020) in Wales. Through a prolonged and diversified engagement with actors from public and third sectors, as well as practitioners and community groups, the findings of this research suggest that collaborative practices of SMNR are emergent and relational, embedded within embryonic systems of *cultural transformation,* at the core of which lie shared and open-ended *meaning-making processes*. Such processes underpin caring-*with* approaches: by deeply listening to each other's needs and aspirations, embracing the interdependent nature of our lives on Earth, practitioners, community members, policymakers and professionals (from multiple different sectors) come together into "communities of practice". These act as *enabling spaces – 'spaces of possibility' -* where collaboration as caring-*with* is given priority as both iterative process and emergent practice. Ultimately, by creating *time* and *space* to nurture and maintain long-term relationships of trust, communities of practice can function as *laboratories* to envision and collectively realise a "prefigurative politics of caring-*with",* to foster socially and ecologically *just* transformations.

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Contents

List of Abbreviations

AS	Area Statements
CBD	Convention on Biological Diversity
CBNRM	Community-based Natural Resources Management
CoP	Community of Practice
FAR	Formative Accompanying Research
FG	Focus Groups
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
NRM	Natural Resources Management
NRP	Natural Resources Policy
NRW	Natural Resources Wales
PAR	Participatory Action Research
PE	Participatory Evaluation
SES	Social-Ecological Systems
SMNR	Sustainable Management of the Natural Resources
SoNaRR	State of Natural Resources Report
SW	South Wales
TDR	Transdisciplinary Research
TGV CIC	The Gren Valleys Community Interest Company
WBFGA	Wellbeing of Future Generation Act (Wales) 2015
WG	Welsh Government
WTOW	Welcome to Our Woods

List of Figures

List of Tables

1. Introduction

This thesis explores how a democratic and feminist approach to care can contribute to achieving socially and ecologically just sustainability transformations, in the context of collaborative practices of Sustainable Management of Natural Resources (SMNR hereafter). Through a transdisciplinary (TDR) and participatory action research (PAR) inspired approach, this enquiry has engaged with a variety of people (namely, community groups, third sector organisations, civil society, and governmental officers) to investigate their experiences and perceptions of how to engage with, and maintain over the long term, such collaborative practices.

The following section 1.1 introduces the key societal challenges at the core of this research. Section 1.2 presents the research approach and theoretical lenses around which this thesis has been developed, and the key knowledge gaps identified in the literature. Section 1.3 follows by illustrating the process of development of the research questions and aims that responded to the gaps in knowledge, as well as the contributions to knowledge this thesis provides. This Introduction concludes with section 1.4, which offers an outline of the chapters composing this manuscript.

1.1 A crisis of relationships: re-assessing human-nature relationships

This study uses the lens of a feminist and democratic ethics of care to start building an alternative approach to the depoliticization and 'techocratisation' of human-nature relationships and, more broadly, of the management of socio-ecological systems. The mainstream neoliberal approach has systemically commodified and undermined this complex and vital web of relationships. It has contributed to maximising the exploitation of our natural environment, deploying (short-term) techno-fixes and managerial solutions, which have disguised the long-term destructive and detrimental effects upon the overall wellbeing of entire social-ecological systems. This has also contributed to denying the politics of human-nature relations: i.e., the diversity of knowledges, perspectives, worldviews, needs and aspirations entrenched in people-nature relationships, that are at the very core of the concept of sustainability.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which exploded in February 2020 across the globe, has highlighted how such a reductionist and exploitative vision of human-nature relationships is behind the irreversible degradation of our natural environment. This "unsustainable exploitation of the

environment" (IPBES, 2020, p. 6) - reflected in "land-use change, agricultural expansion and intensification, wildlife trade and consumption, and other drivers" (Ibid) - poses deadly risks to the health and wellbeing of *all* humans and more-than-humans on Earth.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been just the last (and most destructive) of a long series of alarming signals of the rapidly intensifying ecological breakdown, which the activities of some (the richest 10%) are causing. The experts gathered at the IPBES Workshop on Biodiversity and Pandemics (2020) concluded their report 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).

The COVID-19 pandemic, thus, represents the ultimate example of the multifaceted 'relationships crises' we are experiencing nowadays: as claimed by Williams et al. (2016, p.5) "our ecological predicament is essentially a crisis of epistemology and relationship". First and foremost, as the IPBES experts suggest, the relationship between people and nature urgently needs "re-assessing". As Pope Francis wrote in his Encyclical Letter *Laudato Sí*: "There can be no renewal of our relationship with nature without a renewal of humanity itself" (2015, p. 88). Rethinking our relationship with one another and with nature, in turn, has deep and wider cultural meanings and implications:

> "Culture is more than what we have inherited from the past; it is also, and above all, a *living, dynamic and participatory present reality*, which cannot be excluded as we rethink the relationship between human beings and the environment" (Pope Francis, 2015, p. 108 emphasis added).

Thus, acknowledging the cultural roots of the multifaceted crises investing our times, leads us to realise that there is a "knowledge-action gap" (Castree, 2021), according to which "the science is not, in fact, an adequate basis for translation from knowledge to action. Instead, *we need a different language* to motivate and guide planetary stewardship."(Castree, 2021 emphasis added). Such knowledge-action gap, in fact, calls for science to be "re-grounded into wider, culturally based epistemologies"(Williams, Mcintosh, & Roberts, 2016, p. 4).

This study, thus, enters the debate around sustainability transformations, by investigating the conditions for people to participate in social and cultural processes of *meaning-making,* that underpin and determine *deeper* transformations (O'Brien, 2021). It focuses in particular on identifying so-called "deep leverage points" (Meadows, 1999), i.e., (societal) paradigms, worldviews, values, and beliefs. Specifically, it explores the relational nature of these processes, and how interwoven social-ecological, political, economic and cultural relationships determine conditions for access and participation in the making of democratic and inclusive sustainability transformations. By investigating this intertwined web of relationships and conditions for participation, this study provides reflections on how to best support sustainability transformations which foreground values of social and environmental justice, caring-*with* (reciprocity, solidarity and collective responsibility), in the way we re-frame and re-vision our relationships with one another and with our planet.

1.2 Theoretical background to this research

This section introduces the background theoretical discourse with which this thesis engages, presenting the most relevant concepts and lenses adopted throughout. An extended account of the relevant literature is presented in Chapter 2 and, in turn, the theoretical framework in Chapter 3. As mentioned above, this thesis is located within the broad field of sustainability sciences that investigates processes and conditions for sustainability transformations. Drawing on the work of, amongst others, Pelling et al. (2011), O'Brien (2012) and Feola (2015), the concept of **transformations towards sustainability** has been defined by Patterson et al. (2017, p. 2), as "fundamental changes in structural, functional, relational, and cognitive aspects of socio-technical-ecological systems that lead to new patterns of interactions and outcomes" . In short, "transformation refers to change on different geographical scales and policy levels, opening up avenues to *drastically different futures*" (Grenni, Soini, & Horlings, 2020, p. 413 emphasis added), *futures* that could bring "radical, structural change of the existing global capitalist political economy" (Massarella et al., 2021, p. 82).

The focus on "drastically different futures" highlights the creative and deliberative character that sustainability transformations can assume, beyond techno-managerial approaches. In this thesis, I refer to *deliberate* transformations, that have been defined as "purposive" transformations (O'Brien, 2012), at the centre of which there is the questioning of the societal values, norms and paradigms guiding our development and trajectories as society. "What kind of future do we want/desire/aspire to?" is the question underpinning such *deeper*

transformative processes. Seeking to answer this question entails exploring the collective and "subjective realm of **meaning making**" (O'Brien, 2021) that invests all spheres of our lives.

A focus on the infinitely diverse realm of meanings and meaning-making processes emphasises what Soini and Birkeland (2014, p. 214) refer to as a "**cultural turn**", "associated with the new role of language and discourse, which is seen as not only representing but also constructing realities". Upon this reading, transformative pathways toward sustainability emerge, therefore, through (collective and cultural) processes of creation, contestation, and modification of the meanings that we attach to them. In this research, culture is thus envisioned as "a necessary *foundation* for meeting the overall aims of sustainability" (Soini & Dessein, 2016, p. 3 emphasis added). This representation of culture is defined by these authors as *culture as sustainability*: in this representation, culture becomes an 'agent of change', and cultural processes a force that can trigger wider societal transformations, as they are embedded in and embrace all spheres of our lives. According to such conception, "sustainability becomes embedded in culture and leads to eco-cultural civilization" (Soini & Dessein, 2016, p. 3), where "Culture determines the rate of sustainable change because it is considered a system of values, basic principles, and beliefs for local and/regional societies that control the rate of societal change" (Soini & Birkeland, 2014, p. 218).

An eco-cultural civilization "involves practicing a new understanding of the human place in the world, and recognising that humans are an inseparable part of the more-than-human world" (Dessein, Soini, Fairclough, & Horlings, 2015, p. 31). Such a **relational approach** is at the core of this research and represents both its ontological as well as epistemological stance, following what has been recently defined a "relational turn" in sustainability science and in the study of sustainability transformations (West, Haider, Stålhammar, Woroniecki, & Riechers, 2020). A relational approach is grounded in the idea that "coming into existence is an emergent process within interconnected beings and things, as well as the places and groups they co-create" (Stout & Love, 2018a, p. 6). The foci of relational approaches is, therefore, on continuously unfolding processes and relationships that constitute "the experience at the core of existence", where experience is interpreted as "the embodied engagement and responsiveness between all things (human and otherwise) in holistic situations" (West et al., 2020, p. 305).

A relational approach underpins the concept of (ecological) **stewardship,** which has been proposed as both a management as well as an ethical approach to human-nature relationships (see e.g., Ack et al., 2001; Bennett et al., 2018; Cockburn et al., 2020; Enqvist et al., 2018; Stout & Love, 2018a; West et al., 2018). Stewardship is understood here as a "call for care for both self and other", since "stewardship's sense of *mutual care* and *relational mindfulness* supports sustainability and good governance by considering the social, economic, and environmental implications of decisions and actions to all concerned."(Stout & Love, 2018b, p. 165 emphasis added).

Thus, to this thesis, the relevance of the concept of stewardship lies in the dimensions of *mutual care* and *responsibility* at the centre of it. Stewardship has been framed, in fact, as a "spiritual **responsibility** for humanity, the earth and a shared moral purpose", a responsibility that is "shared and mutually answerable; we are all stewards" (Stout & Love, 2018b, p. 165). Furthermore, it signifies "a responsibility to care for the environment" (West et al., 2018, p. 32), and a commitment to nurturing and maintaining the interwoven web of relationships of which we are part. A *practice* of stewardship, embedded in mutual responsibility and reciprocity, therefore, is tightly connected to the core argument of this thesis, which envisions SMNR as a "caring-*with*" practice. **Caring-*with*** 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-human, "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* as a necessary practice for survival and collective thriving, "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). Moreover, "the everyday doing that connects the personal to the collective, decentres the human, and does not ground ethical obligation in moral norms, but in concrete relationalities in the making" (McEwan & Goodman, 2010, p. 106).

A feminist and democratic ethics of **caring-*with***, at the core of Joan Tronto's *Caring Democracy* (2013), is the main theoretical building block of this study. It challenges the mainstream neoliberal paradigm, which is based on an individualised conception of human life and responsibility, depoliticization of environmental discourses and commodification/ reification of relationships (human-to-human and human-to-nonhuman) (see also Bond, Thomas, & Diprose, 2020; Chatzidakis, Hakim, Littler, Rottenberg, & Segal, 2020; The Care

Collective, 2020). Caring-*with,* instead*,* foregrounds trust, solidarity, and reciprocity in caring relationships. These foundational elements are co-constituted and performed by the caregivers *with* the care receivers, not simply *for* them. However, the most relevant dimension of caring-*with* to this research is not ('just') the interpersonal one, but rather "its broader significance as a practice of communal solidarity" (Power, 2019, p. 764). In this view, caring-*with* represents:

> "a sociopolitical vision in which the equitable distribution of care and caring *responsibility become public concerns, enabling citizen caring*, and in turn providing a foundation for a functioning democracy. This is a society that, quite literally, makes care possible: caring with citizens through the *equitable distribution of care and responsibility*" (Power, 2019, p. 764, emphasis added).

In bringing care, responsibility and equity discourses in conversation within such sociopolitical vision, this thesis contributes to "break[ing] down the boundary between private and public, to give care an eminently political value that empowers its efficacy" (Pulcini, 2009, p. 224). The political value of care, and especially of caring-*with people and nature,* allows this research to critically contribute not only to the wider debate around sustainability transformations, but to further unpack challenges to socially and ecologically *just* transformations by means of democratic and inclusive processes. Agyeman et al. (2016) (re)defined the goal of **just sustainability** as "to ensure a better quality of life for all, now, and into the future, in a just and equitable manner, while living within the limits of supporting ecosystems" (Agyeman, Schlosberg, Craven, & Matthews, 2016).

The focus on **democratic and deliberate processes for sustainability transformations** brings the discourse back to the importance of meanings and culture. Authors such as Hammond (2019) highlight how "both [*democracy and sustainability*] are processes situated in the realm of cultural meanings" (p. 57), through which citizens are not imposed certain types of sustainability, but rather walk towards it by ways of "transforming what they find valuable" (Ibid, p. 60). *Just, participatory* and *democratic* processes towards sustainability and thriving human-nature relationships, however, are structurally undermined by unequal power relations: inequality in terms of control over and access to (natural) resources has been the core focus of the field of (feminist) political ecology for decades (see e.g., Brown & Purcell, 2005; Raymond L. Bryant, 2015; Elmhirst, 2011; Escobar, 2006; Fletcher, Dressler, & Büscher,

2015; Iniesta-Arandia et al., 2016; Neumann, 2009; Peet, Robbins, & Watts, 2010; Thomas-Slayter, Wangari, & Rocheleau, 1996).

To investigate the entrenched unequal power relations hindering just, democratic and inclusive sustainability transformations, this thesis adopts the concept of **ability factors** in relation to participating in caring-*with* practices. Drawing on Fisher and Tronto's (1990) definition of ability factors (i.e., time, knowledge, skills, material resources etc to be able to care), it argues that these factors represent a form of power - the **power *to*** (Gaventa, 2006); in the context of this thesis, the 'power to' being the *capacity* of citizens to participate in caring-*with*. Ability factors for caring activities are unevenly distributed amongst citizens. This study digs deeper into the interwoven web of (political and material) relationships and processes that underpin and affect such uneven distribution of power and capacity to care amongst citizens from different backgrounds and sectors. It does so by applying a caring-*with* framework to the analysis of collaborative SMNR in Wales.

Specifically, **caring-*with* activities in the context of collaborative SMNR** are thus conceived here as the participation of citizens (ranging from community members to governmental officers) in the various, formal and informal activities attached to fostering collaborative approaches and sustainable management of the natural resources, *over the long-term*. These include a combination of different activities such as attending meetings, events, carrying on 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.

The innovative adoption of a caring-*with* approach to the study of collaborative SMNR presented in this thesis is founded upon an in-depth conceptual analysis of feminist political ecology literature. It is also based upon a definition of "SMNR" which is rooted in the Ecosystem Approach promoted by the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) (2004). The Ecosystems Approach defines SMNR as following: "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). This approach is deemed to "help to reach a balance of the three objectives of the Convention:

conservation; sustainable use; and the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising out of the utilization of genetic resources" (Ibid). 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; Cleaver & Whaley, 2018; Olsson, Folke, & Berkes, 2004). Adaptive (co)management is thus deemed to enhance systems resilience, and especially ecosystems resilience as well as biodiversity. The overall Ecosystem Approach of the CBD is built upon nine principles that underpin the SMNR legislation (see section 4.3.3) in Wales – the case study context of this research.

Principles of biodiversity conservation, ecosystems resilience, human and ecological wellbeing, and ecosystems as service providers, are at the base of the need for adaptive management. Such principles are centred around learning-by-doing, long-term, integrated and collaborative approaches to governance and decision-making processes. In sum, collaborative practices built around SMNR, and adaptive co-management are envisioned here as capable of being caring-*with* practices and 'labour of care', for the following reasons:

- SMNR is a highly political concept because its meaning and application is contested and negotiable, and depends on the very different values, worldviews, paradigms, and mindsets that people bring to the table where such meanings are discussed. Moreover, the consequences of supposedly sustainable management practices (or lack thereof) often affect people and places unevenly. This includes, for example, those that might not have had a say or their voice heard, because of differences in power, which cause some interests and perspectives to prevail over others. This can create and exacerbate intersectional forms of inequality and marginalisation. Similarly, care is a highly political and power-imbued concept and practice: "since all relationships of care inevitably involve power, and often involve deep power differentials, all care relations are, in an important way, political" (Tronto, 2013, p. 33).
- The 'technocratisation' and depoliticization of issues related to human-nature relationships means that fundamental political debates around what 'sustainability', 'wellbeing', and 'sustainable management' might look like in practice, have been removed from the public forum, delegated to experts and powerful actors. Similarly, this is what happened more broadly to caring activities as an integral to social reproduction of the capitalist system: care is commonly confined to be a private matter and responsibility,

and especially offloaded onto women's shoulders, obscuring the fundamental reproductive role care does have for the society as whole.

- Time affects the capacity to build relationships of trust, to get to know each other, to understand different perspectives, worldviews and needs; differences in time availability will give more privilege to some than to others, including to participate in collaborative practices and to have the capacity to build relationships of trust. This in turn detrimentally affects the opportunity to achieve inclusive and meaningful participation of everyone, over the long-term, as prescribed by the SMNR approach;

- Caring-*with* is done through "expressive-collaborative processes of assigning responsibilities" (Tronto, 2013, p. 148) and "Assigning responsibility is a *collective* act, not an abstract, scientific or legal endeavour" (Tronto, 2017, p. 32 original emphasis). Similarly, SMNR relies on the fully inclusive collective participation, integration, and collaboration of people, knowledges and values systems.

- Analysing SMNR through a caring-with lens helps to re-politicise the debate around sustainability, transformations, and human-nonhuman relationships. Through a collective and political conception of responsibility as participation and *mutual answerability*, we start to reframe mainstream (neoliberal) approaches focused on individual responsibility for behavioural change that detrimentally contribute to "shifting the burden of responsibility from states and destructive-political-economic structures onto individuals" (Massarella et al., 2021, p. 82).

1.2.1 Knowledge Gap – (Collective) Capacity to Care-with

As discussed in the section above (1.2), increasing scholarly work has been dedicated to exploring the importance of stewardship in SMNR practices, and especially the associated dimension of *care* for triggering transformative changes towards sustainability (e.g., Enqvist et al., 2018; West et al., 2018). This represents a fundamental contribution to shed more light on the relevance of beliefs, incentives, motivations and value systems that guide pro-environmental behaviour as a form of *caring.* Both Enqvist et al (2018) and West et al (2018) highlight that an inner "tacit motivation" and an ethics of care composing the practice of stewardship can play a crucial role to "bring about broad-scale behavioural change and reconnection to the biosphere, without recourse to techno-managerial approaches" (Enqvist et al., 2018, p. 25). However, the more material and political dimensions of the concept of care within environmental stewardship, i.e., what Enqvist et al. (2018) call "agency" and

Bennett et al. (2018) "capacity", and especially what affects these dimensions, have been only marginally investigated in the literature so far. The aim is to move the debate from focusing solely on individual behavioural change, which for too long (as noted above) has contributed to "shifting the burden of responsibility from states and destructive political-economic structures onto individuals" (Massarella et al., 2021, p. 82).

Bennett et al. (2018) define "*capacity*" for *local environmental stewardship* as composed of *local assets* (i.e., social, cultural, financial, physical, human and institutional capital) as well as *governance*, which includes systems of institutions and "structural processes related to power and politics (i.e., economic inequality, discrimination, exclusion from decision-making) [that] can empower or constrain the sense of agency, available options and capacity of would-be stewards" (Bennett et al., 2018, p. 601). Similarly, for West et al. (2018), *agency* "denotes the abilities and capacities of individuals, groups and organizations to engage in (collective) action and affect change, as well as the physical affordances and constraints provided by nonhuman ecologies and material technologies that affect the shape and form of stewardship action" (2018, p. 31).

This research aims to further unpacking the concept of *capacity* as defined by Bennett et al (2018) - informed also by West et al's (2018) conceptualisation of *agency* - by focusing on the "structural processes related to power and politics" (Bennett et al, 2018, p. 61), including material and institutional conditions that can limit people's abilities and opportunities "to engage in (collective) action and affect change" (West et al, 2018, p. 31). More specifically, the focus is on the dynamics and relationships that affect people's *capacity to care,* i.e., to participate to a collective practice of care *with* other humans and more-than-humans. Therefore, by focussing on the political, situated and collective dimension of care and care practices, I aim to reinforce the argument recently proposed by scholars such as Moriggi et al. (2020) who envision care-based approaches as a "vehicle of transformation" (2020, p. 15), as well as to enhance both the scholarly debates and the practice of *just* sustainability transformations.

Care-based approaches to conservation and environmental management, as discussed so far, represent an important contribution on the path towards abandoning merely instrumental, utilitarian, and neoliberal understanding of socio-ecological relationships. However, in this thesis I argue that this is not enough to guarantee *just* sustainability transformations; for

that, a more nuanced and deep understanding of the political and situated conditions that affect people's *capacity* to get involved in caring practices for people and nature is needed.

1.3 The journey towards the research questions and aims

Wales is committed to pursue 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 five ways of working, mainly focused on promoting cross-sectoral collaboration and stakeholder 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 embeds the so-called *new ways of working* – namely Integration, Collaboration, Long-Term, Prevention and Involvement – and acknowledges that a place-based and collaborative approach to the governance of the natural resources is critical to achieve the Well-being Goals and the development of resilient and resourceful communities. The implementation process of these two pieces of legislation, through the *new ways of working*, has posed a number of both immediate and longer-term challenges for government and public bodies involved. For many, it requires changing the ways of making and implementing policies. In response, WG and NRW (Natural Resources Wales) – the WG sponsored body established in 2013 to take over the functions of the Countryside Council for Wales, Forestry Commission Wales, and the Environment Agency in Wales – were compelled to lead-by-example by improving and maximalising their contribution and support to the development of the collaborative practices around SMNR. This entails designing and allocating adequate financial resources (e.g., grant schemes) as well as building organisational and institutional capacity to enable these practices to thrive and become widely embedded in the implementation of SMNR policies and initiatives, across sectors and communities. Moreover, strengthening local stakeholder engagement from public to private and third sectors in collaborative practices, represented a key priority for governmental actors.

This transformative setting led to the development of this PhD project, co-funded by the Welsh Government (WG) and the Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience (CAWR) at Coventry University. The original research proposal was co-developed by Prof Alex Franklin, and a small team of civil servants from WG (who subsequently became part of the WG advisory board to this PhD), belonging to three different divisions: the Environment and Rural Affairs, the EU Exit and Strategy Group, and the Land, Nature and Forestry and Rural Development.

The original questions included in the research proposal from 2017[1] were concerned with understanding how sense of ownership towards the natural environment is developed within communities, and how it translates into engagement in collaborative practices of SMNR; but also, how to measure the value and outcomes of such collaborative endeavours, in terms of making communities more resilient and resourceful. These original research questions influenced the overall breadth and the depth of the methodological approach applied in this research. In terms of 'breadth', the focus on how to best engage and support local stakeholders, led to the choice of investigating the experiences and perspectives of stakeholders belonging to a variety of sectors (from public to third sectors, including community groups). Such breadth is visible across the three strands of fieldwork, but particularly represented by Strand 3. The need for 'depth', instead, relates to the tangible and intangible forms and feelings (at the core of the original research questions) that influenced the choice to be involved directly in one of these collaborative endeavours, i.e., Project Skyline (Strand 1). At the same time, however, the co-funded nature of the PhD project between WG and Coventry University, allowed a continuous interaction over the three and half years of studentship (2017-2020), representing a crucial opportunity to go in-depth, nurturing a transdisciplinary relationship with the small team of civil servants from WG (Strand 2). This opportunity created the *space* and *time* for me to engage in events, meetings

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[1] The questions from the original research proposal (2017, developed by my Director of Studies, Prof Franklin, and a small team of cross-divisional civil servants within WG) are the following:

1. How do tangible and intangible forms and feelings of shared resource ownership contribute to building sustainable, resourceful and resilient communities?
2. What is the relationship between (a sense of) shared ownership and community stewardship of the surrounding natural resource base?
3. How to measure the value and outcomes of shared community management or ownership ventures, including:
   a) sustaining and safeguarding valued natural resources?
   b) transforming previously neglected natural resources into valued community assets?
4. What are the best or most effective mechanisms for engaging and supporting local stakeholders to facilitate learning to practice shared forms of natural resource planning and management?

and workshop organisations, experimenting with a collaborative approach inspired by principles of transdisciplinary and participatory research.

My own academic background in environmental governance and policies for sustainable development facilitated an initial exploration of the literature around adaptive co-management, community-based natural resource management (CBNRM), social-ecological systems and resilience theories. Almost immediately, however, I recognised the need to delve into the field of political ecology. The critical stance of political ecology towards the often technocratic, apolitical and managerial approaches to CBNRM – as an example, see one of the very first works in political ecology on the topic, Blaikie (2006) - brings with it a very different perspective on environmental and community development matters.

The key findings of this initial literature review were discussed with the WG advisory board during the first year of the PhD (2017-2018), and ultimately condensed within a conceptual map (see Fig. 1), which I used to support our conversations and exchanges during meetings.
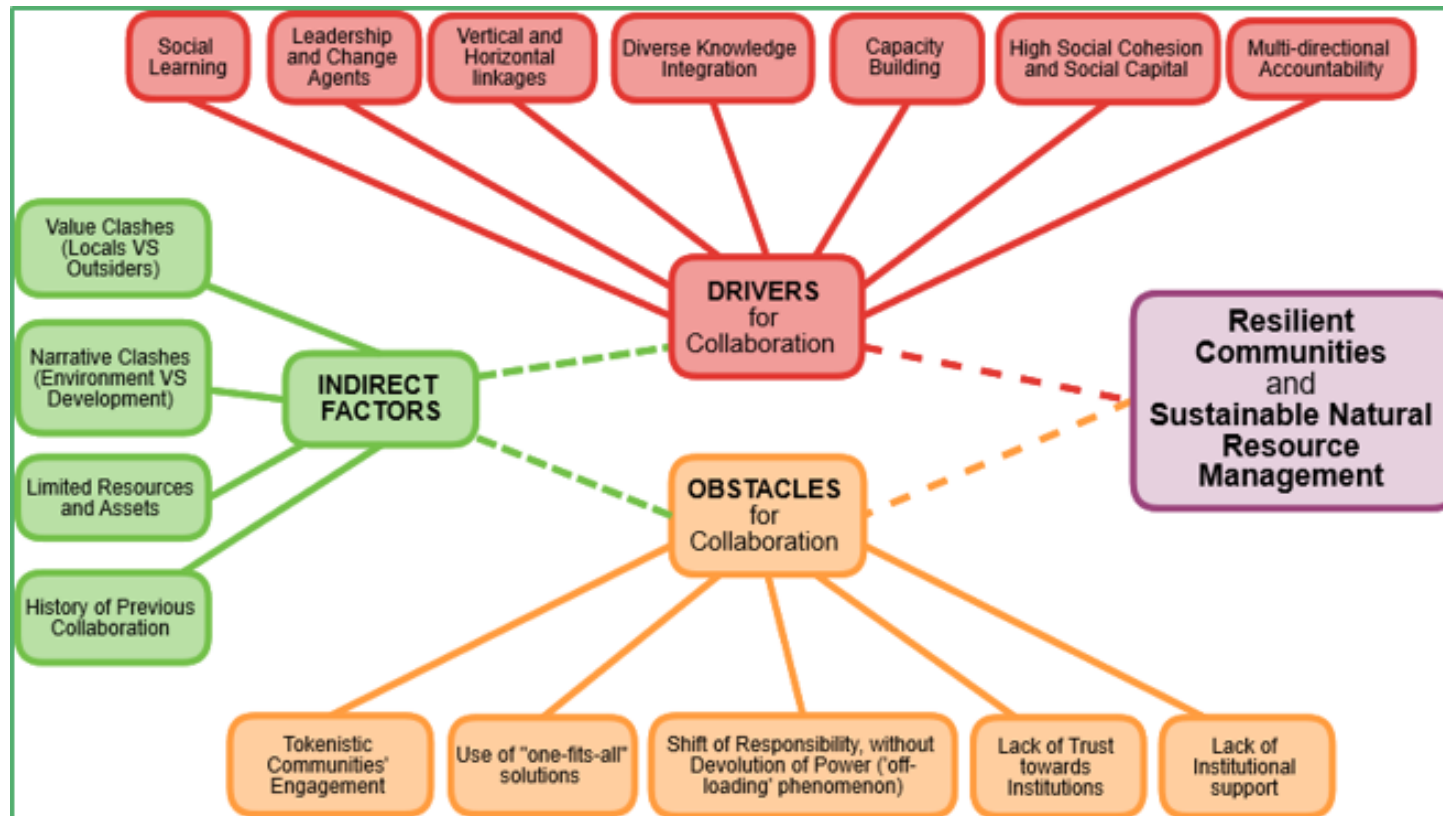
Figure 1 – *Results of the initial literature review conducted in the first year of PhD (2017-2018). Author's own creation.*

Our "epistemic exchange" during progress meetings and my own ongoing literature review led me to further investigate issues of power relations imbalances, oppressive social-economic neoliberal structures, and participatory governance approaches. I started looking into more critical and relational approaches to the mainstream conception of human-nature relations, as proposed by adaptive management and ecosystems services approaches. These approaches include feminist political ecology, critical institutionalism, relational values, participatory and empowering governance approaches, emotional geographies, and Indigenous cosmo-views (etc). Such bodies of scholarship are interested in the *deeper* aspects of human-nature relationships that involve the realms of (subjective and collective) meanings, values, emotions, paradigms and beliefs, as well as the *processes* that bring to the evolution, shaping and re-shaping of these elements.[2]

When I started my more intense fieldwork in spring 2018 it was these theoretical contributions that informed my approach. They translated into a research focus on deeper motivations, challenges and opportunities for people to get involved in collaborative management (e.g., connection to place, personal motivation and history), and a research methodology inspired by PAR and TDR approaches. The latter led me to centre my research around three different strands of fieldwork:

- **An in-depth, participatory-inspired place-based study** through my engagement with Project Skyline (Strand 1) - a feasibility study run by a third sector organisation in three communities in South Wales, with the aim to explore the potential for community stewardship of the land.

- **A long-term transdisciplinary collaboration with two pan-Wales Institutions**, WG and NRW (Strand 2) - centred around supporting their joint programme by way of strengthening collaborative and place-based working within and across their organisations.

- A more conventional **qualitative study centred around semi-structured interviews** with a series of landscape partnerships (Strand 3), all of which (at that time of interview) were in receipt of WG funding via its Sustainable Management

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[2] A comprehensive graphic illustration of the various strands of literature explored and adopted in this research is available in section 3.5.

Scheme (SMS) with the aim to promote SMNR initiatives and practices across sectors and organisations.

The breadth of the research design, which has included participants from a variety of backgrounds and sectors, combined with a more in-depth approach in the case of strands 1 and 2, has resulted in a comprehensive overview of the challenges and opportunities for collaboration faced by the participants. Furthermore, this mixed-methods approach allowed me to go beyond the analysis on individual cases, factors and variables related to collaboration. Rather, it gave me the opportunity to observe, as well as be part of, the intertwined and dynamic web of relationships and processes that shape factors and conditions for participation and collaboration.

Through this rich iterative process at the core of this research, made of a continuous combination of new theoretical insights with ongoing empirical investigations on the ground, I developed my own lens of analysis, and, hence, also new research questions (see below). I have been inspired by observing, and directly participating in collaborative practices of SMNR in Wales, that resulted to be in many cases *caring* practices, for people and place, for the community and its surrounding natural environment. Such practices, as I have come to realise through the process of exploring many different places and initiatives across Wales, are moved by a much deeper and complex set of passion, commitment, motivation and opportunity, compared to what is implied in the managerial and technocratic approach of "collaborative SMNR practices". Along with the inspiring lived experiences of the people of Wales, my interest in investigating towards deep, cultural transformations for sustainability has also grown. Just as these *processes of transformation* of values, worldviews and more in general of the wider (neoliberal) societal paradigms, have led us into the current climate breakdown and environmental devastation so too are they the most powerful potential points of leverage out of our current crisis (Meadows 1999). Gradually, I have shaped a care-based theoretical and methodological framework, originating within feminist studies that deeply resonates with my whole onto-epistemological stance.

The **aim** of this thesis is, thus, to explore how a democratic and feminist approach to care can contribute to achieving socially and ecologically just sustainability transformations, in the

context of collaborative practices of SMNR. The supporting **research question** is: *How does a democratic and feminist approach to care (i.e.,* caring-*with) contribute to achieve socially and ecologically just transformations?*

Connected to the overarching research question and aim, are three further questions that reflect the main areas under study, namely: the meanings and relevance of a caring-*with (i.e., democratic and feminist ethic of care)* approach in the specific context of cross-boundary collaborative practices of SMNR (RQ 1); the main challenges for the various actors to adopt such an approach, and, thus, *to be able* to care-*with* (RQ 2); and finally, the ways in which a caring-*with* approach can be enabled, and the roles that the various actors involved in SMNR can play in it (RQ3). The corresponding research questions are the following:

1. What does a *caring-with* approach to collaborative SMNR practices look like? How does it contribute to achieve meaningful, inclusive, and just cross-boundary collaboration?

2. What are the challenges for the actors - from community groups, to third and public sector - to get involved in such *caring-with* practices?

3. How can collaborative practices of SMNR/*caring-with* practices be better supported?

    a) What is the role of *governments and institutional actors* to enable a *caring-*with approach?

    b) What is the role of *academia and researchers* to enable a *caring-*with approach?

To answer these questions, I deployed a methodology grounded in an *ethic of care*, which foregrounds principles of attentiveness, responsiveness, responsibility, solidarity, reciprocity and competence (Moriggi, 2021; Tronto, 2015). A thorough consideration and application of an *ethic of care* alongside of concepts such as embodiment and reflexivity, has helped me in dealing with the uncertainty and changes throughout the fieldwork, developing flexibility and elasticity within contingent situations (Billo & Hiemstra, 2013). Especially relevant here is Billo and Hiemstra's (2013) discussion of the fluid and dynamic nature of the relationship between (shifting) epistemologies, theories and methods occurring during fieldwork: "One's fieldwork period will inevitably inform the project's shifting epistemologies, as the researcher's own presence in the field is a 'political act' treading the 'social terrain' of the field" (2013, p. 320).

My own time spent in the field has been a fully embodied experience, through which personal, fluid and everyday interactions have shaped the whole process, also in unexpected ways. Recognising my experiences with "fluctuating identities" (Newton et al., 2012, p. 590) through the help also of methodological frameworks such as Formative Accompanying Research (FAR) (Freeth 2019) and the embodied researcher (Horlings et al, 2020) helped me in critically considering my own subjectivity: the field is not a static, and researchers are not an "empty vessel simply waiting to be filled with data" (Billo & Hiemstra, 2013, p. 321). Fieldwork is, rather, built day-by-day, by researchers' subjectivities interacting in "social relationships, combining personal, political and professional needs" (Billo & Hiemstra, 2013, p. 322).

1.3.1 Contributions to knowledge

The findings of this research shed light on the importance of understanding SMNR collaborative practices as emergent and relational processes, at the centre of which lie relationships of trust and care. SMNR practices are embedded within wider ongoing and often embryonic processes of cultural transformation occurring at different scales. They are focused on co-creating new and shared meanings around inclusive SMNR, and, ultimately, aim for socially and ecologically just transformations. In Wales, experimental approaches, facilitated through the help of artists and focused on deep listening to actors' needs, stories and aspirations, enabled the emergence of 'spaces of possibility', of a 'space in between' for people to begin establishing relationships of trust and a generative common ground, to both understand and practice caring-with.

Relational and generative 'spaces of possibility' require actors to invest many different types of resources: time, above all, as well as material, financial, and social resources, knowledge and skills, as well as energy and emotional labour. These resources are identified by the literature (Fisher and Tonto, 1990) as ability factors because they enable people to care. In the framing of this research, these factors are considered to be forms of power, as they enable action (i.e., power to participate and, thus, to care). The fact that, as identified in this research study, such ability factors are not equally available to everyone makes the caring and collaborative processes they underpin imbued with power asymmetries that require further investigation. In turn, unequal distribution of power (i.e., of ability factors) dramatically

affects those whose (conflicting) worldviews, interests and needs are not listened to nor embedded into mainstream policies and practices.

This research finds that it is paramount that actors involved in SMNR, and especially governmental institutions, are better placed to enable caring-*with* by removing the barriers to participation, i.e., addressing the challenges attached to (lack of) knowledges, skills, material resources, and above all, time and space to build and nurture relationships of trust, over the long term. Such relationships are at the core of any truly collaborative approach, and ultimately enable citizens' participation in caring-with practices, i.e., SMNR practices in this specific instance. So-called "communities of practice" that bring together practitioners, community members, policymakers and professionals from various sectors, can act as enabling spaces to maintain and nurture such long-term oriented relationships and mutual commitment to caring-with. This research, moreover, demonstrates the contribution that art and artistic practices can give to cultural transformations, by hosting caring spaces for deep encounters between people from all sorts of backgrounds and sectors, but also by helping them to navigate the discomfort and vulnerability entrenched in meeting and listening to each other profoundly.

This study does not explore the results/outcomes of applying a caring-*with* approach, i.e., whether a fair and democratic allocation of *responsibility* to care (for people and place) occurred, and with what effects on sustainability transformations. Instead, by ways of exploring critical (thus far overlooked) aspects and processes underpinning sustainability transformations, it makes the case for applying a caring-*with* approach to the discourse and practice of SMNR, in order to deepen and reinforce the potential of SMNR to contribute to *just* sustainability transformations. This ultimately accords with the relational ontology of becoming, underpinning this thesis, according to which outcomes are never fixed, continuously unfolding, with a focus on process rather than 'result'.

Specifically, as the debate around *responsibility* remains often on theoretical and/or moral level, this research provides concrete recommendations on where to start adopting the caring-with approach and points to a shared and distributed responsibility. The recommendations (see section 10.4) are mainly related to creating space and time for meaning making processes. A newly created Community of Practice (CoP) can be an example to bring all these different aspirations, needs and perspectives together, in an attempt to

create a more equal situation, at the core of which there is nested forms of experimentation, and coordination rather than top-down imposition and control. Moreover, art and artistic practices, if rooted in an ethics of caring-*with*, can help creating caring and safe spaces where these meaning making processes can occur. They enable deep listening and conversations, reflexivity, and a deeper connection with one another, and with our emotional selves; all of which are key ingredients to start building relationships of trust, at the core of collaboration.

Ultimately then, it is important to note that this study does not aim to assess whether collaborative practices have been more successful than others; or indeed to specify a set of success criteria. The aim, rather, has been to analyse the entrenched relationships of power that operate in the context of collaborative working, highlighting criticalities and critical factors that affect the ways in which collaboration can actually evolve and deepen. Collaboration as techno-fix, as a tick-the-box exercise, is a flawed idea, because it neglects the intricate and complex world of relationships, emotions, vulnerability as well as the politics attached to any type of human relation. All the needs and aspirations of people emerge only in a caring space where listening is at the core.

1.4 Structure of the thesis

The following chapter (2), the **Literature Review/Theoretical Landscape**, brings together the relevant theories and concepts composing the wider theoretical landscape wherein this study is situated. It first offers a synthesis of the major critiques of current neoliberal and depoliticised approaches to the governance of the natural resources. Subsequently the chapter introduces the concept of (deep) sustainability transformations, and of an emerging 'relational turn' in the study of such transformations, which promotes *care*-based approaches. It concludes by pointing out the need for further investigation on the conditions that affect people's *capacity to care*, and participate in democratic sustainability transformations.

Chapter 3, building on the theoretical landscape delineated in the literature review, zooms in on the **theoretical framework** underpinning this research, built on an *ethics of care*, and more specifically, of caring-*with*. It does so by presenting care as tri-dimensional concept made of ethico-political involvement, maintenance work and affective labour. It digs into each of these dimensions, depicting care as a *situated* and *embodied,* (collective) practice and politics, which holds transformative potential to achieve socially and ecologically *just*

sustainability. The chapter ends with a graphical representation of the theorical framework in the shape of a bee.

Chapter 4, presents the **context** to this research, located in Wales. It provides the background information related to the socio-economic situation of Wales and its ground-breaking legislation to guarantee the human and ecological wellbeing of its future generations. Moreover, it focuses on some key policy, programmes and initiatives implemented pan-Wales to deliver such legislation, that sit at the core of fieldwork Strand 2 and 3 of this research. Ultimately, it zooms in on the South Wales Valleys, the location of the in-depth case study of Strand 1.

Chapter 5 presents the **methodology** of this research, including the epistemological underpinnings guiding the participatory-inspired and transdisciplinary approach at the core of this research. A thorough presentation of TDR, PAR, FAR and embodied research approaches is followed by a discussion on the importance of (inward and outward) reflexive practices to navigate fluctuating researcher's identities and roles, especially in more participatory settings. The last two sections provide a description of the data collection process, divided into three highly interwoven strands of fieldwork, of which rationales and limitations are also discussed. A final section explains the data analysis process and the *ethics of care* underpinning the researcher's "moral compass" (Moriggi, 2021).

The first of the results chapter (6) is focused on **the Skyline Project**, (Strand 1 of the fieldwork). The chapter discusses the challenges for caring-*with* emerged through a year of PAR-inspired engagement with this feasibility study run in the SW Valleys. In recounting the most relevant fragments of the engagement process, the chapter highlights how the widespread lack of access to ability factors, can, amongst other things, inhibit sense of self-efficacy and, thus, more radical approaches to SMNR such as community stewardship of land. The chapter concludes that, nevertheless, the creation of caring and convivial spaces to open-up such radical conversations is pivotal to trigger institutional collaboration (and possibly change) that promote caring-*with* approaches to SMNR.

Chapter 7 is dedicated to the challenges for collaborative SMNR experienced by those involved in **pan-Wales landscape partnerships**, funded through the SMS grant scheme of the WG (Strand 3). Again, the emphasis is on the challenges encountered in nurturing and

maintaining collaborative practices over the long term, especially in terms of building relationships of trust and enabling greater institutional flexibility. Particular attention is dedicated to the case of farmers, widely considered 'careless' and whose voices and challenges do not seem to be heard, and/or understood.

The last results chapter, chapter 8, is dedicated to **the transdisciplinary collaboration with the WG and NRW** (Strand 2). The chapter discusses three and half years of reciprocal engagement through embodied and FAR research approaches. This collaboration entailed the co-organisation of various events and workshops, of which two are reported in this chapter. They serve to exemplify the support provided to the ongoing cultural change within these two institutional organisations, aimed at better embracing *new ways of working* in the delivery of the legislation.

Finally, chapters 9 and 10 respectively provide a **synthesis** of the key arguments emerging from the three interwoven strands of fieldwork, and a **conclusion**, with a few final reflections and recommendations, targeting especially academics and institutional organisations such as governments and universities.

2. Theoretical Landscape: depoliticization, transformations and relationality in Natural Resources Management

This chapter provides the theoretical landscape within which this research has developed, discussing three fundamental themes at its core. The first part (Section 2.1) offers a brief overview of the main critiques of a neoliberal approach to natural resource management. Specifically, it focuses on the issue of pervasive depoliticization of the debate and the practices of (supposedly) collaborative and participatory Natural Resource Management (NRM) and of environmental governance in general, paying extra attention to the critics of the concept of resilience (Section 2.2).

The second part introduces the concept of Sustainability Transformation as a more power-sensitive lens through which to understand Social-Ecological Systems (SES) change and dynamics. Moreover, the concept of Sustainability Transformations, I argue, offers a more suitable way to understand the highly complex and relational nature of SES (Section 2.3). The concept of relationality, a fundamental characteristic of SES and of the nature of Transformations, is then explored in more detail (Section 2.4). Its importance has been recently acknowledged by the scholarship concerned with understanding better the processes and evolutions of human-nature relationships. Some of these scholars have started taking a *care* perspective, especially in terms of ethical stance and personal motivation that some individuals show in taking action and engaging with initiatives labelled as forms of ecological stewardship.

Building on the importance of this 'relational turn' emerging in the most recent sustainability sciences literature, and the emerging specific interest towards the concept of care, I explore in the third part how a feminist understanding of an *ethic of care* can contribute to the enhancement of our understanding and practice of collaborative natural resource management. Specifically, I address the collective, political and situated dimensions of care as a powerful leverage point for transformative processes focused on participation and engagement for human and more-than-human wellbeing (Section 2.5).

The themes analysed within each of these three sections collectively constitute the theoretical landscape and framework underpinning this research. These have been

graphically represented in a graph named "Bee Diagram" for its shape (see Figure 3, section 3.5).

2.1 Neoliberal Natural Resource Management

As with the case of the management of the public state, natural resources have been widely and globally governed through a neoliberal paradigm, inspired by principles of rationality, competition, financialization, managerialism, objectivity, with a heavy reliance on science and technical expertise (Castree, 2008; Stirling, 2019). As legacy of colonial times and practices, a marked separation between the biophysical, human and other-than-human has been developed and consolidated within the modern society, to the point that nature has become something to be managed, to exploit, a resource or a form of capital (e.g. Dallman, Ngo, Laris, & Thien, 2013; Escobar, 2006; Fletcher et al., 2015; Williams, 2013). As suggested by feminist political ecologists, this dichotomy resulted from a series of social constructions, products of specific context and power relations (Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter, & Wangari, 1996) that reduce nature to a commodity, losing its status of integral component of the human and other-than-human life (Escobar 2006), which represents, on the contrary, the fundamental common ground of Indigenous cultures.

The commodification of nature, an expression used by numerous scholars (e.g. Harvey, 1996; Liverman, 2004; Swyngedouw, 2015) is part of a process of colonisation of knowledge production, meaning the dominance of some (mainly Western) worldviews over others (Thomas-Slayter et al., 1996), denying important cultural differences and struggles (Escobar, 2006). The neoliberal push towards centralised and top-down forms of natural resource management (NRM), strongly relied on the narrative proposed in the Tragedy of the Commons (Hardin, 1968), according to which there is no hope to safeguard our natural resources, as:

> "Each man is locked into a system that compels him to increase his herd without limit – in a world that is limited. Ruin is the destination towards which all men rush, each pursuing his own best interest, in a society that believes in the freedom of the commons" (Hardin, 1968, p. 1244 as cited by (Ostrom, 2015, p. 2).

The idea that users would have destroyed, in the long term, the natural resources available (although often essential to their livelihoods), represented the scientific basis to legitimize a

series of NRM practices based on the neglect of indigenous and community rights, capacities and interests, in favour of a vast adoption of conservation policy and reforms. These aimed at limiting the common property on one side and reinforcing the state and the private sector on the other (Berkes, 2010; Bixler, Dell'Angelo, Mfune, & Roba, 2015; Borrini-Feyerabend, Pimbert, Farvar, Renard, & Kothari, 2007; Larson & Soto, 2008).

In the last thirty years, scholars have unanimously agreed that practices of NRM are nested within a context of "truly intertwined socio-ecological systems of people, communities, economies, societies, cultures interacting across spatial and temporal scales with ecosystems as part of the biosphere" (Folke, 2016; Folke, Hahn, Olsson, & Norberg, 2005). The recognition of the intertwined nature of socio-ecological systems (SES) paved the way to adopt a *governance* approach to the management of the natural resources, as opposed to a governmental-led approach. NRM is indeed one of those problems, as most environmental issues, defined in literature as "wicked" (Head, 2008). The nature of so-called wicked problems is typically complex, uncertain, and affects multiple actors on multiple scales (Loorbach, Wittmayer, Shiroyama, Fujino, & Mizuguchi, 2016; Miller et al., 2014; Reed, 2008). To be tackled, it requires combining multiple forms of knowledge, perspectives and expertise, and, mostly, "engaging individuals and organisational stakeholders in policy-making and implementation" (Ardoin, Gould, Kelsey, & Fielding-Singh, 2014, p. 361). In this regard, the idea of governance emphasises the interactions occurring between actors, structures, processes and traditions, which critically influence the way decisions are taken, power and responsibilities distributed, and the extent to which citizens are involved in the decision-making process (Lockwood, Davidson, Curtis, Stratford, & Griffith, 2010). Hence, a governance approach is deemed to allow a shift from a "state-centred approach", which conceives governments as the steering actor in decision making, to a "society-centred" approach, which is more concerned with the actual interactions occurring between governmental and non-governmental actors (Carlsson & Berkes, 2005).

Within a "society-centred" approach to the sustainable governance of natural resources, collaboration has become the imperative, to merge more and more distributed and specialized types of knowledge, within increasingly complex and interdependent institutions (Ansell & Gash, 2008). In the realm of NRM, the idea of collaboration between different

entities (governments, civil society and private sectors) is commonly referred to as collaborative management or co-management and it has been defined in a variety of ways. Carlsson and Berkes (2005, p. 66), refer to 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 the strengths and weaknesses of each are combined. Borrini-Feyerabend et al. (2007) refer to it as "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).

Some more critical scholarship has focused on exploring the 'dark side' of (allegedly) collaborative and community-based practices of NRM, deemed to be more participatory and inclusive of the voices of the most marginalised and vulnerable groups, which are, at the same time, the most affected by devastating consequences of climate breakdown. A number of issues have been highlighted by scholars investigating such practices: first and foremost, tokenistic forms of participation through devolved management systems that failed to meaningfully and inclusively give voice to communities' concerns and aspirations in relation to their local environments. As explained 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". When participation is transformed into mere consultation the resulting approaches, empty of their original purpose, "do little to encourage psychological ownership of the proposed plan, or strategy by members of the public" (Selman 2000 as cited by Franklin and Marsden (2015. p. 942).

Furthermore, when devolved and decentralised systems do genuinely involve communities, there might still be a risk that governments devolve important amounts of responsibility without the necessary and associated power (e.g. Agrawal & Gibson, 1999; Armitage, 2005; Berkes, 2010; Curtis et al., 2014). Indeed, this shift of responsibilities well fits in the neoliberal agenda, according to which the original intents of devolution and participatory governance (e.g., capacity building, education and empowerment of citizens) are replaced using (regional or local) bodies to implement decisions taken elsewhere, and often determined by market incentives (Curtis et al., 2014; Lockwood et al., 2010). Some scholars stress the fact that community management represents an opportunity for governments for

structural adjustments (Brown & Purcell, 2005; Hall, Cleaver, Franks, & Maganga, 2014, p. 78), entailing a transfer of a variety of costs from the central government to the communities. This system has allowed governments to appear at the forefront in terms of community support and decentralisation in NRM within relevant international circles.

2.2 Depoliticization of the environmental discourse – resilience for whom?

Some authors belonging to the so-called "post-politics" scholarship[3] , in line with political ecology scholarship, have been very critical on managerial "collaborative" ways of coping with climate change and NRM issues. For example, Kenis and Lievens (2015) argue that mainstreaming environmental concerns, by means of reconciling a variety of forces with, supposedly, very different interests and points of view, has encouraged the flattering of oppositions and antitheses in terms of discourses and conversations (2015, p. 21). The emphasis on consensus and agreement has contributed to a climate of "depoliticization", which refers to the fact that the discourses or representation underpinning social reality are "devoid of what is of the essence of politics, namely power, conflict and decision" (p. 22). This entails that issues related to power, inequality, conflict and decisions are systematically hidden through configuring society as if it had an "ultimate foundation" rather than being "contingent and provisional result of political decisions and power struggles" (Kenis & Lievens, 2015, p. 22). According to MacGregor (2014) this is the result of:

> "decades of neoliberal hegemony where manufactured agreement on economic, ecological, and political issues has led to the replacement of democratic politics by expert administration and consensual governance" (2014, p. 618).

The "post-political environmental consensus" - as Erik Swyngedouw (2013) has defined the depoliticisation of climate change – "is one that is radically reactionary, one that forestalls the articulation of divergent, conflicting, and alternative trajectories of future environmental possibilities and assemblages" (Swyngedouw, 2013, p. 5). The logic of consensus has therefore erased old dichotomies and conflicts, to allow the narrative of climate change as the common global threat to humanity to emerge and consolidate. By doing so, the "Global climate change has become, in other words, a theatre for "governance through markets":

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[3] which developed mainly from the work of the European philosophers Slavoj Žižek, Chantal Mouffe, and Jacques Rancière

government provides incentives and subsidies, and corporations establish their own (voluntary) standards" (Peet et al., 2010). By doing so these authors suggest that the essence of democracy is somehow denied, as well as the opportunity to question and debate the meanings and essences of "society" and "reality". The status quo is therefore presented as unchangeable.

Lievens (2015) argues that "governance arrangements tend to be given meaning in terms of the problem they solve, rather than the type of community they institute" (Lievens, 2015, p. 11). With this regard, the same author opposes the ideas of governance to that of democracy in terms of "place of power". In democracy, the place of power is *positively* empty since, symbolically, new space is made for other people to be heard and for new things to be developed, in order to attribute new meanings to concepts such as "the people" or "a political community" (ibid.). In governance arrangements, instead, the place of power is *negatively* empty as their main function is to effectively and functionally solve problems, which is in turn mystified/concealed by the gathering of a 'variety of relevant stakeholders'.

Being the place of power in governance settings diffused among networks of stakeholders, which might also include governments, but not necessarily, Lievens claims that law, knowledge and power generally "coincide" (2015, p. 13). In his view, in governance networks a convergence between these three elements takes place as "those actors who have the supposed knowledge and power to regulate a particular issue by issuing forms of law" are brought together. In this setting, conflict and dissent are managed either through co-optation of critical voices and broadening of the networks, or through the de-legitimisation/misrecognition of the contestation (2015, p. 14). Similarly, such processes have been reported in community-based initiatives of environmental management, where, to serve the interest of some powerful actors, the heterogeneity of the "community" is somehow denied, thus it is possible to observe a situation in which "those in power may strive discursively as well as institutionally to manage ['contain'] the heterogeneity of discourses, thereby maintaining structures of top-down power"(Harvey, 1996, p. 174).

The strategy of "containment" as elaborated by Few (2001), entails the minimization of disruption through avoidance of conflict, exclusion of dissent and control of knowledge and procedure (P. A. Walker & Hurley, 2004, p. 738). This is what other scholars have called "elite capture" (e.g. Berkes, 2010; Buchy & Maconachie, 2014; Hall et al., 2014; Saito-Jensen,

Nathan, & Treue, 2010; Sowman & Wynberg, 2014), which refers to the domination in decision-making processes of the most privileged members of the community, in order to benefit from the access to collective benefits (Saito-Jensen et al., 2010). Therefore, due to the unequal distribution of power, there is a constant risk of co-optation in co-management arrangements (Borrini-Feyerabend et al., 2007; Cleaver, 2012; De Beer, 2012). By picturing conflict and dissent as failure of the system, rather than an inner feature of the political life of a democracy, as they mine the effective resolution of problems, governance networks do not necessarily represent, thus, values of reciprocity, mutuality, and interdependencies among actors. Instead of facilitating information flows, connections, and the formation of shared identities and objectives among them (Pierce et al 2010), networks might "dilute rather than strengthen institutions" (Cleaver & De Koning, 2015, p. 7).

This view is widely supported by scholars critical with the way politics and issues related to power struggles and inequalities have been replaced by the need for consensus and 'expert' knowledge, especially in the context of climate change adaptation and sustainability transformations. Post-political governance arrangements, hence, are characterised by the creation of "environmental problems" to be tackled by experts, neglecting their intrinsic connection to wider societal and political meanings and struggles, that affect a much wider range of people than mere experts or technicians. Thus, Kenis and Lievens, amongst others, call for a process of re-politicisation as "politicisation is a precondition for democratisation: it is only by making disagreement and conflict visible that one can deal with them in a democratic way" (2015, p. 24).

Some critical feminist scholars have produced, in the last decade, a number of pieces in support of the critique to the "depoliticization narrative" outlined above, entrenched in mainstream managerial and technocratic approaches to adaptation to climate change and NRM (e.g. Bee, Rice, & Trauger, 2015; Cote & Nightingale, 2012; Eriksen, Nightingale, & Eakin, 2015; Iniesta-Arandia et al., 2016; MacGregor, 2014; Ravera, Iniesta-Arandia, Martín-López, Pascual, & Bose, 2016). For instance, Eriksen et al (2015) highlight, "what counts as adaptive is always political and contested" (p. 523), given that "political processes determine which view is considered more important at different scales and to different constituencies" (Ibid.). These authors stress the fact that climate change research and policy that conceive such a complex and wicked issue only through narrowly defined scientific and technocratic

terms, contribute to render it "both universal and distant, rather than differentiated an embodied" (Bee, Rice, & Trauger, 2015, p. 2). Eriksen et al (2015) supports the same argument: analysis of vulnerability in context of adaptation to climate change performed merely through the lens of climate and biophysical research "masks the social-political causes of risk and vulnerability as well as the socio-environmental processes" (p.524). As Nightingale (2015, p. 42) states:

"it is also possible to argue that climate change is fundamentally a social-political phenomenon. From this perspective in order to see adaptation, we need to probe discourses and perceptions of climate change, political economies, and social and political struggles, rather than biophysical change per se".

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) and therefore are 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 we are involved. 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 into it. Throughout this research, the term "power" is understood as a "productive force, one that allows for action and agency and is integral to all human interactions" (Eriksen et al, 2015, p. 527) – or *power to* as defined by Gaventa (2006), "the capacity to act; to exercise agency and to realise the potential of rights, citizenship or voice" (2006, p. 24). By framing power as *power to*, the focus in this manuscript is on the access to and control over resources (material, financial, human, natural, social) as well as time, skills and knowledge. These factors, that Fisher and Tronto (1990) define *ability factors,* are key to enable people's participation and engagement in caring practices, i.e. in collaborative forms of SMNR. A thorough discussion of ability factors as form of *power to* is presented in section 3.3.

The (mostly neglected) issue of power imbalances and the process of depoliticization are highly connected to the widespread use in the recent years of the concept of resilience, originally borrowed from the field of ecology and engineering (Franklin, 2018). Within critical

social sciences resilience has been criticised by a number of scholars (e.g. Bee et al., 2015; Cote & Nightingale, 2012; Cretney, 2014; Derickson, 2016; Welsh, 2014), generally concerned with the question: "resilience of what and for whom'?" (Cote & Nightingale, 2012). Franklin (2018, p. 269) notices that sustainability scientists, by means of applying a "coupled social-ecological lens to resilience thinking" have re-conceptualised it as the capacity of the system to change and evolve, moving from a conservative understanding to a more dynamic and process-based one. However, critiques towards the concept of resilience have consistently highlighted the lack of attention "to the marginal voices and to uneven social geographies of power, all of which fundamentally shape the form or capacity for change across differing sectors of society" (Franklin, 2018, p. 270). Along these lines, Welsh (2014, p. 18) defined resilience a "power blind" concept, that "diverts attention from questions of power, justice or types of (socio-natural) futures that can be envisaged" (Ibid., p.21). A major weakness of the concept is deemed to be linked to its promoting flexibility and adaptabilty, that would ultimately help maintaning the status quo (deeply imbued with inequalities and socio-ecological injustice). Rather than based on values and worldviews sourced from the ground up (Franklin, 2018), what a resilient system should look like is often externally defined by experts and technocrats who have co-opted the term and imposed their views through a top-down approach (Derickson, 2016, p. 163). The result is that often a vague idea of "resilience" and "resilient approaches" are imposed as a "one-fits-all" solution to a variety of domains and contexts, including NRM.

Cote and Nightingale note that research on socio-ecological system theory, rooted in the concept of (ecological) resilience (e.g. Folke, 2016; Folke, Biggs, Norström, Reyers, & Rockström, 2016; McGinnis & Ostrom, 2014) is "so problematic in part because it allows too much focus on the structures and 'functionality' of an institutional system, devoid of political, historical and cultural meaning" (Cote & Nightingale, 2012, p. 484). Approaches to NRM focused on design flexibility and technical fixes, have neglected contextual conflicts around values and worldviews (i.e., the very reasons which push social changes). Moreover, these managerial and depoliticised approaches have consistently flattened the relevance of social justice and sedimented axes of social differentiation, that critically influence access to and control over (natural) resources:

"We advocate to situate our inquiries – resilience cannot be 'seen from nowhere' (Haraway 1991) – based on the recognition that power operates in and through socio-environmental systems in ways that link together the social and environmental at conceptual as well as empirical levels" (Cote & Nightingale, 2012, p. 481).

The concept of resourcefulness has been proposed as counter-systemic approach to such neoliberal resilience thinking (Mackinnon & Derickson, 2013). It stems from acknowledging that the structural problems and processes that hinder wider social-environmental transformations are "deeply bound up in the capacity for communities – particularly those that have been historically marginalised – to realize self-determination, or the ability to shape the economic and environmental future in accordance with their desires" (Derickson, 2016, p. 165–166). Thus, Derickson and Mackinnon (2015) have proposed an interim politics of resourcefulness that aims at proliferating and cultivating the capacity of historically marginalised communities to fully envision their own socio-natural futures (Derickson, 2016). The uneven distribution of resources in marginalised communities creates a fundamental barrier to participate in envisioning more socially just futures, rooted in people's visions and priorities, including their relationship with nature. The ultimate objective of a politics of resourcefulness is "redistributing the capacity for self-determination" (Derickson 2016, p. 165).

Franklin (2018, p. 270) offers a reconceptualization of community resilience as "critical (evolutionary) resilience", that broadly integrates dimensions of both resilience and resourcefulness, grounding the reflection on resilience around a more power-sensitive and relational narrative. 'Critical (evolutionary) Resilience', upon this reading, is therefore considered as:

"constituting collective engagement and reflexive co-learning, as being centrally concerned with the adaptive and transformative management of coupled social-ecological systems, as being a process rather than a state, but crucially also, as requiring a critical stance towards social relations and structural (in)equalities of power."

The concept of resilience has also been recently revisited to include resilience for adaptability and resilience for transformability (Folke, 2016). With growing attention to sustainability

transformations (as the following part will discuss), the approach of resilience has been evolved from "planning and control" to "preparing for opportunity or creating conditions of opportunity for navigating the transformations" (Folke, 2016; Folke et al., 2021). The following section introduces the most recent literature on transformations, partly as an alternative framing to (depoliticised and technocratic) forms of adaptive co-management and governance of natural resources.

2.3 Socio-Ecological Systems Transformations towards Sustainability

Scholars in sustainability sciences emphasize the need for sustainability 'transformations' to ensure the survival of the human species, threatened by global systemic collapse triggered by anthropogenic climate change and biodiversity loss (amongst many other factors) (e.g. Blythe et al., 2018; Feola, 2015; O'Brien, 2012; Pelling, 2010; Pelling, O'Brien, & Matyas, 2015). IPBES defines transformation as a "fundamental, system-wide change that includes consideration of technological, economic and social factors, including in terms of paradigms, goals or values" (IPBES, 2019). Similarly, O'Brien defines transformations "as physical and/or qualitative changes in form, structure or meaning-making. It can also be understood as a psycho-social process involving the unleashing of human potential to commit, care, and effect change for a better life''(2012, p. 670). Importantly, the type of transformations discussed by these authors are those labelled as 'deliberative and intentional', meaning that they are the results of chosen response paths - "in anticipation of collapse" (Pelling et al. 2015) - rather than the unexpected or unintended outcomes of a process or event (O'Brien, 2012, p. 670).

There is wide agreement amongst social sustainability scientists that the transformative change we need is not just about technical solutions for which we merely need more scientific knowledge and evidence – the 'technical trap' (Nightingale et al., 2020).

> "By transformation, we refer to the capacity to create fundamentally new systems of human–environmental inter-actions and feedbacks when ecological, economic, or social structures make the continuation of the existing system untenable (Folke et al. 2010). It involves multiple elements, including agency, practices, behaviours, incentives, institutions, beliefs, values, and world views and their leverage points at multiple levels (Abson, 2017)" (Folke et al., 2021, p. 848)

Instead, adopting a transformation-focused analytical lens means directly questioning and challenging the values, paradigms, norms, beliefs and assumptions that underpin and constantly exacerbate anthropogenic climate change, environmental destruction and socio-economic inequalities worldwide (Fazey, Moug, et al., 2018; O'Brien, 2012). The concept of transformation requires that we address the root or structural causes of something considered a threat (e.g. climate change). This includes, for instance, investigating the existing social, cultural and economic relationships, as well as power hierarchies that have or will trigger system's failures (Pelling et al., 2015). As asserted by Temper et al (2018) "A transformation to sustainability must entail transformation of power relations" (Temper, Walter, Rodriguez, Kothari, & Turhan, 2018, p. 749).

Fazey et al. (2018, p. 199) are explicit in their belief that "intentional transformative change is possible and that humanity is not entirely a slave to its past or current circumstances and trends". The concept of transformation as proposed by O'Brien and colleagues (Fazey, Moug, et al., 2018; O'Brien, 2012, 2013, 2018; O'Brien & Sygna, 2013; Pelling et al., 2015) draws attention to the necessary "shifts in the balance of power, rights and responsibilities in institutions, discourse and behaviour" (Pelling et al., 2015, p. 115) to overtly challenge the status quo, including those who largely and disproportionately benefit from current structures and systems of power (and oppression). Nevertheless, there is great uncertainty inside and outside academia around what exactly should change, and according to whose views and definitions of transformation (Feola, 2015; Nightingale et al., 2020; O'Brien, 2012). In fact, deliberative transformations hold at their core democratic participation and multiple forms of deliberation to define future (sustainability) pathways that have, so far, often failed to gain traction (Nightingale et al., 2020).

Amongst the biggest challenges to nurturing the conditions for deliberative transformations is the abovementioned 'technical trap': in underplaying the critical role of power and politics in such processes we also risk to greatly underestimate the role of agency and the potential of people to move forward or hinder systemic change (O'Brien, 2018, p. 155). To overcome this 'trap' and the simplistic view of change attached to it, O'Brien & Sygna (2013) propose an heuristic device to understand transformations as a 'whole', made of three integrated and interconnected domains or spheres: the practical, the political and the personal (see Fig. 2).

Figure 2 – The Three Spheres of Transformation (O'Brien and Sygna 2013)

The *practical* sphere includes technological innovations, infrastructures, and all those specific actions, interventions, and strategies that directly contribute to a specific outcome (O'Brien, 2018, p. 155). The *political* sphere represents the systems and the structures (i.e., norms, rules, regulations, institutions, regimes and incentives) that influence how systems are designed and governed (Ibid.). Finally, the *personal* sphere includes the beliefs, paradigms, assumptions, worldviews, and values that individuals hold. These also represent the very factors that influence how systems and structures (i.e., the *political* sphere) are defined and ultimately changed.

The *personal sphere,* as visible from the image above (Fig. 1) is the overarching sphere that holds the other dimensions together. It represents both individual and collective assumptions and understandings about the world, which eventually shape how reality is perceived and constructed. This entails that it also "defines what is individually and collectively imaginable, desirable, viable and achievable" (O'Brien, 2018, p. 156). As O'Brien stresses, it would be "tempting to equate culture with the personal sphere" (Ibid.), when in fact, as she argues, culture is pervasive and transversal, cutting across all the three spheres. Moreover, it is embedded and perceivable especially in the interactions amongst these three domains.

Therefore, the next section explores the key relevance of culture and cultural process for sustainability transformations.

2.3.1 Cultural Transformations

Recently, scholars have been further interrogating the connection between climate change and culture (e.g. Asikainen, Brites, Plebańczyk, Mijatović, & Soini, 2017; Geoghegan, Arnall, & Feola, 2019; Hammond, 2020; Mijatović, Soini, Plebańczyk, & Asikainen, 2017; Soini & Dessein, 2016; Tyszczuk & Smith, 2018). The experience presented and discussed in this chapter draws in part from this literature, highlighting the importance of culture and a 'cultural shift' for sustainability transformations:

> "Perhaps the most profound act of transformation facing humanity as it comes to live with climate change requires a *cultural shift* from seeing adaptation as managing the environment 'out there' to learning how to reorganize social and socio-ecological relationships, procedures and underlying values 'in here'" (Pelling, 2010, p. 88, emphasis added).

The concept of culture is extremely wide and holds a myriad of (contested) meanings and understandings, depending on the angles and contexts from which we look at it – "culture can mean anything from networks of meaning to a way of life, to high culture and arts" (Soini & Dessein, 2016, p. 2). I draw on Geoghegan et al. (2019) who investigate the issue of culture and climate changes from three perspectives. First, in terms of "knowing" (cultural practices in past and contemporary scientific and epistemic communities); second as "being" (embodied and lived experiences, emotional encounters and everyday practices); finally, as "doing" (concrete experiences of "cultural work" that pave the way for alternative social-ecological futures) (Geoghegan et al., 2019, p. 2). This three-pronged approach to the exploration of culture in climate change and sustainability transformations discourses confirms what has already been mentioned above: culture is a *verb,* an ongoing, constantly evolving relational process that crosses and shapes the spheres of transformations, at both the individual and the collective level. But most of all, culture is about agency, and thus a (much needed) cultural shift is about mobilising collective imagination and agency, to envision, embody and realise alternative socio-ecological frames and futures, beyond the capitalist and neoliberal paradigm, beyond dyadic visions of the world and life (humans VS nature; body VS mind; individual VS collectivity; reason VS emotion etc.) (Dieleman, 2017).

52

Based upon the above reading, cultural transformations towards sustainability are, therefore, about re-imagining, re-envisioning things, us as species, our relationships, and whole systems, differently. Hammond (2020, p. 3) conceived cultural transformations as "processes of individual and collective meaning-making as a way of broadening the society's imaginative space", that are "necessarily dynamic, fluid, and heterogeneous" (2020, p.8). This supports Dessein et al (2015)'s definition of culture as

"a loosely integrated totality of practices, institutions and mechanisms that deal with the production, distribution, consumption and preservation of *collectively shared meanings*, as well as the explicit and implicit rules that govern the relevant processes."(Dessein et al., 2015, p. 21 emphasis added).

Thus, cultural transformation is essentially a process in which we, individuals and societies, make and re-make culture, through the co-creation of new *shared meanings*: "Climate facts arise from impersonal observation, whereas meanings emerge from embedded experience, and the environmental social sciences, arts and humanities are well-positioned to foster a more complex understanding of humanity's climate predicament" (Geoghegan et al., 2019, p. 3). Pioneering work such as the one of Soini and Birkeland (2014) on the complexity of meanings and interpretations attached to *culture* within sustainable development discourses, has shown how "concepts and language are ways of not only representing the world but also of constructing environmental and social problems and their solutions" (2014, p. 221). The authors emphasise how discourses around cultural sustainability are only at their embryonic stages. As Geoghegan et al. suggest, there is in fact an increasing recognition from across disciplines of the key role the social sciences, arts and humanities can play in helping policy makers and communities to engage with fundamental "cultural discussions" around the meanings, values and worldviews attached to terms such as sustainability, climate change, social and ecological well-being. Cultural conversations and practices around human-nature relations are themselves *relational process*es, where "culture has an important role mediating values, sense of place, practices and routines between human and nature" (Horlings, 2015; Kivitalo, 2017, p. 75). The following section digs deeper in the analysis of an onto-epistemological turn towards relationality that is currently emerging in the field of sustainability sciences, and lies at the core of this study.

2.4 Onto-epistemological turn towards Relationality

Relationality is an overarching concept upon which lies the whole onto-epistemological approach underpinning this research: "Social systems must evolve through the 'principle of relationality'" as "the new glue of society" (Donati, 2014, p. 9 as cited in Stout and Love (2018, p. 106)). Relationality has been identified by various strands of scholarship as a crucial element to be considered in the study of human-ecological interactions. Authors belonging to Indigenous scholarship, such as Williams (2013, 2016; 2017; 2016), for instance, call for a greater, deeper, interconnectedness, which represents an "ecological imperative" nowadays (2013, p. 96). The formation and evolution through time of onto-epistemologies are founded on relationality, given the interconnectedness of all forms of life, which is the fundamental mechanism through which a holistic type of learning can occur (Williams et al., 2017). A relational approach which brings together *practices*, *ontology* and *epistemology* (Cockburn et al., 2020, p. 4), has the potential to foster conservation and human and ecological wellbeing "without putting a price tag on nature" (Chan et al., 2016, p. 1463). Nurturing relationality, hence, facilitates the embracement of a holistic consciousness about life, a so-called "relational becoming" (Stout & Love, 2018b) which considers human and other-than-human as all "co-participants" within an evolving universe: "as it transforms, so do we" (Williams, 2013, p. 100).

An onto-epistemological approach based on relational becoming is opposed to the neoliberal ideology built upon dichotomies, on a "system of dualisms" such as "public/private, masculine/feminine, market/household, self-interest/altruism (care), autonomy/dependence, rational/emotional" (Waller & Wrenn, 2021, p. 15). As Gibson-Graham and Roelvink argue, the "subject-object dualism that separates humans from a disparaged or discounted non-human world (…) has arguably led us into planetary crisis, and "un-performing" it may turn out to be a key practice in an ethics for the Anthropocene." (Gibson-Graham & Roelvink, 2012, p. 324).

A *relational turn* or shift of our onto-epistemologies (paradigms as well as approaches to research), instead, allows us to increasingly embrace two similar formulations: on one side the idea of "*socionatures*" i.e. "a historical-geographical process (and therefore time/place-specific)" (Swyngedouw, 1999, p. 446), a term also adopted, amongst others, by (Castree & Braun, 2001; Fletcher et al., 2015; Latour, 2009; Nightingale et al., 2020). On the other, the

concept of "*naturecultures*" as Donna Haraway (2008) would label the ontological stance according to which nature and culture (within societies) are intertwined and co-produce each-other. Bauhardt and Harcourt (2018) sharply explain:

> "Haraway's concept of naturecultures helps us to transgress the idea of a binary opposition and hierarchy of nature and culture. It allows us to understand how humanity is part of nature, and therefore if we exploit nature, we are directly exploiting ourselves, our health, our well-being and our future" (2018, p. 10).

Relationality is therefore key in understanding *systems* and especially complex systems which can be considered any "set of things — people, cells, molecules, or whatever — interconnected in such a way that they produce their own pattern of behaviour over time", as Donella Meadows, a pioneer scholar of complex system theory and sustainability defined them in her seminal work "Thinking in Systems. A Primer" (2009).

A relational approach to the study and analysis of the entangled relationships between social actors and the diverse biophysical elements at multiple scales is gaining traction in the literature concerned with sustainability sciences, socio-ecological systems change and transformations. In this manuscript I embrace the stance that SES are complex systems (Preiser, Biggs, De Vos, & Folke, 2018), i.e. "social and ecological systems as linked and thus as inseparable ontological entities" (2018). The exploration of highly complex social-ecological transformations require a relational lens: change happens in the 'space in between' objects and subjects; it *emerges through their interactions*, in their encounters across different scales and contexts (Cockburn et al., 2020; Folke et al., 2021; Lejano, 2019; Mancilla García, Hertz, Schlüter, Preiser, & Woermann, 2020; Preiser et al., 2018; Westley et al., 2011).

Emergence, relationality and complexity are all key characteristics of systems in general, but especially relevant in socio-ecological systems and their transformations. The three elements must be understood together, to make sense of the non-linear and unexpected changes continuously happening within SES. As highlighted by Ratter (2012):

> "The emphasis is on the '*becoming*'. Complex means becoming, development, emergence—which can lead to profound qualitative transformations. This is the point where the theory of complexity becomes of practical relevance in the analysis and planning of human–nature interactions" (2012, p. 93).

The emphasis on the becoming, on the dynamic state of the parts of the system that interact with one another, our attention (analytically and ontologically) should be posed on the rich web of relationships and *interactions* between the parts of the system, not only on their existence *per se*:

> "Emergent structures are patterns not created by a single event or rule. Nothing commands the system to form a pattern. Instead, the interaction of each part with its immediate surroundings causes a complex chain of processes leading to some sort of order. [...] the interactions between these parts is central" (Ratter, 2012, p. 96).

The importance of emergence and complexity of systems in general is not only relevant to explain the nature of SES and of their transformations, but also to understand human-nature interactions and "interpenetration", how they interweave and mutually shape each other in each specific context. Therefore, the knowledge resulting from understanding and getting to know the world *relationally* is situated and contingent to each place and practice (West et al., 2020). By focusing on the web of relations composing SES (i.e. human-to-human, nature-to-nature, human-to-nature etc as highlighted by Cockburn et al 2020) we are able to delve into the "rich ground of practice that guides a system in ways that the formal rational designs do not explain" (Lejano, 2019, p. 1). An increasing focus on the dynamic and unfolding relationships between social actors and their environment has led scholars, in turn, to shift their attention towards more nuanced evaluation of such relationships.

Such a relational turn has prompted an increasing attention to the aspects of culture and cultural transformations (see section 3.3.1) as a means to embrace alternative value paradigms compared to the ones entrenched in the neoliberal ideology (individualisation, commodification of everything, including Nature, deregulation, privatisation etc). Moreover, amongst such alternative paradigms, a *relational values* approach is gaining attention in the scholarly debates around how and why people come to care about nature and its thriving. Such values are defined as "preferences, principles, and virtues associated with relationships, both interpersonal and as articulated by policies and social norms" (Chan et al., 2016, p. 1462). They "encompass "eudaimonic" values—values associated with living a good life, as well as reflection about how preferences and societal choices relate to notions of justice, reciprocity, care and virtue" (Klain, Olmsted, Chan, & Satterfield, 2017, p. 21). Within this context, 'value' is derived from the contribution that a specific thing or act gives to achieve a

good life, including "elements of cultural identity, social cohesion, social responsibility and moral responsibility towards nature" (Pascual et al., 2017, p. 12). Therefore, our *relationships* with other humans and more-than-humans, as well as *responsibilities* towards them are rising to a role of primary importance in the analysis of how transformations towards sustainability and human and ecological wellbeing come about.

Adopting an analytical perspective focused on our relationships and responsibilities towards human and more-than-human entrenched in the relational values approach has, thus, reinvigorated the scholarly interest towards the concept of (ecological) stewardship, understood both as an ethical point of view, as well as organisational principle for landscape and natural resource management. In a pioneer study on the "practice of Stewardship" from 2001, Ack et al define stewardship as "a philosophy of care for and long-term commitment to the land. It is about the exercise of moral and civic responsibility to protect, restore, conserve, and prudently use the earth's ecosystems and all that they sustain." (Ack et al., 2001, p. 119). The concept of stewardship, in fact, focuses on people "caring for the environment that they are proximal to, connected to and, in some contexts, that they depend on for subsistence needs and livelihoods" (Bennett et al., 2018).

Scholars have recently started exploring the concept and practice of stewardship from a *care* perspective (e.g. Enqvist et al., 2018; Jax et al., 2018; West et al., 2018)*,* by investigating people's motivations to care for nature and what are their relationships with it. As Jax et al (2018) puts it:

> "What someone cares for, how and why, provides a much more tangible entry point as to how an area is to be used or not, what practices are acceptable to different groups and so on. So the main benefit of the care concept for conservation practice may lie in asking the right questions rather than providing pro-conservation answers"(2018, p. 26).

Enqvist et al (2018) developed a framework for stewardship based around three "mutually constitutive" dimensions: *care*, *knowledge* and *agency*. In this approach, *care* represents the normative, inner and subjective realm that triggers stewardship actions; *knowledge* is mainly related to the know-how, the variety of knowledges that informs such stewardship action; while *agency* relates to the abilities and capacities of individuals to engage in (collective)

stewardship actions. West et al (2018) have further developed the framework by focussing on the care dimension of stewardship, claiming that "a focus on care in the context of relational values helps us better understand the cultural aspects that inform stewardship action and shape pathways to sustainability" (2018, p. 31). Specifically, the stated aim of West et al is to enrich the conceptualisation of care within stewardship beyond that of only a (personal) motivation or ethic. Rather, they envisage care as "emergent from socio-ecological relations", "embodied and practiced", and "situated and political" (2018, p. 34).

West et al (2018), therefore, characterise care as a series of practices and activities through which relationships are shaped, made and transformed, through embodiment i.e. "processes of material, 'inter-corporeal' exchange between the various lifeforms that together produce landscapes" (2018, p.35). Moreover, such set of caring practices and activities that constitute stewardship are "situated, collective phenomenon", visible in local conflicts and competing narratives around land and resources management, strongly echoing Fisher and Tronto's articulation of the concept of care (see section 3). West et al ultimately claim that such multiple notions of care in context and place "demonstrate the political salience of claims to care" (2018, p. 36).

After illustrating the wider theoretical landscape from which this thesis has originated, I now move to discuss in more detail the theoretical framework underpinning it. In so doing, departing from a feminist ethic of care lens, I deepen the debates around the potential of a (feminist) care-based approach to contribute to meaningful and inclusive SMNR and, more widely, to *just* sustainability transformations.

3. Theoretical Framework – A Paradigm Shift through a Feminist Ethics of Care

This chapter unpacks the multifaceted *ethics of care,* concept (and practice) that started being developed by feminist scholars since the 1980s (e.g., Gilligan, 1982). Throughout the following sections I delve into and integrate insights from feminist scholarship (including ecofeminism), as well as more recent work done by post-humanists and sustainability scientists around the concept of care in the context of human-nature relationships and sustainability transformations.

An ethics of care questions the very fundamentals of the neoliberal ideology "individualism, egalitarianism, universalism, and of society organized exclusively around principles of efficiency, competition, and a ''right'' price for everything." (Lawson, 2007, p. 3). Ultimately "neoliberalism has neither an effective practice of, nor a vocabulary for care (...) neoliberalism is uncaring by design" (The Care Collective, 2020). Instead, a feminist ethic of care stems from acknowledging the interdependent and relational nature of all things - first and foremost, of human and more-than-human lives. As Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) puts it, such interdependency is "the ontological state in which humans and countless other beings unavoidably live" (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 4). More specifically to the context under study here, if we are to recognise the key role of relationships, relationality and interdependence in the context of doing collaborative and transdisciplinary work, then it is worth starting the investigation of the concept of *care* through the much-cited definition of Tronto and Fisher:

> "*A species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible*. That world includes our bodies, ourselves and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web" (Fisher & Tronto, 1990, p. 40 original emphasis).

Tronto and Fisher's (1990) definition 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 and Tronto, 1990, p. 41). Such an approach is far from an idealised, '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. It offers a way to ultimately re-claim care as a means to foster solidarities (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 11), amidst unavoidable tensions and conflicts, while experimenting with more just ways of being and doing, of "caring-with" (Tronto, 2013) together, humans and more-than-humans.

The following sections delve into the three dimensions composing the concept of care as outlined above: ethico-political involvement; maintenance work and affective labour. To do so, I draw insights and merge understandings from a variety of bodies of literature, within and beyond feminist scholarship, that have so far investigated human-nature relationships from akin perspectives.

3.1 Care as democratic politics

Fisher and Tronto stress in their definition of care the fact that it is not possible to create universal and/or standardised understandings of

> "what is needed to maintain and repair our world. We know that human "needs" change with the historical, cultural, class, and other contexts. We also know that such contexts involve power relations that affect the content, definition, distribution, and boundaries of caring activities." (1990, p. 41).

The pioneer work of Fisher and Tronto on the political, intersectional, and situated dimensions of care and caring practices is still prominent and keeps inspiring the most recent work around care:

> "Care is relational, situated, non-violent, nurturing, restorative, and future-oriented. As such, care is both a practice and a politics, and therefore becomes the key to social accountability and essential to a meaningful substantive democracy" (Bond et al., 2020, p. 8)"

In order to guarantee human and ecological well-being for the present and future generations we need, in fact, radically just transformations based on equity and democratic principles:

60

"Justice, and its flipside injustice, are central to the intersection of climate change and human wellbeing, and to political systems at all levels" (Klinsky et al., 2017, p. 172). *Just* transformations as argued, amongst others, by Bennett et al (2019), Patterson et al (2018) and Bond and Barth (2020), require genuinely participatory decision making processes. However, as noted by Stenseke (2018, p. 86) "there is a need to further elaborate on the conditions for stewardship and participation to evolve". The need to re-politicise, re-claim and re-appropriate the debate around SMNR can contribute to better understanding what (material) conditions hinder, or facilitate, a more democratic, inclusive and meaningful engagement of people in collective and distributed stewardship actions and practices; conditions, which go beyond personal motivations and ethic.

The link between justice and care was also made by Iris Marion Young in 1990:

> "I suggested at the beginning of this chapter, challenging the traditional opposition between public and private that aligns it with oppositions between universality and particularity, reason and affectivity, implies challenging a conception of justice that opposes it to care. A theory that limits justice to formal and universal principles that define a context in which each person can pursue her or his personal ends without hindering the ability of others to pursue theirs, entails not merely too limited a conception of social life, as Michael Sandel (1982) suggests, but too limited a conception of justice. As a virtue, justice cannot stand opposed to personal need, feeling, and desire, but names the institutional conditions that enable people to meet their needs and express their desires. Needs can be expressed in their particularity in a heterogeneous public." (Young, 1990, p. 121).

Through "a more collective ethos of care and responsibility" (Bond, 2019, p. 16) it is possible to open up collective and political 'spaces' to discuss such institutional conditions and people's needs and desires, on a path towards social justice, beyond the neoliberal focus on "individualised responsibility, blame, and liability" (ibid.), that is so pervasive in debates around pro-environmental behaviours (or lack thereof). In promoting a care-full politics at the base of an ethico-political rationale for radical democracy, Bond (2019, p. 17) highlights: "The tendencies for dominant discourses to individualise responsibility and privilege market rationalities, don't only reduce the space for politics and contestation. They reduce the space for thinking and acting relationally and thereby also thinking and acting care-fully."

Ecofeminism (primarily represented by personalities such as Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies) has been always one of the most vocal strands of feminism about the need for a paradigm shift that centres the way we understand and practice human-nature relationships around care. However, other feminist scholars are clear about the need to take distance from a certain attitude of ecofeminism tending to "ecomaternalist" approaches. Sherylin MacGregor (2006), for instance, argues: "Discussions of ecofeminist ethics have tended to emphasize the different, gendered approach to ethical thought and behaviour taken by women, which, presumably, entails a greater sense of responsibility than that felt by men" (p.28).

The "maternalistic rhetoric" and the "feminized care" (MacGregor, 2006, pp. 34; 58) represents a risky ground upon which to build a political vision for *just* social and ecological transformations. This vision glosses over the oppressing and exploitative conditions to which the reproductive work of (especially) women in the capitalist and neoliberal society is bound. In fact, assuming a "biological determinism" as Harcourt (2018, p. 38) defines the stance of some ecofeminists in highlighting women's caring predisposition and its moral superiority, arguably leads to "reducing women's ethico-political life to care" (MacGregor, 2006, p. 58). By reducing women's role in political life, while seeing in their caring ability, the preferable answer to the ecological crisis we are facing just reinforces unequal and oppressive dynamics: "an uncritical emphasis on women's care-related morality can also affirm harmful assumptions about gender and reify exclusionary notions about the nature of care and, indeed, of carers" (MacGregor, 2006, p.61). Thus, ultimately, ecomaternalistic perspectives "fail to offer a democratic vison of politics that can liberate women - and all people – from the more oppressive traditions of the Western culture" (MacGregor, 2006, p. 75). A democratic take on feminist ethics of care is indeed of utmost interest to this thesis, for its potential to contribute to *just* transformations towards sustainability.

MacGregor (2006) acknowledges the merits of ecofeminism in foregrounding the political meaning of the care work "by showing that everyday practices in the private sphere can contribute as much to social change as can action in the public domain" (2006, p. 66). However, she is also critical of the fact that only a few ecofeminists acknowledged the nexus care-democratic politics-citizenship-justice. Therefore, she further develops an ethics of care through a "feminist understanding of democratic politics and citizenship" lens (MacGregor, 2006, p. 74). MacGregor (2006, p. 76) supports Tronto's argument for a "de-gendered ethic of

care" first introduced in her seminal work *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (1993). Through their definition of care, in fact, Fisher and Tronto deeply criticize the feminization of care supported by certain strands of (eco)feminists:

> "This effort to keep life going does not assume that certain people (women rather than men) have a special ability to sustain our world or that some efforts (healing rather than house-building) make a more important contribution to sustaining life on earth." (Fisher and Tronto, 1990, p. 41).

Such democratic and political understanding of care, thus, contributes to problematise, as opposed to naturalize, the construction of private/public dichotomy. A feminist ethics of care "foregrounds the centrality and public character of care activities and so reframe responsibility" (Lawson, 2007, p.5) by calling for wider and deeper public deliberation over private needs and interests. Only truly democratic societies are attentive and collectively responsible for (private) needs satisfaction (e.g. Fraser, 1997; MacGregor, 2006; Tronto, 1993). Specifically, Plumwood (1995, p. 155) clarifies how the construction of a private/public split at the centre of feminist critique, is relevant to environmental politics discourse:

> "The demarcation of the household and the economy as private removes from political contest and democratic responsibility the major areas of material need satisfaction, production and consumption, and ecological impact."

Tronto (2013) clarifies that "we have misunderstood politics as if it were part of economics" (2013, p. xi). Instead, she argues politics should be perceived as something we keep close, in our households, "a realm of caring" (ibid). This position is rooted in the very essence of democracy: "democracy itself, as a form of governing in which citizens participate, requires care. A democratic state in which citizens do not care about justice, about their role in controlling rulers, in the rule of law itself, will not long remain a democracy" (2013, p. xiv).

These authors envision an idea of democratic politics and (ecological) citizenship as being deeply embedded in relationships of care: Tronto clarifies that any (supposedly) democratic system cannot properly "function without citizens that are produced and reproduced through care" (2013, p. 26). By overemphasising citizens' lives as workers and consumers, there is, in turn, a systematic undervaluation and marginalisation of citizens' lives as made of deeply interconnected relationships of care. By instead conceiving "care work as society's work"

(Lawson, 2007, p. 5), it is possible to re-think the whole concept (and practice) of democratic politics and citizenship on the ground of justice and equality.

By expanding our understanding of democratic politics and citizenship through the lens of care, feminist scholars such as Plumwood propose an alternative framing of ecological citizenship that includes an idea of "unbounded community" that takes collective responsibility for human and ecological well-being alike:

> "A commitment to such concepts of democratic virtue can provide a non-instrumental conception of political community which is inclusive of future generations and the non-human world. If the democratic community is envisaged as an unbounded community, these virtues would have to include such ecological values as taking responsibility for the ecological impacts of one's life, work and community, and not robbing future others for present generation benefits" (Plumwood, 1995, p. 159).

Repoliticising care entails reframing it as an everyday, relational practice, and acknowledging the structural power inequalities underpinning it, which can lead to potential tension and conflict to meet needs and aspirations. Tronto (2015, p. 17) talks about "politics of everyday life" and Institutions as something that "shape who we are and how we think of ourselves as citizens". Specifically, a feminist democratic ethic of care intends to question why and how social and political institutions allow an uneven distribution of care responsibilities amongst citizens, i.e., why some must bear the burdens of caring and others can escape it (Tronto, 2013, p.32-33). The process of repoliticising care is a process of reclaiming the public (and the distributed power inherent to the public sphere) into something that has strategically and detrimentally been made private and the concern of individuals within their households (i.e., caring responsibilities).

As mentioned already in the Introduction and in section 2.5, this collective and public understanding of responsibility as something to be shared, negotiated, and contested through democratic and agonistic politics is opposed to the "all-encompassing ideology" and "disastrous worldview" of Neoliberalism (Tronto, 2013, p. 38), which posits the greatest emphasis on personal responsibility. It does so, by considering individuals entirely autonomous, and responsible for their own choices in life, casting choices as if taken within a general (and neutral) context of freedom and equality, and not one of systemic and

"structural injustice"[4]. Only focussing on a personal and individual type of responsibility for caring presents several issues, and "can have a profoundly antidemocratic effect" (Tronto 2015, p. 25). As feminist Economists Waller and Wrenn (2021) explain:

> "Through the socialization process, neoliberalism teaches that each individual should be accountable to herself, and thus the responsibility to others and to the collective is eroded. Society is then comprised entirely of self-interested, atomistic individuals seeking to forward their own agendas, as emphasis on individual accountability and responsibility naturally segues into the power of the individual acting alone" (2021, p. 2).

In contrast, feminist understandings of care ethics and ecological citizenship as elaborated, amongst others, by MacGregor (2006, 2014), foregrounds processes of re-politicisation through which to reclaim the public and to resist post-political/depoliticised discourses around issues such as climate change adaptation and resilience (see also Dobson, 2003; Kenis, 2016; Seyfang, 2006). Therefore, the work of some feminist scholars here presented offer to us a new terrain to reclaim the political and collective nature of care and citizenship, by means of building collective responsibility to ensure thriving human and more-than-human worlds, as well as across present and future generations. Ultimately, as Harcourt and Escobar (2005) remind us (as cited by Bauhardt & Harcourt 2018, pp. 4–5): "acts of care require acts of imagination to reappropriate, reconstruct and reinvent our personal and political lifeworlds".

3.2 Caring-*with* and Collective responsibility

By looking at responsibility as a social and collective issue, Tronto brings in the definition elaborated by Walker (2007) of an "ethic of responsibility" as a social negotiation between members of a community that try to create common understanding around definition and distribution of caring responsibilities. The idea of a social negotiation brings in the political element of a process of defining and distributing responsibilities for care: "the process of

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[4] Young (2006, p. 114) argues that *"Structural injustice exists when social processes put large categories of persons under a systematic threat of domination or deprivation of the means to develop and exercise their capacities, at the same time as these processes enable others to dominate or have a wide range of opportunities for developing and exercising their capacities. Structural injustice is a kind of moral wrong distinct from the wrongful action of an individual agent or the willfully repressive policies of a state. Structural injustice occurs as a consequence of many individuals and institutions acting in pursuit of their particular goals and interests, within given institutional rules and accepted norms. All the persons who participate by their actions in the ongoing schemes of cooperation that constitute these structures are responsible for them, in the sense that they are part of the process that causes them. They are not responsible, however, in the sense of having directed the process or intended its outcomes."*

allocating responsibility is at the heart of the political practices of care" (Tronto, 2013, p. 55). The importance of collective responsibility within a democratic feminist ethic of care as envisioned by Tronto is thus represented by the dimension of *caring-with,* which adds to the four dimensions originally elaborated by Fisher and Tronto in 1990: *caring about*, *caring for*, *care giving* and *care receiving.*

 The essence of such relational practices, nested within the notion of **caring *with*,** is that

> "all members of the society can live as well as possible by making the society as democratic as possible (...) Democratic politics should center upon assigning responsibilities for care, and for ensuring that democratic citizens are as capable as possible of participating in this assignment of responsibilities" (Tronto, 2013, p. 30).

The process of allocating responsibility, at the core of *caring-with*, is thus a political one and foregrounds relations of trust, solidarity and reciprocity amongst caregivers and care receivers who are ultimately democratic citizens (Burgess, 2006; Moriggi, Soini, Bock, & Roep, 2020; Moriggi, Soini, Franklin, et al., 2020; Tronto, 2013). Similarly, power relations are at the core of the political process around the "creation or assumption of collective capacity to act" (Tronto, 2013, p. 56). As Tronto (2015, p. 15) explains:

> "The first four phases of care imagined a citizen as someone who is attentive, responsible, competent, and responsive; *"caring with"* imagines the entire polity of citizens engaged in a lifetime of commitment to and benefiting from these principles. "Caring with" is our new democratic ideal".

In the work of reclaiming the collective and political dimensions of notions of care, there is a fundamental aspect not to overlook: to reclaim care is to reclaim it "from tendencies to smooth out its asperities – whether by idealising it or denigrating it" (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 11). To reclaim care, therefore, is to reclaim the natural presence in every relationship of conflict and tensions, that are "grounded in practical engagements with situated material conditions" (Ibid.). Situated socio-material conditions for caring are amongst the elements that compose "caring capacity" as Power (2019) defines it. She identifies "sociomaterial, temporal, and spatial assemblages that make care possible" (Power, 2019, p. 774) unveiling the reasons why Fisher and Tronto argue that caring presents a "problematic character" (1990, p.40).

As Fisher and Tronto proceed to explain, care "involves social interactions, that contain potential for conflict and because it requires material resources that might be difficult or impossible to obtain" (Ibid). The inherent contradictions and problematic nature of caring is therefore related to issues of power, especially when there is an asymmetry between power and responsibility (Fisher and Tronto, 1990, p.44):

> "responsibility requires power (…) to say that personal responsibility by itself will be the engine that runs how people should thrive in human societies ignores the reality that not everyone (in fact, probably no one) has the resources sufficient to operate on their own" (Tronto, 2013, p. 144).

Specifically, Fisher and Tronto (1990) talk about **"ability factors"** as "specific preconditions of caring activity" (p. 41). Amongst the most important ones, there are time, material resources, skill and knowledge, which vary according to the different phases of care and also depending on the historical and cultural contingency. Unequal power relations in caring-with, hence, emerge (also) in the interwoven, but not linear interplay between these factors and the wider socio-political contexts and arrangements, within which people interact throughout the caring process. Access to and control over *ability factors* are part of the conception of *power* throughout this manuscript: *power to* (Gaventa 2006) engage and actively participate to caring-*with* people and places. Amongst the *ability factors,* an important resource is **time**, which "is not equally available to everyone." (Tronto, 2015, p. 25). Lister (1997) confirms this view by affirming that "citizenship politics is …in part politics of time". Similarly, MacGregor (2006, p. 224) pointed out that:

> "One of the most significant contributions of feminist theories of citizenship is the point that time is a necessary resource for the practice of citizenship, whose distribution is in large part determined by the gendered division of labour (…) I think an important aspect of any vision of a sustainable society should be increased time for non-productive and non-consumptive pursuits such as leisure, education, and civic participation."

"Capacity and timing needs" have been also mentioned by Bennett et al (2019, p.6) as preconditions for "truly inclusive" and genuine participatory decision-making arrangements as part of *just* sustainability transformations. Therefore, a *caring-with* approach foregrounds attentiveness and responsiveness to different needs and responsibilities, without neglecting

or glossing over structural inequalities (Alam & Houston, 2020, p. 3), but rather by focusing on building dynamic capacity for collective action and democratic participation.

3.3 Caring-*with* and democratic participation

A focus on caring capacity through *ability factors* allows us to enhance and further problematise the scholarly debate around participation and empowerment in natural resource management approaches that privilege community-led initiatives and practices. Through participatory process, people are deemed to be able to enhance their capacity, on an individual level, to "make choices and transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes" (Gibson & Woolcock, 2008, p. 152). Participation inspired by principles of empowerment and equity ideally is supposed to facilitate and support a social change favourable to marginalized and disadvantaged groups of people (Cleaver, 1999; Gibson & Woolcock, 2008). However, some authors highlight the fact that often participation is envisioned as empowering, without paying enough attention to the actual activity implied (Cleaver 1999). Empowerment thus becomes a "buzzword", as Cleaver (1999, p. 599), and Cornwall (2016, p. 342) state, often hollowed-out of its very meaning related to democratic and equity values, similar to taken-for-granted approaches to care that conceive it merely in terms of personal attitude and motivation.

As already noted by Cleaver more than 20 years ago, it seems that there is still a strong reliance on the "rightness of the (participatory) approach and process" (Cleaver, 1999), rather than a proper base of evidence in terms of achieved sustainability and empowerment. For Cleaver, participation has become "an act of faith", something that has not been scrutinised and questioned deeply enough. Primary attention has been given to "getting the techniques right" (Cleaver 1999, p. 598), rather than focussing on the subsistent meaning of the concepts of participation and community. Moreover, this allows for the avoidance of political and conflict issues related to the approaches promoted (Agrawal & Gibson, 1999; Blaikie, 2006; Cleaver, 1999) (as further discussed in section 3.2 around depoliticised governance approaches). Instead, participation should be envisioned more as a political process, similarly to caring practices and caring-*with*, which develop around conflicts and contestations amongst people claiming different perspectives, needs and demands, rather than a mere technique or methodology (Cleaver, 1999; Otsuki, 2015; Peters, 1996). Decisions around *who* is entitled to sit at the decision-making table is a *political* decision, and therefore,

participation itself to decision-making processes is a *political process,* with the aim of contributing to "more just and wise political judgements"(Young, 2002, p. 31). By conceiving care and participation as political processes, it is possible to foreground the role of social justice, and therefore, empowerment in the debate around natural resource management/ human-nature relations.

Young (2000) interprets social justice as self-development and self-determination. The former aligns to the capability approach of Sen (1999). Self-development occurs to the extent that everyone can

> "learn and use satisfying and expansive skills in socially recognized settings, and enable them to play and communicate with others or express their feelings and perspectives on social life in contexts where others can listen" (Young, 2002, p. 15).

Similarly, according to Sen, individual advantage is measured according to a person's capability to achieve what she or he identifies as valuable. Capability is, in turn, therefore conceived as opportunity to do and achieve those things we value, i.e. the ability to choose (i.e., *power to* – see section 2.2). Accordingly, freedom exists to the extent there is an opportunity to decide what we want, what we value and ultimately what we decide to choose (Sen, 2009, p. 232). While self-determination is defined as a situation of "being able to participate in determining one's action and the condition of one's action; its contrary is domination" (Young, 2002, p. 32). Following the argument of Sen (1999), Evans emphasises the importance of participatory arrangements as means by which to substantially achieve the creation of "thickly democratic" decision-making institutions (as opposed to 'thin' ones, which refers to the "leadership succession determined by a regular electoral process") (Evans, 2002, p. 55). "Thick" democracy stands for a "messy and continuous involvement of citizens" (Ibid.), in forms of public discussion and exchange of information, opinions, ideas (Evans, 2004, p. 36) about the desired ends of development. In this exercise of deliberation and planning, participants (citizens) are expected to shape and transform their preferences (Evans, 2004), as well as define and allocating caring responsibilities *(i.e. caring-with)* (Tronto, 2013).

In the context of this thesis, participation is a space wherein individuals engage in caring-*with,* through caring practices (for both people and nature), or in conversations and exchange of ideas, information and opinions, to negotiate their collaboration and responsibilities, as well as needs and aspirations in relation to NRM. In this sense, as Otsuki (2015) suggests, participation is understood here as an open-ended, reflexive and dialectic process; one where participants interact with each other (this including not only "community participants", but also actors coming from NGOs, and governmental agencies), and with the environment, to share their own experiences and negotiate the terms of the collaboration, the process and the goals they want to achieve. In this dynamic process, the environment and communities are co-emergent, rather than a deterministic structure, continuously under evolution and shaped by the interactions happening between them.

The idea (and practice) of participation as deliberation, reflection and exchange enables citizens to rearrange power relations which might represent a strong obstacle to the achievement of their well-being as well as SMNR. By doing so, achieving "better quality" participatory and democratic institutions seems more viable. When translated in the context of NRM this means that the citizens participating are "active advocates of everyday life" (p. 31), who could transform civil society into a "site of struggles" to influence political agendas and raise their own concerns about the achievement of well-being and SMNR.

Deeper and more robust enquiry of onto-epistemologies to achieve a greater understanding of people's worldviews, occur only through a process of reflexivity and consciousness building, which – as already introduced (see chapter 1) - involves body, mind and soul, and which is overtly relational, and potentially transformative. The transformative potential of thorough and critical inquiry of beliefs and worldviews has been recognised also by Cornwall (2016) in relation to women's empowerment: engaging people in a critical and conscious reflection about taken for granted norms and practices is deemed to be a fundamental step towards "consciousness raising" – the *conscientização* of Paulo Freire (Freire, 1970) – and therefore, towards shifting power relations and capacity to act to transform the *status quo* (Cornwall, 2016, p. 356).

 To conclude, it is not possible to elide the fact that collaborative natural resource management is inherently political, as imbued with complex and diverse societal, political and economic struggles around resources. Acknowledgement of this point is seemingly

essential in order to avoid building a "conceptual toolbox that is missing critical tools" (P. A. Walker & Hurley, 2004, p. 748). 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. Using Otsuky's words, how to trigger a process of internalization by means of which the subject-persons can "make further deliberations to objectively negotiate priorities and become a subject-citizen to set terms of engagement with reference of the lifeworld" (Otsuki, 2015, p. 32).

3.4 *Situated* Care – the role of Emotions and Place

The dimension of *affective engagement* in the concept of care (Tronto, 2013) refers to the emotional labour required to perform caring in all its forms (i.e., through the five phases identified by Tronto, 2013 and outlined in 3.2). Such emotional labour is by no means just "positive affectivity": as Puig de la Bellacasa (2017, p. 5) points out, such affectivity can be "oppressive burden, joy or boredom", whilst alongside, as Lawson (2007, p. 3) notes:

> "Care ethics also demands attention to emotions and affective relations (of love, concern, and connection) because of the complex ways in which power is embedded within them".

Moreover, affective labour is extremely energy consuming, and if we want to create and maintain a form of "sustainable collective caring" (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 163) we do need to maintain resources including one's own energy:

> "Cultivating joy is part of the doing. In a conception of care as a collective good, care has to be shared, distributed, the "surplus" of life and energy that it produces returned to the carers in order to avoid affective and material burnout" (Ibid.)

The emotional and affective engagement part of care doings has been recently framed by Moriggi et al (2020) as holding transformative potential. These authors, drawing on Pulcini (2009), contend that, although only marginal attention to this dimension has been reserved so far by scholars of sustainability transformations (some exceptions being Grenni et al., 2020; Ives, Freeth, & Fischer, 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 "compass of morality" and trigger motivation towards action (Ibid.). The long-standing undervaluation and neglect of emotions and emotional involvement in public

71

social relations has led to 'unlearning' what it means to be human, deeply embedded in a web of (caring) relations with human and more-than-human worlds, 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)

Scholars concerned with emotional geographies and (feminist) political ecology are increasingly devoting attention to subjectivity and emotions. As authors such a Dallman et al (2013) and Sultana (2015) highlight, political ecologists have mainly focused on the economic and political forces which affect and influence people's relations with nature (in terms of control, access and use). In so doing, they seem to have overlooked "how emotions attached to places are altered by changes in control of, access to, and use of landscapes for sacred spaces" (Dallman et al., 2013, p. 34). The conception of nature as commodity and resource to satisfy human needs has generally led to a loss of the diverse set of beliefs, practices and values connected to places. This, in turn, has resulted in the neglect of cultural meanings and struggles around human-nature relationship, which have brought to the creation of "hegemonic meanings" which influence economic and political processes (Dallman et al., 2013, p. 41).

Moreover, the affirmation of a cultural dominance – referred to by Escobar (among others) as "coloniality" (2006) –has "rejected emotional content as irrational, irrelevant, and implicitly feminized" (Dallman et al., 2013, p. 35) (see also Moriggi et al (2020)). In contrast, "using insights from emotional geography [enriches] explanations of everyday resource struggles, politics and conflicts without being reductionist, ahistorical or femininizing emotions" (Sultana, 2015, p. 634). Human-nature relationships are deemed to be as much about (hidden) feelings, emotions and lived experiences (including relations with others as well as with nature) as it is about political and economic factors. Therefore, exploring emotions and connections to places is relevant to achieve a nuanced understanding of multidimensional processes of human-ecological well-being and identity formation, which might strongly influence people's sense of ownership and active engagement with caring for place and nature:

"Such an emotional political ecology approach encourages scholars to explain resource politics, struggles and access/conflict – themes that are central to (feminist) political ecology scholarship – as being about more than the resource itself (and its 'rational' use) or the socio-political power relations involved, but also about the diverse emotions set in motion as these influence the practices and decisions people make in everyday resource use, control and conflict" (Sultana, 2015, p. 644).

The relative neglect of subjectivity and spirituality within most discourses around natural resources management has led mainstream SES scholarship to fall into a so-called "rigidity trap" (Stedman, 2016). Especially the attempt to explain transformative processes at the system level appears groundless if dynamics related to identity formation, place-shaping, corporeal and lived experiences, as well as human-ecological interactions, are not taken into account and explored, including the individual point of view. Emotional detachment and sense of unconditioned independence from the rest of the life on Earth, thus, has led us to believe that mere techno-scientific solutions can bring us towards transformative changes towards sustainability pathways. However, as Moriggi et al (2020) strongly argue, there remains a fundamental potential to shift from such 'emotional alienation' in favour of a reviving of all kinds of emotions, including 'negative' ones such as fear and grief:

"fear *of* can indeed lead to paranoia, denial, resistance, inaction. However, fear might activate a totally different set of attitudes and behaviour if it is framed in terms of fear *for*, a productive fear that allows humans to connect to the world with empathy, and to feel the urge to protect it and care *for* it in transformative ways" (2020, p. 10, original emphasis)

The relevance of emotional and affective dimensions of care, within the scope of this research, has two key aspects: on one side, care as emotional attachment to place, as fuel for collective action and engagement in taking care of people and nature through care practices (see e.g., Moriggi, 2021); on the other, the emotional labour, the energy required to engage in deep forms of collaboration, that require vulnerability and emotional awareness (as discussed by, amongst others, Moriggi et al (2020)). Ultimately, as argued by Jax et al (2018, p. 26), care is made of "a series of practices that are rooted in culture, religion or emotion as complements to merely science-based technical measures or management practices".

Accordingly, in this thesis I embrace the suggestion of Cote and Nightingale (Cote & Nightingale, 2012), who believe that researchers should pay more attention to affective dimension and attachment to *place*, by moving "beyond an emphasis on 'rules' and institutional designs that reflect logics of economic maximization, and to broaden our consideration to subjective identities and affective relationships".

Given the multifaceted and rich nature of the concept of *place,* it is worth revisiting some of the several definitions that have been elaborated over time on it. It has been identified as "physical space imbued with meaning", where meanings refer to tangible (utilitarian) and intangible ones, such as values of belonging, beauty, attachment and spirituality (Cheng, Kruger, & Daniels, 2003, p. 89). Places are spaces that people care about, that are remembered and are part of people's lives. Places can evoke emotions, people, memories and even ideas (Cilliers & Timmermans, 2014, p. 413). The importance of taking a place perspective rests on the acknowledgement that nature is a critical component of a system, defined by the complex and multifaceted relations between the human and more-than-human. Indeed, "place is not an inert container for biophysical attributes" (Cheng et al., 2003, p. 90), but rather a dynamic entity constantly constructed and reconstructed through the merging and interaction of biophysical, social, political and cultural processes (Ibid.). These processes when combined provide the fundamental "information" which helps people to shape and define their own identity and set their own values and beliefs (or worldview).

The plurality of place meanings is conveyed through discourses embracing ideas, values, identities, worldviews but also practices (Yung 2003). Worldviews actively inform agency, which, in turn occurs in the everyday process of place-making. The relational nature of processes of place-making has been widely discussed by a number of scholars (e.g. (Franklin, Newton, Middleton, & Marsden, 2011; Marsden, 2013; Pierce, Martin, & Murphy, 2011). By means of corporeal interactions, people can perceive, live, produce and reproduce places and reflect (individually and collectively) on their experiences. By doing so individuals gain awareness of their own beliefs, needs, onto-epistemologies as well as the collocation of these in the wider system (which comprises of institutions, governance, environment and so on). Only then, they can elaborate "alternative understanding of the problems" (Marsden, 2016, p. 601) and, consequently, integrating "multiple approaches to problem solution" (Ibid.), embracing the diverse and contested worldviews. Franklin (2018) defines the concept of place

as a "powerful and productive conceptual boundary device" to comprehensively explore integrated human-nature relations, and bring together the divergent and different understandings of such relationships within places (see also Macgillivray & Franklin, 2015).

The reflexive, place-making, process occurring spontaneously, in every-day life, is at the basis of the personal transformation experienced by human beings, which refers to "the transformation from an object-person to a subject-person" in the process of development (Otsuki, 2015, p. 11). Through this empirical process, individuals start connecting their lived-in places, their own personal experiences, to cultural, broader conceptual units, such as governance and natural resource management. This personal transformation, principle stated by critical pedagogy and its foremost exponent Paulo Freire (1970), is the mechanism underpinning the linkage between one's own dimension and the external environment (including people and nature).

It is possible to identify formal and informal arenas of interactions within which these embodied daily practices become processes of negotiations and contestations over places and place identity, which is what has been called politics (Pierce et al., 2011, p. 55). These interconnected power struggles are not locally fixed, rather they can occur across all scales and levels. This entails that people and institutions (which also refers to informal everyday practices) interlock as "a bricolage of (always partially) shared place understandings", in a networked and relational context (Pierce et al., 2011, p. 157).

Meaning creation is highly connected to emotional geography. The relevance of discussing the "politics of meanings" for the purpose of this research lies on the fact that any form of NRM "create, transform and destroy place meanings – meanings around which individuals and groups develop a sense of identity" (Cheng et al., 2003, p. 98). The feeling of not holding enough influence and/or power towards the decision-making processes related to place strongly affects people's behaviour towards the environment. As noted by Cleaver (2012, p. 212):

> "Place politics and identities are highly significant in shaping people's engagement with resources and decision-making and in creating the links between individual and collective interests".

In sum, senses or meanings of place are contested, negotiated, and fluid (Macgillivray & Franklin, 2015), and part of cultural and political processes of transformation, as discussed in section 2.3.1. Accordingly, it is of crucial importance to recognise that hiding behind "scientific knowledge" and technical solutions for NRM risks exacerbating controversies and conflicts that are intrinsic to places, to the politics of places, and to transformations happening within place. As highlighted by Escobar (2010):

> "Power inhabits meaning, and meanings are a main source of social power; struggles over meaning are thus central to the structuring of the social and of the physical world itself"(2010, p. 42).

Investigating "discursive identities" is therefore a crucial step in the building of human-ecological well-being, given the "ontological connectivity" between place and humans, according to which the "functioning of place is intimately connected with the health and well-being of people" (Wilcock, 2013, p. 466). A way to dig into these discourses and worldviews is by unravelling the narratives, stories and knowledge which are imbued of values and are "of a place" (Williams, 2016). This entails that these narratives cannot be extracted, dislocated and treated as technical data to be managed, draining "the life out of culture" (Wilcock, 2013, pp. 467–470). Rather, exploring these narratives represents the key to understand how a 'place' comes into being and for whom.

3.5 Graphic Representation of the Theoretical Framework

The "Bee Diagram" in Figure 3 below is a graphic representation including both the wider theoretical landscape presented in Chapter 2, and the more specific theoretical framework discussed in this chapter. It is meant to be a supportive tool for the reader to navigate the diverse but interrelated strands of scholarship introduced and discussed throughout Chapters 2 and 3. Moreover, this figure aims at representing the evolution of the PhD journey (see also section 1.3).

The figure should be read starting from the "head" of the bee, i.e., "SMNR and Adaptive Co-management": this represents the first topic I explored when starting the literature review for this research (as recounted in section 1.3). From a close investigation of the literature on adaptive governance, co-management and resilience in SES, I moved towards more critical stances proposed by (feminist) political ecologists (see section 1.3), which directed me to

explore the growing literature on the politics of Sustainability Transformations. By analysing the work of scholars concerned with wider system transformations, I came to understand both the importance of a "relational turn" in the study of SES and human-nature relationships, as well as the key role of culture, values and mindset change (i.e., "deep transformations") to pursue sustainability pathways.

All these iterative circles, depicted in the figure as composing the "body" of the bee, are interconnected under an overarching circle represented by "Democratic and Feminist Ethics of Care", the main theoretical building block of this research, which has been here adapted to the context of SMNR and the wider theme of collaborative environmental governance. The "wings" of the bee (i.e., "Cultural and Personal dimensions of Caring-*with*" and "Institutional and Political dimensions of Caring-*with*") represent a more detail explanation of how a democratic and feminist ethics of care has been operationalised throughout this research, as a result of its integration with the rest of the concepts and theories mentioned in the body of the bee. Ultimately, the bee is surrounded by a dotted blue line that symbolizes the "environment" within which this framework has been developed. This line, hence, reminds us that the theoretical framework here presented does not work in isolation, as a static, standalone theoretical construct; rather, it is immersed in, and affected by, a constant interaction with numerous other (theoretical and practical) emerging elements, in an open-ended process of evolution.

The diagram contains the following text labels:

Democratic and Feminist Ethics of Care: a *Caring-with* approach to SES Transformations

'Deep' and Cultural Transformations

'Relational Turn'

SES Transformations towards Sustainability

Repoliticised SES Governance & Resourcefullness

Neoliberal SES Governance & Resilience discourse

SMNR & Adaptive Co-Management

Cultural & Personal dimensions of **Caring-with** approach:

‣ Subjective and Collective *Meaning-making*
‣ Relational ontology and Stewardship
‣ Embodiment: emotional and affective dimension

Institutional & Political dimensions of **Caring-with** approach:

‣ Focus on Agency and Capacity to care (i.e., on *ability factors*)
‣ Collective Responsibility
‣ Self-Organisation and Enabling role of Institutions

Dotted blue line represents the interacting external environment, that constantly influences the various dimensions highlighted in the Bee diagram.

Figure 3 *- The 'Bee Diagram' representing the theoretical framework underpinning this research. Author's own creation*

4. Context Chapter – Introducing Wales

This chapter introduces Wales to the reader, by providing some key information on the social-economic, ecological and policy context. This is to enable the reader to understand the wider context within which this research was embedded and developed. The chapter starts by explaining the condition of Wales as a 'devolved nation' with a Parliament (the *Senedd*) holding primary legislative powers, within the UK. It then moves to illustrate the policy context concerned with sustainability and wellbeing, the very foundation of this research (section 4.1). Moreover, given its direct relevance to the study, section 4.2 provides information on the Sustainable Management Scheme (SMS), the WG grant scheme funding the landscape partnerships around which strand 3 of the fieldwork was centred (see chapter 7). Section 4.3 provides a brief explanation of the Sustainable Futures Development programme internal to WG, that promotes a wider cultural change within the organisation, and indirectly facilitated the work conducted in strand 2 (see chapter 8). Lastly, section 4.4 provides specific context information on the South Wales Valleys, the region where I conducted strand 1 of my fieldwork - an in-depth place-based study through my involvement in the Skyline project (see chapter 6).

Wales is a devolved nation since 1997, after a referendum with only a 50.1% of turnout, and 50.3% of "yes" registered. The first election of the "National Assembly for Wales" (which the name of which changed to *Senedd Cymru* – Welsh Parliament - in May 2020), was held in 1999. Initially, reduced powers were given to Wales relative to the ones devolved simultaneously to Scotland and Norther Ireland (Davidson, 2020; Lane Thomas, Pierce, Jones, & Harris, 2015). However, with Acts of 2006, 2011, 2014 and 2017 the powers have since come closer into line with the ones held by the Scottish Parliament and Northern Ireland Assembly (Wallace, 2019, p. 74). In 2011, with a second referendum, which produced a 65,3 % vote of 'yes', the 'National Assembly of Wales' was granted "primary law-making powers in the areas for which the Welsh Government had responsibility" (Davidson, 2020, p. 66). Between 1999 and 2021 there have been six elections for the National Assembly. The last one was held on May 6th, 2021 and was the first one in which 16- and 17-years olds were allowed to vote. All six elections have brought the Welsh Labour Party to government. Wales was categorised by the European Commission (whilst it was part of the EU) as one of the poorest regions in Europe.

4.1 Policy and Institutional context for sustainable development and natural resources management in Wales

This section introduces the general policy context within which this research has been developed, departing from the commitment of Wales to the principle of sustainable development through the establishment of WBFGA and the so-called *new ways of working* in 2015; a presentation of the Environment Act (2016) which sets the principle of SMNR and the Natural Resources Policy will follow, so as to provide the reader with understanding of the legislative framework underpinning the case studies investigated in this research.

4.1.1 The Well-being of Future Generations Act (Wales) 2015 (WBFGA)

Wales' commitment to the principle of sustainable development was integral to the call for devolution: the Government of Wales Act from 1998, with which Wales established its own sub-national government within the UK, introduced a constitutional duty with respect to sustainable development (section 121). This was reaffirmed in the Government of Wales Act 2006, which makes provision (section 79, part 2), for the Welsh Government to pursue the principle of sustainable development (Jenkins, 2018, p. 405). The road towards the WBFGA is nicely described by Jane Davidson in her book "#futuregen. Lessons from a Small Country" published in 2020. Davidson was the Welsh Assembly Minister for Education, and subsequently the Minister for the Environment, Sustainability and Housing in the Welsh Government, from 2000 to 2011. During her ministerial tenure she led the way in pushing to create an *ad hoc* legislation to make sustainable development the 'central organising principle' of the institutions of Wales.

The WBFGA represents Wales most progressive piece of legislation in terms of institutional promotion of the cultural, environmental, social and economic well-being of Wales. At the core of the Act there is a "well-being duty" on all public bodies of Wales, according to which they must 'carry out the principle of sustainable development': "the body must act in a manner which seeks to ensure that the needs of the present are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (National Assembly for Wales, 2015, p. 5). As noted by Davies (2016, p. 47) however, this is not a duty "to achieve" but rather a duty "to endeavour to achieve", suggesting that the body exercises "its best endeavours to bring something about without necessarily being able to do so". The fundamental steps for a public body to comply with its duty are: a) to set and publish its own 'wellbeing goals', in line

with the national ones, set by the Act; and b) to take "all reasonable steps (in exercising its functions) to meet those objectives" (National Assembly for Wales, 2015, p. 5). Davies (2016), as well as Jenkins (2018) stress the lack of explanation of what is meant by the expression "all the reasonable steps". The lack of clarity around the meaning of this and others key principles of the Welsh legislation is deemed to reduce the levels of workability and transparency of the Act itself (Davies, 2016, p. 50).

The Act established a Future Generation Commissioner "the guardian for the interests of the future generations in Wales"(Welsh Government, 2015, p. 13),- the "watchdog" as it has been labelled - who supports the public bodies required to deliver against the *well-being duty*. The office of the Commissioner mainly advises, undertakes research, encourages and promotes work around the well-being objectives. It also reviews and reports to the Senedd, on a four-year cycle, about the progress and improvements made by public bodies during that period (Welsh Government, 2015).

4.1.2 The Five Ways of Working or the New Ways of Working

The WBFG Act suggests that public bodies should carry out sustainable development through five ways, commonly referred to as the five '*new ways of workin*g' (National Assembly for Wales, 2015, p. 5); namely:

1- LONG-TERM: this implies that while trying to satisfy short term needs, public bodies must not compromise the ability to meet more long-term needs, "especially where things done to meet short term needs may have detrimental long-term effect*;"*

2- INTEGRATION: To do so, the Act stimulates joined-up thinking, and asks public bodies to take an integrated approach to the formulation and implementation of their objectives. This includes being aware of how they may impact on the national objectives, and on other public body's ones.

3-INVOLVEMENT: The Act encourages public bodies to be proactive in creating links and involving other bodies and/or persons who have an interest in achieving the wellbeing goals. Special attention is reserved to "ensuring those persons reflect the diversity of the population" which the body serves.

4-COLLABORATION: stronger links and connections across and within bodies and organisations support an overarching collaborative attitude to assist each other in the achievement of both specific and national wellbeing objectives, together.

5- PREVENTION: finally, in pursuing the principle of sustainable development and thus theirs and others' wellbeing objectives, public bodies need to "prevent problems occurring or getting worse".

These five ways of working constitute the statutory procedure underpinning the endeavours of public bodies to achieve their well-being objectives, and ultimately contribute to the sustainable development of Wales (i.e., the achievement of its national wellbeing goals).
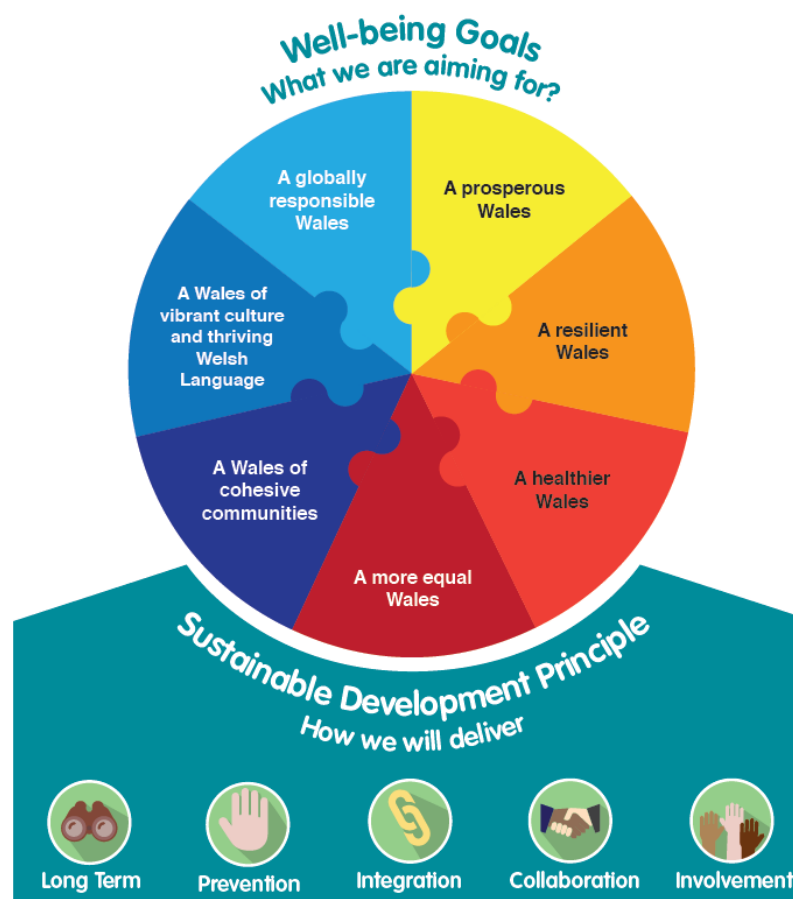
Figure 4 - *The Wellbeing Goals and the New Five Ways of Working. Source: Welsh Government (2015)*

4.1.3 Environment (Wales) Act 2016 and the Sustainable Management of the Natural Resources (SMNR) principle

The wellbeing goals have been embedded in the Environment (Wales) Act from 2016, and 'translated' in to nine principles of SMNR (represented in Figure 5). The first part of the Environment Act (National Assembly for Wales, 2016, p. 2) includes the explanation of the concept of SMNR:

"(1) In this Part, "sustainable management of natural resources" means—

> (a) using natural resources in a way and at a rate that promotes achievement of the objective in subsection (2),
>
> (b) taking other action that promotes achievement of that objective, and
>
> (c) not taking action that hinders achievement of that objective.

(2) The objective is to maintain and enhance the resilience of ecosystems and the benefits they provide and, in so doing—

> (a) meet the needs of present generations of people without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs, and
>
> b) contribute to the achievement of the well-being goals in section 4 of the Well- being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015."

Principles of sustainable management of natural resources		
	Adaptive management	manage adaptively by planning, monitoring, reviewing and where appropriate, changing action
	Scale	consider the appropriate spatial scale for action
	Collaboration and engagement	promote and engage in collaboration and cooperation
	Public Participation	make appropriate arrangements for public participation in decision-making
	Evidence	take account of all relevant evidence, and gather evidence in respect of uncertainties
	Multiple benefits	take account of the benefits and intrinsic value of natural resources and ecosystems
	Long term	take account of the short, medium and long term consequences of actions
	Preventative action	take action to prevent significant damage to ecosystems
	Building resilience	take account of the resilience of ecosystems, in particular the following aspects: (I) diversity between and within ecosystems; (II) the connections between and within ecosystems; (III) the scale of ecosystems; (IV) the condition of ecosystems (including their structure and functioning); (V) the adaptability of ecosystems

Figure 5 - Principles of the Sustainable Management of the Natural Resources. Source: Welsh Government

The Act makes provisions for a strategic national policy framework to implement the statutory principles listed, which includes the State of Natural Resources Report (SoNaRR), a National Natural Resources Policy (NRP) and the Area Statements (AS). Moreover, it provides the Natural Resources Body for Wales (NRW) with statutory powers to: "(a) pursue sustainable management of natural resources in relation to Wales, and (b) apply the principles of sustainable management of natural resources, in the exercise of its functions, so far as consistent with their proper exercise"(National Assembly for Wales, 2016, p. 3).

NRW is the largest WG sponsored body, and a relatively new organisation, officially established in 2013. It is the result of a merge of three different pre-existing organisations:

Countryside Council for Wales (the nature conservation body for Wales), the Forestry Commission Wales and the Environment Agency Wales. The role of NRW is multifaceted, it being simultaneously an "adviser, partner, enabler and educator" as well as "manager, regulator and operator". It engages with all stakeholders - from public, private, to third and voluntary sectors - involved with NRM. It also acts 'unofficially' as an interface, as a link, between central government and the people of Wales, with regards to implementing and delivering SMNR.

Section 6 of the Act establishes a "Biodiversity and resilience duty" to all public authorities: they "must seek to maintain and enhance biodiversity in the exercise of functions in relation to Wales, and in so doing promoting the resilience of ecosystems" (National Assembly for Wales, 2016, p. 3). This includes the publication of a so-called biodiversity report every three years (although this is not a statutory requirement) (Wiseall & Orford, 2019).

Thus far, two SoNaRR reports have been published; from the first in 2016, the second in 2020. The SoNaRR reports are considered among the most important and critical pieces of evidence to support the restoration of Wales' natural resources and are used to inform the strategic policy framework of which the Area Statements and the NRP are part. The current SoNaRR (2020) is clear about the need to move the focus of analysis and action from incentives and regulations around singular issues such as biodiversity loss, to include "a range of approaches, taking an ecosystem, economic, social and cultural focus." (Natural Resources Wales, 2020, p. 23). The report stresses the importance of integrated working that includes public, private and third sector actors: to achieve "transformative change Wales needs to trial ideas, launch experiments and support innovation." (Ibid, p.24). Such an approach is deemed to differ from the "traditional one": "There has been a focus on the ecosystem sphere, with direct management of land and sea, and the economic sphere, involving the regulation of economic activity. Responding to the nature and climate emergencies needs to offer something more than this traditional approach" (Natural Resources Wales, 2020, p. 23).

The Area Statements are, in effect, "place-based natural resource reports" (Wiseall & Orford, 2019, p. 11). Section 11 of the Environment Act establishes that they must contain information about the natural resources of the area; the benefits provided; the challenges and priorities for SMNR and must be informed by the latest SoNaRR. NRW is required to

explain how it is going to tackle such priorities and challenges, clarifying which other public bodies it will work with to address them. In 2020, the first round of Area Statements was released: there are six "operational areas" plus one dedicated to the marine environment, namely, North-East Wales, Northwest Wales, Mid Wales, South East Wales, South Central Wales, South West Wales and the single Marine area.

4.1.4 The Natural Resources Policy (2017)

Section 9 of the Environment Act make provisions for the preparation, publication and implementation of a national natural resources policy (NRP). Its main aim is to identify key *priorities, risks and opportunities* for SMNR, which must include actions in relation to climate change and biodiversity (National Assembly for Wales, 2016, p. 6). Differently from the WBFG and Environment Acts, the NRP is intended to be directly relevant for all the stakeholders including farmers, communities, third sector, academic institutions and society as whole. The NRP highlights the importance of the benefits that humans get from Nature in accordance with the Millennium Ecosystems Assessment (2005): Provisioning, Cultural, Regulating and Supporting services. Building greater resilience within ecosystems to ensure that the multiple benefits are delivered for present and future generations in Wales is at the core of this and the other pieces of law as discussed above. This is deemed to be achievable only if the "historic focus on addressing issues in isolation" (Welsh Government, 2017a, p. 4) is replaced and substituted with a joined-up, systemic approach based on collaboration across and within sectors – as established by the five *new ways of working*.

Resource and energy efficiency, conceived in a circular economy approach to 'green growth', are amongst the opportunities set by the NRP. Other points of focus include the potential of natural resources to support more healthy, active and cohesive, as well *successful* and *sustainable,* communities. These sections focus on the importance of outdoor recreation for tourism, but also to nurture the sense of connection to landscapes as fundamental part of (Welsh) culture and identity. A point is also made about inequality and poverty having an impact on access to green spaces, thereby further diminishing the opportunities for people to keep healthy and active. It is recognised that green spaces contribute towards improving social capital, community cohesion, and reducing antisocial

behaviour. As mentioned, Wales' political commitment to sustainable development dates back some 22 years to devolution. Its latest efforts seem to target the challenges of reconciling environmental protection and the priority to tackle social justice (Jenkins, 2018, p. 406).

The benefits and opportunities coming from natural resources are also highlighted in the wider "Prosperity for All" national strategy of WG: "We will build prosperity in a way that supports and sustains Wales' stunning natural environment (...) Our aim is to realise the economic opportunities of Wales' natural resources, whilst building their resilience to support future generations" (Welsh Government, 2017b, p. 10). The National Strategy sets out four key themes built around the national well-being goals presented above: "Healthy and Active", "Prosperous and Secure", "Ambitious and Learning", "United and Connected". The management of natural resources in Wales is thus very much entangled with a neoliberal approach that stresses the value of nature for its economic potential to boost a "sustainable growth" and rural (economic) development. An example of this is the focus on the monetary value of natural resources in relation to their contribution to food supply chains, recreational services, tourism and carbon sequestration, which is highlighted at the very beginning of the NRP document.
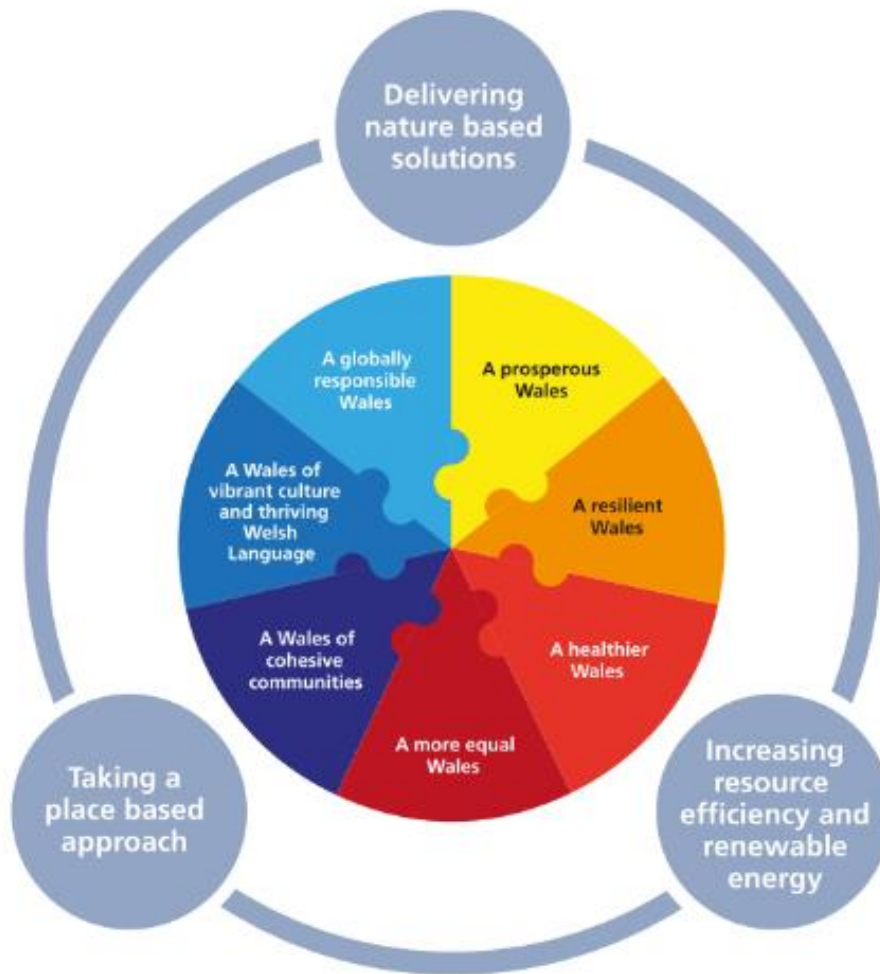
Figure 6 - *The Wellbeing Goals and the Three National Priorities set by the NRP (2017). Source: Welsh Government*

4.2 The Sustainable Management Scheme (SMS)

The Sustainable Management Scheme delivers under sub-Measure 16.5 of the Welsh Government Rural Communities - Rural Development Programme 2014-2020. It aims to support collaborative landscape-scale projects that will improve natural resources in a way that delivers benefits to farm and rural businesses and communities. Moreover, it looks specifically at improving the *resilience* of such subjects to the impacts of climate change. The SMS is also intended to contribute to the European Union's overarching rural development policy, aimed 'to meet the challenges faced by our rural areas, and unlocking their potential' (Welsh Government, 2018, pp. 3–5).

The SMS scheme includes around 44 projects that have been founded in different so-called funding "windows". The very first window opened in 2015 and since then every 6 months there has been a new window opening for more applications to be considered for funding. The supposedly non-prescriptive nature of the SMS scheme allowed the group and partnerships applying for it to establish their own goals and objectives in line with the nine principles included in the SMNR approach and the *new ways of working*. At the core of the funding scheme is the aim of providing the opportunity to collaboratively tackling the issues that currently undermine the achievement of the SMNR principles, with particular interest to contribute towards the well-being goal "a Resilient Wales".

Eligible activities for funding include (Welsh Government, 2018, p. 7-8):

- Development and co-ordination of collaborative groups and management of projects, aimed at improving ecosystem services and mitigation of and adaptation of climate change;

- Communication and dissemination of project approaches, lessons and outcomes;

- Research, technical advice and feasibility studies (such as technical assessment conducted within collaborative project);

- Monitoring and Evaluation – activities to demonstrate the outcomes of the collaborative actions.

The activities that are not eligible for funding are direct payments to landowners or farmers to provide capital works on their own land or for ongoing land management activities (Ibid.)

4.3 Sustainable Futures Development Programme of Welsh Government

The challenges faced by public sector and publicly funded actors in adapting to the new legislative framework introduced in the last 6 years, is at the core of this doctoral research project. Notably, my research began just a year after the establishment of the Environment (Wales) Act, and the same year the NRP was enacted, in 2017. Consequently, although the policy framework was in place, from an implementation and delivery perspective there was - and in many respects still is - a lot of uncertainty for WG and NRW officers is required by way of enactment. Coinciding with the ratification of the new legislation, an ongoing and internal process of transformation at the organisational level had also been initiated within WG, specifically targeting behavioural change among civil servants, including top level senior

management, to support them navigating the uncertainty and complexity of this *new way of working*. The WG's Sustainable Futures Development Programme, for example, which began in May 2012, had reportedly supported a third of all WG's civil servants in embracing and integrating the new ways of working in their everyday work (Reynolds 2015). According to Diana Reynolds (Sustainable Futures Development Manager at WG) (2015), the programme aims to push for organisational behavioural change working around four assumptions as:

1) Everything is systemic;
2) Everyone has a role to play;
3) Change me not you;
4) Change can start anywhere

Through providing and encouraging coaching, co-production, appreciative inquiries, action-learning sets, and space for reflection, this on-going programme intends to support civil servants to work together and learn to tackle policy and delivery challenges collaboratively and systemically. The theoretical underpinnings, as explained by Reynolds (2015) are to be found in Otto Scharmer's Theory U, an awareness-based method for systems' change, that blends insights from action research and organisational learnings, design thinking, mindfulness, cognition science, and civil society movements and experience (Scharmer, 2018). The focus of the programme is thus on "increasing connections" and "building relationships" throughout the process of delivery rather than on policy development. In 2015 Reynolds reported that there has been "enthusiasm for change" and "deeply hidden positive values" had emerged thanks to this programme, that have created space for personal transformative journeys. Moreover, she discussed the importance of creating space for reflecting on "the elements of self, left at the door". As she explained, usually officers go into work only presenting their rational heads – something which Theory U and the approaches along this tradition highly challenge as one of the greatest barriers for transformative and holistic change.

The programme is organised around the *new ways of working:* a document from the Academi Wales (the organisation that facilitates this programme) reported in the Annex of this manuscript, summaries the change expected to happen within WG for each of the *five ways of working,* though a description of "before" and "after". For instance, the programme aims to change the perception that officers have of Prevention: it should change from being perceived

as a matter of problems, intervention and risk documentation for which they are the ones solely responsible, to be seen as a matter of connecting people and places, interdependency between citizens, and the public sector, where there is space for experimentation and ownership of collective solutions. Moreover, an important element such Integration should not be seen any more as a matter of silo working, transacting and measuring. Instead, the programme aims at developing a sense of collegiate responsibility, gifting and contributing time, effort and skills, by investing also one's own emotional capital. Finally, the importance of Collaboration as a matter of creativity and play, where mistakes are just one way of learning, leadership happens all over the places and process is there to support everyone to achieve their desired outcomes, by means of trying, failing and trying again.

Although this PhD has not directly engaged with the Sustainable Futures Development Programme at the WG, it has benefitted from the seeds sown by the programme. More specifically, the programme has constituted a solid and wide base – in 2015 already more than one third of WG civil servants (approximately 5000 in total) had been involved in it (Reynolds, 2015, 2019) – upon which building the arguments at the core of this research. The Programme shares with the structure of this PhD, a more reflexive and relational view on governance, albeit one rooted in a (partially) different epistemological grounds. This has contributed to the process of creating of a 'common ground' and of *caring* spaces for (collective) reflection and learning around alternative and "counter-hegemonic" meanings and interpretations of the important concepts and ideas promoted by the legislation.

4.4 The South Wales Valleys

The south Wales Valleys (henceforth 'the Valleys') are a typical example of a post-industrial landscape that has been struggling for 60 years to regenerate and restore itself. They were sparsely populated until mid-1700s, when this part of Wales became central to the British economy for its production of iron. However, what signed the history of the Valleys up until today was the discovery of coal and the transformation of these landscapes into vast and deep coalfields, in the second half of the 1800s. Whilst still in 1959 the coalfield of the Valleys employed 93.000 people (spread in the 141 collieries owned by the National Coal Board authority), only 10 years later, in 1969, the number of employed people had dropped to 40.000, with by then only 55 collieries left (Johnes, 2012, p. 247).

Since the pits started to close, as Johnes (2012) explains: "By the 1970s, social scientists could talk of life in the Valleys being *unstructured* and *purposeless* without the solidarity of close-knit places of living, play and worship" (2012, p. 122, emphasis added). Prior to the gradual closure of the biggest collieries, the Valleys communities were "strong communities with a semi-rural outlook" (2012, p.122). Chapels, unions and political organisations played a key role in contributing to shape "a distinctive way of life and culture" (ibid.). From the 1940s, which have been defined as "the last authentic years of that distinctive culture" (Smith, 1999, p. 163), a gradual sense of decline and uncertainty became pervasive in these areas. 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, in terms of employment opportunities (i.e. new businesses or industries). Delocalisation of jobs, therefore, "undermined the physical, social and emotional unity of the urban working-class communities" (Johnes, 2012, p.122).

Johnes (2012) provides an interesting interpretation of the situation of Wales in the second half of the 1900s. He explains that people could move up the social ladder through education, better wages, housing and resulting consumerism "ending the old idea of a working class united by poverty" (p. 122). Therefore:

> "Poverty had created the communal and tight-knit culture of the working class, and it was affluence that was killing it, even if only by driving people away in search of it or making them resentful of what they had not got" (2012, p. 131).

The heavy reliance of the Welsh economy and society on public funding and benefits since the beginning of the decline of the coal mines, around the 1960s, resulted in an estimated two-thirds of the 200.000 manufacturing jobs in South Wales in that period having been directly helped by the UK government policy (Johnes 2012, p. 250). In fact, when the United Kingdom entered the European Economic Community in 1973, Wales was the poorest part of the UK (Johnes, 2009, p. 251), and the Valleys (together with West Wales) became one of the poorest regions in Europe.

In the period 2014-2021 the Valleys received €2.01 billion of funding, being categorised as a 'less-developed' region.[5] Through Figure 11 (elaborated by Bird and Phillips, 2018) depicts this situation, with the Valleys and West Wales being amongst the most deprived region in all Europe. In per capita terms, prior to the EU exit, West Wales and The Valleys received around €135 per person per year from structural funds. In comparison East Wales received around €50 per person per year, while the UK average was around €24 per person per year (Bird & Phillips, 2018, p. 7).
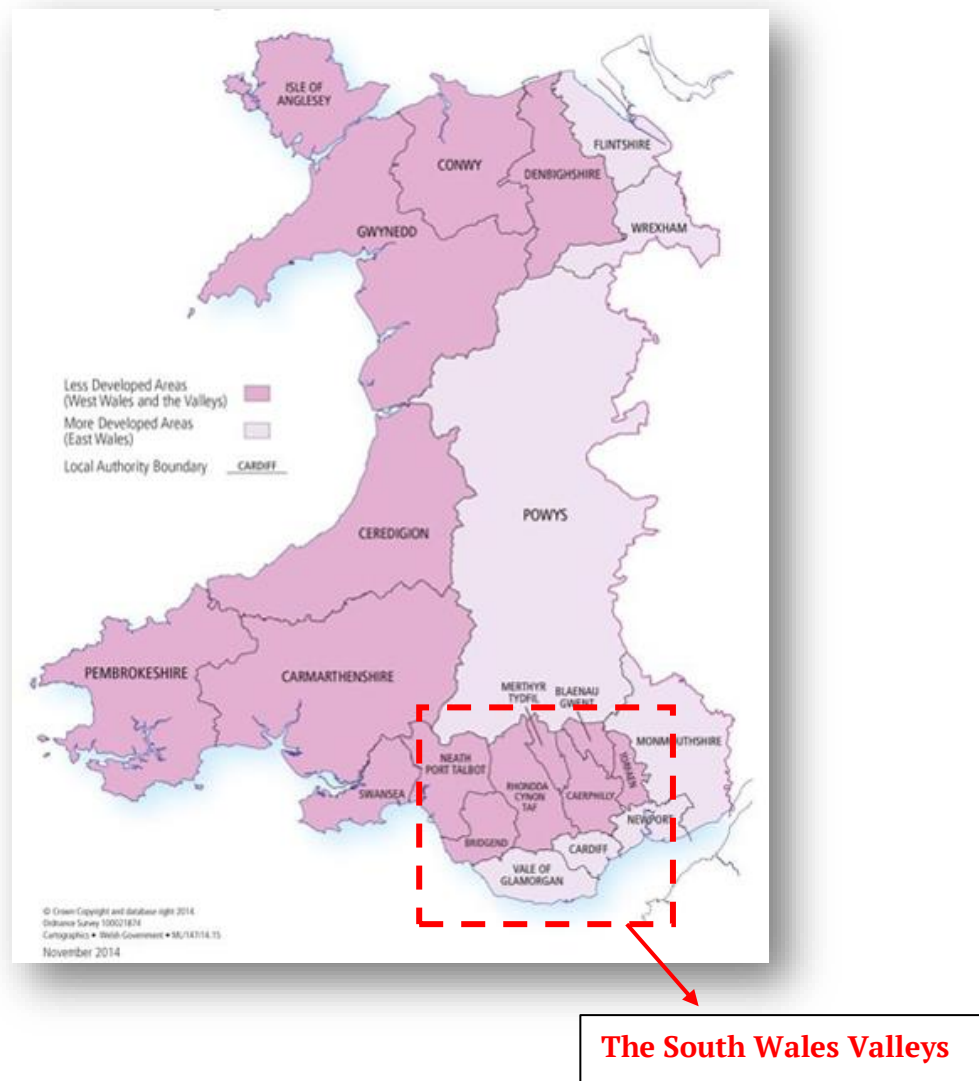
Figure 7 – Regions of Wales benefitting from EU Structural Funds (2014-2020). Author's elaboration of Welsh Government's original map, available at South East Wales Regional Engagement Team (sewales-ret.co.uk)

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[5] Regions with GDP per capita below 75% of the EU average are designated as 'less developed regions' and are receiving 52% of total structural funds in the current MFF period covering the period 2014–2020. West Wales and The Valleys is included in this category (Bird & Phillips, 2018, p. 4).

The history of the Valleys has been further dramatically marked by one event in particular: the Aberfan disaster of 1966. 144 people, of which 116 being under 12 years old, were killed due to the catastrophic collapse of a colliery spoil tip. One of the communities involved in Project Skyline (Strand 1) is Ynysowen, which was directly impacted by the Aberfan disaster. After the disaster in 1966, a fund was set up to help the village: it gathered £1.75 million (which equals £ 24.4 million at 2008 prices (Johnes, 2012, p.246)). Moreover, the government of the UK was then forced to make further substantive contribution to removing the remaining tips in the village, whose residents were angered and exasperated by the ineptitude and guilty negligence of the National Coal Board Authority. In fact, although the inquiry declared that the disaster had been man-made, caused by the negligence of those in charge to keep it under control, "nobody was persecuted, dismissed, or demoted" (Johnes, 2012, p. 246). Safety, thus, became a "key driving force for change", such that between 1966 and 1991:

> "£170 million was spent on the reclamation of 17,000 acres of derelict industrial land for both new employment and public amenities. It was a slow process (...) and many valleys literally became green again" (Johnes 2012, p. 305).

A recent report from WG entitled "Fifty Years of Regeneration in the Valleys-What Can We Learn?" states that amongst the main British coalfields, the SW coalfield - i.e. the Valleys - is lagging behind in terms of regeneration, due to four main phenomena (Welsh Government, 2019, p. 3):

1. Low skilled workforce
2. Weak economic base and isolation
3. "Incapacity Benefit phenomenon"
4. Poor environment and housing stock

The report suggests, however, that there has been some improvement in all these four areas, especially skills levels are improving as well as health barriers are reducing. The same is claimed for the natural environment, partially thanks to regeneration programmes that have occurred in the Valleys for over 50 years, although "there is not enough evidence available to determine how much" (Welsh Government, 2019, p. 19). Nevertheless, the report ultimately suggests that, in terms of relative poverty, household income gaps between the Valleys and the rest of Wales and of the UK are still widening (Ibid.).

5. Methodology

This chapter discusses the research methodology and the methods deployed to carry out this research. The former refers to the wider epistemological approach to research and knowledge creation; the latter to the practical tools, strategies and processes used to gather, interpret and disseminate the data collected throughout the research process. In line with the approach chosen and described in the following sections, I use the first person and the past tense.

I began my data collection process with a loose structure in mind, in terms of specific methods, actions and strategies I would deploy. Notably, however, whilst the methodology of this research is one that gradually emerged throughout my fieldwork - as a constant dialogue between theory and practice, and through an iterative cycle of action and reflection - the epistemological assumptions and values I wanted to draw upon to underpin and guide my research have always been quite clear. Accordingly, section 5.1 presents the epistemological and theoretical assumptions underpinning the research methodology; section 5.2 encompasses issues of positionality and reflexivity and extends to discussing issues related to my multiple roles in transdisciplinary and participatory-inspired research. Section 5.3 then introduces the three interconnected strands of fieldwork conducted. In introducing the three strands of fieldwork, I also provide a detailed explanation of the process of data collection in each strand. The chapter ends with section 5.4, which discusses the data analysis and addresses ethics issues.

5.1 Epistemological Underpinnings of the methodological approach

The "world is largely messy" (Law, 2007, p. 595), and there is need to reduce the obsession for specificity, clarity and the definite in connection with research methods. In his "post-structural detour", Law (2007) talks about the fact that there are many methods and many practices that can lead one to assume that there are manifold (at times overlapping), "out-there-nesses" as well as "in-there-nesses". The (political) attitude to deny recognition and acceptance of such complexity, the vague, and the multiple, characteristics of "realities" has been reinforced by the idea that the problem is about "technical flaws and failings, signs of methodological inadequacy" (Law, 2007, p. 603). Instead:

> "Realities are not flat. They are not consistent, coherent and definite. Our research methods necessarily fail. Aporias are ubiquitous. But it is time to move on from the

long rear-guard action which insists that reality is definite and singular"(Law, 2007, p. 606).

Fostering methodological pluralism is, therefore, part of a much bigger effort aimed at transforming the wider scientific thinking, rather than a mere technicality. An essential first step identified by some critical post-structuralist and feminist scholars (e.g., Doolittle, 2015; Nightingale, 2003; Rocheleau, 2008) is recognising that data collected through different methods (i.e. controlled experiments as well as storytelling or interviews) have to be considered equally valid. This taps into two main arguments, respectively from an epistemological and ontological point of view. First, different methods and approaches are needed to answer different questions. The way knowledge is produced, shaped and diffused is a relational process, which depends on the type of questions we are trying to address. Second, following the argument of post-structuralists and post-modernists, there is no one truth, one reality, that needs to be investigated, unveiled or discovered: knowledge is "situated", arising in specific circumstances (e.g.(Iniesta-Arandia et al., 2016; Mehta, 2016; Newton, Franklin, Middleton, & Marsden, 2012; Nightingale, 2003; Rocheleau, 2008; Rose, 1997).

 Elaborated by Donna Haraway (1991), the concept of "partial" or "situated" knowledge refers to the impossibility to achieve a complete and defined analysis of "the reality" through research, because "there is no one truth out there to be uncovered"(Nightingale, 2003, p. 77). This means that any type of knowledge is partial and strictly connected to the place and the context within which it is created. This, thus, deconstructs claims of universality, neutrality and objectivity supported by part of the academic (scientific) world (Haraway, 1991; Rose, 1997).

PAR and within it, TDR, are suitable methodological approaches to explore the "messy" and entangled nature of people's realities, knowledges and perspectives in a more inclusive way. Section 5.1.1 and 5.1.2 will thus delineate the principles and practices of these umbrella frameworks, while 5.1.4 and 5.1.5 respectively the Formative Accompanying Research (FAR) and Embodied Research approaches, highlighting the fact that these two approaches together with PAR and TDR almost naturally converge under the overarching and multifaceted *ethics of care*, which underpins the whole research practice presented and analysed in this manuscript - what Moriggi (2021, p. 36) defines the "moral compass" of the researcher.

5.1.1 Participatory Action Research (PAR)

PAR has been defined as "collaborative process of research, education and action explicitly oriented towards social transformation" (Kindon, Pain, & Kesby, 2007, p. 9). More specifically, PAR stems from the acknowledgement that a plurality of forms of knowledges and ways of knowing have been systematically neglected and oppressed in different places and times. PAR, as Action Research and Action Learning, represent:

> "A participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes [...] in the pursuit of practical issues of concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and communities" (Peter Reason & Bradbury, 2006, p. 1).

Kindon et al (2007) suggests that generally what is considered to distinguish PAR from Action Research is that the former presents a strong emphasis on learning in order to strengthen the voices and power of (marginalised) people, while the latter focuses on social action, change and policy reform. However, the same authors consider "the politics of the process itself" as the main difference between these approaches (Kindon et al., 2007, p. 11). Besides informing a more general social action, PAR conceives research as a political and democratic commitment within a collaborative and participatory process, aimed at giving voice and power to those historically marginalised in the process of knowledge production. Therefore, a PAR approach is supposed to have first and foremost a transformative and empowering effect on the participants themselves, enabling them to inform a wider change in society.

PAR inspired approaches hold the relationship between people and places at the core of the enquiry (Pain, Kesby, & Kindon, 2007). The activities of defining, verbalizing or just thinking and reflecting upon our relations with nature and with the other-than-humans, might represent something that people do not usually engage with, for a variety of reasons, including unequal power relations that inhibit their capacities (or *capabilities* (Sen, 1999)). Having and creating space for these (possibly conflictual) interactions and reflections is fundamental to create shared understanding and practices of SMNR that reflect people's needs and aspirations. However, the process of depoliticization and neglect of unequal power relations – see section 2.2- have strategically and systematically eluded conflicts and diversity, not only in the policy-making process, but first and foremost in the knowledge production system. PAR has been promoted as a way to remedy these power inequities

through strengthening "voice, organisation and action of the marginalised and oppressed" (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2015, p. 465). Therefore, the role of PAR "is to enable people to empower themselves through the construction of their own knowledge, in a process of action and reflection, or "coscientization", to use Freire's term" (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2015, p. 469).

Engaging "stakeholders" or actors and the researcher in this "epistemological" encounter and exchange in a PAR process thus represents "a counterhegemonic approach to knowledge production" (Kindon et al., 2007, p. 9). Here, the "stakeholders" with the facilitating role of researchers, can achieve an enriched understanding of their own position regarding the way they want to approach and deal with the natural resources, according to their needs, values and beliefs (Stringer, 2014). Indeed, power as interpreted by Foucault, always and directly implies knowledge, and knowledge constitutes power relations (Foucault, 1977). Power is embedded in institutions, discourses and practices that influence and/or constrain the extent and the possibility of one's action (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2015; Stringer, 2014). Therefore, shaping the boundaries of these constraints (i.e., bringing about change in formal and informal institutions, practices and discourses) can be interpreted both as a right[6] and a form of responsibility of the agent (Sen 1999). Agents should be able and willing to take part in decisions about the way they and others live (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006): "[an] agent is someone who acts and brings about change, and whose achievements can be judged in terms of her own values and objectives, whether or not we assess these in terms of some external criteria as well"(Sen, 1999, p. 19).

Responsibility and accountability of both researcher and participants, throughout the entire research process, brings into focus action research as a "living theory" approach. This entails that researcher and participants have the same status of learners and experimenters in the knowledge sharing and production processes (Bryman, 2016; Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995; Kindon et al., 2007). This also implies a commitment to these processes, and to the intrinsic justness and rationality of putting them in place. PAR can be conceived as an "ethical praxis of *care*" (Cahill, 2007a, p. 362). Each participant (first and foremost the researcher) holds full responsibility and accountability towards the others, recognising that she exerts an

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[6] Foucault talks about "the right to rediscover what one is and all that one can be" (1979, p. 145)

important influence on the learning processes of others, being this a mutual and reciprocal learning process (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006).

The acknowledgement of this influence is rooted in the acceptance of the responsibility that the self bears for the present, as well as towards future generations, and the ethical commitment towards the change we want to trigger, both at a personal and at social level (Cahill, 2007a; Stringer, 2014). PAR is thus a twofold learning and transformative journey, which operates at two levels (at least): it concerns both "what is going on out there" and "what is going on in here". Through critically encouraging and prompting a reflexive research process, PAR is thus also about embarking upon a self-transformative learning process. Inspired by feminist approaches, participatory research methodology aligns research with a personal journey. As argued by Cahill (2007b), the intimate connection between practice and theory in everyday life underpins a transformative politics such as feminism. This transformative politics stems from the personal experience, as a way of understanding socio-spatial relations and creating new ways of being through alternative narratives and discourses. This process necessarily entails transformation, change and discomfort:

> "Participatory action research is like a dance. You must listen to the music to feel the beat and get the rhythm, to sway and move with your partners [...] You must listen to yourself. Pay attention to the voice within you that signals something's not right here. Pay attention to your annoyances and discomforts. Periodically revisit your touchstone - what do I believe? Are my action choices congruent with my beliefs?" (Maguire, 1987, p. xvii)

PAR, therefore, holds at its core the importance of a collective and reciprocal *listening* "to the music, to feel the beat and get the rhythm, to sway and move with your partners" (Ibid.), which in turn enables constant adjusting and shaping to meet the needs and the aspirations of those involved. By practicing deep listening (inwards and outwards), the researchers and the participants nurture a sense of reciprocity, and can get moved by a sense of collective (and relational) responsibility, both central to an *ethics of care,* and more specifically to a caring-*with* approach. This entails starting from "where people are, not where someone else thinks they are or ought to be" (Stringer, 2014, p. 21).

5.1.2 Transdisciplinary Research

Participatory approaches belong to the broader category of problem- and solution-oriented approaches to research which adhere to mutual learning between academic and extra-academic expertise. This includes a variety of practices, such as community-based, participatory, transdisciplinary, co-creative etc. (Lang et al., 2012; Scholz & Steiner, 2015). These collaborative practices stem from the need for a variety of inputs (knowledge and experience, as well as values, goals and visions) coming from the wide range of stakeholders affected by complex and wicked problems occurring within socio-ecological systems. In turn, this is deemed to produce "socially robust knowledge" (Scholz & Steiner, 2015, p. 528) and to increase legitimacy, ownership and accountability both in terms of framing the problems and co-creation of solutions (Lang et al., 2012; Scholz & Steiner, 2015; Thompson, Owen, Lindsay, Leonard, & Cronin, 2017; Westberg & Polk, 2016).

The co-funded nature of my research created room and opportunity to foster a transdisciplinary approach since the very beginning of the project. Thus, it was possible to bring into dialogue both scientific and extra-scientific expertise and knowledge (Popa, Guillermin, & Dedeurwaerdere, 2015), and ensure that that dialogue could inform the directions of the whole research. This made knowledge co-production and problem-solving a collective endeavour that "transcends[ed] disciplinary, academic, and epistemic boundaries" (Thompson et al., 2017, p. 30). "Transdisciplinarity" is, accordingly, here conceived as Lang et al (2012, p. 26) suggest:

> "Transdisciplinarity is a reflexive, integrative, method-driven scientific principle aiming at the solution or transition of societal problems and concurrently of related scientific problems by differentiating and integrating knowledge from various scientific and societal bodies of knowledge."

Reflecting on the background assumptions, values and beliefs underpinning the framing and tackling of sustainability issues (such as SMNR, in the case of this research), fosters the acknowledgement of the researcher as an individual having a "normative agenda focused on intervention and change" (Popa et al., 2015, p. 46). However, as suggested by Popa et al, all too often when applied to a transdisciplinary approach:

"The importance of a reflexive questioning of values, background assumptions and normative orientations of various approaches to sustainability in transdisciplinary research is not sufficiently acknowledged" (2015, p. 46).

The value-laden nature of scientific knowledge production, as well as its potential for wider societal relevance, is recognised and supported in transdisciplinary contexts (Thompson et al., 2017). To avoid that 'reflexive practices' become the new "tick-the-box" exercise of public policy, though, it is important that they maintain their capacity to challenge and transform the status quo and taken-for-granted assumptions (i.e., triggering cultural transformations). Specifically, a pragmatic perspective on reflexivity, as elaborated by Popa et al (2015) can be of interest here. A pragmatic turn conceives reflexivity as a creative, collaborative and open-ended process of co-production of new meanings and understandings around socio-ecological sustainability issues. It constitutes a process of questioning and joint reframing of individual and collective values, beliefs and assumptions, of which researchers are an integral part. In this sense, transdisciplinary working becomes a praxis based on collaborative learning and experimentation, that aims at creating an epistemic community for the co-production of knowledge and collective problem-solving; this, in turn allows a *meaning-making process* to occur.

Popa et al (2015) propose a differentiation between more transformational VS descriptive-analytical approaches to pragmatic reflexivity in transdisciplinary research:

"In its descriptive-analytical mode, reflexivity calls for a critical acknowledgement of the values, assumptions, as well as institutional and power structures that shape the current epistemological model and the organization of science. In its transformative mode, reflexivity calls for building a shared normative vision which can challenge dominant assumptions and power structures, and guide social change" (Popa et al., 2015, p. 54).

Delving further into the reasoning behind this differentiation does not fit into the scope of this thesis. However, the approach pursued in this study merges these two aspects of reflexivity: on one hand, I engaged with stakeholders in critically acknowledging the diverse set of assumptions, values and (unequal) power structures underpinning the concept and practice of SMNR. On the other, I contributed to the creation of *caring* spaces where to

challenge hegemonic and often apolitical approaches, in favour of the generation of new and alternative meanings of SMNR, through a caring-*with* lens. The following section digs deeper into the importance of reflexivity in PAR-inspired and TDR approaches.

5.1.3. Reflexivity and Positionality of the researcher

As "academic work is situated, political and partial" (Nightingale, 2003, p. 78), thus, positionality and power relations should be tackled in research as issues of utmost importance. Positioning is "the key practice grounding knowledge" (Haraway, 1991, p. 193), given that a specific type of knowledge is produced and enabled by a specific position. "Siting is intimately involved in sighting' (Rose, 1997, p. 308), thus the researcher (as everyone else) sees the world and "the reality" from a pre-determined perspective. Conceiving knowledge as partial, political and situated leads the discussion towards the next step: understanding how to methodologically tackle issues of positionality and power in research. Reflexivity has been considered "the strategy for situating knowledge" (Rose, 1997, p. 306). Specifically, as Finlay suggests:

> "Reflexivity can be defined as thoughtful, conscious self-awareness. Reflexive analysis in research encompasses continual evaluation of subjective responses, intersubjective dynamics, and the research process itself. It involves a shift in our understanding of data collection from something objective that is accomplished through detached scrutiny of "what I know and how I know it" to recognizing how we actively construct our knowledge" (2002, p. 532).

Reflexive approaches have been used by scholars, and especially, feminist researchers, to reveal the inequalities and elements of domination entangled in research processes (Naples, 2007, p. 552). According to Naples (2007), power is manifested throughout the research in diverse ways. First, in the relationship between the researcher and the researched, which is influenced by a variety of factors including (amongst others), class, nationality and race. The risk of exploiting the privileged position of the researcher is exemplified by the power to define their relationship and the potential to exploit the subjects of the research, as well as by "the power to construct the written account and therefore shape how research subjects are represented in the text"(Naples, 2007, p. 552).

A way to overcome the power inequalities, inevitably part of the process of research, is for the researcher to reflect actively on their research practice, in light of their ethical,

epistemological, moral and political stances. In my own case, the use of a field journal, for instance, was very beneficial to practice inward reflexivity, and record *ex post* reflections (and often frustrations) on the experiences happening in the field. Similarly, deep conversations with colleagues, supervisors and collaborators in the field, especially during the initial phases of the PhD, contributed to gradually improving my understanding of my own social location in relation to the research participants, and the contribution of my work, in terms of processes of knowledge co-production. As noted by Fonow and Cook (2005):

> "Reflexivity has also come to mean the way researchers consciously write themselves into the text, the audiences' reactions to and reflections on the meaning of the research, the social location of the researcher, and the analysis of disciplines as sites of knowledge production" (2005, p. 2219).

By making authority visible and shedding light on the research process, specifying and clarifying one's own position in it, reflexivity helps to look both "inward" to the identity of the researcher, and "outward", to a researcher's relation with the researched and the wider world (Rose, 1997, p. 309). Nevertheless, Rose (1997) argues that a "transparent" approach to reflexivity, i.e. conceiving power relations as a landscape within which the relation researcher-researched occurs, and which the researcher can get to understand through collective and self-reflection, is bound to fail (1997). In fact, researchers' positionality and understanding of the power landscape is not linear but mediated by a myriad of intersectional axes of social identity (for instance related to their gender, class, race, sexuality, and so on). This is to suggest that researchers' identities are complex, uncertain and situated, and that they do not exist in isolation (Gibson-Graham, 1994; Iniesta-Arandia et al., 2016; Newton et al., 2012; Rose, 1997). This makes "the vision of a transparently knowable self and world impossible" (1997, p. 314), leaving the researcher with a number of unresolved tensions and (internal) conflicts - as discussed further in the empirical chapters as well as in the conclusions of this manuscript.

Throughout this research, I often had the feeling of "performing" different identities, in different situations (Butler, 1990). Subjectivities and identities are embedded and contested, constructed and reconstructed, through people's practices, policies and actions in experiencing, creating and using environments (Mehta, 2016, p. 272). Being constantly exposed to "fluctuating identities" (Newton et al., 2012, p. 590), exploring differences,

conflicts and tensions, not as problems but rather as "spaces of conceptual and indeed political opportunities and negotiations" (Smith 1996 as cited by Rose 1997), was very important. This results in a process of "constitutive negotiation"(Rose, 1997, p. 316) between the researcher, the researched and the research itself. Within this negotiation, the reflexive journey is a fundamental part; an opportunity to reflect on "how one is inserted in grids of power relations and how that influences methods, interpretations and knowledge production"(Sultana, 2007, p. 276). This view opposes the idea of those who regard reflexivity as a "self-indulgent" approach to research, which does not really overcome the issues related to unbalanced power relations as it over-emphasises the researcher's position (Ali, 2015; Routledge & Derickson, 2015; Sultana, 2007).

The following section 5.1.4 introduces the FAR framework (Freeth, 2019; Freeth and Vilsmaier, 2020), which is a tool to navigate the 'fluctuating' positions, identities and roles of researchers specifically involved in transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary research projects.

5.1.4 Formative Accompanying Research (FAR) Framework to navigate positionality

I came across the Formative and Accompanying Research (FAR) and the Embodied Researcher (5.1.5) frameworks halfway through my journey. I integrated them into my frame of PAR and TDR, whose core principles have been guiding my research since day one. The Formative Accompanying Research (FAR) framework (Freeth 2019) is, in essence, "committed to promoting knowledge about collaboration while promoting the practice of collaboration" (Freeth & Vilsmaier, 2020, p. 58). At the core of the FAR approach lies a dynamic conception of the positionality of a (FAR) researcher: she can benefit from the proximity to her team or group, that allows her "to experience the inner workings" involved in doing collaborative work, but also from the opportunity to "move further away", to maintain an overview of the wider mechanisms of collaboration. The FAR framework is particularly relevant here in the discussion of strand 1 (Project Skyline, section 5.3.1) and strand 2 (transdisciplinary collaboration with WG and NRW, section 5.3.2) of my field research.

To navigate the blurring boundaries between the different roles that FAR researchers assume while working collaboratively in team or group settings, Freeth (2019) distinguishes between three roles - *scientific researcher, team member* and *intervener* - and three related research

orientations. The goal of the scientific researcher is learning *about* (the interdisciplinary team) and creating transferable knowledge; the team member learns *with* the team, alongside the team; finally, the intervener learns *for* the team to support the advancement in terms of research outcomes. Although the context to which I apply this framework is different to that in which it originated (see Freeth and Vilsmaier 2020), it nevertheless helps me explain and analyse "the idea of research positionality [as] constituted in movement, between outsider and insider roles" (Freeth, 2019, p. 54). Moreover, it supports such analysis especially in the context of cross-boundary collaborative research.

In understanding a researcher's positionality as a fluid, complex and dynamic process, Freeth and Vilsmaier (2020) identify three balancing acts and three related practices for negotiating the paradoxes implicit to each balancing act. These balancing acts are needed to navigate the tensions that necessarily arise when moving between being an insider and outsider of the team. They argue that these acts are "a continuum, and that all positions along this continuum are possible and appropriate at different time[s]" (2020, p. 62), with none of these positions existing independently, but only in relation to the others along the continuum.

 The first of such acts is balancing participation and observation, a well-documented tension described by a plethora of literature on ethnographic and participatory methodologies (e.g. Billo & Hiemstra, 2013; Cahill, 2007; Newton et al 2012). Freeth and Vilsmaier (2020) propose a first accompanying practice of "**dynamic proximity**" to balance this tension and with it the paradox of being both an insider and participant, as well as an outsider and observer, along the same continuum. Keeping a dynamic proximity allows the researcher to be close enough to see finer details, but also to be able to step back, to hold a system view and see the "whole-in-context" (Freeth & Vilsmaier, 2020, p. 62). By doing so, a dynamic proximity enables the researcher to provide the team (or group) with specific inputs for reflection and discussion. Finally, adopting dynamic proximity allows the researcher to be near enough "to perceive when the conditions are ripe for team-level learning", and distant enough "to avoid imposing a learning agenda" (Freeth & Vilsmaier, 2020, p. 63).

A FAR approach thus helps the researcher to see the "inner workings" and emotional labour of those involved in collaborative and interdisciplinary teams. Curiosity and care, the second balancing act introduced by Freeth and Vilsmaier (2020), sheds further light on the emotional labour involved when digging deeper into certain (personal) matters of a group, towards

which the researcher might be led by her curiosity. In fact, "curiosity and knowledge regarding the needs of an 'other' – human or not" (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2011, p. 98) are required for adequate care, which becomes "a doing necessary for significant relating" (Ibid). Recognising the interdependence of all beings, allows one to embrace the idea that "caring is not a romantic endeavour, nor an exclusive affair of motherly love, but a matter of earthly survival" (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2011, p. 95). When curiosity, a basic characteristic of any researcher, meets care, as a form of responsibility for the becoming of the object of the research (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2011), this creates the ground for a "careful curiosity (…) attuned to possible impacts of the research on others" (Freeth & Vilsmaier, 2020, p. 63). On this ground, the researcher, through a second accompanying practice of "**critical reflexivity**", stays in inquiry mode, but at the same time is able to recognise appropriate times and conditions (or lack thereof) to dig deeper, and to challenge the others on uncomfortable territory. By being critically reflexive, the researcher hence accompanies the group and its individual members (i.e., "walks in step with those being researched" (Ibid.)), while also taking responsibility for her own situatedness (normative positions and power exerted) within the research, all the while aware of the possible impacts on others.

Acknowledging that the interests and normative positions that a researcher holds do carry power within the research context, leads Freeth and Vilsmaier (2020) to the third balancing act researchers have to engage with: the balancing between impartiality and investment. Given emphasis here, is the fact that impartiality does not equal neutrality (i.e., no one is ever "interests-free"), but rather implies "being aware of interests but seeking to remain unbiased" (Ibid, p. 64). As the above discussion of the concept of care suggests, once we recognise the interdependence and fundamental relationality of all beings and things within the Earth system, caring becomes a doing, a practice necessary for survival, which implies caring for (i.e., maintaining) that web of relationships, and dealing with the vested interests and powers with which this web is imbued. As an "inevitable consequence of being in relationship" (Freeth & Vilsmaier, 2020, p. 59), we are partial and invested, especially when decisions taken within a group necessarily impact on our role and work, too.

A practice of "**embedded relationality**" allows us to balance, on the one hand, the need to overtly challenge certain interests by "claiming the power granted by an insider-outsider perspective" with, on the other, leaving the matter to the interpretation of the rest of the

group. This often implies engaging in an exercise of enriching perspectives without having to necessarily achieve a compromise. Freeth and Vilsmaier remind us here of Haraway's understanding of "embedded relationality": it produces "partial, locatable, critical knowledges sustaining the possibility of webs of connection called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology." (Haraway, 1991, p. 191 cited in Freeth and Vilsmaier (2020, p.64)).

Freeth and Vilsmaier (2020) lastly propose three "anchoring principles" for navigating the dynamic and fluid positionality at the core of the FAR approach: congruence, sensitivity and translucence (p.64). However, the practices, the balancing acts and the whole experience that I present and discuss below have been mainly anchored to the overarching principle of *care*. As mentioned above, a (feminist) ethic of care stems from acknowledging the interdependent and relational nature of all things - first and foremost, of human and more-than-human lives. As Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) puts it, such interdependency is "the ontological state in which humans and countless other beings unavoidably live" (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 4).

Notably, 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. They reject an '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 offers a way to ultimately re-claim care as a means to foster solidarities (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 11), and more just ways of being and doing, amidst unavoidable tensions and conflicts. It is this understanding of the principle of care and its importance for doing collaborative and trans-disciplinary research which leads me in turn to introduce to the concept of the embodied researcher.

5.1.5 The Embodied Researcher

The Embodied Researcher provides further 'grounding' of the practices of PAR, TDR, and FAR within a place-based approach to sustainability research. Horlings et al. (2020) argue that researchers involved in place-based research "suspend the categorization of different roles"

(e.g., reflective scientist, process facilitator, knowledge broker, change agent and self-reflexive scientist (see Wittmayer & Shapke, 2014, p. 488), engaging instead in transformative and situated research practices as 'embodied researchers' (see Figure 8 below). The embodied researcher is characterised by four elements: heart, hand, head and feet (Horlings et al., 2020, p. 479). This conceptualisation portrays the researcher going into the field with her whole self, adopting a reflexive approach inward and outwards, a key aspect also of the FAR framework discussed in section 5.1.4.

Horlings et al. (2020) discuss how the embodied researcher practices self-reflexivity in the way she is aware of her own (evolving) positionality and normativity and also through her "responsibility and willingness to change" (Ibid). At the same time, importantly, she continuously considers and acknowledges the biases, values and positions held by the people involved in the research (beyond herself), which ultimately informs a critical reflection on the research's dynamics, processes and data. As is also the case with FAR, neutrality is not an option; rather, being reflexively aware of our own partiality strengthens Haraway's idea that there is no contradiction between being objective and partial: "… a practice of objectivity that privileges contestation, deconstruction, passionate construction, webbed connections, and hope for transformation of knowledge and ways of seeing" (Haraway, 1988, pp. 584–585).

The embodied researcher's practices envisioned by Horlings et al (2020) stem from a rooted normative stance (a deep wish to support change towards sustainability) present in her *heart*, which in turn acts as an "inner compass" (Horlings et al., 2020, p. 479). Conscious of the values and principles she stands for throughout the whole research process, the embodied researcher engages as a human being in the place and with its people, intertwining new personal connections with the communities involved, and developing ethical responsibilities towards those people and their stories. Being grounded and embedded in the place through commitment and a sense of responsibility towards the people is represented by the *feet* (see figure 13). The heart and the feet allow the researcher to experiment and engage with situations and people through her *hands* and her actions, according to a care-centred and process-based (rather than an outcome-oriented) approach.

Engaging in research as a full human being, invested and aware of responsibilities, normative positions, roles, emotions and inner workings necessarily brings with it a process of self-transformation:

"Self-transformation happens by engaging with critical theories related to sustainability and transformations (head), by reflecting upon one's own normative position as a researcher (heart), by experimenting with methods grounded on one's own values (hands) and by engaging in places as a human being open to developing response-ability (feet)." (Horlings et al., 2020, p. 480)

Thus, the embodied researcher framework enhances PAR and TDR bringing in, together with FAR, a vision of a self-reflexive, embedded, invested researcher who builds caring and creative practices, without ever compromising her analytical, critical and enquiring attitude.
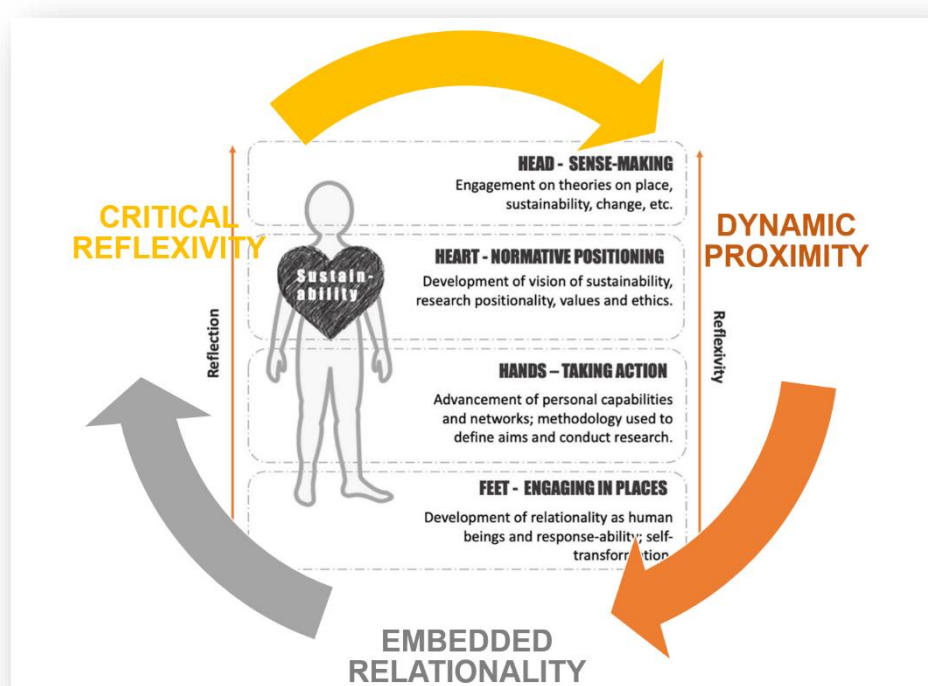
Figure 8 – Representation of the methodological approach. Author's adaptation of Freeth (2019) and Horlings, L.G., Nieto-Romero, M., Pisters, S., Soini, K., (2020)

5.2 My Standpoint

Given the importance stressed by the variety of literature mentioned above with regards to the positionality of the researcher, and her specific background, this section addresses my own particular "social locations"(Barbosa da Costa, Icaza, & Ocampo Talero, 2015, p. 260; Naples, 2007, p. 554). As noted by Nightingale (2016) "ontological understandings of research problems are derived from logical thinking, established theories, history and habit" (2016, p. 42). 'Social locations' refer to gender, class, ethnicity and, more generally, the type of

background of the writer/researcher. Exploring personal, professional and structural positions is fundamental for the researcher "in a bid to avoid automatically reproducing dominant class, gender or race biases" (Naples, 2007, p. 549). The only way to fight back structural inequality and power imbalances in knowledge production processes (at the core of PAR) is for researchers to: "fruitfully examine their motivations, assumptions, and interests in the research as a precursor to identifying forces that might skew the research in particular directions" (Finlay, 2002, p. 536).

Doing fieldwork across Wales and, particularly in the South Welsh Valleys entailed quite a few challenges. The Welsh Valleys, a hidden gem of Wales for their lush natural beauty, are (as already noted) ranked among the most deprived areas of the UK, afflicted by a number of social-economic issues, high levels of unemployment and low education (see Chapter 4). I never previously worked or lived in a "deprived area". I am a privileged person, coming from a village in the countryside of Le Marche region – central Italy. I am an only child, my father owns a small-medium, conventional and (until a few years ago) profitable farming business, while my mother takes care of the house; neither of them accessed higher education and they are not politically active. Although I have not grown up in a well-educated type of family, I never experienced directly or indirectly, poverty or difficult economic conditions. I was already 19 when, moving to Rome to do my Undergraduate Degree, I saw for the first time in my life a homeless person. It is fair to say I have mainly lived in rather safe and privileged environments, quite different from the Valleys, and deprived communities in general.

I believe that being aware of one's own privilege is the very first step to develop empathy and capacity to understand other people's lives and experiences. Although my personal history and privilege will always prevent me to fully grasp what others, in very different situations, might go through in their lives, an ethics of care, made of its three component parts (see section 3), is a solid *anchor* (Freeth, 2019) and can provide a "moral compass" (Moriggi, 2021). By nurturing dimensions such as solidarity, reciprocity, attentiveness, responsibility (or response-ability as Moriggi (2021) argues) and responsiveness (Tronto, 2013) , being informed by an ethics of care emphasises what we, human beings, have in common, more than what keeps us apart.

In the specific case of my relationship with Wales and its people, however, an extra element played the role of connector: my Italian nationality. Thousands of Italians migrated to the Valleys between the end of 19th century and beginning of 20th, to work. Some were employed in the coalfields, whereas many others started to establish cafes and ice-cream parlours[7]. Italian immigrants, therefore, became an integral part of the fabric of these communities, to the point that while walking and meeting people on the streets, I could still enjoy and benefit from the good memory and legacy they have left over the generations.

5.3 Data Collection Process: Strands of Fieldwork and Methods

I structure the discussion of my data collection process - which extended from June 2018 to April 2020 - around the three "strands" of fieldwork introduced above, in section 5.1. These strands emerged from iteratively combining the original intention to pursue a transdisciplinary and participatory-inspired approach, with both the interests of WG and NRW, as well as other practical and timely opportunities that arose along the way (as in the case of the Skyline Project). This resulted in three different, yet highly interwoven, strands of fieldwork, which collectively provide both breadth and depth to this research. Following a mixed-methods approach, the fieldwork was conducted by on the one hand, experimenting with more participatory and creative methods, often being a participant myself in others' practices and activities; and on the other, adopting an ethnographic approach, which itself can be seen as a "methodological toolkit", i.e. short- and/or long-term participant observation, observations more generally, interviews, photographs, videos etc., which are united by the "focus on everyday life, people, meanings, and practices" (Reyes, 2017, p. 2).

With the overall approach based on TDR, PAR, FAR and Embodied research having now been discussed at length, I delve next into each of the three strands, explaining the research methods adopted and my role in the contexts in which I was working.

5.3.1 Strand 1 – Project Skyline

Project Skyline is a feasibility study aimed at exploring the potential for community land-ownership or management in Wales, where (differently from e.g., Scotland) there is no legislative framework establishing the pre-emptive right of communities to buy the land

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[7] Before WWII there were more than 300 Italian cafés in Wales (Why cafe culture has rich Italian flavour in Wales - BBC News, 2020).

where they live. This feasibility study was developed and run over a period of ten months (July 2018-May 2019) by The Green Valleys Community Interest Company (TGV CIC)[8], funded by the Friends Provident Foundation[9]. The project ran in three communities in the South Welsh Valleys (see Figure 14), namely Caerau, Treherbert and Ynysowen, which are all amongst the 10%-20% most deprived areas of Wales (according to the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation)[10] (see section 4.4 for more on the SW Valleys).

Figure 9 - *Geographical location of the three communities involved in Project Skyline*

Wales has been described elsewhere as having a "huge range of tremendous assets which are not being used to improve the quality of our lives" (Cato, 2004, p. 206). Amongst these assets, the two most important and most undervalued are arguably the land and the people of Wales; especially in the case of the Valleys: "the most basic resource of any people is their land" (ibid, p. 211). Being inspired by experiences from Spain and Scotland and intrigued by "why and how places come back to life again" (personal communication, 2019), the TGV CIC Director, Chris Blake, project manager of Skyline, elaborated some explorative questions and working streams around which the Project Skyline was then developed (see figures 10 and 11). The questions guiding the Project were the following:

1. Do communities want to be stewards of their landscape?
2. Are there sustainable business models that would allow communities to

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[8] TGV CIC is a local social enterprise experienced with community woodland and energy projects created by members of communities in and around the Brecon Beacons National Park (Wales) http://www.thegreenvalleys.org/

[9] Friends Provident Foundation is an independent charity that provides grants to foster a fair, resilient and sustainable economic system that serves society https://www.friendsprovidentfoundation.org/

[10] WIMD - Home Page (gov.wales)

break free from a culture of grant dependency?

3. Is it possible for communities to manage the landscape in a way that benefits nature?

4. Can these landscape-scale projects be governed well?

Figure 10 - *Project Skyline Working Streams. Source: skyline.wales*

Figure 11 - *Key Questions for each Working Stream of Project Skyline. Source: skyline.wales*

In a nutshell, Project Skyline was aimed at supporting the three communities in visioning and realising a shared 'land use plan', with residents' views and ideas on what a potential community ownership of some (currently) publicly owned land surrounding these areas,

might look like. The main events which were organised during each phase, in each community, are gathered in Tables 2, 3, 4; table 5 includes all the activities that gathered the three communities together. These tables include a description of the role I played in each of them, and the type of data collected.

Although there were differences of timings and approaches in each of the three areas, people's ideas and dreams were captured and gathered during the *Dreaming* (or *Imagining)* stage (Figure 12) through the help of professional facilitators. The three teams of facilitators adopted different techniques and methods. To start with, the process in Caerau was led by an organisation called *Cynnal Cymru,*[11] while the other two teams, *Peak Cymru* [12] (Melissa Appleton and Owen Griffiths in Treherbert*)* and *The Larks and Ravens*[13] (Ynysowen), were composed of visual artists and art producers. The Dreaming/*Imagining* stage had the specific intent to propose to the people living in these areas the opportunity to shape their own vision of the *Skyline* in 100 years. The residents that the engagement process managed to reach and who decided to get involved with the Project, participated in a more targeted design of a plan for community land management in their community.

Throughout the *Designing* stage, the residents who got involved in the previous stage in each community, were invited to structure and articulate those emerging ideas with the support of some "experts". The experts[14] were employed by the Project to support community residents in addressing the challenges related to economic, ecological and social sustainability of their envisioned plans. The *Validating* stage*,* consisted mainly of two public events held in Cardiff (see Table 5, activities 30 and 31), aimed at disseminating the learnings and the experiences of the community residents and the Team members involved. The final stage, *Reporting,* was the writing of a Report,[15] which was completed by the Project Manager,

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[11] Cynnal Cymru/Sustain Wales is a membership-based organisation that provides training and support to develop and promote a sustainable, resource-efficient and low-carbon society through engagement with enterprises, the third sector and communities http://www.cynnalcymru.com/about-us/

[12] Peak is an arts organisation based in the Black Mountains (Wales) that works creatively with professional artists and communities, responding to the rural environment https://peak.cymru/

[13] The Larks and Ravens are an experimental group of two visual artists and an irrational psychologist. They create physical and symbolic contexts to trigger conversations and fresh thinking about the socio-environmental issues of our day, e.g. climate change, value, money and social inequality https://larksandravens.com/

[14] Belonging to the following organisations: Shared Assets, the Wildlife Trust, Stephens Scown LLP, and the Sustainable Places Research Institute at Cardiff University.

[15] The report is freely available at Skyline report | Skyline

Chris Blake with contributions of the various facilitators and experts employed throughout the Project.

Figure 12 - *Phases of Project Skyline. Source: skyline.wales*

I met Chris Blake in June 2017, at the very beginning of my PhD, when he was still applying for funding to run Project Skyline as feasibility study. A year later, when I moved to Wales to start data collection (May 2018), I got in touch again with him, since the opportunity to work with the Project Skyline was highly appealing: I could join the Team and be part of the development of a (semi-)grassroots, place-based project, with quite a radical idea of SMNR at its core, i.e., community stewardship of the land. This would allow me to compare that experience with more established (and presumably less 'radical') landscape partnerships funded by the Governments (see Strand 3). Notably, though, the working streams of Project Skyline, the structure of the process (including hiring professional facilitators and "experts"), as well as the three locations where Skyline was run, had been defined prior my involvement in the project. Furthermore, three organisations acted as gatekeepers in the three villages:

the *Invest Local* groups[16] in Ynysowen (Merthyr Tydfil) and Caerau (Maesteg, Bridgend), and *Welcome to Our Woods (WTOW)*[17] in Treherbert (Rhondda Cynon Taf).

My rationale to get involved with this project was therefore twofold: on one side, Skyline eased my access to and contact with communities, organisations and contexts. It provided me with some initial support, legitimacy and credibility to 'enter' these communities, which it would have been otherwise difficult to reach out to within such a short timeframe. Through Skyline, thus, I had a facilitated opportunity to conduct a more in-depth place-based study, that allowed me to gradually embed myself in the research context, and connect more profoundly with the local participants. This in turn facilitated the exploration of challenges, needs and aspirations (mainly from a socio-political perspective) of marginalised communities to participate in caring-*with* and improve human-ecological wellbeing. On the other side, Skyline - as well as the close collaboration with the WG discussed in section 5.3.3 - represented a timely opportunity to experiment with transdisciplinary, participatory and creative research practices. I had the opportunity to be both a participant and an observer, an outsider and insider (Jorgensen, 2015), moving dynamically across the continuous of roles identified by the FAR framework (see 5.1.4).

The breadth of my research design (that included engagement in the three different strands of fieldwork), did not allow me to conduct a complete PAR approach within the Skyline Project. I acted as a facilitator only in few instances, adopting a hybrid approach to navigate some tensions related to the breadth of the research. Specifically, engaging with art-based methods, preparing and running creative workshops myself consistently over a period of 10 months, would have been a highly resource-intensive activity (see e.g., Moriggi, 2021, p. 145 for a reflection on this), that would have not left much space and time for other type of data collection, and involvement in other contexts. Wearing only the hat of a facilitator would have partly limited thorough participant observation, the opportunity to understand emergent and situated dynamics of power between participants. Moreover, the responsibility to be *the* facilitator in meetings and events would have compromised my own *capacity* in

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[16] Invest Local is a programme of funding and support for 13 of the most deprived communities across Wales. Each area will have £1 million to spend on local priorities over 10 years. Invest Local is funded by the Big Lottery Fund and managed by the Building Communities Trust (BCT) http://www.bct.wales/invest-local/

[17] WTOW is a community partnership in the Upper Rhondda Fawr, with the aim to make local natural resources more useful and relevant to the community and region http://welcometoourwoods.ac4.amitywebsolutions.co.uk/

terms of *time* and (mental) *space,* to engage in more informal and spontaneous conversations with the residents and participants in the Project; such conversations have been key to develop relationships of trust. Ultimately, being part of the co-ordinating team of Skyline, also implied participation in a number of organising meetings in all the three communities and quarterly meetings with the steering committee of the Project Skyline. Overall, the multifaceted and ample role I played within Skyline guaranteed me to a certain extent the freedom to focus on situations/conversations/encounters that I felt required greater attention in some specific moments.

My involvement with the three communities and the three groups of facilitators varied over time, along also with the methods adopted (as reported in tables 4, 5, 6, 7 below). At times I was (just) the scientific researcher, learning *about* research participants and contexts (see e.g., activity number 1, 7, 9 and 12). On other occasions I was (also) an intervener (i.e., a facilitator), learning *for* the Skyline Team, as well as the local participants (see e.g., activity number 18, 19, 15, 25, 29 and 31). And at other moments, I had the role of team member, when I learnt *with* the rest of the Skyline Team by being a participant myself in the artistic and creative practices put in place by the facilitators (see, e.g., activity number 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, 26 and 30). The opportunity to learn *with* (and from) others (i.e., artists, professional facilitators, academics, third sector organisations, community members etc.) is one of the most valuable and rich aspects of working in a transdisciplinary project, especially as an early career researcher.

5.3.1.1 Research Methods

Since the beginning I was meeting the Skyline Team (project management and facilitators) weekly or fortnightly to organise each event and workshop, as well as going directly in the communities to start meeting residents. Initially, I adopted **participant observation** (as described in Tables 4, 5, 6 and 7). Participant observation is a qualitative method, typically adopted in ethnographic research, for its capacity to enable the investigation of the "realities of human existence in their totality as they exhibit external, physical characteristics and internal, subjective, and personal features as well as intersubjectively and socially meaningful properties" (Jorgensen, 2015, p. 2).

At the heart of the adoption of participant observation, during my involvement in Skyline, lays a spontaneous and genuine interest in understanding more of the people around me:

their visions, dreams, fears and everyday challenges in relation to their relationship with the landscape, and participation in caring-*with*. Jorgensen (2015, p. 7) talks about participant observation as a method being used in a "highly artful" way, i.e., "informal and dependent on the intuition and interpersonal abilities of the researcher and therefore not something that is mechanically reproducible based on a formula by just anyone". According to this definition, my overall approach was "highly artful", where artfulness assumes also the meaning elaborated by Pigott (2020, p. 879) as "manner of being", generative agency and "dispersed sense of creative agency" that engage bodies and sensations directly (Pigott, 2020, p. 886). This is ultimately about "making the road while walking" (Rajesh Tandon as cited in Wicks, Reason, & Bradbury, 2008, p. 25).

I engaged both actively and passively as a participant observer (Jorgensen, 2015): at times, I performed deep listening and note taking during participants' conversations and engagement with the activities proposed by Skyline facilitators. Upon other occasions, I intervened and asked questions and clarifications with a specific focus on the challenges and difficulties participants were discussing. Asking direct questions about proposals or experiences shared by others was a way to adjust and improve the process of engagement, and shape the direction of the conversations according to people's interests and needs.

Participatory Mapping

From autumn 2018 onwards, I decided to take a more active role in the facilitation process in Caerau. After the initial scoping visits and conversations I had undertaken, I felt I wanted to bring more energy to the process in that place. The detailed list of activities I took part in are included in section 5.3.1.4, Table 4. They consisted of numerous informal and scoping visits, meetings with the Skyline team and other facilitators, to organise engagement events. Among the latter, I co-organised and facilitated with the Caerau facilitation team *(Cynnal Cymru)* a couple of more creative workshops, using participatory mapping (activity number 18 and 19). Participatory mapping is an umbrella term that refers to a series of different methods to value local knowledge, and is used to stimulate knowledge and perception sharing (Di Gessa, Poole, & Bending, 2008). As noted by Cadag and Gaillard (2012, p. 101), "maps are powerful instruments that give visual expression to realities that are perceived, desired or considered useful". Specifically, we drew so-called "sketch maps" (Cadag & Gaillard, 2012) of the Caerau

area, and integrated enlarged pictures of key pieces of land considered more suitable for a community freehold management agreement.

As part of the participatory mapping we put some pictures of the local area on the sketched maps. People recognised places they knew, or even their houses and started telling stories about those places, and how they use it or used to, what is now lost or missing etc. Maps and photographs stimulated people's imagination and sharing of experiences and dear memories, as well as letting concerns and challenges emerge. Photographs of their own local area represented a bridge between us (facilitators) and them, a figurative "space in between" (which is the space where practices of *care* occur -see section 3.4), where participants could feel comfortable because it was something known to them, a 'known place', where to begin an 'unknown' conversation. Ultimately, the use of maps and photographs served both the purpose of facilitating the creation of space and time to have these explorative conversations around the landscape, and building 'a common ground' where to meet, and through which start building relationships of trust.

Figure 13- Participatory mapping in Caerau - Project Skyline. Photo Credits: Mike Erskine

119

Figure 14 - Participatory Mapping in Caerau (2), Project Skyline. Photo Credits: Mike Erskine

Figure 15 - Workshop at Noddfa Community Center, Caerau, Project Skyline. Author's photo.

Figure 16 - *Workshop at Community Development Trust, Caerau. Photo Credits: Mike Erskine*

Figure 17. Exhibition of children's drawings for competition "draw your dream woodland park". Community Development Trust, Caerau. Photo Credits: Mike Erskine

Semi-structure Interviews and Focus Groups

After the ending of Project Skyline, in summer 2019, I conducted ten individual semi-structured interviews and three focus groups across the three communities. I interviewed participants from the three communities who were regular attendees at the events, and also the facilitators, with whom I had worked throughout. The regular attendees are referred to in the remainder of this thesis as "Participant", plus a letter to identify them; the rest of the interviewees (occasional attendees and the facilitators) are labelled as "Interviewee #" and a progressive number.

I adopted interviews mainly as a "reflection tool", to explore the process of engagement across the ten months of feasibility study. As Hockey and Forsey (2012, p. 71) argue interviews are "engaged listening" and "engaged encounters with fellow social beings" that can "fulfil the criteria for the (…) particular, and special insights", and consist in a "culturally appropriate means of conducting socially engaged forms of research" (Ibid., p. 74). In the case of the local participants from the communities, the more private setting of the interview (compared to engaging in public and busy events) allowed me to performed more targeted "engaged listening". I had the opportunity to carve out time and space with them and listen intently to the individual stories, experiences, critiques, and proposals of the people who have made Skyline, who have been part of the journey since the beginning. The relationships of trust already established with most of these individuals allowed a certain degree of closeness when it came to speaking about their experiences, and about what they could have done differently if they were to run the Project themselves. Most of them appeared comfortable sharing critical views on the Project, for instances about the engagement methodologies, and more in general on what they did not like.

Three focus groups (FG) were run - one in each community - and the same questions used in the interviews were asked to the FG participants. The FG were useful to stimulate further collective reflections on the meanings and relevance of the Project for the wider community, without expectations or pressures coming from targeted workshops, meant to produce specific outcomes (e.g., a community land plan). They were useful to provide further space and time for people to share (collective) concerns, challenges, critiques and visions around the potential of Skyline to contribute to the social and ecological wellbeing of their

communities. One FG had nine participants, another one had just three and the last five participants; they each lasted 1-1.5 hours. They were all held in public spaces located in the three communities, and participants were recruited either directly through the existing personal contact I made with some of them; or through snowball sampling.

Table 1 - Summary of Interviews and Focus Groups conducted within Strand 1

- <u>Semi-structured individual interviews</u>: **10**
- <u>Focus groups</u>: **3**
    - Treherbert, 9 participants
    - Ynysowen, 3 participants
    - Caerau, 5 participants
- <u>Total number of people involved</u>: **27**

Autoethnography

An overarching strategy I used throughout the entire fieldwork (and therefore encompassing all the three strands) was autoethnography. A form of self-narrative (Ali, 2015): "this strategy takes the researcher's self, identity, roles, activities, and personal experiences, as the central focus of investigation or as an important part of the inquiry" (Jorgensen, 2015, p. 12). Bochner (2012, p. 161 original emphasis) emphasises the fact that the "truths of autoethnography exist between storyteller and story listener". The "space in between" where (practicing of) care occurs, is also the space of encounter between the stories of the autoethnographer and the reader, stories that "call for engagement within and between, not analysis from without" (Ibid.).

My reflections, perceptions and 'stories' from the fieldwork are the result of care-full interaction and relationship building and nurturing with the many people I met and work with in all the contexts. Care-full encounters and exchange, however, do hold tension and conflictual elements, which were widely reported in my field notes (journal). These entries narrate of deep dilemmas and critical questioning of myself, my capacities, my fluctuating identities and roles, but also on my actions and reactions to changing circumstances or people's behaviours. With this regard, Bochner stresses how autoethnography represents a legitimate form of inquiry because the stories that the researchers narrate "revolve around

trouble, presenting feelings and decisions that need to be clarified and understood. (…) something is being inquired into, interpreted, made sense of, and judged" (Bochner, 2012, p. 161).

5.3.1.2 Table 2. Overview of the researcher's activities in the Skyline project in Treherbert

Table 2 - Overview of the researcher's activities in the Skyline project in Treherbert

Treherbert	Activity	Role of Researcher	Data Collected
July – September 2018 *(Dreaming Phase)*	**1. Kick-off Meeting (03-07):** -Introduction between WTOW and Skyline Team -How to build a collective understanding of Skyline's potential for this area -Discussion built around Society, Environment and Economy themes	-Participant observation and notes taking -Introduction to the rest of the members: background information on my PhD research and contribution I aim to give to the project	-<u>Field Notes</u> Information on people involved (including facilitators' team and gatekeeper organization WTOW) -Initial background information on the place and community -WTOW's background information including reasons to get involved in Skyline
	2. Workshop (23-07) -Skyline team and WTOW people -Use of map of the area and an historical timeline to capture place's *distinctiveness* -Creating a new narrative based on *aspirations* (from "deprivation" to an "asset-based/celebratory" one, considering economic, social, and environmental challenges of the area)	-Participant observation and notes taking -Active engagement in conversations around actions and strategies to "engage wider community"	-<u>Field Notes</u> General perceptions on what is distinctive of Treherbert/the Rhondda Valley; Initial information around "connection to place" experienced by participants -<u>Visual material</u> maps, photographs, and flip charts

125

	-Creation of 4 phases "Skyline process for Treherbert"		
	3. Informal visit to community (08-08) -Morning spent in the woods with local people (both members of WTOW and residents not members) with some food, coffee and informal conversations – regular activity organized by WTOW on Saturday mornings;	-Informal conversations; -Participant observations; -Engagement in the planned activities;	-Background information about people involved with WTOW; reasons for joining the organization; type of activities they get involved with;
October-December 2018 *(End of Dreaming Phase, beginning of Designing Phase)*	**4. Workshop, F*estival of Ideas* (27-10)** -Public event (people external to Skyline team and WTOW) to mark the end of the Dreaming/Engagement Phase, and gather more ideas and perspectives on the Skyline vision for this area -Collective activities: walking in the woods, poetry reading, convivial meal and collective reflection on memories and dreams about the area thinking around three themes chosen by the facilitators: Environment- Everyday- Economy	-Participant observation and notes taking; -Joining conversations happening in small groups of residents	- Field Notes "Everyday memories" of people living in this Valley (people' stories about how things have changed in the area – e.g., what represented the closure of some local shops and public spaces like the library or the swimming pool) -Frustrations and aspirations of the participants on the "future of the Valleys" in relation to the three themes proposed by the facilitators. Visual Material Maps, flip charts, photographs and video recording of the various conversations occurred throughout the day

| | 5. Workshop

First "Design Meeting" (08-12)

-Event organised with a small group (12 people were present) who signed up during the Festival of Ideas (see row above) to get involved in the designing phase

-Continuation of the work on the nexus Everyday-Economy-Ecology: facilitators invited participants to brainstorm around these three interconnected topics | -Participant observation and notes taking

-Joining conversations happening in small groups of local residents, sporadically asking participants how they were feeling (especially to the most silent ones) and their opinions on the conversations we were having. | <u>Field Notes</u>

-Importance of poetry and creativity to bring about change → "Culture as a moving, growing thing"

-Reflections of participants around *interconnection* of multi-benefit activities and importance of system thinking (e.g., two clusters of potential activities such as food-timber-energy and tourism-related; producing and selling community energy and pay childcare with revenues)

-Reflections around power dynamics: not everyone speaks out equally, some people are constantly leading the conversation; (deep and reciprocal) listening appears difficult

<u>Visual Material</u>

-Different maps of the area with annotations from the participants' brainstorming around activities and things they would like to see

-Photographs and videos of the activities and of the conversations occurred |
| **January- March 2019** | 6. Workshop

Second "Design Meeting" (12-2) | -Participant observation and notes taking; | <u>Field Notes</u>
Strong focus on the potential for the community to become *"multigenerational* |

| (Designing Phase) | -Workshop to discuss the proposals emerged from the 3rd workshop with the various experts, part of the Skyline Team to check feasibility of ideas

-To produce a shorter and more targeted list of activities to put on the final community land plan | -Joining conversations happening in small groups of residents, sporadically asking participants how they were feeling (especially to the most silent ones) and their opinions on the conversations we were having | *land stewards"* and caretakers, by "building a culture"

-Aspect of stewardship highlighted in sentences like "we need to make this our wood" (community member)

<u>Visual Material</u>
-Photographs, flipcharts, and annotated maps of the area, with proposals and ideas emerged |

5.3.1.3 Table 3. Overview of the researcher's activities in the Skyline project in Ynysowen

Table 3 - Overview of the researcher's activities in the Skyline project in Ynysowen

Ynysowen	Activity	Role of Researcher	Data Collected
July – September 2018 *(Dreaming Phase)*	**7. Kick-off Meeting (13-08)** -Introduction between the Invest Local group and the Skyline Team -Discussion around (physical) divides within the community -Use of the map of the area to mark divisions and main challenges (e.g.,	-Participant observation and note taking -Introduction to the rest of the members: background information on my PhD research and contribution I aim to give to the project.	-Information on people involved (including facilitators' team and gatekeeper organization's members *Invest Local Ynysowen*) -Perspectives of this group on Skyline's potential for the community -Initial background information on the place and communities

	no collective space for 'youngsters').		-Initial background information on Invest Local Ynysowen and their work as related to Skyline.
	8. Walking Tour with Dream Catcher (16-09) -Participation in a walking tour organized by the facilitators *Larks and Ravens* around the area, with a big dream catcher used to catch people's attention and ask them about their dreams and visions for the area (their vision of the Ynysowen Skyline).	-Participant in the activity; walking with the three facilitators holding the dream catcher; asking people about their dreams; recording of the answers on ribbons tied to the dream catcher.	<u>Field Notes</u> Dreams and aspirations of people as recorded in the ribbons attached to the dream catcher <u>-Visual material</u> Photographs and ribbons.
October-Dec 2018 *(End of Dreaming Phase, beginning of Designing Phase)*	*9. Invest Ynysowen* – Meeting (27-11) -Skyline Team for Ynysowen joined the monthly gathering of the *Invest Local* group to update them on the "progress" of the project.	-Participant observation and note taking.	- <u>Field Notes</u> Facilitators' experience and impressions throughout engagement process (e.g., focus on youngsters and their demands and needs; people's relation with the surrounding hills) -*Invest Local* members' experiences working and engaging with youth in the area -*Larks and Ravens'* perspective on "disempowered youth" and how Skyline could help raising their voices bringing them to steer the design of the land plan.

	10. Skyline Team meeting (04-12)	-Partly observer and note taking	Field Notes
	-Discussion with Dr Mark Lang (Skyline facilitator for the *Designing Phase* in Ynysowen), and *Larks and Ravens* about Skyline next phase;	-Partly actively engaged in the discussion with the facilitators.	-Facilitators' perception of the "culture of over-consultation" experienced by people in the community as reported to them.
	- Focus on the "multigenerational" aspect given the focus on youth's involvement.		
January-March 2019 *(Designing Phase)*	**11. Meeting between Skyline Team and local stakeholder group (07-03)** -Reporting by the artists-facilitators in the Dreaming Phase, on the work done with the local kids (27 in total, aged 8-9) who joined the call for proposals made by the artists.	-Participant observation and note taking.	- Focus on issues of ownership: discussion (prompted by the artists) about enabling 'youngsters' to take decisions, rather than just asking what they want: the kids involved have highlighted the fact that "decisions are always made by someone else" (as reported by one of the facilitators); -Sharp contrast between the managerial attitude of some of the participant (officers in local community organisations) and rigidity towards the idea of letting 'youngsters' lead the way.

5.3.1.4 Table 4. Overview of researcher's activities in the Skyline project in Caerau

Table 4- Overview of the researcher's activities in the Skyline project in Caerau

Caerau	Activity	Role of Researcher	Data collected
July – September 2018 *(Dreaming Phase)*	**12. Kick-off Meeting (16-08)** -Introduction between the *Invest Local* group, the Skyline Team and other individuals interested in the project.	-Participant observation and note taking -Introduction to the group: background information on my PhD research and contribution I aim to give to the project.	Field Notes: -Who are the people attending (e.g., facilitators' team and gatekeeper organization's members *Invest Local Caerau*) -Perspectives on Skyline's potential for the community -Perspectives and emotions related to their connection to the area (e.g., sense of "being a forgotten community" given its the geographical location at the top of the Llynfi Valley).

	13. Skyline Team meeting (Skype, 23-08) -Meeting with two facilitators of *Cynnal Cymru* and member of *Invest Local Caerau* to plan the engagement process.	- Active engagement in the planning of actions and strategies for engagement -Notes taking.	Field Notes: -information on activities carried out by Invest Local Caerau that could feed into the Skyline process; -who are the stakeholders and groups to start the engagement process with; -Key areas of interest for potential land transfer (e.g., Coal Board Authority land).
	14. Skyline Team meeting (17-09) -Meeting the two facilitators of *Cynnal Cymru* to plan the engagement process.	-Active engagement in the planning of actions and strategies for engagement -Notes taking.	Field Notes: -discussion around potential methods to deploy in engagement process (e.g., photo-boot, "postcards from the future", timelines and photographs of the area) -List of initial "partners" for engagement events (e.g., the three local churches) -Personal reflections on challenges experienced in working collaboratively with the facilitators.

	15. Scoping Visit (27-09) -Informal visit (without other Skyline team members) accompanied by *Invest Local Caerau* member to three locations in Caerau: Community Development Trust café'; the Dementia-friendly group weekly gathering, parking area outside the local primary school.	"Skyline Facilitator": -Informal conversations with people met in the 3 locations about what the aim of Skyline is and about people's ideas in relation to it; -Notes recorded on field journal afterwards.	Field Notes: -People's perceptions of what is missing in their area and what they would like to see/do; -Places and community groups to visit/meet in order to reach out to as many people as possible in Caerau; - Personal reflections on the visit, the people met and the place, including challenges experienced in being a "Skyline facilitator".
October-January 2018 *(Dreaming Phase)*	16. Skyline Team meeting (01-10) -Meeting the two facilitators of *Cynnal Cymru* to plan the engagement process.	-Active engagement in the planning of actions and strategies for engagement -Notes taking.	Field Notes: - Personal reflections on challenges experienced in working collaboratively with the facilitators.
	17. Scoping Visit with facilitator from *Cynnal Cymru* (03-10) -Visit to three different community centres, two local Cafés; Walk and picture taking around the Coal Board Authority Land.	"Skyline Facilitator": -Engagement in conversation with people casually met in the locations, using maps of the area, glued on a flip-chart sheet to record people's ideas; -Relationship building -Notes recorded in field journal afterwards.	Field Notes: -People's perceptions of what is missing in their area and what they would like to see/do; - Personal reflections on the visit, including challenges experienced in being a "Skyline facilitator" Visual Material: -Photographs of the potential area for land transfer (Coal Board Authority) & flipcharts with people's ideas and suggestions.

18. Workshop at Noddfa Community centre (23-10) -Use of maps and photographs of the area to engage in conversation especially with parents bringing their children to the weekly youth club; -conducted without other Skyline team members.	"Skyline Facilitator": -Engagement in conversations with people using maps of the area, glued on a flip-chart sheet to record people's ideas; -Relationship building; -Notes recorded in field journal afterwards; -Participatory Mapping.	Field Notes: -People's perceptions of what is missing in their area and what they would like to see/do; -Perceptions of major socio-economic and environmental issues of the area - Personal reflections on the visit, the people met and the place, including challenges experienced in being a "Skyline facilitator" and building relationship with "community activists"; Visual Material: -Maps and flipcharts with people's ideas and suggestions.
19. Workshop at Bethel Chapel co-organised with *Cynnal Cymru* (25-10) - Event (drop-in format) with refreshments, organised with the help and support of the Bethel Chapel Reverend; - Use of maps and photographs of the area to engage in conversations.	"Skyline Facilitator": -Engagement in conversation with people using maps of the area, glued on a flip-chart sheet to record people's ideas; -Relationships' building; -Notes recorded in field journal afterwards; -Participatory Mapping.	Field Notes: -People's perceptions of what it is missing in their area and what they would like to see/do; - Personal reflections on the visit, the people met and the place, including challenges experienced in being a "Skyline facilitator" Visual Material: -Maps and flipcharts with people's ideas and suggestions.

	20. Informal Visit to Caerau Market Garden Halloween Party (31-10) -Visit of a community event to meet the coordinator of the community garden.	"Skyline Facilitator": -Relationship building, especially with the coordinator of the community garden.	Field Notes: -Personal reflections on the visit, including challenges experienced in being a "Skyline facilitator" and building relationships with key "community activists".
	21. Skyline Team meeting (01-11) -Meeting the two facilitators of *Cynnal Cymru* to plan next actions for engagement process	-Active engagement in the planning of actions and strategies for engagement -Notes taking	Field Notes: -Personal reflections on challenges experienced in working collaboratively with the facilitators
	22. Meeting at Community Garden (02-11) -Meeting with members of local community organisation.	"Skyline Facilitator": -Relationship building; -Collaboratively planning a community event to disseminate the proposal of Skyline; -Notes taking.	Field Notes: - Personal reflections on the visit, including challenges experienced in being a "Skyline facilitator", especially in building relationships and collaborations with key "community activists".
	23. Skyline Team meeting (26-11) -Meeting with facilitators from *Cynnal Cymru,* members of a local community group and Skyline team management to plan Christmas community event	"Skyline Facilitator": -Relationship building; -Collaboratively planning a community event to disseminate the idea of Skyline;	Field Notes: -Personal reflections on the visit, including challenges experienced in being a "Skyline facilitator", especially in building relationships and collaborations with key "community activists"

		-Notes taking	
	24. Meeting with local community organisation to organise Christmas event[18] (05-12)	"Skyline Facilitator": -Relationship building; -Collaboratively planning a community event to disseminate the idea of Skyline; -Notes taking.	Field Notes: -difficulties in building relationships while managing expectations of community groups on the Skyline project; -ideas on how to engage local primary schools (e.g., through a drawing competition).
	25. Public Event at the Community Development Trust Café (26-01) -Event organised along the lines of the Festival of Ideas in Treherbert, with food, activities for the kids, exhibition of the drawings of the pupils who participated in a competition around "the woodland of your dreams"	"Skyline Facilitator": -Engaged in conversations with participants (some of which I knew already) around the ideas and proposals emerged from other engagement events, and from the drawings of the kids (which were hanging on the walls of the Café); -Participant observations, especially during an inspirational talk from community member from Treherbert;	Field Notes: -Stories of people who I have had conversations with: some shared their struggles and difficulties in participating to community events; others shared their ideas and aspirations for the landscape; -Reflections on the overall participation of the community to the event (e.g., there were only very few 'new' people joining, most of the attendees joined other events before); people's reaction to talk from community member from Treherbert and follow-up conversations.

		-Notes taking; -Participatory Mapping	Visual Material: -Pictures of the event, artistic creation of the kids participating to the competitions, maps of the area enhanced by participants ideas and proposals;
February-March 2019 *(Designing Phase)*	**26. Designing Meeting at Noddfa Community Centre (27-02)** -Event facilitated by artist collective *Larks and Ravens* with community members, to discuss the proposals which had emerged from previous events, add new information starting from a timeline of the area ("When/Where did Skyline start for you?", "Where are we now?", "Where do we want to go?"). -Event was aimed to produce a shorter and more targeted list of activities to put on the final community land plan.	-Participant observation and notes taking;	Field Notes: -Reflections on the power dynamics between participants; on the tension created by the fact that realising these "dreams" and "aspirations" requires knowledge, skills, time and resources, which prevents people from feeling fully confident, and creates general sense of discouragement. -Ideas and proposal for future uses of the landscape which reflect values and things people care about (e.g., natural burial ground or oak trees named in memory of local people etc); Visual Material -Pictures of the event, maps of the area enhanced by participants ideas and proposals, banners with timeline.

5.3.1.5 Table 5. Overview of all activities involving all three communities

Table 5 - *Overview of all activities involving all three communities*

All Communities	Activity	Role of Researcher	Data Collected
2018 *(Dreaming Phase)*	**27. Kick-off Meeting in Treherbert (10-09-2018)** -Gathering to allow gatekeeper organisations' members and Skyline Team members to meet each other; -exchange of opportunities and challenges for each of the community in relation to the Project Skyline, looking at five elements: their history, ways of working, engagement, needs and perspectives on success. -Visit to the Hydropower facility created by Treherbert's <u>WTOW, and</u> walk to the local piece of woodland identified as suitable for a community stewardship scheme.	-Participant observation and notes taking; -Introduction to the rest of the members: background information on my PhD research and contribution I aim to give to the project.	-<u>Field Notes</u> Information on people involved (including facilitators' team and gatekeeper organizations) -Initial background information on the places and communities; -reflections around the dynamics between participants <u>Visual Material</u> -Photographs and flipcharts with participants' annotations in relation to the five elements we reflected on.

	28. Scotland Trip (09-12/10) -Skyline Team and community members (total of 15 people) went on a trip to the North-West Mull Community Woodland Company and to Kilfinian Community Forest, in the Scottish Highlands.	-Participant Observation and Notes taking -full participant in the various visits, workshops and meetings organised with local groups; "Skyline Facilitator" -Support of lead facilitator Kelli Pearson in the delivery of the various exercises and activities she planned; -Co-presented Project Skyline at the 19th Annual Community Woodland Association and Making Local Woods Work Conference 2018 - Strathpeffer Pavilion, Ross-shire, Scotland (UK).	Field Notes: -Reflections on participants' reactions and comments on the examples of Scottish community buyouts; -Information on experiences of locals with community ownership ventures; Visual Material -Photographs, material from Kelli Pearson's exercises (e.g., handwritten timelines of the three communities).
2019 *(Designing Phase)*	**29. Governance Meeting (29-03)** -Meeting co-facilitated by Skyline Team member Matthew Quinn and myself, to deepen understanding of governance challenges from a governance point of view, for community land stewardship. -Questions to prompt conversation: Who makes decisions? How are they accountable? What is the (legal) purpose? How are the activities delivered and by whom? Your	"Skyline Facilitator": -co-hosting and co-facilitating conversations within groups (especially with Caerau's group) and wider group sharing; -Notes taking.	Field notes: -Participants' ideas and experiences regarding desired modes of governance; -Reflections on what emerged as the biggest challenges for people including caring-for/delivery attitude of institutional actors VS nurturing independence and empowerment of communities of the Valleys; also opportunity generated by Skyline in

	experience of different forms of governance? What combinations of governance might help the project ideas to deliver on the aspirations? -Information sharing from other expert partners of the Skyline Team, such as Shared Assets.		terms of gaining confidence and sense of self-efficacy; Visual Material: Photographs and flipcharts used to gather participants' ideas and experiences.
2019 *(Sharing and Validating Phase)*	**30. Final Public Event "How to build a Valley",** on May 1st at the Sull Art Space Gallery in Cardiff. Exhibition of artwork and photographs produced throughout the engagement process, and gathered by the artists organising the event (Melissa Appleton and Owen Griffiths); Conference with speakers from the three communities and special guest Alastair McIntosh. Event aimed at disseminating the experience and the learnings of the Project with wider public, outside the Valleys area.	-Skyline Facilitator: -Co-organisation and setting up of the exhibition.	N/A

	31. Public Event "How to build a Valley – Making it Happen", at the Pierhead Building, in Cardiff Bay, on July 10th and sponsored by Welsh Parliament member Irranca-Davies. Event organised to disseminate experience and learnings of the Project with Welsh Parliament and Welsh Government members. Along the lines of the May event (above), participants from the three communities shared their experiences and joined a panel discussion with some of the experts who were part of the Skyline Team.	-<u>Skyline Facilitator:</u> Co-organising event Introducing the event with a personal speech, at the presence of the First Minister of Wales, Mark Drakeford.	N/A

5.3.2 Strand 2 – Transdisciplinary Collaboration with Welsh Government and Natural Resource Wales

In this section, I provide an overview of my transdisciplinary collaboration with WG and NRW, as well as an explanation of the role(s) assumed and methods adopted. Chapter 8, in follow on, explains in further detail the various phases and activities of the collaboration with WG, and the relevance to the wider aims and objectives of this doctorate. A full overview of the activities carried out within Strand 2 during the entire duration of the PhD is available in section 5.3.2.1, Table 6.

Table 6 presents two columns, one for "Progress Meetings" and one for "Workshops with WG and NRW": since the very beginning, my supervisory team, myself and the small WG advisory board agreed on quarterly "progress meetings"; these were held between May 2017 and October 2020 (i.e., the duration of the studentship exclusive of writing up months). This set up ensured that my progress throughout the research was constantly informed by the WG feedback and interest; moreover, it represented a way to establish a virtuous and iterative learning cycle, thereby mutually enhance each other's practices.

The "Workshops with WG and NRW" column of Table 6 lists the six workshops (two of which were done twice, for a total of eight) – see Table 6 activities f), i), j), k), l), and n). I participated and contributed to these in different ways, while performing *balancing acts* (Freeth, 2019), across the continuum of roles identified by the FAR framework (5.1.4). All the workshops, excluding workshop k), were part of the so-called "WG-NRW joint programme". This programme (referred to hereafter as "the WG-NRW joint programme"), was built on the needs to deepen conversations and understandings around collaborative and place-based working, emerged after an initial workshop held in July 2018 - see section 5.3.2.1, Table 6, activity f). After the initial workshop in July 2018 (activity f), the collaboration with WG assumed more fully the form of a transdisciplinary research approach, given my direct involvement in the design, organisation and contribution to the workshops listed in the column "Workshops with WG and NRW".

The WG-NRW joint programme represents a way to further support the ongoing efforts to nurture the 'cultural transformation' within these organisations (discussed in section 4.3). The idea behind the workshops was to create some *space* and *time* for professionals working in these organisations to reflect about and practice what it takes to embrace and embed the

new ways of working (as established in the WBFGA, 2015) in their everyday work around SMNR. The interest of the workshops within the joint programme was on the topics of "place-based working and co-production", "trusted intermediaries/change agents" and improving Monitoring and Evaluation of SMNR practices.

The transdisciplinary collaboration with WG and NRW represented an invaluable opportunity in terms of direct access to policymakers and key stakeholders within WG and NRW. Having such a privilege meant that I could gain a comprehensive overview of the dynamics occurring at the policy level, especially of the challenges that civil servants and NRW officers experience in their everyday work, to deliver SMNR and promote collaborative working not only across sectors, but also between their own organisational departments. Moreover, my direct involvement in the organisation of the workshops for the WG-NRW joint programme led to a twofold benefit: on one hand, I had the opportunity to experiment with transdisciplinary and participatory methods (e.g., when I proposed a participatory evaluation system during one of the workshops, as discussed in section 8.2). On the other, the numerous meetings and events allowed the *space* and *time* to deepen my relationship with the WG collaborators. The many (formal and informal) conversations, exchange of perspectives and opinions, sharing of more personal life story, all contributed to start building our own 'common ground' imbued of reciprocal respect. This was key to enable a caring-*with* approach first and foremost within our transdisciplinary collaboration. Over the years of collaboration, the common ground gradually turned into a *caring* space, characterised by emerging relationships of trust that have reinforced the collaboration itself.[18]

Amongst the many workshops and events I contributed to, I chose to focus on the analysis of two key sets of workshops that were particularly "formative" and relevant in this transdisciplinary journey with the WG advisory board. I consider the two sets of workshops - Table 6, activities i) and j), respectively discussed in section 8.2 and 8.3 - as "formative" moments because they represented the moments of highest intensity, in terms of *learning process* entrenched in the transdisciplinary collaboration, as well as in terms of embodied and emotional involvement. From both a practice as well as methodological perspective, these two key moments encapsulate, retrospectively, the main learnings attached to this

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[18] As reported in section 7.3, in March 2020 I submitted a grant proposal for a NERC (UKRI) post-doc fellowship (unsuccessful), elaborated with the WG advisory board for the PhD, and in which the WG was the main partner.

transdisciplinary collaboration (e.g., depth and breadth of information and insights gained throughout). Additionally, both the workshops were highly energy and emotionally intensive. The activities planned by the facilitators were very focused on embodiment (walks, dance), conviviality (collective meals and coffee breaks) and on spending time immersed in individual and collective deep listening (learning *with* each other). Moreover, one set of these two workshops – activity j) - was residential, over two days. Over a combined total of four full days, we had even more opportunities for informal conversations and learning *about* each other, and to build our 'common ground'.

Therefore, the two formative moments selected represent the most significant fragments of what I would define a *formative accompanying* journey. Through them, I could *accompany (*even if only for a small part), the WG collaborators as well as other professionals and officers working in SMNR, along their own transformative journeys to embrace more meaningful and inclusive collaborative working.

5.3.2.1 Table 6. Overview on the activities of the researchers within Strand 2

Table 6 - *Overview on the activities of the researchers within Strand 2*

PhD scholarship duration: May 2017 – December 2020[18]			
2017			
	PROGRESS MEETINGS with WG advisory board		**WORKSHOPS with WG and NRW**
a)	June (Introductory meeting)	- Interest from WG in knowing about international practices of collaborative NRM and a systematic literature review on 'governance'. - Introduction to Wales policy context and approach to SMNR. - Discussion about difference between resilience and resourcefulness approaches, and their value for future policy recommendations. - ROs from WG officers: how to ensure long-term sense of ownership and sustainability? How to evaluate it? How to reconcile bottom-up with top-down approaches? What people come together for?	
b)	July (Introductory meeting)	- Discussion on the legacy of Project Cynefin: focus on people-place-policy, unlocking local resources (incl. 'local champions') - how do you support them? Enabling role of governments. - Difference between co-production and collaboration (power-related differences and strength-based approach). - Short-term thinking and focus on deliverables are among main governmental challenges;	

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[18] The studentship was originally meant to last 42 months (May 2017- October 2020). However, Coventry University has extended my salary of three months (until December 2020) due to the detrimental impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

145

		PROGRESS MEETINGS with WG advisory board	WORKSHOPS with WG and NRW
		• Lack of reflexive learning approach focused on policy process.	

c)	October	• Discussion around a systematic literature review of international experiences of collaborative approaches of NRM (*drivers and obstacles for collaboration*).
		  o Introduction of topics related to potential for *self-determination* and *empowerment* for communities' involvement in NRM;
		  o institutional support to avoid off-loading and distrust,
		  o *polycentric and multilevel governance* needed for flexibility.	

	2018		
		PROGRESS MEETINGS with WG advisory board	**WORKSHOPS with WG and NRW**

d)	February	• Highlights from literature review's findings around forms of CBNRM:
		  o *risk of 'de-politization'* and *tokenistic participation,*
		  o *transformative potential* (i.e., empowerment and self-efficacy),
		  o *risk of reinforcing unequal power relations* and *co-optation* of such approaches,
		  o importance of *everyday and embodied practices against technocratic blueprints and one-fits-all solutions.*
		• Discussion around four criteria for selection of case studies in Wales: *initiating actors; type of funding; objective area* and *type of community.*	

		• Suggestion for *scoping interviews* with *relevant stakeholders* (e.g., within NRW).		
e)	June	• Discussion around four proposed case studies in South Wales, at the landscape scale, initiated either from the top-down or bottom-up, and which comprise a wide set of stakeholders (including Project Skyline). • Introduction to WG officer working with landscape partnerships funded under WG Sustainable Management grant Scheme (SMS);		
f)			July	**"What Success looks like for the sustainable management of natural resources?"** • Delivery of NRP priorities • *Stakeholders Communication* and community engagement: *"How do we tailor the message to the different audiences?"*, *"How do we galvanise people to do something?"* → 'Paternalistic way of engagement'. • Area Statements– *need for 'internal (to NRW) (r)evolution' to engage with people, "spend time with people".* • Producing and communicating *scientific/academic evidence* often perceived as sufficient to bring about change • NRW meant to produce solutions and outcomes for environmental problems, *not "to get into the engagement cycle".* • *Lack of "functional tools" and "architecture"* to enable collaborative approaches for SMNR.

		PROGRESS MEETINGS with WG advisory board	WORKSHOPS with WG and NRW
g)	October	• Reflections on ongoing process of engagement with Skyline communities. • Success factors of community buy-outs in Scotland and issue of land reform for community ownership in Wales. • Importance of co-production (for empowerment and ownership) in the Design Phase of Skyline. • Need for change in mindset of all stakeholders (incl. governmental bodies/actors).	
		2019	
		PROGRESS MEETINGS with WG advisory board	**WORKSHOPS with WG and NRW**
h)	February	• Report on the progress of the Design Phase of Skyline, focusing on multifaceted and dynamic role of researcher as *participant and observer*; • Introduction of Participatory Evaluation approaches to be integrated into the "place-based working" pilot workshops organised by WG and NRW. • Update on main themes and discussions which happened during Leverage Points 2019 International Conference for Sustainability Research and Transformation, and other events I had been part of.	Five preparatory meetings in December 2018, January, February and March 2019 for subsequent workshops (i, j, l)

i)	**March**	**"Professional Development in Sustainable Place Making"** (Formative Moment #1 – see section 8.2) Two-day pilot workshops on participatory place-based working, held in Cardiff and Aberystwyth: • Focus on digging into the concepts and approaches of co-production for delivery at the place-based level; • impact of personal and professional worldview on capacity to work collaboratively; • importance of system-thinking and integration of different knowledge and evaluation systems; • Contribution with a presentation on "Introduction to Participatory Evaluation (PE) Methodologies" and an exercise of self-evaluation of the workshop • Concern about the tension between short political term VS need for long-term commitment → it requires to "focus on people and personalities, rather than pushing agendas" • Frustration and uncertainty regarding what need to be done differently
j)	**May**	**"To the Moon and Back"** – (Formative Moment #2, section 8.5) - Residential Pilot Workshops ("Trusted Intermediaries"), held in Newtown, Gregynog Hall: • Deep listening and Conversation • *Inside-out transformation* through the use of Theory • Exploration of the overlaps and interconnection between the *professional* and

		the *personal ("mental and institutional operating systems") in order to revise them;* • Awareness-based change
k)	July	**"Sustainable Management Scheme – Monitoring and Evaluation Workshop"** held in Cardiff and Aberystwyth and organised by the SMS team within WG. • Contributed with a presentation on PE connected to SMNR principle and SMS projects; • Support to more qualitative approaches to monitoring and evaluation of landscape projects
l)	August	**"Working together to evaluate nature-based solutions in Wales"** Workshop – held in Newtown and Swansea. • Workshop organised by the Ecosystems Knowledge Network with landscape partnerships and practitioners involved in collaborative working; • Contributed by facilitating activities and conversation in one of the groups of participants; • Reflections on the biggest challenges around M&E that practitioners face (e.g., long-term "learning by doing"; enabling local leadership; national database for best practices etc).

		PROGRESS MEETINGS with WG advisory board			WORKSHOPS with WG and NRW
m)	October	Report on: • the final events with Skyline; • Dissemination and presentation of my work within WG and at academic conferences (e.g., SUSPLACE) • Plans for SMS landscape partnerships interviews • Discussion around main themes emerged from the research until then			
			2020		
		PROGRESS MEETINGS with WG advisory board			**WORKSHOPS with WG and NRW**
n)				March	**"To the Moon and Back – follow up" online workshop** (see section 9.1.3) • Setting up of a "Community of Practice" to experiment and learn together; • Focus on openness and vulnerability to build genuine relationships of trust.
o)	April	Discussion around outputs from PhD studentship: • 'Toolkit for reflection' around key questions to be asked when working collaboratively; • Challenges in working around the 9 principles of SMNR and the *new ways of working;* • 'Dilemma questions' workshop: to explore the biggest challenges with stakeholders and Wales Audit Office possibly; • Policy brief with couple of case studies.			

p)	**October**	Final meeting with Key lessons learnt: • Introducing the care-framework emerged from fieldwork, what are the implications for collaborative SMNR? • Discussion around role of WG and institutional actors to enable collaboration and change;	

5.3.3 Strand 3 - Interviews with SMNR Landscape Partnerships

Throughout the first year of my PhD (2017-2018), I conducted scoping interviews with WG officers working with the grant scheme "Sustainable Management Scheme" (SMS) (see section 4.2) and other NRW officers (6 people, from different offices in the Country). The purpose of these scoping interviews was twofold: on one side, to understand the broader functioning and dynamics of the SMS system, including getting an overview on the relationships between the various partnerships, and the challenges posed by the scheme, from the perspective of those who created it and are responsible for its operation. On the other, I always discussed with the WG advisory board any methodological and/or practical choice made within the PhD. This was to both honour the transdisciplinary nature of the research, while maintaining a balance between guaranteeing my own academic independence and keeping them interested and involved in the actual research, throughout the years.

There is a great variety of cases spread all over Wales, characterised by membership, stage of maturity and practices very different one from another. The final selection of case studies was, therefore, the result of an iterative process between consulting NRW officers and WG civil servants, and conducting some desk research and investigation of grey literature, reports, policy briefs and other material produced around the SMS scheme. Conducting in-depth interviews with these partnerships was fundamental for my research: it helped me to understand what is the "state of the art", in terms of SMNR practices already in place in Wales, and what are the main obstacles in order for these practices to follow a more transformative pathway towards caring-*with*.

The **12 partnerships** involved in the interviews were selected according to a series of criteria that were discussed thoroughly with the supervisory team, WG advisory board team and during the scoping interviews with NRW officers (see above). The criteria chosen were the following:

1. **Geographical location**: the cases chosen are located across Wales, given the socio-economic, ecological and cultural differences between the various areas of Wales. As visible in figure 23 below, the areas which I have not managed to cover are the South-West, the

North-East and the Isle of Anglesey, due to lack of time and failure to get in contact with local SMS projects.

2. **Longevity:** I chose cases that were at different stages of maturity, meaning that some partnerships I interviewed had been established for much longer than others. Some had just been formed purely to access SMS funding; others were already 3 or 4 years old, others have been around for decades. This was meant to provide me with a fuller picture of challenges and opportunities that partnerships might face at different stages of development.

3. **Type of natural resources:** I picked partnerships involved in the management of different type of natural resources, so as to understand to what extent different ecosystems and natural resources imply also a very diversified set of challenges in relation to the integrated management, protection and enhancement of different environments.

4. **Leading organisation**: the last criterion was related to the organisation/group leading the partnership. Differences in access to and availability of resources (especially staff member and financial resources) as well as of skills, knowledge and different expertise, can have major impact on the organisational capacity to navigate bureaucratic and logistic aspects of partnership working/access to governmental funding.
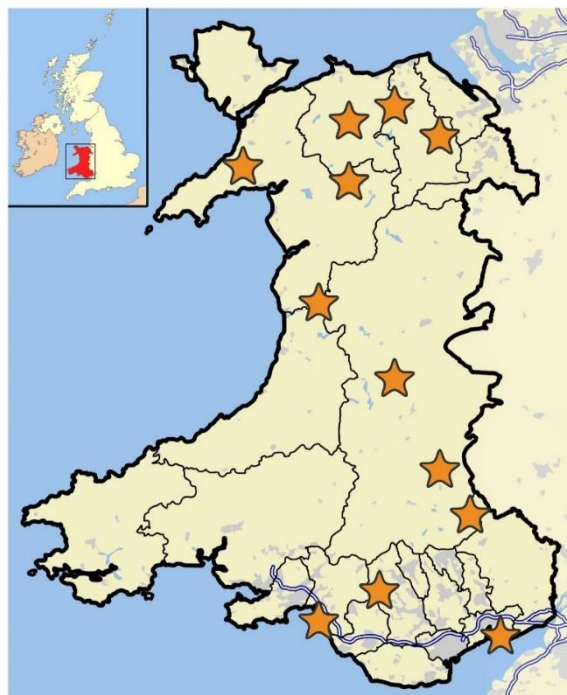
Figure 18. *Geographical Location of the 12 SMS Partnerships interviewed in Strand 3*

Questions for interviews with SMS projects

1. People' and partnerships' stories (episodes or stories about their involvement on things/partnerships/initiatives) to understand what they value, what they believe being important, and beliefs related to their involvement (why they got involved);

2. Stories about the place and their relation to it (stories about when they were kids and used to go there, for instance);

3. Episodes that played a crucial role in changing dynamics within the partnership/make them move forward/or negatively affected it;

4. Impressions/reflections on what has worked well, what has not, and why?;

5. Who gets mostly involved and who does not – why? Factors affecting this...

6. Main obstacles and incentives for people to get involved (of any kind, including institutional support etc).

7. Definitions of a successful partnership? Crucial elements that affect a "successful partnership"? Is it possible to have one at all?

8. Key people/roles to move things forward and/or to disrupt them?

9. Relationships, including if personal relationships are a crucial element to things going well, or to derailing them? In what way?

10. What is needed to change things towards particular goals/partnerships' goals? (i.e., more external support? Institutional support? Time? Money?)?

Three partnerships in the North-West of Wales were interviewed by myself and my Director of Studies, Prof Franklin, in October 2019 during a three-day fieldtrip. The remaining nine were interviewed by me during various individual visits conducted between summer and autumn 2019. Notably, in all the cases, I went to meet the interviewees directly *in situ,* to gain a possibly fuller and deeper understanding of their *situated* stories, relationships with the landscape and experiences. Meeting them in their 'natural environment' was also a way to logistically facilitate the meeting in certain instances: it would have been highly difficult for a farmer from Mid-Wales to come down to Cardiff, during sheep gathering time. I felt that causing as little disruption as possible to people who are so busy with their everyday jobs already, such as farmers - and I know it as a fact, being a farmer's daughter! – and

nevertheless invested their time and energy to meet me, a privileged researcher, was an important aspect of a grateful and caring approach.

The interviewees belong to a mix of backgrounds: farming, third sector organisations' officers and facilitators, civil society organisations, governmental organisations, landowners. A **total of 23 individuals were interviewed**. They were selected as spoke persons for their respective SMS partnership either because of their role as Project Officers of the selected partnership, or because I previously met them in either events organised within the WG-NRW joint programme, and/or in Monitoring and Evaluation workshops organised by WG - see section 5.3.2 and Table 6, activities f), i), j), k), l), n).

It is important to notice that the only private sector represented amongst the interviewees is farming. This is motivated by two intertwined reasons: since the very beginning of the fieldwork in Wales, I always heard people within policy and academic circles, as well as from environmental organisations, blaming farmers for their lack of care and compliance with sustainable practices. However, my family's farming background allowed me to have a certain level of familiarity with the (economic) challenges farmers face to produce organically and sustainably. Therefore, the natural connection and sympathy I normally feel towards the challenges of farmers triggered my interest in digging deeper in the seemingly careless attitude of Welsh farmers, as discussed in section 7.4.

5.3.4 Summary Table of Methods, Data and Participants in Strand 1, 2 and 3

Table 7 - Summary Table of Methods, Data and Participants for Strands 1, 2 and 3

	Strand 1 – **Project Skyline (2018-2019)**	Strand 2 – **Transdisciplinary Collaboration with WG and NRW (2017-2020)**	Strand 3 – **Interviews with SMNR Landscape Partnerships (2019)**
Research Participants	-Community members and residents of three communities in the South Wales Valleys (i.e., Treherbert, Ynysowen, Caerau) -Individuals involved in the three "gatekeeper organisations" who have supported Project Skyline in each community -Facilitators and experts (i.e., third sector organisation officers, artists and artistic collectives, academics) -NRW officers, operating in the three communities	-Civil servants from WG, working in different departments, all related to environment, land and rural development -NRW officers and managers, whose work is focused on place-based, cross-sector collaborative working and monitoring and evaluation -Professionals and practitioners from third sector organisations, operating in the field of SMNR and/or environment, working across Wales	-Professionals and practitioners from third sector organisations working in the field of SMNR, involved in landscape partnerships funded through the Sustainable Management Scheme (SMS) -Farmers and landowners involved in SMS projects -Individuals volunteering in community groups involved in SMS projects
Main Methods used for Data Collection	-Participant observation -Participatory mapping -Semi-structured interviews	- Participant observation - Autoethnography -Co-facilitation of workshops	- Semi-structured interviews

	-Focus Groups -Autoethnography		
Types of Data and Analysis	-Field notes -Visual Material (flipcharts, photographs, maps) - Interviews recordings Interviews were transcribed through Otter.ai, and then coded in various cycles of analysis, both manually and through NVivo. Field notes and visual material were used in the process of triangulating data collected through the participatory engagement, and the interviews.	-Field notes -Visual Material (flipcharts, photographs, maps) -Feedback forms from co-facilitated workshops Data collected through feedback forms was coded both manually and through NVivo. Visual material was used in the process of triangulating the data collected in field notes during the participatory engagement in workshops.	-Field notes -Interviews recording Interviews were transcribed with Otter.ai, and coded in various cycles of analysis, both manually and through NVivo. Field notes, manually coded, helped in providing context to the information shared in the interviews.

5.4 Data Analysis and Ethical Issues

As inferable from the previous three sections, and from the above Summary Table 7, which provides the full overview on the types of data collected in each event, meeting and workshop I attended, the breadth and depth of the engagement process across the three strands led to a very rich set of data collected. The data from the participatory and transdisciplinary processes at the core of strands 1 (Project Skyline) and 2 (WG-NRW collaboration) were collected simultaneously, given the prolonged engagement in both contexts. For this reason, the data analysis from these two strands started i*n the field*. Moreover, the quarterly progress meetings and the various workshops and events I attended and contributed to within Strand 2 (WG-NRW collaboration), for instance, were consistently informed by the ongoing analysis and reflections on the data emerging from the engagement process through the Skyline Project. Thus, the analysis of the data collected through participant observation, autoethnography and numerous field journals in one strand in turn fed, through an iterative process, the engagement process in the other strand. The analysis of the notes and reflections emerging from both engagement processes was performed through manual coding, and in parallel.

Triangulation of data collected during workshops i), j), k), l) and n) of strand 2 was guaranteed by access to and analysis of workshops' participants feedback forms. The participants were asked to provide anonymous feedback in all these workshops. In the case of workshop i) I elaborated the feedback forms myself, as part of an exercise of participatory evaluation (see section 8.2). Additionally, as discussed below, the participants at this workshop were always informed at the beginning of each session of the presence of a PhD researcher and of the fact that I would have access to the anonymous feedback forms. In the case of the data collected during progress meetings with the WG advisory board (see section 5.3.2.1, Table 6), notes recorded by my supervisory team – who attended all the meetings over the three and half years – supported a process of triangulation. This was particularly important at the beginning of the PhD, to mitigate risks related to the fact that the main language of discussion was English. This process was further enhanced by an iterative practice of inward and outward reflexivity and positionality, as discussed in section 5.2. This was fundamental to mitigate the high risk of bias, especially in the case of the participatory and transdisciplinary engagement in Strand 1 and 2.

The 34 conversations taped during both the individual and collective semi-structured interviews conducted within Strand 1(Skyline) and 3 (SMS), were first uploaded and automatically transcribed with the AI software Otter.ai. However, they needed manual revision, as some parts of the conversations were not fully grasped by the software. In the process of revisioning (i.e., re-listening and re-transcribing manually) the interviews, I also started manually coded them, isolating at first only broader emerging themes, such as 'challenges' and 'opportunities' for collaborative SMNR, or 'challenges to community stewardship' in the case of Skyline. From this first cycle of analysis, it emerged that it was possible to frame the engagement with SMNR practices as a form of caring-*with* practice: the main challenges faced by the interviewees and research participants were in fact overlapping with the *ability factors* identified by the literature (Fisher and Tronto, 1990). Therefore, the second cycle of analysis, again performed through manual coding, was more targeted at identifying specific experiences and perspectives of the participants in relation to ability factors such as (lack thereof) time, skills, material resources, knowledge etc.

Notably, both the sets of interviews with Project Skyline participants and with the SMS landscape partnerships were conducted towards the end of the fieldwork period, during the second half of 2019. By then, I had started analysing (through manual coding) the numerous field journals compiled throughout the years, which further supported the interpretation of the interviews with detailed contextual information, as well as personal reflections on the various encounters and conversations occurred. Thus, many of the themes arising during these conversations were known to me at the time of the interviews. Moreover, by then I had already, been immersed in the Welsh context for over a year and half, and met and had conversations with many of the interviewees, multiple times already (during workshops and events organised across the three strands).

Finally, in the case of strand 1 (Project Skyline), a process of triangulation of the data collected during the participatory engagement process, was supported by the visual material (photos, maps created during participatory mapping, flip charts and banners) produced throughout the various events and workshops. Visual material had a fundamental role during the participatory processes and in the analysis of the data collected in both Strand 1 and 2: most of the maps, flipcharts, banners were co-produced by participants in the various workshops, resulting in a key element during the analysis of the data to validate the

information collected through the other methods, and/or to add details/information that somehow went missed when I went form data collection to analysis. Moreover, being co-produced by the participants, the visual materials were used to guide the conversations throughout the duration of the workshops and events (sometimes stretched over more than one day) as they helped 'fixing on paper' all the information shared, and ideas suggested. When visual material was not co-produced but showed by facilitators to stimulate conversations with the participants (such as in the case of using some photographs of the local area in Project Skyline – see Figures 13-14), it greatly helped to create an emotional connection, through the sharing of personal stories and anecdotes from the past. Similarly, the drawings from the pupils of the local primary school in Caerau (see Figure 17), helped involving parents, who, inspired by their kids' drawings/ideas, used them as prompts to think deeply (and laterally) about their local landscape and its potential use. Hence, visual material was ultimately a way to stimulate lateral thinking around the issues at hand, and to strengthen inclusivity in collaborative working (Franklin, 2018; Moriggi, 2021; Peter Reason & Bradbury, 2008).

Ethical Issues

As mentioned already, an ethics of care, and particularly of caring-*with* underpinned my entire research approach, rooted in four key dimensions: attentiveness, solidarity, responsibility, competence and responsiveness (Tronto, 2015). Formally, this research followed Coventry University ethical guidelines and was peer-reviewed before approved. Participant Information sheets were provided to all the interviewees and focus groups participants. These explained the scope of the research, the aims, the methods, and implications, as well as further information on data storage, privacy and confidentiality. All the interviewees agreed and signed a consent form, also included in which   was: my commitment to guaranteed anonymity to all participants; the fact that participation to the research was voluntary and that withdrawal was possible at any time; and further background information on the researcher and supervisory team.

In the case of the participatory and transdisciplinary involvement though Strand 1 and 2, I preferred not to hand over consent forms prior the beginning of workshops and activities. This was because I thought this would have created distance between me and the participants. Instead, I verbally clarified at the beginning of the various sessions who I was and what was

the objective of my presence, including a short introduction to my research. This was reiterated multiple times, including also during more informal conversations held during such events, and every time people asked further questions. Ultimately, on top of the adoption of formal devices (e.g., informed consensus forms) to guarantee ethical standards, I did my best to prioritise building relationships of trust and care with the variety of participants in the three strands of fieldwork. It would be naive to claim that I built relationships of trust with *everyone*. However, the fact that Wales is a relatively small country, and 'everyone knows everyone', especially within the same field (SMNR), proved highly beneficial to making myself and my research known by the majority, through a constant and prolonged presence on the field (across the three strands).

6. The Skyline Project: new narratives and old challenges in the South Wales Valleys

6.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the experiences and the learnings of the Project Skyline. A feasibility study run in 2018-2019 to assess the potential of community land transfer in the South Wales Valleys, Skyline represents the first of the three interwoven strands of fieldwork. The structure, aims and objectives, as well as background information of the Project have been introduced in Ch. 5. The present chapter unpacks the experiences, perspectives and stories from some of the most economically deprived communities of Wales and the UK, which hold, at the same time, an enormous social and ecological potential to thrive and ensure human and more-than-human wellbeing.

I argue that in order for this potential to materialise, it is fundamental to move away from top-down, often paternalistic and technocratic approaches to regeneration and human and ecological wellbeing. These approaches, historically seen in the Valleys are underpinned by a blaming attitude towards the local people, for lack of entrepreneurialism and dependence on public sector's aid. Instead, a horizontal and empowering approach, rooted in deep listening and collective meaning-making, on the pathway towards caring-*with,* started to be explored through this project. Skyline is about imagining a new way to make the local economy self-sustaining through working with the needs, aspirations, and the culture of these places, rather than against it.

The chapter adopts the three phases of the Rubric of Community Regeneration proposed by McIntosh and Jeanrenaud (2008) to structure the analysis of the learnings emerging from the Skyline Project to the discussion around a caring-*with* approach to SMNR:

- Re-membering – what has been dismembered;
- Re-visioning – how the future could be;
- Re-claiming – what is needed to bring it about;

With the words of McIntosh and Jeanrenaud (2008):

> "No cultural carcinogen is more powerful than oppression internalised to the point that a community blames itself for disempowerment, dysfunction, and underachievement. So let us start by *re-membering*. Then we can engage in *re-*

visioning. We must envision what our communities could become...sorting out the realistic from the fantasy and asking what kind of people do we want to be. Finally, dare we to *re-claim*?" (2008, p. 77)

Since the Rubric inspired the development and the engagement process of Skyline on the ground, this chapter begins with section 6.2 discussing how the team of Skyline and the facilitators involved tried to create a caring space for people to meet and share memories and stories, and *re-member* together. Section 6.3 presents the meaning-making process we embarked upon, by imagining and "re-visioning" alternative socio-ecological futures for the Valleys, although the phases of re-membering and re-visioning often occurred simultaneously. Section 6.4 presents the most prominent issues that emerged and were discussed with Skyline participants during the re-visioning and re-membering exercises: what are the main challenging and opportunities for these communities to gain greater control over their land and their future? Using the ability factors framing (see section 3.3), the section analyses what obstacles are on the pathway towards *caring-with*, that prevent these communities from being able to take care of themselves and of their landscape, realising their own visions of socio-ecological prosperity and wellbeing. This chapter concludes with some final reflections around the limitations and opportunities that projects like Skyline present when trying to bring caring-*with* transformations forward.

6.2 "Re-membering that which has been dismembered"

The process of Skyline, first of all, was focused on creating opportunities for people to reconnect to each other, and to their landscape, through listening, sharing and learning about each other's stories and memories. The focus of such stories was what the Valleys (the landscape and the people) looked like pre-industrialisation. The heavy coal-based industrialisation occurred between the end of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century, in fact dramatically transformed the rural landscape of the Valleys forever. One of the most important situations in which the *re-membering* activity occurred was during our trip to Scotland, in October 2018 (see section 5.3.1.5, Table 5, activity 28).

During one of the sessions facilitated by artist and SUSPLACE researcher Kelli Pearson, we engaged in a "timeline writing" exercise (see Figure 19, 20, 21). As part of the exercise participants were asked to build a timeline of their areas. The pictures below show the timeline constructed by the group of Caerau (each of the communities' "delegations" was asked to do one). In remembering the past while reimagining the present and future, they shared what it was before the mines were open. This exercise represented a very important moment to deeply reflect about the fact that the collieries (and all the activities attached to it) had surely provided employment, development, some sort of wealth, education and, to a certain extent, an *identity* to these places. However, these Valleys have also known a different landscape from the collieries, and there was a time when these so-called "mining villages" were something else. In one of the stories written by our participants, they highlighted the pre-mining era, when there were many different varieties of trees populating the slopes of the Valleys, and farmers were working the land, making this traditional Welsh community thriving and self-sufficient, thanks to their balanced relationship with the land that was providing them with food and timber.

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Figure 19 - Project Skyline members gathering in Kilfinian Community Forest (Scotland). Photo Credits: Mike Erskine

165

Figure 20 - Timeline Writing exercise with Project Skyline members, gathered in Kilfinian Community Forest (Scotland). Photo Credits: Mike Erskine

We gathered around a wooden table, located on the top of the Kilfinian Community Forest, in Tighnabruaich, a village on the Cowal peninsula, on the western arm of the Kyles of Bute in Argyll and Bute, Scotland, with a beautiful view on the Peninsula (see Fig 19, 20, 21). On that cold but sunny day, I sat next to the ladies of Caerau, whom I had spent quite some time with already, even before the trip to Scotland. It was very moving for me to learn about both their personal and collective stories. I felt particularly close to them in that instance: they 'let me in', allowing me to get closer through their personal stories, as well as to slowly deepen my understanding of the cultural history of the Valleys, enhancing a strong emotional connection.

The timeline written by the ladies of Caerau talks about farmers and the variety of native trees which suddenly disappeared when "coal was discovered" and "people flocked into the Valleys from all parts of the UK and other countries to work in the mines". In the following 50-60

years "landscape and population changed": the traditional Welsh lifestyle had to give ground to an increasing amount of English, Scottish and international workers who went to populate these areas. Gradually English became the preferred language of communication due to two intertwined phenomena. On one side was the "suppression" of the Welsh language and culture, operated by the government up until the 1960s. As one of the ladies remembered:

> "There was legislation with the government that only English was spoken, and Welsh was suppressed. My mum was born in 1905, and she wasn't allowed to speak in school in Welsh. We were persecuted, not like the Jews, but in a similar way" (Participant C).

On the other, as another lady from Caerau stressed, the families of miners themselves wanted their children to be educated in English and learn the language properly, to get the opportunities that boys and girls only speaking Welsh did not have:

> "Welsh families valued education so much as they saw it as the only route of getting out of the mines. To get out of poverty. They actually encouraged their children to speak English because if you only spoke Welsh, you were not going to be able to move up. So, it was twofold. It wasn't just the government suppressing it. It came a lot from the aspirations of families who wanted to better their children. And they knew they could not do that, through the medium of Welsh. So, they encouraged to speak English" (Participant A).

This is confirmed by Johnes (2012) who states that "Even Welsh-speaking children brought up with stories of the English oppression of the Celts could find themselves under parental pressure to move you in the English world of class and language" (2012, p. 135). Education thus had the potential to enable social mobility for the Valleys' kids. At the same time, however, " education and university degrees were unlikely to solve the problems of an industrial town, out of a mix of idealism, pragmatism and snobbery, they were widely esteemed in all Wales" (Johnes, 2012, p. 135). Listening to these women talking about their families' experiences as well as the oppressed conditions of the people living in Welsh Valleys in the first half of the last century was an intense process; a caring process. Time and emotional energy were required to get as close as possible to each others' stories and collective memories, and to keep nurturing the 'common ground' we had begun to build since the beginning of the Skyline Project.

The history of oppression of the language and culture lived by these places and these people is one side of the coin. On the other, there is a history of resistance and comradeship, that has kept Wales and Welsh people united, even throughout the hardship of the mines. The Industrial Revolution of the second half of the 1800 that brought development and employment in the Valleys through the coal mines, also carried alongside exploitation and devastation from both health and environmental points of view. The conditions in the mines were terrible and workers were going through 14, 15 up to 16 hours shifts underground, for a 11£ pound salary at the end of the day (Participant C). The exploitation and the brutal working conditions were in fact at the core of the politicisation of the miners, who were organised through Unions:

> "When you are at the downdraught's bottom, the philosophy of Marxism is obviously going to appeal you, and uniting against the owners, as the mines owners were the ones who dictated everything in your life. You were powerless to them. (…) You realise that you're not going to improve your life, because you can work your whole life in a mine, and your life was inexistant. So, the only way out of it was either education or by united. Politically." (Participant A).

What really sustained these communities in the tough conditions in which they were forced to live, thus, was comradeship and the solid social fabric they could rely on:

> "When you talk to ex-miners, they do all talk about the comradeship of the mines. And they all accept that it was hard. It was hard work and certainly debilitating to the heart. But the positive thing they talk about is the comradeship, a real community and that is missing now. (…) This is what is missing now from our community is that we're losing that (bonding) and now we've got people who are isolated, they've left without. When it was a mining community, it was a community, everybody had to pull together, the miners themselves, the families of the miners, everything was connected, but now it's all disintegrated. You have got people feeling a little lost, they haven't got purpose." (Participant C).

A sense of mutual caring at the core of the mining communities was a very present element in the narratives of the participants to the Skyline Project. Similarly, they share the perception that this is now lost, and a sense of community fragmentation together with a lack

of common purpose, are now pervasive. The sense of having been left out, or behind, compared to the rest of Wales, or even the UK, is deeply rooted. However, participants' attitudes and ways of resisting and reacting to widespread disillusionment and deprivation were different. From one side, people feel deeply unmotivated and unconfident regarding their own capacity to get anything done, to change their own and their children's destinies:

> "I think that people's experience is that all things being done *to* you, or *for* you, not "you're doing yourself". So, it's very hard concept to understand that this is an idea [i.e., Project Skyline and community land stewardship] of something that you can do for yourself, because it's something quite different to anything that's been offered before." (Participant C, emphasis added).

On the other side, though, there is a strong sense of pride and resistance amongst some of these individuals and groups. Regarding this last point, one of the participants highlighted:

> "So now where we are now? We've just had a realisation. That's the pit development, which should have been for the people and I think it is fair to say, for all the South Wales mines, these communities deserved to benefit from the colliery more than any. The promises of shops and new pubs and all of those things didn't materialise. So, I think we're now on the way back up. We definitely need to unite and to look at that development, and how we now insist that the little bits of land that are left become ours. So no more for the outside world, but we develop things for us." (Participant H).

Notable also here is the other people who were forcefully nodding and expressing their agreement when this participant pronounced these words. Participant A emphasised:

> "I think each area shared that mining history, you know, you've got the same story. It's where you go from here, with what you've got left. You can't change the past, you can only reshape the future." (Participant A)

The next section discuses, therefore, a part of the process of "reshaping the future" we engaged with during the *dreaming* and *designing* phases of the Project.

Figure 21 - *Project Skyline members involved in Timeline Writing in Scotland. Author's own photograph.*

6.3 "Re-visioning what the future could be"

This section discusses some segments of a *shared meaning-making process* at the very heart of Project Skyline. Prompted by a range of diverse activities and creative practices, we collectively explored the visions and dreams of the people of the Valleys who took part to the Project. During this *"Dreaming phase"* I learned *with* the team (Freeth, 2019), moving dynamically between the position of a *participant* in the conversations, through questions and inputs, and of an "impartial" *observer* of the interactions between the participants. Section 6.3.3 explores in depth the case of the Festival of Ideas, a successful example in terms of participation (more than 100 people joined). Its relevance to the analysis conducted in this study, lies on the fact that through hosting and convivial practices of the artists facilitating

the event, we have explored new and shared meanings around the idea of 'community stewardship', bringing the focus on the role of culture and cultural transformations. Section 6.3.2 recounts other re-imagining moments that occurred throughout the engagement process, and that were meaningful for the type of challenges highlighted throughout. The challenges are themselves then discussed in section 6.4.

6.3.1 The importance of hosting and convivial practices

The Festival of Ideas was organised in Autumn 2018 by PEAK creative producer Melissa Appleton and artist Owen Griffiths in one of the three community involved, Treherbert. They developed a programme for the day that had at its core emphasising this interconnected nature of the everyday and emotional dimensions of our lives, with broader concepts such as culture, economy and ecology. In a place where detachment and (emotional) distance from the landscape was repeatedly mentioned by its people, the importance of creating the opportunity to re-think this relationship going through memories, personal and collective stories, dreams and imaginaries was very powerful. By bridging the everyday dimensions of our lives (that includes our relationship with nature as well as our jobs, families, friends) with the broader cultural, economic and ecological contexts within which we operate, participants have been stimulated to reflect around the connection between climate change and culture, 'entering' a meaning-making process. The reflection was prompted by the presence of a long sheet rolled over the tables where people were sharing lunch. Written on the sheet was "Climate Change is Culture, and Culture is Ordinary", as shown in picture below (Fig 22).

Figure 22 - *Banner prepared by artists Owen Griffiths and Melissa Appleton. Project Skyline. Photo Credits: Mike Erskine*

The Festival of Ideas, therefore, was a set of interwoven "hosting practices" - as one of the artists defined their own approach (interviewee #11). Such hosting practices were defined by the same interviewee as:

> "a process of trying to work out what the right gesture for that community is, or what the right spaces. And use tools to do that like the food, or like the social gathering or bringing different voices in, to give different perspectives" (Interviewee #11)

Food sharing, preparing and having meals together (see pictures 23 and 24) represented a key ingredient in the development of such hosting practices, and in general throughout the engagement process of the Skyline project. It was, for example, a at the very centre of the Festival of Ideas , during which the Skyline Team organised a community shared lunch in the Old Library of Treherbert. The Old Library had recently reopened, having been refurbished and turned (again) into a community asset by WTOW, the gatekeeper organisation we have been working with. Food sharing can be considered "a form of social action, engaging citizens in cooking and eating together (and) can become an act of conviviality" (Marovelli, 2019, p. 191).

Figure 23 - Food sharing at the Festival of Ideas in Treherbert, Project Skyline. Photo Credits: Mike Erskine

Figure 24 - Food sharing at the Festival of Ideas in Treherbert (2). Photo Credits: Mike Erskine

Although a deeper investigation in the great political and social potential of conviviality is not within the scope of this thesis, it is fundamental to remember that the aspect of conviviality (e.g., in the form of food sharing, collective walks in the woods, poetry performance from the local children involved in the Project), played a major role throughout the Skyline engagement. Specifically, if taking Marovelli's definition of conviviality (2019), it is possible to highlight its relevance to this study in connection with the idea of *relational becoming* (see section 2.4) and the potential of relational approaches to pave the way for deeper (and transformative) sustainable futures. Marovelli defines conviviality as:

> "An atmosphere and an affect, in which social dimensions enmesh with material, sensory and spatial ones. Convivial atmospheres are related to a sense of 'becoming with' that allows an open encounter." (Marovelli, 2019, p. 193)

A convivial "atmosphere and affect", therefore, contributed to open up conversations with and amongst the local people, to "create a space where people could connect to some of the language and some of the concepts" (Interviewee #11) key in the proposal of Skyline. Namely, what does stewardship means to them? What role do the landscape, its ecology, have in their lives, and in the ones of their children and grandchildren?

A key aspect of the conversations initiated was in fact trying to create new links, between the concepts and the ideas proposed, and the everyday life of the local people. We tried to facilitate a reflection around the history and the memories attached to these places, to initiate a co-creation of meanings and narratives around seemingly big and at times abstract concepts (such as stewardship, or climate change, or energy transition), that could assume a sense of familiarity or relevance to these people and their everyday life. One of the facilitators provided a very fitting example of the importance of "*everydayness*":

> "I think what was really nice about that space that we created on that day [Festival of Ideas] was that this grandmother, who came with her granddaughter, said to me 'I'm here because I want to make it better for her, for my granddaughter, I want to commit to this idea of land stewardship and things like that'. So quite abstract kind of concept. Abstract, in the sense that if you're 70-year-old, retired person, then maybe land stewardship is not something that's been on your radar yet. So even getting people to

positively engage in that, but to also to see then the everydayness of it" (Interviewee #11).

Skyline Project most of all, thus, was about creating *space* to initiate conversations and dialogues through which 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., heads, hearts, hands and feet).

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Figure 25 - Collective walk in the woods during Festival of Ideas - Project Skyline. Photo Credits: Mike Erskine

The case of the Festival of Ideas in Treherbert is an interesting example of the relevance of the concept of everydayness to the process of Skyline. It represents one of those moments where the generative power of the "everydayness" was emphasised, carefully building a *space in between*, a *common ground* where people could share some of their personal and intimate stories, and use them as reflection tools *to re-vision*, *re-imagine* the future, their aspirations and dreams for the next 100 years, i.e., for their children and grandchildren. Allowing room for affective and emotional dimensions to emerge and be shared, had a key role in this specific instance (as in many others throughout the Skyline engagement process, as also discussed in section 6.2). It allowed people to reconnect to their personal and collective shared history. But even more, in prompting people to connect (also) on an affective dimension, this triggered the transformative and generative potential of emotions (Moriggi, Soini, Franklin, et al., 2020). The intention here was to encourage recognition amongst participants of our own interdependence through the help of *hosting practices*, including our links with our future generations, thereby paving the way to develop a caring-*with* type of approach over the long-term.

More than 100 people joined the Festival of Ideas, sharing their memories of the place within different groups, gathered around tables (Figure 31). The participants (local residents of all ages, from kids to elderly), painted a very lively picture of 'what it used to be' that mining town: "Treherbert was thriving" highlighted one of the participants, "when the mines were open. But then at some point all the community meeting points (swimming pool, library, bank and cinema) got closed and the community has missed since then a place to gather, to meet up and spend time together". The mix of memories of the people participating to the Festival of Ideas, as with other events also, populated the **ecology-economy-culture** nexus the facilitators were trying to build, especially in Treherbert. Within this linked-up approach, culture is seen as the ensemble of our ways of perceiving, being, thinking, seeing ourselves and what surrounds us, which also includes our own paradigms, our mindsets. Creating clear and almost tangible connections between all these three dimensions of our lives was a key mechanism to stimulate a re-imagining of the roles of the Valleys landscape. A re-imagining which could serve as best as possible the needs of these places, while responding to the aspirations of those who live there. A cultural transformation, indeed.

Figure 26 - Participants to the Festival of Ideas in Treherbert sharing memories and stories. Photo Credits: Mike Erskine

The transformative potential of hosting and convivial artistic practices that hold the space for radical conversations lies on their capacity to nurture *reflexivity* and *embodiment*. This is confirmed by the words of one of the artists facilitators involved in the Skyline project:

> "Once we have this cultural leverage or cultural capacity that a Project Skyline will support, how do you get those people out onto those Woodlands to talk to all those lovely people in Treherbert. And really get embedded in those conversations about place? These are radical conversations, even if they're very, very gentle but radical…maybe the start of that is to get people out of those offices and out into the landscape?" (Interviewee #24)

Challenges and provocations that might arise from the "unconventional" activities or requests of artists, can critically push people out of their comfort zone (sometimes to the point of putting them off, completely). One meaningful example was the time in September 2018, when I joined the Larks and Ravens, the artist collective facilitating the Skyline community engagement in Ynysowen: they built a giant dream catcher (see figure 27 below), that we carried around the village on a heavily rainy (typical Welsh) Sunday afternoon. We asked whomever passed by the (almost deserted) streets, to record on the colourful ribbons

attached to the dream catchers, what desires, aspirations, *dreams* they had for the future of that valley, of their landscape. We received all sorts of reactions: from highly enthusiastic people who engaged and wanted their views recorded, to highly sceptical, not interested ones. A local community worker that I later interviewed later told me that "they [the artists] are a bit too alternative for the people here" (Interviewee #25).

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Figure 27 - Larks and Ravens in the streets of Ynysowen with a Dream Catcher. Project Skyline. Photo Credits: Mike Erskine

The words of some of the artist facilitators recorded during an interview further explain the provocative and challenging nature of art, and artistic practices:

> "The issue around involving artists, artists, is that artist ask different questions. Questions you wouldn't thought off. And I think psychologists do the same, also ask questions that aren't instantaneously going to be top of the list of anyone else. And that creates a space in which there is a possibility for some creative energy to arise. Like a question that causes somebody to pause and think "oh, what is that?" (Interviewee #28)

178

By allowing *time* for asking 'difficult' questions and letting different and 'difficult' conversations be developed, the *space* created by artistic practices is an *enabling* space, where there is attention to what people have to say and share, and where *care* can be collectively generated and nurtured, where shared understandings and implications of caring-*with* can be generated and pursued. In the words of another artist facilitator interviewed: "Creating a space for other people, you create a different space that *enables* other people to come in" (Interviewee #29).

In line with what eventually emerged in each of the strands of fieldwork, *time* is a major barrier also for artistic practices to contribute to building a 'caring-*with* society'. Amongst the Skyline facilitators, for example, it was a common opinion that more time was needed to get closer to the reality of these communities and of the people living there: "it's going to take more time, and it's going to need more embedding" (interviewee #24). As another facilitator confirmed: "this community is a complex beast with a complex history. And there isn't a generic way of working with it. It requires deep investment. And that's why you need the time to work out how you're going to make come contact and build relationships" (Interviewee #27). Time for embedding, building and caring together is especially needed in communities like the ones involved in the Skyline project, highly traumatised and disillusioned by numerous unfulfilled promises of regeneration and development. The following sentiments of two of the facilitators interviewed express this very well:

"I think a community that is on the margin, on the periphery, is very difficult to engage with. The thing that held them back was time. I think if they had a much longer period to do that participatory art engagement, with less pressure like we need to get this done, I think we would have had more success, or greater success in terms of community engagement." (Interviewee #1).

"I felt that we needed more time really, we needed that time to really get to know the community, before we started kind of attempting to pull rabbits out of hats, which is what we would never want to do anyway. But if you don't have time, then that's often what you end up doing. And it's actually about getting to really kind of build that conversation and actually just observe as well, get a sense of the politics and the feel of it and where the

179

tensions are, where the energy is, and who's not speaking? And where do people go? And where are the young people?" (Interviewee #27).

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Figure 28 - Art installation about the Engagement process in Treherbert as exhibited during "How to build a Valley" event in Cardiff. Project Skyline. Photo Credits: Mike Erskine

6.3.2 Re-imagining the landscape – exploring vision of caring-with

On top of the pre-organised events set up by the different facilitators within the team of the Skyline project, I engaged more informally with the locals, especially in Caerau. On September 29th, 2018 I was in Caerau to meet some members of the organisation we collaborated with, who in turn introduced me to some of the community members and residents of the village. Our collaborators met me at the local community centre of the village, where we had lunch and some conversations. While eating, people got curious about the "stranger"/ "outsider" (i.e., myself) sitting with two very well-known members of the community. They informally introduced me to the other guests at the café, telling them I was there as Project Skyline team member, to get to know the opinions of the people of Caerau about what was needed there, and how a different use of the landscape could have helped to achieve it. I subsequently used the opportunity of this introduction, to start asking questions, for instances about easy accesses to trails in the woods, that people could enjoy walking on, and if not, if that was something they would have liked to see. One of the people sitting nearby, a 70-year-old resident, said that trails in the woods would not be a "priority" for them. Caerau would rather need an "inclusive infrastructure", as sporadic bus services and absence of a train line (stopped in 2004) had left Caerau in isolation from the rest of the SW Valleys.

On that same day that I went for lunch at one of the local cafés, I also went to two other key places of Caerau: to the Dyffryn Chapel to visit the Dementia Group, who was there for its Thursday's meeting, and right after that to the Ysgol Gynradd Caerau Primary School, to approach some of the parents waiting out of school for their kids. I wanted to start some conversations and introduce the Project to the residents. Our local collaborators suggested to me that I visit these places to get myself known by the locals - especially the school, if I wanted to interact with the parents and 'young' families of the town (adults roughly in their 30s and 40s). I went at about 3.15pm, just before the kids were let out.

The fieldnotes I took in relation to these attempts are imbued of the complex and tensed situation I found myself in, which still generates in me a heavy mix of conflicting emotions. Once outside of the school, I (randomly) approached little groups of mums and dads spread in the parking lot in front of the school, and introduced myself: "Hi, my name is Gloria, and I am part of Project Skyline, have you heard of it? We're working with Invest Local Caerau, to explore options for community management of the land surrounding Caerau – we are

interested in knowing what would you do if *this land was yours, was owned by the community*? What do you guys feel is missing here around?". People were certainly curious about a stranger, what is more, a foreigner with funny accent, asking them "what they need or want" (asking directly to residents "what *they* want" – what a revolutionary approach to be taken in the Valleys!). In some instances, the curiosity translated in interested replies; in others there was a straight rejection "I don't know, I really don't know, sorry I have to go"; or even "no, I don't wanna speak with you".

That day provided me with a few hints to start drawing my own picture of what Caerau is like, besides the statistics and what is said about the SW Valleys. A common theme amongst the handful of replies I managed to collect was "something for the kids", especially "a nice and *looked after* park or green area for the kids", that could be accessible without necessarily having to use a car or public transport. The parents I talked to complained about the lack of infrastructures and activities for the little ones, that were available also to disable kids and/or parents.

The difference between the enthusiasm showed by the (mostly) elderly people gathering at the Dyffryn Chapel, and the lost eyes of the parents met in front of the school stroke me. The former had plenty of ideas on how to benefit most from their rich natural environment: they proposed horse riding activities, a lama farm, beehives, an archery, a fitness bootcamp, forest schools for kids, but also community gardens to cultivate flowers, food. They highlighted the need for wheelchairs accessibility to all these spaces, and especially to a potential café with a sitting area and plenty of benches to enjoy, together, the view on the Valley. Whereas the parents in front of the school were just confused – it seemed they had not thought deeply yet about the opportunities attached to a different use of the landscape, about that valley as a place of recreation, enjoyment, conviviality, or even education. What clearly emerged from their answers was the need for something for the kids, but something that someone else (possibly the Council) had to provide, and, most of all, that someone else would *initiate* and *maintain* for them. Someone who could *care for* them, indeed.

These small examples give the dimension of some of the socio-economic deprivation that is possible to find in these areas and the ways in which it produces an enormous pressure on the capacity of/opportunity for its residents to participate to caring-*with* practices, or just to imagine alternative futures inspired by a caring-*with* approach: "Who will watch the kids

while the adults deliberate?" asks Tronto (2013, p. 27) in her *Caring Democracies*. This represents one of those questions I have been metaphorically asked multiple times by the people I met in the communities we were working through the Skyline Project. An example that stayed with me is that of a mother of four, who joined the event in Caerau on January 26th, 2019. Her daughter participated in a competition launched in the local school, where the pupils were asked to design their dream woodland park/playground, and she told me how great she found the idea of Skyline. However, she highlighted that it is very hard for her to join any of the meetings and events, because she has to work two jobs, which often do not even allow her to fully pay for her internet bills.

These are real barriers, real and material challenges that affect people's agency and capacity to participate. 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 their children. Two of the interviewees incisively articulated the implications of this issue:

> "*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 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).

> "I think that when you live in a deprived area, your day is filled with eating, sleeping, affording things for the family, to actually look at vision is quite difficult, isn't it? We need to get out of that social, emotional trap, of making the ends meet to be able to think bigger" (Participant H)

Ultimately, the challenges related to the socio-economic deprivation of the areas that detrimentally affect the imaginative capacity of the locals add up the historical detachment -

or even aversion - towards the surrounding natural environment. This was also perceivable in places like Aberfan[19]:

> "Even though the disaster was mainly industrial in its nature, it did come from the mountain side, which is the environment, because of the spring...Nature almost caused it – I think underlying that is that mentality, "we don't go up there, that's where the pit was". The land is still owned by the Coal Board, and people are aware of that. Even though it's green, to a lot of people is still black. And a lot of people don't realise that. People do carry a lot of animosity towards the mountain side and the valley" (Interviewee #4)

This was confirmed by another participant, who claimed: "There is definitely disengagement with our woodlands and nature. And I think it's because people have said "don't" so many times" (Participant H). A lost sense of connection with the local river, or the woodland or the spring where many years ago some of the participants had spent their childhood, is a common theme. However, at the same time, the processes of re-membering and re-imagining have provided some space for these people to reinvigorate these often-broken relationships, attaching new or re-discovered meanings to those disregarded local natural resources:

> "it's a river, it's not that deep. Our environmental group – "river roots" – we actually own the river in our own name, it's where we come from, it's why we picked this name..." (Interviewee #4).

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[19] See section 4.4 for account of the Aberfan Disaster

Figure 29 - Another picture from the collective walk during Festival of Ideas in Treherbert. Photo Credits: Mike Erskine

6.4 The challenges to a caring-*with* transformation in the Valleys

This section provides an overview of the main challenges to a transformation towards caring-*with* that emerged from the months of engagement with the communities involved in the Skyline project. This section discusses how paternalistic and managerial approaches to community regeneration have contributed to exacerbate multiple tensions, contradictions and challenges starting from a pervasive sense of disempowerment and helplessness amongst these Valleys communities. Section 6.4.2 discusses how history of difficult relationships with institutional actors and organisations (including but not limited to local governments) has left a legacy of a bureaucratic "fear culture", that impedes collaboration and relationships of trust between communities and their political representatives. Ultimately, 6.4.3 addresses issues related to internal fragmentation and "tribalism" within and between these communities, which strongly emerged throughout the engagement.

6.4.1 "Learned helplessness"

There is a 'double-edged sword' situation in a paternalistic attitude from the public sector (both at the national, European and the local level). From one side, historically[20], there has been substantial amounts of public funding and benefits to support people in need, in poverty or unemployed. From the other, however, as Scott-Cato argues "grants can have a pernicious effect in terms of perpetuating dependence" (Cato, 2004, p. 208). The pervasive caring-for approach of the past decades have, therefore, strongly contributed to nurture the "unhelpful myth of Welsh helplessness" and a "psychological dependence on grants" (Cato, 2004, p. 207). Cato (2004) reports that while walking the streets of any ex-mining village in the SW Valleys, there is:

> "A general air of hopelessness and lack of confidence leavened, at least in the case of the workers themselves, by an irrepressible seam of black humour. The feeling is that everything possible has been tried, that everything has failed, and that we are left, as the Czech proverb has it, pretending to work while they pretend to pay us. This is the view from the ground, and it is depressing." (Cato, 2004, p. 206).

One of the interviewees, part of the Skyline Project management team, talks about this very phenomenon in terms of there being a "personal psychological concept of *learned helplessness*" (Interviewee #30). Perceivably, this is linked to a rooted conviction amongst people in these areas that "there's nothing, nothing you do that makes any difference" (Interviewee #30). A heavy but subtle sense of disillusionment and helplessness was almost tangible in the words of many of the people who were sharing about promised projects of regeneration or new developments for the communities in the Valleys than never materialised. As Molly Scott-Cato (2004) herself concluded, decades of unattended promises and claims about upcoming new eras of prosperity "has left a huge gulf of trust between policy-makers and the people with whom they need to work in regenerating Wales's depressed regional economies" (2004, p. 204). The words of the Skyline participants confirm this:

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[20] As well as more recently, through the UK-wide austerity policies which have drastically cut welfare and public services (Gardner, 2018)

"People's experience is all things being done to you, or for you, not "you're doing yourself". So, it's very hard concept to understand that this is an idea of something that you can do for yourselves because it's something quite different to anything that's been offered before." (Participant A, Focus Group)

"People from here so often have been told by organisations that they're gonna do this, and that, and their experience unfortunately so far it is that it hasn't happened. So you too become very cynical about it, 'oh yeah we have heard all this before, they are all always promising this to us'." (Participant F).

As many people told me in different circumstances and places throughout my time in Wales, the people of the Valleys are historically used to stuff being done *to* them, and *for* them, but *not with* them. This includes, for example, carrying out a quick consultation to manage public money "poured into communities", without fully and strategically involving the residents in developing shared visions, aspirations, and goals. This emerged clearly when I asked interviewees their perception of what the attitude was of the local people towards the idea of taking ownership and/or direct organisation of projects and events involving the whole community. One of them, for example, explicitly said "I do think that the public would attend [events and meetings] but they rather have someone doing it for them" (Interviewee 2). Another, Interviewee #4, explicitly aid that people in their community are "scared by the idea of ownership and stewardship". It seems to prevail a sense of pushback towards the idea of ownership and stewardship from conversations with the participants to the Skyline project.

At the core of it, there is certainly a difficult relationship with the local councils and/or the Institutional organisations managing the land and forestry surrounding the villages. The tensed relationships with local councils and other institutional organisations has roots in the mid-1950s (Johnes 2012), when some of the pits of the SW coalfield started to close – a process that culminated in the second half of the 1980s. The National Coal Board authority (formally dismantled in 1983) is no exception here. Still being the owner most of the ex-colliery sites in the Valleys, a strong sense of resentment towards this organisation was perceptible amongst the people of the Valleys, including in relation to their guilty negligence in the Aberfan disaster.

Some disappointment towards the institutional negligence towards publicly owned land was perceivable also in the words of one of the interviewees, while talking about the opportunity for their community group to engage in the management of the local riverbanks. They said:

> "We have got bits of the colliery land here, still vacant, probably not going to be developed. Well, let's use it! Let's take it our own and use it. We have got the Taff Trail...Let us do something with it. Let's work with the local authority rather than against it, because this is what it seems most of the time." (Interviewee 4)

The difficult relationships between Valleys communities and authorities in general (i.e., not just local councils), was the basis for the choice of the Skyline project management to 'downscale' the initial vision of community land *ownership* to community *stewardship*. As discussed in the Skyline final Report (2019), the difference between the two lies on the fact that stewardship entails a leasehold, and therefore long-term management rights over the land. In contrast a freehold entails full ownership rights (and liabilities) over the land, as in the case of the community buyouts in the Scottish Highlands. As stated in the Skyline final report (Blake, 2019, p. 13):

> "In the context of the Valleys, leasehold tenure is recommended since it protects the community from potential liabilities resulting from previous industrial use, can establish conditions that could lead to surrender, protecting the landowner and giving the community clarity on the term, rights, and conditions of the agreement."

When asked about the reasons for the change of wording from ownership to stewardship, one of the Skyline management team members interviewed stated:

> "[Stewardship] is a term that is supposed to be less frightening to the landowner. A landowner being the local authority or the Welsh Government, because it comes with different legal obligations." (Interviewee #30).

Thus, the complex relationships between communities and authorities, underpinned by an historical lack of trust between them, is an important element shaping present and future attempts to undertake transformative pathways towards sustainability in the Valleys. Another Skyline participant stressed the complex relationship between community groups and local council:

"We lost ownership, we definitely lost ownership with the council, local authorities taking over, and they are forgetting that they are there for the people, and not the other way around. Because when I put a bid in and saying we want to build houses in this piece of land, their response was 'well, you don't even own the land', well actually we do, don't we? Because it is a community piece of land, it was a colliery, it was given to you [local council] to look after. And you have not done anything with it, so it is not yours either!" (Participant H).

6.4.2 The bureaucratic "fear culture"

The heavy presence of the public sector in the way the Welsh civil society is organised and works, is partly perceived to have weakened the development of capacities within communities to take up control and power over matters fundamental to their socio-ecological well-being. For instance, the many bureaucratic constraints (i.e. broadly linked to insurance, legal and liability issues) imposed on entrepreneurial and community-led activities, seem to suggest a mutual mistrust and 'distance' developed between residents and local governments. In the words of a participant:

"In areas where there is a high public sector involvement, and high public sector work patterns, they aren't innovators, they aren't entrepreneurial. There's a need to constantly audit everything (…) You do not always need to process something to death. And I think that is what happen in load of the meetings and committees I seat on. They bring it in, process their reviews before, not prepared to just run it in a different way. In the end, I think it stops innovation, because people who turn up to meetings because they are active, do not want to go through a constitution word by word. So, they go away. If you have got a process-related group, who want to design forms, let them do it, but let the others be active. There are so many things that are there to prevent you instead of saying 'how do we make this works'." (Participant H).

The perception that local governments and residents are "so stuck in their ways, that they have to see something first" (Participant H) is very widespread, and it has been reiterated by many people involved in the Project. Talking about local governments personnel, one of the interviewees said:

"Because the local councillors don't make anything easy, everything has to be bureaucratically controlled, which is how they're run, it's been that way forever, and they don't know how to do it differently. (...) There's quite an older element here, so perhaps more traditional, "we don't do it that way"... but you got to break it up someway" (Interviewee 4).

"Seeing something first" was stressed by participants in each community as the key requisite in order to get wider sections of the residents engaged and involved in something new and alternative (almost radical!) such as Skyline. They repeatedly told me that people (both residents and administrators) need to see tangible results before getting on board. As discussed also in the literature:

"Balancing the need for a strategic long-term approach with the need to show results is important for community members as well as partners. This typically involves planning for 'quick wins' - investing in resident-driven short-term projects that enable residents to work together towards tangible goals and demonstrate to themselves that change is possible. This helps to build trust and commitment." (Taylor, Buckly, & Hennessy, 2017, p. 51).

Historically, at the core of most of the government-led regeneration initiatives in the Valleys there is a seemingly paternalistic attempt to address problems only superficially (i.e. "pouring money into it"), failing to recognise and tackle the systemic issues related to unequal power, control, and sense of helplessness that so overtly undermines participation and active engagement of most of these communities' residents. Some interviewees were particularly aware of this:

"But then it comes down to power. In Skyline you talk about land, the more land you have the more power you have got, and I think that is still the point...is like an archaic principle, people still think that way. As soon as you start to give land to community groups to own, the ownership of that, is almost like handing over power, and I do not think local authorities or governments will jump at that straightaway, because of that aspect." (Interviewee #4).

Trust, especially, is the very element that makes collaborative working in the sense of caring-*with* possible. The complex historical tensions between communities and their representatives have deeply undermined the development of trust and working relationships:

> "I think public bodies are scared of people, we've criticised them for 20 or 30 years, we've been very critical of our public bodies, councils, council workers, the reputation of council workers that we've been at, and we've taken it to court for blocks in the pavements. (…) These are our public servants. They have forgotten they are public servants, as one thing and maybe they have forgotten because we would treat them like s***. This whole disconnection about why we pay our taxes and what these people do for a living. That connection has been completely eroded, lost, society has forgotten it now, these people work for us" (Participant G).

There is a need to break their circle of disappointment and mistrust originated in the many unmet promises. Ways of doing so, as envisioned by the participants, are related to the need for *action* in order to trigger same *reaction* (in both residents and institutions) towards change. Similarly, one of the interviewees from management Team pointed out that "A big part of the process is getting people to believe". When asked "How do you bring people to believe?", they replied that (bold) action should come from powerful actors:

> "Somebody [with power] saying: "I want to make this happen. I believe we should be taking risks. This is exactly the kind of risk we should be taking" (Interviewee #30)

Without bold action from governments and/or powerful actors, the situation that emerges is a sort of conundrum: community groups who are regularly engaged in various activities need/want more engagement from those who are usually not engaged (amongst institutions and the rest of the residents) to achieve wider and more effective change. However, in order to capture more interest and involvement, they need to "show something concrete" an activity, a project up and running, something that goes beyond the usual "talking shop" (Participant B). Unless they already have resources (*time* and *space*, as well as financial), thus power and support (both socially, politically and economically), they are not going to be able to "show something" to 'convince' others of the relevance and importance of what they are proposing. In this way it becomes extremely difficult, if not impossible, for such groups to amplify their activities and reach out beyond the 'usual suspects' to affect wider change.

In the case of the three communities engaged with through Skyline, this vicious cycle seems to break when an important element comes into play: a paid officer is embedded in the community and fully part of it. When a person is paid to do a continuous and long-term engagement process (rather than on a project-base), the situation has the potential to drastically changes. Suddenly there is someone who has got *time, material resources, skills and knowledge* to effectively engage with people at all levels. The connection between such element and better or stronger community engagement is visible in the case of Treherbert, where a paid officer, appointed in different roles but continuously since 2013, is now in a leading position within the local Skyline gatekeeper organisation. This person admitted clearly that "I wouldn't have been able to do it. Obviously. I'm working-class guy so I wouldn't have been able to do that without being paid" (Participant G).

The presence of a paid officer (part of an established umbrella organisation, that gathers more than 40 organisations) who is *in the conditions to be able to take care of* the many different aspects of community engagement, especially building the necessary relationships with institutional and non-institutional actors, can be identified as a key element of difference between the three communities involved in Skyline. Although it is by no means guaranteed that the presence of a paid officer will necessarily create the right conditions for more meaningful community engagement, it can contribute to go beyond traditional consultation models. As stressed also by one of the facilitators: "And the other key element was that Treherbert had two paid officers on the ground. And I think that is absolutely essential as well" (Interviewee #6).

To have the means to take care of the need for listening to people's voices and helping translating those visions and needs into actions, is at the very core of what happened in Treherbert:

> "And it really it was obvious that this community didn't want to be talked to, again, they wanted something to happen. So, they wanted to participate in something, they didn't want to be asked "is your voice being heard?" again, what they wanted was to be able to take some action, to get involved" (Participant G).

6.4.3 Internal fragmentation and "tribalism"

An important element when thinking to the potential consequences of a caring-for approach is the fragmentation of social capital and activities resulting from handing out considerable amount of financial resources into the Valleys, without strategic visions, needs and aspirations of the local people to guide the process of planning and spending. During the many informal conversations I had during my time in Caerau, often it occurred that people had no idea that a local group had been established in 2018, to manage around a million pounds of charitable monies for the benefit of their own community. The detachment perceivable in these communities was further confirmed by the words of an interviewee (a community officer), who highlighted the detrimental effect of decades of mere consultative processes; processes that have nether led to efficient and effective regenerative results, nor contributed to empowering people:

> "People have had decades of things being done *to* them, or *for* them, and not *with* them. So, it's a community that had money thrown at it, but it's been often misspent" (Interviewee #3; emphasis added)

The amount of money poured into these communities, based on a top-down and managerial approach, therefore not only risks further dis-empowering people, depriving them of the capacities and even of the opportunities to learn to do things themselves. It also has a divisive effect on the community itself, creating factions between "those who are involved" and "those who don't care", without really trying to address the underlying causes of such superficial distinction. The fragmentation and disconnection within the communities is noticeable even in trivial things such as people not being aware of activities happening in the community centre up the road. When showing to people the sheet with this list of activities, the outcome was regularly one of surprise at the things that were happening there. In some instances it was also noted that there was a price to pay to join those activities, and they could not afford it.

In my journey of *learning about* these communities, I had the clear impression that tensions and disagreements within them were quite radicalised. They have led to a conflictual situation: on one hand, a perceivable opposition - either specifically towards the local group created *ad hoc* to manage the million pounds, or more generally towards those more active within the communities, considered by those not involved in it as "always the same people"

who love meetings but not getting things done. On the other, a reported feeling amongst those not involved of not feeling welcomed, nor listened to, due to their different ideas or different approach to community development and projects. With this regard, one of the interviewees explicitly confirmed "I think it's a personality issues [that stops collaborative working], it's not [the nature of] the project itself" (Interviewee #2). These circumstances provide an important example of how fragmentation and a certain level of (personal) animosity can tear apart the very social fabric of the community, hindering opportunities for the whole community to thrive.

As mentioned in section 6.2, a turning point of the Skyline Project was the trip to Scotland (see section 5.3.1, Table 5, activity 28), organised with the primary aim to inspire the Welsh folks and show them that "it can be done", that community ownership or stewardship *can be* a reality also in Wales. The trip to the North-West Mull Community Woodland Company and to Kilfinian Community Forest represented an intense 5 days of proximity and intense relationship building, not just between facilitators/Skyline Team and the participants, but also amongst the participants themselves. Until then, they had not had many opportunities to get together as the three communities involved in Skyline. The trip to Scotland was fundamental from a number of point of views, including collective learning and reflection, relationships and trust building, and to reinvigorate a lost sense of cohesion and self-confidence to affect change.

The timeline writing done in Scotland (see section 6.2), for instance, was thus a focal moment of the collective learning and sharing between these three groups: it represented a turning point in the engagement process towards opening a new space, one where to start building a new narrative, a new way of envisioning the future across the three Valleys. A sharing moment between the three communities is thus not something to consider banal or trivial in the context of the Valleys. As one of the interviewees reflected during a focus group "Valleys communities are very territorial" (participant C) and connecting them is very hard; one of the interviewees talked about the "tribalism" of the Valleys communities. Indeed, the villages we have been working with range between ca. 7000 (Caerau) and ca. 3800 (Ynysowen) inhabitants, with Treherbert being around 5000. Although the reduced size of their population, historical and geographical barriers impede this communities to be very collaborative and united even within them, not just amongst them.

I can recall the tangible sense of pride and the strong will to resist, and actually demand for more, for better lives and opportunities to thrive and live well, as communities, not just as individuals, that emerged right after the timeline writing exercise in Scotland. In this regard participant G stressed the importance of better and reinforced communication between the different Valleys, since the mix of a hostile landscape and lack of linking infrastructure impedes ease of access and movements between them. In fact, the current system of roads in the Southwest part of Wales is mainly vertical, meaning that although the Valleys are geographically only a few miles away from each other , in practical terms, the lack of a horizontal/cross-cutting system of roads force people to drive down towards Cardiff and then up again towards the next Valley. In this situation, the landscape becomes the object of a process of re-imagination, something to take back in their own hands, and re-define. That is, to change its meaning from being an obstacle, something "that divides", to being rather something that can unite, and can hold new and renovated hopes, dreams, and relationships, although the history, pain, disillusionment it carries with it.

> "Communication between us is gonna be really important across the valleys, that whatever happens needs to be a valleys-wide... An Alliance between the Valleys. Something like a "Southwest Valleys forest Alliance" that needs to take shape. And it's about pulling equipment, pulling ideas, we are neighbours, we only live a couple of miles apart from each other, but in reality, it may take us 40 minutes to get there. So, if that landscape becomes our landscape, we are neighbours again." (Participant G)

One of the participants well captured this emerging theme in this quote:

> "The opportunity I think they've all highlighted is actually an upward trend to new thinking. I think it's a new thinking going on. I think all of them sort of got to that point where this is this a new thinking? Is there a new way? Is there something else? Because that's the question." (Participant G).

Moreover, the fact that these communities have been brought together, was not just important to stimulate a sort of "Valleys' pride", and a sense of wanting 'do it together' but also a way to gain greater confidence about the fact that is possible to do things differently and stimulate a local development that really works for the landscape and its people. This

specific point has a twofold relevance in this analysis. On one side, there is an acknowledged difference between the three villages in terms of community organisation and coordination. The case of Treherbert and the 'Welcome to Our Woods' organisation, for instance, was unanimously recognised by the participants from the other villages as the one "much further up the road", in terms of community engagement and capacity to implement change at the community level. According to one of the interviewees (#3):

> "I would argue that Treherbert is more progressed, and mature as community, and Caerau, in terms of the growing, very well developed. And there are different stages in terms where they are in delivering their aspirations, but Treherbert is being great".

Pulling together communities that do share a mining past (as the timeline writing exercises evidenced) but that, at the same time, are different from many points of view, represented a powerful inspirational tool and an important ingredient of the Skyline formula:

> "We as community group are looking to run things locally, side of the road, where people can see what we do! We are spending some time in setting up and running the bureaucratic. But we've only done that, after the culmination of Skyline. When we went to the different communities. I only managed to go to Treherbert, and I was really inspired by it, what they are doing there, mainly from the forestry management point of view. The fact that they own the management rights, and they could fell their trees, they've got their own power supply there.... (...) It took them some time to get there, but they're doing it. They're going from strength to strength. Like the Old Library, they're running shops, activities...that's what we want to do. When you see people doing it and not too far away, just two valleys away...seeing them doing it, why aren't we doing it?" (Interviewee #4).

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to illustrate and critically discuss some meaningful moments, processes and elements occurred throughout the one-year engagement with Project Skyline. The multiple and varying events and activities promoted during the engagement process created some *space* and *time* for these Valleys communities to re-connect, to repair

relationships, as well as to embark upon deeper meaning-making processes around the kind of social and ecological future they desire.

The entrenched power imbalances, lack of opportunities, mixed with material deprivation and (spiritual) disintegration of these communities' social fabrics, are at the core of the tensions and contradictions entrenched in the pathway towards caring-*with* and just sustainability transformations. Although the process of engagement of Skyline was far from perfect or fully inclusive, it did create some opportunities for critical reflection, deep listening and sharing of needs and aspirations. The creation of convivial and caring spaces enabled a rich learning and inspiring environment, that enhanced some participants' motivation, legitimacy and sense of self-efficacy:

> "In Scotland it does work! It really does work, and people on board especially in Kilfinian, they've built their own community centre with the trees that grow on the same ground where they're standing on" (Participant #E)

Not a single 'Skyline Project' will ever be effective enough to trigger deep sustainability transformations. However, it is possible to affirm that the Skyline Project has opened an important (cultural and political) conversation in Wales, on how to enable greater community stewardship of natural resources by means of strengthening their role in caring-*with* governance approaches. With this regard the Skyline Project in Treherbert (now in the process of becoming a community land trust, re-labelled "Rhondda Skyline") was awarded further funding in 2020, through the Welsh Government's Foundational Economy Challenge Fund. The aim is to bring this 'conversation' further, and for the newly set up community land trust to get rights to the land from NRW soon.

7.Landscape Partnerships on the pathway towards caring-with

This chapter discusses strand 3 of my fieldwork, a pan-Wales qualitative study of landscape partnerships funded through the SMS grant scheme of WG. The focus of the chapter is on the challenges encountered by the interviewees in developing and maintaining collaborative practices of SMNR, within the context, requirements and framework provided by the WG for the SMS grant scheme. I interpret and discuss the challenges highlighted by interviewees through the ability factors lens (Fisher and Tronto, 1990): what are the challenges that landscape partnerships encounter when trying to take care of the natural resources and the communities inhabiting these places, collectively?

In sections 7.1 and 7.2, I delve in the analysis of *time* (and lack thereof) to build and nurture relationships of trust as well as to nurture capacity to understand different needs and worldviews (a fundamental part of a caring approach). In section 7.3 I then discuss other ability factors for caring such as *resources* (especially financial and human)*, knowledge* and *skills.* Section 7.4 zooms in on the case of farmers, and critically discusses the widespread myth of "careless farmers". Section 7.5 discusses an overarching issue related to a "fear culture" and rigidity from the side of government and bureaucracy (highlighted also in the case of Skyline, see 6.4.2) perceived by many of the interviewees as the ultimate challenge towards a caring-*with* approach for SMNR.

7.1 Time to *repair* and *nurture* relationships of trust

Tronto (2015, p. 25) defines *time* as "the most important resource for caring". However, time "is not equally available to everyone" (Ibid.), and in fact, is a fundamental and multidimensional challenge emerging in the narrative of those involved with collaborative working on the ground. Specifically, interviews revealed that there are multiple aspects that make *time* a determinant in how inclusively and meaningfully we can pursue partnership working and caring-*with*, on an everyday basis. In this regard, Puig de la Bellacasa (2017, p. 175) highlights how "looking at temporality from the perspective of everyday experience, time is not an abstract category, or just an atmosphere, but a lived, embodied, historically and socially situated experience."

There is a tendency in the neoliberal ideology attached to technocratic and managerial governance approaches (in the SMNR realm as in many other fields) to:

"discount the present as everyday practices, relations and embodied temporalities of practitioners embedded in this industrious speed-up time are also compressed and precarious. Productionism not only reduces what counts as care (…) but also inhibits the possibility of developing other relations of care that fall out of its constricted targets." (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 186).

The current system places many challenges in front of those involved in building relationships in the way it does not fully recognise the value of the time the various partners spend *being together*. This includes being together through numerous face-to-face meetings that are at the very base of the partnership working and the caring-with for nature and people: "I do stress that it does take time to build the relationship, you can set up a partnership signing a bit of paper, and you think that's it" (interviewee #10).

This was confirmed by another interviewee, who is part of the management of a UK-wide third sector organisation. They explained:

"So again, I would always be present in those meetings too. So it's a lot of work. It's a lot of meetings. It's a lot of organisation but it does keep us very closely in touch with what's going on the ground" (Interviewee #16).

Most of the interviewees mentioned, at one point or another, how much time is needed to see each other, to spend time together to address challenges arising within their respective SMS partnership. As highlighted by Tronto (2013, p. 166) "care is about relationship. And relationships require, more than anything else, two things: sufficient time and proximity". The importance of proximity was also highlighted by interviewees from a community group involved in an SMS project, which managed to secure a long-term lease on a former council building through a grant form WG "community assets" scheme:

"[This building] is really crucial to us because this is a base that people know where it is, they use to put up notices… People come in and out, it's not formal, they don't have to have a meeting booked, they have a cup of tea, a talk, lots of social groups here too – there's always people in and out." (interviewee #10)

As highlighted by this interviewee, proximity and a space to meet informally as well as formally offers the possibility to have that cup of tea, that chat, to facilitate relationship building over the long-term, especially in highly fragmented communities and groups (as was similarly discussed also in the case of the Skyline communities). The importance of

repetition, of meeting on a regular basis as facilitated by the presence of a sort of "community hub" is beautifully emphasised in Puig de la Bellacasa's words:

> "Specific care becomes better when it is done again, in the particularities of a knowing relation that thickens as it goes, as it *involves* (…) Care time suspends the future and distends the present, thickening it with myriad multilateral demands"(2017, p. 207 original emphasis).

The opportunity of *thickening* relationships through investing time in meetings and encounters was stressed by another interviewee, coming from the private sector. They highlighted how having invested time and energy to create a partnership through the SMS scheme had allowed them to *start* conversations with stakeholders historically labelled as 'enemies'. They recounted the times when communication between these adversary groups was so hard and stuck, such that it could happen only with the presence of a *super partes* mediator*,* often from a public body. Mentioning these episodes, they stressed how a project like the SMS despite providing only three years of funding, is in reality leading to the *repair of* decades of damage and lack of collaboration and enable the creation of a common vision for the use of the landscape*:*

> "it's actually 20 years, we're undoing 20-50 years of damage" (Interviewee #11)

The perspective of a long-term repair and, then, maintenance of the relationships of trust needed for any SMNR partnership to be meaningful and inclusive is well encapsulated by the words of the same interviewee while talking about the four objectives of their partnership:

> "So we're going to just like push hard against matching these four things [the partnership' four goals], that are four great big oil tankers, that are just huge and turn slowly. We're just essentially trying to shove as hard as we can all four of them. And if all four of them have turned a bit, then that is the sort of momentum to push us into the next 20-30 years." (Interviewee #11).

In the following section I discuss more specifically the ways in which trust and relationships of trust have actually been *repaired*, *maintained*, or developed from scratch in the case of some of the SMS partnerships. In doing so I gradually unravel the challenges and the key enabling factors behind trust building. Although 'trust' is unanimously considered a 'key ingredient' for collaborative working, rarely the literature has investigated how access to, or control over *power* factors (i.e., *ability factors* throughout this manuscript), affect the capacity of people to build trust, and thus, to care (-*with*).

200

7.2 Time for listening to needs and different worldviews

One of the main questions I consistently asked to interviewees was about the major challenge faced in the many years of partnership working. One of the interviewees replied:

> "A complete lack of understanding of where the other partners were coming from. Yeah. Yeah. A complete lack of understanding and awareness and sympathy with what everyone else was trying to do" (Interviewee #16).

The "lack of understanding" was mentioned by more than one interviewee as an element that has slowed down (if not hindered at times) the process of getting to know and trust each other. If in the case of interviewee #16 a "lack of sympathy" represented the problem, others have highlighted the fact that sometimes people are just fully focused on their own needs and aspirations, lacking (mental) *space* to stop and reflect on those of others:

> "When I started working with local authorities 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 recognising 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 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, perspectives in decision making arenas (see e.g. Turnhout et al., 2019). The underplay of challenges and limitations to the capacity of people to express their own needs as well as to understand the ones of others leads to overlooking a fundamental link in the caring-with approach to SMNR applied in this manuscript: identifying needs and allocating responsibility to meet them lies at the core of caring-with.

Those that Tronto (2013, p. 162) calls "need talks", are therefore deeply affected by the ability factors mentioned. As mentioned in chapter 6 about the Skyline Project, the definition of needs and the discussion around 'how to' collectively meet those needs especially in deprived and exhausted communities represent a very delicate matter. As one of the SMS interviewees astutely describes:

> "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).

Some of the interviewees' experiences therefore provide evidence of the complexity of identifying and meeting needs in situation of disadvantage (related to any of the ability factors identified by Tronto and others). The tendency of parachuting in communities and places short-term projects seems to fully contribute to exacerbate this 'careless' approach, failing to recognise 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).

This quote from a member of a community group funded through SMS crucially reminds us of the importance of investing time and space to appreciate and welcome people's needs "at their own pace". As suggested by Puig de la Bellacasa (2017):

> "temporal diversity is crucial in tunings and readjustments of intensified involvements because one form of care does not necessarily work in a different arrangement and will need to be readjusted as relation evolves" (p. 207)."

Using the example of soil, whose multiple types need different type of care depending on the time of the year, Puig de la Bellacasa clarifies that there is not "one-fits-all" way of caring and caring-with, but there is a need to constantly adjust and adapt to specific contingencies, situations, conditions that affect both human and more than human needs, to make sure that

these needs are met democratically, inclusively, meaningfully. As further discussed by another interviewee:

> "The bad thing to do is parachuting in with an idea that "you need this". The other side of that is the open side: what do you need? So you have to come to know the people of the area and the resources, before you can even approach them (…) you have to have those sorts of conversations, those stories, many stories about people's lives, the good bits and bad bits and only from that, you can get something which might resemble a need, that could meet with the resource" (Interviewee #10).

Therefore, time and mental space are necessary to be present and open to welcome and understand others' experiences and perspectives, which sometimes are unspoken needs and aspirations. The following section shows how other factors such as knowledge, skills and resources are intrinsically related to such time and space.

7.3 Access to facilitation, resources, and skills

Investing time in getting to know the people, the place and the resources available over "months and months" is thus deemed to be fundamental before even thinking to know what the needs of a people or a place are. Often, this is possible only if someone is fully dedicated to doing that: some interviewees have indeed praised the presence of a facilitator between the WG officers at the head of the SMS scheme, and the people on the ground who participate in it, or want to participate (e.g., who are preparing an expression of interest or a full application). For instance, the farmers interviewed in one particular SMS partnership praised the visit of a WG officer who went specifically to explain to them the content of the latest WG consultation "Sustainable Farming and Our Land" - a meeting at which I was also present. They agreed afterwards that:

> "I think that's good that you have people like [the officer from WG}, who knows the area, the people, with whom so much doesn't need to be said, whereas if you have somebody coming from somewhere else, they wouldn't have got the feedback they got today. [The officer from WG] is a rural fella from further up the coast,
> his family background are rural people, and he understands, he understands things. Because with him he understands from day one. But it's people like that we need on the ground, to be able to get up, because I promise you there's a massive misunderstanding up there." (Interviewees #22 and #23).

As the farmers highlighted, the presence of a person *who knows the area and the people,* with whom they do not have to say much because "he knows", is of a fundamental importance to help them make their needs and positions understood, "to be able to get up" given the "massive misunderstanding" they perceive between them and WG. The importance of a "trusted intermediary" is understood by the WG and NRW (see section 8.3). An example of how this has translated into practice is with the establishment of a facilitation service for farmers (15 appointed facilitators) who want to apply for the SMS scheme. All farmers, without exception, indicated when asked about it, that the facilitation service is fundamental to get the voices of the farmers heard. They have access to someone who is paid to listen to their ideas and proposal and guide them through the application:

> "Somehow, you've got to release that time for the farmers to do it themselves. Because they haven't got the time now. And that's where this mentoring, the facilitation service comes in. I think the Welsh Government recognized that actually they need facilitators to help take the groups [of farmers] forward. I think that was very useful, because that was the one thing that was lacking. So, they have provided some funding to pay for facilitators to take schemes forward and that's fantastic" (Interviewee #19).

The importance of the facilitation service has been recognised also as an empowering tool through which to help farmers building confidence. One of the interviewees, for instance, stressed how the facilitation role helps the farmers in gaining the confidence to realise the value and feasibility of what they might have proposed and become enthusiastic about it, as a contribution to SMNR. An example was given by one of the interviewees working with farmers who said:

> "One of the things that the farmers group have highlighted is about the improved communication between farming people and non-farming people. And inner-city children working with primary schools, potentially local interest groups... is a part of that. So, to say you can take people out and once or twice, they can see what the farmers point of view is. And also, farmers are going to learn what other people do, why these leisure user people go up there with dogs and mountain bikes... what on earth they are doing. So, everyone can understand each other, a little bit better!" (Interviewee #14).

Another interviewee closely working with farmers stressed the same aspect in their interview, adding how "powerless" they believe the farmers feel when provided with the wrong type of 'support':

> "In an ideal world, the graziers association would have an appointed person, someone works for them, to represent them, to communicate amongst them, to do things for them. Economically they can't afford that. (…) Groups like that need some facilitation. And I think in the past, when we talked about that sort of stuff, if they get anything, they get presented with an advisor or a consultant, and they don't want that. They didn't want someone coming in to tell them again what they should be doing, what they need, but rather someone to come in and facilitate them really, to listen to them, and to try and find a way through, and help them and support them. This is what they need." (Interviewee #13).

Enhancing people's capacity to care-*with* through the presence of a facilitator, i.e. a "trusted intermediary" at best, or a dedicated officer at least, who can take care of the paperwork and help the participants gathering ideas and translate them into their *own* projects and visions for SMNR, was highlighted as fundamental not just by farmers or those working with them, but also people working in a big public authority:

> "We've got dedicated officers looking at them [the paperwork] and they're getting frustrated with the procedure. It's just very cumbersome and you haven't got that one point of contact, they're all of a stretch that to the other end as well" (Interviewee #18).

Most of the organisations that lead SMS projects, and in general are involved in SMNR initiatives, in fact, are well established and funded. This emphasises the importance of having *capacity*, in terms of staff members, to take care of all the procedural aspects of being part of a partnership. Examples like this strengthens the argument according to which collaborative working for SMNR is a form of caring-*with* practice,
that require people *to be able* to take care of all the important dimensions embedded in partnership working, most and foremost nurturing relationships of trust.

Another area in which unequal power relations have a detrimental effect on the process of building and *maintaining* collaborative working is that of funding and financial resources. The

issues attached to power imbalances in terms of financial resources are deeply complex and multifaceted, and the strictly technical and economic aspects of the conversation go well beyond the scope of this research. However, the short-termism built in grant schemes such as the SMS, exacerbate an underpinning problem to the whole field of SMNR – uncertainty and precarity of funding for projects that necessarily look to the long-term for achievement of outcomes. Relational and iterative care *practices,* such as collaborative working, instead require to be sustained over the long term (as also acknowledged by the Welsh legislation, see Ch. 4). This is necessary to adapt to changing circumstances and needs, as well as to maximise benefits for all those involved.

With regards to the highly competitive nature of the public funding of the SMS and its clear tension with the built-in long-term approach of SMNR, two issues particularly stood out from the field research. On one hand, very different organisations compete for the same pot of money. As aforementioned, those such as long-established UK-wide third sector organisations involved in conservation and natural resources management, and also local Councils, will have far greater resources and capacity to deal with the complex grant application procedure than newly formed and/or underfunded private or third sector groups (such as local groups of farmers, or small charities). On the other hand, in a scenario where a single partnership is made of both 'small' and 'big' organisations it is possible that this leads to a situation, as defined by one of the interviewees, of a "David and Goliath" type of partnership (Interviewee #10), where the needs, requests and capacities of the small organisations within it might be easily succumb to those of the most powerful one. An example of this was given by one of the interviewees (#14):

> "[The partnership] wasn't successful because going back to this idea of what the partners want, and the fact that you always have a partner that seems to be a bit bigger, and in control of the others. Our business was quite submissive to the bigger partner because we thought, you know, let's give them a chunk of what we're doing in return for some good investment and that will help us grow. Not really, it just made us grow too quickly. It made us dance to their tune, and so we lost our direction a little bit. And ultimately, we failed because we overstretched ourselves".

As discussed with regards to PAR (see 5.1.1), any participatory or collaborative endeavour (even life itself!) can be compared to a *dance* during which feeling the beat and attuning to

each other's rhythm is fundamental to keep going *together,* and possibly even enjoying it. Here, as the interviewee continues, an appreciative attitude towards what each has to offer, exercised through reciprocal deep listening, turned out to be key:

> "Everybody has something to contribute, everybody. I think the challenge for managing it is recognising what the different partners bring. It isn't always about the bigger, the louder ones. Sometimes the smaller ones can actually contribute more effectively than the so-called bigger ones" (Interviewee #14).

An important consequence of the former case, where very different organisation in terms of size and capacity apply for the same pot of money, is that the combination of a risk adverse nature of the public funding structure (further discussed in section 7.5) and the shortage or lack of track records, resources, personnel and experience of the 'smaller' and/or newly formed groups will likely favour big and well-established organisations (or partnerships led by such organisations). The uncertainty and precarity of such funding cause stress in the short as well as on the long term:

> "It is difficult, long-term planning is not possible - the SMS grant is three years and is quite good. Most grants are for a specific project or for a year, and so the length of a project grant, it causes us planning problems. The competition for grants is huge. So you have to be pretty in tune with what is needed in order to put the right sort of application in to be successful. It is disruptive with services. If you haven't got a constant source of money that is guaranteed, it causes stress. And it forces us, as the people who run the place, to do a lot more than we're paid for. I mean, you always have to make up with your own time to do things, just to keep it going. There was a period over a year, we had no money, but we kept the building open and we didn't take a salary, just to keep it going." (Interviewee #10)

The difficulty expressed by this interviewee is one of the most tangible examples of how hard it can become to be able to take care of people and place within the context of short-term projects, that only guarantee financial resources for limited time. Serving only to exacerbate the anxiety and precariousness of the situation is the need to report to funders and self-assess projects' outcomes that might emerge only over the long term.

The discussion around project Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E) was at the core of many conversations, meetings and events I participated in during my involvement with WG and NRW (chapter 8). It was also an area to which I specifically contributed by introducing participatory evaluation methodologies - see Table 6, section 5.3.2.1, activities i) and k).[21]

In fact, how to define and measure 'success' of SMNR practices is one of the greatest challenges that civil servants at WG and NRW officers face (they refer to it as "dilemma") – as Davidson (2020, p. 45) says "On the civil service basis that if you can't measure it, it won't happen".

Of particular interest (and difficulty) seems to be reconciling more qualitative and participatory methods of evaluation, with the mainstream quantitative approaches usually pursued in so-called evidence-based policy-making (Parkhurst, 2016). More mainstream and easily accessible (affordable) evaluation methods are often focused on very narrow quantitative metrics, given that more participatory and qualitative approaches require far more resources to be performed (i.e., time and facilitators). However, mere quantitative approaches might fail to grasp the richness, depth and long-term perspective of certain SMNR initiatives. This possibly leads to a negative evaluation for scarcity of short term, quantitative evidence of results, precluding any further access to funding for repeat applicants. This risks to creating a vicious cycle that highly hampers small and under sourced projects/groups to keep their (potentially transformative) caring-*with* practices going over the long term, regardless of how much energy, time, and care has been put into everyday work. As Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) puts it:

> "In particular with regard to anxious futurity, feelings of emergency and fear, as well as temporal projections, need often to be set aside in order to focus on getting on with the tasks necessary to everyday caring maintenance. Without this mode of attention, care would always be an impossible charge, always at the edge of a break." (p. 207).

The "everyday caring maintenance" mentioned by Puig de la Bellacasa, is a fundamental aspect of SMNR as a caring-with practice, and is strongly emphasised in the words of one of the interviewees, who calls for governmental organisations to enable 'specialised' third sector organisations to do it. Given their deep place-based knowledge of people and ecosystems, and

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[21] Moreover, the work I have done around participatory evaluation methodologies culminated in the submission, in March 2020, of a grant proposal for a NERC fellowship (unsuccessful), supported by the WG advisory board of this PhD, and entitled "Co-producing a participatory monitoring and evaluation framework with 'landscape communities of practice' in Wales".

the specific skills they have developed by constantly working on the ground, some of these organisations are deemed to be the best placed to deliver fundamental everyday caring maintenance. As illustration of this, the following interviewee extract explains how important it is that such organisations are supported given the poor conditions that many environmental sites across Wales experience due to the 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 unfavourable 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 practice: third sector organisations (as many other organisations and people working directly on the ground) provide the everyday care which is fundamental to the most basic functioning of ecosystems and of places (its people and its nature), 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's 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 really, because that's what we need to keep things at steady baseline." (Interviewee #14).

The view of this respondent deeply resonates 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).

In a system characterised by an "innovate or perish credo" (Ibid.), 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"

(Ibid.) in the neoliberal and productionist system within which we all live. The very act of reclaiming time to care, and especially to care-with, thus, "ground the everyday possibility of living as well as possible" (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 206), as also Fisher and Tronto's definition of care reminds us (1990, p. 40).

Ultimately, as called for by interviewee #14, funding must be ensured not just for "being innovative" but for these more mundane, everyday type of activities too:

> "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" (emphasis added).

There seems to be a profound lack of responsibility towards not only the current status of these "things" (e.g. places, ecosystems, communities etc) that get "missed" and "forgotten", but also towards their future, what they will *become*, paving the way to the gradual spreading of carelessness: "care as an every-day labour of maintenance is also an ethical obligation: we must take care of things in order to remain responsible for their becomings" with Puig de la Bellacasa's words (2011, p. 90).

7.4 "Careless farmers": myth or reality?

The previous sections sought to provide an overview of the challenges that people involved in the SMS scheme face in relation to getting their individual (and collective) needs and stories heard. This section delves into the challenges of a specific group, farmers, towards which, as I clarified already in section 5.3.3, I feel a particular connection and interest, being the daughter of a farmer, and having witnessed the complexity and tensions attached to their work and (social) role all my life. There is a common perception I have heard reiterating across Wales, about farmers being careless and reluctant to engage in sustainable farming practices that could improve ecosystems' health to the (supposedly) detriment of their own business profit. One of the interviewees who works in this sector summaries this perception like this:

> "So much nowadays, you know, people and the media just portray this image that the farmers don't care. The farmers don't care about the environment. And the farmers don't care about animal welfare. And nothing could be further from the truth. It's just that they do have a different perspective on things. When you're working in that

situation you have a very different perspective. (…) It's not that they don't appreciate the environment and they don't consider animal welfare. They absolutely do, but they're dealing with it you know, they have to deal with the practicalities, not just theory behind. They wake up in the morning and they've got floods or they've got animals that have got a parasite breakout and they have to deal with it. And yet, it is really strange actually that in dealing with it and facing those challenges they're often seen as being the perpetrators." (Interviewee #16).

The farmers I have interviewed, part of different SMS projects, and the people closely working to them in different capacity confirmed that they know there is such a perception amongst people. One of them sarcastically confirmed:

"Yeah, there's a story going around that we produce food, but we really want to kill everybody by poisoning them" (Interviewee #12).

The "stigma" attached to the category of farmers in Wales is very tangible especially within policy circles and amongst conservationist and environmental organisations. This was confirmed by an officer working in a third sector farming-related organisation:

"In my view, there's as much reluctance from conservationists and people who have a particular job in talking to farmers as there is from farmers wanting to talk to them. And sometimes I think they're not exactly afraid of farmers, but they really think they haven't got anything in common" (interviewee #13).

As mentioned in section 7.2, lack of *time* to listen and to be spent together prevents the opportunity for people to get to know each other, their needs and perspectives, as well as to build relationships of trust. This leads them to think that there is no "common ground" to build and/or nurture. In the case of the farmers I talked to, such void leads to feeling "incredibly undervalued" (interviewee #22). In a sense, they believe their reasons and perspectives are not listened to, are not taken into consideration or valued. There seems to be especially a lack of contextualisation of the farmers behaviours within the global market of food and farming, including the policies that regulate that:

"You know, it is so easy to forget why farmers have done what they've had to do there and they didn't have choice really, they've been encouraged to do what they've done over the last 40-50 years" (Interviewee #16)

"So you've got farmers, trying to earn a living, being supported by government to produce lots of waste, encouraged by Europe to do that through these weird payments and everybody would take money for producing more, if it brought more income, and everybody would do it. So that's what the farmers have been doing. But unfortunately, that's had a negative impact on the environment. We know that, but instead of blaming the farmers, which a lot of NGOs do, because they blame the part of the farmers immediately, you've got that conflict immediately. And for as long as we blame the farmers, you're never going to achieve overcoming that conflict." (interviewee #14).

A "culture of blaming people" (interviewee #14) and especially farmers and graziers, was pointed out by a number of interviewees (more and less close to the category) as a negative and devaluing attitude that only nurtures conflict, rather than collaborative working. The sense of powerlessness and feeling undervalued and unheard trigger aggressive reactions from the side of farmers and graziers, as confirmed by one of the interviewees: "I do think that they feel that they're powerless. And I think when they feel that they want to try and exercise power, the only way that is open to them [is being aggressive]" (Interviewee #16). In a similar regard, Young (2006) has clarified the detrimental impact of such blaming and devaluing culture on collective action for social justice:

"In many contexts where the issue is how to mobilize collective action for the sake of social change and greater justice, such finger-pointing and blame-shifting lead more to resentment and refusal to take responsibility than to a useful basis of action" (2006, p. 124).

There seems to be a call for appreciating the environment and socio-economic context within which farmers operate, especially in rural areas that have been increasingly depopulated before being able to harshly criticise the whole category. Certainly, there was a very perceivable sense of pride in the sentiments expressed by the farmers that I encountered (all part of SMS funded schemes). This came through particuarly when they talked about their connection to their community and the desire to contribute to its strengthening and thriving. An example of this was given by a farmer who mentioned the idea of including dry stonewalling as part of their SMS project:

"One of the ideas we came up with is [dry] stonewalling. It's a dying art. You see stonewalls falling down and there is someone who is on the point of retirement who spent his life putting walls up. We would like to not just pay him to put walls up, but pay him to teach youngsters how to put walls up, as a sort of apprenticeships. They could take on this skill and then the following second or third year they might like to be paid to do some of the walls on in the scheme"

(Interviewee #12).

There is clear commitment in the words of the farmers interviewed (confirmed also by those working closely to them such as interviewee #20) towards their own community, place and people, over the long-term:

"They [the farmers involved in the SMS scheme] are going to be in the community long term. And there had been a couple of generations before them, at least, so they know that their children will go to school in the local school. So, they've got an investment already in the area. So, they're very keen to get involved. And they are conscious of climate change and everything else."(Interviewee #20)

As occurred also during one of the events with participants to Skyline Project (section 5.3.1, Table 2, activity #6), the idea of care and being *caretaker* for present and future generations overtly emerged from the words of the farmers involved in the SMS scheme and those closely working with them:

"The farmer will always tell you that he or she is looking after that farm, it is like a *caretaker*. They don't think of it as something to denude. Their responsibility is to pass it on to the next generation in a better condition." (Interviewee #19)

Indeed, the following statement by another farmer confirms this:

"Every generation wants to pass the place better than they had it, be it in an economical way and in environmental way. Always, always want the next generations to have a better time than yourself. Must always be. You're not gonna destroy the land because there's nothing there for your kids. So, you've got to look after it. So we've always done it" (Interviewee #23).

There seems to be an important neglect of the element of intrinsic care for people and place in the narrative built around the role of farmers in sustainable management. The two farmers I interviewed together (interviewee #23 and #22) admitted that the "caring" side of their work

is done "inherently" and therefore they are often the first ones not to appreciate their own valuable work:

> "It is inherently done and we're not very good analysts, we don't employ like big companies, analysts who actually value what we do. Therefore, we do it and people don't value. People don't value it. Because we don't value ourselves. So I think we need to learn to value what we do and understand what we do, because most of it is done second nature." (Interviewee #23)

The same lack of realisation from the farmers themselves with regards to the very social and caring nature of their practices strikingly emerged during conversation with yet another farmer (interviewee #12). That individual mentioned that Commons committees have been there for hundreds of years, as a "loose thing", something that often meets without a formal agenda, when there is something to discuss, plus during "gathering days". When they realised I had no clue what gathering days were, they surprisingly replied "Oh gathering? I have taken it for granted!". This specific example represented in my interpretation the extent to which collaboration, helping each other out and a caring attitude for self and others is so embedded in the farming activity, that the farmers themselves do not even realise its value anymore. After briefly explaining to me how sheep gathering works, they concluded:

> "Everybody helps each other, it has always worked like that. There's a few exceptions, but they don't really seem to matter. I've heard people say that if you haven't got good neighbours who will help you gather you can't farm on the hill. You can't do it on your own. It would be four times a year, when our neighbours come to help, and if there is school holidays, his children as well. There are two big tables longer than this. All full, round 15 people, sharing a meal talking about farming, about Brexit, about everything. About whose dog needs praising and whose need shooting; who sleeps with whom! Farming up here is not isolated business. You know, farms are isolated. But the farming is not. You can be much more isolated lowlands." (Interviewee #12).

The intrinsic collaborative spirit and essence of the farming activities, and specifically of sheep gathering, was confirmed by another interviewee, who works closely with farmers:

"The gatherings I would say have more influence on how people work together than the actual graziers' associations, because that is just people getting together and sorting stuff out. It's not focused, it's not a called meeting with an agenda, is on the relationship, is very much a grassroots collaboration" (Interviewee #13).

Another important element that the interviews seem to reveal is a neglect of farmers' schedules and needs. This creates a barrier for individuals spending time listening to each others' perspective, observing and doing things together. This has slowly but surely fed a general form of misunderstanding, between farmers and everyone else, especially the government. As noticed by one of interviewees:

"I think one of the ways of engaging with farmers better is sometimes quite simple like not asking people to a big meeting in the daytime, it could be working around their schedules... and not everyone wants to go to a meeting. If they go to a meeting, not everyone wants to talk in a meeting. And I find that the quiet people quite often will have the best, the most to say but the last ones to either go to a meeting or actually speak about" Interviewee #15).

The issues related to miscommunication and misunderstanding in the case of farmers, might have partly been to do with a lack of time invested in trying to listen to their views, without "asking them to go into one meeting and treat them like school children"(Interviewee #23). For instance, some of the farmers lamented that they have not been asked what 'sustainable' management means to them, what it means to their business and everyday practices. As interviewee #22 stressed "something sustainable is that it pays for itself, it generates movement, but to keep itself going, it needs income" (interviewee #22).

There is rooted frustration in the words of these farmers who are constantly told that they are fundamental for the development of the nation as they feed the nation, but at the same time their needs and views are not fully considered. As section 5 of this chapter will discuss in more depth, farmers and people working closely to them highlight the lack of flexibility and adaptiveness of the SMS scheme procedure as something that strongly hinders their attempt to be collaborative and contribute to SMNR more incisively. Instead:

215

"They [the farmers] get criticised and expected to change...and it's always change to someone else's view of life, it's not about them adapting. They lose ownership of what's going on. It's really, really tough" (interviewee #16).

The heavy criticism perceived by farmers is deemed to be also strongly tied to a cultural element: all of them have reiterated how much the reliance of our societies on supermarkets and globalised food supply chains has profoundly damaged the relationship between people and their food, and their food's provenance: farming. This has made people generally indifferent to and detached from it. One of the farmers sharply commented:

"There's a cultural change. As I said, from the 1960s, I would go in an old Land Rover to a sheep sale and everybody through the town would wave to the Land Rover, because they appreciated their food. They had rationing, farmers were supplying their food. Now, people just don't think about where their food comes from. It's a god given right to be able to go and get it. People complain about spending 50 or 100 pounds on food, when they'll spend hundreds on a mobile phone" (interviewee #23).

Generally, most of the criticism towards farmers that I observed during my time living in Wales stems from the fact that the concept of sustainability for them is (also) related to aspects of economic viability and income. Although sustainability is universally declined as encompassing economic, social and environmental dimensions, the fact that farmers need to 'make money' while sustainably managing land and natural resources, resonates almost as ecocide. However, this "blaming culture" towards farming deliberately glosses over the numerous environmentally detrimental practices, now fully embedded and normalised in western culture (e.g. the environmental and socio-economic impact of hight-tech production and consumption, especially in terms of raw-material extraction and related exploitation of labour/slavery). The cultural shift demanded by the farmers, frustrated and saddened as they are by the lack of consideration and the demonisation towards them, was reiterated also by other interviewees, e.g.:

"Ultimately, farmers need to understand what's in it for them, because they're running a business ultimately. But I think right across the board is about a culture shift. We've got to stop blaming people, we need to stop blaming the farmers." (Interviewee #14).

"When we first started right to the very beginning years and years ago there was no facilitators. We put some money in it ourselves, at the very beginning, we invested our time and finance to get it [a landscape partnership] all up and running, knowing

very well at the end, we won't get any money. Then who else would do it? What other business would do it? If they didn't care about the environment and the place you live? No one wouldn't." (Interviewees #22 and #23)

The constant undervaluing and denigration of farming practices attached to the lack of an appropriate economic support for the farmers involved in SMNR deeply undermines the sense of confidence and meaning for these people to keep doing their work:

"You've planted hundreds of metres of hedges that is costing you money because capital payments and schemes don't cover all the costs. And once you've done it, you've got annual costs of maintaining it. That doesn't come into accounting. I spent three and a half thousand pounds a year cutting edges, doesn't make me a penny, doesn't make me one penny. All it does is make people in the village angry because the edge brushes stop them, and there's a bit of rubbish on the road, sometimes mud on the road. They cost me three and a half thousand pounds just to pay the bill, without anything else. If we don't get the money, we just stop, because we won't have a choice." (Interviewee #23).

As noted by one of the interviewees closely working with farmers, there is a need to demonstrate much more recognition and appreciation of the multifaceted contributions of farmers in caring for land and their communities: "ideally some financial reward but certainly a psychological reward needs to be given for the delivery of all that stuff." (Interviewee #16).

7.5 The elephant in the room: bureaucratic 'fear culture'

In follow on from delving into the specific challenges faced by farmers interviewed, this section addresses a final issue amongst those emerged from the interviews with landscape partnerships: the risk-adverse culture of governmental institutions. The lack of flexibility and capacity to adapt to ever changing circumstances of governmental institutions, was highlighted by the interviewees as a critical element of rupture in the relationship of trust between them and the governmental institutions themselves. Ultimately, the resulting loss of trust undermines the very fundamentals of the SMS scheme, and more generally of the SMNR approach pursued by governmental policies.

Most of the interviewees mentioned, for example, that there had been a sporadic or absent clear communication of "what's going on" from WG's offices when delays of direct payments to projects occurred. This has nurtured an increasing sense of frustration and abandonment

amongst the people involved in the partnerships. This situation has deeply damaged the trust and enthusiasm that people perceive towards the idea of collaborative working to contribute to SMNR. In the words of one of the farmers interviewed:

> "WG is frustrating us, dragging their feet, losing enthusiasm, losing momentum. People get a bit disillusioned. We were promised that we would be in control. It hasn't exactly manifested itself like that. We're still being told very precisely what to do and how to do it." (Interviewee #12).

As the words of this interviewee suggest, there seems to be an increasing disillusionment amongst people about the real nature of the scheme. It was joined on the basis of the promise that it would not be prescriptive, but it would rather leave participants 'loose' and able to build their own vision of SMNR and realise it through the funding provided. The feeling of a 'missed promise' was very common amongst the interviewees. Many seemed to have had to deal with payment delays, lack of clarity as well as of flexibility from the government, on top of all the other challenges above mentioned. An interviewee working closely with farmers reflected:

> "It is contradictory because the SMS projects are built on the principles of sustainable management of natural resources, one of which is manage adaptively. Whereas we've been told that you shouldn't have much adaptation built into your project. But we know, everyone knows really, that if you adapt as you go along, the chances are you'll end up with more outcomes. Because there's no point in going down one route if it's not producing the outcomes you want." (Interviewee #13).

The main issue attached to overly prescriptive funding schemes, is related to the complexity of evaluation of outcomes. As highlighted in 7.3 and further discussed in 8.2.1, the WG and NRW officers I have been working with are very keen on broadening the meaning of "evidence" to integrate different types of knowledge, including more qualitative and participatory methodologies for M&E of SMNR projects. However, major flexibility of measurement systems leads to more complexity (less standardisation) in the definition and applications of criteria and indicators against which projects should be assess for accountability purposes. Although most of the interviewees were aware of the issues related to accountability of public spending, the challenges they face in accommodating this within their day-to-day tasks remain:

"The inflexible nature [of the Scheme is a problem] because obviously, if you're doing something with people or on land, then there's a lot of stuff that you could only do in certain times of the year, or if the rivers are not in flood...or you may have to put it over to the autumn, which might be in another year. It throws everything out. You need some flexibility, really, within the system, to be able to cope with that. Maybe the sort of whoever's setting these rules and regulations are not aware of all the regulations the farmers have to work for" (Interviewee #21).

The farmers and the majority of the interviewees recognise the value of the Scheme in terms of facilitating collaboration amongst different groups or sectors - "I think what it does to bring us together is massive, we can't put a value on that" (interviewees #22). Similarly, most of them spoke words of praise towards the WG team in charge of dealing with the SMS scheme. This further proves that the issues highlighted are not related to lack of 'caring' people within the institutions, but rather the institutions themselves, the processes and structures that seem to not be fit for purpose – i.e. to enable caring-*with*.

The issues arising from this deep tension between accountability and adaptability have nurtured a gradual loss of trust towards the institutions as true enablers of such collaborative working. That is, how can they be trusted to support groups on the ground caring-*with* people and place, when they act in a way which leaves them open to being perceived to be the first ones not to show trust towards the people they work with, continuously micromanaging them instead?

In relation to the issue of micromanaging, one of the interviewees stated:

"I think it goes back to that trust. I think the funder in that instant has to be able to trust that organisation , and if the trust is there, then they've got to let that organisation get on with it. And let that organisation decide how they're going to meet the targets, and meet the requirements and not micromanage it. Basically, give them some space to be creative. Because ultimately, that's why we buy in third sector, we buy in third sector for that creativity as well. I think you've got to give them some space to be creative and come up with new ways of working, that aren't necessarily wrong. They're just different. I think it is about it's about having that trust and really

be able to trust and not micromanage because then that becomes quite stifling"
(Interviewee #14).

The indispensable need for accountability of public spending enters in tension with what is perceived from interviewees as a micromanaging attitude, contributing to a gradual corrosion of the (self-)confidence and enthusiasm of these people, some of which were already struggling with this prior to entering the SMS scheme. This is especially true for the case of farmers, whose confidence is already highly compromised:

"We don't feel Welsh Government can trust us enough to let us lose and do what is good. If we haven't got a qualification for... an environmental qualification from a university... Well, we're not worth trusting!" (Interviewee #12).

"[the SMS scheme procedure] is long winded, it's difficult. They [WG] don't listen, when we tell them things, they think we're lying. And it is a matter of trust at the end of the day, isn't it? It's a two-way thing. And to be honest, we've lost a lot of trust in them early on. There are some good people within the organisation, but some that we will never see, that are always behind some closed doors. (Interviewees #22 and #23).

These words highlight how delicate and fragile the equilibrium is in collaborative working: trust breeds trust as the saying goes, and caring can be practiced only in a caring environment. Interviewees spoke their minds in relation to the underpinning causes of such lack of trust:

"We've got the relationships with the farmers and the land managers in place, but because they [WG] get staff turnover, people move around. They have not got that knowledge. They haven't got that understanding as such that we will deliver for them (...) I think the staff [in WG] are afraid of making a decision and having the ramifications ...it's not quite right. There's a bit of fear culture there. That's the feeling that you get." (Interviewee #18).

The "fear culture" perceived by some interviewees represents a great obstacle for the key role of governmental institutions in supporting and enabling a caring-*with* approach by loosening control and trusting people within and outside their organisations. The potential of this role was well recognised by some of the interviewees working in the third sector: one of them (#14) stressed that both NRW in Wales and the Environmental Agency (EA) in England need to source competences, expertise and specialists outside their organisations, and especially

within the third sector. This was deemed to be necessary by this interviewee in order for both NRW and the EA to pursue "area-based working" and "strategic delivery" capable of maintaining, repairing and enhancing natural ecosystems. Reportedly, this does not seem to happen at the moment:

> "What's missing at the minute, generally speaking, is that sense of trust, is that sense of x organisation are competent enough to do A, B and C. And we are not there yet. But we've got to get there because the work on the ground still needs to be done" (interviewee #14).

"Taking risk" and enabling people's empowerment intended as gaining greater control over, and access to resources, including natural ones, are at the core of the role of enablers that governments and institutions should play according to many of the people I have been interviewing and working with (see also in the case of Skyline, section 6.4.2):

> "Sometimes you've got to take the risk and empower people, it's the same with the [young people employed as officers in the organisation of the interviewee]: they have not managed projects in the past, they are young but, you know, they're quick, they're taking things on, they're going to make mistakes, but, you know, everybody would be alive tomorrow morning. Things can be rectified and that's how they learn, isnt it? It does make you feel that the powers involved in Cardiff are making people just too nervous to make a decision.". (Interviewee #18).

The relevance of learning and making mistakes as a way to improve, are a fundamental part of the idea of adaptive management (the very core of SMNR) within organisations. 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. The same view was also reiterated and very much supported by participants to one of the workshops organised within WG-NRW joint programme (see 9.1.3 and 9.1.4):

> "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 call for more time and space for reflection within such organisation that could allow better learning and the emergence of more effectives way of delivering SMNR, was equally highlighted by SMS interviewees. So too was it included as well as in the feedback forms of participants to the workshops of WG-NRW joint programme (see chapter 8). A cultural shift is thus perceived as needed within these organisations; a shift that could allow everyone to have more time and space to think, to practice, to do and be together, as well as to nurture that creativity needed to face such challenging times as the ones we live in. One of the interviewees, a project manager in a relatively large third sector organisation, emphasised strongly the cultural aspect:

> "That's culture, as I've said to my lot: at the end of the day, I don't want you being 100% committed to work all week, because where's your thinking time? I need you to go for a walk along the river and come up with projects and think creatively. So you need to build that time into your week, and that's fine. That's valid working. But as you say, culturally, we're not used to that, are we? I should always have something to do...and to work in partnerships, we need some time and space I think that need to be created" (Interviewee #14).

7.6 Conclusion

This chapter has evidenced how unequal distribution of, and access to *ability factors* such as time, skills, knowledge, material resources etc represent concrete and fundamental barriers for SMS landscape partnerships to nurture and maintain collaborative working. The latter strongly emerged as actual form of *care work* from the words of the interviews, who have emphasised, amongst other things, how a "fear culture", rooted in the functioning of governmental institutions, has deeply undermined the process of building relationships of trust, across sectors and organisations.

The specific case of the farmers further demonstrates that the sense of 'powerlessness' that they perceive is deeply attached to a systematic *careless* approach: no space and time to listen, observe, repair, nurture, or maintain. The system does not allow time to take care of different needs and perspectives, and, in turn, it does not leave space and time for people to make their own needs and perspectives heard and considered by those in power. In synthesis, it does not allow democratic participation. This chapter is ultimately a concerted call for enabling caring-*with* approaches by means of embedding *time* and space within the governance structure, processes and institutions involved in SMNR.

8. Co-creating enabling and caring institutions

This chapter discusses strand 2 of my fieldwork, the embodied and transdisciplinary long-term collaboration with WG and NRW, embedded in a wider and ongoing internal process of 'cultural transformation' put in place within these organisations (see section 4.3), to fully embrace and practice principles of reflexivity, collaboration, and cross-sector integrations (as established by the *new ways of working* in the WBFGA- see section 4.1.2). The series of meetings, workshops and events organised between 2018 and 2020, discussed throughout this chapter, focused on the *experimentation* of new and alternative ways of *working* and *being together*, as human beings first, besides professionals and practitioners with different backgrounds.

Firstly, section 8.1. provides an overview of the very initial phases of development of the transdisciplinary collaboration with WG. Subsequently, in section 8.2 and 8.3, this chapter analyses some fragments of an 'inwards' (i.e., self-examining personal assumptions and mindsets) and 'outwards' (i.e., collectively examining structural and institutional barriers) journey lived with different professionals, researchers and practitioners, as a collective *meaning-making* process. It focuses on two particularly 'formative' moments of this journey. It provides critical points for discussion around what it takes to enable a caring-*with* transformation within and across governmental institutions, thereby improving the capacity of these institutions to support themselves collaborative practices and caring-*with* across sectors and organisations, over the long-term.

8.1 The contested meanings of the SMNR principle

An 'ante-litteram' tester of a joined-up, collaborative approach prior to the five *new ways of working* promoted by the WBFGA, was a WG programme called Cynefin, a place-centred, community-led development programme run between 2013 and 2016 in 11 localities across Wales. This programme has been praised on several occasions by some of the WG officers I have been working with, as an example of the will and capacity of the WG to give space to communities to set up their own priorities and working towards them, mainly relying on their own resources (human, social, economic etc). Cynefin was an example of the fact that it was possible and realistic in Wales to think of more horizontal and 'people & place' centred programmes and delivery actions that replace centralised, 'command and control' type of

approaches. An important lesson coming from Cynefin, repeatedly highlighted by my WG collaborators, was the fact that the communities involved have shown themselves to be fully capable to identify and deliver against their own priorities and needs, without needing the central government to provide for them. Supporting and enabling the work and efforts of these "local heroes" (as one of the WG collaborators called some of the members of these communities) to activate resources and people within their place/locality has been identified several times in the initial meetings as what WG should be doing while promoting collaboration and joined-up approaches.

Reflecting on the experience of Cynefin and Pathfinder, another WG programme that followed the same principles as Cynefin around community empowerment and self-efficacy (see Franklin, 2013), the overarching question guiding our conversations in the first two meetings occurred in 2017, at the very beginning of my PhD, was "what people come together for"? And how do we make sure that the commitment and motivation to collaborate and work together stays over long-time and beyond the time of a grant?

The initial stage of the collaboration (and of the PhD) was therefore dedicated to *learning about* the context of Wales, its policies and approaches to SMNR. It was also dedicated to getting to know the key individuals and organisations who work on the ground, including our partners at WG and NRW. Through my role of *scientific researcher* (Freeth 2019; Freeth & Vilsmaier, 2020) embedded in the collaborative project, I was able to dig into critical theoretical frameworks (e.g., political ecology, sustainability transformations as discussed in section 1.2) that could provide my partners with alternative approaches to the one embraced in the Welsh legislation around SMNR. Looking at SMNR through a distinctively political lens, critical of the structural socio-economic inequalities affecting access to and control over natural resources for instance, enabled me to challenge taken-for-granted meanings, rooted in managerial and technocratic approaches to environmental governance. Such approaches overlook the tensions and ambivalence of concept(s) such as 'sustainable' 'management' of 'natural resources', which can induce very different meanings, depending on *whose* assumptions and perspectives are privileged in the definitions. The learning *about*, therefore, went hand-in-hand with the learning *with*. While providing my partners with new inputs from the literature and theoretical perspectives under study, I was gradually engaging my *head* and

my *heart* in the research, *making sense* of such (new to me) theories, whilst also building my own understanding and normative position around the subject.

The initial four meetings between us (i.e., myself, my supervisors and WG collaborators), held during the first year of the PhD (May 2017- April 2018), were therefore focused on starting to explore together different assumptions, alternative ways of looking at the practical and political implications of pursuing 'collaboration' for 'SMNR'. For example: *whose* definition of sustainability are we talking about? *Who* is sitting already around these policy and collaborative tables? *Who* is missing from these conversations, and should be here? Are we only seeking a managerial and rather top-down approach to tick the 'collaboration' box, or are we open and committed to truly transformative (inwards and outwards) practices and institutions that include in this conversation people who are not the "usual suspects"? I was asking these questions trying to navigate and balance my *curiosity* about their own ideas and perspectives on these issues, which did not seem to be fully addressed by the current formulation of the policies and laws, while *maintaining*, as much as possible, *a caring and 'safe' space.* By doing so, I wanted them not to feel (personally) attacked or criticised, but rather encouraged to reflect on current policies and practices from different points of view. In this initial phase, I thus found myself engaging in the complex balancing act of *critical reflexivity*, through a practice of *care* that would allow me to nurture the space of safe collaboration we had started building (care as maintenance work) while also asking questions I profoundly care about (care as ethico-political involvement): e.g. where do we stand - as individuals, community members, citizens, policy makers, academics etc., in the journey of Wales as a nation committed to social and ecological wellbeing for present and future generations?

After purposefully relocating to Cardiff in Spring 2018 to conduct more intense fieldwork, my constant and physical presence in Wales facilitated face-to-face meetings and interactions with WG collaborators, allowing a shift from formal and pre-organised quarterly meetings, to more spontaneous and frequent encounters. Moreover, I started to build new networks with people from various sectors and organisations involved in SMNR practices across the whole of Wales and in so doing, also gradually enriched my knowledge of the people and the places at the core of my research. Concurrently, my sense of attachment and belonging to Wales was

growing fast – parts of its landscape reminded me so much of my home village in Italy! The more I engaged with the people, the institutions and with its outstanding natural beauty, the more a sense of care (in an affective and emotional sense) and responsibility (as ethico-political involvement) was growing, defining my role as a researcher, and more simply as a human being, becoming fully committed to give my contribution to realise human and ecological wellbeing in Wales. My *feet* were increasingly grounded and my *hands* more and more ready to take up an active role in advocating for a necessary 'cultural transformation' with and within governmental organizations. I felt fully present with myself and in my role as *embodied researcher*.

In July 2018, I was invited to a WG workshop titled "What does success look like for the sustainable management of the natural resources?" – see section 5.3.2.1, Table 6, activity f - which targeted NRW officers from across Wales, some WG civil servants and other relevant stakeholders from community and third sector organisations who are involved in SMNR projects, with a total of approximately 50 attendees. Being the first event, I was invited to by my partners, I found myself unable to navigate the spectrum of *dynamic proximity*, mainly stuck in the (silent) observer's place, without being able to *participate* and articulate critical considerations. I felt astonished by the conversations at the tables, and the physical frustration I was experiencing required a lot of emotional labour to contain potential inadequate reactions. The observed conversations emphasised the need to find the right communication strategy to 'galvanise' people (especially farmers, a category who I have heard multiple times being portrayed as one of the main obstacles for 'successful SMNR practices' in Wales) to learn to do things differently, in line with the new ways of working. Most of the debate, it appeared, was therefore about finding the right strategy to communicate the 'evidence' (mainly conceived as the one produced by scientific academic institutions) to those not educated or enlightened enough to understand it as it is - "just avoid the high-level stuff" was one of the comments I recorded in my notes. The importance of blending and respecting different types of knowledges, experiences and perspectives was neglected in order to meet objectives of rapid and efficient delivery, through "galvanising" (uncompliant) people to do the right thing.

This workshop sent a clear message to WG and NRW as well as to me: more targeted work was urgently needed to bring officers at all levels and from both organisations into a space where they could collectively reflect on the meanings and implications of the new ways of working and NRP priorities in their everyday work. This would entail a far greater amount of time spent in conversation, listening to one another – not a common practice in these organisations, as reiterated by key collaborators in both organisations on several occasions. This opportunity to listen and interact with different people working in both organisations helped me to realise the direction in which I wanted to focus my own contribution to the planning of future events of the joint programme.

Subsequently to the above workshop, WG and NRW collaborators planned a meeting in December 2018 and invited me there to provide some feedback and thoughts. When preparing for it, I felt very strongly the need to convey messages about the 'inside-out adaptation' and the importance of challenging our own paradigms through the use of different mediums. I decided to gather the most relevant theoretical and academic inputs for the discussion with WG and NRW, in the form of a very rudimental, imperfect, yet comprehensive illustration on a flipchart paper (see Figure 30 below). I felt deeply and fully embodied in my research while experimenting with this unusual medium, imbued with a creative tension between 'letting all go' (on paper, with crayons, scissors and glue) and maintaining an extent of rigour and clarity of my messages. This moment, which might otherwise sound like a minor, trivial detail, represented instead a turning point in my personal and professional upbringing, a step into my own process of self-transformation, as described by Horlings et al. (2020). In fact, if at first, I had thought to never show that sheet to my collaborators, I then realised I was the one proposing to *them* to *learn with* one another, embracing vulnerability and bring our *whole selves* to the everyday job. Therefore, if we were to try to acknowledge and challenge personal assumptions, paradigms and worldviews, I had to accept imperfection and the risk to appear ridiculous and/or a 'mere student' rather than a professional researcher. So, after this realisation, I proudly went into the meeting with the drawing shown below in Figure 30.
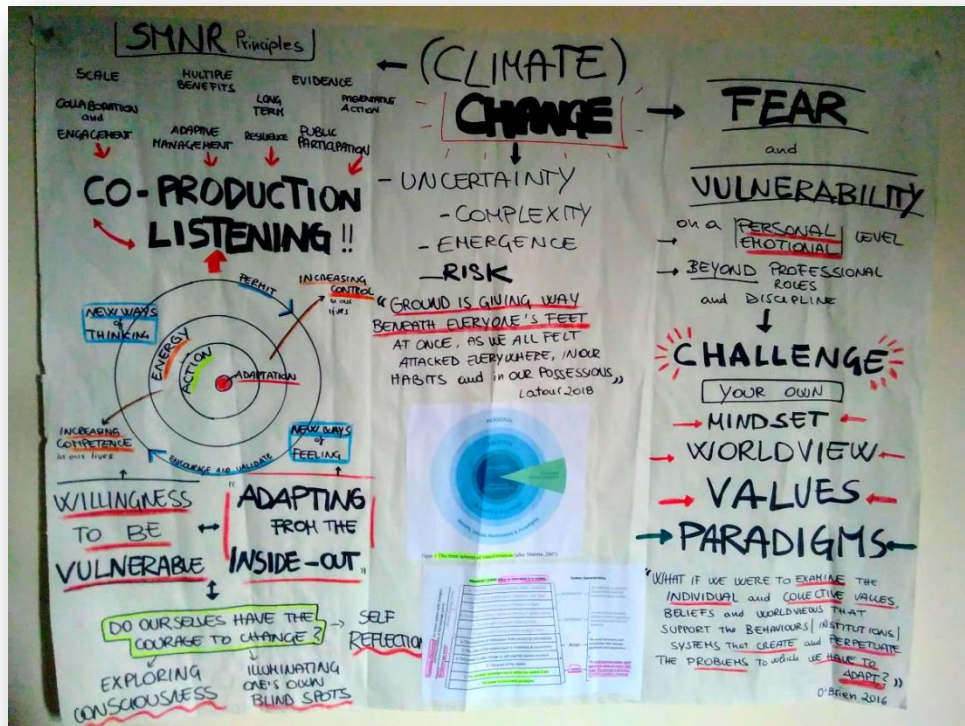
Figure 30 *– Picture of author's own conceptual map*

The reactions to this poster were generally positive, and made me realise that the trust and reciprocal respect already in place with my WG collaborators gave me strength to follow my intuition and experiment with my own creativity. Moreover, I had built some confidence in using some more creative and alternative means to express my reasoning (and myself more in general), thanks to my simultaneous involvement in the Project Skyline (see ch 6). Through Project Skyline I had the opportunity to take part in and co-facilitate the community engagement processes led by various artists collectives. In those instances, I was able to experiment (alone, as well as collectively with other participants) with the power of art and artistic practices to bring ourselves out of our comfort zone and free up (mental) space for new thinking, new reflections and visions for action.

The following sections 8.2 and 8.3 will discuss two key formative moments in the transdisciplinary collaboration with WG and NRW, and, ultimately, the online follow-up event to "To the Moon and Back" workshop. I argued in section 5.3.2 the rationale for the choice of these two moments amongst the various events and workshops part of the Strand 2

of my fieldwork (see Table 6 in 5.3.2.1 section for full overview). In the first workshop, which corresponds to the first formative moment, we started reflecting about and unpacking meanings and understandings of the key concepts of the legislation, highlighting the main challenges that the governmental and bureaucratic systems pose to the cultural transformation required to implement them. With the second one, we sought to deepen the exploration of those challenges and meanings by looking inwards at our own *personal* difficulties, in the context of the transformative journey from a caring-for to a caring-with approach. Finally, the online follow-up to the second formative moment we had a year later, discussed at the end of this chapter, represented a way to crystalise some of the key learnings and outcomes of the previous encounters, during which the needs and aspirations of the participants could clearly emerge and be shared.

8.2 Formative moment 1 – Focus on Place-based working

Together with WG and NRW collaborators we did decide to deepen the conversations around meanings and narratives attached to the principle of SMNR and the collaborative mode of working. We did so by co-designing and co-creating two sets of pilot workshops around participatory place-based working and trusted intermediaries.

This subsection analyses the first set of pilots, the one about Place-based working (March-April 2019). This workshop, entitled "Professional Development in Sustainable Place-Making", focused on co-production for delivery at the place-based level; impact of personal and professional worldviews on capacity to work collaboratively; importance of system-thinking and integration of different knowledge and evaluation systems and it was held in March 2019. It was delivered by academics of the Sustainable Places Institute at Cardiff University, whom I provided with some inputs and suggestions during the planning phase of the workshops, being more closely involved with the WG-NRW joint programme and more aware of the needs and the concerns of the officers promoting it. However, my role throughout the preparation and the workshop itself varied, from intervener to team member, as it will discussed more in detail throughout the following sections.

8.2.1 The time to re-connect, observe and listen to each other

Place-based working is needed in the context of the legislation as the NRP put it as one of the three key priorities of Wales to deliver against the Environment Act and the WBFGA. The attention to place, as discussed in chapter 4 where the context of Wales and its legislation is

presented, stems from acknowledging that communities living in an area are the best placed to identify challenges and opportunities in their specific place, to ultimately contribute to realise SMNR, and more in general, the WBFGA. However, as the workshop in July 2018 discussed in section 8.1, the professionals and officers who joined that workshop shared a sense of confusion and uncertainty about *how* the idea of place-based working and co-production would work *in practice,* on the ground, in their everyday jobs. How to include people's view and perspectives? How to deliver against the legislation when the system imposed short-term outcomes and results?

With the group of academic facilitators and the WG and NRW officers involved in the organisation of the pilot workshops, we decided to address such sense of unclarity and uncertainty by ways of deepening and grounding the theoretical understanding of the key concepts (i.e. place-based, coproduction, participatory approach, local knowledge, system thinking etc), while creating, though, the opportunities for real-life exploration of such concepts, through each other's different worldviews and ways of working, by using more creative and visual methods such as photo-elicitation, mapping and role plays. The ultimate goal of our team, and in general of the pilot workshops organised within the WG-NRW joint programme, was that "the vision of the WBFGA has to become a way of feeling, not just of working" (WG officer, personal communication, 2019).

The workshop kicked off with an exercise focused on reconnecting ourselves emotionally *with place*, grounding ourselves *in place*, to the idea of place. The participants were asked to name a place "that defines you, a place that you connect with, a place that has special meaning to you, and why" (Sustainable Place Institute, 2019). The exercise was a helpful icebreaker that allowed people to move around the room, talk to each other and share their stories related to the places of their heart. With a follow up exercise, participants were also asked to draw a map of their place, identifying things they value of it, things that work well for them and those that do not, paying attention also to changes occurred over time.

One of the participants' feedbacks about this exercise were: "My Place - an excellent approach to someone's true self, a great way to meeting someone"; "Place' intro and map exercise was illuminating and fun!"; "Mapping a place was a good way of showing this and the different information that could be captured". These moments, hence, represented a first step towards

realigning head, heart, feet and hand, through the stimulation of our emotional and not just rational self – so needed to fully appreciate the importance of place-based working, and to be able to deeply connect with one another. The relational element of *place* was indeed highly recognised by participants, who highlighted how "place provides commonality of purpose, a sense of purpose".

The little stories and memories that emerged from the exercise were also a first step to start feeling comfortable sharing personal experiences and challenges, related to everyday tasks related, for example, to including communities' voices in the Area Statements produced by NRW[22]. Through these initial exchanges, we began to create a space to share challenges as well as to explore the different worldviews that each person holds, and how these affect both the ways in which we perceive those challenges, as well as the ways through which we respond to them. A very appreciated element by the participant was the focus on the importance of looking at knowledge as a plural and multifaceted concept, that spans beyond scientific and academic, to include equally valuable local knowledges and all the stories and experiences of people living in a place. With this regard, some of the participant highlighted the importance of "experts by experience" or "community-based experts" as fundamental voices to be heard and included: "Better understanding about what knowledge is"; "helpful clarity that everyone has local ecological knowledge"; "reinforced importance of involving and valuing others"; "reinforced the importance and power of engaging, considering and listening to others" and "getting people to share their stories is a prelude to local adaptation" are some of the feedback gathered during the workshop at the questions "what have you learned in these two days?"[23].

As mentioned, the workshop aimed to provide the participants with both deeper theoretical understanding of the complexity of the SMNR system, as well as practical tools to deal with such complexity through which realising the principles and *the ways of working* on the ground, in their everyday practices. One of the more practical tools discussed was Participatory Methodologies for M&E, about which I prepared an introductory presentation. This

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[22] At the time of this workshop (March 2019) the Area Statements were still under development. They were finally published in April 2020 and available here Natural Resources Wales / Area Statements

[23] The feedback forms for this event were developed by myself with the help and suggestions of my supervisors and my WG and NRW collaborators.

contribution aimed at critically deepening the conversations we were having about the importance of integrating different perspectives and understandings, through connecting the issue of power and power imbalances in the way we account for different knowledge and evidence in SMNR. Through this direct contribution, I thus temporarily moved from *learning about*, and being an impartial observer of the dynamics and conversations amongst participants to *learn for* my team, assuming the role of a facilitator. I had to make myself more familiar with Participatory Evaluation (PE) literature: although participatory approaches have been always at the centre of my research approach, I never look at it from Monitoring and Evaluation perspective. Moreover, in the numerous meetings with WG and NRW prior to this workshop, we had multiple conversations about how to evaluate the initiatives and projects on the ground, how to know to what extent they were effectively contributing to SMNR. Therefore, I started reading and researching PE approach to make sure I could link my own research interest in meaningful and inclusive practices of SMNR with their interest in knowing how to evaluate them from a policy point of view. Learning about PE was a way to enhance my team's (and workshop participants') knowledge about the alternatives we can experiment with to meaningfully integrate people's opinions and stories and break the circle of mere consultation. Furthermore, the opportunity of presenting something I so much *care* about, being PE a tool that I believe holds a critical and radical potential to support and further enable the transition from a caring-for to a caring-with approach to sustainability transformations, was a way to reaffirm my ethico-political stance and my normative positions, even outside of my (more familiar) transdisciplinary team.

By visually comparing the ways in which the principles of PE were fully overlapping the nine principles of SMNR outlined by the legislation, I wanted to stress the fact that our values and paradigms not only crucially affect the ways in which we deliver SMNR, our capacity to collaborate and appreciate different knowledges, but also how they affect what we value, what we consider important and relevant in producing evidence of success for future policies. Asking "whose evidence" are we privileging? Whose stories are we favouring and listening to? Whose stories and data, instead, are we considering less relevant, and remain out of the picture we are creating? As mentioned in section 1, asking *political* questions, in the sense of challenging the normative assumptions and the values underpinning policies and initiatives has been always at the core of my approach based on FAR and Embodied research. This has

represented a way to push forward the "cultural transformation" of the institutional organisations, by providing new tools to their officers to challenge current understanding while developing their own meanings of the legislation and its principles.

This workshop (and even more To the Moon and Back workshop discussed in the next section of this chapter), represented a way to occupy that "space in between" outlined by Lejano (2020), in which the relationships and the encounters amongst policy actors do shape the actual realisation/implementation of principles and provisions of the legislation on the ground. Through carving some space out of busy working schedule, and starting to experiment with different (and creative) approaches, we have engaged in a collective reflection about the multiple and alternative meanings attached to key concepts such as place-based working, participatory engagement, co-production, evidence etc.

Some of the feedback gathered when participants were asked what they learned in the two-days workshop were: "Reminded to consider everyone's views and the importance of it"; Good to work with a cross-sector of people"; "That framing the right question is really important in supporting meaningful engagement/participative processes"; "The need for care and careful preparation in developing, designing and delivering effective co-production, participation, engagement and analysis"; "An awareness of my own bias, and some strategies for starting conversations on an even plane"; "An awareness of different world views and how different people view place"; "Techniques and strategies for working with others from different disciplines or backgrounds, and gathering meaningful, rich data"; "Tools to challenge own and others' perceptions"; "Key words and phrases: collective decision making; values and evidence considered equally, build trust, commitment, long-term, local environmental knowledge, ownership, open-ended"; "the difference between consultation and co-production! Applying system-thinking to this kind of thing".

By way of engaging reflexively with thought-provoking ideas (it is not very usual for governmental officers to talk about issues of power, privilege and care within the context of SMNR) as well as practical exercises, our purpose was to start to collectively *reclaim* some power (i.e. time and space) in defining what it actually takes to bring the WBFGA and the *new ways of working* to live, through a meaningful and inclusive way.

8.2.2 Bureaucratization as an obstacle to caring-with and relational approaches

Participants generally appreciated the sessions within the workshop and gave positive feedback about the workshop being useful and interesting. However, they also highlighted the criticalities of a system and a way of working that is still very far from what it should be (i.e. *the new ways of working).* For instance, there was some disappointment from some of the participants regarding the fact that not enough practical examples, case studies and applications of the various methodologies and concepts were provided: "Case studies and practical examples would help – is all a bit theoretical"; "Many principles common sense/recognisable but could do more to examine the implications for delivery/practicalities"; "I think it would be good to go a little further in bridging the gap between theory & policy and reality & guidance". The expectation of an "how-to" type of approach from the workshop seemed to be expected, some sort of guidelines or "how to" deliver the legislation. That made me further realise how uncomfortable people feel navigating the emergent, adaptive and uncertain dimension of doing place-based and collaborative working. Also, usually there is no space to experiment emergent ways within their everyday job, whereas the legislation now seems to ask them to do so. They rightly asked "how?".

When asked what they need more in order to do things according to principles of participation, involvement, place-based, respect of different and local knowledges etc, many of the participants have in fact highlighted the need for "improved organisational mechanisms to assist", "[institutional] culture change!", "organisational buy-in", especially institutional "buy-in for emergent practices". Someone commented in their feedback particularly about the PE session I delivered: "How do you satisfy funders who don't value/see PE? Too big of an ask for a training I think". Someone who had mentioned the need for a cultural shift also added:

> "Everyone wants to see action/outcomes realised instantly. To take a more collaborative approach takes time/long term thinking. More emphasis on ways of working rather than a sector/functional outcome. Less emphasis on scientific expertise and more on ways of working e.g., collaboration, continuous improvement."

There are important tensions and contradictions attached to establish legislations and principles that do not have, though, one way of being implemented, one way of delivering it, that do not have a guideline or a blueprint. Together with my WG collaborators and generally within any of the contexts where I found myself having conversations with either policy actors or practitioners, we all agreed that the only way to learn such *modus operandi* is by practice and reflection over the long-term. Instead, by observing and listening to the governmental and institutional actors in Wales, I always had the impression that the ground-breaking legislation has been "thrown at" them to implement it, without providing them with the capacity (i.e. ability factors) and the opportunities to embrace the completely different *modus operandi* required.

The feedback forms identified similar lack of attention to the *ability factors*. Especially time and resources were mentioned multiple times as answers to the key question of the feedback form: "what do you think you need in order to do things differently in your everyday work?". Amongst the answers: "Time & space internally to involve & collaborate properly"; "Time and resources (numbers) in order to engage more widely and effectively"; "Need time to develop this model of delivery"; "More time and resource"; "Time and space internally to involve and collaborate properly".

It was very interesting for me as researcher, facilitator and learner in that context to realise that the *emergence* dimension of participatory work in the context of policy implementation, place-based working and *new ways of working*, was still concealed and trapped in a formula-based approach/blueprint approach. It was interesting to realise that the unexpected, unplanned, uncertain and emergent element specific to participatory work was mainly neglected, as if participatory approaches were just a tick-the-box exercise and not a means to embark a collective process through which achieve unplanned, uncertain and unexpected, but shared, outcomes. However, there was also someone who said:

> "I believe the framing of the initial question to people is the challenge – not going straight to the solution. Having faith in people involved in co-production has to happen, letting go of control! Putting ourselves into others' shoes more often – including that of our colleagues and partners."

Fisher and Tronto (1990) provide an interesting analysis of the limits of bureaucratic structures in the way they constraint those who work within them to be able to meaningfully and inclusively engage in caring practices (i.e. collaborative working for SMNR in the context of this research). As highlighted by Fisher and Tronto (1990, p.51-52): "bureaucratic caring grows out of a political process that precludes control by care-receivers, much bureaucratic care is fragmented and inadequate", creating a fundamental flaw in the ways bureaucracies manage people' needs. These authors argue that there is fragmentation due to the separation between caregiving (task of the people on the ground, officers as the ones participating in the WG-NRW pilot workshops) and taking care of (the role of management and higher-level bureaucracy who establish procedures, logic and routines for those on the ground). This dichotomy creates a situation in which:

> "Because bureaucracies function through routines, furthermore, all of the problems that present themselves to the bureaucracy must become routine; that is, they must be standardized. When a problem that is not routine presents itself to a caregiver, she must find ways to fit it into the routines or to improvise new routines." (Ibid.)

The ways problems need to be standardised is similar to the way also people's needs have to be standardised "to fit individuals into bureaucracies" (p. 51) – as well as places and their very own specificity. The same perspective was elaborated by one of the interviewees, active in policy and academic circles:

> "I think the almost absence of place in a lot of this, which I'd sort of argue is because the idea of public service is repetition. It's about uniformity. It's about predictability. It's the machine. It's the machine of regular government." (Interviewee #15)

The creative, spontaneous dimension of an approach based on relational, emergent and embodied practices is fully trapped and hindered by the conditions imposed by a whole system wanting the people operating within it (from top managers to on the ground officers) to get to pre-determined and standardised results – as discussed in 7.6. The big issue with a paternalistic and managerial type of approach, is that governmental bureaucracies implicitly impose to their officers and professionals a standardised 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).

Such system clearly clashes with an idea of *enabling* approach to governance that provide with the time, resources, space etc to fully embrace the *new ways of working*. An enabling system would provide the opportunities and the tools to co-create and co-produce knowledge and solutions with the citizens. The rigidity imposed to civil servants, instead, is the same lamented by the interviewees from SMS partnerships: it is a devaluing attitude of the bureaucracy, one that disempower and empty these civil servants of their very own qualities and capacities of co-producing results, because of the constant requests for delivery, results, outcomes that reflect standardised approaches.

8.3 Formative moment 2: "To the Moon and Back" workshop and its follow-up

To the Moon and Back is the focus of this subsection as fundamental experiential learning process, that has played a key role in the way this transdisciplinary collaboration has developed and evolved. This pilot, a residential workshop, was built on the previous one on place-based working and targeted people within NRW, WG and the third sector organisations highly involved in SMNR practices. This workshop directly targeted the *human and relational* dimensions of the collaborative meaning making process, through the help of art and artistic practices. We have met as humans first, which means that the vulnerability, fears and challenges implied in deepening human relations emerged fully and strongly. Moreover, besides the challenge of dealing with all the internal tensions and contradictions, this section provides evidence on the structural challenges and barriers for institutional actors to engage with alternative forms of "implementing policies and legislations". By this we mean alternatives to the neoliberal model that hollow every attempt to bring humanity and empathy into the policy/political realms (issues with time, mental space, opportunities etc).

This section narrates these challenges and the tensions, especially from the point of view of the researcher who is *learning with* but also *for* the team, as I could observe and feel the difficulty of people in engaging with each other throughout the activities proposed (as part

of a Theory U process). The subsection therefore discusses the role of the researcher (and her challenges) but also what it means for policy making moving forward to a more reflexive and caring governance approach, where people's experiences, shared values and relationships are appreciated and put at the core of the policymaking and implementation processes. The space within which we have worked through these workshops, is one of *relationality,* the *space in between* what is written in the law and the actions and strategies of actors involved to change and transform the system towards their desired goals. This section also merges the results of a follow-up online workshop done with the same group of people in April 2020, that consolidated the idea of building a "community of practice" cross-sectorial and cross-organisations, as discussed at the end of this chapter.

The workshops were designed and facilitated by Emergence, an "evolving art, ceremonial and facilitation practice" with a "history in hosting transformative events and spaces for dialogue on issues of creativity and sustainability and change processes" (Emergence, 2020), led by Fern Smith and Phil Ralph. It occurred two months after the workshop discussed in section 8.2, and was designed following a different rationale: fully experiential, with a strong focus on the personal (vulnerabilities, fears, dreams, needs) and less on the professional level.

The focus of the To the Moon and Back workshops was on enhancing skills and capacity of practitioners across Wales to become trusted intermediaries and change agents, able to champion meaningful and transformative collaborative practices across sectors and organisations for the SMNR. To do so, we agreed on the need to learn about and practice deep-listening (to one another and to ourselves), and open and honest communication, from the shared basis of understanding and empathy. Using Theory-U (Scharmer, 2018) as a guiding framework for an embodied, practice-based learning, Phil and Fern proceeded to creatively guide participants in their 'journey along the U' to collectively develop the skills of 'learning-by-doing', through co-production, collaboration and 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 endeavour such as tackling climate change and stopping biodiversity loss to ensure the survival of our species) was the aim to discover those inner and structural blind-spots of leadership, 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 our 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 "conscious raising" (Freire, 1970) and empathetic self-awareness.

As Figure 31 below shows "going through the U" is an inner journey made of various steps and phases. Throughout each two-day workshop, the way we experienced this was by switching between more individual reflections and collective sharing, either in groups of four to five people, or with the whole group of participants (around 20 each time). A key element of adopting the Theory U was 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, these three 'requirements' immediately put us, the participants, in a context where our professional hats were no longer relevant. Instead, we 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" although "getting rid of the expectations on my role" was considered challenging.

Figure 31 - *The U Process of Co-sensing and Co-creating. Presencing Institute, Otto Scharmer*

We engaged our bodies, our hearts, and our hands in a dynamic relational process of sense-making: what does collaboration mean to us? What does 'deep-listening' mean? How do we do that? How can we learn to listen to ourselves and others, without interruption, leaving aside a judgemental attitude to embrace a welcoming and generative one? As one participant put it, "making sense of the mess in the way we did it" was something good about the workshop, but it was also considered challenging; as the same participant reflected: "(it was challenging) to make sense of the mess in my mind". Many exercises proposed by our facilitators helped us to reflect on these aspects. As highlighted by participant feedback, one of the most appreciated parts of the workshop was a walk outside with one other person, whom we had (ideally) not met before, to share a formative moment of our lives with, while also practicing deep-listening. These walks and the request 'to have more of it' were amongst the most frequent answers to the "what was good about the workshop" question, as well as to the "what would you do differently" question, in the feedback forms.

Especially through the 1:1 walk, immersed in nature, present with ourselves, we had the opportunity to encounter each other, to feel connected, to feel we are in relation, with one another, as human beings. "Taking time out connecting with others", "sense of community – you managed to create it!", but also "talking with people without having preconceptions of their views", "more connection and a different type of dialogue" and "meeting people and doing exciting, meaningful and sustainable things" were amongst the answers of the participants, when asked what was good about the workshop. Being aware of our inherently relational nature, of being and doing together, implies being reflexive 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 the one is not separate from the system. However, the more we recognised our interdependence, the more vulnerability, fears and a certain (possibly uncomfortable) intensity of emotions came along. 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".

To the Moon and Back was organised twice, two weeks apart, with two different groups of participants – except for me who participated both times. This allowed me to experience the usually fluid and ambivalent role of the embodied and FAR-inspired researcher, always juggling between insider-outsider, participant-observer, impartial-invested roles, in a more distinctive way. During the first set of workshops, I fully embraced the role of participant, enthusiastically engaging with fellow participants in all the activities proposed by the facilitators. I thoroughly immersed myself, especially in the self-reflexive process, core of the two-day workshop. We crafted a space together in which to take the time to simultaneously reconnect, inwards and outwards, individually and collectively. The importance of time dedicated to nurturing reflexivity was mentioned by the majority of the participants in their feedback on what was good about the workshop: "loads of reflection - very much needed", "Time to go deep – nothing felt too rushed – helps drop down into reflective space", "time to re-centre", "allowing time for reflection", "space and time for people, to let themselves out of their boxes".

At the same time though, the emotional labour I experienced in these moments of intense inner working drained most of my energy. I felt like my internal compass was not balanced: a propension towards only one side of the spectrum envisioned by the FAR framework brought me towards participation, investment and care, leaving no space or energy to counterbalance that instinctive need to be just a participant. The inner working, reflection, sharing and learning with the other participants resulted in a sense of loss of my usually ambivalent researcher's role. I was painfully letting myself into my own personal journey along the U: I noted in my journal "so hard to let it go, I feel very embarrassed and vulnerable". Nevertheless, I was aware that my normative positions and my strong will to contribute to that (cultural) change (at the heart and feet of my research practice) required me to fully embrace that vulnerability to be able to co-create and hold that space with others, that could let us all feel part of a wider community with common purpose. As one participant rightly put it: "interesting points on how to change – the need for pain and discomfort".

An example of such complex and difficult moments of vulnerability came towards the end of the first set of workshops. The final steps of the Theory U, as depicted in fig 30, required us to crystalise a vision, an intention, an idea, that was generated throughout the *presencing* phase (the uncomfortable and painful 'bottom of the U', the place from which we also generate and create "the new") into a concrete and tangible prototype. This involved us listing and identifying a series of concrete actions to bring "the new" to life, and make it real. When we were asked to make our own prototypes by the facilitators, I refused. I felt I was not ready yet to get out of 'the bottom of the U'. The painful but generative moment I was going through was not finished yet, I needed more time to process that pain and discomfort, before being able to 'prototype' my (new) intentions and vision. When we were asked to share our prototypes to the rest of the group, and I had to admit that I could not do it, it was embarrassing, but also liberating and empowering: I had reached that sense of safety and trust within that newly emerged 'community', that I felt confident and fine with being honest about my "failure".

Figure 32 - Cover of author's personal journal, given to each attendee by the facilitators during the workshop. Author's own image

As discussed already in the literature review chapter of this manuscript, fundamental to systemic change towards sustainability are cultural shifts, envisioned as re-thinking, co-creating, and re-imagining new and alternative meanings and understandings of the world we want to live in and the people we want to be. The interactions and relationships that occurred throughout the series of workshops and meetings reviewed here show how artistic practices and creative methods can facilitate such collaborative and creative processes of meaning-making. As argued by Lejano (2020, p. 4) "What is needed is closer, undivided attention to the workings, and the richness, of the relationships themselves" between policy actors, in policy-making contexts. I have attempted to account for such richness and intensity by discussing the relational dynamics between participants, while making sense of principles, requirements and ways of working, established by the Welsh legislation in relation to SMNR.

The elements of relationality and embodiment, the being and doing together, remained at the very centre of both formative moments. Two crucial elements/challenges have emerged especially from To the Moon and Back experience. Firstly, the engagement in creative and collaborative sense-making processes is extremely energy- and emotionally intense. Moreover, it has potential to produce multiple and multi-faceted tensions within participants, including myself. In my own experience, such (emotional) intensity was exacerbated by the fact that I anchored my practice to the principle of care, which is an

244

ambiguous and multifaceted concept. In the instance in which I was not fully able to balance impartiality and investment, the intensity of my emotional involvement mixed with my ethico-political commitment to practice care, led me to a difficult situation. As a result, I found it hard at the time to re-establish a 'safe distance', and a dynamic proximity between myself and the group of participants.

Secondly, the emotional work involved in such creative and collaborative processes goes hand-in-hand with the uncomfortable (but unavoidable) task of facing vulnerability and fears, triggered by being and doing with others. The experience analysed here stresses the importance of meeting one another "just" as human beings during shared, collaborative endeavours. From working with artists as professional facilitators I have learnt to experience vulnerability as a way to practice and embrace interdependence and relationality. As highlighted by Tronto (2017, p. 32) we do go through a fundamental ontological shift, a fundamental rethinking of our very own nature, when we understand that "everything exists in relation to other things; it is thus relational and that people, other beings and the environment are interdependent", and that "all humans are vulnerable and fragile", sooner or later in their lives. Knowing that we (as human species, and as Planet Earth inhabitants) are interdependent and vulnerable is not enough: the being and doing together dramatically help us to fully embrace our very own condition.

Notably, however, the embodied and relational experiences and practices here presented require fundamental ability factors: especially time and mental space. Especially "time out for thinking" was mentioned by many of the participants as the main good thing about the 'To the moon and Back' workshop. Similarly to the Place-based working workshop, fundamental benefit of such a workshop for professionals from governmental organisations and other practitioners, was indeed to carve out some time and space for themselves to engage in conversations, listening and reflecting: "Building in space to think and plan – expectation and request from top down..."; "A 'buddy' to reflect and support us"; "Allowed to experiment..."; "More time and investment for cross-sectoral collaboration; "Fund for experiments/innovations".

A year after the first To the Moon and Back workshop, the WG-NRW joint programme organised a follow-up online event, with more or less the same participants, again facilitated

by Emergence. This occurred 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, and therefore happened on Zoom. This follow-up was organised to give continuity and consolidate the relationships and the ways of *doing* and *being* together that we experimented with during the first round of residential workshops held in May 2019. Specifically, the feedback gathered at the first To the Moon and Back to the question "What do we need?" emphasised the importance of having "A forum for sharing questions in real time. Access to the community of change-makers"; "Forums to bring decision-makers and deliverers together around collaborative working" and "to find common goals".

The need for continuity in relation to the opportunity of a space (a "forum") to share and learn together, was especially attached to the need to "encourage and support appropriate risk-taking (as learning) within the culture" and, therefore, the need for "re-framing 'failure' as learning – honesty and openness". It was clear already from these initial pilots that there was appetite from the practitioners and professionals involved for a cultural change based on embedding (and normalising) 'failure' as a form of learning, within an institutional approach that encourages and support experimentations and risk-taking.

The common need to create a more solid and easily accessible platform to discuss these themes and keep sharing and learning together, pushed the WG-NRW officers involved in the joint programme to create the opportunity to continue the dialogue and the conversations started during the 2019 pilot workshop. The focus of this follow up was therefore on understanding if, and on what bases, was it possible and/or desirable to build a "community of practice" (hereafter CoP) made of practitioners, policymakers, community groups, farmers and all the people involved in SMNR across Wales. There was a general enthusiasm for the idea of a CoP and throughout the workshop we developed and discussed together the values and the foundations of such a community.

In the 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-judgemental" 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 making "questions and having 'spiky' conversations". The participants envisioned such a *caring* space, thus, to support the creation of "long-term common visions", through "perseverance and commitment", "determination and tenancy" while being "comfortable with not-knowing the answers", and "making time for listening and observing".

The aspirations for the CoP presented here from the 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. This deeply resonates 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).

As one of the participants explicitly stated:

> "If there is time, energy, openness, and the group is persistent, there will be organic change over time. We need to first develop trust and let what wants to emerge, emerge."

The follow-up to To the Moon and Back workshop emphasised how much energy and enthusiasm the experience of the pilot workshops from 2019, together with the individual experiences of the people working collaboratively and through the *new ways of working,* had been generated. Namely, there was a collective demand for some (safe) space to let needs and the aspirations of SMNR practitioners and professionals emerge and be shared, in relation to what an institutional cultural change might look like, and through which conditions. An initial shared *meaning-making process* was therefore triggered within such space: the aspirations and the needs of these professionals have collectively pushed 'the conversation' beyond the comfort zone, unveiling issues that are often considered "the elephant in the room" within institutional settings. The discussion opened around the investment in terms of time, energy and vulnerability that trust building requires, and the opportunity to frame failing as a learning and experimental process. This in itself prefigures an important cultural

transformation within institutional and governmental organisations. It represents a fundamental shift from the way we have been socialised through neoliberal systems(2017, p. 34):

> "neoliberal subjectivity is 'marked by a repudiation of vulnerability that has arisen from the social, economic, and political milieu of the past 30 years'; (...) such a repudiation causes 'a decline in empathic capacities and in the capacity to experience ourselves as responsible and accountable for the suffering of others". (Tronto (2017, p. 34) citing Layton (2009, p. 105)

As Hammond (2020) argues, cultural transformations are about "broadening society's imaginative space"(Hammond, 2020, p. 3) and, thus, about letting vulnerability, failure, and listening enter the conversation. Overall "the range of the human stuff" addressed in the conversations held during the workshops concerned broadening the understanding of cross-boundary 'collaboration', imagining and shaping new meanings for it, and identifying what are the enabling conditions for such alternative understandings to be mainstreamed.

8.4 Conclusion

This chapter has analysed a fragment of intersecting journeys: the one of the WG and NRW to improve their collaborative organisational culture; the one of the participants, each committed in their own ways, to realise the SMNR principle on the ground, in their own part of Wales; and the one I embarked, attempting *to accompany* these professionals for a very tiny part of their journeys, trying to listen as much as possible to their stories and needs, while walking my own doctoral path alongside.

Working within a the "space in between", i.e. the relational space between the provisions of the legislations and the actions on the ground aimed at realising those provisions and principles, means that the people participating in/occupying such space should have the capacity and opportunity to co-create place-specific translations of such principles and provisions. The challenges related such capacity (i.e. the ability factors highlighted both in this chapter as well as in the one concerning the experiences of Project Skyline and the SMS partnerships), remind us of a fundamental step in the journey from a caring-for to a caring-with transformation of the governance approach: needs must be defined through a

meaningful and inclusive political process, that is specific to places and to the people inhabiting them:

> "No caring institution in a democratic society (I include the family) can function well without an explicit locus for the needs-interpretation struggle, that is, without a 'rhetorical space' (Code 1995) or a 'moral space' (Walker 1998) or a political space within which this essential part of caring can occur." (Tronto, 2010, p. 168)

This is what I called in the literature review of this manuscript a *process of shared meaning making*: co-producing a tailored and place-specific translation of such policies means co-producing meanings and understanding of needs and aspirations that are shared, common, owned by all the people part of the process. However, such experimental and emergent process is totally out of the mainstream way of doing and implementing policies, and this is why the WG and NRW understood the importance of bringing people to a space where they could be stimulated to a different thinking and imagining new and alternative ways of "delivering" SMNR on a place-based level. Bureaucratic oppressing systems, in fact, dramatically limit the everyday jobs of these professionals, often filled with tight deadlines and narrowly-defined deliverables, rarely if ever allow such engagement, and leave little, if any, room for experimentation and possible failure. The professionals involved in the workshops, once having overcome an initial reluctance to make time for it, found it "refreshing" to have the opportunity to deeply engage with one another. Time and (mental) space to experience genuine collaboration and the sharing of stories about personal as well as professional lives constitute the very base to build relationships of trust. Ultimately, these relationships underpin the whole legislative structure around SMNR in Wales.

Envisioning the space in between legislation and the policy actors appointed to implement it as a *relational* space, validates what Bartels and Turnbull claim in developing their heuristic of relational public administration:

> "Relationality extends to the analytical process as it dissolves the object-subject dichotomy: 'meaning is constructed in an open-ended, reciprocal, performative conversation' (Wagenaar 2007b, 326, 2011) in which researchers and participants confront personal beliefs, theoretical assumptions and interpretations, leading to emergent surprises and complexity." (Bartels & Turnbull, 2019, p. 16)

The "emergent surprises and complexity" enmeshed in the experiences discussed in this chapter, allowed our humanity to become fully visible and almost 'tangible' in a professional context, through the help of creative and artistic practices, that guided us through vulnerability and embodiment. It is through such iterative and reflexive experimentation that we can find ways to align our heads, hearts, hands and feet. My own experience leads me to conclude that such alignments are fundamental to get us – and keep us - on a path towards socially and ecologically just sustainability transformation.

9. Synthesis Chapter

This research has investigated collaborative endeavours to manage natural resources sustainably within different contexts and initiatives across Wales. Encompassing a range of different initiatives at different stages of maturity, they have each been analysed as collective forms of caring practices (caring-*with*). The rich set of data collected in the relatively prolonged fieldwork carried out across the three years of study provides a number of insights to advance the theoretical and practical relevance of a caring-*with* approach to SMNR. In offering a synthesis of these findings the contributions of this chapter are twofold. Section 9.1 provides an integrated discussion of the key elements and processes, relating to a caring-*with* approach, that have emerged as most relevant across the three strands of fieldwork in contributing towards socially and ecologically *just* transformations. In doing so it addresses the first overarching research question (RQ1). Section 9.2 then discusses the challenges that were highlighted the most by the research participants and interviewees, providing a comprehensive answer to RQ2. The last research question (RQ3) is addressed in the conclusions of this manuscript – chapter 10 - which presents a series of final reflections and recommendations for strengthening the application of a caring-*with* approach, both to SMNR and to the study and pursuit of sustainability transformations more widely.

This chapter ends with a graph that summarises the key elements (and their relationships) that emerged throughout this research, from both theoretical and practical points of view. This so-called *reflection tool* aims to guide the readers (e.g., policymakers, SMNR practitioners, farmers, community groups etc) through a critical reflection over the complex web of relationships and processes enmeshed in adopting a caring-*with* approach to SMNR.

9.1. Building a common ground: situated meanings, emotions and art

The experiences recounted in the previous three chapters have highlighted the importance of building and nourishing relationships of trust between actors, across all sectors and over the long term. Such relationships imply the need for considerable care work to sustain, nourish, and maintain them. Amongst the *ability factors* that enable such care work, and thus these relationships to be developed, 'knowledge' represents a first, key aspect to start with for the purposes of this synthesis. The "remembering" and "reimagining" phases of the Skyline Project is a good testimony of the importance of investigating people's aspirations in relation to the present and future of their landscapes, relationships and community, without

forgetting "what it was" in the past, and how that can inform collective visions for human-ecological wellbeing in the SW Valleys. Similarly, practitioners participating in the workshops organised within the WG-NRW joint programme, as well as in some of the interviews at the core of chapter 8, reiterated that a contextual and contingent knowledge of the multifaceted and interconnected relationships (e.g., human-to-human, human-to-nature, nature-to-nature etc.) occurring within a specific place/context/area/project is key in building a successful place-based collaborative process. Moreover, the same practitioners emphasised the need for such contingent and contextual knowledge of "what is going on" in different SMNR initiatives and projects across Wales, to be shared, connected, and communicated through a national 'platform'[24].

The stories of the people involved in the SMNR initiatives explored as part of this study, share one common characteristic above all: *situated*, specific, 'local' knowledge of the "other" (human and non-human) is a precondition to building relationships of trust and engaging in caring-*with* practices at the place-level. Creating the necessary "common ground" made of solid relationships of trust, upon which caring-*with* and SMNR practices are gradually built, depends on understanding many elements related to the ways the persons, the place, the area, the communities, the history, the ecology, as well as the social, economic and cultural traits of those people and places interact in the definition (and reclaiming) of their (situated) needs and aspirations (i.e. their politics). This knowledge in turn, is a precondition to effective care and SMNR. With this regard, Pulcini, following and enhancing Tronto's theory of care, affirms that "an ethics of care is outlined as a *concrete*, *contingent* and *contextual* ethics"(2009, p. 191). Tronto highlights this aspect:

> "Care for others require knowledge about their lives. Citizens would need to spend time learning about the lives of others (...) That would need to be practices that allow people to meet beyond their homes, workplaces and schools (...)" (Tronto, 2013, p.147)

The *situated* nature of the relationships at the very core of any collaborative practice for SMNR and therefore, of caring-*with*, are thus, deeply entangled with the *everyday* dimension of such practices, happening in *proximity*, within *place*. It is useful to remind ourselves here

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[24] "Connecting and Communicating local activity" is one of the themes most discussed during the "Working Together to evaluate Nature-Based Solutions in Wales" workshops, held in August 2019 in Newtown and Swansea, as reported by the organisers of the workshop, Ecosystem Knowledge Network, in their report of the event.

that: "Care is about relationships, and relationships require, more than anything else, two things: sufficient time and proximity" (Tronto, 2013, p. 166). The meaning of proximity in this statement of Tronto is not clarified, but I believe that it is possible to interpret it as referring to both something physically as well as 'spiritually' *close* to us*, dear* to us. Briefly mentioned in section 6.3.1 for instance, is the story of a grandmother who joined our Festival of Ideas because of her granddaughter: the woman herself self-declared no interest in climate change or community land transfer, but nevertheless joined the event because the future of that community represents also, potentially, her granddaughter's future, something she deeply cares about.

The ideas and suggestions around the potential uses and regeneration of the landscape that emerged from the community throughout the Skyline feasibility study, represent the results of the meaning-making process which the participants 'went through' collectively and individually. Ideas, such as the ones depicted in picture 33 (i.e., a pumpkin farm, vegetable gardens, community orchards with benches and access for wheelchairs, cafeterias on the top of the hills etc), are situated and contingent representations of the needs and aspirations of some of the members of these communities. More specifically, they represent the *meanings* that these members attached to concepts such as community land stewardship, sustainability, wellbeing etc.

Figure 33- Art Installation of the material (map, photographs, and ideas) gathered during the Dreaming phase in Caerau, during the Event "How to build a Valley" in Cardiff. Photo credits: Mike Erskine

The practice of the artists involved in the facilitation of Project Skyline in Treherbert (Griffiths and Appleton), focused on engaging the community members around the nexus Ecology-Economy-Everyday. It represented an attempt to *ground* complex conversations about dreams and aspirations for the next 100 years of that community and its landscape within the context of climate change, in their everyday. Specifically, grounding such conversations in the everyday means filtering ideas and concepts that might sound distant and abstract at first, through our own lens (i.e., the combination of our lived experiences, emotions and worldviews), to make it more familiar, to make it acquire *meaning* for us, to make it something we deeply care about. The key role of *meaning-making processes* is the focus of the following section 9.1.1.

9.1.1 Meaning-making processes to build and maintain the "common ground"

The stories and experiences of the people involved in this research are in fact stories of investment of time and energy to continuously nurture relationships (of trust and, thus, of collaboration) throughout many years: as highlighted by Tronto (2013, p. 121) "An important aspect of care is simply spending time with another, listening to stories, observing care receivers". The ways in which the research participants (from governmental officers to community members and practitioners) discussed processes, experiences and outcomes of collaboration, are very much aligned to the ways in which care and caring relationships work. Cross-sector collaboration is commonly considered as a long-term, non-linear *relational* process of getting to know each other's (evolving) worldviews, aspirations and needs, which lies at the core of how caring-with practices work. Trust, sense of solidarity and reciprocity (all key dimensions of caring-*with* – see e.g., Bond & Barth, 2020; Moriggi, Soini, Bock, & Roep, 2020; Tronto, 2013) emerge mainly thanks to iterative processes of investing time, energy, and resources to continuously build and re-build a common ground - the "space in between", where the needs and the aspirations of those involved can meet. When time energy and resources (amongst other so-called *ability factors*) are not accessible or available, this iterative and dynamic process gets interrupted, as section 9.2 below further discusses.

The "space in between", concept developed by Lejano (2020) within his wider relational approach to policy (versus a more mainstream rational approach), is a semantic tool which I have used in this research to articulate and capture a phenomenon identifiable throughout the different experiences of collaboration discussed. This is the 'ground', the foundation of

(potential) collaboration, that needs to be built, nurtured and *maintained,* whereby *meaning-making processes* occur. Such 'ground', especially in place-based working as this research has shown, is a *space of possibility* to prefigure alternative ways of doing and being together, i.e., of collaborating, of caring-*with* each other, providing shared meanings to institutions and norms such as the SMNR principle of the WBFGA in the case of Wales. As noted by Taylor et al in their review of place-based approaches, developing a 'middle ground' is key: "it is important not to polarise – but, as noted earlier, work 'on both sides of the equation' and to develop the middle ground, be aware of what each party has to offer and to facilitate dialogue" (Taylor et al., 2017, p. 50).

Developing the 'middle ground' as shown throughout this research, is about nurturing relationships deeply enough to generate new/alternative spaces of possibility, *imagining* new *meanings*:

> "*Creating the world* also means *imagining a world form*, so that we can choose, from the plurality of possible options, the ones in which we can recognize the *meaning* of our being-in-the-world." (Pulcini, 2009, p. 207 original emphasis)

The importance of the processes through which such meanings are created through imagination has been discussed especially in the chapters dedicated to the Skyline Project and the transdisciplinary collaboration with the WG-NRW joint programme. Within the spaces created, through the help of professional facilitators and artists, the process of caring-*with* has overlapped (in both cases) with that of meaning-making. In the instances where people could share perspectives, discuss their experiences, challenges and needs around collaborative working, they have simultaneously contributed to shape the meanings and definitions of the very concept of 'Collaboration', alongside also other '*new ways of working'* (National Assembly for Wales, 2015): they have negotiated and started developing their *own, situated* meanings of the principles and provisions of the legislation, contributing to bring the legislation itself to life, gradually closer to their lived experiences.

I have argued in the literature review of this manuscript (section 3.3) that, within the context of sustainability transformations, "deep" leverage points i.e. those concerning societal and individual paradigms, worldviews and values sets (Meadows, 1999) are the hardest to act upon, but, also the most important to achieve transformations. These dimensions are

generally connected to the concept of "cultural" transformations, which are about "re-imagining, re-visioning" ourselves and our relationships with one another and the wider non-human system we are embedded in (see section 2.3.1). Hammond (2020, p. 3) conceives cultural transformations as meaning-making processes to "broaden society's imaginative space".

Participation in collaborative practices of SMNR is thus here interpreted as a collective meaning-making process (i.e., part of a process of cultural transformations) where imagination and creativity regain their prominent political role to contribute to sustainability transformations, by negotiating and shaping the meanings of human and ecological thriving. These processes of meaning-making, therefore, highlight the importance of the *agency* of actors in (deliberatively) shaping transformations, and attaching meaning to them which is relevant to their own lives. D'Alisa and Kallis (2019) stress this aspect whilst talking about transformations towards degrowth:

> "People will accept it *[change]* only if they find it resonating with their everyday needs and prevalent beliefs – otherwise, they will attempt to re-establish the prior condition (…) From a Gramscian perspective, our attention should then shift to creating new common senses within civil society."(D'Alisa & Kallis, 2019, p. 7)

The open-ended, reflexive and dialectic nature of co-creating (counter-hegemonic) cultural meanings that can become new *common senses* in people's everyday lives, and therefore push transformation forward, is what characterises democracy and democratic processes too. According to Hammond:

> "Once it is recognised that both *[democracy and sustainability]* are processes situated in the realm of cultural meanings, a new potential avenue for a democratic approach to sustainability opens up, in which it is precisely the open-enedness of democratic engagement that makes popular demand for sustainability possible in the first place, and then constitutes sustainability in the long run." (Hammond, 2019, p. 57)

This resonates with the concept of "thick democracy" put forward by Evans (2002) and reinforced by Hammond (2020a, p. 223 original emphasis): "Sustainability can only be a trajectory toward prosperity for all those to whom it applies—that is, *all*—if its meaning is negotiated democratically". Such processes are underpinned by a *diversity* of worldviews,

perspectives, ways of being, feeling and doing. This stands in marked contrast to the idea of "institutional monocropping" (Evans 2004), which delegitimises such diversity to produce a standardised narrative. As also noted by Dieleman (2017), this results in:

> "A narrative of monophony and monologue where the voice of science prevails and provides us with absolute explanations and truth. Alternative voices — tradition, day-to-day experience, spirituality, aesthetics, emotions — all are seen as inferior sources of knowledge and understanding the world." (2017, p. 11).

Instead, as Dieleman continues, it is paramount to sustain the "practice of dialogue (…) to put knowledge in cycle, with the aim of creating polyphony of multiple voices, diverse interpretations and complementary truths." (Ibid., p. 14). Therefore, the diversity of meanings generated through the encounter of a variety of needs, aspirations, perspectives, and everyday experiences of people, 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).

Such shared processes of meaning creation and negotiation happen throughout both formal and informal everyday interactions between the various actors of the SMNR 'landscape':

> "Institutions as bundles of norms, practices, and rules are hybrids, blending the old and new, formal and informal, formed through bricolage (improvisation and adaptation) in everyday settings. History, social structure, power relations, meaning, and legitimacy are key to how institutions work. Institutions partially elude design" (Cleaver & Whaley, 2018).

Hence, such polyphonic meaning-making processes represent a fundamental step towards institutional resilience. As highlighted by Cleaver and Whaley (2018): "Institutions can only work and endure (be resilient) if they are seen as legitimate and *meaningful*" (emphasis added). This is well exemplified by the experiences discussed in both Strand 1 (Ch. 6) and 2 (Ch. 8), very much focused on such 'polyphonic meaning-making processes'. Especially the "To the Moon and Back" workshops and their follow-up (part of the WG-NRW joint programme) provide key examples of the importance of co-creating caring and *enabling spaces*, where meaning-making processes can be embarked upon and developed through deep

and complex conversations, while embracing vulnerability and emotions (collectively and individually).

9.1.2 A CoP as a caring and transformative space: but under which conditions?

As shown by the example of the CoP established through the WG-NRW joint programme (see section 8.3), CoPs have the potential to provide continuity to both the meaning-making process and the conversations started within it. Stout and Love talk about "the practice of community" which is necessary to "synthesise *external criteria* and *internal motivation*" (2018, p. 174): by being and doing together, caring-*with* one another, and co-creating new meanings and understandings, people involved in a CoP have the opportunity to dialogically get to a shared *synthesis* between what collaboration and SMNR 'should be' according to externally defined criteria (i.e. as described in the legislation) *and* what it means to each one of them (their *internal motivation* to pursue such principles). The method of integration in collaborative governance and the subsequent concept of "integrative governance" elaborated by Stout and Love in their homonymous book (2018) is insightful here to further understanding the transformative potential of such a CoP in enabling and nurturing a caring-*with* approach:

> "we must get underneath fully formulated positions to core desires in order to find common ground for generating a new synthesis position that meets all of those desires." (Stout & Love, 2018b, p. 257).

The idea of synthesis put forward by Stout and Love emphasises the fact that through "practice of community" and continuous iterative meaning-making processes, new understanding and practices emerge organically *from within* the individuals comprising a CoP, without imposition. The process of co-creation in a caring and safe space, therefore, contributes to reinforce the sense of commitment and ownership towards what has been collectively created: "A sense of commitment to acting upon what is determined is ensured not through the binding authority of law or contract, but in the fact that it has been produced by the community" (Stout & Love, 2018b, p. 174).

A key question remains: how to create the enabling conditions for such a CoP - be it an individual place- initiative- or institution-specific CoP, or an all-Wales umbrella CoP - to be developed and sustained over time, so as to realise its potential to deepen democratic and

inclusive participation for just sustainability transformations? The literature on local adaptive management practices, community and Indigenous based NRM provides important insights on the key elements to make such spaces as inclusive and democratic as possible. Borrini-Feyerabend et al. (2007, p. 393), for instance, provide an exhaustive selection of methods that can be used to foster deliberative inclusive processes (DIPs) to strengthen the inclusion of a variety of social actors in decision-making, planning and consultation over NRM.

As Borrini-Feyerabend et al. (2007) illustrate, there are no shortage of practical examples already in existence for purposively building into SMNR initiatives protected and dedicated time and space for nurturing the types of caring-*with* ability factors outlined through this thesis and/ or conditions for them to generate and flourish. These include for example, *citizens panels* (either *research panels* or *interactive* ones) which have a standing membership that might be replaced over time, consist of a group of citizens who gather regularly, deliberate on the specific issues and provide policy recommendations. Also, regular *consensus conferences* could be incorporated, creating a dedicated space for lay public and experts to come together over a few days to exchange their local and expert knowledges, thereby giving each other the opportunity to enhance their understanding. At the end of the conference, the citizens will deliberate and produce a report with recommendations. However, in order for this process to be genuine and not tick-the-box exercise or techno-fix (see chapter 2) it is crucial that such mechanisms/ spaces are befitting to the particularities of each place, community, initiative etc. It is pivotal, hence, that such DIPs are not imposed upon people, and that are introduced in a manner which does not inadvertently create an unintended burden tolerable only by those with more power/access to ability factors.

Similarities can be found between the aspect of the CoP developing in Wales and a *future search conference,* which "brings together those with the power to make decisions with those affected by decisions to try to agree on a plan of action" (Borrini-Feyerabend et al., 2007, p. 394), although their conflicting views and interests. Notably, "To the Moon and Back" workshops in Wales from which a CoP has originated, did help reviewing past SMNR experiences to create ideal future scenarios, keeping social interaction, dialogue, reflexive and open-ended discussion at the heart of the activities promoted, so as to make decisions that are "solidly grounded and owned" by the participants (Ibid.). Being still at a very

embryonic stage, the future of the CoP around SMNR emerged in Wales is very uncertain, and by no means guaranteed. Along with the methods used to enhance the inclusivity and participatory nature of the processes of decision-making and planning within it, the future of the CoP will greatly depend also on the structure and position it will assume within the wider policy environment and institutional setting of Wales.

The importance of building a polycentric governance approach to maintain a democratic and participatory character, made of horizontal and nested networks of initiatives, communities and organisations, which are self-organised yet complementary allies, is well established (Borrini-Feyerabend et al., 2007; M. Pimbert & Borrini-Feyerabend, 2019). In the case of Wales, one way in which this could be supported is by using the already existing Area-based way of working. As explained in section 4.1.3, the Area Statements (AS) take a place-based approach to examining the opportunities and challenges that a particular locality presents in terms of NRM for present and future generations' benefit. Established by law in 2017, the development of the AS has seen the creation of seven different teams of NRW officers (one per each area) working with citizens and across organisations involved in SMNR to produce the AS reports. This horizontal and nested system of AS teams (which are closely working together, yet in a self-organised manner) could represent the starting point to further develop participation and inclusion of a variety of social actors, in their own locality. By deepening conversations, relationships, collective analysis and discussions around specific issues relevant to each Area, for example, the seven teams would be in the position to nurture the wider CoP with a variety of perspectives, needs and aspirations of the communities, organisations and actors involved. Such an approach could lead to a gradual democratisation of the CoP's *modus operandi*, as well as to a consolidation of its role as a caring and transformative space, to influence the political debate and the agenda of those in power.

9.1.3 The role of Emotions and Vulnerability in Caring-with

A fundamental contribution of adopting a feminist ethics of care lens to the analysis of collaborative SMNR practices for just sustainability transformations is that it acknowledges the emotional dimension and labour involved in building and maintaining the deep and genuine relationships of trust and care, at the core of collaboration. As discussed in section 3.4, emotions play a big role in stimulating imagination and action, holding a fundamental transformative potential (Moriggi, Soini, Franklin, et al., 2020). Chapter 8 extensively

discussed the emotional labour and the uncomfortable feelings perceived by some participants of the "To the Moon and Back" workshop, while engaging in deep listening of others, sharing perspectives and (emotional) challenges related to their (professional and not) lives. Bringing our emotional selves into the conversation, is about providing "substance" to the "neutral and disembodied subject of formal morality", transforming it into a "situated and embodied self" (Pulcini, 2009, p. 190). Situatedness and embodiment are key elements in the emerging narrative proposed by feminist and critical scholarship around sustainability transformations (e.g. Cote and Nightingale 2012; O'Brien 2013). As noted also by Cockburn et al:

> "Paying attention to the affective or emotional dimensions of social-relational processes is critical, as without it we ignore the most basic of human characteristics" (Cockburn et al., 2020, p. 16).

The discussion at the core of Chapter 8 around sharing of (personal) stories, through deep conversations, reflections and listening, provides support to the concrete, contingent and situated nature of an ethics of care. As elaborated by Tronto (and enriched by others such as Pulcini (2009)), it identifies "the other" as no longer the 'generalized other' of abstract morality, but the 'real other': 'an individual with a real story, with an identity and an affective-emotional make-up" (Pulcini, 2009, p. 191). The 'spaces of encounter' created through the workshops organised within the WG-NRW joint programme, as well as during the Skyline engagement processes, allowed people to meet "just as human beings" (see section 3, Chapter WG-NRW) rather than with professional hats on.

The focus on the emotional labour involved in engaging deeply in collaboration, thus, allows a space to open up where personal, inner transformations, deemed to be at the core of wider sustainability transformations (Ives et al., 2020; O'Brien & Sygna, 2013; Wamsler et al., 2020), can happen and evolve. However, increasing emotional awareness and facing one's own deepest emotions (including fear and discomfort), require also a willingness to being open to feeling vulnerable, somehow "uncovered" or "unprotected". Embracing vulnerability can have transformative potential because it can have the effect of opening oneself to the unknown, to the uncertain, to complexity and entanglement – a well as to experiment with it.

Here 'vulnerability' is thus understood as encompassing both the intrinsic, reciprocal interdependent nature of our lives, that ultimately makes us *all* vulnerable (sooner or later, more or less, in specific situations/periods of our lives). Simultaneously, it is also about *perceiving*, *being aware* of this undeniable truth, and of the whole set of different feelings we experience when we connect, deeply and truly, with the *diversity* of other people, their perspectives, their worldviews, their stories; a process that can often scare us, and makes us long for safety, and 'safe spaces'. To recognise vulnerability, thus, is to recognise the frailness of human life, "the world is irreparably *frail*" (Pulcini, 2009, p. 218); but also, the immense transformative potential in opening-up to the 'other', to diversity, in order to co-create new, collective, shared, meanings and understandings.

By affirming the emotional dimension and 'frail' nature of human life (key in the *relational* onto-epistemological approach adopted in this study), as potentially transformative in stimulating agency and motivation to action, a caring-*with* approach helps create a common ground upon which to establish new and alternative meanings of *responsibility:*

> "In any case, this chance contains the possibility to think—or rather to rethink—responsibility not as arising from an abstract ethical imperative or an altruistic sentiment, but from the subject's (emotionally founded) perception of his own vulnerability and recognition of his dependence (or interdependence)"(Pulcini, 2010, p. 459).

Collaborating in SMNR practices, thus, becomes a caring-*with*, where responsibility becomes a collective, shared and distributed action, rooted in the intrinsic vulnerable and interdependent condition we all share, but which neoliberal individualisation profoundly disguises. With this regard, as a participant to the Skyline Project sharply noted (while discussing the history of the Valleys): "We've got a very big move to consumerism, which I think has made us a little bit too independent and worried about our own ends, [rather than] going back to the community" (Participant H). As Pulcini (2009, p. 192) argues, *fear* has brought humans to consider themselves self-sufficient and sovereign, and to neglect the innate need for care that we all share.

Knowledge co-creation, information sharing, and dialogue are, then, all fundamental dimensions of the *meaning-making processes* that underpins deep (cultural) and democratic transformations. However, a holistic, embodied engagement of the self, that implies deep emotional awareness and labour, profoundly complements the scientific and more technical approaches so far adopted to analyse and push sustainability transformations forwards. A care-based approach further strengthens the (political) role of emotions[25] and emotional awareness, in contributing to transformations and more specifically to transformative agency - a conclusion drawn also by Moriggi et al (2020):

> "Connecting to the inner sources of passion, joy, despair, and other moral sentiments, further enhances the consciousness regarding our condition of interdependence, while nourishing the desire to imagine alternative tomorrows."
> (Moriggi, Soini, Franklin, et al., 2020, p. 12)

The importance of emotions and emotional labour "to imagine alternative tomorrows", and build a caring-*with* approach to SMNR, is further discussed in the following section (9.1.4), whilst highlighting also the role of art and artistic practices in enabling caring-*with* approaches.

9.1.4 The role of Art and Artistic Practices

Chapters 6 and 8 discussed the experiences of working closely with artists and artistic practices as ways of opening-up spaces for deeper conversations and engagement, through sharing, conviviality and creativity. Different groups of (mainly local) artists (a total of seven artists) were involved in the Skyline team, as well as in the organisation and facilitation of the WG-NRW workshops. I engaged with their practices and activities as a *participant* in most of the situations, and only marginally I attempted to experiment with more creative methods myself. Therefore, the analysis I have presented in the previous chapters, is the result of being a *participant* and an *observer* at the same time, and informs a synthesis of reflections that I will present in the this section

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[25] See also Chantal Mouffee's work around passions and radical democracy: "For those who want to contribute to a radical politics of counter-hegemonic engagement with neo-liberal institutions, one important task is to cultivate a multiplicity of practices that would erode the common affects sustaining the current neo-liberal hegemony. Those practices should aim at fostering common affects of an adversarial nature because, as Spinoza was keen to stress, an affect can only be displaced by an opposed affect, stronger than the one to be repressed. A counter- hegemonic politics necessitates the creation of a different regime of desires and affects so as to bring about a collective will, sustained by common affects able to challenge the existing order. This is what I understand by the mobilization of passions and I am adamant that it would be tragic for the left, and for the future of democracy in our societies, to abandon this terrain to right-wing populist movements."(Mouffe, 2014, p. 157).

There are a number of elements attached to the involvement of artists and the adoption of artistic practices, that turned out to be key in shifting the 'level of the conversation' (and of the practices) around collaboration and collaborative SMNR far deeper; that is, into the cultural realm, the one of meaning co-creation. As noted by Tyszczuk & Smith (2018):

> "The arts and humanities support a fuller understanding of what it means to craft shared futures with others through 'conscious social transformations' or indeed to 'make and unmake futures that impact on all life on this planet" (2018, p. 60).

The artistic practices at the core of Skyline and of the "To the Moon and Back" *gently* created safe and caring spaces, where people could feel comfortable delving into, and sharing their personal stories, perspectives, as well as aspirations around what their own socionatural futures might look like. These caring spaces had the role to host these very cultural conversations, without being labelled as such: instead, we discussed and shared what might look like 'trivial' details of the *everyday* dimension of people's lives, memories, as well as needs and aspirations, regarding landscape and community – as discussed above within this section. Hence, at the core of the creation of these spaces is the idea of "hosting": "the art of hosting" conversations and encounters, as mentioned by Interviewee #24, is about gently bringing people into conversation – a "gentle-but-radical" approach where people feel welcomed and safe to speak, to share, to create, to reflect, to listen to each other.

The 'radical' aspect of the space created, and the conversations that emerged within it, lies in the very meaning of the word radical: it is derived from the Latin noun 'radix', meaning roots. Temper et al (2018) suggest that "a radical transformation not only digs the roots of a problem, but also engages with turning it over by *creating new societal meanings* and practices"(Temper et al., 2018, p. 748 emphasis added). Similarly, it is possible to argue that the "radical conversations" occurring throughout the Skyline community engagement and "To the Moon and Back" workshops, had a fundamental cultural role, through which *new societal meanings* were created. This happened by generating and hosting spaces where people who do not generally meet and spend time together "just as human beings", had an opportunity to experiment with new ways of *doing* and *being* together, to co-create new meanings, to discuss worldviews, perceptions, aspirations and even emotions. It is in this regard that Pigott (2020), discussing the role of art in social-ecological transformations, and specifically her experience with Emergence (the artist collective who also organised the "To

264

the Moon and Back"), uses the concept of 'artfulness' to capture this sense of co-creating, co-generating: "Artfulness is not only about bringing awareness to everyday relations (this might be called 'mindfulness') but is also about genesis; allowing new or different relationships or conditions to emerge through unpredictable interactions" (Pigott, 2020, p. 884).

Collective walks, immersed in the landscape, whilst listening to the poetry created by the local children, helped to carve out the *space* and the *time* to listen to and reconnect with oneself, one another and the surrounding natural environment. However, these processes of (re)-connection do not occur smoothly and linearly: the almost 'parallel' dimension generated through creative and artistic practices, where people have time and space to listen, reconnect and imagine, is also a dimension where conflict, provocations, uncomfortable feelings and tensions are produced and legitimately allowed to exist. Pigott (2020, p. 879), referring specifically again to the work of the facilitation group Emergence, confirms that "Emergence conversations make space – both in their content and form – for difference, discomfort, surprise and vulnerability". Looking at the wider field of the arts and humanities, Tyszczuk & Smith (2018) also note: "arts and humanities are essential to enriching scenarios work, even if that enrichment may arrive studded with challenges and provocations." (2018, p. 60).

This quotation also brings the debate back to the importance of reflexivity for meaningful engagement and collaboration: art feeds reflexive processes, contributing to nurturing spaces for care, deep listening and conversations, which - it is important to remember - also legitimise and allow for differences, conflict and diversity to emerge. A commitment towards reflexivity is key to build and re-build those (human as well as more-than-human) connections that we urgently need to push transformative processes forwards: "Reflection can also help build empathy and compassion towards others by seeing matters from others' points of view"(Ives et al., 2020, p. 212). This includes the empathy to try to "walk in each other's shoes" (Cockburn et al., 2020).

To conclude, the transformative capacity of art and artistic practices relies not only on the stimulation of imagination and thinking out-of-the-box, but also on the capacity to emphasise aspects of reflexivity and embodiment in the making of the "common ground",

accompanying people in their journey to *feel* and *think* differently/new/unexpected, even uncomfortable, things.

9.2 Challenges to practicing caring-*with*

In section 9.1 of this chapter I highlighted the main themes emerging from the analysis of the collaborative practices of SMNR in Wales through the lens of caring-*with*. I have discussed how, firstly, a focus on building *deep* relationships of trust lies at the core of the transformative potential that a caring-with approach holds and offers when applied to collaboration for SMNR practices. Secondly, I have argued how such deep relationships of trust can only be built when people feel safe to embrace emotional awareness, and their (innate state of) vulnerability, through embodied practices and deep listening: this is aimed at nurturing empathy and a deeper understanding of others' situated needs, worldviews and aspirations (thus, their politics); finally, I have discussed how these deep encounters allow for the creation of a 'common ground', where to meet, interweave and generate shared, *meaning-making* processes, that art and artistic practices can deeply stimulate. These relational and dynamic processes are at the very core of the 'deep (cultural) transformations' we need (O'Brien, 2021).

Although it might sound like a linear process of reaching consensus, the empirical evidence provided in this thesis confirms what the critical scholarship concerned with both feminist ethics of care and political ecology have always claimed: caring processes, i.e. collaborative practices of SMNR in the specific case at hand, are necessarily imbued with conflict and agonisms, because of the fundamental *diversity* and *plurality* (of needs, aspirations, perspectives, politics) that populate the "space in between", the common ground. The very act of meeting and building a common ground, entails ongoing and dynamic, ever changing, processes of negotiation of the very meaning attached to the common ground, what, where that is supposed to be, according to whose definitions and criteria.

The co-creation of *new*[26] and *shared* meanings and narratives of fundamental concepts such as collaboration, sustainability, just social and ecological transformations, is therefore key to crystalise where we stand (genuinely, intimately), where are we heading to (i.e., the directions

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[26] Following Pigott (2020), I intend *new* also in the sense of renovated, or re-discovered meanings: "in many instances one could argue that such things are not necessarily 'new', but rather need to be re-discovered or allowed to become more visible" (2020, p. 880).

of the deliberate transformations we are seeking) and how we can move forward to get there, together. This is ultimately the goal of applying a caring-with approach to sustainability transformations: strengthening the political importance and the functions of the (cultural) process of meaning-making, that begins in the very basic human encounter in wholeness, holistically (but also is far too rare nowadays, in the neoliberal individualised era). Here, we (humans *and* citizens – all, from governmental officers to community members) can democratically and fairly meet and participate in the (open-ended and dynamic) process of allocation of responsibilities to achieve our chosen forms of socially and ecologically just transformations. As Hammond notes:

> "Sustainability denotes the unending construction of future society that is normatively meaningful to its members (Robinson 2004: 379–80). This implies the heart of sustainability to be the possibility (and necessity) of a cultural transformation – in the sense, based on the above definition, of a transformation of meanings – which in turn suggests sustainability does not come from imposing certain outcomes against citizens' democratic wills, but rather from citizens' transforming what they find valuable." (Hammond, 2019, p. 60)

However, the meaning-making processes identified at the core of cultural transformations, which allow for a caring-with collective allocation of responsibilities style of approach to be initiated, requires *maintenance and nurturing over the long term*. A long-term built-in perspective of such processes is what distinguishes experimentations (e.g. the pilot workshops "To the Moon and Back" put forward by the WG-NRW joint programme), from embedded, radical processes of cultural change. Building on the preceding empirical chapters, the following section provides a summative analysis of the challenges faced by actors involved in each of the case study collaborative SMNR initiatives.

9.2.1 Accountability versus Flexibility: the challenges of learning to manage adaptively

Amongst the most relevant issues attached to working "adaptively" there is the oppressing and rigid bureaucracy of the state, with endless criteria, requirements and regulations to managing access and allocation of (especially) financial resources for SMNR. The most relevant issue attached to the lack of flexibility and adaptiveness of bureaucratic procedures and regulations is the loss of momentum in the short-term, but also trust over the long term,

on the side of the local actors (practitioners, farmers, third sector organisations, community members) towards the institutions and the governmental structures who are supposed to support them. On one side, for example, the delayed payments of the SMS funds (discussed in chapter 8) represented a fundamental barrier especially for small and newly established groups such as farmers group, who do not have the same organisational capacity and resources of larger organisations. As noted in the dedicated chapter, such delays have had a double effect to prevent actors involved to get going with their planned projects and activities, losing momentum and enthusiasm hardly generated amongst the farmers (interviewees #12, #13, #20).

On the other side, the reasonable and fundamental need for accountability of public money spending prevents governmental procedures from embracing flexible ways of accounting for changes and uncertainty along the way. The need for accountability within the short-term of electoral cycles creates a profound tension with the aims and approaches needed for a long-term transformation towards sustainability. This specific issue has been long discussed within the literature concerned with the study of the governance of sustainable development transformations. For instance, Meadowcroft (2011) argues:

> "It is easy to castigate political leaders for short-sighted decisions and their failure to get to grips with sustainability. But transforming the societal development trajectory is necessarily a long, messy and painful process. The short-term focus of prevailing arrangements (electoral cycles, voter attention span, planning horizons) is often criticized. Yet there are good reasons why we keep politicians coming back for renewed mandates every four years, and why democracies hesitate to commit scarce social resources to projects that will only bear fruit decades into the future.
> Experience with environmental policy since the 1970s suggests three big problems for political engagement with sustainability: (a) there are lots of other things to worry about; (b) uncertainties overwhelm action; and (c) change disturbs established interests"(Meadowcroft, 2011, p. 71)

Although farmers as well as interviewees from other sectors do generally acknowledge the role of these elements highlighted by Meadowcroft (2011), the lack of a built-in 'room for manoeuvre' that allows flexibility when things suddenly and unpredictably change, is causing a number of issues for the development of a sustained collaborative and caring dynamic

between government and people on the ground. The detrimental effects are visible in the gradual loss of self-confidence experienced by the farmers who perceive mistrust from the side of the government, and lack of understanding of their needs and perspective. The story emerging from some of the farmers interviewed, in fact, seems to be strikingly different from the picture of "careless farmers" outlined to me especially in the first months of my fieldwork in Wales, during which I had little direct contact with farmers themselves. As discussed by Ack et al (Ack et al., 2001, pp. 137–138) amongst some of the key institutional challenges to provide better support to collaborative and bottom-up management practices, such as the case of the farmers involved through the SMS scheme, is the need for "balancing accountability and flexibility".

The scholarship concerned with decentralised and community-based forms of management of the natural resources, recognise the tension governmental agencies face between the need to promote standardisation for the sake of accountability, while allowing for the flexibility to address changing ecological, social and economic local circumstances. Adaptive management, as opposed to control, is unanimously considered as the best approach to deal with such tension. This is evident in Wales too, where adaptive management is one of the nine principles composing the overarching SMNR approach established by the Environment Act (Wales) 2016. However, the concept in itself, and the literature produced around it, have not provided much more than a "shopping list of "conditions" for adaptive governance, including "policy will," "coordination of stakeholders," "science," "common goals" and "creativity" (...) rather than the complex political, cultural and social dynamics at work" (Peet et al., 2010, p. 10).

As discussed in chapter 7, some of the interviewees identified a perceived lack of trust towards organisations or communities outside of the government, and a lack of capacity to "let go control", as being at the core of the lack of flexibility from the side of the government. This was reiterated by some of the participants of the Skyline Project, who lamented the rigidity demonstrated by governmental organisations towards their request to collaborate on a plan for the community-led management of some of the woodland surrounding the Valleys' towns. One of the interviewees, a community worker in one of the pilot communities of the Skyline Project, further commented on the lack of trust and reluctance from governmental organisations towards the Skyline project, particularly towards the project manager: "And

you've got somebody in that position with a track record and you're still not trusting him to have some funding to make Skyline a reality?" (Interviewee #25).

A form of "fear culture" - as defined by one of the interviewees (#18, see also section 7.5) – was thus perceived by many of the participants to the research who, alongside, provided several examples of a perceived lack of trust towards organisations and community groups coming from the side of the government. This perception was confirmed by the answer of one of the interviewees, active in academic and policy circles, when asked if they thought the government should believe in people: "I think so. It's so ingrained that you shouldn't [trust people]. It's so ingrained that it's about risk aversion and, this is about control. And letting go is really scary" (Interviewee #15).

However, many participants have also expressed words of praise towards individual governmental officers they had the opportunity to interact and/or work with, for their commitment and willingness to participate in an "organisational cultural change" that struggles to emerge. The tension between letting control go, allowing flexibility, experimentation, learning by doing, *alongside* the indisputable need to guarantee accountability, is highly present within policy circles. Such tension continues to have detrimental impact also on the genuine endeavours of some officers within governmental institutions that attempt to break through the institutional rigidity: they often feel disempowered and not supported within their departments or by their managers, despite the words of praise coming from most of the interviewees.

Further evidence of this tension was provided to me through the informal conversations and meetings that happened throughout my close collaboration with the WG-NRW joint programme of pilots in 2019. Specifically, for example, during a follow-up informal meeting held between with some practitioners who participated in "To the Moon and back", and some WG officers (to discuss "what's next" for place-based approaches to mainstreaming the implementation of the Natural Resources Policy), it was reiterated: "how do we address the question of need for certainty around public funding spend versus adaptive management approaches which redefine 'failure' as system learning?". During this meeting there was clear interest and willingness from the WG officers to push "new thinking", moving from rigid, impersonal and managerial approaches to others that could allow them "to really engage and

listen to local communities". Specifically, the conversation centred around what the literature would define as "resourcefulness" (discussed in section 3.2), a relatively radical and disruptive approach, especially if discussed with and amongst governmental officers. In fact, they mentioned the need to trust a community to define its own vision and values through participative and emergent processes and support them in delivering it. Yet, the doubt around what exactly it means to "support communities in delivering their own visions" remains. How can governments and development organisations address the inherent element of uncertainty and risk involved in designing approaches to delivery?

Already three decades ago, David Korten (1987, 1996) was suggesting that development organisations such as the World Bank, or the International Monetary Fund, instead of being problem solvers, represented the core of "the threefold crisis" the world was (already) experiencing, i.e., poverty, environmental destruction and communal violence (Korten, 1996, p. 165). He proposed a reverse of the mainstream growth-centred development (which only exacerbates our multidimensional crisis), in favour of a people-centred development. The latter shifts the focus on equity, on the needs and aspirations of the most marginalised, who should benefit from a process of resources and asset redistribution, to build self-reliant local economies, that they own and manage themselves (Ibid., p. 181).

This approach is complementary to the idea of "putting the last first" (Chambers, 1983), which among many aspects, gives great emphasis to a reversal in learning within development organisations' *modus operandi*, according to which professionals should "step over and see and feel the world form the other end" (1983, p. 201). Chambers suggested that "sitting, asking and listening" was both the best method and attitude the 'outsiders' could adopt: "Sitting implies lack of hurry, patience, and humility; asking implies that the outsider is the student; and listening implies respect and learning" (1983, p. 202).

A "sitting, asking and listening" approach is not only people-centred , but also promotes development of a flexible and process-oriented wider organisational culture. The latter being the "combination of the individual opinions, shared knowledge, values and norms of the members of an organisation, represents the most fundamental at which transformations needs to take place" (Borrini-Feyerabend et al., 2007, p. 328). An organisational culture adopting a process-approach is based upon the assumption that when a variety of actors and perspectives are at stake, time is needed to listen and get to know each other's needs and

capacities, and develop understanding of everyone's social and ecological knowledge. As mentioned already, time is key to build such knowledge, and to build long-lasting relationships of trust, especially between governmental actors and communities, who should be trusted in their knowledge, understanding, capacities to take on responsibility and innovate (2007, p. 328). There are a number of proposed ways to develop flexibility and adaptive capacity of often compartmentalised and hierarchical organisational structures. Amongst some innovative methods, Borrini-Feyerabend et al., for example, suggest the "establishment and funding of small self-managed teams within organisations, endowed with the freedom to experiment, motivate and learn from mistakes" (2007, p. 334). This accords with the case of the AS teams mentioned in section 9.1.2, as a potential starting point for further development and democratization of the Welsh SMNR CoP discussed in this manuscript.

In more recent years, as highlighted also by section 2.4, increasing scholarly attention has been reserved to the importance of *relationality* (Bartels, 2013; Bartels & Turnbull, 2019; Lejano, 2020; Stout & Love, 2018b), and *co-production* for more democratic and participatory policy-making processes, or so-called "new public governance" approaches (Bentzen, Sørensen, & Torfing, 2020; Mortensen, Brix, & Krogstrup, 2020; Von Heimburg & Ness, 2021). Such relational approaches are rooted in the idea that enabling institutions should, amongst many things, nurture relationships of trust, cooperation and reciprocity with a variety of actors, and especially with the civil society. This is key to make public organisations fit for purpose, i.e., pursuing socially and ecologically just sustainability transformations. Stout and Love (2018b) talk about administrators as co-learners of citizens, facilitators of deliberation and stewards of the public trust (2018b, p. 165), who *enable* others to do their work well, rather than directing and controlling their actions (2018b, p. 170). The idea of facilitative coordination foregrounds the *humanisation of* decision-making and policy processes, which aim to make "government more accessible, caring and connected to the people" (2018b, p. 174).

9.2.2 Resourcing Time to participate over the Long-Term

Throughout my involvement with the WG-NRW joint programme, and specifically during a set of workshops held in August 2019, called "Working Together to evaluate Nature-based

Solutions in Wales"[27], the concept of "learning by doing", at the core of the principle of adaptive management, was repeatedly linked by participants to being truly effective, especially if applied over the long-term. The *maintenance* and nurturing of practices (and relationships) based on collective 'learning-by-doing' over a longer span of time was mentioned by the practitioners attending the workshops (as well as by many interviewees), as a fundamental way to better understand the benefits and cost-effectiveness of their projects. Also important was to learn from (and get inspired by) the experiences and the stories of fellow SMNR projects, funded through similar government schemes. Seen through a lens of *care*, learning-by-doing, its (intrinsic) repetitiveness and the importance of the relationships that can be nurtured through it, resonates with what Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) claims in relation to observing soil cycles and respecting soil temporalities through permaculture practices:

> "The repetitive character of ongoing observations of soil cycles enables care. Care work become better when it is done *again,* creating the specificity of a relation through intensified involvement and knowledge. It requires attention and fine tuning to the temporal rhythms of an "other" and to the specific relations that are being woven together" (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 201 original emphasis).

The challenges of learning-by-doing and adaptive management, therefore, seem to organically merge into the realm of the *ability factors* identified by Fisher and Tronto (1990) that critically influence people's capacity to care. Specifically, *time* comes across as fundamental for the process of learning-by-doing, because it is key to experimenting (the "doing" bit of the learning-by-doing approach), as well as to allowing the "learning" part to evolve, be nurtured and benefit the people involved. The concept and practice of learning-by-doing, at the core of SMNR, is key also to care and caring-with, to build the trust necessary to get to understand needs and how to meet them. In both cases, *time* regularly plays a determining role. As demonstrated in the previous chapters: interviewees involved in SMS projects (from people working with community projects to those more involved with farming and farmers groups) had to invest *time* over the long-term, to deeply understand the needs

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[27] The report of the workshops was compiled by the Ecosystem Knowledge Network who was employed to organise both sessions in 2019. The document was circulated internally, amongst facilitators of the events (including myself) and the WG and NRW officers part of the organisation.

and the perspectives of the people they have been working with to, ultimately, co-create a common ground. Time is not only fundamental to the development and maintenance of relationships with others, but also with oneself: collaborative governance and practices notably require (inward and outward) *reflexivity*, a highly time and energy consuming practice, that needs behind-the-scenes emotional work and (mental) space to occur. As Tronto (2013) points out:

> "To take the task of learning about other citizens in order to understand caring responsibilities thoroughly will require, in itself, a large investment of time an energy" (Tronto, 2013, p.174)

Conversely, lack of time brings misunderstanding, frustration, and sense of (self-) inefficacy, as for example in the case discussed by interviewees working with farmers. According to interviewees #13, #19, #20 , farmers often do not have the time to engage in conversations, meetings and events organised around SMNR initiatives as much as they would like. Similarly, this means lack of time to engage in *listening*, especially the deep listening for which only a very few opportunities were created through the Skyline Project and through the pilot workshops of WG-NRW. Lack of time, therefore, has a fundamental (detrimental) impact on real opportunities to explain one's own perspectives and get oneself heard and understood by the rest of the people and groups one works with (i.e., governments, environmental NGOs, community organisations etc). This ultimately leads to disengagement and lack of participation, that on the surface seems a 'careless' attitude, confirming Tronto's (2015, p. 25) statement: "The most important resource for caring is time. Alas, time is not equally available to everyone." Clearly, lack of dialogue, and deep listening results in a missed opportunity to share our *own* stories, the stories of our relationships (or lack thereof) with one another, as well as with the non-human world we are embedded in. Consequently, this results in a missed opportunity to create *new*, *shared,* stories, based on the exploration of the 'common ground' that keep us together – a missed opportunity to care-*with* one another. As beautifully put by Harcourt (2018):

> "It is the stuff of our stories that requires serious discussions among social scientists, economists, ecologists and feminists as we learn that care for life requires the interplay of many kinds of beings, and many understandings of the possibilities of coexistence (...) How can these stories help to transform local economies into

everyday ethical and political practice of constructing communities of care for natureculture in the face of deep erasures, violence, climate change and urban developments which deny the importance of care?"(Harcourt, 2018, p. 49)

All the inspiring examples reported here from both the literature and from Wales, of how people across the globe build "communities of care for naturecultures" against human-environmental destruction, fundamentally call for a radical shift away from the current neoliberal economic paradigm, in order for us to survive and possibly thrive. We need "path-breaking reforms" (Kallis et al, 2020, p. 65), i.e., policy and institutional changes that foreground ideas of 'sharing', 'simplicity', 'conviviality', 'care' and the 'commons' in the envisioning of alternative futures (Demaria, Kallis, & Bakker, 2019; Kallis, Paulson, D'Alisa, & Demaria, 2020; Kothari, Demaria, & Acosta, 2014; M. Pimbert, 2018a).

Degrowth scholarship and those inspired by such approach, call for policies that can promote *just* sustainability transformations by means of: a **Green New Deal without growth** (massive deployment of renewable energies, decarbonisation of transport and agriculture, reforestation and fundamentally less use of total energy thanks to reduced consumption and production); **universal incomes and services** (Universal Basic Income and Services for all, and even a Universal Care Income which foregrounds the importance of unpaid and highly gendered care work, by equitably allow all of us to take care of each other); **reclaiming the commons** through improved institutional support for social and solidarity enterprises and cooperatives that promote, for instance, healthy and sustainable food systems, beyond the conventional economics and utilitarianism; a **significant reduction in working hours** and fair sharing of work and free time between men and women, in order to both reduce carbon emissions and environmental impacts in general, and to free up time (and mental space) to engage in non-monetised activities (e.g., leisure, caring, community and political engagements); **public finance that greens and equalises** (Kallis et al, 2020, p. 78), including, amongst other things, carbon fees, green taxes, progressive taxes on wealth, global tax on financial transactions and translational profits (Brand et al., 2021; Kallis et al., 2020; Kothari et al., 2014; M. Pimbert, 2018a).

9.3 A Reflection Tool to apply a caring-*with* approach to SMNR

The key arguments and dynamics discussed throughout this thesis and summarised within this chapter are graphically depicted in the "Reflective Tool" below (see figure 34). This is meant to firstly support the reader to gain an overview of the main elements and relations at the core of this study; secondly, and perhaps more importantly, this has been elaborated to stimulate reflection and dialogue amongst practitioners and actors involved with SMNR, as a means to support and *accompanying* them navigating the complexity of doing collaborative working through a caring-*with* approach. Hence, such tool will be used in my future engagements with collaborators from WG, practioners and community members involved in this research, and with whom I aim to maintain a connection beyond the duration of the PhD (as it will be also discussed in the next, final chapter of tis manuscript).

Figure 34 - *A Reflective Tool to navigate SMNR through a caring*-with approach. Author's own creation

Sustainable Management of Natural Resources (SMNR) as Caring-*with* People and Nature. *A Reflection Tool*

6b. Enabling Self-Organisation

6a. Genuine Relationships of Trust

2c. 'Ability Factors' (i.e., time, space, skills, knowledge, material resources etc. necessary to care) **unevenly distributed**

2b. Power Asymmetries

2d. Agency and Capacity of *all* people to participate to **caring-*with***

6. Building a 'Common Ground' & **Maintaining it over the long-term**

2a. Conflicting worldviews, perspectives and interests

2. Politics of Caring for People and Nature

1. SMNR as Caring-*With* practices: definition of **people's needs and aspirations** around social-ecological *just* futures, & **democratic allocation of responsibilities** to realise them

4a. Democratic Transformations

4. Deliberative Sustainability Transformations

5. Shared, Open-ended *Meaning-Making* Processes

5a. Reflection - Inwards & Outwards, Deep Listening & Dialogue

5b. Practice - Embodied: Being, Doing & Feeling together

3. Acknowledging Interdependence & Vulnerability of all forms of life on Earth

4b. Cultural Transformations

3a. Paradigm Shift

3b. 'Deep' Transformations (levering *deep leverage points*, to change social value sets, paradigms, worldviews etc)

8. Sense of Ownership & Collective Responsibility

7. Practices and Institutions (e.g., *Collaborative SMNR*) become **meaningful to people's everyday life**

LEGEND - NB numbers have priority over arrows			
Level 1 - 'Golden Thread' Concepts	⬤	Not direct link: "ultimately, it goes back to.."	— →
Level 2 - Linking Concepts	⬤	To be interpreted as *whole*	-----------
Level 3 - Explanatory Concepts	⬤	Direct link	——→

277

10. Conclusions

This concluding chapter begins from gathering the key arguments made in the previous chapter 9 and presenting them in the form of final recommendations and reflections around the roles of governments, community groups and researchers in fostering and supporting a caring-*with* approach to sustainability transformations. Secondly, it discusses the limitations of the research design and methodology, by means of reflecting on the learnings that emerged from the application of transdisciplinary, and PAR-inspired approach. Thirdly, it highlights the contribution to knowledge of this study. Ultimately, it ends with suggestions for further research.

10.1 Key Reflections

In this thesis I have argued that a caring-*with* approach, focused on collective practice and fair distribution of care responsibilities towards each other and the living world, can contribute to achieve just sustainability transformations. In doing so I have emphasised the importance of the *political* and *cultural* dimensions of such transformations. In terms of the *cultural* dimension, this study has discussed the key role of *meaning-making* processes, through which people (collectively and individually) contest, define and shape their needs and aspirations in relation to social-ecological thriving futures. Such processes, underpinning cultural transformations, represent the ways in which concepts such as 'SMNR', 'collaboration', 'sustainability', and in the specific instance of Wales, the legislation and its provisions (i.e. the WBFGA, Environment Act, New Ways of Working etc), become *meaningful* to the everyday life of the citizens involved in its implementation: the processes through which the WBFGA can become a "People's Act" as auspicated by Jane Davidson (2020, p. 139) for instance.

Adopting a combined analytical lens that takes both a cultural and a *political* perspective, implies analysing these meaning-making processes as forms of political and democratic participation. It is this which lies at the very core of a caring-*with* approach. As discussed by Hammond (2019):

> "The role of democracy, in other words, shifts from one of facilitating or legitimating a certain set of outcomes, towards providing a foundation for cultural change towards sustainability. Democracy is necessary for this because it invites participation in a public dialogue in the first place; it ensures that everyone has an equal right to take

part in shaping the public culture; and it makes cultural reflection rewarding for individuals, by ensuring it has political consequentiality" (Hammond, 2019, p. 69).

The necessity of closely analysing both the democratic and the cultural dimensions of sustainability transformations lies at the core of this thesis. Specifically, I have argued throughout, that pursuing *deeper,* cultural and democratic transformations entails continuously building and nurturing a 'common ground', founded upon the acknowledgment of our shared interdependency and vulnerability:

> "It is in allowing people to see that *care* is a *critique of domination* that there is the most promise. The urgency of caring for our world becomes more stark every day. (…) Our ultimate relationship with this world matters greatly, too, as we pursue social justice" (Tronto, 2018, p. 27).

An "ecological turn of the values and behaviour of people" (Soini & Birkeland, 2014, p. 218) towards the emergence of an "eco-cultural civilization" (see also section 1.1), therefore, is profoundly linked to deepening the democratic dimension of such processes of transformations. This extends to enhancing procedural fairness, and stimulating a wider sense of ownership amongst all those who are collectively engaged in caring-*with* practices.

However, democratic participation and the pursuit of social and ecological justice through a caring-*with* approach is constantly at risk of being undermined by unequal power relations,; by "privileged irresponsibility" (Tronto, 1993, pp. 120–122). Directly relevant also here is an uneven distribution of the so-called *ability factors* (i.e., skills, time, knowledge, material resources etc) (see chapters 6, 7, 8 and 9). The unequal distributions of and access to power (i.e., ability factors), dramatically affect whose (conflicting) worldviews, interests and needs are listened to and embedded into mainstream policies and practices.

In the analysis of the challenges encountered by the people involved in this research, *time* and *space* emerged amongst the most important factors affecting people's capacity to care-*with*, i.e., to participate in processes of deliberate sustainability transformations. With regards to *time*, Tronto suggests:

> "A new paradigm of time must begin with the idea that decisions about time are decisions about values. (…) Amongst the most important considerations in rethinking society from a caring perspective, then, is creating time and space for care" (Tronto, 2013, p. 166).

Similarly, Hammond (2019, p. 68) emphasises the role of "general spaces" for people to "unmask, challenge, contest and explore" cultural meanings and trigger *deeper* transformations, that involve changes in societal paradigms and value systems, and ultimately, institutions.

The investigation into the challenges and barriers for people to engage with SMNR practices at the core of this study, has emphasised how the creation of *space* and *time* is key to enable and facilitate more democratic and *just* participation of *all people* in caring-*with* activities. Specifically, the meaning-making processes observed and analysed (especially during both the Skyline Project (ch. 6), and the workshops organised within the WG-NRW joint programme (ch. 8), went beyond mere consulting, accentuating activities such as deep listening to needs and aspirations of the participants. Although limitations related to the design and methodology of this study (further discussed in section 10.2) resulted in only partially inclusive participation of people to the events and workshops, the meaning-making processes narrated and discussed nevertheless still draws attention to the importance of *democracy* for *cultural sustainability transformations*.

Participatory and transdisciplinary processes of meaning-making, therefore, have a key role to play in the long-term process of building and maintaining an inclusive 'common ground'. As discussed throughout this thesis, many of the activities and events included in this study have enabled the creation of *spaces* and *time* for people to reflect on, and experiment with new and alternative ways of being and doing together. The two "To the Moon and Back" workshops (analysed in sections 8.3) are especially useful to exemplify the potential of creating relational and generative 'spaces of possibility', where a prominent role is given to building, maintain and nurturing relationships of trust. As claimed by Stout and Love (2018b, p. 180 emphasis added): "To transform how power operates, we must transform *relationships* between individuals and groups". The **Community of Practice** (CoP) that started emerging from, amongst other initiatives, these two workshops, represents an *enabling space* where actors have the opportunity to start shaping and (possibly but not necessarily) deepening their relationships. The CoP in fact, acts as a form of "**democracy's practical laboratory**" (Hammond & Smith, 2017, p. 17), bringing together those actors (from civil servants to farmers) that would not otherwise sit at the same table, would not spend time together

walking in the forest, sharing some of their personal and professional stories. The concept of CoP is here adopted for the emphasis on *collective learning*, sharing and exchange, as well as on the *situated practice* that allows such learning to occur: "the process of learning as a trajectory of participation" (Gherardi, 2009, p. 516).

This CoP has the potential to become what Pereira et al (2019) call a "**transformative space**", characterised by an emphasis on "designing the engagement and dialogues in ways that involve and consider emotions and allowing for empathy" as a way to "humanising the solutions"; by the need to support a prolonged and continued process of engagement over the long-term, not limited to a couple of events; and by the need "for a level of dis-comfort to be able to process internal transformations" (2019, p. 14) - this being intrinsic to the belief that to transform a system it is necessary to process change also at the personal level – see also Fig. 2, section 2.3). The always present risk of reducing collaborative governance to tokenistic participatory processes through "recipe-like approaches" lies at the heart of the need for *deeper* forms of transformations, that involve both *cultural* (the realm of collective and personal *meanings, values* and *paradigms*) and *political* (*ability factors* and distribution of *power to* participate, *with* others) dimensions.

CoPs, such as the one emerging in Wales across sectors and organisations working around SMNR, seem to hold potential to grow as a democratic laboratory and a *transformative space*, enabling what I would identify as a "**prefigurative politics of caring-*with***". With this expression, I aim to encapsulate the many dimensions of a caring-*with* approach that are (and can be further) embedded in the ways of being and doing together, promoted within a CoP. Specifically, this includes, an emphasis on vulnerability, deep listening and empathy, as a means to reach deeper connections to one another; the shared and open-ended meaning-making processes around collective responsibility, based on peoples' situated (and conflicting) needs and aspirations. The maintenance and nurturing of a CoP through which a prefigurative politics of caring-*with* is enacted, would meet the call made by Hulme (2020):

> "Investing in new participatory and agonistic forms of democracy—where value conflicts and political disagreements are acknowledged, voiced, and worked with—is as important (perhaps more important) than investing in new scientific or technical knowledge." (Hulme, 2020, p. 311).

The following section propose recommendations on how a prefigurative politics of caring-*with,* enacted through deliberative processes and forums such as the CoP presented in this study, can be supported further by governments, other institutions - including academic ones - community groups and practitioners involved in SMNR. All have a key role to play to achieve just sustainability transformations.

10.1.1 Recommendations for governments and institutions

The main recommendation for governments and institutional actors (e.g., public sponsored bodies) resulting from the analysis provided throughout this manuscript is the need to favour *coordination* of SMNR initiatives *over control*. The wealth and spread of SMNR initiatives in Wales, across both scales and sectors (which this study has only managed to partly show), suggests that there is potential to improve the decentralised and specifically place-based approach to NRM. Notably, a place-based approach is considered one of the three priorities of the Natural Resource Policy of Wales. Polycentric networks and nested organisations involved in NR governance have been widely supported in the literature concerned with SES and NRM (e.g., Berkes, 2008; Bixler, 2014; Carlisle & Gruby, 2019; McGinnis & Ostrom, 2014; Ostrom, 2015; M. Pimbert, 2022). They have been praised for the potential to "holistically integrate knowledge on the ecology, economy and culture of places" (M. Pimbert, 2018b, p. 284).

However, coordination amongst these networks is by no means guaranteed, often impeding these decentralised centres to work as an integrated polycentric governance *system* (Carlisle & Gruby, 2019, p. 928). Participants and interviewees often lamented a "lack of common vision" amongst the different organisations and networks operating at either the place-based or landscape scale. A lack of coordination amongst visions and, subsequently, delivery on the ground, risks deeply undermining attempts to pursue sustainability transformations at the system level. As noted by Lane Thomas et al, referring to the specific case of Wales (2015):

> "A lack of coordination meant that often local regeneration initiatives did not focus on long-term community resilience but instead on entrepreneurial ability to draw down available funds for project-driven rather than strategic sustainable development, as happened in so many of the inward investment initiatives of the 1970s and 1980s." (2015, p. 202).

The specific case of Wales presents two key opportunities to improve the coordination and the development of *enabling spaces,* within a polycentric network arrangement: its size and its rooted interconnectedness in terms of social capital. As clarified by Jane Davidson (2020):

> "There are particular opportunities for a small country to be a test bed; to be smarter and more flexible than its larger neighbours. Here cultural behavioural change experiments can be piloted, and new approaches forged" (2020, p. 3).

Its small size, combined with a historic and cultural sense of interconnection and community still present in many parts of Wales, can arguably facilitate the challenge of fostering relational and caring-*with* approaches to the governance of sustainability transformations. Wales is "small enough to be inventive" (Davidson, 2020, p. 36) and can leverage the rooted networks of people, communities and organisations very active across the whole territory. The potential of fostering such CoPs is especially relevant in the context of the monitoring and evaluation of SMNR projects, where coordination of assessment criteria and processes is of critical importance. A CoP dedicated to the elaboration of place-based and participatory systems of monitoring and evaluation, for instance, could represent an insightful experiment on the pathway toward institutionalisation of CoP and caring-*with* approaches.

CoPs can, hence, provide the (agonistic) *space* to let conflict and tensions emerge, as well as to practice the deep listening and embodied engagement needed to develop and maintain long-term relationships (see 9.1.2). More specifically, governments could act so as to build-in more *space* and *time* in civil servants' schedules to participate to such CoPs, where policymakers, farmers, practitioners and citizens in general can come together "just as human beings" (see section 8.3) and have the opportunity to deepen their relationships and bring processes of co-creation of shared meanings and visions forward. However, it is of utmost importance to remove the obstacles to participation to such CoPs for what otherwise remain as marginalised voices - including, for example, farmers and civil society groups from disadvantaged communities. The presence of locally embedded facilitators, for instance, has been suggested as a pivotal bridge between governmental institutions and the needs and aspirations of the farmers (see section 7.4). If we are to achieve inclusive and meaningful sustainability transformations, exploring suitable ways through which making time and space available to these actors to sit at the decision-making table and be listened to is of paramount importance.

10.2 Contribution to knowledge

This research contributes to advancing our understanding of the challenges, but also the opportunities for achieving *enabling* approaches to sustainability transformations. In so doing, particular attention is paid to the "values, agency, relations and processes that underlie both structures and systems" (Scoones et al., 2020, p. 67). The principle supporting argument here is that "focusing on the scope for political mobilization and cultural change, [enables] a hopeful, *caring*, emancipatory stance on transformation; one that de-emphasizes controlling, violent or fearful futures" (2020, p. 68 emphasis added). This thesis acts upon this by contributing to advancing knowledge from a number of points of view.

Firstly, it has clarified and broadened the relevance of a care-based approach applied to the investigation of sustainability transformations, by emphasising its potential to strengthen social and ecological justice within such processes of change. As discussed (see chapters 1 and 2), in the last few years, sustainability scientists have been increasingly interested in the exploration of how values, beliefs and paradigms hold at the individual and societal level, can be (or come to) change, so as to trigger deep systems transformations (Abson et al., 2017; Meadows, 1999). There has been a particular interest towards the exploration of relational values, (sense of) stewardship and care towards others (humans and more-than-humans), as underpinning personal motivation to engage in pro-environmental practices.

In this study I have shifted the focus of the analysis from personal motivation to include wider social, cultural and political processes; the latter contribute to determining the (material) conditions and the (unbalanced) relationships of power that ultimately affect such engagement, beyond personal motivation. I have done so by deeply and vastly exploring both the *political* and the *cultural* dimensions of collaborative SMNR, and more widely of sustainability transformations in different contexts and with a wide range of stakeholders. Specifically, I have investigated the *ability factors* affecting people's *capacity* to care-*with*, i.e., to participate in collaborative practices of SMNR (*political* aspect), as well as the processes and dynamics occurring when people come together to collaborate and care-*with* others (humans and more-than-humans). Not least, this includes the *emotional* and *cultural* aspects related to sharing and co-creating meanings, visions, needs and aspirations.

Throughout the study I have remained concerned with unveiling unequal power relations enmeshed in natural resources governance and human-nature relationships at the core of

political ecology, drawing regularly upon feminist scholarship as a means of doing so. The latter has historically focused its critique on reclaiming the political value of care in terms of women's empowerment from the burden of (exploited and privatised) care work - key to social reproduction within neoliberal systems. With this thesis, I have contributed to bridging these two fields by finding a 'common ground' in the research around social and ecologically just transformations towards sustainability, which in turn is rooted in pursuing democratic and fair processes of deliberate transformations.

The second contribution is related to enhancing our understanding of the recent "relational turn" (West et al, 2020) that has been acknowledged in the literature concerned with transdisciplinary research and sustainability sciences. West et al. (2021, p. 108) identify four key dimensions of a relational approach "continually unfolding processes, embodied experience, reconstructing language and concepts, and ethics/practices of care". This study has explored all four dimensions. It has intentionally privileged the comprehension of their entrenched and dynamic relationships - as occurring in the three different strands of fieldwork - over the understanding of individual variables and/or specific agency. The rationale for this choice is discussed at length in section 1.3 and throughout chapter 5.

The third contribution is specifically related to the application of a caring-*with* framing to the investigation of SMNR practices. This choice represents an innovative approach to the study of collaborative practices of SMNR. The concept itself of SMNR (as discussed in section 1.1), has been introduced as part of the Ecosystem Approach of the UN CBD, which falls into an overarching adaptive (co-)management perspective. As discussed, this approach has been widely criticised from a number of perspectives, for being managerial and technocratic, often ignoring social, political and cultural dimensions of human-nature relationships. By applying a caring-*with* framing to SMNR practices, it is possible to address some of the shortcomings identified by the literature. A caring-*with* framing deepens the consideration of social, political and cultural elements in both the theoretical understanding and practical development of SMNR practices. Although this thesis does not assess the impact of such practices, it suggests that it is possible to strengthen their inclusivity and meaningfulness by investing resources into further supporting emergent and open-ended "communities of practice" (CoPs). These are built around experiential and collective forms of learning, focused on new/alternative ways of doing and being together. For this reason, I argue they have the

potential to be *transformative* and *enabling spaces* to enact a prefigurative politics of caring-*with*.

10.3 Methodological Learnings and Limitations of the research

The breadth and depth of the research design supporting this study creates a number of opportunities for critical reflection. As discussed at length in chapter 5, the methodological approach followed in this research was inspired by ethnographic, participatory, transdisciplinary, creative and FAR approaches. The conscious choice to merge various (although interconnected) methodological strands across three different study contexts, implied that it would not be possible to fully meet the criteria of each of these approaches within the constraints of a-year doctoral study. Instead, I iteratively built a hybrid and dynamic approach, *inspired* by the principles and epistemological stance of these various strands. Nevertheless, this also presented a number of limitations. Some of these tensions were visible in the case of Project Skyline (strand 1).

The Skyline Project, which was led by a third sector organisation (TVG CIC) with external funding, presented a timely opportunity to participate from the very beginning in the development of a (semi) grassroots initiative. At the time that I joined the project already had a clear structure and some external collaboration and facilitation in place. However, the nature of the Project was not fully participatory. This was reflected both in the arbitrary choice of communities and gatekeeper organisations around which to focus the project, made by the Project management team. Both such details created an element of tension and contrast when compared to my own onto-epistemological stance. The limitations that gradually emerged in terms of the participatory character and inclusivity of the engagement process were at the centre of many challenging conversations I had with the rest of the Skyline Team, as well as part of my field journal, through which I could reflect *ex post* on the difficulties encountered along the way.

Similarly, other tensions arose in the case of the transdisciplinary collaboration with WG and NRW (strand 2). In that context many difficulties emerged from the feeling of being considered at various times more like a consultant by our institutional partners. This feeling seems common to researchers involved with TDR and PAR, as discussed also by Moriggi (2021, p. 145): "my role resembled that of a consultant rather than a researcher which created a sense of confusion regarding my tasks and the expected outcomes". A remarkable challenge

within both Strand 1 and 2 was in fact the management of expectations of research partners and participants. My enthusiasm, dedication and care for my project, the initiatives investigated within it, and the people of Wales involved throughout, pushed me throughout some very challenging and unexpected situations. For instance, I found myself –Italian, woman, postgraduate researcher - being part of meetings to organise and plan the workshops recounted in this manuscript, or to give presentations on the topics of this research, attended by very senior civil servants, academics and practitioners, always native speakers (and often Welsh). There, I tried to substantially contribute to the conversations, balancing my (academic) curiosity - conveyed through some challenging questions - with both the struggle against an insidious and always present Imposter Syndrome (as recounted also by e.g. Anderson (2020, p. 271)), and the need to avoid being too critical of their approaches. Had I been so, besides what impact it would have had on our working relationship, it would also have represented for me a failing of the ethics of care underpinning my very presence there.

Regardless of how "well" I performed in my multiple and fluctuating roles of *team member, intervener* and *scientist* (Freeth, 2019) in situations like these, the pervasive feeling of being expected to be good at one (or all three) of these roles required the adoption of *balancing acts* (Freeth, 2019) that were highly energy and resource consuming. Upon occasion, it resulted in it being simply impossible for me to maintain the balance (see section 8.3). With this regard, my experience in deeply embracing an Embodied Researcher approach (Horlings et al, 2020) confirms not only that being present in the field with full heart-hand-feet-head is very challenging and emotionally intense. It also suggests that it can turn out to even be counterproductive or inefficient in terms of academic performance and rigour.

Being my very first time in adopting transdisciplinary, participatory and embodied approaches, I often found myself feeling unskilled and inept at rigorously balancing the various roles (e.g., at facilitating workshops using more creative methods, being fully present with the participants while trying to rigorously collect data). This discomfort sometimes led me to favour a much more spontaneous and informal (and traditionally less professional) approach with the research participants: in some of these instances, despite the "constant imperative to experiment, to be creative, and to foster reflexive and critical thinking" (Moriggi, 2021, p. 145), I preferred instead to nurture my relationships and emotional connection with the participants by sitting in a café or in the middle of the forest, sharing

stories of our everyday lives, even simply laughing about something together; relying thus, more on an "artful" (see section 5.3.1), or better still, a "heartful" approach, defined by one of the Skyline participant "warm approach to people, which was quite touchy feeling. And strange, but very welcome!" (Participant H).

The discomfort and vulnerability that I experienced throughout this research is part of the process of self-questioning and *self-transformation,* at the core of the Embodied Researcher framework (Horlings et al, 2020), and of *deep* transformations in general (O'Brien, 2021). In fact, such a profound and prolonged investment of the self in the field, the relationships, the place and the normative positions underpinning my own actions, has led me to develop a strong sense of responsibility and belonging towards the people, the places and the 'cause' itself, i.e., a desire to continue to be part of and support SMNR practices and the process of transformation towards sustainability in Wales. These are deeply rooted feelings that I had the opportunity to develop as a result of being myself a part of the meaning-making processes occurring within the CoP emerging from the WG-NRW workshops, as well also as during the Skyline Project community engagement. Alongside researching and helping to enable the experience of others, I experimented also as much myself with being and doing together, creating and safe-guarding the space and time for caring-*with* others, for being responsible *with* others for the purpose of achieving more sustainable social-ecological futures.

My own experience and the feedback from participants of the To the Moon and Back workshops (see section 8.3) demonstrates that an important limit for any transdisciplinary and participatory research that tries to reach a deeper level of emotional awareness and self-questioning is the diffuse sense of discomfort and vulnerability amongst participants (including researchers themselves). With regards to this last point, also Pereira et al (2019) note the intrinsic tensions occurring between creating enabling and open spaces to have deep conversation and listening, and the discomfort that this might generate.

One final point worth noting here is that the transition from fieldwork and data analysis to the writing up of this thesis coincided with the start of the Covid-19 pandemic (March 2020). The emotionally and psychologically exhausting situation created by the pandemic had the effect of limiting my energy and capacity to maintain a constant interaction with the research participants to get feedback and discuss the writing up of the thesis, as a PAR approach would normally require the researcher to do. This represents a further limitation of this study in the

application of a fully participatory and transdisciplinary approach. However, it has been agreed with the WG advisory board that the results of this study will be shared through a policy brief I am preparing alongside at the time of writing (June 2021). Additionally, we agreed to organise with practitioners and actors involved in SMNR in Wales (participants in both Strand 2 and 3 of fieldwork) future workshops, during which I aim to adopt the Reflective Tool (see 9.3) I designed as a way to stimulate conversations and collective reflections. Similarly, as soon as it will be possible to do so, I plan to host a workshop/event with the participants to the Skyline Project to reconnect and share these final reflections with them.

10.4 Recommendations for further research and action

This concluding section incorporates recommendations for further research addressing also the final sub question of RQ3, concerned with the role of researchers in further supporting a caring-*with* approach for just sustainability transformations. This study has strengthened the argument for foregrounding TDR and PAR approaches, according to which researchers are embedded within the system they observe and explore, and are *interveners* in it, in the sense that they perform "purposeful action to create change" (Fazey, Schäpke, et al., 2018, p. 56). It also serves to reinforce the need, as emphasised by Fazey et al (2018) for researchers engaged with TDR and PAR to be more explicit about the kind of intervention they aim to engage in, overtly acknowledging the normative and political nature of science and knowledge production.

This research's intervention aimed at exploring the conditions and challenges for a caring-*with* approach applied to SMNR, to understand how it can contribute to achieving just social and ecological sustainability transformations. It did so by embodying and applying a caring-*with* approach throughout, whilst at the same time contributing to carving out the *space* and *time* for others to practice caring-*with*. Despite the above acknowledged limitations and shortcomings of this study, it nevertheless reaffirms my own belief that the societal transformations we need to achieve if we, as *terrestrials* (Latour, 2018), are to survive (and possibly thrive), pose a moral obligation – to myself, to other researchers and especially to academic institutions as powerful enablers - to fully engage with a caring-*with* approach. In their ground-breaking work "Scientists' warning on affluence" from 2020, Wiedmann et al (2020) argue that "necessary alternative futures need to be discussed, envisioned and shared" (p. 7) to move beyond current systems based on overconsumption and endless economic

growth. To do so, creating a sense of *collective responsibility,* which (as it has been argued throughout this manuscript) lies at the core of a caring-*with* approach, is paramount:

> "It is important to create a sense of collective responsibility and action. Social sciences research and approaches can help by creating, providing and sharing concepts, experiences and platforms where public debates and dialogues take place" (Wiedmann, Lenzen, Keyßer, & Steinberger, 2020, p. 7)

Researchers have a key role to play by contributing to carve out the *space* and *time* for dialogues, debates and *practices* to emerge and be sustained over time. It is thus pivotal that researchers join the collective societal effort to understand how "cultures of sufficiency, care, solidarity and simplicity can be created" (Ibid., p. 8). Academic institutions, together with governments and other powerful institutional actors, must "empower people and strengthen participation in democratic processes and enable stronger local self-governance" by emphasising the adoption of "social experiments, innovation and engagement" (Ibid.). Neoliberal academic institutions, akin to governments, do not normally leave time and space for researchers to experiment and engage over the long term with more democratic and inclusive processes. As one tangible step towards supporting a more embodied and *care-full* research (along the lines of the very recent work of Corbera et al. (2020) and Moriggi (2021)), dominant academic practices and metrics around impact should be revised. They should instead integrate the activities beyond writing of scientific outputs, including "social impact grounded on the transformational premises of embodied researchers" (Horlings et al., 2020, p. 480) and care-full research approaches.

Transformative and enabling spaces such as CoPs could offer an alternative starting point for researchers: from here they might begin investing time, resources and space to foster debates, dialogues and caring practices, based on deep listening and open to the tensions and conflicts. Researchers are often in a privileged and powerful position, where powerful here is conceived as having access to the ability factors. As demonstrated especially in the case of Skyline and as I have argued also somewhere else (Giambartolomei, Forno, & Sage, 2021), researchers have a pivotal role to play in supporting less powerful actors gaining means, sense of self-efficacy, legitimacy and motivation for action.

A valuable way to invest the privilege and powerful position researchers often benefit from, is to reinforce our engagement with artists and artistic practices, to promote deeper cultural transformations. This research has partially demonstrated the immense potential of 'social artistic practices' or 'social engaged art' to disrupt the status-quo and stimulate critical reflection, through embodied and emotional involvement. Although artistic practices are not unproblematic given the discomfort and emotional challenges that they might generate, when 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 can truly enable the emergence of 'spaces of possibility'. Concerted action with artists, as well as communities, policymakers and practitioners can help researchers in building an "affirmative" and "generative praxis" (Stout & Love, 2018b, p. 261), aimed at defeating unproductive cynicism and scepticism, while nurturing hope and gratitude.

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Appendix

Sustainable Futures Development Architecture

Long term

BEFORE	AFTER
We used to think this....	But now we have evidence that...
CONSULTATION We need to work out what we think is possible, formally ask the public about it, adapt our views in light of this, then advise our Minister or chief executive on possible ways forward, then devise some implementation methods and consult again on these, then back to the Minister for approval etc ...	**CO-PRODUCTION** We choose to engage Ministers early and secure their on-going involvement with officials and stakeholders. We deliver the Programme for Government (or equivalent) by working with others to develop shared outcomes, projects and reporting mechanisms. We welcome diversity and new ideas.
SHORT TERM FIXES Based in the recipient/consumer model we provide pick lists of services or interventions, aimed at day-to-day symptoms instead of underlying causes, with no flexibility for clients or professionals.	**LONG TERM RELATIONSHIPS** To solve tough problems, we need everyone who is prepared to help; the recipient or customer has just as much to bring as the field expert. We commit to people to help discover and build on all our strengths and create relationships that increase trust.
EFFICIENCY To achieve outcomes we need to make everything as big, simple and fast as possible, using the minimum possible resources; including human resources. We fail to distinguish between outputs and outcomes	**RESILIENCE** We need to be efficient with our use of physical resources through whole life-cycle design and engineering; reduce, reuse, recycle. For human and natural resources we need to increase resilience i.e. our long term ability to cope with change through continuous learning.

Involvement

BEFORE	AFTER
We used to think this....	But now we have evidence that...
HERO (with the solution) We believe that we are the only one who can solve the problem; if only I just work longer hours, learn this new technique or mend my ways. Or we believe that someone else will be the hero and come to save us.	**HOST** (fostering the change) We can't do it alone. We invite diverse people to come together and have focused conversations about the underlying causes of real symptoms. Together we create, manage and deliver preventative solutions that will last. We practice and develop our hosting skills.
CORPORATE CONSISTENCY To be successful everyone needs to conform to the same basic bureaucratic patterns and behaviours. Learning does not necessarily lead to implementation.	**APPRECIATING DIVERSITY** To be resilient we need a diverse, creative, enthusiastic work force held together by a desire to learn, change and grow, We embody the civil service (or other ethical) code.

Prevention

BEFORE	AFTER
We used to think this....	But now we have evidence that...
PROBLEMS Problems are solved by reducing them to their individual parts, creating specific agencies and solutions to solve each one and tackling each issue separately. As keen problem solvers, we sometimes create problems that need to be solved.	**PEOPLE AND PLACES** We need to start by looking at the combined impacts of our actions in the real world; discover more about the possibilities in the links between the people, places and communities that are affected; share our knowledge and develop integrated approaches which attempt to solve multiple challenges.
INTERVENTION We need to intervene to break an unhealthy pattern or mend something that has broken; based on a patient-expert, victim-helper or problem-solution model.	**PREVENTION** We work together to increase interdependency between citizens and the public sector. Behaviours can be changed more successfully if people have direct ownership and make use of their own and others' experience as equal participants within a wider system, rather than simply being customers subjected to services or publicity campaigns.
RISK DOCUMENTATION We put our faith in carefully designed risk logs and detailed processes that protect us from criticism and help identify the cause after failures have occurred. We tackle symptoms rather than underlying causes.	**RISK MANAGEMENT** We can learn and improve only by taking risks. Increasing our understanding of the substantial long term risks facing us now and in the future, helps to increase our appetite for taking appropriately managed short term risks.

Integration

BEFORE	AFTER
We used to think this….	But now we have evidence that…
SILO WORKING I only work on and listen to feedback about my own area of responsibility. Even if I am the only representative from my organisation in the room; other matters are for other people not for me. Knowledge resides in individuals and is often lost or overlooked.	**COLLEGIATE RESPONSIBILITY** We actively connect our work with that of others. All feedback is a learning opportunity. If I receive feedback on any aspect of my organisation's operations, I have responsibility for identifying someone with an interest in this aspect of our work, passing on the message in person and assisting if I can.
TRANSACTING We need to bargain for the cheapest deal to get as much as we can for the smallest possible outlay.	**GIFTING/CONTRIBUTING** We are generous with our time, effort and skills, while being clear about the sustainable development principle to protect and enhance Wales' assets (social, physical environmental and emotional capital).
MEASURING We need to work out what information and evidence we need for each individual project or policy and set up contracts to provide this by designing new research projects from scratch. Our preference is for simple quantified data.	**SENSING** We need to maximise use of existing information and long term data sources and to develop the knowledge and skills of specialists and non-specialists by integrating science and research (their development and use) into policy and delivery, learning as we go.

Collaboration

BEFORE	AFTER
We used to think this….	But now we have evidence that…
POWER We need to work out what to do (in great detail), then secure funding and then tell/convince other people to do it. We are seldom wrong.	**PLAY** Leadership happens all over the place. We need to share evidence and work together to identify the best, coordinated way forward; creativity is the key. We admit mistakes and learn from them.
SCALING UP We need to create easily replicated models/projects and then reproduce them everywhere else.	**INSPIRING ACROSS** We need to learn from real experiments on the ground and use these to inspire others to take similar, yet different, approaches elsewhere.
CHECK We need to plan and monitor in as much detail as possible, on paper or on a computer, to ensure that every aspect is completed on schedule. We use targets to secure achievement which can end up delivering quantity without quality.	**FLOW** We need just enough process to support everyone to achieving the (quantitative and qualitative) outcomes through trying, failing and trying again; measuring success, learning lessons and discovering more as we go.

Sustainable Futures Development Programme of Welsh Government. Source: Academi Wales