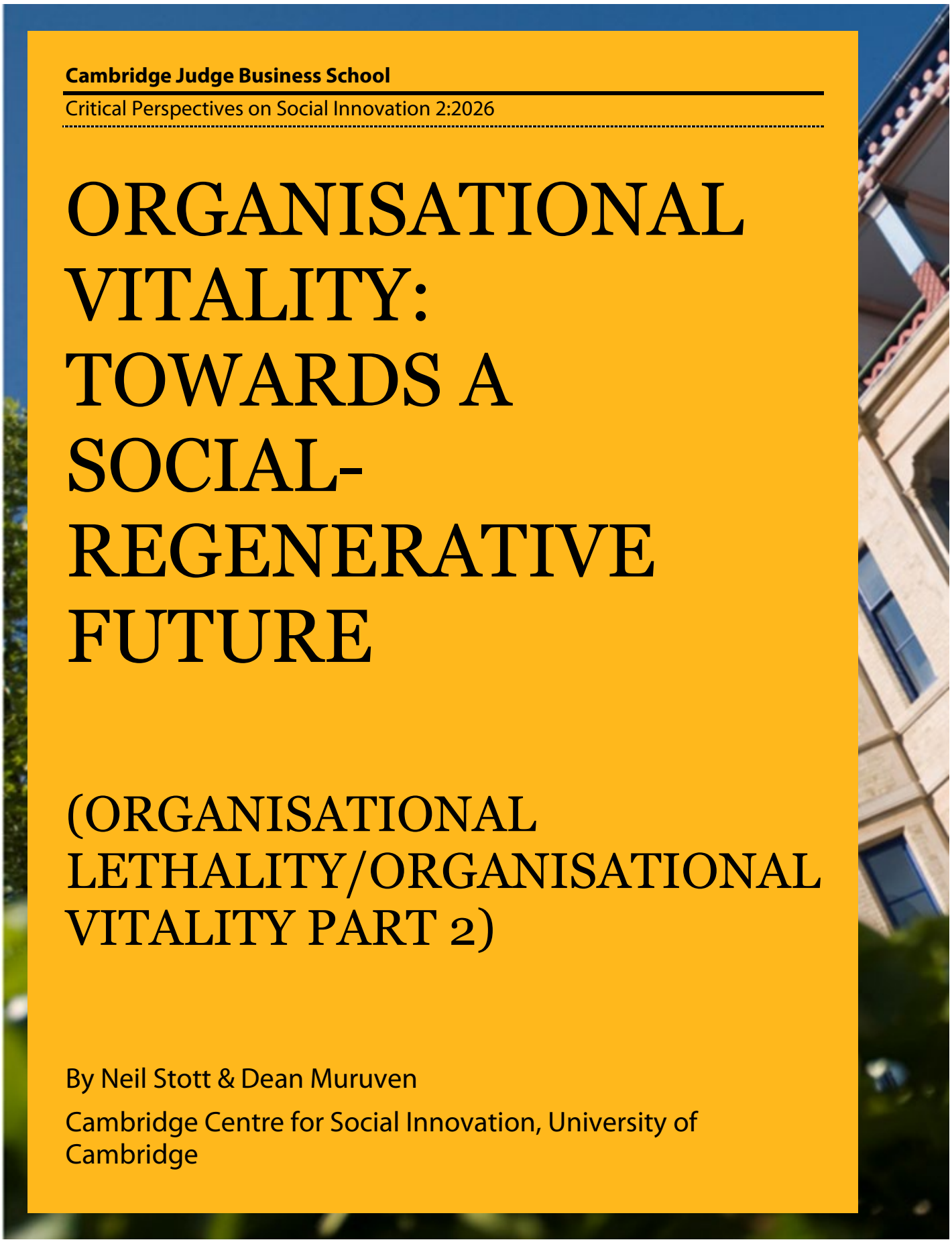

Cambridge Judge Business School

Critical Perspectives on Social Innovation 2:2026

ORGANISATIONAL VITALITY: TOWARDS A SOCIAL-REGENERATIVE FUTURE

(ORGANISATIONAL LETHALITY/ORGANISATIONAL VITALITY PART 2)

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Foreword

The *Critical Perspectives in Social Innovation* series of working papers is designed to provide rigorous and challenging analyses. The purpose of the series is to critically examine prevailing assumptions, practices, and narratives within social innovation. By bringing together academic research and practitioner insights, the series seeks to bridge the gap between theory and practice, encourage reflection, and support the development of a critically informed social innovation for a more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable world.

In this essay, part 2 of O*rganisational lethality/Organisational vitality*, Neil & Dean discuss the principles of social regenerative work to create "organisational vitality".

To cite this essay please use:

Stott, N & Muruven, D. (2026) "Organisational lethality/organisational vitality – part 2: Organisational Vitality: Towards a social-regenerative future. *Critical Perspectives on Social Innovation.* 2026/2. Cambridge: Cambridge Centre for Social Innovation.

Organisational vitality: towards a social-regenerative future

Organisational vitality-defined here as the capability and capacity of organisations to regenerate life-stands as a vital counter to organisational lethality, which encompasses practices and products that harm or destroy life[1]. This essay examines the imperative for organisations to move beyond merely reducing harm, and argues for a paradigm shift towards organisational vitality, To do so will require "social- regenerative work" which we define as the creation and maintenance of social, economic and ecological practices, institutions, organisations and societies that restores health, life, and planetary well-being.

The dual goals of our organisational vitality agenda are to deinstitutionalize socially lethal ideas and practices and institutionalise social-regenerative ones. Drawing on both academic literature and practitioner insights, we outline social-regenerative work and six underpinning principles: sacrifice, subsidiarity, ecological design, solidarity, stability and prefigurative practice. In doing so, we challenge prevailing organisational norms, and advocate for a fundamental reimagining of organisational purpose-one that prioritises social-regenerative over extractive practices.

The essay *Hidden organisational lethality: an existential challenge for social innovation*[2] argued that *all* organisations, not just those overtly associated with violence or harm, possess some degree of organisational lethality -the capacity to kill people, other species, or the planet- whether directly or indirectly, intentionally or through normalised practices. The essay outlined the concept of a 'globalized thanato-economy', an economic system fundamentally driven by extractive and destructive logics that make organisational lethality pervasive and often hidden.

Such organisational lethality is legitimized by legal, policy, and societal norms across public, private, civil, and criminal sectors. In the context of a globalized thanato-economy, even organisations with social missions can be complicit through their procurement or partnerships. This is illustrated by a recent report from the UN Special Rapporteur about human rights in the Palestinian territories, the report mapped and named 48 corporate entities aiding the genocide in Gaza. The named entities were from a diverse range of sectors, including major technology companies, financial institutions, agricultural suppliers, energy players and the construction and hospitality sectors[3].

Hidden organisational lethality concludes by urging social innovators to confront and dismantle lethal organisational processes, arguing that moving from organisational lethality to organisational vitality-the capacity to regenerate life-requires a fundamental transformation, not just incremental change[4].

In this essay we develop an agenda for organisational vitality. This concept encompasses efforts to reduce, prevent, and eliminate organisational lethality. At its core, organisational vitality is about the social-regeneration of health, life, and the planet. Organisational vitality entails a fundamental shift: moving away from an extractive thanato-economy that prioritises power and profit over life, toward a social- regenerative economy to restore planetary well-being. We argue that there is an urgent need for action rooted in the idea of a social- regenerative future - one that transforms social and ecological systems for the mutual benefit of people and the planet.

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[1] Stott, N.(2025). Hidden organisational lethality: the existential challenge for social innovation organisational lethality. Essays in organisational lethality and organisational vitality. *Critical Perspectives on Social Innovation.* No 3 2025. Cambridge Centre for Social Innovation.

[2] Ibid

[3] https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session60/advance-version/a-hrc-60-19-aev.pdf

[4] Ibid

The principles and practices we describe here are based on the Centre for Social Innovation's ongoing research. Over the past decade we have observed long-standing and deeply rooted organisations which seek to sustain their communities in the long-term. We also take a scholarly interest in the historical precedents of regenerative organising. The insights we offer are a synthesis of the wisdom of these organisations, contrasted with mainstream practices that sustain the unsustainable.

Our conceptualisation of organisational vitality is rooted in a social-regenerative approach which combines the regenerative aims of restoring ecological systems to provide mutual benefit for people and the planet and those of the social, economic and environmental justice movements. In the next section we outline our concept of 'social-regenerative work' and the six principles which support it. In doing so, we are under no illusions about the enormity of the task ahead. Nor are we entirely sanguine about the chances of success- we echo Ulrich Beck's 'hope embedded in despair'[5] in the face of organisational lethality. But organisational lethality needs to be confronted, and alternatives articulated and applied no matter how fragile such attempts are.

Social-regenerative work

Our aim is to inspire a future which repairs the ravages of extractionism and creates just relationships with people, other species and the planet. Therefore, social-regenerative work focuses on the root causes of systemic breakdown and new ways of organising post-carbon societies within planetary limits.

Regenerative approaches gathered momentum from the 1960s, rooted in anxieties over ecological and human catastrophes deriving from state, technological and military action. The 'radical ecologism', alternative technology, self-sufficiency and back to the land movements of the 1960s and 1970s emphasised a transition to holistic, local and self-sustaining solutions in reaction to the mounting evidence of environmental degradation[6]. In other words, giving agency to individuals and grassroot groups to make change.

Regenerative approaches included a wide range of perspectives such as deep ecology, eco-feminism, social ecology and degrowth. Radical ecologists developed philosophies such as deep ecology (or ecosophy) which aimed to fundamentally change humans' relationships with nature[7][8]. Eco-feminists, political ecologists (from Marxist traditions) and social ecologists (from Anarchist traditions) emphasised that environmental problems, like social problems, were socially constructed - and that experimentation with, and demonstration of, alternative technologies, organisational forms and practices were critical to show what was possible.

Our social-regenerative approach draws on the more radical regenerative traditions which emphasised that power imbalances and the exploitation of people and the planet required social and political solutions as well as ecological ones[9]. Social-regenerative work, as we imagine it, is compelling because it offers significant agency to individuals and grassroots groups which, if replicated, has the potential to

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[5] Beck, U. (2010). 'The cosmopolitan manifesto,' in (Brown, G.W & Held, D.(eds.) The *cosmopolitanism reader*. Cambridge: Polity Press, pp. 217-228.

[6] Todd, N. J. (2005). *A safe and sustainable world: the promise of ecological design*. Island Press. Washington.

[7] Madsen, P. (2023). 'Deep ecology'. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. 28 October. Available at: https://www.britannica.com/topic/deep-ecology (Accessed: 2 Sept 2024).

[8] Sessions, G. (1987). 'The deep ecology movement: A review'. Environmental review, 11(2), pp. 105-125. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2307/3984023.

[9] Eiglad, E. (2015). 'Introduction,' in Eiglad, E. (ed.) *Social ecology and social change*. Porsgrunn: New Compass Press.

create the disruption necessary to make transformative change. But a social-regenerative future cannot happen without social and political change. A social-regenerative society would look radically different. As the New Alchemists observed in 1970, the task is to create;

"... ecologically derived human support systems - renewable energy, agriculture, aquaculture, housing and landscapes. The strategies we research emphasise a minimal reliance on fossil fuels and operate on a scale accessible to individuals, families, and small groups. It is our belief that ecological and social transformations must take place at the lowest functional levels of society if humankind is to direct its course towards a greener, saner world."[10]

The principles of social-regenerative work

Our conceptualisation of social-regenerative work is underpinned by six principles- sacrifice, subsidiarity, ecological design, solidarity and prefigurative practice - which we outline below and summarised in table 1.

Table 1 The principles of social-regenerative work.

Principle	**Definition**	**Example**
Sacrifice	To make sacrifices to protect ourselves, other people, species and generations.	Ghent, Belgium, replaced several major roads with tram lines and bike lanes to prioritise people, air quality, and community—including reducing parking availability and vehicle access[11].
Subsidiarity	To govern and organise at the lowest possible level.	Kilbraur Wind Farm Co-operative (Highlands, Scotland): local ownership of wind energy, with strategic and financial decisions handled at the community level, not by national utilities[12].
Ecological design	To minimise environmental harms by integrating production and consumption with the living world.	Full of Noise, an experimental music hub (Barrow-in-Furness, Cumbria) embedded permaculture design, ethics, and principles across their entire organisation[13].

[10] Bulletin of the New Alchemists, Autumn 1970
http://www.nature.my.cape.com/greencenter/newalchemy.html

[11] https://stad.gent/en/mobility-ghent/circulation-plan

[12] https://www.kilbraur.coop/

[13]https://juliesbicycle.com/resource/full-of-noises-cultivating-a-regenerative-culture-through-permaculture-design/

Solidarity	To contribute to the common good of people and the planet to the best of our abilities.	Loughborough Junction Action Group (London) runs community farms, café, and skill-sharing projects that provide food, green space, and supportive "third places which enable vulnerable residents to find solidarity through shared work and mutual aid[14].
Stability	To cultivate long-term stability through rootedness in place	The work of Scotland's Development Trusts in ensuring assets are managed with future generations in mind [15].
Prefigurative practice	To act now to experiment with, & demonstrate, alternative futures.	Landless Workers' Movement (Brazil) occupies unused land and turns it into collectively farmed, agroecological settlements which practice sustainable agroecology, democratic governance, and education rooted in land stewardship[16].

The principle of sacrifice

In social-regenerative work the concept of sacrifice has a dual focus: making sacrifices to protect ourselves and on behalf of other people, places, species, and generations. This means conserving, replacing or doing without products which cause harm such as fossil fuels and re-organising how we move, heat/cool and eat to minimise future impacts.

We can 'sacrifice for' moral or political reasons, such as self-sacrifice to a nation's war effort or a common good[17]. For example, the common good dictates an urgent need to cut fossil fuel consumption. The dominant approach in affluent nations to climate change is to replace fossil energy green alternatives at scale such as coal for wind. In seeking solutions without sacrifice we create trade-offs. In doing so we still cause immense suffering due to the transfer of harms where others extract, process or recycle the material needed. Because of this, it is important to be aware of the consequences of proposed 'solutions', and to make decisions through a social-regenerative lens.

A good example is the replacement strategy for transport systems. Peter Wells argues that the transition from petrol/diesel to "electromobility" will exacerbate existing injustices and create new geopolitical risks[18] rather than creating idyllic green net zero societies. The expensive electric cars and charging networks coupled with emission policies to curtail petrol/diesel cars will create "a growing proportion of

[14] https://loughboroughjunction.org/

[15] Stott, N., Darlington, M., Brenton, J. and Slawinski, N. (2022) "Partnerships and place: the role of community enterprise in cross-sector work for sustainability." In: George, G., Haas, M.R., Joshi, H., McGahan, A.M. and Tracey, P. (eds.) (2022) Handbook on the business of sustainability: the organisation, implementation, and practice of sustainable growth. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, pp.118-136

[16] https://www.britannica.com/event/Landless-Workers-Movement

[17] Halbertal, M. (2012). *On Sacrifice*. Princeton University Press. Princeton.

[18] Wells, P. E. (2025). *How the Global Automotive Industry Stole Our Green Mobility Future: Grand Theft Auto.* Edward Elgar Publishing.

'mobility dispossessed', with unknown political consequences"[19]. The wider risks of electromobility include new types of environmental harms, modern slavery and poor labour conditions[20]. Studies already indicate mining the critical minerals required for the energy transition in water-scarce basins within Australia, Kazakhstan, South Africa, and Chile, are exacerbating environmental and community issues[21]. Pursuing the EU's climate goals could expose between 15 and 89,000 African miners to increase modern slavery vulnerabilities by 2040. There is perhaps a need to avoid doubling down on strategies that privilege the car and reduce the mobility 'derived demand' driven by public policy and powerful interests. For instance, to develop collective solutions (such as buses and shared fleets), redesign urban spaces to reduce the need for cars and move away from the "Green Monsters" SUV to low speed/power alternatives[22].

The principle of subsidiarity

Social-regenerative work is underpinned by the principle of subsidiarity which establishes that whatever can be done by a smaller authority, organisation or group should not be absorbed by a larger entity[23]. A larger body should not interfere until a smaller body cannot fulfil a particular task. To achieve sufficient participation in climate sacrifice decision making, shared meaning is essential. However, the larger the entity, the harder this is. Larger organisations should give support 'while still respecting the initiatives and capabilities of those who receive it'[24]. In other words, social-regenerative work should occur at the lowest level possible. Larger organisations must create the enabling conditions for implementation, through policy reform, capability building and resource support, particularly in emerging markets. Examples include the state passing enabling legislation to stimulate urban farms or district heat pump schemes[25] and the development of Renewable Energy Communities (RECs) across Europe. RECs are autonomous, controlled by stakeholders in the proximity of the scheme, based on open and voluntary participation and local benefit [26]. For instance, Brixton Energy Solar community -the first Inner-City

[19] Ibid. P162.

[20] Scheyder, E. (2024). *The war below: Lithium, copper, and the global battle to power our lives.* Simon and Schuster.New York.

[21] Berthet, E., Lavalley, J., Anquetil-Deck, C., Ballesteros, F., Stadler, K., Soytas, U.,& Laurent, A. (2024). Assessing the social and environmental impacts of critical mineral supply chains for the energy transition in Europe. *Global Environmental Change*, 86.

[22] Wells (2025)

[23] Melé, D. (2005). Exploring the principle of subsidiarity in organisational forms. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 60, 293-305. P 300.

[24] Ibid

[25] See the recent UK examples of a completed village scheme and a city centre scheme in progress.

https://www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/residents/climate-change-energy-and-environment/climate-change-action/low-carbon-energy/community-heating/swaffham-prior-heat-network.

https://bradford.energy/

[26] European Climate, Infrastructure and Environment Executive Agency. (2025). *Energy communities in action: Lessons from 60+ local projects.* https://managenergy.ec.europa.eu/publications/energy-communities-action-lessons-60-local-projects_en

Community-Owned Solar Project[27] - and Thermo Bello, Culemborg, Netherlands, controls a district heating system and heats water using a geothermal heat pump on the local drinking water reservoir[28].

Who does what and where in terms of governance and in the provision of goods and services are key social-regenerative decisions. For instance, just access to water may require watershed level governance to ensure the common good. Ecological transport systems, which prioritise waterways and public transport would require local, regional and national collective governance. While Blake & Gilman suggest 'Planetary Stewards' to ensure that global knowledge, frameworks and enforcement is coordinated on issues like achieving a habitable atmosphere[29].

Given the aim is to reduce the amount of carbon released as well as capturing as much existing carbon as possible, a priority is to provision goods and services as locally as possible as well as moving less people and material using fossil fuels. To do so requires local/place-based governance and creativity supported as necessary by larger organisations. We are not promoting localism for localism's sake. Rather we argue for a social-regenerative subsidiarity to minimise carbon emissions, do less harm and privilege ecological considerations.

The principle of ecological design

Social-regenerative work embraces the principle of ecological design. Ecological design "minimises environmentally destructive impacts by integrating itself with living processes"[30]. Such processes are cyclical, interconnected and interdependent[31]. The principles of ecological design include emulating nature, contextualised solutions which recognise the ecological and cultural uniqueness of place, co-production with people and other species and ecological accounting[32] .

Ecological design can address the carbon designed lock-in we currently experience. If the necessary change must be of a scale to disrupt our carbon-locked system, it must either be from large-scale technological disruptors or, as we argue, from multiple smaller interventions which embrace the principles of a living system. For example, John Todd's (a New Alchemist) 'restorer technologies' and 'ecological machines' are used to clean polluted waterways, ponds and lakes[33].

Well established approaches like permaculture, local food and energy systems and 'passive house' architecture can minimise destructive impacts while providing livelihoods. For instance, the Chikukwa Ecological Land Trust (Zimbabwe) rehabilitated 1,000 hectares through agroforestry, soil conservation, and water-harvesting to improve local food security[34]. The integration of ecological design also has the potential to achieve large scale transformation. The Sow-A-Seed project in Sabah, Borneo -a long-term

[27] https://brixtonenergy.co.uk/

[28] https://www.thermobello.nl/

[29] Blake, J.S & Gilman, N. (2024). *Children of a Modest Star: Planetary Thinking for an Age of Crisis*. Stanford University Press. Stanford.

[30] Van der Ryn, S., & Cowan, S. (2007). *Ecological design*. Island Press. Washington. p x

[31] Todd, N. J. (2005). *A safe and sustainable world: the promise of ecological design*. Island Press. Washington.

[32] Shu-Yang, F., Freedman, B., & Cote, R. (2004). Principles and practice of ecological design. *Environmental Reviews*, 12(2), 97-112.

[33] Todd, J. (2019). *Healing Earth: An Ecologist's Journey of Innovation and Environmental Stewardship.* North Atlantic Books. Berkeley.

[34] https://celuct.org/

and large-scale restoration project launched in 1998- resulted in planting of over 5 million trees during the last 25 years. This resulted in increased wildlife including orangutans, elephants, hornbills and all five wildcat species in Sabah have been documented in the area. In 2015, the area was classified as a Class 1 protected forest, the highest level of conservation status in Malaysia, and removed from commercial forestry[35].

The principle of solidarity

Social-regenerative work is underpinned by the principle of solidarity whereby individuals, groups and organisations contribute to the common good "in proportion and in accordance with their respective capacities"[36]. The creation of solidarity through shared meaning is a prerequisite for action. For instance, experiencing harm - or witnessing others in distress - can create solidarity when there is a shared understanding of the problem.

In a social-regenerative context, the common good ranges from the planetary to the local. Equity Bank in Kenya demonstrated local solidarity during the COVID pandemic by waiving mobile charges of 1.2 billion Kenyan Shillings to enhance households' disposable incomes while at the same time sensitizing clients to adopt mobile, digital, and online banking, in compliance with health protocols of reduced mobility, minimized interactions, promoting hygiene, and maintaining social distancing[37].

There is a higher degree of complexity when considering the global common good, for instance, protecting the biosphere which necessitates 'negotiating solidarities' with people, places and species we may not know[38]. Or, at least having empathy and acting upon it. For instance, not purchasing goods that are harming others. Protecting the biosphere also requires locally negotiated solidarities such as organising a village heat pump network [39] or grassroots food activism like the Incredible Edible Network to transform public spaces by growing and sharing local food[40]. For instance, Incredible Edible negotiated solidarities with Age UK Salford, NHS, Salford Council and older people to develop edible gardens[41].

[35] Axelsson, E. P., Grady, K. C., Alloysius, D., Falck, J., Lussetti, D., Vairappan, C. S., & Ilstedt, U. (2024). Lessons learned from 25 years of operational large-scale restoration: The Sow-A-Seed project, Sabah, Borneo. *Ecological Engineering,* 206, 107282.

[36] Mele (2005) p300

[37]https://www.google.com/url?q=https://equitygroupholdings.com/ke/newsroom/press-releases/equity-group-defies-covid-19-impacts-and-registers-51-balance-sheet-growth/&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1776084767367742&usg=AOvVaw1Rb0JogvCrPibIcG1oCglc

[38] Stott, N., Darlington, M., Brenton, J. and Slawinski, N. (2022) "Partnerships and place: the role of community enterprise in cross-sector work for sustainability." In: George, G., Haas, M.R., Joshi, H., McGahan, A.M. and Tracey, P. (eds.) *Handbook on the business of sustainability: the organisation, implementation, and practice of sustainable growth.* Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, pp.118-136

[39] https://ww3.rics.org/uk/en/journals/land-journal/fossil-free-heat-network-Swaffham-Prior.html

[40] https://www.incredibleedible.org.uk/

[41] https://www.incredibleedible.org.uk/news/working-together-incredible-education-and-age-uk/

The principle of stability

In social-regenerative work, the principle of stability concerns rooting organisations in place to cultivate resources - using ecological design -and relationships to endure across generations rather than being optimised for short-term gains.

Barbora Spalová and Isabelle Jonveaux develop the idea of the "economy of stability" in their research on Catholic monasteries. Stability, in the Benedictine tradition of "stabilitas loci" means committing to a particular place-based community so that work, land use and relationships – within and beyond the monastic community – can be organised for the very long term. This long-term horizon reframes economic activity as providing for the immediate and long-term sustenance of the community and not as a vehicle for short-term profit maximisation[42].

Monastic economies illustrate stability through three interlinked dimensions: place, time and community. First monastic communities develop the surrounding environment to support a degree of economic autarchy. Second, time is conceived from an almost unlimited perspective, with economic decisions (such as about forestry, buildings and energy systems) being taken with centuries in mind. Third, community continuity matters therefore economic models (from internal production to property management and hospitality) are designed to sustain communal life over the long run[43].

From a social-regenerative standpoint, stability challenges organisations to design governance, assets and relationships that minimise climate harms while keeping knowledge and value rooted locally. The economy of stability observed by Spalová and Jonveaux illustrates how locally based production, careful stewardship of land and buildings, and long-term planning for energy and livelihoods can align with a social regenerative agenda.

The principle of prefigurative practice

Social-regenerative work enshrines the principle of prefigurative practice. Prefiguration occurs when people enact the new values, institutions, social relationships they aspire to in the 'here and now', rather than merely theorising them or waiting for others to transform society[44].

While political and scientific approaches often focus on future targets- such as net zero carbon by 2050 - prefiguration allows us to experiment with new forms of organising, such as how we could achieve net zero rapidly. These approaches often build upon participatory approaches and lessons from history and indigenous practices. For instance, the prefigurative work of organisations like the New Alchemy Institute who developed self-sustaining ecosystems for plants, fish and people with solar powered "Ark" bioshelters[45].

In doing so, the New Alchemists sought to legitimise and share practice for others to emulate. Their vision to create self-sufficient, local and regionally autonomous communities without a dependence on

[42] Spalová, B., & Jonveaux, I. (2018). The Economy of Stability in Catholic Monasteries in the Czech Republic and Austria. *Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion* , 269-296.

[43] Ibid

[44] Reinecke, J. (2018). Social movements and prefigurative organizing: Confronting entrenched inequalities in Occupy London. *Organisation Studies*, 39(9), 1299-1321.

[45] Greene, W. (1978). A Conversation with: The New Alchemists. *Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development*, 20(10), 25–28.

fossil fuels coupled with lived experimentation and proof of concept provide crucial lessons for social-regenerative work today.

Dismantling lethality, cultivating life

Applying the principles of social-regenerative work entails rethinking how we organise to resist and replace organisational lethality. Creating organisational vitality is not merely a matter of compliance or incremental reform. We argue that genuine progress requires a paradigm shift: moving from reactive harm mitigation to the proactive social-regeneration of life. We hope our social-regenerative principles provide a frame for praxis.

For social innovators, our analysis serves as both a warning and a call to action. It underscores the ethical imperative to understand and address the complex, interconnected dimensions of organisational lethality as a prerequisite for meaningful change.

The transition to organisational vitality is not a simple reversal of harm but a fundamental reimagining of organisational purpose and practice-one that prioritises the social-regeneration of health, life, and the planet. Only by embracing this transformative agenda can organisations hope to dismantle the systems that propagate organisational lethality and instead foster a future grounded in collective wellbeing and planetary sustainability.

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