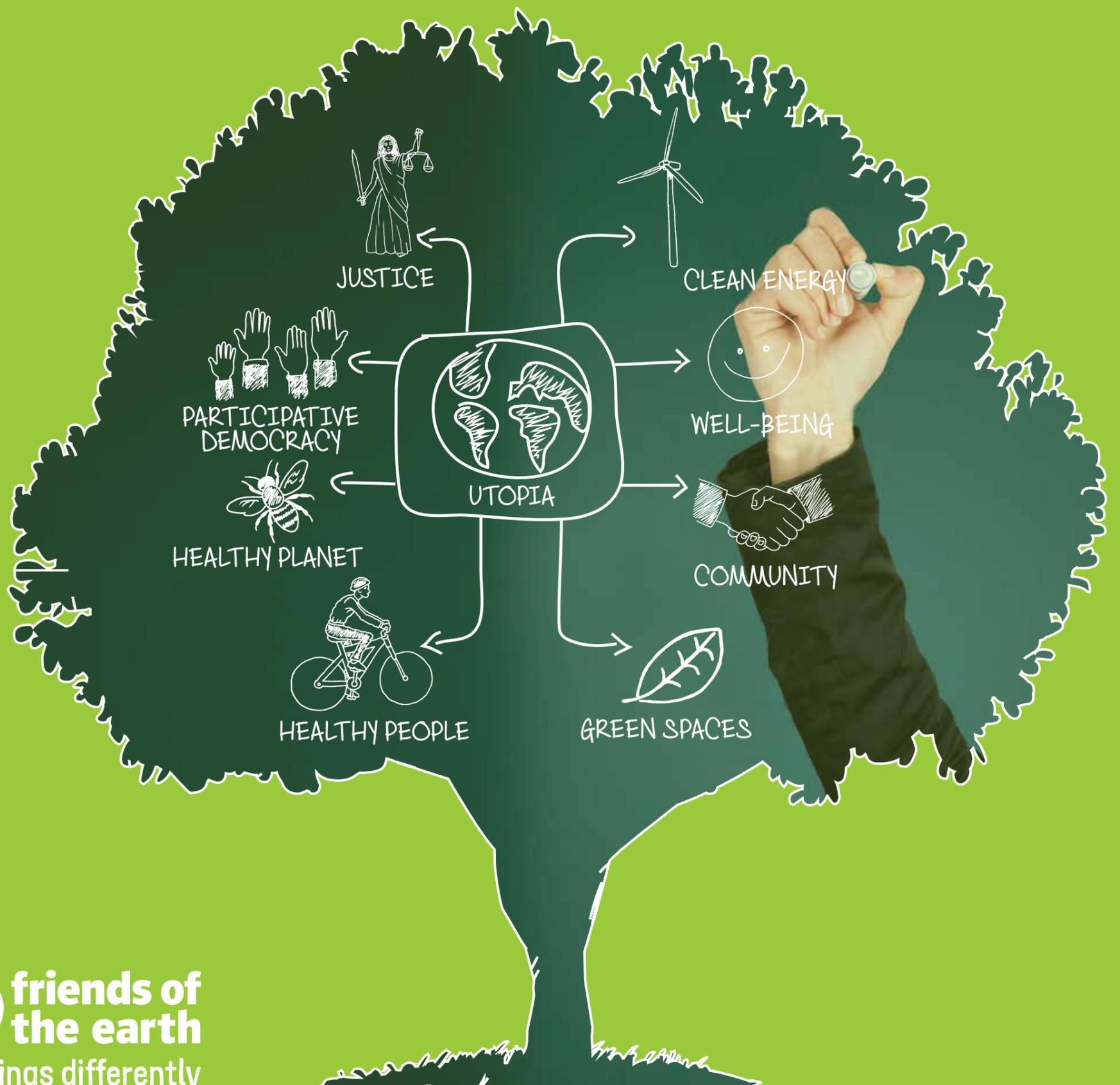


Northern Ireland

NEWSLETTER

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Realising Utopia a visionary Northern Ireland



CONTACTS

Friends of the Earth

7 Donegall Street Place
Belfast BT1 2FN
Tel: 028 9023 3488
Fax: 028 9024 7556
Email: foe-ni@foe.co.uk
Website: www.foe.co.uk/ni

James Orr Director

Tel: 028 9023 3636
Email: james.orr@foe.co.uk

Declan Allison Campaigner

Tel: 028 9089 7591
Email: declan.allison@foe.co.uk

Niall Bakewell Activism Co-ordinator

Tel: 028 9089 7592
Email: niall.bakewell@foe.co.uk

Colette Stewart Office Manager

Tel: 028 9023 3488
Email: colette.stewart@foe.co.uk

Local Groups

Banbridge and Mourne Friends of the Earth

Bonnie Anley
Tel: 077 3040 1331
Email:
bonnie@mournecountrypark.org

Belfast Friends of the Earth

Jaimie McFarland
Email:
jaimiemcfarland@yahoo.co.uk

Craigavon Friends of the Earth

Maggie McDonald
Email: maggiemcd@hotmail.co.uk

Queen's University, Belfast

Micheal Callaghan
Email:
micheal.callaghan@foe.co.uk

Downpatrick Friends of the Earth

Imelda Hynds
Tel: 028 4461 2260
Email: iehynds@yahoo.co.uk

East Antrim Friends of the Earth

Niall Bakewell
Tel: 028 9089 7592
Email: niall.bakewell@foe.co.uk

North Down and Ards Friends of the Earth

Andrew Muir
Tel: 078 1394 5411
Email: mail@andrewmuir.net

Belfast and the dream of Utopia

Hugh Ellis from the Town and Country Planning Association describes his vision for a utopian Belfast.

In the year that Belfast City gets back its planning powers the question is "what should we do with them?"

Friends of the Earth and the TCPA, with the help of Forum for Alternative Belfast and Queen's University, are beginning to shape a plan that will set a transformational agenda for the future of the city. This is a simple plan with a simple question at its heart: how do we want to live and what legacy should we leave for our children?

It's true that planning is seen as boring and out of touch but it's also at the heart of all successful communities. Without a clear sense of where the city is going we have nothing to guide our actions and, most importantly, no story to tell the outside world about our talents and aspirations. Planning the city means thinking about people's health, education, housing and transport. It means thinking about how the city feels, about its culture and history as well as its economic development. In short, it's about

transforming our lives for the better based on taking the best of old and new from across the world. We used to be good about thinking about the future, of realising the utopian legacy of building better communities. We have stopped asking these questions and as result we have neither a vision of the future nor even the tools to deal with social division, economic renewal or climate change.

This makes Belfast pretty unique in a European context. Copenhagen, Freiberg, Berlin, Amsterdam all have powerful plans for the future. These don't reflect the normal meaningless aspirations simply focused on economics but are based on real targets on carbon reduction, education and culture. Such plans include all aspects of community development from child care to housing standards, and vitally, see the city as whole.

They also plan over the long term. Singapore plans for 50 to 60 years not the five or six we focus on. This is vital because the decisions we

make about the built environment last for generations. Planning is a legacy business and needs to think about the Belfast of 2050.

The plan we are suggesting will draw down some of the best ideas already being discussed for Belfast as well as the fantastic examples from abroad, including local control of energy supplies, greening existing buildings, creating new play space, creating a walkable city, and hardest of all, creating the conditions for a non-sectarian future. The discipline of the plan is that all the ideas we propose will have been achieved in other cities. We also need to be clear about how we pay for this new city using land value taxes much more effectively.

Pipe dreams? All progress begins with dream of the future. More importantly, all the ideas we talk about are just thought of as normal in other nations. We have also done this before. When Letchworth Garden city was built in 1903 it aimed to give ordinary people an outstanding environment. It achieved that goal. Remarkably, and despite the passage of time, the mutualised model it was developed on still invests millions of pounds each year to social and

cultural activities. It is a utopia which has paid for itself.

So the choice for Belfast is clear: drift into the future with no clear pathway, managing crises as they come, or set a clear vision for an inclusive future in which Belfast can take its place as one of Europe's most dynamic cities. There is no technical barrier to Utopia, but do we have the will to secure it for future generations?

'A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realisation of Utopias' Oscar Wilde

Building a Movement for Rights

Mari Margil, Associate Director of the Community Environmental Legal Defense Fund, writes about their work in the US

Communities across the U.S. (and across the globe) – whether they're facing water privatization, fracking, or other threats – are coming to a shared conclusion: we can't protect the environment under existing structures of law.

Environmental laws legally authorize harm. In the U.S., this includes laws such as the New Hampshire Groundwater Protection Act – and its equivalent in other states – which legally authorize water bottling corporations to siphon off hundreds of thousands of liters of water a day from local aquifers. Under the federal Clean Water Act, coal corporations are authorized to conduct mountaintop removal mining which has damaged over 3,000 kilometers of streams.

Further, environmental laws operate within a larger body of law which elevates corporate rights over community rights, such that corporations are able to override local, democratic decision making.

Through our organizing, we have learned that our structure of law has been designed to regulate the use and exploitation of nature, while protecting fracking and the 'right' of corporations to frack (mine, privatize water, etc.). Under this structure, communities find that they are prohibited from saying "no" to such harms and mandating sustainable energy, water, and other systems in their place.

Conventional environmental activism has become mired in this structure, seeking to better regulate activities such as fracking. This advocacy defines 'the problem' as fracking or other activities that harm nature. But attempting to make inherently unsustainable activities a little bit better may slow the rate of harm, still results in ecosystem destruction. As our communities find, even when we better regulate shale gas drilling, we're still getting fracked.

We have come to recognize that fracking and other such activities are actually a symptom of the problem, rather than the problem itself.

Rather, 'the problem' is the structure of law whose primary aim is the constant expansion of commerce and development, not the protection of people or nature.

Our work, therefore, is aimed at structural change, to elevate the rights of people, communities, and nature above the rights and protections conferred upon commerce, development, and corporations.

CELDF has partnered with close to 200 communities across the U.S. to establish community rights and ban practices – including fracking – that violate the rights of human and natural communities. Together we are building a movement for Community Rights and the Rights of Nature.

Through our Democracy School trainings, we examine how

fundamental social change happens, building from the bottom up, not top down. We learn that it will not occur because we ask for it. Rather, we must build pressure up from the grassroots to force the existing system to change.

In the U.S., the Suffragists and Abolitionists built grassroots movements to advance structural change. The U.S. Supreme Court did not pave the way for women's rights. The U.S. Congress did not lead the charge to end slavery. Rather, those institutions followed movements of people who came together to drive fundamental change.

These are critical lessons that we are building into our organizing strategy, beginning in our communities.

For more information: www.celdf.org.



Editor: Declan Allison Contributors: Hugh Ellis, Mari Margil, Regan Smyth, Lynn Finnegan, Niall Bakewell, Stevie Nolan, Marian Farrell, and Rebekah McCabe. The views expressed are not necessarily those of Friends of the Earth. Designed by: Leslie Stannage Design. Printed on paper made from 100 per cent post-consumer waste.

For more than 40 years we've seen that the wellbeing of people and planet go hand in hand – and it's been the inspiration for our campaigns. Together with thousands of people like you we've secured safer food and water, defended wildlife and natural habitats, championed the move to clean energy and acted to keep our climate stable. Be a Friend of the Earth – see things differently.

Catching some rays

Regan Smyth explains Friends of the Earth's Run on Sun campaign.

The sun – you know that hot, shiny ball you see in the sky sometimes? Well – it's actually been powering this planet for millions of years – and it could become the main source for supplying our ever-increasing energy needs. I don't know why we didn't think of this sooner!

PV (photovoltaic) cells use a semiconductor to convert solar energy into electricity and are the foundation of modern electronics, including transistors, light-emitting diodes (LEDs), digital and analogue integrated circuits. They are composed of silicon – the second most common element in the Earth's crust, and advances in the technology have resulted in some sophisticated devices. They power your laptop, mobile phone, watch – and the technology could be expanded to power your home, your school, your business, and local hospital. PV energy can be sited on rooftops close to the point of use, avoiding

transmission and some distribution costs. Planning risks for PV are low and the panels last for around 25 years, incurring few environmental risks on disposal – now that EU regulations are in place governing their disposal.

But do we have enough sun in Northern Ireland to use them? Climate conditions do affect the performance of solar cells but even when the sky is cloudy the earth is still absorbing photons from the sun. The efficiency of most PV systems is currently around 5% to 15% but on-going research and development has achieved up to 40%. And when the sun doesn't shine the wind blows! We have wind in abundance in Northern Ireland and used in combination with PV this has produced 'grid-parity' in some countries with similar climates such as Germany, meaning the energy supplied to the grid by PV is comparable to prices from conventional sources.



Declan Allison/Friends of the Earth

So the technology is improving, the climate isn't such an obstacle – how about the political will? Are we still dinosaurs powered purely by fossil fuels? Well, there may be some who think investment in renewable energies is "dangerous", but they are fast becoming an anachronistic minority to the extent that last year, DENI decided to invest millions in solar energy for schools. This will help Northern Ireland meet its ambitious target of 40% renewables within this decade. The response from schools was really positive – it could save a school up to £8000 in

their budget. And the good news is around 300 or roughly a quarter of schools have now signed up to solar!

Summer is coming – it's time to catch some rays!

Slow journalism

Lynn Finnegan, editor of *Freckle* magazine, writes about alternatives to the mainstream media.

We listen to, and are shaped by, the stories around us. They have a profound impact on how we understand the world and make sense of our place within it. But what do we listen to?

The dominant narrative from mainstream news and media is a message of negativity, complacency and despair. As Noam Chomsky reminds us, "All over the place, from the popular culture to the propaganda system, there is constant pressure to make people feel that they are helpless, that the only role they can have is to ratify decisions and to consume."

It is scary how little solutions-based media we have in Northern Ireland and internationally. If this is all we are listening to, no wonder it so often leaves us feeling weary and defeated.

But there are whisperings of hope from recent movements towards positive media and slow journalism. UK-based *Positive News* focuses on constructive developments to challenges facing society. US-based *Yes Magazine* is an amazing resource that reframes global issues in terms of their solutions. *Solutions Journal* is similar but slightly more science focused.

Slow journalism is not about naive story-telling or shying away from the truth, it is about getting beside people to better understand how they see the world and their place in it. It focuses on how we are responding to the world's challenges. In Northern Ireland there has so far been little space to create and share such a narrative, which is a large part of why a small group of people have set up *Freckle*; a new independent magazine dedicated to upholding sustainable, peaceful and creative living. We are trying to practice slow journalism to celebrate people carving out their own stories in an era of climate change, mindless over-consumption and global inequality. We have found a bedrock of joyful hope, community and stewardship existing under the ocean of disempowering mainstream media.

Making solutions-based, positive media part of our regular reading can make a big difference to our energy levels and visions for the future. Being inspired gently invites us to take action and make more thoughtful choices in a way that fear-mongering and education-through-guilt is rarely able to do. It lets us believe in possibility again. Surely only then can we build a practical utopia?

Freckle's second issue is due out in June. Find out more at: www.frecklenorthernireland.org

The play's the thing

Niall Bakewell, Friends of the Earth's Activism Co-ordinator, writes about the role of drama in campaigning.

A fossil fuel millionaire dances the blues and sweeps a politician off her feet. Fascistic security guards in dark glasses hector the public through megaphones, declaring the city a "free-frack zone."

Sexist rig-workers harass bystanders as they swagger arrogantly towards the next drilling site. Demonic toxic chemicals run amok in the crowd, offering poison with the promise that it's harmless.

Pale and sickly refugees in burnt rags beg for clean water. Balls of flame light up the gloaming.

Welcome to the Methane Mardi Gras, a creative collaboration between the Friends of the Earth Northern Ireland team, and the anti-fracking campaign community.

The parade was staged on Culture Night Belfast, in late September of 2014. Culture Night invites contributors to stage events in the city centre.

This was the second year in a row that Friends of the Earth produced a piece of campaigning street theatre for the annual festival. In 2013 the team staged a funeral for democracy, with New York performance artist Reverend Billy as celebrant.

Street theatre acts both as a medium, and as a tool for galvanising existing activists to keep fighting for justice. A good piece of political theatre can transform public perception of an issue like fracking, and renew optimism that campaigns can be won.

The process of co-production deepened Friends of the Earth's relationship with key activists,

who were given the freedom to lead on the development of the project. Some activists enlisted members of their families to help, who then became more involved in the general campaign.

The Northern Ireland team is developing expertise in this area, and is looking to the writings of influential practitioners like Augusto Boal for guidance on how to challenge injustice and oppression creatively and inclusively. Events like Belfast Culture Night offer campaigners a ready audience of 1000s of people. It is up to grassroots movements to maximise their impact by being concise and compelling in how they convey their messages to this audience.

In an age of clicktivism and email inboxes full of unread petition requests, the old fashioned occupation of public space to satirise the powerful is a welcome throwback for many people working for an end to injustice.

Friends of the Earth Northern Ireland is in the early stages of developing a new performance piece for Culture Night 2015. To find out more about our latest production, and to volunteer to take part, email niall.bakewell@foe.co.uk



Aaron Cummins/Friends of the Earth

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Collective benefits versus private profit

Stevie Nolan from Trademark argues that workers' co-operatives offer a viable alternative to the prevailing capitalist model.

Northern Ireland is moving from conflict to a place where democratic institutions are functioning and broadly participative. However, it is also moving from an economic framework that is formulated upon the post-war social contract, to one that is dominated by market agendas and neo-liberal principles.

If we want a balanced, stable and sustainable island economy it is time to start building the co-operative and socialised alternatives, and that is what Trademark, the anti-sectarian unit of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, is attempting to do. The labour movement has acknowledged

the importance of forging allegiances with other progressive social movements that seek to create a more equal and democratic world. This of course must include the co-operative movement.

In Northern Ireland the co-operative movement comprises credit unions, agricultural co-operatives, housing associations, and the co-operative retail movement. These co-operatives hold over £2 billion in assets and up to 350,000 members providing employment to nearly 4,500 people and they make a substantial contribution to the economy.

Co-operative forms of economic activity deserve to be part of the creation of a sustainable economy, that minimise the leakage of revenue streams (profits, wages, assets, credit creation) from the regional economy. In order to create more sustainable, independent, and democratic work practices, the model of co-operative development needs to expand beyond retail, social finance and farming, just as social enterprises need to look seriously at worker management and ownership.

Worker owned co-operatives, however, are almost entirely absent. It is clear that worker owned and



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worker managed co-operatives must be part of a new alternative economic landscape. They can offer an alternative means of creating dignified and socially useful employment. They also resist sectarianism by bringing workers together for joint benefit in which values of solidarity and democracy can replace the dynamics of suspicion and mistrust.

During the much vaunted 2011 MTV Europe showcase in Belfast, a perhaps more significant event was taking place. A group of worker-owners from the Falls and Shankill Roads, with the support of ICTU, established Belfast's first Interface Worker Co-operative, The Belfast Cleaning Society. The vision and commitment of the founder members enabled them to develop a

profitable, cross-community, worker owned co-operative business.

The system that is in crisis is not absolute. It is always resisted, challenged and transformed. Whether in the struggles of labour against capital or in those co-operative spaces where the market's grip is loosened, we are challenged to look beyond the system for answers. We can perhaps look to alternative structures where participative democracy is practised and where collective forms of ownership exist. In distinguishing themselves as democratic, and as community focused, worker co-operatives offer new experiences and can act as spaces of collectivism and social solidarity.

Money, money, money

Transition Derry activist, Marian Farrell, discusses problems with our money, and offers some alternatives.

'To say that a state cannot pursue its aims because there is no money, is like saying that an engineer cannot build roads because there are no kilometers'

Ezra Pound, American poet and economic historian.

Think about it. When politicians say there isn't enough money to build a hospital or school, there may well be protests demanding that they find the money, maybe reallocate it from military spending but nobody is asking the question, 'Why isn't there enough money?' and nobody is saying, 'Well, we have everything else – people who have land; people who have the materials; people with the skills and time to build and run the hospital or school. The only bit missing is a means of repaying the work in a way that the people involved can meet their needs for food, shelter, heat, leisure etc'.

The creation and control of money has become the Emperor's new clothes. It isn't discussed. It isn't even mentioned in the endless debates on the austerity measures that are putting people out of work and their homes, and into soup kitchens. It is time to point a finger and state the facts – around 95% of the money in circulation in the world is created by private banks whenever they extend credit. The banks create the money out of thin air by typing figures into a computer and then they profit from the interest charged. This is legal. In

the UK the legislation for creating money hasn't been changed since the 1844 Bank of England Act and it wasn't until November 2014 that money creation was even discussed again in the UK Parliament.

Money doesn't grow on trees. It isn't dependent on favourable weather conditions. Humans create money. It is long past time for governments to use their power to create money in democratically accountable ways. In a recent letter to the Financial Times 19 economists proposed that the Eurozone central banks use quantitative easing to give each EU citizen €175 a month for 19 months to spend into the economy 'rather than being injected into the financial markets'. The US economist Robert Parenteau proposed that the Greek government introduce a parallel currency - Tax Anticipation Notes, an IOU backed by future tax revenue. This discussion needs to be happening at the national and international level.

At the local level, people are endlessly creative and ingenious in meeting their needs with and without currencies- Time Credits, LETS, the Swiss Wir, the Jak Bank, the Bristol pound, Brazilian fomentos, the Irish meitheal, where neighbours and friends come together to help each other.

When we have the skills and resources, why are we so powerless?

Love economy

Rebekah McCabe from PLACE explains what the Big Table was all about.



Declan Allison/Friends of the Earth

The Big Table is an idea that evolved and took shape during discussions between various organisations and individuals, led by Friends of the Earth, which began during the summer of 2014.

We weren't sure what we wanted, but we knew we wanted it to be big, public, interesting, and involving. We knew that we wanted it to be something that created and encouraged conversations, connections, and friendliness. There was a vision of people coming together to talk in that most convivial of ways – sharing food around a table. PLACE took the lead on the project early in 2015, seeing it as a natural fit with an annual project we roll out each year as part of Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival.

That project, The Open Source (named after the co-production and

open access movement in software and product design), encourages collaboration between artists and activists by providing a pop-up venue, art studio, and café that is free to use, free to attend, and open to all. It is crowd-sourced event programming and the outcomes are as wild, varied, and unexpected as you might imagine, from drum circles to a workshop that teaches how to draw zebras (and only zebras). The users vary from individuals who feel compelled to share their passion, to organisations that see it as an opportunity to raise the profile of their work. Each year has been a different venue, a vacant shop somewhere in Belfast's cultural heart that we fill with donated furniture, freely offered music and art, and the energies of groups of volunteers who make the whole thing tick for 11 straight days.

Each year brings a new search for a place to host the Open Source – new negotiations with landlords, with service providers, with NIE, with our insurers, to try to make it all happen. This year we figured, why not host the Open Source at the Big Table and use it as a way of animating and redefining the public space of Lower Garfield Street?

So that's what we did. We brought people together in the most public of spaces, in the most familiar of contexts to chat, agitate, laugh, learn, and make friends. Shaped, gently, by the theme of the 'Love Economy', the three-day event that had the modest ambition of building new connections – physical, conceptual, and social, that challenge the free market status quo.

I think we achieved that ambition.