Relational Social Work

Beyond Research: The Deliberative Forum as Ecosocial Practice for a Post-Growth Housing Commons

Katarzyna Wodniak
Trinity College Dublin, Ireland

Waleed Serhan
Trinity College Dublin, Ireland

CORRESPONDENCE:
Katarzyna Wodniak
e-mail: wodniakk@tcd.ie

Abstract

This article presents a deliberative forum on cooperative housing in Dublin as transformative ecosocial practice. Adapted from Fishkin's (2009) Deliberative Polling, the forum operationalised Folgheraiter and Raineri's (2023) relational social work by scaffolding the trust, conflict navigation, and knowledge co-production essential to commoning (Ostrom, 1990). Participants, predominantly young adults locked out of traditional markets, framed cooperative housing as a holistic vehicle integrating environmental justice with community repair, where social cohesion enables sustainability through shared resources and collective design, directly challenging narratives of individual ownership. The study suggests that such deliberative interventions expand the «institutional imagination» required to materialise housing as an urban commons, concluding that post-growth policy must prioritise enabling ecologies for polycentric co-production. The forum thus emerges as a scalable prototype for ecosocial work in times of intersecting crises.

Keywords

Cooperative housing, Deliberative democracy, Relational social work, Ecosocial practice, Institutional imagination.

Introduction

The intersecting crises of climate change and social inequality demand not only new policy solutions but fundamentally new methods for imagining and co-producing those policies. This is particularly acute in housing, where the growth-driven, market-centric paradigm has produced profound ecological damage and social exclusion (Piketty, 2020).

Erickson
Relational Social Work
Vol. 10, n. 2, October 2026
(pp. 93-113)
doi: 10.14605/RSW1022605
ISSN: 2532-3814

For those systematically locked out of traditional housing pathways, often young adults, migrants, and those in precarious employment, the search for affordable shelter is increasingly connected to the search for belonging and ecological sustainability.

This article reports on a half-day deliberative forum conducted in Dublin in July 2025, which aimed at investigating cooperative housing as a relational ecosocial response to these intersecting crises. It was guided by two research questions:

How does structured deliberation shape participants' knowledge, attitudes, and policy preferences regarding cooperative housing?

In what ways can a deliberative forum itself function as a transformative practice of ecosocial work?

Adapting Fishkin's (2009) Deliberative Polling methodology, the forum created a structured public sphere designed to move participants from uninformed opinion to considered judgment through moderated dialogue, providing a scalable model for engaging complex, value-laden issues beyond adversarial debate.

The findings reveal a post-deliberation shift from conventional understandings of housing as an investment to a holistic vehicle integrating environmental justice with the rebuilding of community, trust, and belonging, core concerns of ecosocial work (Dominelli, 2018; Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2023). The deliberative space became a site where participants co-produced knowledge, navigated dilemmas of trust and conflict, and expanded their collective imagination beyond the constraints of the current system.

In this article, we first establish the theoretical foundations, synthesising critiques of modernist and neoliberal housing policy with relational social work and Ostromian's (1990) polycentric governance (1990). We then detail the methodology and present our findings. Finally, we discuss positioning such deliberative processes as transformative practice for ecosocial work, arguing they are essential for building the social capital and shared «institutional imagination» required to materialise a post-growth housing commons.

Literature Review

The deepening twin crises of climate change and social inequality demand a fundamental re-evaluation of prevailing policy paradigms. This review establishes the theoretical foundations for examining cooperative housing as an ecosocial response, moving beyond rigid typologies towards a polycentric «library of solutions» (Raworth, 2018), a diverse catalogue of context-sensitive, proven models adaptable to local conditions. It synthesises critiques of top-down planning with the relational ethos of social work and Ostromian commoning to argue that sustainable solutions must be co-produced through high-energy democracy (Unger, 2005), embodied in empowered, deliberative communities. Cooperatives, as member-owned, democratically controlled enterprises, represent a concrete institutional form for this transformation, embedding democratic governance

directly into economic organisation and serving as living examples of systems prioritising community wellbeing over profit (Ozarow & Croucher, 2014; Rothschild, 2016).

Beyond Modernist and Neoliberal Paradigms: The Call for Relational Co-Production

Traditional welfare state analysis overlooks the practical failures of universal, top-down policy models that, as James Scott (1998) argues, disregard local context and lived experience. This is exacerbated by neoliberal hegemony, which prioritises market logic over social and ecological wellbeing (Piketty, 2020), disconnecting humanity from nature through an «anthropomorphic dominance of the physical environment» (Dominelli, 2018, p. 2). Social work, though philosophically attuned to environmental protection, remains excluded from decision-making, its holistic knowledge dismissed as vocational (Dominelli, 2018).

Relational social work emerges as a corrective, re-centring the «social» as caring performed by networked subjects and shifting from bureaucratic delivery to relational action (Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2023). This responds to the call for a systemic reversal of priorities requiring a rethinking of the economy (Dominelli, 2018). Folgheraiter and Raineri (2023) conceptualise professional intervention across eight levels of reciprocity, two of which are particularly salient here. The fifth, relational facilitation of open dialogical networks, sees professionals scaffold community co-production, mirroring the grassroots ecosocial innovations that Matthies et al. (2019) describe as integrating ecological, economic, and social sustainability in niche spaces. The sixth, relational networking addressed to policy-makers, channels these community-generated insights into the policy arena. Together, this dual practice bridges co-produced community solutions with the structural policy-making needed for a degrowth-oriented, sustainable society (Närhi & Matthies, 2018).

Polycentric Governance and the Institutional Craft of Commoning

The relational, community-centred approach finds its institutional counterpart in the work of Elinor Ostrom (1990). Ostrom challenged the inevitability of the «tragedy of the commons» (Hardin, 1968), demonstrating that communities successfully self-govern shared resources through tailored, polycentric arrangements. While her empirical framework originated with environmental commons, its principles apply directly to the urban commons of housing, showing that a self-organised system's success depends as much on its relational infrastructure of trust as on its formal governance rules (Wodniak, 2021). Her principles for sustainable common-pool resource management, clearly defined bounda-

ries, participatory rule-making, and monitoring, provide a blueprint for community-led housing and housing cooperatives.

Crucially, Ostrom underscores the necessity of accessible conflict resolution mechanisms. She posits that robust, internal tools for managing disagreement are a foundational element of institutional resilience, allowing communities to adapt and maintain cooperation. This principle directly addresses the core relational dilemmas of trust and conflict that emerge in cooperative ventures, framing them not as pathologies but as governance challenges to be intentionally designed.

Understanding how order is established and sustained within a polycentric system, a governance structure characterised by multiple, overlapping centres of decision-making that operate at different scales rather than a single, top-down authority (Ostrom, 1990), requires examining the relational foundation upon which it rests. This involves integrating Ostrom's institutional analysis with the concept of social capital, the «trust, norms, and networks» that enable collective action (Putnam, 1995). Within the diffuse and interdependent structure of a polycentric arrangement, social capital acts as the essential «binding glue» (Koinova et al., 2021) that coordinates diverse actors, creating a reservoir of mutual understanding that can only be filled by fostering trust and by approaching conflict in a constructive, rather than adversarial, way.

Operationalising the Ecosocial Imaginary: Deliberation, Imagination, and Empowerment

Putting these principles into practice requires structured, democratic spaces that facilitate what Fung and Wright (2003) term «empowered participatory governance» or Unger (2005) calls «high-energy democracy». This study's deliberative forum, adapted from Fishkin's (2009) Deliberative Polling, applies this approach by creating a microcosmic public sphere where citizens engage in informed, moderated dialogue. Aligned with Meadows' (1999) concept of «leverage points», the forum targets the shared paradigm and collective imagination as the most potent sites for potential systemic change.

This deliberative process cultivates what Murphy (2023) identifies as an emergent ecosocial imaginary: a paradigm envisioning economic activity within social and planetary boundaries (Raworth, 2018). Here, the relational scaffolding described by Folgheraiter and Raineri (2023) becomes the mechanism through which abstract ecosocial principles, humanity as part of nature (Dominelli, 2018), grassroots integration of sustainability (Matthies et al., 2019), and structural policy change (Närhi & Matthies, 2018) are translated into lived practice. Practical initiatives like Palmi Koinsep embody this synthesis, demonstrating how environmental stewardship and community empowerment can be mutually reinforcing (Fato, 2023), grounding the ecosocial imaginary in tangible, community-led action.

Cooperative Housing as Relational Co-Production of the Urban Commons

Cooperative housing emerges here as an applied case of relational co-production and urban commoning, positioning the deliberative forum not merely as a research method but as an act of relational social work, facilitating open networks, navigating conflicts through Ostrom's (1990) principles, and building the shared «institutional imagination» (Murphy, 2023) required to transcend dominant paradigms.

This imaginative leap has deep roots. Today's housing crisis mirrors post-WWI conditions, which catalysed a visionary European movement pursuing not just unit delivery but «spatial creation», i.e., holistic communities where architecture supported social life through shared communal spaces. This early project was fundamentally social, a historical antecedent to today's ecosocial imaginary that treated housing as a common good rather than a commodity. That such approaches remain marginal reflects the exclusion of holistic, value-based knowledge that Dominelli (2018) critiques, where social and ecological reasoning is dismissed in favour of market logic.

Contemporary initiatives are reviving this ethos. Domestic Dawns (Espegel & de Lapeurta, 2022), documenting 2,500 European projects, reveals a resurgence of models prioritising «Climate Awareness» and «New Management». Projects from La Borda in Barcelona to Wohnprojekt Wien in Vienna operationalise the ecosocial innovations Matthies et al. (2019) describe. These polycentric alliances, where communities collectively govern their homes, decommodify property, and embrace sufficiency, constitute the «library of solutions» (Raworth, 2018) that a post-growth transition demands. This finds contemporary articulation in the «Housing (for) a Post-Growth World» Manifesto (Pagani et al., 2025), which provides the essential ecological framework by rejecting «green-growth» narratives.

The Manifesto argues that making new construction energy-efficient is insufficient if the environmental cost of constant development is ignored, instead championing sufficiency, retrofitting, and fair distribution of existing stock, echoing Närhi and Matthies's (2018) insistence that a degrowth-oriented society requires structural changes beyond individual ones. Cooperative housing thus becomes not another development model but a strategic tool for community-led stewardship within planetary boundaries. Its success hinges on integrating relational facilitation and polycentric governance with lessons from historical visionaries and contemporary pioneers, answering the call for social work to support grassroots initiatives (Matthies et al., 2019). This framework offers a robust alternative to the high-modernist and neoliberal paradigms critiqued at the outset, centring community knowledge, democratic governance, and ecological limits as foundations for a just housing future where humanity is understood as part of nature, not outside it (Dominelli, 2018).

Methodology

The study adapted Fishkin's (2009) deliberative forum methodology, moving from raw opinion to reflective judgment through structured learning and moderated dialogue. Centred on cooperative housing as a crisis response (Murphy, 2023), this approach is uniquely positioned for topics largely absent from Irish public discourse, empirically testing how balanced information and facilitated deliberation shape attitudes towards unfamiliar ecosocial alternatives. A smaller, purposively sampled cohort prioritised analytical depth over statistical representativeness, enabling nuanced investigation of the reasoning, value trade-offs, and informational triggers underpinning attitude change among key stakeholders.

Sample

The sample strategically centred those at the sharpest edge of Dublin's housing crisis, namely young adults for whom the linear path from family home to rental to ownership is not accessible. This non-probability method prioritises analytical depth over statistical representativeness, enabling nuanced investigation of attitude formation within an information-rich cohort whose perspectives are often marginalised in policy debates dominated by homeowners and older generations (Patton et al., 2015). Participants were recruited via multiple channels, namely social media platforms including Instagram and LinkedIn, flyers with QR codes placed around campus and public spaces, word of mouth, and snowball sampling from initial contacts.

The resulting demographic profile is significant for the research aims. A large majority (82%) were aged 18–25, with the remainder under 44. This focus on «Generation Rent», those systematically locked out of both mortgage markets and secure tenancies, captures a group experiencing the systemic failures of the market with particular acuity, yet still formulating long-term housing strategies. Their housing status underscores this precarity: 73% lived with family or friends, while only 18% were in the formal rental market. Their primary residence in urban settings (91%) reflects the geographic concentration of Ireland's housing pressures. This cohort, therefore, provides an essential window into the emergent needs and collective imagination of a key demographic at a policy crossroads. Their engagement in the deliberative forum offers critical insights into how cooperative and ecosocial housing models could be designed to meet the specific needs of those seeking stable, affordable, and community-oriented homes.

Deliberative forum

A pre-test/post-test, within-subjects design was employed, with all participants completing surveys before (T0) and immediately after (T1) the deliberative process to measure individual and collective changes in knowledge and preferences. The forum followed a standardised five-stage protocol.

Stage 1: Pre-Deliberation Survey (T0). Participants completed a survey measuring baseline knowledge, attitudes, and demographic information. Key questions probed initial familiarity with community-led housing and existing policy preferences, and explored the connection between housing issues and voting preferences, providing a critical benchmark against which post-deliberation shifts were measured.

Stage 2: Balanced Briefing Materials. Participants were presented with a carefully curated, neutral information package developed by the research team, presenting evidence-based arguments for and against cooperative housing, including international case studies, financing models, barriers, and advantages of community-led housing.

Stage 3: Facilitated Small-Group Deliberation. Participants were randomly assigned to two diverse groups of five and six, facilitated by the research team to ensure equitable speaking time, respectful dialogue, and critical engagement. Key questions probed motivations, perceived barriers, and comparative policy influences, including: «If supportive policies were available, would you choose this over a traditional path to home ownership?» and «What risks would most discourage participation?» Both sessions were audio-recorded with consent for subsequent analysis.

Stage 4: Plenary Session with Expert. Participants reconvened to pose questions developed in their small groups to a cooperative housing expert from Self-Organised Architecture, who clarified issues and presented competing arguments.

Stage 5: Post-Deliberation Survey (T1). Participants retook a revised survey measuring changes in policy preferences, knowledge, and attitude strength.

Data analysis

Quantitative data from the pre- and post-deliberation surveys were analysed through comparative graphical analysis generated by the survey software, allowing for the visualisation of within-subject shifts in knowledge, policy preferences, and attitude strength between T0 and T1.

Descriptive statistics were used to map proportional changes across key indicators, including familiarity with cooperative housing, willingness to participate, and electoral support for enabling policies. This provided a clear empirical measure of the forum's impact on the cohort.

Qualitative data from the small-group and plenary deliberations were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Transcripts were coded inductively in NVivo, with themes such as trust, sustainability, value shift, and imagination emerging organically from participants' own language and concerns. These were then clustered into broader thematic categories capturing the central patterns in how participants reasoned through the dilemmas and possibilities of cooperative housing. This rich qualitative data, the primary advantage of the smaller sample, provided depth and context, revealing the «why» behind the quantitative shifts observed.

Ethics

This study received full ethical approval from the School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin's Research Ethics Committee, guided not only by procedural compliance but by the relational principles central to the research design.

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, emphasising voluntary participation and the right to withdraw at any stage. Recognising consent as an ongoing process, participants received an information leaflet and consent form a minimum of seven days before the forum, allowing reflective consideration mirroring the study's emphasis on moving from uninformed to considered judgment. Participants could ask questions before, during, and after the forum to ensure consent was maintained throughout. All data have been anonymised using pseudonyms (e.g., P1, P2). Confidentiality within small-group and plenary deliberations was stressed as a collective responsibility to foster a safe space for open dialogue.

Audio recordings were used solely for analysis, securely stored, and transcribed by the research team.

Findings

Community-led Housing as Relational-Ecological Practice and the Impulse for Cultural Change

The following Findings sections report on the integrated qualitative and quantitative results from the deliberative forum, comprising data from the two facilitated deliberation sessions and the pre- and post-deliberation surveys. Before delving into participants' articulation of cooperative housing as a community-based and ecosocial practice, it is crucial to note that the deliberation itself provided a unique laboratory for observing these principles in action. As we will see in the sections below, the forum's structure and facilitation directly fostered the relational processes, building trust, navigating conflict,

co-producing knowledge, that are foundational to the cooperative model. This embedded methodological dimension underscores that the attitudes and visions expressed were not merely abstract opinions but emerged from a lived, microcosmic experience of collective deliberation, a process whose measurable impact is captured in the quantitative survey data.

Essentially, participants did not perceive cooperative housing as merely a physical shelter solution. Instead, they consistently framed it as a holistic practice aimed at repairing social bonds and living more sustainably, signifying a critique and a conscious move away from dominant individualistic and market-driven values.

Re-framing Housing: An Integrated Relational and Ecological Practice

Participants discussed a vision of housing that directly counters urban alienation, describing the city's current social fabric as «cold», «individualistic», and «broken» (P3, D1). They saw cooperative models as a deliberate mechanism to rebuild community, a way to «force you to engage in the community» (P5, D1) and actively «bring back the fabric of society» (P3, D1). This perspective intrinsically linked social and ecological well-being. The collective agency of a cooperative was seen as a direct enabler of sustainability, with one participant noting: «I think there's almost like a natural margin between something that's community managed and sustainable» (P2, D2). For them, community governance was not separate from ecological action but its very foundation as expressed by this participant:

> I also think that in general for circularity and sustainability, anything community-driven kind of advances it. So whether it's gardens and allotments or that kind of thing, or even just shared resources. (P5, D2)

The ecological benefits of this model were clearly articulated as practical outcomes of its relational foundation. Participants emphasised shared resources as a cornerstone of sustainable living, pointing out the waste of excessive individual consumption: «I think it's so bizarre that every single house on my road owns their own lawnmower» (P5, D2). They envisioned co-ops enabling everything from tool libraries and communal gardens to shared renewable energy systems, seeing «circularity and waste reduction» (P5, D2) as a natural by-product of communal organization.

The Cultural Shift: From Individual Convenience to Collective Interdependence

Deliberation surfaced a critical awareness of the need to move beyond deep-seated cultural norms. Participants identified a tension between the prevailing «obsession with

owning land» (P2, D2) as a private asset and the ethos of shared stewardship. They critiqued the «linear life» (P3, D1) of neoliberal individualism, arguing for an alternative:

> Maybe this coop space might be a redirection in how you should live your life. Maybe you shouldn't be on your own path. Maybe you should be giving time to your community and to your neighbours. Oh, you're busy, I'll take the kids for the evening, you know... (P2, D1).

This shift was understood as moving from the blade of convenience, which leads to isolation, towards more demanding but rewarding collective practices. As one participant reflected, smaller, less convenient choices could often be better, yet hard to make alone:

> I wish maybe things were a little bit less convenient. It'd probably be better for me, but I just can't turn away the convenience. So I think having to build that community and having to work with your neighbours, I think for me it would be like a healthy thing, a good thing. (P3, D1)

Cooperative housing was thus seen as a structure that facilitates this healthier, if more complex, way of living. This was not about erasing individuality but forging a new common identity: «the culture shift whereby, OK, it would be different but the same, because we are the same by objective or missions but different in identity» (P5, D1).

Deliberation also allowed participants to remember and reflect on past communal experiences. One of the participants who grew up in a housing estate and remembered being part of a close-knit community, discussed it as a way of living which was less convenient but that they enjoyed and missed. The participants also discussed Ireland from before the economic boom years of the Celtic Tiger and neoliberalism, and communal practices that existed then, which could be revived. It would then become a matter of tapping into a collective memory that is already a part of the Irish culture. The participants discussed this issue in the context of a still powerful discourse of Ireland being a postcolonial state and how community-led housing could be used to reframe this discourse in a way that would be enriching and empowering for the Irish people:

> [Reframing] has to start... to get at the idea of community, that is a precolonial existing idea, that's land is held in common, and I think there'd be huge interest in movement of that kind in Ireland. (P3, D1)

This reframing taps into a latent collective memory, positioning community-led housing not as a radical imposition but as a recovery of an empowering aspect of Irish culture. It consciously challenges the prevailing neoliberal obsession with individual property ownership, a concept deeply intertwined with Irish histories of land dispossession and enclosure. By invoking the pre-colonial idea of land held in common, this narrative offers a potent counterpoint, reframing secure housing not as a speculative asset

acquired through market competition but as a collectively managed right and a form of cultural and social reclamation.

The Interdependence of Social and Environmental Sustainability

The deliberative forum revealed that participants did not view sustainability as a separate or added feature of cooperative housing, but as an intrinsic outcome of its core principles: shared resources, collective agency, and human-scale community planning. Their vision integrated ecological benefits directly with the social fabric of cooperative living.

The Circular Logic of Shared Resources

A dominant theme was the intuitive link between communal living and waste reduction through the practical sharing of goods. Participants critiqued the environmental excess of privatised consumption. They envisioned cooperative living as a natural enabler of a circular economy, where tools, appliances, and even cars are collectively owned and maintained. This was not seen as a sacrifice, but as a logical and beneficial step towards «circularity and waste reduction» (P5, D2). The model transforms sustainability from an individual burden into a collective, convenient practice, where «You have more time, and you're being resourceful with what you have» (P2, D1).

Reclaiming Agency in Sustainable Design

Participants emphasised the importance of direct control over the environmental impact of their homes that cooperative housing would offer, and that is typically absent from both the private rental and speculative purchase markets. They expressed frustration with standard developments where «the materials themselves aren't sustainably sourced» (P2, D2), even if the final building has some efficient features. They viewed contributing to a building design, whether building from scratch or renovating, as a major motivation to engage in cooperative housing:

> That's extremely attractive to me if we're having some sort of access to this way of doing it that is somewhat sustainable, that feels a little bit like the future... (P3, D2)

The group discussed how this agency would extend to installing solar panels, creating communal gardens, and choosing renewable energy systems, turning the home into a proactive site of ecological production and stewardship.

Sustainable Urban Form: Density, Retrofit, and Place

Participants explicitly connected the cooperative model to a critique of unsustainable suburban sprawl, advocating instead for «medium density, mixed-use» development as an «alternative to suburban... boring suburban developments, and country living, and car dependence» (P1, D1). They stressed that compact, walkable communities with local amenities inherently reduce carbon footprints. Furthermore, they identified the retrofitting of vacant urban buildings as perhaps the «most sustainable step we can take» (P3, D2). This approach was valued not only for preserving historical architecture and avoiding the embodied carbon of new construction but also for revitalising urban cores. As one participant argued, repurposing buildings overlooked by the market is a uniquely community-scaled solution, blending «the historical value of these architectural structures» with «the practical value of providing homes» in the most resource-efficient way (P3, D2).

In essence, participants articulated a holistic vision where the social structure of a cooperative, its collective decision-making, shared spaces, and communal ethos, becomes the very engine for practical, everyday environmentalism. Sustainability is embedded, not bolted on.

Navigating the Core Dilemmas: Trust, Conflict, and the Pursuit of Diversity

The deliberation provided a nuanced exploration of its core social challenges. The primary barriers identified were not ideological opposition, but practical concerns rooted in a lack of trust and the anticipated complexities of diversity and conflict. Crucially, participants engaged with these not as insurmountable obstacles, but as relational processes to be intentionally designed and managed.

Trust: The Foundational Deficit

A pivotal finding was the identification of trust, or rather, its profound deficit, as the primary practical barrier to cooperative housing participation. Participants framed trust as a concrete prerequisite operating on two interconnected levels: institutional and interpersonal, outweighing ideological objections to the model itself.

The first layer concerned the external policy environment. Participants questioned the security of investing their lives and resources into a cooperative model without robust, long-term legislative and financial frameworks. As one participant synthesised, this trust is conditional on stable policy support: «you can live here for X amount of years because

the policy support is there» (P3, D2). Without guaranteed «safety», the cooperative pathway appeared riskier than the failing yet familiar routes of private renting or mortgaging.

The second, more complex layer involved trust in the cooperative's internal workings. Participants voiced concerns extending beyond neighbourly goodwill to the practicalities of governance and apprehension about reliance on a potentially hierarchical organising team, with one expressing a common fear: «you kind of just have to hope they're doing a good job… organising the finances… getting the people in properly» (P2, D2). This highlighted fears of both incompetence and potential misuse of power, where a governing body could become «a bit coercive» (W, D2). Participants also dreaded the time burden of endless, inefficient «weekly meetings» (P2, D2), emphasising the need for a shared «ethos» and clear, fair rules to prevent arbitrary governance. Ultimately, internal trust was seen as essential to the literal integrity of the project: «you also have to trust… the internals to the building too» (P3, D2), encompassing everything from financial stewardship to construction quality.

In essence, the deliberation revealed that the leap into cooperative living requires a dual leap of faith: trust that the state will secure the model's longevity, and trust that one's community will govern it competently and justly. Building this trust was framed not as an organic outcome but as a critical design challenge to be addressed through transparent structures, clear policies, and demonstrable success stories.

From Silos to Inclusive Community: Grappling with Diversity

The composition of a cooperative community emerged as a site of significant deliberation, highlighting a tension between the tendency toward homogeneity and the aspiration for inclusive, ecosocial community. Participants critically examined the default scenario where cooperatives naturally form among «like-minded people» sharing hobbies and interests (P3, D1). While acknowledging the pragmatic ease of this approach, they identified a clear social peril: such exclusivity risks creating isolated «silos» that «destroy… wider social cohesion» (P1, D1), fundamentally at odds with the cooperative ethos.

Consequently, discussion shifted from problem identification to co-designing solutions. Participants offered concrete strategies for intentionally engineering diversity as a structurally embedded value. One prominent proposal was reserving spaces for specific groups, such as older adults, to «ensure… diversity» (P2, D1) and directly challenge the natural gravitation toward sameness (Ozarow & Croucher, 2014). Another pragmatic suggestion involved a phased approach: establishing a foundational core with familiar contacts for initial stability, then deliberately expanding to incorporate a wider range of members, allowing a group to «give it that name, and foundation, and stability, and then… start getting other people in» (P5, D1).

Crucially, diversity was framed not merely as a moral good but as a functional catalyst for shifting housing paradigms. Participants highlighted generational diversity as key to challenging deep-seated norms around property, observing that different age cohorts hold «a different understanding of the concept of ownership», suggesting intergenerational mixing could actively disrupt the individualistic «identity of the building itself» and foster more communal attitudes (P3, D1). Designing for diversity was thus understood as an active mechanism for social change, ensuring the cooperative model evolves beyond a niche for the like-minded into a genuinely transformative and inclusive social form.

Reframing Conflict: From Bickering to Generative Process

Participants approached the inevitability of conflict within cooperative housing with a pragmatic and nuanced understanding. The deliberation revealed a collective shift in perspective: moving from viewing conflict as a destructive inconvenience to reframing it as an inherent and potentially generative part of the relational process. This reframing centred on two key insights: the structural imperative for resolution and the transformative potential of conflict's purpose.

A critical distinction was drawn between conflict in conventional neighbourhoods and within a cooperative structure. Participants reflected on experiences in traditional housing estates, where neighbourly «bickering» often festered unresolved because individuals could simply disengage and «live on their own» (P3, D1). In stark contrast, they identified the cooperative model's fundamental characteristic: its structure of shared ownership and collective decision-making creates a structural imperative to resolve disputes. As one participant concluded, «if there's a conflict, you kind of have to go through it. You have to resolve it» (P3, D1). This compulsory engagement was seen not as a flaw, but as a mechanism that could ultimately lead to «less resentment» by forcing a completion of the process rather than allowing grievances to stagnate.

The most significant conceptual breakthrough was the collective redefinition of conflict's purpose. Participants actively challenged a win-lose paradigm, distinguishing between conflict aimed at domination and conflict aimed at collaborative problem-solving. The facilitator noted that if the aim is «to win, it's one thing. But if it's to figure things out, it becomes an enriching experience» (K, D1). This sentiment was echoed by a participant who argued for embracing conflict as a constructive force: «we can find solutions by embracing conflict» (P1, D1).

This reframing directly counters the polarising «this or that» dynamics of contemporary political discourse. Instead, participants advocated for navigating the «grey area» and finding common ground (P4, D1). The solution, therefore, lies not in avoiding disagreement but in designing robust, equitable governance structures to channel it productively. Participants pointed to formal mechanisms like a residents' council as a

«very powerful, collective way to resolve disputes» (P1, D1), ensuring «everyone should have an equal decision-making power» (P1, D1). Ultimately, the group acknowledged that the idealised vision of a conflict-free «holding hands utopia» is unrealistic. Instead, the true measure of a healthy cooperative is its capacity to «find a way to come through that and work through that» (P2, D1). In this view, well-managed conflict is not a sign of failure but a vital process of communal learning and strengthening.

Transformative Dialogue and Expanding the Collective Imagination

A central outcome of the deliberative forum was the demonstration of how structured dialogue can function as a catalyst for transformative thinking, actively expanding the collective imagination beyond the entrenched parameters of Ireland's housing crisis. The process moved participants from initial scepticism and abstract knowledge towards concrete, co-created visions, revealing that a primary barrier to ecosocial alternatives is not the lack of a model, but a deficit in the shared capacity to envision and believe in its possibility.

Deliberation as a Generative Space for Re-imagination

The forum itself became an engine for social innovation. Through facilitated deliberation, participants did not merely analyse a pre-defined concept; they actively re-scripted it for the Irish context. This was evident when sceptical individuals began spontaneously proposing grounded applications, such as utilising the country's vacant building stock for community-led retrofits. The dialogue enabled connections between previously siloed ideas, linking housing cooperatives to broader critiques of car dependency, waste, and social isolation, thereby constructing a more holistic vision of an ecosocial future. As one participant reflected, envisioning community as being «linked by shared resource» is where transformative change must start, highlighting the «inkings of the political imagination» that deliberation can activate (P2, D2).

Shifting the «Goal Posts»: From Crisis Stasis to Alternative Futures

Participants diagnosed a collective mental block stemming from the prolonged housing emergency: the repeated failure to deliver sufficient conventional housing has paradoxically frozen public imagination. As one noted, «the goal posts are still there because no one's scored a goal… So it's almost hard… to imagine expanding the goal posts» (P3, D2). The deliberative process directly challenged this stasis.

By engaging with European case studies and brainstorming local pilot projects, such as trailing a cooperative «in a town centre somewhere» (P2, D2), participants began the work of redrawing the boundaries of what is considered feasible. This shift is not merely informational but deeply discursive, creating the powerful narrative question: «why not here?» (P1, D2).

Cultivating Awareness and Re-narrating Community

The discussions consistently returned to the necessity of making the invisible visible. Participants emphasised that for an alternative to gain traction, a concerted effort in «social marketing» and awareness-raising is essential to «reshape the imagination of the Irish people» (P3, D2). This involves strategically broadcasting «best practice examples» (P1, D1) and leveraging existing community networks to normalise the concept. Crucially, this work of imagination is also an act of cultural recovery, tapping into latent memories of communal life and pre-colonial notions of shared land to frame cooperation not as a radical import, but as a return to deeply embedded, though suppressed, social values (P3, D2). Thus, the transformative dialogue initiated in the forum points toward a larger societal process: using deliberate, shared storytelling and visible prototypes to forge a new, credible, and desirable collective narrative for living.

Measuring the Impact of Deliberation: Quantitative Results

Pre- and post-deliberation surveys reveal a measurable shift in participants' knowledge, perceptions, and policy support, indicating the deliberative process successfully moved participants from uninformed positions to more considered judgments on cooperative housing.

Increased Knowledge and Awareness

A primary goal was grounding participants in a shared foundation of facts. The surveys showed a significant increase in objective knowledge. In the pre-deliberation survey, only 27% reported being «Somewhat» familiar with cooperative housing, while 27% were «Not so familiar» and 46% «Not at all familiar». Following balanced briefing materials, deliberation, and expert discussion, this rose sharply to 100% in the exit survey.

Strengthened Support for Cooperative Housing and Enabling Policies

The most significant changes emerged in support for cooperative housing and enabling political action. Initial support for the model as a viable solution was tentative at 9%. After the forum, support solidified to 80%, declaring they would be «inclined to potentially participate in CLH (Community-Led Housing)». Regarding policy, 100% responded «yes» to voting for a candidate or party with CLH in their electoral programme, suggesting deliberation not only made the model more attractive but clarified the necessary public-sector role in facilitating it.

Responses to the Housing Crisis and Imagination

An important affective outcome was the shift in perceptions of solutions beyond the current narrative. Initially, 64% pointed to the existing crisis and wanted to learn about potential solutions. In the exit survey, 80% declared being «more aware of the housing crisis and solutions».

The quantitative findings indicate the forum achieved its core objective, namely, facilitating a transition from uninformed opinion to considered judgment. Participants left with greater knowledge, stronger support for cooperative models and enabling policies, and an enhanced sense of collective efficacy, providing empirical evidence for the potential of participatory processes to build legitimate foundations for innovative, community-centred policy solutions.

Discussion

The findings point to a translation process in which structured dialogue enabled participants to pragmatically engage with the abstract principles of relational social work, polycentric governance, and the ecosocial imaginary. In this sense, the deliberative forum may be understood as a form of ecosocial work practice, one that speaks to calls for more relational and transformative responses to the ecological crisis.

From Institutional Imagination to Grounded Re-imagination: The Forum as Relational Facilitation

The literature review argues for an «institutional imagination» to transcend the dominant housing paradigm, a task aligned with the fifth level of reciprocity in relational social work: facilitating open dialogical networks (Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2023).

The findings demonstrate this facilitation in action. Participants did not merely receive information; they used the deliberative space to actively re-script the cooperative model for the Irish context. They connected abstract concepts to tangible local issues, such as retrofitting vacant buildings, identified as the «most sustainable step we can take» (P3, D2). These context-specific applications exemplify the co-production of knowledge that relational social work champions, answering the call for social work to move beyond individual-level interventions and contribute to structural change (Närhi & Matthies, 2018).

The staggering shift in support, from 9% to 80% in favour of participation, and the unanimous (100%) willingness to vote for supportive policies suggest that this facilitated re-imagination can build a legitimate social foundation for radical policy shifts.

Navigating the Core Dilemmas: Adjusting Ostrom's Principles for Urban Commons

The forum's deep engagement with the dilemmas of trust, diversity, and conflict provides empirical illustration and crucial nuance to Ostromian institutional theory when applied to urban commons. Participants identified the dual deficit of trust, in policy frameworks and in internal governance, as the primary practical barrier, not ideological opposition. This finding suggests that for urban housing commons, Ostrom's principle of «clearly defined boundaries» must extend beyond physical or membership rules to include legally and politically secure boundaries and policies that protect the model from market volatility. Trust is not merely a byproduct of a well-designed system; it is its essential fuel, a prerequisite for the self-monitoring and peer enforcement Ostrom identified.

Conversely, conflict is not a sign of failure but an inevitable feature of shared management, as revealed in the forum deliberations. The participants' sophisticated analytical deliberation reframed it from a destructive force to a «generative process» where «through antagonism… we can find solutions» (P1, D1). This directly embodies and elaborates Ostrom's principle of accessible conflict-resolution mechanisms. The crucial work, therefore, is not avoiding disagreement but establishing the community's shared norms and procedures for navigating it productively. This is where the deliberative process and relational facilitation play a vital role: the forum itself became a low-stakes training ground for this essential relational skill, demonstrating how structured dialogue can prefigure and build capacity for the cooperative governance required. It served as the site for both building foundational trust and co-designing the very conflict-resolution tools Ostrom deemed critical for institutional resilience.

Weaving the Social and Ecological: Realising the Ecosocial Imaginary

Participants consistently articulated a vision where the social fabric of the community is the very engine of ecological sustainability. They intuitively linked shared resources to «circularity and waste reduction» (P5, D2) and saw collective agency as the key to sustainable design. This lived understanding mirrors the «ecosocial imaginary» (Murphy, 2023) and initiatives like Palmi Koinsep (Fato, 2023), where environmental and community empowerment are «mutually reinforcing». It also reflects Dominelli's (2018) insistence that humanity be understood as part of nature, not outside it, and that holistic, value-based knowledge must be centred in responses to ecological crisis. Importantly, the findings reveal that this holistic view is not an external ideology imposed on communities but an endogenous logic that emerges when people deliberate on their own needs. The call to move away from the «linear life» and «obsession with owning land» towards interdependence signifies the cultural shift at the heart of both degrowth and relational perspectives, confirming that housing justice and environmental justice are co-constitutive.

The Deliberative Forum: A Leverage Point for Potential Systemic Change

The forum's design, adapting Fishkin's Deliberative Polling (2009), functioned as a practical application of «high-energy democracy» (Unger, 2005). By moving participants from a state where the «goal posts» of housing debate seemed frozen, to actively asking «why not here?» (P1, D2), the intervention targeted what Meadows (1999) identifies as the most powerful leverage point: a change of the paradigm or mindset.

The quantitative leap in awareness (from 64% to 80% more aware of solutions) and the qualitative shift towards «reshaping the imagination of the Irish people» (P3, D2) suggest its efficacy. The deliberative forum is therefore more than a research tool; it can be a prototype of transformative practice, building social capital, navigating conflict, and expanding collective imagination, much like the ecosocial innovations Matthies et al. (2019) describe.

For such forums to function beyond the research setting, certain conditions are desirable. A convening actor trusted by the community, ideally a municipality, NGO, or social work team embedded in local networks, would host the process, with facilitation provided by a researcher specialising in deliberative methods to ensure balanced expertise and procedural rigour.

Outcomes would need linking to genuine policy channels to avoid forums remaining one-off exercises. Recruitment should centre those typically excluded from policy debate, and while the half-day format sufficed for this exploratory study, deeper or more conflicted settings may benefit from longer, iterative engagement. Under these conditions,

the forum offers a replicable model for rebuilding public imagination and democratic capacity in the face of intersecting crises.

Conclusions

This study demonstrates that the intertwined crises of housing and climate demand a fundamental re-imagination of the systems governing how we live. By synthesising relational social work, polycentric governance, and ecosocial principles, we have framed cooperative housing as a relational infrastructure for building the trust, democratic capacity, and ecological consciousness essential for a just transition. The findings suggest that when given structured space for informed dialogue, those locked out of traditional markets actively envision housing as a holistic relational-ecological practice, linking community repair with practical sustainability through shared resources and collective agency. The quantitative shifts underscore that the primary barrier is not public opposition but a deficit of imagination and secure frameworks.

The paper's main contribution is twofold. First, it offers an empirical exploration of how structured deliberation can shift attitudes towards cooperative housing in a context where such models are largely absent from public discourse, suggesting the potential of ecosocial alternatives when citizens are given space to engage with them. Second, and more distinctively, it positions the deliberative forum itself as a method of ecosocial work practice, not merely a research technique but a relational intervention that prefigures the very processes of dialogue, co-production, and collective problem-solving that define a successful housing common. As a leverage point (Meadows, 1999), the forum facilitates the institutional imagination needed to break the paralysis of the current paradigm.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The small sample (n = 11), while justified by the study's aim of achieving analytical depth over statistical representativeness, means findings are indicative rather than generalisable; transferability rests on the richness of the qualitative insights rather than their breadth. Finally, the study captures immediate post-deliberation shifts; whether these changes in knowledge, attitudes, and political support persist over time remains an open question for longitudinal research.

Bibliography

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology*, *3*(2), 77-101.

Dominelli, L. (Ed.). (2018). *The Routledge Handbook of Green Social Work*. Routledge.

Espegel, C., & de Lapeurta, M. (2022). *Domestic Dawns. Collective Housing Issues in 21st Century Europe*. Fundacion ICO.

Fato, E. (2023). Social Work and Sustainable Living: Palmi Koinsep's Inspirational Journey. *Relational Social Work*, *7*(2), 61-68.

Fishkin, J. (2009). *When the people speak: Deliberative democracy and public consultation.* OUP Oxford.

Folgheraiter, F., & Raineri, M. L. (2023). The relational foundation of Social Work. *Relational Social Work, 7*(2), 2.

Fung, A., & Wright, E.O. (2003). *Deepening democracy.* Verso.

Hardin, G. (1968). The tragedy of the commons. *Science, 162,* 1243-1248.

Koinova, M., Deloffre M.Z., Gadinger, F., Mencutek, Z.S., Scholte, J. A., & Steffek, J. (2021). It's Ordered Chaos: What Really Makes Polycentrism Work. *International Studies Review, 23*, 1988-2018.

Matthies, A.L., Stamm, I., Hirvilammi, T., & Närhi, K. (2019). Ecosocial innovations and their capacity to integrate ecological, economic and social sustainability transition. *Sustainability*, *11*(7), 2107.

Meadows, D. (1999). *Leverage points. Places to Intervene in a System.* Sustainability Institute.

Murphy, M.P. (2023). *Creating an ecosocial welfare future: making it happen.* Policy Press.

Närhi, K., & Matthies, A.L. (2018). The ecosocial approach in social work as a framework for structural social work. *International Social Work*, *61*(4), 490-502.

Ostrom, E. (1990). *Governing the Commons.* Cambridge University Press.

Ozarow, D., & Croucher, R. (2014). Workers' self-management recovered companies and the sociology of work. *Sociology*, *48*(5), 989-1006.

Pagani, A., Volmary, H., & Fitzpatrick, D. (2025). *Housing (for) a Post-Growth World: A Manifesto.* https://housingdegrowth.substack.com/p/housing-for-a-post-growth-world-a

Patton, C., Sawicki, D., & Clark, J. (2015). *Basic methods of policy analysis and planning.* Routledge.

Putnam, R.D. (1995). Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital. *Journal of Democracy, 6*(1), 65-78.

Piketty, T. (2020). *Capital and ideology.* Harvard University Press.

Raworth, K. (2018). *Doughnut economics: Seven ways to think like a 21st century economist.* Chelsea Green Publishing.

Rothschild, J. (2016). The logic of a co-operative economy and democracy 2.0: Recovering the possibilities for autonomy, creativity, solidarity, and common purpose. *The Sociological Quarterly*, *57*(1), 7-35.

Scott, J.C. (1998). *Seeing like a state: How certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed.* Yale University Press.

Unger, R.M. (2005). *What should the left propose?* Verso.

Wodniak, K. (2021). Social leverage of sporting mega-events and co-production. The case study of Orlik facilities in Poland after EURO 2012. *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, *13*(1), 85-104.

Wodniak, K., Serhan, W. (2026). Beyond Research: The Deliberative Forum as Ecosocial Practice for a Post-Growth Housing Commons. *Relational Social Work, 10*(2), 93-113, doi: 10.14605/RSW1022605.

Relational Social Work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License