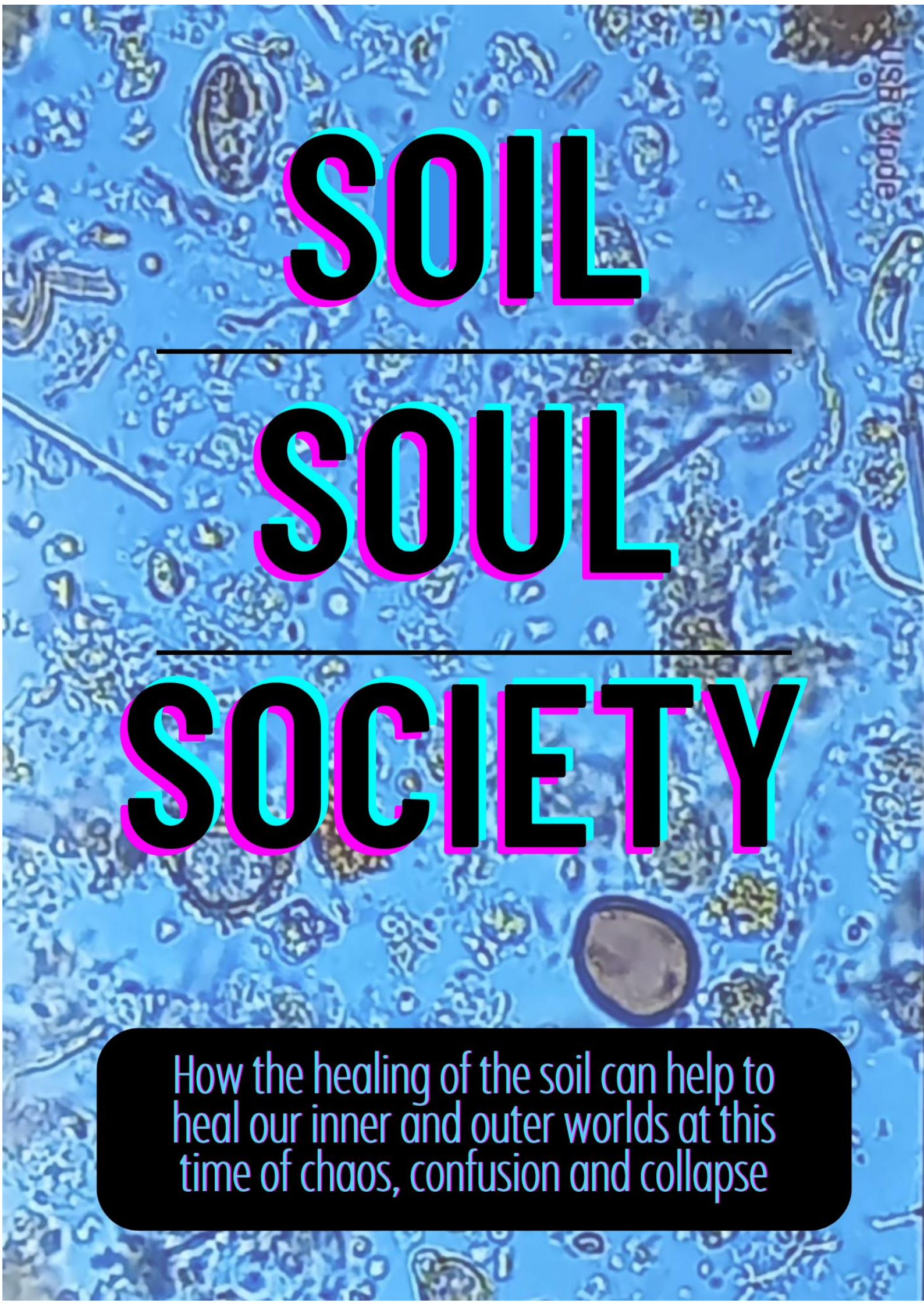


A microscopic view of soil organisms, showing various microorganisms and structures in shades of blue and green. The organisms are densely packed, with some larger, more complex structures and many smaller, simpler ones. The overall texture is intricate and detailed.

SOIL

SOUL

SOCIETY

How the healing of the soil can help to
heal our inner and outer worlds at this
time of chaos, confusion and collapse



Written by: Gráinne O'Neill and with special thanks to Gareth Conlon, Joanne Fullerton, Conan Connolly, Conor O'Kane, Meabh O'Neill, Jim O'Neill, Becca Barnes, Vivana Checchia, participants on our 'Soil Soul Society' courses, and to Indigenous wisdom for the guidance and inspiration.

Design by Deborah Conlon

Proof Read by Nora McQuaid

Dedicated to Carmel Mulrine; Earth Mother and Change Maker.

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This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the European Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

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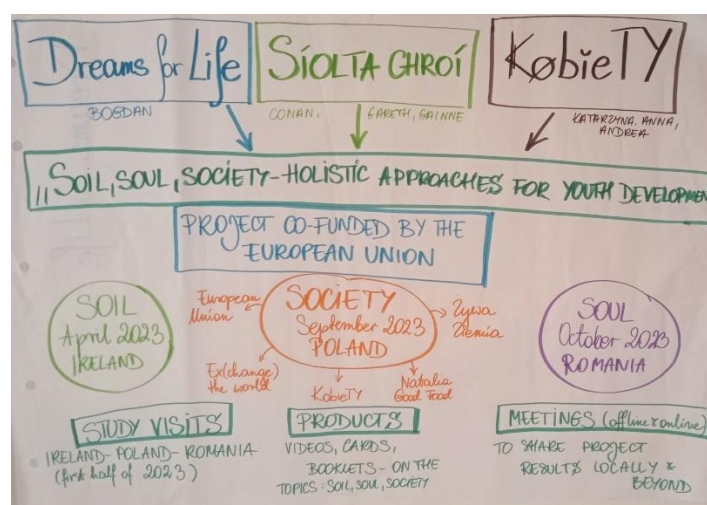
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Context for this resource

This manual is a tool that can be used to enhance the impact of Youth Work when integrating a stronger connection to the land, the soil and to soul work. The creation of the manual 'Soil, Soul, Society: how the healing of the soil can help to heal our inner and outer worlds at this time of chaos, confusion and collapse' is a result of the project 'Soil Soul Society: holistic approaches for youth development'. As part of this project we drew on various approaches: Soul-centric development and 'inner' work, Nature-based learning and 'outer' landscapes, and a social justice approach enhanced and informed by the soil and the soul.

The project "Soil Soul Society" had the following outcomes in Ireland:

- An online series of videos about different perspectives into 'Soil, Soul, Society' such as regenerative agriculture, fungi, boundaries, Soil and Soul, trauma and the land.
- An educational booklet 'Síolta Chroí: Our Story', a guide for youth and community groups on ecosystem restoration.
- An 8-day training course for 24 youth workers in Ireland on Soil, Soul, Society. This took place in April 2023.
- A 7-day mobility for exchange of good practices in Ireland for 12 youth workers which showcased good practice in the areas of nature restoration, environmental education and nature-based youth work. This took place in April 2024.
- A video with best practices to document and present local organisations and their best practices on 'Soil, Soul and Society'.
- Multiplier events in Ireland for 100 youth workers from local, regional level.
- An online multiplier event for 50 youth workers at national, European level.



Who we are: Síolta Chroí

Síolta Chroí is a not-for-profit cooperative, made up of members with backgrounds and experience in adult education, environmental activism, regenerative agriculture, social justice, peacebuilding, meditation, and yoga. As a social enterprise, Síolta Chroí is run as ‘a business with primarily social objectives whose surpluses are principally reinvested for that purpose in the business or in the community’.

Síolta Chroí has an environmental education centre, Teach Tui, where we run courses and retreats focused on ecosystem restoration and similar topics. We also run projects on ecosystem restoration locally, regionally, nationally and on a European level.

At Síolta Chroí, our aim is to restore Ireland’s ecosystems and communities. We do this through:

- 1) education focused on regenerative cultures;
- 2) exploring resilient and regenerative food systems; and
- 3) carrying out ecosystem restoration work.



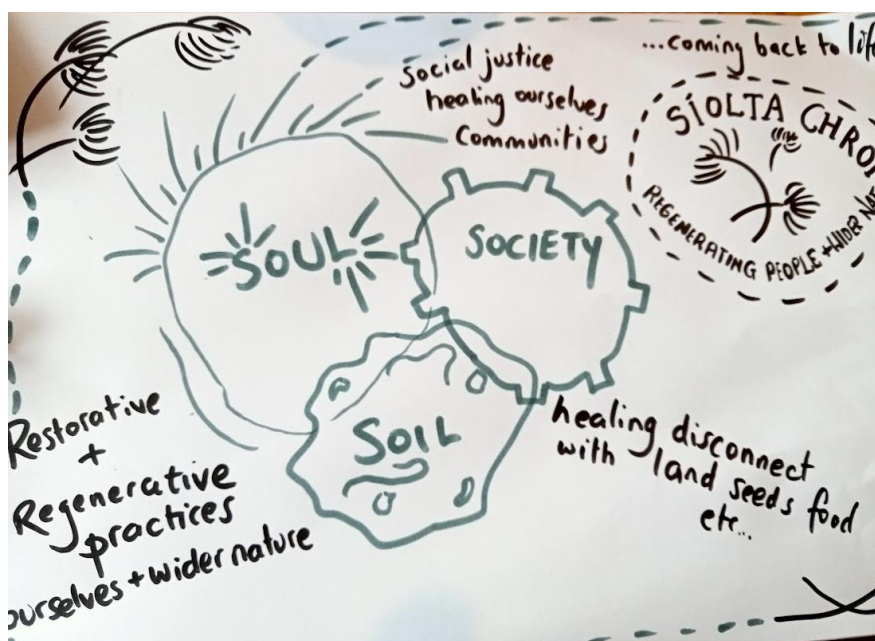
Participants on the ‘Journey into Soil: Soil, Soul, Society’ training course, April 2023

Soil, Soul, Society... where our journey began

'Let's put Soul back into the soil, let's put Soul back into our body, let's put Soul into our society...'

- Satish Kumar

Inspired by the work of Satish Kumar, the trilogy of Soil-Soul-Society provides a beautiful way in to loving, understanding, learning from and caring for soil on a number of different levels. This trilogy resonates strongly with our approach as Síolta Chroí; our focus on ecosystem restoration through a social and global justice approach and exploring regenerative practices for ecosystems that includes regeneration of the humans within these systems. The lens of Soil, Soul and Society was an intuitive and curious fit for us to explore.

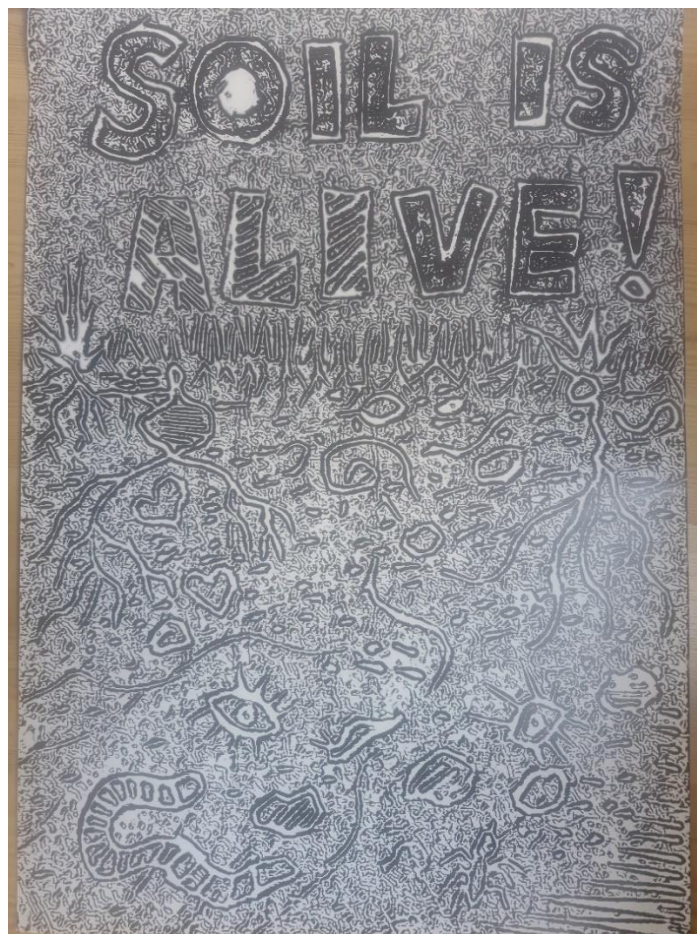


We were lucky to be in a position to come across other people in Europe who shared a similar curiosity for what this Trilogy might mean for their work and for deepening learning with others within our networks. And so we connected with Dreams 4 Life (Romania) who support people to follow their 'true meaning in life, towards their personal development and the development of the community'. They became the focus and input of the 'Soul' component for our partnership. We also connected with KobieTY who have been supporting Changemakers from all across the world through collecting stories and offering frameworks to help amplify their work. They became the 'Society' piece of the jigsaw to complete our Trilogy.

Soil is Alive

'In English soil evokes dirt, agriculture, or the homeland. In multiple Pacific languages instead soil has meanings connected to the womb, to the placenta, to the people, community, place and country, echoing interconnectedness and spirituality'.

(from the 'School of Soil Futures' [Reflecting On The School of Soil Futures – Arts Catalyst](#), from a presentation by Frances C. Koya Vaka'uta, titled Counter-narratives. Decolonizing Stories We Tell Ourselves About Ourselves. She introduced herself as a Pacific Island daughter, as a mother and educator, a writer and artist, and presented the practice of storytelling from a Pacific decolonial perspective.)



'Soil is Alive', print artwork by Conor O'Kane

We can often see people **treating soil like dirt** in our society; trying to 'control' weeds with various chemicals, making 'work' for themselves in the garden through excessive digging and other ways to control soil... In the work we have been exploring with people, soil can often be seen as something to be 'dealt with', almost like an inconvenience or something merely taken for granted.

Imagine...

What would Soil have to say about this?

What would it take to fall (back) in love with soil?

What is possible?

‘When I talk about relationship – first our relationship has to be with the soil, with the earth. We have become disconnected with the soil, with the earth. Dirt is not dirty. Soap is dirty with chemicals. Our relationship with the earth with the soil with the plants, walking on the earth, walking on the soil, Soil is our Mother, we are soil’

- Vandana Shiva.

Soil is Society

The scientific journey into soil has many exciting twists, turns and exciting revelations. We at Síolta Chroí are on a deep learning journey to know more about biological approaches to soil health and restoration, as well as understanding the chemical and physical approaches, uses and implications on soil health. We are experimenting with the soils around us for ways to build good soil, how to grow regeneratively in a way that can promote rather than deplete soil health, and engage in any networks and spaces for sharing learning.

However, as well as the science of soil, we are also curious about the soul of the soil. What history does it hold? What traumas? What beauty? What are the stories? What does the soil want to communicate to us and how can we prepare ourselves to be ready to listen? Are we willing to change our pace and perspective to truly embrace the soul of the soil? Are we ready?

We have come to understand soil as a dynamic, living organism that we are only beginning to learn about on multiple and deeper layers. The topic of Soil is coming to the surface in recent times with a swell of interest, particularly through scientific research, the emergence of specialist expertise in this field, and an increased awareness of the importance of soil for some of the climate and biodiversity crises we are currently facing. Already we were seeing the huge importance of looking at soil and society; from a social justice perspective the living healthy soil appears to be abundant with answers to many of the critical issues facing these times.

Soil itself is a society – different organisms competing to create a dynamic equilibrium.

Dynamic Equilibrium = Life.

Soil is a complex Web of ancestral evolution that has created a balanced place within which competing interests strive to survive and evolve differently in different environmental circumstances. It is not too great a leap to suggest that we humans are a manifestation of soil, an intention echoed in many cultures, traditions and religious ceremonies. We ourselves are descendants of soil microbiota and we

have evolved a society not hugely different in essential mechanisms to that of a well ordered and healthy soil - when we are in balance!

A large part of our communication with what we see as our essential being, our soul or spirit is often interconnected with our internal microbiome, which affects our mood and mental health to a greater degree even than anything in wider society. “Listen to your Gut” takes on more meaning when we consider the implicit wisdom of our inner microbiome and how this key to our wider holistic wellbeing, physically, mentally and spiritually.



In our journey to understand the soul of the soil, we have witnessed beauty and deep healing. We have seen farmers dance with joy to see samples of their own soil come to life under a microscope. We have seen proud organic growers consider what more they can be doing to support healthy, dynamic soil - not just growing without chemical input but going the next step through regenerative practices. We have borne witness to people declaring their love for soil, in many different languages!

Here are some of the words of the people with whom we have worked through this project:

“Mind blowing, life changing, seeing the soil organisms and hearing their stories and perspectives and enthusiasm and love”.

“Amazing, mind-blowing perspective for the life in the soil”.

“I used to see soil as something to be ‘dealt with’, now I have fallen in love”

“The microscope spoke more than a million words (about soil)”.

“I like to see how people from our generation are changing the ways of agriculture. It gives me the hope that we can globally reduce the level of pesticides, hormones and chemical fertilizers in the soil and the water”.

This resource is a chance to communicate our journey, but we have written it as an emerging piece, including lots of quotations, images and questions. Indeed, we have more questions than answers, more stories to be unearthed than what we will ever know just ourselves. The beauty of this Journey into Soil is that it is emergent, restorative and ongoing. So we welcome you to journey with us. Develop your own relationship with the soil under the place you stand. Soil is ready for you. And on a quiet day you might even hear her breathing...

"I remember the words of Bill Tall Bull, a Cheyenne elder. As a young person, I spoke to him with a heavy heart, lamenting that I had no native language with which to speak to the plants and the places that I love. "They love to hear the old language," he said, "it's true." "But," he said, with fingers on his lips, "You don't have to speak it here." "If you speak it here," he said, patting his chest, "They will hear you."

— Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*.

Activity: Connect with the soil around you

Is there a place in nature that you feel belonging to?

Go to that Place.

Thank that place for allowing you to be there, and for all the gifts its presence makes in your life.

Put intentions of gratitude into the space you are in.

How is the soil? Is it visible?

How does the soil feel? Damp? Warm? Cold? Content? Happy to see you?

Become curious about the soil.

Touch it.

Smell it.

Breathe it in.

Listen to it.

Engage with the soil with all your senses.

What is it communicating?

Tune in with yourself.

How are you feeling when you are in relationship with the soil?

How is your mind? How is your body?

Listen inwardly for any messages or communication coming from within.

Thank the soil and your inner listening for this experience.

Digging where we stand



Artwork from participant on 'A Journey into Soil' (April 2023)

In creating a resource on Soil, Soul, Society, we first of all need to introduce the space and context from where we are writing...

We are based in a townland called Aghacloghan close to the town of Carrickmacross in the southern part of county Monaghan.

Aghacloghan is the townland which has (like many townlands) been anglicised from the original name, Áth an Chlocháin. This translates as 'ford of an old stone causeway'.

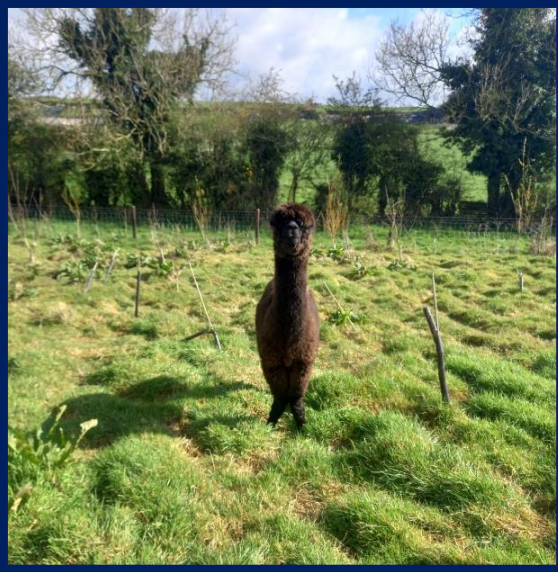
We are based in an area dominated by land that has been farmed by industrial agriculture. What some people see as rolling green fields in a supposedly picturesque Irish landscape, we see a green desert.

We recognise the need for healing...

... healing the separation of people and wider nature...

... healing of the soil from overgrazing, fertiliser use and a model of farming and gardening that extracts without giving back...

... healing the soul of the land and the souls of all the beings that live here.



Paddy the Alpaca on the land at SÍolta Chroí

Let us dig where we stand.

Let us recover our old placenames and the wisdom of the land carried by them.

Let us go barefoot on the soil surface, earthing ourselves and connecting with an talamh, the land.

Let us speak our language, the language of the land, sing and speak and taste the words that heal.

Let us remember ways of living and being that are reciprocal, regenerative and restorative for soil, for society, for the soul of this land and the souls that live here.

The Place of the Worm

The placenames of Ireland reveal mysteries and myths about the landscapes we find ourselves in. We have discovered that the townlands to the south of Áth an Chlocháin is called Peast, anglicised from the Irish name Péist.

péist, f. (gs. ~e, pl. ~eanna). 1. (Fabulous) beast, reptile, monster. ~ mhór, monster; whale. ~ chon, ~ mhara, sea-serpent. ~ ghliogair, rattlesnake. S.a. COR15. 2. (a) Worm. ~ chrúcach, hookworm. ~ talún, earthworm. ~ phlánach, flatworm.

Cor na péiste, cable-stitch (see image).

Péist chapail, large caterpillar.

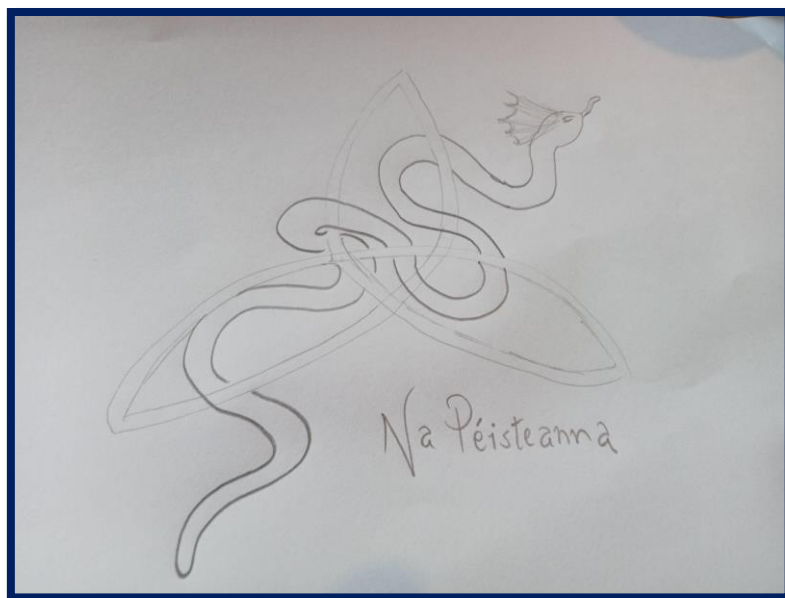
Snaidhm na péiste, 'serpent's knot'.



Leaning into the translation of Péist as referring to 'worm', we can speculate that at one time the soil here may have been quite good, worms being one indicator of healthy living soil. And so we feel a responsibility to restore the soils around us, and beyond, to a healthfulness that is busy with worms and other life! Minimising soil disturbance (e.g. no dig), mulching, sowing cover crops, mob-grazing of livestock are some ways to increase the fertility going into the soil. These processes provide habitat and the conditions for earthworms to thrive! In return, they will thank you by aerating the soil, decomposing organic matter, enabling nutrient cycling and promoting plant growth → all adding up to improving soil structure, one earthworm at a time!

However, Péist can also refer to fabulous beast, sea serpent, and we are curious about the associations with these serpent energies. These energies are hanging around close to the surface on these lands, however some would argue that they have been suppressed and pushed underground. So what does the serpent or beast mean for Ireland? Think of St Patrick driving the snakes out of Ireland. Unlikely that Ireland was overrun by snakes, more likely that the serpent energies needed to be driven out and this was attempted and to an extent achieved by the Church. However these energies were likely only driven underground and are waiting to be stamped back above the surface, back into our beings and communities once again - people of all genders reclaiming their sovereign serpent energies, their divine masculinities, at ease in their sensualities and sexualities.

So what does this mean for us if we are to embrace Soil, Soul, Society with a grounded integrity to the place we are working from? We can honour the péist within us. We can heal the soils to bring back worms and wider soil life, thus healing the suppressed energies brought about by the church and state and work towards greater sovereignty of the land, its people and the soils.



Practical Activity: Take a soil sample

For this activity, you might want to take comparative samples from two separate locations, e.g. in the middle of a field/ under a hedge or tree/ at the entrance. Choosing the locations is entirely dependent on your own curiosity for the soil you are on.

Get a spade and make a clear square cubic cut on all 4 sides.

Lever the sample out, ensuring to take care to keep the base and face intact so that it is as much as possible the shape of a cube.

Lying the sample on it's side, you can observe the top soil and sub soil layers, the colour, the structure of the soil, the length and structure of any roots in the soil.

You can make comparisons based on the samples you have chosen.

To count the earthworms in the soil, this is best done when it is warm and after a few days of rain to give the best result. It is best not to do this when the soil is dry.

Using a mat and a pot, hand-sort through the soil, placing earthworms into the pot and counting them as you do so.

Count and record the number of earthworms.

Both of these activities could be repeated on an annual basis, under similar conditions, timing and location as possible, and this could give you information on any improvements you might be seeing.



The Stony Grey Soil of Monaghan

Reflecting on the stony soil from the cloch in the townland of Áth an Chlocháin is the famous poem by Patrick Kavanagh, 'Stony Grey Soil of Monaghan'.

Patrick Kavanagh, one of Ireland's greatest poets, was born in Inniskeen in 1904 on a small farm not that far from Áth an Chlocháin. Inniskeen, or Inis Caoin, means 'peaceful island'. In 1936, he was still a working farmer. Born into modest means and living through decades of great hardship in Ireland, Kavanagh struggled financially for most of his lifetime. As a poet, he often felt isolated, on the margins of society. Much of his poetry adopts a confessional tone as he reveals his inner conflicts and soul questions. He found inspiration and comfort in nature, and in his treasure-trove of Monaghan memories. Today his legacy lives on through the universal themes of soul, love, beauty, nature and God laid bare in the great gift of his poetry. It is indeed, *a legacy of the soul*.

(taken from 'The Patrick Kavanagh Centre', Inniskeen).

Stony Grey Soil of Monaghan

*O stony grey soil of Monaghan
The laugh from my love you thieved;
You took the gay child of my passion
And gave me your clod-conceived.*

*You clogged the feet of my boyhood
And I believed that my stumble
Had the poise and stride of Apollo
And his voice my thick-tongued mumble.*

*You told me the plough was immortal!
O green-life conquering plough!
The mandril stained, your coulter blunted
In the smooth lea-field of my brow.*

*You sang on steaming dunghills
A song of cowards' brood,
You perfumed my clothes with weasel itch,
You fed me on swinish food*

*You flung a ditch on my vision
Of beauty, love and truth.
O stony grey soil of Monaghan
You burgled my bank of youth!*

*Lost the long hours of pleasure
All the women that love young men.
O can I still stroke the monster's back
Or write with unpoisoned pen.*

*His name in these lonely verses
Or mention the dark fields where
The first gay flight of my lyric
Got caught in a peasant's prayer.*

*Mullahinsa, Drummeril, Black Shanco-
Wherever I turn I see
In the stony grey soil of Monaghan
Dead loves that were born for me.*

Image by Helga from Pixabay

- What does the grey colour of the soil reveal?
- What is significant about the stones?

The poet gave us information about the land we find ourselves in. While in this poem it is a reluctant yet nostalgic relationship with the soil, we can decipher information which is significant in this journey of getting to know the soil more intimately.

Activity: Write a poem to your soil

Before beginning, have a pen/ coloured pencils and a writing pad or jotter to hand.

Take off your shoes. Connect with the soil through your bare feet.
Breathe and allow your nervous system to settle down.
Notice the sensations in your feet, your soles, your toes.
Notice how it feels throughout your body to stand barefoot on the soil.
Breathe.

Imagine the boundary between your bare soles and the earth begin to blur.
You are growing through the soil, from the soil.
You are becoming soil.
Through your soles are roots starting to burrow down through the earth.
Your body is firmly planted and is thriving in this soil.
Breathe.

When you are beginning to feel grounded and connected in the place in which you are standing, notice any parts of your body that want to speak.
Listen to these parts, even if they don't quite make sense.
Listen to the earth pulsing through you, listen to the earth underfoot, listen to yourself through this connection.
What does she have to say?

Enjoy the sensations and the experience for as long as it feels good to be there.
When you are ready, thank the earth for holding you and for sharing with you.
Begin to come back into your body, back into the human-being body you occupy.
Notice the air on your face, you might want to wiggle your fingers or toes.
Breathe.
Start to move, as and how it feels comfortable.

Take your writing pad and writing utensils.
Jot down any words or images coming up.
You might want to continue with this, drawing and doodling the flow as it emerges.
If there are words, note down the words that have arrived, then take some time to then arrange these into a poem or prose.

When you are finished, read this to the soil.

Ecosystem Restoration and Soil

The UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration is a rallying call for the protection and revival of ecosystems all around the world, for the benefit of people and nature. It aims to halt the degradation of ecosystems and restore them to achieve global goals. Only with healthy ecosystems can we enhance people's livelihoods, counteract climate change, and stop the collapse of biodiversity.

www.decadeonrestoration.org

Síolta Chroí is one of Ireland's first Ecosystem Restoration Camps (ERCs), and we are connected to the Global Network of ERCs worldwide. We have been doing what we can to learn, experiment with, and practise ecosystem restoration on the land here at Aghacloghan, while at the same time sharing and promoting these approaches with others throughout the island and beyond, connecting learning and networks across the world in order to share the best practice and enhance solidarity for these urgent efforts to restore ecosystems worldwide.

We are at a critical moment as we have reached serious ecological tipping points. The work to be done is urgent, and requires bottom-up, community based and nature-informed practices, while at the same time having policy, governmental and financial support to make this happen at the scale that is required.

'Soulful' Ecosystem Restoration

These efforts in restoration are an opportunity not only to heal and restore biodiversity and wider nature, but from a Soul perspective, this can be an opportunity to return to many Indigenous ways of being, retrieving place-based ecological knowledge and the healing and promotion of a renewed partnership between humans and wider nature.

'Indigenous people didn't garden gardens; we cared for whole forests, for whole ecosystems. Indigenous management was at massive regional scale. Minding all life - not just little pockets - was our job to tend to the whole system... we need the whole system if we are really going to work regeneratively'

(*'Architects of Abundance: Indigenous Regenerative Food Systems and the Excavation of Hidden History'*, Lyla June, Food Sovereignty Now! Indigenous Perspectives on Seed Sovereignty, January '23).



Ecosystem Restoration and Social Justice

The ecological tipping points that we have passed are intertwined and inseparable from many other social injustices at this time. The Climate Justice movement acknowledges that the climatic and ecological damage that has been done disproportionately affects people and communities within and between countries. While these communities typically have had nothing to do with creating the mess in the first place, the impact will be felt most by them.

‘Poor communities and communities of colour have unwillingly become homes to some of the world’s most toxic, most polluting sites - resulting in unforgivable losses for the community and for the environment’. (‘What do you mean by restoration’, Andrew Schwartz, Akin, Issue 2, centreforethics.org).

‘The long arm of modern agriculture stretches beyond farms, contributing to water pollution and climate change. Moreover, the health and well-being of those who work on farms remain social justice issues that should concern us all’. (What Your Food Ate, David Montgomery and Anne Bilke).

As well as intentions to heal the soil and the disconnect between people and wider nature, there is an important piece of work to be done in naming and addressing social justice within ecosystem restoration, climate justice and what a ‘just’ transition means for those who are going to be most affected by these changes. In order to learn from this, we can take inspiration from those communities already doing the work: those fighting for racial justice, queer rights, feminist movements, working class communities, peasant and landworkers’ movements.

Climate Change and Soil

After oceans, soil is the second largest natural carbon sink, surpassing forests and other vegetation in its capacity to capture carbon dioxide from air. These facts remind us how important healthy soils are, not just for our food production but also for our efforts to prevent the worst effects of climate change.

In April 2019, a group of highly influential scientists and activists called for ‘defending, restoring and re-establishing forests, peatlands, mangroves, salt marshes, natural seabeds and other crucial ecosystems’ to let nature remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and store it. Restoring ecosystems would also support biodiversity and enhance a wide range of ecosystem services, including cleaning air and water. Healthy soil can assist with mitigating flooding and droughts, capture carbon from the air, store carbon, reduce the need for inputs for farming and food growing, as well as help to bring back wider ecosystem health benefits starting from healthy soil.

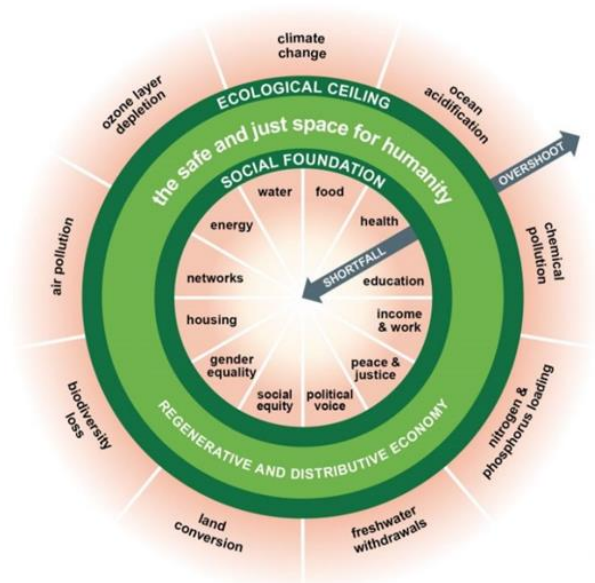
Climate change has a major impact on soil, and changes in land use and soil can either accelerate or slow down climate change. Without healthier soils and a sustainable land and soil management, we cannot tackle the climate crisis, produce enough food and adapt to a changing climate. Healthier soils and land ecosystems could capture and store more carbon dioxide from the atmosphere than they currently do. Green spaces and natural areas could also help people and nature to adapt to the inevitable changes in our climate. Soil could be a powerful partner in our efforts to tackle climate change and deserves the love and attention to be able to do the best job possible in these efforts.

(Taken from ‘Soil, Land and Climate Change’, European Environment Agency, 2019).

Doughnut Economics

Doughnut Economics, by Kate Raworth, is an approach offering a vision for humanity to be able to thrive in the 21st century, meeting the needs of all people while living within the means of the planet. The circular image of the doughnut has one ring representing the 'social foundation' to ensure that no one is left behind, nor left without any of life's essentials, while the other ring is the 'ecological ceiling' to ensure that humanity does not overshoot the planetary boundaries that support Earth's life-supporting systems. The space between these two rings is the doughnut – a space that is ecologically safe and socially just – a space where humans and nature can thrive.

The following activity is from DEAL (Doughnut Economics Action Lab) www.doughnuteconomics.org



Doughnut Economics Activity

Invite everyone to make two circles; a big circle on the outside and a smaller circle on the inside.

Introduce Doughnut Economics, the inner and outer rings and what they represent.

Introduce the different limits presented as part of the inner and outer rings and tangibly how these might manifest for people in this country, and in other countries.

Invite those on the outer ring to stretch out as far as they can go, until only the ends of their fingertips are touching. Check in with how people are feeling. These are our outer boundaries, and if we pass where the fingertips touch the ecological ceiling fragments and breaks which undermines the life-supporting systems of the planet and bringing collapse.

Invite those on the inner circle to stand shoulder to shoulder, and tighter if they can. This ring represents the Social Foundation and the inner limits. Billions of people are experiencing this edge, feeling the squeeze. You can ask people how this feels.

Explain to the groups that the space in the middle is the yummy part of the doughnut, the space where humans and wider nature are able to thrive. So, taking that thought, invite everyone to drop their hands and move around the space in silence.

As you walk think of:

- a place in nature you love and care for.... Meet a partner and share where this is.
- something you are grateful for that has enabled you to be here today... Meet a new partner and share what this is.
- a skill, a question, an idea that can help us engage with the doughnut... Meet another partner and share this.

Invite people back into the two rings again, all facing into the inner doughnut centre.

Invite any reflections that have come up from this activity.

Access to Green Spaces

“People often ask me what one thing I would recommend to restore relationship between land and people. My answer is almost always, “Plant a garden.” It’s good for the health of the earth and it’s good for the health of people. A garden is a nursery for nurturing connection, the soil for cultivation of practical reverence. And its power goes far beyond the garden gate—once you develop a relationship with a little patch of earth, it becomes a seed itself. Something essential happens in a vegetable garden. It’s a place where if you can’t say “I love you” out loud, you can say it in seeds. And the land will reciprocate, in beans.”

Robin Wall Kimmerer, [‘Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants’](#).

We are increasingly learning more about the positive impacts being in nature has on human beings; in terms of soothing nervous systems, mental health benefits, and reducing stress. However as cities expand and the wild and green spaces are eaten up, it highlights the privilege that is access to land, and raises the question of who has access and who does not?

Social Farms and Gardens NI have created [‘The Case for a Benchmark Standard for Community Growing and Allotment Provision in Northern Ireland’](#). There are a number of recommendations seeking to increase the area for community growing space, promotion of Community Asset Transfer, local food growing strategies and community planning. Reports like this are one step in making more space available for community growing, and has potential to enable more inclusivity for those who otherwise cannot access growing space.

Community Gardens Ireland have produced a proposal for Community Growing, [‘Let’s Get Growing’](#). In this proposal, they acknowledge the climate mitigation benefits of community growing and contribution to wider ecosystem “services”,

‘Urban and peri-urban agriculture (also) contribute in adapting to climate change, including extreme events, by reducing the urban heat island effect, increasing water infiltration and slowing down run-offs to prevent flooding, etc. (Lwasa et al. 2014, 2015; Kumar et al. 2017a1209). For example, a scenario analysis shows that urban gardens reduce the surface temperature up to 10°C in comparison to the temperature without vegetation (Tsilini et al. 20151210). Urban agriculture can also improve biodiversity and strengthen associated ecosystem services (Lin et al. 20151211).’

- Referenced from ‘Let’s Get Growing’, Community Gardens Ireland.

These localised approaches drawn from international good practice can help inform a community-based approach to ecosystem restoration, highlighting what communities can do if land is made available and the structural supports are there. Soil is key in all of this; building healthy soil within community gardens, restoring soils and wider ecosystems across the island and beyond, supporting communities to access land and the opportunity to grow food and care for those spaces that care for them.

Mapping Activity: Green Spaces

Consider the green, shared and nature spaces in your local area.

Who is welcome here?

Who might not feel welcome?

How would you know?

Who is represented here?

Who is not represented?

How would you know?

Who has access to green space in your community?

What prevents people from accessing these spaces?

Who are involved in the local community gardens and allotments?

Who is not represented?

Why might this be the case?



Regenerative Agriculture

‘Local food systems; that is where you can make a difference. You can't create a different supply chain - that is not our role. Our role is to build from the ground up, from the soil up, from the earthworms up and do the real work, care for the earth, care for our communities’.

Dr. Vandana Shiva

Regenerative Agriculture focuses on the restoration of soil health by a set of guiding principles that largely aim to create more diversity of life in our soils. It requires a shift in mindset alongside the shifts in changes to the dominant and extractive agricultural practices that have been promoted over the last decades into new ways of thinking and being with the land and with the soil. It's a direction rather than a destination, and much of the work invites people into new ways of thinking and being with the land rather than prescribed solutions.



When we think about restoring the soils and wider ecosystems of Ireland, farmers are a key group of people that are vital in making this possible. With almost 70% of the land in Ireland being used for agriculture (OSI, 2022), there is a huge potential for ecosystem restoration if more farmers and landowners practiced ‘Farming for Nature’ and regenerative agriculture, to bring back life onto their farms and into their soil.

Our ‘modern’ ways of doing agriculture are killing soil. ‘For a long time the plough was seen as noble and necessary’ (Matthew Evans, ‘Soil: the incredible story of what keeps the earth, and us, healthy’). In our modern agricultural system, soil does not have the opportunity to recover from regular ploughing, overgrazing and being sprayed with fertilisers, herbicides and pesticides. Just as soil is recovering and reestablishing diversity and biological life, the plough comes in and disrupts the microbiome of the soil, interrupts the complex fungi networks, destroys soil structure and actually counter-intuitively promotes the establishment of fast-growing weeds – the very problems that ploughing is seeking to address. These approaches need to be addressed when we look at agriculture’s contribution towards the climate and biodiversity crises we are facing.

However, regenerative agriculture approaches can actually be significant in assisting nature in navigating the same crises. Well-managed grazing can increase carbon in soil and increase biodiversity¹. Much of the work of regenerative agriculture is curious about how to bring back living, healthy soil, so that farming can be good for the land, good for farmers, good for growing nutritious, affordable food and can be one of the enablers through this time of climate transition.

'Regenerative farming isn't just good for farmers, it is really the only way, if performed across the globe, that humanity can have any hope of living on a pleasant planet'. (www.groundswellag.org)

'Farmer as Hero'

Farmers have been presented as the 'bad guys' in the fight against climate change, and very often are pitted against the environment. We are curious about:

- What could 'Farmer as Hero' look like?
- Can farmers make a decent living while still healing and restoring the environment around them?
- What does the restoration of farmers look like within the wider work of restoring ecosystems?

We are leaning into compassionate approaches to explore regenerative agriculture and ecosystem restoration with farmers in and around the border counties of Ireland. Key to regenerative agriculture is healthy soil, and we explore how to achieve this through looking at the connected issues of livestock, water, agroforestry, economics and humans within the ecosystem.

'...regenerative farming practices can heal the soil, bring life back to the land, and grow the nutrient-dense and flavour-packed foods we need to reclaim our health. Once you understand the connections, it becomes clear that for plants, animals and people alike, the roots of health grow from healthy soil'. ('What Your Food Ate', David Montgomery and Anne Bilke).



Soil and Soul

'We are ancestors, life partners, co-creators with the micro and macro-organisms'

(Erin Ju-Yin McMorrow)

The organic component of Soil is 'Humus'. The word humus is related to the Latin words homo (human being) and humilitas (humility). The adjective humilis can be translated as "humble", "grounded", or "from the earth".

And so from an etymological as well as a spiritual perspective, humans are soil, we are the Earth.

In Yoruba, the word for human is eniyan, or 'chosen one' (Baba Wande Abimbola). While this might seem egotistical, according to Indigenous wisdom, this is actually a call for humans to be guardians of the land. This is our gift, our calling to take care of the Earth.



When we take a look at our inner ecosystem, and in particular our gut, we are not so different from soil. The diets we are feeding ourselves have drifted a long way from that of our ancestors, and globally micronutrient malnutrition has become a bigger problem than inadequate calories².

Our ancestors would have foraged from the roadsides.

They would have eaten the food that was possible to grow in the local climatic conditions.

Our ancestors, up until very recently, would have eaten organic without that term having been coined.

So what has changed?

2 'What Your Food Ate', Montgomery and Bilke

Food is big business.

The impacts of global trade have had huge effects on what we eat: limiting choice and nutritional content, making healthy and nutritious food a luxury rather than something accessible and affordable for all.

Seeds are big business.

Typically, seeds were held, protected and shared by the peasants and farmers, they were open pollinated and had open access for farmers, peasants, growers and the pollinators, and they were held in reverence by the ancestors and future generations.

However, today seeds have been commodified, forcing people to become reliant on seeds that have been modified and which can predict a profit for the seed companies each year. Seed Sovereignty is the reclaiming of the right to grow, save and share open-pollinated seed which has the ability to adapt to local climatic conditions and which are within the control of those who care for the land and grow the food.

'Food Sovereignty is about more than local food – it is about rights – our rights to access land, resources, seeds and knowledge. It is also about the welfare of the planet, about how low-input farming systems that feed our people while responding to the challenge of climate change. It is about democracy, about the voices of our people and about how we organise ourselves. It is about the rights of women. It is about our societies living at peace with each other and with our planet. It is about recognising our place in the generational flow that includes our ancestors and our descendants.' — Irish Food Sovereignty Declaration – 2015

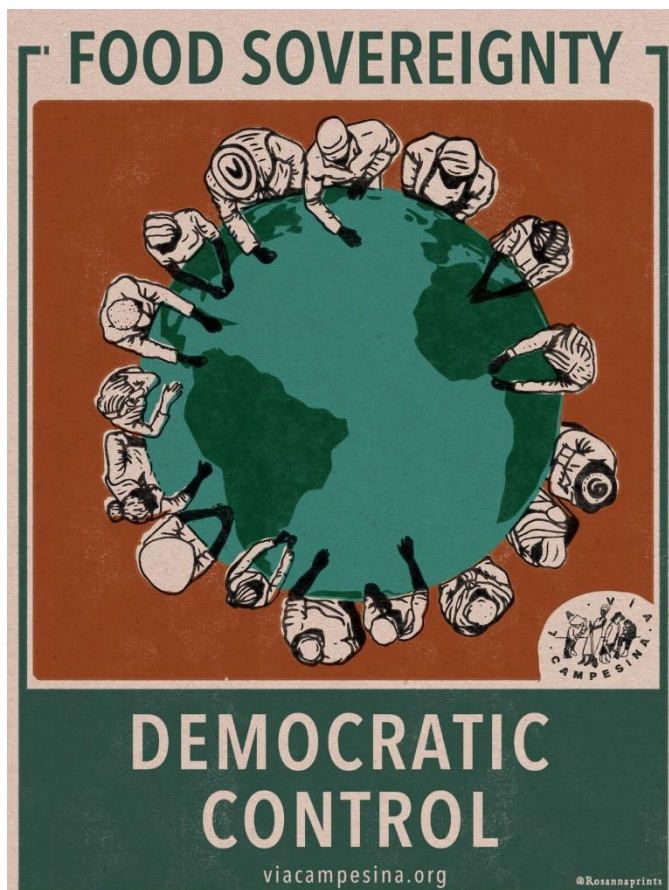


Image created by Rossana Morris, an artist of the Land Workers' Alliance, a member of La Via Campesina based in the United Kingdom, and access has been possible through the invitation to *'appreciate the art, learn more about the declaration and freely share with others'*. viacampesina.org

We also must remember the impact of An Gorta Mór (Ireland's forced starvation or 'famine') on the cultural and transgenerational trauma of this land and its people, and thus our relationship with the soil, with foraged foods and with growing our own.

During An Gorta Mór 1 million people died from hunger while food was plentiful and being exported from the country by the shipload, and there was the forced migration of another 1.5 million people. The causes of An Gorta Mór included colonisation, laissez faire economics and monoculturalism, namely overdependence on one variety of potato (the lumpers) which the landless Irish had become dependent on. When this was struck by blight, the entire crop was wiped out. Comparatively, a variety of potato grown in Kerry at that time, 'Butes', was unaffected by blight, demonstrating the importance of biodiversity for resilient food systems³.

'We desperately need to keep all of the rich diversity growing in the ground out in the fields. I think of the loss of that incredibly complex rich peasant society in Ireland, all of that whole layer of richness of our country, of our people that we lost. Because they are the people that I meet in Ethiopia and Kenya now, who are keeping their rich complex informal systems of seed alive in the ground, in situ, evolving and adapting in the climate and the environment. And the dominant paradigm of why there was a famine in Ireland in the 1840s, that is all there, trying to steal their genetic resources and capture their seeds and telling them how to grow it in a particular way, the way the white man says'.

Clare O'Grady Walsh, Afri Feile Bride, 2020

What does 'Sovereignty' look like when we consider our access to land and reclaiming control of our own food and seeds?

What are Indigenous perspectives that might help to inform this?

'Trust' is a Soul quality that opens up opportunities to strengthen local food ecosystems. We can trust the memory of indigenous seeds to produce resilient crops. We can trust the soil. We can set up honesty boxes to sell eggs. We can engage in Community Support Agriculture and trust the growers to produce food for us.

Joanne Fullerton, from her [article⁴](#), 'What Difference Can Soul Make to the Real Food And Farming Movement?' 2024.

At Síolta Chroí, we find that we cannot properly look at issues of Food and Seed Sovereignty without looking at the traumas of the land and of the people here on this island. Indeed, trauma and land trauma is not unique to this island, and many of those arriving here from other countries have experienced similar issues but from different contexts. This should be a call to action for those of us based here to warmly welcome people arriving here having been forced to flee their own places of origin. Nature clearly shows us there is strength, creativity, resilience and more dynamic life when there is diversity; as beings in nature we should learn from this and welcome as much diversity into our communities with open arms.

³ 'The Web of Life: biodiversity, interconnectivity and An Gorta Mór', Nicola Winters (Afri, 2021)

⁴ <https://orfc.org.uk/what-difference-can-soul-make-to-the-real-food-and-farming-movement/>

Gartan Clay

Gartan Clay is found in Gartan, Co. Donegal, where Colmcille was born. It is said that Colmcille gave the soil special powers as a gift to his clan. If you carry the clay with you on a journey, no harm will come to you and so emigrants from this part of Ireland would typically have paid a visit to Gartan before emigrating and would take some of the clay soil with them.

This story resonates today with migrants who are forced to flee their own countries because of climate change, war and forced migration due to economic reasons. It has been reported that packets of soil have been found with people who have been crossing the Mediterranean in recent years, exactly as our ancestors on this island have been doing for generations.



Soil and Society: Composting our Shit^t



'When we realise that the Great Mother herself and all of fertility lie in the soil and the womb, we begin to reconnect with the eternal. When we awaken our suppressed relationship to the soil, the earth, our bodies, and our sexuality, we begin to feel the great dance and song of all life within us'.

(Erin Yu-Juin McMorrow)

It would be impossible to create a resource on 'Soil' without mentioning Compost! However, when we extend this to a resource on 'Soil, Soul, Society', this compost can take on another life of its own completely.

Compost is the process of recycling organic matter through decomposition to create a nutrient-rich soil amendment. The process involves the activity of microorganisms feeding on the materials added to the compost, using nitrogen, carbon, water and oxygen to make the magic happen!

In our gardens there is waste, produced from clearing out, weeding and cutting back. This waste can stay on site and serve the purpose of eventually feeding the garden through the process of creating compost, recycling the waste materials which will go back onto the soil.

Planning and management is key to a successful composting process, and making decisions around the collection, planning, design, and maintenance of the compost bin or heap will make the difference between well-rotted and ready to use compost, or a smelly heap or rodent trap.

Here are some tips:

- Gather brown (paper, cardboard, twigs, leaves, etc.) carbon materials and green (food waste, grass clippings, plant trimmings) nitrogen to a ratio of about 3:1 brown: green. Compost can be sped up by these materials being shredded or chopped down, increasing the surface area.
- Make sure there is enough oxygen and water passing through the compost. This might mean turning it with a fork or from one bay to another on a regular basis, and keeping an eye on water levels.
- If the pile is too wet, it might need more brown material and more turning to get more airflow. If the pile is too dry, adding water and turning it will kick start activity again.
- The initial design you chose can also have an effect on successful composting: this will depend on your site, your space and the quantities of materials you want to compost. Creating the design that works best for you will make it most usable in the end. Consider airflow, access and how you will clear out at the end of the process.

Composting the 'We'

'We imagine compost as a way of thinking, reading and writing with land as a storied place where humans and nonhumans are being made and unmade in the ongoing recomposition of a common world'.

(Composting Settler Nationalisms, Arthur and Jentik).

Arthur and Jentik frame the Composting of Settler Nationalisms in terms of:

Waste: the colonial project is based on assumption of Indigenous lands as 'disposable', and often 'laid to waste along with knowings, beings and doings tied to Indigenous lifestyles'.

Recycling: the post colonial process of keeping the colonial project going; one in which many post- or currently colonised societies can often be complicit within.

Composting: the strength of this process is that transformation is possible, considering what is it that needs composting and considering knowledge and ways of being as part of this.



Applying the process of Composting to the societal context, we can consider what needs composting in terms of knowledge or ways of being that are no longer serving us? Just as the leftover waste from the garden is no longer needed, we can socially compost that which we consciously want to transform into new ways of doing and being. Donna Haraway (2015), a feminist theorist, takes this a step further to suggest that it is not humans, but individual companies and knowledge regimes that are that which need composting at this time for their complicity in sustaining unjust systems.

The Glasgow CCA (Centre for Contemporary Arts) hosted work around 'We are Compost/ Composting the We' (2022). They asked, '*what new kinds of transformation are possible when we read, share, shred, till, test, plant and grow collectively with the land and its soils*'?

Inspired by this, we include this question here:

What systems, stories, ways of living and being need composting?

What would this look like?

What could it mean to grow collectively with the land and its soils?

We invite you to lean into these questions with those with whom you work, and integrate the ideas here as concepts into the work you do. As well as creating healthy, dynamic and life-giving compost heaps, consider what else is needing composting in other areas?



Soil and Soul; the only difference is U and I

'When we develop the tools for healing and thereby heal our connection with the land, the land herself starts to share her stories; Mother Nature herself will share her song.'

(Erin Yu-Juin McMorrow)

So how is it that healing of the soil can help to heal our inner and outer worlds at this time of chaos, confusion and collapse?

In this time of polycrises, systems declining and collapsing, we can look to nature for ways to navigate the unknowns.

We have not been trained for **uncertainty**; our education, economic and many other systems are based on predictability and somewhat certainty. Yet nature is continually adapting, changing, shifting based on her response to what is happening at that time.

We have not been trained for **chaos**; rather a predictability and order that keeps us all behaving well and is easier to manage. Yet nature is chaotic; she is fractal and unpredictable and beautiful in the chaotic patterns she grows into. We see this when we allow nature to do her thing, when we relinquish control of our human-over-nature tendencies and trust that in the chaos, nature knows exactly what she is doing.

We have not been **trained for these times**. However, when we lean into nature, into our very own human nature, we may find that we have the answers. Leaning into old knowledge, Indigenous wisdom, and nature's teachings might be the learning we are needing right now. The answers are already there; observing nature and how she manages to achieve balance (sometimes against all odds!) can be a guide as well as a cause for hope right now.

Part of the work is to unlearn old ways and compassionately dismantle the systems that are no longer serving us. Alongside this, we can be trying and testing localised and collective responses to some of the big challenges we are facing.

Keep ourselves and each other going through these rapidly changing times is important. Slowing down. Rest is work. Becoming comfortable with a new pace, a pace that allows for different wisdom to arrive and relationship with nature to integrate into our being.

And developing a closer relationship to the soil is a huge part of this process. It will look differently for everyone. Getting hands on the soil, bare feet on the Earth and remembering and reigniting that deep and beautiful connection that we have with wider nature is Restoration in Practice.

Conclusion

This resource has captured some of the places we have gone to in our exploration of the intersection between 'Soil, Soul, and Society'. While the resource has very much been written from the land and soil on which we are based in Aghacloghan, we have had the privilege of interacting with people from all across the world in the process of diving into these questions, as well as being touched by the inspiration from Indigenous wisdoms - hopefully engaging with this in as non-extractive way as possible!

While we do not know all the answers, and while our own learning is ongoing in terms of the science of the soil through innovations that are continually emerging, as a result of engaging with this project and this process, we have discovered a renewed appreciation for Soil. We have looked more closely below our feet for how our own soil is. We have kept a place at the table for the land to speak to us. We have infused our own souls with the spirit of the soil, including all the associated wounds and our determination for restoration. We have leaned into the traumas the soil holds, while continuing to sing and walk barefoot in our attempts towards healing and restorative practices for humans, soil and wider nature. We have been exposed to the current social injustices connected to land and soil, including forced migration, access to land and green spaces, food insecurity and the extractive practices of mining. We have also seen how deeper connection to the soil can be the space for people to slow down, tune in and fill themselves up, restoring themselves and wider nature with renewed capacity to tackle some of the other outer issues needing to be addressed in our society today.

Throughout, we have been closely guided by the lands, soils, trees, hedgerows, dreams, ancestors, winds, rains, seeds, roots and many other living beings that have been doing their thing in the background.

We hope you have enjoyed journeying with us in this resource on 'Soil, Soul, Society'. May it provide some inspiration and resourcing for you to care for the soils, spaces and places that care for you.

*'Widening circles of sisters and brothers working together to create
the new economy, the new healing work, the new agriculture,
the new technology, the new cities, the new relationships,
the new loving, the new communicating,
the new intimacy, the new dying'.*

(Erin Yu-Juin McMorow, 'Grounded: a Fierce, Feminist Guide to Connecting with the Soil and Healing from the Ground Up')

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