



COMMONING WATER AS A PATHWAY TO SUSTAINABLE AND CULTURALLY-GROUNDED MANAGEMENT: THE CASE OF STAGIATES, GREECE

Maria-Iris Kotzamani¹ , Angeliki Paidakaki¹ , Xenia Katsigianni² , Manolis Pratsinakis¹ 

¹ Harokopio University of Athens, Department of Geography
Eleftheriou Venizelou Ave. 70, GR-176 76, Kallithea, Athens: Greece
i.kotzamani@hua.gr • paidakaki@hua.gr • m.pratsinakis@hua.gr

² KU Leuven, Department of Architecture, Faculty of Engineering Science
Kasteelpark Arenberg 1 – box 2431, 3001 Leuven: Belgium
polyxeni.katsigianni@kuleuven.be

Abstract. This paper investigates the emergence of water commons as an alternative paradigm to privatization, focusing on commoning practices as sustainable forms of governance. It emphasizes the role of a culture of water in fostering long-term stewardship and sustainable management. To illustrate these dynamics, it examines the case of Stagiates, a small village in Greece, where the community-led initiative community-led Free Waters initiative mobilized commoning practices to protect the local source of water from privatization. The research draws on empirical data collected during two field visits, interviews with community members, and analysis of blog-posts, newspaper articles and other sources. The case of Stagiates demonstrates how commons-based governance can sustain resources, and how commoning builds linkages across ecological care, cultural identity, and democratic participation, offering a living example of water sustainability in practice.

Keywords: commoning, water, privatization, culture, sustainability.

Introduction

Water has been recognized as a common good, and as part of humanity's natural and cultural heritage, by international organizations and regulatory frameworks such as the EU Water Framework Directive (WFD) (EC, 2000), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS, 2023). The official declaration of the human right to safe and clean drinking water, was made on 28 July 2010, by the United Nations General Assembly (OHCHR, n.d.). However, this recognition remains centered on the needs of individual human beings (Bakker, 2007), without ensuring a community's collective rights to access, use, and manage local sources of water (Dupuits et al., 2020).

Alongside these developments, since the early 1990s, water privatization has spread worldwide, promoted as a mechanism to improve efficiency and ensure universal access (Prasad, 2007; Bakker, 2003; Greiner, 2020). Often implemented through processes of enclosure (Bollier, 2014), privatization has paradoxically been justified as a way to fulfill the human right to water (Bakker,

2007). However, its outcomes remain highly problematic. Today, 26% of the global population still lacks access to clean drinking water and about 40% lacks safely managed sanitation (WHO, 2025, August 26). At the same time, water prices continue to rise. In the EU, water, energy, and housing costs have increased by over 65% in the past two decades (Eurostat, 2024), while in the United States water privatization has been associated with price hikes far above inflation, on average 18% every two years (Food & Water Watch, 2023, March 2029).

These economic pressures have triggered worldwide resistance in the form of protests and grassroots initiatives. Landmark examples include the 'Cochabamba Water Wars' in Bolivia (Dwinell & Olivera, 2014), the Naples Manifesto in Italy, 'Água é de todos' ('Water belongs to everyone') in Portugal, the 'Initiative 136' and 'SaveGreekWater' in Thessaloniki, Greece, the 'Za pitno vodo' ('For Drinking Water') in Slovenia, the 'European Water Movement', and the European Citizens Initiative 'Right2Water.' Such movements contest the commodification of water and highlight the need for alternative, more democratic models of water governance. Although these mobilizations have primarily been directed against privatization, they have also broadened the debate on how water should be governed. By asserting water as a shared good and mobilizing community participation, they have challenged the dominant logic that treats water as a commodity and positioned collective stewardship as both possible and legitimate.

The entrenchment of privatization reflects the deeper ideological tensions in resource governance. Since the 1960s, neoliberal narratives have framed local, collective resource management as inherently unsustainable. This view is epitomized by Hardin's influential essay on the 'Tragedy of the Commons'. Hardin (1968) portrayed humans as rational maximizers inevitably depleting shared resources thereby implying that only state regulation or private ownership could prevent environmental degradation. Over the past three decades, however, commons scholarship has fundamentally challenged this assumption revealing that communities can and do manage resources sustainably through collective institutions, ensuring fair access, preventing overexploitation, and fostering long-term resilience (Wade, 1987; Ostrom, 1990; Agrawal, 2001; Bollier, 2014; Bollier & Helfrich, 2019). These studies evolved further introducing and exploring the notion of 'commoning', namely the social practices, institutions, and cultural values through which resources are collectively governed, as a viable pathway to sustainability (Bowers, 2006; Hansen et al., 2016; Euler, 2018b). Crucially, commons scholarship highlights that such governance systems are not merely resource-management arrangements but are embedded in cultural values, local knowledge, and community identities, which shape how resources are understood, used, and protected over time.

Parallel work in cultural and social sciences underscores the role of culture as a fourth pillar of sustainability (Nurse, 2006; Astara, 2014), drawing attention to the ways in which indigenous and local communities' knowledge, practices, and attachments to place foster stewardship and protection of natural resources (Diver et al., 2019; Tom et al., 2019). Water, in particular, is not only a biophysical necessity but also a cultural and social medium: it sustains livelihoods, anchors social life, and shapes collective memory and identity (Strang, 2006). In fact, societies may be understood as 'waterworlds' (Hastrup & Hastrup, 2015), where relationships with water permeate everyday life, value systems, and socio-economic activities.

In this context, scholars have increasingly framed water as a commons, highlighting how practices of commoning link governance, shared cultural values, and socio-ecological sustainability (Wagner, 2012; Boelens et al., 2022). A typical example of such a practice is the case of Naples, Italy, where water was legally recognized as a commons after citizens mobilization (Geagea & De Tullio, 2024). Similarly, work on local communities and indigenous peoples highlights how cultural identity underpins stewardship and more just, sustainable governance arrangements

(Johnston et al., 2012; Johnston, 2013; Martinez-Cruz et al., 2024). Yet, despite growing recognition of the value of commons-based water governance, the literature remains fragmented. Few studies systematically theorize the conceptual nexus between water commoning, cultural identity and sustainability, leaving limited understanding of how identity-based practices of commoning can be scaled or integrated into broader sustainability transformations without eroding their cultural grounding.

This paper contributes to these debates by examining how local initiatives treat water as a commons, mobilize cultural memory and identity in resisting privatization, and advance sustainability. The analysis centers on Stagiates, a small village in Mount Pelion, Greece, where the initiative where the Free Waters initiative emerged after the village's water supply was abruptly disconnected from its ancestral spring, Krya Vrysi (Cold Spring). Throughout its history, the community has been responsible for managing both the water and the irrigation channels. Nonetheless, in the 1970s–1980s the community gave permission to a private investor for the establishment of a bottling factory, followed by a second attempt in the 1990s to create a community-run bottling factory. However both attempts had an unsuccessful turnout. This, along with other events that hindered potential privatization of the local resource have reinforced a community-based management of the water resource. In 2020, the municipal enterprise – which is the official entity responsible for water management for Stagiates – disconnected, without any prior notice, the village's water supply network from its local source and connected it with the water supply network of the neighbor village of Portaria. Upon this action, locals immediately self-organized and formed an assembly to determine the necessary steps to achieve the village's reconnection to Krya Vrysi. These involved both legal action and a shift towards a commons-based management of the water resource.

The case offers a particularly revealing context for studying water commoning. Unlike many rural communities in Greece, Stagiates has a long-standing tradition of local assemblies and collective decision-making, which enabled residents to mobilize quickly in defense of their water source. The initiative not only challenges the commodification of water but also illustrates how claims to water as a commons can emerge from deeply rooted cultural ties to place. In Stagiates, water is not understood merely as a resource but as part of the community's heritage, collective memory, and identity. These cultural attachments sustain local mobilization and shape practices of stewardship, transforming resistance to privatization into broader claims for commons-based water governance. Building on this case, the study explores how commoning practices offer sustainable alternatives to privatization and how cultural values and collective memory shape water governance. To unpack these linkages, the paper answers the following questions: (1) How do local initiatives promote sustainable alternatives to water privatization, as well as articulate and mobilize claims for water as a commons? (2) How, and to what extent, can a culture of water as a commons sustain and steer local collective memory, knowledge, history, and identity, towards more sustainable water management? (3) To what extent does commoning result into and nourish water sustainability?

Analytically, the paper draws on theorization of commons and commoning as alternative governance models that counteract privatizations and promote sustainable socio-ecological systems. It focuses on patterns of commoning, to reveal how these develop social systems through which people sustainably manage water to cover their collective needs in self-organized ways. It also puts emphasis on water as a commons, and the way that communities, through local knowledge and initiatives, contribute to water sustainability.

Empirically, the paper draws on two field visits to Stagiates: the first in November 2023 for initial contact and engagement, and the second in April 2024. This five-month interval coincided with the election of a new community president taking office in 2024, providing an opportunity to examine potential shifts in local administration and their implications for the management of the village's water resources. This transition was significant, as the previous administration had failed to address long-standing community concerns, needs and priorities. The newly elected president, an active member of the village's assembly, was expected to advocate for the reconnection of the local spring to the village's water supply network and to restore community access to two common spaces – the local museum and the school – previously restricted by the former administration.

In addition, four semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted in Greek in 2024 with residents and local activists, two of which took place online. Each interview lasted approximately 2 hours and was recorded with the participants' consent. All interviewees are referenced in the paper using aliases. An interview guide was developed to facilitate discussion focusing on participants' relationship with local water, the circumstances surrounding the sudden disconnection from the spring, and community initiatives aimed at protecting water resources, and advocating for reconnection. The interviews were subsequently analyzed thematically.

The relatively small number of interviews reflects the qualitative and exploratory nature of the study. It also relates to the size of the community and constraints in participant availability. This is despite efforts to broaden participation, as several participants chose to share information informally rather than through recorded interviews. In any case, the interview material is not intended to be statistically representative of the wider population. Instead, it is indicative of key perspectives within the community. It is worth noting that while all interviewees were guided by a common interview protocol, their accounts reflect individual experiences and positions within the community. For instance, one of the interviewees, Alexandra, provided insights into the role of the local assembly, whereas Giannis offered an in-depth analysis of the privatization trajectory affecting local water. Additionally, some residents shared information informally during field visits, which proved valuable for contextual understanding, and the study triangulates interview data with web-based sources, including local blogs and newspaper articles.

By documenting how community members organize, deliberate, and defend access to their spring, the paper illustrates the transition from perceiving water as a shared resource to actively practicing commoning. It further exhibits patterns of commoning such as collective decision-making, shared stewardship, and local knowledge unfolding in specific cultural and institutional settings, as identified in commons literature (Bollier & Helfrich, 2019). In this sense, Stagiates offers insights into how culturally grounded practices of commoning can support more sustainable and democratic forms of water governance, and in turn, contributes to debates on commons, sustainability, and culture by illuminating their interconnections.

Commodification of Resources

The commodification of resources often follows a recognizable pattern: it begins with practices of enclosure, understood as 'a series of actions of creating new forms of boundary' (Johnson, 1996, p. 71, cited in Blomley, 2007, p. 1), which restrict access to land and resources previously available to local users (Bollier, 2014; Thompson, 2020). Such acts of enclosure are often state-led and followed by the granting of rights to a private company to manage and exploit these resources (Alden Wily, 2012; Bollier, 2014; Thompson, 2020). This phenomenon is not confined to land but extends to water, forests, and a wide range of natural resources and has profound implications for both ecosystems and local communities. It deprives people of access

to resources that have long been central to their livelihoods and cultural heritage. [De Vos et al. \(2017\)](#) describe the dynamics of land-grabbing in West Kalimantan, Indonesia, where oil palm plantations have fueled deforestation, illustrating how corporations, states, and local officials may all participate in processes of commodification.

Beyond material dispossession, communities also face the erosion of cultural values and traditions, alongside new financial burdens, as they are forced to pay for goods and services that were once freely accessible or affordable. Pricing structures, moreover, are dictated by global markets rather than local needs, further deepening inequities. Advocates of privatization argue that private-sector participation can introduce managerial efficiency and mobilize capital for infrastructure investment, especially in contexts where public water utilities struggle with financial or administrative limitations ([Marin, 2009](#); [Bakker, 2013](#)). Nevertheless, the effectiveness of these arrangements remains highly context-dependent and frequently raises concerns regarding affordability, equity, and democratic accountability.

Although privatization has often sparked protest, these struggles typically demand the protection of resources as public goods, rather than as commons. Yet, as [Quilligan \(2012, p. 112\)](#) observes, ‘in theory, public still means people; in practice, public means government’. When state ownership falters – particularly in times of financial crisis – governments frequently transfer control to private actors, reinforcing cycles of exclusion and commodification ([Prasad, 2007](#); [Quilligan, 2012](#)). Given the ecological and social costs of privatization, there is a pressing need to move beyond the public-private binary toward alternative governance models. Approaches rooted in the commons offer a means of ensuring that resources, especially essential ones such as water, are managed collectively, equitably, and sustainably. Such models can protect the longevity of resources while reaffirming the rights of communities to fair and meaningful access, challenging the dominant logic of commodification that continues to undermine both ecological resilience and social justice.

Commons and Commoning: A Pathway to Sustainability

The alarming concerns arising from the impact of human activities on nature, has led since the early 1970s to the examination of how economic growth could be achieved without jeopardizing the environment, while also taking into account social needs ([Mehmood & Parra, 2013](#)). This resulted in the concept of sustainable development, the materialization of which requires all three intertwined key factors of sustainability – economic, social and environmental, often described as ‘pillars’ – to be equally considered ([Kuhlman & Farrington, 2010](#); [Mehmood & Parra, 2013](#); [Revelli & Paidakaki, 2022](#)). Economic sustainability concerns financial growth that also takes into consideration the environment and the distribution of the resources, as well as social needs ([Mehmood & Parra, 2013](#)). Environmental sustainability caters for the environment which is perceived not as an independent entity, but rather as a complex relational ecosystem of human and non-human factors coexisting in harmony ([Mehmood & Parra, 2013](#)). Lastly, social sustainability – often the most neglected of the three pillars – refers to equity and human well-being ([Kuhlman & Farrington, 2010](#); [Mehmood & Parra, 2013](#); [Revelli & Paidakaki, 2022](#)).

Nonetheless, in the neoliberal economy, emphasis is mainly given into achieving financial growth, while at the same time societies face a plethora of challenges such as food and water scarcity, and land and resource insecurity, problems frequently linked to processes of privatization and enclosure. In response to these pressures, claims for commons emerge as an alternative and sustainable form of resource governance, that secures a more fair access and use among community members ([Bollier, 2014](#)). What distinguishes a commons from other models of resource governance is that they are not reducible to a business-oriented ecosystem managed primarily

by market decisions and shaped by neoliberal economic imperatives (De Angelis, 2003). Instead, commons have become a dynamic response to structural shortcomings of globalized financial systems, offering alternative pathways for organizing social and ecological relations through the practice of commoning.

This social practice delineates ways of managing resources and developing an alternative economic, political and cultural space around a community (Fournier, 2013; Euler, 2018a). In doing so, commons practices integrate the core pillars of sustainability. Specifically, they foster environmental stewardship through collective responsibility for ecosystems, promote social equity by ensuring fair access and participatory governance, and support local economic resilience by prioritizing shared needs and long-term resource regeneration over short-term profit. Commons-based governance, therefore, moves beyond the mere sustaining of resources, to regenerating them (Gutwirth & Stengers, 2016; Tanas & Gutwirth, 2021).

The nexus between sustainability and commons lies within and is fostered through the practice of commoning, as it reveals how a commons can be managed and accessed in ways that guaranty its perpetuity (Ostrom, 1990; Bollier, 2014; Bresnihan, 2015; Bollier and Helfrich, 2019; Perkins, 2019). Bollier and Helfrich (2019) identify eight interconnected patterns of the social life of commoning (see Table 1), which reveal ways in which commons are managed and sustained – or even produced – highlighting the relations between commoners, the non-human environment, and the commons resource that they value and cherish. In this context, commoning is characterized by a cultivation of shared values and purposes, and a ritualization of shared togetherness. The shared values and purposes are established, produced and reproduced through time as well as strengthened with repetition and forms of routinization (e.g. meetings, gatherings, etc.) (Euler, 2015, 2018a) that can also underpin the collective identity of the community, which preserves and nurtures the commons over time. These shared values highlight the complexity in the relation of a commons and commoners as they indicate the ways that their society is co-configured.

At the same time, shared purposes and values can sustain and reinforce resource management with commoners acting as caretakers through practices of free contribution. Such contributions are offered without expectation of direct reciprocity, but rather in accordance with a practice of gentle reciprocity (Bollier & Helfrich, 2019). The ethos of giving does not comply with the *quid pro quo* type of exchange, but is associated with a form of reciprocity in perpetuity (Fournier, 2013), as resources are continually produced, reproduced and sustained through collective use (Fournier, 2013; Euler, 2018b). These ongoing reciprocal relations can also induce a context of non-market production and reproduction (Bresnihan, 2015, Euler, 2018b), thus creating ‘an ongoing form of exchange and interaction that cannot easily be separated into a discrete ‘economic’ sphere’ (Bresnihan, 2015, p. 104).

Reciprocity is often embedded in cultural systems, further strengthening sustainability. For instance in Hawaii, the fishing community of Hā’ena identifies endangered species and develops rules to ensure their protection. Fishermen release part of their catch back into the sea and are also obliged to share their catch with the wider community (Diver et al., 2019). Such practices of commoning, rooted in local knowledge and tradition, safeguard ecological systems, such as marine ecosystems and fish stocks, while fostering social equity and mutual support.

The coexistence of human and nature in commons-based management systems is embedded in commoning, where the communion between commoners and their environment deepens. In this process, humans not only shape nature but are also shaped by it, alongside other non-human factors (Bollier & Helfrich, 2019; Poderi, 2020). Communities have ‘lived within ecosystem relationships for thousands of years’ (Perkins, 2019, p. 184), and this connection extends far beyond

emotional attachment. The term ‘affect’ only recently introduced into commons studies, highlights this mutual dynamic: individuals and communities both affect and are affected by ecological and non-human forces (Singh, 2017; Poderi, 2020).

Recognizing ‘affect’ can be invaluable, as it shows that human-nature relations are grounded in coexistence rather than exploitation (Poderi, 2020). This interdependence is often mediated through cultural systems, societal norms and beliefs, encompassing both tangible and intangible heritage (e.g. local knowledge, collective memory, and history), thus serving as a crucial dimension of sustainability:

For indigenous peoples, all human beings, nonhuman animals and the natural world have a common origin, history and future. Indigenous cultures are fundamentally connected to, and remain inseparable from, not just people but the natural world. Mountains, rivers and lands form ‘the basis of their social organization, economic system and cultural identification’ (Nicholas and Singh, 1996; as cited in Watene & Yap, 2015, p. 52).

‘Situated knowledge’ is a term used to describe ‘knowledge embedded in, and thus affected by, the concrete historical, cultural, linguistic, and value context of the knowing person’ (APA, 2018, April 19). In the context of commoning, this concept helps illuminate how the actions of commoners are guided by their lived experiences – both personal and collective – and can also be closely tied to sustainability. Through long-term interaction with their environments, commoners develop practices that ensure the continued viability of the commons.

For instance, in the fishing port community of Castletownbere, Ireland, the overfishing in the area led the state to enforce regulations that permitted fishing only during a specific time of the year (Bresnihan, 2015). Full-time fishermen argued that the issue of fish deficiency could not be resolved in this way, as both full-time and part-time fishermen were allowed to fish at the very same time, thus forcing the full-time fisherman to struggle to make a living (Bresnihan, 2015). While interviewing a local fisherman, Bresnihan (2015) observed an elderly man fishing in the area and asked whether he was one of the part time fishermen. However, his interviewee replied that this man’s fishing was not causing fish deficiency, because he was a retired fisherman who knew very well how to take care of the fish. This example illustrates how situated knowledge, rooted in local practice and long-term engagement, informs sustainable resource use in ways that externally imposed rules may overlook. Situated knowledge, therefore, is generated and reproduced through commoners’ ongoing use and management of shared resources. It also reflects a deeper relational connection between people, nature, and the commons, shaping practices that can foster ecological resilience and long-term sustainability.

At the same time, commoning practices emphasize the preservation of relationships within communities. Conflict is not absent, but it is addressed through locally developed rules that prioritize social bonds over competition (Bollier & Helfrich, 2019). Peer governance plays a central role here, as commoners collectively manage resources while seeking to shield them from market pressures and the logics of private ownership. Yet, as participants in a neoliberal economy, commoners inevitably navigate overlapping behaviors and tensions. This requires ongoing reflection on governance practices to ensure the continued protection and sustainable use of the commons (Bollier & Helfrich, 2019).

Taken together, the aspects of commoning mentioned above illustrate that commons are sustained not only through ecological and economic practices but also through deeply embedded cultural ones. Culture, traditions, and collective memory shape how communities understand, use, and care for shared resources, guiding practices that support both ecological resilience and social cohesion. In this sense, commons-based governance does not merely balance

the economic, environmental, and social pillars of sustainability, but also cultural sustainability foregrounding culture as a vital link between communities and their environments. The eight patterns that comprise the social life of commoning further highlight that communities share and reproduce cultural knowledge, identities, and meanings that anchor stewardship practices and reinforce a strong sense of responsibility among community members to act as caretakers of shared resources. By embedding ecological care within cultural values and practices, commoning offers an alternative governance model that counters the pathogenies of privatization and takes ‘sustainability’ a step further towards the regeneration of socio-ecological systems.

Table 1. Eight patterns of the social life of commoning

1. Cultivate Shared Purpose and Values	Commoners share the same purposes and values that are produced and reproduced through a ritualization of togetherness and forms of repetition and routinization (e.g. meetings, gatherings, etc).
2. Ritualize Togetherness	
3. Contribute Freely	Commons are produced, maintained and sustained through the act of commoning, in forms of free contribution from the commoners who act as gift-givers. The nature of giving is associated with a form of reciprocity in perpetuity. Reciprocal relations are often culturally oriented, securing social equity and sustenance of the commons.
4. Practice Gentle Reciprocity	
5. Deepen Communion with Nature	It describes the relation that people form with nature. The term ‘affect’ shows how people affect and are affected by nature and their surroundings. It relies on cultural norms and beliefs.
6. Trust Situated Knowing	This knowledge is deeply embedded in the community, shaped and sustained by the lived experience of managing the commons together. It is also accompanied by a deeper connection the commoners have formed with nature and the commons, and thus can lead to a sustainable management of the commons.
7. Preserve Relationships in Addressing Conflicts	Conflict resolutions aim to sustain relations.
8. Reflect on Peer Governance	Commoners themselves are also part of the neoliberal economy and inevitably navigate overlapping behaviors and tensions. For this reason they should reflect on their peer governance often, to continue using and managing the commons sustainably.

Source: authors’ elaboration and synthesis based on [Bollier and Helfrich \(2019\)](#) further enriched with insights from [Fournier \(2013\)](#), [Bresnihan \(2015\)](#), [Watene and Yap \(2015\)](#), [Diver et al. \(2019\)](#), [Euler \(2015, 2018a, 2018b\)](#), [Singh \(2017\)](#) and [Poderi \(2020\)](#).

The Socio-Cultural Value of Water Commoning against Water Commodification

Water is not only essential for sustaining life; it also carries meanings that extend far beyond its material properties. Framing water solely as an economic resource risks obscuring its broader roles in human societies. As [Orlove and Caton \(2010\)](#) suggest, water should be understood as a ‘total social fact’ because it permeates all dimensions of social life, from subsistence to culture, politics, and spirituality. Historically, water has shaped the evolution of civilizations through irrigation systems, agricultural development, flood-control infrastructures, and diverse techniques of water collection ([Yevjevich, 1992](#); [Lemaistre, 2015](#)). Traditional building practices demonstrate how cultural ingenuity has supported sustainable water management, as seen in the elaborate multistory cisterns of India – commonly known as stepwells or in widespread dry-stone construction techniques, where walls, terraces, and dams are carefully assembled without mortar to regulate flows and conserve water. These practices embody not only technological adaptation but also cultural values of stewardship, continuity, and collective care.

A culture of water, however, extends far beyond physical infrastructures. Water is deeply embedded in the symbolic, spiritual, and everyday practices of many societies, often co-structuring their social systems (Hastrup & Hastrup, 2015). Across cultures, people have developed enduring material and spiritual bonds with water (Van Schaik et al., 2015). Over millennia, water has acquired a sacred status, the use of which is frequently ‘accompanied by rituals, music, songs, and prayers’ (Lemaistre, 2015, p. 87). These cultural practices reflect the relational nature of water, namely the way it engages the senses through sound, touch, taste, and sight, shaping a community’s sense of place and contributing to identities and collective memory (Strang, 2006; Goralnik et al., 2022).

In societies where water is a central element, ‘thinking social relations through water’ (Krause & Strang, 2016) provides an entry point to understanding socio-ecological relations, as well as the policies and practices that govern them. This perspective resonates strongly with the commons, since commoning is not only a set of governance arrangements but also a social practice through which relationships between people, resources, and non-human agents are continuously negotiated and reaffirmed (Bollier & Helfrich, 2019; Poderi, 2020). Water commoning, therefore, embodies more than sustainable management. It represents a cultural practice rooted in shared values, collective responsibility, and reciprocal relations.

By foregrounding the cultural dimensions of water, water commoning challenges narrow utilitarian or market-based framings. It reveals water as both a life-giving substance and a medium of social cohesion, memory, and meaning. In this sense, water commoning contributes not only to ecological sustainability but also to cultural continuity, reinforcing water’s place as a connective force between humans, non-humans, and environments.

Contemporary pressures of commodification and privatization place these cultural and relational dimensions of water under increasing strain. Water commodification has been an ongoing process, particularly since the early 1990s in both the developed and the developing countries (Prasad, 2007; Greiner, 2020). The World Bank has had a core role in these actions contributing to designing, supporting, and promoting financial policies for water infrastructure and distribution in many countries (Bakker, 2003; Prasad, 2007). This shift to the private sector, was also a result of political and socioeconomic reasons, as it was portrayed in the neoliberal ethics of the late 1980s–1990s, while also being deeply embedded within the Washington Consensus, a guide aiming to redirect emerging national economies away from the formal socialist countries and draw them towards the capitalist economy (Greiner, 2020).

Furthermore, countries with underdeveloped infrastructure that struggle to compete in the world market, while remaining susceptible to global economic pressures, frequently seek private sector intervention (Prasad, 2007). Under financial pressures, governments form various partnerships with the private sector, transferring control and management or even ownership of resources and infrastructure (Bakker, 2007). In the case of water, this process involves the state first creating regulations and assigning responsibility to public sector agencies, and then giving the management of these agencies to private companies (Bakker, 2003) who, in turn, gain control over rates and pricing. Hence in such cases a paradox emerges, as water appears to be public but in practice is privatized.

Such processes not only intensify economic pressures but also unsettle the socio-cultural relations and forms of stewardship that sustain water as a commons. Seen through this lens, practices of water commoning become simultaneously a response to water commodification and a reaffirmation of cultural identity, ecological care, and collective responsibility. Underpinned by the socio-cultural values of water, such practices highlight its role in both the development of humanity’s material heritage and communities intangible heritage, social norms and traditions. It is against this backdrop that the case of Stagiates in Greece is studied and analyzed below.

The Case of Stagiates

Stagiates is a small village in mount Pelion Greece, in close proximity to the city of Volos, in Thessaly. Although little information can be found in records about Stagiates, the establishment of the village dates back to the 17th century when Greece was under the Ottoman Regime (Koletsos, 2003). According to the census of 2021, the village has 106 permanent residents (ELSTAT, 2023, April 21), however during the field visits in 2023–2024, locals claimed that Stagiates has approximately 70 permanent inhabitants.

With the most recent administrative change occurring in 2010 and the implantation of the 3852/2010 Law known as *Kallikratis*, Stagiates administratively belong to the municipal unit of Portaria, with the latter belonging to the greater municipality of Volos (Buk, 2024). The municipality of Volos comprises of 9 municipal units that include 22 municipal communities, among which are the city of Volos with 85.8 thousand permanent residents and the village of Portaria with 496 inhabitants (ELSTAT, 2023, April 21). The map below presents the location of Stagiates and its proximity to both Volos and Portaria, highlighting its small size compared to the other municipal units and the rich flora of the mountainous area.

Stagiates has the right to elect one president to act as a representative of the community, however administratively it is mainly dependent from the Municipality of Volos. Moreover, since the implementation of the *Kallikratis* Law, responsible for the water management and sewerage of Stagiates, became the Municipal Enterprise for Water Supply and Sewerage of Volos (DEYAMV).

Key factor for the establishment and development of Stagiates was the local source of water Krya Vrysi, located at the northern part of the village, right under a very old but still thriving plane tree. The water streams out through the roots of the tree, as if it runs directly from the tree. Krya Vrysi has been their main source of water for over 300 years, making the village a place where travelers and merchants would stop with their animals to rest (Koletsos, 2003). Because of this stopover, it is believed that the village's name comes from the Slavic word *staja* that means station.

The water of Krya Vrysi has long been considered exceptional and beneficial to human health, a view confirmed by chemical analyses showing it to be of very high quality (Koletsos, 2003). Moreover, Krya Vrysi is the center of a folklore tale, according to which there was a snake hiding in the plane tree, guarding the water and preventing access to it, until it was killed by lighting, and thus freeing the water and allowing it to run in the village (The Press Project, 2020, June 27).

In April 2020, the water supply network of Stagiates was abruptly disconnected from Krya Vrysi only to be directly connected to the supply network of Portaria. However the village's fountain in the square and a couple of households still have running water from Krya Vrysi. Today, as in the past, Stagiates is still known for its high quality spring water, and inhabitants of Volos drive all the way to the village just to collect water from the fountain at the village's main square, returning straight back to their homes in the city, carrying the water they collected in Stagiates, as tap water in Volos is considered not potable.

Water in Stagiates is embedded within the community's collective memory and heritage, shaping their identity. As Katerina explains:

I drink water from Stagiates from the day I was born. My mother is 95 years old, she was born here, she is still alive, and she drinks water from Stagiates (21/04/2024).

Locals have been visiting, since childhood, Krya Vrysi with friends and families, spending quality time and making memories there.

Stagiates and water are inseparable in people's narratives, and phrases such as 'Stagiates equals water' is embedded in the locals narratives. Katerina echoes this in an illustrative manner while recalling the sound of water from her childhood:

I remember as a kid sleeping in my bedroom, and I remember the sound of water. The flume was a couple of meters away, and it was like a waterfall, and I was sleeping with the sound of water. [...] When I think of the village, I cannot think of it without immediately thinking of water (21/04/2024).

Likewise, Alexandra, describes water as an inseparable from the village:

I cannot imagine Stagiates without running water in the water fountain in the square. I cannot imagine the village without water. [...] I grew up with this belief, that this is a village that has a very good [quality of] water, which it shares and protects. Everything is water! (08/07/2024).

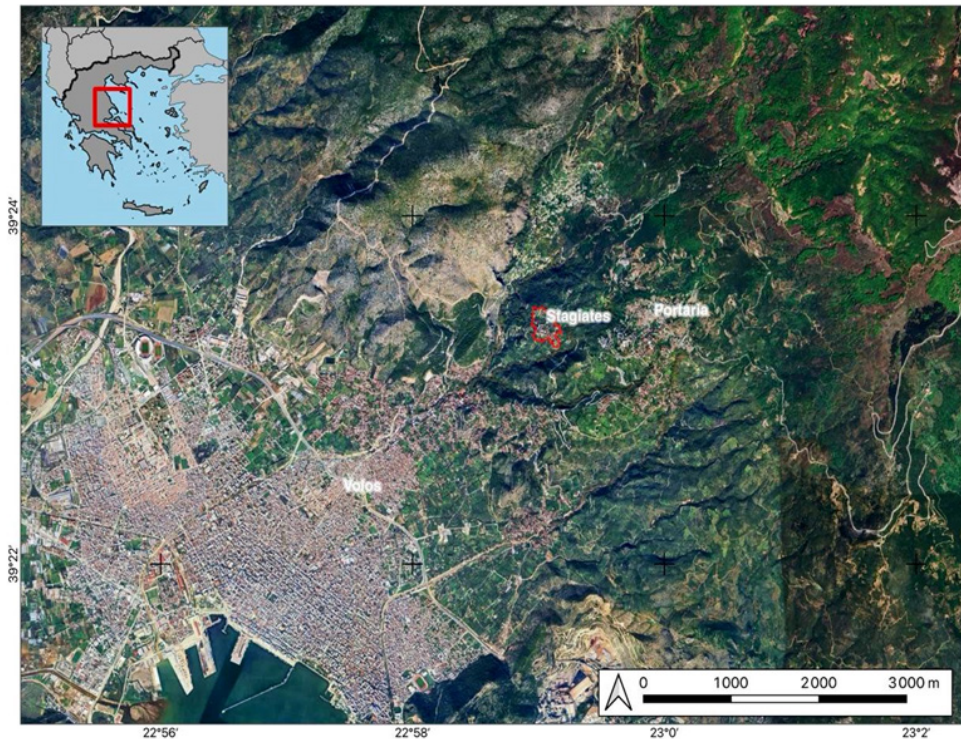


Figure 1. Aerial map of Stagiates
Source: created by Cornelis Stal.

Mount Pelion is widely known for its freely running waters that allow the enrichment of its fauna with plane trees. Because of its waters, communities such as Stagiates have historically developed water springs and irrigation channels (flumes), that for years have been part of their traditions and responsibilities to clean and cater for their maintenance, while also utilizing them for agriculture (E-Thessalia, 2015, April 15). There were also workers called *ydronomeas*, *nerokratis* or *avlakaris*, responsible for the maintenance of the flumes and irrigation channels, as well as for the distribution of the irrigation waters.

In Stagiates, locals were also responsible for the maintenance of the flumes of the water source, George recalls from his childhood:

Inhabitants of the village were obligated to do personal work to clean the flumes. [...] People were saying: 'We are going to go and do personal work in Krya Vrysi to clean it' [...] People did not object to that, they were going because they said: 'Who is going to fix this for us?' [...] They were doing it for their village (20/04/2024).

Locals nowadays continue on the same path. They clean the flumes, observe if there is water overflowing in any of them – as this indicates that the water channels need cleaning – and make sure that there are no sources of pollution anywhere near Krya Vrysi. At the same time, the maintenance expenses are shared and covered by their own free contributions.

In warnings by DEYAMV claiming that the local water may be contaminated, locals respond by regularly taking samples of water for chemical analysis, in order to ensure that the water remains potable and that there are no bacteria present. If sources of contamination are found, they clean the fountains and the irrigation channels. At the same time, they have trust in each other. Katerina who is from Stagiates and currently lives in Volos, recalls being asked if she was aware that she was drinking unchlorinated water:

If [the chemical analysis] shows that there are coliform organisms, they immediately go and clean voluntarily all the facilities, the channels, the cisterns [...] they clean it, and the water comes [out of the springs] as of very good quality. We have trust! (21/04/2024).

This trust also lays with the community's situated knowledge. As Alexandra mentions:

The people who live here, know much better the water supply network and what problems may occur [...]. The practical empirical knowledge of people in the past, [...] made them worry as to how they could ensure that they could have in their households, for themselves, their kids and other residents, clean fresh water to drink. So, they found ways to maintain the water system, and clean and protect it (08/07/2024).

Additionally, for over 40 years there have been many challenges in Stagiates regarding the water management and its use. Historically, water from Stagiates circulated beyond the village through the work of the *neroulades*. These were local peddlers who loaded their donkeys with jugs and transported water to Volos and sometimes exported it abroad (Koletsos, 2003). Importantly, this activity did not constitute commodification of the water source itself. The water remained abundant, freely accessible to villagers. What was being sold was primarily the labour and transportation service rather than exclusive rights over the resource.

In contrast, in the late 1970s–1980s, when the community granted permission to an external investor to bottle and sell the local water, tensions emerged precisely because this arrangement began to resemble actual commodification and proved to be at the expense of the community. According to Giannis:

During the summer, when water levels were decreasing while demand was increasing, the investor disregarded local needs and deprived the village of water by taking more than what had been agreed upon (11/07/2024).

This investor further introduced plastification practices of water bottling that conflicted with local socio-ecological practices and communal perceptions of water management (Giannis, 11/07/2024). This episode led the community to revoke the permission. Although the idea of community-run bottling remained, a subsequent attempt in the 1990s was hindered by mismanagement (Giannis, 11/07/2024; Koletsos, 2003).

During 2005, a water supply network connecting Stagiates with the neighbor village of Portaria was created, as an alternative solution to possible water shortage in the village of Stagiates. Locals claim that in 2009 a proposal was made to bottle the local water, as the new supply network would allow them to get water from Portaria. In 2011, villagers of Stagiates along with their then-community president, met with the former mayor to express their concerns about a hotel uphill from the village, whose sewage could contaminate the local spring. Giannis looks back on that meeting:

He [the mayor] told us that we should stop thinking about our water spring as 'ours', and it was the first time that we felt that we are losing the spring (11/07/2024).

In the summer of 2011, chlorination of the Peliorian waters became mandatory, which provoked the reactions of a large part of the inhabitants of Pelion and Volos. Local initiatives emerged, complaining about the chlorination of water, that was so excessive that it could potentially cause harm to humans, animals and the environment (Save Greek Water, 2013, October 20). Inhabitants of Pelion also referred to a technical report indicating that, based on on-site examination in the region, chlorination of Pelion's springs was deemed unnecessary¹ (Save Greek Water, 2013, October 20). Additionally, they also made use of the legislation (Y.M. 5673/4-12-57) in force at the time, which stipulated that in communities of less than 3.000 inhabitants, water chlorination is not mandatory (APO DRASIS, 2020, May 11).

Locals perceived this chlorination as a form of enclosure, because water had changed in smell and taste and had become repulsive to them, making it impossible for them to drink it. Giannis states:

We have read before a paper that said that one of the goals for them [the water management companies, enterprises, etc.] is that in a spring, first of all they degrade the quality of water. This means that they make people buy bottled water, because they cannot drink it [the water of the spring] anymore, and they do so after a regulatory authority checks and finds that the waters is dangerous (11/07/2024).

In 2013 the communities in Pelion faced an additional challenge, as it was proposed that responsible for all irrigation would become DEYAMV. The enterprise would replace the open flumes that are part of Pelion's heritage, with water pipes, a project that would be assigned to a private investor. As Giannis describes:

[The investor] would change the irrigation system, but he would also do water obstruction and management works to make money for 30 years, and during winter when we would not water the gardens, he would shell the water to the municipality [of Volos] (11/07/2024).

The resistance was strong, and, as a result, the proposal did not pass. Giannis adds:

This was a very big win for the water issue here, because irrigation accounts for 85% of the total consumption of the spring waters (11/07/2024).

On January 23, 2020, the president of DEYAMV stated in an interview that the water of Pelion could be bottled and sold with a brand name such as Pelion Water (The Newspaper, 2020, January 23). This statement was viewed as a proclaim of privatization. A while later, on Good Friday, April 17, 2020, of the Orthodox Easter, and during the first lockdown in Greece due to the government regulations for the Covid-19 pandemic, the water supply system of Stagiates was suddenly disconnected from Krya Vrysi, and instead became connected to that of Portaria. For this shift the water supply network that was created in 2005 was utilized. Until July 2024, only a couple of houses and the water fountains built at the village square, still have running water supplied from the water source of Krya Vrysi.

¹ The results of the expert report are available online in Greek (Water Without Chlorine, 2010, April 12).

The case of Stagiates reveals the deep historical and socio-cultural connection between the local community and its ancestral water source, Krya, Vrysi. For generations, the spring has been embedded in everyday life, collective memory, and community practices, with residents acting as caretakers of the resource and its irrigation channels. These longstanding relationships with water have fostered a sense of collective responsibility and stewardship toward the spring. At the same time, the case exposes how external pressures, ranging from administrative decisions to broader processes of privatization and enclosure, gradually threatened community control over the resource. The possibility of water commodification and the disconnection of Krya Vrysi from the village's water supply network, however, marked a turning point. Rather than weakening community ties to the resource, this disruption re-activated local traditions, knowledge, and collective identities, transforming them into new forms of resistance and water commoning. It was in this context that the Free Waters initiative emerged, mobilizing the community around the protection and reassertion of water as a commons.

Turning to Commoning: The Free Waters Initiative

The Free Waters initiative emerged as a direct result of the village's water supply network disconnection from Krya Vrysi, fulfilling the need of the villagers to self-regulate and reconnect with the local source. The initiative also emerged due to the refusal of the at the time then community's president to take any kind of action regarding the disconnection issue. The locals self-organized to reclaim the village's connection to Krya Vrysi, by immediately forming an assembly with the responsibility to deal with all the matters related to the village (Fassea, 2020, May 16). This was not the first time that locals participated in the creation of initiatives. The Peliorian Independent Group of Action A.P.O. DRASIS has already been formed in Stagiates in 2009. While it had addressed water-related issues, its primary focus was on improving the local life through various forms of cultural and recreational activities, and on fostering stronger connections with elements of non-human nature.

The organizational structure of the Free Waters initiative changed over the years. The assembly was first held by locals that were residents or originated in the village. Moreover, it was open to the public and anyone could participate. The assembly was taking place openly in the village square, and locals participated equally, without any formal organization, hierarchy, or specific roles, and the topics discussed then were only related to the water issues.

However, the original organizational structure gradually changed (Alexandra, 08/07/2024). Although there were no restrictions for attendance, participation was only allowed to members of the local community. Alexandra explained that they still welcomed suggestions, and that this decision happened out of respect for the elderly members of the community and the less educated, who felt uncomfortable to express their thoughts (08/07/2024).

The organization of the assembly also changed in the beginning of 2024, when a community president was elected. It was important for the locals that the new president would be an active member of the initiative, willing to represent in all formal matters what was decided during the assembly meetings. Giannis explains:

We are a small community and therefore we only have one local representative [the president]. As you understand this is undemocratic [...]. There cannot be one person [acting alone], so we decided that we would self-organize a body to surround the one [the president] for practical reasons too. The second is that the assembly whose meetings are conducted very regularly, is the one who will decide what is going to happen in our village and not the president. The president will just be the executive body. [...] It is important

that it is not just one that decides. To overcome the institutional deficiency, we did our own thing (11/07/2024).

The location of the assembly has also changed and moved to the local school building which, due to the village's declining population numbers, does not operate anymore for teaching but hosts the president's office, a library and a venue for events and activities such as free piano lessons. This relocation was considered a victory by the villagers, as for a period before the election of the new community president, they were prohibited to access and use both the old school building and the local folklore museum.

The assembly is held on the first Wednesday of each month. However, participation has declined, with approximately 25–30 people attending the meetings up until July 2024, compared to the 80–100 who participated when the assembly was held in the village square after the disconnection. Still, Giannis stresses the importance of a wide participation, despite this reduction:

It is very important that it is not the one, but the twenty – twenty five – thirty – forty [people] that decide, this is a very important step (11/07/2024).

Finally, when asked about the occurrence of tensions and disagreements between the locals, interviewees confirmed that they may not agree upon everything, but they are united to the cause of the initiative. As it is a small community, there is not yet a systematic approach or a set of rules, on how to address conflict, however this is done in a discrete manner through the process of dialogue.

The assembly's agenda has also changed, as there are pending court procedures on the water related matters. Alexandra explains:

We may discuss subjects that concern cleaning the village and the paths, fire safety and protection [...] daily life things, that are also part of being a good neighbor. But there are also strategy subjects, like for instance now with the irrigation issue, if we decide that things are going slowly, we may have a proposal that we need to find ways to repair the damages (08/07/2024).

The aforementioned irrigation issue by Alexandra, refers to the damages and disasters caused by Storm Daniel, also known as Cyclone Daniel, in September 2023, which devastated a number of different areas in Greece, including Pelion. Stagiates were not immensely affected by the storm, and the water source of Krya Vrysi was saved as the plane tree remained intact. However, there were damages to the irrigation channels, the repairing of which is financially demanding. Financial support and repairs in such cases are typically covered by the administrative authorities. However, this process often takes considerable time. During the field visits and the interviews in July, locals mentioned that they had been discussing ways to repair the channels themselves, despite the significant financial burden.

In Stagiates, the community continues to cater for the water resource, bringing all water related matters to the assembly's attention, while expanding their agenda to other matters of the village's welfare. For example, in response to the ongoing fire threats in Greece, locals out of their own free contributions raised money and installed water tanks in the village, hoses, and all necessary equipment, and also received training on firefighting. Activism and solidarity acts are also a strong part of the initiative. During the Storm Daniel, the water in the city of Volos was contaminated ([To Vima, 2023, September 9](#)) and the locals of Stagiates, whose water system was not damaged, provided water to the residents of Volos ([Rosa, 2023, September 14](#)).

Finally, the role of culture is closely intertwined with the Free Waters initiative. The locals combined water activism with cultural events and activities, including movie nights (some held in the Krya Vrysi area), musical and literature gatherings, and annual festivities like the Feast

of the Grains, which aims to inform the public and raise awareness about agricultural and environmental issues. This idea of transforming the village into a cultural hub was originally proposed by a visitor, who suggested that such an approach would help achieve their ultimate goal of reconnecting with Krya Vrysi (Giannis, 11/07/2024).

In Stagiates, a process of culture in the making can also be observed through the creation of original songs dedicated to the village and its waters. Among these, the most popular is the piece by the famous Greek musician, composer and singer Alkinoos Ioannidis performed with the Estoudiantina of the Nea Ionia School of Volos (2020, June 2). Ioannidis, who lived in Stagiates during the lockdown period, actively supports the Free Waters initiative, expressing through his lyrics how the locals perceive and feel about the water:

δεν τ’ αγοράζω δεν πουλώ μα με κερνάς και στο κερνώ	I don’t buy it I don’t sell it but you offer it to me as a treat and I offer it to you as a treat
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The emergence of the Free Waters initiative illustrates how community mobilization around water can evolve into broader practices of commoning. While the initiative initially formed in response to the disconnection of the village’s water supply from Krya Vrysi, its activities extend beyond the demand for reconnection. Through collective organization, assemblies, and community-driven actions, the Free Waters initiative has fostered forms of mutual support and engagement that address wider aspects of the village’s social well-being. In this process, Stagiates has gradually developed into a vibrant cultural hub where gatherings, events, and collective practices reinforce both the initiative’s objectives and the community’s shared values. These activities not only sustain the struggle to reclaim the spring but also cultivate new cultural meanings and relationships around water, illustrating how resistance to enclosure can generate ongoing processes of commoning and a culture-in-the-making.

Unpacking the Nexus of Commoning, Culture and Water Sustainability

The case of Stagiates and the Free Waters initiative offers a concrete illustration of how local claims to water as a commons can generate sustainable alternatives to privatization, while revealing the interconnections between commoning, culture and water sustainability. Importantly, long before the conflict over the spring intensified and the Free Waters initiative emerged, Stagiates had already cultivated a culture of water as a commons. The village had cultivated a shared understanding of water as a collective resource embedded in everyday practices, local traditions, and systems of stewardship. The community also retains the memory of earlier unsuccessful attempts to commodify water; efforts that were perceived as threats not only to the longevity of the spring but also to community access and identity. As a result, proposals aligned with market-oriented or privatized forms of water governance encountered strong resistance. While in other contexts water privatization may proceed with limited contestation, the Stagiates case demonstrates how deeply embedded cultural meanings and collective memories surrounding water can render commodification socially incompatible and catalyze practices of commoning.

For the community of Stagiates, water is more than a resource; it represents a foundational element of local history, heritage, and collective life. The Krya Vrysi spring has flowed through the village for over 300 years, shaping both the natural and built environment. Water’s sensory presence and flow – its sound, sight, taste, touch, and smell – has created what Strang (2006) terms a ‘fluid environment’, one that nourishes flora such as the plane trees, while simultaneously structuring the village’s fountains, flumes, and public spaces. Historically, the maintenance

of these infrastructures relied on collective labor and shared responsibility, embedding practices of stewardship within everyday community life.

This relational entanglement between humans, water, and non-human factors is central to commoning. In Stagiates, water is embedded in the community's value system, and it has shaped at its core the community's collective memory. Water functions as a unifying social and ecological anchor that mobilizes collective action. These mobilizations extend from legal contestation to the development of commons-based practices for organizing and governing the village's water resource. The emergence of the Free Waters initiative illustrates how these cultural meanings translate into institutional forms of commoning that reaffirm water as a shared cultural and ecological commons.

Drawing on literature on the patterns of commoning, the Free Waters initiative reveals both cultural and institutional dimensions of commons governance. The community's shared purposes and values are further sustained and cultivated through ritualized forms of togetherness, such as collective practices of catering for the water resources, participation in open assemblies and the organization of various cultural events. Moreover, the assemblies provide a space for democratic dialogue, where residents co-develop rules and approaches to resource governance. These include electing a local committee to collaborate with the village president, ensuring that every villager may speak freely, and resolving disagreements through dialogue rather than coercion. They thus prioritize preserving relationships in addressing conflict. Notably, these governance practices are not static, but rather evolve over time as locals reflect on their peer-governance in making the assembly more accessible and democratic to community members. While privileging local voices, the assemblies also welcome external supporters extending the culture of water as a commons beyond the village and creating broader networks of solidarity.

The case of Stagiates further demonstrates how practices of commoning can foster multiple dimensions of sustainability. The village's water system has long relied on situated knowledge developed through generations of collective interaction with the local environment. For centuries, villagers collectively maintained the irrigation network and spring infrastructure, relying on shared labour and locally transmitted know-how, practices that helped preserve water quality and regulate flow. This ethos persists today through free contributions of time, skills, and resources by community members who collectively care for Krya Vrysi and its surrounding ecosystem. As locals have formed historically a deep communion with nature, centered around the local water, they have been acting as care-takers of the resource. The acts of care-taking of both the resource and other non-human factors throughout the history of Stagiates, present a form of reciprocity in perpetuity. At the same time, reciprocity is further strengthened through the Free Waters initiative as locals cater for both the resource and the community's welfare.

Taken together, these dynamics illustrate how cultural values, collective governance practices, and ecological stewardship intersect in the process of commoning, enabling the community to sustain water resources while resisting pressures of commodification.

Conclusions

The case of Stagiates demonstrates how water commoning is inseparable from culture, identity and local history. A key finding of this study is that collective mobilization around water did not emerge in a vacuum. Long before the creation of the Free Waters initiative, the community had already cultivated a shared understanding of water as a commons embedded in everyday practices,

traditions, and systems of stewardship. In this sense, the Stagiates case shows that a culture of water as a commons can precede and enable collective action, shaping how communities interpret and respond to external pressures such as privatization.

Building on this cultural foundation, the Free Waters initiative illustrates how practices of commoning can structure local water governance and social organization. Through open assemblies, collective maintenance of the spring, and shared decision-making, residents developed forms of peer governance that enabled them to organize the management and protection of their water resource. In doing so, commoning functions not only as a mode of resource management but also as a social practice that creates alternative economic, political, and cultural spaces within the community. These practices foster participatory governance, strengthen social cohesion, and cultivate networks of solidarity that extend beyond the village.

The Stagiates experience further demonstrates how commoning can bring together multiple dimensions of sustainability. Through collective stewardship of the Krya Vrysi spring, residents contribute to environmental protection and the regeneration of local ecosystems. Concurrently, commons-based governance promotes social equity by ensuring fair access to water and enabling inclusive participation in decision-making processes. It also supports locally embedded economic practices oriented toward meeting community needs rather than maximizing profit. In this way, commoning integrates the environmental, social, economic, and cultural pillars of sustainability, reinforcing cultural values and situated knowledge that shape how communities relate to and care for shared resources.

The case also highlights the achievements and limitations of grassroots commons initiatives operating within broader political and economic systems. Over the past five years, the Free Waters initiative has strengthened community cohesion, mobilized residents to protect their local spring, reclaimed public spaces such as the village school and museum, and transformed Stagiates into a cultural hub that attracts wider networks of solidarity. Yet significant challenges remain. The initiative has not yet succeeded in reconnecting the village's official water supply to Krya Vrysi, illustrating the structural constraints that commons initiatives face when interacting with state authorities, legal frameworks, and market-oriented governance models. In addition, demographic pressures – particularly rural depopulation and an aging population – pose long-term challenges for sustaining collective participation.

Rather than presenting a universally replicable model, the Stagiates case underscores the contextual nature of commons. Commons-based initiatives often emerge in response to specific socio-ecological crises and local histories of enclosure, meaning that their forms and practices are shaped by particular cultural and institutional conditions. Nevertheless, the experience of Stagiates offers important insights for water governance more broadly. It suggests that strengthening participatory governance, recognizing community stewardship practices, and integrating local knowledge into water management systems can create more equitable and sustainable alternatives to purely market-based or centralized approaches.

More broadly, the case contributes to debates on commons and sustainability by illustrating how commoning practices can bridge ecological care, democratic governance, and cultural meaning. Water, in this context, is not merely a physical resource but a socio-cultural force that organizes relationships between people, place, and environment. By foregrounding this relational understanding of water, commons-based governance offers a powerful critique of neoliberal resource management while demonstrating viable pathways toward more socially embedded and sustainable systems of water stewardship.

Future scholarly endeavors could build upon these findings by examining how commons-based water governance can be supported and adapted across different contexts without undermining the cultural specificities that sustain such initiatives. This includes examining how commons interact with state institutions and regulatory frameworks, identifying mechanisms that enable collaboration between communities and public authorities, and investigating ways to strengthen the long-term viability of commons in the face of demographic change and economic pressures. Understanding these dynamics will be essential for translating localized experiences, such as Stagiates, into broader strategies for sustainable and democratic water governance.

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