

SHAPING
INNOVATION
FUTURES.

Discovery report

June 2023

Uncovering the **conditions** we need to
accelerate regenerative and distributive futures.

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We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands on which we, our discovery cohort, and the initiatives we interviewed operate on. We pay our respects to their Elders past and present. We also acknowledge that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were forcibly removed from their lands and sovereignty was never ceded. We recognise their continuing connection to lands, waters and communities, and their deep understanding of complexity and the interconnected nature of the systems we inhabit.

Executive Summary: Shaping Innovation Futures – Discovery Report

“ There is a direction to history and it is toward cooperation at larger scales. ”

Haidt, 2022

This report aims to increase awareness, understanding, and appreciation of systems innovation in practice. We seek to inform the case for greater investment in systems innovation and strengthen connections between individuals and organisations involved in this work within and across Australasia.

We need to reimagine how we organise and act

We have entered a time of increasing disruption, change, and risk. The challenges and opportunities we face today are complex, hyper-connected, and consequential. How we navigate them will determine the quality of life for future generations.

This project starts from a pragmatic but hopeful standpoint - our individual and collective capabilities to comprehend our surroundings and forge new realities have been defining traits of humankind. Imagination, cooperation, and innovation are our superpowers.

However, to realise safe and stable futures, we need to evolve how we harness these capabilities. We need to innovate innovation.

“ To realise safe and stable futures, we need to evolve how we harness these capabilities. We need to innovate innovation.

”

What might this look like?

Systemic challenges require systemic responses. We need to move beyond specific solutions and develop systems of innovation (and solutions) to address the complex and interconnected challenges we currently face and will continue to face in the future.

While ‘innovation’ is often narrowly framed and pursued, we now need new and improved approaches, processes, and systems to shape the future of humanity and the planet. Many of these approaches are not limited to new technologies or market-based entrepreneurship. This is not to downplay the role of technology and markets but to emphasise other dimensions that influence how these powerful tools are developed and deployed.

To bring forth a new generation of innovation, we must also reimagine and rebuild the underlying conditions and infrastructures that enable people to experiment and act in ways that are genuinely transformative.

Shaping innovation futures

To understand how we can promote systems innovation, we first need to gain a better understanding of pioneering initiatives that are experimenting with systemic approaches to innovation.

As a result, we have undertaken an exploration of why and how such initiatives are developed, how they operate, how they evolve, the capacities they require, and the factors that enable or constrain their development. We recognise that this work took place at a specific point in time and that learning and iteration processes with initiatives like these are continuous.

What did we learn?

The transformation gap

While there is growing recognition among capital holders and decision-makers of the need for systems change and transformation, the practical implications and mobilisation of such approaches remain unclear.

On the other hand, we are witnessing an increasing number of promising initiatives that are experimenting with systems organising and innovation (referred to as ‘systems initiatives’). However, almost all of them struggle to access adequate support and resources.

Diverse contexts but common attributes

Systems initiatives are diverse and influenced by their context, but they also share common attributes. These attributes include:

1. **Holding a bold ambition** to move toward a future state that provides fundamentally better outcomes for people, places, and the planet.
2. **Providing spaces and platforms** that enable actors and stakeholders to come together around shared goals, leverage their collective intelligence, and take actions that have the potential for 'better outcomes,' often in novel ways.
3. Contributing to **rethinking the fundamentals** of how current systems and structures work and supporting cultures that are open to new paradigms and possibilities.
4. Intentionally using a range of levers **to incentivize, enable, and sustain multiple innovations** across and within the chosen systems context.
5. Establishing and maintaining mechanisms that **enable coherence**, such as networked governance and information flows, and connecting actors and actions in ways that make the whole more productive than the sum of its parts.

We also observed that systems initiatives: take a long-term perspective while holding multiple time horizons, embrace messiness and adapt to emergence, foster change through multiple dimensions and 'scaling pathways', and embody and nest transformation processes.

Also common practices and needs

In addition to these common attributes, we have observed common practices, processes, and inputs that enable systems initiatives to take shape and function. These include:


1. **Systems readiness and self-organisation** – developing social capital, understanding and visualising the system, taking time to organise and deliberate, and finding a shared language that encourages and aligns participation.
2. **Processes of instigation** – 'who initiates' and the art of convening.
3. **Developing core infrastructures** – organising platforms (broadly defined), implementing networked governance, leveraging the role of data, creating learning and knowledge systems, and providing enablers of innovation and action.
4. **Linking and nesting** – connecting with macro systems and structures while embodying change at the micro level.
5. **Accessing appropriate resources** – securing funding suitable for core infrastructures and systemic financing for innovation and action.

A call to action

We call for greater attention, support, and resources for systems innovation. And urge capital holders, decision-makers, innovators, and influencers to recognise the importance of advancing this work.

Ultimately, expanding the scale and effectiveness of systems innovation relies on building new innovation capabilities and infrastructures. We deliberately use the term 'infrastructures.' Just as we acknowledge the significance of providing infrastructures for essential services like energy, mobility, water, and waste, the same lens (and investment) should be applied to mobilising human agency, creativity, and cooperation.

We also need more rigorous, critical explorations of systems innovation to understand and inform these developments. As a result, we propose three foundational directions to promote systems innovation in Australasia. These directions are framed around questions focused on engagement and intentional dialogue, connecting and strengthening practice, and further discovery.

 Read the full report for more detail and to see which questions for exploration you might dive into.

Introduction

Introduction

How can we create the conditions for regenerative and distributive futures?

Shaping Innovation Futures is an exploration into how we might accelerate the change we need to realise better futures for people, places, and the planet.



Beyond specific solutions, there is a need for more systemic innovation to respond to the complex and interconnected challenges we face now and will continue to grapple with in the years ahead. It follows that we are focused on the **underpinning conditions** that enable people to organise and act in ways that are **genuinely transformative**.

Put another way, the aim of this inquiry is to better understand the nature of systems innovation in practice and to inform the development of 'innovation infrastructures' that support it.

The use of the term 'infrastructures' is deliberate. In the same way we commonly understand the importance of providing infrastructures for essential services - energy, mobility, water, and waste - we believe the same lens (and scale) needs to be applied to mobilising human agency, creativity, and cooperation.

We propose that innovation infrastructures should be understood as core societal infrastructures that need to be evolved, resourced, and maintained if we are to respond to the challenges and opportunities of our time.

For capital-holders, decision-makers, innovators, and influencers, who are increasingly recognising the need for more systemic ways of working, we believe that building these infrastructures will be a precondition of action that brings about real change. Their design and development, therefore, demands greater attention.

Project purpose

Through this project we aimed to:

01

Grow awareness, understanding, and appreciation of organised approaches to systems innovation.

02

Generate knowledge around how to support and resource such approaches.

03

Build a case for investment into systems innovation.

04

Strengthen connections between practitioners and lay foundations to design, test, and develop new innovation infrastructures in Australasia.

Why are we doing
this work?

Why are we doing this work?

We have entered a time of increasing disruption, change, and risk.

Systems innovation is difficult and messy, but the opportunities to generate better outcomes and shared value are huge.

The challenges and opportunities we face today are complex, hyper-connected, and consequential. How we navigate them will determine the quality of life for generations to come.

This project starts from a pragmatic but hopeful position - our individual and collective capabilities to make sense of our surroundings, envision possibilities, and forge new realities have been a defining story of humankind. Imagination, cooperation, and innovation are our superpowers.

However, complex challenges demand systemic responses, and we urgently need to evolve how we harness and align our superpowers if we are to realise better futures for people, places, and the planet. So, we need to rethink innovation.

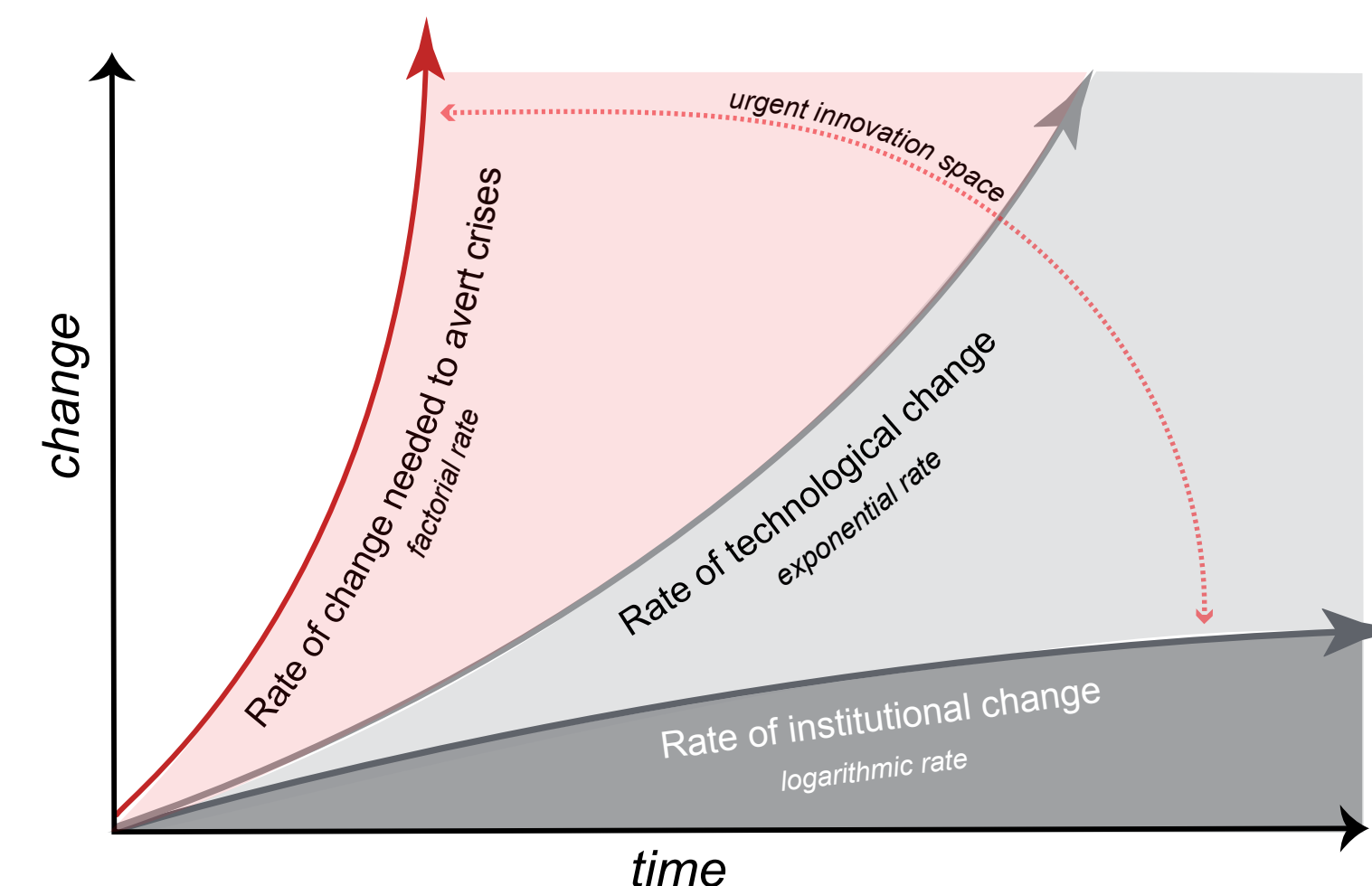
Marianna Mazzucato, a UK-based economist, has argued that innovation should be understood as a collective endeavour that better serves the interests of citizens, rather than specific sectors and narrow interests. This includes more people being engaged in both the direction and process of innovation, and also determining how its risks and rewards can be more evenly shared.

Early in 2023, The Treasurer of Australia, The Hon Jim Chalmers MP, called for the need to overcome old 'mental models' in order to respond to the 'polycrisis'¹. He asserted that the way forward will be forged by (to paraphrase) 'focusing on the intersection of prosperity and wellbeing, reimagining and redesigning markets, and fostering new models of cooperation across sectors in pursuit of our common interests'.

Across Australasia, and around the world, there is growing recognition amongst capital holders and decision-makers of the need for systems innovation and transformation, but what this means in practice and how such approaches can be mobilised is much less clear.

On the flip side, we are seeing an increasing number of initiatives that are experimenting with systems organising and innovation. These are taking shape in a range of contexts and include: place-based responses to climate change, cross-sector collaborations on energy transitions, enhancing the impact of value chains, using new economic and governance models to regenerate landscapes, and community empowerment and wealth-building. While many of these are promising, most struggle to access adequate support and resources.

This is why we undertook this work - to help bridge the gap between the growing demand for systems change and the emerging initiatives that have the potential to facilitate it. At the heart of our exploration is a core question – **how can we grow the capabilities to mobilise the innovation required to respond to the urgency and complexity of the challenges we face?**



The transformation gap based on Martec's Law with additions on the innovation space by GCSI.

SECTION 2

WHY ARE WE DOING THIS WORK?

¹ The Griffith Centre for Systems Innovation has another discussion paper on 'values-based capitalism' as a response to the polycrisis being published shortly. It will be found [here](#).

Our approach

Our approach

To inform how we might grow systems innovation, our starting point was to better understand the dynamics of initiatives that are taking organised and systemic approaches to innovation and how they work.

We wanted to explore why and how such initiatives are developed, how they operate, how they evolve, what capacities they require, and what enables and constrains their development. We recognise that this investigation took place at a point in time, and that learning and iteration processes with initiatives like these are constant and ongoing.

While we appreciate how contextualised, differentiated, and nuanced approaches to systems innovation are, we started with the hypothesis that many of them share common attributes, and therefore have the potential to offer transferable learnings. This thinking was informed by our research into mission-oriented/ challenge-led innovation approaches and also our experience and engagement with systems change work, more broadly.

We used the 'starting-point' attributes outlined in the next section to guide who we engaged with. For the purpose of this project (and report) we refer to these as 'systems initiatives'.

Convening different perspectives and experiences

➤ To anchor our explorations in practice, we designed our discovery around three components:

1. Inviting a small group of organisations working on systems innovation to partner with the project. These included:
 - [The Menzies Foundation \(Australia\)](#) - *funding and delivery support*
 - [Catalyst 2030 \(global\)](#) - *funding and delivery support*
 - [The Australian Centre for Social Innovation \(TACSI\) \(Australia\)](#) - *delivery support*
 - [The Systems Transformation Action Research Lab \(STARlab\) at University of Otago \(Aotearoa New Zealand\)](#) - *delivery support*
 - [Collaboration for Impact \(Australia\)](#) - *delivery support*
 - [Five and Dime \(Aotearoa New Zealand\)](#) - *communications support and supplier*

Forming this alliance, enabled us to test our initial aims and assumptions, and also shaped how we approached the design of the discovery process.

2. We then convened a 'discovery cohort' - a diverse group of systems thinkers and doers from across Australasia to undertake the exploration with us (and each other).
Beyond the insights that the cohort brought to the discovery process, we intended that individual members would also learn from each other and consider possibilities of forming alliances through which the project's intentions could be progressed and/or diversified. We introduce the participants and their motivations for joining the cohort in a later section.

3. We then identified and engaged with a range of systems initiatives from the region and around the world. While operating in different contexts and at different stages of maturity, these initiatives demonstrated the 'starting-point attributes' and were also available and willing to engage with us.

Through these engagements we sought to understand the mindsets, principles, patterns, capacities, and activities at the heart of such initiatives, and infer how they might be better mobilised, supported, and scaled.

Other inputs and influences

While undertaking this project we drew on and, in some cases, engaged with individuals, organisations, and initiatives around the world undertaking comparable investigations, albeit with different framings and approaches. We did this through group discussions, interviews, and reviewing research. These included:

- Transitions Innovation Group hosted by Community Foundations Canada.
- [Mission Oriented Innovation Network](#) hosted by Institute of Innovation for Public Purpose at UCL.
- Dark Matter Labs - a range of projects and especially [Radicle Civics](#).
- Bridgespan's research into [supporting system-change leadership](#).
- The [Systems Innovation Initiative](#) hosted by ROCKWOOL Foundation.
- [International Development Innovation Alliance](#).

Framing the inquiry

Framing the inquiry

SECTION 4

Our focus on 'innovation'

While 'innovation' is often framed and pursued in a narrow sense, we also need new and better approaches, processes, and systems to shape the future of humanity and the planet. Many of these are not limited to new technologies nor subject to market-based entrepreneurship. This is not to diminish the role of technology, but to elevate other dimensions that shape why and how these powerful tools are developed and deployed, and also expand the scope of what can be reimaged.

For us, the scope of innovation needs to be broadened, as should participation in it. In essence, innovation is based in a commitment to possibilities and practices that make preferable futures more probable, and this concerns us all.

It can also be seen as an incredibly radical activity given the status quo bias in many societal systems. Indeed, while some of the conditions for creativity and innovation have expanded greatly over the last few decades, there are also strong pulls at the political, social, and cultural level towards pessimism, cynicism, inertia, and complacency (Mulgan, 2020).

Innovation, as we see it, should now seek to cultivate a movement of possibilities - mass, hopeful, interconnected possibilities - fuelled by social, political, economic, technological, and cultural imaginations.

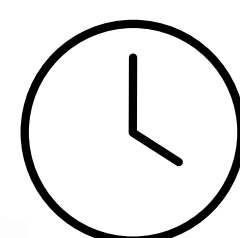
What we mean by systems innovation

Engaging with systemic approaches to innovation starts with determining and understanding the nature of the challenge being addressed.

Here, we draw on Rob Ricigliano's 'Complexity Spectrum' (2021) as a way of differentiating between complicated challenges ('*predictable, controllable, bounded*') and complex challenges ('*unpredictable, hard to control, endless and evolving*'). And also the difference between 'solutions' that address specific needs and approaches that engage and shift systems.

Appreciating the difference between targeted solutions and systems transformation recognises that a spectrum of approaches

FRAMING THE INQUIRY



Targeted solutions

To address urgent, localized, time-bound needs

Solutions at scale

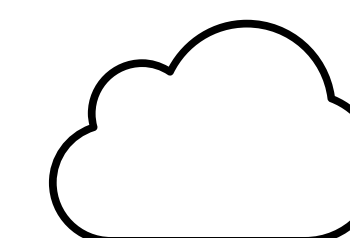
To address a widespread need in a sustained way

System innovation

To disrupt a problematic pattern or amplify a positive one

System transformation

To improve the health of a system by affecting its web or underlying patterns, narratives, power relationships, norms, etc.



COMPLICATED CHALLENGE

COMPLEX CHALLENGE

is needed, relative to context. Critically, it highlights that complex challenges can't be addressed by singular 'solutions' alone, regardless of their scale. Rather, complex issues, such as poverty, inequality, climate change, and collapsing ecosystems, require multi-dimensional, interconnected, and adaptive responses if outcomes are to be truly improved and sustained. This is what we mean by a 'systemic' approach to change and the practice of systems innovation.

Despite the growth in discourse about 'systems innovation', much of what is referred to doesn't really look that different from conventional approaches to innovation or 'solutionising'. It is often easy to see the novelty of such processes at the program, project, or product level, but it is harder to see how they will help us to really shift the status quo in systems that have become stuck and need to be more fundamentally evolved.

So, in addition to more systemic approaches, we also need more rigorous, grittier, and more critical explorations of systems innovation to understand and appreciate what might be involved. Surfacing this type of knowhow will hopefully enable innovators (and supporters of innovation) to embody different perspectives and practices when engaging with complex challenges.

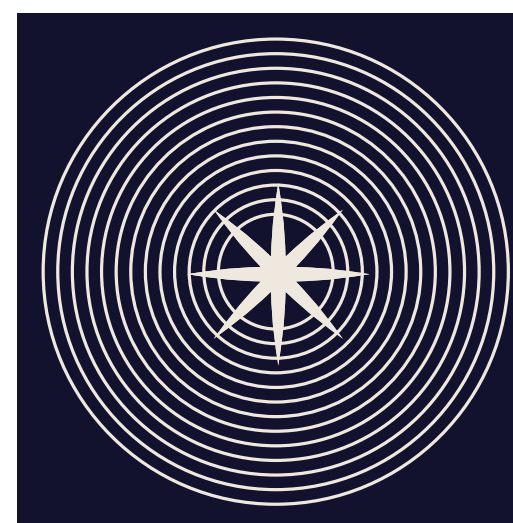
“ Systems don't get solved. At best, we hope to shift systems to a healthier state. Systems don't just need things fixed. They need the healing of relationships, historic inequities, destructive patterns, and the environment. Systems are infinite. There is no finish line that can be crossed in days or even a few years. Maintaining healthy systems is an ongoing task. Damage can be done when we try to fix what needs to be healed or think we can solve that which is unsolvable. Rather we must apply the appropriate approach to the type of problem being addressed. ”

Rob Ricigliano, 2021

Common attributes of systems initiatives

We see a number of commonalities emerging across initiatives that are taking systemic approaches to innovation. These shared attributes can help 'put a sheet on the ghost' of this work, and enable us to explore this form of organised systems innovation as a field of practice that can be named and developed. Identifying these initiatives is not arguing for silver bullets, but more like stoking sparks that can kindle deeper insights. As a starting hypothesis, systems initiatives:

1. Hold a **bold** ambition to move towards a future state that provides fundamentally better outcomes for people, places, and the planet.
2. Providing spaces and platforms that enable actors and stakeholders to convene around shared goals, harness their collective intelligence, and act in ways that have potential for **'better outcomes'**, meaning they are also often 'novel'.
3. Contribute to **rethinking** the fundamentals of how current systems and structures work, and support cultures that are open to new paradigms and possibilities.
4. Intentionally use a range of levers to incentivise, enable, and sustain multiple **innovations** across and within the chosen systems context.
5. Establish and maintain mechanisms that enable **coherence** (such as networked governance and information flows) and connect innovations in ways that make the whole more productive than the sum of the parts.



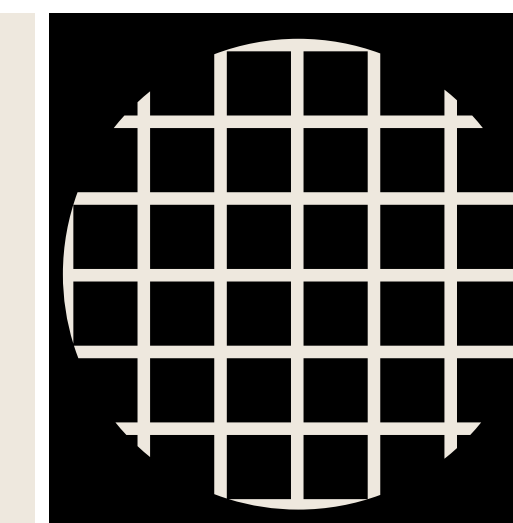
Bold approach to innovation - rethinks the core focus of innovation towards **creating better economic, social + environmental outcomes.**



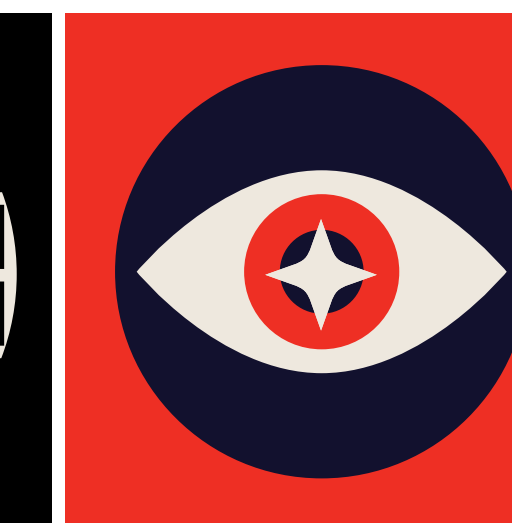
Intentionally using all levers + power to **direct innovation towards those outcomes.** All sectors have a key role to play - no one sector is a superior innovator. Innovation is democratised - and creating better futures becomes a 'right'.



Rethinking fundamentals - risks, rewards, value, better. New risk mindset focussed on **shared risks + rewards** plus **learning + experimentation** approaches.



Platform that draws together all **actors + stakeholders** needed to innovate towards creating better outcomes; and **stimulates collective intelligence** to **direct growth** towards addressing challenges.



Coherent portfolios of projects learning towards bold goals, which requires **joined up approaches** across sectors so **focus is on cooperation for outcomes** + actions not sector coordination.

Attributes derived from our research into mission-oriented/challenge-led innovation approaches, which we used as a starting-point for identifying and engaging with 'systems initiatives'.

Where does a system start and stop?

The majority of the systems we inhabit (social, cultural, economic, political, and environmental) are open systems - they are dynamic, nested, and overlapping. This fluidity is the reality of the world we live in, and so is implicit to systems work.

However, it is possible to define contexts where intentional and organised interventions can be facilitated. The systems initiatives we engaged with (and know of, more broadly) locate themselves in such contexts where there are identifiable (albeit permeable) boundaries - often delimited by a geography, value chain, sector, or natural ecosystem.

While boundaries are helpful in making systems work manageable, other boundaries (for example, regulatory jurisdictions), can pose real challenges when the intervention context cuts across them. In the 'what we learned' section, we also reflect on the need for systems initiatives to link into the wider systems and structures they exist within (e.g., how a city transformation initiative knits the change it generates into national policy frameworks and the macro market environment).

In addition, it's not merely a matter of 'nesting' interventions/ innovations in the wider context so they 'stick'. The dynamic also goes the other way. Within any systems initiative, there will be organisations, groups, and individuals who all play a part in contributing to systems transitions and change. In this sense, while the end goal of any given initiative may be to affect change

at a certain 'scale', change processes need to be attended to with a *fractal integrity* - small dynamics reflect the nature of bigger dynamics. Again, this points to appreciating the nuanced and relational nature of real transformation rather than relying (solely) on the seductive promise of 'leverage points' and 'scalable solutions'.

Does size matter...?

No and yes. No, in that scale in systems innovation is non-linear - discrete changes can result in significant shifts and, as discussed before, the integrity of multiple small actions creates the conditions for more fundamental transformation. Also, there is no minimum size - transformation can be pursued within and between systems of all sizes, including the household, classroom, garden, or self - and not all systems work will take the organised form of a systems initiative.

That said, it is also reasonable to expect that the size of any given systems initiative will generally affect the scope of its potential impact - an initiative mobilising regeneration across a bioregion stands to have a greater impact than the transformation of a single garden (although the Eden Project may dispute this!). Also, in many cases, the intervention context informs the scope of activity, or at least ambition - a city transformation initiative is required to operate at the level of the city, in some shape or form.

However, more than size, the most essential aspect of systems work is that **it is relational**, and this tracks to all levels of scale. It's a contingent, messy world, and systems innovation is the craft of intentional interconnection - attentive to the "*web of relations that weaves reality*". (Rovelli, 2020)

As a result, being able to foster and sustain (many to many) rich relationships is a critical, practical consideration when scoping the scale and ambition of any given systems approach.

“ However, more than size, the most essential aspect of systems work is that it is relational, and this tracks to all levels of scale. It's a contingent, messy world, and systems innovation is the craft of intentional interconnection. ”

Discovery

Discovery

“ I want to know more about diverse approaches that organisations are experimenting with and the conditions that make systems innovation really work. ”

“ I want to learn about different thinking, engagement, and collaboration approaches that affect change at the systemic level. ”

Discovery cohort

The discovery cohort was made up of 22 thinkers and doers active in systems innovation across Australasia. Participation in the cohort was by invitation and based on recommendations, availability, and willingness to be involved. A list of cohort participants can be found in [Appendix 1](#).

It was intended that the cohort would bring a diversity of perspectives, experiences, and expertise to the inquiry. We also wanted to test if the group would get value from working with and learning from each other.

Motivations of cohort members

“I have been head down recently in our own approach to systems change. As such, I’m looking forward to learning about how others are thinking about it at the cutting edge. Also, to build connections within Australia.”

“I want to learn about different approaches to systems change, and their context and impact. I’m particularly interested in governance, community organising, and advocacy. Also in how the tension between autonomy and cohesion are walked.”

“I want to learn about approaches to developing and sustaining innovation within organisations and the particular mindsets needed to decolonise thinking and behaviours.”

“I am curious about examples of cross-sector collaboration - it’s important work and is very difficult to do well, authentically, and effectively.”

“I’d like to understand what is working elsewhere and how effective diverse coalitions are being formed for systems change.”

“To better understand the conditions conducive to regenerative ways of being and doing and how we might transition systems in ways that honour and embody them. I’ll be looking for the connections between all our work and how we can amplify one another.”

“To translate theories and abstract ideas so they are useful in practice and make sense to more people.”

Discovery process

The discovery process was split into three phases and was undertaken over twelve weeks. All sessions were held virtually.

We provide more details on the discovery process in [Appendix 2](#).

01

Onboarding

Cohort members were orientated to the purpose of the investigation, the process, and each other.

02

Exploration

The cohort engaged with the guest initiatives, had reflection sessions, and learned from each others' work and perspectives.

03

Synthesis

The cohort synthesised their learning, reflections, and insights. These have been summarised in this report.

Initiatives we engaged with

1 Future of Fish

[View initiative](#)

Purpose: building human centred solutions that transform coastal economies for the sustainable use of ocean resources.

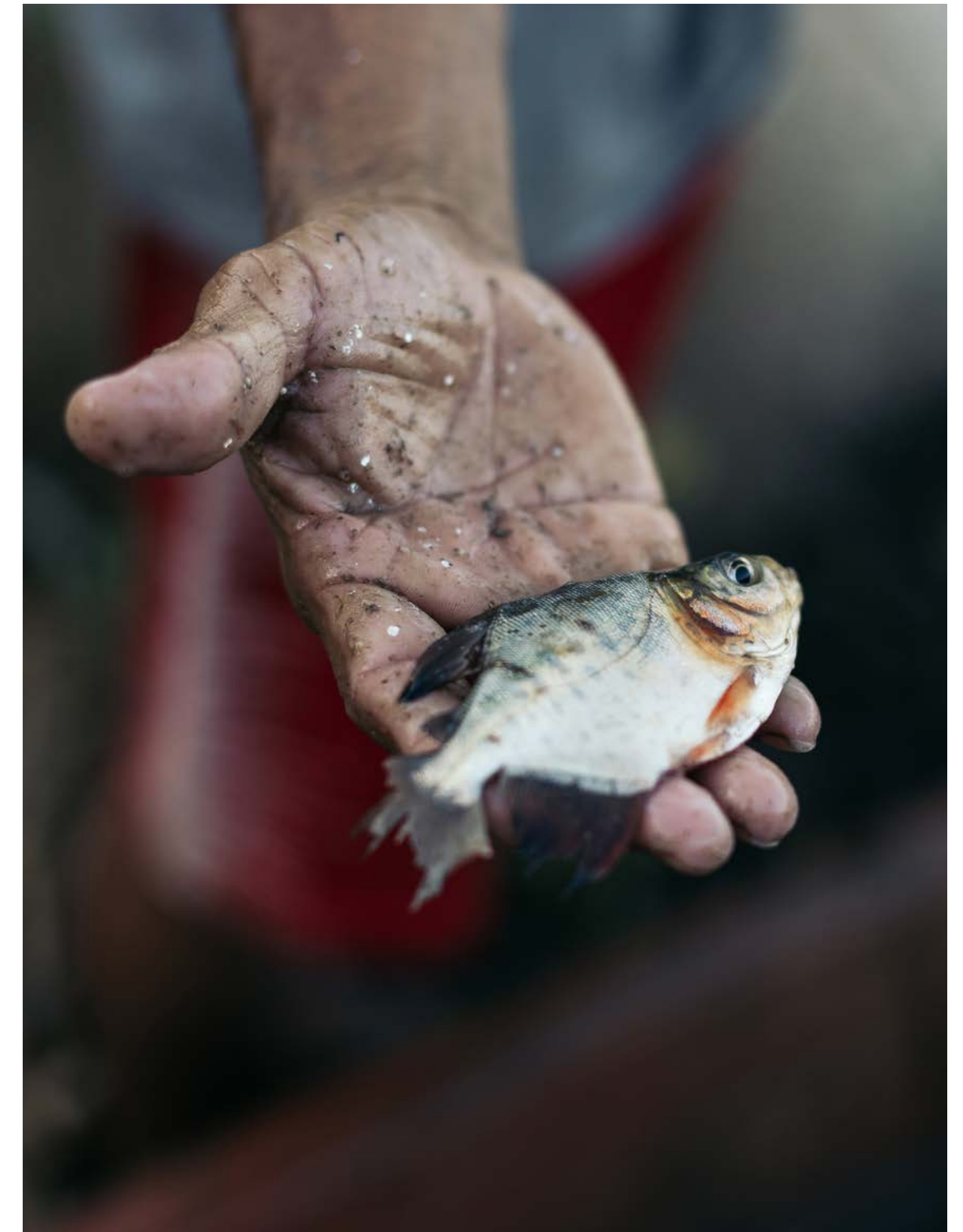
Goal: to advance ocean economies based on the principles of: healthy marine systems; increased food security; improved livelihoods; and climate resilience.

Challenge: globally, the ocean and its resources are being depleted, polluted and over-exploited. Many groups - governments, development banks, philanthropy, NGOs - are working hard on the issue. But there are big gaps, and fishers and first-line businesses struggle to access resources and coordinate solutions.

Tools/interventions: fostering systems innovation and collaboration through: data collection, interpretation, modelling, and democratisation; development of enabling services, infrastructures, and incentives; brokering supply chains and market arrangements, and capital coordination.

Intervention context: small coastal economies in developing countries.

➤ We're a stakeholder, not a consultancy. We stick around for the long haul, building deep collaborations with partners and fishers, raising capital and coordinating resources, and building infrastructure that lasts.



Initiatives we engaged with

2 Moving Feast

[View initiative](#)



SECTION 5

Purpose: to transform Victoria's food system.

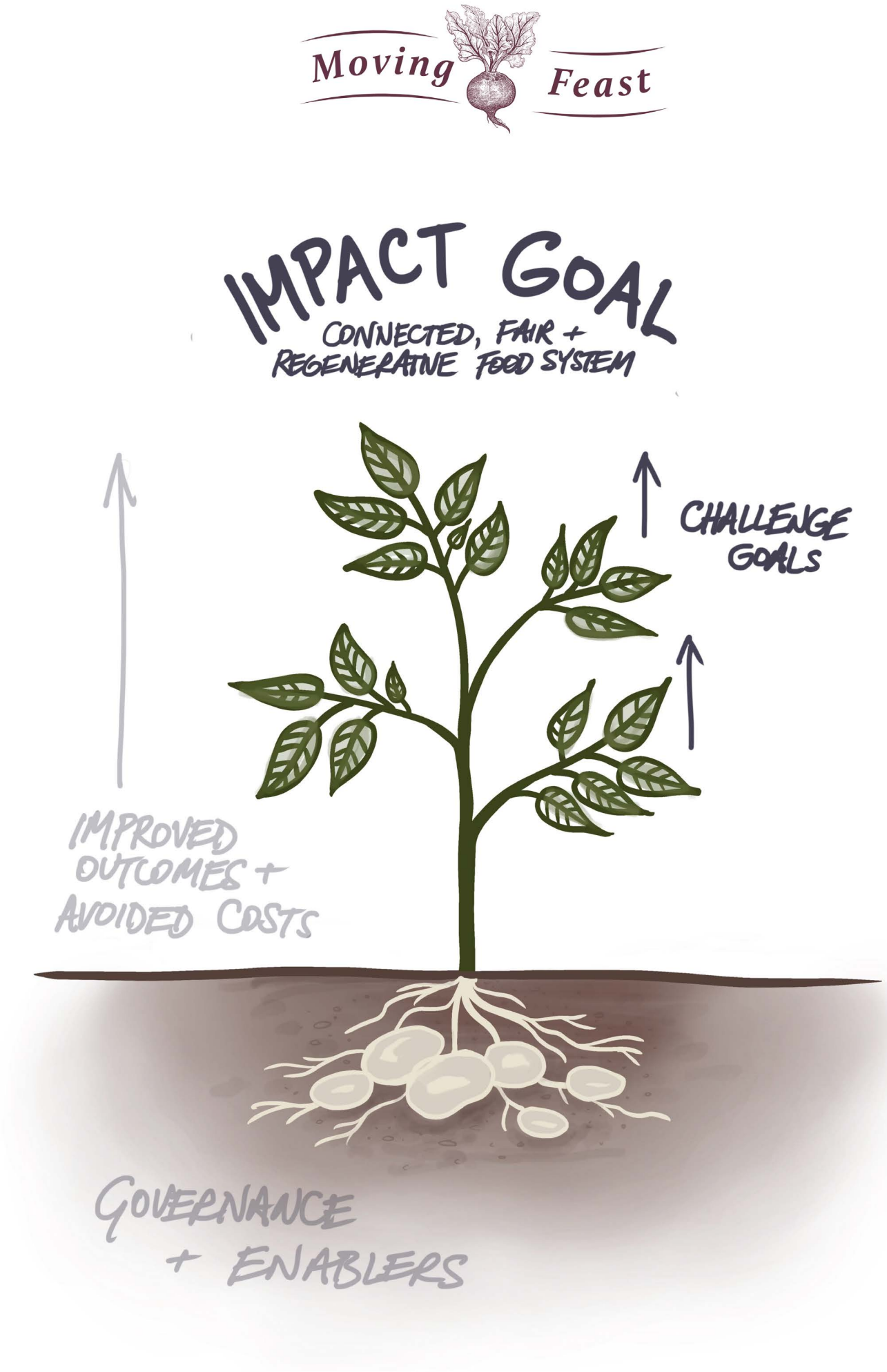
Goal: to create a fair, regenerative and connected food system for Victoria.

Challenge: a broken food system is a complex, ever-changing problem that has many actors and unintentional and unwanted consequences. We can only address it holistically, through experimentation and collaboration.

Tools/intervention: connecting and aggregating smaller actors, creating local and resilient supply chains, sharing and optimising resources to create a fair, regenerative, and connected food system.

Intervention context: the food system in Victoria, Australia.

➔ Social enterprises building a fair and regenerative food system for Victoria.



DISCOVERY

Initiatives we engaged with

3 Regen Network

[View initiative](#)

Purpose: Regen Network accelerates new markets that realigns economic health with ecological well-being, by providing a way to track, verify, and reward ecologically regenerative practices at scale.

Goal: realigning economic health with ecological health.

Challenge: misalignment between economic systems and natural systems and the limitations of existing market mechanisms that seek to incentivise good ecological stewardship.

Tools/intervention: Regen Network is a community building an open source (science-based) tool kit (infrastructure) designed to align ecology with economics to drive regenerative ecological outcomes. Regen Network Development, Inc. is a company building a global marketplace and contracting platform for Earth's ecosystem assets, services, and data on a public, proof-of-stake blockchain ledger.

Intervention context: ecosystem and landscape regeneration, global.

➤ Public digital infrastructure for ecological data, claims, and assets.



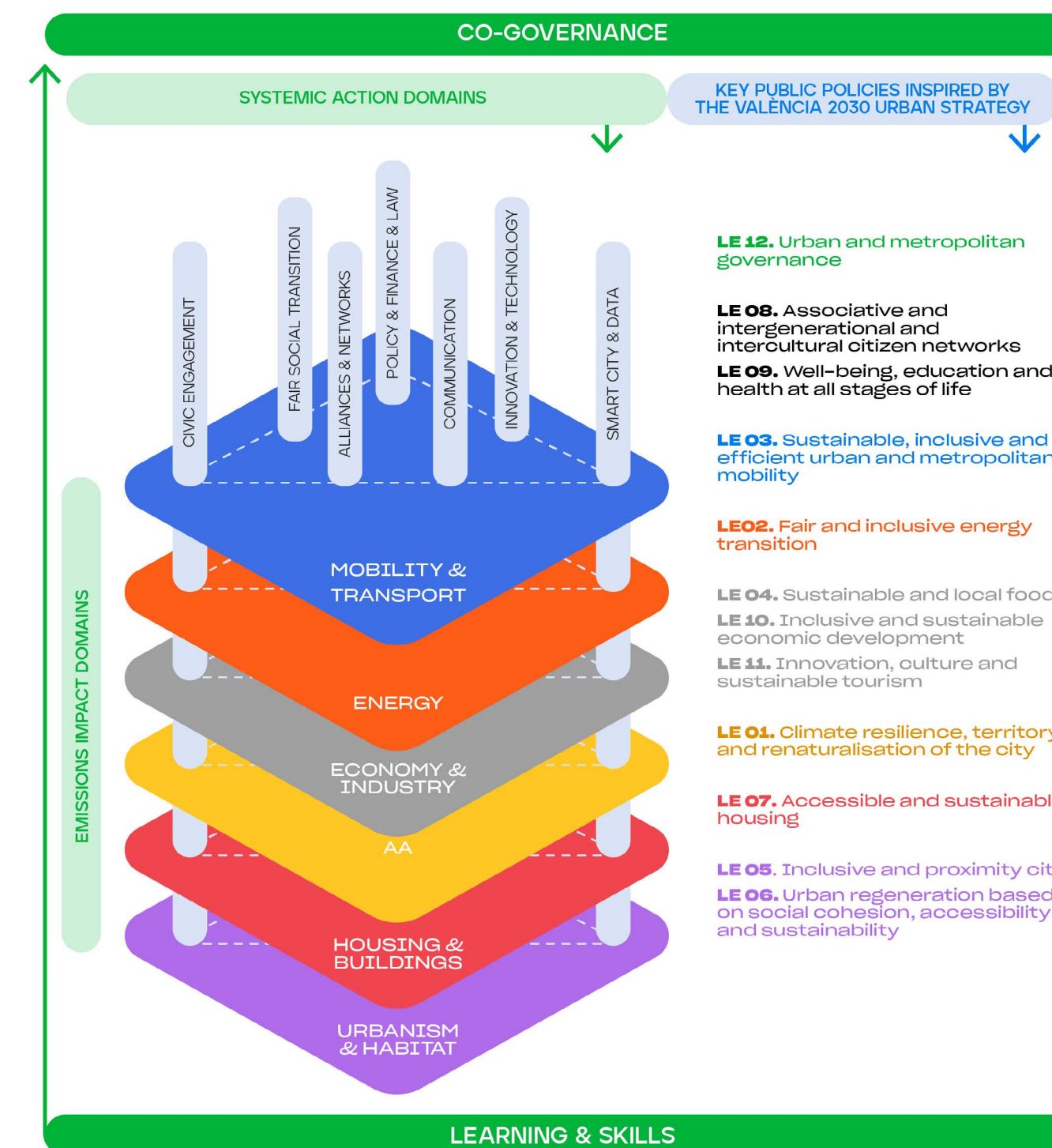
Initiatives we engaged with

4 Missions Valencia 2030

[View initiative](#)



VALÈNCIA 2030 CLIMATE MISSION ACTION PLAN Transition and Systemic Innovation towards Climate Neutrality in Valencia



SECTION 5

Purpose: to focus Valencia's research and innovation on missions that improve the life of its citizens in ways that are meaningful for them.

Goal: improving quality of life and the resilience of the city, starting with a Climate Mission: 'Valencia is a climate neutral city by 2030 by and for its citizens'.

Challenge: Missions València 2030 must make amends for mistakes that innovation has made in the past. The approach must be related to the concerns of Valencian citizens and society, and be important to them. They must also stimulate the innovative momentum from different sectors and disciplines and inspire creativity, talent and knowledge.

Tools/intervention: a long-term, stable, and visible focus for innovation governance and the whole innovation ecosystem. Use of a 'mission-led' innovation framework and approach.

Intervention context: València, Spain.

➔ Innovation that is based on the talent and creativity of the whole ecosystem.

DISCOVERY

Initiatives we engaged with

5 Regen Melbourne

[View initiative](#)

Purpose: to move our city into the safe and just space of the Melbourne Doughnut.

Goal: a regenerative Melbourne that is knowledgeable, full of life, affordable, connected through culture, collaborative, and enabled to bring this vision to life.

Challenge: Melbourne is currently contributing to an overshoot of planetary boundaries and not adequately providing the social foundations that would enable its citizens to thrive.

Tools/intervention: Regen Melbourne is a platform for ambitious collaboration, in service to Greater Melbourne. Powered by an alliance of more than 160 organisations, we host bold projects for a regenerative future.

Intervention context: Greater Melbourne, Australia.

➤ Reimagining and remaking Melbourne, together.



Initiatives we engaged with

6 Participatory Canada

[View initiative](#)

SECTION 5

Purpose: to prototype building a social infrastructure for our times that invites people to imagine, co-create, and build meaningful ways of living and working.

Goal: to inspire meaningful and inclusive participation, community resilience, and local circular economies, and to centre Truth and Reconciliation and friendships with one another and with Earth.

Challenge: to determine to what extent the Participatory City approach is feasible, viable and desirable, and whether it has the potential to create value for all residents in communities in Canada.

Tools/intervention: a systemic approach to communications, data and learning, creating networks, providing resources and space, and facilitating new social practices.

Intervention context: demonstration projects in three cities across Canada.

➤ The times we live in invite us to ignite next-level creativity, curiosity, and courage for how we live and work together in our neighbourhoods.



DISCOVERY

Initiatives we engaged with

7 The Southern Initiative

[View initiative](#)

SECTION 5

Purpose: we champion and enable social innovation by working with our communities to learn and prototype solutions, and then influence the levers that will drive social and economic transformation for south and west Auckland.

Goal: a prosperous resilient South Auckland where tamariki and whanau thrive.

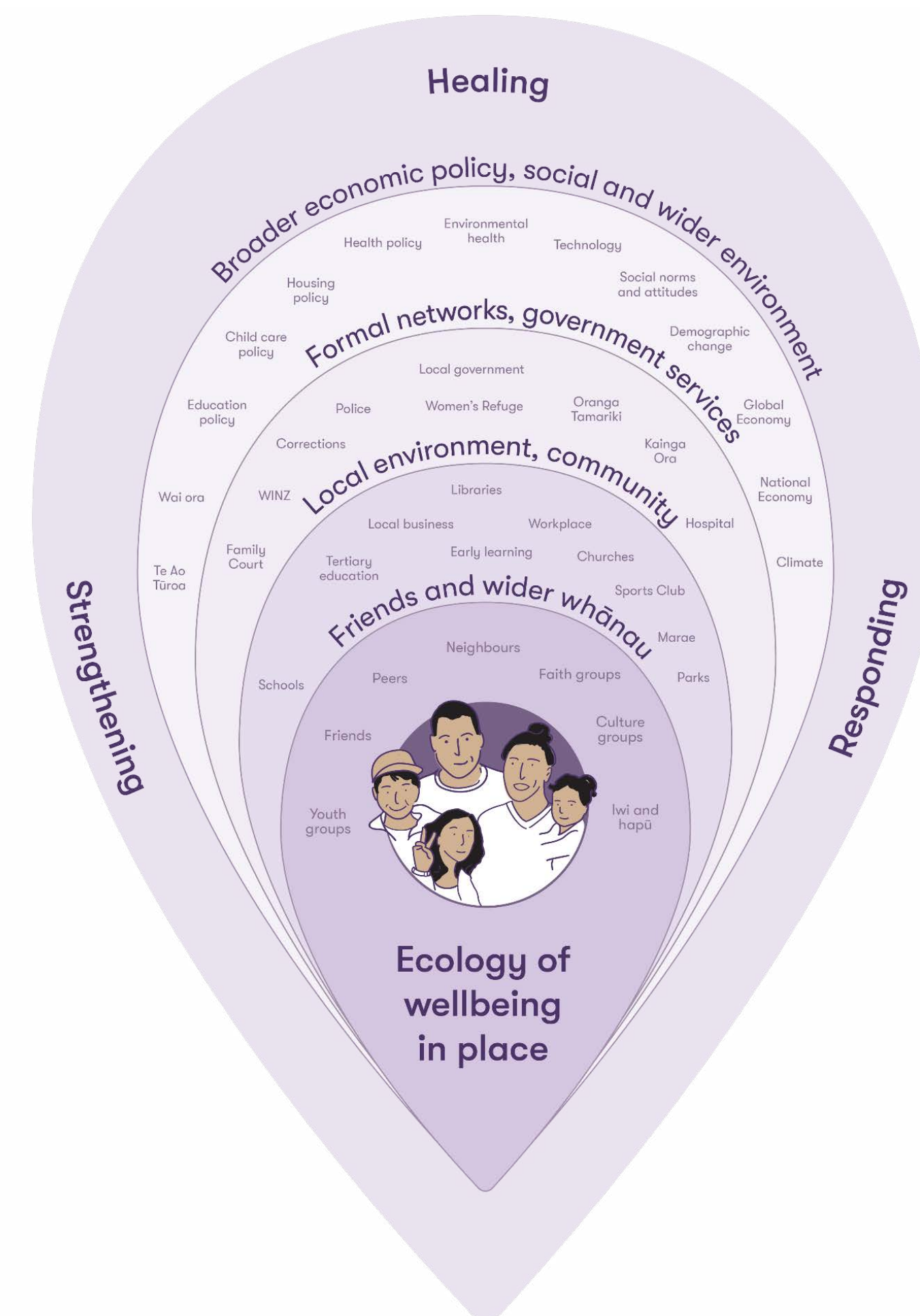
Challenge: business-as-usual practices in both the public and private sectors are not bringing about the changes needed at the pace required.

Tools/intervention: reflecting its community, TSI takes an integrated approach to social and economic development. It focusses on both quality and transformation to ensure big leaps, as well as incremental changes. Responses focus on immediate stressors for whānau. At the same time, longer term shifts are catalysed in the policies and systems that have potential to generate significant and positive shifts in the current socio-

economic conditions. Integral to the work is providing space for, and reconnection to the innovation inherent in mātauranga (Māori knowledge) and indigenous knowledge systems.

Intervention context: South Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand.

➔ An ecology of well-being in place.



DISCOVERY

What we learned

What we learned

The following sections summarise our observations, reflections, and insights generated through the discovery process. A draft of this report was shared with the discovery cohort for corrections and comments before publishing. We group this synthesis into three parts:

01

Evolved attributes of systems initiatives (**what** defines these approaches).

02

Practices, processes, and inputs that enable systems initiatives to take shape (**how** do these approaches work).

03

Directions to grow systems innovation in and for Australasia.



We invite readers to engage with our synthesis **as emergent learning rather than looking for definitive conclusions**. More research and learning (by doing) needs to be undertaken in this field, and we outline areas for investigation in [section 9](#).

Evolved attributes of systems initiatives

Evolved **attributes** of systems initiatives

Reflecting on the attributes we started with

As a result of our discovery, we have some reflections on, and refinements of, the common attributes of systems initiatives.

On 'bold goals'

The setting of goals for systems initiatives appears to be consistent, essential, and nuanced in a number of ways. On one hand, the role of a goal (which might also be expressed as a vision, mission, or challenge depending on the framework or narrative logic being used) is to provide a compelling direction and/or outcome statement that is sufficiently inspiring to engage a diversity of actors, including those who may not otherwise 'see' themselves as contributors in that space. Its role, as one initiative put it, is to 'lift people out of their silos' - to enrol individuals in a collective endeavour ('they stopped talking about themselves and started talking about the mission').

In this sense, while goals represent a desirable future state, they are as much about the present as they are the future (and getting overly

attached to specific targets may be missing this point). On the other hand, goals are most powerful when they are widely owned - ideally they will be co-created and not imposed. They should also remain open enough to allow diverse perspectives and responses - aligning is not about homogenising.

In addition, contextualisation matters both with respect to making the goal relevant and also in directing efforts towards outcomes that are implicitly transformational. The articulation of Regen Melbourne's challenge to 'make the Birrarung river swimmable again by 2030' is an example of this - it's relatable, unequivocal, compelling, and genuine progress towards it will require significant structural and systemic change in multiple sectors across the city. Vinnova's mission to 'ensure that every student in Sweden eats healthy, sustainable, and tasty school food by 2025' (an initiative we engaged with outside of the cohort process) offers another example of this type of systemic framing.

On 'all levers'

The intentional use of multiple, complementary levers was apparent in all initiatives. What's more, there was a consistent emphasis on the need to develop and deploy **new** levers, or enablers. This

reflects that existing resources and enablers are often not fit for systems organising and innovation, especially in relation to core infrastructures such as governance and investment. As one initiative commented, 'it's not an issue of capital but an issue of structuring. You have to pull yourself out of traditional financing approaches and think creatively.'

The exploration of market mechanisms that stimulate new value chains/flows and enable different forms of value to be accounted for was also a common pursuit. How this was being done in practice and the implications for further experimentation and research are discussed in later sections.

On 'rethinking'

All the initiatives spoke of holding the tension of working with/within existing systems while creating new ones - 'surfacing compelling alternatives to the status quo' or 'determining what a preferred change-of-state could look like'.

Between the existing and the new, there was recognition of the need to deconstruct existing ways of thinking, being, and doing in order to reimagine and recreate alternatives. Some initiatives centred deep civic engagement and 'truth telling' as a way of

“ There was also recognition that this work could be damaging if not done well (i.e., systems initiatives are in no way guaranteed to lead to better outcomes), and that doing it well was not easy or quick. ”

surfacing historical injustices and systemic biases - this included questioning fundamental structures and ownership rights, such as private property. There was also recognition that this work could be damaging if not done well (i.e., systems initiatives are in no way guaranteed to lead to better outcomes), and that doing it well was not easy or quick. In many cases, there were few precedents for working towards genuine reconciliation between groups and peoples. Here, 'rethinking' translates to deep listening and having a genuine openness - *'we have to learn our way into that, together; and that's quite uncomfortable'*.

In other cases, initiatives found themselves not only needing to address forces that resisted change, but also approaches that might otherwise be seen as progressive forces for it. This was particularly the case when competing interventions pursued a narrow set of outcomes, such as conservation, without considering the wider social, economic, and cultural context.

On 'organising infrastructures'

We found the framing and self-identification of being infrastructure, or a platform, for systems organising and innovation to be explicit in most of the initiatives - this included references to being *'social infrastructure'*, *'a platform for deep collaboration'*, and *'public infrastructure for living capital'*. Rather than multi-actor participation and self-organisation being a co-benefit of their approach, it was a core objective.

On 'coherence'

Fostering coherence across diverse activities and playing an intentional role in creating the 'connective tissue' was again an explicit (and essential) function for most of the initiatives. How they do this and the challenge of this work being structurally under-resourced is explored in the next section.

In addition, one tension that consistently came up related to the attributes of centralised versus decentralised forms of organising and governing. It was noted that 'decentralised' is increasingly being assumed to be good and 'centralised' bad, but perhaps this binary is somewhat misleading. There are doubtless tensions between these states of organising, and who gets to determine agendas, but they can also be complementary.

What seems to be more important than the inherent efficacy of one arrangement or the other, is the fit between the form and function of any given organising or governing component within the system initiative and/or intervention context. And also how different, but interdependent, organising and governing components (are designed to) interact with each other. This is what underpins 'coherence'.

How these arrangements transition over time is also an important consideration - the intended set of arrangements may not be possible to begin with, for a range of reasons. Again, we explore how some of these tensions are being navigated in practice in the next section.

Additional attributes we observed

In addition to the attributes we started with for this inquiry, we propose the following.



“ There is a spectrum between those working in the system to reduce harm and the people doing the imagination work, which is also important - and in between is the complex space, full of compromise. Not many want to play there. ”

Long-term perspective while holding multiple time horizons

The initiatives understood that the transitions and transformations they existed to facilitate were long-term endeavours. This is self-evident in the ambitious goals they articulate and organise around. This has implications for the resources required to sustain momentum over the long-term and creates risk of entropy setting in after the initial energy subsides - *'some actors will drift apart and revert to siloed activities if momentum and connectivity doesn't hold'*.

It also surfaces tensions that arise when working with actors who are grounded in different time horizons and/or have the capacity to move at different speeds. One of the initiatives cited the challenge of *'attending to current needs and the fragility of the systems approach (due to limited backing) while also building towards long-term time horizons'*. Another spoke to the challenge of *'how to progress dreaming into the hard work of organising. There is a spectrum between those working in the system to reduce harm and the people doing the imagination work, which is also important - and in between is the complex space, full of compromise. Not many want to play there'*.

Equally, the need to progress slowly, even when need may be urgent, was also discussed. One initiative emphasised that *'systems transformation requires slow, sustained work of building bridges, coalitions, and interconnected activities over time'*. Another made the point that novel approaches (and technologies) can leave out the communities who stand to benefit from them if they are implemented too quickly, and may reinforce existing power structures and systems rather than changing them. All of these considerations need to be respected, held, and managed.

Embracing messiness and adapting to emergence

This attribute is linked to 'rethinking' but is deserving of its own point of emphasis. All the initiatives were candid about embarking on processes they couldn't plan for in pursuit of goals they didn't know how to achieve. They embraced the messiness of the unknown because the *'status quo was intolerable'* or no longer viable.

Comfort working with uncertainty seems an important quality and mindset. One initiative stated that *'transition pathways would be emergent - unknowable to start with and only revealed through intentional engagement with the system'*. Responding to emergence sounds abstract, but in practical terms this creates a requirement for system initiatives to have sophisticated measurement and learning mechanisms, which we explore in the next section.

Another reason for highlighting this attribute is the challenge it poses to engaging funders and other actors, many of whom (for good reason) seek degrees of certainty around what they're investing in and the outcomes they expect to see. Often the link to long-term goals is too tenuous to satisfy expectations and there is currently little appetite for resourcing explorations into the unknown.

Fostering change through multiple dimensions

All initiatives designed for generating impact through multiple dimensions, or pathways. One initiative commented that their approach to change was *'definitely not the western idea of scale'*. It was generally anticipated that fostering change through multiple dimensions would be complementary and create the potential for more systemic impact.

A way of thinking about these different dimensions is through Tulloch's five scaling pathways (2018, adapted from Moore et al., 2015):

- **Scaling out:** impacting greater numbers (*a conventional view of scaling*).
- **Scaling up:** impacting laws and policy.
- **Scaling deep:** impacting cultural roots.
- **Scree scaling:** impacting norms and expectations.
- **Scaling initial conditions:** impacting infrastructures to enable and inform action.

Understanding the relationships between these dimensions of change also has implications for the design of measurement and evaluation processes within initiatives. As part of this, it requires a willingness from backers to support work that goes beyond delivering specific outputs and value the interdependence between activities that together weave a systemic approach.

Transformation processes are nested and embodied

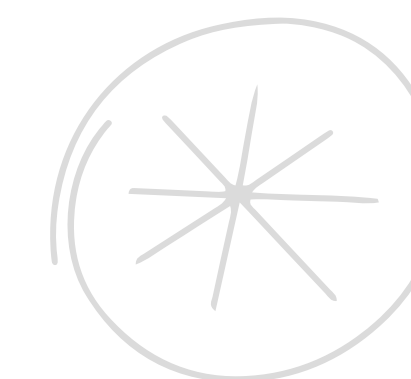
The last attribute we observed is both subtle and profound. It relates to the process of systems innovation not being something that happens 'out there' while those involved remain unchanged. Systems change is demanding of personal change, which is embodied and hard to articulate within a paradigm that assumes and privileges 'objectivity'.

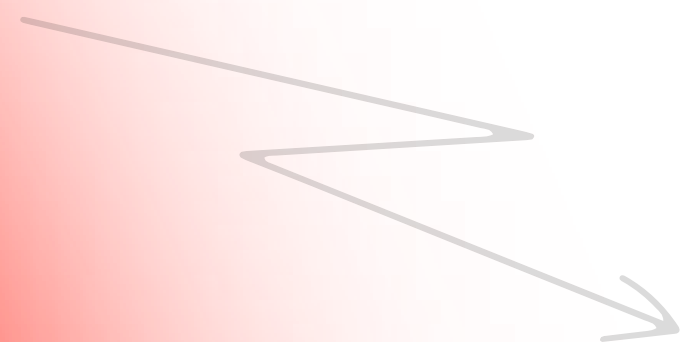
This is significant as it also extends to how funders and decision makers think about their engagement in systems innovation - it requires them to be willing to be changed by the process as well as support it. One initiative highlighted the usefulness of this framing: *'The idea of navigation has been really helpful, and talks to going on a journey together rather than project plans, Gantt charts, etc. Also, having the funders as active participants, not passive observers.'* Regen Melbourne makes this notion explicit in its purpose statement: *'to move Melbourne into the doughnut [referring to Kate Raworth's Doughnut economics] through healing and reconnecting to country and each other'.*

To paraphrase the American historian, Robin Kelley, it reminds us that transformation *'is not a series of clever manoeuvres and tactics, but a process that can and must transform us.'* (2002).

“ Transformation is not a series of clever manoeuvres and tactics, but a process that can and must transform us. ”

Robin Kelley, 2002





Cautions and caveats

Through the process, the cohort also heard and discussed a number of cautionary tales that are useful to keep front and centre when engaging with this work. We highlight some of these below.

Messy, hard, and not guaranteed

While the premise of systems innovation is that current approaches are insufficient to generate the change and outcomes we need, this only signals the intent to do things differently - it's not a guarantee that they will work. Experiences expressed through the discovery process unanimously highlighted how challenging, messy, resource-intensive, and contingent systems organising and innovation is. More than once, people doing the work emphasised what they were doing did not conform to a *'model'* - these approaches may have commonalities but they are also contextual, and do not lend themselves to being codified or replicated.

All this has implications for the capabilities required to steward and progress systems initiatives, and, again, the resourcing strategies to support them.

Systems change is not inherently good

There was much discussion about the cliches and jargon mixed up in systems innovation narratives - some of this is explored in the next section with respect to the communication approaches that the initiatives have learned to be most effective.

One of the cohort discussions explored the sense that systems innovation and change was predominantly framed as an inherently constructive endeavour, but this is not the case. It follows that if there isn't acknowledgement that systems change has actually led to as many injustices as positive transformation, there would be risk of repetition. More broadly, there was an acknowledgement of both unintended consequences and the tension of working with 'bad actors'.

Again, this reflects the need for more rigorous, gritty, and more critical explorations of system innovation which emphasise learning and reflection at both conceptual and practice levels.

We should not rule out more radical interventions

Another discussion focused on whether this inquiry was at risk of assuming that the challenges we face are actually amenable to organised and deliberative transitions, and whether we are too often *'looking for win-win solutions.'* While this discussion is somewhat unresolvable, we acknowledge that some situations, given their urgency and consequences, may require more radical, or imposed, interventions (such as carbon rationing or mandated resettlements), which will invariably create winners and losers.

This is a reminder that while this work starts from a hopeful position in respect to the potential to organise, innovate, and act in different ways, it also needs to stay grounded in the realities of physics and politics.

Much of this work is not new

There was also caution in seeing and representing emerging initiatives as demonstrations of **new** practice. It was noted that much of systems work is grounded in long-standing practices and knowledge sets that have extensive evidence and traditions around them, from Indigenous wisdom to more contemporary community and place-based development approaches.

What is new, perhaps, is the growing recognition of the interconnected nature of the challenges we face and the scale of the transformation that is needed. For example, it was interesting to note that while Missions Valencia was focused on its own transformation, it was *'connecting with 100 other cities undertaking similar transition pathways'*.

Also, diffusion from fields focused on systems and complexity give us new tools, language, and ways of thinking about the world. Certainly, there are a growing number of approaches that draw on such work to provide frameworks for systems transitions and change, albeit through different entry points and informed by different perspectives.

Promising, but early days

Finally, we acknowledge the small sample size of experiences, perspectives, and initiatives that we were able to draw on for this exploration. While the systems initiatives we engaged with had big ambitions and promising starts, the majority of them were still young (less than five years old) and fragile from both a human and financial resourcing perspective.

While this should be considered when digesting our observations and recommendations, it is also the point of the project - the promise (and need) is sufficient to invite greater investment, exploration, and experimentation in the field.



Practices, processes, and inputs

Practices, processes, and inputs that enable systems initiatives to **take shape** and **work**

What we share here isn't comprehensive. There were many insights generated through the discovery process which we haven't been able to incorporate into this synthesis, and there are areas which require further investigation to provide commentary on (some of these are outlined in the [directions](#) section).

Rather, we present a summary of the practices, processes, and inputs consistently raised during discovery and seem to be important in enabling systems initiative to take shape and work.

We have grouped these into **five categories**:

- 1 Systems readiness and self-organisation
the development of social capital, surfacing and seeing the system, taking time to organise and deliberate, and finding a shared language that mobilises participation.
- 2 Processes of instigation
who initiates and the art of convening.
- 3 Developing core infrastructures
organising platforms (broadly defined), networked governance, the role of data, learning and knowledge systems, and enablers of innovation and action.
- 4 Linking and nesting
linking with macro systems and structures and embodying change at the micro level.
- 5 Accessing appropriate resources
funding for core infrastructures and fit-for-purpose financing for innovation and action.

Practices, processes, and inputs that enable systems initiatives to take shape and work

1 Systems readiness and self-organisation

There is a deceptive simplicity at the core of this work that comes down to the ability of diverse actors to organise and act coherently.

As a cohort member concluded at the end of the process: *'when we are more connected, we do better; when we have more time, we do better; and when we have more synergy (between individual and collective goals), we do better'*. While this may sound obvious, it also invites us to recognise how challenging the work of cooperation actually is.

Here, we explore the processes of *'systems convening, facilitation, and organising'* that need to be undertaken to generate a readiness for systems innovation.

Development of social capital

All of the initiatives spoke about the development of social capital as a precondition (and pre-work) of systems innovation:

- *'This initiative was possible because of the latent social capital between the core actors'*.
- *'Building the partnerships, getting all the parties at the table is the key question for us'*.
- *'Systems transformation requires slow, sustained work of building bridges, coalitions, and interconnected activities over time'*.
- *'[Our] initial focus was on systems organising - sensing, generating insights, weaving, reflecting back, iterating, and drawing together different expertise and perspectives to generate a holistic and shared vision of what was desired and possible'*.

Systems innovation needs to be coherent to be effective, and generating the potential for coherence requires relationships and alignment across sectors and multiple, *autonomous* actors - *'the recognition of common interests and a shared interest in cooperating needs to be awakened'*. This work of building trust and networks doesn't happen on its own.

Therefore, the development and maintenance of (many to many) relationships within any given intervention context needs to be understood as a primary activity and resourced appropriately. It is open question whether social capital can be substituted or fast-tracked, to some degree, through the application of financial and/or political capital (in contexts where existing relationships are thin), even if this form of systems organising is likely to be more transactional and imposed.

Seeing the system

Strengthening connections and alignment can be fostered through *'making the system visible to itself'*. This is about enabling actors to see how they relate to each other and getting a picture of the dynamics and patterns that shape the intervention context (e.g., norms, narratives, assumptions, and flows of resources, value, information, and authority).

One of the initiatives stated that it is their *'job to hold the space so different actors can see how their work is aligned with each other and the potential for action'*. Another spoke to how their work started with *'extensive on the ground research, ethnographic studies, and other forms of systems mapping and analysis'*. This work would then be presented back to, and validated with, stakeholders to surface opportunities for disruption and innovation, and potential transition pathways. Another initiative spoke to the importance of these processes *'finding consensus with stakeholders, determining how value can be created, contextualising available tools, and determining mechanisms for monitoring.'*

Mapping and making the system visible also has other functions. It provides an opportunity to identify where strengths and assets lie within the system and creates the potential to build on *'what's already working'*. One cohort member referred to this as *'abundance mapping'*. Also, it's a means to mitigate conflict and tension between actors. As a cohort member asserted, *'unbalanced systems often pit actors against each other which makes coalescence difficult.'* Transparency can be an antidote to this misalignment and help entrenched situations to become more visible and open to change.

Time to organise

All the initiatives spoke of the energy and time it takes to galvanise actors and facilitate self-organisation - *'this upfront work requires considerable time, effort, and resources.'* In some cases, creating the foundations for systems innovation took more than a year - *'It took a year to engage with the civic system and all core sectors. They were open to what would be pursued but it was vital that there was strong civic and political support for [the initiative's] direction.'*

There is an inherent tension in taking time to organise for action, especially as the purpose of organising is usually underpinned by some degree of urgency, but the experience of those facilitating initiatives indicated that the process can't be cut short.

This creates a case for 'readiness funding' and also progressive funding so that systems initiatives can form and evolve over time. It also has implications for how funders set their expectations in relation to timelines and how progress is monitored and evaluated in an initiative's initial development - assessing the nature of networks, participation, and alignment will be more relevant than looking for material 'impact'.

Language and dialogue

In addition to time, there was much discussion about the role of language in enabling and constraining actors to organise. Chief among these was a sense that *'systems should be seen and not heard'*. That is, while those involved in facilitating systems innovation benefit from using a technical language set, this has limited value when engaging with actors more broadly - *'[talking about systems]*

gets way too esoteric way too fast for most people.' There was broad agreement on avoiding the language (jargon) of systems and overly complicated concepts. The language of *'engagement and change needs to be relevant to stakeholders and address their needs. The language of systems should not be explicit. Instead, propositions should be framed around interests and (multiple) benefits'*.

Beyond language sets, the importance of seeking clarity and specificity through dialogue with and between actors, was also discussed. *'Systems are abstract and there is a need to be highly specific when discussing different aspects of their dynamics and multiple time horizons - it's easy to talk past each other and lose people'*. Supporting dialogue between actors was seen as an opportunity for people to express themselves, hear each other, translate perspectives, deliberate, and arrive at shared understandings while still recognising diversity. These processes are part of growing a sense of ownership and help avoid the risk of any given initiative becoming homogenised and dislocated from the people it needs to mobilise - *'most top down interventions are undermined by huge disconnects'*.

Expanding on language, there was also discussion on the value of arts and culture in engendering shared identities, connections, new possibilities, and purpose. It was noted how the arts are conspicuous by their absence in many impact frameworks and 'transformation' narratives, and that this omission potentially limits their influence. *'Arts and culture were a massive part of how individuals would describe their city experience (and what they valued), but don't show-up in the doughnut (economics) or SDGs - so, we had to add them.'*

Practices, processes, and inputs that enable systems initiatives to take shape and work

2 Processes of instigation

There's a paradox at the heart of systems initiatives - while they are, ultimately, dependent on collective agency and action to foster change, they are often driven by smaller groups and individuals who have the vision and capabilities to breathe them into life. This section reflects on the nature of that capability.

Who initiates?

The majority of initiatives could trace their origins back to key instigators who had either innate systems sensibilities and/or skill-sets in systems thinking - *'the originator of the research was a systems person, not a seafood person.'* Also, *'facilitating transformation requires a systems perspective and awareness that can then enable the threading together of many small actions.'*

Other commentary suggested that initiators were often in possession of certain enablers that positioned them to be catalysts. One initiative reflected on their origin story coming down to a mix of their leadership standing, access to resources, social capital, and ability to convert salient pressures (e.g. COVID) into a rallying call for potential change. Other initiatives combined the power and resources of an anchor institution (usually a public body) with the vision of key individuals within those entities to initiate a systems approach.

“ Facilitating transformation requires a systems perspective and awareness that can then enable the threading together of many small actions. ”

The art of convening

A distinct skill-set of systems instigators is the art of convening - *'surfacing common interests from key actors around specific challenges and then 'baking-in' cooperation and values which will last.'* This work requires instigators to have the organiser's mindset, be able to relate to different worldviews, and also engender credibility with those different groups. One initiative spoke about this work requiring *'a rare mix of capabilities - granular practical work and conceptual systems thinking.'* Another suggested that the *'mode of facilitation is something akin to being an 'intelligent glue.'*

It was also noted that convening was more than the process of bringing people together, it was about creating *'enabling spaces'* where people *'feel safe to make contributions.'* In many cases this required the fortitude to resist and reset existing power relations and the capabilities to manage *'the dynamics of constant friction and change.'* Some saw the work as being gendered - *'again and again, it's women who are making the circle bigger and keeping collaboration kind'.*

There was discussion on whether these skill-sets were 'born or made', with a general conclusion that these capabilities can be learned, but are currently scarce. The attritional nature of the work was also called out - *'it's exhausting to hold on-the-ground delivery and also the systems convening and overarching trajectory of change'* - and that it was hard to encourage talent to step into convening roles: *'How do we get people skilled in this messy work? People drop and don't want to do the work because of attrition and conflict. A big part is about appraising and making trade-offs when moving towards common goals - how do you get people excited about having made a whole bunch of compromises today, and seeing that as progress?'* This highlights that politics and negotiation are critical parts of creating the conditions for change. However, there was a general tendency for initiatives to emphasise the need for collaborative structures rather than acknowledging that transformative work requires a mix of collaboration, conflict, contestation, and engaging in power differentials.

Overall, it was seen as important that those with these capabilities were equipped with the material resources to be able to make the most of them, and that more capability building was also supported.

“ Convening was more than the process of bringing people together, it was about creating *'enabling spaces'* where people *'feel safe to make contributions.'* In many cases this required the fortitude to resist and reset existing power relations and the capabilities to manage *'the dynamics of constant friction and change.'* ”

Practices, processes, and inputs that enable systems initiatives to take shape and work

3 Developing core infrastructures

While individuals play a key role in the instigation of systems innovation, the role of convening and organising typically need to be structured for an initiative to be progressed beyond its initial stages and sustained over the long-term.

This often leads to the development of core organising infrastructures or platforms (broadly defined) that can knit together activities and actors across the systems initiative and also lead on creating and/or aggregating enablers of innovation.

Core organising infrastructures

There is an organisational dualism in systems initiatives. That is, while the initiative, itself, is the sum of what happens across the intervention context, there also needs to be a definable organising function that underpins the overall initiative. These core functions exist to mobilise, orchestrate, harness, and enable the actions of many others - 'we see ourselves as a platform for deep collaboration.'

This creates opportunities for new, more open, and networked types of organising, which in turn require different types of infrastructures. It is similar to 'movement' organising, but much more diverse in terms of the interests and intersections between actors, issues, and actions. One colleague described their function at the heart of their initiative as 'surfacing 'wisdom' (research/knowledge) and facilitating 'action' (projects), this means: strategic convening, communication between actors, catalysing collective innovation, collective measurement, funding architecture, and public

campaigning.' Another initiative spoke to their role as 'growing capability, capacity, and conditions for action. Joining up and connecting. Leveraging, influencing, and incentivising.'

This is not a command and control approach to change, but a facilitative one - 'you can't control specific plans - rather, you need to facilitate a 'hyper-connected ecosystem of solutions' and enable them to be visible to each other while orienting towards shared directions.' **For funders, this implies at least two things - to foster systems innovation, core organising infrastructures need resourcing. Also, the nature of activity that's then generated through these infrastructures can't be easily predicted or controlled - requiring adaptive investment approaches.**

Valencia 2030 Climate Mission Constellation

Cities - Missions Areas

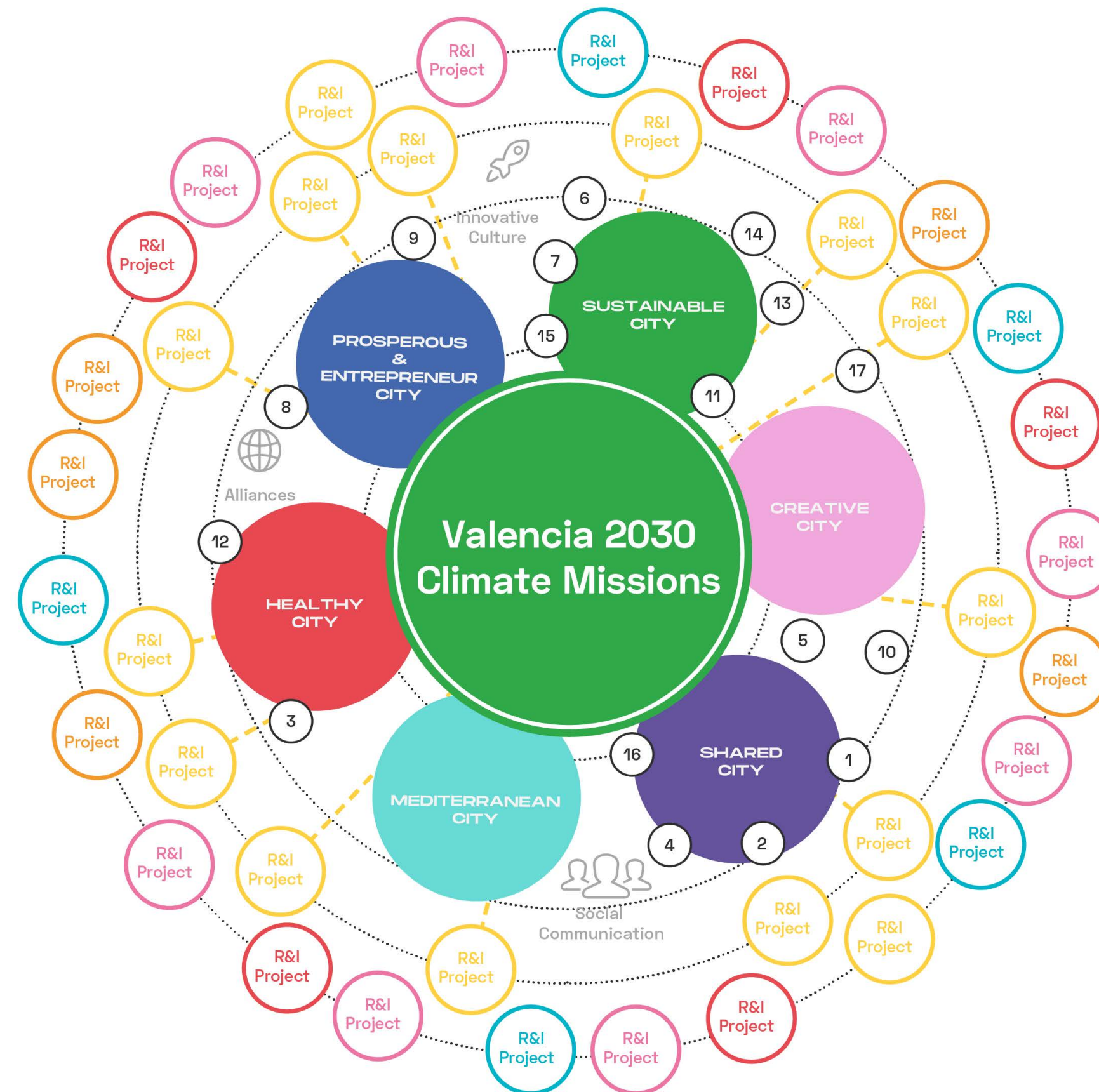
- Healthy City
- Sustainable City
- Shared City
- Prosperous & Entrepreneur City
- Creative City
- Mediterranean City

Five Helixes - R&I Projects

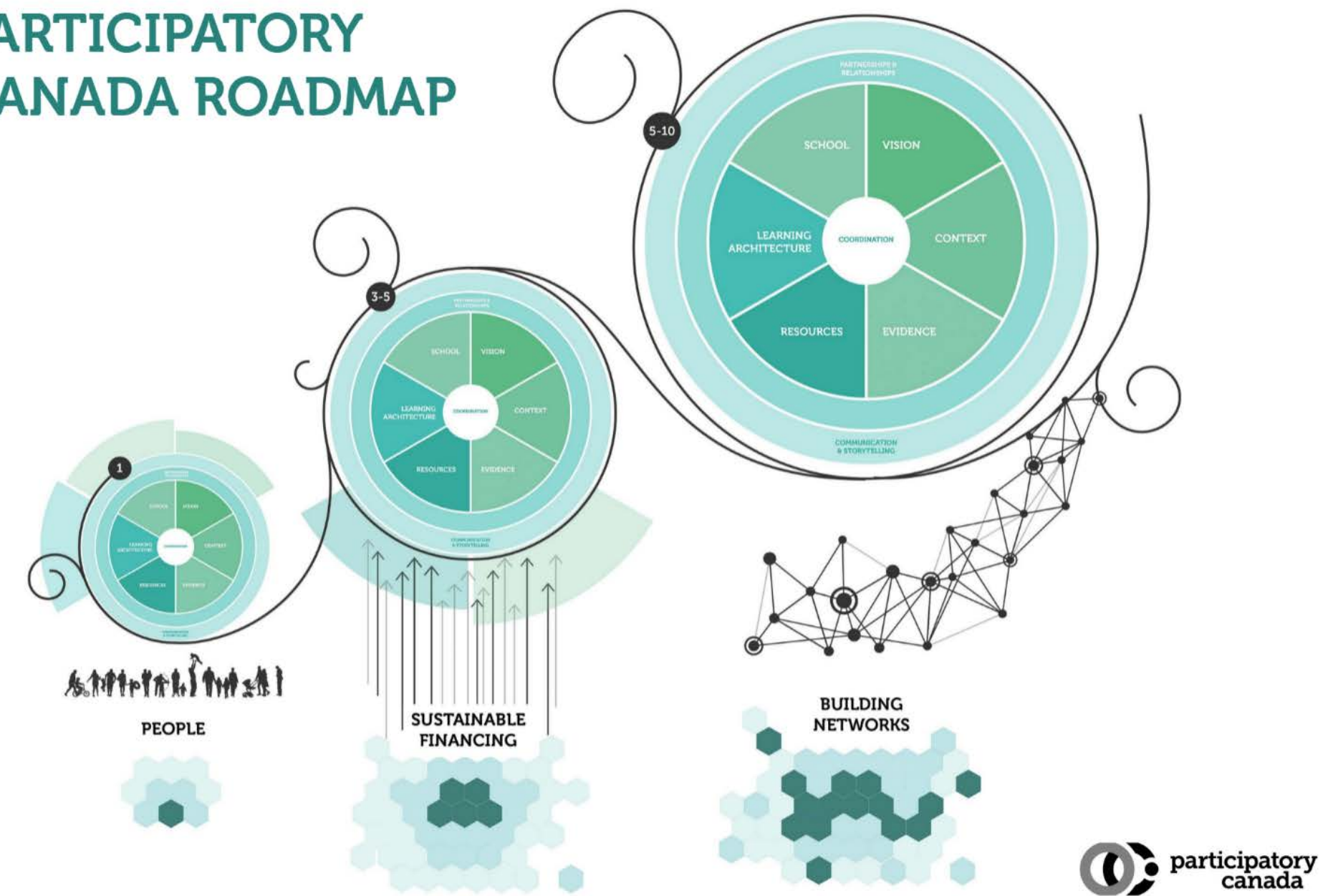
- Academy, Research Centre & Tech Institutes
- Civil Society & Citizenship
- Private Sector & Corporations
- Multilevel Public Sector
- Mass Media

Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations)

- 1 No poverty
- 2 Zero hunger
- 3 Good health & well-being
- 4 Quality education
- 5 Gender equality
- 6 Clean water & sanitation
- 7 Affordable & clean energy
- 8 Decent work & economic growth
- 9 Industry, innovation & infrastructure
- 10 Reduced inequalities
- 11 Sustainable cities & communities
- 12 Responsible consumption & production
- 13 Climate action
- 14 Life below water
- 15 Life on land
- 16 Peace, justice & strong institutions
- 17 Partnerships for the goals



PARTICIPATORY CANADA ROADMAP



A couple of different ways in which systems initiatives express their organising function and the relationships between activities and actors in their contexts.

Networked governance

While command and control approaches to coordination were not seen as appropriate for systems innovation, arrangements that could generate coherence, balance accountabilities, and harmonise authority flows were seen as essential. It should also be noted that while governance functions in conventional context usually relate to a specific entity or actor, in a systems context they more commonly involve relationships between many. In this respect, the design of governance was something that all the initiatives were grappling with: *'deep systems work occurs through communities and is anchored by governance.'*

Some challenges being encountered related to the mismatch between existing authority structures, defined by organisational and institutional boundaries, and the systems being worked with: *'We have a challenge to shift governance arrangements from being defined by organisations and institutions to the boundaries of the bio-regions we're seeking to work across.'* Also, *'there's a tension between existing structural boundaries (e.g., regulatory jurisdictions) and the actual social and environmental systems we're working on.'*

“ Deep systems work occurs through communities and is anchored by governance. ”

Other challenges related to managing resources and accountabilities between autonomous actors. Here, organisational structures could be problematic in siloing resources that *'need[ed] to be liberated into liquids'* to enable collaborative working. On the other hand, *'issues of non-delivery by some actors with constrained capacity creates risk across the whole initiative and with core backers.'* Networked governance arrangements were seen as having a role in mitigating these challenges by enabling resources to be distributed effectively and by establishing shared risk management mechanisms.

Governance was also seen as needing to provide functions beyond managing accountabilities and decision-making. This included providing generative spaces and conduits for *'information sharing, cooperation, and possibilities.'* There was also commentary that the process of transforming social and environmental systems should explicitly incorporate more accountability to future generations in core social infrastructures and institutions as *'these accountabilities aren't currently built in.'*

In terms of how governance is constructed, many of the initiatives speculated that the arrangements they had now were not the arrangements they anticipated for the future, and that there should be a *'shift to a decentralised community governed system'* or a *'more distributed and self-organising model'* that can appropriately hold *'an alliance between actors'*. However, it was also recognised that this would take time, experimentation, and that *'capacity has to be built within the system before it can evolve itself.'*

One initiative named this as a process of *'progressive decentralisation'* and was using blockchain technologies *'not just for how transactions are processed, but as infrastructure for decentralised communities and governance'*. This included seeding ownership of core assets (not just enabling representation) through distributing governance rights to underrepresented groups. Another initiative was experimenting with ways to shift power out to the community through mechanisms such as *'open budgeting'* and the formation of citizen assemblies.

Overall, governance, itself, was seen as a major innovation opportunity. And it may be that the experimentation being undertaken by systems initiatives to form effective, networked governance approaches generates useful learning for a wider range of multi-stakeholder forums and processes.

Data, learning, and knowledge systems

The initiatives were highly attentive to change occurring within and across their intervention contexts and recognised that interpreting data and signals was essential for the development of their work and navigating the complexity they were acting within. As part of their core organising infrastructure, initiatives saw a *'need for ongoing sensing and sense-making to cut through the noise of activities across the systems and recalibrate overall priorities and directions.'*

Most of the initiatives formalised this function through the establishment of learning and knowledge systems, which included having researchers in residence or other dedicated capacities. Regen Melbourne has established a Research Lab to provide a knowledge and learning function that runs alongside projects and activities. Moving Feast tracks change at multiple levels through different tools. This includes using the [Wicked Lab platform](#) to track the impact of individual projects, alignment with the SDGs, network evolution, and changes in the overall system/intervention context.

The Southern Initiative (TSI) positions itself as an *'innovation learning platform'* and has built its learning system around Indigenous knowledge and values, obligations of [Te Tiriti](#), and evidence of material change. It sees learning as a primary enabler of systems change and invites policy makers to learn alongside communities through experimentation as a means to shape policy from the bottom-up. Missions Valencia has an impressive data infrastructure which informs innovation as well tracking change.

However, while data and metrics were unanimously valued, there was also a sense that the general demand for hard targets and

measures, particularly by funders, is often at odds with the realities of systems change - *'what's a metric for systems rearrangement? Sometimes getting unstuck is the transition enabler regardless of its direction.'* It was recognised that there is a *'poetry and grammar of measurement - a grammar of hard, material metrics, and targets, and a poetry which is nuanced and hard to describe, but still essential to weave in.'*

Enabling innovation and action

Beyond organising functions, all the initiatives sought to enable innovation and provide material support for activities across their intervention contexts. This was done in different ways and determined by maturity, resources, approach, and context. Perhaps, the most significant of these supports was identified as funding and finance, and we cover these separately below. However, it was also recognised that financial capital is rarely sufficient by itself, and there are a range of other enablers that systems initiatives are able to provide, channel, and aggregate.

Missions Valencia offers a comprehensive range of enablers. Leaders at the City Government frame the whole city as a *'test-bed'* and have sought to provide a combination of supports to facilitate bottom-up and cross-sector innovation. This includes funding, *'mission-aligned procurement'*, skills and capability building, civic spaces for experimentation, ['Las Naves'](#) - a central innovation precinct, incentive programs for civic institutions (such as schools), an ambassadors program, and communication feedback loops that seek to amplify momentum across the initiative.

Likewise, on a smaller scale, Moving Feast is seeking to combine capability building, funding, procurement, communities of practice, and the development of shared infrastructures, such as marketplaces. It was noted that the provision (access and ownership) of real assets such as land and property was also a powerful enabler. Future of Fish, again, seeks to coordinate finance with *'advance market mechanisms'* to stimulate new patterns of economic activity and value flows in their partner fisheries.

In all cases, it was discussed that the provision of enabling resources needs to be designed for context (and actors). They should also be *'joined-up to each other and proportional to the overall ambition of the initiative'*. However, nearly all the initiatives struggled to access and provide the resources they felt there was demand for.

Practices, processes, and inputs that enable systems initiatives to take shape and work

4 Linking and nesting

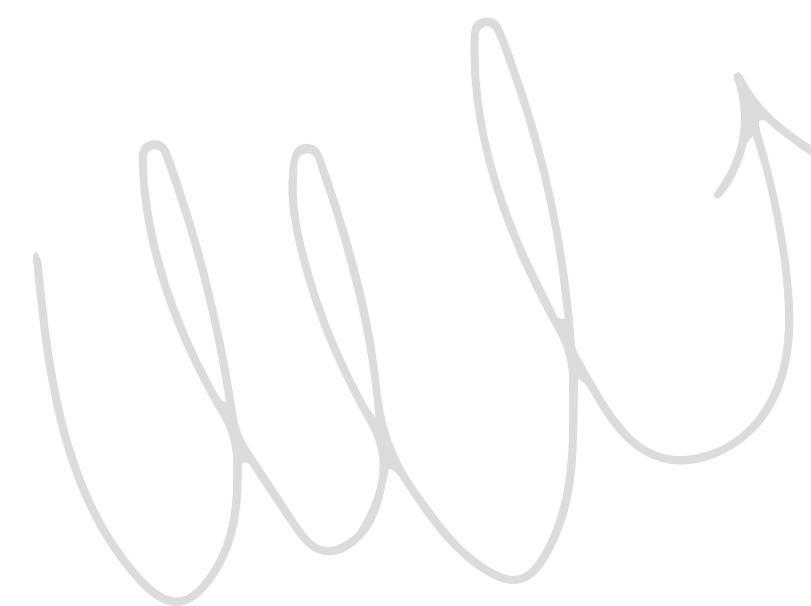
Linking innovations into macro systems and structures

Innovation generated in any intervention context needs to be woven into the macro systems and structures they exist within. This is to ensure that localised changes aren't disconnected from the broader context that they exist within and also to provide a potential pathway to scale - *'we're trying to build a movement on the ground and a narrative back into the system at the same time.'*

Practically, this requires an additional function for an initiative's core infrastructure - to provide links that enable flows between the intervention context and their systemic contexts. This can be through markets, financing, information, technologies, narratives, learning, and/or policy influencing. One initiative emphasised that the direction of innovation and the wider policy agenda needed to be *'two sides of the same coin'*. While this may not be the case for all initiatives, it highlights the point that systems innovation can't exist in a vacuum.

It also invites thinking about how to transfer innovations to comparable contexts. *'[We've been asking ourselves] how to enable trans-civic pollination? How to create systemic enablers and infrastructures across different places? How to balance local agency with cross-context structures and infrastructures? There are some examples of how this can work, but not enough.'*

“ We're trying to build a movement on the ground and a narrative back into the system at the same time. ”





Organising for systems innovation.

Systems initiatives enable self-organisation and innovation within an intervention context and create links to the macro structures and systems they exist within.

Nesting

Just as innovation in an intervention context needs to be woven into macro contexts for longevity and the potential for scaled impact, so does it also need to be embedded into the patterns of groups, organisations, and individuals at the micro level. There needs to be a fractal integrity within systems change if it is to be anchored and sustained. As one initiative put it: *'values need to be baked-in to core actors, core frameworks, and core infrastructures to match the intended direction of innovation.'* Another emphasised that *'the internal dynamics of the initiative/network, and the individuals active within them, need to reflect the overall goal and purpose.'*

Moving Feast explicitly works through four levels of change - *'self, enterprise, sector, and system'*. Regen Melbourne (informed by Kate Raworth's work) expressed this nesting through the lens of economic activity - *'the economy has almost always been equated to the market, but that's not true, it's the interaction between the market, the state, the commons, and the household. Together these are critical for holding balance in an economy. We wanted to build a network or alliance that had some balance across these functions and that actors could contribute from all levels.'*

We explore these ideas in greater detail in our ['restructuring series'](#) produced in partnership with The Southern Initiative, one of the initiatives we engaged with for this project.

Practices, processes, and inputs that enable systems initiatives to take shape and work

5 Resourcing

Fit-for-purpose funding and financing

A consistent message from the initiatives centred on the mismatch between conventional funding and financing mechanisms - be they commercial or impact - and the resourcing needs of systems initiatives and the various innovations and actions they seek to enable: *'impact investment products - and all financing available - are not flexible enough when trying to do genuinely collaborative work.'* Also, *'fit-for-purpose funding flows are a challenge and ideally require tailored vehicles that don't currently exist. The current arrangements are workarounds - dependent on some higher-capacity organisations acting as funnels and proxy allocators.'*

Here, we explore the funding and financing requirements of systems initiatives through two lenses: 1) what's required to resource core organising infrastructures; and 2) how innovation and action can be resourced across the intervention context. We also explore many of these themes in greater detail in our paper on ['Design Foundations for Systems Capital'](#).

Resourcing core organising infrastructures / platforms

Repeating previous points, systems initiatives require resources to undertake core organising, the work of providing enablers of innovation, and linking resulting activities and flows with the macro context. This work is intensive, difficult, and benefits from having long-term and stable funding - *'there needs to be some degree of certainty around the viability of the core initiative. Otherwise it's hard to generate momentum when you present as precarious and are constantly in survival mode.'*

Currently, regardless of the increasing interest in systems innovation, many of the initiatives are finding themselves having to conceal the real nature of their work from funders - *'there are no funds to resource systems change... we've learned what the dirty words are (for funders) and 'systems' and 'adaptive strategy' are some of them'*. Also, *'around the messiness, it's like we have to hide it from our funders - they want it to sit in a neat framework and that's what they're funding - but it's such messy work and that's the reality.'* As a result, *'very few funders in Australia are willing to fund non-project and program activity - this is just a reflection of where current culture, practice, and patterns are.'* While *'new social infrastructures are essential, there are no appropriate funding mechanisms for it.'* There is a structural and fundamental lack of dedicated resourcing for this form of systems innovation.

Some of the initiatives feel the pressure of *'shifting this culture'* and demonstrating that *'systems organising creates value at multiple*

levels, including generating better 'project-based' activities to invest in - better conceived, supported, connected, and, therefore, also de-risked.' The potential for systems organising to be a multiplier in generating resources and action also needs to be better communicated to funders and decision-makers. Missions Valencia see their core investment as a means to generate leverage - *'the public sector can only achieve 10% of efforts towards missions - but it has a powerful catalysing capacity.'*

So, to create the conditions for systems innovation there needs to be increased awareness about the nature of systems organising and enablement, a shift in funding culture, and the provision of new resources that align with the intent, needs, and work of systems initiatives. To help facilitate this, people working in systems innovation need to develop stronger value propositions about what these approaches can deliver, and *'not just ask for resources to join the dots.'*

“ To create the conditions for systems innovation there needs to be increased awareness about the nature of systems organising and enablement, a shift in funding culture, and the provision of new resources. ”

Capitalising interconnected innovation and action

Beyond core infrastructures, initiatives raised the need for financial capital to be available for the innovations and activities generated across their intervention contexts. Some of these may be self-resourcing or resourced through match-making with existing funding sources and mechanisms. However, it is important (and often missing) that investments are made with visibility of, and sensitivity to, each other and how they relate to the system context. Doing this creates opportunities to catalyse spill-overs and multipliers between innovations and, critically, for interdependent activities to be phased and coordinated.

Again, allocating resources with this *'systems vision'* is currently rare and challenging to do - *'financing intermediaries aren't doing aggregation - they're still working with individual entities on specific deals and activities.'* Also, *'Investors are often rigid in what and how they'll fund. Fit-for-purpose investment vehicles need to be creatively tailored to and for context.'*

Most of the initiatives were exploring or actively developing specialised investment vehicles which could provide 'systems financing' to form portfolios of interconnected activities and resource them as such. This includes 'blended finance' approaches but is also more than that. Blended finance draws on different forms of capital to remove barriers to investment and create an appropriate financing structure for any given activity. In a systems investment portfolio, this needs to happen at the individual activity level *and also* at the portfolio level, recognising that some activities may need entirely 'concessional' funding in order to enable/de-risk other entirely commercial ones - *'you have to pull yourself out of*

traditional financing approaches and think creatively - mix and match for different stages, activities, and needs, etc.' These approaches expand the focus from deal to system - portfolios are formed through surfacing the investable landscape within the intervention context, and capital is allocated to harness relationships and enhance beneficial flows.

Establishing these vehicles is non-trivial and requires both *'scarce capabilities'* and aligned sources of capital. It also requires experimentation, particularly around how interconnected and distributed value flows can be mapped, accounted for, and returned to capital sources/holders. Much of this work can potentially be undertaken (or at least coordinated) by the core organising function - for example, Future of Fish are increasingly seeing their role as a *'capital coordinator'* to hold *'the financing strategy for the system'* - but, again, this work needs to be resourced.

In addition, current approaches to sourcing capital are work intensive - *'we're trying to put a thematic lens across projects and talking to investors who are interested in that lens... [this involves] trying to get large groups of funders together at the same time, with all the projects represented, then following up where there's interest in one part or another.'* Inevitably, any systems financing vehicle or approach, no matter how well designed, will be undermined if it doesn't have liquidity. Currently, this capital is scarce and inefficient to access.

In summary, systems innovation and initiatives are currently being held back by fractured and insufficient access to financial capital - this is an area for high-potential intervention.

Directions to grow systems innovation in and for Australasia

Directions to grow systems innovation in and for Australasia

Based on the discovery process, we offer some directions for how systems innovation can be further developed in and for Australasia.

These directions **focus on accelerating learning and engagement**. Done well, these activities have the potential to build understanding, connections, and confidence - especially amongst capital holders, decision-makers, and influencers. It is our intention that these foundations will then enable more informed and material commitments to support and grow systems innovation in practice.

The directions are framed as questions and are intended as invitations. They **focus** on:

01

Engagement and intentional **dialogue**

02

Connecting and strengthening **practice**

03

Further **discovery**

01

“ We need more people to shift their paradigms and perspectives around what change is required and how it can be fostered. ”

Engagement and intentional dialogue

Questions for exploration

How might we increase engagement between system practitioners/systems initiatives and capital holders, decision-makers, and influencers to explore opportunities to support and grow systems innovation?

In particular, how can we get clearer on what further experiences and/or information is needed to shift the mind-sets and practices of capital holders and decision-makers with respect to investing in innovation? What questions and constraints are they (you) encountering when considering how they (you) might support more systematic approaches to the complex challenges we face?

Who could effectively convene and/or champion first-next-steps engagement and dialogue on systems innovation? Who is willing to contribute and under what conditions?

What are the spaces where these questions can be raised and discussed? Can existing spaces, places, or processes be adapted or do we need to create new ones? Who is best-placed to initiate this?

02

“ It’s not often you get to engage in these conversations with people who have this depth of experience, insight, and diversity. ”

Connecting and strengthening practice

Questions for exploration

How might we provide more structured opportunities for people instigating and practising systems innovation to engage with, support, and learn from each other? Are there common challenges that systems practitioners are grappling with which could be addressed through structured support and learning?

What would it take to make these engagements useful given the wide range of contexts and issues that systems practitioners are working with?

How might we better capture and disseminate learning from practice?

What are the spaces where these questions can be raised and discussed? Can existing spaces, places, or processes be adapted or do we need to create new ones? Who is best-placed to initiate this?

03

“ We are learning how to create new social infrastructures. ”

Further discovery

Questions for exploration

What are the most appropriate and useful ways to undertake research and generate new knowledge in this context?

Who is best placed to do this work? What capabilities and expertise could be brought to this work? How might this be resourced?

What aspects of systems innovation initiatives do we need to understand more fully, now - to move practice forward more quickly - and into the longer term - to support making 'right decisions' as we go along? How could collaborative action learning and research oriented agendas be developed, coordinated, and resourced?

How can already existing knowledge and data be identified and more effectively pooled and shared? How can this critical 'glue' work be resourced? What knowledge already exists that hasn't been captured or disseminated?

What are the spaces where these questions can be raised and discussed? Can existing spaces, places, or processes be adapted or do we need to create new ones? Who is best-placed to initiate this?

Closing comments

The Griffith Centre for Systems Innovation will be asking these questions in future work and is committed to exploring and evolving them with others who are energised to grow systems innovation in and for Australasia.

We also urge those with the means and/or the mandate to respond to urgent challenges to engage with the work we outline here. Let us know how your experiments go – systems innovation requires **collective intelligence!**

Appendixes

Appendix 1: cohort participants

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Co-Founder and CEO, [STREAT](#) and [Moving Feast](#)

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[B Lab Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand](#)

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Partner, [Second Muse](#)

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Liz Gillies

CEO, [Menzies Foundation](#)

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Managing Director and Chair,
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Industry Development Manager,
[Sustainable Table Fund](#)

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Appendix 2: details on the discovery process

Onboarding

During the **onboarding phase**:

- Cohort members were asked to sign-on to the 'participation agreement'.
- Members were provided with an onboarding pack and framing paper for the exploration.
- Members were invited to attend drop-in sessions to familiarise with tech platforms and clarify any other aspect of the discovery process.
- The cohort convened for a kick-off session.

Exploration

During the **exploration phase**:

- The cohort engaged with seven demonstration initiatives.
- The cohort convened for three reflection sessions (generally held a few days after the sessions with demonstration initiatives).
- All sessions (including breakout groups) were scribed.
- The cohort Miro board was open throughout.
- There was a week break between session cycles.

Synthesis

During the **synthesis phase**:

- The cohort convened for a wrap-up session to:
 - Review and reflect on the process.
 - Synthesise key insights and learnings.
 - Discuss what will be useful to articulate and share.
 - Generate ideas on engagement and further activities.
- Development of outputs was then led by the Centre team.

Resources provided

To support the cohort through the process, they were **provided** with:

- A framing paper for the exploration landscape and investigation.
- An onboarding pack, including briefing information on demonstration initiatives.
- Calendar invitations for all cohort sessions and platform links.
- Optional onboarding sessions to familiarise participants with tech platforms and clarify other aspects of the discovery process.
- Briefings for each cohort session and on each of the demonstration initiatives.
- Availability of one-to-one discussions at any time throughout the discovery process.
- Demonstration initiatives, outside of the region, were offered an honorarium for their time and involvement.

Participation agreements

To enhance the productivity and experience of the discovery cohort, members were asked to agree to a shared set of **participation principles** and **expectations**:

1. Principles of participation – what we asked cohort members to consider before agreeing to join the cohort.
2. Principles of conversation – what we asked of cohort members during the process.

Principles of participation

Before agreeing to join the process, we asked cohort members to agree to the following in good faith:

- *I can commit to the process and believe I will be able to attend most of the sessions based on the provisional schedule.*
- *While in session, I will endeavour to be focused and fully present.*
- *I am curious about the potential of the process and see its relevance and value to my work. I am open to sharing my ideas and also changing them.*
- *I recognise that other Cohort members will bring different perspectives, interests, and beliefs. I am comfortable with this pluralism and accept that multiple ways of interpreting the world can coexist.*
- *I understand that any statements or opinions about the process or outputs expressed by Cohort members are to be conveyed as theirs alone, and not to purport to speak on behalf of others.*

Principles of conversation

During the discovery process, we asked cohort members to **agree** to the following in good faith:

- *We aim to co-create insights and learning. We welcome respectful debate, disagreement, and the iteration of ideas.*
- *We will separate ideas from people. Ideas will be heard, tested, and evolved on their merits. People will always be supported and respected.*
- *We welcome the sharing of bold and/or difficult ideas that are still being formed and will endeavour to appreciate points of nuance and subtlety.*
- *We appreciate that this is a collective process, and the outputs will be attributed to the Cohort as a whole.*

References and acknowledgements

References **and** acknowledgements

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'Answering some questions about Imagination Infrastructures', Cassie Robinson, 2023

Thanks to Indy Johar for taking the time to be interviewed and sharing his insights with the cohort.

