

Commentary From the Field

Leveraging Resources for Governance Transformation:

Early Insights From the Governance Futures Network

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Introduction

Roots, *often hidden from view*, are the unsung heroes of plant life, providing the foundation for growth, resilience, and adaptation.

—Deveautour, *Rooted resilience: Unveiling the secrets of plant root systems*

For most of the world's population, governance is in an extreme state of disruption. Many have known governance disruptions for decades: human rights violations, authoritarianism, shrinking civic space, unresponsive institutions, etc. In recent years, this disruption has spread to once stable democracies in Europe and the US.

What can we do to both meet the moment *and* build a better governance future? How might we organize to make true systemic transformation possible? And, most importantly, how might we marshal the resources needed to sustain these efforts for the long term?

Our experience in launching the Governance Futures Network (GFN)¹ offers some early observations that may provide helpful guidance for those working on governance transformation. CoCreative and the Fito Network were essential partners in GFN's early stages of development. The lessons here both reflect what GFN is learning, and point to wider realities in the field of system change. Our core contention is that system change networks like GFN build the healthy root system needed to leverage resources and increase the probability of successful system transformation. However, this creates a problematic tension with traditional philanthropic thinking and practices. Many funders and systemic investors are reluctant to fund networks dismissing them as “merely overhead” or too risky. Our experience at GFN challenges those beliefs.

What is GFN?

Entering our third year of operation, GFN is learning how to leverage the resources at its disposal, both financial and non-financial (the time, skills, networks, and experiences of its members), as we seek the “exponential change” (Purohit, 2024) that transforming governance systems requires. Before digging into what we have learned so far about leveraging resources for systems transformation, it will be helpful to provide details on the network and its beginnings.

Governance Futures is a global network of practitioners that seeks to bridge the gap between today's democratic crises and future, transformative means of governance. Network members² come from diverse organizations, such as Dark Matter Labs, Learning 2 Unlearn, The Participatory Budgeting Project, Tokona Te Raki, and the Centre for Exponential Change. They come from different parts of the world, from Zambia to New Zealand, Morocco to Mexico, Cape Town to Chicago, and from Bengaluru to Boston.

GFN grew out of a two-year research effort into what governance might look like in a generation's time and in a fully digital age. The research comprised 56 interviews with a diverse group of thought leaders and practitioners across sectors and geographies, along with desk research and several case studies. It produced a set of first principles for healthy governance (The Ecosystem of Governance, n.d.). The participants in the research characterized current systems of governance as being in a state of collapse, requiring transformative

¹ Further information on GFN can be found in the About Us section of the Governance Futures website at <https://governancefutures.org/about>

² For a list of network members, please refer to <https://governancefutures.org/about>

change rather than marginal fixes. They also envisioned governance as the product of a healthy governance ecosystem and highlights its key qualities. The outcome of the research defines governance as how we collectively steward the interdependent well-being of people and planet.

The idea to form a network emerged from a cross-section of our interviewees. GFN is built to be a system change network (Pando Funding, n.d.-b) and follows a Pando Funding approach (Ricigliano & Muoio, 2025). Pando Funding is an approach to financing system change that reimagines how capital flows and who controls it, grounding collaborative funding in principles of collective governance, shared accountability, and long-term commitment so that networks can not only act together but govern together (Pando Funding, n.d.-a).

Resilient System Change Requires Leveraging Multiple Types of Capital

Kania et al. (2018) argue that scaling project-level funding addresses a problem at the surface of a system while leaving its underlying conditions unchanged. As they observe, complex problems "remain intractable due to myriad constraints that surround any specific program a foundation might fund" (p. 2). Donella Meadows, a renowned environmental scientist who applied systems thinking and system dynamics to global sustainability, addressed this question with a framework that outlined a hierarchy of places to intervene to achieve sustained change in complex systems. In "Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System" (Meadows, 1999), she stated that adjusting parameters (i.e., changing constants, numbers, and quantitative elements of a system), though important, is among the least effective interventions for long-term systems change. Therefore, funding many diverse projects and initiatives in pursuit of individual outcomes, akin to seeking change in individual parameters, will not improve the long-term health of a complex system.

These works informed GFN's view that using resources to just fund individual projects would not be a cost-effective way to transform a complex system, like governance. Rather, GFN sought to build an infrastructure that could engage governance at a more systemic level. In this regard, the network was guided by the principles of Pando Funding (Ricigliano & Muoio, 2023, 2025).

In the natural world, root systems are key to leveraging resources and maintaining ecosystem health. Take the Pando Grove in Utah, the largest and oldest living organism on earth (Friends of Pando, n.d.). The key to its longevity is its massive root system. Pando's roots not only collect and transfer resources, such as water and nutrients, to the above-ground grove, but they also use their ability to span and "see" the whole grove. This enables them to channel resources to where they are needed most, and to coordinate, defend, and guide regeneration and growth (Ricigliano & Muoio, 2023). Much like the tree it was named after, Pando Funding pools and deploys capital to support a system change network.

Similar to how the Pando Grove's root system "spans the grove" and allocates nutrients, Pando Funding convenes and connects leaders from across a system, helps them develop a shared vision for transformational change, and shifts power to them by putting the bulk of resource allocation decisions in their hands. In turn, this strengthens their ability to adapt and innovate in response to emerging developments. The approach draws on the work of diverse and experienced practitioners and scholars (Farnham et al., 2023; Gips et al., 2024; Gleeson, 2024; Kania & Kramer, 2011; Scearce, 2011; Stockholm Resilience Centre, 2012; Zhexembayeva, 2024) and several recent movements in philanthropy, such as the Trust-Based Philanthropy Project (Philanthropy Together & Trust-Based Philanthropy Project, 2022) that are rethinking grantmaker-grantee relationships.

Based on feedback from network participants over the first 3 years of GFN's work to apply a Pando Funding model, we have developed four hypotheses about how we are leveraging resources to pursue system transformation. GFN is leveraging resources at its disposal by:

1. Assembling a diversity of perspectives to create and maintain an ecosystem view of governance; which is necessary for
2. Enabling flows of information and inspiration that drive innovation; in service of
3. Fostering collective action that aligns near-term action with long-term transformation; all of which contributes to
4. Efficient allocation of capital (especially financial capital) in support of long-term system change.

Assembling a Diversity of Perspectives to Create and Maintain an Ecosystem View of Governance Among Members and Their Networks

As mentioned, the idea for GFN came from a group of interviewees at a participatory research session in late 2022. They found unique value in the research's incorporation of diverse viewpoints across sectors, geographies, and experiences, giving them a broader systemic view than they would normally see.

To prepare for the 2022 participatory session, we conducted two separate analyses of our 56 interviews (one an internal coding process and one by an external team). We hung the output of these analyses on the walls and invited about 15 interviewees and colleagues to look for interconnections, inconsistencies, integrations, and themes.

At the end of that session, one participant said she saw value in our inquiry because "this was not my first discussion about the future of governance, but it was the most diverse" (Participant 1, personal communication, October 27, 2022). As such, it delivered distinctive value that she wanted to sustain.

Another participant, who was interviewed as part of the research effort, said that he could see his views represented in the research data posted on the walls.

But he felt no need to defend his views because he could see the wealth and validity of other views and perspectives also represented. Rather than being defensive, this ecosystem view made him curious and motivated him to engage with others to explore differing views more deeply.

The feedback from that session led to the development of GFN. We prioritized growing a diversity of perspectives and using those diverse views to build and maintain an ecosystem view of the governance challenges we face.

In practice, this diversity of perspectives proved to be an essential ingredient for building GFN. The sentiments from these comments from network members are widely shared:

This network brings together people of very high diversity of fields, backgrounds, worldviews, and geographies... Precisely, the people from this network are those who I want to make sense with about these types of challenges: not because they think the same as me but quite the opposite, because we have such diversity. (Participant 1, GFN Annual Convening, Bogotá, Colombia, June 12, 2025)

What I really value of this network is its diversity... This gives me the possibility to learn and take some of these learnings to my country and share these new insights with other organizations from other parts of the world. (Participant 2, GFN Annual Convening, Bogotá, Colombia, June 12, 2025)

At times, this diversity of thought and experience builds constructive, creative tension. For example, during our 2025 Annual Convening, one participant from the US said it felt like they were in “World War III” regarding attacks on democratic values in their country. As the group discussed this, a person from Kenya responded, “Welcome to my world, we have been there for decades” (Participant 11, personal communication, June 11, 2025).

It is easy to imagine that this type of exchange could have become confrontational or destructive. The fact that it didn't speaks to another essential ingredient for nurturing an ecosystem view: building a container of respect and trust. One participant captured this well:

Within this network, we can discuss sensitive, complex, and sometimes uncomfortable topics with openness and respect. While many of us may share certain values or worldviews, dissent and nuance are welcome here. It's refreshing to be part of a space where ideas matter, where people listen in good faith, and where respect is the norm. (Anonymous, End of Year Survey, December 2025)

Key takeaway: While many networks succeed because they bring together people with similar jobs or backgrounds, GFN succeeds as a system change network because it brings together people with a diversity of views, experiences, sectoral knowledge, and geographies. Holding a container based on respect and a

shared desire to put those views into practice makes meaningful exchange possible.

Enabling Flows of Information and Inspiration That Drive Innovation

Taking guidance from the value of a root system, GFN is built to facilitate the flows of “nutrients” across the governance ecosystem. These nutrients are in the form of information about innovative governance practices; some new, some used for generations in Indigenous communities. These flows of information come in one-on-one conversations, Learning and Connecting sessions, network convenings, regular system sensing and sensemaking (e.g., Three Horizons Model³), and in GFN’s collaborative project clusters, what we call Greenhouses.

These nutrients are especially important in situations that require a great deal of innovation. In our experience, innovation happens when ideas move, concepts are tested, and learning is shared. Network members captured the value that the network contributes to its members; that which would nearly be impossible to get without the network:

What makes this network unique is that people here walk their talk. They’re not just discussing governance — they’re living it, testing it in their contexts, and bringing that experience back to share. (Participant 3, GFN Annual Convening, Bogotá, Colombia, June 12, 2025)

Being part of this network has been incredibly valuable because it brings together people from all over the world — especially from the Global South and from Indigenous communities ... Their resilience and their practices offer so much wisdom for how we might build new forms of governance and participation that are rooted in dignity, autonomy, and collective care. (Participant 4, GFN Annual Convening, Bogotá, Colombia, June 12, 2025)

I don’t think I’ve ever been part of a space that brought together such powerful, intergenerational, and global grassroots leaders, all in one place, sharing so vulnerably about what needs to happen for the future. (Participant 5, GFN Annual Convening, Bogotá, Colombia, June 12, 2025)

³ We believe that this inspiration is a critical part of members' persistence and innovation flow of information. Find more information about the Three Horizons Model on the Complex Systems Frameworks Collection website, accessed May 11, 2026: www.complexsystemsframeworks.ca/framework/three-horizons-model

And network members are able to weave those ideas and learnings into their everyday work:

Being part of the network has meaningfully shaped the way I approach my work with cities. I've integrated several of the network's governance principles into our projects. (Anonymous, End of Year Survey, December 2025)

The network has been amazingly influential in my thinking. For example, one of the ideas that came up was this concept of shifting from the idea of “government” as a noun to “governance” as a verb and the set of mechanisms by which we achieve things together as a society. (Participant 6, GFN Annual Convening, Bogotá, Colombia, June 12, 2025)

Network members have shown us that innovation does not thrive solely on the transfer of information. We have observed that inspirational stories often accompany the flows of information that occur in the network. And we believe that this inspiration is a critical part of members persisting and innovating in their work. These comments from members are illustrative:

In this time of great change, having spaces where we can be in community, in relationship, and in creativity—where we can be bold and courageous—truly feeds and heals us. (Participant 7, GFN Annual Convening, Bogotá, Colombia, June 12, 2025)

Recharging a sense of hope and possibility by hearing about and learning from what is happening in different parts of the world. Every exchange helps to reframe challenges and to remember that, despite global uncertainty, there are many inspiring efforts underway. (Anonymous, End of Year Survey, December 2025)

Key takeaway: Improving the flows of information and inspiration across an ecosystem is not an outcome many funders prioritize. However, just as nurturing healthy roots is much less attractive than a majestic redwood or the vastness of the Pando Grove, the infrastructure and practices that create those flows are essential for system transformation, and they do not happen on their own. You cannot meaningfully pursue system transformation without such a solid root system.

Collective Action That Aligns Near-Term Action With Long-Term Transformation

While flows of information and an ecosystem view are essential, they are insufficient. Ultimately, GFN is about making change on the ground. Our imperative is not to just patch holes in current governance systems but to build toward transformative governance futures. GFN's belief is that aligning near-

term action with longer-term transformation requires identifying key drivers of healthier governance futures and aligning collaborative project groups with those drivers.

Our approach to change (i.e., theory of change) is that these drivers are important conditions that increase the likelihood that governance systems produce better outcomes for people and planet over time. Our belief is that future healthy governance systems (Ecosystem of Governance, n.d.) are more likely if we can:

- better care for each other, our communities, and the environment so that we can better steward the interdependent well-being of people and the planet;
- build on the contributions of past generations and address the needs of future generations, in a way that supports and is supported by a healthy relationship with prosocial technology;
- increase participation and provide multiple avenues for people and communities to have a voice and agency on issues that affect their lives;
- weave stronger community fabrics by acknowledging, respecting, and living in light of people’s identities, stories, and values; and
- support trustworthy and equitable decision-making processes that increase inclusive participation and balance stability and adaptability.

The work of the network, through its Greenhouses and individual members, is aligned with these core conditions. The Greenhouses are member-initiated and designed collaborative project groups and support work around four focus areas:

- Collective Decision-Making Greenhouse: Exploring new and innovative ways for communities to make informed, collective decisions.
- The Ritual Studio Greenhouse: Exploring how to meaningfully embed ritual into our governance processes to create cultures of care, helping us tackle complex problems.
- The Leadership Circle Greenhouse: Redefining leadership paradigms and cultivating inter-generational leadership that stewards the interdependent well-being of people and the planet.
- Prosocial Digital Spaces Greenhouse: Building a new generation of social networks supporting community cohesion, democratic culture, and self-governance.

The following comments from members are illustrative of the important role the network has in the work of individual members advancing collective action for long-term transformation:

GFN has been critical for me in thinking about multiple timeframes. So, how do we live into the future that we want to see? How can what we do in the next five days, in the next five months, in the next five years, build into the future we want to see five decades from now? (Participant 8, GFN Annual Convening, Bogotá, Colombia, June 12, 2025)

People were deeply committed to action, to finding new ways forward that don't recreate what was, but instead truly build the future. (Participant 5, GFN Annual Convening, Bogotá, Colombia, June 12, 2025)

I think the Greenhouses have really helped bring some of these wild ideas down into practice. (Participant 7, GFN Annual Convening, Bogotá, Colombia, June 12, 2025)

Our intention is that the development of the key drivers of healthy governance, plus the focused action groups (Greenhouses), increases the likelihood of positive combinatorial effects of tackling motivation and action together.

Key takeaway: The network's infrastructure (e.g., the root system, ecosystem view, Greenhouses) shows promising signs that it may bridge the gap between the need to take near-term action and the need for long-term transformation.

Efficient Allocation of Capital (Especially Financial Capital) in Support of Long-Term System Change

There will never be enough funds to transform systems if we fund project-by-project (Pando Funding, n.d.-b; Ricigliano & Muoio, 2025). We have to find ways to leverage resources, especially financial capital. This network member captured the value of the network as a resource multiplier:

I think what's really exciting and interesting about this group is how it brings together people from a range of different perspectives and practices and tries to find ways where we can get the additionality of having us all work together and bring our existing work and contribute it so that the whole is more than the sum of the parts. (Participant 9, GFN Annual Convening, Bogotá, Colombia, June 12, 2025)

GFN is learning a lot about how to build its infrastructure (as detailed above) and use a Pando Funding approach to leverage its resources by:

- Using a collaborative funding approach (e.g., we are seeking a pooled fund where any one donor’s funds are matched at a 3- or 4-1 ratio).
- Reducing the workload for donors and increasing the targeting of funds by putting the allocation of funds in the hands of those closest to the system (e.g., as part of GFN’s internal governance, Greenhouses have the primary say in how to allocate funds dedicated to them).
- Reducing the inefficiencies that come from recipients working in silos, duplicating efforts, and competing over a limited pool of funds.
- Bringing in other forms of capital alongside financial capital (e.g., flows of information capital, relationship capital, intellectual capital, network capital, etc.).
- Greatly reducing the transaction costs of facilitating collective thinking and action by using a small backbone support team that serves as the network staff.
- Improving the flow of innovative projects that have a better chance of supporting system transformation because they are aligned with an ecosystem-aware strategy and supported by a learning and dissemination infrastructure.

Interestingly, each Greenhouse used the modest resources at its disposal (e.g., \$10K/year) to do some form of a landscape scan, which in turn greatly enhanced the value of any individual or collaborative action that followed. Beginning with a landscape scan shows that practitioners value the knowledge gained from taking an ecosystem view, something that is hard to do on their own with limited time and resources. It also shows that if you have a root system, we can leverage resources to remedy this problem (e.g., using limited financial capital, support from a backbone team, and the limited time of several practitioners who support the Greenhouse).

Key takeaway: Rather than waste them, the efficient allocation of resources that networks like GFN provide has the potential to stretch resources. Further, the systemic infrastructure and intelligence that GFN is developing may offer a kind of “safety net” for funders and investors. It helps ensure that projects originating from or influenced by the network, whether deemed a success or a failure, will contribute to healthier long-term system change.

On the Horizon

Our experience with GFN and its promising early returns demonstrate that this work is much more than “merely overhead” and, rather than increasing risk, may actually reduce the risk of long-term failure. The ability of the network to foster

an ecosystem view of governance, facilitate innovation, align near-term action with long-term transformation, and efficiently allocate resources may not only increase the potential for system transformation but may also be a key indicator of it.

Just as a lush forest above ground is evidence of a healthy forest ecosystem, so is the existence of a healthy root system that made the forest possible and ensures its resilience. The roots, despite being underground and hidden from view, are as important a part of the forest as the trees we see above ground. What we are learning at GFN is that this metaphor holds for healthy complex human systems. Building a healthy root system for governance transformation may be as important as any specific governance practices that emerge from it.

As GFN enters its third year, it is entering a more active phase of collective action. It has taken a lot for the network to get to this stage; to build the root system capable of producing green shoots of transformative change.

We have been fortunate to have received the financial backing not only to build the network but also to conduct the deep research (2+ years) that has led to and guided our efforts. We are learning that more resources are needed to provide seed funding for our Greenhouses and their collaborative projects and to fairly compensate leaders for their time (e.g., Greenhouse and working group leaders, directors, etc.). Critically, the network is transitioning from its start-up phase and testing whether it can build a multi-donor/investor base and become financially sustainable over the long term.

This type of risk-tolerant, power-shifting start-up funding is rare in philanthropy and impact investing. Yet it is essential for the change we seek in cultivating healthier governance, essential for a better world for all. We look forward to working with our members and building a sustainable flow of resources to keep our burgeoning forest alive and thriving.

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