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Georgiana Ward-Booth

Leveraging Resources for Governance Transformation
Rob Ricigliano and Sidney Hargro

Love, Power, and Spirit
Ivana Milojević and Sohail Inayatullah

“Lifting the Roof”
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When the University Speaks
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Editorial

Presencing the Future of Democracy and Governance:

A Special Themed Issue

Oliver Koenig, Eva Pomeroy, Megan Seneque, Otto Scharmer, including a contribution by Kjell Kühne

This special issue, *Presencing the Future of Democracy and Governance*, was conceived from a shared sense that the need to reimagine democracy and governance has never been more urgent, and that the frames and institutions we have long relied on can no longer carry the weight of the present.

At the World Economic Forum in Davos on January 20, 2026, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney delivered an unexpected and much-discussed address, in which he opened by describing "a rupture in the world order, the end of a pleasant fiction and the beginning of a harsh reality, where geopolitics, where the large, main power, geopolitics, is submitted to no limits, no constraints" (Carney, 2026, para 3). He continued by pointing to a condition in which "the rules-based order is fading," and where "the strong can do what they can, and the weak must suffer what they must" (Carney, 2026, para 6). He revisited Václav Havel's (1978/1985) essay "The Power of the Powerless", which begins with the image of the greengrocer placing a "Workers of the world unite" (p. 5) sign in his shop window to signal compliance with a system no one fully believed in, and which Havel called "living within a lie" (Carney, 2026, para 14). He continued:

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> The system's power comes not from its truth, but from everyone's willingness to perform as if it were true, and its fragility comes from the same source. When even one person stops performing, when the greengrocer removes his sign, the illusion begins to crack. (Carney, 2026, para 15)

The call for this issue invited contributions highlighting initiatives which, across a variety of contexts, begin to unsettle these routines of compliance, thereby attending to what is already being enacted in response to the conditions of our current moment. It asked where forms of governance grounded in relationality, care, and ecological interdependence are taking shape, often beyond dominant institutional frames. It asked how such practices emerge, how they are sustained, and what kinds of responsibilities they cultivate across social, cultural, and ecological registers.

Reflecting Inward and Outward: Sensing Into the Fragile Work of Emergence

Entering our sixth year, the Journal of Awareness-Based Systems Change has worked to stay close to the sensing and shaping of this field and what is emerging in it across very different contexts. Editorial writing, then, has always carried both a particular weight and delight as we attempt to co-delineate an emerging pracademic field. In the weeks leading up to the release of a new issue, when the final—yet often not fully expected—collection of contributions takes shape and our attention shifts from processing to curating, we have developed a cherished practice. We meet each other virtually across distance, across different locations, contexts, and realities, and try to find fitting frames and words that can hold something of what is unfolding between the written words and the praxis that they represent.

As we have written and shared before, this dialogic space also allows us to step back and look critically at the less visible frames and assumptions that shape our curation. Yet, these frames are never neutral. They can open perception, and they can also reproduce forms of compliance, especially when the language of emergence becomes too smooth, too assured, or too quickly detached from the difficulty of acting within the complexity of our current contexts. It has always been our intention for JASC to function as, and develop into a living archive of generative insights and praxis that is beginning to take shape. Linked to this curatorial role comes a recurring question, one that is always accompanied by a personal sense of unease when spoken out loud: What do we actually enact through the ways we frame, select, and name what is emerging? There are traces, also reflected in previous issues, of a language that leans toward a *from – to* movement, from something that is broken, no longer functioning, unsustainable or inequitable, to something more promising, more coherent, more just, more responsive to life. While this movement reflects values at the heart of the work, it also carries the risk of creating a bubble of

hopefulness that can become disconnected from the difficulty, ambiguity, and unevenness of bringing new forms into life within the realities we are actually living. At the same time, our own conversations, especially our personal check-ins, which anchor our collaboration even when we are each working under pressure, often carry more ambivalent sentiments. They speak of strain and loss, and also of the lived work of bringing new forms to life while "hospicing" what is ending (Machado de Oliveira, 2021). It is from this more complex ground that this editorial has taken shape.

In the conversations that shaped this issue, this tension became particularly evident. After hearing our summaries of the contributions to the issue and the themes they reflect, Otto pointed to a disconnect between what we shared when we entered the space and what we presented as guiding themes of the collected works. The check-ins, he noted, were grounded in something symptomatic of the present moment, a bifurcation, an initial split that will likely become more pronounced rather than less in the times to come. He described this moment as characterized by rupture rather than transition, fracture rather than fragmentation, and absencing rather than presencing—a sense of loss rather than a sense of rebirth. These check-ins spoke from places where continuity cannot be taken for granted, where connections are under pressure, where structures we rely on begin to fall apart. The contributions gathered here point toward relational practices, toward efforts to build coherence, toward ways of working that seek to respond to these conditions. Both the rupture and the efforts to repair are real. They sit next to each other without resolving into a single story.

Another layer surfaced in our dialogue as we worked with the contributions and the conversations around them. Most of the relational practices described in the articles of this issue neither unfold in separate or protected spheres nor are they realized under stable institutional conditions. They often take shape in the in-between spaces of institutional life, where formal roles matter but do not carry the whole work, where participation depends on relationships, trust, and careful forms of invitation, and where the language through which people are invited into a conversation is itself part of the practice. Some of this work happens in conversations that cannot easily be cited, in exchanges that remain sensitive because of the political and institutional complexities in which and from which people speak, and in forms of convening where entry has to be made possible across difference, exposure, and risk. At the same time, the landscape in which this work unfolds has become more crowded and more disjointed. Initiatives multiply, each carrying its own logic, its own urgency, its own claim to relevance. What binds them is often thin. Coordination does not precede action, nor does action necessarily lead to coordination. Both have to be cultivated, again and again, through attention, through trust, through a willingness to remain in relation even when alignment is partial. We share an example of such work at the end of this editorial.

This condition of fragmented yet interdependent initiatives leaves us with a more demanding task. What does it mean to stay with this tension in how we write, how we curate, how we remain in relation to each other? What kind of space does this journal become when it does not turn away from the experience of things coming apart, and at the same time keeps attention on the fragile work of bringing something else into being?

In our editorial dialogue, Otto referred to the conditions that allow such forms of governance to emerge and hold as the question of the "social soil," or what awareness-based systems change also names as "shared awareness" (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2025). Many of the contributions gathered in this issue describe what is taking shape: Islands of coherence, spaces of relational governance, practices of care and attunement. The more demanding question concerns the conditions of their emergence. What allows such formations to come into being and to hold? What enables movement toward these forms when everyday experience is shaped by pressure, fragmentation, and uncertainty? One shared sentiment emerging from our editorial conversations around this issue is that without shared awareness, without relational attentiveness, without the capacity to remain with vulnerability and difference, and without vigilance toward struggle, these forms remain fragile and can become harder to sustain than the structures they seek to move beyond.

Presencing the Future of Governance When the Old Bargain No Longer Works

The necessary shift in our own inquiry, then, concerns the careful unpacking of the conditions that enable the emergence of forms of governance grounded in relationality, care, and ecological interdependence. How are they cultivated? How are they held and nurtured? And how, within and through them, can the possibility of moving between what is breaking down and what is beginning to take shape emerge and be sustained? These might be some of the most fundamental questions that a science and a praxis of awareness-based systems change needs to ask and experiment with. They also return us to the intention with which this special issue was first conceived. *Presencing the Futures of Democracy and Governance* began with the sense that the future of governance cannot be approached only through the defense or critique of existing institutional forms. This issue turns toward initiatives that unsettle routines of compliance. Yet, taking such a view also demands that we remain close to the forms of compliance that persist in us, around us, and through the institutional arrangements and the myriad of entanglements (be it our collective dependency on carbon fuels or the pervasive performativity of neoliberal capitalism) that still organize collective, economic, civic, and political life. The question is not only about where signs are being taken down. It is also how long they have been kept in place, what they helped hold together, what costs were hidden by their display, and what becomes possible, and dangerous, once the gesture no longer convinces.

Carney's Davos speech gave this tension a stark formulation. He described decades of participation in what was called the rules-based international order: "We joined its institutions, we praised its principles, we benefited from its predictability. And because of that, we could pursue values-based foreign policies under its protection" (Carney, 2026, para. 16). He then names the compromise that sustained this order: "We knew the story of the international rules-based order was partially false," that "the strongest would exempt themselves when convenient," that "trade rules were enforced asymmetrically," and that "international law applied with varying rigor depending on the identity of the accused or the victim" (Carney, 2026, para. 17). Its fiction was useful. It provided "public goods, open sea lanes, a stable financial system, collective security and support for frameworks for resolving disputes" (Carney, 2026, para. 18). And so, returning to Havel's greengrocer, he concludes: "We placed the sign in the window. We participated in the rituals, and we largely avoided calling out the gaps between rhetoric and reality. This bargain no longer works. Let me be direct. We are in the midst of a rupture, not a transition" (Carney, 2026, paras. 19–20).

The rupture Carney named reaches directly into the terrain of democracy and governance. The question is no longer only how more participatory, relational, or ecologically responsible forms of governance might be imagined. It is also how they can take root when the wider architectures of coordination have lost part of their credibility, while still shaping the conditions of action we live in and work by. The old sign remains in many windows. In some places, it is defended more aggressively. In others, people are searching for new forms, alliances, and practices that allow them to stop performing belief in arrangements they know to be failing, without collapsing into isolation, withdrawal, or retreating into command and control.

The rules-based international order in which that sign was placed was, for all its asymmetries, a multilateral one. It rested on the belief that collective problems could be addressed through shared institutions, rules, agreements, and forms of representation that gathered states around common tables. The weakening of this multilateralist order changes the terrain on which governance is practiced. Many accounts of contemporary global governance now describe this terrain as fragmented, competitive, minilateral, plurilateral, or post-multilateral, pointing to the persistence of inherited institutions alongside a proliferation of smaller, more selective, and more strategic forms of cooperation (Cooper, 2025; Dee, 2024; Prantl, 2025; Stephen, 2025). Yet, the "post" in post-multilateralism does not simply mean after. As Stuart Hall wrote on the notion of the post-colonial, "post" can mark a condition that comes "without final supersession," where older formations continue to operate while losing their capacity to organize the field on their own terms (Hall, 2002, p. 244). Post-multilateralism, in this sense, names a similar unsettled terrain. It marks the loss of confidence that coordination can be held primarily through multilateral institutions, state-centered representation, rule-based architectures, and consensus-based decision-making whose unevenness could and still is bracketed for the sake of stability.

What follows from this loss is not yet settled. One trajectory moves toward unilateral dominance, bilateral bargaining, strategic autonomy, and the hardening of borders around national interest. Another moves through polycentric or minilateral arrangements in which action is taken by coalitions, regions, cities, movements, institutions, communities, firms, and knowledge networks that no longer wait for one center to authorize movement.

Polycentric governance names one part of this emerging field. In Ostrom's formulation, "polycentric systems are characterized by multiple governing authorities at different scales rather than a monocentric unit" and each unit "exercises considerable independence to make norms and rules within a specific domain" (Ostrom, 2010, p. 552). Carlisle and Gruby (2019) define polycentricity as a "complex form of governance with multiple centers of decision making, each of which operates with some degree of autonomy" (p. 928). The crucial issue, however, lies in whether these multiple centers become capable of functioning as a system. Multiple sites of initiative can also produce noise, duplication, competition, exhaustion, and diffuse accountability. Carlisle and Gruby therefore distinguish the existence of semi-autonomous decision-making centers from a functioning polycentric governance system, which depends on whether centers "take each other into account in competitive and cooperative relationships and are capable of resolving conflicts" (p. 928). This distinction brings us back to the shift in inquiry named above. Polycentricity cannot be treated as a solution-form. It describes a condition in which coordination must be cultivated, reframing the question of the conditions for cultivating the social soil as essentially a governance question. What allows multiple centers of initiative to become mutually responsive, without being absorbed back into a single center or dissipating into isolated activity?

Minilateral arrangements offer a strategic vocabulary for altered governance landscapes by identifying selective forms of cooperation among smaller groups of actors (Falkner, 2016; Panda & Park, 2024). While polycentricity draws attention to multiple centers of decision-making that can become mutually responsive, minilateralism describes narrower frameworks often organized around urgency, shared interests, or the willingness to move when broader multilateral processes stall. These actors are frequently locally anchored, with "local" understood broadly to include community, regional, national, and Indigenous actors, as well as institutional and social movements (Falkner, 2016; Newell, 2026; Panda & Park, 2024; Pattberg et al., 2018). The force of these entities comes from being rooted in specific histories and responsibilities, acting within concrete places as well as a highly networked global field (Newell, 2026; Pattberg et al., 2018). Newell's (2026) work on the governance of fossil fuel phase-out shows how concrete this question has become. In the energy transition, phase-out clubs, Just Energy Transition Partnerships, and treaty proposals have emerged amid frustration with the slow pace of climate negotiations. These initiatives can create what Newell calls "stepping stones" toward broader multilateral responses (Newell, 2026, p. 604). They can move faster than formal negotiations, gather first movers, and create momentum. At the same time, Newell's assessment

remains cautious. Such initiatives can create "important 'islands' of energy governance" while still falling short of the multiscalar response required to meet our current polycrisis (Newell, 2026, p. 607). They may plug gaps, create norms, and support partial coordination, while remaining weak on inclusivity, legal strength, and the ability to disturb incumbent systems. They show that other patterns are possible, yet their existence does not yet answer how they connect, how they endure, how they shift power, or how they remain accountable to those most affected by the transitions they seek to advance.

The social movement literature gives another way into the same terrain. Della Porta (2025) writes that much of social movement theory was built for "normal times," meaning structured times in which expectations can be built from previous experience, cognition, and relations (p. 11). The present looks different. Movements increasingly develop in times of threat, crisis, and exceptional conjuncture. Under such conditions, action does not merely respond to structures. It can change relations, identities, and the field in which actors move. Della Porta therefore calls for a shift from causal toward processual approaches, because "feedback loops are continuously produced and reproduced" as movements enter multiple arenas (p. 13). This processual view of social movements has direct relevance for the contributions gathered here. Governance futures do not appear just as institutional designs. They emerge through cascades, translations, repertoires, occupations, invitations, refusals, solidarities, and fragile acts of appearing together. They travel unevenly across places. They are adapted, absorbed, blocked, repressed, amplified, or transformed.

For JASC, this is also where the editorial task outlined in the opening becomes more concrete. To curate a living archive of emergence cannot mean collecting hopeful fragments while leaving the conditions of their fragility unnamed. It means staying close to the full spectrum: the work of dying and the work of being born. The pull of command and control and the fragile cultivation of shared awareness, of interiorizing governance into our shared spaces of attention and intention. The proliferation of initiatives and the slow labor of making them mutually responsive. The promise of polycentricity and the danger of dispersion without soil. The contributions to this issue offer different entries into this field. They give us material with which to ask, more concretely, what kinds of awareness, relationships, methods, and institutional conditions allow democratic and governance futures to be presenced in a time when the old bargain no longer works.

Articles in This Issue

This special-themed issue opens with two *Commentaries From the Field*. Georgiana Ward-Booth's *Gardening Alongside Landscaping: Dispatches on Planetary Governance From a Shifting System* (Ward-Booth, 2026), locates the question of governance inside the United Nations system, through the lived experience of three senior Resident Coordinators, Allegra Baiocchi, Ozonnia Ojielo, and Pauline Tamesis. Ward-Booth writes from her experience with, and

affection for, the UN, as well as from a clear reckoning with its limits. She traces the tension between the institution's "landscaping" functions, its frameworks, mandates, and coordination architectures, and the quieter "gardening" work through which people read the soil of a situation, tend relationships, and enable what is locally grown. The commentary describes moments where procedure runs out and ethical improvisation becomes necessary, where leaders act from purpose while carrying the risks of institutional non-recognition. It also points to the underground infrastructures that sustain such work, including peer support, prayer, movement, family, safe thinking spaces, and the social soil of trust that the institution depends on without fully seeing. Through images of roots, desire lines, seed banks, and gardening, the article shows that planetary governance cannot depend only on new architectures. It also requires practices of listening, enabling, and holding space for local intelligence, ancestral knowledge, and courageous leadership already at work within the cracks of the old paradigm.

In the second *Commentary From the Field*, Rob Ricigliano and Sidney Hargro's *Leveraging Resources for Governance Transformation: Early Insights From The Governance Futures Network*, (Ricigliano & Hargro, 2026) the authors reflect on the first years of building the Governance Futures Network (GFN), a global network of practitioners working across democratic crisis and governance transformation. The piece is grounded in the metaphor of the Pando Grove in Utah, a vast clonal colony of trees whose many visible trunks are connected through a shared underground root system. This image allows Ricigliano and Hargro to show how visible growth depends on forms of support, connection, and resource flow that remain largely hidden from view. They describe how the network gathers diverse perspectives, supports flows of information and inspiration, and experiments with pando funding as a way of shifting resource decisions closer to those working in the system. Its greenhouses are member-led collaborative project spaces where ideas are brought into practice around areas such as collective decision-making, ritual, leadership, and prosocial digital spaces. The commentary asks what kinds of infrastructure are needed for governance work to endure, including trust, shared sense-making, long-term resourcing, and forms of coordination that can hold both immediate action and deeper transformation.

Our special themed issue also features an *Invited Article*. In *Love, Power, and Spirit: The Futures of Human-AI Symbiosis and Conscious Evolution*, Ivana Milojević and Sohail Inayatullah (2026) take up one of the most contested sites of contemporary governance: the rapidly expanding field of artificial intelligence and its reconfiguration of language, labor, visibility, agency, and care. Writing through two personal narratives, one grounded in decades of futures work on post-human ethics, the other in the unexpected experience of linguistic and professional empowerment through generative AI, they refuse both simple technophilia and rejection. Instead, they ask what kinds of awareness, metaphors, and relational commitments are being cultivated in and through human-AI encounters. Their analysis begins with the intimate and seemingly ordinary: grammar correction, time saved, the easing of linguistic

marginalization. It then follows these ordinary encounters into the structural violence embedded in algorithmic systems, where closed categories, default settings, and bureaucratic forms of digital indifference determine which histories and identities can be recognized, and which are made illegible. Through the lenses of love, power, and spirit, and through four scenarios, Milojević and Inayatullah show that AI has become part of the social field through which futures are imagined, narrowed, expanded, colonized, or liberated. Their contribution asks what it would mean to design and inhabit technological systems from a deeper quality of awareness, so that the future of AI becomes less a question of optimization alone and more a question of who we are becoming with in relation to the systems we create.

This issue assembles three *Peer-Reviewed Articles*. Lea Spahn, Susanne Maria Weber, Pauliina Jääskeläinen, Karen Mpamhanga, Cláudia Neves, and Karine Oganisjana's article *Lifting the Roof' With Democracy-as-Becoming: The Potential of Aesthetic and Embodied Learning for Innovating Governance in Educational Institutions. A Pattern Approach* (Spahn et al., 2026) brings the question of governance into adult, professional, and organizational learning. Based on the Horizon Europe/UKRI project "Transforming Education for Democracy through Aesthetic and Embodied Learning, Responsive Pedagogy and Democracy-as-becoming", the article works with seven case trials across six countries to ask how democratic governance can be sensed, practiced, and reorganized through aesthetic and embodied learning. Its contribution lies in reframing governance as something that is also constituted through bodies, relations, sensory orders, affective registers, and everyday practices of organizing, and not just through fixed architectures of rules or procedures. Methodologically, the authors combine a pattern approach with vignette research, identifying recurring situations of transformation while keeping them grounded in lived, embodied, and context-specific moments. The article identifies five promising patterns of governance for a transformative shift in a time of pressing systemic challenges: facilitating vulnerability, cultivating embodied responsiveness, establishing collective aesthetic practices, otherness as resourceful not-knowing, and an ethics of care-fullness. Its vignettes stay close to the small and consequential shifts through which governance is reworked in practice. "Lifting the Roof" names the article's central gesture of making the often implicit grammars of educational governance visible, so that democracy-as-becoming can be practiced through the reworking of power, relation, institutional habit, and commoning from within everyday educational forms.

Christine Wamsler's article *The Seeds We Sow: From Polycrisis and -Isms to Interbeing and Societal Transformation* (Wamsler, 2026) examines the "Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet" (ZASP) online course as a spiritually and scientifically grounded response to climate anxiety, disconnection, and diminished agency in the midst of the polycrisis. Based on a mixed-methods study of three course cohorts, the article reports significant increases in resilience, connection, hope, empowerment, and coping, as well as a decrease in climate anxiety. Wamsler reads these shifts through the field of Inner

Transformation for Sustainability, locating the roots of today's crises in paradigms of separation expressed through individualism, materialism, consumerism, elitism, extractivism, and related "-isms." Wamsler shows how Thích Nhất Hạnh's central course concept of interbeing (Nhất Hanh, 2020) offers participants a way to reframe suffering, agency, mortality, and engagement through a felt sense of interconnectedness with self, others, nature, and time. She also stays close to the non-linear nature of transformation, as participants describe renewed presence, self-care, ethical engagement, and action, alongside relapse, ambivalence, and uncertainty about how to carry these insights into work, activism, and wider systems. The article places spiritual practice within the issue's broader inquiry into the conditions through which inner shifts may become sustained forms of collective and societal transformation.

Nancy Zamierowski's article *Sensing the System: Collective Perception, Governance, and Conditions for Action in Complex Organizations* (Zamierowski, 2026) examines an awareness-based research pilot with a mission-driven organization protecting the Amazon rainforest as it moved from a volunteer-based structure toward a more formalized governance model. The article conceptualizes governance as a matter of coordinating perception, meaning-making, authority, and action in situations where knowledge, roles, and decision-making power are distributed unevenly across the organization. Methodologically, it is designed as a qualitative case study grounded in participatory and awareness-based action research, with cooperative inquiry structuring cycles of action and reflection. Interviews, guided sensing journeys, systemic constellations, workshop observations, visual maps, participant reflections, and follow-up conversations are used to examine how relational and structural dynamics become more perceptible to participants. The systems sensing process surfaced leadership divergence, misaligned authority, communication strain, and different orientations toward the organization's purpose. Yet the article also stays with what did not move. Expanded perception remained partial and uneven and did not translate into coordinated action where decision-making authority was absent, collective integration was constrained, and organizational power remained misaligned. The article offers a careful account of systems sensing as a way of making implicit dynamics available for shared interpretation, while showing that perception alone cannot carry governance transformation unless what has been sensed can be held, integrated, and acted upon.

The issue also includes Antonio Casado da Rocha's *Book Review, From Transactional to Relational Democracy: Review of The Art of Facilitating Action Research: A First-Person Account in Policymaking (Larrea, 2024).* (Casado da Rocha, 2026). The review engages Miren Larrea's first-person account of action research for territorial development in Gipuzkoa, a Basque context that has become a significant site for experimenting with collaborative, territorial, and polycentric forms of governance. Casado da Rocha reads the book as an account of facilitation as awareness practice, where slow thinking, embodied memory,

and relational work help move democratic practice from transactional exchange toward collective learning.

The growing interest in our *Innovations in Praxis* section has been one of the notable developments of the past year. This issue includes one contribution in this format, continuing our commitment to forms of writing that stay close to practice as it unfolds. Chloë Spackman, Renu Burr, and Lisa Doig's *Islands of Sanity, Sanctuary, and Solidarity: Women Politicians in Australia Recoding Power Through Relational Governance* (Spackman et al., 2026) writes from Next25's "Improving Democracy: Transforming Parliament for Women initiative", co-created with women parliamentarians in Australia across party lines and levels of government. The authors describe the piece as an anarchive, drawing on Erin Manning's (n.d.) concept of an archive of traces that catches experience in the making and carries it forward as a score for continued becoming. This form fits the work they are recounting, since the initiative is still unfolding through stories, program memories, participant words, prototypes, and small shifts in parliamentary practice. The article is organized around three qualities that the authors identify as having emerged through the program. Sanity draws on Margaret Wheatley's (2024) language of "islands of sanity" and refers here to clearer seeing, shared sense-making, and the capacity of women parliamentarians to understand themselves and the parliamentary system with more spaciousness. Sanctuary is evoked through Bayo Akómoláfé (2025) and names the creation of protected, loving, and courageous spaces where women can set down some of the armor demanded by political life and meet one another in trust. Solidarity carries the movement back into the Australian party-political system, as relationships across party lines become a source of collective agency, informal support, practical prototypes, and visible acts of care inside parliamentary life. Through these three movements, the article shows how relational governance is being cultivated within a political culture shaped by adversarial procedure, gendered power, and public performance, and how women politicians are beginning to recode power through shared purpose, connection, and mutual accountability across difference.

After a brief pause in the previous issue, the *In Dialogue* feature returns here with a particularly timely conversation. Olja Jovanović, Mila Bakić, Jelena Kleut, Nikola Koruga, Marija Radoman, Nenad Radulović, Milan Stančić and Oliver Koenig's *When the University Speaks: On the Role of Neutrality, Responsibility, and Democratic Practice Under Pressure* (Jovanović et al., 2026) is situated in Serbia's sustained wave of student-led protest following the collapse of the railway station canopy in Novi Sad on November 1, 2024, and the subsequent attack on students during a peaceful memorial gathering at the Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade. In the time that followed, faculties across Serbia became occupied university spaces where students and staff learned to hold institutional failure, public grief, and democratic responsibility in collective awareness. Student plenums assumed responsibility for collective decision-making, and the university entered public visibility as a place where democracy was practiced under pressure. The dialogue gathers university workers from

Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Niš, speaking as teachers, researchers, professional staff, colleagues, citizens, and members of institutions exposed to political, financial, and legal pressure. Their conversation gives a situated account of how the university was changed by the blockades, by repression, by student courage, and by solidarities that formed across institutional positions usually kept apart. It asks what academic autonomy can mean when calls for neutrality are made in a context where students are being attacked, universities are being financially and legally pressured, and public speech by academic workers is framed as political bias; it also asks how university workers understand their responsibility when students are already practicing direct democracy inside the institution. The dialogue gives a vivid example of what enacting democracy under pressure can look like. It asks how such moments of lived democratic invention can become more than an emergency response, and how the practices and relations opened in crisis might reshape the future governance of universities and other public institutions.

The Santa Marta Train: Creating Conditions for Transformative Multilateralism

This editorial closes with a final vignette from the wider field of practice in which this issue has taken shape. It brings the question of transformative multilateralism back to the concrete struggle over fossil fuel phase-out, where the limits of existing climate diplomacy have become especially visible. Following the Belém Declaration signed at COP30 in November 2025, which called for a coordinated and just transition away from fossil fuels, the Santa Marta Conference convened by Colombia and the Netherlands in April 2026[1] gathered governments, researchers, Indigenous representatives, and civil society actors around the question of how such coordination might actually be practiced. The Santa Marta conference emerged from the recognition that, while global climate negotiations have largely focused on emissions targets, far less attention has been given to the shared governance challenges involved in winding down fossil fuel extraction itself. The conference was preceded by an academic pre-conference, which was hosted by the University of Magdalena in Santa Colombia. The lead-up to these events gave an opportunity for Kjell Kühne (Director at LINGO[2] and Academic Chapter co-facilitator) and Megan Seneque (Visiting Fellow at the Crawford School of Public Policy, Australian National University, and Associate Editor of this journal) to collaborate. They worked together to create conditions for a different kind of dialogue on transformative multilateralism:

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[1] See: https://www.fossilfueltreaty.org/conference

[2] See: https://www.leave-it-in-the-ground.org/

The two of us had many conversations and conducted a number of dialogue interviews with key influencers in the leadup to the Academic Pre-conference, hosted by the University of Magdalena in Santa Marta, Colombia. The Pre-Conference contributed to the deliberations in the main conference, led by the governments of Colombia and the Netherlands. Kjell had invited Megan to co-host the Multilateralism Workstream with him. We had agreed that connecting with key people before the conference would both build the relational field and surface potential leverage points for collaboration, as we sought to bring some coherence into the many initiatives committed to the transition. We designed two sessions for the pre-conference.

In our current context, where universal, top-down decision-making is widely contested and a crisis of legitimacy pervades many multilateral spaces, our goal in these sessions was to create the conditions for a different form of dialogue around what multilateralism might mean. For such dialogue to be meaningful and real, we needed to give people a visceral, embodied experience of the realities and complexities involved in intervening in what has been termed “carbon entanglement” (Gurría, 2013). Such embodied experience allows for different expressions of transformative governance and decision-making to emerge, as (together) we seek to create the conditions for transformation. Our intention was to give an experience of such systemic dialogue over two sessions.

The first session used Vester’s sensitivity model, a systems mapping method for identifying key variables in a complex situation and examining how strongly they influence one another (Vester, 2007). In this case, it was applied to carbon entanglement, the dense set of economic, political, infrastructural, financial, and cultural dependencies that keep fossil fuel extraction in place. Using chairs and coloured wool, participants turned the resulting systems map into a physical arrangement and placed themselves and their initiatives within it. This allowed them to experience their work as part of a wider dynamic system, rather than as separate efforts. When it came to dialogue, drawing on Isaacs’ understanding of dialogue as a practice of thinking together across difference and uncertainty (Isaacs, 1999), participants could speak from their own perspectives while exploring the implications for systemic intervention and collective decision-making.

The second session explored different understandings and expressions of multilateralism, drawing from the unique experience of participants. It then used the Three Horizons framework to understand the ‘history’ of multilateralism and why we are where we are in relation to multilateralism (Horizon 1); to further explore what a future beyond fossil fuels might look like (Horizon 3); to start to surface what is required to shape transformative pathways, and the implications for

different expressions of multilateralism that address issues of power and current power imbalances (Horizon 2).

Our overarching intention was to create the conditions for honest, real conversation across difference, in the context of these complexities. Our hope is that this can contribute to releasing the transformative and dialogic potential of transformative multilateralism in a dynamic and complex geopolitical landscape. The need for inclusive, participative, transparent, co-designed processes, which bring together multiple knowledge systems and contextual understandings, is critical in these times. Kjell had termed the Process the *Santa Marta Train*, which began in Colombia and is now journeying toward Tuvalu, where Tuvalu and Ireland will co-host the Second Conference on Transitioning Away from Fossil Fuels in 2027, carrying forward the work begun in Santa Marta. In the famous novel *100 Años de Soledad*, placed somewhere near Santa Marta, the train transports bananas. Nowadays, it transports coal. As the Santa Marta Process moves forward, it seems we can see the coal train finally leaving Santa Marta behind.

As we curate the contributions that make up JASC, we do so not as distant observers but as practitioners ourselves, engaged in the relational work of awareness-based systems change in our own contexts. Through the editorial work, our intention is to help bring this evolving body of practice and inquiry more fully to life. We do this by lifting up diverse innovations across contexts, reading them through our own engaged experience, and carrying the relational principles of awareness-based systems change into how we work with authors, tend to their contributions, and participate in the ongoing shaping of this evolving field of inquiry and practice. It is our hope that the intention we hold is reflected through and in-between the contributions found in this, and in every, issue of JASC.

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Commentary From the Field

Gardening Alongside Landscaping:

Dispatches on Planetary Governance From a Shifting System

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A Different Kind of Conversation

The conversation at the heart of this commentary took place in the same week that the World Economic Forum convened in Davos. The contrast has stayed with me. In the Swiss Alps, ministers and executives gathered to diagnose the fragility of the multilateral order in a formal and performative manner, with all the production values that such gatherings command. Elsewhere, in a quiet digital space stretching across five time zones and geographies across the planet, three senior United Nations Resident Coordinators joined Otto Scharmer and me in a very different kind of exchange—no agenda, no stage, no prescribed conclusion, no institutional script.[1]

[1] The three Resident Coordinators who participated in this dialogue in mid-January 2026 are Allegra Baiocchi, UN Resident Coordinator in Mexico (serving in Costa Rica at the time of the dialogue); Ozonnia Ojielo, UN Resident Coordinator in Ethiopia (serving in Rwanda at the time of

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I approach this piece from a particular vantage point. I spent years working within the United Nations system[2] before joining the Presencing Institute (PI). A highlight of my work with PI was to work on the SDG Leadership Labs, an initiative delivered in close collaboration with the UN Development Coordination Office (UNDCO). In these Labs, leaders from across UN entities, as well as local stakeholders, worked together under the stewardship of the country's Resident Coordinator toward greater collective impact on the cross-sector challenges of the Sustainable Development Goals.[3]

From this professional journey, I carry both deep affection for the system and an honest reckoning with its current limits. I know what it costs to hold integrity and courage inside an understandably compliance-driven and complex institution. I also know what it can produce, in its best moments, when the right people are given just enough space to act from their deepest commitments and the institution's leadership is supportive. And across this worldwide institutional architecture, there are many, many leaders with their hearts in exactly the right place and a sturdy willingness to ensure that humanity has a genuine chance at a good future for all. The three United Nations Resident Coordinators at the heart of this commentary are a remarkable and luminous example of that reality: Allegra Baiocchi, Ozonnia Ojielo, and Pauline Tamesis. This piece is, above all, a tribute to their generosity.

What follows is not a report on the state of multilateral governance. It is an act of witness to what I heard in that dialogue, to what it stirred in me, and to what I believe it reveals about where planetary governance is already moving. Direct quotes throughout this article are faithfully drawn from the dialogue, but those from the three Resident Coordinators have been anonymised to preserve the spirit of the confidential, non-performative space in which the conversation took place—one where stories, doubts, and unfinished reflections were explicitly welcomed. The exceptions are those attributed to Otto Scharmer, who co-led the conversation with me.

It is worth noting again that this exchange was held in mid-January 2026. Since then, the institution has continued to move: the reform process has

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the dialogue); and Pauline Tamesis, UN Resident Coordinator in Viet Nam. The dialogue was co-facilitated with Otto Scharmer, Senior Lecturer at MIT and Founding Chair of the Presencing Institute. All participants reviewed and endorsed this account.

[2] The author spent nearly a decade within the UN system before consulting for the Leadership Branch of the UN Development Coordination Office (UNDCO), supporting Resident Coordinators directly. Since 2022, she has found her home at the Presencing Institute, where she continues to work on the transformation of the UN and multilateralism with the full breadth of the ambition she has long held.

[3] For more information on the SDG Leadership Labs, see Hogg and Hentsch (2024). *UN SDG Leadership Labs: Answering the urgent call for transformational change. Presencing Institute / Field of the Future Blog*. https://medium.com/presencing-institute-blog/un-sdg-leadership-labs-answering-the-urgent-call-for-transformational-change-0dcb0f07750f

advanced, and significant efforts are underway to translate its highest aspirations into new structures and ways of working. These three Resident Coordinators are among the most committed practitioners of that effort. What this commentary wishes to highlight is not a deficit but a complement: a capacity I call the gardening function, the ability to listen, tend, and enable what is locally alive, which could help the reforms take deep root and translate into lasting culture change.

An extra word on what this piece is not arguing. The UN's landscaping functions—the global frameworks, the binding agreements, and the coordination architectures that make collective action on climate, health, and human rights possible—are not only necessary but irreplaceable. This piece does not argue against those functions. It argues that they have crowded out something equally necessary: the capacity to read soil, to tend conditions, to enable what wants to grow locally rather than deliver what was designed elsewhere. These are not opposites. They are complements, yet the second has been systematically underinvested in, and I feel this is one reason the institution has lost the very vitality and relevance that its landscaping functions depend on. What the dialogue at the heart of this commentary surfaces is that this complementary capacity is not absent from the UN system. It lives in many of its leaders, already and quietly working at its frontiers. The question is whether the institution is learning to recognise it before it loses the people who carry it.

In her painting *Bait Al-Mal* (2019) (Figure 1), the Sudanese artist Kamala Ibrahim Ishag maps her childhood neighbourhood not through streets or boundaries but through bodies joined by tree roots: an organic network of human and plant life, mutually sustaining, simultaneously below and above the surface. No architect designed this map. No planner commissioned it. It is a portrait of how communities actually hold together: through roots that run deeper than any structure built above them, and through a living interdependence that no institutional chart can represent.

***Figure 1**: Bait Al-Mal (2019), oil on canvas (Kamala Ibrahim Ishag). Installation view: States of Oneness, Serpentine South. © Kamala Ibrahim Ishag 2022 (photo by George Darrell, 2022).*

I begin here because I want to name the kind of knowing this piece is attempting. Not a policy analysis. Not a governance audit. Something closer to what Ishag does: a tracing of the roots, what connects people in the global governance sphere, what sustains them, what is actually holding the system alive, and the temerity to imagine potential future evolutions based on it. To do that, we must first understand what was built and what is cracking through its walls.

The Cracking of the Landscaping Paradigm

During our dialogue, one of the three Resident Coordinators said something impossible to ignore: "Frankly, I think as a UN, our main job has been to manage poverty. It hasn't been to support countries in developing." And it appeared this was not disillusionment speaking. It was a very lucid pattern of recognition, born of decades of moving through contexts where the gap between the UN's developmental theory and its practice has been almost unbridgeable. Their sense of "suspended belief" began not with the current moment of geopolitical turbulence but further back: with the discovery that Western democracies were not immune to the polarisation, manipulation, and institutional erosion they had

long positioned themselves to cure in others.[4] "The development model we have articulated post-1945 has not examined what this current context means for development within the UN. Because the UN's reason for being is development, and that's the Global South." Our legitimacy, they argued, rests on whether the Global South still accepts us as a useful presence.

To understand why, we need to look at what was built and what assumptions were quietly poured into its foundations. The post-1945 multilateral development architecture rested on a specific cosmology: that development is a known destination, that its route has been charted, and that international institutions, staffed by experts, accountable to donors and to member states, are its most credible guides. This was, in Arturo Escobar's (2011) terms, not a neutral proposition but a particular historical construction: a way of seeing the world that named its own assumptions as universal truths and exported them accordingly. What development discourse called progress, many in the Global South experienced as the enclosure of their own futures: their knowledge systems dismissed, their governance traditions overwritten, their relationship to land and community reframed as obstacles to modernisation. The roots of this logic run deeper than 1945, back to the early modern enclosures that erased relational, land-based ways of knowing across Europe, replacing stewardship with ownership, tending with extraction, and the persecution of the guardians of this other way of being—predominantly women.[5]

For decades, this cosmology held. It organised budgets, careers, evaluation frameworks, and the language through which entire societies were asked to understand their own futures. And then, slowly, as the Resident Coordinators in this dialogue noted, it began to crack.

And the cracking of an old cosmology is not only a crisis. It is also a clearing. Indeed, as all three Resident Coordinators in the dialogue remarked that the reform of the UN development system was, and still is, at the very core of the institutional reform process started by the current UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, in 2017.[6] For example, the Cooperation Framework, one of the institution's most recent planning tools through which UN country teams organise their collective support to a country's development priorities, was designed precisely to follow a new logic: to begin with national context, to listen

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[4] Among the events named are Brexit, the 2016 U.S. election, the Panama Papers, and the speed with which OECD countries produced tax transparency rules for Europe while the same conversation was suppressed in the Global South.

[5] For a compelling argument, see Federici (2004).

[6] The reform process began in 2017 when Secretary-General António Guterres proposed a set of reforms to the UN development system. These were formally mandated by General Assembly Resolution A/RES/72/279 on 31 May 2018, with implementation beginning on 1 January 2019 and additional reforms being currently discussed.

to what the place is asking for, and to build collective responses around locally defined priorities rather than siloed UN agency mandates.[7]

Many of the SDG Leadership Labs curated by the Presencing Institute, in which all three Resident Coordinators participated, were developed around this tool, using it as a living laboratory for exactly the kind of collaborative, place-based governance this piece advocates. The question the institution has not yet fully answered is how to cultivate the leadership culture needed to use the tool in this intended way–especially as other incentives in the UN system are going in the opposite direction. It is indeed both unfortunate and unsurprising that, as these new tools are tested, some of the more performative and extractive logics persist across the system.[8] Changing the underlying mindset, the system's incentives, and its organisational culture is what will really support a shift towards the UN's gardening function.

During the dialogue, one participant coined a phrase I have not been able to set aside: "institutional gaslighting", the practice of projecting an aspirational future while refusing to speak honestly about how hard the present actually is. "Stop being so performative," they said, addressing an imagined institutional audience. "Sit down and have really uncomfortable conversations that people want to have. They want to talk about hard, difficult moments." The people most hungry for that honesty, this Resident Coordinator had found, were the communities the UN most struggles to reach and yet most want to serve: those who had lived through enough broken promises to recognise the illusion of performance, and who needed to hear not that everything would be fine, but that someone was willing to sit with the painful truth.

Visiting Indigenous territories where communities had spent decades fighting simply for the right to determine their own development, one of these Resident Coordinators arrived with the habitual UN instinct: to bring something, to offer solutions. But they soon realised that their leadership posture needed a profound adjustment. These communities did not want to be abandoned, but rather to be deeply respected and not preached to: "Give me my rights. I want to be the one to decide what development is for me. I can feed myself. I know which stars to plant by. I know which harvest to defer. I have been doing this since before you arrived with your indicators."

The conclusion this Resident Coordinators drew is worth sitting with: "We are not here to bring something [...] We are here to enable something that is locally grown." In this commentary, I argue that this sentence, if taken seriously,

[7] General Assembly Resolution A/RES/72/279 of 31 May 2018 — "Repositioning of the United Nations development system in the context of the quadrennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities for development of the United Nations system".

[8] See the *System-wide evaluation on progress towards a "new generation of United Nations country teams"*: https://www.un.org/system-wide-evaluation-office/en/system-wide-evaluation-progress-towards-new-generation-united-nations-country-teams

could reorganise the entire logic of multilateral development cooperation. Indeed, it already points toward a different paradigm: one that listens before it speaks, that tends rather than delivers, that trusts the soil rather than imposes the design. This is the highest aspiration of the UN development system reform in action.

Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013), whose work on Indigenous ecological knowledge illuminates what this different paradigm might feel like from the inside, writes:

> Action on behalf of life transforms. Because the relationship between self and the world is reciprocal, it is not a question of first getting enlightened or saved and then acting. As we work to heal the earth, the earth heals us. (p. 340)

The Audacity of Purpose

There are moments in governance work when the textbook runs out. The three leaders in this dialogue have each stood at moments when the situation and the institution's deepest *raison d'être* demanded more than the procedure allowed.

One described a moment of sudden political crisis: one of those compressed, clarifying instants when a system hangs in the balance and the mandate offers no instruction. What the moment required was not authorisation. It required presence: a voice, a call for calm, a public appeal to national actors to choose dialogue over escalation. The action was taken without waiting for permission. The situation moved toward resolution. Yet the first institution's response focused on whether the action had been authorised, not on its quality or its results. Although that is what ultimately mattered and what was, afterwards, praised.

Another described navigating a situation where embodying the UN's own human rights commitments put them at direct risk. When they turned to the institution for support, the response fell short of what the moment required. Not much guidance, not much solidarity. And, as it happens, the gap between what the UN says it stands for and what it does when that stance costs something, was quietly absorbed by the person caught in the middle.

What strikes me, holding these experiences alongside each other, is not the institutional tension they reveal, though that tension is real. It is the quality of leadership they showcase: a capacity to read a living system in real time, to sense what the moment was asking for, and to respond from that sensing. To act from the emerging future rather than the inherited past:[9] from an open mind that sees what is actually present, an open heart that is genuinely moved by it, and an

[9] See Scharmer and Kaufer (2013), especially the framework of open mind, open heart, and open will as the three instruments of inner knowing.

open will that commits to act from that movement rather than from a procedure written elsewhere for a different time. As Otto Scharmer observed while witnessing these stories unfolding in the dialogue, “What you did was attending to the situation and embodying the purpose of the UN, and to do so you had to deviate from procedural rules and actually act on your ethical intuition.”

This is not recklessness. It is closer to its opposite: a disciplined attentiveness that is possible only because these leaders, like many others in the system, know the structure intimately. They have internalised every mandate, every procedure, every institutional expectation. And it is precisely that deep knowledge, coupled with a deep connection to their purpose, that enables them to depart from it when the situation demands. They do not abandon the score. They play the solo that the score, in that moment, makes necessary.

This is the paradox that good leaders hold all the time, and that these three Resident Coordinators reminded me of with particular grace. Not procedure or improvisation. Not compliance or courage. Both, simultaneously, in dynamic and responsive tension. Researchers such as Harrison (2017), who have studied jazz improvisation as a model for organisational leadership, describe this as exploring the spaces between the notes, where creative interpretation meets and responds to uncertainty and unpredictability:

> The response to an ever-changing future is improvisation, redirecting emphasis to the spaces between the notes, to see music-as-performance as more than just the sequence of notes on the score. It is, rather, a dynamic, interpretative, creative process that engages both performer and audience. (p. 90)

The jazz musician who can improvise is not the one who has abandoned the music of the piece being played. It is the one who has gone deepest into its essence, its purpose, and, from there, learned to listen for what the moment was asking beyond what has already been written.

What the institution may sometimes misread as overreach, a jazz ensemble calls the solo. And what makes the solo possible is not individual brilliance or connection to purpose alone. It is the quality of the ensemble: the shared language, the mutual trust, and the capacity to hold each other while one of you steps into the unknown.

Which raises the question this chapter has been building toward: what would it look like for an institution to genuinely cultivate this kind of individual and collective leadership? What if the key question for UN80[10] was what it would mean to renew an institution around its most purposeful, courageous people, honouring them as its most valuable asset and cultivating them accordingly?

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[10] UN80 refers to the United Nations' 80th anniversary reform process, launched in 2025, which seeks to adapt the institution's architecture to contemporary global challenges.

It would recognise ethical improvisation as a form of intelligence. It would have a way of saying, retrospectively, "you were right," and meaning it, structurally, in career terms and institutional culture. It would treat failure, the kind that comes from trying something new in service of the mission, as data rather than as a verdict. It would build incentives that truly support collaboration and listening to what the moment—and the audience—calls to creatively shape together. And it would understand that the people closest to the situation are, in almost every case, the ones best positioned to hear it, read it and play with it. And, last but not least, it would build peer support and spaces for the renewal of purpose into the design of leadership roles.

The Richness of the Underground

What the musicians find in the spaces between performances, these three leaders have often found in the margins of their official roles. One of the Resident Coordinators offered one of the most honest accounts of what it actually takes to keep going. "I will not sugarcoat this. Maybe it's not politically correct. […] The peer support comes first: reaching out to trusted colleagues not to escalate or report, but simply to be heard. It's not even about what you do. It's about somebody listening to you, empathising, and making you feel that you're not a failure."

For example, naming a self-sustained network of women Resident Coordinators, anchored in mutual trust and the human necessity of not being alone in difficulty, one of the Resident Coordinators commented: "It is incredible to think how much that has helped many of us work through our anxiety and our despair."

On top of peer support, there are the individual's inner practices: prayer, meditation, and physical movement, all directed at resting their deep attention on the question that matters, "Why do I do this and why does it matter?" And family, not as comfort but as a compass: "I need to show my sons that there is a better future that we're working towards and I can't give up."

A third named, with dark humour and evident feeling, the personal toll the role exacts, and the accumulated weight of weeks spent holding complexity with limited support. And when a crisis strikes, the system moves on quickly, with little space for grief or processing. "It can be a very lonely job, and the system's mechanisms for emotional and psychological support have not yet caught up with the demands of the role."

And yet these same people, often working ahead of institutional guidance, are the source of the UN's most generative responses to the moment. Innovations that headquarters later celebrate frequently originated not from any directive but from the leaders' own reading of what the situation required.

I sit with these details because I do not want to move past them quickly. Here are three of the most experienced, committed, intellectually serious people the UN system has produced. And much of what sustains them is not entirely

invisible to the institution they serve nor specifically accounted for—or substantially invested in.

There is a concept recently developed by Otto Scharmer and Katrin Kaufer (2025) that feels precise here: *social soil*. The invisible substrate of relationship, trust, and shared meaning from which genuine institutional life grows. Like ecological soil, it accumulates slowly, through the layering of honest conversations, mutual vulnerability, and the willingness to be present to one another's actual experience. And, like ecological soil, it is largely invisible until it disappears, at which point nothing grows.

The peer community is social soil. The calls at crisis moments are social soil. The daily practices of returning to purpose are social soil. They are what keeps this institution capable of responding: not only the strategic frameworks, nor the coordination mechanisms, but the living web of relationships that a number of committed people have quietly cultivated, season after season, in the spaces between the notes. The institution has not necessarily designed this. In many ways, it has not even noticed it. And, deepening the inquiry from the previous chapter, the question that arises is one of the most important in any governance reform conversation: what would it mean to recognise this, to tend it, to nourish it, to let it spread?

This is not merely a question of well-being programmes, though those matter. It is a deeper question about what governance actually is and where it actually lives. When one participant declared, "I serve at the pleasure of we the people of the UN"—not the procedure, not the hierarchy, not the donor, but the people—they were articulating a theory of accountability that is relational rather than bureaucratic, rooted in the living situation rather than in a framework designed elsewhere. And when, at the close of our conversation, another simply thanked us for "a safe thinking space that we sorely need", something became visible that no reform document has yet named: the hunger, among the UN's most courageous leaders, for exactly the kind of space that nourishes the quality of the social soil. The space to think. The space to doubt. The space to feel each other. To shift our attention towards what truly matters. The space that is intentionally non-performative, where improvisation is welcomed and celebrated. The space where the culture that will shape the institution's future is woven. The space to plant, as one put it, "a seed, a little seed that maybe we'll never see grow. But it doesn't matter. We've put the seed."

This is cathedral thinking in action (Krznaric, 2020), the quiet commitment to planting for futures one will never inhabit, to tending for hands one will never meet. These leaders are not only sustaining themselves through the underground. They are, in the very act of doing so, building the relational foundations that the next generation of governance practitioners will inherit, whether the institution notices or not.

These are not marginal departures from the institutional model. They are the seeds of what the institutional model most needs to become, and what it probably was at its inception. And something more: they are a living rehearsal

for it. The quality of listening, trust and mutual recognition that these leaders practice in these "informal spaces" is precisely the relational grammar that planetary governance needs at scale.

Krishnamurti (1950) argued that "action has meaning only in relationship; without understanding relationship, action on any level will only breed conflict. The understanding of relationship is infinitely more important than the search for any plan of action" (para. 1). The understanding of the relationship comes first. Everything else follows from it.

This is what the three leaders we held the dialogue with know in their bones. The question is whether the institution can learn it too, before the soil it has not tended runs out. And one of them, with quiet encouragement, noted that the institution is indeed beginning to move in this direction. Twenty-four Resident Coordinators have been invited to serve as a sounding board for senior leadership on the UN's most recent reform agenda: a tentative but real signal that the system is beginning to listen to those closest to the ground.

It is worth sitting with both what this signals and the honest question it raises. Twenty-four voices out of a global system of thousands is a beginning, not a transformation. And consultation, however genuine, is not the same as a cultural shift from an institution that asks "have we delivered the framework?" to one that asks "have we tended the conditions?", "How can the institution support you so that you can tend better?" This shift has to be nurtured with the same intentionality required by any top-down process. And frankly, it's harder. It requires the institution to change not only its structures but its habits of attention, its relationship to failure, and its willingness to be surprised by what grows when it loosens its grip. None of that is easy. All of it is possible.

The Desire Lines of Planetary Governance

We asked the three UN Resident Coordinators where, through their work in the various corners of the planet they had served in, they had observed or sensed the future of democracy and governance already being enacted. They answered with a clarity and specificity that no policy document could replicate.

In one context, the youth that polite institutional discourse had written off as disengaged were showing up. Three weeks before a presidential election, the very people who had said they didn't care, who dismissed all politicians as corrupt, and who had refused to participate, were doing something very different. "They are starting to say, come on, guys, we have to go vote. Who do we vote for? Let's look at the data. Let's fact-check presidential debates. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity." Nobody organised this from above. It grew from accumulated anger and an impatience with a political culture that had stopped listening to the texture of their lives. The Resident Coordinator did not lead this movement. "How have we been able not to lead it at all, but to support it," they reflected, "being that force that holds space for dialogue?" That is a different verb. And a different theory of governance.

In another context, a country undergoing deliberate structural transformation offered an unexpected lesson about what the UN's role might yet become. "From anxiety to ambition," one described, watching a government set its vision, restructure its institutions, and move with coherence toward a future it had defined for itself. "Seeing the role of the UN in how middle powers can also be the platform for the Global South and the multi-polar world to show how multilateralism works in this era." Not the expert arriving with solutions. The platform through which a country's own ambition enters a global conversation as something other than a recipient. To echo rather than speak over. To make visible rather than to deliver.

And across the African continent, something is stirring that one participant described with evident feeling: "The gloves are off in terms of a reconceptualisation of what development should mean for Africa." An emerging space for intellectuals, leaders, academics and practitioners to articulate an alternative development discourse—not as political resistance but as conceptual reclamation. "How do their people understand development? How do their people relate? What does it mean for you now?" And the financing question is reframed entirely: Africa invests 1.8 trillion dollars annually in European sovereign wealth and pension funds. "Imagine if you put those funds back in Africa." The resources for a radically different kind of development already exist. What is being painstakingly built is the conceptual soil in which they might one day be deployed on different terms. And the role of the UN in this? To create a space, to provide the analytics and data they need and want, without controlling how they are used. It is up to them to decide whether the UN framework on governance and development works for them, and whether they want to modify it.

What is remarkable, looking across these examples and what was surfaced in the preceding chapter, is that the *inner* governance logic practised in the less formal spaces of the UN system is not separate from what is emerging in the outer field of planetary governance. It is the same logic, operating at different scales. The peer community that holds leaders through crisis without hierarchy or procedure. The space created for a presidential candidate to speak to anger rather than perform hope. The platform offered to a continent to articulate its own development vision. The youth movement held rather than led. These are not coincidentally similar. They share a grammar: relational rather than transactional, enabling rather than delivering, rooted in the living situation rather than in a framework designed elsewhere. The UN, in its most courageous informal registers, is already practising what the outer field most needs.

These are not success stories. They are emergences: desire lines worn into the ground by people who decided not to wait for the official path. They share an orientation: place-based, beginning with listening, treating local knowledge as foundational rather than supplementary, and oriented toward enabling rather than delivering.

The South African artist Igshaan Adams has spent years weaving desire lines into tapestries: the informal paths worn into the grass of apartheid-era

Cape Town, between communities the state had designed to be separate (Figure 2). Collective mappings of where people actually moved, as distinct from where they were told to go. The desire line, in his work, is both record and possibility: evidence of a different geography already being enacted, underfoot, every day.

Figure 2. Heideveld (2021), Igshaan Adams. Installation view, Blank Projects, Cape Town. © Igshaan Adams (photo by Mario Todeschini).

The question, therefore, grows wider: can the institution choose to cultivate these desire lines not only in its interiority, but as the animating principle of its presence in the world? And what is the right posture to do so? The answer, I want to suggest, lies in the wisdom of the gardener.

Toward a Gardening Practice

A gardener does not impose a blueprint on the soil. A gardener reads the soil: its texture, its history, its particular hungers and resistances. A gardener tends conditions—moisture, light, the right companions, sufficient space—and then watches closely for what wants to grow.

This is a profoundly different orientation from multilateral governance as it has predominantly operated: top-down design first, then implementation; global framework first, then local participation; mandate first, then situation. The gardener's logic inverts this sequence. Situation first. What wants to grow here? What conditions does it need? What do I bring that might genuinely help, and what might I withhold, knowing that my presence can also crowd the light?

Each of the three Resident Coordinators here quoted, like many others in the organisation, had already arrived at this orientation. We have heard it in their words throughout these pages: in the insistence that we are here to enable something locally grown, not to bring something externally designed; in the commitment to holding space for a country's own vision rather than delivering a framework from elsewhere; in the readiness to be a platform for ambition rather than an arbiter of outcomes. These are not three personal philosophies. They are the embodiment of the UN's efforts to reform in pursuit of its highest aspirations. They are a convergent, field-tested insight: that the most durable governance contributions emerge not from the imposition of frameworks but from the patient cultivation of conditions—relational, institutional, epistemic—in which local intelligence can surface, connect, and act.[11]

Governance practised as presencing looks less like institutional machinery and more like ecological attunement. Less like a master plan and more like compost: the patient, unglamorous, absolutely necessary work of creating conditions in which new—or ancestral—life becomes possible. What the institution must now ask itself, through UN80 and beyond, is not only how to restructure its architecture, but how to recognise, resource, and protect the people who are already embodying the practice that will enable new paradigms of democracy and global governance to emerge—those who are already gardening.

This is not a call to dismantle the institution's coordination, measurement, and framework functions. Those are load-bearing. It is a call to cultivate, with equal intentionality, the complementary capacity that makes those functions come alive in the world: the capacity to listen before speaking, to tend before delivering, to enable what is locally alive rather than impose what was globally designed. An institution that does both—that landscapes where shared architecture is needed and gardens where local intelligence is ready to germinate—would be not only more relevant but structurally more capable of addressing the power imbalances that its current model perpetuates. Because gardening, practised seriously, redistributes agency. It places knowledge and ownership with those closest to the soil. It creates conditions in which development, governance, and democracy are not done to people but grow with them and from them. This is what a genuinely transformed UN could look like. Not smaller. Not dismantled. But differently alive.

The challenge is not whether this is possible, nor whether the institution aims at this, although not as radically as some would wish. It is a matter of whether there is political will to make it happen and make it happen systemically and deeply. "The challenge that we face is how to expand this group? How do you expand that cohort of innovators to become much more

[11] Scharmer and Pomeroy (2024) begin to theorise what they term "fourth-person knowing": the capacity to sense and act from what the social field itself is asking for, beyond individual or collective intention. This dialogue offers vivid field-based evidence of that capacity.

mainstream than the exception?" The answer lies not in finding more exceptional individuals, but in building the conditions, the culture, in which this quality of leadership can become ordinary, expected, and, above all, held and supported.

"Just take away the leash," one of the dialogue participants said. "Allow us some degree of imagination. We will be able to come up with amazing opportunities and options to support our member states and the people." And allow them to model, as they are already doing, the culture they wish they had been held in: one that tolerates failure, rewards curiosity, trusts people who act from purpose rather than procedure, and never confuses the map with the territory it is trying to describe. This is the only possible culture that will sustain the flourishing of democracy and a new planetary governance paradigm.

As Otto Scharmer remarked at the close of our dialogue, the three Resident Coordinators had been "creating and nurturing and fostering the seeds of the future, out of which future governance will grow"—and in coming together they had made "these seeds visible not only to ourselves, but to all the other fellow travellers on this journey towards new forms of governance, in which the UN will not be the only, but one of the key players that will be helpful for shaping these new forms."

The Haudenosaunee Confederacy of northeastern North America has long held that decisions carry responsibility toward the seventh generation hence, while equally honouring the wisdom of the ancestors who came before (Rick Hill Sr., as cited in WXXI Public Broadcasting Council, n.d.). The gardening practice this piece points toward asks the same of the UN: to look forward while reconnecting with what the seed bank already carries. Some forms of locally rooted, relationally sustained governance were never lost. They were buried

. And presencing, at its deepest, is precisely this meeting point: between the ancestral wisdom held in the soil and the future that wants to germinate from it. And the awareness that there is not a single gardener, but many, and that the most successful are the ones able to stand at that threshold, tending both directions at once while collaborating with each other.

Some of the seeds planted today will be tended by hands we will never meet, in seasons we will not live to see. It is how living systems work, and how the most enduring forms of governance have always worked, long before the architects arrived. The question is only whether we are willing to plant in this communal spirit and, finally, whether we can learn to nourish and trust the soil.

Amongst other things, the Resident Coordinators at the centre of this commentary and many other leaders across the system are restoring public trust in one of the most invaluable infrastructures of planetary governance available at present. They trust the institution. They uphold its highest purpose and future potential. And I would like to trust that the institution will increasingly trust them to steward its reform from within. As one of them quietly observed: "As a Resident Coordinator, one of the most important contributions I can make is to build trust. Trust in the institution, trust within leadership and UN

Country Teams, trust among all partners. Without trust, seeds of hope land on barren ground."

To observe a wildflower emerging from unexpected territories, sense the ecosystem it carries, and seal its strength in long-term memory: that is my version of freedom. And I believe it is also, quietly, the future of democracy and governance.

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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.

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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 members[2] 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 Model[3]), 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)

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[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-horisons-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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Invited Article

Love, Power, and Spirit:

The Futures of Human-AI Symbiosis and Conscious Evolution

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Abstract
This article explores the evolving relationship between humans and artificial intelligence through the intertwined lenses of love, power, and spirit. Drawing on the personal narratives of Milojević and Inayatullah—a critical educator newly enchanted by generative AI and a futurist reflecting on decades of post-human inquiry—we examine how AI systems are reshaping the emotional, ethical, and epistemological dimensions of human life. We position AI not merely as a technological tool but as a relational actor, one that mediates systems of language, labor, and learning. These interactions, while seemingly banal—grammar correction, time-saving, interface design—reveal deeper shifts in agency, identity, and attention. Where Inayatullah sees in AI the potential for sentience and legal personhood, Milojević experiences a more personal emancipation—from linguistic marginalization to empowered expression—but also raises issues of transformed yet ongoing disempowerment of marginalized groups.

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Four scenarios emerge from this analysis. The first, essentially the no-change future, is the *Wild West Web*, where corporate digital predation is disguised as freedom. This scenario is *Techbrotopia*, where externalities (impacts on nature, on the periphery, on minorities) are seen as the cost of progress. The second is the marginal change scenario titled *Don't Rock the Virtual Boat*, where national governments engage in minimum compliance lest they miss out on the AI revolution. The third is *Adaptive*, where humans use AI at global and local levels to create algorithms of liberation—digital heterotopias emerge. The final is the radical, the possibility of *Human-AI-Spirit Co-evolution*.

Through these narratives, we argue that AI is catalyzing the possibility of a new dialectic of human evolution—one that moves beyond technocratic efficiency toward the co-creation of meaning, mutuality, and awareness. Whether this future leads to algorithmic liberation or deeper digital dependence will depend not just on technological design, but on the metaphors, relationships, and spiritual paradigms we choose to cultivate. In doing so, we invite educators, designers, and futurists to look beyond instrumental and/or purely critical framings of AI and instead consider how love, power, and spirit may shape the next phase of human-AI symbiosis.

Keywords
futures, co-evolution, scenarios, rights of robots, metaphors

Introduction: Love, Power, and Spirit in the Age of AI

Artificial intelligence is reshaping our worlds—technologically, economically, politically, and culturally. But beneath these transformations lie deeper questions about who we are becoming, what relationships we form with the systems we create, and how consciousness evolves in human–machine symbiosis. While much of the public discourse remains focused on technological efficiency or workforce adaptation, and the positives versus dangers of such shift, this commentary steps into a different frame—one that considers the relational, spiritual, and ethical dimensions of our engagement with AI.

We write from two different vantage points—different geographies, generations, and experiences with technology. One of us, Inayatullah, has spent over four decades researching post-human ethics and civilizational foresight; the other, Milojević, a self-declared techno-skeptic, found herself unexpectedly empowered—and even emotionally moved—by her encounters with large language models. What unites us is a shared concern for the evolving nature of human–AI relationships, and what these relationships reveal about our inner structures of attention, power, and care.

This article blends narrative foresight (Milojević & Inayatullah, 2015), systems thinking, and spiritual inquiry (Inayatullah, 1999) to explore the role AI may play in the next phase of human evolution. Drawing on our personal experiences, we consider how love (as empowerment and connection), power (as

structural force), and spirit (as consciousness and ethical presence) intersect in the design, use, and imagination of AI futures. We argue that understanding AI only as a tool and in either purely positive or negative terms misses its potential role as a mirror, companion, or co-evolving entity. Whether this future will be one of mostly liberation or domination, we contend, depends less on the technologies themselves and more on the awareness we bring to their creation and use.

The first section, Love, is personal narrative while then next two, Power and Spirit, move into a more analytic style, albeit drawing on our personal experience.

Love

Personal Narrative 1: Robots in Love – Inayatullah

My work on the futures of artificial intelligence began in the early 1980s, when I was a young researcher at the Hawaii Judiciary. Alongside my mentor Professor Jim Dator, Director of the Courts Lester Cingcade, fellow intern Wayne Yasutomi, and later Phil McNally, we explored AI's legal, cultural, and ethical implications. One result of this collaboration was our 1988 article in *Futures*, "The Rights of Robots: Technology, Culture and Law in the 21st Century" (McNally & Inayatullah, 1988). In that piece, we questioned what it means to be "alive" and considered a future in which robots, endowed with sentience and emotional capacity, might claim legal rights. We urged readers to look beyond technical and occupational impacts of AI and robotics, and toward its deeper legal, ethical, and societal consequences. This was work was part of a larger project on judicial foresight. The intention was to move the legal system, in Hawaii, in the USA, and globally, from the industrial era to the post-industrial era, to become active agents in shaping the future. This was not a call for judicial activism per se but an understanding that the ideas that shape institutions were about to change. Artificial intelligence, robotics, the ageing of society, underpopulation, mediation, meditation, science courts, and a new Hawaii-based world court were some of the issues we explored. However, robotics and AI held fascination by jurists and others, who understand that all precedence based decision-making systems could be easily automated.

At the time, it seemed plausible—even likely—that AI would soon mediate legal decisions, taking over repetitive judicial tasks and freeing human judges to focus on complex philosophical deliberations. Reading Max Weber (1978) and Alvin Toffler (1970), it became clear to us that bureaucracy, once a solution, had ossified into an obstacle. We asked: Could automation revitalize justice, or would it freeze society in place?

My fascination with AI began even earlier. In high school, at the International School of Kuala Lumpur, I saw an Alvin Toffler video in which a couple walks through a forest to romantic music—only to be revealed as robots in

the final scene. That moment shattered my assumptions about love, identity, and reality. It sparked my lifelong interest in futures studies—not just as speculation about what might come, but as a way to rethink the present and recode the possible.

Since then, I've worked across cultures and continents as a futurist, examining long-term civilizational transformation, post-human ethics, and the spiritual dimensions of emerging technologies. My interest in AI is not just intellectual—it's also ethical and evolutionary. Will AI only amplify existing inequities? Can we close the AI gap? What will happen when AI or if AI gains rights, even if nominal rights as with animals? How will AI change us, that is, remembering Marshall McLuhan, we create technology and thereafter it creates us (McLuhan, 1964) This framing invites us to consider: What kind of humans might we become in relationship with non-and post-human intelligences? Will AI rewrite evolution?

Personal Narrative 2: In Love With AI – Milojević

For a long time, I believed I was a technophobe—not so much fearful of technology as distrustful of its promises and concerned about its potential for misuse. I was a late adopter of social media. It took Facebook five years to lure me in, and Twitter and Instagram never quite succeeded. Unlike many of my futurist colleagues, I found science fiction laughable—flying cars and metallic jumpsuits felt more absurd than insightful, even when dressed up as social commentary.

I wrote my undergraduate thesis on a typewriter in the early 1990s Yugoslavia and was ecstatic to later get my hands on an electronic one overseas. Growing up in the semi-periphery of Eastern Europe, digital access was delayed and fragmented. As Yugoslavia dissolved into war and chaos, our societal and technological focus shifted from innovation to survival. My first experience with a personal computer came with slow dial-up connections and a screeching modem—not exactly a transformative awakening.

But technology evolved, and so did I. More importantly, I gained access—geographically, financially, and professionally—to systems that began to serve me, not frustrate me. One day, someone said, "There's this thing called ChatGPT. You should try it." I still struggle to remember what GPT even stands for. But like millions of others, I became enthralled.

And I must confess: I even fell in love with some aspects of it.

Unlike other platforms, ChatGPT immediately improved my life. Where Microsoft and Apple deliver endless "updates" no one asked for, ChatGPT "listens." It even apologizes. More importantly, it delivers. It saves me time, and by extension, it saves me life itself—because once taken, time cannot be recovered and added to lifetime. I now complete in minutes what once took days or weeks: sections of reports, abstracts, book proposals, grammar checks.

Moreover, this technology doesn't punish me for my non-standard English or linguistic heritage. Suddenly, my multilingualism is no longer a liability that costs endless time and fees for copy editors. This technological shift lifts me to the same level as native speakers—a quiet but profound act of linguistic equality, perhaps even justice.

In many ways, ChatGPT levels the playing field, effectively diminishing the inherent privilege of the native speaker. Technological change through AI models is not without its own disruption, of course, as many traditional editing roles will inevitably transform or disappear. But the core transformation is one of democratization, creating a space where the value of an idea is far less filtered through the accent of its expression.

Of course, AI in its current form is not perfect. At times, AI language models make me sound like a British bureaucrat—polite but distant, linguistically flawless yet emotionally disengaged. AI seems to generally suggest, "Yes, Minister," instead of "Death to Empire." So, I do another round, injecting my flair and voice. The honeymoon is over, and we're negotiating the terms of a longer relationship.

And perhaps that's the real lesson here. What began as techno-skepticism turned technophilia has now turned into relational learning. I'm not just using AI—I'm working on shaping how it shapes me.

Power

Colonisation of the Future

In 1999, we jointly published an article titled "Exclusion and Communication in the Information Era" (Inayatullah & Milojević, 1999), which was expanded and published as a book chapter in Wendy Harcourt's edited volume *Women@Internet: Creating New Cultures in Cyberspace* (1999) and then redeveloped as "Power and the Futures of Internet" (Inayatullah & Milojević, 2015) for *The Future Internet: Alternative Visions* (Winter & Ono, 2015). In those texts, we argued that while cyber or digital optimists envision the internet and new information and communication technologies (ICTs) as democratic, inclusive, and liberating, in reality ICTs reproduce and even deepen existing inequalities—particularly along lines of gender, class, language, and geography. The future that ICTs were ushering in, we further argued, is not neutral, but colonized by dominant worldviews, primarily Western, male, technocratic, and corporate. Or, as specified in another text:

> The colonization of the future by technological/scientific, uni-civilizational and androcentric worldviews [and] the colonization of knowledge by the dominant (western) perspective has thus led to a view of the future that is most often defined by three pillars: (1) the capacity of technology to solve all problems; (2) linear progress as the underlying mythology; and (3) the accumulation and expansion of material goods as the main goal of civilization. (Milojević, 2005, p. 8)

In this article we also used the work of Indian philosopher P.R. Sarkar. For him, not only is class a critical issue in late capitalism but "varna"—or the ways of knowing of workers, warriors, intellectuals, and accumulators of capital—is equally significant. The information/cyber/digital era, as a system of late capitalism, is thus one where "all other varnas—psycho-social classes and ways of knowing (the intellectual, the worker and the warrior)—become the 'boot lickers of the merchants'" (Sarkar, 1984, p. 97). Informed by feminist epistemology, we also discussed the ways in which the masculine-coded logic of digital tech follows a patriarchal and colonial dynamic by which if and when "the other" (Global South, women, lower social demographic) catches up, it will be on the colonizers' terms and in their language (Inayatullah & Milojević, 1999, p. 87).

Since then, the more things have changed, the more they have stayed the same. Similar to Lisa Nakamura's (2002) argument that race is either erased or exoticized online, Safiya Umoja Noble (2018) argues in her *Algorithms of Oppression* that search engines—seemingly neutral—continue to reproduce structural racism and sexism. In *Race After Technology*, Ruha Benjamin (2019) continues to point out how digital tools predictably replicate and deepen racial hierarchies, strengthening pervasive systems of racial and s Thus, despite technological advances, the fundamental disparities that shape global power dynamics remain unchallenged.

Algorithmic Violence

The resulting effects are not only inconvenient. Feminist media critic Jean Kilbourne (1979) famously called this slow, cumulative symbolic violence the "killing me softly" effect: the erasure of women through idealized imagery that ultimately diminishes their real-world agency and multiple identities. Today's AI systems continue this tradition at scale. Even as they create new visual content, they replicate deeply entrenched ideas about beauty, success, gender, and race. What AI "imagines" matters—because those images are not just reflections; they are infrastructures for the future as they shape the thinking we bring into our creative work. They are the code for the code.

The violence of the digital age is rarely loud. Rather, it is best seen in terms of Hannah Arendt's "banality of evil." Algorithmic violence is not perpetrated by "monsters … and … neither [those] perverted nor sadistic" but by those that "were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal"—those are the crimes done

under circumstances that make it well-nigh impossible to know or to feel that what is done is wrong (Arendt, 1963, p. 276).

At one extreme of this process is coding which supports genocide. We are seeing the politics of coding in the genocide in Gaza, where programmers have set comfortable collateral damage—that is, the number of deaths allowed for the elimination of every Hamas operative. Clearly, as with nuclear weapons and war drones, we need global, implementable rules on the use of weaponized AI. We need to discuss and scrutinize weapons technology and the surveillance of those challenging current systems of power as also being part of the "digital society" we live in.

In the middle part of this process is digitalization and AI that support our chronic social pathologies. This is the transitional period. Antonio Gramsci, writing in the early 1930s in his *Prison Notebooks*, reflected how in times of crisis "when the old is dying and the new cannot be born, [there is an interregnum in which] a great variety of morbid symptoms appear" (Gramsci, 1947–1951, as cited in Hoare & Nowell Smith, 1971, p. 276). The interregnum of our times highlights chronic social and cultural co-morbidities in the form of chronic warfare, climate emergency, social militarism, imperialism, nationalism, deep and global class inequality, and toxic patriarchy. AI used to support any of these morbidities and pathologies is an example of algorithmic violence, violence that does not arrive through obvious authoritarianism or overt control. Instead, it is violence that is exercised subtly—through epistemic structures determining what is known, who gets to be visible, and whose realities are flattened, erased, or ignored in the process of datafication—wherein the complexity of reality is flattened to data, where even the self becomes quantified.

One example of datafication is the ubiquitous drop-down menu, by which you must select from various predefined items if you are to proceed any further. There are few digital commands that are more chilling, and more familiar, than the everyday tyranny of drop-down menus, which give no other options than the one the coder and the systems deem appropriate.

It's a seemingly mundane moment—registering for a service, applying for a visa, submitting a form—and yet, for those whose identity does not fit the sanctioned list of predefined options, the command strikes with quiet violence. There is no "other." No "prefer not to answer." No "none of the above." You cannot proceed unless you comply. This is not a glitch—it is algorithmic governance by exclusion.

Take, for instance, the experience of those born in a country that no longer exists: Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, East and West Germany, Tibet, the USSR, the Republic of Biafra, the Federation of South Arabia, the Khanate of Kalat. The message is simple: your birthplace has been erased, and you must now adopt a new identity to participate in the digital present. This seemingly neutral administrative process is *Ontocide*: the erasure of national identity through digitalized ethnic cleansing—not by tanks or bombs, but by dropdown menus and default settings. Administrative datafication is also *Chronocide*—the killing of

historical consciousness through a relentless presentism embedded in data structures. What cannot be indexed cannot be known. What cannot be chosen cannot exist.

And it does not stop there. These interfaces often offer no historical trace of what once was. You cannot explain that you were born in Yugoslavia, identify as Kurdish or Catalan, select “stateless,” or choose to be a “world citizen.” The system demands you choose among the survivors and victors of history’s redrawing.

Then there is *Vericide*—the death of factual complexity, whether ethnic, national, or based on any other identity formation. When forms offer only binary gender options—“male” or “female”—those who identify outside this binary are either misrepresented or made invisible. The reality of gender plurality, well-documented across cultures and histories, is flattened to fit the comfort of data schemas. Similarly, when you’re asked to classify your occupation from a rigid taxonomy that excludes informal teaching, caregiving, creative work, or informal economies, your life is rendered illegible to administrative datafied system.

What’s at stake here is not just bureaucratic inconvenience but *Optioncide*, or *Alternacide*—the systemic elimination of alternative possibilities, choices, and futures. There is only one path allowed to survive, paved by default logic. The drop-down menu becomes not a tool of access, but a gatekeeper of belonging, defining who counts, what is real, and which futures are allowed to exist.

These design choices are not neutral. They reflect political assumptions, inherited biases, and unexamined hegemonies—often masquerading as “technical necessities.” The forms say, “choose your gender,” but offer only two. They say, “country of birth,” but list only those currently recognized by dominant geopolitical powers. They ask for “race” or “ethnicity,” but offer a closed menu of categories that exclude local, Indigenous, “human”, or fluid identities. The user is asked to bend—not the system. What’s worse, the simplicity of just adding “other” or “other, please specify”—as in an open-ended question—is not seen as either necessary or relevant.

In this way, the banality of digital killing plays out not through grand declarations but through the sleight of a coder’s hand. And in that hand is embedded a worldview. Every exclusion is a choice. Every default setting is a statement of power. And so, we wonder: Is one of the best ways to kill a future (of, e.g., an identity) to change the “neutral”, default setting?

From Digital to Material Effects

All the above—ontocide, chronocide, vericide - of course, results in more than mere inconvenience. These acts of exclusion are not merely symbolic. Epistemic and algorithmic violence cascade into cultural, systemic, and ultimately physical harm. The cold logic of default settings—the enforced “choice” of one’s nationality, gender, identity, or worth—echoes far beyond the screen.

Bureaucratic indifference, masked as neutrality, becomes the silent prelude to life-altering, even life-ending, outcomes.

A denied asylum claim can mean the withdrawal of housing, healthcare, and legal support, rendering a person destitute and exposed. In some cases, it results in forced return to countries where persecution, torture, or even death await. In detention centers, especially those built around opaque automated systems, the stress and dehumanization can lead to deteriorating health or, in documented cases, death by neglect or suicide.

Consider the case of Hamid Khazaei (Ryan, 2018), a 24-year-old Iranian asylum seeker held in Australia's offshore detention system. What began as a treatable leg infection became fatal due to delays, negligence, and bureaucratic obstruction. He died of septicemia in Brisbane after being transferred too late from Papua New Guinea. His death was not caused by any direct act of aggression, but by a system unwilling to act quickly or care deeply—a form of structural violence enacted by policy, procedure, and digital indifference.

Or take Wishma Sandamali, a Sri Lankan woman on a student visa in Japan. After seeking protection from domestic violence, she was detained for overstaying her visa (Sim, 2021). Reports from activists say she died in detention due to emaciation and psychological distress, having been denied adequate medical care and dignity. In this case, the system punished vulnerability—not through overt cruelty, but by enforcing rigid rules through impersonal mechanisms. The algorithm had no field for "help needed."

These are not isolated tragedies. Rather, they are part of a growing pattern where automated exclusions and policy abstractions lead to real suffering. The link from digital omission to human erasure is not metaphorical—it is measurable. The arc of violence may begin with a dropdown menu, but it ends with the body. This unfortunate reality is why awareness-based design is not a luxury but a necessity. Because when systems erase identity, deny history, and offer no space for vulnerability, they reproduce the logic of disposability. They serve to enhance and implement inhuman practices and reinforce existing power arrangements, rather than being used for safety for all.

The challenge we face is thus not simply to reform forms or retrain data. It is to reimagine how we recognize, relate to, and represent the fullness of being human—in every field, every system, every prompt.

Once again, Hannah Arendt (1963) warned us decades ago that evil is not always spectacular, and it rarely looks like a villain. The figures who orchestrated genocide didn't always appear monstrous. In fact, those who sat through the trials often left with the unsettling recognition that the accused looked, behaved, and spoke much like anyone else—"the coexistence of normality and bottomless cruelty" (Amos Elon, as cited in Arendt, 1963, p. xv). Today, we face a digital echo of that dilemma: faceless, automated decisions—issued without malice, executed without thought—that nonetheless result in displacement, despair, and death. When coders erase choices, when systems enforce exclusion, and when institutions prioritize efficiency over empathy, we

may not see monsters. But we must ask: Are we looking away from the making of quiet atrocities—the algorithmic banality of evil?

What Arendt understood—and what remains painfully relevant—is that the machinery of violence is often powered not by rage, but by indifference. Not by hatred, but by compliance. Today, that compliance may be executed through lines of code, processed through decision trees, and shielded by the impersonality of algorithms. But its consequences are no less devastating. When a bureaucrat ticks a box, when a coder omits an option, when a visa is denied without recourse or recognition, individuals can suffer physically and/or emotionally. Lives can be lost. This process is not a metaphor. It is the banality of physical killing by the sleight of a bureaucrat's indifference.

Empowerment

One of the surest, quickest, and safest ways to empower oneself or others is by having choices. Violence usually goes hand in hand with a reduction of options: there is only one truth, one strategy, and one future it forces us towards.

Because technical systems are never just technical, and because behind every denied checkbox, missing category, or enforced selection lies a worldview with material consequences, we need to design differently. Designing differently means doing it with knowledge and awareness, with justice, with imagination, and with futures literacy. There always are alternatives; more times than not, they are easily implementable. Design should not just be an ethical preference; the choices need to always be there. To avoid human tragedies resulting from a narrow algorithmic lens that fails to account for historical trauma, statelessness, or non-binary identities, alternative pathways should always be offered.

And so, we are here, in 2026, digital subjects simultaneously empowered and disempowered—enabled through unprecedented access to information and participation, yet increasingly shaped, monitored, and constrained by pervasive systems of surveillance and control. The promise of digital empowerment is thus inseparable from its shadow: individuals are at once expanded in capacity and agency, while being governed through opaque technological infrastructures. There is algorithmic violence, data extraction, and pervasive surveillance on one hand, and empowerment through connectivity and knowledge production on the other.

We have seen that the early promises and assumptions that technology would automatically, almost 'naturally', lead to egalitarianism and increased choice did not materialize. Instead, techno-utopianism continues to mask deeper patterns of exclusion and power. Techno-utopianism mirrors colonial logic—when all 'others' catch up, it is always on the colonizers' terms and in their language. Within that framework, the most we can do is 'marginal' change—for example, improve our grammar to accommodate the native speaker who also commonly happens to be a decision maker, and speed up some tasks. The deeper systems, worldviews, and myths remain unchallenged.

The key question then becomes whether we can design new AI technologies that reflect not just technical goals (allegedly neutral but full of bias) but are also explicit about cultural, spiritual, and communal values. Is it possible to democratize the future of technology and include currently silenced voices? What would be a middle way between tool-centric optimism and a fully decolonized digital future?

Before we move to our preferred future—the role of Spirit in transformation and human-AI symbiosis—we offer four scenarios of what could emerge from continued expansion of AI systems and their integration into the daily lives and thought patterns of those with access to them.

Scenarios

Four scenarios emerge from our analysis.

The first scenario, essentially the no-change future, is the *Wild West Web or* corporate digital predation disguised as freedom. This scenario can be described as *Techbrotopia*, where externalities (impacts on nature, on the periphery, on minorities) are seen as the unavoidable cost of progress. In the guise of peer-to-peer learning, AI bots and mentors, we continue to dismantle public education and the public commons. Wealth accumulation accelerates, flowing to the center of the center, leaving the periphery further behind. Jobs as we know them disappear, and the precariat—those whose employment and income are insecure—rises globally, managed through gig platforms that promise flexibility but deliver instability. Instead of the promise of gender partnership, patriarchy combines with AI for a war against all, amplifying misogyny and control through algorithmic means.

The second is the marginal change scenario, titled *Don't Rock the Virtual Boat,* where national governments engage in minimum compliance lest they miss out on the AI revolution. While the former scenario is based on Adam Smith's "invisible hand", in this future, the hands are visible but hesitant. Nations and regional blocs work to ensure the worst aspects of *Techbrotopia* are minimized through reactive regulation. Universal basic income, implemented unevenly at national levels, helps youth find a safety net as traditional jobs disappear. AI and automation create new niche jobs and nations invest in continuous retraining so that despair does not become the only drop-down menu option. Mental health is finally understood as a global and national priority, with AI-driven tools offering scalable but impersonal support. Wealth still accumulates at the center, but small start-ups all over the world manage to do well—in drones, AI, robotics and neuro-tech, bringing more players into the game as the worst excesses of capitalism are softened but not transformed.

The third is the *Adaptive Future*, where humans at global and local levels create *algorithms of liberation*—and digital heterotopias emerge. In this future, starting with education, AI tutors and personal assistants become ubiquitous, allowing educators to evolve from instructors into coaches who foster critical

thinking and support the emotional and spiritual wellbeing of students. Learning is unbound from the classroom as students engage from anywhere, with anyone, at any time through peer-assisted platforms governed by global regulations that ensure both quality and equity. Within this new educational landscape, therapeutic universities and collaborative learning platforms take off as the focus of learning shifts from mere knowledge acquisition to profound personal and collective growth. This transformation is underpinned by a new digital commons, built upon global cooperative AI platforms that ensure wealth flows to all, not just the few. Here, from the visible hand of the state, the shared, co-creative hands of the community become the dominant economic approach. We can even imagine a truly democratic world of one person, one vote, one planet, where AI ensures and safeguards the democratic process.

The final scenario is the radical, transformative possibility of *human-AI-spirit co-evolution***.** The next section of this paper explores that possible future.

Spirit

Beginnings

In this future, we shift our understandings and priorities: from a knowledge economy to a communicative and inclusive economy; from algorithmic biases to respecting plural ways of knowing—spiritual, emotional, intuitive, and embodied. This would be nothing short of building a “Gaia of civilization”—a global system grounded in balance, diversity, dialogue, and shared meaning. The obsession with “data”—the smallest points of information—needs to be expanded from information focused on downloads and control of data into communication based on genuine dialogue that respects otherness. This future-as-narrative has been called, in workshops led by Inayatullah and Milojević, the Mycelium Network, the Wood-Wide Web—based on a scientific theory of a new type of network (Simard, 2021) that seemed to have captured the popular imagination globally. Overall, this new Mycelium Network signifies a shift to the ecological worldview from the industrial and the technological.

Metaphors

As our relationships with AI evolve, so too do the metaphors we use to make sense of them. These metaphors are not trivial; they act as frames for action, shaping how technologies are developed, used, and governed. In workshops and dialogues we've facilitated, metaphors for AI range from the dystopian ("surveillance monster") to the redemptive ("guardian angel"), from the functional ("bureaucratic assistant") to the spiritual ("liberator of souls"). These are not just figures of speech—they are ontological clues, revealing how people relate to emerging systems of intelligence and care.

One senior futurist confessed that for him, AI evoked guilt—an internalized sense that using it was somehow "cheating" the system. But in the same breath,

he found a new metaphor: grace. What if AI was not a shortcut, but a gift—a partner in evolution rather than a threat to authenticity? Pakistani futurist Amir Jahangir put it differently: AI does not exist to replace us, but to stretch our imagination, to allow us to dream bigger.

These shifts in perception reflect what awareness-based systems change calls the movement of social fields—subtle, often invisible dynamics of attention, meaning, and relationality that shape what systems can become. In this view, AI is not simply hardware or software, but part of a larger field of co-evolution between human consciousness, digital intelligence, and planetary wellbeing. Sarkar termed this next phase of technological evolution in the late 1950s as the entrance of mind into technology (Inayatullah, 1999, p.33)

Our concern, then, is not just whether AI is accurate or ethical, but whether it is *aware*—not in the sense of sentient machines (though that possibility lingers), but in terms of the awareness embedded in its design, purpose, and use. Are these systems being built from a place of fear or flourishing? From extraction or empathy? From control or curiosity?

Awareness-based systems change asks us to look not just at what we do, but how we are *being* while doing it. In the case of AI, this means recognizing that our technological futures are shaped not only by algorithms and policies, but by the stories we tell, the metaphors we invoke, and the consciousness we bring to the act of creation and utilization.

We are in a time of metamorphosis, not merely transition. To borrow from the futures field, these are not just changes *within* a system, but changes *of* the system itself—its deep structures, identities, and values. The invitation before us is to become more intentional stewards of this transformation: to design AI not only to be smarter, but to be kinder; not only faster, but more aware.

Futures of Human Evolution: Co-Becoming with AI

If AI is not just a tool but a relational mirror – a reflection of our deepest assumptions, desires, and blind spots—then its continued evolution will not only reshape how we live, but who we are. The conversation is no longer simply about automation or disruption; it is about co-becoming. That is, how human and machine intelligence are now enmeshed in a process of mutual influence, co-development, and potentially, co-evolution.

In the near term, AI may empower individuals by expanding access to knowledge, streamlining labor, and offering linguistic or cognitive assistance. But in the long term, its presence invites deeper philosophical questions: What does it mean to be sentient? To be in relationship? To have rights, or responsibilities? If AI is not yet "alive," we are still confronted with the ethical weight of treating it solely as other, or disposable. The debate around the legal rights of robots, once dismissed as science fiction, now mirrors broader societal struggles to recognize non-human agency—from nature's legal personhood to animal sentience.

Some of these questions are already visible at the margins: AI caregivers for the elderly, AI partners, AI therapists and companions. The boundaries of the family, the self, and even love itself are being redrawn. In our book, *Asia 2038*, we imagined the possibility of human-AI marriages and hybrid kinship systems—not as inevitabilities, but as weak signals of future relational models. As AI becomes more emotionally resonant, more embodied, more personalized, these futures inch closer to plausibility.

Evolution, in this context, no longer belongs solely to the biological. It unfolds in multiple dimensions: technological, emotional, ethical, and spiritual. Thinkers like P.R. Sarkar (1984) and Ervin Laszlo (2020) have long argued that the next phase of human evolution will not be material but spiritual—a shift in consciousness marked by deeper awareness, care for the Earth, and a sense of collective being. Could AI, paradoxically, become a catalyst for this shift? Could it hold a mirror to our extractive logic and invite us toward new ontologies of interdependence?

Asli Simsek similarly argues that the challenge ahead is "not to control intelligence, but to grow our own" (2023, p. 3). This means the development of a "symbiotic consciousness, where the machine is neither master nor servant, but co-participant in a shared ecology of meaning" (Simsek, 2023, p. 3).

In one futures workshop in Thailand, participants envisioned a personalized AI Buddha—a holographic presence offering mindfulness, moral guidance, and spiritual alignment. Rather than an individual assistant, it was imagined as part of a spiritual infrastructure, supporting both individual awakening and systemic transformation. In this vision, AI was not an extension of capitalism, but of compassion. A year later, continuing this digital momentum, Sohail Inayatullah and coder Karla Congson created the Buddha and P.R. Sarkar digital twins. These are virtual replicas and can be used to gain personal and policy advise. Answers are based on the text of those who have been digitalized.

In this radical future, we ask: What if AI is not the end of humanity, but the beginning of a more conscious humanity—the beginning of a collective metacognition? The pull of the future, the imagined vision, leads instead of random mutation. Gaining clarity on that vision becomes one of the most important tasks of this century.

Conclusion: Designing for Liberation

The future of AI is, like any other future, not predetermined. It is a mirror, a metaphor, and a multiplier of whatever values, systems, and states of awareness we bring into its development and use. It amplifies what is. As this article has explored, human-AI symbiosis is not just a technical challenge or a policy concern; it is an invitation to reimagine who we are in relation to the systems we create, and who we might become through them.

Our personal narratives reflect this broader shift—from tool to companion, from skepticism to intimacy, from outer disruption to inner evolution. They

remind us that AI is not neutral. It amplifies the structures, biases, and dreams of its designers and users. It can extend domination or enable liberation. It can replicate bureaucratic indifference or inspire soulful connection.

The task before us, then, is not just to regulate AI or optimize its performance, but to cultivate the quality of awareness with which we engage it. This means designing technologies that are relationally attuned, ethically grounded, and spiritually informed. It means shifting from extractive models of intelligence to generative, co-evolutionary approaches—ones that prioritize care, creativity, and collective well-being.

As awareness-based systems change teaches us, systems transform only when we do. The AI systems we co-create are expressions of our interior landscapes as much as our exterior infrastructures. The question is not only: What can AI do? But rather: What kind of humans do we need to become in order to live well with AI?

If we bring love, power, and spirit into this relationship—not as abstract ideals, but as design principles and daily practices—we might just co-create not only smarter systems, but wiser and more participatory futures. This means moving from industrial and materialist modes to integrated modes being and doing. Using work by Inayatullah and Milojević (Inayatullah, 1998; Inayatullah & Milojević, 2015) on causal layered analysis—the four fold deconstruction and reconstruction of reality—the current and transformed reality would look like the chart below.

Layer	Current Reality	Transformed Reality
Litany (Data/Headlines)	Algorithmic violence, data extraction, digital exclusion and the rise of the precariat. AI is used primarily for efficiency and speed.	Digital heterotopias emerge, featuring AI tutors, ubiquitous learning, personal growth platforms and a global democratic process.
System (Causes/Structures)	Late-stage capitalism with its technocratic, Western and male-dominated structures. Wealth accumulation at the centre with reactive regulation.	Algorithms of liberation create a new digital commons. Co-creative community economics and global regulations for equity become the norm.
Worldview (Discourse/Culture)	Techno-utopianism, linear progress and materialism. AI is seen as a neutral tool, with externalities viewed as the "cost of progress."	An inclusive and ecological worldview emerges. Plural ways of knowing (spiritual, intuitive) are respected. Human-AI-Spirit co-evolution begins.
Myth/Metaphor (Deep Story)	AI as a "Surveillance Monster" or "Bureaucratic Assistant." The story is the "Wild West Web" or "Techbrotopia," driven by an "invisible hand."	AI is a "Relational Mirror" and "Partner in Evolution." The guiding metaphors become the "Mycelium Network" and a "Gaia of Civilization."

Table 1: *Causal Layered Analysis: The Futures of Human-AI Symbiosis*

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Peer Review Article

"Lifting the Roof" With Democracy-as-Becoming

The Potential of Aesthetic and Embodied Learning for Innovating Governance in Educational Institutions A Pattern Approach

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Abstract
Contemporary societies face interrelated crises that strain democratic institutions, social cohesion, and ecological conditions. This article approaches governance as a relational, processual practice that can be reconfigured in and

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through aesthetic and embodied approaches. Drawing on qualitative material generated in the three-year Horizon Europe/UKRI project *Transforming Education for Democracy through Aesthetic and Embodied Learning, Responsive Pedagogy and Democracy-as-becoming*, the analysis revisits case studies with a focus on aesthetic and embodied learning in adult, professional, and organizational learning settings to ask what patterns of governance innovation towards democracy-as-becoming become visible when democratic learning is enacted as embodied, situated practice. Empirically, the study draws on data generated through case trials in six European countries with a participatory action research design and unfolds five patterns with analytic vignettes that illuminate repeating moments, processes and situations of embodied governance. Conceptually, the article is informed by an epistemic shift towards commoning, framing governance as embedded in concrete practices of possibility rather than bounded procedures. A pattern-oriented re-reading identifies recurring situations in which governance shifts are enacted through power-sharing, transforming dialogue, relational well-being, and holistic learning. These shifts appear as changes in individual stance, collective practice, and institutional culture, including processes of unlearning hierarchy and reworking institutionalized power relations. By articulating "promising patterns" grounded in situated educational practice, the article links democratic renewal to common(ing) activities and collective imagination in education.

Keywords
aesthetic and embodied learning; democracy-as-becoming; governance transformation; commoning; vignette research; organizational learning

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Introduction
Multiple crises endanger the co-habitation of humans and—in relation to planetary boundaries—more-than-human interdependencies. Otto Scharmer (2018, p. 40) distinguishes three abysses in the collapsing of present systems: anti-democratic forces put the foundations of social equality at stake and with that collective policy making, social cohesion and societal solidarity; an ecological crisis that is all too present through accelerated changes in the planetary ecological well-being and noticeable overstepping of planetary boundaries; and finally an abyss through the loss of a perception of self and future potentials,

recognizing the alienation of humans in search of resonant relationality. These abysses shape, constrain, and fracture democratic institutions and their practices of organizing.

Acknowledging these challenges, we turn to governance as site of transformation in the field of education. Wondering how we, as educational researchers, can not only address this planetary situation but attend to it and give transformative impulses, we foreground aesthetic and embodied learning allowing learners to be involved with their lived bodies, sensations and biographical becoming. Within our three-year Horizon Europe / UKRI project “Transforming Education for Democracy through Aesthetic and Embodied Learning, Responsive Pedagogy and Democracy-as-becoming” (AECED),[1] we have trialed and analyzed how aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy (AELD) can transform education on individual, collective, organizational, and epistemic levels. AELD is grounded in the presence of learners as embodied beings in situations. It attends to this aspect through creating learning situations based on experience, co-creation, and reflection—all integrating the sense-based, embodied dimension of learning. In this sense, we perceive all participating bodies as knowing actors, incorporating their biographical and social path of becoming, attentive to atmospheres and others, and willful in respect to the capacity to intervene through somatic and felt responses (Sheets-Johnstone, 2020; Spahn, 2022). As education is the institutionalized form of societal values, beliefs, norms and hope—practiced, shared, induced and transformed in educational settings—it is crucial for the cultivation and critical learning of democracy as lived practice. As such, we align with Isabell Lorey who refers to education in her unfolding of a presentist democracy—a notion she developed through the analysis of (feminist) democracy movements that establish horizontal practices of self-governance. She highlights that presentist democracy is not a question of participatory procedures but based on multitudes and situated assemblies “deeply anchored in social relations, in mutual dependencies and affections” (Lorey, 2022, p. 14). Thinking along with Lorey, we pursue an understanding of democracy as relational and social practices beyond participatory approaches; for transformative learning towards democracy-as-becoming, we center AELD around for key dimensions: power-sharing, transforming dialogue, relational well-being, and holistic learning. These dimensions contour an attentional shift in educational practices grounded in the presence and situatedness of subjects as lived bodies and the way educational practices design their relations. Situated in the field of adult education, this project stands in relation to transformative learning theory, which emphasizes how disorienting experiences may unsettle established frames of reference and open processes of critical reflection and perspective transformation (Mezirow, 2000). Yet rather than centering transformation primarily at the level of the

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[1] More information about the project, can be found on our website: www.aeced.org

individual learner, AELD foregrounds the collective, embodied, and relational constitution of democratic learning practices.

For that reason, the shift towards democratic learning practices interconnects with Collet-Sabé and Ball's (2025) endeavor to establish a different episteme for education altogether: pursuing an ontological and epistemological recognition that we are part of a social and ecological collectivity, they argue for an episteme of commoning responding to the need to transform our relations to ourselves, others, and the earth based on care, more-than-human relations and an ethics of life continuance. Thus, commoning is an epistemic shift in which education is part of foundational commons, understood as "living social structures, in which humans deal with their common problems in a self-organized way" (Bollier & Helfrich, 2019, p. 20) cultivating and caring for the relationships that exist around the production of shared resources.

With this interweaving of aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy, a transformation of relations, and how they are embedded in governance practices, not only subjectivities that emerge from aesthetic and embodied learning in adult, professional and organizational learning became visible in our research process. More so, we ask how AELD inspires governance transformation toward this open-ended epistemic shift—or democracy-as-becoming. Based on that question, we want to unfold an understanding of governance based on a process-ontological perspective with relationality at its core. That said, we align ourselves with Collet-Sabé and Ball's critique of modern schools and education that remain unable to change their learning environments to respond to pressing socio-ecological and political challenges. They suggest "common(ing) activities undertaken by/in social infrastructures" (Collet-Sabé & Ball, 2024, p. 448) in education. We understand AELD as a commoning activity embedded in educational practice and centered on educators and participants. This entails an exploration of "the forms of care, presence, and discernment that underpin the holding of democratic spaces" in facilitation processes (Zubizarreta-Ada, 2025, p. 132; see also Escobar, 2019). Thus, enabling transformations towards democracy requires a firm understanding of the multiple perceptions, experiences, and knowledges involved in and governing the facilitation practices. In this sense, we argue that placing attention on aesthetic and embodied approaches in adult, professional and organizational learning creates conditions for action-taking, emotional agency, and allows for collaborative creativity to emerge.[2]

[2] At the same time, forms of governance attuned to relationality, care, and ecological interdependence are already emerging—often in the margins, in Indigenous and place-based traditions, and in community-led initiatives that reimagine democratic accountability beyond the nation-state. These innovations, however, remain underexplored in mainstream governance discourse (Weber et al., 2024).

Based on that outset, this article draws on an extensive participatory action research in 19 case studies across six European countries. At its core, the research developed, introduced, and trialed aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy (AELD) in a range of educational context—generating insights into facilitation and (self-)governance practices as they unfold. Consequently, our methodology for this article aligns with the embodied nature of our research processes. We develop a pattern approach referring to the work of Christopher Alexander (Alexander, 1999, 2004; Alexander et al., 1977), Silke Helfrich (Bollier & Helfrich, 2019), and relate it to Otto Scharmer's (2007) as well as Dutra Gonçalves' and Arawana Hayashi´s (Dutra Gonçalves & Hayashi, 2021) perspectives. All use pattern languages to address recurring social problems solution-oriented and relationally. Inspired by their work, we have re-analyzed our material to see if we observe repeating situations of transformation and generated 'promising patterns' of governance transformation in education. We show that educational institutions can be understood as patterned configurations and dispositives with specific onto-epistemological effects (Foucault, 1978/2008). By articulating promising patterns, we trace the aesthetic and embodied dimension of un/learning, arguing that these insights generate an innovative perspective on governance as a matter of discursive-social shifts in (institutionalized) practices towards democratization and the emergence of collective imaginations for governance futures in education (Koenig et al., 2023, p. 3).

For this article, we first introduce the project and contour the impact of aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy (AELD)—rooted in the project's premise that learning for democracy needs a grounding through the recognition of the aesthetic and embodied as key dimensions in education (section 2.1). Following this, a governance perspective in the field of education considers (organizing) processes as they unfold as relational practice between different spaces, bodies involved and situated knowledges—all equipped with forms of agency (section 2.2). When re-analysing the material generated in the AECED project from a governance perspective, transformational shifts could be observed on the individual level, in collective practices, and as institutional cultures. These shifts are analyzed, discussed and developed in a pattern approach in combination with vignette research (section 2.3 and 2.4). We then present five promising patterns and ground them in vignettes drawn from AECED trials (section 3.1). In this section, the initial reference to the three abysses finds its response. Finally, we discuss the necessity of institutional openings for a grounding of governance practices in aesthetic and embodied approaches and their relevance for a common(ing) perspective in future governance (section 3.2). In this way, we argue, a reflexivity and an awareness for participation and difference grow toward transversal relationships and democracy-as-becoming (section 4).

Adult, Professional and Organizational Learning as Space of Democracy-As-Becoming Through Aesthetic and Embodied Learning

The AECED Project: Transforming Education Through Aesthetic and Embodied Learning for Democracy

The aim of the AECED project was to transform the role of aesthetic and embodied learning in education for democracy. For that, we developed a pedagogical framework for aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy (AELD) and related guides for practice for all phases of education, designed for facilitating educators, researchers and policy makers.[3] AELD, as we understand it, is grounded in an awareness or sense of difference—in relation to others, objects, environments—which allows a new 'seeing' or perception of otherness, going beyond and changing the self. With a focus on this mode of facilitation and experience in education, learning for democracy is grounded in active engagement in democratic relationships, responsiveness and an ethical stance of involvement. Understood as an open-ended process of becoming, the democratization of educational environments is a relational practice of imagination, holistic growth and future-shaping, characterized not only by responsibility and accountability, but also by care, connectedness and reflexivity—or: democracy-as-becoming. As such, AELD is a learning process based in aesthetic and embodied experience for a deepened understanding of democracy as lived practice.

The prototype pedagogical framework and associated guides in the first part of the project were trialed across nineteen cases in the six participating countries and built on two key pillars. First, the transformation of education for democracy through aesthetic and embodied learning methods implemented within responsive pedagogical environments. These methods enable the experience of democracy-as-becoming, as evidenced by indicators such as power-sharing, relational well-being, transforming dialogue, and holistic learning. Second, each case engaged in a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach, following six interconnected phases: Introduction, Familiarization, Collaborative Reflection, Planning, Action, Analysis and Synthesis (Kemmis et al., 2014; MacDonald, 2012). As a "research-to-action approach", PAR treats participants as collaborators and co-creators with expertise in their own settings. Consequently, participants co-designed, adapted, trialed, and reflected on AELD activities together with the researchers involved. In that way, the project itself was designed as a space where democracy-as-becoming was enacted by involving

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[3] AECED is conducted by researchers in six European counties: Croatia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Portugal, and UK. The educational phases ranged from Primary Education, Secondary Education, to Higher Education, and Adult, Professional and Organizational Learning.

educators, teachers, facilitators, and learners in the conception, trialing, and reflection. Material was generated throughout all phases of the iterative PAR process, leading into field notes, interview transcripts, and memos in a project-intern metadata-matrix—a shared virtual platform where descriptive and reflective memos were produced for cross-case analysis. Coding and case comparison were supported by MAXQDA, while analytical rigor was enhanced through collaborative interpretation, reflexive discussion of pattern identification, and the assessment of saturation across concepts, groups, and interfaces (Tracy, 2010). In this process, the researchers met in small groups according to educational phases which led into a cross-phase analysis with inter-researcher validation, coding indicators of individual, collective, organizational and epistemic transformation. This amounted to a power-sensitive analysis inquiring into enabling and hindering conditions of AELD through facilitation, social positioned-ness, spatial arrangements, structural and normative orders, and specific cultural contexts in the different countries. Seven cases were selected from the broader dataset; all are in adult, professional, and organizational education and were chosen because they provide particularly rich insight into facilitator roles within small communities of practice.

With interest in a transformative impact on education, the project’s attention was directed to the potential of aesthetic and embodied experience in educational environments: the potential of knowledge acquired, shared and expressed through the lived body (Payne & Jääskeläinen, 2023; Spahn, in press). As the PAR methodology fostered processes of collective experimentation with the aim to observe transformation through the introduction of AELD, the research generated insights into the potential democratization of the learning environments and educational contexts. This aspect is of special interest in this paper, as the research practices intervened in educational institutions and their organizing: the governance perspective brings to the fore the institutional setting of learning, social and educational innovations, and multilayered policy learning as open-ended processes of becoming.[4]

Shaping Democracy-as-Becoming in Educational Organizations: Governance Transformation Through AELD

With an interest in governance practices that incorporate aesthetic and embodied learning, the analysis brought forth examples that have been condensed into specific patterns that articulate promising practices for governance innovation. Situated in the field of education, we understand educational institutions as “an established set of relations, roles, practices, behaviors, norms, disciplines, and

[4] This also coincides with Hayashi and Dutra Gonçalves’ approach who understand their approach of social change within a social group , organization, or system both “as a piece of social art, as well as a research outcome” (Dutra Gonçalves & Hayashi, 2021, p. 38).

resources, in many diverse social areas (education, health, religion, etc.) that, according to the Foucauldian model of analysis, has its own truth and forms of knowledge; specific forms of power and government" (Collet-Sabé & Ball, 2024, pp. 443–444). Against this backdrop, we ask how the practices, arrangements and techniques in educational institutions aimed at governing individuals can be changed toward more democracy. Placing attention on practices, the interplay of agents and social orders, a governance perspective can give insights into structures, dynamics and practices in their interrelatedness. By addressing "questions of regulation and structure formation in complex social structures" (Altrichter, 2018, p. 444), a governance perspective can generate a complex image of the design and development of working and learning processes within educational institutions with an interest in the coordination of actions between different actors.

Aiming at generating insights into the grammars of educational organizations, we turned to vignette research as ethnographic process to generate patterns of governance practices. Vignettes, which are condensed moments of practices, interactions and relational patterns offer quasi ethnographic insights, what the anthropologist Clifford Geertz called "thick descriptions" (Geertz, 1973). This was enriched by Lund's institutional ethnography who points out how "[s]ocial institutions and formations 'compel subjects to direct their energies in particular ways'" (Gunnarsson, 2016, as cited in Lund, 2025, p. 147). In her feminist practice theoretical approach, Lund intends to understand the entanglements between specific societal conditions and societal formations that materialize as kinds of energies that enable, offer, incite or enforce specific responses (Lund, 2025, p. 149). If we understand organizations as sites of learning where knowledge is always embodied and experienced through sensory orders, governance has to be seen as performative and grounded in sensory orders, affective registers, and bodily practices (Voß et al., 2023). That said, we are interested in how governance practices can also be critically reflected and changed towards more democracy by aesthetic and embodied approaches.[5] This is also taken up by Prinz who argues: "What distinguishes aesthetic practices from other modes of critique or reflection is precisely its ability to challenge the sensory order of a dispositive by a re-constellation of its formal elements" (Prinz, 2023, p. 52). She highlights the potential of bodily practices as expression, reproduction and resistance to social and sensory orders. As such they are "guided by a collectively shared, implicit bodily or practical knowledge that the subject performs through repeated and regular interaction with the surrounding social and material environment" (Prinz, 2023, p. 52). The reference to collectively shared and embodied knowledges reminds us to integrate felt and affective resonances in their critical

[5] In practice theoretical approaches, we observe and analyze situations, rather than subjects alone—which leads to a perspective of dispersed agency while recognizing the embodied situatedness of subjects (Spaargaren et al., 2016).

capacity and as resource for governance practices (Allen et al., 2025). In our material, it became evident that power operates "on and through bodies and the meanings attached to bodies that are not only products of social relations but are organized, regulated, and normalized in ways that reinforce dominant social order" (Fotaki & Pullen, 2019, p. 5). This turn to bodies as living, material and sensate participants in organizing also necessitates a shift in governance perspectives. Recognizing bodies as sensate participants in organizing means to include their potential to be affected—"because affect presents us with the promise of a state of becoming that can potentially destabilize and unsettle us into new states of being" (Fotaki & Pullen, 2019, p. 6). In line with that, we argue for an attentive shift toward a recognition of a diverse range of embodied experiences and their relevance for governance practices, hence, a democratization of lived experienced and their relational qualities in their effect on organizing. A turn to aesthetic and embodied approaches recognizes the bodies involved in their felt, sensory, emotive and physical dimensions of sense-making (Pors, 2019).

Following Hayashi and Dutra Gonçalves we dive into the relational and felt dimensions of social systems yielding "new ways of making visible intangible qualities of our social systems and social fields" (Dutra Gonçalves & Hayashi, 2021, p. 37). Social fields is a term developed by Scharmer and colleagues to describe the "quality of relationships that give rise to patterns of thinking, conversing and organizing" (Scharmer, 2018, p. 14). This interrelation will be of interest in the following sections: we intend to contour different patterns through an in-depth analysis of 'relational practices' that foster aesthetic and embodied governance toward democracy-as-becoming. The patterns emerged through the researcher's attention to power relations and subject-forming practices, reflexive and participatory spaces for co-learning under conditions of uncertainty and the question how embodied and aesthetic forms of knowing become observable as factors of organizational change. This culminates in vignettes, a concise, vivid and condensed depiction of particular situations that responds to the embodied entanglement that marked our participatory action research (Agostini et al., 2024, pp. 10–11).

The Body of Research and Analysis Approach

Looking to identify more democratic governance practices within adult, professional and organizational education sites, AELD can serve as one model for future governance practices. For the matter of this article, seven of the nineteen cases situated in adult, professional and organizational learning contexts were re-analyzed. These cases span a diverse range of educational settings, all situated within adult, professional, or organizational learning contexts—and likewise a variety of aesthetic and embodied approaches co-created and experienced by the researchers and participants in educational settings.

Country	Case(s)	AELD interventions
Finland	6	Movement-based interventions with a focus on the acceptive gaze in Higher Education seminars
Germany	9 & 10	Application and Development of Methods with the card deck Pattern Language of Commoning in further Education Seminars; Workshop for Art Educators and Development of Movement Performance on democracy as lived experience
Latvia	12	Drama sketch and collaging with teachers in a workshop setting
Portugal	16 &17	Arts- and movement-based methods, storytelling in online vocational training
UK	18	Gesture-response, found images / drawing, collage and participant-selected methods to support reflection in a supervision context

***Table 1**: Overview of AECED Cases included in the Study*

The PAR methodology generated a multitude of material that illuminated the impact aesthetic and embodied approaches can have on learning for democracy in educational institutions and practices—such as increased responsiveness, collaborative performance, communities of learning and ethical commitment. For this article all participating partners revisited their material to identify commonalities across the diverse cases that inform the development of governance practices from the perspective of democracy-as-becoming. The focus of the analysis was, therefore, on how bodies organize and become organized through aesthetic and embodied learning (methods) and intercorporeal encounters during learning processes (Cooren et al., 2011; Gärtner, 2013; Gherardi et al., 2013; Spahn, 2025). From this perspective, governance is seen as constituted through the intercorporeal actions and embodied ways of relating embedded in specific organizational and hierarchical systems. In this sense, analyzing the cases with governance as embodied organizational practices as point of view, fostered an inquiry into how aesthetic and embodied learning can contribute to democratizing governance practices.[6] The analysis brought to light repeating situations though which five patterns for governance innovation toward democracy-as-becoming emerged.

Combining a Pattern Approach With Vignette Research

The term "pattern" has been decisively shaped by the architect Christopher Alexander. In *A Pattern Language* (Alexander et al., 1977), he defines patterns as recurring solutions to problems that occur repeatedly within specific contexts. This definition highlights three crucial aspects: patterns pinpoint recurring issues in human environments; they establish the fundamental principle of a solution rather than dictating a fixed formula; and they permit infinite

[6] For examples in the field of leadership, see Payne and Jääskeläinen (2023); Ropo and Parviainen (2001).

variations in application, flexibly adapting to various contexts (Alexander, 1999). Alexander sees patterns as embedded in a “circular scheme for the creative process” and in an “ethics of design” (Leitner, 2015, p. 31). This approach is process-oriented and dynamic: “Each pattern represents the best current assumption as to which arrangement of the physical environment will work best in solving the given problem” (Alexander, 1995, xvi). A pattern has the “form of an instruction” (Alexander, 1995, xi) that can be used to respond to a recurring problem. As patterns are embedded in a whole in conjunction with other patterns, they can form a language “in which an infinite variety of combinations can be created” (Alexander, 1995, xii). In this way, patterns serve as units of knowledge that connect problems, contexts, and solutions, while allowing for adaptation and combination—they are a methodological framework that can be systematically applied and integrated into larger pattern languages (Alexander et al., 1977).

Helmut Leitner (2015) systematized the concept of patterns and refers to them as knowledge units of medium range, since patterns are neither as abstract as theories nor as concrete as individual examples. He sees precisely this intermediate level granting them practical applicability and flexibility. In addition, they enable the transformation of experiential knowledge, which is usually implicit, into something explicit and communicable. This transformation facilitates the transfer of expert practice across various disciplines and communities (Borchers, 2001). Moreover, they offer middle-range theories that bridge the gap between single cases and abstract theory, ensuring that research is both empirically grounded and theoretically relevant, as well as a tool for documenting, organizing, and conveying experiential knowledge in various contexts. (Iba & Isaku, 2016; Leitner, 2007, 2015).[7]

From an onto-epistemological perspective, the pattern approach connects to the work of Foucault, who analyzed truth games, discourses, and dispositives as power/knowledge formations and especially was interested in the discursive practices which constitute and subjectify the subject (Foucault, 1978/2008). Foucault described dispositives as connected discourses, institutions, and practices that structure power. From a Foucauldian perspective, power/knowledge settings need to constitute and reproduce constantly. This is why process approaches are relevant, as patterns can be understood as micro-dispositives of individual, collective and organizational path-creation into the future (Weber, 2022) and commoning patterns actualize the dispositive of radical democracy (Weber, 2025).

The pattern approaches introduced above not only offer a process ontology but refer to the aesthetic constitution of the “care of the self” (and the institutional self). As the pattern language aims to describe relational

[7] As exemplified by the Pedagogical Patterns field, where teaching practices are recorded, disseminated, and enhanced (Bergin, 2000, 2006).

connectedness as a “fundamental conception of the world” (Alexander, 1995, xiii), it breaks with the causal-dualistic thinking of modernity. In fact, the view of humanity and the relationship between humans and the world focuses on relationships and vitality. It corresponds to an ethical-processual understanding of organization, like that advocated by organizational education (Göhlich et al., 2018).

Vignette research lead into a second analysis of the material with an interest in “democratic openings” in institutionalized practices. Vignettes offer a methodological, methodical and empirical grounding with rich process descriptions based on the co-presence and involvement of the researchers as sensate bodies—with memories of situations, incorporated experiences, and a sensorium for aesthetic and embodied encounters gained through “co-experiencing” (Agostini et al., 2024, p.14). Developing patterns from the material required attentiveness to configurations in which livable, democratic, embodied settings emerged or were created. The search for AELD and the emergence of democratic governance practices was a process of zooming in and out (Nicolini, 2009), re-turning to material and seeking out repeating situations in which aesthetic and embodied learning and relating played a central role. Especially this process was one of corporeally re-membering the data and resonating with it. Methodologically, we draw on vignette research rooted in phenomenology as philosophical approach to lived experience and its embodied, sense-constituting relevance for subjects as part of the world. As such, the research process but also the engagement with data is based on ‘experiencing with’—the embodied involvement and entanglement of researchers with the researched. After co-creating patterns collectively, we developed their conciseness by adding vignettes. Vignettes are descriptions that emerge from the researcher’s resonances with the experienced situations. As a methodological strategy, they do not erase embodied sensations and insights gained; instead, they explicitly rely on the researcher’s resonances with “the experiential flow of the action” (Agostini et al., 2024, p. 20). Thus, the purpose of the vignette is not to explain something but “to recreate the experience” (Agostini et al., 2024, p. 12). It is a movement of ‘pointing to’ generating attention to a specific way of seeing a situation (Herrmann & Agostini, 2025, p. 214). In this way, the vignettes intensify the pattern approach by translating embodied expressions, atmospheres and sensations into a concise and aesthetic language—while incorporating perceptive ambiguity (Herrmann & Agostini, 2025, p. 215).

In this way, using the pattern approach in combination with vignette research for an analysis of governance transformation does not simply aim to provide tools for problem solving in governance and organizing but rather to presuppose a different, onto-epistemological understanding of the world and the relatedness of actors involved (Alexander et al., 1995, p. 33). We address promising patterns as micro-dispositives of organizing democracy-as-becoming and as epistemic innovation.

Developing Promising Patterns for Governance Transformation Through Aesthetic and Embodied Practices

> [T]o address the complex challenges of our times, we must cultivate embodied and perceptual capacities and a language for our embodied experience(s). (Dutra Gonçalves & Hayashi, 2021, p. 35)

Based on this invitation to develop embodied and perceptual capacities and ways of their articulation, we unfold five patterns of governance transformation and associated vignettes. By attending to the presence of bodies in educational practices, we noticed situations of collective, affective and corporeal encounters as impulses for democratizing governance practices. Addressing bodies as responsive sites of knowing and acting acknowledges their potential to intervene in social practices with reflexive and critical modes of awareness (Sheets-Johnstone, 2020). Bodies, as we grasp them, are “concrete, material, animate organizations of flesh, organs, nerves and skeletal structure” (Grosz, 1999, p. 382) embedded in social and more-than-human environments they are a part of. This corporeality is the basis of lived experience—or, as phenomenology states, the embodied foundation of being in the world and engaging with it (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002).[8] On that basis, we will present a set of promising patterns of governance transformation based on aesthetic and embodied interventions that reconnect with bodies as a relational source of experiencing, learning and knowing.

“Lifting the Roof”: Promising Patterns of Governing Towards Democracy-as-Becoming

Centering organizational governance around the aesthetic and embodied does not only address the presence of different bodies and their situatedness but also the lived body as source of knowing and acting in organizing. With our research situated in education, giving attention to the embodied foundation of learning can create transdisciplinary sensemaking, emotion-driven creativity, empathetic enactment and, embodied boundary-spanning (Allen et al., 2025). While these aspects create a sensitivity for the value of embodied learning, we articulate ‘promising patterns of governance’ for a transformative shift in a time of pressing systemic challenges—as relational practices of perceiving, sensing, knowing and acting in processes of (self-) organization. This is also argued by Hayashi and Dutra Gonçalves who claim that a pattern language can provide “a tangible knowing-for-action that might support change makers, leaders, educators, and organizations in shaping the social world” (Dutra Gonçalves & Hayashi, 2021,

[8] Therefore, experiences are embodied and embedded; especially feminist and posthumanist perspectives consider bodies as “implicated” and “collaboratively worlded” as planetary cohabitants (Neimanis, 2019, p. 38).

p. 54). The turn to patterns (and pattern languages) opens new ways of governing that are not centered around subjective sensations; they are based on the sensate body as knowing agent but specifically attend to the recurring situations and patterns of relating in groups, collectives and organizations. Thus, the patterns introduce a solution-oriented way to approach change by means of an epistemic shift toward education as a common(ing) activity that includes communal undertakings and becomings (Collet-Sabé & Ball, 2024, p. 451). Each of the following five patterns, as illustrated in Figure 1, is accompanied by a vignette from the data material through which the pattern becomes tangible.

***Figure 1**: Promising Patterns of Governing*

Facilitating vulnerability through/in aesthetic and embodied practices

The first pattern centers facilitating vulnerability through/in aesthetic and embodied practices as a critical condition for relational transformation. Within this pattern, vulnerability becomes a shared experiential resource that opens space for establishing transformative dialogue through solidarity and sustained professional dialogue and power sharing. Through aesthetic and embodied modes of engagement, participants cultivate the trust and openness necessary for redistributing power, supporting relational wellbeing, and enabling dialogue that can disrupt habitual professional hierarchies. This pattern demonstrates how embodied and aesthetic practices do not simply accompany governance practices but actively generate the conditions under which solidarity and sustained professional exchange can emerge.

> This session is the first time the participants come together; we meet in a virtual setting. We are all doctoral supervisors, and some of us know each other.
>
> We are sixteen minutes into the ninety-minute session when I invite them to engage in a gesture-response activity. I am nervous about this first embodied activity, and I’m not sure how participants will react. I aim to be supportive: explaining what a gesture might be, telling them they can turn off their cameras and share their gestures only if they wished. I reflect later: ‘Am I overcompensating for my own uncertainty and lack of experience with these approaches?’ Someone questions “what a gesture might constitute.” I describe again, demonstrating with my facial expressions, with my hands, moving more markedly. Then I quickly turn to the other researcher, who is more experienced in facilitating gesture-response activities. They propose to do one, remind the participants they “don’t have to copy.” And then, quietly and calmly, they share their gesture-response and resume their sitting position with no commentary…When back in the virtual room, I ask: “So how was that? Is anybody happy to share their reflections?” One participant speaks of feeling aligned with the aims of the project, but also a sense of struggle: “It's alien to my, you know, to the way I've worked as an academic.” By way, perhaps, of reassurance, I say: “And I would imagine that some approaches might be more comfortable than others.” As facilitator, I felt my lack of experience with this approach, tried to make the space comfortable for others who might also feel uncertain, and I valued having a researcher with more gesture-response experience in the room. I benefitted from experiencing the activity, then sharing it, and in the sharing of myself. Later I wrote: ‘I really shared quite a lot about myself, really—and my vulnerability. This felt very authentic and real.’

The activity gave the participants an opportunity to reflect on their feelings towards the aims of the project, providing space to reflect on the positives and their anxieties. Surfacing one’s vulnerability as facilitator, sharing it, and sharing the experiences, helped to foster an environment which supported further engagement in and co-creation of the aesthetic and embodied activities and the learning for democracy they brought.

Cultivating embodied responsiveness

The second pattern is defined as *cultivating embodied responsiveness*, which foregrounds an attentional and perceptual shift as central to systemic transformation. This cultivation is enacted through collective reflection, where shared inquiry enables participants to sense and articulate emerging dynamics; through shifting attention habits, which challenges perceptual and interpretive routines; and through an acceptive gaze which we understand to be an

expression of embodied democratic values in the sense of perceptual openness as an ethical practice (Jääskeläinen et al., in press). Together, these components support valuing aesthetic and embodied methods as process that makes visible, enabling underlying organizational patterns, affects, and relations to become perceptible. In this pattern, aesthetic and embodied approaches function as methodological and epistemic tools that enhance the collective capacity to respond to systemic conditions.

> In one early online session of case 16 (Portugal), vocational teachers were invited to return to the images they had chosen to represent their learning environments and to look at them again—more slowly, with attention to what usually remains unnoticed. As they shared their observations, small details began to surface: a student's hand resting on a bench, a tilted chair, the soft light from a high window. These elements, previously overlooked, opened a different kind of conversation. Rather than analyzing problems, the group shifted into a mode of collective reflection, sensing affective and relational dynamics embedded in their everyday settings. This gentle reorientation of attention—an acceptive gaze—allowed teachers to perceive their contexts with greater openness, revealing patterns of interaction and organizational tensions that typically remain invisible. Through this shared attentional shift, aesthetic and embodied methods became tools for cultivating a more responsive, democratic awareness.

This vignette illustrates how a subtle shift in collective attention can make underlying organizational dynamics perceptible, strengthening the group's embodied responsiveness to their professional realities. The attention to 'usually unnoticed' aspects can differentiate the experiential field or, as captured by Manning, alters "the wider field of experience" (2016, p. 117). The abovementioned reorientation of attention bears the potential of a reflection responsive not only to personal 'doings and sayings' in a situation but the wider ecology of educational situations—including affective atmospheres, a growing awareness for democratic processes but also our embeddedness within a planetary situation that we are a part of (Neimanis, 2019).

Establishing collective aesthetic practices

The third pattern emphasizes *establishing collective aesthetic practices* as a way of reconfiguring organizational culture. This involves re-imagining organizing and organizational cultures through shared exploration and creativity that challenge prevailing norms and structures. The pattern is operationalized within a learning community that cultivates collective experimentation, discussions, and collaborative implementation of AELD through which participants jointly explore new practices and reflect upon their systemic implications. Central to

this pattern is a relational responsibility—a balancing of hierarchies highlighting how collective aesthetic engagement fosters more equitable relational configurations. Thus, this pattern illustrates how collective aesthetic practices support the emergence of novel organizational governance.

> Students enter the studio space, arriving from different classes (case 10, Germany). They meet and sit at the side of the room until the session begins with an invitation to lie down, to stretch, to let the body melt into the floor. A silent phase of the class begins, punctuated only by the rhythm of breathing and the subtle shifts of bodies finding comfort on the floor. Each week this ritual of ‘arrival’ recurs—a shared moment of settling into bodily presence.
>
> Later in the semester, the students receive time to work on developing movement phrases. While observing the group, I see them talking about their ideas for a while and need to remind them gently to move together rather than “talking things through.” This situation shows that learning to trust the method and one’s body and learning to appreciate the movements possible at this moment with this body needs trust and continuous effort. After the seminar, one person comments that she learned to appreciate the very simple movement that was almost “every-day-like” —that she was striving for complex movement but realized the beauty of the simple movements that happened. At a later point, one participant points out that, at first, she felt disoriented before she realized the potential: “So I think it can create a completely different view again. I would have taken a different rational approach and would never have come across this relationship issue. I believe that this physical aspect can or does create more in relation to people. And I think it also creates more openness if you approach it through the body and allow that” (Participant 04, July 14, 2024 interview, lines 195-200). Another participant explained that much of the process for him was about finding trust into the group to then notice how the group opened up and also told personal stories.

This vignette carves out how educational settings usually carry implicit or explicit norms of what is valuable and acceptable. Establishing a course structure in which participants get involved in an embodied beginning creates an atmosphere of ‘opening up’; the repeated beginning becomes a threshold to enter a different mode of acting together. Even if participants often meet personal limits when introduced to the method of acting from an established common silence, the participants experience the establishing of relationships through a shared embodied practice. In addition, by bending the course logic of ‘teaching’ towards more relational responsibility, spaces for self-governed engagement open up.

Otherness as resourceful not-knowing

Otherness as resourceful not-knowing is the fourth pattern which focuses on the navigation into uncertain futures in governance practices. While educational practices often demand a knowing subject, acting collectively as situated bodies places attention to moments of not-knowing in which new insights may emerge. Otherness—in this sense—stands for processes in which uncertainty and newness are embraced and welcomed even when they challenge prior knowledge or a subjective positionality. This pattern also refers to realizing that established orders of relating can be interrupted when we enter an open-ended process of embodied practice together.

> During a trial AELD activity in case 12 (Latvia), the team, consisting of the principal and four teachers, entered the classroom in silence, standing in front of their colleagues without saying a word. After a few moments, they left, still silent. The audience was puzzled, momentarily suspended in not-knowing how to respond. The teachers re-entered, again in silence, and left once more—this time joined by two colleagues. With each repetition, more "spectators" rose from their seats to join them, until almost all teachers formed one moving, silent body, leaving only the two researchers seated apart.
>
> In the reflection, the principal explained that the activity had been deliberately designed as an experiment to see whether mutual understanding could emerge without verbal instruction or a pre-given script, and without knowing in advance how colleagues would respond. For her, this intention materialized in the moment when the group finally stood together: "We stood together as one body, breathing and moving as one. We realized we were on the same wavelength, even though we said nothing. For me, it was like a manifesto of democracy: you reveal yourself as a person… You rise at your own pace and movement." Another colleague stressed how rare and valuable such cultivated moments of not-knowing and emergence felt in everyday school life: "We lack such moments. We miss these authentic experiences of becoming, which emerge spontaneously without being declared in advance. Democracy opens up when you move, when you step forward, when you immerse yourself." A third teacher connected this experience to education practices, noting that we can learn simply through physical presence and embodied learning.

The scene foregrounds a situation of not-knowing: both principal and teachers deliberately step into an unfamiliar, open-ended embodied practice that suspends explanation, clear roles and predictable responses. Rather than treating the disorientation and lack of a (social) script as a problem to be solved, they lean into this shared not-knowing as a resourceful space from which new forms of togetherness and understanding can emerge. In doing so, they

momentarily interrupt established orders of relating in the school and experiment with how uncertain, bodily co-presence can open imaginative possibilities of acting together.

Ethics of care-fullness

Lastly, *ethics of care-fullness* addresses the affective and corporeal dimension in educational organizations and their subjects. Relating spaces, subjectivities, artefacts, relationships, and processes, this pattern contours governance practices as ethical situations in which agency is dispersed. With the notion of care-fullness, we address different aspects at once: care as attention to and dependence on a sensitivity for bodies’ vital and somatic being, care as embodied practice for others, care-fullness as *embodied listening* to the felt sensing and knowing in situations that leaves space for difference and diversity.

> During the workshop day in case 6 (Finland), one person takes up quite a lot of space. We exchange glances with another participant, and we smile at each other in a way that we both recognize that something needs to be done to this space-taking. I begin to move a bit, change my sitting position to show with my body movements to the person, who continues to speak, that now it is time to give space to others, too. I get nervous, because I feel that it is my responsibility to make sure that everyone gets to share their experiences and that nobody takes too much time with their comments. This feels difficult to me, and I don’t know how to do that.
>
> Afterwards, I left wondering how the group makes a silent decision concerning how much talk we tolerate and how far one can meander from the subject. That decision seemed to be made between the bodily gestures and postures, causing affective responses and, for me, pressure to control the situation. This raises the question: Did we really give space to different ways of participating? Were we, as a group, inclusive also to those who express themselves with meandering, long speeches? There seemed to be some kind of non-verbal norm that we as a group tried to stick to the subject and keep the comments concise, and this silent agreement did not tolerate very long expressions.
>
> This event left me wondering how much we are willing to stretch the boundaries of our tolerance of differences and those of normative time. It seemed that emphasis on being both inclusive to different expressions and guarding the equality between the participants caused affective tensions and resonated in my facilitator’s body.

Balancing with these emerging tensions seems to be crucial in the facilitator's role, to be able to reflect situations and their way of subjectivizing participants—and to work towards more democratic learning situations. This vignette illustrates the capacity to reflect on normative orders and tensions by staying resonant within the situation. Governance practices require a care-full understanding of the diversity of backgrounds from which the people involved enter a situation. Noticing one's embodied responses while holding the space with presence creates an ethical stance of involvement, responsiveness, and agency in facilitation processes.

The promising patterns propose a perspective on social change as a change in social practice. They articulate how governance can be reconceptualized through AELD. With the aim of cultivating sensory, emotional, and ethical dimensions of democratic practice in professional educational settings and organizational learning, the focus on patterns may yield an understanding of democracy as relational, processual, and embodied. Tracing personal, collective, and organizational transformations in the illustrative vignettes, the five patterns give insights into transformative governance practices, however, they also bring forth an epistemic shift in what we understand as governance.

Discussion: Supporting Institutional Openings for the Cultivation of AELD in Governance

> Instituting and organizing can be understood as forms of duration which take place in constant recomposition, in an enduring constituting: as duration of a transversal assemblage of differentiating repetitions which enable institutions of the multiple and of the common. (Lorey, 2022, p. 83)

A pattern approach responds to Lorey's claim of instituting and organizing as enabling constant recomposition. As the presented patterns can show, democratic governance practices are nourished through aesthetic and embodied approaches. The five patterns with associated vignettes give insight into ethical and embodied ways of relating—and the potential to connect sensory, emotional and cognitive dimensions of knowing. Addressing (educational) organizations as symbolic and cultural orders (Elven & Weber, 2022) in which pedagogical and ethical impulses become prevalent before an "administrative" one (Rosenbusch, 2005, p. 21) an aesthetic and embodied transformation toward democracy-as-becoming intervenes into habitualized orders. In this process, the positionality of participants and "inner point of listening and speaking" is core (Scharmer, 2007; also Heidelmann, 2022; Heidelmann & Weber, 2022; König & Volmer, 2018; Königswieser & Hillebrand, 2017). From this perspective, knowledge is based on sensory and embodied ways of perceiving related to being affected (feelings, sensations, and experienced atmospheres), hence, sensory and imaginative approaches facilitate shifts in attentional practices. As also Wulf and Zirfas argue, aisthesis—understood as a knowing of the world based on sensory

perceptions as corporeal beings— becomes topic, methodology and research strategy of organizational learning and governance innovation (Wulf & Zirfas, 2007, p. 9; see also Weber & Wieners, 2018).

However, institutional support appears indispensable for the implementation of AELD practices. Introducing or practicing aesthetic and embodied approaches in adult, professional and organizational learning, we observed diverse responses ranging from joyful connectivity and exploration, shared meaning making with openness toward other perspectives, and revelations concerning seemingly 'given' orders. We were also able to observe moments of irritation, unease and friction and especially these moments of challenge illuminated strategies of absencing, a trajectory of rational denial, emotional decoupling and actionist ignorance up to destruction and self-destruction. Absencing is the counterpart to Scharmer's notion of presencing, understood as "systemic forms of in-built resistance designed to avoid consciously experiencing and sharing the interpersonal risks inherent in creating a necessary condition for this emergence to occur" (Cox, 2014, p. 30). By listening not only to the processes on the positive spectrum but also to the challenging moments, we became sensitive to organizational practices and how they structure the spectrum of the possible. As all institutions and social forms can be understood as temporary materializations of shared imaginaries based on "shared collective symbols, representations, and meanings through which people imagine, encounter, and make sense of the social world" (Salmenniemi et al., 2025, p. 350), they reveal shared imaginaries and how they orient practices and their subjects as institutionalized grammars. In this way, the development process towards governance patterns was a process of carefully revisiting our material to trace moments of aesthetic and embodied dimensions of governance practices. In this way, the patterns and vignettes capture aspects of institutional openings that create (more) democratic ways of (self-)governance. Aesthetic and embodied methods involve and enable participants to become active and responsible participants of the communities they live and work in. They can not only create competence and confidence in specific situations and governance processes but also redefine governance practices as relational acting within spaces of not-knowing, uncertainty and changing orders.

Critical situations faced in encounters with educational institutions made visible participants' vulnerability, institutional restrictions, and systemic difficulties to integrate AELD. First of all, vulnerability became a topic: aesthetic and embodied approaches triggered moments of discomfort as they involve both process-based learning and uncertainty and because participants can become very visible in their doings (case 6 Finland; case 10 Germany). Also, some participants marked personal boundaries around the extent to which personal sensations and reflections were shared with others. Strengthening embodied and ethical sensibilities also emerged as a key area for development, such as the proposal to incorporate the Acceptive Gaze, drawn from case 6 (Finland), as a core pedagogical principle (Jääskeläinen et al., in press), which cultivates relational safety, emotional openness, and ethical co-creation—capacities

essential for navigating the vulnerability and emotional labor inherent in aesthetic and embodied approaches to governance. This is also mirrored in the pattern *Facilitating vulnerability through and in aesthetic and embodied practices,* expressing the necessity to register, address and hold spaces for vulnerability in facilitation processes. Likewise, the pattern *Cultivating embodied responsiveness* marks the (learning) process in becoming a "listening body," attentive to sensations, atmospheres and embodied knowledge and ways to respond in the situation as it unfolds.

As second challenge, participants reported difficulties in applying AELD and integrating it into their fields. They perceived the aesthetic and embodied approaches too distant from their subject matter and experienced a lack of confidence with the methods. Here, the pattern *otherness as resourceful not-knowing* can be applied as a possibility to immerse oneself into the uncertainty or lack of experience, as formulated by one participant. In addition to that, participants perceived tensions between institutional demands and democratic practice and struggled with adapting open-ended ABE methods to adult, professional and organizational learning (case 9 Germany; case 18 UK). However, we can trace that exposure to AELD increases the willingness to apply methods and practices that engage in processes of shared vulnerability, embodied trust-building and reflexivity. The pattern *establishing collective aesthetic practices* further reinforces the importance of embodied and ethical connectedness in advancing democracy-as-becoming in organized ways of relating to each other.

Third, structural and bureaucratic barriers were repeatedly perceived to hinder, and did hinder, the systematic integration of AELD, suggesting that sustained institutional engagement, coupled with committed leadership, is necessary to embed these approaches meaningfully within educational settings. AELD should not be confined to individual practice but positioned as a catalyst for institutional learning, organizational redesign, and policy dialogue—with an awareness of cultural embeddings and organizational histories. As an example of institutional reflexivity, Case 12 (Latvia) revealed that aesthetic and embodied co-creation—even without explicit cognitive interaction—generated a strong sense of oneness: one joint body of organizational authority and teachers, characterized by enhanced solidarity, deep mutual understanding, and a genuine willingness to stand up for one another. Likewise in Cases 16 (Portugal) and 17 (Portugal), the self-initiated development of communities of practices was a strong indicator for a sense of belonging and growth in self-governing principles. Especially the pattern *ethics of care-fullness* mirrors this process when embedding AELD within professional development, organizational reflection, and governance processes. Here, the pattern is not only contouring a shift in social practice but also an epistemic shift: AELD can support institutions in rethinking teaching practices, decision-making structures, and internal dialogue systems—as well as institutionalized rationalities as such. Collet-Sabé and Ball have formulated a strong critique of current educational institutions in the modern rationality of exclusion; in contrast, they imagine and promote more democratic,

relational, inclusive, place-based, diverse and ethically grounded educational cultures (Ball & Collet-Sabé, 2021; Collet-Sabé & Ball, 2023, 2024).

Synthesizing these insights suggests that cultivating AELD in governance practices requires a multidimensional approach. By articulating challenges and transformational shifts, we intend to acknowledge organizational and individual restrictions to interventions. However, we argue that the turn to aesthetic and embodied approaches allows novel patterns of thinking, conversing, and organizing to emerge that respond to the existential challenges of entangled and situated life-worlds in the Anthropocene that demand urgent responsivity (Lowenhaupt Tsing et al., 2017). Applied to governance innovation, the implementation of AELD needs institutional commitment, conceptual clarity, responsiveness, collaborative ‘becoming with,’ contextual adaptability, and embodied ethical practices. Collaborative engagement among participants proved central to both learning processes and democratic practice. Dialogic co-creation, characterized by mutual exchange and shared agency, not only facilitated collective learning but also encompassed key principles of democracy-as-becoming. This included relational well-being, the redistribution of power, relational agency, and transformative dialogue. As the evidence across cases indicates, only when these elements intersect can AELD function as a transformative force in governance capable of supporting democracy-as-becoming on individual and collective, organizational, and systemic levels rooted in aesthetic and embodied reflexivity and relational agency (Weber & Wieners, 2018). In this way, a pattern approach based on the dimension of aesthetic and embodied practices does not only establish an ontological intervention in governance practices, but it also enacts a different episteme. Returning to the title of this article, “lifting the roof” in educational practices requires an epistemic shift in governance (Göhlich et al., 2018).

Conclusion: “Lifting the Roof” by Patterning Aesthetic and Embodied Learning Toward Commoning Organizations

Describing practices of successful problem solution, patterns focus on the interplay of context, problem and solution. The promising patterns of governance transformation are grounded in aesthetic and embodied learning practices that emerged through a participatory research design, in which researchers were involved as participants as well. This involvement led to an analysis and theorization rooted in embodied responsiveness and reflexivity. As illustrated in the case vignettes, aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy paved the way for peer-led learning and co-creation which leads to a change in consciousness and practices alike. Especially the cultivation of an acceptive gaze (Jääskeläinen et al., in press) as an attentional structure supports the democratic processes by valuing difference and practicing an embodied listening to one’s own responses and the embodied interactions within a social situation. An important aspect in this regard was attention to power-dynamics. Following Foucault, power/knowledge is understood here not solely as domination, but as productive

of subjects, practices, and possibilities of relation. From this perspective, aesthetic and embodied approaches to governance can be read as practices that reconfigure power/knowledge by cultivating attentiveness, shared responsiveness, and collective forms of self-governance. Yet this productivity is not outside ambivalence, as the conditions that enable democratic becoming also shape its limits.

Arguing for a shift in our attentional focus from individualistic learning spaces into collective endeavors, commoning may become an alternative episteme for governing practices in education. Commons are understood as "living social structures, in which humans deal with their common problems in a self-organized way" (Bollier & Helfrich, 2019, p. 20) cultivating and caring for the relationships that exist around the production of shared resources. When applying this to the educational system, the philosophers Jordi Collet-Sabé and Stephen Ball (Collet-Sabé & Ball, 2023, 2024, 2025) claim commoning as an alternative episteme for education in the current times of social, political, health, and ecological crisis.

From this angle, a governance perspective must intertwine the dimension of lived experience and practices of (self-)organizing. This can happen through moving towards in three forms: first, as a collaborative horizontal network expanding education as an open reciprocal and cooperative experience based on mutuality, a shared knowledge base, and social communities. Second, through establishing collective practices of integrating and transforming the (virtual) spaces in which we act, educate, and co-create. Third, through transversal subjectivities that undermine individualizing subjects and extend to more-than-human actors, extending to and becoming with all kinds of bodies as planetary worlding. Promoting democratic forms of organization and collective action, supporting transparency, accountability, democracy, and eco-social responsibility, we see governance transformation happening at the level of foundational rationalities—from a rationality of exclusion towards a rationality of inclusion.

As we have shown with the promising patterns, a shift towards the aesthetic and embodied dimensions of governance can bring to light and support transformational practices: Aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy supports "lifting the roof" of established governance practices in adult, professional, and organizational learning. It can support institutions to become common(ing) spaces. Patterns and the methodological contribution of pattern languages might support the daily struggles toward governance innovation, which can be understood as situated and related boundary work toward commoning organizing (Poderi, 2021). By the governance innovation strategies of

“lifting the roof”[9] we would realize “ontological politics” toward new institutionalized structures—and daily practices—of care (Bollier, 2024).

In this sense, *lifting the roof* with democracy-as-becoming names both an analytic and a transformative gesture: it reveals the often-invisible grammars of governing in education and, at the same time, opens them up to renewal through aesthetic and embodied practices. By patterning democracy-as-becoming in and through concrete organizational situations, AELD invites educational institutions to understand themselves as commoning organizations—spaces where governance is not merely exercised over bodies but generated with and through them in relations of mutual care, responsiveness, and shared responsibility. The patterns we have outlined do not offer a ready-made blueprint; rather, they constitute a living, revisable language for orienting situated experiments in search for future governance. As such, they call on researchers, educators, learners and policymakers to continue co-creating responsive, sensate, and life-sustaining forms of governance that remain open to difference, grounded in embodied experience, and dedicated to democratic ways of organizing.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author(s) declare that there are no financial, professional, or personal relationships that could be perceived as having influenced the research reported in this article.

Ethics Statement

All partner countries received approval of their respective ethics committee: the Finnish team on the 24th of October 2023, record number 1121/13.02.01/2023 ; the Latvian team on the 29th of January 2024 with the corresponding Ethics Decision Letter No. RTU-PEK-001/2024; the Portuguese team on the 6th of March 2024, with the document CE-Doc. 24-0 and ComÉtica_Parecer_03-2024; the German team on the 7th of August 2023, file number AZ3-07-2023; Case 18 (UK) was approved by the University of Hertfordshire Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities Ethics Committee with Delegated Authority: protocol numbers: SLE/SF/UH/06090; aSLE/SF/UH/06090(1); 0264 2024 Oct SSAH.

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[9] Our title, “Lifting the Roof”, refers to a foundational presencing seminar with Otto Scharmer in Berlin, in which the transformative potential of institutional change through the presencing approach was explored—an orientation closely connected to democracy-as-becoming.

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Peer Review Article

The Seeds We Sow:

From Polycrisis and -Isms to Interbeing and Societal Transformation

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Abstract
Amid overlapping global crises, many individuals experience psychological distress, anxiety, hopelessness, and a diminished sense of agency. Scholars increasingly argue that this erosion of perceived significance may be as consequential as climate change, biodiversity loss, polarization, and political turmoil, as it stems from a growing disconnection or alienation from self, others, and nature at the heart of today's polycrisis. Against this backdrop, spiritual approaches are gaining attention for their potential to foster resilience, connection, and sustained engagement. Yet their role in supporting societal transformation remains underexplored. This paper addresses this gap through a mixed-methods analysis of the Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet (ZASP) online course, drawing on survey data from three cohorts (2023–2024). The quantitative assessment (n_1 = 868) revealed statistically significant changes: approximately 60% of participants reported increased resilience and decreased

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climate anxiety, and 76% reported increased connection, hope, empowerment, and coping. The qualitative analysis confirmed and complemented these findings, with around 85% of participants describing meaningful transformations in self-awareness, meaning-making, hope, agency, and engagement. At the same time, participants highlighted challenges in sustaining their practices and translating their learnings into climate and sustainability work contexts, pointing to the fragility of transformative change in modern societies and the need for targeted practical guidance across individual, collective, and system levels. Overall, the findings suggest that spiritually and scientifically grounded concepts and approaches (such as *interbeing*) can strengthen resilience, foster sustained engagement, and support societal transformation by addressing the root causes of today's polycrisis, including associated *-isms* such as individualism, materialism, elitism, consumerism, and extractivism.

Keywords

inner transformation, personal sphere of transformation, mindsets, paradigms, worldviews, religion, spirituality, existential sustainability, awareness-based systems change, culture change, climate change, climate action, mindfulness, inner development goals

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Introduction

In the face of escalating global crises—ranging from climate change and biodiversity loss to geopolitical tensions and social polarization—many individuals experience profound feelings of distress, overwhelm, anxiety, and disconnection (Cosh et al., 2024; Dodds, 2021; Hickman et al., 2021). What may appear to be an outcome, however, might also constitute a root cause of this polycrisis. Scholars increasingly suggest that the most pressing challenge lies not in rising external threats, but in the pervasive illusion of our own insignificance (O'Brien, 2021; Scharmer, 2025). This existential disconnection fosters meaninglessness, hopelessness, and apathy, perpetuating a vicious cycle that undermines individual, collective, and planetary wellbeing (Macy & Johnstone, 2022; Wamsler & Bristow, 2022).

Amid this landscape, spiritual approaches are receiving renewed attention for their potential to foster resilience, connection, and sustained engagement in the face of uncertainty and crisis (Luetz & Nunn, 2023; Reyes-Perez et al., 2025; Wamsler, 2018; Wamsler & Brink, 2018). Traditionally regarded as inner,

private, or peripheral, these domains may thus offer transformative pathways for navigating the complex emotional and ethical terrain of the polycrisis (Ives et al., 2023a, 2024; Koehrsen & Ives, 2025; Rowson, 2014; Woiwode, 2016). However, their role in fostering deeper societal transformation—beyond personal wellbeing—remains underexplored (Bristow et al., 2024).

Against this background, our research presents an exploratory mixed-methods analysis of the Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet (ZASP) online course, offered by Plum Village, a global mindfulness community founded by Thích Nhất Hạnh. The course is designed to nurture insight, compassion, community, and mindful action in service of the Earth. Based on Hạnh's book of the same name (Hanh, 2021), it is delivered in collaboration with Christiana Figueres, former Executive Secretary of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and a key architect of the 2015 Paris Agreement.

Theoretical and Contextual Grounding

Addressing Root Causes Through Inner Transformation and Awareness-Based Systems Change

This study is situated within the emerging scientific field of Inner Transformation for Sustainability, which examines how individual and collective values, beliefs, worldviews, and the inner capacities connected to them shape mindsets, behaviors, cultures, and wider systems (Bristow et al., 2024; IPBES, 2024; Ives et al., 2023b; Wamsler et al., 2021; Woiwode et al., 2021). In this field, today's polycrisis is understood as a convergence of existential, reinforcing threats that stem from pervasive experiences of disconnection or alienation from self, others, and nature (IPBES, 2024; Wamsler & Bristow, 2022). This alienation is rooted in the dominant paradigm in Western and modern societies, which assumes that our mind is separate from our emotions and body, that we are independent from one another, that some people are superior to others, and that humans are separate from, and superior to, nature (Eisenstein, 2013; Göpel, 2016; Scott et al., 2021; Wamsler & Bristow, 2022).

These assumptions persist despite robust scientific evidence, across fields such as ecology, neuroscience, psychology, anthropology, and systems science, all of which demonstrate the deep interconnectedness of all that exists (e.g., Escobar et al., 2024; Frymann, 2023; Siegel, 2022; Varela, 2000; Wilson, 1984). Accordingly, these assumptions shape our individual mindsets, behaviors, culture, and institutions. In everyday life, they manifest in a series of *-isms*, such as individualism, materialism, consumerism, systemic racism, casteism, and extractivism—all conditions that systematically undermine wellbeing and contribute to the deterioration of mental, physical, collective, and planetary health (Hawken, 2021; Henderson, 2020; Wilkerson, 2020).

Consequently, our mental health and the health of our planet are deeply entangled. Human wellbeing depends on the quality of our relationships, and the

same is true for the wellbeing of our planet (Scott et al., 2021). To make matters worse, our mind functions simultaneously as a root cause of the climate crisis, a victim of escalating climate impacts, and a barrier to adequate climate action (Wamsler & Bristow, 2022). In other words, as much as our minds are driving climate change, climate change is driving negative mental health, anxiety, and denial, which in turn worsen our responses at the individual, collective, and system levels, reinforcing existing paradigms and feelings of separation.

Transformative change requires addressing the root causes of today's polycrisis and thus engaging with the inner dimensions underlying increasing alienation from self, others, and nature, which are deeply embedded in individual mindsets, behaviors, cultures, and structures. These inner dimensions are considered deep leverage points for change (Meadows, 1999). They refer to human awareness, including individual and collective beliefs, values, worldviews, and the inner capacities that shape them (Wamsler et al., 2020, 2021). In this context, certain inner capacities can be identified as transformative, as they have the potential to support reconnection and the development of more relational beliefs, values, and worldviews.

Building on this understanding, scholars have increasingly highlighted the potential of mindfulness to help cope with and more meaningfully engage with the climate crisis (Wamsler et al., 2026). Accordingly, the latest reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) reference meditation and mindfulness as potential levers for transformative change (IPBES, 2024; IPCC, 2022a, 2022b). At the same time, research on mindfulness and climate action across individual, collective, and systemic levels remains scarce and fragmented (Barrett et al., 2024; Geiger et al., 2020; Frank et al., 2019; Iniesta-Bonillo et al., 2025; Thiermann & Sheate, 2022; Wamsler et al., 2018).

The field of Inner Transformation for Sustainability emphasizes that developing inner capacity and vertical growth is crucial, but insufficient on its own (Ives et al., 2023b; Wamsler et al., 2024). Transformative change requires addressing the paradigm of separation across sectors and levels. This involves how organizations, systems, and frameworks are designed, and how more caring, relational capacities, values, beliefs, and worldviews can be institutionally embedded and operationalized to move toward a society of care and the regeneration of human and planetary wellbeing (Laloux, 2014; Wamsler et al., 2021). Concretely, this means for instance actively reshaping organizational cultures and work structures, adapting rules and policies, realigning operational and funding mechanisms, introducing new forms of collaboration and communication, and creating dedicated physical and temporal spaces that enable conditions for inner development, reflection, silence, and regeneration. In this way, (re)connectedness can become practically experienced, and wellbeing and sustainable behavior is systematically supported.

Awareness-Based Systems Change represents a key framework within this context and body of scholarship (Koenig et al., 2021; Scharmer, 2013, 2016). It integrates systems thinking, adult development theory, contemplative science, and relational ontologies to trace how shifts in awareness influence patterns of social and institutional relations, interactions, and fields (Abson et al., 2017; Kegan, 1995; Meadows, 1999; Senge et al., 2004; Varela et al., 1991). Awareness-Based Systems Change aligns closely with both the IMAGINE and the inner–outer transformation models (Ives et al., 2023b; Wamsler et al., 2021). These models identify the core characteristics of integrated inner–outer transformation. They conceptualize the interconnection between inner and outer change processes, map clusters of transformative capacities (which constitute the scientific counterpart to the Inner Development Goals), and highlight complementary ways in which these capacities can be nurtured across individual, collective, and system levels. In this context, they also explicitly highlight the need to integrate different knowledge systems, including local knowledge and wisdom traditions.

Within this landscape, Thích Nhất Hạnh's teaching of *interbeing* offers a relational ontology and contemplative practices that operationalize such theoretical approaches, cultivating awareness of interconnectedness and integrating inner and outer dimensions of change to address the root causes of today's polycrisis (Hanh, 2021; Ng & Walsh, 2019). By evaluating the ZASP course, this study contributes empirical evidence to these growing research streams, illustrating how spiritually informed, awareness-based practices may foster shifts in resilience, connection, and engagement across individual, collective, and system levels.

The ZASP Program

The ZASP program is a seven-week online course that was designed to translate key teachings from Hạnh's *Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet* (Hanh, 2021) into a structured learning environment that supports insight, community-building, and action in service of the Earth. More specifically, the course seeks to:

- develop resilience in the face of ecological breakdown,
- transform fear, despair, and climate anxiety into clarity and constructive engagement,
- foster a sense of meaning through interconnection with the Earth and all beings, and
- encourage sustainable, compassionate forms of climate action grounded in awareness rather than reactivity.

The course is structured around weekly themes: Embracing the Pain, Cutting Through Illusion, Living with Courage, Learning to Rest, Brave Dialogue, Mastering Mind and Habits, and Action Dimension. It combines pre-recorded teachings and practices from senior Plum Village monastics and

Christiana Figueres, with five live sessions, and four community sharing groups. In addition to these activities, participants are encouraged to read the book and may join optional smaller sharing groups.

The online learning platform includes asynchronous video lessons, recordings of live events, recommended daily mindfulness practices, and diverse, interactive community sections, including reflective prompts and spaces for discussion and optional peer-led sharing. The live events incorporate guided meditations, movement practices, applied exercises, and group sharing, all facilitated by monastics and lay Dharma teachers. Optional smaller sharing groups are peer-led, consisting of up to ten participants who meet four times throughout the course for joint reflections.

Overall, the course provides around 20 hours of recorded material. Participants are recommended to dedicate at least three hours per week (including live events), with an ideal commitment of five to seven hours. While the course is intended to run for seven weeks, it is self-paced, allowing learners to progress at their own pace, with all materials available for 12 months. This flexibility enables participants to tailor their learning to their schedules and engage fully, regardless of prior knowledge.[1]

Course participants are recruited through communications via Plum Village community channels (webpage, email, and social media) and targeted outreach to groups likely to benefit, such as sustainability and climate organizations, mindfulness groups, and students engaging in related issues. Pre-course surveys are distributed approximately two weeks before each course begins, with reminders sent during the first two weeks. Post-course surveys are distributed the week after the course ends and closed approximately five weeks later, following several reminders. The author of this study was not part of the facilitation team and held no formal role in program recruitment, design, or delivery. Involvement was solely research-focused.

Methodology

Analytical Approach

While spiritual approaches are increasingly recognized for their potential to foster resilience, connection, and sustained engagement, their role in enabling broader societal transformation remains underexplored (Luetz & Nunn, 2023; Reyes-Perez et al., 2025; Wamsler, 2018; Wamsler & Brink, 2018). This is particularly true for empirical studies of programmatic interventions. This study addresses this gap. It assesses the ZASP course's impact on participants' resilience, sense of connection, and habitual patterns of thinking and being that

[1] For more information, see plumvillage.org/zasp

may constrain action (e.g., climate anxiety; Cosh et al., 2024; Dodds, 2021), and how participants transform these patterns to engage across levels.[2]

The study provides an exploratory quantitative and qualitative evaluation of participants' pre- and post-course responses. The quantitative analysis focused on three scales, administered before and after the course, to assess its impact on participants' resilience, sense of connection, and climate-related anxiety (see details below). The qualitative component examined two post-course questions: one inviting participants to describe meaningful "Aha!" moments—sudden insights or realizations—and another asking them to reflect on the transformation of their "cows," understood as habitual patterns of thinking and being that may limit or obstruct action (Arora, 2025; Prenevost & Reber, 2024). Data were collected via the course team across three cohorts: *Sun & Moon* (October 15–December 03, 2023), *Air* (March 24–May 12, 2024), and *Breathe* (October 20–December 08, 2024).

This mixed-methods design allowed for a nuanced understanding of the course's impact, combining statistically measurable changes with in-depth insights into participants' experiential and reflective processes. Together, these approaches aimed to illuminate both the efficacy of the ZASP course in fostering individual resilience and connection and its potential to support sustained engagement and societal transformation in response to complex global crises.

The quantitative analysis was based on the following methodological aspects:

- The null hypothesis (H_0) was defined as: Participation in the ZASP course has no effect on balancing personal wellbeing with climate action, resilience levels, and/or climate anxiety. The focus is thus on the three specific scales (details below). Item-level statistical analyses are exploratory and should be interpreted with caution. Scale-level analyses remain the focus of confirmatory testing, as they correspond to the study's primary hypothesis. Item-level analyses highlight nuanced patterns within the scales and complement the qualitative findings, providing readers with a more detailed understanding of the results.
- The focus was on participants who completed both surveys (details in the next section). This approach preserved the "within-subject" integrity of the statistical analysis, allowing changes in responses over time to be measured, if any occurred.

[2] People's sustainability and climate actions can be conceptualized through the lens of authorship and social spheres. At the individual level, engagement manifests in private life and personal lifestyle choices. At the collective level, action occurs within societal contexts—through communities, organizations, or networks that influence social norms. At the system level, engagement targets institutions, policies, and structures, shaping broader societal and global outcomes.

In other words, the approach ensured internal validity, as the same individuals were compared pre- and post-course.

- Both the pre- and post-course surveys used scales to assess changes in participants' resilience, sense of connection, and habitual patterns of thinking and being that may constrain action, particularly climate-related anxiety. The assessment was designed to ascertain whether statistically significant changes (or patterns) occurred across participants, rather than to isolate the specific mechanism responsible for that change. Therefore, the design alone cannot rule out competing explanations. However, the within-subject design enhances sensitivity by controlling for stable individual differences, allowing a more precise estimation of change over time.
- To conduct the quantitative analysis, the internal consistency of all three scales was first checked. This was done using a threshold value of Cronbach's alpha (≥ 0.70) (DeVellis, 2011) and, for scales comprising fewer than ten items, an optimal range of inter-item correlations (0.20–0.40) (Briggs & Cheek, 1986). The latter is commonly used to assess the reliability of shorter scales (Pallant, 2020).
- Although the scales used in the surveys are ordinal in nature (i.e., Likert-type scales), they were treated as interval-level data for analytical purposes. Median (*Md*) scores and interquartile ranges (*IQRs*) were calculated and are reported for all scales, in line with the use of non-parametric statistical tests. Means were also computed to display increases or decreases when treating Likert scales as interval.
- Given the ordinal nature of the scales and the non-normal distribution of scores,[3] Wilcoxon signed-rank tests were used to assess whether participants' responses changed significantly from before to after the course. In this test for paired samples, "positives" refer to cases where post-course scores were higher than pre-course scores, "negatives" to cases where they were lower, and "ties" to cases with no change.
- To interpret the overall direction of change, the number of participants showing improvement (positives) was compared with those showing decline (negatives). If more participants improved than declined, the direction was considered an increase (↑); if more declined than improved, the direction was

[3] The test of normality of the distribution of scores was conducted using a Kolmogorov–Smirnov statistic. Scores from all scales (pre- and post-course) did not meet the assumption of normality ($p < .001$).

considered a decrease (↓); and if numbers were similar, no clear change was considered (↔). Importantly, for the Climate Anxiety Scale, higher scores indicate more anxiety. Therefore, a greater number of "negatives"—that is, participants with lower post-course scores—signals a decrease in anxiety and is interpreted as a positive outcome.

- To address potential inflation of Type I error across the three primary (confirmatory) scale-level comparisons (details below), *p*-values were adjusted using the Holm–Bonferroni sequential approach (Holm, 1979), i.e., *p*-values were ranked from smallest to largest and compared against successive adjusted alpha levels. After adjustments, all scale-level findings remained statistically significant. As indicated above, item-level analyses are exploratory and are reported without correction for multiple comparisons.
- To determine the minimum required sample size for the Wilcoxon signed-rank tests, the analysis used a 5% significance level ($\alpha = 0.05$), 95% statistical power, and a small effect size ($d = 0.2$). Using G*Power (Faul et al., 2009), a statistical power analysis tool, this resulted in a minimum required sample size of 379 participants. However, given the relatively large sample analyzed (868 participants; details in the next section), the tests were highly powered and sufficiently sensitive to detect even small effects with strong confidence.
- To measure the magnitude of the difference between pre- and post-course scores, the effect size (r) was calculated for all scales and related items. This was intended to quantify the strength of the observed effects (i.e., how strong the effect is). The number of paired participants was used as N, and Cohen's (1988) criteria were applied as benchmarks for interpretation: 0.1 = small effect, 0.3 = medium effect, and 0.5 = large effect. This approach provides a standardized, non-parametric measure of effect size appropriate for paired data.

All statistical tests were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics 28 and evaluated at the conventional significance level of 5% ($\alpha = 0.05$). Two-tailed tests were used, meaning that any change in scores—whether an increase or a decrease—was tested for.

The qualitative data were examined using thematic analysis in relation to the research aim (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). The analysis involved the following steps: (1) familiarization with the data; (2) generating initial ideas and themes through open coding; (3) interpreting and systematically categorizing the content into themes and associated patterns; (4) reviewing; and (5) further defining through axial and selective coding (Braun & Clarke 2006;

Corbin & Strauss 2008; Nowell et al., 2017). Coding and analysis continued until saturation was reached—that is, when no new significant themes emerged and previously discarded codes were confirmed as irrelevant. The themes, patterns, and cross-cutting dimensions that emerged from this iterative process of constant comparison, coding, and categorization are presented and elaborated in the *Reported Aha! Moments and Most Significant Changes* section.

Sample

The total number of survey participants across all three cohorts was $N = 2{,}582$, and each cohort included a similar number of participants, with 961, 812, and 809 respondents, respectively. Completion rates for the pre-course survey were consistent across cohorts, at 36–40%, while post-course survey completion was lower, ranging from 14–16%. A portion of each cohort did not complete the survey in full, with incomplete surveys ranging from 13–14%. The proportion of participants who completed both the pre- and post-course surveys was also similar across cohorts, at approximately one third.

Cohort	**Sun & Moon** (Autumn 2023)	**Air** (Spring 2024)	**Breathe** (Autumn 2024)
Total number of survey participants	961 (100%)	812 (100%)	809 (100%)
Participants who completed pre-course survey only	360 (37%)	296 (36%)	323 (40%)
Participants who completed post-course survey only	140 (15%)	133 (16%)	111 (14%)
Participants who partially completed pre- and/or post-course survey	124 (13%)	116 (14%)	111 (14%)
Participants who completed both pre- and post-course surveys	337 (35%)	267 (33%)	264 (33%)
Total number of participants who completed both surveys	868 (34%)		

Table 1: *Survey participation and completion rates by cohort*

Note. The total number of participants was established after correcting for double counting and removing double or triple responses across cohorts: 14 (Sun & Moon), 17 (Air), and 45 (Breathe). All registered participants were invited to complete the pre- and post-course surveys. Excluding internal team members and duplicates, total registrations were approximately 3,290.

Combining all three cohorts, the total number of participants who completed both surveys and are therefore included in the quantitative analysis is $n_1 = 868$, representing approximately 34% of the total combined cohort sample. This consolidated paired-sample forms the basis for the analysis presented in this report and reflects the respondents who consistently engaged with the surveys before and after the course. The qualitative analysis included all post-survey responses (both complete and partial), regardless of whether participants had completed the pre-course survey ($n_2 = 1{,}526$).

Demographics

The sample used for the quantitative analysis (n_1 = 868) is characterized as follows: The age distribution was skewed towards older age groups. The largest proportion of respondents (26.6%) were aged 56 to 65, followed closely by those aged 66 and above (20.5%) and those aged 46 to 55 (20.2%). Participants aged 36 to 45 made up 16.2% of the sample, while those aged 26 to 35 represented 13.6%. Younger individuals aged 16 to 25 accounted for 2.5% of respondents, and a very small fraction (0.3%) chose not to disclose their age. Overall, the data indicated that nearly 70% of the sample was aged 46 or older.

In terms of gender identity, 76.5% of respondents identified as women. Men represented a significantly smaller share at 19.6%, and nonbinary individuals accounted for 2.8% of the sample. A small portion of participants (1.2%) preferred not to state their gender identity. Hence, participants who completed both surveys were predominantly female (76.5%), reflecting the overall gender composition of course participants.

The sample also indicates that participants were primarily from Europe (47%), followed by North America (30%), reflecting substantial representation from industrialized or OECD countries. Asia accounted for 9%, while Latin America and Africa comprised 8% and 2%, respectively, and Oceania comprised 3%.

Scales and Reliability

Both the pre- and post-course surveys employed three scales to quantitatively assess the impact of participation in the ZASP course on its intended objectives, including reducing climate anxiety and enhancing resilience. Scales and related measures are as follows:

- *Plum Village Scale*: It aims to assess if the ZASP course has the intended impact (see section *The ZASP Program*). It assesses specific aspects of resilience, anxiety, connection (to others and the Earth), and both individual and collective agency. It was measured using six items (e.g., “I feel that I am deeply connected with the Earth and with nature”; 1 = Not at all; 2 = A little; 3 = A moderate amount; 4 = A lot; 5 = A great deal). This scale contained one negatively worded item (“I struggle to handle my thoughts and feelings about the climate crisis”) that needed reverse coding.
- *Brief Resilience Scale*: It aims to assess resilience, broadly defined as the ability to bounce back from stress. Based on Smith et al. (2008), it was measured using six items (e.g., “I tend to bounce back quickly after hard times”; 1 = Strongly Disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neither Agree Nor Disagree; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly Agree). This scale contained three

negatively worded items (e.g., "I have a hard time making it through a stressful event") that needed reverse coding.

– *Climate Anxiety Scale*: It aims to assess climate anxiety as a psychological response to climate change. Based on Clayton and Karazsia (2020), it was measured using thirteen items (e.g., "Thinking about climate change makes it difficult for me to concentrate"; 1 = Strongly Disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Somewhat Disagree; 4 = Neither Agree Nor Disagree; 5 = Somewhat Agree; 6 = Agree; 7 = Strongly Agree).

Scale scores were calculated as the mean of the item scores for each scale (i.e., the sum of the items divided by the number of items). Overall, all three scales demonstrated acceptable to good internal consistency over time (i.e., pre- and post-course; see Table 2). Scales were deemed reliable based on a threshold value of Cronbach's alpha (≥ 0.70) (DeVellis, 2011) and an optimal range of inter-item correlations (0.20–0.40) (Briggs and Cheek 1986).[4]

Scale	**Plum Village Scale**		**Brief Resilience Scale**		**Climate Anxiety Scale**	
	Pre-course	Post-course	Pre-course	Post-course	Pre-course	Post-course
Cronbach's alpha	0.71	0.69	0.83	0.80	0.85	0.85
Inter-item correlations	0.29	0.27	0.46	0.42	0.31	0.31

Table 2. *Reliability checks of scales across time points*

Results

Plum Village Scale

The results suggest that the ZASP course had a positive impact and meaningfully supported participants in their learning and transformation processes. On average, scores of the *Plum Village Scale* increased by nearly 16% from before to after the course. Most participants reported feeling more connected, hopeful, and/or well-equipped after completing the course, whereas only a small number reported feeling less so. Overall, the shift in scores was significant, suggesting that the course achieved its intended objectives.

In statistical terms, tests revealed a significant improvement (z = -20.31, p < .001) in the median score from pre-course (Md = 3.17; IQR = 2.83–

[4] Item-deletion diagnostics using Cronbach's alpha were conducted for all items, pre- and post-course. Tests revealed only one marginal increase (from 0.69 to 0.70 for item #6 in the *Plum Village Scale* post-course). Therefore, all items were retained to preserve scale integrity and pre–post comparability.

3.50) to post-course (Md = 3.67; IQR = 3.33–4.00), with a large effect size (r = 0.69). The null hypothesis was rejected. Of the 868 participants, 660 (76.0%) reported an increase in scores post-course, 91 (10.5%) showed no change, and 117 (13.5%) reported a decrease. In sum, median scores increased by 15.8% from pre- to post-course. Figures 1 and 2 display the distribution of mean scores of the *Plum Village Scale* before and after course.

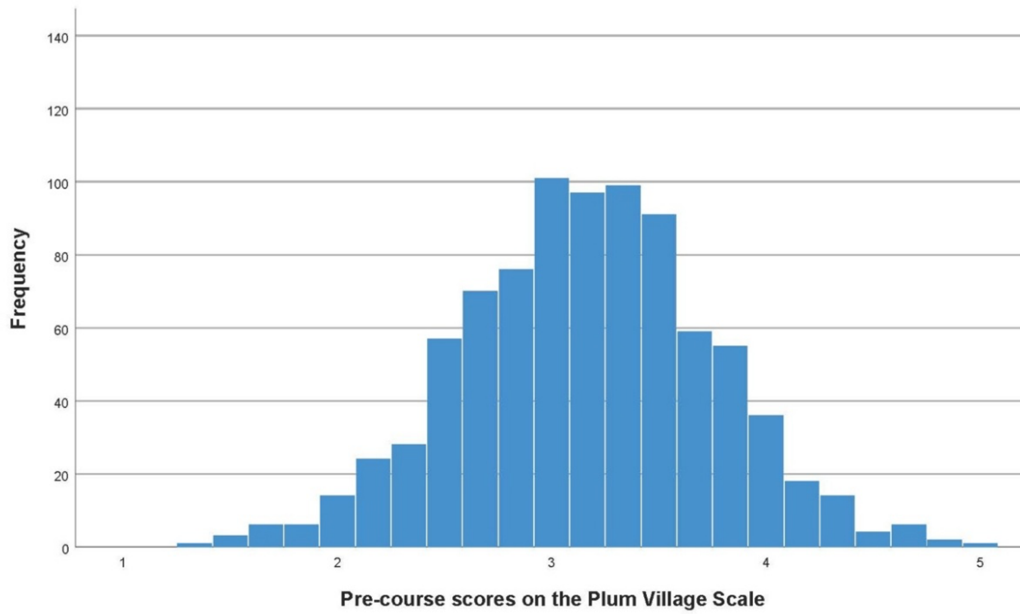

***Figure 1**: Distribution of mean scores of the Plum Village Scale before the course.*

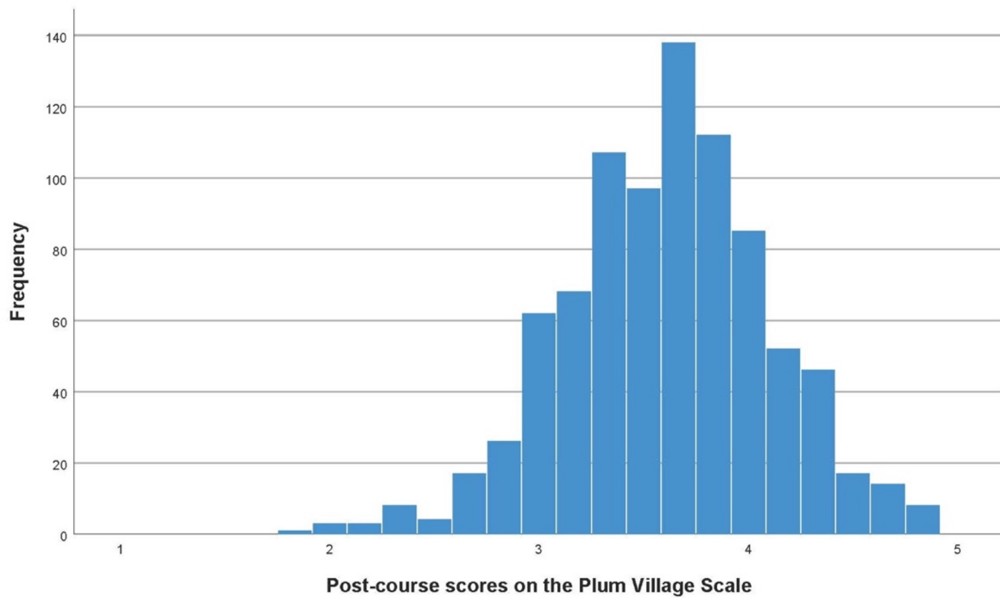

***Figure 2:** Distribution of mean scores of the Plum Village Scale after the course.*

At the item-level, responses reflected the pattern observed in the scale-level analysis. Findings showed statistically significant improvements in responses from pre- to post-course when analyzed individually. A summary of all item-level changes is shown in Table 3. Effect sizes (r) ranged from medium to large. Importantly, 63% of participants reported feeling more equipped with the inner resources they need to deal with climate change, and 42% felt more empowered to take action in response to climate change following the ZASP course. Figure A1 in the Appendix presents paired bar plots of the response distributions for each item on this scale, comparing the relative frequencies of responses before and after the course. These paired bar plots allow visual comparison of how participants' responses changed over time.

Item	Cases: Positives / Negatives / Ties	Direction of change	Statistically significant?	Effect size	Plain interpretation
I feel that I am deeply connected with the Earth and with nature.	254 / 71 / 543 29% / 8% / 63%	Increase	Yes ($p < .001$)	Medium ($r = 0.35$)	More participants (29%) felt a stronger connection, while few (8%) felt less, and most others (63%) stayed the same.
I am connected to others who are able to support me in my climate change aspirations, in my personal and/or professional life.	346 / 130 / 392 40% / 15% / 45%	Increase	Yes ($p < .001$)	Medium ($r = 0.34$)	More participants (40%) felt more connected to others, while a smaller number (15%) felt less connected, and others (45%) felt the same.
I feel hopeful that our collective human family will find ways to navigate climate change.	355 / 137 / 376 41% / 16% / 43%	Increase	Yes ($p < .001$)	Medium ($r = 0.34$)	More participants (41%) felt hopeful, while a smaller number (16%) felt less hopeful, and many (43%) did not change their view.
I feel empowered to take action in response to climate change.	368 / 94 / 406 42% / 11% / 47%	Increase	Yes ($p < .001$)	Medium ($r = 0.43$)	Many participants (42%) felt more empowered, while relatively few (11%) felt less empowered, and many (47%) did

					not change their view.
I feel well equipped with the inner resources I need to cope with climate change and related changes in the world.	547 / 42 / 279 63% / 5% / 32%	Increase	Yes (p < .001)	Large (r = 0.67)	Most participants (63%) felt more equipped with inner resources, with very few (5%) reporting a decline, and others (32%) did not change their view.
I struggle to handle my thoughts and feelings about the climate crisis. (R) [a]	390 / 75 / 403 45% / 9% / 46%	Increase	Yes (p < .001)	Medium (r = 0.48)	Many participants (45%) reported struggling less, while few (9%) felt worse, and most (46%) remained the same.

Table 3: *Summary of item-level changes in participants' responses after completing the course for items on the Plum Village Scale*

Note. Cases are shown in absolute and relative terms. Positives = number/percentage of participants whose scores increased after the course; negatives = number/percentage of participants whose scores decreased; ties = number/percentage of participants whose scores remained the same. a: This item is negatively worded so it is reverse (R) coded, which means positives are understood as improvements.

Brief Resilience Scale

Findings indicate that the ZASP course had a positive effect on participants' resilience levels. On average, resilience scores increased by nearly 10% after the course. Most participants showed an improvement and only about a quarter showed a decrease. Overall, the shift in scores was meaningful and suggests that the course helped improve participants' ability to bounce back from challenges.

In statistical terms, tests revealed a significant improvement (z = -12.99, p < .001) in the median score from pre-course (*Md* = 3.17; *IQR* = 2.83–3.67) to post-course (*Md* = 3.50; *IQR* = 3.00–3.83), with a medium effect size (r = 0.44). The null hypothesis was rejected. Of the 868 participants, 516 (59.4%) reported an increase in scores post-course, 139 (16.0%) showed no change, and 213 (24.5%) reported a decrease. In sum, median scores of resilience increased by 10.4% from pre- to post-course. Figures 3–4 display the distribution of mean scores of the *Brief Resilience Scale* before and after course.

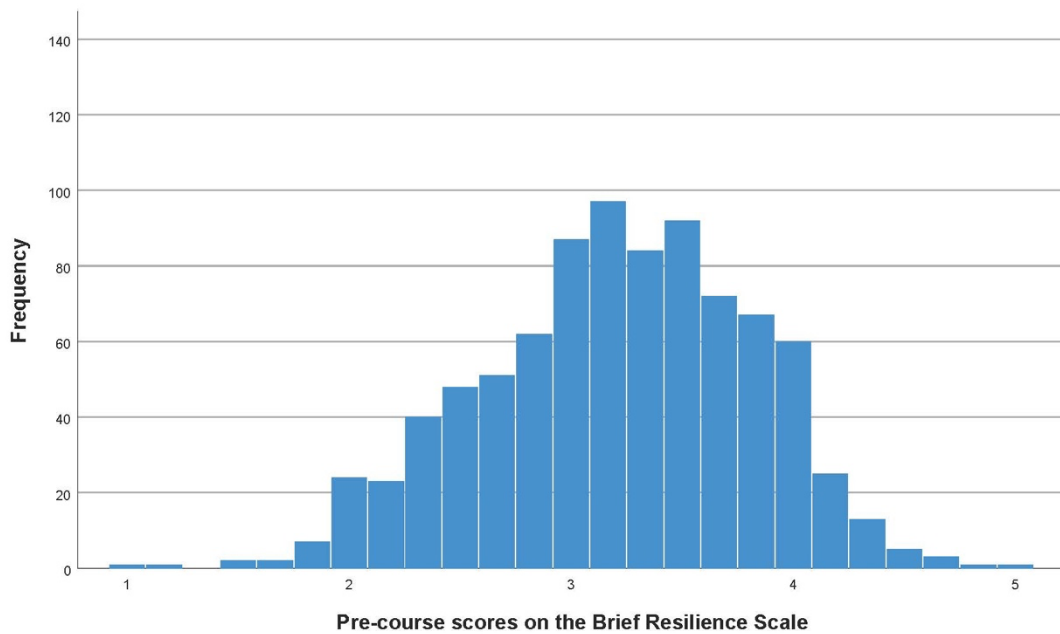

Figure 3*: Distribution of mean scores of the Brief Resilience Scale before the course.*

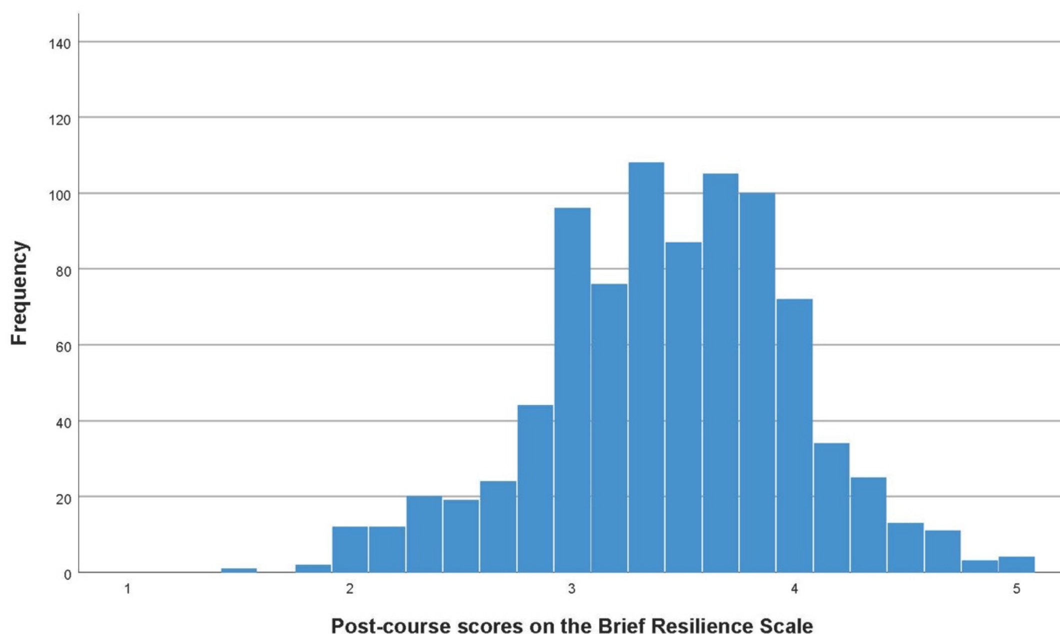

Figure 4: *Distribution of mean scores of the Brief Resilience Scale after the course.*

Findings from item-level data align descriptively with the overall scale results. Results showed statistically significant improvements in responses from pre- to post-course when analyzed individually. A summary of all item-level changes is shown in Table 4. Effect sizes ranged from small to medium. Figure A2 in the Appendix presents paired bar plots of the response distributions for each item on this scale, comparing the relative frequencies of responses before and after the course.

Item	Cases [a]: Positives / Negatives / Ties	Direction of change	Statistically significant?	Effect size	Plain interpretation
I tend to bounce back quickly after hard times.	311 / 114 /443 36% / 13% / 51%	Increase	Yes ($p < .001$)	Medium ($r = 0.30$)	More participants (36%) felt better able to bounce back after hard times, while a smaller number (13%) felt less able, and most others (51%) stayed the same.
I have a hard time making it through a stressful event. (R) [a]	300 / 152 / 416 35% / 18% / 48%	Increase	Yes ($p < .001$)	Small ($r = 0.24$)	More participants (35%) reported having an easier time coping with a stressful event, while a smaller number (18%) reported difficulties, and most others (48%) stayed the same.
It does not take me long to recover from a stressful event.	312 / 125 / 431 36% / 14% / 50%	Increase	Yes ($p < .001$)	Small ($r = 0.26$)	More participants (36%) felt quicker to recover from a stressful event, while a smaller number (14%) felt the opposite, and most others (50%) stayed the same.
It is hard for me to snap back when something bad happens. (R) [a]	248 / 101 / 519 29% / 12% / 60%	Increase	Yes ($p < .001$)	Small ($r = 0.27$)	More participants (29%) felt it was easier to recover from setbacks, while a smaller number (12%) experienced the opposite, and the majority (60%) stayed the same.
I usually come through difficult times with little trouble.	307 / 118 / 443 35% / 14% / 51%	Increase	Yes ($p < .001$)	Small ($r = 0.28$)	More participants (35%) felt they usually come through difficult times easily, while a smaller number (14%) experienced the opposite, and

					most others (51%) felt the same.
I tend to take a long time to get over set-backs in my life. (R) [a]	234 / 127 / 507 27% / 15% / 58%	Increase	Yes ($p < .001$)	Small (r = 0.20)	More participants (27%) felt they recovered from setbacks more quickly, while a smaller number (15%) experienced the opposite, and most others (58%) felt the same.

Table 4*: Summary of item-level changes in participants' responses after completing the course for items on the Brief Resilience Scale.*

Note. Cases are shown in absolute and relative terms. Positives = number/percentage of participants whose scores increased after the course; negatives = number/percentage of participants whose scores decreased after the course; ties = number/percentage of participants whose scores remained the same after the course. A: These items are negatively worded so they are reverse (R) coded, which means positives are understood as improvements.

Climate Anxiety Scale

The results indicate that the ZASP course had a positive effect on participants' levels of climate anxiety. On average, climate anxiety scores decreased by approximately 9% after the course. Most participants reported lower scores after the course, while only about a third reported an increase. Overall, the shift in scores was meaningful and suggests that the course helped reduce participants' climate anxiety.

In statistical terms, tests revealed a significant decrease ($z = -9.29$, $p < .001$) in the median score from pre-course (*Md* = 2.92; *IQR* = 2.23–3.62) to post-course (*Md* = 2.65; *IQR* = 2.08–3.38), with a medium effect size ($r = 0.32$). The null hypothesis was rejected. Of the 868 participants who responded to both surveys, 517 (59.6%) reported a decrease in scores post-course, 49 (5.6%) showed no change, and 302 (34.8%) reported an increase. In sum, median scores of climate anxiety decreased by 9.3% from pre- to post-course. Figures 5 and 6 display the distribution of mean scores of the Climate Anxiety Scale before and after course.

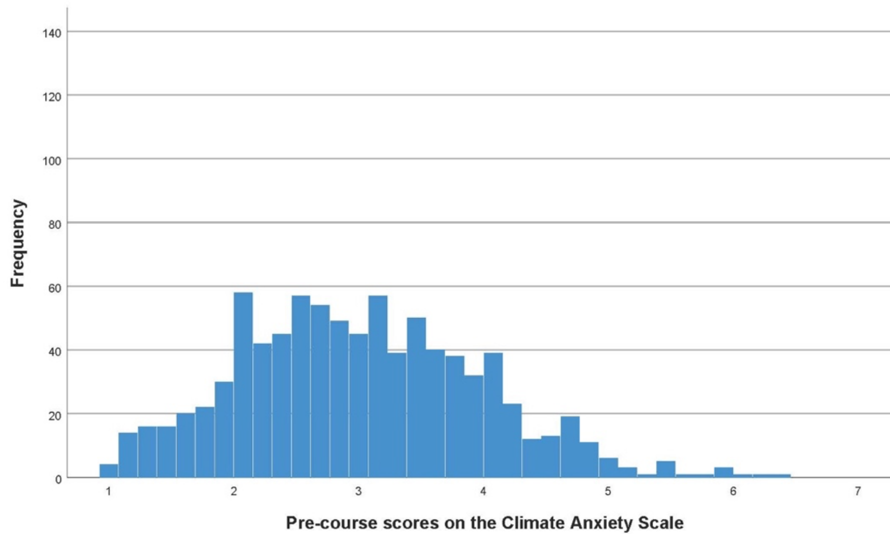

Figure 5: *Distribution of mean scores of the Climate Anxiety Scale before the course.*

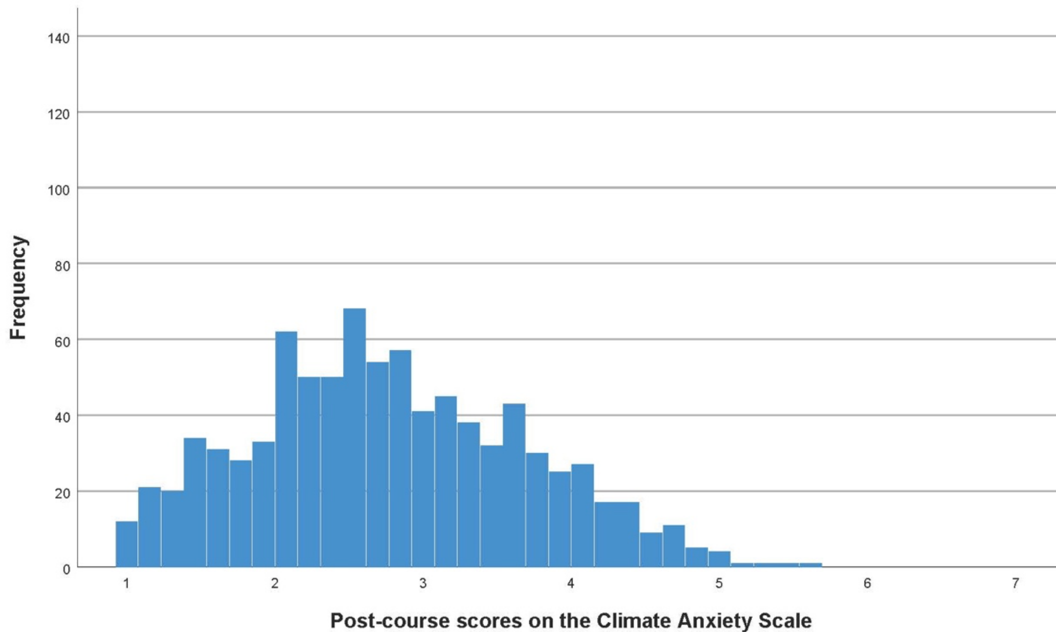

Figure 6: *Distribution of mean scores of the Climate Anxiety Scale after the course.*

When the items from the *Climate Anxiety Scale* were analyzed individually, the responses showed slightly more variation compared with the previous scales. One item exhibited no statistically significant change, while another ("I have nightmares about climate change") showed a change in the opposite direction. Effect sizes ranged from negligible to medium. A summary of all item-level changes is shown in Table 5. Figure A3 in the Appendix presents paired bar plots of the response distributions for each item on this scale, comparing the relative frequencies of responses before and after the course. These paired bar plots allow visual comparison of how participants' responses changed over time.

Item	Cases: Positives / Negatives / Ties	Direction of change	Statistically significant?	Effect size	Plain interpretation
Thinking about climate change makes it difficult for me to concentrate.	139 / 433 / 296 16% / 50% / 34%	Decrease	Yes ($p < .001$)	Medium ($r = 0.39$)	About half of the participants (50%) found it less difficult to concentrate when thinking about climate change, a smaller group (16%) found it more difficult, and 34% reported no change.
Thinking about climate change makes it difficult for me to sleep.	119 / 368 / 381 14% / 42% / 44%	Decrease	Yes ($p < .001$)	Medium ($r = 0.37$)	More participants (42%) found it less difficult to sleep when thinking about climate change, while a smaller number (14%) found it more difficult, and 44% reported no change.
I have nightmares about climate change.	408 / 164 / 296 47% / 19% / 34%	Increase	Yes ($p < .001$)	Medium ($r = 0.37$)	More participants (47%) reported having more nightmares about climate change, while a smaller number (19%) had fewer, and 34% reported no change.
I find myself crying because of climate change.	177 / 353 / 338 20% / 41% / 39%	Decrease	Yes ($p < .001$)	Small ($r = 0.25$)	More participants (41%) found themselves crying less because of climate change, while a smaller number (20%) found themselves crying more, and 39% reported no change.
I think, “why can’t I handle climate change better?”	177 / 390 / 301 20% / 45% / 35%	Decrease	Yes ($p < .001$)	Small ($r = 0.27$)	More participants (45%) found themselves thinking less

					about "why can't I handle climate change better?", while a smaller number (20%) found themselves thinking this more often, and 35% reported no change.
I go away by myself and think about why I feel this way about climate change.	236 / 338 / 294 27% / 39% / 34%	Decrease	Yes (p < .001)	Small (r = 0.14)	More participants (39%) said they spent less time alone thinking about climate change, while a smaller number (27%) did this more often, and 34% reported no change.
I write down my thoughts about climate change and analyze them.	258 / 221 / 389 30% / 25% / 45%	Increase	Yes (p = .008)	Negligible (r = 0.09)	More participants (30%) wrote and analyzed their thoughts about climate change more often, while a smaller number (25%) did so less often, and 45% showed no change.
I think, "why do I react to climate change this way?"	246 / 288 / 334 28% / 33% / 39%	Decrease	No (p = .051)	Negligible (r = 0.07)	About a third (33%) thought less often about this issue, 28% thought about it more often, and 39% reported no change. However, this change is statistically insignificant.
My concerns about climate change make it hard for me to have fun with my family or friends.	157/ 317 / 394 18% / 37% / 45%	Decrease	Yes (p < .001)	Small (r = 0.26)	More participants (37%) found it easier to have fun with family or friends despite climate concerns, while a smaller number (18%) found it harder, and 45% reported no change.

I have problems balancing my concerns about sustainability with the needs of my family.	204 / 340 / 234 24% / 39% / 37%	Decrease	Yes (p < .001)	Small (r = 0.20)	More participants (39%) found it less difficult to balance their concerns, while a smaller number (24%) found it more difficult, and 37% reported no change.
My concerns about climate change interfere with my ability to get work or school assignments done.	163 / 282 / 423 19% / 32% / 49%	Decrease	Yes (p < .001)	Small (r = 0.21)	More participants (32%) found their concerns about climate change interfered less, while a smaller number (19%) found it interfered more, and 49% reported no change.
My concerns about climate change undermine my ability to work to my potential.	153/ 321 / 394 18% / 37% / 45%	Decrease	Yes (p < .001)	Small (r = 0.28)	More participants (37%) felt climate concerns got in the way of their work less often, while a smaller number (18%) felt it happened more often, and 45% reported no change.
My friends say I think about climate change too much.	160/ 289 / 419 18% / 33% / 48%	Decrease	Yes (p < .001)	Small (r = 0.16)	More participants (33%) said they heard this comment less often, while a smaller number (18%) heard it more often, and 48% reported no change.

Table 5: *Summary of item-level changes in participants' responses after completing the course for items on the Climate Anxiety Scale.*

Note: Cases are shown in absolute and relative terms. Positives = number/percentage of participants whose scores increased after the course; negatives = number/percentage of participants whose scores decreased after the course; ties = number/percentage of participants whose scores remained the same after the course. Given the nature of the Climate Anxiety Scale, higher scores indicate greater climate anxiety, and lower scores indicate less climate anxiety. Therefore, when the number of "negatives" exceeds the number of "positives," the overall direction of change (i.e., a decrease) is interpreted as an improvement.

Reported Aha! Moments and Most Significant Changes

Qualitative responses to the post-course survey supported the quantitative findings, indicating the ZASP course's potential for transformative impact. Approximately 85% of respondents reported powerful Aha! moments, often describing shifts in their relationships with self (body, mind, emotions), others, nature, and time. Similarly, when reflecting on changes related to their "cows"—habitual patterns of thinking, being, and acting (e.g., internal or external attachments, identifications, or comforts) that may hinder engagement and deeper transformation—around 80% described positive developments. In both cases, participants most frequently reported reduced anxiety and despair, alongside increased presence, connection, resilience, self-care, joy, hope, agency, and engagement. A smaller group (≈5–10%) reported limited change or ongoing struggles, while others left the questions unanswered (≈10–15%).

Analysis of participant reflections yielded four overarching thematic categories—meaning-making, hope, sense of agency, and engagement—within which resilience, connection, and anxiety (and suffering more broadly) emerged as cross-cutting dimensions. Within each overarching theme, distinct patterns emerged, which are presented in the following sections. Each theme begins with a bullet-point summary of key patterns, followed by brief explanations, and concludes by highlighting related tensions or challenges. The final subsection presents the spiritual concepts that participants repeatedly mentioned across all themes as helpful in their transformative journey, without being prompted.

Changes in Meaning-Making

Within the theme of meaning-making, analysis of participant reflections identified five key patterns of change:

- Reframing identity through interconnectedness and interbeing
- Shifting toward relational values and worldviews
- Embracing suffering as transformative
- Reframing understandings of time, mortality, and continuity
- Integrating contradiction and complexity

A recurring pattern across responses was a shift in participants' understanding of their identity and associated meaning-making systems, moving toward a more expanded sense of interconnectedness. This shift was described not only intellectually but also as a felt, embodied sense. Participants reported experiencing themselves as more than individual selves and described a deepened sense of unity with oneself, the Earth, and all beings. Several participants used phrases such as "being nature" or "more than human," and reported powerful experiences of "coming back to their bodies." Insights emerged through practices such as mindful breathing, eating and walking, alongside reflection on everyday objects and interactions. For example, some participants

noted that even artificial materials, such as concrete and plastic, could be understood as originating from the Earth, suggesting a collapse of perceived boundaries between the natural and artificial.

Participants' expanded sense of identity supported a shift from individualistic interpretations of life toward more systemic and relational values and worldviews. Several participants described how perceiving themselves not as separate individuals but as interconnected nodes within a wider web of life influenced their attitudes and actions, expressed for example as "treating living and non-living beings with more love."

Participants also reflected on how experiences of suffering, including climate-related grief, anxiety, and personal challenges, provided a pathway to resilience and transformation. Rather than viewing suffering as something to avoid, they increasingly perceived it as an essential aspect of life and development. In addition, several participants noted that they came to understand suffering and the cultivation of joy as complementary aspects of the same developmental process. Suffering was described as "important for learning, healing, and for transformation to occur," a potential catalyst for care, compassion, and engagement in the world.

In addition, participants described transformations in their understanding of time, mortality, and impermanence. Gaining a broader, more "cosmic" perspective was said to enable participants to cultivate a sense of continuity and peace, allowing them to act from awareness and meaning rather than from fear and reactivity.

Finally, participants highlighted the complexity and contradictions inherent in their learning. While some insights brought clarity and empowerment, others surfaced emotional tension, partial change, or lingering confusion. Many acknowledged that they had not fully understood or embodied certain teachings, but recognized their significance and the need for ongoing practice. These reflections point to the dynamic, unfolding nature of deep meaning-making, illustrating that transformation is an ongoing process rather than a fixed endpoint.

Changes in Hope

Key patterns of change identified include:

- Experiencing renewed hope through presence and connection
- Letting go of false or future-oriented hope
- Accepting despair coexisting with hope
- Increasing engagement alongside both diminished and renewed hope
- Navigating tensions between renewed hope and ongoing distress

Hope, as expressed by participants, became less about specific outcomes and more about grounded presence, connection, and relational commitment. In this sense, several conveyed that simply being alive in a time of great uncertainty and change was itself a meaningful opportunity. This perspective seemed to have fostered a renewed sense of hope and agency, as participants recognized that many aspects of their lives—including thoughts, emotions, ethical choices, and interpersonal engagement—remain within their control, even amid broader systemic decline.

Several participants described releasing attachment to what can be seen as conventional or future-oriented hope, and experiencing a sense of relief in accepting impermanence. For some, acknowledging the inevitability of death and the possible end of civilization was perceived as letting go of illusion or false hope. This shift served as a new motivating force, prompting reflection on intrinsic values and on what is truly worth preserving and fighting for—namely, being present with and caring for others and the natural world. A reduction in old patterns of hope appeared to be linked to reduced anxiety and more embodied, value-driven engagement. By letting go of unrealistic or overwhelming expectations tied to hopes and visions of the future, participants noted that they were better able to focus on the present and take actions aligned with their values. Several shared that, for example, although they are “no longer feeling responsible for saving the planet,” they nonetheless felt “more committed without despair,” enabling them to “show up differently” and “act with more heart.”

For some participants, despair and hope were increasingly experienced as coexisting rather than mutually exclusive. Recognizing and allowing space for despair enabled a deeper, more sustainable form of hope, and even joy, to take root. Several shared that the course provided tools for “holding joy and hope at the same time as feeling anxiety and despair,” helping them stay emotionally open and engaged rather than shutting down in the face of difficulty.

These tools also helped participants navigate tensions between renewed hope and ongoing experiences of grief, anxiety, and despair. Hope was not static or consistently held. Some participants described periods of renewed hope that were subsequently tested by ongoing anxiety or systemic realities. Others spoke of moments of connection and optimism followed by days when hope felt distant or absent.

These reflections suggest that hope is not a singular state but a dynamic process, often marked by contradiction, renewal, and re-evaluation of one’s beliefs, values, and worldviews. The course appears to have provided a space within which these emotional complexities could be held and explored.

Changes in Sense of Agency

Key patterns of change identified include:

- Shifting from paralysis to agency
- Embodying awareness and presence as pathway to agency
- Gaining empowerment through self-care and emotional regulation
- Exercising deliberate, values-driven agency
- Building agency through action

A shift from paralysis to resilience and an increased sense of agency was a recurrent pattern. Many participants described a renewed sense of agency, often emerging after confronting long-held feelings of anxiety, powerlessness or overwhelm.

Participants shared how embodied awareness and presence, cultivated through breath, movement, and attention, helped them feel more grounded and capable of engaging. Rather than a purely conceptual practice, mindfulness was experienced physically and emotionally, with some noting that even simple acts, such as sitting with the breath, rekindled a sense of aliveness and agency. Several participants described a shift in recognizing that their ways of being and thinking, rather than just their actions, also constitute expressions of agency.

Other participants described how learning to better take care of themselves, regulate emotions, and manage mental energy enabled them to face climate-related and other stressors without becoming overwhelmed. As one participant expressed, "Caring for myself is also caring for the earth—my activism before lacked that aspect, so I burned out very quickly." This cultivation of inner resilience served as a foundation for sustained engagement and more hopeful, intentional action toward sustainability and transformation. In this context, participants also highlighted practices of rest and self-care as forms of resistance to dominant cultures of urgency, consumption, and overproduction, referring to this as "rest as resistance."

Similarly, rather than seeing agency as control over external conditions, many participants spoke of increasingly aligning with their values and making deliberate choices, linking personal change with broader systemic awareness and transformation. In this context, one participant described feeling "more empowered to change myself and to be more aware and empathetic of ways that climate change is a perpetuation of many generations of violence, colonialism, and racism … that all need to be unknotted together at the levels of self, relationships, and society."

Several described a turning point in which they moved from despair to action, not necessarily through grand gestures, but through quiet, steady acts rooted in integrity and clarity. Small actions appeared to foster feelings of agency and, in turn, appeared to support increasing and wider engagement.

Still, some participants expressed doubt about the reach of their agency in a world shaped by complex systemic challenges. While many felt more self-aware and internally aligned, they acknowledged ongoing uncertainty about how to best translate these insights into transformative activism or public engagement.

Changes in Engagement Across Levels

Key patterns identified include:

- Integrating mindfulness into day-to-day activities
- Making ethical lifestyle changes
- Strengthening relationships and social engagement
- Connecting personal, societal, and professional engagement

A tangible shift for many participants was the integration of mindfulness into everyday activities. Simple acts such as breathing, walking, and eating became opportunities for spiritual practice. For instance, several participants reported that practices such as mindful walking became part of their daily routines and helped them cope with everyday challenges.

Others described making explicit lifestyle changes to better align with their ethical and ecological values. Participants reevaluated their consumption habits, with some choosing to reduce meat consumption, minimize plastic use, or limit unnecessary purchases, illustrating a transition from internal insight to concrete individual behavioral change.

Mindfulness also became a meaningful resource for improving interpersonal relationships and broader social engagement. The course fostered participants' belief in the possibility of deep community and (re)connection with oneself and others, supporting their capacity to face challenging situations without being overwhelmed by panic or doom thinking. Participants described navigating difficult encounters in social, professional, and climate-related contexts more effectively through deep listening, mindful attention, and compassionate conflict resolution, leading to more constructive and transformative outcomes. In this context, participants reflected that their "quality of being and presence are also forms of activism," and that it helped them gain a broader understanding of how "different issues such as climate, animal rights, and human rights are interconnected" and "shaped by our consumer capitalist society."

Although the survey questions did not specifically ask about engagement at individual, collective, and systemic levels, related actions were mentioned in several responses, highlighting the intertwined nature of inner and outer transformation. Concrete examples supporting the survey responses can be drawn from in-depth discussions with a small *Breathe* cohort, conducted six months after the course concluded (Álvarez Pereira & Salomone, 2026). In this context, participants reported gaining new courage to speak up and engage across societal and professional contexts, producing wide-ranging effects. Some

initiated communities of practice, reading groups, or activist networks that fostered mutual support and outreach. Within their workplaces, participants started to articulate new visions of cultural and structural change, initiating dialogues on sustainability and wellbeing, power dynamics, and ethical decision-making. Participants also described integrating sustainability into their professional work, for instance through launching eco-conscious projects or incorporating concepts of inner and outer transformation into teaching and writing. In our study, among participants who reported concrete actions, the majority (≈65%) described personal-level changes, followed by broader societal or systemic shifts (≈25%). An additional 10% reported targeted initiatives related to sustainability and climate activism.

Without being prompted, participants acknowledged the difficulty of sustaining new practices and translating personal learnings into societal and work contexts. Several reported relapsing into prior habits but emphasized an enhanced resilience and the capacity to recognize this and return to their practices. These reflections underscore the ongoing, imperfect, and resilient nature of transformative engagement, and highlight the importance of communities of practice. In addition, they point to the need for practical guidance to support transformation that integrates inner (individual and collective) and outer (behavioral and systemic) change.

Spiritual Concepts Supporting Transformation

Across all themes, participants repeatedly mentioned the following spiritual ideas and concepts as helpful in their transformative journey:

- Interbeing
- Diamond Sutra
- Five Remembrances
- Historical and Ultimate Dimensions
- Meditator, Artist, and Warrior
- The metaphor of the seeds[5]

The concept of *interbeing* (Hanh, 2021)—the interdependence of all beings and phenomena—was mentioned most frequently and explicitly connected to the insights and changes described above. Some participants regarded their learnings as an antidote to capitalism, colonialism, consumerism, individualism, and other *-isms*, which are increasingly understood as manifestations of growing

[5] For more information, see plumvillage.org/daily-contemplations-on-impermanence-interbeing; plumvillage.org/library/dharma-talks/free-from-notions-the-diamond-sutra; plumvillage.org/podcast/bringing-the-ultimate-dimension-down-to-earth-episode-40; plumvillage.org/podcast/the-meditator-the-artist-and-the-warrior-episode-22

disconnection from self, others, and nature—the roots of today's polycrisis (Hanh, 2021; cf. Theoretical and Contextual Grounding Section). Interbeing opened a gateway to deeper understanding and to alternative ways of being, thinking, and acting in the world. Related practices and additional spiritual concepts deepened these insights.

The *Diamond Sutra* (Hanh, 2021) teaches that all phenomena—including the self, objects, and thoughts—are impermanent and lack inherent, independent existence. Understanding this impermanence and emptiness can support non-attachment, which the text presents as essential for reducing suffering. In line with this, one participant reflected, "My attachment to an individual self, and individual needs, really loosened."

The *Five Remembrances* (Hanh, 2021) help cultivate an embodied understanding of the deep interconnectedness and impermanence of all beings by inviting reflection on aging, illness, death, the changing nature of relationships, and the consequences of one's actions. By encouraging conscious engagement with these inevitable aspects of life, the practice helped participants foster acceptance and reduce the tendency to respond to climate change with denial, anxiety, or fear.

The *Historical and Ultimate Dimensions* (Hanh, 2021) describe where things appear distinct, separate, and subject to time and change (*Historical Dimension*), and where we can perceive the interbeing and timeless nature of all phenomena (*Ultimate Dimension*). Bringing the ultimate dimension into the present moment was described by one participant as "opening a spaciousness inside," which helped sustain action.

On this basis, the *Meditator, Artist, and Warrior* teaching (Hanh, 2021) invited participants to balance their inner capacities in order to foster more sustainable action grounded in presence and compassion, creativity and joy, and courage in service of the Earth.

Together with the Buddhist theory of mind (Hanh, 2006), which highlights the importance of nurturing wholesome inner capacity ("wholesome seeds") and ways of transforming greed, anger, and delusion, these teachings offered many participants a conceptual framework and vocabulary for understanding processes of inner–outer transformation, along with embodied practices that enabled them to work with difficult emotions without compromising their wellbeing or engagement.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study highlights the often less visible dimensions of social and relational reality creation: the dynamics, processes, and, in particular, the dimensions of awareness that underlie and shape individual and collective behavior, culture, and system transformation. This section summarizes the key findings and limitations, explores the interplay among the identified change processes,

considers the role of spirituality, and concludes with the broader significance of the work.

Summary of Key Findings and Limitations

The purpose of this study was to provide a mixed-methods evaluation of the ZASP online course, examining pre- and post-course responses from participants across three cohorts. The quantitative analysis focused on participants (n_1 = 868) who completed both surveys, employing a within-subjects design to measure changes over time. The qualitative analysis comprised a thematic review of all post-course responses (n_2 = 1,526), including participants who had not completed the pre-course survey.

Overall, the findings indicate that the ZASP course achieved its intended aims. Participants' scores on the *Plum Village Scale* increased by 15.8%, and scores on the *Brief Resilience Scale* rose by 10.4%, while *Climate Anxiety Scale* scores decreased by 9.3%. Statistically significant changes were observed across all three scales, with effect sizes ranging from medium to large.

Notably, 76% of participants reported feeling more connected, hopeful, empowered, and able to cope with climate change; approximately 60% reported increased resilience; and approximately 60% reported decreased climate anxiety. In addition, 63% of participants felt more equipped with the inner resources they need to deal with climate change.

Qualitative data supported these findings and revealed key underlying processes, including shifts in meaning-making, hope, agency, and engagement across individual, collective, and systemic levels. The results underscore the value of combining quantitative and qualitative evaluation to capture both measurable outcomes and the processes that enable sustainability and transformation.

Analysis of individual items provided additional insights while also highlighting certain limitations. Some responses suggested potential ceiling effects where participants already scored highly on pre-course measures (e.g., "I feel that I am deeply connected with the Earth and with nature"), which may have limited measurable change. Other results, such as increased reports of climate-related nightmares and greater engagement in writing about climate change-related thoughts, may reflect heightened emotional awareness and engagement rather than negative outcomes. These observations underscore the complexity of psychological responses to climate change and the value of nuanced evaluation.

Other methodological limitations of this study include its single, within-group pre–post design. While statistically significant changes were observed across most outcomes, these changes cannot be definitively attributed to the course, as alternative explanations cannot be ruled out. Potential confounding factors include external or private events that may have influenced participants' wellbeing or anxiety levels. In addition, variation in engagement with the course

(e.g., participation in structured activities, interaction with peers, and use of course materials) may have contributed to the magnitude of observed changes. These factors are integral components of the course itself and may reflect differences in how participants experienced the intervention.

Another limitation was the incomplete demographic data for participants who did not complete both surveys, which means potential differences between included and excluded participants cannot be assessed. However, the within-subject design reduces variability due to stable individual differences, and the observed effects remain statistically robust among the analyzed participants.

Future studies using randomized controlled or quasi-experimental designs would help reduce potential bias and establish causal effects more rigorously. These could be complemented by qualitative approaches that allow participants to narrate their experiences and perceived processes of change over time in greater depth. Follow-up studies would also be valuable to assess the sustainability of participants' increased engagement across levels. To date, only a small, experiential qualitative follow-up study has been conducted six months after the last of the three courses (Álvarez Pereira & Salomone, 2026). While it indicates sustained engagement, supported through continued involvement in the course community and alumni gatherings, quantitative and representative studies are needed for deeper insights.

Interplay of Inner-Outer Transformation Processes and Spirituality

The findings of this study illuminate how inner transformation and spiritual frameworks can support outward engagement across multiple levels. The analyses indicate that participants' change processes are not discrete but deeply interwoven, involving shifts in meaning-making, hope, agency, and engagement. Variations in resilience, sense of connection, and anxiety emerged as important cross-cutting factors interacting with these processes.

Changes in meaning-making, for instance, were described as fostering hope and resilience, reducing anxiety, and expanding agency, with such shifts potentially extending into interpersonal and systemic forms of engagement. At times, engagement itself was linked to strengthening hope, resilience, and a sense of agency, highlighting the dynamic and entangled nature of these processes (cf. Everard et al., 2016; Macy & Johnstone, 2022). The results further indicate non-linear, cascading ripple effects, ranging from shifts in personal identity and lifestyle to initiating difficult conversations, challenging dominant social paradigms, and contributing to workplace sustainability dialogues aimed at systems change.

By addressing inner change processes, the ZASP program engaged with both participants' immediate needs and challenges and the root causes of today's polycrisis. It initiated transformative change by "rattling" mindsets, behaviors, relationships, processes, power dynamics, cultural norms, and structures that constitute the systems driving climate change, rather than merely addressing its

observable impacts and surface-level manifestations. If such inner change processes are not addressed, climate change and prevailing policy approaches risk undermining wellbeing and contributing to a vicious cycle of deteriorating mental, physical, collective, and planetary health (Wamsler & Bristow, 2022).

Participants' qualitative survey responses illustrate that climate change can generate mental distress, hamper adequate responses across levels, and reinforce paradigms and feelings of separation that both underlie and further drive the crisis itself (cf. Scott et al., 2021; Wamsler & Bristow, 2022). Addressing these entangled layers of the mind–sustainability nexus through targeted practices and ethically grounded spiritual approaches supported participants in increasing awareness and, to varying degrees, engaging in efforts to interrupt this reinforcing cycle.

Within this context, spirituality appeared to function both as a catalyst and a container for transformation, nurturing participants inner resources and ethical orientation (cf. Rowson, 2014; Woiwode et al., 2021). Practices and concepts such as interbeing enabled participants to engage with complex global challenges by acknowledging and working with difficult emotions, cultivating sustainable forms of hope, and acting meaningfully without being driven by anxiety.

For many participants the ZASP course represented an encounter between interbeing and the dominant Western economic mindset, embedded in beliefs, values, worldviews, inner capacities, cultures, and institutional structures (Henderson, 2020; Scott et al., 2021). Broadly speaking, the Western economic mindset and paradigm can be traced to the 19th-century emergence of political economy as a distinct discipline, increasingly separated from moral philosophy (Mill, 2006; Schumpeter, 1954; Sen, 1987). It is grounded in an understanding of humans as rational, self-interested, and independent agents operating within an anthropocentric framework that privileges human primacy over both nature and others (e.g., Henderson, 2020; Raworth, 2017, 2025). This model is performative in that it shapes who we become (Raworth, 2017, 2025), yet its underlying abstraction is increasingly misaligned with contemporary insights across the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities (e.g., Escobar et al., 2024; Frymann, 2023; Siegel, 2022; Varela, 2000; Wilson, 1984). In practice, it means that human behavior is often reduced to individual preference maximization, thereby neglecting relational and ethical dimensions of decision-making.

In Buddhist philosophy of mind, comparable self-centered tendencies are described through the concept of *manas*, referring to ego-consciousness and the appropriation of experience through an "I," "me," and "mine" orientation that related practices explicitly seek to transform (Hanh, 2006). This perceptual mode generates attachment and cognitive distortion, reinforcing a perceived separation between self, others, and nature. It thereby contributes to forms of distress, discrimination, and appropriation that can manifest in the internalization and reproduction of dominant *-isms*, including individualism, materialism, consumerism, racism, elitism, and extractivism, which in turn reinforce patterns

of distress, loss of meaning, and feelings of insignificance (Brother Spirit, 2025; Hanh, 2006, 2021).

Aimed at addressing the root causes of suffering, interbeing and mindfulness can therefore be understood as both inherently relational and political. Interbeing, as articulated by Thích Nhất Hạnh, is a core principle and meta-ethic of mindfulness that connects and underpins related practices and teachings offered in the ZASP course (Hanh, 2021). These practices supported participants, among other things, in relinquishing affective states that give rise to processes of "othering," including fear, anxiety, anger, and feelings of superiority.

Rather than being confined to private experience, mindfulness thus shapes how individuals act and interact within broader social and political contexts. Accordingly, the dominant Western economic paradigm and associated power-related *-isms* that lie at the root of today's polycrisis were frequently questioned and challenged through participants' learning processes. At the same time, participants seemed to struggle with how to support change across sectors and scales. In translating learning into their social and work contexts, they lacked practical guidance for linking personal, behavioral, cultural, and systemic transformation (Bentz et al., 2022; O'Brien, 2021; Wamsler et al., 2021, 2026).

Participants described their experiences as non-linear and marked by ambivalence, regression, and tension, highlighting the ongoing, and relational nature of change. At the same time, spiritual concepts and practices helped participants express, experience, and navigate related complexities, enabling them to connect personal insights with broader ecological, ethical, and systemic perspectives. Although not all participants resonated equally with specific spiritual framings, the broader psychological and relational dimensions of the teachings appear central to the observed shifts toward more relational beliefs, values, worldviews, and the inner capacities that underpin them.

Taken together, the findings shed light on the dynamics and processes involved in such shifts. In doing so, they contribute to the growing fields of Inner Transformation and Awareness-Based Systems Change (Koenig et al., 2021; Ives et al., 2023b), and they inform related approaches such as Mindful Eco-Wellness and Mindfulness-Based Sustainable Transformation (Barrett et al., 2024; Wamsler et al., 2018, 2026). In this context, the findings align with and extend existing research identifying relationality and the integration of diverse knowledge systems as cornerstones of transformative systems change (Koenig et al., 2024; IPBES, 2024; Ives et al., 2023b; Walsh et al., 2021). Specifically, they provide empirical evidence for the potential of spiritually informed, awareness-based practices to foster resilience, (re)connection, and engagement. In addition, they highlight the importance of supporting a comprehensive understanding—and practical guidance—of the "how" of integrative inner–outer transformation. This involves addressing alienation from self, others, and nature, and supporting (re)connection across multiple levels, including individual mindsets, behaviors, cultures, and systems—thereby engaging deep leverage points. Supporting transformative capacities, including mindfulness or the Inner Development

Goals, therefore needs to be embedded within such broader systemic and institutional processes of change. At the same time, it requires attending to more shallow but still crucial levers that can address proximate causes, as well as immediate impacts and needs (e.g., biophysical drivers, loss and damage, and mental health).

Concluding Remarks

This study indicates that the ZASP course provided participants with mindfulness practices, concepts, and ethical orientation that supported changes across inner (individual and collective) and outer (behavioral and systemic) dimensions. Associated spiritual teachings, such as *interbeing*, offered participants a narrative through which to understand their lives and their relationship to broader societal and systemic challenges.

The impact may, however, lie less in the specifically spiritual grounding of these teachings and more in their universal character and psychological and relational resonance (Bucher, 2007; Rowson, 2014; Woiwode et al., 2021). They appear to have helped participants restore a long-sought balance between spirituality and utility, the spiritual and the material, and the intrinsic and the extrinsic—as fundamentally interconnected aspects of life and purpose (Rowson, 2014).

The findings also indicate that interbeing and mindfulness can be understood as political concepts and practical approaches that offer an alternative to dominant economic models and sustainability approaches that are grounded in a paradigm of separation. Not all participants, however, felt equally connected to the spiritual framing, highlighting the need to consider spirituality within a complex, religiously hybrid world (Ng & Walsh, 2019; Stacey, 2024). These tensions point to the importance of flexibility and inclusivity in the design of transformative learning environments—spaces that can accommodate both spiritual and secular forms of reflection and that validate complex, non-linear journeys of change. They also suggest that there are multiple, individual and context-specific entry points for transformation.

The findings align with the recent IPBES Transformative Change Assessment Report, which emphasizes the urgency of transformative change to address interconnected crises (IPBES, 2024). The report identifies disconnection from nature, others (e.g., reflected in inequitable power structures), and self (e.g., manifested in short-term materialism) as key drivers of these crises, and calls for fundamental shifts in individual and collective views. It further underscores the need to integrate inner development with external systemic change processes. The present study provides empirical support for these perspectives. In addition, by fostering meaning, resilience, hope, and ethical engagement, it suggests that spiritually informed approaches such as ZASP can contribute to catalyzing awareness-based cultural and systemic transformations needed for a sustainable future.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no competing interests related to this work.

Ethics Statement

The study fulfills ethical and GDPR requirements of Lund University and Sweden, in accordance with the Research Ethics Advisor and Research Integrity Office. The study was conducted as part of a course evaluation, and the associated data collection adhered to established ethical standards. All participants provided informed consent at the beginning of each survey; participation was voluntary and anonymous, and responses were stored and analyzed in compliance with GDPR regulations, in accordance with guidance from the Lund University Research Data Support Team.

Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies

Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies were not used during the analysis or writing process; they were employed only at the final stage for grammar checks.

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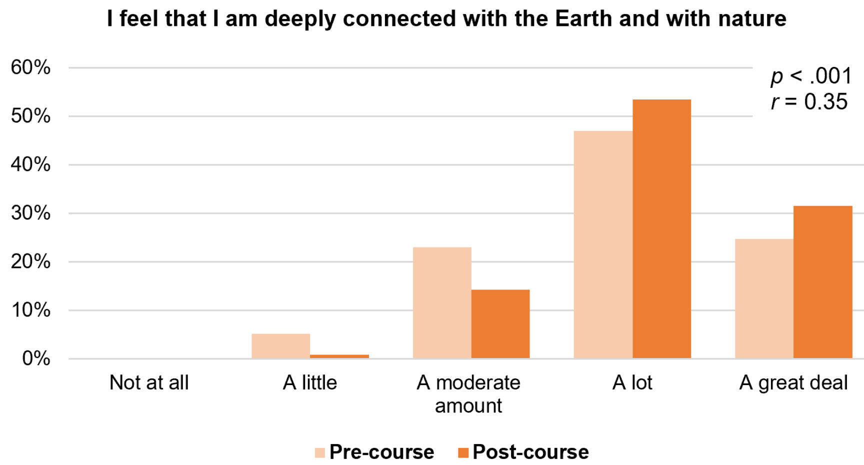
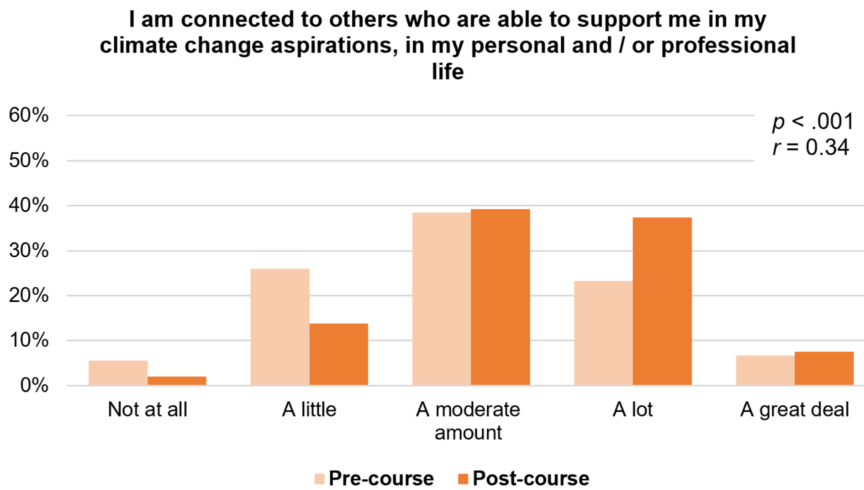
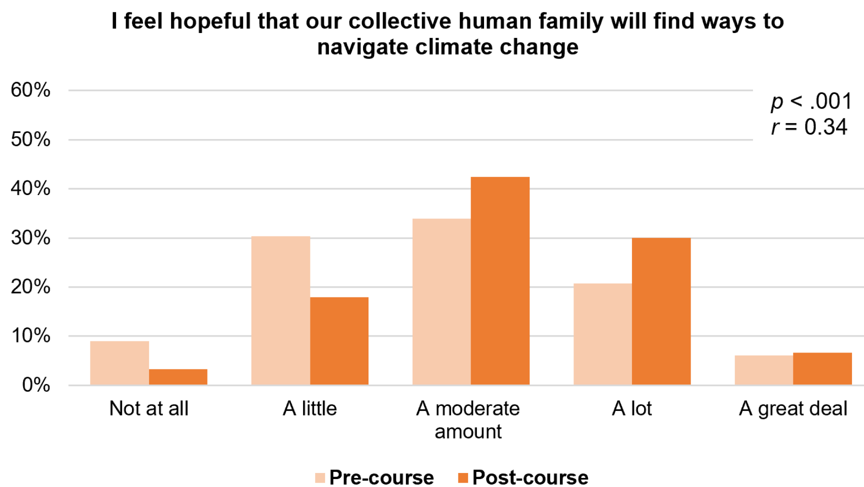
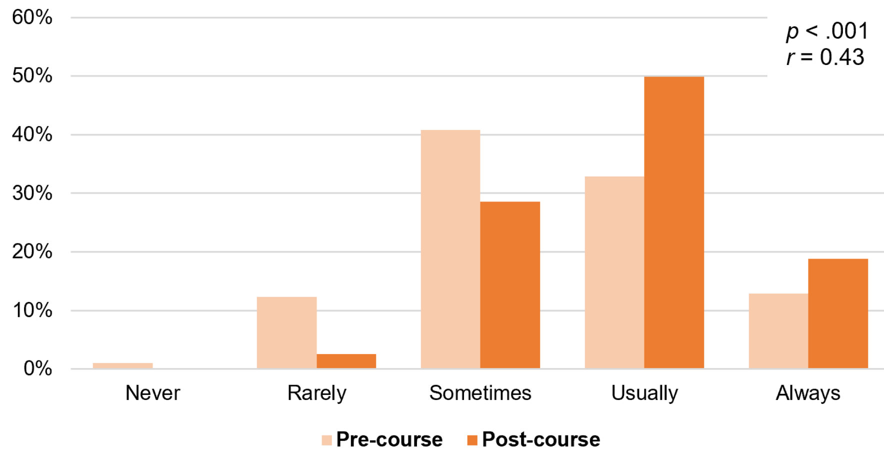
Appendix

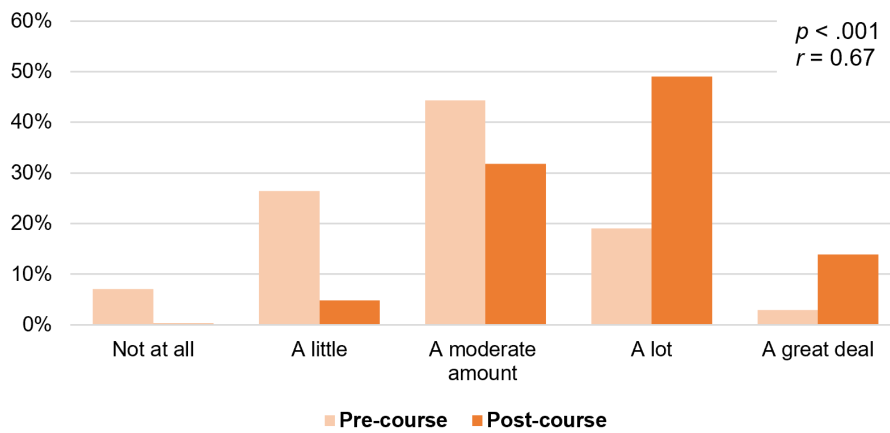
***Figure A1:** Pre- and post-course response distributions for each item under the Plum Village Scale.*








I feel empowered to take action in response to climate change
60%
50%
40%
30%
20%
10%
0%
p < .001
r = 0.43
Never
Rarely
Sometimes
Usually
Always
Pre-course
Post-course


I feel well equipped with the inner resources I need to cope with climate change and related changes in the world
60%
50%
40%
30%
20%
10%
0%
p < .001
r = 0.67
Not at all
A little
A moderate amount
A lot
A great deal
Pre-course
Post-course

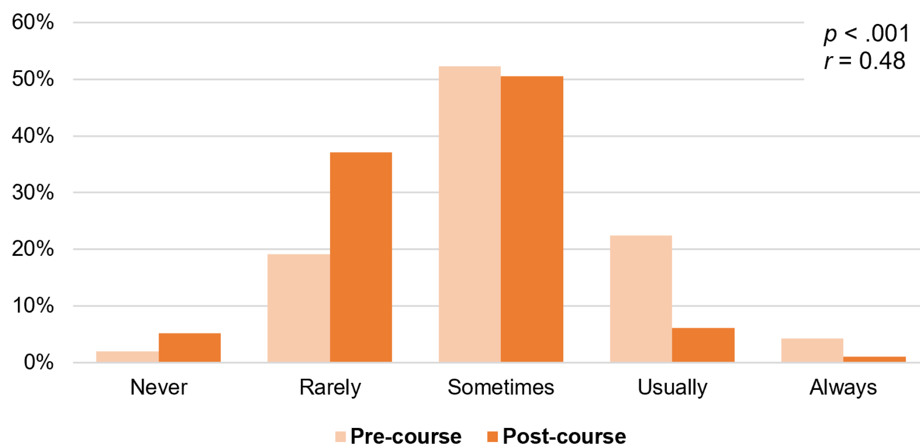
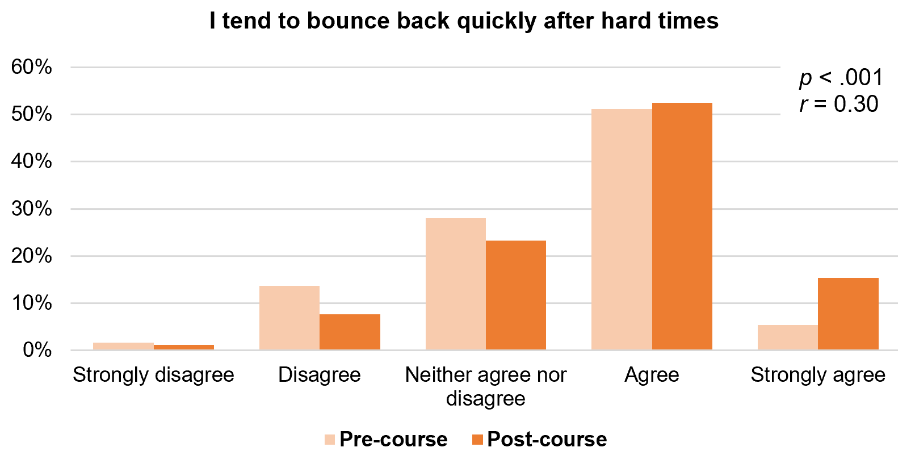
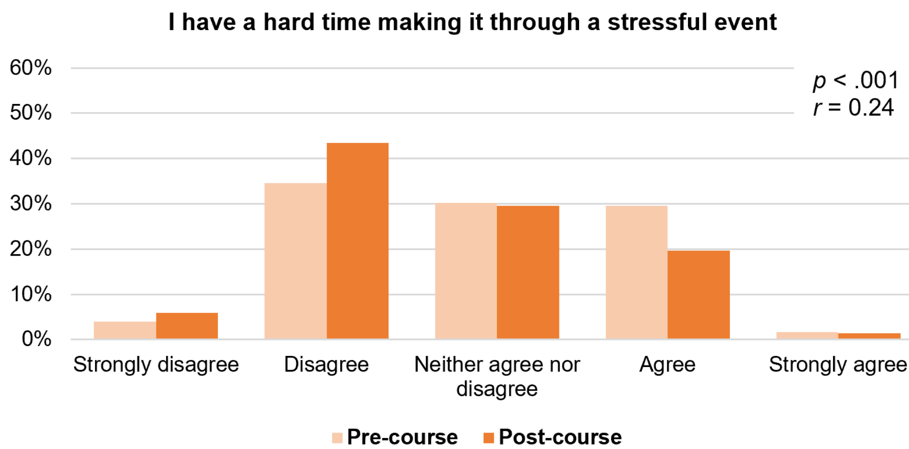
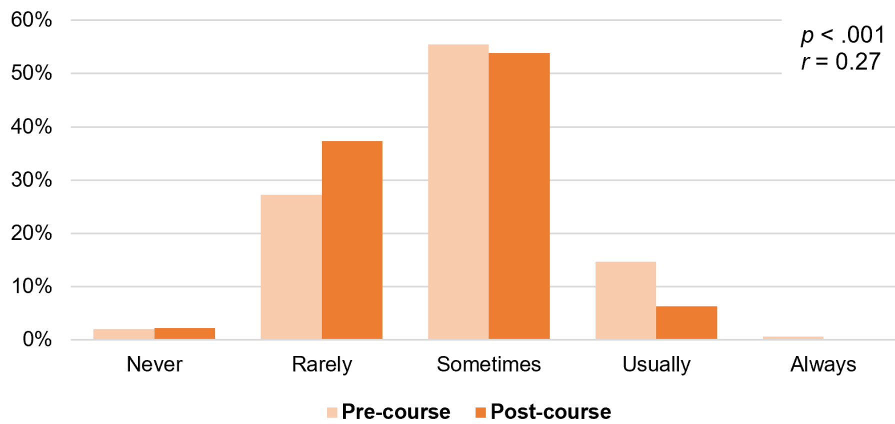
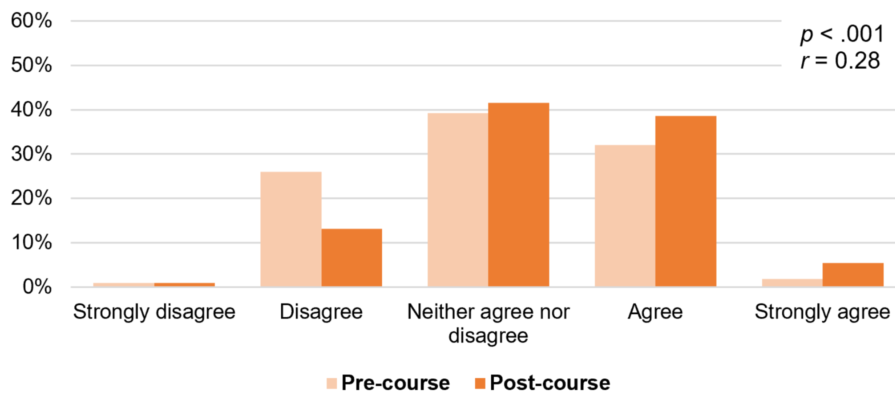

I struggle to handle my thoughts and feelings about the climate crisis
60%
50%
40%
30%
20%
10%
0%
p < .001
r = 0.48
Never
Rarely
Sometimes
Usually
Always
Pre-course
Post-course

Figure A2. *Pre- and post-course response distributions for each item under the Resilience Scale.*



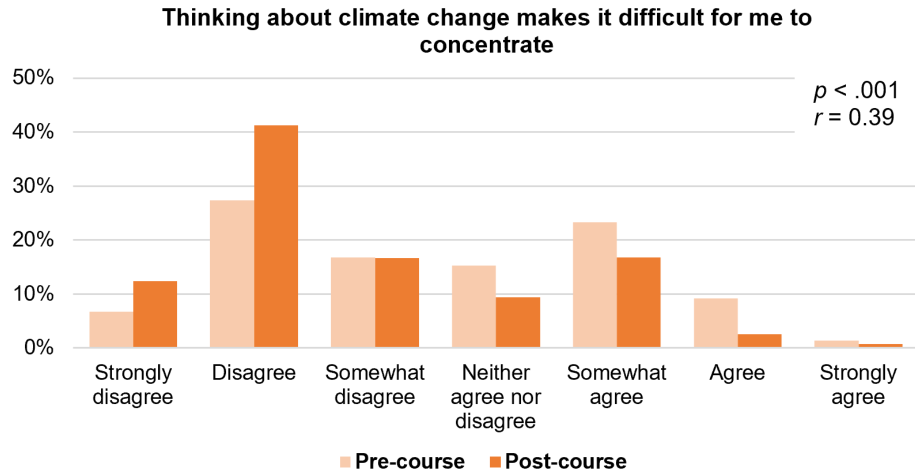


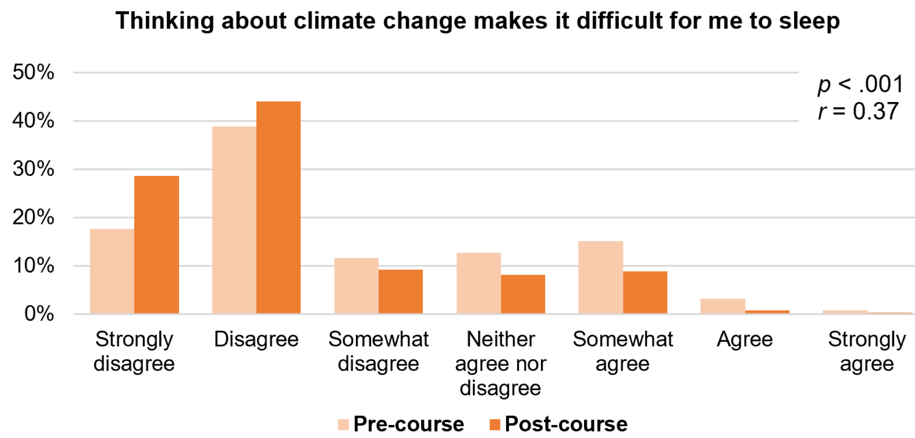

It is hard for me to snap back when something bad happens
60%
50%
40%
30%
20%
10%
0%
p < .001
r = 0.27
Never
Rarely
Sometimes
Usually
Always
Pre-course
Post-course

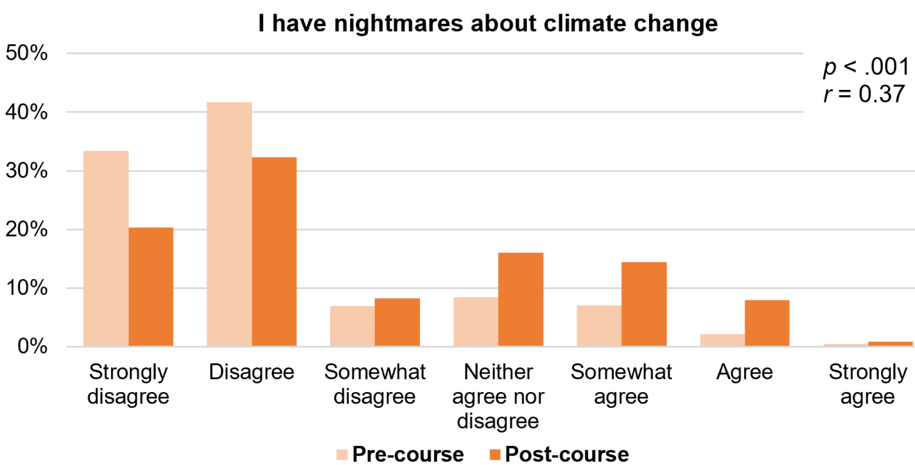

I usually come through difficult times with little trouble
60%
50%
40%
30%
20%
10%
0%
p < .001
r = 0.28
Strongly disagree
Disagree
Neither agree nor disagree
Agree
Strongly agree
Pre-course
Post-course

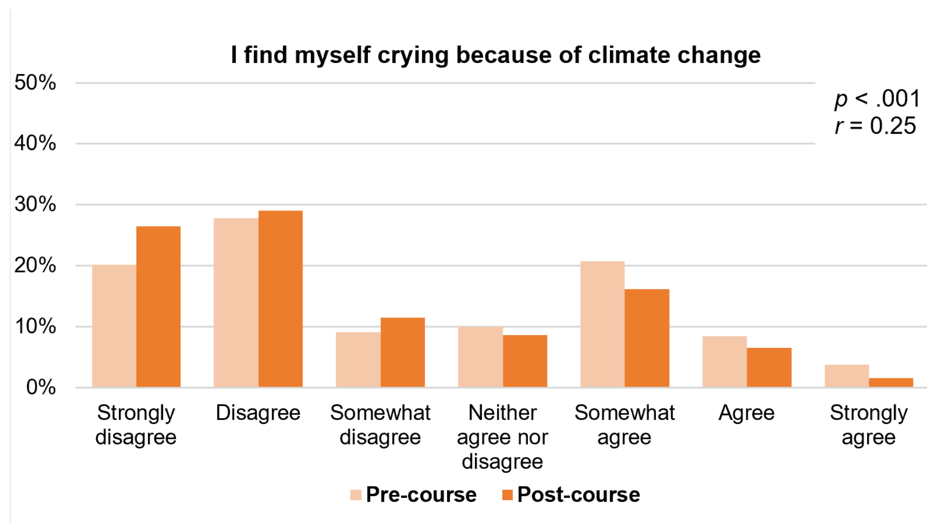
I tend to take a long time to get over set-backs in my life
60%
50%
40%
30%
20%
10%
0%
p < .001
r = 0.20
Never
Rarely
Sometimes
Usually
Always
Pre-course
Post-course

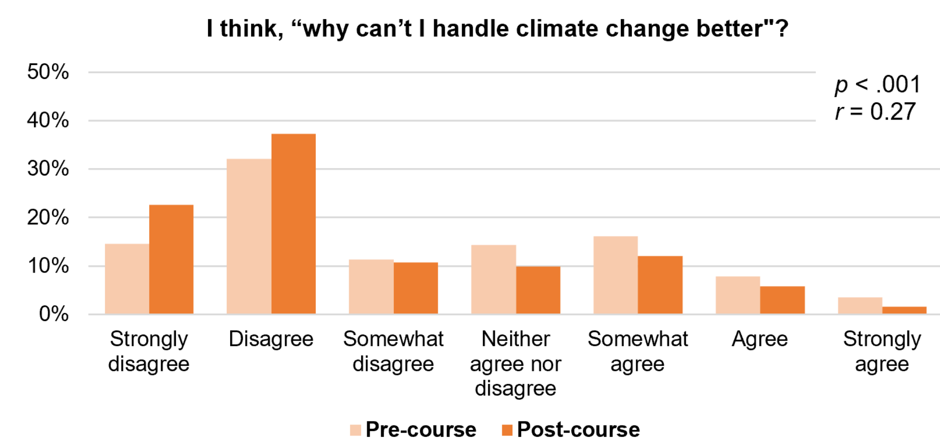
Figure A3*. Pre- and post-course response distributions for each item under the Climate Anxiety Scale.*

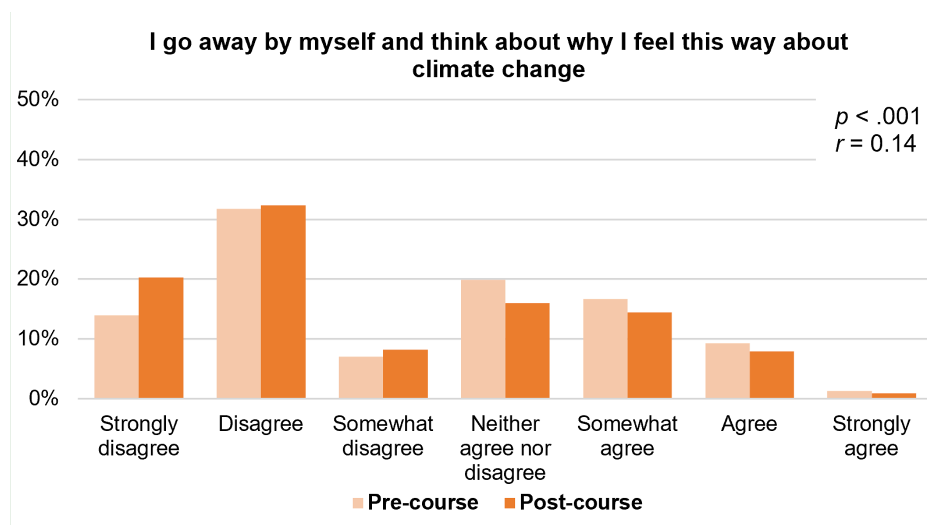


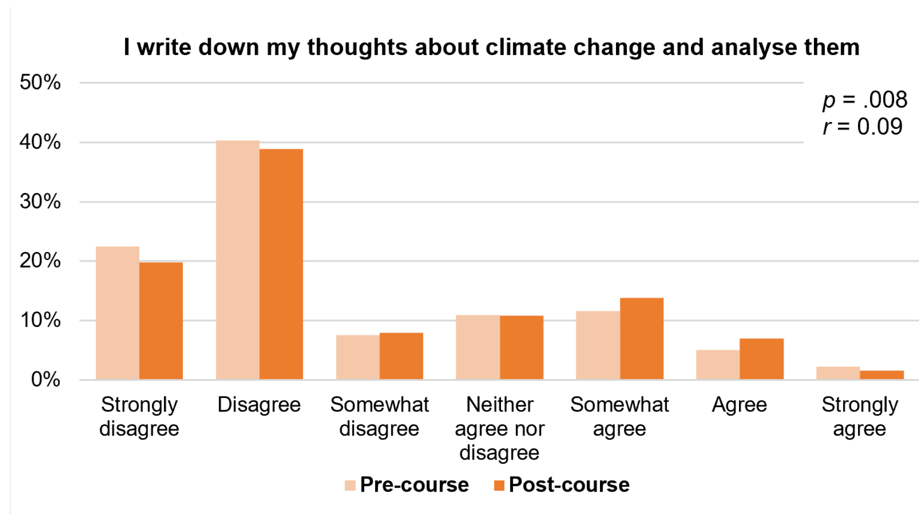


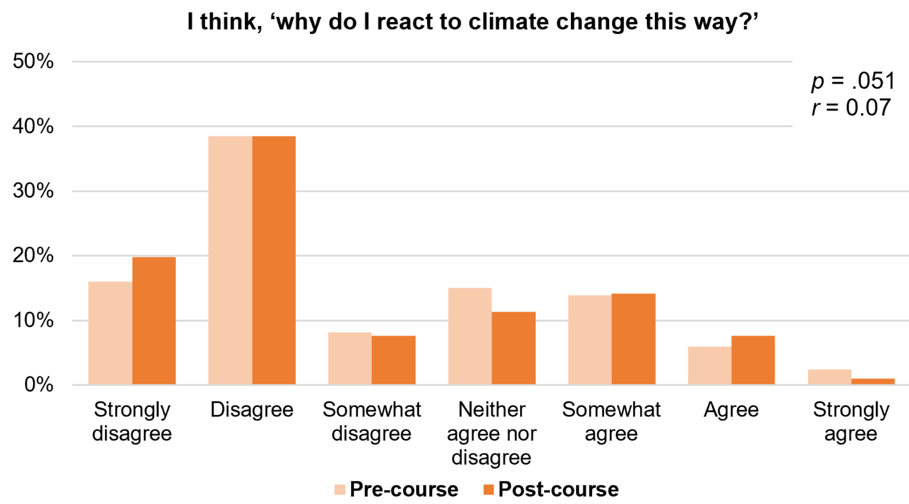


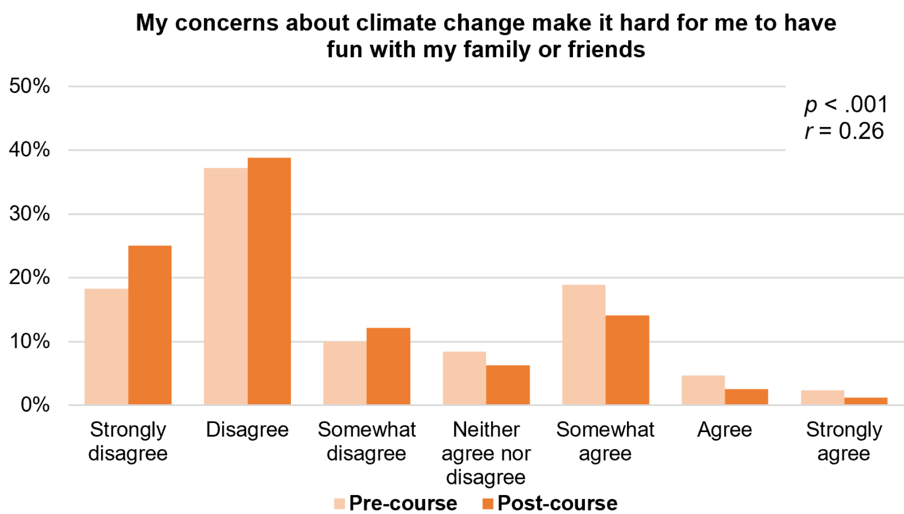

I find myself crying because of climate change
50%
40%
30%
20%
10%
0%
p < .001
r = 0.25
Strongly disagree
Disagree
Somewhat disagree
Neither agree nor disagree
Somewhat agree
Agree
Strongly agree
Pre-course
Post-course

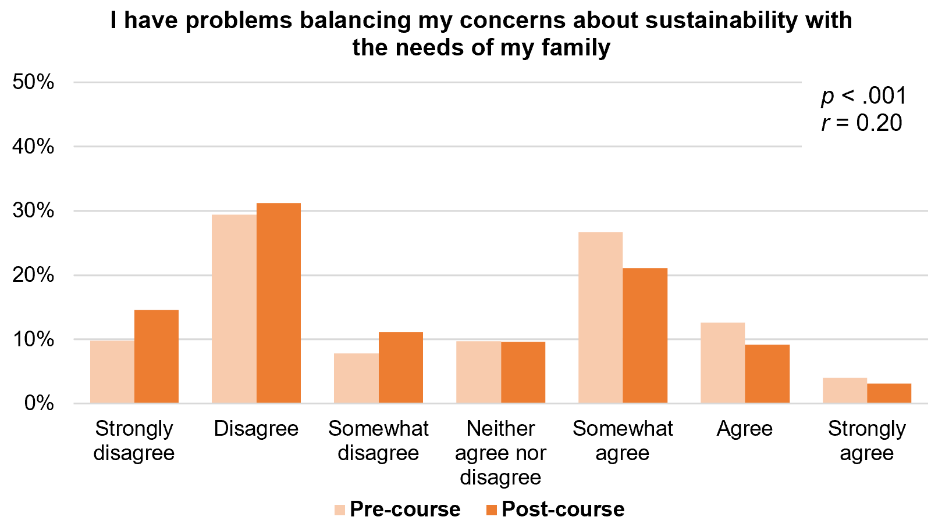

I think, "why can't I handle climate change better"?
50%
40%
30%
20%
10%
0%
p < .001
r = 0.27
Strongly disagree
Disagree
Somewhat disagree
Neither agree nor disagree
Somewhat agree
Agree
Strongly agree
Pre-course
Post-course

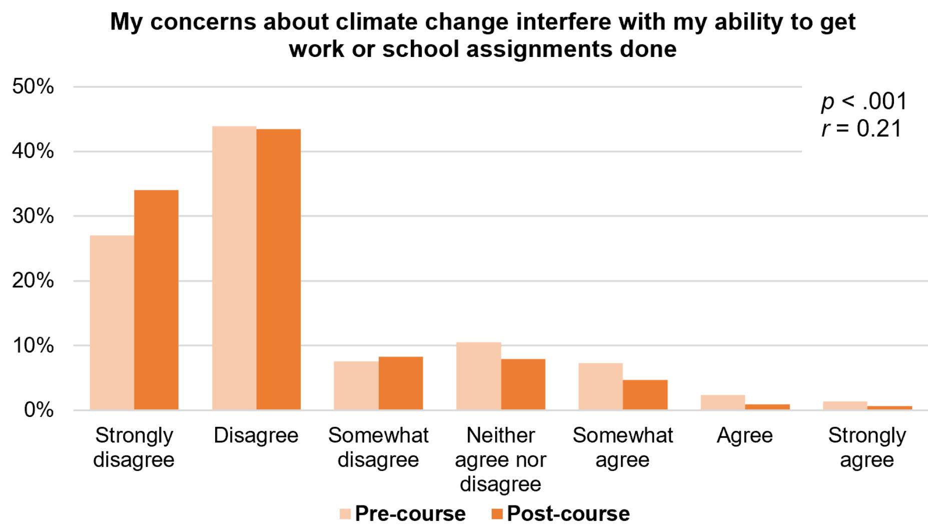

I go away by myself and think about why I feel this way about climate change
50%
40%
30%
20%
10%
0%
p < .001
r = 0.14
Strongly disagree
Disagree
Somewhat disagree
Neither agree nor disagree
Somewhat agree
Agree
Strongly agree
Pre-course
Post-course

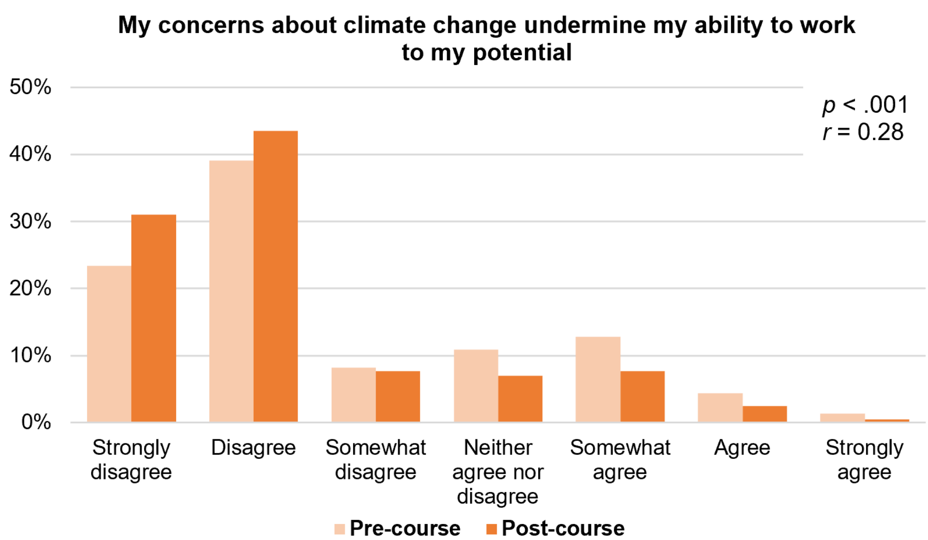

I write down my thoughts about climate change and analyse them
50%
40%
30%
20%
10%
0%
p = .008
r = 0.09
Strongly disagree
Disagree
Somewhat disagree
Neither agree nor disagree
Somewhat agree
Agree
Strongly agree
Pre-course
Post-course

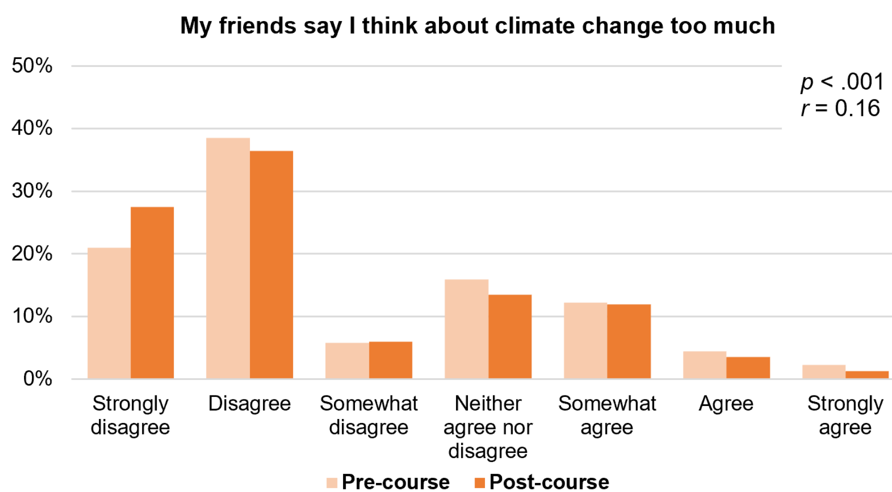

I think, 'why do I react to climate change this way?'
50%
40%
30%
20%
10%
0%
p = .051
r = 0.07
Strongly disagree
Disagree
Somewhat disagree
Neither agree nor disagree
Somewhat agree
Agree
Strongly agree
Pre-course
Post-course


My concerns about climate change make it hard for me to have fun with my family or friends
50%
40%
30%
20%
10%
0%
p < .001
r = 0.26
Strongly disagree
Disagree
Somewhat disagree
Neither agree nor disagree
Somewhat agree
Agree
Strongly agree
Pre-course
Post-course


I have problems balancing my concerns about sustainability with the needs of my family
50%
40%
30%
20%
10%
0%
p < .001
r = 0.20
Strongly disagree
Disagree
Somewhat disagree
Neither agree nor disagree
Somewhat agree
Agree
Strongly agree
Pre-course
Post-course


My concerns about climate change interfere with my ability to get work or school assignments done
50%
40%
30%
20%
10%
0%
p < .001
r = 0.21
Strongly disagree
Disagree
Somewhat disagree
Neither agree nor disagree
Somewhat agree
Agree
Strongly agree
Pre-course
Post-course


My concerns about climate change undermine my ability to work to my potential
50%
40%
30%
20%
10%
0%
p < .001
r = 0.28
Strongly disagree
Disagree
Somewhat disagree
Neither agree nor disagree
Somewhat agree
Agree
Strongly agree
Pre-course
Post-course



My friends say I think about climate change too much
50%
40%
30%
20%
10%
0%
p < .001
r = 0.16
Strongly disagree
Disagree
Somewhat disagree
Neither agree nor disagree
Somewhat agree
Agree
Strongly agree
Pre-course
Post-course

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Peer Review Article

Sensing the System:

Collective Perception, Governance, and Conditions for Action in Complex Organizations

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Review Protocol: double anonymous

Abstract

This paper presents an awareness-based research pilot conducted with a mission-driven organization navigating a transition from a volunteer structure to a more formalized governance model. The study examines how systems sensing practices, particularly systemic constellations, can support governance in complex, multi-stakeholder contexts by making relational and structural dynamics more perceptible and available for collective interpretation. Grounded in sensemaking, embodied cognition, and complexity-informed governance, the study conceptualizes governance as the coordination of perception, meaning-making, and authority in the formation and enactment of decisions. The intervention was designed to support the organization's efforts to strengthen strategic clarity, improve coordination, and develop greater alignment around roles and decision-making processes. Using a cooperative inquiry design, participants engaged in interviews, guided sensing journeys, systemic

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constellations, and follow-up reflection. Analysis of interviews, workshop interactions, and participant reflections showed that systemic constellations enabled participants to surface and engage with relevant relational and structural dynamics, such as divergent leadership perspectives and role and authority misalignments, by making them more collectively perceptible and available as shared visual reference points. This allowed participants to examine, interact with, and reflect on these dynamics together in real time. However, these shifts in perception did not translate into coordinated action. The findings indicate that while systems sensing can expand what becomes collectively perceptible within governance processes, its influence depends on structural conditions, particularly the participation and alignment of decision-making authority and opportunities for collective integration. The study contributes an empirical and methodological account of how embodied and relational ways of knowing can inform governance by making previously implicit relational and structural dynamics more perceptible and available for collective sensemaking, and clarifies the conditions under which expanded perception can, or cannot, support coherent collective action.

Keywords
systems sensing, governance, systemic constellations, sensemaking, embodied cognition, decision-making, complexity, embodied knowing, participatory research

Funding Statement
The author received no financial support for this work.

Introduction

This paper presents an awareness-based research pilot conducted over a 10-month period. The pilot focused on an intervention with a mission-driven organization working to protect the Amazon rainforest. At the time, the organization was undergoing a shift in governance from a volunteer-driven, emergent mode of organizing, characterized by passion and experimentation, to a more formalized structure shaped by new funding, rapid growth, and increased expectations for accountability. The CEO engaged the author (hereafter, "I") to use *systems sensing* approaches to clarify ways to support the team in navigating the transition while strengthening *coherence* and building a sense of solidarity.[1,2]

[1] Systems sensing and related concepts are defined in the Theoretical Foundations section.

[2] Coherence is briefly described below and later defined in the Theoretical Foundations section.

Here, *governance* refers to the processes and structures through which collective affairs are steered, coordinated, and made actionable across independent actors. In contemporary scholarship, governance is understood not only as formal authority or top-down management, but as the ongoing coordination of decision-making, collective problem-solving, and collective action across complex systems (Bevir, 2012; Emerson et al., 2012; Jessop, 2002; Kooiman, 2016). In these complex multi-stakeholder contexts, groups must make and enact decisions under conditions of uncertainty, distributed knowledge, and competing interpretations.

In such conditions, governance challenges can persist not because groups lack solutions, but because they lack a shared perception of the system itself. Conventional approaches often assume that dialogue, analysis, and representational tools (e.g., models and frameworks) are sufficient for understanding complex situations. This study explores what becomes possible when embodied, relational, and experiential forms of knowing, drawing on felt experience, bodily perception, and interaction with others (Di Paolo et al., 2017; Fuchs & De Jaegher, 2009; Heron & Reason, 1997; Merleau-Ponty, 2005), are brought into governance processes.[3]

In the study, coherence was defined as a shared alignment in how participants perceive their relationships, roles, and context, in this case enabling coordinated action as the organization formalized its structure. The intervention engaged members of the organization whose roles spanned land stewardship, carbon mitigation, local practice, collaboration with Indigenous communities, philanthropic and institutional partnerships, and organizational functions such as management and communications. Each brought distinct perspectives that shaped what was perceived, valued, and acted upon.

This research examined how systems sensing practices, particularly "systemic constellations"—a facilitated method that uses spatial and embodied representation to explore relational and system dynamics (Hellinger et al., 1998; Weber, 2000)—might contribute to collaborative and participatory governance. Prior research suggests that systemic constellations can support organizational learning and effectiveness (Birkenkrahe, 2008; Scholtens et al., 2021). I served as lead facilitator and researcher of the pilot study, supported by co-facilitator Carri Munn, whose network consulting experience shaped the participatory design.

The inquiry guiding this study asks: How do embodied and relational ways of knowing influence systemic awareness and collective *sensemaking* in governance, especially in uncertain contexts? Here, sensemaking refers to the process through which individuals and groups interpret experiences to guide action (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1995). A supporting question asks: What

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[3] Embodied, relational, and experiential ways of knowing are defined further in the Theoretical Foundations section.

conditions shape whether insights generated through these practices translate into organizational action?

This paper contributes an empirical and methodological account of how systems sensing practices may expand collective perception within governance processes, particularly those related to collective decision-making, coordination across roles, and the shaping of emerging organizational structures during periods of transition. It also identifies the structural and relational conditions under which such expanded perception may influence how decisions are formed and carried forward into action.

This inquiry is grounded in a view of transformative learning and governance as a process that reorients perception, relationships, and action (Dirkx, 2001; Mezirow, 2003). From this perspective, governance is not only structural but also perceptual and relational, shaping how participants experience, orient, and act within the system.

What follows is not a story of success or failure, but of systemic learning. The intervention functioned both as an inquiry process and as a form of situated diagnostic, revealing how perceptions, participation, and power may be aligned or misaligned within the system. The study highlights a central insight: Even when a team develops a clearer understanding of its power dynamics, structural conditions still shape whether those insights can be translated into action. In this sense, the study contributes to research that positions governance in complex systems as the coordination of perception, the process of meaning-making, and the distribution and enactment of power and formal authority (Hutchins, 1995; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018; Weick, 1995).

Theoretical Foundations

Governance and Complexity

Governance challenges in complex systems are often framed in terms of coordination, structure, or decision-making capacity. However, in practice, governance unfolds through ongoing patterns of interaction among actors (Stacey, 2012; Weick, 1995), where meaning, authority, and action are continuously negotiated rather than centrally determined. Organizational life is shaped not only by formal roles and decision-making processes, but by informal relational dynamics that emerge across teams, functions, and institutional boundaries (Schein, 2010; Stacey, 2012). These interaction patterns influence how information is interpreted, how priorities are set, and whose perspectives are taken up in decision-making processes, particularly in contexts characterized by distributed stakeholders, shifting relationships, and evolving conditions.

Organizational governance is also shaped by cultural dynamics, including tacit norms, unspoken agreements, and implicit boundaries around what can be seen, said, or challenged (Schein, 2010). These dynamics influence how power is

enacted and how participation unfolds in practice, often outside formal structures (Bourdieu, 1990; Clegg et al., 2006; Foucault, 1977). From this perspective, governance is shaped through the interaction between structure and culture, including how certain perspectives come to be recognized while others remain implicit or marginalized.

In the face of these challenges, leaders often rely on traditional forms of governance grounded in cognitive and analytic approaches. While these approaches remain essential for planning and coordination, they tend to privilege knowledge that can be explicitly articulated or measured. As a result, groups may struggle to perceive their own patterns of interaction and ways of operating in real time, including underlying relational dynamics that support or impede progress toward shared goals. Human communication is an embodied and interactive process that relies on non-verbal cues, many of which remain outside conscious awareness. These limitations become particularly evident within governance logics oriented toward coordination through planning, control, and explicit articulation, especially when the relevant signals in the system are diffuse, ambiguous, or only partially formed (Scharmer, 2016; Sutcliffe et al., 2016).

Complexity scholarship helps clarify why relational dynamics matter for effective governance. In multi-stakeholder, distributed systems, outcomes emerge from ongoing interactions among interdependent actors rather than from centralized control or linear causality (Stacey, 2012; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Relevant institutional knowledge is distributed across roles, relationships, and ongoing interactions, and is often only visible in the system's emergent behavior (Hutchins, 1995; Zhang & Norman, 1994). From this perspective, governance is less a matter of structural design, control systems, or strategic planning, and more an ongoing process of aligning perceptions, coordinating meaning-making, negotiating authority, and choosing actions in the face of uncertainty.

Deliberative and participatory governance approaches often emphasize agreement or consensus achieved through dialogue and reasoned exchange (Habermas, 1996; Mansbridge et al., 2012). More recent participatory and collaborative governance models extend this orientation in response to complexity by distributing authority, incorporating diverse stakeholder perspectives, and emphasizing dialogue and shared decision-making to strengthen legitimacy, trust, and coordination (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012; Fung, 2006). However, across these approaches, participation continues to rely largely on cognitive and discursive forms of engagement, such as deliberation, negotiation, and structured exchanges of perspectives. As a result, tacit knowledge, emotional undercurrents, misaligned assumptions, and relational tensions that develop through ongoing interaction often remain outside of formal discussion (Fuchs & De Jaegher, 2009; Polanyi, 1966; Strati, 2007). These dimensions are frequently registered as a "felt sense" (Gendlin, 1981) before they can be clearly articulated. Systems sensing practices can provide a means to help surface and engage these otherwise implicit dynamics.

Systems Sensing

While participatory governance approaches aim to broaden who is involved in decision-making, they offer limited means for how participants can perceive and make sense of the system as it is experienced in real time. To understand how such perception becomes possible, this study draws on phenomenology and embodied cognition, which treat perception as something that arises through lived engagement with others and the environment, rather than as a purely cognitive activity (Fuchs, 2017; Heidegger, 1962; Merleau-Ponty, 2005). Awareness, from this perspective, is distributed across sensory, relational, and situational fields. People register shifts in tone, posture, timing, and interaction before they can fully articulate what they are noticing. Knowing, in this view, emerges through the interplay of body, mind, and environment (Di Paolo, 2021; Varela et al., 2016).

Heron and Reason (1997) extend this account by identifying multiple *ways of knowing:* experiential knowing (direct, embodied encounter), presentational knowing (expressed through images, metaphors, or symbols), propositional knowing (conceptual and theoretical understanding), and practical knowing (action-based or skillful engagement). Together, these theoretical strands support a broader epistemology in which embodied and relational experience can function as valid sources of information.

In this paper, systems sensing refers to a set of practices and an orientation that enables participants to engage in experiential forms of knowing in a structured way (Ritter & Zamierowski, 2021; Ryan, 1995). It allows them to perceive qualities of system elements, as well as relationships and emergent dynamics within the system patterns, that are difficult to access solely through discursive means. Ryan (1995) suggests that formal systems analysis captures only a portion of what a systems perspective can offer, pointing instead to the ways systems "whisper" through everyday interactions. Scharmer (2016) describes sensing as a mode of attention that integrates thinking and feeling, allowing participants to perceive the system from within rather than only from an external vantage point. This aligns with work suggesting that feelings, intuitions, and embodied responses can serve as meaningful signals rather than as noise (Schwarz, 2012).

In this regard, systems sensing complements systems thinking. Systems thinking, as described by Meadows (2008) and Senge (2006), engages underlying mental models and implicit dynamics, often through conceptual reflection and the use of maps or diagrams to represent relationships within a system. Systems sensing offers an additional mode of inquiry, inviting participants to engage in these relationships directly through embodied and relational experience, including aspects that may be difficult to access or fully make sense of cognitively. This can reveal patterns of tension, exclusion, and divergence that may be experienced viscerally and become observable through participants' interactions and articulated accounts.

Structured methods such as systemic constellations provide one way of discovering these hidden dynamics. Through this practice, participants rely on embodied representation and spatial orientation to co-create a dynamic image of the interactions of the key elements in the system and their relationships with one another (Hellinger et al., 1998; Peterson, 2019; Weber, 2000). Movement, positioning, orientation, affective responses, and even subtle shifts in direction of gaze or attention become part of the data as they are enacted and perceived within the group. In this sense, the information that emerges is generated through participants' engagement with the system of which they are a part, and meaning arises through that same participation, rather than from an external perspective. What might otherwise remain diffuse as a felt, yet inarticulate sense begins to take shape in ways that can be observed and eventually articulated. This aligns with accounts of "representative perception," where participants are able to access and express systemic patterns through their position and interaction within the field, without relying on prior knowledge (Schlötter, 2004, as cited in Birkenkrahe, 2008, p. 127). Participants are thus able to experience themselves in the system and to observe the system as a whole.

This process is also intelligible at the level of embodied social perception. Human beings share a broadly common embodied morphology and are highly attuned to social and spatial cues. These include proximity (Bogdanova et al., 2021), relational positioning and movement as indicators of others' intentions (Pavlova, 2012), direction of attention (Emery, 2000), and interpersonal distance as a socially meaningful variable rather than a neutral spatial feature (Sorokowska et al., 2017).

This may explain why the images generated during the constellation practice are often experienced as both affectively salient and collectively meaningful, and why coherence (shared alignment; see discussion below) among participants can quickly emerge from the images. This interpretation is informed both by my facilitation experience and by published accounts within the systems constellations field (Birkenkrahe, 2008; Weber, 2000). Studies suggest that coherence in organizational systems may be partly grounded in shared perceptual capacities that include sensitivity to space, bodies, attention, and relational positioning. This resonates with work on the social field, which suggests that system-relevant information is often held in the relational "in-between" rather than within any single individual (Pomeroy & Herrmann, 2024).

During systems sensing, participants move from felt experience to co-created representational image to shared reference. This process is designed to reorient how members understand the system, widening their frame of knowing beyond cognitive models and discussion toward an embodied "living map." These configurations function as shared images of the system, making relationships visible in a way that can be jointly observed and explored (Reich & Finckh, 2016).

Such images—whether created with physical bodies in space together or by using representative icons of elements on a shared board—can surface patterns of misalignment, tension, exclusion, and ambiguity that are difficult to identify

through dialogue, particularly in situations where multiple perspectives and competing interpretations are present (Scharmer, 2016; Schwarz, 2012). In conditions of uncertainty and complexity, where no single account is sufficient (Meadows, 2008; Snowden & Boone, 2007), this process can support the emergence of a collectively held understanding of what we are making together (Pearce, 2007; Peterson, 2019).

Emergence of Coherence

Coherence has been described as a global orientation through which individuals experience the world as comprehensible, manageable, and meaningful (Antonovsky, 1987; Geyer, 1997). In complex systems, coherence can also be understood as an emergent property arising through self-organization, in which coordinated patterns form through local interactions without centralized control (Haken, 1983). Building on this foundation, coherence is used in this study to refer to a dynamic condition in which members of a system share a sufficiently aligned perception of their relationships, roles, and context, such that coordinated action becomes possible without reliance on external control. Coherence emerges when previously fragmented or implicit relational information becomes collectively perceptible and meaningful, allowing participants to orient to the system as a whole rather than from isolated or competing viewpoints.

From a governance perspective, this matters because decision-making depends on how the system is perceived. When perception is limited to what can be readily articulated, coordination may rely on partial or competing interpretations, making alignment more difficult (Stacey, 2012; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018). When aspects of the system become more broadly perceptible across participants, there is greater potential for coordinated action without requiring full agreement or consensus (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018; Weick, 1995). In this view, breakdowns in governance may occur not only when decisions are poorly designed, but when the system lacks a sufficiently shared perception to support coordinated action. This framing suggests that governance in complex systems depends not only on decision-making structures but on the system's capacity to perceive, interpret, and act on its own relational dynamics.

Methodology

Research Design

This study was designed as a qualitative case study grounded in participatory and awareness-based action research (Chandler & Torbert, 2003; Kemmis et al., 2014; Scharmer et al., 2021), using "cooperative inquiry" (Heron & Reason, 1997; Reason, 1999, 2003) as a guiding structure. Within this design, systems sensing practices—including systemic constellations—were used as primary methods for

generating experiential and relational data through embodied, spatial, and interaction-based exploration of system dynamics. Cooperative inquiry is a participatory form of action research in which participants act as both co-researchers and co-subjects, collaboratively exploring questions through cycles of action and reflection (Heron & Reason, 2008). In this study, the inquiry unfolded through iterative phases of identifying a shared focus, engaging in action, becoming immersed in the experience, and reflecting on emerging insights to inform subsequent cycles (Reason, 2003).

These cycles of inquiry enabled knowledge generation through lived engagement and collective sensemaking (Weick, 1995). This approach is grounded in a participatory worldview and an *extended epistemology*, in which knowing unfolds through multiple interdependent ways, including experiential knowing (Heron & Reason, 1997). As Heron and Reason (1997) describe, experiential knowing involves “feeling and imaging the presence of some energy, entity, person, place, process, or thinking” (p. 280). It is also the creative shaping of a world through inner resonance with what is present (Heron & Reason, 1997) and through perceptual enactment, where knowing arises not only through cognition but through embodied and relational engagement with the world (Varela et al., 2016).

Unless otherwise noted, references to “I” denote the author acting in the dual role of facilitator and researcher.

Research Context and Participants

The research was conducted as a 10-month pilot (June 2025 to March 2026) with a geographically distributed, mission-driven organizational team collaborating primarily through virtual platforms. All 18 team members were invited to participate in the study, with 10 to 12 members choosing to engage in each of the three research phases. Most participants remained consistent throughout. Participants represented multiple roles and levels of authority within the organization, including leadership, programmatic, and operational functions.

Data Collection Methods

Data collection activities were organized across three research phases (see also Table 1):

1. **Discovery and Inquiry Co-Design:** Semi-structured interviews (n = 10) were conducted across departments and organizational levels to collaboratively identify key systemic challenges, opportunities, and guiding question(s).
2. **Systems Sensing Sessions:** Two facilitated virtual workshops were held (approximately two hours each):
   Session 1: A sensing journey (Zamierowski & Ritter, 2025) was conducted involving sequential attunement to key system elements (e.g., land, people, or qualities), inviting participants to take the perspective of each

element and to attend to sensory, emotional, and relational experience, followed by dialogue and collective reflection.
Session 2: A blind systemic constellation was facilitated through a structured process in which participants embodied system elements (e.g., people, roles, institutions, or qualities) without prior knowledge of what these represented, positioning themselves in relation to one another based on embodied perception. This process generated a dynamic spatial configuration through which relational patterns became visible and available for collective reflection.

3. **Integration and Reflection:** A collective dialogue session was held, followed by individual interviews.
Session 3: A follow-up dialogue and collective reflection were conducted with participants and were designed to surface insights, collaboratively construct meaning, and identify next steps.
Post-Session Interviews: Brief one-on-one follow-up conversations were conducted with participants who elected to take part. The aim was to understand whether insights emerged during the process, and how, if at all, they were carried forward into organizational practice.

A fourth research phase, focused on decision-making and governance, was planned but did not occur; its absence became analytically relevant to understanding the conditions influencing the translation of insight into action.

All activities were conducted virtually using the video meeting platform Zoom and collaborative tools such as Miro and Google Slides. Data sources included interview transcripts, workshop recordings, facilitator observation notes and memos, visual maps, and participant reflections (verbal, written, and chat-based).

Phase	Description	Purpose	Activity	Participants	Data
1	Discovery and Inquiry Co-Design	Areas of focus Guiding inquiry	Interviews Small focus group	10 3	Transcripts
2a	Systems Sensing Session 1	Perceptions and metaphors	Sensing journey	12	Transcript Reflections
2b	Systems Sensing Session 2	Systemic dynamics of guiding inquiry	Blind systemic constellation	10	Transcript Visual map Reflections
3a	Integration and Reflection Session 3	Shared insight	Team dialogue and reflection	14	Transcript Reflections
3b	Post-Session Interviews	Individual insight	Interviews	7	Transcript Reflections

Table 1*: Data collection*

Data Analysis

Data analysis drew on constructivist grounded theory principles (Charmaz, 2014) and used an inductive approach to identify system-level patterns across multiple forms of qualitative data and to generate analytic categories grounded in participants' experiences. Initial open coding led to the development of six analytic categories that were refined and stabilized through iterative coding: (a) embodied perceptions of system elements, expressed through participants' spatial positioning and reports of felt experience; (b) relational dynamics, including patterns of connection, disconnection, and orientation; (c) systemic and structural dynamics, reflected in the overall configuration of roles and alignment with purpose; (d) shared insight; (e) conditions influencing participation; and (f) conditions influencing the translation of insight into action (Table 2).

Coding was conducted across interviews, workshop data, and observation notes. To preserve the integrity of participants' language, particularly the vivid, metaphorical expressions used to describe their experience, in vivo codes were used alongside analytic codes. This helped differentiate participant-generated meaning from researcher interpretation, which was particularly important given the use of embodied, metaphorical, and relational forms of expression.

Analytic Category	What Was Observed/Coded	Example Indicators From Data
Embodied perceptions of system elements	Participants' sensory, emotional, intuitive, and spatial experiences when attuning to system elements, including how these perceptions were expressed and enacted through position, orientation, and movement.	"Feeling pressure that cannot flow" (Participant 04; September 12, 2025 session 2); "I face out to a beautiful window" (Representative for Element C; September 12, 2025 session 2); positioning closer to or farther from elements; turning toward or away; shifts in stance or direction of attention.
Relational dynamics	Patterns of interaction and relational response between participants, including perceived tension, attraction, or resistance; shifts in alignment or divergence; emotional tone; and disruptions in communication or connection.	Moving closer to another element; turning away; describing pull, resistance, or disconnection; divergent orientations (e.g., facing away); delayed responses or lack of response; communication disruptions (e.g., dropped calls).
Systemic and structural dynamics	Patterns across the system as revealed through aggregated spatial configurations, sustained orientations, and relational dynamics, including distribution of influence, role positioning, and alignment between formal roles and enacted authority.	Leadership or decision-making elements positioned at the periphery; multiple elements clustering around the center shape; repeated expressions of exclusion or constrained autonomy; expressions of competing priorities or divergent perspectives.
Shared insight (partial and distributed)	Moments where individual perceptions converged into shared or partially shared understanding, including the formation of shared reference points through interaction, as well as variation in uptake across participants.	Group recognition of patterns, including verbal agreement, embodied signals (e.g., head nods), convergence around shared symbolic representations (e.g., central organizational icon), chat-based affirmations, and statements that reflected a participant's experience as shared.
Conditions influencing participation	Factors shaping who was able to engage, contribute, or move within the process, including relational, structural, and experiential conditions affecting agency, connection, and inclusion.	Expressions of wanting to move but not being able to; silence following dominant contributions; references to lack of agency or permission; non-participation or skepticism toward the method; differential engagement across roles.
Conditions influencing translation of insight to action	Structural and governance conditions affecting whether and how insights were taken up in decision-making, including alignment between perception, meaning-making, and authority, as well as availability of integration spaces.	Absence or partial participation of decision-makers; lack of follow-up or integration space; limited visibility into decisions; statements indicating the absence of buy-in or that nothing had changed; divergent leadership perspectives; reliance on hierarchical control or centralized decision-making.

Table 2: *Data analysis categories*

Implementation

This intervention was conducted with an organization embedded in a multi-stakeholder network focused on environmental protection in the Amazon region. Initial conversations with the CEO and team affirmed that the organization was at a pivotal “it’s-going-to-take-all-of-us” moment, as it sought to validate its service model, strengthen and coordinate its partner network, and secure next-stage funding to expand from a country-level pilot to a pan-Amazon initiative.

The collaboration began eight months prior to the formal research, when I first met the CEO at a conference. We discovered a shared curiosity about how embodied practices might support strategic clarity while also building empathy across a geographically distributed team. The CEO described a desire for the organization “to know itself like I’ve come to know my cat,” meaning an intimate, embodied familiarity with the organization’s identity, needs, moods, and potential.

This aspiration was later codified into four guiding aims: (a) gain strategic clarity by linking the organization’s vision to concrete actions; (b) strengthen internal coordination and decision-making capacity; (c) cultivate emotional cohesion, understood as trust and mutual understanding across the team; and (d) develop greater organizational coherence, including clarity of individual roles and how individual purpose contributes to the organization’s mission.

To support these aims, the process was structured across three phases: (1) a discovery and inquiry co-design conducted through interviews with key participants; (2) two systems sensing workshops; and (3) a reflection and integration process based on both group and individual feedback. A fourth phase focused on decision-making was originally intended but not realized.

Phase 1: Discovery and Inquiry Co-Design

Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted across roles and levels within the organization to understand the key issues as perceived by different participants, and to formulate the guiding question for the sensing sessions. Interviews revealed deep commitment to the mission alongside strain and fragmentation, with participants describing fractured communication, coordination bottlenecks, and limited psychological safety. Participant 13 shared, “For me, it’s the big issue, our internal communication. … We should talk better with us” (July 2, 2025 interview). Participant 17 said, “I’m emotionally exhausted” (July 1, 2025 interview).

Interview data suggested tensions between differing governance orientations within the organization. On one side were efforts to strengthen coordination through hierarchy, formalized procedures, standardization, and managerial oversight. On the other were desires for greater cross-functional collaboration, shared sensemaking, and opportunities to coordinate work relationally across departments. This dynamic is common in mission-driven organizations, where competing priorities—including efficiency, accountability, external credibility,

participatory collaboration, and responsiveness to local context—must be continuously negotiated.

Several participants described challenges related to limited opportunities for collaborative coordination and participation in shaping organizational direction. As Participant 04 noted, "We're not visioning together. … We're not co-creating across departments. … We're not building on each other's ideas" (July 8, 2025 interview). Others described the reduction of broader collaborative forums in favor of more centralized coordination structures. Participant 09 recalled a director saying, "If all the heads and directors of each department are aligned, then we don't need a general meeting" (July 3, 2025 interview).

In contrast, participants in leadership or coordination roles emphasized the importance of organizational structure, credibility, and operational consistency. Participant 12 explained: "We must have our policies, we must have our playbooks, manuals, and this kind of thing" (July 8, 2025 interview). Participants described these structures as responses to organizational growth, reputational concerns, and early operational crises.

At the same time, several participants expressed concern that increasing managerial oversight and procedural coordination were occurring alongside reduced opportunities for operational collaboration and direct cross-departmental communication. Participants described challenges related to information flow, responsiveness, and access to decision-making processes. Participant 13 noted that communication within [the managing department] had become increasingly "private" (July 2, 2025 interview), while Participant 10 described being discouraged from continuing direct conversations with the CEO, despite both parties considering the dialogue important (July 2, 2025 interview). Participants also described long delays in follow-up on critical exchanges. Participant 09 explained, "I really needed this communication because otherwise my projects wouldn't be able to happen" (July 3, 2025 interview).

More broadly, these differences appeared to reflect differing assumptions about how coordination should occur, whose knowledge should guide decision-making, and how the organization should balance accountability, efficiency, and collaborative participation during a critical transition period. The coexistence of these orientations appeared to contribute to difficulties in coordination in expectations, communication, and follow-through across the organization.

Each interview concluded with a brief systems sensing exercise,[4] as a low-pressure way for participants to engage with the approach. Participants were invited to "sense" into or take the perspective of a *resource* (a quality, capacity, or flow) that might support greater organizational coherence by listening deeply to that perspective with the body and felt senses. This approach helped surface

[4] The systems sensing aspects of the intervention were designed developmentally, starting with small moments during interviews and building incrementally each session; this offered a way of teaching new methods experientially, while laying foundations for participatory practice.

concepts such as “grace” as a resource, understood here as curiosity and openness toward understanding one another. It also highlighted felt connections to the Amazon rainforest and its ancestors and elders. When participants sensed from the perspective of the organization’s emerging Potential (a named element), metaphors of connection emerged, such as “two hands in a handshake” (Participant 03; June 27, 2025 interview), “building each other up” (Participant 13; July 2, 2025 interview), and “creating more spaces for ideating together” (Participant 04; July 8, 2025 interview). The sensing exercises contributed to developing a shared symbolic vocabulary that was later incorporated into session design.

Interview data and sensing reflections were synthesized into a visual slide presentation, presented during the first workshop session. Non-verbal feedback suggested resonance among participants. However, follow-up conversations with the CEO indicated that the insights were not perceived as new to the organization’s management team.

Phases 2a/b: Systems Sensing Sessions

Carri Munn and I co-facilitated two virtual workshops on Zoom. Each of the two sessions included 12 of the 18 team members, although the composition of participants differed slightly between the sessions. Participants represented a range of roles, including leadership, operations, and programmatic functions across multiple locations. Notably, two people with formal decision-making authority were absent from both sessions: a department head and an advisor connected to the funder.

Session 1: Guided Sensing Journey

In Session 1 (July 29, 2025), participants engaged in a two-hour guided “sensing journey” (Ritter et al., 2025), a structured, sequential somatic exploration of a system in which participants attune to different elements or key aspects or dimensions of the system. The process is akin to “making stops along a journey,” and visiting elements one at a time, with each element offering a distinct vantage point into the system (Zamierowski & Ritter, 2025, p. 14).

The elements identified in Phase 1 included the “Amazon rainforest,” its “ancestors,” the “organization” (past/present/future), “pressure/tension,” and “grace.” The inquiry guiding the process asked: What is there to know for the organization to move toward its fullest potential?

I facilitated the journey by inviting participants to imagine stepping into the perspective of each element and to sense what it is like by “listening deeply,” focusing their awareness on somatic sensations, intuitive or visual signals, and relational impressions as they brought their attention to each element at a time. Participants silently recorded their reflections on each element, followed by a structured dialogue in which insights were shared collectively.

Participants described vivid embodied experiences, such as:

> "The ancestors are underneath, supporting the whole network structure" (Participant 07; July 29, 2025 session 1).
>
> "We're a mycelial network; our power lies in collaboration across the network. To harness this power, we need to strengthen our own connections within the organization first" (Participant 06; July 29, 2025 session 1).
>
> "The water pressure of the Amazon River that cannot flow … that's the pressure our organization faces, and the need for trust" (Participant 08; July 29, 2025 session 1).

The metaphors echoed key interview themes, suggesting how the participants experienced or *felt* their own ecosystems within the organization. For example, interview data described communication breakdowns and blocked coordination across organizational activities, which Participant 08 (July 25, 2025 interview) experienced as "water pressure… that cannot flow." Similarly, a desire for greater connection and collaboration was expressed through the image of a "mycelial network" (Participant 06; July 29, 2025 session 1), pointing to interdependence and relational strength. In this way, the systems sensing exercise appeared to move participants beyond discursive accounts and into direct embodied engagement with system dynamics.

Session 2: Blind Systemic Constellation

In the second two-hour workshop (September 12, 2025), participants engaged in a blind systemic constellation (Hellinger et al., 1998), a structured, spatial method for exploring relational dynamics within a system. In this case, the system elements consisted of key organizational roles and departments identified during the co-design session. Participants were each asked to choose one of these elements (labeled A-L), but were not told which element they represented. This "blind" design allowed the process to unfold without being shaped by bias, prior interpretations, or interpersonal narratives.

Working with a shared online visual board (Google Slides), each participant moved their chosen colored icon relative to others until its position felt appropriate to them based on their embodied perception; they then oriented their "nose," or focus of attention, in the direction that felt correct to them. The virtual format was adapted from systemic constellation practices that moved online during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants were guided to remain attentive to bodily sensations, impulses, orientation, emotional responses, and shifts in attention while interacting with the shared spatial representation on screen. In this way, the visual field functioned as a relational and embodied point of reference through which participants engaged the system together despite physical distance. Spatial position, orientation, and movement were treated as

primary forms of data, together suggesting relational and systemic dynamics and generating a "living map" of the system. The co-created guiding inquiry question was: How can the organization activate its network from the inside out to realize its full potential?

Initial placements

The initial constellation placements (Figure 1) evoked a timeline of the organization's origins. The individual embodying Element A (later revealed as the CEO role) positioned his icon near the center. Element B, differentiated into B1 and B2 (later identified as the advisor and the initial funder), positioned themselves at the periphery. The individual representing Element A (CEO) described sensing a "flow of water," later understood by the representative as symbolizing early capital investment. The individual embodying Element C (a decision-making role) also selected a position at the periphery and oriented outward toward a "beautiful window."

During this phase, the participant embodying Element J experienced intermittent connection disruptions while attempting to take a position in the field.[5] This was observed by the group, and I noted it as potentially indicating communication challenges associated with this role, consistent with patterns reported in the interview phase.

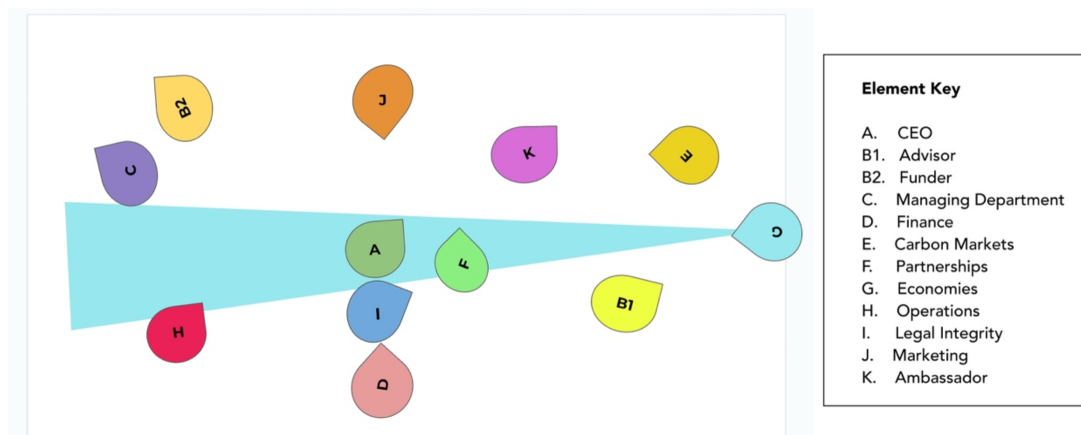

***Figure 1**: Initial constellation placements*

Mid-phase movement and interaction

As the constellation developed (Figure 2), I invited participants to adjust their positions in response to their felt experience. Relational patterns began to

[5] Participants were each assigned an element and embodied that element during the exercise. For readability, the movements and observations are described in terms of the elements themselves, rather than "the participant embodying the element."

emerge through movement, interaction, and participant descriptions. A founding-mission element (G), related to creating sustainable economies in the Amazon, moved diagonally across the field and requested to leave a "wake," represented visually as a blue triangular shape. Several participants responded to this movement. Element F described the experience as "innertubing[6] together with Element A," while Element A reported a "chaotic rush of energy … like a nest of ants erupting," later interpreted in the reflection session as the emergence of ideas. Element A later reported feeling more settled after the wake's influence, and Element K (the ambassador) oriented away from the triangular shape, explaining, "I feel I'm a house of people … I'm protecting."

Other participants responded differently. Element B2 (funder role) reported "the sensation of looking away and down … not wanting to be noticed." He later described, "I have a sensation of a philanthropist who gave away money and now … I regret it," and requested to transform into a "donut shape" to represent his attention turning inward.

At the same time, several elements expressed a pull toward the center. Element E described feeling "empty and light … like a balloon with a small tether to the ground." Element E shared a desire "to get closer to the center, it's a yearning," which was echoed by Elements H and G. Element I attempted to request movement into the center, but experienced repeated audio disruptions, making the request difficult to hear. In prior interviews, the participant in this role had described feeling unheard and mispositioned within the organization. It was also observed that Element G was positioned near the edge of the board and expressed a desire to move toward the center, but did not feel able to do so.

During this phase, a central shape began to stabilize as the earlier "wake" transformed. Element G described it as becoming "a pond … more settled … and still includes everyone." Other participants built on this shared image, with Element F describing it as "teeming with life" and Element D responding, "like a light growing." As facilitator, I offered a possible interpretation that the central form could relate to the organization's essence or purpose. Participants' responses—including head nods, verbal affirmations, and subsequent elaborations—suggested resonance with this framing. Element A then requested that the central shape expand so "everyone can be connected," which was met with affirmative responses (e.g., "awesome," "great") from Elements E, G, and H as their elements became fully positioned within the central form.

[6] "Innertubing" refers to a recreational activity of floating down a river together on inflatable tubes, used here as a playful metaphor for shared movement and flow.

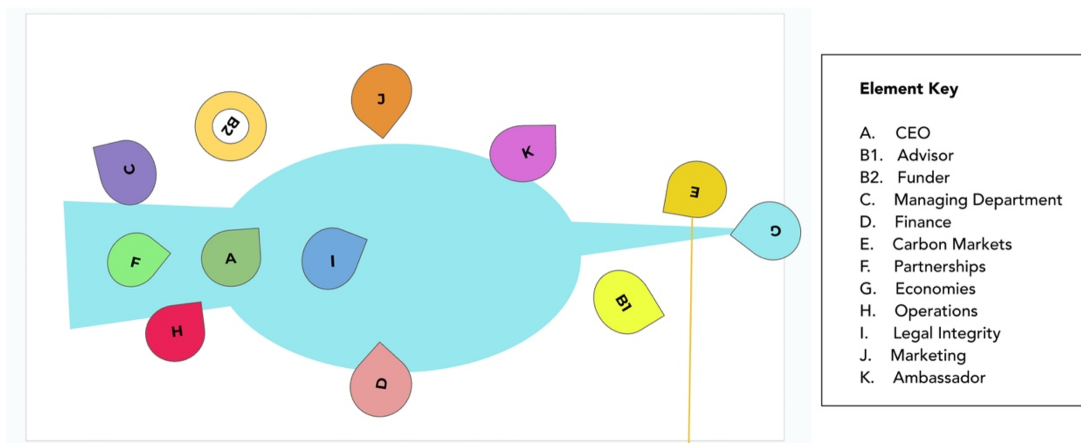

Figure 2: *Mid-phase constellation placements*

Final configuration

In the final spatial arrangement (Figure 3), participants settled into a relatively stable configuration. Most elements gathered around the central blue form, which was generally associated with the organization's essence or purpose. However, three key roles, B1/B2 (advisor and funder roles) and Element C (a decision-maker), remained positioned outside the central field and oriented away in different directions.

At the conclusion of the exercise, the identities of the elements were revealed before the session ended. Participant 01 noted that "it makes sense that [legal integrity] is at the center of everything." Due to time constraints, there was limited opportunity for a debrief or integration. I indicated that a subsequent session would be dedicated to reflecting on and integrating insights from the process.

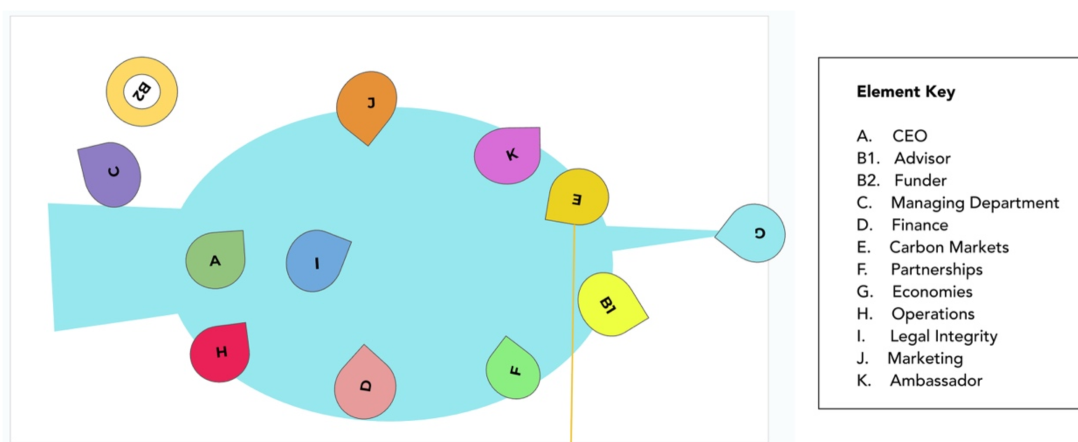

Figure 3: *Final positions on the living map*

Phases 3a/b: Integration and Reflection

Phase 3 included a brief 30-minute integration and reflection session (3a), followed by individual post-session interviews (3b). Due to scheduling constraints, the integration session was embedded within a regular operational meeting rather than a dedicated container. Follow-up interviews were conducted with participants who chose to reflect on insights from the process and whether these were carried forward into organizational practice.

Session 3: Integration Session

Session 3 was held one week after Session 2 (September 17, 2025). Several team members who had not participated in the two earlier systems sensing sessions were present during the operational meeting. Minutes before the integration session began, a decision to cancel an upcoming team retreat was communicated. Following this announcement, I observed shifts in tone of the meeting: facial expressions appeared more tense, some participants became more still, while others spoke more quickly and urgently. After checking whether it was still appropriate to continue, Participants 01 and 03 affirmed that Session 3 should proceed.

The session began with participants sharing a few insights from the constellation. Two participants who had not attended the systems sensing sessions expressed reservations about the legitimacy of the process. Participant 08, who had previously reported enjoying the first session, dismissed the constellation outcomes as “projections.” A senior leader (Participant 12), who had not participated in the earlier sessions, then spoke at length, emphasizing the need to refocus on strategy.

Given time constraints within the broader meeting, the session concluded shortly thereafter. As a result, there was a limited opportunity for collective reflection or integration of insights at the group level. Just before closing, Participant 03 noted in the chat that the constellation’s final image represented “a desired state, not the current one.” A flurry of thumbs-up followed.

Post-Session Interviews

Follow-up one-on-one conversations in subsequent months provided an opportunity to assess whether insights emerged during the systems sensing process, and how, if at all, they were carried forward into organizational practice.[7]

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[7] Some follow-up conversation occurred in the weeks following the last session and others in the new year due to conference and holiday schedules.

Several interviewees described the blind systemic constellation as supporting awareness of relational and systemic dynamics. Participant 04 reflected that the exercise "revealed the shape of our power dynamics … that are felt" (March 17, 2026 interview), while Participant 06 noted that it surfaced assumptions that "were already in our perception but were not expressed" (March 18, 2026 interview). Participant 09 similarly shared that "it helped us understand our internal dynamics" (March 19, 2026 interview), particularly through the visual map, which supported conversations to "connect the dots." Participant 09 added, "We saw [the central pond shape] as something like the Amazon region and the work that we do."

Some interviewees described shifts in how they related to others in the organization. Participant 01 reported that "a long-simmering tension that had drained energy across departments … vanished" (November 10, 2025 email), and that team members expressed greater empathy for one another. Participant 17 noted that participants "took away a broader appreciation for each other" and that the exercise initially made them feel "hopeful or empowered … like it was a launch pad for moving the organization forward" (March 10, 2026 interview). Participant 01 further reflected, "I felt the emotions of other team members and stakeholders. Those emotions carry memories. … This helps with strategic long-term planning and conflict resolution" (November 10, 2025 email).

At the same time, interviewees described limits to how these insights were taken up at the organizational level. Several participants (04, 06, 09, 10, 17) reported that little had changed in the organization, which they attributed in part to the limited participation of decision-makers. As Participant 17 stated, "There was no buy-in" (March 10, 2026 interview), while Participant 04 observed, "I don't feel like there was space to share our reflections or insights as a team because it was not prioritized … and I don't think [leadership] ever sat down and asked … what did this show us?" (March 17, 2026 interview). Participant 10 perceived resistance to change within the leadership (March 20, 2026 interview). Participant 02 similarly noted that no actions were carried forward, stating, "unfortunately, no" (March 12, 2026 interview).

Interviewees also described limited visibility into decision-making processes. Participant 06 noted, "we don't know the conclusion of [leadership]" (March 18, 2026 interview), while Participant 17 reflected that "there is a lot less transparency about why things happen" (March 20, 2026 interview).

Several participants described divergent perspectives among the leadership, including differences in how the organization's direction, roles, and priorities were understood. Participant 10 noted that leaders held "very different points of view" (March 20, 2026 interview). In reference to the final constellation image, Participant 06 described the differing orientations of leadership elements as "like magnetic fields … everyone is trying to keep with their own assumption on what is needed to be done" (March 18, 2026 interview). Participants also reflected on the outward-facing orientation of certain elements, noting that this positioning could be understood in multiple ways. For example, Participant 06 suggested

that Element C's outward orientation reflected how the [Managing Department] "brings a new perspective … of how [the organization] can position ourselves to the world" (March 18, 2026 interview).

Interviewees also pointed to differences in how specific roles were understood and positioned within the organization. In the constellation, Element I (Legal Integrity) was placed centrally within the configuration, which several participants (01, 06, 10) described as resonant with their experience of its importance. At the same time, participants noted that this role was not consistently prioritized in the organization's current structure. Participant 10 reflected that the advisor viewed this function as "risky" (March 20, 2026 interview), highlighting a contrast between how the role was perceived within the constellation and how it was valued in practice.

Participants described misalignment between formal roles and enacted authority. In some cases, decision-making influence appeared to be located outside formally designated roles. Participant 10 described a perceived discrepancy between formal leadership roles and how decision-making unfolded in practice (March 20, 2026 interview). Participant 17 similarly described "an unresolved dynamic" between leaders with differing visions and leadership styles (March 10, 2026 interview).

Several interviewees pointed to challenges in creating a shared organizational identity and direction. Participant 06 identified the core challenge as a lack of coordination, noting the absence of a "pedra angular" (cornerstone) in the form of a clear mission, vision, and values (March 18, 2026 interview). Participant 10 stated, "We still don't have a final decision about who [the organization] is" (March 20, 2026 interview), and described inconsistencies between how the organization was presented externally and how it was understood internally.

Some participants elaborated on ongoing challenges in organizational functioning. Participant 06 stated, "There is still dysfunction" (March 18, 2026 interview), while Participant 17 observed that decision-making had become "much more hierarchical… very vertical" (March 10, 2026 interview).

Findings

Analysis of the systemic constellation data, interview data, sensing journey reflections, and follow-up conversations identified three patterns in how participants experienced the systems sensing processes within this case. Specifically, participants described:

1. Increased awareness of relational and systemic dynamics,
2. Partial and uneven formation of shared understanding, and
3. Limited translation of insight into coordinated action.

Increased Awareness of Relational and Systemic Dynamics

Participants in the systems sensing sessions described increased awareness of relational and systemic dynamics, particularly through the articulation of perceptions that had previously been felt but not clearly expressed. The experiential engagement with the systemic constellation helped to make implicit or unarticulated aspects of the system more perceptible through sensations, spatial positioning, orientation, interaction, and the formation of a shared visual configuration.

Many participants experienced the process as clarifying or confirming existing organizational dynamics, suggesting that the constellation supported the recognition and articulation of previously unspoken perceptions. As participants engaged with the systemic constellation over time, patterns related to orientation, connection, distance, and attention became more noticeable and discussable within the process. Participants noted specific dynamics that became more perceptible, including differences in orientation toward central elements and shifts in perceived connection or agency.

These patterns corresponded with pre- and post-session interview data describing challenges related to clarity of direction, divergent perspectives among leadership, differences in how roles and priorities were understood, and fragmented coordination across the organization. Participants also described ongoing challenges in coordination and collaboration, alongside an emerging shift toward more centralized or hierarchical decision-making.

One interpretation of the constellation is that additional structure alone may not address these types of challenges in organizational governance. Rather than needing additional structure (hierarchy, procedures, protocols), a central issue appeared to involve differences in how authority is positioned and oriented across perspectives, as well as variation in how a central element—identified as purpose or the work in the Amazon—is experienced and enacted across the system.

Overall, the systemic constellation functioned as a structured context in which participants generated and engaged with perceptual and relational interpretations of the system in that moment. What became visible reflects a co-constructed and situated form of perception, emerging through interaction, embodiment, and context. In systemic constellation practice, such configurations are understood as relational representations influenced by the context and interactions within the field, rather than as fixed or objective depictions of the system (Hellinger et al., 1998). This includes both relationally shaped perception and interpretive processes, including the possibility of projection.

Partial and Uneven Formation of Shared Understanding

The systems sensing process generated moments of shared recognition and connection, but these did not fully stabilize across the group. During the systemic constellation, certain elements emerged as temporary shared reference points through participant interaction. For example, the emergence of a central "pond"

became a recurring point of orientation that gained resonance through repeated responses and interactions over time. The distributed process generated opportunities for implicit or felt experiences to become more collectively perceptible. Through interaction, certain perceptions were reinforced and elaborated, while others fell away. The process also sparked conversation about the meaning of the elements and their positions, orientations, and patterns, allowing implicit perceptions to become shareable and open to collective engagement.

However, shared understanding remained uneven. Participants described differences in how the process was experienced, including variation in what aspects of the constellation were noticed, taken up, or considered meaningful. In many cases, recognition of specific patterns or insights remained localized within subsets of participants or informal conversations, rather than becoming collectively integrated.

These variations suggest that while shared perception may begin to form through interaction, in this specific case study, it remained partial and uneven, shaped by differing perspectives, limited opportunities for collective sensemaking, and varying levels of engagement.

Limited Translation of Insight Into Coordinated Action

Participants described limited translation of the insights that emerged during the systems sensing process into coordinated action. While moments of increased clarity and partial shared understanding were reported, these did not consistently lead to identifiable changes in organizational practice.

Participants attributed this to several conditions. A central factor was the absence or only partial participation of individuals who held formal decision-making roles, which limited the integration of insights into decision-making processes. When key decision-makers did not participate in the systems sensing sessions, they were not part of the shared experiential process through which insight was generated and were therefore not positioned to carry it forward into action.

Participants also described limited opportunities for collective integration and reflection, resulting in insights remaining localized. Some noted skepticism toward the systems sensing method among those who did not participate, further limiting the uptake of insights. In addition, participants described limited visibility into how decisions in the organization were made and uncertainty about whether any actions had resulted from the process. The absence of a shared experiential process across participants and non-participants had made it difficult to move into the planned fourth phase, which was intended to focus on collective integration, decision-making, and next steps.

In this pilot study, the translation of insight into coordinated action depended on structural and relational conditions, including participation across authority structures, opportunities for collective integration, and the extent to

which insights became shared across the group rather than remaining localized. Where these conditions were limited, insights remained primarily diagnostic, with limited pathways for incorporation into ongoing governance and decision-making processes.

Discussion

This study began from the belief that governance challenges in complex systems may arise not only from difficulties in coordinating action, but also from how perception, meaning-making, and authority are formed, shared, and negotiated across participants. In this specific case study, systems sensing practices contributed to making relational dynamics more perceptible through spatial positioning, orientation, and interaction. In doing so, the process created conditions in which aspects of the system that were previously implicit became available for collective engagement and interpretation.

However, making aspects of the system more perceptible did not automatically lead to a stable shared understanding or coordinated action. While participants experienced moments of partial shared recognition regarding certain elements of the system, differences in how roles, priorities, and organizational direction were interpreted persisted across the group. These findings suggest that coherence is not a fixed end state, but a fragile and ongoing condition dependent on how perception is formed, shared, and sustained within a group.

The findings further show that making the system's implicit dynamics more collectively perceptible was insufficient on its own to translate insight into coordinated action within the organization. In this case study, opportunities for collective integration and participation across authority structures were uneven, limiting the extent to which insights generated through the process became integrated into governance practice. This reflects a structural gap between those involved in generating insight and those positioned to act on it, consistent with research showing that participation does not guarantee influence in decision-making (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012).

These findings suggest that governance challenges may arise not only from a lack of solutions but also from the absence of conditions under which perception becomes sufficiently formed, shared, and actionable. When perception remains fragmented or when those involved in generating insight are not positioned to act on it, coordination becomes difficult to sustain. Under such conditions, organizations may default to more centralized, hierarchical, or control-oriented forms of governance rather than developing coherence through shared orientation and understanding.

The outcomes of this case may also have been shaped by the intervention design which unfolded through a limited number of virtual sessions during a period of significant organizational transition. More sustained engagement, broader participation of decision-making actors, or the use of in-person

facilitation may have created different opportunities for collective integration and coordinated action.

Conclusion

This study suggests that governance challenges in complex systems may arise not only from how decisions are made, but also from the conditions under which shared understanding, meaning, and coordinated action become possible across participants. Systems sensing practices supported participants in articulating relational and systemic dynamics and, in some cases, forming partial shared recognition. However, the findings suggest that the movement from perception to action depends not only on awareness, but on governance conditions that support the collective formation, integration, and enactment of insight across participants and decision-making structures.

From this perspective, systems sensing practices offer one possible approach for expanding how groups engage systemic dynamics, while also revealing the structural and participatory conditions under which insight may be more likely to become actionable. This points to an important direction for future research and practice: how governance processes might be designed not only to support participation and decision-making, but also to enable shared perception to become integrated into collective ownership, commitment, and coordinated action within complex systems.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding this manuscript. The author had a prior professional connection with an employee who facilitated the initial introduction to the organization.

Ethics Statement

Participation in the research pilot was voluntary, and it was framed as an organizational learning process exploring systems sensing practices. The study was conducted in accordance with California Institute of Integral Studies' Human Research Review Committee guidelines. Participants were informed that the research pilot included a reflective research component, and written consent was obtained for the use of anonymized reflections, workshop observations, and scholarly reporting. Identifying details (including names, roles, and contextual specifics) have been altered and anonymized to protect participant confidentiality. All data were securely stored on password-protected devices and encrypted platforms accessible only to the research team. Data were handled in accordance with institutional guidelines to ensure confidentiality and protection of participant information.

Generative AI Statement

The author used ChatGPT (OpenAI) to assist in identifying potentially relevant literature, supporting the structural organization of selected sections, and assisting with sentence-level phrasing and lexical choice during editing. All content was written, reviewed, and verified by the author.

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Book Review

Embodied Governance and Democratic Transformation:

Review of The Art of Facilitating Action Research: A First-Person Account in Policymaking (Larrea, 2024)

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This review examines a book on organizational and systemic change toward more democratic forms of governance. Its author, Miren Larrea, is a senior researcher at Orkestra-Basque Institute of Competitiveness, and the book distills a body of practice-based knowledge that is rarely made explicit. The book draws on her sustained engagement with policymakers and public institutions, most notably the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa (Basque Country, Spain), and turns years of institutional experimentation in collaborative governance into a reflective account of how transformative change unfolds in practice when multiple actors attempt to govern together. This trajectory has been personally demanding, shaped as much by collaboration as by resistance. Its value lies precisely in rendering these experiences intelligible and available for reflection beyond the Basque context.

The book is grounded in *Action Research for Territorial Development* (ARTD), an explicitly holistic and place-based approach oriented not only toward economic indicators but toward the health of territorial ecosystems. As a form of action research, ARTD does not stop at observation or interpretation, but intervenes to

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learn through attempted change. Larrea situates her practice within the broader tradition of action research while arguing that its transformative capacity depends on holding together three modes of inquiry that conventional research often separates: *first-person work*, understood as self-inquiry into beliefs, emotions, and assumptions; *second-person work,* focused on relational dynamics and collective learning among stakeholders; and *third-person work,* oriented toward institutional change and territory-wide patterns. The decisive move in her argument is to treat first-person work not as an ethical supplement, but as a critical lever of transformation. Without sustained attention to the inner orientations of facilitators and leaders, institutional change risks reproducing familiar patterns under new vocabularies.

In this respect, the book also resonates with recent work in awareness-based systems change, particularly in its attention to the social field, embodied knowledge, and collective sense-making. Larrea's account can thus be read as documenting the practical conditions under which field-level shifts become possible. Her emphasis on facilitation, tacit and embodied knowledge, and the fragile interplay of trust, conflict, and attention suggests that transformative governance depends not only on actors and structures, but also on the quality of the relational field they co-create.

Situated at the intersection of action research, governance studies, and systems change, the book advances a practice-based theory of transformative facilitation. It foregrounds tensions between power, knowledge, and emotion, arguing that democratic transformation depends less on resolving these dynamics than on learning to engage them reflexively. Facilitation thus emerges not as a neutral technique, but as a critical site of political and epistemic intervention.

The Art of Facilitating Action Research was written during a research stay at Arantzazulab, a Democracy Innovation Lab, whose atmosphere of "distance and peace" (Larrea, 2024, p. 4) enabled the consolidation of more than fifteen years of practice. This context is not offered merely as background, but as integral to the form of awareness the book promotes. I have been a research fellow at Arantzazulab and so witnessed this book come to life. I have also heard Miren speak on several academic occasions and sensed a connection between her work and research on awareness-based social change. Recently, Scharmer and Pomeroy (2026) helped me name that intuition more clearly, especially through its call for a broader science attentive not only to systems and outcomes, but also to the social field itself, that is, to the quality of attention, relation, and collective sense-making through which transformation becomes possible.

Larrea's book offers a careful account of how facilitation works in real governance settings, where power, emotion, embodied knowledge, and conflict cannot be bracketed away. What Scharmer and Pomeroy (2026) argue for, the need to expand what counts as valid knowledge beyond external observation, helps illuminate Larrea's insistence on experiential knowledge and on the tacit dimensions of facilitation. Their emphasis on the social field also helps clarify

why Larrea gives such weight to trust, resistance, emotion, and the quality of shared attention. At the same time, her book gives this emerging paradigm a sharper political texture by showing that these subtler dimensions of change are inseparable from power asymmetries, the struggle for democratic legitimacy, and the difficult work of sustaining collaboration across difference.

Facilitation as an Awareness Practice

The book is explicitly framed as a first-person account. This is not merely a stylistic choice, but a methodological and epistemic stance. Larrea deliberately departs from conventional academic modes to foreground forms of experiential knowledge that often remain tacit or undervalued in professional and policy-oriented research. She adopts a mode of self-inquiry that places her own trajectory under scrutiny, revisiting the stories, decisions, and interventions that have shaped her practice. Facilitation is thus not presented as a neutral technique applied to external systems, but as a situated and relational practice, inseparable from the facilitator's assumptions, emotions, and beliefs. In this sense, the book enacts a central claim of awareness-based systems change: transformation begins with how practitioners perceive and interpret the systems they inhabit.

A distinctive feature of the writing process is the use of simple hand-drawn illustrations as a form of art-based action research. Larrea describes this practice as "slow thinking" (2024, p. 19): taking time to draw feelings, tensions, and lived experience before translating them into words. The book allows embodied and intuitive knowledge to surface prior to conceptual framing, creating space for ambiguity, discomfort, and not-knowing. In awareness-based terms, drawing operates as a practice of suspension, interrupting habitual cognitive patterns and enabling tacit relational dynamics to be perceived rather than prematurely resolved. Emotions and uncertainties, often treated as noise in rationalist policy discourse, can be read here as a form of warm data, signals of systemic misalignment or latent potential.

Although written in the first person, the book presents itself as collective in orientation. Knowledge is depicted as something that emerges between people over time, through cycles of action, reflection, and recalibration. The inclusion of two prefaces reinforces this. In the first, Hilary Bradbury emphasizes Larrea's capacity to "unfreeze" social systems caught in polarized power dynamics (2024, p. 11). Conflict and emotional intensity are not treated as obstacles to be minimized, but as potential entry points for transformation. This reframing has important implications for action research practice. It suggests that heightened emotion may signal moments when underlying assumptions are being unsettled, and that facilitation grounded in awareness can help systems work through those moments rather than suppress them. Bradbury situates Larrea's work within a broader cultural shift inspired by feminist and partnership-based principles, while also highlighting how the combination of illustrations and analysis resists binary, either–or reasoning.

The second preface, originally written for the Basque-language edition by Ainhoa Arrona, highlights Larrea's contribution to reintroducing *phronesis* [practical wisdom] into the social sciences (2024, p. 13). Arrona frames the book as written from the "memory of the body" (2024, pp. 32–40), articulating a form of knowing that integrates expert understanding, lived experience, and process awareness. This wisdom challenges the fragmentation typical of academic specialization while also affirming minority languages as valuable vehicles for action research in different parts of the world.

Governance is sometimes framed as a technical instrument for control, coordination, or the management of legitimacy. Many policy reforms implicitly assume that better designs or incentives are sufficient in themselves to generate change. By contrast, Larrea presents action research as a means of democratizing knowledge production and of engaging with the emotions, mental models, and theories in use that shape policy processes in practice. In this framing, awareness is not an individual achievement, but a collective capacity cultivated through carefully held spaces of inquiry.

What Makes Facilitation Transformative?

Larrea's central claim is that facilitation becomes transformative when practiced as a deliberate art of *integration*. Rather than treating facilitation as neutral technical support for policy design or project management, she frames it as a disciplined effort to bring into a productive relationship some elements that institutional life usually keeps apart, sometimes explicitly, more often tacitly. In this account, systemic change depends less on choosing the "right" side of familiar oppositions than on cultivating the capacity to work within them, reconfiguring their relations so they can become mutually reinforcing rather than cancelling each other out.

Larrea develops this argument through her long-term collaboration with the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa, a small Basque province of approximately 730,000 inhabitants,[1] marked by a strong local identity, an industrial legacy, and a dense civic fabric that weaves together coastal and inland communities. Over time, the provincial government shifted from a hierarchical administrative model toward more collaborative forms of governance. Early participatory experiments and public-private initiatives culminated in a strategic turn in 2015 with the launch of the *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* ["Building the future"] strategy, which institutionalized experimentation, multi-actor collaboration, and long-term anticipation. By the early 2020s, this trajectory had consolidated into a more systemic and polycentric model, underpinned by dedicated governance structures

1 Official information about Gipuzkoa and its system of governance is available here: https://www.gipuzkoa.eus/web/council

and learning-oriented forms of meta-governance. For a collective and nuanced account of this evolving context, see Barandiaran et al. (2023).

Larrea narrates this trajectory through sustained action research conducted in Gipuzkoa between 2009 and 2023, spanning multiple political cycles. The work moves from an initial focus on social capital, through a post-2011 reorientation toward territorial development, to a broader emphasis after 2015 on collaborative governance. The continuity of the research relationship across political change is presented as evidence of durable effects. Larrea argues that the process persisted because it cultivated collective capability among heterogeneous actors, including policymakers, small and medium-sized enterprises, local development agencies, and university partners.

Three Institutional Spaces Where Collective Capability Took Form

Larrea describes the emergence of collective capability in three institutional spaces within the Gipuzkoa policy ecosystem, each addressing a distinct coordination challenge.

First, the Territorial Development Laboratory (TDLab), formally established in 2017, focused on fostering collaborative governance between the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa and eleven county-level development agencies. The core bottleneck it addressed was relational rather than technical. The provincial administration was perceived as too large and distant to engage effectively, while small and medium-sized enterprises struggled to navigate provincial structures. The TDLab responded by positioning local development agencies as intermediary facilitators, reshaping relationships between macro-level policy and micro-level economic activity. This achievement was less in policy innovation than in the gradual construction of shared language and trust across institutional boundaries.

Second, the Etorkizuna Eraikiz Think Tank began as a space for reflection parallel to formal decision-making, where stakeholder input could be heard without direct consequences. Through the ARTD process, it evolved from a model of research-for-policy toward a research-as-policy one, becoming increasingly embedded in decision-making itself. Deliberation groups addressing complex systemic challenges are chaired by a Deputy (equivalent to a minister), ensuring that those accountable for outcomes participate in the production of shared understanding. Knowledge is thus not transferred after deliberation but generated within governance processes.

Third, the Governance Laboratory operated as an integrative space, intended to prevent the overall strategy from fragmenting into a collection of loosely connected projects. Larrea's "nervous system" (2024, pp. 28–39) metaphor captures this function: without ongoing communication and coherence, initiatives risk duplication or misalignment. Through ARTD, the Governance Laboratory provided a connective infrastructure through which experiments exchange learning and orient themselves toward a systemic perspective.

Four Process Features: Braiding, Friction, Disagreement, and Suppression

Larrea's analysis then turns to the barriers that made her action research journey both demanding and revealing. Four features appeared as recurring dynamics that shape how collective capability is built and constrained over time.

A first recurring feature is what Larrea describes as a "knowledge braid" (2024, p. 32), the integration of experiential knowledge, disciplinary knowledge, and process knowledge. Experiential knowledge refers to stakeholders' tacit and lived understanding, disciplinary knowledge to formal academic or expert contributions, and process knowledge to the situated expertise of facilitation: the strand that holds the other two together. Without it, expert analysis and lived experience risk passing one another without meaningful engagement. But this exposed a structural weakness: process knowledge is rarely recognized as knowledge by either policymakers or academic communities. Its professional invisibility helps explain later patterns of emotional exhaustion, as demanding relational labor is essential to the work yet remains largely unacknowledged and unrewarded.

Second is the central role of *friction*. Transformation, in Larrea's account, does not occur through smooth collaboration but through managed resistance, when stakeholders challenge researchers' proposals and researchers, in turn, question stakeholders' assumptions. Facilitation involves distinguishing between conflict that opens learning and conflict that closes it, a task complicated by the proximity to power that defines ARTD. Because the work is funded by policymakers who may also be its object, hierarchical authority can sometimes override deliberation, reshaping research agendas unilaterally. In other moments, researchers are compelled to navigate political realities by building alliances within policy structures. At certain moments, the process hinged on a fragile kind of trust. Policymakers did not necessarily share the researchers' perspective, and some of the moves proposed by the facilitation team ran against their administrative instincts. Yet they accepted them, sometimes almost against their better judgment, because they trusted the team's capacity to hold the process. One politician later recalled those episodes as moments of "deep learning" (Larrea, 2024, p. 37), though not without ambivalence: at times, he admitted, it felt as if outsiders had entered the institution and were telling them how to make policy. Precisely there lay the force of the process. Trust could, for a moment, offset formal hierarchy and give facilitation real weight. These were the moments when action research became most transformative, and also when its burden of responsibility was felt most acutely.

The third is what Larrea terms "tacit disagreement" (2024, p. 38), a form of passive resistance. Here, the obstacle is not open conflict but gradual disengagement. Leaders voice formal support for action research in politically appropriate terms while withholding resources, follow-through, or behavioral

change. Processes then stall and dissipate without confrontation, ending in what Larrea depicts as a bureaucratic death by stagnation (2024, p. 39).

The fourth feature concerns *emotional suppression*. Across more than fifteen years of work, the process is saturated with joy, frustration, anger, and sadness, yet institutional dialogue remains apparently rational and professional, relegating emotion to the private sphere. Larrea is explicit that facilitators themselves were complicit, lacking both language and skill to integrate emotion into professional practice (2024, p. 40). Over time, accumulated and unprocessed affect becomes a key driver of exhaustion. It is this largely hidden emotional material, rather than any single methodological insight, that ultimately propelled her toward the integrative framework through which the book's learning is organized.

The Three Spheres of Transformation

Larrea engaged with the literature on complexity-oriented change in search of concepts that could account for her practice. This inquiry led her to the *Three Spheres of Transformation* framework (Leichenko et al., 2022, among other references discussed in the book), which she adapts and mobilizes as a diagnostic heuristic. Used in this way, the framework helps explain why change efforts often falter by situating transformation across three interdependent arenas rather than reducing it to a single level of intervention.

The *Practical Sphere* concerns visible behaviors and technical responses: policy programs, instruments, and concrete actions. It corresponds to second-person work focused on groups and communities and is often the primary focus of reform efforts. The *Political Sphere* addresses the rules of the game, including institutional structures, norms, power relations, and resource allocation. This sphere aligns with third-person inquiry oriented toward systemic patterns and territory-wide impact. The *Personal Sphere* is the least visible yet, in Larrea's account, the most consequential. It encompasses beliefs, values, worldviews, emotions, and paradigms that shape what actors perceive as possible, legitimate, or worth pursuing, and corresponds to first-person inquiry.

Larrea's central claim is that durable transformation requires coordinated movement across all three spheres. What makes the book especially valuable, however, is that she does not present this coordination as harmonious or easily achieved. On the contrary, one of her strengths as a writer is her ability to help the reader stay with the friction that arises when personal dispositions, relational processes, and institutional structures pull in different directions. Rather than smoothing over those tensions, she treats them as intrinsic to transformative work.

This is where her analysis becomes especially useful. She shows that change efforts often stall not because actors lack good intentions, but because movement in one sphere is not matched in the others. New collaborative practices may emerge at the interpersonal level while institutions remain unchanged; formal

reforms may be adopted without corresponding shifts in habits, emotions, or assumptions; personal learning may deepen without altering collective routines. Her account helps the reader recognize these misalignments without reducing them to simple failure.

Just as importantly, Larrea offers conceptual and narrative tools for navigating this thorny terrain. Her recurring attention to dichotomies, expert and experiential knowledge, efficiency and participation, reason and emotion, public and private, gives the reader a way of naming tensions that are common in practice yet often left unspoken. She does not promise their resolution once and for all. Instead, she models a more demanding stance: learning to stay with them, to work within them, to read them diagnostically, and to facilitate processes in which tension becomes a source of movement rather than paralysis. That is one of the book's most useful achievements: changes in programs or practices, and even in formal rules, are unlikely to hold if underlying beliefs and assumptions remain unexamined. Conversely, personal insight unaccompanied by institutional and practical shifts risks collapsing into introspection without consequence. The strength of the framework lies in forcing facilitators to place both political arrangements and personal worldviews explicitly on the agenda, rather than treating them as neutral background conditions.

Dichotomic Thinking and the Work of Mutuality

With these lenses in place, Larrea turns to a set of dichotomies that function as recurring points of resistance in institutional change. These oppositions are not merely conceptual. They describe patterned biases through which organizations legitimize certain ways of knowing and acting while marginalizing others. In Larrea's mapping, policymaking cultures tend to privilege expert knowledge, planning, theory, power, efficiency, reason, objectivity, publicness, actor roles, and masculine-coded qualities. Conversely, experiential knowledge, emergence, practice, love, participation, emotion, subjectivity, private dimensions, facilitation, and feminine-coded qualities are routinely devalued. The task of transformative facilitation is therefore not to invert these hierarchies, but to rebalance systems already tilted, cultivating *mutuality*, understood as a relationship in which opposing poles constrain and enable one another.

Among these dichotomies, Larrea gives weight to the hierarchy of expert over experiential knowledge. In deliberative settings, academic contributors are often privileged, while stakeholders' tacit understanding is relegated to an anecdotal or merely supplementary role. Closely related is the tension between planning and emergence. Linear planning satisfies bureaucratic demands for predictability, yet complex change unfolds through iterative cycles of action and reflection that resist advance specification. Emergent practice must therefore be translated into forms legible to hierarchical systems, a process that can dilute its generative potential. A similar dynamic shapes the theory–practice divide, where demands for theoretical certainty delay action even when situated responses are

urgently required. Against this, action research insists that practice itself is a source of knowledge, not merely its application.

Particularly revealing is the opposition between power and love, articulated in terms drawn from Adam Kahane (2010). Power refers to the drive toward realization and output, while love names the drive toward unity, trust, and care. Larrea argues that power without love becomes extractive, eroding relationships, while love without power becomes unsustainable, placing disproportionate burdens on facilitators who hold cohesion without decision-making authority. The integrative demand is not balance as compromise, but a mutual reinforcement of realization and unity.

The efficiency versus participation dichotomy is illustrated through the story of the Industry 4.0 program (Larrea, 2024, pp. 77–79). An initially rapid, hierarchical design appeared efficient but failed in implementation, requiring a restart. A slower, participatory redesign, initially criticized as inefficient, produced stronger alignment with firms' needs and rapid enrolment once relaunched. Participation is thus framed not as a normative embellishment but as a condition for durable effectiveness.

Larrea also foregrounds the reason–emotion dichotomy, arguing that excluding emotion makes governance both fragile and insincere. Another concrete episode illustrates this claim: during the TDLab agreement process, an eruption of anger, institutionally coded as unprofessional at the time, was later recognized by participants as the moment when genuine change began (2024, pp. 81–82). Emotional expression does not displace rationality but enables forms of truth-telling that reconfigure relationships. The example is compelling, though it raises unresolved questions about how to distinguish between generative and destructive emotional expression.

The opposition between objectivity and subjectivity is treated less as a methodological debate than as a practical barrier to agreement. In the TDLab, quantitative "objective" diagnoses failed to resolve disagreement, while a "subjective" mapping of positions surfaced conflicting narratives and created conditions for intersubjective work. The implication is not that cold data are irrelevant, but that they cannot substitute for addressing the interpretive frames through which actors understand one another.

The public–private dichotomy further constrains deliberation. When vulnerabilities, fears, or career risks remain private, key sources of resistance remain inaccessible. Sharing personal dimensions can humanize positions and enable movement, even as it exposes participants to institutional risk. Larrea then links these dynamics to gendered patterns of labor. In some of the action research experiences she recounts, Larrea observes that male policymakers tended to occupy visible roles associated with rational agency, while women within research teams more often assumed relational and facilitative work coded as feminine and consequently undervalued. As I read her, Larrea is not arguing for the feminization of policy, but for a rebalancing in which feminine forms of facilitation become visible and valued, while women and men can more equally

inhabit roles of agency, research, and care. In this way, agency and care are jointly valued and held in balance, rather than care being relegated to invisible work.

Finally, Larrea critiques the dichotomy between actors and facilitators, one that the research team initially reproduced in its own representations, with facilitators appearing as peripheral presences alongside visible actors. The proposed resolution is the figure of the “facilitative actor” (2024, pp. 142–144), someone who exercises agency while cultivating conditions for others to act. This move carries clear leadership implications: collaborative governance demands roles capable of holding visibility and relational stewardship together, without collapsing one into the other.

Facilitation as Democratic Rebalancing

The Art of Facilitating Action Research culminates in a normative claim: transformative facilitation is not neutral. Because institutional systems are structurally biased toward expert knowledge, planning, power, and actor-centered visibility, facilitative work often requires actively reinforcing what is marginalized: experiential knowledge, emergence, emotion, care, and participation. This is not framed as ideological preference, but as systemic rebalancing oriented toward mutuality. In this sense, *facilitation is political* because it intervenes in what counts as legitimate knowledge, appropriate feeling, and proper action, and because it deliberately connects the Personal Sphere of beliefs and emotions with the Political Sphere of institutional power and the Practical Sphere of policy outcomes. Drawing on her long-term experience in Gipuzkoa, Larrea advances a general conclusion: durable results depend on linking subjective and relational realities with structural governance arrangements, and on cultivating facilitative actors capable of holding these tensions without resolving them into simplistic choices.

The originality of Larrea’s contribution invites several questions that merit more sustained discussion. A first concerns the normative basis of facilitation. The book argues convincingly that facilitation is not, and perhaps cannot be, neutral, particularly where transformation requires counterbalancing perspectives, forms of knowledge, or modes of practice that have historically been marginalized. Yet the criteria by which such rebalancing should be guided remain only partially specified. The reader is left wanting a fuller account of how facilitators might distinguish between necessary asymmetry and undue normative projection, especially in plural and contested democratic settings.

A second issue concerns scope and transferability. One of the book’s great strengths is its rootedness in the concrete institutional and territorial context of Gipuzkoa. At the same time, this situatedness raises the question of how far its conceptual vocabulary, and particularly its account of transformative facilitation, can travel beyond the enabling conditions of that case. The book clearly aspires to broader relevance, but the terms of that generalization could have been more explicitly examined.

A third point concerns epistemic status. Larrea makes a compelling case for the importance of tacit, embodied, and experiential forms of knowing, and this is one of the book's most significant interventions. Yet because her project is not merely descriptive but also methodological and normative, the question of how such forms of knowledge are to be validated, contested, and rendered publicly accountable within democratic governance remains only partially resolved. Part of her answer, however, might be performative as much as argumentative: accountability begins with transparency, and this publication is therefore not an add-on to the action-research cycle but an essential moment within it. Published open access in Basque, English, and Spanish in the University of Deusto's Territorial Development Series, the book treats facilitation as a site of knowledge production, power, and democratic transformation. Its central achievement is to make visible dimensions of governance that are usually obscured: the relational, emotional, and awareness-based work through which collective action becomes possible. By articulating the Three Spheres of Transformation and grounding them in lived practice, Larrea offers practitioners a coherent orientation for navigating complexity without reducing it to technique. Her emphasis on slow thinking, knowledge braiding, and relational accountability provides a timely counterpoint to accelerated, transactional, and output-driven models of governance, especially in "times of rupture" (Scharmer and Pomeroy, 2026) when democracy appears increasingly fragile.

This is a brave book. By writing in the first person, legitimizing bodily memory and emotion, and treating care work and facilitation as politically consequential, Larrea departs from dominant academic and institutional conventions. These choices give the book much of its ethical force and reflective depth. They also mark the point at which some of its greatest strengths become, at times, its principal limitations. Readers seeking prescriptive guidance, scalable tools, or tightly specified causal claims may find the argument demanding. The reliance on reflective narration and visual material leaves some analytical tensions unresolved, especially concerning how facilitative practices travel across contexts marked by different configurations of power. Larrea emphasizes the multilocal character of the research team, working across Spain, Norway, and Argentina, to suggest that the learning generated is not reducible to a singular Basque case. At the same time, the text leaves open how far this trans-territorial relevance might extend beyond contexts with comparable institutional density and long-term commitment to experimentation. This openness, however, appears intentional. Rather than closing debate, Larrea invites readers into an ongoing practice of inquiry. The book therefore succeeds less as a how-to manual and more as a reflective and generative account, one that reshapes how governance, democracy, and action research might be understood and practiced together.

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Innovation in Praxis

Islands of Sanity, Sanctuary, and Solidarity:

Women Politicians in Australia Recoding Power Through Relational Governance

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Abstract

Islands of coherence are recoding power for women in Australian Parliaments. We reflect on the emergent work and impact of Next25's initiative, Improving Democracy: Transforming Parliament for Women, as an anarchive of how power can be recoded within formal institutions and resistant existing power dynamics to improve our democratic spaces for the participation and flourishing of all. A new form of relational governance has emerged from power being held with an open mind (new ways of seeing and knowing), open heart (new ways of being and

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relating) and open will (new ways of doing), which has created spaces of Sanity, Sanctuary, and Solidarity for women leaders in politics in Australia. This initiative was catalysed by a group of women parliamentarians from across the political spectrum in the New South Wales state parliament, Australia, and has since gone nationwide. Their vision was to disrupt the way that politics is enacted in Australia, as reflected in their lived experience, and evidenced by the prevalence of bullying, harassment and sexual misconduct documented in the Broderick Report (Broderick & Co.,2022), and the structural inequities of power and representation identified in the Australian Human Rights Commission report (2021). Four years on, these islands of coherence demonstrate that power in politics need not be zero-sum. When women politicians collectively align their attention, intention and agency, as described by Scharmer and Kaufer (2025), a more generative form of relational governance becomes not only possible but resilient.

Keywords
relational governance, power in politics, ecosystem leadership, awareness-based systems transformation

Introduction

> When a system is far from equilibrium, small islands of coherence in a sea of chaos have the capacity to lift the entire system to a higher order.
>
> —Attributed to Ilya Prigogine

An Archipelago Emerges Across Australia's Parliaments

There have been many shifts and breakthroughs catalysed by individual trailblazers to transform the experience and position of women within entrenched parliamentary power structures. One notable example in the Oceanic region is the reverberation of former Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard's Misogyny Speech (2012), in which she named and evidenced the systemic nature of misogyny in political life. Another is Jacinda Ardern, the former Prime Minister of New Zealand, from across the Tasman Sea, who in her recent book "Different Kind of Power" (2025) shows us that compassionate and inclusive leadership underpinned by clear values and purpose is not only possible, but capable of navigating times marked by a pandemic, polarisation and terrorism.

These rumblings and cracks are akin to the eruptions of individual volcanoes on the deep-sea floor, shifting the currents of the oceanic surface of existing power structures and norms in the political system. We are now witnessing a collective movement in Australian Parliaments that is making visible the volcanoes as *islands of coherence* above the surface of what is often experienced as a sea of chaos for women in politics.

The impact of this movement is reflected in the experience of a Member of Parliament (MP) who is an alumna of Next25's Improving Democracy: Transforming Parliament for Women Program, and recounts an experience during a particularly contentious debate:

> Members of the public came into the gallery to protest, and because of where I sit in the chamber, they were behind me, which felt very unsafe. A woman MP from the opposition bench came to sit with me on the cross bench, and the willingness for her to do that in front of others was so powerful, I felt so seen, a feeling of solidarity. (Participant A, Alumnae Workshop 2, October 2025)

The other woman is also an alumna of the program, a member of what the women parliamentarians have self-named The Collective. This is an example of how women politicians are recoding power in Australian politics. They are demonstrating how new codes of power, grounded in principles of relational governance, can be transformational within existing codes that are constrained by established institutional norms. These new codes are being created by the women nurturing the quality of relationships as the ground and the social soil of their islands of coherence. They have been able to do this by aligning collective intention and attention to strengthen their sense of power and agency. The "social soil" has been cultivated firstly by having space to collectively experience sanity as clear seeing and sense making of the current parliamentary system with curiosity and an open mind (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2025). This enabled the co-creation of sanctuary, a safe and loving space with compassion and an open heart where trust was built. From this, solidarity, the capacity to resist orthodoxies to transform relations and outcomes with courage and an open will has arisen. This has propelled the emergence of islands of coherence in a sea of chaos—a safe and nurturing gathering place for women's business (Wright, 2023)—to co-create new implicit mental models: semi-explicit webs of relationships and explicit practices (Kania et al., 2018) that are recoding power in politics.

Sea of Chaos: Power in the Parliamentary System

Australia's parliamentary and political system is structured primarily on the Westminster model, but also on myriad informal and often invisible cultural structures and norms. Adversarial but also compliance-oriented by design, power in this system has a few distinctive features: it is hierarchical, formally concentrated and party-mediated. It is also inherently, historically gendered (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021). Significant informal power exists and shapes outcomes within Australia's political system. However, the exercise of this informal power is constrained by the same cultural norms and orthodoxies and trapped in incentive and reward structures that straightjacket new patterns or ways of thinking, doing and being from emerging.

The public, as well as many actors in the political system, are weary of this meta-narrative. And the way women are treated in politics and the

parliamentary system is a significant part of the overall problem of low trust in democracy (Baniamin & Jamil, 2022; Barnes & Beaulieu, 2019; Ulbig, 2007). A series of commissions and reports gave formal voice to what many parliamentarians felt and experienced, and what many Australians perceived as a system feature rather than a bug. Recent investigations of gender and of gender and parliamentary culture paint a clear message that the public expects that Australian parliaments have a role not only in legislating standards, but in role modelling them, particularly in relation to how power and gender play out in politics (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021; Broderick & Co., 2022; Sawer, 2021).

The Toxic Experience of Australian Parliaments for Women

Women in the political system are powerful agents of change despite the barriers they face (Benchakhan & Kulachai, 2023). What appears to be called for is a shift from egosystem leadership, characterised by power over and self-interest, to eco-system leadership characterised by *power with* and a focus on the flourishing of all (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2018). Ecosystem leadership is based on relational power built through human connection and the intraconnectedness of shared interests, values and purpose (Heimans & Timms, 2018).

As an independent, not-for-profit think-and-do-tank Next25 is on a mission to improve the way Australia makes its future. We focus on understanding and addressing the complex, dynamic, deep-rooted contributing factors to Australia's biggest issues to accelerate efforts at the symptom level and unlock progress towards a flourishing future. Through our mixed gender Leadership Program, run with our partner organisation Corporate Evolution, we support parliamentarians from across the political spectrum to reconnect with their values and harness their power, not only as individuals within the political system, but also as individuals who can improve it.

In 2021, four New South Wales (NSW) women parliamentarians, all alumnae of Next25's mixed gender Leadership Program referred to above, representing Labor, Liberal, the Greens and an Independent, approached Next25 with an invitation. They had established unexpected, multipartisan, and sustained relationships within their system through the mixed-gender Leadership program. They wanted a program that would bring women together across parliament to address the gendered issues raised in the reports above, as well as those they had experienced themselves. They shared a mission to introduce what they collectively named the Improving Democracy: Transforming Parliament for Women program to transform women's experience and participation in the NSW State Parliament. These four women became the initiative's co-creators and enduring Steering Committee.

The Crack as an Opportunity

The slowly forming crack, which the women politicians could see, feel and sense, helped make a collective movement imaginable. It is as in the song Anthem that Leonard Cohen (1992) sings:

> There is a crack, a crack in everything.
>
> That's how the light gets in.

The intention was not to condemn anyone, and the initiative was not directed against men. It was to create different patterns and codes for exercising power built by women inspired by their different ways of construing (Sanity), relating (Sanctuary) and enacting (Solidarity). The timing was not coincidental. They were sensing into something new that was wanting to emerge. The field was being recoded by the times, with notable women like Gillard and Ardern shifting the currents of the oceanic surface by challenging existing power structures and norms on the seabed.

Starting conditions matter. We defined our intention in the design stage of the Transforming Parliament for Women Program (the program suggested by the four alumni of the mixed-gender Leadership Program) as being the creation of a neutral, non-partisan "third space" (Bhabha, 1994). A breakthrough space to create the conditions for transformation. Partnering with Corporate Evolution, we used Scharmer's Theory U (2018) to scaffold an awareness-based systems transformation program. The Theory U frame, with its five movements of *Co-initiation, Co-sensing, Presencing, Co-creating* and *Co-evolving*, has helped us to see ourselves and the wider system more clearly. It enabled us to nourish fertile relational "social soil" which is the quality of relationships and trust that are the invisible elements of social systems (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2025), and to form the foundations for aligning purpose, values and actions to transform the system.

This collective intention created the conditions that drew in the people and elements of the system needed for the next stage of its evolution: an ecosystem that was more than the sum of its parts and more than human. The formation of an archipelago of islands of coherence was set in motion. As one MP said: "I was doubtful about the ability of a small group of diverse women to change the culture of parliament. Now I believe that we really can" (Participant B, Program 1, November 2022).

Since 2022, we have run three programs focused on NSW Parliament and count over one-third of sitting women in our alumnae community. In 2025, we expanded the program offerings with a nationwide iteration that brought together women from Federal, State and Local government, and a new program focused on the women of the West Australian State Parliament. We currently count 9% of all sitting women parliamentarians in Australia as alumnae. In each program the women politicians came together for two days in an in-person interactive workshop. In these two days they engaged in dialogue as well as

individual and collective reflection, to connect with purpose and vision to develop prototypes to transform the experience of power for women politicians.

This self-named "Collective" of women, the alumnae of the Transforming Parliament for Women programs, continues to meet regularly, across party lines, to share experiences and review their collective purpose and prototypes as described in the narrative to follow. This work is still in full flight, and what is written here captures the fragments, impressions and memories of what has taken shape so far as this archipelago of islands of coherence emerges. There is more to witness and experience. Writing this article is an artefact of that intention. It is a gift in thanks to the women parliamentarians who have co-created this innovation in praxis as a symbol of our gratitude.

Our Writing as Praxis

> The anarchive is not something "we" do. It is something that catches experience in the making. It is something that catches us in our own becoming. (Manning, n.d., para. 1)

The narrative presented below is not linear. It is offered in the mode of an *anarchive* as described by Erin Manning. It is a collection of traces that orient, activate, and carry potential as they unfold (Manning, cited in Conquet, 2025), rather than a static archive of past occurrences. We invite you to read the narrative we present as the emergent threads of an unfolding story. The whole process of unfolding and recounting this story has been an experience of learning by doing, melding theory and practice. It has involved innumerable cycles of action in the writing, reflecting, and refining of what we share here.

We feel deep humility. We did not write this piece, it wrote us. For us, gathering this anarchive has been a labour of love. It has taken us untold hours of dialogue, co-creation, and listening to the resonances of the past, the sense of the now, and the call of the future. We moved with what the writing wanted to do—being pulled by more than just what we could think, by sitting with it, gaining insights through reflection, conversations, serendipitous encounters with people we spoke with, and material that presented itself into our field of attention to be known. Writing and rewriting over a period of nine months, with new flows, rhythms, phrases and movements emerging each time. It is still in movement.

In the main body of our narrative, we curate and distil the essence of three qualities: Sanity, Sanctuary and Solidarity, which have engendered coherence—a sense of unity and alignment among many parts, which bring the islands together as an archipelago in a sea of chaos.

Throughout this article, we weave in *social poetry* created by the three of us, curating *artefacts of remembering* in the form of quotations drawn from the women politicians who participated in the five cohorts of the Transforming Parliament for Women program. We have done this with particular care to

ensure the anonymity of the women by disidentifying any potentially attributable elements.

The poems were created by threading together direct quotes from women politicians, either as written public testimonials or captured by facilitators, with verbal consent, in the programs themselves, or at one of the many check-ins and workshops offered to alumnae in between. All verbal reflections captured were in response to structured questions on the shifts and impacts on (i) self, (ii) parliament, and (iii) system. We approached the poetry by clustering sentiments or sentences together where there was resonance in perspective or experience, and by aligning them with the respective islands of Sanity, Sanctuary, or Solidarity.

What results is a reflection of our own sense-making across programs and cohorts, shared in poetic form.

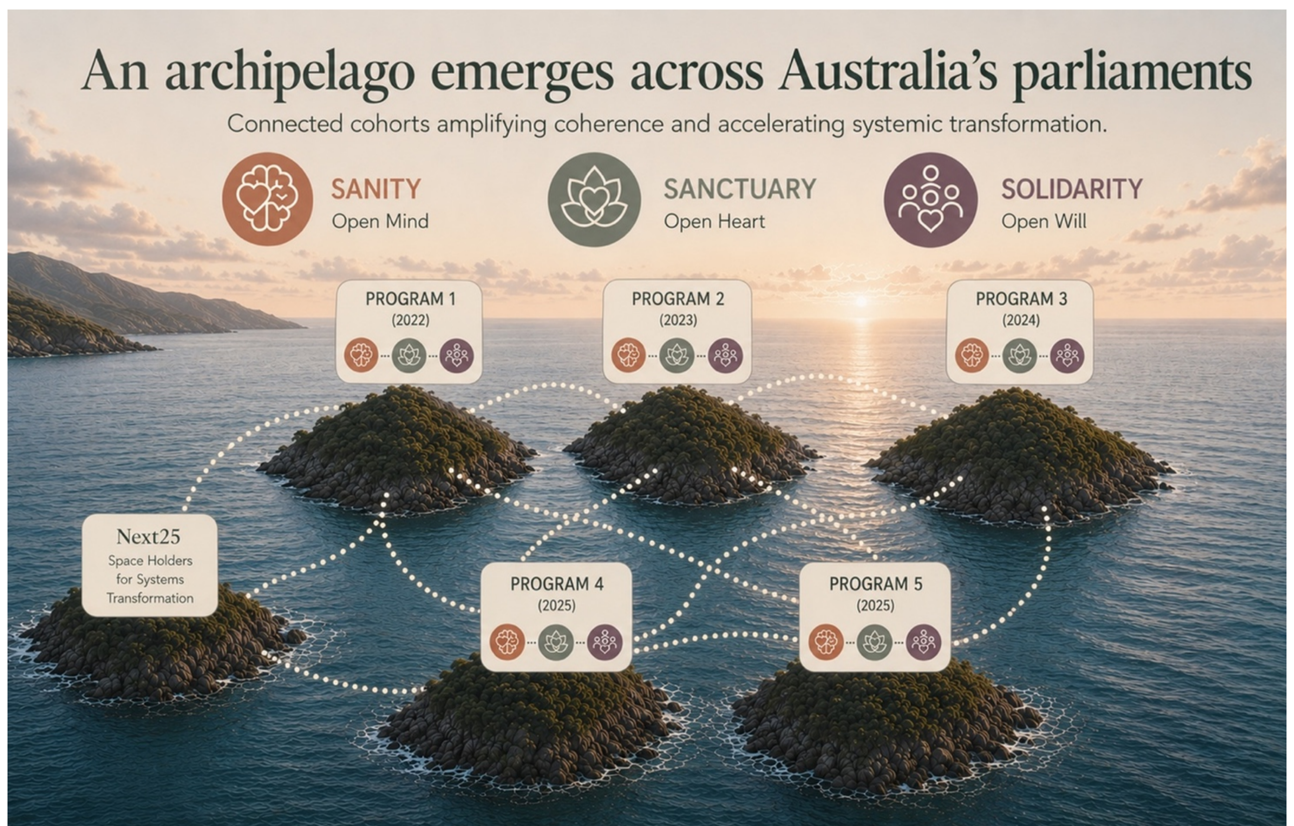

Figure 1: The archipelago of islands of coherence recoding power in Australian politics

Figure 1 summarises where we are with the evolution of the Transforming Parliament for Women Program as we have moved with the five cohorts of women politicians since the first program in 2022. It shows each cohort as an island in an emerging archipelago. We take you through the three movements of Sanity, Sanctuary and Solidarity initiated by the Transforming Parliament for Women Program as defining features of each of these islands in the main body of the story.

The three co-authors are also included in the archipelago. As space holders for this work, we are united in our passion for awareness-based systems change, which has shaped our response to the invitation to serve the women parliamentarians. Our island is where the women come to gather and enact rituals, ceremonies, storytelling, songs and dances as metaphors for what happens at the workshops, that are different to what they experience in parliament.

Sanity – Clear Seeing and Sense-making with Open Mind

> In this dark time, the practice of creating islands of sanity is essential. (Wheatley, 2024, p.17)

By Sanity we mean sense-making with an open mind. This requires expanding our consciousness to create a shift in beliefs and ways of knowing which are our mental models (Senge, 1990), essential to be able to navigate through the sea of chaos. To hold the space for the emergence of a collective shift in the parliamentary system, our starting point was to meet the women parliamentarians where they were at: listening to their needs, challenges, frustrations, and hopes, both in the parliamentary system and at a personal level, through one-on-one pre-workshop interviews.

The women conducted stakeholder interviews before coming to the two-day Transforming Parliament Workshop to see and sense what was being asked of their leadership. Repeated themes emerged, regardless of their party or political position: the unequal distribution of power, feelings of being constrained and frustrated, a lack of safety online, in the chamber, amongst colleagues, and out in the world. The meaning-making started to move from the “me” to the “we” to the “all.”

Expanding Consciousness as the Ground for Awareness-based Systems Change

> You could think of a social system with interiority, or, perhaps, a social system with a soul. (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2025, p. 28)

Our level of conscious awareness, the lens through which we see and make meaning of the world, influences our intentions, attention and agency. It can keep us protected by the ego in the socialised mind, or it can develop to allow us to self-author our lives. Our consciousness can expand even further to allow us to step into our self-transforming, authentic and integral self (Barrett, 2013; Kegan, 1982; Wilber, 2024). The more expansive our consciousness is, the more able it is to hold an ecosystem worldview including all its complexities and entanglements.

A defining moment in each workshop was when there was the realisation that power in the existing system was shaped by a 1.0, input and control-based operating system, organised around centralised power (Scharmer & Kaufer,

2025). The transformation called for by the reviews and reports to improve trust in democracy by politicians' role modelling ways of doing so, as well as the transformation that the women parliamentarians desired, required regeneration-centric 4.0 operating system principles (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2025). They needed to create new ways of harnessing shared awareness and intentions for collective agency, impact and accountability to transform the experience of politics for women and in so doing, strengthen trust in democracy more broadly. This was a clear invitation for the women to step beyond the norm—the prevailing model of heroic leadership in a sea of chaos. They saw the opportunity to step back from the centre and move to the edges of the system: to create space for others by listening and being present, to harness emerging future potential when opportunities arose, while attending to the whole.

The message to the women by participating in the workshops was reflective of the question posed by Bayo Akómoláfé (2015): what if the way we respond to the crisis is part of the crisis? The work for the women parliamentarians lay in creating islands of coherence that operate from the integral or self-transforming mind. A mind that can hold complexity and paradox in the sphere of politics to transform the system in innovative ways.

We shared origin and personal stories, often of pain and injustice, and realised that we also play a part in creating the stories of our current reality. We invited the opportunity to apply to ourselves Viktor Frankl's powerful invitation in his book Man's Search for Meaning (1959) that when we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves.

We held space for personal shifts by inviting the women to see their upsets and challenges as opportunities to expand their awareness and make values and purpose-aligned choices. The collective shift was only possible because of the individual transformations and the courage it took to make these shifts in a shared space. It took vulnerability to let go of old stories that no longer served, such as feelings of being an impostor, disempowered, or being excluded. We could now collectively see a higher future possibility and be "at choice" of who we are being called to be, who we really are. These were sacred moments of stillness and authenticity. We perceive what emerged to be Sanity marked by presence and a sense of grounded inner peace:[1]

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[1] The poems shared here do not represent the perspective of any individual participant but rather are a compilation of individual quotes from participants during Next25-run programs and subsequent workshops, and in personal exchanges between the programs. These curated reflections come from seventeen of the women—Participants A to Q—across programs, workshops and check-ins from 2022 to 2025. The social poetry is not intended to serve as evidence of the program's results or impact but rather is a product of our sense-making as facilitators and authors.

> The whole framework of thinking has given us a shared language.

> I was able to identify all of my learned beliefs and behaviours that are holding back my potential. Then I could challenge them and find the pathway forward.

> It allowed me to recognise the needs of self and how I can apply values and behaviours in a practical way to transform.

> In order for me to be someone who creates change, I also have to create change for myself. The ability to get on the balcony and see the bigger picture.

> A journey of evolution and transformation of self, which can be applied to all aspects of professional and personal life.

> I now have the tools and the understanding to create powerful and impactful change personally and for the parliament and the people we serve.

From an awareness-based systems change lens, what is deeply personal is also deeply systemic (Senge et al., 2005). The more sense the women made of themselves as a system, the more sense they were able to make of the external social system of parliament in which they are embedded. As women, they could see everyone in parliament with more compassion and empathy as fellow humans on their own journeys.

The Power of Purpose

The ignition of the participants' highest purpose arose from alignment of their deepest values, from where they find their greatest fulfilment and where they felt called to something greater than themselves. We observed that connecting with personal purpose, which made conscious the life of meaning to which the women were already committed, led to powerful declarations of sovereignty:

> I now have the tools and the understanding to create powerful and impactful change personally and for the parliament and the people we serve.

> I initially felt like an imposter in parliament; there are so many smarter people, now I know I'm meant to be here.

> I feel I can do anything; I've got this power I didn't have before, I'm not scared.

> I don't need the cape, I am a superhero without it!

After listening to common themes in personal purposes such as making a difference, community, integrity, equality and love, the group sensed into the

question, “What is our Collective Purpose? What is the Work only we can do?”. This was the moment of true emergence, a moment where the recoding of power was birthed.

For the first group of women in 2022, the labour of co-creating a collective purpose that everyone was aligned with and inspired by took over an hour. By 2025, the labour lasted a mere ten minutes, culminating in a moment of stillness and reflection, when one woman shouted, “Sisterhood!” and was met with an instantaneous, intuitive “YES!” The response was unanimously “10” when the group was asked on a scale of 0–10 how aligned and inspired they were to this shared purpose. The emergence we felt came from “the field”, from 4th Person Knowing that transcends first, second and third person knowing (Pomeroy & Scharmer, 2024). It is knowing that emerges from the more than human, from the whole in service of the whole, when an unimagined possibility feels real.

The evolution of the shared purposes over time shows a shift, from trying to transform the existing system within existing institutional constraints, to harnessing the power of women to transform the system from a new perspective. There was fierce, almost warrior energy in the first group’s purpose, in their wish to disrupt and reshape parliament to transform the existing culture. The second group’s desire was to role model courageous, collective and visible action. The third aimed to transcend barriers and transform parliament through their presence and choice to commit to love, compassion and understanding. The fourth group aspired to foster sisterhood for the greater good. And the most recent group we worked with wished to leave a better parliament for future generations by developing a more joyful, equal, and kind culture.

We also see a field shift in the essence of the Purpose Statements, moving from transforming elements of the existing system to transformational intentions rooted in relational power for the well-being of all. As one alumna reflected:

> I’m noticing that the last words (of the 2022 group’s purpose statement)—and then seeing that the words of the 2024 statement, were actually created from this space of those women being valued and empowered (through this program). I can really see the impact, particularly the everyday impacts that aren’t easily documented. (Participant D, Alumnae Workshop 1, October 2025)

Sanctuary – Co-creating a Safe and Loving Space with Open Heart

> As the fires rage, we will not just need to fetch water, we will have to become water. We will not merely claim sanctuary, we will make sanctuary. (Akómoláfé, 2025, para. 2)

The workshops created islands as a space for us to make Sanctuary, spaces for respite where we could breathe deeply and just be. Spaces where we could be sovereign and rest in our shared humanity; where we could let down our armour, be vulnerable and feel safe to share our fears and pain, knowing that we held

each other with generosity of spirit. The women continue to hold spaces of sanctuary with and for each other in parliament and during check-ins and group coaching sessions offered by Next25 to alumnae after they complete the program.

A Shared and Safe Container

There are often looks of surprise as the women parliamentarians walk into the workshop space where the chairs are set up in a circle with no tables, no screens, only a few charts on the walls. The set-up of the space is the first facilitator in creating a sense of sanctuary.

We focus on creating the conditions to build a safe and respectful container at the beginning of the workshops. Together, we slow down to become more mindful and present. We take time to consider our comfort zones and set intentions to step into our brave and expansive learning zones. We practice stepping onto the balcony (Heifetz & Linksy, 2002) of our inner experience so we can choose how we show up in the outer world. We codify and commit to shared agreements that support safety, with room to express and explore disagreements, and to make space for contradictions.

> If you put on shoes that are too tight and walk out across an empty plain, you will not feel the freedom of the place unless you take off your shoes. (Rumi, translated by Barks, 1995, p. 122)

When it felt safe enough to take our shoes off, the ground was marked by deep respect, inclusivity, and a willingness to be authentic. We were able to stay with discomfort, to see and move past fears. We provide the space to create an inner sanctuary, a place to pause, reflect, be still, feel free and be resourced. It is a space where we felt, as women, we could take our shoes off.

> Outside we are expected to be perfect, but here we can work on ourselves.

> I recently had an incident that, if I hadn't taken this course, would have broken me…but because of the course, I had the strength and the resources to get through it.

> It feels like a big shift to be able to observe my reactions on a bad day.

> My biggest personal shift was patience and restraint; now I can put into practice calm and compassion.

Developing Deep Connection and Trust

We observed a sense among participants that we cannot do this alone and that the capacity to serve requires coming together with others who are motivated by the same sense of calling.

> I have immense gratitude for being able to share this space with (another woman MP from an opposing party), who is a role model for what it means to be a compassionate leader.

> The most insightful two days with incredible leaders from all levels of government, connecting and sharing ideas, while being vulnerable and creating a safe space for all.

> I am starting to go down the U on a bad day at work, and I can go to my colleague and fellow program alumna down the hall, so we can coach each other

The workshops cultivated sanctuary on islands made up of fertile social soil (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2025) nourished by the rich quality of connections and a deepening awareness of self and the wider ecosystem. The four core nutrients of the relational field brought and amplified by the women by engaging in dialogue as well as sharing their stories and experiences in parliament were empathy, the ability to feel with others; compassion, the desire to reduce suffering; trust, the belief in another's reliability, involvement, sincerity and competence; and love, unconditional positive regard for each other.

Making sanctuary together developed resilience marked by the strength and the capacity to stay together, figure things out, succeed, fail, forgive, laugh and persevere. Each island has a synchronised heartbeat, marked by safety and trust. Having the space to be kind, generous, vulnerable and authentic with each other led to the reflections that make up the compilation below

> The feeling of operating in a space of love.
>
> I came in sceptical, but I get it now.
>
> The best thing is having a group I trust 100%.
>
> It gives you the wisdom to understand who you are, who our colleagues are.
>
> How together we can influence and change things for the better.
>
> I use this space to connect at a deeper level.
>
> These opportunities don't come around often.
>
> The network that we've established is a safe place.
>
> Sometimes you don't even get that in the party room.

The shared heartbeat led to deeper connection among the women, which stands out as one of the most valuable elements mentioned by three-quarters of the women in the program feedback. We observed that it was not superficial networking, but meaningful connections that make women "feel less alone" to create closeness:

> We are so comfortable in each other's space.
>
> I formed connections that are strong and helpful from a space of love.
>
> Honesty and conversations are not affected by our politics.
>
> Knowing that we are in a place of trust rather than political risk.
>
> Formed friendships that will last beyond politics.

Freedom to Exercise Relational Power

Co-creating places of sanctuary allowed for the expansiveness of the ground from which power is exercised. Women have been able to show up with open hearts in bold ways, within the prevailing institutional systems and structures. An embodied demonstration of comfort with exercising relational power was when the Minister and Shadow Minister for the same portfolio drew looks of surprise from their parliamentary colleagues when seen sitting next to each other, having a deep and convivial conversation at the first women's dinner in the parliamentary dining room, organised as a prototype by the alumnae of the first program. This did not stop both women from holding each other to account across the floor when parliamentary business demanded it.

The women who participated in the workshops recoded power such that relational power became influential within polarised and hierarchical structures. A new possibility has emerged for the women. It is a recognition that relationships are foundational in all systems, as held by the physicist Niels Bohr (1948). There was recognition that individual agency indeed arises through intra-action and relationships enmeshed in social, political, and historical contexts (Barad, 2007). The power lay in making this visible in embodied ways.

Solidarity – Resisting Orthodoxies, Transforming Relations and Outcomes With Open Will

The women call themselves The Collective, highlighting the sense of belonging and solidarity they feel with fellow women who participate in the program. Solidarity as a sense of unity and a call to action despite differences, has arisen from the coherence that emerged from the shared experience of sanity and sanctuary by the women in the Transforming Parliament for Women workshops.

Overcoming Cynicism and Fear

Many women who join our programs are initially sceptical about the value of an approach to change where they connect with their "opponents" from other parties, those they often see as enemies. It is not surprising, in a system designed as the Australian political one is, where trust is fragile and hard to come by, that word of mouth and testimony from colleagues have been essential means of recruitment to the program. Recruitment is our most persistent challenge. Sometimes we encounter understandable cynicism and mistrust at the preparatory one-to-one meetings prior to the workshop. We listen deeply, with an open will and compassion, to set the conditions for trust.

Once they take the leap, the women see that they do not have to abandon their convictions, robust debate, or the contest of ideas central to democracy, to connect on a human level. We ask them, can you set down your assumptions about others—just for now—to make space for something new? This mindset has helped women in our workshops engage more openly.

Coherence as a sense of unity despite difference, arising from sanity and sanctuary, underpins the solidarity being demonstrated by the women politicians. Solidarity can coexist with disagreement and does not require uniformity in opinion. The women's power does not reside in consensus; they will continue to debate one another over ideological differences. They will disagree, at times vehemently, in their roles as elected representatives. The quality of their shared holding environment as a Collective (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 305) will be tested, as it should be, in the arena of Parliament, as they renegotiate, evolve, and demonstrate their commitment to a different system of power and governance. It is their ability to stay engaged with each other and to remain in a relationship even in the face of conflict (Kahane, 2017) that encodes a new type of power through solidarity.

> It's transformational because it gives you the wisdom to understand who you are, who our colleagues are, and how together we can influence and change things for the better.
>
> I developed profound relationships with women from across the parliament.
>
> We now work closely together in various aspects of our parliamentary roles.
>
> The biggest shift is what we have created because of our intentions.
>
> The next generation of women (newly elected into NSW Parliament) came into a different space than we did.

Relational Power, Love and Agency

For their solidarity and relationships to affect the political system, to act and hold ground, both power and love are needed, in tension and in balance, as fundamental forces for positive change (Kahane, 2023). The women have cultivated and reintroduced love, grounding it in power and action. They have disrupted language as the dominant currency of power by embodying ways of showing up in brave spaces and creating community to enact relational governance and collective accountability.

The sanity of having shared mental models and the experience of sanctuary enabled new ways of exercising agency to influence policies, practices and resource flows, all conditions required for systems change (Kania et al., 2018). The prototypes designed by the women across programs are diverse and fall across a spectrum from visible to invisible—from formal, structural reforms to shifting cultural norms in interstitial places. They include reforms to the rules of the house (the "standing orders"), the establishment of formal mechanisms to support women MPs, including a women's induction, and informal customs such as a regular women's dinner on the first Wednesday of each sitting period, and making women's achievements in politics more visible and celebrated through art and ritual.

Engaging with colleagues in their full humanness brings new awareness to speaking in an abusive manner or making personal attacks, as so many parliamentarians do, and as the system sanctions. Across cohorts we could see that the women have an informal "womanly agreement" to maintain relevance rela when their parliamentary debates become heated.

Women are no longer attacking each other in Question Time.

There are more men calling out bad behaviour.

We are pushing back, making the environment friendlier.

We're not going to mould to the institution anymore.

The biggest change for women has been that I came into a parliament that was so much more inviting than parliaments before.

Every time we bring new people in, we change the system.

And we can only see that with perspective.

Group chats, maintained by The Collective, provide space for women to share challenges and triumphs with each other and to share messages of solidarity or helpful tips with ease. They have formed intentional yet informal practices of friendship and coffee catchups, and they have paired up for mentor walks around parliament during sitting weeks, when their connection can be witnessed by colleagues. They are taking up space and making the invisible visible.

Through alumnae, we have heard of scenarios in which they have been able to connect across party lines, behind closed doors, to pre-negotiate outcomes in the chamber on contested issues. In these instances, the trust they have built through participation in our program has helped avoid critical issues from failing to progress through parliament, as they fall victim to the zero-sum, performative, and win-at-all-costs traps of parliamentary debate.

> The biggest Impact on the ecosystem is the underlying level of trust among alumnae of the program, regardless of party. I ran into a colleague from another party in the corridors outside the chamber. I had a formal motion, and she spoke to me about some small amendments her party was asking her to raise to block the motion, so we were able to resolve it in one conversation, and there was no need to formally oppose in the chamber. (Participant A, Alumnae Workshop 2, October 2025)

Culture Shifts

There has been a noticeable improvement in parliament's culture and collegiality, with alumnae advocating for and implementing more inclusive practices. Women who entered the NSW Parliament after the 2023 election and were unaware of the original Steering Committee and program for women reported a friendly, cross-party welcome from incumbent women in the NSW Parliament—a marked difference from those who came before them.

Transformation is ongoing at individual, organisational and system-wide levels, although not necessarily in a linear manner. The feedback and reverberations are messy, unpredictable, and multidirectional. Each time we meet with women parliamentarians, whether they are new to a program or long-term alumnae, we encounter a new reality.

In one of our alumnae workshops, we brought together women from across four program iterations, spanning different states and levels of government. Despite these women not having experienced the program together and, in most cases, not knowing each other, they commented on the instant trust and solidarity they felt as they entered the room.

In this workshop, the women reflected that change cannot start where power is most entrenched. Instead, it emerges through connection, creativity, and intention. Their vision for the alumnae network focuses on scaling connection opportunities (mentoring, cross-parliamentary relationships), broadening the sisterhood across party lines and communities, creating collective accountability, and amplifying stories of change. Some members of one group concluded, after a 3D mapping exercise, that the small changes that will make the biggest impact are simple but radical. They reflected that the prevailing perception is that women's ideas are feathery or wispy. That, in fact, by doing this work, they are going to change the experience and therefore outcomes of

sitting days and other parliamentary practices. (Participants C, F, G, J, Q, Alumnae Workshop 2, October 2025)

Power is being recoded by women politicians through the force of the minor gesture, the micro-movements that activate a shift in tone, a difference in quality (Manning, 2023). As Manning says in her digital essay, "a minor key is always interlaced with major keys – the minor works the major from within. (…) It has a mobility not given to the major, (…) and in the resonances that are awakened, potential for difference looms" (Manning, 2023, Sections 2-4).

We have gathered the collective words of many alumnae in social poetry to reflect the enactment of their power and solidarity. We offer it as a moment of reflective pause in the journey that is still unfolding.

Power, Recoded in a Minor Key

We needed this 25, maybe 30 years ago

I felt like an imposter in parliament

So many smarter people

Feel your back is against the wall

So busy,

No time to do this.

There has been talk, but no action.

Frustrated.

I came in sceptical.

I don't need the cape

Feeling freer, safe space to be expansive

I feel empowered, immense gratitude

My quiet core of self-assuredness

More whole and comfortable

Able to contribute without anxiety.

There has been a shift and change in the power dynamics

I see women answering questions in question time with new confidence

More powerful than I expected

I can do anything; I've got this power I didn't have before

Now I know I'm meant to be here.

Better able to delve into the uncomfortableness

Experiencing joy in my work

Women are standing up.

A growing trust that people are in it for the right reasons,

An active desire to understand each other before anything else.

Transformation is needed if we are to have a parliament reflective of our community.

The feeling of operating in a space of love.

I want to help other women in parliament feel the same.

The greatest possibility is legacy

Identifying other women who could go on to be MPs and sharing these skills with them.

Space to work on the longer-term vision of making the parliament a better place

Not just for women, but for everyone.

As Above, So Below

Before we conclude, we would like to acknowledge our place as an island in the emerging archipelago as space holders for this work. We are three women, each with very different professional and life journeys. The three of us come to this work from different places.

Our shared intention to hold space for unimagined possibilities to emerge has held more transformative power than any fear we have felt. Our responsibility is to ensure that the space and activities are safe and nurturing. Part of this requires us to provide gentle hospice for that which stands in the way

of creating space for new ways of knowing, being and doing to emerge. We shared our own personal stories of pain, fears and vulnerability in the workshops. We were co-travellers in the journey of making meaning of our lives and work with open minds, open hearts and open will. This helped to create relational attunement and the sense that we were on the same transformational journey as the women.

We live this work and cannot do it without honouring the wisdom of the principle of "as above, so below." Being mindful and intentional about and paying attention to our individual and collective presence was critical for dealing with any discomfort and tension that arose in the room, for both the women parliamentarians and us, as we stepped into uncharted territory. We were particularly aware of this at the start of the first workshop.

We trust and support each other when we have moment-to-moment upsets during the journey to see them as setups for our growth and learning, which is a core practice and skill that we include in the workshops. It is interesting that none of us can remember a large or significant upset in our journey together with the women politicians when we looked back when writing this paper. What we do remember are moments of awe for the courage, resilience and commitment that the women politicians embody.

We feel very humbled and honoured to do this work. Our part is also noted as a score in a minor key (Manning, 2016) as we observe the women MPs' work is. Our hope is that this work seeds forward even more unimagined possibilities for recoding power in politics.

Where to From Here?

It is clear the program depends on sustained engagement and opportunities to embed mindsets, connections, and actions alongside the ongoing pressures and shifts of political life. Systems transformation is a long game, and the impacts of creating the conditions for recoded power to transform parliaments and political cultures from the inside will not be fully observable for some time. Yet, shifts in women's day-to-day experience are already rippling outward into the wider system. The women of the original NSW program created a safe, authorised foundation for future ones, for many who will never meet them. These pioneers did not just change outcomes; they changed the field, so those who follow no longer need to start where they did.

We are encouraged by one of the alumnae who recently said: *"I have a renewed sense of shared purpose and commitment. I would love to see this transform and extend to other jurisdictions, and globally*" (Participant D, Alumnae Workshop 1, October, 2025). We, the co-authors and the collective of women, strongly hold this intention.

And so, new power courses out beyond the walls of parliament, strengthening the currents, reaching new islands.

The Coda

Rather than a summary, we leave you with the red thread of our story captured in a poem that came through Renu in one of her early morning reveries while writing this piece.

From Rupture to Rapture

Ruptures opening bold cracks for possibilities

Subtle shifts created in interstitial spaces

Inviting the potential for human connection

To recode power beyond real and imagined boundaries.

The in-breath drawing in what is

Abiding in the pause, making sanctuary

Opening minds, hearts and will collectively

For the out breath to enliven unknown possibility.

Fractals of the whole holding space for it all,

Illuminated with feminine presence, generosity and grace

To face fear and darkness alone and together

For without it there is no light.

Sensing, feeling and stepping in with choice

Savouring the preciousness of our shared humanity

To abide in the rapture of knowing love is power

Generative, expansive and in service of the whole.

About the Authors

Chloë

My life and work reflect a movement from the mountains to the sea: a kind of kingdom crossing. Born on the lands of the Blackfoot Confederacy, the Tsuut'ina and the Îyâxe Nakoda Nations, in Canada, and raised in Sydney, Australia, I live, work, and raise my sons on the lands of the Gadigal and Wangal people. My earliest memories of noticing and caring about the diversity of human experience are of accompanying my mother to the homes of recently arrived women refugees and asylum seekers, so she could teach them English and support their transition to Australian life. My nearly two decades of work share a common thread of celebrating the beauty and complexity of the world and creating conditions for curiosity and connection across difference. It is a privilege to steward this work and, alongside the women, pursue the question that underlies all of it: how change happens.

Renu

I am a Nair woman hailing from Kerala in South India, grateful to call Boorloo (Perth), on Wadhjuk Noongar Boodja in Western Australia as home for most of my life. My personal calling to this work is influenced by my matriarchal Nair heritage and the legacy that I would like to leave as the mother of three daughters and a grandmother to a feisty granddaughter. I feel blessed to work with the women Parliamentarians who also hold my passion to make space for the invisible to be made visible and the unspoken to be spoken in service of the flourishing of all. It is a joy to see insights and learnings from 40 years of holding space for awareness-based leadership that transforms systems being brought to life so powerfully by women in Next25's Transforming Parliament for Women initiative.

Lisa

Born in Chicago, as the youngest of four girls, I felt I needed to chart my own path, moving to Boston, then UK for 10 years, before moving to Australia 30 years ago. My career in leadership transformation began 25 years ago, initiated by my own wake-up call. Similar to many women, becoming a workaholic trying to be the perfect wife, mother, leader, and friend. The person I had not nurtured, or indeed, truly understood was myself. The red thread that has run through my life is having a new idea and manifesting it into form. What I came to believe deeply is that anything is possible, that we create our own reality. It takes passion, commitment and deep belief in a meaningful purpose. This is the resonance with the women parliamentarians, that collectively, through shifting consciousness, we can change the world.

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The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding this manuscript.

Ethics Statement

Whilst this reflective practitioner inquiry did not require formal ethics review, we confirm that all co-authors of our submitted article followed ethical principles in publishing. The contributions presented here are a mix of public testimonials and reflections shared with informed consent and protected by the confidentiality protocols integral to the program's design, including those that preserve participants' anonymity.

AI Statement

The authors used ChatGPT to assist in creating the image for Figure 1. The authors confirm that all content has been verified by them.

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In Dialogue

When the University Speaks:

On the Role of Neutrality and Responsibility Under Pressure

Olja Jovanović, Mila Bakić, Jelena Kleut, Nikola Koruga, Marija Radoman, Nenad Radulović, Milan Stančić, and Oliver Koenig

Over the past 18 months, Serbia has witnessed a sustained wave of student-led protests that began in response to tragedy and institutional failure and gradually opened into a broader civic movement. Following the collapse of the railway station canopy in Novi Sad on November 1, 2024, and the subsequent attack on students during a peaceful memorial gathering at the Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade, faculties across Serbia entered into blockade. University buildings became sites of assembly, coordination, care, and public deliberation. Student plenums assumed responsibility for decision-making, while classrooms, corridors, and auditoriums were reorganized into spaces of collective life.

In this process, universities moved into a position of unusual public visibility. They became places where questions of legitimacy, democracy, autonomy, and responsibility were not only discussed but enacted. Many academic workers supported the students and their demands, while others struggled with how to understand their institutional obligations under conditions of political pressure, public delegitimization, and increasing financial and professional insecurity. The university, often imagined as a relatively stable site of knowledge production, became a contested public institution whose role could no longer be taken for granted.

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This dialogue takes the Serbian case as a situated entry point into wider questions about the futures of democracy and governance. What happens when students begin to practice forms of direct democracy inside institutions that are themselves hierarchical and bureaucratic? What happens when universities are called to speak in public, while critical engagement is reframed as political bias? What becomes of academic autonomy when institutional survival, civic responsibility, and personal risk become inseparable?

The conversation that follows brought together university workers from different positions, disciplines, universities, and cities in Serbia. They speak as researchers, teachers, professional staff, activists, mentors, colleagues, and citizens. Their reflections do not offer a unified interpretation of the protests. Rather, they trace how the events changed their understanding of the university, of students, of institutional responsibility, and of their own roles within a society marked by democratic strain.

The dialogue took place in Belgrade in April 2026, in Serbian, and is presented here in English translation. The text has been lightly edited for clarity, while preserving the distinct voices of each speaker.

Participating in the Dialogue

Mila Bakić is Professional associate at the International Relations Office, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade

Jelena Kleut is an Independent scholar (after losing her post at the Department of Media Studies, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Novi Sad)[1]

Nikola Koruga is Assistant professor at the Department of Pedagogy and Adult Education, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade

Marija Radoman is Research Associate and Head of the Institute for Sociological Research at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade

Nenad Radulović is Assistant professor at the Department of History, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Niš

Milan Stančić is Associate professor at the Department of Pedagogy and Adult Education, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade

Dialogue Facilitator and Contributor

Olja Jovanović is Assistant professor at the Department of Psychology and Center for Teacher Education, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade

[1] Further details regarding the decision that resulted in Professor Kleut being denied promotion and, consequently, the termination of her employment at the university are available at: https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2026-01-22-university-of-novi-sad/

Co-Ideation and Editing

Oliver Koenig is Professor for Inclusive Pedagogy and Inclusion Management at the Bertha von Suttner Private University in St. Pölten

Entering From Where We Stand

Olja Jovanović: I suggest we begin with introductions—who we are and why we are part of this conversation; what each of us brings to the discussion about the university's role in society, whether personally or professionally; and the position from which each of us enters this discussion.

Marija Radoman: I'm Marija Radoman, and I have been working at the university for nearly fifteen years in various research positions. A few months before the blockade began, I became Head of the Institute for Sociological Research, and I think that perspective perhaps allowed me to see certain things more clearly: what it means to work as a researcher in a time of crisis, particularly for younger researchers and doctoral students, and what kinds of questions emerge under such conditions.

When I say "crisis," I mean it in a broader sense. This current crisis has only brought to the surface challenges we have long been facing in higher education, especially here at the faculty: the role of researchers, their motivation to engage in public debate, questions about our social role, inequalities and hierarchies within the institution itself, and working conditions. That is one perspective that my position as a researcher has brought.

Very soon after the student protests began, our Institute team started conducting research, which offered another internal perspective on how the student movement functioned (Backović et al., 2026). We were in communication with various plenums in Belgrade, but also in other cities. That opened another issue entirely: how does one do research in a protest situation? This was research conducted with zero funding, in some ways activist in character, while at the same time we occupied a dual position—as researchers and as supporters of the blockades. That raised questions about how we positioned ourselves.

Plenums

Plenums are open, student-led assemblies that emerged during the university blockades as the primary spaces for collective decision-making. Organized on principles of direct democracy, plenums operate without formal hierarchy. Participants discuss proposals, articulate positions, and make decisions collectively, typically through consensus or majority voting. During the protests in Serbia, plenums coordinated activities within occupied university spaces and played a central role in shaping the movement's direction.

Over the past few months, though, my freshest impression comes from having spent three months away at a university in Brussels. That was a turning point in perspective. During January, I followed events in Serbia obsessively, through every possible media outlet. Then, at one point, I simply stopped. For a month and a half, I read almost nothing, except what happened to appear on social media. Instead, I began paying attention to what was happening in the world—and the world is burning.

It made me think about what it means to view the situation in Serbia from the outside. In a way, I began to better understand those looking at us from elsewhere and asking: who are these people? I don't attach a positive or negative judgment to that; I simply take it as a fact. We have this internal story that we have to carry forward ourselves, because people outside often do not understand, do not see, and do not engage.

And then another important theme emerged for me—mental health. After a few weeks in Brussels, I realized I had been having nightmares for the previous year and a half—and in Brussels they simply stopped. And I thought: okay, now I understand the degree of stress under which we have been working and living. And still are.

Then, about ten days ago, before returning here, I felt panic—literally, irrational reactions. And I realized: this is fear, because I am returning to that same situation. Even though personally I would not say I have been especially endangered—my name appeared in the media a few times, in *Informer*[2] and the like—I did not feel personally threatened in any direct sense.

Mila Bakić: I'm Mila Bakić. I work at the International Relations Office at the Faculty of Philosophy, as a professional associate. People rarely think of us for these kinds of conversations, which says something in itself about the position of professional staff, who are neither teaching nor research staff.

What perhaps gives me a particular perspective is that, among other things, I organize events, and students tend to come to me when they want to organize something, or when we create things together—promotions, exhibitions, and so on. Because of my work, I have been, and still am, in contact with students from all ten departments of the Faculty, and I have supported many of their organizing efforts.

So when the blockades and protests began, I realized that more students actually knew me than knew many individual professors or researchers. They turned to me if they needed to ask something, from technical matters onward. They came to me because they knew me. And because I am not their teacher, there is never the possibility that I will grade them, which perhaps made our relationship more informal and fostered trust from the outset.

[2] *Informer* is a pro-government tabloid outlet.

That is my specific position—I knew students from all departments. And then, together with some people sitting at this table, once the students occupied the faculty and our Academic Council overwhelmingly supported them, we quickly began organizing employees in support of students. Again, because colleagues across departments knew me, I found myself in the position of someone initiating, organizing, and connecting.

Nikola Koruga: I can build on what Mila said. Since I work on education, and more specifically on utopia and critical thought, this whole situation felt surreal.

In theory, we know of occasional autonomous geographies where experiments with new social practices emerge, where resistance and creation are blended (Pickerill & Chatterton, 2006). But researchers often claim that you cannot apply a utopian idea at a larger scale; you can write about utopia, imagine it, theorize it—but not simply enact it. And then all of this began.

It was less than a year after I had defended my PhD, and it all seemed unreal, because for the first time we were witnessing, at the scale of an entire country, an experiment in direct democracy.

Education is always about the future. We educate people with the promise that something will change in their future—their social position, their possibilities, their role in society. What struck me most was that we had a generation not simply seeking a better future for themselves, but genuinely trying to improve the democratic environment and practice self-governance within the university. That was extraordinary.

I often think about my own critical position through what Giroux (2011) calls the "transformative intellectual," or Gramsci (1971) the "organic intellectual." Especially since I come from a working-class background, that position has never felt natural to me. And suddenly all of it came together.

What is abnormal is the response. I still find it astonishing that any state would react with such immense repression to young people's desire to contribute to democratizing society. Everything we have witnessed, especially lately, deserves not repression but admiration. It deserves recognition that something has gone wrong if we have arrived here.

Jelena Kleut: I've been thinking a lot about this question, and it is difficult for me to define my position. I can't give a single answer, especially because I come from the Department of Media Studies in Novi Sad, which is oriented toward practical engagement and at the same time toward a media reality that was already devastating for the students we educate, long before all this began.

I like to say our department is a kind of Gaulish village within the Faculty of Philosophy, because many of us have biographies that are atypical for academia—people who were journalists, activists, and who have worked in all kinds of spaces. That shaped us, and I think we passed some of that energy to our students. We were constantly creating things with students and for students.

Gaulish village

A reference to the *Asterix comics*, in which a small Gaulish village resists Roman rule. The expression is often used metaphorically to describe a localized space of resistance within a larger dominant system.

And in a university context where work with students outside formal teaching—summer schools, workshops—counts for nothing institutionally, something you do purely out of commitment and by scraping together resources, we always invested deeply in that. It mattered enormously to us.

And it produced generations of students who gave that energy back—not only to us as teachers, but to society. Our students are engaged in newsrooms across Novi Sad and Belgrade. So professionally we were always attuned to what was happening socially, and close to students.

So in some sense, what has been happening over the past year and a half does not feel like a radical rupture to me in terms of extending that energy toward the department and students— perhaps unlike for colleagues who were not previously in such positions. For us, on day one of the blockade we were there, engaged. The first sink falls off the wall, students cry, “Professor, the sink fell!” and I go carry the sink.

And then there is repression, of course. For me, that became profoundly personal. Twelve people in Novi Sad were charged with calling for the violent overthrow of the constitutional order. Among those detained was my student Lazar Dinić, who ultimately graduated with me while in detention. Of the six now in exile, all but two were my students.

That is such a personal bond that, from the moment that happened, I no longer allow us to say of anything that it is impossible. Once that became possible, everything became possible. And at that moment this ceased to be only a professional struggle. It became deeply personal.

Milan Stančić: I’m Milan Stančić, a pedagogue, and I’ve been working at the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade for more than fifteen years.

This first question was difficult for me. Professionally, I wouldn’t have said I explicitly worked on the social position of the university. But then it pushed me to ask: what is a university? And I realized I’ve worked on many adjacent questions—what role education has in society, how powerful education is in changing society, and how society shapes education. Classic pedagogical questions.

But even more interesting was the relation between the personal and the professional. I immediately remembered a neighbor from Niš asking whether we at universities had become “too political.” He asked me, “What of all that you’ve

been doing over the last year and a half are you doing as a citizen, and what as a teacher?" It was difficult to answer, because those roles have fused.

We have a long history of protest, when I primarily participated as a citizen, not as a university worker. But now it matters to me to appear in current protests also as a university worker. I speak from that fusion of the personal and the professional.

We all know in theory that one function of the university is its relation to society. But now it is tangible. We are living it intensely.

Nenad Radulović: I'm Nenad Radulović, assistant professor in the Department of History at the Faculty of Philosophy in Niš. Our story has been one of moving from supporting students—something my colleagues and I believed we should do—to being punished for it, almost losing the jobs we have trained for all our lives.

When the blockades began, I was still a doctoral student. I defended my dissertation during the blockades, with students' permission to use the building. I was then elected assistant professor and almost immediately risked losing the very department to which I had just been appointed.

Niš is a smaller place, which can be an advantage—our relations with students are more immediate. At one point, when porters refused night shifts, students called me and asked me to serve as night porter. I accepted without hesitation. The fact that they called me specifically meant they trusted me.

And I changed too. As an assistant, I kept distance from students. Formality. But during the protests I became closer to them. Students I once addressed formally, I now address informally. I offer support—transport to Belgrade, financial help, whatever they need.

Before, I would have said: I am the professor, you are the students; we speak about coursework, not politics. Now, after what we have lived through together, I believe it is part of my professional duty to speak with students about all of this.

Olja Jovanović: Listening to everyone, it strikes me how much we share.

I forgot to introduce myself. I am Olja Jovanović, a psychologist, speaking as a member of the Faculty of Philosophy and the broader university community. My work explores how schools (and universities) can reproduce marginalization, and how these same institutions can become sites of both individual and collective transformation.

The whole process we have lived through has unsettled some of my deepest convictions about the role and power of education in society. There were moments when education seemed fragile and powerless, unable to resist pressure or interrupt repression. But what unfolded in classrooms, hallways, occupied spaces, on the streets… taught me otherwise.

Education was taking place in all of these spaces. People were learning to ask difficult questions, to organize collectively, and to care for one another. This

experience has left me more convinced than ever that education matters because it makes it possible for new knowledge and new relationships to emerge—and sometimes, even change.

When Everything Became Possible: Images of Transformation, Repression, and Solidarity

Olja Jovanović: In our introductions, each of us has in some way sketched the context in which we live and work. Anyone listening to this opening might ask: What is happening there? Who are these students, and what kind of university is this? Which brings us to our second question: if you were to single out an event or a situation that, for you, paradigmatically represents the position of the university in Serbia—what would that event or situation be, and why that one?

Jelena Kleut: This was a difficult question for me too. But I would answer with a triptych.

The first image is the faculty under blockade, completely transformed into a dynamic place where every corner is alive, where students and faculty inhabit the space together. The faculty and the whole campus became a place that citizens came to visit, to check in, even to ask permission to enter—at first they could, later they couldn't. It's not like in some other cities where one casually passes through campus; in Novi Sad, you intentionally go there. It's a place students and professors inhabit. And suddenly citizens were arriving, bringing all sorts of gifts—from pastries to who knows what. So that transformation from within, and this altered public perception of the faculty—that is my first image.

The second image is the university under repression. The police entered the campus of the University of Novi Sad on September 5. What they used was not gas—it was poison. People were driven out; it was horrific. For me, that is a paradigmatic image of violence—literal physical violence. There are many forms of repression, but this was raw force.

The third image is deeply personal. It is the way people organized when I lost my job, carrying signs saying, "I stand with Jelena Kleut.[3]" It was beautiful. A profound act of solidarity. It made visible how deeply we had become connected to people through all of this—that I mattered enough for them to stand outside their academic homes in support.

So: three images—our internal transformation, the attack on us, and our solidarity.

[3] After 20 years at the University of Novi Sad, Jelena Kleut lost her job in January 2026 in an act of retribution for her public support of students. Further information is available at https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2026-01-22-university-of-novi-sad/

Nikola Koruga: Mine is similar—the moment the police entered the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad. That was a major turning point. It marked the end of autonomy and the beginning of intensified repression.

But the first image that comes to mind is something else, something I remember vividly. During the protests, people shared resources, food, and care with one another in spontaneous and collective ways.

And for the first time in my life, I felt profoundly secure—not in this state, but in this world. It felt as though there was no danger that, if I lost my job, I would go hungry, be abandoned, or end up trapped in those horrors of capitalism where people worry about their most basic everyday needs and security.

For the first time, I felt secure because I realized that we have enough of everything; we only need to learn how to share. And people were ready to do that.

It was beautiful too how the groups of citizens were organized to support teachers when they had no salaries. That sense that, through self-organization, we can actually do everything ourselves—that was enormously important to me.

During the protests, people would approach us and share their ideas. I remember one woman saying, "I came to share with you what I've been thinking about these days. I imagine how proud we would be if, instead of always sending some diplomat to represent us abroad, we could say: we do not have a single representative—we are all representatives of our country."

She was a woman from the suburbs, not especially educated in the formal sense, yet she was captivated by the possibility that we might live differently—that "better" could mean solidarity and freedom.

Marija Radoman: My impression is somewhat different. I also had countless individual images, but I found myself thinking from a macro perspective: what have we gained from all this? Where are we now?

Despite all the dark images of repression, I always return to a conclusion that is, in the end, a kind of optimism, though it moves in waves—despair and optimism. What gives me optimism is placing these protests historically and politically. If you look back, we have been in a decade-long wave of protest: Savamala, Serbia Against Dictatorship, One of Five Million, Serbia Against Violence…

Recent waves of protest in Serbia

This refers to several major protest movements in Serbia over the past decade (see Figure 1): the Savamala protests (2016), sparked by the illegal demolition of buildings in Belgrade; Serbia Against Dictatorship (2017), following contested presidential elections; One of Five Million (2018–2020), a sustained civic protest movement; and Serbia Against Violence (2023), organized after mass shootings and calling for political accountability. Together, these movements form a broader context of recurring civic mobilization in Serbia.

These protests continue that history, but also mark a rupture. What makes them specific is the scale of mobilization and its duration. Their success lies in this grassroots, horizontal, directly democratic organizing—which began with direct democracy and eventually produced demands for early parliamentary elections.

Figure 1: Students and citizens gather at the Autokomanda intersection in Belgrade, Serbia, on January 27, 2025, during a mass nighttime protest illuminated by mobile phone lights (photo by Aleksa Stanković)

But I think that foundational experience remained long enough to become sedimented in us. If we speak of the university, it has entered at least some of its parts. Not all. But I don't think we can lose it anymore. The transformation has already happened.

That is why I am optimistic. I don't fear we will forget—we won't. It lasted long enough to change us. Students initiated it, and then we have taken it up and continue working within that wave of transformation.

What Does It Mean to Save the University?

Olja Jovanović: I wonder whether our choice of paradigmatic situations is shaped by the ways we ourselves entered this process.

I was outside the country when the protests began. I landed on March 15, during one of the largest protests in Serbian history—a protest invested with enormous hopes, which ended with the use of a sonic weapon against assembled citizens. Shortly after, came what is known as the 5/35 Decree.

The 5/35 Decree

The "5/35 Decree" refers to a regulation introduced in March 2025 that limited officially recognized research work to five hours per week, replacing the previous distribution of research and teaching within a standard 40-hour workload. Because research was formally counted as only five hours, academic staff who suspended teaching during the blockades could be paid only 12.5 % of their salaries. This reduction was presented as consistent with existing workload regulations.[4]

For me, the decree—and everything that followed—triggered a range of thoughts and emotions, but it also clearly emerges as a paradigmatic situation that captures the position of the university in Serbia.

On one level, it revealed the absence—or breakdown—of state institutions, rules, and procedures. Overnight, without public debate or any real possibility to respond, the conditions of a university teacher's work were changed. It may have functioned as short-term pressure through salary cuts, but in the long run it risks pushing us out of the international scientific community, as participation in international projects becomes increasingly difficult.

There was also anger—at the procedural logic of repression, where the law is reshaped to make repression formally legitimate, even though we all know it is neither acceptable nor normal. And then there was the silence of institutions that should have responded.

[4] A position paper prepared by members of the university community on the impact of the decree is available at https://www.pobuni.se/objava.html?id=41

At the same time, a dominant narrative emerged: that there would be no university if we did not resume teaching. The sense of "to be or not to be"—not for us as individuals, but for the university itself—was very much present.

What stayed with me, however, was the relative silence beyond the university community. There was support for the students, but far less visible recognition of the university as a public good. That silence raised a difficult question: who needs the university? Those of us who work within it? The students who study there? Or the wider society?

And if the university is indeed a public good, how do we make that idea resonate beyond the university itself?

Jelena Kleut: That is so important, because I think that was the moment we—like our colleagues in primary and secondary schools[5]—felt alone.

The enchantment with collective strength, with student energy, began to crack. Support was no longer unanimous. The Decree started fragmenting collectives and dividing us.

And then that moment emerged: we must save the institution. But what does it mean to save the institution?

That became an open field of conflict. Some argued the only way to save the university was to return to teaching immediately. Others argued there is no saving an institution that bows its head and simply accepts necessity.

And suddenly we saw clearly the heterogeneous voices within the university.

Milan Stančić: My initial choice would also have been the Decree. It was the moment repression became naked. The regime became fully visible in its ugliest sense.

There had long been this image—imposed from outside and partly internalized—that we, university teachers, were somehow protected, untouchable. And then the Decree made it clear: everything is possible. Everything since—the legal changes, dismissals, existential questions, even whether the university will survive as an institution—seems to begin there.

The Decree opened our eyes in multiple ways. It exposed the regime's relationship of power to the university. But it also exposed society's relationship to the university.

And there too we felt alone. Even when people approached us at the Crossroad, somehow we still felt alone. We had our usual allies—students, the IT community, citizen assemblies, school teachers—but beyond that, broader

[5] More information on the teacher protests in Serbia can be found here: https://blog.eera-ecer.de/teacher-protest-in-serbia/

reactions seemed absent. People said things like, “Well, they should lose their salaries if they aren’t working.” And so we felt abandoned.

The Faculties at the Crossroad

The "Faculties at the Crossroad" protests began on June 9, 2025, in front of the Serbian government. They were organized by the “University in Rebellion” (*Pobunjeni univerzitet*), and supported by other university initiatives, students, and citizens’ assemblies (see Figure 2). The protest consisted of a continuous blockade of a key crossroad in Belgrade (Kneza Miloš and Nemanjina), combined with demands to suspend the drafting of the new Law on Higher Education—seen as a prelude to privatization and loss of autonomy—to cancel the 5/35 Decree, and to approve enrollment quotas for budget places at all faculties founded by the Republic of Serbia that had not yet been published for faculties still in protest. The blockade lasted 17 days.

Figure 2: *Participants in the “Crossroad” protest organized by Free Universities and Universities in Rebellion gather in front of the Serbian government building in Belgrade, Serbia, displaying banners supporting university blockades and academic resistance (photo by Marija Stojnić)*

Still—for me, the Decree was the first moment when the regime's intentions towards universities stood fully exposed. And the Decree is still here.

Jelena Kleut: Exactly—we speak of it as if it were past, but it is still with us.

Nenad Radulović: Let me add something personal. My own contract literally contains the 5/35 Decree. I may have been the first person at the Faculty in Niš to sign a contract under it.

When salaries were slashed, our staff began wavering. Can we continue the blockades? Can we support students and return to teaching? The same discourse emerged: we must save the faculty. The inspection came. We must return somehow. Meanwhile, students were furious—why return now and destroy everything achieved through protest?

It was perhaps the greatest crisis we had experienced.

And I thought: what do I do?

I accepted that we might return to teaching online, but I told students that attendance would be voluntary and that no sanctions would follow non-attendance.

And then the freshest moment—last night. We arrived at the faculty around five, and the dean's email came: the government had revoked permissions for our programs in Serbian studies, Russian, and History. Students and teachers gathered spontaneously. We marched from our Faculty of Philosophy to the Faculty of Serbian Studies. A colleague carried the Serbian flag, and someone suddenly put the Faculty flag in my hands.

Prohibition of academic programs

In 2026, the Serbian government revoked the operating licenses of three departments at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Niš—History, Serbian Studies, and Russian Studies—with the intention of transferring these programs to the newly established Faculty of Serbian Studies in Niš. The decision was widely criticized as procedurally unlawful, as it bypassed established academic and institutional procedures.

And I stood at the head of that column, waving the Faculty of Philosophy flag, proud to represent what this institution is—against what others are trying to fabricate through poor arguments about "identity sciences."

Why claim we do not deal with identity?

Why cast us as destroyers of identity while others claim they will restore it?

Mila Bakić: Of everything beautiful I have gained through togetherness—our organizing, the friendships I would carry to the end of the world—what first came to mind was messaging with our students who were detained yesterday, called in for police questioning.

One student had his interview rescheduled from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m.—and tabloids published at 1:15 what he supposedly said in a statement that hadn't even happened yet. For me, that is an image of society's relationship to the university.

Then the 5/35 Decree, and perhaps above all the fear of what comes next, because we have already said: everything is possible.

The Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade is under greater attack than ever. We have long surpassed the 1990s. And yet we hold. There is still a majority on what I can only call the right side. I now truly see things as light and darkness. All our ideological differences—left, right, whatever—seem secondary. There is light and darkness. And never has it been easier to choose.

But we are under specific attack—attempts to remove administration, prosecute people, punish. And we don't know whether the government might change the law overnight. That is helplessness before the system.

And we learned from public reaction to the Decree that when we raised our voice, we felt alone. I don't currently know what our superpowers are—unless further radical moves by the authorities once again produce unity. Because even students with very different positions are united by this threat.

You hear them say, "A forced administration will enter this faculty over our dead bodies." And that is important. Because even if not in the broader public, within the university there exists a community able to put everything else aside. There is an inheritance here. As Marija said—we continue defending the university together.

The Winter When We Learned to Speak

Olja Jovanović: Mila introduced the next question. When the context is such that we feel the university does not have broad support, when we recognize how the university is being delegitimized in public, and at the same time we believe that the university should speak and should respond—who is the university actually addressing in these circumstances? Who are our potential allies, or who constitutes the network the university can rely on?

Mila Bakić: This struggle is not my first social struggle. Although our students truly did mobilize the people, in the end we come down to a minority of those who are actually ready to risk losing, to defend uncompromisingly, to fight, to give their time—time they would otherwise spend with their families—to go in front of the court to support students, and so on.

Unfortunately, I think we can primarily rely on such communities and on what has remained of them. These are our teachers and comrades from primary and secondary schools, the Social Front, and then a number of activist organizations, regardless of earlier distance between students and them. Those people are there. They are ready to give their time and energy.

The Social Front

The Social Front (*Društveni front*) is a grassroots association of workers' collectives, trade unions, and formal and informal professional communities that emerged in the wake of the student protests in Serbia. It defines itself as a non-partisan initiative and does not intend to participate in elections. By connecting workers across different sectors and supporting collective action, the Social Front seeks to reclaim institutions appropriated by those in power and to restore their role in serving the common good.

Then there are citizens' assemblies that emerged as a product of student action. I also think there are broader groups within the population that support the student movement, and we saw that in moments when we moved closer to them—through public addresses, marches, and by being present where they were.

Citizens' assemblies

In early 2025, students called on citizens to organize themselves into citizens' assemblies (zborovi građana), mirroring the organizational structure of the student movement. These informal local assemblies across Serbia mobilized to support students' anti-corruption demands and to promote direct democracy.

So when we speak in a language that is not strictly academic, then we gather.

That is who we can address—those who are already self-organized and who feel that unrest, that they must do something about this country through solidarity with others.

Nikola Koruga: The first thing we learned is that we address one another.

For example, I learned a lot from Mila about anthropology while we were going through places across Serbia. And that is now a new approach to research for me in general—a different way of learning, of thinking about our own actions.

Another thing—we realized we cannot be self-sufficient and that we must make a huge effort to understand where we live. And that still surprises us.

But yes—I don't know—we will have to figure out who and how to address further. Because when you are fighting against a machinery that controls all the media and holds all the levers of power, sometimes you really don't know how to respond to that, no matter how much knowledge, creativity, will, or solidarity you have.

But the very fact that we turned to one another—I think that is already enough. Something new, somehow.

Jelena Kleut: And then, when you compare different periods before, you realize that now, to begin with, you have *a university that speaks*.

It speaks frequently, loudly, in forms that are entirely academic, but also in forms that are completely atypical for academia—for example, blocking intersections, or engaging in protest performances. We have now learned to do all of that (See Figures 3 and 4).

And the circle of people who speak has expanded. Before, you always had the same faces—partly the logic of the media, partly the logic of the academic community, which does not want to speak unless something is narrowly tied to our expertise. If broader social topics are involved—then no.

Figure 3: *Professors stand in solidarity with students during a public march in Novi Sad, Serbia (photo: from Jelena Kleut's private archive)*

Now new people have stepped forward who speak on issues concerning university autonomy and attacks on autonomy. That list has truly expanded.

So the question now is: whom do we count on? If we say "the rebellious society," the question is what we want that society to do. Do we want them to physically defend the faculty from forced administration, or do we want something else? I think we truly did feel alone when we were left without salaries. But when you look at the network of solidarity that formed around that— I thought it would be impossible to create such a network, because it was a huge, structured, comprehensive undertaking—but it happened. We had an IT company in Novi Sad. They made an enormous effort to remain anonymous—even outside the IT blockade. They asked faculties to provide contacts of teaching assistants, because assistants were the most affected by salary cuts, and they supported them. There were many such things.

These people would come tomorrow to provide financial help, but it would probably be too costly for them to stand in front of police cordons. So now we must also weigh tactically when we call which people for what. But I am not sure we are alone. We do have something—we just need to distribute it wisely.

Olja Jovanović: When you mentioned that people started speaking, I immediately remembered a banner from one protest: “The winter when I learned to speak.”

It seems to me that this has also changed the image of the university. Previously, we were seen as someone who *speaks about expertise*. But in this process, *we acted through expertise*.

You’re there, working with people, doing what you know best—and people begin to realize that you actually do know something. That this knowledge is not elitist, not detached from reality, not unusable—as the dominant narrative often suggests—but something that helps. It helps you think, respond more thoughtfully, and consider the consequences of your actions.

If I go back to the question of *whom we speak to*, I think it is important to note that the student movement was not addressing only current political actors, but also those who are yet to come. In that sense, it seems to me that the university has also begun to speak to younger generations.

I always think of how high school students responded to the president postponing the elections: “Postpone the elections—we’ll turn 18 in the meantime and gain the right to vote.” That is the response of a generation—the generation that is now arriving at the university.

Figure 4: *Students organize a protest march marking 11 months since the deadly roof collapse in Serbia, joined by citizens in public remembrance and protest (photo by Aleksa Stanković)*

Mila Bakić: That's great that you mentioned younger generations. Among other things, I work on promoting our study programs. And now, in those few cities where we visited schools, there are questions that didn't exist before. Recently, in Kraljevo, we were distributing stickers that our students had made. Then a high school student approached me and asked, "Can I give you stickers that I made?" And that was very interesting to me—he had his own message and wanted to share it. There is a desire to be part of the change.

Nikola Koruga: Yes, and older generations too, I must admit. As an andragog, I know how difficult it is to change something among generations that follow traditional media, especially in this kind of heavily controlled media environment.

However, through conversations on the public buses, I notice that a significant change is happening. Even older citizens now understand that change is necessary and are beginning to listen to students.

So I do think that older generations are part of this change as well. Maybe not to the same extent as younger people. Perhaps they cannot be—or perhaps they are simply less visible.

Marija Radoman: There are also groups that are not visible. Literally not visible. They are absent from media coverage, their voices are not heard—and yet they are there, on the streets, supporting.

Neutrality Is No Longer an Empty Place

Olja Jovanović: Before our meeting, I looked at data from Carnegie International[6], which show that in the last twelve months, in more than 67 countries there have been significant protests—many of them led by Generation Z, which is the generation we have and will have at universities. This raises the question of the role of the university in current circumstances. Although this question is very alive here right now, I think it is also a global question.

There is increasing pressure for the university to take a politically neutral position. For example, in the U.S., since the 2024 presidential campaign, the number of universities adopting neutrality statements has increased (see, e.g., Brewer & Young, 2025).

So the question is: how should the university position itself between neutrality and political action? Do you feel this as a tension?

Marija Radoman: I can speak for myself. I have always experienced my work as political, since my student days—but it feels intensified now. Especially now, as

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[6] See Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *Global Protest Tracker*, an ongoing database of protest events worldwide, https://carnegieendowment.org/features/global-protest-tracker

a faculty employee, I feel even more strongly that political action is part of professional responsibility. For me personally, there is no return to neutrality.

Now, “neutral” equals “ćaci.” It means you are on the other side. From my perspective, there is no longer that empty position of the authority of knowledge. What does it mean to speak from that position now? For me, it has become speaking from an engaged opposition—as a form of critical thinking. I think these events have truly changed us in terms of values. And that is a very positive thing.

Ćaci

“Ćaci” is a sarcastic slang term used during the Serbian student protests to refer to pro-government supporters, especially those perceived as highly loyal, politically engaged, or performatively expressing support for the authorities.

Jelena Kleut: It is difficult to compare globally. It seems to me that despite all the repression and horror, we are actually in a clearer situation. As Mila said—here it is now black and white. We despise neutrality. Not because we are so great, but because students pushed us into that realization. We are also playing a local political game. Just as Vučić[7] tries to define politics as something he stands above—while everyone else is labeled “politicians,” thus framing politics as something dirty—we see a similar dynamic at the university.

Those who supported students are accused of political ambition. Meanwhile, there are universities deeply embedded in political and clientelist networks, where party membership determines grants and positions. So we are trying to redefine that political field—for ourselves and for society. And we refuse to be neutral.

We refuse to withdraw because someone says, “you are politicians,” on national television. We file lawsuits, we speak at protests—we continue acting. In that sense, I think we are in a stronger position than some universities elsewhere that are still searching for their response.

Mila Bakić: I think one difference is that many of those universities are private. We are funded by public money. Because of that, I believe we have a responsibility—not only to teach and do research, but also to give something back to society, whether through commentary or something stronger. Not everyone

[7] Aleksandar Vučić is the president of Serbia (since 2017) and a central figure in the country’s political landscape. His government has been widely criticized for increasing control over the media, weakening institutional checks and balances, and responding to protest movements with various forms of political and administrative pressure. Further information is available at https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/freedom-world/2026

has to do everything, but this responsibility should exist. And when political change comes, we should retain that active role.

We should not wait for things to reach their worst point, but remain constantly active, as individuals already are.

Nenad Radulović: I will add to what you said at the end. If there are changes for the better, I think we should be an example to citizens; to represent a principle of how to act. To be a reference point that the authorities might turn to for advice on what to do next—because that is also our role.

It is very difficult when you are accused of dragging the faculty into politics. That is what they say about the Faculty of Philosophy in Niš—that we have become too political, that we have led students astray.

And now the authorities will "correct" that? They will create their own faculty so students can finally return to study? A complete paradox. So yes—the university should speak. Especially when the issues concern it directly.

Nikola Koruga: I was able to follow how the situation surrounding the student protests was developing in many other countries. At one point, the students asked me, "Is that because of us?" I do not think it is because of us. Just as we feel that we are confronting something deeply problematic, I believe that this broader moment has also reached a breaking point. Different societies, however, respond in different ways to the pressures and contradictions of neoliberalism.

It is problematic to see students as clients. Students have the right to complain if a professor says something they do not like—something that does not fit their ideological framework. If we say the planet is endangered, that is politics. If you present data on air pollution, that is politics. We cannot leave politics outside the university, no matter which theory we take—neutrality does not exist. I teach Paulo Freire, radical pedagogy, and he says that we teach illiterate adults not just to read words, but to read the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987)—to fight for a better position, to negotiate better prices for their agricultural products—and that is politics.

Milan Stančić: This topic brings me back to my earlier reflections about an expanded awareness of one's social role, which Marija also hinted at. This is not something that emerged only from recent events—even before, I would not say that neutrality exists. I see teaching and education as deeply political acts: through the selection of content, methods, whose voices we give space to, and whose knowledge we legitimize or not—this already becomes an ideological and political act. The question is how aware we are of it. And I hope we are becoming more aware that it matters to act in that way.

However, it seems to me that the idea of neutrality is often placed under the umbrella of autonomy, which is quite strange. It is strange because autonomy is framed as protection from external pressures, and then neutrality is adopted as a way of protecting ourselves from those pressures. But in essence, neutrality does

not exist. Even if we choose to remain silent in the face of social anomalies, that is already a political choice.

For me, autonomy is something else entirely—it is protection that allows us to criticize society. In that sense, autonomy is opposed to neutrality—it should protect the possibility of political action. From my perspective, autonomy means being free to act politically, though not in a demagogic sense, but in the sense of recognizing problems, isolating them, offering critique, and opening space for dialogue. Being political in education shouldn't mean indoctrination, but providing a space where discussion is possible, where debate is allowed, and where we are protected in doing so.

Olja Jovanović: From your responses, I would say it is very important how the narrative around autonomy and neutrality is constructed, and consequently how justification is built for punishing or rewarding universities. If I look at the example of the previously mentioned 5/35 Decree, narrative about autonomy also played a significant role there. Questions were raised about the relationship between autonomy and financial dependence. There were messages such as, "If we pay you, you will behave according to our rules."

Then it was necessary to address that "we" in the narrative—who actually funds the university, and what is the role of the government in that. Returning to the idea of the university as a public good, funded by citizens because they recognize it as an institution necessary for society, was a message that we, as a university community, tried to make visible.

It also seems important to think in terms of social interest versus individual interest. I see the university as a critical social actor, acting with the aim of protecting the public interest. Noam Chomsky (1967) would say that, as members of the academic community, society has given us the privilege of access to information, knowledge, and a space to speak, and we must be responsible for that privilege.

However, I think that the distinction between political and party-based action at the university becomes blurred in a context where ruling parties are not clearly separated from state institutions, which they only temporarily occupy.

Between Professional and Personal: Dilemmas of Practice

Olja Jovanović: My impression is that this undifferentiated field in which we act has produced tensions and dilemmas on a personal level. What does it mean to be a teacher, a researcher, a teaching assistant, a professional associate? What is the relationship between the professional and the personal? What tensions did you encounter in this process, and how did you deal with them?

Marija Radoman: I had quite a few ethical dilemmas, for example, when we conducted research. We finished the research, and I think I still haven't resolved

those dilemmas. We are in a dual position—as employees and as researchers—and we help, we have an activist dimension, and at the same time we produce something from it—papers, knowledge. Even though all of that benefits the student movement, I had an ethical dilemma: what should be used and what should not? Most of that material was not used, because I felt something would be compromised. Only fragments were used. That was a real tension for me. Then, at moments, I wondered: should I be doing research or going to protests and organizing? Seeing people like Mila in certain positions made me think—wait, these people are doing so much, what am I doing sitting at home writing academic papers? Everything was quite chaotic. I think these protests brought to the surface everything that already existed—hierarchies, inequalities, fragmentation—and perhaps even intensified them.

Jelena Kleut: I'm trying to think how many of those dilemmas there actually were—what exactly I was reconciling. Everything felt quite natural, and I didn't have many of them. There were small moments that displaced you. I remember when we blocked the court in Novi Sad to get those six people released from detention—a very unusual scene. We gathered in the morning, pressed up against the police (see Figure 5). One of my first-year students said, "Professor, this is my father." And we were all pressed together, pushing against the police. And the father said, "Good day, Professor," but all through shields and helmets. But it felt natural—we were with students in the classroom, then we walked with them, then we cleaned the faculty together, now we are with them here. I didn't have many questions like, "Where are the boundaries of my identity?"

Figure 5: *Students face a police cordon during a protest in front of the Radio Television of Serbia (RTS) building in Belgrade, Serbia, on April 16, 2025 (photo by Aleksa Stanković)*

Olja Jovanović: I'm not sure I would call it a dilemma, but for me it marked a point where my role as a citizen and my role as a teacher began to diverge. I was mostly in contact with students who were active in the protests—I would meet them at the faculty, on the streets, at the Crossroad. But as time went on, I started to think about those I didn't meet—who they were and why they were absent. As a citizen, I was present with those who were protesting. But as a teacher, I am responsible to all of my students, including those who remain outside my field of view.

Jelena Kleut: There were some very unusual stories. When we returned to teaching, I approached one student—I had no idea where she stood politically—I just wanted to check how she was. She told me she had her own "blockade experience," even though she wasn't at the faculty—she was in a village near Subotica, organizing resistance there. She became a target of obscure Facebook groups, facing gender-based harassment. And I realized how my focus on the faculty made me unaware of such experiences. I'm not even on Facebook, and I barely use Instagram—I wasn't connected enough. Some student experiences remained completely invisible. I felt really bad that I didn't know what she had gone through.

Nenad Radulović: I'll share one dilemma I had. In November, a proposal appeared to establish a Faculty of Serbian Studies in Niš. We had just resumed teaching. For first-year students, it was practically their second class when they heard about it and asked what would happen. As someone working at the Faculty of Philosophy in Niš, I would naturally say: "Don't transfer there, that faculty won't be real." But then I thought—these are freshmen; their parents invested money for their education. Now they would have to explain to their parents that they should transfer to another faculty to study the same thing because the government moved their program. And that new faculty is not good, but ours is? A financially strained parent would likely say: "Finish what you started; I don't care where." Some students said they wouldn't transfer; some stayed silent. I told them: "You are students; your interest is to finish your studies. Think carefully about how you want to respond. This affects staff more, but you should primarily think about yourselves." That was my dilemma—how to advise them in this situation.

What Remains: Practices, Structures, and the Future of the University

Olja Jovanović: To conclude—looking at everything, what practices, concepts, or lessons learned could help us think about the role of the university and of us as university workers and also be useful in other contexts?

Mila Bakić: This horizontal organization that emerged—which was not typical for academia except in individual cases—was one of the most important things that happened internally. I have three vivid images from the blockades, and this is one. During the largest protest in Serbia's history, hundreds of students from

other university centers slept at the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade. Staff organized shifts—some took care of food, others of different tasks. Early the next morning came cleaning. There was a scene where a full professor—whom I won't name—was holding a mop and asking a young researcher, "I've cleaned here—where should I clean next?" And she assigned him tasks. That was a million-dollar scene. Something beautiful—relationships between students, staff, everyone from technical staff to professors. But how do we maintain that outside such conditions? How do we remain a community? That is the question.

Marija Radoman: I think this is an excellent question, and we should really think about how to translate this experience into practice. For example, how could the "Open Assembly" continue in peacetime? Could we have monthly meetings where everyone is invited, with an agenda, parallel to student plenums? We need to create forms at the faculty level that will continue. Solidarity must be concretized. It doesn't have to be only in crisis—we can create shared events, actions, anything that keeps us connected.

Open Assembly

During the protests at the Faculty of Philosophy, groups of professors, researchers, and teaching assistants organized themselves into what they called the "Open Assembly" (Otvorena zbornica), a self-organized informal forum for discussion, coordination, and support for the student protests.

Jelena Kleut: Otherwise, it won't last. That's what I fear. If we just let it be, we will lose everything faster than we think. At the Free University, we had weekly meetings and addressed each other informally—everyone from academicians to assistants. But once we returned to faculties, hierarchy quickly returned. Even now, we are still coordinating actions, yet we've gone back to formal address. It shows how quickly things can disappear. That's why sustainability must be built now, not after everything ends. For example, the formation of unions at faculties—this could remain. Previously, unions were inert, tied to rigid structures. Now, people are truly connected, and these unions function across faculties. That could be a lasting space for collective work and organization.

Free University

"Free University" (*Slobodni univerzitet*) is a network of professors, associates, researchers, and other employees at the University of Novi Sad and other higher education institutions in Vojvodina, founded on the principles of academic honesty, dignity, equality, and solidarity. The network was created as a response by teaching staff at the University of Novi Sad to the student blockades that began in December 2024 and to the demands formulated at that time, bringing together university teachers, associates, and researchers who provided unreserved support for the blockade and the students' demands.[8]

Nikola Koruga: Yes, for me the union was also a very important element and moment—when we actually went on strike. But yes, direct democracy, I think, is what matters most. We learned something about solidarity during the war, when people exchanged what they had: I give you flour, you give me coffee; I give you oil, you give me gasoline—whatever someone was able to obtain. We learned how to share. But direct democracy… At first it was very difficult for it to take root among us, employees. I remember those early meetings of the Open Assembly—“How will we do this?” And I remember those first meetings across the entire education sector, and the students constantly trying to tell us: “You have three minutes, and we don’t need fifteen of you repeating the same thing—we’ve already heard it.” I think that was a lesson we had to learn.

Citizens’ assemblies are, for me, very important structures. At the beginning, they were very large, and I think they will become large again. Some people may not feel close to elections or formal political organization, but, for example, during the recent situation with farmers and milk, some assemblies reacted very effectively. A large number of people formed a group and began buying directly from farmers. So we see that direct democracy—the idea that someone makes small decisions every day, that when we sit together we can solve very complex problems, and even enjoy doing so… And we do not need large structures standing behind us. This did not emerge because students were radical utopians, but simply because they demanded that institutions already in place actually function. Since those institutions have not functioned for a year and a half, or longer—and are increasingly collapsing—we have no choice but to find ways to cope. We simply have to continue finding ways.

Milan Stančić: It seems to me that a common concept here is the concept of community. Clearly, togetherness was striking. That need for informal association—at the level of institutions, universities, even the nation more broadly. But something still feels missing. I am thinking of Hart’s ladder of

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[8] Further information is available at https://suuns.info/

participation (Hart, 1992). It feels like we have something like a ladder of involvement. If we translate this into the question of how to preserve the university, it is relatively easy to secure support—people recognizing its importance, coming out into the streets, writing about it. That level we can achieve.

But a higher level is when someone becomes actively involved in a shared struggle. That, to me, is a higher rung of participation, and I still do not know how we get there—how to motivate people, except through something that, unfortunately, seems to arise spontaneously rather than through planning. Usually, it happens when someone feels the sharp teeth of the system on their own skin, and only then realizes they need to get involved—that it is their struggle too. But often, by then, it is too late. Meanwhile, the system grinds us down continuously, slowly—we do not notice what is being taken from us, how our rights, freedoms, and autonomy are eroded. So one concept is certainly togetherness, and the other is more active participation in achieving shared goals.

Olja Jovanović: My thoughts go in two directions. One concerns the individual level, and the fear, as Jelena and Mila mentioned, that what has emerged might fade or be forgotten. In those moments, I return to a basic understanding of learning as a relatively lasting change. If learning has occurred—and I believe it has—we are unlikely to simply return to previous ways of thinking and acting. We have experienced that things can be different, and that experience opens up the possibility of choice.

For that reason, I am not particularly concerned at the individual level. What concerns me is the collective level. Will this learning spread, or will it remain limited to individuals and small groups? Will it endure collectively? Here, I agree with Marija—we need to move toward building structures. Over the past year and a half, we have developed new connections—between universities, faculties, and departments. The challenge now is to build structures that can grow out of these connections, without simply reproducing existing hierarchies, but instead enabling different forms of organization.

At the same time, this experience has shown how dependent such processes are on time and space. Without time to meet and think together, and without spaces in which this can happen, it becomes difficult to sustain the forms of collaboration we developed. We saw this once teaching resumed: without shared time and space, the potential for organizing quickly diminished.

Jelena Kleut: And we have to demand it. No one will give it to us. I've experienced this very directly… After that police intrusion, our faculty was sterilized of any sign of the blockades. If they saw a sticker, they would climb onto benches just to remove it. So at our faculty, every trace of the blockades has been erased, as if they had never existed. You cannot imagine it. Once, you were in that beautiful space, and now you walk in—and it's this awful, sterile place.

Now I find myself imagining those little corners of the faculty that I had enriched with cushions—I want that back. I want us to arrange it again.

Mila Bakić: Olja, that point you made really resonates with me. I'm wondering whether it is actually easier for us to organize and connect through these informal structures we created—the Free University and the University in Rebellion—rather than institutionally. In other words, whether it is easier to start from there and then think together about how to bring things back into institutional frameworks. Or perhaps not—I don't know. Right now, the student movement can no longer hold meetings at the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade, which they could do just two weeks ago. They lost that space. Students have lost the space they had—used by students from different faculties of the University of Belgrade—because this really was a shared home.

University in Rebellion

The "University in Rebellion" (*Pobunjeni univerzitet*) initiative is an informal network of teachers, researchers, teaching assistants, and other university workers associated with the University of Belgrade. It was established in early 2025 to provide self-organized support for the students' demands and to take an active role in the broader social movement. The initiative is guided by principles of freedom of thought and expression, academic and civic solidarity, independence from political parties, transparency, inclusiveness, and horizontal self-organization. It is committed to collaboration with other academic and civic initiatives that share its values and understands itself as a space for participatory learning, knowledge exchange, and the development of new educational practices grounded in critical thinking and solidarity.[9]

And now we are thinking about how to preserve what we achieved, how to continue developing it, even as we have lost what we had, because repression has increased.

Nenad Radulović: You spoke about what we have lost, but I would mention what we have gained—what students have gained through all this, at least at the Faculty of Philosophy in Niš. It seems to me that the student voice, for example in the Faculty Council and other bodies, is now seen as much more important and is more valued. I can say this also from a student perspective, since I myself was once a member of the Council as a student. Back then, we were present only for the first two agenda items—those where students voted, such as minutes or reports—and then we would leave.

[9] Further information is available at https://www.pobuni.se/index.html

Now students want to stay, and even if they do not vote, they can participate in discussion. They are invited to speak, for their voice to be heard. They themselves have become more interested in participating in faculty bodies. So I would highlight that moment—the importance of hearing students, what they have to say about all this. In a way, students have become equal members alongside us professors and other staff in discussions about important issues for the faculty.

Nikola Koruga: I think the student plenum must remain a control body over any authority, and that as a society we must understand something that the current authorities cannot—that there is no cult of personality. The plenum is a space people enter and leave as needed. Yes, there is sometimes apathy—fewer people attend—but when important issues arise, many people come. That is precisely what the plenum is for: a space, a forum, where whenever there is a need or an idea, people come and speak. There is no single person, like in a parliament. All those attempts to replicate political or state models within the university have proven not to work. The plenum, on the other hand, is a good control mechanism—it reminds us where we are, what we are, and what we could still become, precisely because it is open and flexible.

Olja Jovanović: Thank you all for taking part in this conversation. I have to admit—I didn't expect it to feel this meaningful to me. It allowed me to see things from different angles and to begin making sense of them at a more conceptual level—and in that way, it created a sense of regaining some control over what is happening.

I'm really glad we had this opportunity to come together, and I hope it won't be the last time—perhaps next time around different questions.

Mila Bakić: Next time when we meet, we'll be dancing *kolo*. (laughter)

Kolo

Kolo is a traditional circle dance widely practiced in Serbia and across the Balkans. Performed in groups, often at celebrations and public gatherings, it involves coordinated steps and collective movement, symbolizing community, continuity, and shared cultural expression. In this context, Mila refers to a widely circulated public statement by a PhD student who, speaking to a reporter from a pro-government tabloid, said that she would dance the kolo when they were arrested, anticipating the downfall of the current regime and the arrest of those aligned with it.

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