Bridging Divides In Governing Together Everyday Politics

The challenges that cities and local governments face today – from the climate crisis to housing, public health, and mental health – ***are deeply interconnected.*** With no single cause and no single solution, effective responses to these complex crises require ***collective action*** that works across organisational and civic boundaries to enable a fully joined-up response.

Local governments are increasingly recognising the importance of enabling collective action and are seeking answers to critical questions such as:

What do we need

to improve the quality of our collective decisions about where to act, how to act, and what actions to prioritise – especially in the context of complex crises, uncertain future trajectories, and rapid change?

How can we mobilise

and motivate people – whether from local government, the private sector, civil society, or individual citizens – to act and participate in collective decision-making processes and spaces?

How do we (re)build

trust so that people are willing to show up in spaces of collective decision-making in the first place?

This Deep Dive is shaping a new strand of work at Dark Matter Labs, where we're exploring how to **design *with* and *for* relationality** – fostering relationships, building trust, and enabling collective sensemaking as essential levers for systems change.

While much of our focus is on supporting cities and local governments, these qualities and enabling conditions apply broadly across contexts – improving dynamics between actors at every level of an ecosystem, whether between two people, a team, a community, a company, or an entire city.

How we are approaching the work and how we invite you to engage:

1. We intend for this work to be a radically iterative exploration and open dialogue: we are sharing ideas, insights, and recommendations as starting points to be challenged, reshaped, and co-developed.

2. We are actively building a network of partners and organisations to test and expand these ideas.

3. We invite you to engage with the same sense of openness and generosity that we do in navigating this journey together, recognising that genuine, ecosystemic ways of working are often complex and challenging in practice.

Governing Together is a body of work that explores a worldview – an approach that shifts how we understand our place in the world, how we relate to one another, and how we design, decide, and act. As authors, we come to this work with humility and generative curiosity, rather than a sense of certainty, challenging the belief that we can fully know, define, or have all the answers to complex questions. Our insights come from decades of practical experience on the ground, not from abstract concepts or theories.

We recognise that this way of engaging contrasts with a more familiar Western tradition of a focus on solutions, often rooted in modernist and Enlightenment frames of reference. That tradition values certainty, linear progress, and clear answers and set briefs – often before we even fully understand the problem. While that approach has brought important advances, it can also limit openness to ambiguity, uncertainty, and relational complexity. Governing Together invites a complementary posture – one that holds space for ongoing questioning and co-creation over time – being responsive or attuned to what arises in real time.

This work calls for a particular attitude shift – not only from its authors but from anyone engaging with it. It's less a rigid framework and more a set of conditions or a 'companion guide' that invites curiosity, openness, and generosity. Generative curiosity means beginning from a place of genuine openness towards others, adopting a 'yes, and…' mindset – a technique borrowed from improvisational theatre that helps build on each other's ideas rather than block them. As part of this, we welcome being challenged, along with new ideas and perspectives, to help build upon this work as a collective endeavour.

We don't even always have the perfect words or terms to describe what we're discovering here. Sometimes we only understand something by circling around its edges – and that's okay. Our work and reflections embrace a high degree of emergence, where meaning and clarity unfold over time, shaped by relationships, patterns, and insights that surface throughout the process. In the thinking and practice we offer, we will surely make assumptions and mistakes – and we see that as a healthy part of the process. We are open to being challenged, because we believe that is where the seeds of transformation and innovation live: in dialogue, in friction, in difference, and not only in shared but also in compatible visions and ideas.

This approach draws on practices from ***contemplative traditions***, some of which invite us to make meaning for ourselves. Rather than offering fixed interpretations of this work, words and ideas are meant to open up space for personal resonance and allow new understandings and ways of seeing to emerge. *Meaning arises in interaction with the material, and this process calls for proactive engagement on both sides.*

The insights from this work apply to individuals and organisations at all scales, from national to local, political to community, and business to institutional.

What we are proposing through this work is a new way of governing. This will require a shift in attitude, practice, and civic infrastructure across the whole ecosystem of individuals, organisations, and institutions that make up cities and nations.

Much of our initial focus has been on public officials at the city and local government level. Given the important role they play in creating conditions for collaboration across cities and places, we imagine this focus will continue to have particular resonance with them.

In this work, we are inviting public officials – elected representatives and senior leaders, and officers across all parts of local government – to take part in a generative process that explores and evolves how their roles might shift from being 'public servants' toward becoming '*public stewards*,' critical actors enabling wider collective action. This shift toward a *more interconnected model of governance – rooted in openness, vulnerability and trust – calls for building a shared understanding of what needs to change to make this paradigm happen.*

Collective action requires citizens, communities, businesses, and institutions to engage actively in city governance, making these insights relevant and meaningful to a wide range of stakeholders. We encourage all who shape our societies to reflect on what these insights evoke for them and how they might inform their own actions.

This work offers ideas and guidance on how to better support and involve people who are not currently participating in city decision-making, whether that's due to a lack of agency, opportunity, or motivation. It also explores ways to amplify the voices of those already engaged, embedding their perspectives more directly in governance and building a new generation of responsible civic actors.

01 Context

02 sensemaking as the key to unlocking collective action

a. sensemaking as the key to unlocking collective action
b. sensemaking in our formal and informal spaces of participation
c. sensemaking as a relational, not as an individual, act
d. Threats to sensemaking

03 Designing *with* and *for* relationality

Trust and Safety as Cornerstone Conditions for Collective sensemaking and Action
a. How might we build a society where people can move beyond survival mode to thrive?
b. How might we build trust by improving psychological safety?
c. How might we recognise and respond to trauma with trauma-informed practices?
d. How might we design accountable formal participatory processes?
e. How might we start valuing plurality to strengthen ideas and foster (a) collective (of) intelligence(s)?
f. How might we build trust by telling more expansive stories?

04 Next Steps

01 Context

Governing Together is rooted in the recognition that everyday politics is shaped by the deepest values that drive each one of us.

These values often differ sharply across the divides in our world, and we have not yet fully resolved how to bridge them. This is a challenge we face in our work now, and one that will continue to unfold in the years ahead. It is unresolved, yes – but not necessarily unresolvable. We wouldn't study this subject if we didn't believe that more balanced ways of thinking and relating to each other, rather than binary approaches, were possible.

On one hand, we are clear about the values we intend to double down on, the principles and conditions we see as non-negotiable. On the other hand, we also know that meaningful engagement requires listening to values that differ from our own. Only through this delicate balance, affirming what matters most to us while remaining open to understanding others, can we face the complex crises of our time.

For us, just transitions are a critical and foundational lens for everything we do and design. Without recognition, justice risks becoming shallow – reduced to technical fixes rather than a transformation of the conditions that perpetuate harm. In our work, we hold justice as both an ethical and philosophical grounding and a practical necessity. It requires not only designing fairer processes but also confronting structural inequities, questioning entrenched privileges, and shifting burdens away from those who already carry them most heavily. This means acknowledging that justice is always plural – distributive, procedural, restorative, and recognitional – and that each dimension is inseparable from the others.

As authors based in Europe and the USA, we also recognise the limitations, blind spots, and biases in this first step towards creating the foundations for Governing Together. While our worldview seeks to move beyond these boundaries, we acknowledge that our knowledge, social conditioning, and understanding are still shaped by them. As we continue to develop our work, research, and practice, we remain committed to pushing past our own limits.

As Marcial Silva Mercado and colleagues (a collaborative effort between Atelier itd, Dark Matter Labs, Viable Cities and Climate KIC, supported by Porticus) explain in their work *Accelerating Just Transitions: Insights for Cities and National Platforms* **[1]**, **a just transition** is "a fair and equitable shift from an environmentally damaging or unsustainable economy to a more sustainable and socially inclusive one. It addresses the needs and well-being of affected workers and communities, while also tackling the structures that contribute to and sustain systemic vulnerability and inequity.

Common dimensions of just transitions include recognition, distributive, procedural, and restorative justices. Interventions need to consider these layers of means and ends, as they are inseparable.

Yet many just transition initiatives in cities focus more on social inclusion or social innovation, rather than, for instance, targeting high-energy users and their lifestyles as an immediate, near-term action. By avoiding challenges to the status quo and increasing consumption, we continue to prioritise self-preservation over achieving equitable distributive outcomes.

“Nations talk, cities act”.

—Mike Bloomberg [2]

Cities and local governments are on the frontlines of the 21st century’s biggest societal challenges – from pandemics and housing shortages to renewable energy transitions and social disconnection. These challenges often hit hardest in communities where structural and historical inequalities already exist.

While national governments debate, cities and local governments are compelled to step up and confront these challenges.

The long-term action needed to address the polycrisis requires change and commitment at every level – international, national, and local. Yet it is at the city and local government scale where civic leaders are grappling with real, on-the-ground challenges and opportunities. Even within the constraints shaped by broader governance systems, local government-led efforts can lead the way in forging new ways of thinking, working, and acting; enabling the change we need through shared responsibility.

What’s needed is bold, collective action.

Yet, tackling today’s polycrisis requires more than isolated initiatives on citizen participation, social inclusion, or policy innovation.

There’s *a desperate need but also a unique opportunity for local governments to cultivate fertile ground* and create *the enabling conditions for Governing Together.*

Glossary & Notes

Polycrisis: The simultaneous occurrence of multiple, interconnected crises that exacerbate one another, creating more complex and compound challenges. These crises may include economic instability, environmental degradation, political unrest, social inequality, and public health emergencies.

How collective action is defined across disciplines (this is not an exhaustive list):

Political Science / Economics: Actions taken by a group to achieve a common interest, often in the face of collective action problems.

Social Psychology: Group behaviour driven by shared identity, perceived injustice, or emotions like anger and hope (e.g. social identity theory, relative deprivation).

Sociology: Coordinated efforts by people or communities to bring about social change, often in response to marginalisation or systemic challenges.

Management & Organisational Studies: Cross-functional or inter-organisational collaboration to solve shared problems, especially in uncertain, complex, or adaptive environments.

Local governments play a key role in addressing the overlapping elements of the polycrisis, from the climate crisis and rising living costs to health issues and failing infrastructure, but they have limited power, money, and tools to bring about lasting change on their own. *Transformative change needs everyone to work together*: individuals, businesses, community groups, and all levels of government.

Most practical levers are widely distributed and often sit outside a local government's control.

Local governments alone have a limited ability to shape how the polycrisis plays out in a variety of ways.

Action must outlast election cycles.

Challenges cross administrative boundaries.

Risks are entangled and cascading.

Siloed responses underperform.

Most practical levers are widely distributed and often sit outside a local government's control.

Cities and local governments differ greatly in how much regulatory freedom they have to set policy or raise their own funding. In some places cities are highly devolved, allowing them freedom to act, whereas in others like the UK, this is more constrained.

At a local government level, many of the practical levers that can be used to drive change and address the polycrisis are also widely distributed, particularly around assets and resources. This varies between different geographies, but for example, over 90% of the net zero investment required in European cities is associated with assets not under direct city control [3].

This means that much of the change needed in cities depends on residents, landlords, utilities, and businesses, not just local governments. This means a different way of working together and close collaboration between local governments and other local actors is critical to support change.

Local governments alone have a limited ability to shape how the polycrisis plays out in a variety of ways,

both responding to them as threats and to imagine them as possibilities. Without stronger collaboration and more responsive, trust-based relationships, early warning signs are missed, and timely action becomes difficult.

Action must outlast election cycles.

Transformative work needs a long-term mandate that survives short-term political agendas.

Challenges cross administrative boundaries.

Complex problems cut across sectors, jurisdictions, and knowledge domains; progress depends on practical collaboration across communities, governments, civil society, and the private sector to deliver public value.

Risks are entangled and cascading.

Shocks are increasing in frequency and intensity; local stresses in one system spill into others, requiring a highly coordinated system to be able to predict, understand, and respond to rapid changes across the system.

Siloed responses underperform.

Outcomes-led, place-based collaboration improves resilience and unlocks co-benefits – jobs, health, equity – when actors coordinate. Often the toughest governance barriers are the 'boring', operational and organisational ones.

But there are critical barriers to collective action, mostly rooted in a lack of trust across all sectors of society and among the key stakeholders who need to come together to act collectively.

The citizens

are politically disengaged, divided by growing polarisation, or fatigued by tokenistic engagements that have failed to meaningfully improve their wellbeing and quality of life. This has eroded trust in institutions and political promises, making it harder to build shared or compatible priorities and confidence in collective solutions.

Elected officials

are often caught in the middle. On one hand, they need to show quick wins to their constituents and follow their party's national direction. On the other, they face constant media pressure and the ticking clock of political cycles. All of this can make it hard to focus on longer-term change or test new ideas. Many feel the weight of expectations but don't always have the time, tools, or support across sectors to deal with complex problems in a meaningful way. It's a constant balancing act: keeping public trust while working within the limits of politics as usual.

Public servants

are often overstretched and working within rigid systems, and with limited funding, can become risk-averse and feel overwhelmed or hesitant to engage openly with communities. They may also fear negative public backlash.

The private sector

seeks stable policy and regulatory environments, needing to trust that political and policy frameworks will remain consistent enough to support the changes required of them.

Civil society organisations

though vital connectors, often operate with limited resources and influence.

It has never been more important to understand what drives our support for, or resistance to, collective action, and to (re)build trust as a critical infrastructure. [4]

"There's often a kind of deep, systemic fear that runs through much of local government: fear of getting it wrong, of being blamed, of political fallout or legal challenge. It's rarely about individuals being intentionally risk-averse or difficult, and more about a system that puts people under pressure without any real power or protection. In that context, it's rational to become defensive, to hold on to information, and to avoid conversations that might expose uncertainty or risk. The irony is that this defensive culture creates more problems: it stops learning, prevents collaboration, and isolates people. *Psychological safety, or being able to speak openly, admit mistakes and ask questions, isn't a 'nice to have' in this context. It's the only way we break out of that fear-driven cycle and start to work in a way that works with and meaningfully helps the communities we serve."*

—Eleri Thomas, *Independent Consultant, Public Sector Strategy, Governance and Systems Change*

Even if we manage to establish and rebuild broken trust over time and design the best participatory governance or decision-making processes, history shows us that groups can still have poor *collective intelligence*, and make suboptimal or even harmful decisions together.

Spaces, tools, and opportunities for collective decision-making and action alone are not enough. *It's also important to improve the quality of our collective decisions.*

Our hypothesis is that by enhancing our ability to make sense of the complex world around us – and by cultivating a critical mass of informed, reflective, and critical thinkers – we can raise the quality of our societal decisions.

Collective Intelligence in our framing is more 'a collective of intelligences' (for the lack of a better word). This part of our work is detailed in depth in an upcoming, unpublished deck 'Fostering Relationality and a Collective of Intelligences'):

Building on the work of Geoff Mulgan and others (e.g., Anita Williams Woolley, Thomas W. Malone, and James Surowiecki), in our work, we study collective intelligence as **an outcome of enhanced *relational* capacity** within an ecosystem.

Collective intelligence emerges when people, communities, and ecosystems think, learn, and act together in ways that surpass what any individual or part could achieve alone [5] [6]. It involves the dynamic combination and evolution of knowledge, ideas, experiences, and instincts through relationships – whether between people, organisations, technologies, or ecologies [7].

Key factors to foster collective intelligence – or rather a collective of intelligences – include:

Increasing team members' emotional intelligence and 'social perceptiveness', i.e., the ability to read non-verbal cues and subtle social signals, which requires and supports deeper empathy and emotional attunement, understanding, and coordination [8].

Enhancing plurality of thought and experience to bring diverse perspectives, helping protect against subtle exclusions and behaviours that undermine psychological safety [9] [10].

Creating conditions for 'transactive memory' to develop by allowing stable teams to work together over time. Transactive memory is a shared system for encoding, storing, and retrieving knowledge within groups, enabling members to rely on one another's expertise and coordinate more effectively [11] [12].

Transactive memory (i.e. the map or navigation of institutional knowledge) is foundational to how knowledge is organised, maintained, and accessed across teams and organisations.

02

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sensemaking as the key to unlocking collective action

sensemaking is the foundation and core element that makes collective action possible.

sensemaking helps us understand and navigate the world around us, shaping our sense of agency and willingness to act – both essential for governance and community building.

For local governments, understanding what sensemaking is, how it currently takes place, and how it produces resilience, security, and the conditions for thriving is critical for improving cities. Investing in ongoing sensemaking processes helps shape behaviour change, gauge public sentiment, and fosters shared or compatible commitments within communities. It creates fertile ground for cooperation, enabling diverse stakeholders to align and sustain collective efforts over time.

Intentional collective sensemaking signals that change is possible, helping communities feel more agency, responsibility, and clarity on how best to contribute to the futures they want.

As Geoff Mulgan explores in his book 'Connexity: How to live in a connected world ' [13], the only way we can address the profound crises of the modern era is by dissolving our understanding of the world through the lens of individuals and, instead, facilitate sensemaking through diverse networks of co-responsibility, seeing our perspectives as part of a system.

sensemaking:
The process of understanding the empirical world – the world as we observe and experience it, rather than how we imagine or theorise it to be – interpreting reality and attributing meaning to the information we encounter [14].

Distinguishing different uses of the word:

Capitalised 'Sensemaking':
Often used when referring to an established concept or framework in academic or professional fields (e.g., organisational studies, cognitive science, communication). It implies a specific approach or model, such as Weick's Sensemaking theory, which focuses on how people construct meaning in organisations.

Lowercase 'sensemaking':
Used more generally as a common noun or verb phrase to describe the process of making sense of something. It can refer to everyday or informal acts of interpreting or understanding situations.

sensemaking, capacity, and agency operate along a continuum of interconnected levels – from the individual to the organisational and societal – and understanding how these layers influence and shape one another is key to enabling us to *govern together*.

At the

Individual Level, sensemaking

involves a process where each person interprets their individual experiences of the world around them. Interestingly, this *personal sensemaking isn't entirely isolated, because humans are inherently relational beings* – our understanding is shaped through interactions and connections with others. Individual agency emerges as we develop confidence and motivation to act based on this sensemaking.

At the

Organisational Level*,

sensemaking happens within communities, local governments, businesses, and other institutions. *Here, sensemaking is a more complex social process built upon shared values, beliefs, and histories, involving collective interpretation, knowledge exchange, and coordination.* Organisational capacity and agency depend on how well these internal processes enable the group to learn, adapt, and make decisions collectively.

At the

Societal Level, *collective sensemaking* happens both

between organisations and/or sectors (in more direct, bilateral relationships) and across broader systems (involving multilateral dynamics that span many actors – human and non-human or more-than-human, including plants, animals, other natural systems, algorithmic agents, and machines – as well as multiple boundaries and levels. *This process is grounded in shared and/or compatible identities and value systems, and involves how multiple entities coordinate, align, and co-create meaning and strategies that go beyond individual organisational goals.* Collective agency is the capacity of these wider networks to act cohesively toward common or compatible goals – especially when facing complex, systemic challenges.

Each layer influences and depends on the others: Individual sensemaking is shaped by organisational cultures and collective narratives, while organisational and collective capacities grow through the aggregation and alignment of individual and group insights. Understanding these layers – their boundaries and dynamics – is critical to knowing at what level, and with whom, we feel psychologically safe to share doubts or dissenting views. Recognising and nurturing these dynamics through relationality is essential for designing practices that build trust, motivation, and sustained, more collectively intelligent action.

**The above framework from sociology is used to distinguish between micro (individual), meso (group/organisational), and macro (societal) levels of analysis*

To exercise our agency – to make the decision to act on our capacity – we need both willingness and motivation.

In complex, distributed systems like cities – where change relies on many actors – local authorities, civil servants, consultants, and funders often focus on building capacity or delivering resources. The intention is that if the 'right' tools, training, or funding are in place, willingness and action will follow. But in these contexts, acting on our capacity requires more than just belief in our skills and capabilities. Even with our best intentions, the ability to act is as much about culture, the systems we are locked in, the social signals that surround us, and the broader context, as it is about competence or resources.

Agency, motivation, and ***both self- and collective efficacy*** are deeply relational concepts, shaped by trust, social norms, belonging, and more.

We often conflate these terms, but understanding their differences can help us better design for the messiness of real-world complexity:

Capacity: Having the abilities, skills, knowledge, resources, or attributes required to perform a particular behaviour or activity.

Agency: The ability of an individual or entity to act and make choices within a given context. It involves choosing to act on a person's capacity – but having capacity doesn't guarantee action. Exercising agency typically requires motivation – the internal drive or willingness to act, as well as the appreciation of the trade-offs or risks involved. Without motivation we may choose not to act or make decisions, even if we have the capacity to do so.

Self-efficacy: A person's belief or perception of their own ability to perform a task or behaviour. It is not about our actual skills or capabilities but about our confidence in our ability to use those skills.

Collective-efficacy [15] [16]: the belief that group actions can make a difference – encourages us to take action and improves our self-efficacy. As Sander L. van der Linden explains, promoting collective efficacy will encourage individuals to take action: "if everyone is doing it, it must be a sensible thing to do" [17]. However, this can also go very wrong if we set and normalise harmful social signals.

Motivation: is the internal drive or desire that initiates, guides, and sustains behaviour towards a goal. It can be more intrinsic (driven by personal values, interests, or satisfaction) or extrinsic (driven by external incentives, rewards, or pressures).

These concepts do not exist in a vacuum, they are constantly shaped, enabled, or constrained by the wider economic, political, and social systems we live within.

To fully understand how agency shows up – or doesn't – we also need to consider the structural and systemic conditions that shape what people believe is possible. Our economic and political systems – along with our lived realities – radically shape not only what we can do but also what we *believe* we can do.

As individuals, capitalism, consumerism, and neoliberal ideas have profoundly shaped our sense of agency – both real and perceived – and how we see ourselves: less as active participants in collective life, and more as individual consumers. These systems prioritise values such as competition, efficiency, individualism, speed, and quantifiable performance – often at the expense of cooperation, care, reflection, and long-term thinking.

These values are reinforced not just in markets, but across institutions – including educational systems. From an early age, we are socialised into rewarding structures that privilege individual achievement, standardised testing, and career readiness above civic imagination, critical consciousness, or relational capacity.

This normalises a narrow vision of success that mirrors the priorities of the economic system rather than the broader needs of society or the planet.

These systemic forces also shape the freedom and agency that organisations – as well as individuals – feel they have. In local government, both real and perceived constraints affect how freely civil servants engage with others across the city. In business, expectations often limit behaviour to the delivery of goods and services, rather than enabling broader or more proactive support for long-term, collective outcomes.

These systems influence how we expect government services, businesses, and institutions to work, how we relate to our neighbours and communities, and how we understand our own power - often narrowing our sense of individual agency down to our personal choices and consumption.

At the same time, governance systems shape the extent to which we can act, speak out, or feel motivated to participate in shaping our shared futures. The kind of economic system we live in – whether a liberal market, a coordinated market, or state-driven capitalism – influences our motivations, constraints, and capacities to act and govern together.

02

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sensemaking in our formal and informal spaces of participation

sensemaking happens in both *formal* and *informal* spaces

(Calling it 'formal' and 'informal' isn't a rigorous distinction on our part, but rather a lack of a better way to label them.)

In this context, *formal* spaces might include citizens' assemblies, participatory budgeting, and other structured forums where we come together to deliberate and drive collective action. Local governments often focus on these spaces to engage communities and shape decisions.

But *formal* spaces are only part of the picture. While often overlooked in public participation strategies, *informal* spaces – like conversations with neighbours, chats over coffee, or online groups – are equally critical to understanding how communities form opinions, challenge assumptions, and develop shared narratives long before entering a formal process.

In many ways, informal spaces determine the tone, openness, and inclusivity of formal decision-making forums.

Understanding that sensemaking starts in everyday *informal* interactions and chatter helps local governments support deeper, more meaningful collective action. When *informal* and *formal* spaces work together, engagement and the solutions designed subsequently become stronger and more inclusive.

We don’t show up to formal participatory processes like citizens' assemblies or town halls as blank slates.

Our worldviews are shaped long before we enter the room – not only by the one-way messages we absorb through media, schools, and institutions, but also, and critically, by how these messages are interpreted and internalised through *everyday dialogue* within our informal social environments.

Conversations with friends, family, and peers help frame how we understand the world and shape our sense of what is acceptable, normal, possible, or worth caring about.

These subtle but powerful processes – what we call Everyday Politics – are a critical, underexplored tool for local governments to understand how beliefs and motivations are formed.

Recognising this helps create more authentic, inclusive public participation.

Everyday Politics: While there is no universal definition of ‘everyday politics’ [18-22], it broadly involves people contesting their world views with others through relatively spontaneous, fragmented, and mundane conversations; whether with friends, family, colleagues, or others in daily life.

A few interesting references:

Framing theory [23] argues that the way information is presented – its framing (in news, social media, etc.) – shapes how people understand or perceive issues. Media frames can define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies, all of which influence audience interpretations. However, this framing doesn’t work in isolation; its effect depends heavily on the social context of the audience – their existing beliefs, culture, social networks, and so on.

Building on this, the concept of **‘Frame Control’** [24], which emerged from online rationalist and adjacent discourse, explores how powerful actors or platforms deliberately manipulate frames as a strategic tool to influence public opinion, shape behaviour, and reinforce particular agendas to maintain power.

Hall’s Reception theory [25] highlights that people interpret media messages differently depending on their social and cultural background. One-way communication is formative, but its effect is filtered through social meaning-making.

Bandura’s Social Learning Theory [26] shows that people learn behaviours and norms by observing others, not just through direct dialogue, but also silence or implicit approval/disapproval.

Berger and Luckmann’s *the Social Construction of Reality* [27] outlines how meaning is socially constructed through both dialogue and habituated, institutionalised knowledge – including things like what is not said.

Norm signalling refers to the ways people communicate what is acceptable or expected – often without realising it. Silence or casual approval (like a parent ignoring a racist joke, or a teacher’s offhand comment) can send powerful signals about what is considered normal or tolerated.

Master narratives are dominant, culturally shared storylines that shape how we understand politics, identity, and everyday life. They act as *powerful cultural scripts*, subtly influencing how we interpret events, talk about policies, and relate to others.

Rather than explicit agendas, they form an underlying lens through which we make sense of the world, reinforcing the prevailing values and ideologies of a society [28-30].

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz wrote that “man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun.” The question is: are we the spiders – actively shaping the meanings and stories that define our world – or are we the flies, caught in webs spun by others, believing we have freedom to act while in fact constrained? Often absorbed unconsciously, these narratives influence our sense of identity and shape what we consider ‘normal’ or ‘fair.’ They frame how we define success, morality, and national pride. Examples include deeply held beliefs about gender roles, religion, or stories of national greatness. Politicians, media, and institutions frequently leverage these master narratives to legitimise their power and influence public opinion.

People internalise master narratives over time, and in everyday political conversations, they may reproduce these narratives, or push back and create new ones. Unpacking these stories exposes hidden biases, broadens representation, and creates space to imagine more just, inclusive, and plural futures. In this way, understanding the extent to which we are the spiders and/or the trapped flies in this web helps us reclaim agency over the narratives that shape our lives and the collective possibilities we create.

These narratives are powerful because they influence individual choices, institutional structures, and policy agendas – often without being questioned. How do master narratives influence political discourse?

Framing and Interpretation (e.g. calling tax policy ‘relief’ vs. ‘burden’) – They highlight certain facts while downplaying others, making particular perspectives feel ‘natural’ or common-sense. This enables political speakers to present issues in a way that aligns with familiar storylines, making their perspective feel ‘natural’ or common-sense [31-33].

Simplification of Complexity (e.g. describing political issues through ‘good vs. bad’ binaries) – Complex issues boiled down into digestible components – heroes, villains, threats – all wrapped in a story structure that audiences understand instantly [34].

Identity Construction in Talk (e.g. ‘We’re a nation under threat’ narratives) – When people talk about politics, they’re often positioning themselves within a broader story of belonging – ‘us vs. them’ – reinforcing group identities and loyalty through everyday political chatter [35].

Emotional Resonance [e.g. using fear (‘saving democracy’) or hope (‘forward together’)] – Narratives evoke feelings – hope, fear, pride, anger. These emotional triggers deepen engagement and shape not only what people say but how they feel and respond [36].

Legitimisation and Authority (e.g. ‘protecting tradition’ as a moral justification) – By weaving political discussion into a broader narrative, speakers legitimise their stance – portraying policies or actions as morally or historically necessary. Everyday political talk taps into these scripts to make ideas seem right or inevitable.

First Place

Family & Friends

Home and-family are where individuals experience their primary relationships, nurturing, and emotional support. *These interactions often shape personal values, identity, and early socialisation or conditioning.* Family dynamics can strongly influence individual behaviour and interpersonal relationships, and transgenerational trauma or inherited beliefs can also deeply affect how individuals relate to themselves and others.

Second Place

Work & Professional Peers

The workspace includes offices, workplaces, and organisational settings characterised by professional relationships, collaboration, and role-based interactions. Formal communication, organisational culture, and structures shape individual identity and social dynamics in this context.

Third Place

Online & IRL (In Real Life) Civic Spaces

This includes spaces beyond home and work – such as social media and online communities, community centres, cafes, parks, cultural institutions, libraries, clubs, sport facilities, and religious institutions – where we connect, interact, and co-create shared experiences [37].

The importance of third places

Ray Oldenburg [38] emphasises that so-called third places play a vital role in supporting democracy, civic participation, and a shared sense of belonging. In the 2025 sequel, his coauthor Karen Christensen suggests that these spaces also hold the key to addressing loneliness, bridging political divides, and strengthening climate resilience.

The reason why everyday political chatter matters so much to local government is, at least, two-fold:

First, it's crucial that local authorities and institutions are able to *speak the same language as the people* they serve – understanding their daily realities and the way political talk circulates in everyday spaces.

Listening in on everyday political chatter gives us a powerful snapshot of how complex and often alienating public messages are received, reinterpreted, or resisted on the ground.

Especially when the language used by governments or institutions is **overly technical or rooted in jargon**, it can feel disconnected from our lived realities. It's one of the few ways to measure the real 'temperature' of society – to understand how we make sense of what's happening in their world.

The more informed, literate, and critically engaged a population is, the more nuanced and constructive this everyday political talk becomes. This is precisely why many authoritarian regimes begin by banning books, defunding education, or undermining culture – because **the more infantilised and disempowered we are, the easier we are to control**. Trust, agency, and belonging grow from deeper understanding – and that starts with what we talk about, and how we talk about it, every day.

Informal talk shapes formal participation: We don't enter public consultations or formal engagement spaces as blank slates. We are influenced by our peers – by what is being said in WhatsApp groups, at school gates, in corner shops, and community spaces.

Everyday political talk either encourages us to show up and speak up – or deters us from even trying.

The reason why everyday political chatter matters so much to local government is, at least, two-fold:

Second, we can only influence everyday political talk in a meaningful way when people’s lived experiences genuinely improve. No matter how carefully crafted the messaging or how well-intentioned the engagement, we can’t build trust or overcome disinformation and resentment if daily life remains difficult, unfair, or insecure.

People’s conversations reflect what they actually live through – and if those realities don’t change, neither will the stories they tell or the trust they place in decision-making.

When people’s realities consistently place them in vulnerable positions, they become more susceptible to disinformation and manipulation.

For us to be considered trustworthy, our words need to align with our actions. Tangible improvements – in housing, services, safety, or opportunity – speak loudest and help rewrite the narratives pushed by political figures or media.

Even the right language can only go so far. More importantly, people’s perceptions and everyday conversations begin to shift only when things visibly change: when jobs are available, utilities work, homes are decent, and streets feel safe.

Social trust is built through experience: Local authorities that have successfully shifted the tone of everyday political chatter didn’t do it through messaging campaigns alone. They invested in actions that visibly improved people’s lives – closing the gap between words and deeds by listening, acting, and following through. This generated genuine trust and shifted everyday chatter on the ground – beyond symbolic or tokenistic forms of engagement.

Chatter drives motivation and belonging: When we see meaningful progress – in the things that matter to us most – we are more likely to stay engaged, more likely to bring others along, and more likely to develop a sense of belonging to place and process. Everyday political chatter becomes not just critique, but shared motivation.

02

a b **c** d

sensemaking as a relational, not as an individual, act

Decision-makers often focus on individual behaviour change, but we are inherently ***relational beings***. Our beliefs, perspectives, and sense of identity are shaped through community and through our interactions with others.

If we want to sustain change in the long run, we need to design not just *for* people but *for* and *with* their social practices [39] and the worlds they inhabit – the networks, norms, narratives, and everyday interactions that influence what feels true, fair, or possible. In other words, how they make sense of the world around them.

Relational approaches help cities cultivate the social conditions – trust, shared understanding, motivation, and aligned practice – that make collective sensemaking possible.

**__Relationality__ describes how people and things are connected – not just formally, but emotionally, socially, culturally, and ecologically. It's the idea that governance doesn't happen in isolation or solely through structures and rules, but through the quality of dynamics and the depth of relationships between actors – whether between governments and communities, institutions and ecosystems, or systems and everyday life. Relationality invites us to act not as isolated agents, but as proactive and reflective participants in a wider web of relationships – human, non-human, and planetary.*

Supporting and co-designing conversational spaces (e.g. online civic forums, welcoming community spaces, local meetups, exhibitions in public space, intergenerational dialogue sessions) is one of the most powerful ways to help residents and businesses reimagine social identity, explore new perspectives, values, and possibilities, and ultimately shift political views and actions.

A **better grasp of 'in-the-wild' public sentiment** – the attitudes, frustrations, hopes, and lived realities expressed through everyday talk or chatter – better equips cities to design effective interventions and mobilise meaningful collective action because it better responds to what people are already saying, doing, and signalling together.

Interventions that build on social interaction – peer exchange, mutual learning, shared practices, trusted messengers – are more likely to sustain motivation and behaviour change over time. **Relational approaches turn community networks into social infrastructure and improve resilience**: pathways for ideas to spread, norms to shift, and action to scale.

This requires a paradigm shift in governance: from seeing society as made up of isolated individuals and economic units to ***governing together*** with people as relational beings.

When we help generate the understanding ourselves, we are more likely to trust the process, stay motivated, and take action.

Fostering relationality and a collective of intelligences means drawing on the unique knowledge, perspectives, and desires held across communities, neighbourhoods, businesses, civil society, and public institutions. It asks: Who sees what? Who is affected? Who holds insight that never makes it into policy briefs? How do we bring these ways of knowing into shared or compatible framings, problem definition, and collective action?

In a *relational* model, the role of public officials shifts from being public servants who provide services to people, to public *stewards* who mobilise and facilitate the public to govern together.

More and more public servants and policy entrepreneurs are taking on a broader role – not only ensuring people have access to the services, facilities, and support they need, but also fostering effective coordination, enabling, and facilitation, whether through direct provision or collaboration.

However, it's important to recognise that meaningful change cannot rest solely on individuals within a system or institution adapting their practices; **it requires a fundamental shift in the institution itself** – its governance, funding, activities, and its understanding of itself – to support and sustain transformation.

The activities of **a more relational version of local government** go beyond providing core services, distributing funding, and overseeing regulation. They actively cultivate connection, care, and belonging by:

Convening diverse voices, worldviews, and lived experiences to build a sense of shared kinship across the community.

Translating locally generated insights into policy choices, practical implementation, accountability mechanisms, resource allocations, and collective action.

Hosting inclusive spaces for everyday political talk and listening, where real concerns and emerging possibilities can surface, be heard and honoured.

Staying committed to the long-term – nurturing relationships over time, fostering trust, rather than relying on one-off engagement events.

Supporting collective sensemaking, enabling communities to navigate complexity together and better understand the trade-offs behind complex decisions.

This shift in the role of local government and how they relate to their wider ecosystems of actors can't happen all at once.

We can think of three horizons over which we see change happening, allowing for movement in the right direction today that enables more systemic change in the long run.

Horizon 1:

Working with the system as it is

Focus: *Support and expand the agency of policy entrepreneurs* and frontline public servants within the current system.*

Support relational leadership within the bureaucracy – celebrate people who are already navigating the in-between spaces of formal roles and informal care.

Build communities of practice across cities and departments – safe, low-risk spaces to share, reflect, and experiment with relational governance.

Prototype small interventions that show the value of relational governance: e.g., participatory budgeting rooted in kinship and care.

*A policy entrepreneur is a civil servant who focuses on delivering public good outcomes for residents through innovation and creative problem-solving, rather than by following established processes or standard operating procedures.

Horizon 2:

Transition zone

Focus: *Create experimental conditions and infrastructure that hold the emerging logic of governance-as-relationship.*

Shift internal language and narratives – work with those rewriting what 'public value' means from inside the system (e.g. well-being, belonging, kinship, land).

Redesign roles, rhythms and rituals of local government to support entangled responsibilities (e.g. shift from 'service delivery' to 'relationship building').

Create new institutional forms for shared stewardship and polycentric governance – local climate assemblies, civic convening roles, guardianship councils.

Invest in regenerative capacity building for public servants: learning journeys, partnerships grounded in local ecosystems and cultures (bioregional) in planning approaches, alongside embodied and systems practices.

Support learning infrastructures across local government, academia, civil society, and movement spaces – allow mutual learning, grounded in place.

Horizon 3:

Transforming the institution itself

Focus: *Reimagine the role of local government as a steward of entangled futures and collective care.*

Local government as steward, host, weaver [40] and healer – not just manager or planner.

Governance rooted in kinship and place – enable plural forms of legitimacy and authority (e.g. intergenerational councils, recognising lived experience of communities, bioregional custodianship).

Mandates based on responsibility, not control – hold and redistribute power with care across public, civic and natural systems.

A new philosophy/ethic of public work – institutions that care *with* rather than *for* the public, recognising the symbiotic relationship between citizen and state.

02

a b c **d**

Threats to sensemaking

Our individual ability and collective capacity to make sense of the world has been impaired, and this is affecting our ability to make *quality* collective decisions.

Who is given a voice, who is allowed to participate, who holds the power, and how well those involved understand the complexity of the issue and the likely impacts of possible solutions all shape what we understand as the 'quality' of a decision. This question sits at the heart of this research.

The link between sensemaking and the need for *quality* collective action is crucial. When we struggle to make sense of what's happening around us, trust erodes, confusion spreads, and decision-making becomes reactive and polarised. Without shared understanding, it's hard to align around priorities or sustain momentum, leaving collective action at risk of being fragmented and ineffective.

Strengthening both individual and collective sensemaking lays the foundation for informed, thoughtful decisions – the kind needed to tackle today's complex challenges.

We're facing growing challenges in how we make sense of the world around us, undermining our capacity to make quality, collective decisions.

Unmet basic needs & [mental] health

Economic pressures often force us to focus solely on survival, pushing broader aspirations aside. Being compelled to prioritise immediate needs - such as food, housing, education, and employment – can lead to helplessness and stagnation, stifling creativity and our capacity to envision alternative futures. Impaired mental health can also trap us in daily routines. As individuals prioritise mere existence, they become caught in a cycle of disempowerment that limits our potential for change.

Disinformation

Particularly focusing on the issue of the climate breakdown and the role of disinformation in shaping public perceptions, some actors, often linked to industries with a vested interest in maintaining the status quo, have intentionally sowed doubt about the scientific consensus on climate change. This has contributed to public confusion and political polarisation, hindering effective action [41] [42].

Information overload

In today's world, we are constantly inundated with vast amounts of information and data, making it increasingly difficult to make sense of what's happening around us. This overload can overwhelm us, dull our awareness, and hinder our ability to recognise meaningful patterns. The situation worsens when political figures deliberately exploit this overload as a tactic to disorient and paralyse [43]. The sheer volume of information itself is a fundamental challenge. In this space, patterns and narratives are often constructed for us by media and vested interests, shaping how we understand the world.

Declining complexity

Declining complexity in arguments means a growing mismatch between the simple solutions offered by partisan politicians with the real complexity of the problems themselves. Reduced complexity often leads to a loss of diversity in thought, culture, and innovation. The potential for creative problem-solving diminishes. A simplified worldview can foster rigidity in thinking, making it difficult for individuals and institutions to adapt to new challenges or uncertainties.

Incivility

Declining civility in the interactions amongst elected officials – who often become our role models – decreases citizens' trust in democratic institutions. Similarly, wider political and non-political talk also has a detrimental impact on what we normalise as acceptable behaviour. As Dryzek et al points out, "the more polarised (and uncivil) the political environment gets, the less citizens listen to the content of messages and the more they revert to following partisan cues or simply drop out of participating all together resulting in a vicious spiral." [44]

Reinvesting in third places, both physical and digital, plays a vital role in improving sensemaking.

Decades of shrinking public budgets and rising costs in critical service areas – such as adult social care and homelessness – have contributed to the decline of our physical 'third places' like cafés, pubs, libraries, parks, and community centres. Often deprioritised or underfunded, these spaces have become less accessible, despite their vital role in fostering connection, conversation, and identity-building. This erosion undermines the relational infrastructure needed for sensemaking and long-term civic resilience.

As physical community spaces have diminished, digital platforms have increasingly stepped in to fill the gap. While some online spaces have historically been genuinely collective, decentralised, and community-driven – and a few still persist – these are often overshadowed by commercial platforms governed by algorithms and attention economies. These dominant platforms tend to reward polarisation, performance, and conflict over genuine dialogue and mutual understanding, weakening social ties and eroding everyday civility.

Third places are not just social conveniences; they're vital civic infrastructure. When well-designed and facilitated, they create low-barrier environments where people can encounter difference, share lived experiences, and make sense of what's happening in their communities and the world. They support slower, more relational sensemaking – the kind that builds trust, empathy, and the capacity to act. Rebuilding democratic culture and fostering a collective of intelligences depends on re-investing in them.

Conversation: Conversation is a broad and informal exchange of ideas, feelings, or information between two or more people. It is often spontaneous and flexible, allowing participants to share thoughts, stories, or small talk without a fixed goal or structure. Conversations don't necessarily aim to reach agreement or solve problems.

Dialogue is a deeper, more intentional form of communication focused on understanding different perspectives and fostering mutual respect. It requires active listening, openness, and a willingness to suspend judgment. A healthy dialogue creates a safe space for exploring complex or sensitive topics, encouraging participants to think together rather than simply express their own views. The goal is to expand understanding rather than win an argument or make decisions.

Deliberation is a structured and purposeful process where participants carefully weigh different options, evidence, and viewpoints to make informed decisions or reach collective agreements. It often involves critical thinking, debate, and reasoning about specific issues or policies. Deliberation prioritises the thoughtful consideration of consequences, aiming to produce well-founded and legitimate outcomes that serve the common good [45] [46]

"Deliberation sounds really hard, and in practice, it is. It's a practice we need to get better at, so moving from discussion to deliberation isn't quite as easy as we think it might be. We need to better understand the tools people from all walks of life need to have a deep conversation, be curious about what their neighbors are saying, dive into the meaning behind that, and listen very clearly. This requires making the time and space and providing the appropriate mechanisms, like great facilitation, to help people have those sorts of conversations that are quite different, that bring in worldviews different from their own. *By working together to understand particular values we can align on, we're able to move forward and find a space of agreement on what some of those values actually look like*. When conversations are centered around purpose, belonging, and contributing, we begin to truly hear what people value in a place."

—Cam Perkins, *Head of Economic Development and Activations, Darebin City Council*

03

a b c d

Designing *with* and *for* relationality

Trust and safety as cornerstone conditions for collective sensemaking and action

Trust is, in part, a leap of faith – a willingness to be vulnerable. It means actively engaging with the unknown [47]. It says: I don't know for sure, and I am still willing to try. At the same time, trust is also an intentional and structured process built on several critical components: consistency, communication, transparency, and practising curiosity, self-reflection, and repair, among other things.

Consistency involves being reliable and predictable in our behaviour, ensuring that our words actually match our actions. Communication means keeping an open dialogue and addressing issues as they arise. Transparency is about being open and clear about our actions and intentions. Trust is also about the ability to repair: it is not about avoiding conflict or disagreements, but about having confidence that disagreements can be resolved in a healthy way.

In an organisation, for instance, **trust (1) means** [48-56]:

- being able to rely on our team and leaders to have our back,
- trusting that our leaders won't betray us or put their own interests ahead of ours,
- trusting that they won't take credit for work that isn't theirs, and
- that there is a culture of psychological safety, generative curiosity, and avoiding shaming and blaming at all costs.

It's also about recognising: We are stronger together than apart.

This creates **a sense of belonging (2):**

- In that shared space, I start to get a sense of who I am.
- The group shapes me – and I shape the group.
- It's a mutual and reciprocal relationship.

And **mutuality** (2.a.) **is essential** in all social-ecological systems. It leads to a sense of belonging.

Belonging (2.b.) is tied to **recognition:**

- It means feeling valued.
- It means that my individual contribution is not just made, BUT also seen.

We can achieve and perform a lot, but if our efforts go unrecognised, we will lose motivation and feel used.

Paying attention to what people do and say matters:

When this doesn't happen, it doesn't meet our inner drivers and needs (e.g. colleagues reading emails in the background on zoom calls).

Collective resilience is not just about individual toughness in the face of adversity:

- It's about facing challenges creatively, adaptively, and flexibly. Together.

The workplace and work is in massive flux.

An organisation's resilience is no longer about the good-to-have 'soft' skills.

These values and guiding principles, including relationality, trust, and a sense of belonging, are increasingly recognised as the new bottom line.

[An important way to draw the line between a nervous system response and a trust judgement]

"Trust is the willingness to be vulnerable based on positive expectations. It's a relational phenomenon impacted by all we are and all we've ever experienced. It requires us to actively deliberate, assessing the trustworthiness – the benevolence, integrity, and competence – of another party, in order to move positively towards the uncertainty of futures we co-create. Although there's much nuance in the literature, the distinction that trust requires deliberation is important to highlight. This helps differentiate trust as a deliberative, ongoing, relational process, from other 'trust like' processes where there is observable automaticity, and thus, if anything, post hoc deliberation. An example of this can be seen in such studies as Freeman et al. (Our Brains Judge a Face's Trustworthiness – Even When We Can't See It)"

—Nathan Kinch, Ethicist and Trust Designer

Trust is a cornerstone condition for collective sensemaking and action. It's relational, built through consistent, positive interactions, and fuels our motivation to act. But trust is not a given - it must be deliberately nurtured. *Like any living system, trust requires ongoing care, responsiveness, and practice.*

Trust is a foundational driver of our willingness to participate in sensemaking, collective decision-making, and action. When we trust that our contribution will be taken seriously, that others will also do their part, and that institutions or systems will act fairly, transparently, and with accountability, they are more likely to step forward and stay engaged. Trust reduces the perceived risks of acting – socially, emotionally, or materially – and creates a sense of safety and reassurance that encourages us to invest our time, energy, and ideas.

Without trust, motivation quickly deteriorates, and we withdraw, feeling that our actions won't lead to meaningful change.

In this way, trust is not just a by-product of good governance or community relations – it is both a precondition and an outcome of quality and sustained collective engagement (both the chicken and the egg).

Building and sustaining trust is therefore essential – not only to foster participation but also to enable the deep relational work that underpins adaptive *collective action.*

What do we mean by 'cornerstone' in this context:

The word cornerstone comes from construction: it's the first stone laid in a building's foundation, and the rest of the structure is oriented around it. Metaphorically, it means the key element on which everything else depends.

For instance, a cornerstone indicator is:

Foundational – other indicators or decisions build on it.

Orienting – it helps set direction or framing for your work.

Non-negotiable – without it, the rest of the measurement or monitoring would lose coherence or meaning.

Integrative – it often links multiple aspects of a system, rather than representing only a narrow slice.

In our kind of relational and entanglement-focused work, these are likely the few indicators that tell us whether the deeper shifts we care about are really happening, rather than just surface-level changes.

"You have to treat people well, respect their voices, and honour differences. You're essentially creating a context of engagement that values different perspectives. Governance that operates this way produces thriving communities."

—Eric Hubbard, *Africa Regional Focal Point at the Urban Biodiversity Hub and co-leads the NATURA Network Africa Regional Team for the Global Urban NBS Roadmap*

This quote comes from a yet-to-be published interview that we conducted shortly before Eric's passing. Eric Hubbard was a relentless, creative, and passionate changemaker, and a friend who inspired us tremendously. We are deeply grateful for his contributions to this project, and his spirit will be missed by many of us.

Trust is earned over time through demonstrating an ongoing commitment to achieving positive outcomes.

Trust is not built through performative statements or promises alone – but through changed behaviours and consistent actions that reflect genuine commitment.

For public institutions and civic processes, this means *showing up over the long term*, being transparent about decisions, acknowledging past harms and failures, and being open to learning and adapting.

It involves *creating spaces where people feel heard,* where their contributions visibly shape outcomes, and where power is shared rather than merely consulted.

Crucially, *trust is built when intentions align with impact* – when civic processes lead to tangible improvements in people's lives, especially for those historically marginalised or excluded.

For individuals and communities, this means *engaging in good faith where possible*, and recognising that meaningful shifts in public sector practice require institutions to trust communities enough to let go of control. This process of opening up decision-making asks for mutual trust and care, and this delicate balance can create space for the long-term, mutual respect and trust that underpins true relational governance.

It is critical that these shifts are not just shifts in intention or attitude, which are vulnerable to being easily undermined by external conditions or influences, but they need to be formalised in shared agreements, practices and safeguards, such as decision-making protocols or codes of conduct, that enable all parties to act with confidence and hold one another accountable when these agreements are transgressed.

In the following, we list a few conditions for further debate and explore how they could be applied and integrated into our individual and collective practices.

This list of enablers or conditions is intended as a starting point – not a definitive or exhaustive guide. We see it as an evolving foundation for a broader body of work. To truly enable relational collective decision-making and action, we are actively building an ecosystem of partners and organisations who will co-develop, test, and expand these ideas with us.

Together, we aim to deepen our understanding of how to build trust, motivation, and sustained engagement through a relational approach tailored to different local realities and systemic challenges.

a.
How might we build a society where people can move beyond survival mode to thrive?

Core human needs are a vital prerequisite for building trust – without the conditions to thrive, trust in institutions and in one another remains fragile.

We can only sustain motivation and the willingness to act when we have both the means and the security to do so.

When we are trapped in survival mode, we have little capacity to participate proactively in shaping our future. Fear takes over – how to pay rent, cover medical bills, or manage child and elder care at the same time. The mind shifts into crisis mode, prioritising immediate survival over connection, empathy, or long-term vision. Disconnected and overwhelmed, our ability to imagine new possibilities with others fades.

But this trap of fear and scarcity isn't limited to those outside formal power. It affects those within it too. Decision-makers often face intense constraints – limited budgets create a sense of resource scarcity, regulatory frameworks produce real or perceived limits on action, and public scrutiny or the fear of backlash can lead to risk aversion and a reluctance to share control. Many are overworked, burned out, or stuck in delivery cycles that leave little space for co-creation or transformation. When those in power don't feel safe, they're less able or willing to enable participatory processes that redistribute agency.

In both cases, it's the same dynamic: survival mode narrows our horizons. It undermines the conditions we need for trust, empathy, and participation to flourish. That's why focusing on the foundations of wellbeing – secure housing, reliable income, accessible healthcare, meaningful work – isn't just about fairness or equity. It's about ***unlocking collective capacity***, for everyone. When core needs are met, people – whether in positions of formal authority or not – are more able to connect, share power, imagine alternatives, and shape decisions together.

Survival mode is a state of deep insecurity, when one is on the verge of serious hardship. It is also a state of the nervous system – often called 'fight-or-flight' – that anyone can experience during times of intense stress, poor mental health, trauma, or overwhelm. While economic or social hardships often trigger it, it can arise from many sources of stress. Poor mental health, low-wage jobs, zero-hour contracts, rising housing costs, inflation, and a retreating welfare system can all trap a person in survival mode – the feeling of constantly treading water just to stay afloat.

Important 'side' note: And that's exactly how power stays in place – by keeping us too consumed by survival to collectively define and demand something better.

Moreover, when people feel their personal welfare is under threat – whether due to economic insecurity or other real or perceived dangers – they may become more vulnerable to radicalisation or more receptive to political movements that promise security, even at the expense of liberty. In these moments, strong-handed leadership can appear protective, and trade-offs between liberty and security may feel justified [57].

"Basically, every time a real need of the people isn't fulfilled, it creates an opening for a populist. Populists are very effective at exploiting these kinds of weaknesses in democracies."

—Bernadett Szél, Academic Researcher, former Member of Parliament, Hungary

"The future of governance must be grounded in Ubuntu – the Zulu idea – that 'I am because we are'. Governance should not feel like an impersonal system, but a reflection of relationships, care, and belonging. This is a significant departure from the top-down, hierarchical leadership models of the past. The future of governance depends on us adopting a new approach to leadership. Building new economies needs us to, in tandem, build futures where governance can be about belonging and where decisions are made with the well-being of people and planet at the centre. *The stories we tell have to shift, the visions of power that drive us need to change, and our heart posture must be based in love for all as self."*

—Ashanti Kunene, Founder of Learning 2 Unlearn **[58]**

b.
How might we build trust by improving psychological safety?

Trust is earned through positive, psychologically safe interactions – and these depend on mutual psychological safety among all actors within the system. *Psychological safety isn't something granted by one side to the other; it is co-created by everyone involved.*

Trust is a relational condition, and it can only emerge as an outcome when conditions of psychological safety are in place [59] [60]. When we feel safe to express ourselves without fear of shame, blame, or judgment, we are more likely to engage openly and authentically. When both/all sides involved agree to create space for one another – to hold each other with care and mutual respect and responsibility – trust becomes possible.

While power imbalances, structural inequities, and oppression often mean one side carries more distrust or trauma than the other, both sides of the table have fears and vulnerabilities. Trust requires recognising this mutual vulnerability and making a deliberate commitment to create the conditions for safety, together.

Of course, the call for mutual psychological safety cannot ignore asymmetries of power, oppression, or harm. Asking those who are already carrying trauma, or who are directly subject to oppression and aggression, to take equal responsibility for creating safety risks compounding injustice. This is why the work of fostering trust must be held proportionally: those who caused harm or who hold greater power and responsibility carry a greater duty to invest in practices that reduce fear and repair harm, while those most affected need assurances that their voices will be protected and not further marginalised.

Psychological safety, then, is not about levelling the field overnight, but about recognising imbalance while still holding on to the principle that trust can only emerge when everyone's humanity, dignity, and vulnerability is acknowledged and respected.

Designing for psychological safety – within institutions and across communities – enables deeper understanding, collaboration, and resilience. It lays the foundation for loyalty, creativity, and lasting trust between citizens and public institutions. Most critically, however, none of these conditions arise organically. They require deliberate investment in specific skills, capabilities, institutional capacities, and practices – exercised regularly – so that psychological safety can be fostered, embodied, and sustained.

Creating the conditions for psychological safety: Building 'brave spaces' where creativity, innovation, and resilience can emerge through creating psychological safety. These conditions are not just 'nice to have' – they are essential. In fact, they are the new bottom line – the ground on which thriving, healthy organisations are built.

When people feel safe to speak up, make mistakes, and be themselves, wellbeing improves, retention increases, and resilience deepens. In uncertain times, this becomes a quiet but vital strength – one that also enhances an organisation's competitive edge.

Staying open to challenge and difficult questions: Creating a space where people feel able to ask 'why?' or raise uncomfortable truths helps teams adapt and grow. Innovation cannot flourish in rooms where people feel shut down or overlooked. Modelling openness – especially when the questions are tough – lays the groundwork for collective learning.

Practising kind and reflexive leadership: Kindness – not to be conflated with politeness or niceness – helps nurture deeper trust and stronger relationships. Reflexive leaders who lead with genuine kindness, care, and openness can foster long-term commitment, strengthen collaboration, and create the conditions for collective creativity and long-term thriving. This kind of leadership stays open to being challenged and involves regularly turning the mirror on oneself, staying present to discomfort, and meeting others with humility. Innovation and trust struggle to grow in environments where people feel controlled, dismissed, or unsafe.

Avoiding blaming and shaming at all costs – Practising kindness means telling the truth with care, offering feedback without blame or shame, and addressing challenges directly rather than avoiding them. This creates a space where accountability is shared, not weaponised. Niceness avoids conflict; kindness stays in relationship and seeks repair, not exclusion – even when it's hard.

Nurturing a culture of radical or generative curiosity: Kindness invites us to turn towards one another with respect and attentiveness. Asking 'What was your intention?' or 'Help me understand?' can deepen understanding and strengthen relationships. Curiosity doesn't mean agreeing – it means making space to listen and reflect before reacting.

Celebrating imperfection and viewing failure as an essential part of learning: Shaming after mistakes leads to silence and damages trust, making it harder for the whole team to speak up and grow. Taking accountability, modelling vulnerability, and offering genuine apologies can transform failure into shared learning. When people feel heard and valued even in their missteps, they are more likely to speak up, take risks, and grow together.

Emerging research also shows that a sense of humour can strengthen these dynamics: teams and leaders who can laugh at mistakes signal security and resilience, making it easier for everyone to engage, learn, and adapt. Of course, this does not mean making jokes at other people's expense; a little laughter, when shared kindly, can turn a stumble into a moment of connection and learning.

"In Hawaiian culture, leadership is often understood through the concept of kūleana, which refers to responsibility, duty, and a sense of belonging to a collective community. A leader is someone who takes on the kūleana of caring for others and ensuring the well-being of the community, environment, and future generations. Leadership is also tied to the notion of pono, which means righteousness or balance. A leader is expected to act with integrity, respect, and compassion, fostering harmony within the community. While the term ali'i is often used to refer to chiefs or leaders, but it is not just about authority or power; it implies a sense of stewardship, where the leader is a guide, protector, and caretaker of the people. A true ali'i is deeply connected to the land (ʻāina) and people, always seeking what is best for everyone and maintaining a balance with nature. In Hawaiian leadership, there's an emphasis on humility, respect for others, and collective well-being, rather than just personal power or success..."

A note captured during a conversation with Keoni Lee, *CEO of Hawai'i Investment Ready (HIR)*, and Kevin Chang, *Executive Director of Kua'āina Ulu 'Auamo*

Encouraging All Voices

Psychological safety grows when all participants – especially quieter, marginalised, or introverted voices – are actively invited to contribute.

Designing meetings and decision-making spaces with inclusion in mind: using structured turn-taking, anonymous input, and reflection prompts to broaden participation.

Embracing plurality and intersectionality. Teams that intentionally work with these dynamics build deeper trust and retain team members more effectively, and collaborate more strongly over time.

Structuring Courageous Conversations

Building spaces where hard truths can be spoken – and heard. Psychological safety doesn't mean avoiding discomfort; it means having the trust and structure to navigate disagreement well.

Recognising that tension and disagreement aren't signs of failure – they're signs of a healthy team or environment. When navigated with care, these conditions help teams build stronger trust, clarity, and resilience.

Creating ground rules and facilitation practices that support honest dialogue, and modelling curiosity and care when things feel difficult. Good facilitation is an expertise in itself.

Making Repair a Shared Practice

Building spaces that acknowledge people arrive with past wounds – and that harm can happen. Brave spaces don't avoid this reality; they prepare for it together.

Equipping teams and organisations with trained facilitators or skilled team members and leaders who can hold space for difficult conversations.

Establish clear and trusted processes for addressing harm and rebuilding trust – and making it everyone's responsibility. When repair is shared, the whole team contributes to a culture of integrity and safety.

Intersectionality is a way of understanding how different aspects of a person's identity – such as race, gender, class, age, disability, sexuality, and more – interact with each other and shape their experiences in the world. It shows that people are not defined by just one identity category, and that these overlapping identities can create unique forms of privilege or discrimination **[61-68]**.

c.
How might we recognise and respond to trauma with trauma-informed practices?

Supporting trauma-informed systems and interactions that prioritise care, reduce harm, and build trust is a critical foundation for any transition.

Beneath daily struggles often lies the profound impact of trauma and past harm. This could include experiences of poverty, displacement, violence, systemic racism, neglect, or institutional betrayal. These experiences may be invisible but can leave individuals and communities deeply wounded and distrustful, shaping how they engage with power, decision-making, and relationships. Trauma often leads not only to reactive responses but also to active withdrawal, scepticism, and disconnection – especially among those harmed or marginalised by institutions. It can erode the empathy and imagination needed to co-create different futures.

But institutions, too, can carry their own forms of trauma – shaped by repeated crises, public scrutiny, resource scarcity, or adversarial relationships with communities.

These pressures can foster cultures of defensiveness, risk aversion, and disconnection, which in turn deepen cycles of mistrust.

Healing and transformation require space for both communities and institutions to acknowledge harm, rebuild trust, and explore new ways of relating – with care, courage, and honesty.

Without acknowledging these wounds and learning how to address them with care and sensitivity, efforts to build trust risk being not only ineffective but ultimately counterproductive [69] [70].

That's why trauma-informed practices are not optional – they're *foundational*:

Embedding support systems and ways of working that recognise trauma across transitions and throughout ecosystems of actors.

Designing interactions and decision-making processes that minimise coercion and allow people to set boundaries without explicit or subtle penalties, and carefully attend to both visible and invisible power dynamics – especially in times of conflict.

Holding space for people's responses without rushing to fix, judge or problem-solve.

d.
How might we design accountable formal participatory processes?

Not all decisions require participation.

Not every decision calls for broad citizen participation, though some may benefit from the input of specific stakeholders depending on the nature of the challenge. While engaging citizens and stakeholders can enhance decision-making and strengthen legitimacy, certain choices are better suited to experts or delegated authorities to ensure efficiency and effectiveness. Participatory processes can be time- and resource-intensive, *so it is important to carefully consider when and where public or other stakeholder input genuinely adds value.* Recognising that different decisions require different levels and types of engagement allows for a balance between inclusivity and practical outcomes.

But when you decide to involve the public, do it properly. Avoid 'participation washing'.

Participation washing occurs when organisations or governments conduct engagement activities superficially, merely to create the appearance of involvement without genuinely incorporating community input into decision-making. This tokenistic approach undermines trust, as we quickly recognise when our voices are heard but not valued or acted upon. Rather than fostering connection and motivation, participation washing breeds cynicism and disengagement, deepening feelings of distrust and disempowerment.

Meaningful participation requires transparency, respect, and a ***real commitment to achieve positive outcomes*** – without these, engagement efforts risk doing more harm than good.

Engagement processes should ensure that people can genuinely influence and shape decisions – not simply be consulted after choices have already been made.

As part of the next stages of this project, we will publish a set of practical case studies from across the globe which we studied and which explore different processes in more depth. The key insights from these diverse case studies indicate the critical importance of:

Choosing the right engagement process for the task – Different situations call for different types of engagement. Selecting the most appropriate method ensures participation is effective and tailored to the specific needs and context.

Considering the timing of engagement carefully – Meaningful participation happens early and continues throughout the decision-making process. Engagement should not be a one-off or performative act after decisions are made but a sustained and resilient practice that allows people to genuinely influence outcomes from the start.

Formalising participatory processes with clear terms and accountability – To build trust and legitimacy, engagement must be embedded in robust governance structures that everyone understands and agrees upon.
This ensures participation is not a one-off or performative gesture, but a sustained, meaningful practice with clear feedback loops.

Crucially, all participants need to know **the terms of their involvement** and have confidence that their input will be genuinely considered. Follow-up is essential – whether through legislative changes or concrete actions – that demonstrates how community needs are being addressed and quality of life improved.

This isn't just about local government listening to communities – it's **about mutual accountability**. Local authorities have needs too: meeting legal duties, fulfilling democratic mandates, and managing limited resources. Just as communities deserve to have their voices heard and their needs respected, local authorities also need recognition of their constraints and collaboration in navigating them. Reframing the relationship this way can help move beyond hierarchy and foster shared responsibility.

Engaging a representative cross-section of society – Effective engagement processes make space for a broad range of voices, perspectives, and lived experiences – not only across demographics, but also in terms of values, worldviews, and ways of knowing. Tools such as sortition (random selection) can help ensure that participation reflects the full diversity of a community, rather than being shaped only by existing power structures or self-selection.

Using structured deliberation formats – Rather than open-ended, free-flowing dialogue, structured deliberation allows for deeper listening, more equitable participation, and higher-quality outcomes. Expert facilitation is critical to enable all participants to contribute meaningfully while holding space for disagreement, plurality, and complexity.

"First, if you actually participate in the project, and then in one month, two months, or three months you actually see the change – that's something that's going to give you a level of trust in the process going forward. And at the same time, that's literally the first thing we say to the government when we start planning participatory processes: First, set the rules right from the very beginning, and do not change them unless it's a matter of life and death. If you set the rules, play by the rules – even if it's uncomfortable. You have to stick to them, because that's when you start losing people's trust. Second, at the end of the process, deliver what people actually told you to deliver, or what you promised to deliver. And if there are any delays in implementation or delivery, over-communicate. It's understandable – sometimes you can't find the right person or contractor to deliver a specific service or product – but you have to communicate that to the public. A lack of communication creates mistrust. So if the government cannot commit to the rules or to delivery, it's better not to initiate participation at all. Because once people have a negative experience with participation, they're even less likely to engage in the future. Starting small, with tangible, really local outcomes, is for us one of the best ways forward."

—— Katya Petrikevich, *Co-Founder and International Director, Participatory Factory*

e.
How might we start valuing plurality to strengthen ideas and foster (a) collective (of) intelligence(s)?

Trust grows when we feel valued and seen – especially when our positions and worldviews differ from dominant voices. Respecting and valuing these differences strengthens legitimacy and resilience.

Collective action should not mean forcing consensus or promoting a single set of shared values – approaches that can erase or marginalise difference. Instead, lasting change grows from embracing the full spectrum of values, experiences, and ways of knowing within our societies. We can create conditions that honour plurality – recognising that people bring different cultural references, lived experiences, and visions of the future.

Historically, terms like ‘plurality’, ‘integration’, or ‘multiculturalism’ have often been used to erase Indigenous and other non-dominant cultures, subsuming them under dominant norms rather than respecting them on their own terms.

Genuine plurality goes beyond simply coexisting worldviews; it recognises the deep epistemic value of diverse knowledge systems – balancing scientific, technical, and lived or experiential knowledges as complementary rather than competing.

It requires creating spaces where these diverse insights are carefully woven together to inform more grounded, context-aware, and adaptive collective decisions.

While this can be incredibly challenging in practice, creating conditions that allow compatible – rather than uniform – worldviews and actions to emerge is critical. This shift not only fosters more inclusive participation but also strengthens the resilience of collective decisions by rooting them in a richer, more realistic understanding of society.

“Why aren't young people listened to? I think there is the belief that they don't know what's best for them. There are stereotypes about young people that I think get fed into this as well – like, young people are lazy. I think a big thing is actually young people coming together, first of all over shared interests and what they hope for their future. We always underestimate the power of bringing young people from different backgrounds into a room together who have never met, and then the magic that comes from that space. They seek out multiple points of view from the same story and make up their own minds from there. Even then, just doing one project where their voices are heard makes them feel like they're actually making change in their community. It's making sure that they're upheld and valued in the processes and spaces we design, and that they really leave feeling like, ‘I've really, you know, done something good, that I know something good is going to come out of it’. Young people give me hope: they're still so positive about their futures, even though they feel like their future is falling apart. They want to be there, they want to make it better, and they always talk about wanting to make it better for the next young people who come through...”

—Miriam King, *Co-Founder and Director, LIVING PROOF*

"New Zealand's indigenous youth represent our fastest-growing demographic. They will inherit a world shaped by converging demographic shifts, climate urgency, and technological revolutions—challenges that demand thinking beyond political cycles and short-term fixes that mortgage our children's future. The question for us now is: how are we preparing the next generation to build what comes next? We call this rangatiratanga—the ability to create a future of our own making. We recruit, train, and employ indigenous youth through an applied apprenticeship in tackling complex problems. This equips them with the skills, frameworks, and experiences needed to design systems that work for them. Those skills include... Our approach represents an investment in tomorrow, cultivating new forms of leadership and unlocking young people's power to be part of the solution for a better world."

—Dr Eruera Tarena, *Executive Director, Tokona te Raki: Māori Futures Makers*

Intellectual humility may be among the most important qualities for meaningful dialogue and bridging divides, as it creates space for genuine curiosity about different perspectives and overcome polarisation and resentment.

In today's world, we often think we have all the answers and rely on simplified, one-size-fits-all solutions to complex problems. But our future depends on embracing uncertainty, practising intellectual humility, and recognising that no single viewpoint holds the full truth. This means shifting from fixed knowledge to an ongoing process of questioning, reflection, and dialogue – one that values diverse perspectives and deeper understanding over easy answers or static beliefs.

Bioregional thinking, much like the practices of Joe Brewer and others, and also the approach of Two-Eyed Seeing [71], embodies these values: they are rooted in place and in what's real, attentive to the relationships and life around us, invites us to hold multiple perspectives at once, and adapts to the evolving complexities of the living systems we are part of.

"If people in positions like mine, just dig in our heels and say, 'No, you can't question us because we're all tied to the superior authority – and it's called science,' you're sidelining where the terms of the debate need to be. I think we have to understand that people make facts – or at least accept facts – that cohere with their version of the world, the world they want to live in. And they reject facts that don't fit with that. We often retreat to a superior form of rationality that keeps us from the need to deliberate. *I think that's the original sin of the Enlightenment: we created a kind of god that cannot be challenged.* And yet, the world we deal with is far too complex to say there are facts that can't be questioned. Besides, we create facts we want to live with. I think altogether too many people, once they believe they have the security blanket of truth on their side, feel that anything they do under that mantle is entitled to respect. And they forget just how much of the world still depends on discretion, judgment, and experience."

—Sheila Jasanoff, *Pforzheimer Professor of Science and Technology Studies, the Harvard Kennedy School*

"When conflicts over values and distrust of elites arise, we should bring them to light and work through them, rather than simply code them as misinformation and write off the people with these concerns as disinformation victims... we won't succeed in winning people over to climate action. But if we come to these meetings not just ready to hear concerns about, e.g., the safety of wind turbines and battery storage – and follow up with the concerned parties with verifiable information about those concerns – but also ready to have more challenging conversations about who is profiting from the transition and how local impacts will be addressed, we have a chance at climate progress. The chattering classes are central to the climate fight...We have to put resources into a different sort of public engagement with climate change, one that sees publics as competent and nuanced rather than as susceptible marks for memes."

—Holly Buck, *Obsessing Over Climate Disinformation Is a Wrong Turn, Jacobin (2024)* **[72]**

f.
How might we build trust by telling more expansive stories?

The polycrisis is also rooted in a crisis of imagination and storytelling.

The many overlapping challenges we face today – ecological, social, and institutional – reflect not just a crisis of systems, but a deeper crisis of imagination and storytelling. Our shared narratives, shaped by education, media, and public discourse, often simplify complexity into polarised or binary choices, leaving little room for ambiguity, nuance, or long-term thinking. In such environments, disinformation flourishes, amplified by under-resourced institutions and communication systems that favour certainty over curiosity.

Much of today's public storytelling (in the minority world) functions as a kind of delicate veneer – offering reassurance that the crises of our time are distant, manageable, or someone else's problem. These narratives protect us from discomfort but also keep us in bubbles, discouraging deeper engagement and muting our sense of responsibility or possibility. Meanwhile, stories that do name the scale of our challenges often lean heavily into collapse and critique, offering little vision for what could be different. *What's missing are narratives that hold complexity while inspiring hope and tangible alternatives – and the recognition that people have a place and motivation in shaping them.*

What is this crisis of imagination?

The crisis of imagination refers to the widespread difficulty individuals and institutions face in envisioning alternative futures, new possibilities, or transformative solutions, especially in the face of complex social and environmental challenges. This crisis limits our collective ability to innovate, adapt, and respond effectively to systemic problems because it traps us in familiar patterns of thought and behaviour.

As **Dan Lockton** often argues "by creating experiences and artefacts that stimulate curiosity and empathy, designers can unlock new ways of thinking and inspire collective action toward more sustainable and equitable futures [73]. Addressing the crisis of imagination is therefore crucial to expanding our capacity for creativity, empathy, and collaborative problem-solving in times of uncertainty.

Mina Niazi [74-77] and others pose a provocation to fellow design educators, particularly in non-Western contexts: could design be reimagined as a pedagogical praxis of cultivating imaginaries and building alternative worlds – one that signals a return to a grounded interpretation of the human condition, and learns to embody critical thinking as a crucial part of the design process through somatic-based frameworks? **Imaginaries** are the shared stories, visions, and mental pictures that shape how we understand the world and what futures we believe are possible. Working with imaginaries means engaging with these collective visions and asking how they might be reimagined to open up alternative futures.

The language we choose matters deeply, as words shape our innermost values and perceptions of the world, influencing what we normalise (for better or worse) and consider possible.

Words shape our innermost values and perceptions of the world, directly impacting how we design policies and interventions. For example, various highways authorities refer to drivers as ‘people,’ but pedestrians become ‘non-motorised users,’ and trees are labelled as ‘fixed hazardous objects’ that must be removed from our roads [78]. This language reflects a focus on moving vehicles efficiently from A to B, often sidelining broader social and environmental concerns.

Similarly, oil companies frequently describe the communities affected by their operations as ‘sensitive receptors’ [79]. Such terminology and phrases become normalised in our culture, and are deliberately dehumanising and desensitising us, allowing organisations to avoid truly connecting with those harmed by their actions. As a result, efficiency-driven measures and indicators often take precedence over other vital priorities and values like protecting social and environmental health.

The stories we tell should reflect our diverse needs, concerns, interests, inner values, and political positions

We can foster empathy, bridge divides, and build more inclusive narratives by developing communication and storytelling that account for the diversity of humanity – our unique experiences, values, and perspectives. Moving beyond tokenistic representation, these approaches connect with what truly matters to people through a deeper, values-driven approach to engagement. For example, themes like justice, fairness, compassion, family, tradition, the beauty of nature, national pride, and respect can resonate differently depending on individual, community, and organisational priorities [80] [81].

When we identify with characters in a story, we naturally connect with its message. This shows why it's important to create relatable and engaging characters in our storytelling.

Stories that evoke genuine emotions allow us to connect more deeply and make the message more memorable and meaningful.

When a story reflects our values and beliefs, it resonates more powerfully. Understanding people's perspectives is essential to crafting stories that truly matter to them [82].

Emily Falk's research [83], along with initiatives such as the 'Behavior Change for Good' programme led by Katherine Milkman, Angela Duckworth, and their team of behavioural scientists, economists, and psychologists at the University of Pennsylvania [84], suggests that relying on arguments, facts, statistics, or direct appeals may not be the most effective way to overcome the barriers (e.g., defensiveness, counter-arguing) people face when confronted with challenges to their prior beliefs.

Stories are often much more effective in this regard. Creating engaging narratives can pull us into a journey and experience (referred to as 'transportation') that lets us transcend our usual perspective and empathise with characters, see how others might face similar struggles, and imagine outcomes differently.

For instance, when feedback or behavioural suggestions are embedded in a narrative, rather than delivered as abstract statistics or direct charges, people are more willing to open up, reflect, and change. Similarly, values affirmation reminds us of what matters most to us – core values such as family or purpose – so that when we receive criticism or see areas for growth, it does not feel like a total identity attack, but rather an invitation to align with our better selves. Adopting the vantage point of a 'distanced other' can also help us transcend the defensive barriers that often arise when feedback or change are proposed.

From the standpoint of storytelling, using a distanced other or character (someone we can empathise with but also see from a slight remove from ourselves [85]) gives the audience greater openness and wisdom: we see the possibility of change more clearly, recognise our shared humanity, and yet do not feel personally attacked – which helps sustain empathy and indeed behaviour change.

In addition, for people who hold strong 'just-world' beliefs – the idea that the world is fundamentally fair – highly catastrophic messages about climate change can create a psychological conflict. These dire warnings suggest that the world is suffering unfairly and that people may face undeserved harm, which directly contradicts their deeply held worldview.

Pairing discussions of problems with practical, manageable solutions can help people feel empowered rather than overwhelmed. Offering clear paths forward encourages acceptance and constructive engagement with an issue [86].

Demonstrating complexity through our storytelling and strategic communications – rather than 'simplifying the world' or offering one-off fixes – helps us make more informed, responsible decisions.

Both technological and technocratic solutions tend to reduce complexity: they often rely on linear, standardised, and quantifiable models that sidestep the lived realities, messiness, and entangled causes of the problems they aim to solve. These kinds of solutions may appear neutral or efficient, but they can mask the deeper social, cultural, and relational dimensions of change.

Technological interventions are not just technical – they also carry with them **specific political and economic logics** and interests. Often, they reinforce existing power structures and market dynamics, serving the status quo more than genuine transformation.

It's essential to understand the narratives and framing that these underlying interests give rise to – and how they turn certain solutions and technologies into widely popularised answers, often without questioning their actual usefulness or unintended consequences. Without that awareness, we risk believing in or buying into them uncritically.

Instead, we could expand the range of approaches and choices we explore and invest in, *allowing more options or possibilities to emerge* and be tested over time.

This creates room for multiple perspectives that a single-path plan would miss, enabling us to collectively iterate and decide on solutions as conditions on the ground evolve.

We broadly distinguish technological and technocratic:

Technological solutions focus on tools or devices (e.g., renewable energy systems [innovations that solve problems through technology], AI-based traffic control [automated management], carbon capture machines [technical fixes]).

Technocratic solutions are those developed by technical experts such as economists or engineers with little public input or lived experience. They tend to involve centralised planning, prioritise cost–benefit ratios, and use governance structures that might sideline democratic debate.

[The appeal of simple narratives]

In the minority world, “people still believe in the technological fix – that if push comes to shove, we will be able to solve the climate crisis. And if you pick up the newspaper, or listen to scientists [and technologists] continually dangling very seductive fruits in front of you, the message is that we will be okay and don’t need to curb our appetite.”

—Sheila Jasanoff, *Pforzheimer Professor of Science and Technology Studies, the Harvard Kennedy School*

"How do you move the needle on shifting baseline syndrome, where we're in this space of denial and wanting to stay comfortable? There's also a challenge that arises in policymaking, where policymakers feel they've got to get it right before even starting the discussion. The policymaker comes with the answers, the evidence base, the research, the number-crunching... But as a policymaker, how do you become more open and confident in working with uncertainty – more willing to say, 'What do we think?' – instead of going in on single issues? And it is often very single-issue, because funding comes in silos..."

—Louise Marix Evans, *Director, Quantum Strategy & Technology*

Many inspiring local governments – from Dunkirk to Gothenburg to Pécs – operate with a variety of strategic positions and engage stakeholders across the city by reframing the same set of issues within different narratives to suit a broad spectrum of interests and values.

For example, each of their narratives around the climate crisis are shaped by distinct social, economic, and environmental realities, not all of which focus solely on carbon neutrality or the climate crisis. Often, these governments are not simply following a set path but are actively engaged in ongoing sensemaking – continuously navigating and reinterpreting complex priorities in response to shifting local conditions.

Economic competitiveness & industrial transition: economic diversification, digitalisation, clean industries & technology, or avoiding stranded assets

Ecosystem preservation & biodiversity resilience: habitat loss, deforestation, ecosystem services, nature-based solutions

Climate adaptation, resilience & public health: extreme weather adaptation, heat mitigation, flood protection, pollution & disease prevention.

Resource security & supply chains: food, water, energy, and material self-sufficiency, circular economy, supply chain resilience.

Demographic shifts & social equity: aging populations, migration, climate displacement, service provision, housing affordability.

The given synthesis of potential priorities across European cities was developed by our colleague Marcial Silva Mercado and other colleagues for a training session within the context of the NetZeroCities programme.

04 Next steps

This Deep Dive is the first step in exploring our collective understanding of how we can create an ethic of governing together – that is, a set of values, principles, and everyday practices that guide how we relate, make decisions, and act collectively. It's about building the trust, motivation, and conditions needed for sustained collective action.

In the coming months, we plan to develop this work by:

Sharing Practical City Stories

We'll share inspiring city stories from around the globe – that show cities' capacity for the type of relational working and nurturing a collective of intelligences that is proposed in this publication, and how this has delivered positive outcomes for communities through community resilience, job creation, local economic growth, and industrial renewal.

Cultivating the Ecosystem of Governing Together

Community of practice: We'll continue working across our existing ecosystem of organisations and partner networks to amplify each other's work, co-develop new ideas and proposals, and convene and connect like-minded practitioners to build a supportive ecosystem around relational governance.

Animated storytelling: We'll share animated stories that illustrate shifts in governance helping to bridge divides, reduce polarisation and social fragmentation, and unlock collective action, drawing on insights co-developed with our ecosystem of practitioners and thinkers.

Direct partnership work: We're working with local governments to ground tools and processes in practical contexts we've co-designed in incubation spaces. Our relational capacity audit help teams reflect on how to become more relational and collectively intelligent. These will be tested and iterated through these collaborations.

Open Resources & Tools Repositories

Dynamic web platform: We'll launch a central online space that brings together all our work and explorations in one place.

Conversations with thought-leaders & practitioners: We'll share interviews and conversations to capture insight from people doing inspiring work on the ground.

Shared glossary: We'll build an evolving glossary to support a shared understanding of the language and vocabulary of governing together.

The insights and recommendations in this Deep Dive are intended to be discussed, updated and revised.

We invite you to share your thoughts and suggestions.

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04
Dark matter Labs

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