



Catalyzing Transformation: A Process Framework for Transformative System Change

Sandra Waddock*

Galligan Chair of Strategy, Carroll School Scholar of Corporate Responsibility, Professor of Management, Boston College Carroll School of Management, Chestnut Hill, MA USA

Abstract

This article offers a synthesized perspective on a future-oriented process for transformational change makers, here called transformation catalysts, to catalyze systemic change through processes of connecting, cohering, and amplifying the transformational change work of multiple initiatives in numerous social-ecological contexts. Oriented towards purposeful or deliberate system change towards just, equitable, inclusive, and thriving social-ecological systems, the outlined processes of connecting, cohering, and amplifying provide a template or framework for organizing co-creative approaches. This process brings multiple, typically independent individuals and initiatives into alignment, connecting them through shared understanding of the system and determining what is already happening and who is doing what through mapping key stakeholders and their activities. Through visioning and similar processes, transformation catalysts enable different actors to align and cohere their shared aspirations and develop joint and individual action plans in what can then emerge as a self-aware and potentially more effective transformation system comprised of these actors. The amplification process involves the implementation of planned actions, both independently and in concert with others, evaluating and learning from those processes, and adapting future efforts. The latter includes developing, if appropriate, additional transformational efforts and catalysts in different parts of the system to create ongoing momentum. The example of [WEAll](#), the Wellbeing Economy Alliance, with information drawn from the website, is used to illustrate these ideas.

1. Introduction

In the context of what is now being called polycrisis—an intersecting mix of intractable problems¹ that threaten the foundations of civilization as we know it^{2,3}, the need for system transformation is becoming clearer to many, including business leaders^{4,5}, foundations⁶, academics⁷⁻⁹, and economists¹⁰. The ‘what’ of such transformative change has become clearer in recent years. Keen observers argue for a transformative shift in socio-economic and ecological systems towards a primary focus on human and planetary wellbeing^{11,12} in societies and economies that operate equitably and inclusively within planetary boundaries¹³, and preserve biodiversity and ecosystem services^{7,10,14}, and reduce inequality^{15,16}. Despite the known difficulty of accomplishing it, transformative actions are needed to change the

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trajectory of polycrisis and avoid what UN Secretary General António Guterres has called collective suicide¹⁷.

“We envision a world where everyone has enough to live in comfort, safety, and happiness. Where all people feel secure in their basic comforts and can use their creative energies to support the flourishing of all life on this planet.”

In what follows, this paper briefly discusses the orientation of existing theory about transformative change, then explores why a process-oriented, prospective framework that both envisions what changes are desired and opens pathways forward is needed. Then, using the literature and experience, it synthesizes a catalytic approach for achieving transformative change and building powerful transformation systems in ways that can be applied in numerous contexts, providing an illustration based on activities described on the [Wellbeing Economy Alliance’s](#) (WEAll) website. Drawing on extant literature, the article briefly explores what needs to change, then illustrates how transformation catalysts can undertake catalytic actions of connecting and cohering that can be used to amplify the transformative impact of numerous actors, enabling them to develop into self-aware and effective transformation systems.

2. Background

The prospective or aspirational, future-oriented framework¹⁸ for catalyzing purposeful system transformation offered here builds on and integrates a body of existing theory, including growing calls for catalytic action^{19–23}. This literature emphasizes the need for collaboration and network weaving to create cohesion and link key actors^{20,24,25}, which in turn orients system change agents towards acknowledging and emphasizing inherent relationality among actors—and, not incidentally, nature²⁶. Much research emphasizes the importance of having a systems-orientation^{19,20,27}, because of the multi-scalar and multi-directional nature of fundamental or transformative system change^{28,29}. In turn that requires participatory and inclusive approaches²⁸ towards co-production or co-created action^{21,30}. This systems-based understanding is rooted in understanding the nature of both complexity (as in complexity science)^{31–33} and ‘wickedness’ as with wicked problems^{34–36} associated with polycrisis, which in turn acknowledges the uniqueness of each context and the need for contextually appropriate approaches, pathways, and actions.

From a transformation perspective, it is clear from the 2023 IPCC Synthesis Report³⁷ that rapid, wholesale reduction of CO₂ and other greenhouse gases is desperately needed to avoid the worst impacts of climate change. Like IPBES’ 2019 report on species loss², the IPCC 2023 report on climate change calls for significant systems transformation across numerous interacting ‘feasibility dimensions’. These dimensions include transformative change in how economics, technologies, institutions, societies, environmental and ecological systems, and geophysical systems are treated and operated^{38,39}. The IPCC report is highly critical of current

efforts and calls for transformative changes in, among other systems, infrastructure design, socio-cultural and behavioral aspects, and the restoration of ecosystems³⁷. Similarly, reports on biodiversity and ecosystem services loss^{38,40} further highlight these interconnections and the need for holistic transformational change, emphasizing the *why* and *what* of systemic change needed^{4,5,41}.

Further, there are numerous reports, research papers, and initiatives from a broad array of actors, from business associations to intergovernmental panels to activists, that also spell out what systemic changes are needed^{3,4,10,38}. Economic changes envisioned include development of circular economies, ‘finer futures’ advancing life-centered economies, adoption of doughnut economics, nature-smart development, just and regenerative economies, and similar changes^{4-6,42} in part to deal more effectively with growing issues of inequality^{15,16}. Many of these publications emphasize the importance of shifting towards an integrated socio-ecological paradigm emphasizing flourishing, balanced, and healthy human nature, and planetary interrelationships^{11,12}. Most such descriptions, in fact, emphasize values like equity, inclusion, social and ecological justice, as well as flourishing human-nature intersections^{6,16,43,44}. Other approaches focus on the importance of limiting human impacts on (increasingly breached) geophysical limits of planetary boundaries^{13,45-47}, although often with insufficient attention to human population growth and its impacts⁴⁸. Collectively, these ideas emphasize the importance of values and visions in generating purposeful transformation, integration across multiple systems (e.g., transdisciplinarity), recognition of technological, structural, and institutional impediments to change, and the need to recognize and respect the values and perspectives of numerous different groups and peoples while developing shared aspirations to develop new (collective) meanings and narratives⁴⁹. The WEAll initiative (see Box* : WEAll: The Wellbeing Economy Alliance) incorporates many of these values and approaches.

WEAll: The Wellbeing Economy Alliance

The Wellbeing Economy Alliance (WEAll) describes itself as the leading collaboration of organizations working towards achieving a ‘wellbeing economy. It works to catalyze transformative change in economic thinking and practice towards emerging wellbeing economies (or economies that serve life) by ‘promoting radical connection and collaboration among a wide range of actors with similar agendas to shift worldviews, society, and economies from “us vs. them” to “we all”’. WEAll works on three key pillars: connecting and strengthening the work of actors that collectively have the power to change the economic system, co-creating knowledge, and changing cultural narratives about what is possible economically, culturally, politically, and socially to bring about economies in service to life. At this writing, WEAll has more than 400 organizational and thousands of individual members, is working with six national governments through WEGo (WEAll Government, now spun off), has 88 ambassadors (affiliated thought leaders), 150 academics, and 13 local hubs, with numerous others developing.

* All information on WEAll is taken from their website, effective January 2024. The example is meant to be illustrative of the general catalytic approach described here rather than definitive. Other examples of entities that take a catalytic approach to change include EcoCiv, 1000 Landscapes for 1 Billion People, Seafood Source, The Nature Conservancy, GRLI (Globally Responsible Leadership Initiative), and Doughnut Economics Action Lab. In other work Ju Young Lee and I studied 27 such entities to understand how they work (see Lee & Waddock, 2021) and Steve Waddell and I synthesized how transformation catalysts work (see Waddock & Waddell, 2021).

WEAll has articulated the following vision:

We envision a world where everyone has enough to live in comfort, safety, and happiness. Where all people feel secure in their basic comforts and can use their creative energies to support the flourishing of all life on this planet. We thrive in a restored, safe, and vibrant natural environment because we have learned to give back as much as we are given. A world where we have a voice over our collective destiny and find belonging, meaning and purpose through genuine connection to the people and planet that sustain us.

WEAll works internally using a core set of values that include passion (for their purpose), care, trust, togetherness, and equality. To achieve its vision of Wellbeing Economies, WEAll fosters the core economic values of: dignity, nature (a restored and safe natural world for all life), purpose, fairness, and participation. WEAll, which was founded in 2018, has emerged with a variety of approaches to systemic change since its inception: catalyzing change by bringing together multiple actors from different regions, sectors, and levels “to influence societal values and norms and ...show that change is necessary and possible,” working through collaboration and learning together.

Source: Synthesized from WEAll: <https://weall.org/>

Some transformation specialists describe the desired future, as WEAll does, in terms that emphasize a focus on fostering life as opposed to the wealth, growth, and consumption^{5,50,51} orientation of today's economics^{52,53}. Some descriptions also add localization of control and decision-making^{54,55} to issues of voice and participation, as evidenced in WEAll's numerous and growing collective of local hubs. Further, with all the attention on sustainability, there is a growing recognition that something beyond 'sustaining' current practices and systems is needed for emerging a socially and ecologically flourishing world^{41,56}. That conception is aligned with much Indigenous wisdom⁵⁷⁻⁵⁹, because it is based on recognizing that humans are integrally part of, interdependent with, and dependent on nature^{45,56} or, as WEAll expresses it, in its value of togetherness and 'a restored and safe natural world for all life.' Humans do, in fact, rely on and are interdependent with nature's resources and technological progress alone will be unlikely to solve today's issues^{60,61}, as humans are not separate from nature and somehow immune from nature's constraints⁶². In summary, the concept of transformed socio-ecological systems generally emphasizes the holistic transformation of socio-ecological systems towards equity, justice, fairness, and inclusiveness for humans operating within planetary geophysical boundaries^{46,63} that results in flourishing for humans and other than human beings^{19,40,45,56}.

There is also significant understanding of the changes defined as cycles of transformational changes in socio-ecological systems in the system called panarchy⁶⁴, as well as the different levels at which significant shifts occur and their influence on other levels in what is known as the multi-level perspective^{65,66}. The need for transformative systemic change as well as what it might look like has reasonable consensus (e.g., 27,40,50,56). Other scholars acknowledge the emergent nature of processes associated with transformative change and

its co-created nature, which require ongoing learning and adaptation in addition to clearly articulated core values^{20,21,28} in a future that cannot be predicted. In addition, there is a need for open awareness of systems supporting wellbeing, a clear sense of agency on the part of change makers, and strong social cohesion among the parties working towards change²⁷. Purposeful transformative change is also considered to be based on experimentation⁶⁷, because of its inherent uncertainties and unpredictability⁶⁸. Significant attention needs to be paid to what Meadows called leverage points for transformative change⁶⁹, in places in the system that enable ripple effects beyond the immediate changes envisioned or attempted. Since Meadows also emphasized the importance of paradigm or mindset shifts in fostering transformation, shifting core narratives or social imaginaries⁷⁰, which can include visions and shared aspirations or new narratives that inform such mindsets^{45,71,72} and important cultural mythologies⁷³, takes a central place as an important lever for transformative change.

The transformative change literature also describes many of the important system characteristics of transformation, including recognition of complexity, nonlinearity, and, as noted, the importance of narratives and social activism as key leverage points, all of which are evident in WEAll. Further, governance mechanisms need to provide pathways forward, with four ‘drivers’ perceived as necessary by one set of scholars: technology innovation, political economy redistribution (equity), new narratives, and transformational learning⁷⁴. These characteristics mean that new and more integrated ways of knowing, along with transdisciplinarity and a relational perspective among a wide range of stakeholders, are also important²⁷.

These systemic considerations inform the work of transformational change catalysts, who are often (and here) described as change (transformation) stewards because, in a very real sense, they are caretakers of systems that will benefit others⁴⁵. Westley and colleagues’ synthesis identifies nine skills needed by such stewards: facilitating knowledge building and use, vision building, developing social networks, building trust and legitimacy, developing social innovations, mobilizing and preparing for change, recognizing opportunities, communicating ‘small wins’, and facilitating and negotiating conflict resolution²². Wamsler and colleagues similarly indicate that transformation stewards need an integrated set of transformative capacities that include awareness (presence, attention, self-awareness, self-reflection), connection (including compassion and generosity), insight, purpose, agency (empowerment and co-creation of meaning and actions, among other aspects), which is associated with mindfulness⁹. These capacities combine with inner states, including non-materialistic and earth-centric values, caretaking responsibility and a general ‘other’ orientation that includes both humans and other-than-human beings⁹, as well as meaning-making, learning and listening orientations, and integrative approaches that overcome dualisms like mind-body separation⁴⁹. Collectively, these attributes characterize the stewardship roles needed by transformation catalysts, many of which are expressed in both the internal and economic values expressed by WEAll. This paper synthesizes and integrates a process perspective across these various conceptualizations and empirical results to articulate a generalized framework for *how* purposeful and prospective or future-oriented systemic changes in desired directions can deliberately be guided by stimulating and integrating explicitly-developed and generative social visions^{9,19,22,49}. This process synthesis takes up the challenge presented by Bentz,

O'Brien, and Scoville-Simons, who observed that 'there is very little shared understanding of how such [purposeful] transformations come about and to seek greater integration across the literature'⁴⁹, p. 1, providing insight into that 'how' using the example of WEAll.

“Transformation catalysts or stewards are actors—individuals or people working in initiatives—who recognize the need for systems transformation and are willing to steward (but not ‘plan’ or ‘lead’ in the traditional sense) transformative system change.”

3. Approach

The rest of this article presents a prospective or future-oriented framework that outlines a generalized set of processes for the how of catalyzing purposeful transformation towards thriving socio-ecological systems that transformation catalysts can use to connect, cohere, and amplify the work of change agents who typically operate in underdeveloped systems into cohered and effective transformation systems. These ideas are based on a synthesis of the literature introduced above, as well as working with the ideas and practice of purposeful system change^{75–80,80} (also 75,80). In particular, it builds on work done in collaboration with Steve Waddell and the Bounce Beyond team.

Epistemologically, this framework for catalyzing transformation is prospective^{18,81} rather than retrospective in two senses. First and most importantly, it is a collective ‘envisioned prospectation’, which means that it is oriented towards enabling participants, that is, catalysts and changemakers, to envision and try to bring into reality a set of shared aspirations for the future¹⁸. This collective envisioning has been described as ‘sensing, presencing, intuiting future-forming, collaborative construction of a better world’(18, p. 26). Secondly, it is sufficiently new that it is offered as a prospective framework synthesizing past work as discussed above, as well as experiences of how more effective, purposeful systemic change can be catalyzed and tested in practice to evolve the future in new ways. Although that future can be imagined and actions⁸¹ can be taken towards it, specific outcomes cannot be predicted, and different actors will do things in their own ways.

Ontologically, these ideas are built on a quantum, complexity-based, and wicked problems understanding that provides a realistic and highly relational perspective on the way the world—and systems within it—work, based on today’s scientific understandings. Specifically, it is based on understanding the systemic implications of quantum physics combined with ‘complex wickedness’, which is an integration of complexity-based systems^{35,82–84} and wicked problems^{34,35,85,86} theories. Together these understandings describe the inherent characteristics of any living (socio-ecological) system and move away from mechanistic, reductionist, and positivist understandings of how the world functions towards a living system and quantum physics-based ontology. These perspectives when combined view systems and the living world as an interconnected, inseparable whole that is deeply entangled and interconnected,

complexly interrelated, inherently relationally based, emergent, and dynamic^{68,87,88}. Although it is often necessary to define systems and their boundaries, it is important to recognize that those boundaries are permeable—and linked to other systems.

Catalyzing purposeful transformation engages a participative, co-creative process that is emergent, nonlinear, with actors and actions entangled and aimed at prospectively emerging a collectively desired future world that does not currently exist^{18,81}. Although that future can be imagined and actions⁸¹ vibrant, and humane organizations and communities? This has been a guiding question for the field of ODC throughout a year-long series of activities (e.g., design meetings, webinars, and informal dialogues taken towards it), because what emerges from novel or newly-structured interactions and engagements is nonlinear, emergent, and unpredictable, the outcomes of transformation catalysis are similarly unpredictable, though patterns do exist⁸⁹. The quantum-based, complexly-wicked perspective on the nature of socio-ecological systems means that impacts and outcomes thus emerge from the interactions (in what might be characterized as a kind of epigenetic or co-evolutionary process⁹⁰) of actors who are brought together in new ways to co-create new narratives, aspirations, and action and implementation plans. Such interactions require transformation stewards to ‘let go’ of pre-conceived plans and ideas to orient towards possibilities as envisioned in agreed-upon and active co-creation with other participants.

In the framework, there are two other important assumptions. One is the idea that systems transformation is a distinct form of change that works at very fundamental levels, affecting multiple interacting and important elements of the system^{2,75} (explained more below). Second is the assumption that in the type of systems described above, catalytic processes will be more effective at bringing change about than more directive, linear processes because they draw out the skills and capacities of participating actors in co-creative and new ways.

4. Catalyzing Transformations

Catalyzing transformation is a process for achieving purposeful, large- (and small-) scale whole system transformation. It involves actors and change makers²² serving as transformation catalyst(s)/stewards to bring together other change makers and initiatives in a given context or system that are or would like to be working for systemic changes towards an aspirational and collectively-shared future. Transformation catalysts work to connect, cohere, and amplify the transformative impact of multiple previously un- or loosely connected change makers who want to accomplish transformative systemic change in a self-aware and focused transformation system⁷⁶. Change makers in a transformation system work towards more impactful, shared aspirations, agendas, and actions that can, because of the collective power, potentially better overcome obstacles to change, current regimes^{19,91}, and systemic inertia towards more just, inclusive, equitable and flourishing systems. This framework for catalyzing transformation²⁰⁻²² offers a powerful set of processes that can be applied in widely different contexts and adapted as necessary. Yet it provides sufficient guidance that cohered and amplified actions can shift the system in the desired direction.

Catalysis of chemical reactions involves the introduction of an agent into a chemical mix that creates significant change without undergoing change itself. Catalyzing transformation has

a similar fundamental change effect; however, it is important to recognize that transformation catalysts are inherently part of the system undergoing change. As they are part of the system, they co-evolve with systemic changes because of the emergent, interconnected, and dynamic nature of such shifts. Importantly, transformation catalysts recognize that it is participants in emerging transformation systems who are the key actors undertaking transformative initiatives and actions (not the catalysts). It follows that through the quantum and complexity lenses, there is no ‘objective’, or for that matter, values-neutral stance possible for observers and actors since the premise is that of interconnectedness and interrelatedness in one holistic system, which means that any given actor’s stance and actions matter⁹².

The next sections discuss how transformation catalysts work to organize actors and initiatives in new ways through processes enabling connecting, cohering, and amplification of their work^{76,78,79}, generating potential for transformative impact.

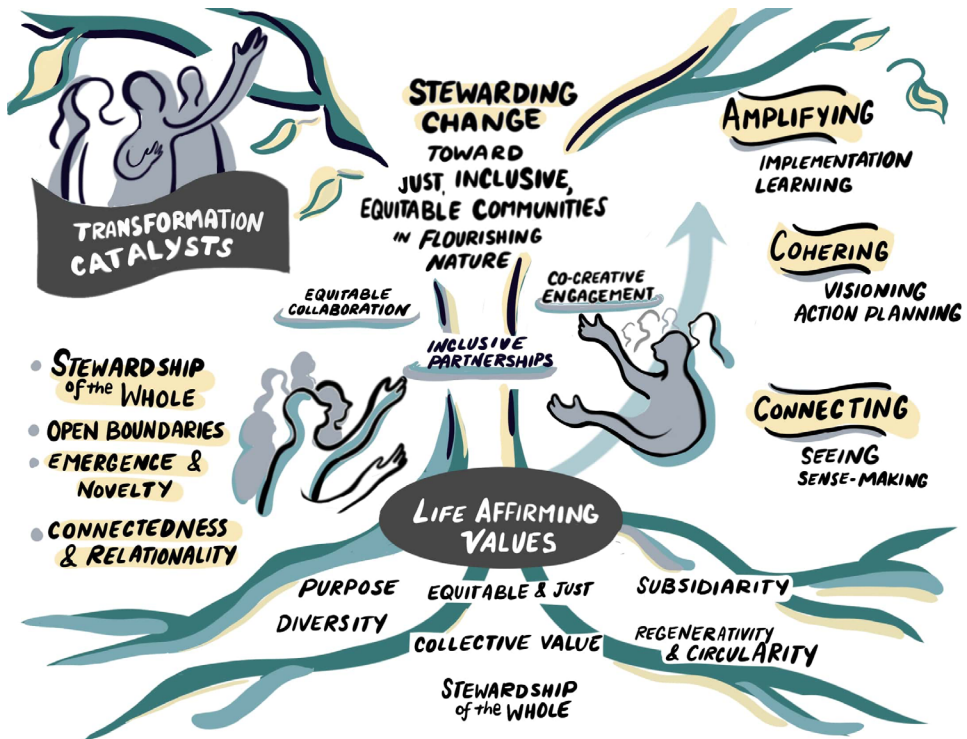
5. The Work of Transformation Catalysts: Connecting and Cohering

Transformation catalysts or stewards are actors—individuals or people working in initiatives—who recognize the need for systems transformation and are willing to steward (but not ‘plan’ or ‘lead’ in the traditional sense) transformative system change, much as WEAll has done in bringing together numerous actors around the shared agenda of creating wellbeing economies. They do so by bringing together a collection of ‘the willing’—other actors and initiatives who are interested in similar goals and largely, at least initially, not directly connected with each other, to understand each other’s individual and potential collective efforts with respect to a given context or system. While connecting, cohering, and amplifying are discussed separately here, in practice, they are interconnected and overlapping. Figure 1 provides an overview of the connecting, cohering, and amplification work of transformation catalysts.

Connecting: Two processes are core in connecting processes: seeing and sensemaking. *Seeing* involves helping relevant parties define and understand the relevant system and its (possibly redefined) purposes. Seeing means understanding who is doing what changes work towards relatively similar aspirations in the relevant context by identifying actors already working (or willing to work) towards change and connecting them in shared processes of sensemaking^{93,94}. For example, WEAll is accomplishing this connecting by initially identifying, and then linking together the numerous actors already engaged in working towards what WEAll characterizes as a wellbeing economy—now numbering more than 400 initiatives and organizations, thousands of individuals, and multiple hubs and governments.

Sensemaking^{94,95} here means helping connected actors map and begin to understand enough about the whole system to begin to work together effectively. Mapping and stakeholder identification processes help uncover the potential shared agendas that exist among participants and initiatives and their (collective and independent) transformative potential. WEAll began with an initial insight that the current structure and practices of economies were core to sustainability issues (a narrative perspective, see below), then brought together numerous initiatives with similar orientation to collectively make sense of this issue and begin to align their efforts.

Figure 1: The Transformation Catalyst's Role in System Transformation



Source: Waddock, S., 2024. *Catalyzing Transformation*, author's own, used with permission.

As actors connect, typically through mapping processes of various types⁹⁶⁻⁹⁸ that enable the emergence of a shared understanding or sensemaking of the relevant system or context, they can begin to think about themselves as a *transformation system*⁷⁷. A transformation system is the collection of change makers willing and able to cohere and align their activities for systemic impact, rather than solely as individual, largely unconnected actors doing their own thing. This alignment or connecting enables what are frequently small, under-resourced, and disconnected entities to come together in new ways to enhance transformative potential, helping to overcome what Hawken described as the 'blessed unrest' of many transformation initiatives⁹⁹. In WEAll's case, there are multiple such emerging transformation systems, including WEGo, the Wellbeing Economy Governments (currently numbering six), the policymakers network comprised of policymakers interested in understanding how to develop Wellbeing Economy policies, and the Local Hubs, who work on local visions and transformation while connecting with each other to share experiences, insights, and learning.

Recognizing that the nature of *purposeful* system change involves changing significant relationships and fundamentals in a system, one way to synthesize *what* changes are needed

is to recognize that there are five core system dimensions, all of which need attention and may well change¹⁰⁰. Transformation catalysts' work is to facilitate connected initiatives' recognition of how the relevant system and its boundaries and *purpose(s)* are/need to be (re-) defined, understood, and played out in practice. Thus, catalysts in a sense ask participants whether or not the currently-defined system's purpose is 'fit for purpose', and, if not, how its purpose(s) might need to be rethought. Purpose matters because it informs other key aspects of any socio-ecological system. WEAll itself, as an initiative, serves as the core transformation catalyst moving this purposeful change agenda along, articulating it, and drawing together the numerous allies it now collaborates with, with particular focus on how economies' purposes are both stated and developed, i.e., towards wellbeing for all.

As the seeing process evolves, participants need to think about other core aspects of the system, particularly how they understand the system, that is, what paradigm (or mindset) do they (individually and) collectively hold with respect to the system? The reason that understanding the paradigm is important is that Meadows considered shifting and even transcending paradigms to be the most powerful transformative change lever⁶⁹. Paradigms or mindsets inform people about the nature of the system, their place in it, and how it and they relate to the broader context. Also important is to determine what performance metrics are used—or need to be used—to assess and evaluate the system holistically¹⁰¹, because how performance is assessed drives a lot of behavior within any given context. Purpose(s), paradigms, and performance metrics in turn influence the operating practices (policies, processes, and procedures) that characterize how work gets done in a given context or how that system operates, as well as influencing important power relationships, structures, and resource flows in that context, which further determine how the system actually performs and meets its intended purposes. These five aspects, all of which likely need to change in transformation, can be synthesized as purpose, paradigms, performance metrics, practices, and power structures¹⁰⁰.

Meadows in arguing the importance of paradigms pointed out the need for finding important levers with which to bring change about, including identifying and possibly rethinking dominant narratives that shape mindsets or paradigms⁶⁹. A redefinition of purposes, for example, can mean developing new social imaginaries⁷⁰ or narratives that reframe how systems are understood⁶⁹ shaping the dominant paradigms or understandings that actors in the system hold, which in turn inform different ways of engaging in and acting on that system. For example, many transformation specialists argue for shifting the 'story' of human relationships with nature from one of separation and human exceptionalism to integration as a core aspect of transformative change^{23,28,56}. Others call for explicitly life-affirming new narratives^{5,40,50}. Shaping economic systems to foster 'life' or wellbeing rather than financial wealth^{5,11,42} can make a big difference in how the goals, purposes, and practices of the system are shaped.

Throughout its existence, WEAll has developed a variety of [white papers and briefing papers and other ways of shaping narratives](#) that are broadly shared with allies and interested others as a way of fostering new seeing and sensemaking about the nature, purposes, and

functioning of economies around not financial wealth and endless growth but rather wellbeing that includes all people and nature. That sensemaking includes making available (and broadly sharing) definitions and visuals of [key concepts](#), [identifying core relevant resources](#) including papers, articles, books, videos, and podcasts, and describing key [case studies](#) of transitions towards wellbeing. Notably, all of these resources and developments have taken considerable investment time to emerge.

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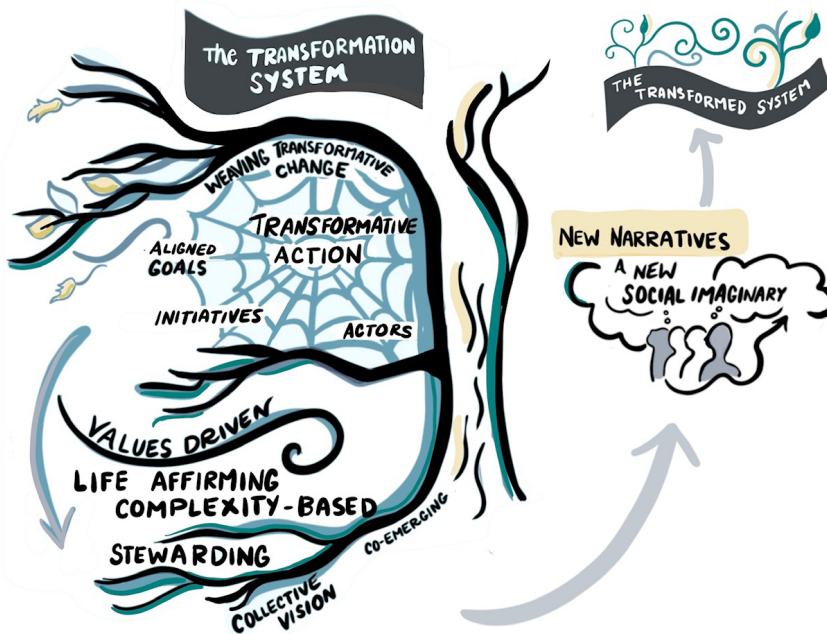
Cohering: Cohering also involves two core processes: *visioning* or new narrative creation (in a sense, a continuation of the sensemaking process) and collaborative *action planning*. Once participants in an emerging transformation system have been initially connected, transformation catalysts can engage them in shared visioning (and related) processes (e.g.,^{102–105}) to begin to co-create their desired/aspirational future for the relevant system. In doing so, they can begin to *cohere* and make sense of their activities in new ways that can inform new narratives or social imaginaries⁷⁰. These new narratives inform mindsets and paradigms within the relevant system, reshaping understandings in connecting processes. It is the participants in the transformation system who are co-emerging the vision and action strategies, not the transformation catalysts, though they are part of the process and have input. WEAll’s efforts to reshape the economic narrative, as noted above, include numerous publications and definitions, along with fostering collaborative activities in a whole range of contexts—from governments focused on wellbeing economies to engaging both initiatives and individuals in collaborative and co-creative engagement.

Shared visioning helps change makers understand better what needs to change and towards what ends, as well as how they might undertake different change processes and begin *action planning*. As they do so, they can begin to sense where their initiative’s individual actions, aligned with the vision or new narrative, make sense and where collective engagement^{20,106,107} and action, co-producing results, are needed to bring the aspirational future into reality. These two activities—shared visioning and action planning—can help change makers cohere their actions as a transformation system in ways that they previously could not because they were unconnected with others who share similar agendas. That leads to the third set of activities, the amplification of transformative impacts. For example, as WEAll describes it, its hubs are designed to ‘collaborate to change the debate and accelerate economic transformation locally, whether it is in a region, a country, a city, or a bioregion. WEAll Hubs serve as links between local and global movements, actions, and solutions, cross-sharing experiences and working within their territories to co-create context-specific visions, narratives and solutions for a transition to a Wellbeing Economy.’

6. The Amplification Work of the Transformation System

Amplifying: Amplification processes derive from the connecting and cohering processes and involve the implementation and emergence of new transformation infrastructure, including subsystem transformation catalysts and systems as contextually appropriate. Connecting begins to shift the system as actors get to know each other, understand what others are doing and begin to figure out where redundancies and gaps exist in transformation efforts. As the transformation system evolves, transformation catalysts can guide but not control the emerging connections in traditionally conceived ways. Rather they are stewarding^{22,23} the co-production^{108,109} of proposed action strategies that participants wish to undertake. Amplification also necessarily involves participants actually implementing the action strategies developed through cohering processes, and, importantly, witnessing and evaluating the results and learning from those outcomes and impacts so that they can change what needs to change in future efforts.

Figure 2: Processes and Guidelines for Evolving Purposeful Transformation Systems



Source: Waddock, S., 2024. *Catalyzing Transformation*, author’s own, used with permission.

One way to conceive of how successful transformation systems evolve is that participants put their plans into action, fostering the emergence of a cascade (or ripple effect) of similar activities in more localized (or possibly more global) contexts within the overall system. It can be helpful to think of amplification as evolving and emerging as a cascading array of

initiatives, propagating change in ways that are matched to the specific contexts in which they arise—much as seeds scatter, then sprout and grow in ways that are matched to the particular ecosystem where they develop. The process of catalyzing actors through connecting and cohering processes creates purposefully aligned transformation systems. These new catalysts work by cohering the actors in those sub (or meta-) contexts to create new, more local or broader transformation systems as a way of amplifying impacts. Figure 2 provides an overview of processes that help bring such purposeful transformation systems into alignment and amplify their collective work.

“The whole idea behind catalyzing transformation as a change framework is that it is a new approach to organizing existing and emerging initiatives for transformative impact.”

In WEAll’s case, such amplification involves the emergence and spinning off, for example, of the WEGo (Wellbeing Economy Governments) group, as well as the emergence of local hubs that share a wellbeing economy agenda but recognize the need to be locally and contextually appropriate in their decision making and activities. For example, the [Australian Hub](#) expresses its goal as to ‘change our economy’s goals, drivers and measures of success—from mere growth and profits for some to wellbeing for people and the planet’. The [WEAll East Africa](#) envisions ‘supporting grassroots movements across East Africa to be key drivers for the global movement for a wellbeing economy’. Doing so also involves participants truly tackling systemic challenges, discussed next.

Tackling Systemic Challenges: Any system that is the focus of purposeful transformation efforts has both obstacles to change—in the form of entrenched interests, current practices and policies, resource constraints, and many others—as well as opportunities where the system has ‘opened’ sufficiently that change is possible, since systems themselves go through cycles (sometimes called panarchy) in which there are times when more or less change is possible^{64,110}. Just think of the powerful entrenched interests in the conventional economy, where riches accrue to the already wealthy, in shifting towards WEAll’s envisioned more equitable, life- (versus wealth-) centered economy. One of the core sensemaking processes is to determine the state of the system and its adaptability to change, and potentially to create the conditions for more change if necessary. The whole idea behind catalyzing transformation as a change framework is that it is a new approach to organizing existing and emerging initiatives for transformative impact.

In thinking about amplifying transformative impact, it is helpful to envision the collection of actors in a transformation system as what is called a loosely coupled^{111,112} or underorganized system¹¹³. Initially, at least, actors are generally not well aligned or connected to each other and do not consider their work in a collective or cohered way. The under-organization or loose coupling means that traditional hierarchical organizational structures are not present in the system, hence there is no central authority to assume conventional leadership. Amplifying

involves transformation catalysts stewarding the fostering of whole system change that works to bring participants together in new ways, generates alignment, and helps them learn how to and actually begin to work in new ways for greater impact. In this approach, the participating entities remain independent while simultaneously attempting to cohere (envision and action plan) their collective efforts, hence working towards overcoming the ‘blessed unrest’ described by Hawken⁹⁹ and noted earlier. The steward or catalyst needs to be able and willing to cohere and align efforts without too much ego getting in the way of effective action by others. Because there is no ‘boss’ or leader in these systems, stewards can benefit from using core design guidelines to enable actors to develop amplified transformative impacts.

Stewardship Design Guidelines: Stewarding catalytic transformation as described above is a network weaving (or netweaving)^{20,24,114} process of bringing the efforts of largely independent actors into alignment. Netweaving relies on design guidelines to forward shared agendas. Given the orientation of most transformation efforts towards equitable, just, inclusive, and flourishing socio-ecologies, one useful guideline is to adopt principles for action that ‘give life’ to systems^{50,56} or emphasize wellbeing of the whole system.

One approach synthesizes these life-affirming principles as: being holistic, building in diversity, ensuring the capacity for novelty as well as permeable boundaries that allow what is no longer fit for purpose to be eliminated, and recognizing interconnectedness¹¹⁵.

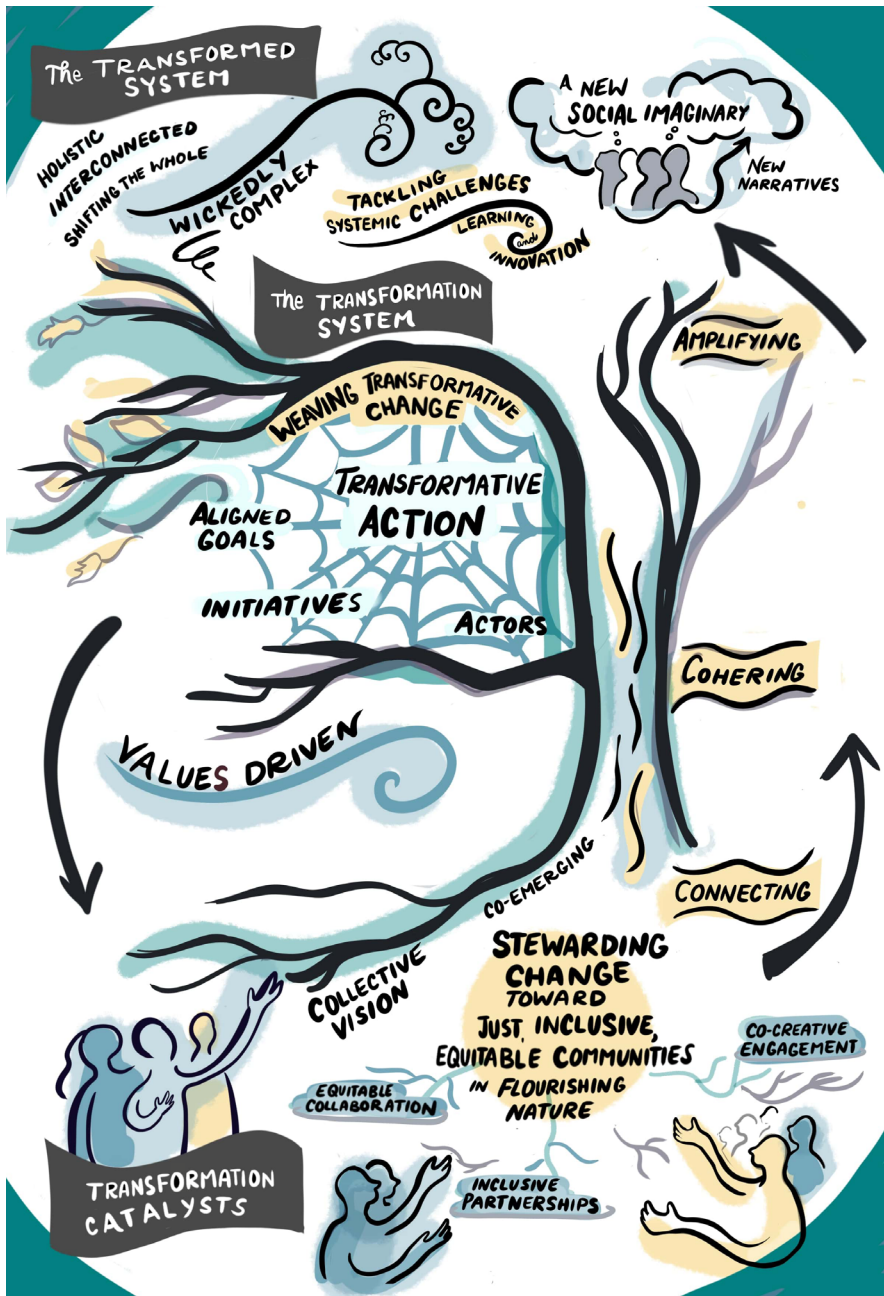
A second design guideline emphasizes the importance of such catalytic efforts being values- and shared aspiration-driven⁸⁰. Principles associated with inclusion, equitable collaboration and participation (reducing power differences as much as possible), and generating aspirations and potential actions co-creatively apply here^{40,67} with respect to how various people and initiatives participate in transformation efforts in particular.

Another design guideline indicates the need for taking complexity-based perspectives, discussed earlier, to recognize the holistic nature of the system and interconnections among its elements, its multi-level, -spatial, -stakeholder, and -perspective diversity, as well as its self-organizing (emergent) qualities⁵¹.

The final design guideline (note that these guidelines are interconnected and overlapping, not ordered) argues for taking the stewardship approach discussed earlier, i.e., a catalyzing, coaching, facilitating, and experimentation approach that helps participants in the system become aware of themselves as a system to cohere their efforts for more effective actions to be taken (e.g., 21,22) to further the amplification process.

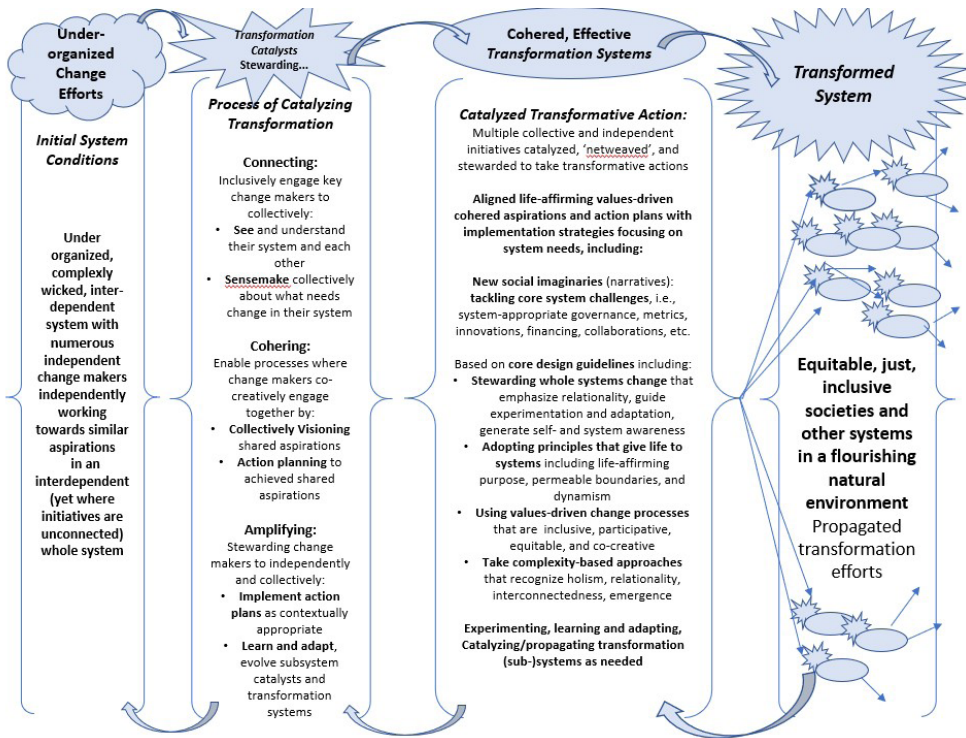
WEAll’s internal values of passion (for needed economic change), care, trust, togetherness, and equality reflect many of these design principles. Much the same can be said for the articulation of the economic core values that WEAll has designed: dignity, nature (healthy and safe), purpose, fairness, and participation. A visual image of the whole process of catalyzing transformation is presented in Figure 3, and the process is summarized in words as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 3: Framework for Catalyzing Transformation: The Overall Process



Source: Waddock, S., 2024. *Catalyzing Transformation*, author's own, used with permission.

Figure 4: Synthesis of the Processes Involved in Catalyzing Transformation



7. Conclusion

Overall, this framework outlines an adaptive and flexible set of processes for achieving purposeful systemic change and transformation in a wide range of systems in contextually appropriate ways, using the emerging example of WEAll, the Wellbeing Economy Alliance, to illustrate how such ideas can be put into practice. This framework recognizes the typically underorganized nature of system change efforts. It proposes that someone or a group of people and initiatives needs to step into the role of transformation catalyst/steward, then work prospectively, that is, in recognizably future-oriented ways, to connect and cohere the efforts of numerous others already working for similar agendas to understand themselves and operate as purposeful transformation systems that can collectively amplify transformative impact. If actors in the transformation system are willing to come into alignment around shared aspirations and agendas—a new social imaginary for the relevant system—they can amplify the transformative impact of their work, both as individual actors and, importantly, collectively when appropriate to the challenge. This approach thus offers a synthesized framework for *organizing* systemic change processes that can be applied in many different contexts.

This synthesized framework is needed because the transformation field still struggles to move beyond what was termed the ‘blah blah blah’⁴⁹ of system transformation towards the *how* of (co-)generating purposeful transformative action. That is what the catalyzing transformation framework tentatively offers, with the recognition that there is still much to be learned because these ideas are still tentative, to further inform how systemic change in positive directions can occur.

Author’s Contact Information

Email: waddock@bc.edu

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