



**SCHOOL
OF SYSTEM
CHANGE**

Navigating the field of systems change

April 2021

**FORUM
FOR THE
FUTURE**

A little bit about me....



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and
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A little bit about Forum

Forum for the Future is an international sustainability non-profit with offices in London, New York, Singapore and Mumbai.

We leverage our experience in systems change and futures to **accelerate change on global challenges**, and to **cultivate capacity of organisations and individuals to create long-term and transformative change**.

For over **25 years**, we've been working in partnership with business, governments and civil society to accelerate transformation toward a just and regenerative future.



Our School of System Change

Forum has nurtured the [School of System Change](#) to support and coach people and organisations to deliver system change in practice.

In the School we focus on making systems approaches applicable in practice to drive the desired impact towards system-wide goals.

Our approach is to help people and organisations navigate the emerging field of systems change, to build capacity and to coach them in order to find the appropriate tools and methods for them.



We're coming together today to...

Begin to learn how we can navigate the field of systems change by using different frameworks and practices that can help us understand and work in our systems

How does change happen?

A black and white photograph of a large flock of birds, possibly starlings, flying in a circular pattern over a field. The birds are concentrated in the upper half of the frame, creating a dense, swirling cloud. The background shows a line of trees and a field under a bright sky.

"All that you touch you Change. All that you Change Changes you. The only lasting truth is Change..."

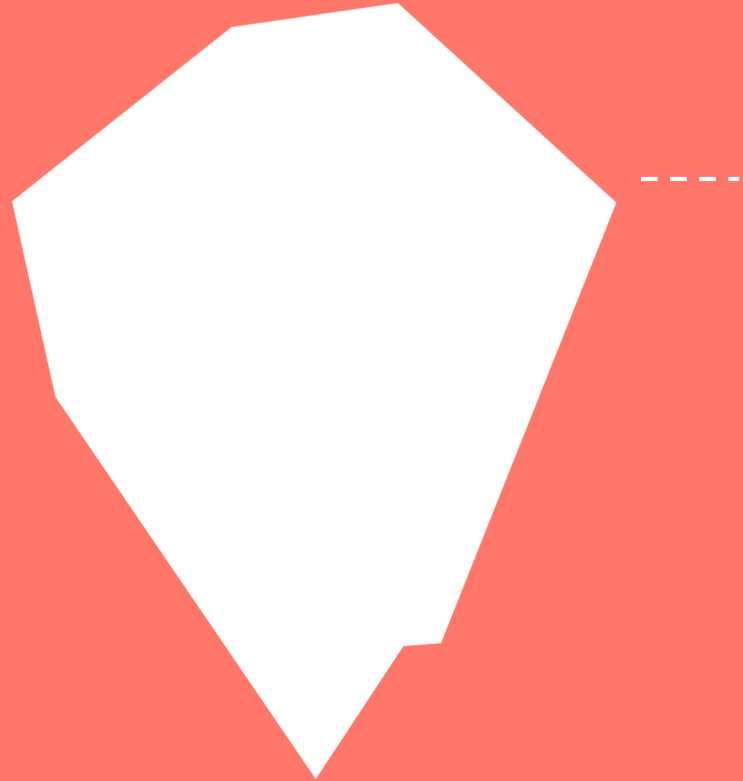
Octavia Butler, Parable of the Sower

The Iceberg Model

We know that an iceberg has only 10 percent of its total mass above the water while 90 percent is underwater.

But that 90 percent is what the ocean currents act on, and what creates the iceberg's behaviour at its tip.

To see global issues more systemically, we can analyse them in the same way.





What it is underneath a significant change event?

“ Remember, we see the world not as it is, but as we are. Most of us see through the eyes of our fears and our limiting beliefs and our false assumptions.”

The Iceberg Model

E*EVENTS

What is happening?

These are the kinds of things you see in the news.

PA**ERNS

What are the trends or cycles that can be observed?

These are the kinds of things academics or institutes might report on.

STR*CT*RES

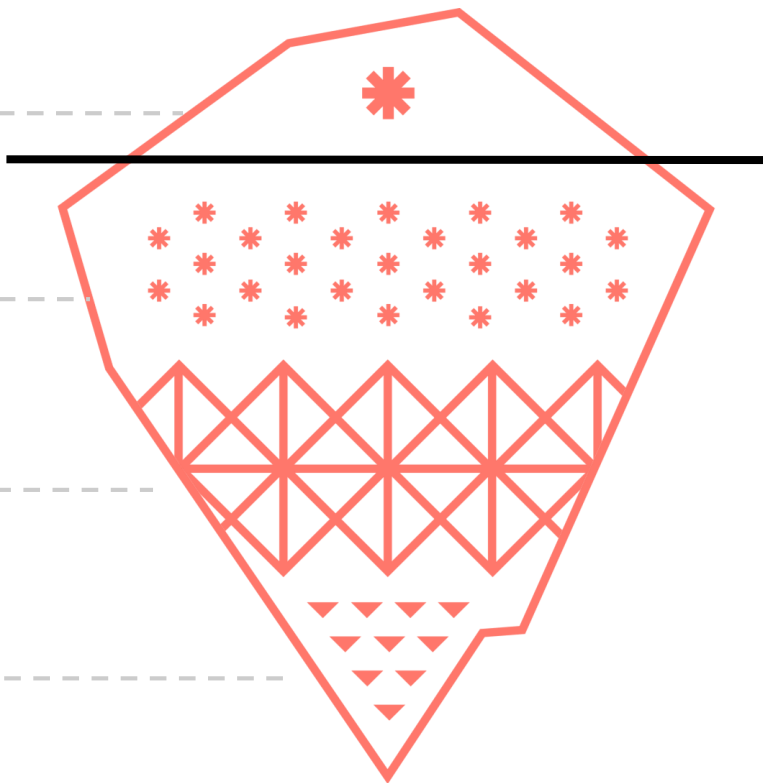
What creates or influences the patterns?

What are the relationships between the parts?

MENTAL MO▶ELS

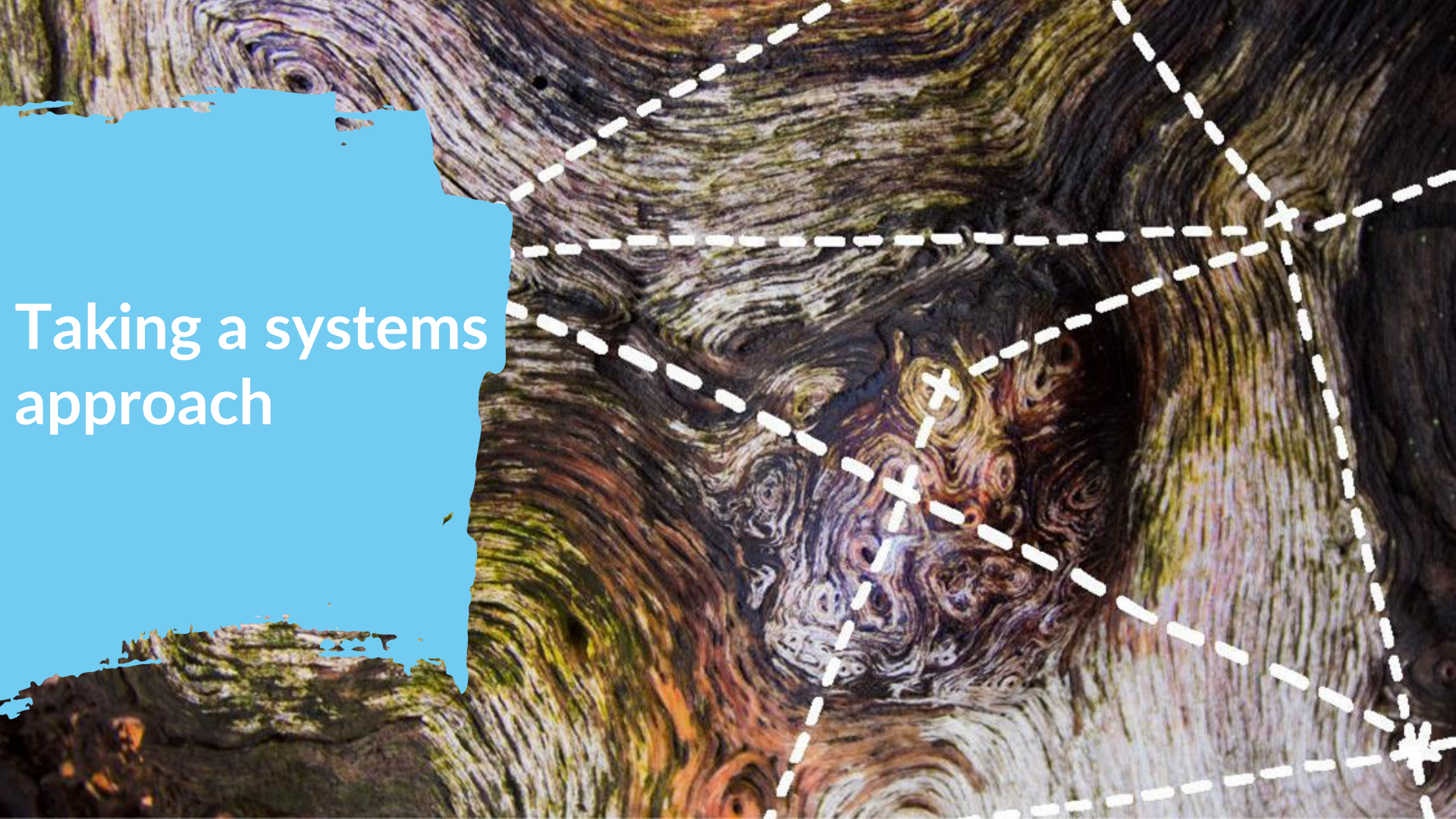
What assumptions, beliefs and values underlie the system, that hold it in place?

Think, big ideas or values passed down over time.



THINK TO YOURSELF...

What do the insights from the Iceberg model and the Rosa Parks story tell you about how change happened?

The background is a close-up photograph of a tree trunk, showing intricate wood grain patterns in shades of brown, tan, and grey. On the left side, there is a bright blue, torn-paper-like overlay. On the right side, a dashed white line forms a large, irregular rectangular frame. Inside this frame, there are several small white 'x' marks placed at various points within the wood grain.

Taking a systems
approach

Let's start with worldviews...

Worldviews are at the heart of things

Fundamental philosophical orientation of an individual or society

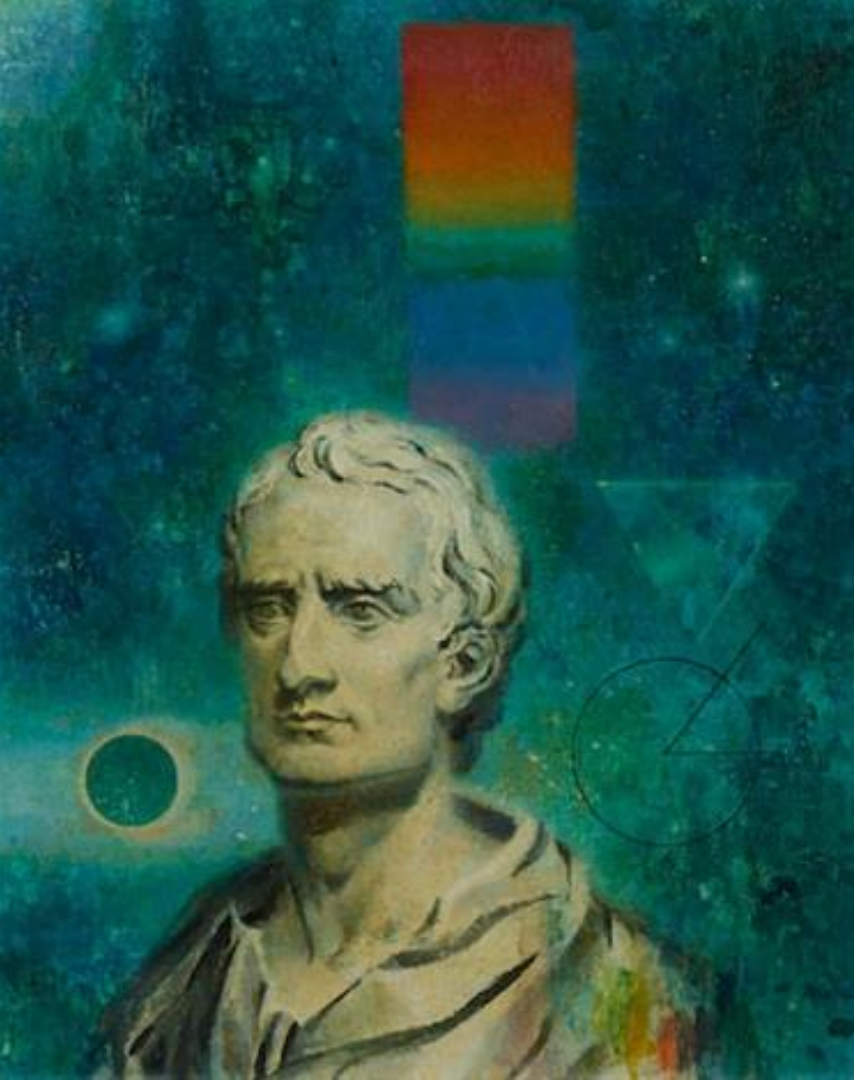
The beliefs and assumptions through which we interpret new experiences and make sense of the world

They drastically shape how we perceive and interact with change work



Which pictures are most aligned with the way you think
about “the nature of things” or “how the world works”
YOUR ‘scientific’ worldview?

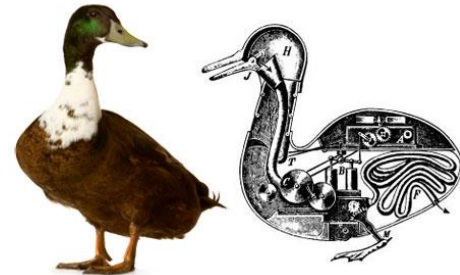




The Newtonian Paradigm

A way of seeing the world where everything is described as the result of linear, cause-and-effect chains.

Led to reductionism - the process of breaking things down into simple components and linear relationships.



Three fundamental beliefs of the *Newtonian Paradigm*



A complete understanding of the world is possible.



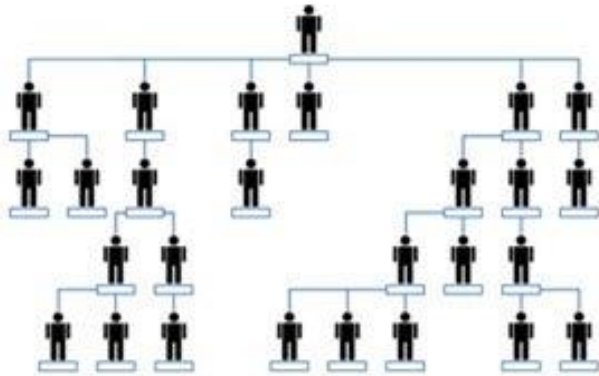
The world can be understood through analysis - or by breaking things down to their most basic level.



Everything can be described through simple cause-and-effect relationships.

Some (potential) implications of the *Newtonian Paradigm*

- Organizations seek to standardize processes
- Best practices rule for getting things done
- Management involves planning, predicting, controlling and evaluating
- Hierarchies prevail, concentrating power and limiting autonomy



The world is not so simple

3.5M

individuals experienced homelessness

18.5

million homes stood vacant



The most persistent challenges face are complex...some characteristics

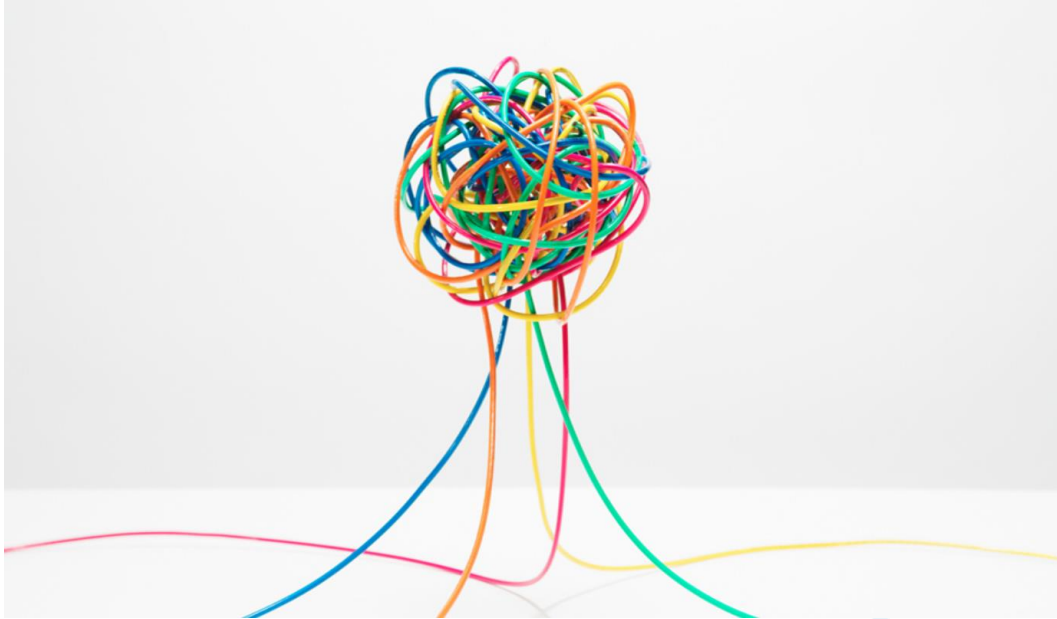


- Non-linear causality
- High connectivity between parts
- Ongoing information generation
- Emergent behavior by actors

“Emergence is the way complex systems and patterns arise out of a multiplicity of relatively simple interactions”

Nick Oboloensky

Challenges of living, working and leading in complexity



- Challenges the dominant paradigm!
- Ambiguity
- Rapid change
- Unpredictability
- Messiness!
- Feeling of overwhelm

Reductionist and holistic

How can we not only look at individual parts but also interconnected whole?



Enter thinking in systems!

“Any group of interacting, interrelating or interdependent parts that form a complex unified whole with a specific purpose”

Donnella Meadows, 1998

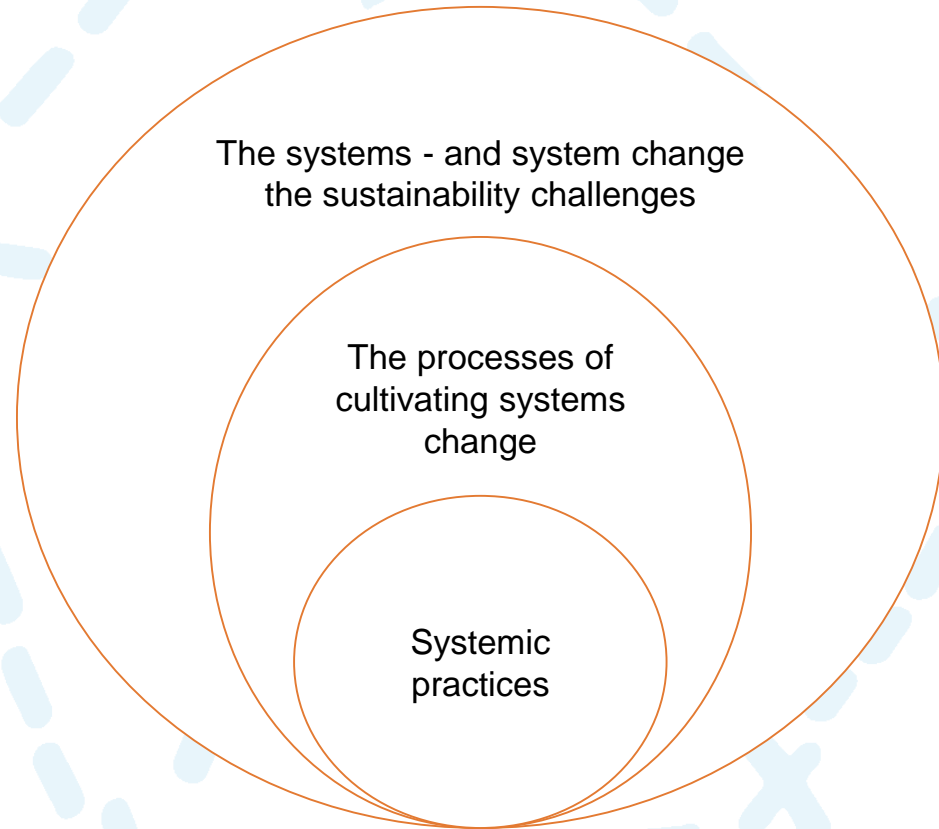
Function: Purpose

Structure: Elements and Interconnections

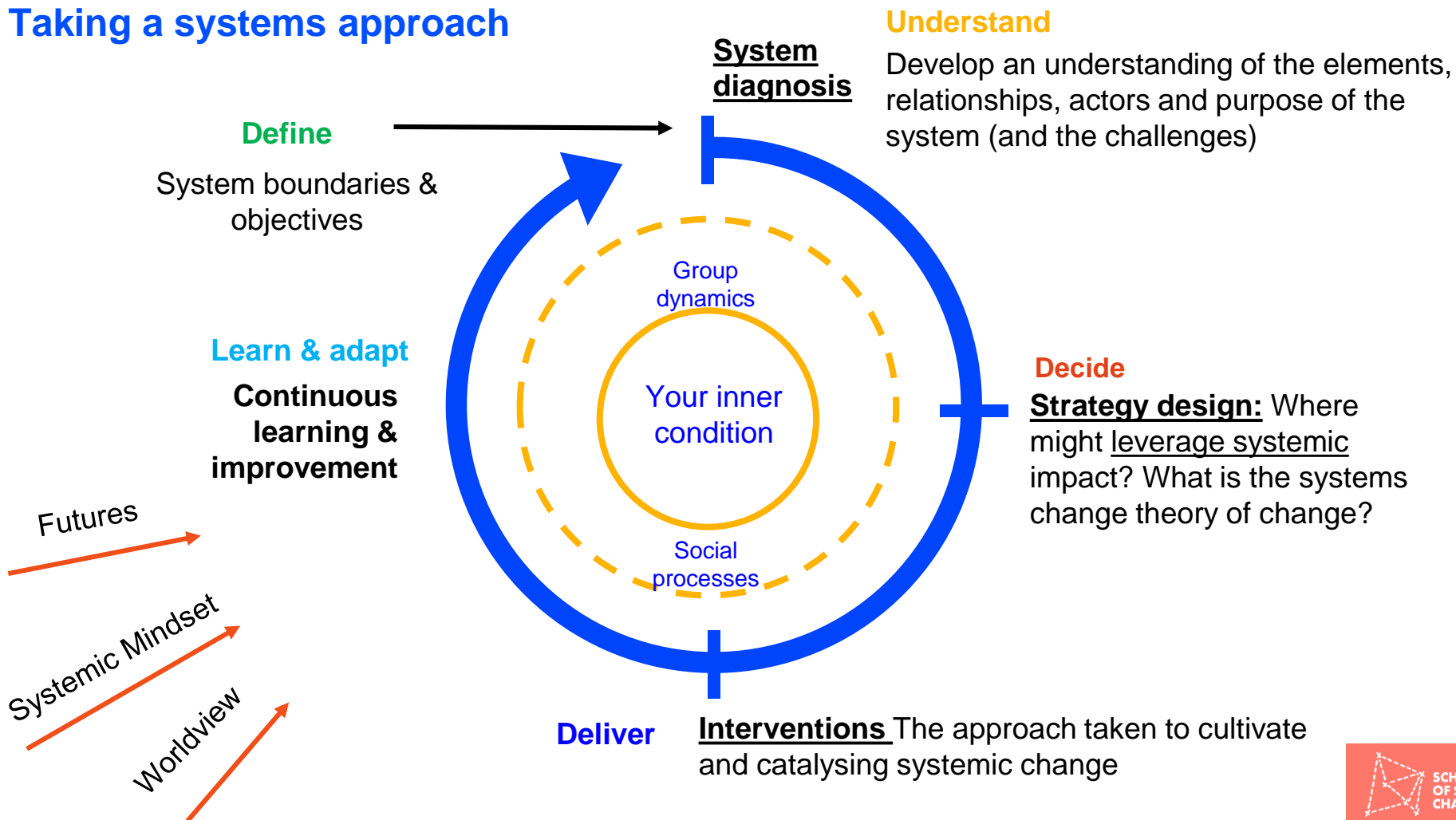
So what is systems change...

... “the emergence of a new pattern of organisation or system structure”

Anna Birney, 2015



Taking a systems approach



Frameworks - helping us be systemic and system changing



Define

Goals & system boundaries

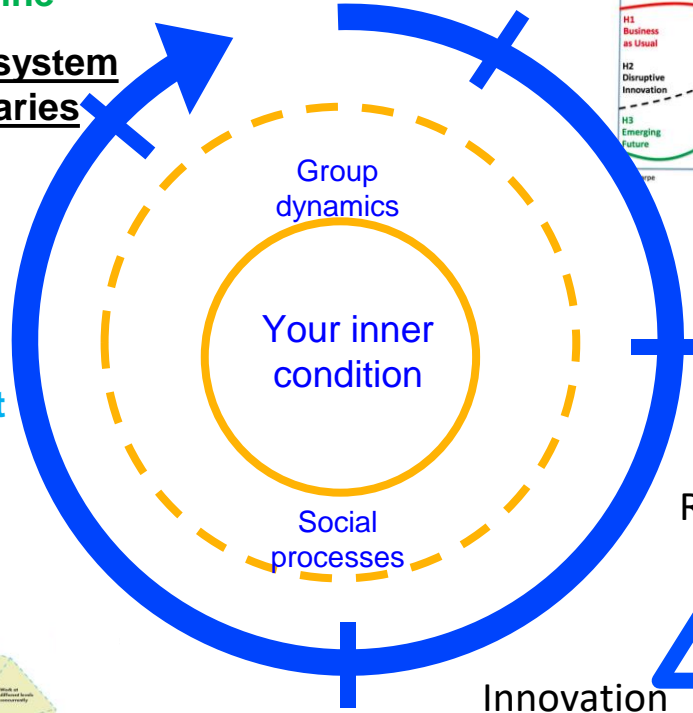


Learn & adapt
Continuous learning & improvement

Systemic Mindset
Worldview

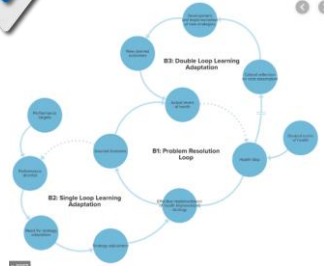
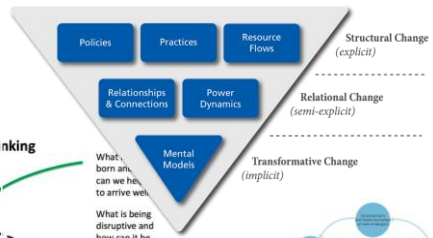
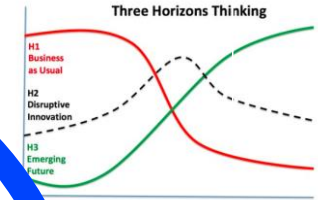


System diagnosis



Deliver

Understand



Decide
Strategy design: Where might leverage systemic impact?

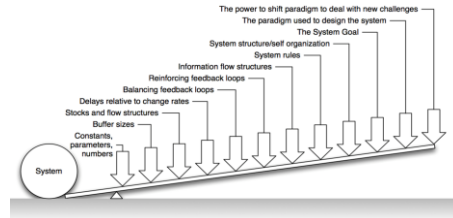
Resources



Innovation

Power

Role in intervening The approach taken to cultivate and catalysing systemic change - assets, relationships and funding instruments



Frameworks of the Field

Frameworks: an essential supporting structure underlying a system

Fabric, configuration, scheme, architecture, scaffolding, foundation

Field: a particular branch of study or sphere of activity or interest; including all participants of that activity not in the laboratory but out in the environment

Ground, discipline, domain, subject

Leadership & learning



Leadership & learning: What might support us to lead systems change?

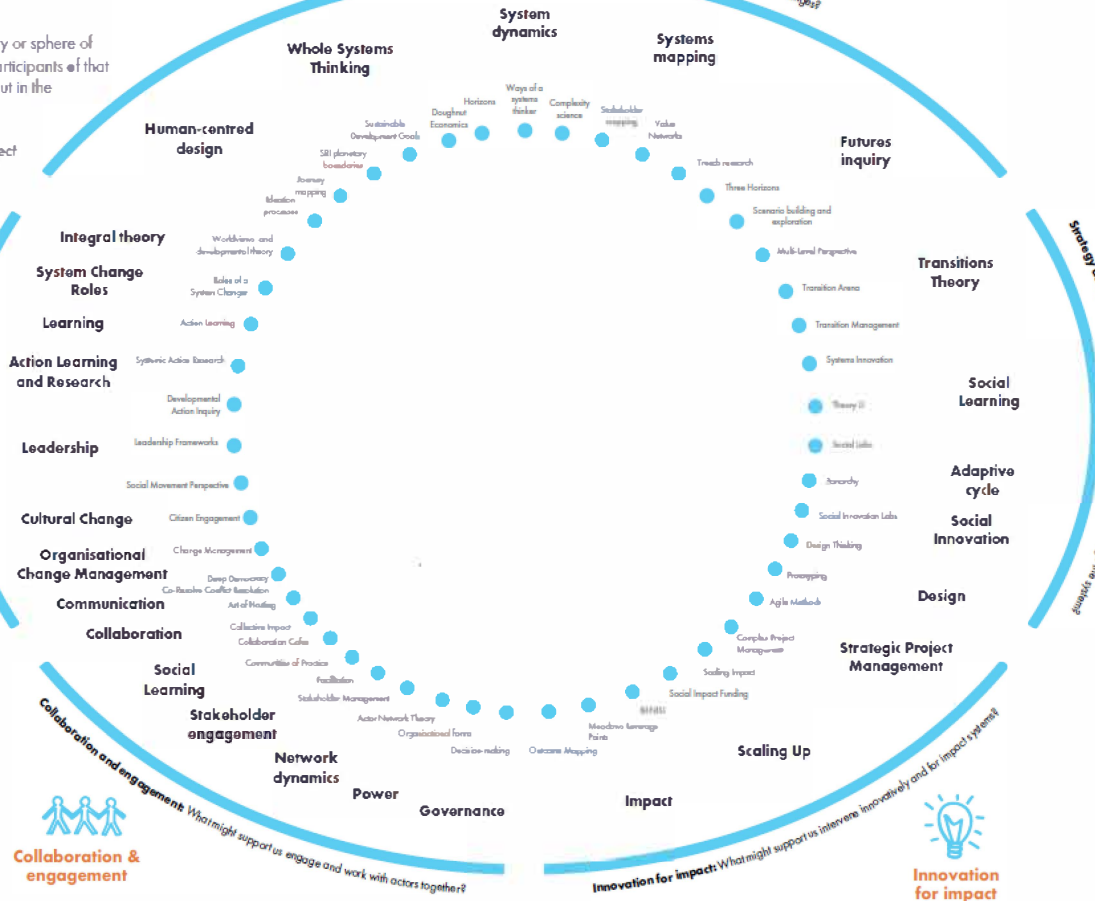
Collaboration & engagement



Collaboration and engagement: What might support us engage and work with actors together?



Systemic diagnosis
Systemic diagnosis: How might we take a systemic approach to understand complex challenges?



Strategy design



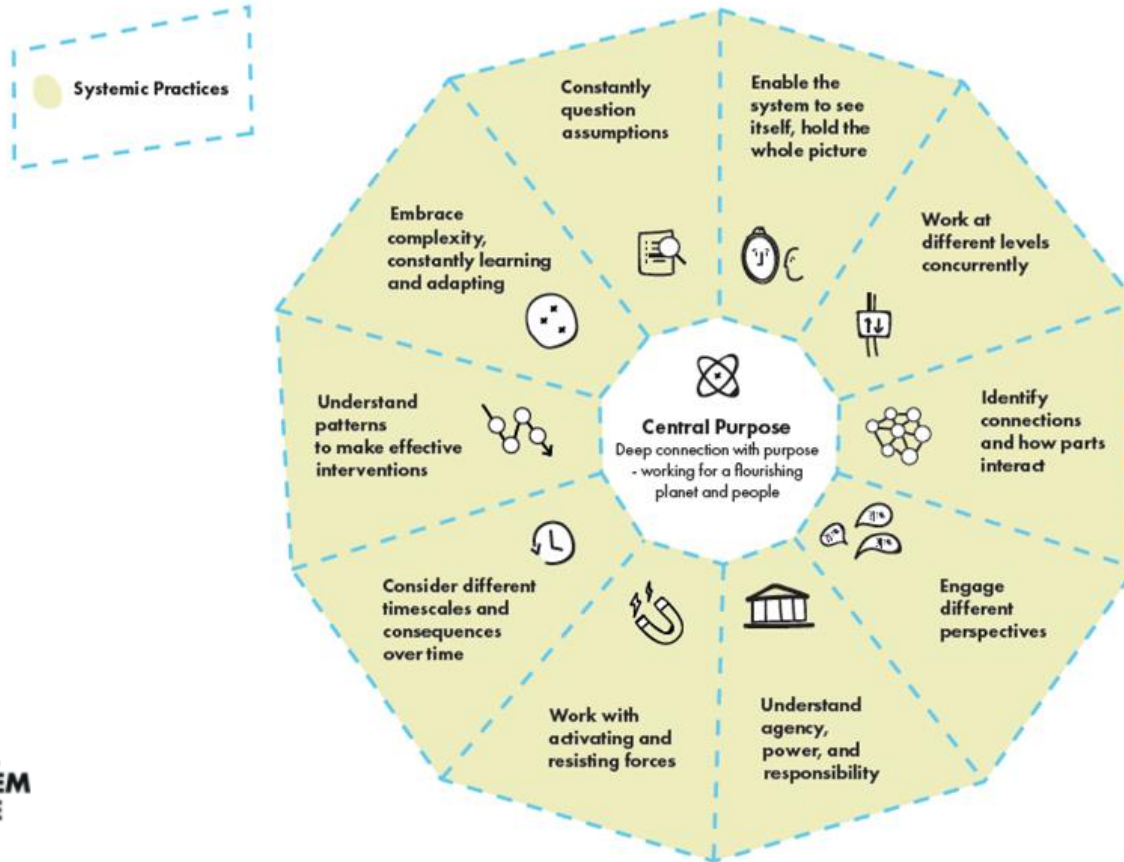
Strategy design: What models & theories of change will help us change the present?

Four elements of frameworks

Every framework is wrong and right. There is only better or worse.

1. Navigate complexity in a visual structured way that helps understand dynamics, patterns and interconnections
2. Goes beyond simple task of clustering 'like with like' (reductionist tendency)
3. A 'looking glass map' into the world, not the landscape so we can scan, bring some things to the fore and let others slip away
4. Letting go of trying to see or know everything by paying attention to the patterns that matter here and now for this conversation

Underpinning all of this are our *systemic practices*




To discuss with each other...

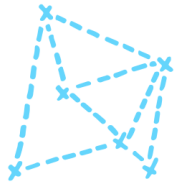
Are there any frameworks that help you work with complexity and think in systems?

How do you decide what frameworks to use when?



An aerial photograph of a busy city square, likely in Istanbul, showing a large crowd of people walking. In the center, a horse-drawn carriage is visible. A large, white, stylized letter 'A' is superimposed over the image, with a network of white dots and lines connecting them, suggesting a system or data flow. The text 'Understanding the systems we are working in' is written in white, sans-serif font in the upper right corner.

Understanding
the systems we
are working in



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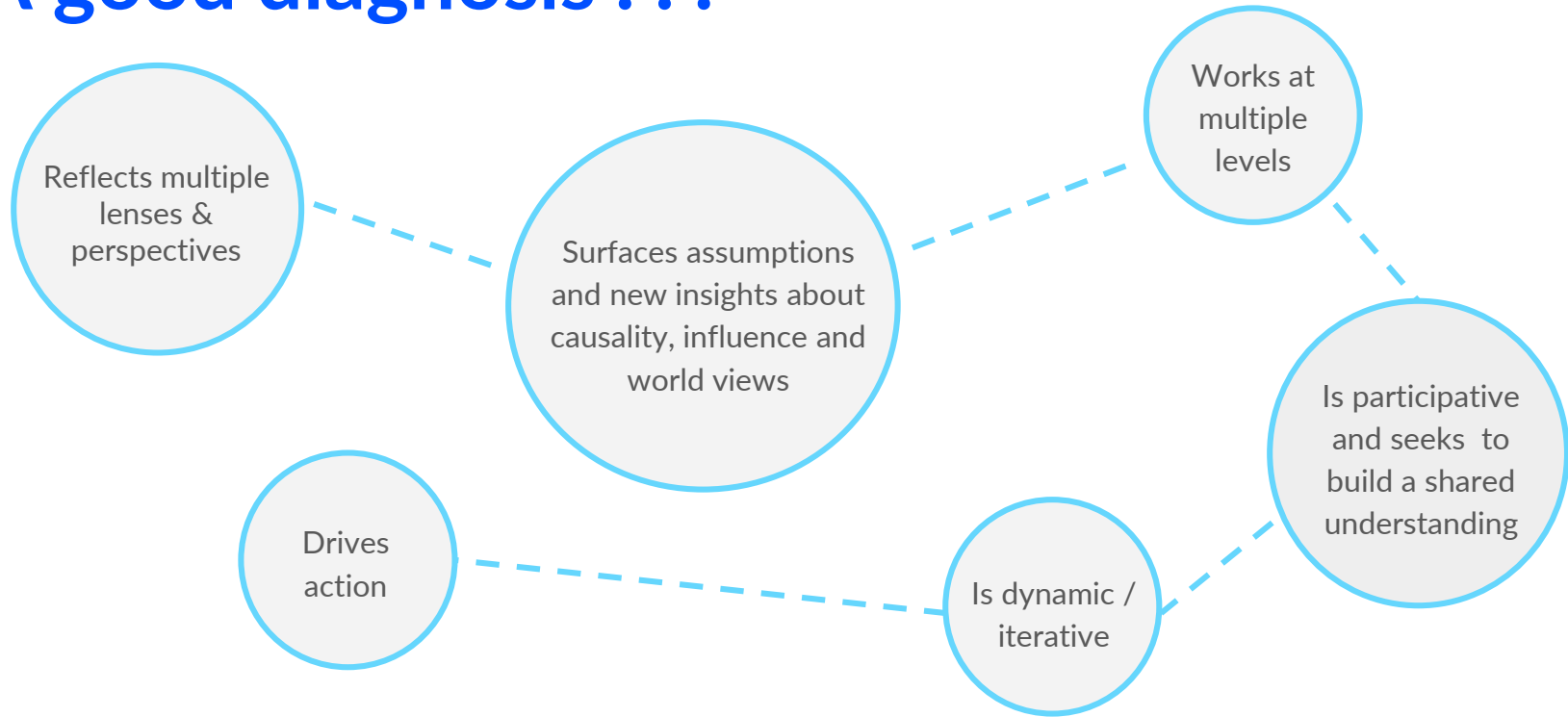
When you hear the word, **'diagnosis'** what words or images come to mind?



So what is the purpose of a systems diagnosis?

- To help people understand their system, its interconnections and to make boundary choices;
- To identify challenges or opportunities;
- To test ideas and prioritise the best places to act;
- To bring people together, to prepare them to intervene and innovate for change
- To create a shared endeavour.

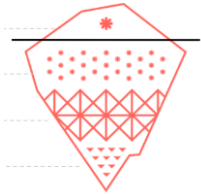
A good diagnosis . . .



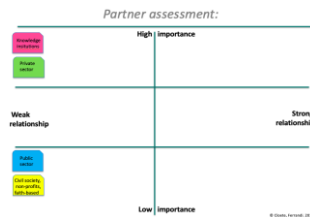
“A good diagnosis simplifies the often overwhelming complexity of reality by identifying certain aspects of the situation as critical.” — Richard Rumelt / Good Strategy-Bad Strategy

A multitude of systems diagnosis frameworks and tools...

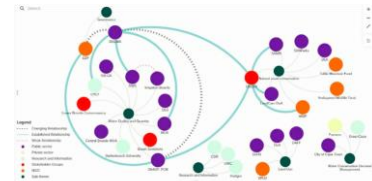
If you want to go deeper (to explore blindspots or question assumptions) find ways to reflect through the **iceberg model**.



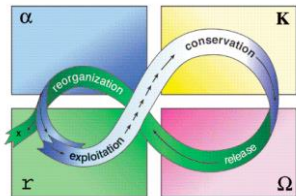
If you want to map the actors and the power dynamics then look at the **Change Ecosystem** templates.



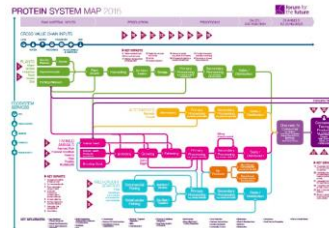
If you want to understand the challenges more deeply and get to the root cause of the problem then use a **multiple cause diagram** / **causal loop** diagram



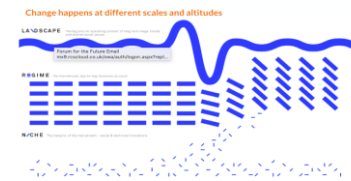
If you want to understand where the current system is in a change cycle – start with the **Adaptive Cycle** approach.

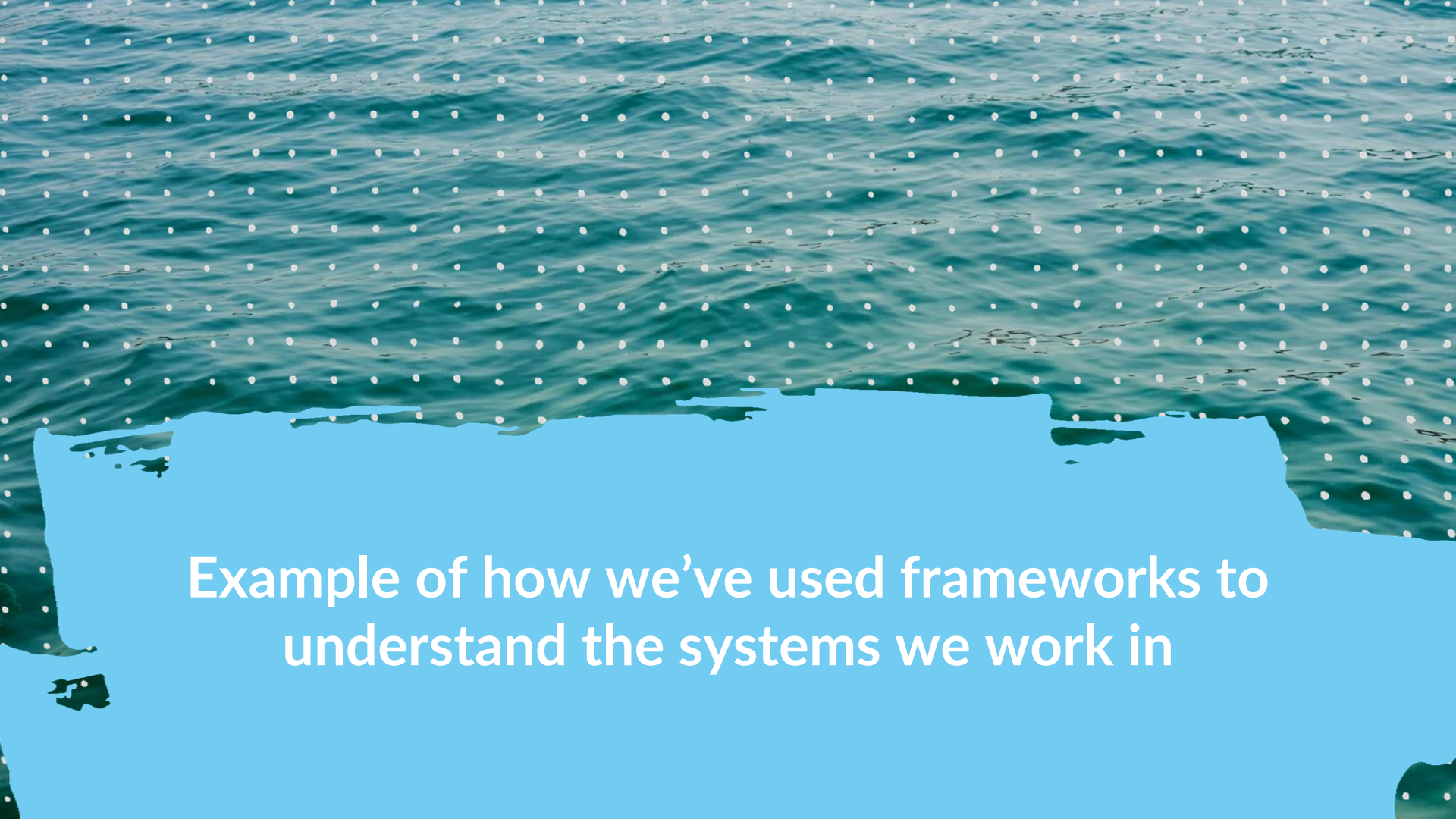


If you want to understand the relationships and values flowing through a system then use a **Value Networks** map.



If you want to understand the forces that are driving change at multiple levels – start with the **MLP** approach.





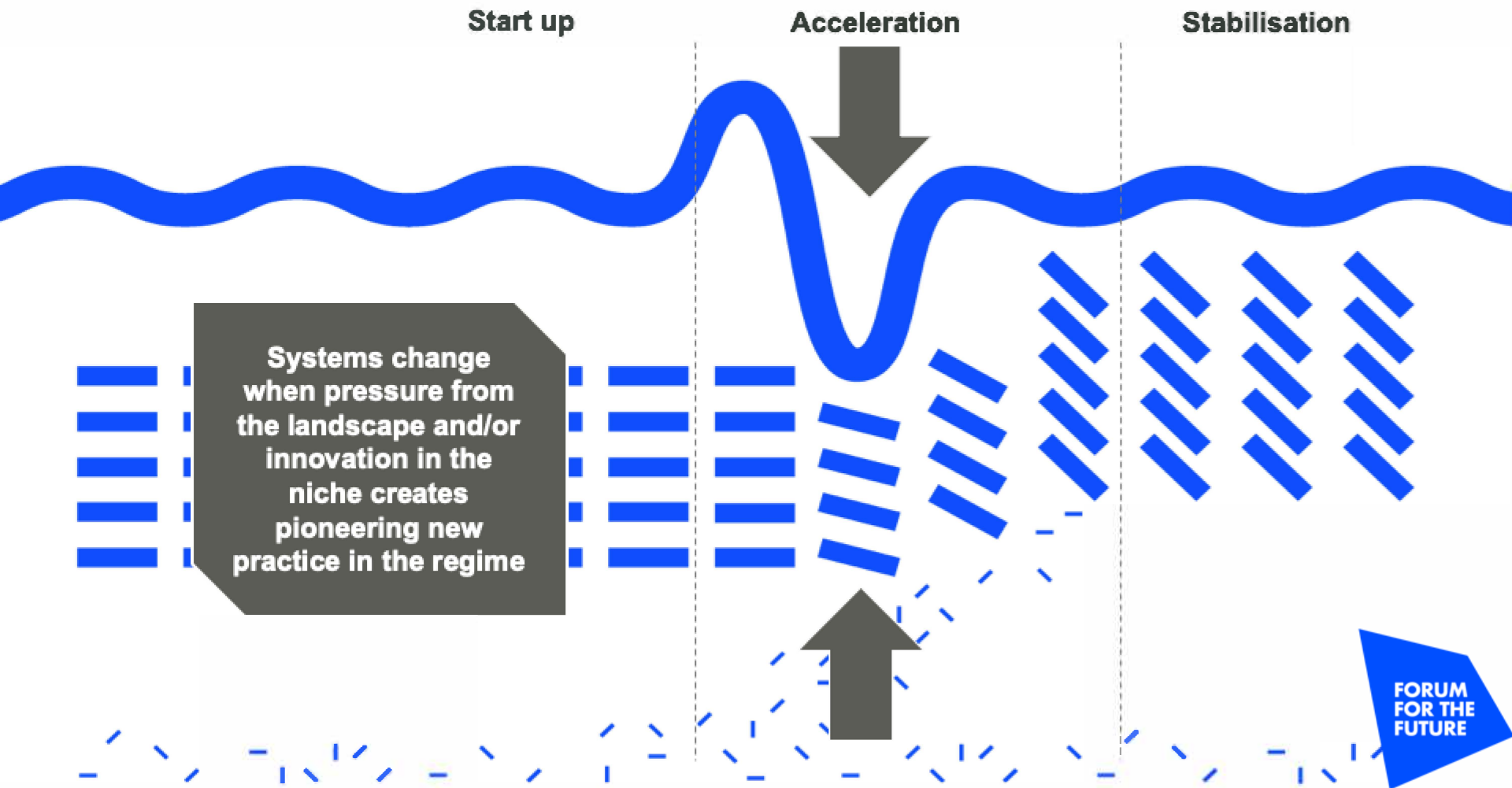
Example of how we've used frameworks to
understand the systems we work in

The Multi-level Perspective

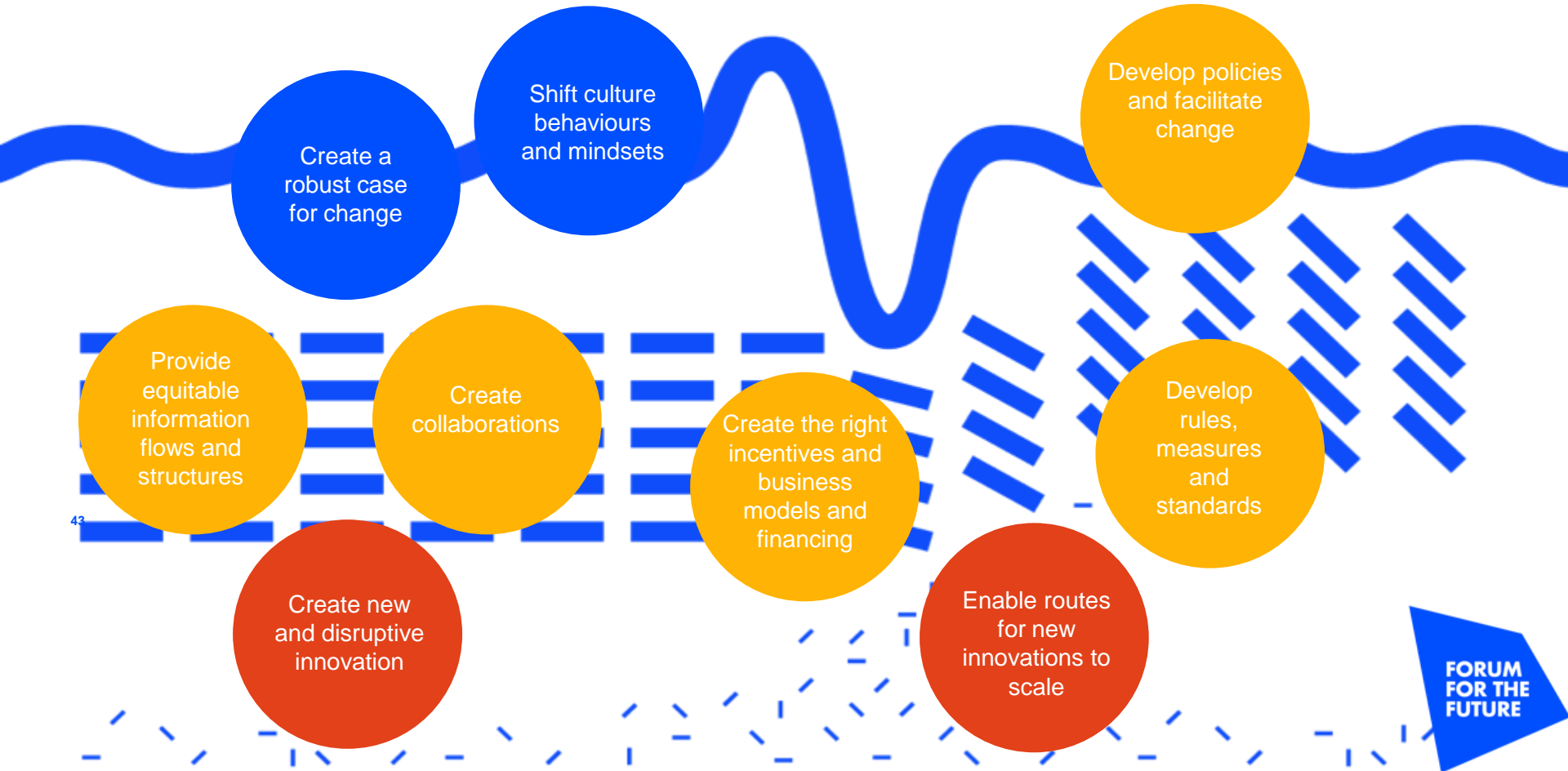
LANDSCAPE The big picture 'operating context' of long term mega-trends and shared social values

REGIME The mainstream, day-to-day 'business as usual'

NICHE The margins of the mainstream – social & technical innovations



Multi-level interventions





GROWING OUR FUTURE

Catalyzing collective action
to scale regenerative agriculture

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LANDSCAPE

Landscape Trends - e.g. Increasing Population

What's not changing in the landscape?
(stabilising factors)

What pressures are causing the system
to change?

What needs to change to enable sustainability?
What barriers are there and how can they be
overcome?

What would be the goals
of the new system?

REGIME

The System - e.g. Our Current Food System

Who are the stakeholders in the system?
Who has power, influence and resources?

UNSUSTAINABLE SYSTEM

Why is the system unsustainable?
And/or why does it need to change?

SUSTAINABLE SYSTEM?

What are the rules of the system?

What are the current goals of the system?

N/CHE

Emerging Innovations - e.g. Sustainability Start-up

Where are new ideas coming from?

Which innovations are beginning to infiltrate
the system? Do they challenge the goals of
the system?

Where are there signs of things changing,
and how much momentum is there behind
the changes?

Who is acting for change? What are they doing?



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MULTI-LEVEL PERSPECTIVE

Adapted from R. Geertz



Trend Questions



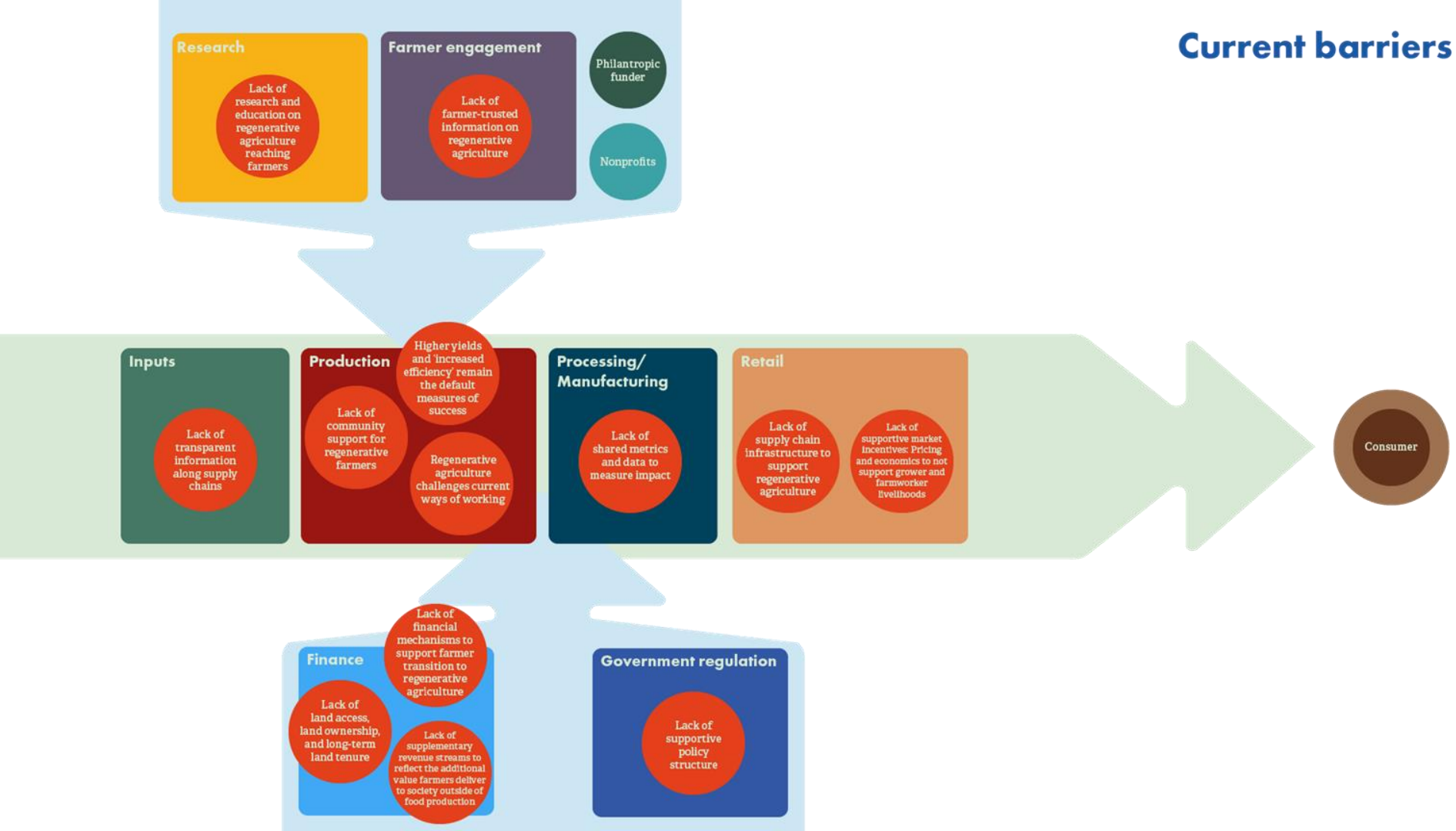
Signals of Change Questions



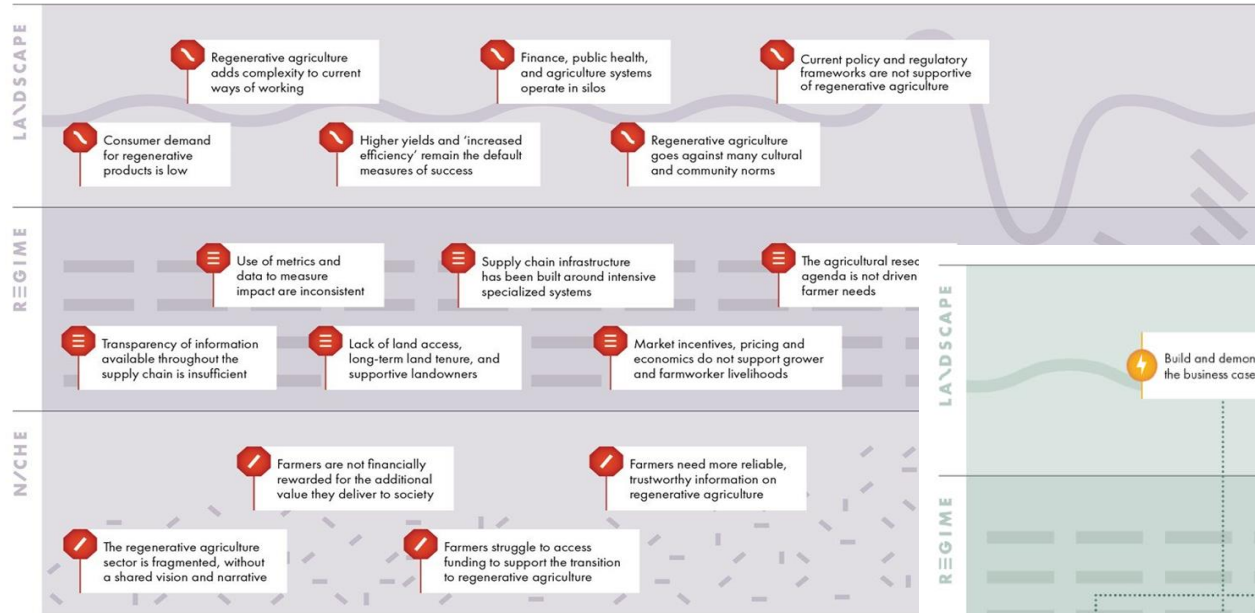
Action Questions

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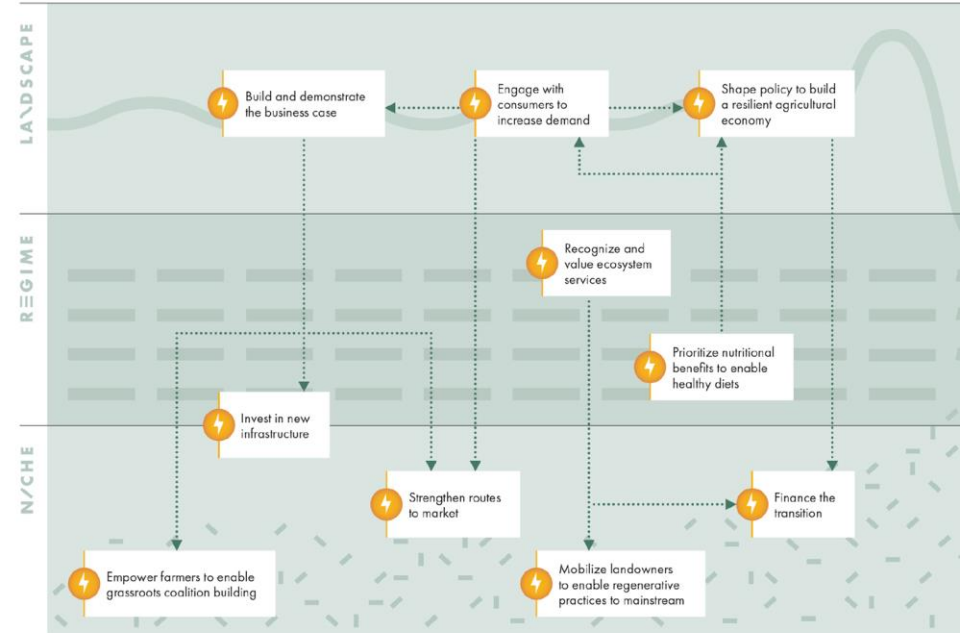
Current barriers



Key barriers



Leverage points



HOW MIGHT WE...



IMPROVE INFRASTRUCTURE

#1: How might we accelerate the adoption of farmer practices by investing in infrastructure (organizational and physical processing) to support systems of farming linked with the relevant market pull?



ENGAGE CONSUMERS

#2: How might we demonstrate to consumers the value of regenerative systems?



SEE FARMERS AS STEWARDS

#3: How might we enable grassroots farmer movement to lift farmers as stewards to lead on regen ag through support on risk sharing, policy, funding?



INCENTIVIZE ECOSYSTEM SERVICES

#4: How might insurers, corporates, government and investors align incentives to support farmers and landowners to invest in ecosystem services and regenerative agriculture practices?



FINANCE THE TRANSITION

#5: How might we create financing mechanisms that support farmers in transition to regenerative agriculture that take a collaborative/co-op approach, come with safeguards, and take longer term view?



IMPROVE MARKET STRUCTURE

#6: How might we establish the right incentives and financing / insurance / ecosystem services market structures for farmers and agribusiness companies?



Some reflections on diagnosis

Reflections/questions we have about diagnosis...

- We can't map the whole system
- Work with a golden thread
- Tell a participatory story
- It is all alive
- Difficult to move from systemic diagnosis to strategy
- Difference between diagnosis and research
- Often a gap between access to frameworks and worldviews



How do you go about diagnosing the systems you work in? What's working?

What might you want to experiment with?

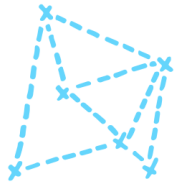
Thank you!

*Anything else coming up
for you?*

Sean Andrew

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Upcoming Basecamp Americas Summer 2021

