

Human capabilities and practices for sustaining collective action

Connecting collaboration, learning and directionality through Shared Agendas

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Content

1. Introduction.....	2
2. Human capabilities and practices for sustained collective action	3
2.1. Acting responsibly.....	3
2.2. Relating in three dimensions	4
2.3. Looking for what’s unseen	5
2.4. Working with cracks.....	6
2.5. Experimenting a way forward.....	7
2.6. Collaborating with unlike others.....	8
2.7. Persevering and resting.....	8
2.8. Leadership within Shared Agenda processes	9
3. Facilitation and managing polarities.....	10
3.1. Introduction.....	10
3.2 Facilitation as a systemic function	10
3.3 Working with polarities in systemic change	12
4. Bringing it together and looking ahead	14

1. Introduction

Policy and innovation debates often focus on governance models, instruments and investment frameworks. These elements are visible, formalised and comparatively easy to describe. Less attention is given to how collective work actually unfolds when actors with different mandates, incentives and responsibilities attempt to act together over time. Plans can define roles, procedures and budgets. They do not determine how responsibility is assumed in practice, how disagreement is handled, or how actors remain engaged when tensions persist.

In Shared Agenda processes, this becomes evident from the outset. Collective action takes place under interdependence and uncertainty. Actors depend on one another, yet no single organisation controls outcomes. Structural tensions are part of the context in which decisions are made and revisited. Coordination therefore relies not only on design, but on how people interpret situations, relate across institutional boundaries and adjust their action as conditions evolve.

Progress in these settings is shaped by how tensions are engaged in practice. Actors question dominant framings, test approaches through concrete initiatives and revise assumptions as experience accumulates. A shared direction provides orientation, but the path towards it remains open and subject to adjustment. What sustains the work is not the absence of disagreement, but the capacity to continue acting together while differences remain.

Over time, certain recurrent practices make this possible. People take responsibility in relation to the shared direction without waiting for complete alignment. They remain in dialogue across institutional and sectoral boundaries. When situations become ambiguous or contested, they interpret developments together rather than retreating to isolated positions. Facilitation helps maintain the conditions under which this collective work can continue. Working deliberately with polarities supports the navigation of persistent tensions within ongoing processes.

Making these practices explicit clarifies how collective action is sustained in reality — beyond formal structures and declared objectives.

This document examines how collective action is enacted and maintained within Shared Agenda processes. Section 2 focuses on the practices through which collaboration becomes a shared capability over time. Section 3 addresses facilitation and polarity work as integral components of ongoing collective processes. Section 4 reflects on what this implies for sustaining Shared Agendas over longer time horizons.

2. Human capabilities and practices for sustained collective action

This section examines the practices through which collective action is sustained over time within Shared Agendas. The seven practices presented here draw on Adam Kahane's everyday habits for transforming systems and are interpreted in light of experience from Shared Agenda processes.¹

These practices describe how collective work is carried out. They shape how actors position themselves in relation to a shared challenge, how they engage across differences and how they remain involved as situations evolve. They are exercised across the process, although their expression varies depending on actors' roles, responsibilities and degrees of influence.

Leadership is addressed later in this section, not as a separate capability, but as one way in which these practices are exercised by actors who hold authority, resources or decision-making power within a Shared Agenda.

2.1. Acting responsibly

Acting responsibly gives practical meaning to a shared direction of change. It becomes visible when actors — individuals and organisations — recognise their position in relation to a shared challenge and decide how they will contribute.

Shared Agenda processes unfold in contexts where authority is distributed and outcomes cannot be fully predicted. No single actor controls the trajectory of change, which means responsibility is expressed through contribution rather than command. Each actor acts from their mandate and capacity, while recognising their interdependence with others.

This is reflected in how concrete initiatives are taken forward. Actors advance what they can within their sphere of responsibility, taking into account institutional commitments, constraints and available resources. Collective action develops over time, and uncertainty remains part of the context rather than something that can be eliminated.

Full agreement on every objective or action is neither expected nor required. Differences in priorities and approaches remain present. Acting responsibly means continuing to contribute in relation to the shared direction while those differences are addressed through practice.

Facilitation helps sustain this work. By clarifying how ongoing activities relate to the shared direction and to one another, it supports alignment without erasing

¹ Adam Kahane, *Everyday Habits for Transforming Systems: The Catalytic Power of Radical Engagement* (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2025).

distinction. Through joint reflection, participants connect their institutional responsibilities to the broader challenge while maintaining their distinct mandates.

It also becomes important to recognise initiatives contributing to the shared direction, even when they are not supported by all participants. Shared Agendas provide a space in which such contributions can be related and interpreted, allowing experience from action to inform coordination and decision-making over time.

In this way, commitment is translated into sustained contribution. Acting responsibly links continued action to the shared direction and supports collective work under conditions of uncertainty.

2.2. Relating in three dimensions

Collective action within Shared Agendas depends on how actors relate to one another over time. This involves holding together three interconnected ways of relating: collaborating on shared work, engaging as actors in place-based challenges, and relating as human beings. These dimensions coexist within the same actors and organisations and need to be navigated over time. Over-emphasising or neglecting any one of them limits collective capacity.

Each dimension serves a different function. Collaboration provides structure and capacity for joint work. Engagement with place-based challenges keeps collective action grounded in concrete conditions and accountability. Human relationships make it possible to remain engaged when tension, uncertainty or disagreement persist. None of these dimensions is sufficient on its own.

In Shared Agendas, these dimensions are cultivated through facilitation as part of ongoing collective work. Shared Agendas typically begin with actors who are already engaged with a shared challenge and who recognise a need to act in a more coordinated way. These actors bring institutional roles, professional expertise and lived experience, without assuming alignment of interests, priorities or positions.

As collaborators, actors work through coordination arrangements oriented by a shared direction of change. They clarify priorities, relate initiatives where this is useful, and align efforts selectively, while retaining autonomy over their individual responsibilities and decisions.

As actors engaged in a specific place, they remain connected to local needs, constraints and opportunities. Dialogic and participatory processes help surface perspectives that may otherwise remain marginal, supporting relevance and accountability as the Shared Agenda evolves.

As human beings, actors relate beyond formal roles and mandates. Sharing experiences, motivations and concerns makes it possible to address disagreement and remain engaged in collective work overtime, without requiring convergence of views or interests.

Holding these three dimensions together helps sustain collective action over time. Relationships across roles and organisations support learning and problem-solving; connection to place supports legitimacy and continuity; and attention to relational work allows collaboration to continue under conditions of uncertainty. Relating in three dimensions is therefore a core practice for sustaining collective work.

2.3. Looking for what's unseen

Looking for what is unseen supports collective action by improving how shared challenges are interpreted and discussed. It draws attention to less visible dynamics — such as assumptions, power relations, routines and absences — that influence how situations are understood and acted upon, but that are often overlooked in formal processes.

Strong relationships alone are not sufficient for working effectively in complex contexts. Coalitions also need to attend to dynamics that shape how action unfolds but are not immediately apparent. These include how problems are framed, which perspectives are heard, which routines stabilise existing ways of working, and which actors, data or viewpoints remain outside collective consideration.

Focusing only on what is immediately visible can limit action to symptoms rather than underlying conditions. By bringing less visible dynamics into collective discussion, actors can revisit how challenges are framed, clarify facilitators and inhibitors, and consider where effort may have greater effect. The aim is not exposure for its own sake, but relating these insights to shared understanding and ongoing action.

Within Shared Agendas, this work is treated as an ongoing practice. As initiatives advance and contexts evolve, actors revisit their interpretations of the situations they are working in. Facilitation supports this process by creating spaces where assumptions can be questioned, tensions explored and interpretations adjusted through collective reflection.

Monitoring and learning systems contribute by embedding this reflection within ongoing work. Indicators, structured moments of review and cross-agenda learning spaces help actors notice persistent obstacles as well as emerging dynamics that influence progress. This supports action informed by evolving interpretation, rather than by fixed initial analyses.

By bringing less visible dynamics — including institutional constraints, power relations and neglected enablers — into collective consideration, Shared Agendas provide a basis for relating practices, adjusting coordination and refining direction over time, without assuming uniform conclusions or responses.

Looking for what is unseen is therefore a core practice within Shared Agendas. It supports collective action grounded in more explicit interpretation of context and enables adaptation as conditions change.

2.4. Working with cracks

Working with cracks refers to acting through limited openings that allow collective work to proceed within otherwise stabilised institutional conditions. These openings make it possible to take action, generate learning and adjust coordination in the present.

In complex contexts, opportunities for change rarely appear as clear or favourable situations. More often, openings emerge in partial and imperfect conditions, where established ways of working are unsettled or temporarily loosened. Cracks can take different forms: disruptions linked to crises, policy shifts that affect existing arrangements, spaces where new practices are being tried, or tensions between stated objectives and everyday practices.

Working with cracks involves recognising when such openings appear and deciding how to act within them. Action moves forward without waiting for ideal circumstances or full alignment. What matters is whether an opening offers a meaningful entry point for acting in relation to the shared direction.

This practice requires attentiveness and persistence. Actors notice where movement becomes possible, act within existing constraints, and relate incremental steps when they contribute to coordination and learning. As conditions evolve, approaches are adjusted and re-oriented.

Within Shared Agendas, working with cracks builds on initiatives that are already under way, often carried by actors operating within existing institutional, organisational or resource constraints. While limited in scope, these initiatives involve ongoing action that can be observed, reflected on and related to the shared direction.

Facilitation supports this practice by helping actors interpret such initiatives as entry points for further work rather than as isolated achievements. Cracks may include temporary policy windows, emerging alliances, shifts in public attention or increased recognition of practices that were previously marginal. The focus remains on how these openings are related to one another and to ongoing collective work.

Because Shared Agendas are grounded in action that unfolds over time, cracks are worked with deliberately rather than awaited. Actors strengthen, connect or adapt practices when this supports coordination and learning, while recognising that not all openings will be taken up. By acting where movement is possible and relating action over time, working with cracks supports continued collective work in place-based contexts under conditions of uncertainty

2.5. Experimenting a way forward

Experimenting a way forward refers to organising collective work through cycles of action and learning under conditions of uncertainty. Action is treated as a source of information, and learning as part of ongoing practice rather than as a separate evaluative step.

Cracks create openings for action, but moving through them requires acting without knowing in advance how situations will evolve. Waiting for complete plans or stable conditions limits the ability to respond. In this context, progress takes place through iterative cycles in which action generates experience, and reflection informs subsequent decisions.

Experimentation, in this sense, involves acting with intention while remaining open to adjustment. Actions are sufficiently deliberate to remain connected to the shared direction, yet flexible enough to generate insight and inform coordination as conditions change.

Within Shared Agendas, experimentation is embedded in ongoing initiatives that address concrete place-based challenges. These initiatives are not treated as pilots, but as sustained efforts that develop through practice. As contexts evolve, actors reflect on what is happening, adjust their actions and reconsider how their work relates to the shared direction.

Facilitated spaces support this process by creating opportunities for collective reflection and exchange. Structured moments of review allow actors to examine assumptions, relate experience across initiatives and adjust coordination where needed. Learning is integrated into ongoing work rather than accumulated for later use.

This way of working reflects how Shared Agendas hold together immediate action and longer-term orientation. Initiatives respond to pressing situations while contributing experience that informs judgement over time. Evidence from practice, emerging relationships and observed effects are used to reassess priorities and adjust coordination, without assuming predefined pathways or outcomes.

By organising work through repeated cycles of action and learning, experimenting a way forward supports continued collective action under

uncertainty and helps actors remain oriented while adapting their practice over time.

2.6. Collaborating with unlike others

Collaborating with unlike others refers to working across differences in mandates, positions and responsibilities in order to sustain collective action over time. Difference is treated as a condition of work rather than as a problem to be resolved or a resource to be instrumentalised.

Complex contexts are characterised by interdependence. Actors with different interests, incentives and time horizons remain connected through shared challenges in a place. Limiting participation may simplify coordination in the short term, but it also narrows the range of perspectives and contributions available for collective work over time.

Within Shared Agendas, coalitions bring together actors who relate to a shared direction in their place while differing in mandates, capacities, organisational cultures and constraints. Community-based organisations, research actors, companies and public administrations contribute in different ways. What matters is not the categorisation of actors, but how their roles and actions are related to the shared direction and to one another.

Collaboration therefore includes actors operating under established rules, routines and institutional responsibilities, alongside actors developing new practices. Engagement across these positions allows collective work to remain connected to existing decision contexts while creating space for adjustment and learning. No actor is expected to adopt the same priorities, positions or forms of action.

Facilitation and governance arrangements support this work by creating conditions in which difference can be engaged without collapsing into conflict or requiring consensus. Dialogue, reflection and joint work provide ways for perspectives to be expressed and related, while governance arrangements clarify roles and expectations so that actors can contribute according to their responsibilities and capacities.

By holding together actors with different positions in relation to the shared direction, collaborating with unlike others supports continued collective work across institutional and social boundaries under conditions of uncertainty.

2.7. Persevering and resting

Persevering and resting refers to organising collective work over time by combining continuity of effort with deliberate moments of pause, reflection and adjustment.

In complex contexts, progress is uneven and unfolds at different speeds. Periods of sustained engagement alternate with moments of slowdown, uncertainty,

reorientation or even discouragement. Working effectively under these conditions involves recognising this variability and establishing rhythms that allow collective work to continue without exhaustion or loss of orientation.

Within Shared Agendas, renewal is integrated into ongoing work. Coalitions incorporate moments for reflection, review and recalibration while initiatives continue to develop. Shared direction is revisited, assumptions are examined and coordination is adjusted as contexts evolve.

Shared Agendas hold together near-term action and longer-term direction. Experience generated through action informs judgement and adjustment, while shared direction provides orientation as conditions change over time.

Perseverance is distributed across actors rather than concentrated in a single organisation or initiative. Different actors carry momentum at different moments, depending on mandates, resources and institutional cycles. When some actors reduce activity or face constraints, others continue advancing work, allowing collective orientation and learning to be sustained.

Broader communities of practice contribute to this rhythm by enabling experience to circulate across contexts. Peer exchange and cross-agenda learning support reflection and renewal beyond individual Shared Agendas. Monitoring and learning systems structure this reflection, helping actors adjust coordination and remain oriented over time.

By combining sustained engagement with deliberate renewal, persevering and resting supports continued collective work under conditions of uncertainty.

2.8. Leadership within Shared Agenda processes

Shared Agenda processes do not rely on leadership as a separate role or capability. Leadership is nevertheless present throughout these processes.

Within Shared Agendas, leadership becomes visible when actors who hold authority, resources or decision power engage in the shared practices described above. In these situations, leadership is expressed through how such actors take responsibility, relate to others, work with uncertainty and contribute to sustaining collective effort over time.

Rather than directing outcomes or aligning others to a predefined strategy, leadership in Shared Agendas concerns how power is exercised under interdependence: whether decisions and actions widen or restrict the space for collaboration, learning and adaptation around a shared direction. This becomes particularly relevant when pressures for simplification, speed or unilateral optimisation increase, and the capacity to sustain collective action is most at risk.

Leadership, in this sense, is not something added to the process, but becomes visible through how actors engage when influence is unevenly distributed.

3. Facilitation and managing polarities

3.1. Introduction

Shared Agenda processes are shaped by tensions that do not disappear through better design or clearer decisions. They arise from interdependent ways of working that need to be held together over time. When one orientation dominates, risks emerge that make it harder to sustain collective action.

These tensions cannot be resolved once and for all. Working with polarities offers a way of engaging with them as ongoing conditions of collective work, rather than as problems to be solved. It involves recognising how different needs pull action in different directions, and how emphasis shifts as contexts evolve. Navigating this terrain calls for judgement and adjustment, not definitive solutions.

In practice, this work does not happen through analytical tools or predefined frameworks alone. Tensions surface in action — in decisions, interactions and moments of pressure. Working with them depends on processes that help actors notice what is happening, interpret its implications for their work, and adjust how they coordinate over time.

This is where facilitation operates as a systemic function. Facilitation supports collective interpretation when tensions surface, helps actors name what is at stake, and creates conditions for adjusting coordination without forcing resolution or consensus. Polarity work is one practical way in which this facilitative function is exercised, providing a shared reference for engaging with persistent tensions as they unfold.

From this perspective, facilitation is not about smoothing differences or driving agreement. It is about supporting the ongoing work of holding tensions in a way that allows collective action to continue under conditions of uncertainty.

The following subsections examine facilitation as a systemic function, and polarity work as a practical means through which persistent tensions are engaged and navigated within Shared Agenda processes over time.

3.2 Facilitation as a systemic function

In Shared Agendas, facilitation operates as a systemic function that supports collective action over time. It is not treated as a neutral support activity, but as part of how collective work is organised in complex, place-based contexts.

As Shared Agendas develop, formal structures such as governance arrangements, systemic portfolios of initiatives and monitoring and learning systems provide orientation and reference. Facilitation works alongside these structures. It supports the relational and interpretive work through which they are enacted in

practice, particularly when coordination needs to be adjusted and situations remain uncertain.

Seen from practice, facilitation contributes to sustaining systemic change in three closely related ways.

One concerns collective interpretation. Collective action unfolds in contexts where information is incomplete and conditions shift as work progresses. Facilitation helps actors make sense of what is happening, revisit assumptions and relate experiential, technical and institutional knowledge to ongoing action. This keeps work connected to evolving interpretations rather than fixed initial framings.

Another concerns orientation without uniformity. Shared Agendas bring together actors with different mandates, incentives, time horizons and organisational settings. Facilitation supports the ability to relate diverse contributions to a shared direction without requiring alignment of positions or priorities. In this way, actors remain accountable to their own roles while staying connected to collective effort.

A third concerns continuity under uncertainty. Collective action rarely progresses in a linear way. Periods of acceleration alternate with moments of slowdown, reorientation or tension. Facilitation supports reflection on these shifts, helps adjust coordination and enables direction to be revisited as needed, allowing work to continue across cycles rather than depending on a single initiative, leadership configuration or funding arrangement.

Facilitation does not replace leadership, governance or decision-making. It shapes how these functions are carried out in practice by supporting shared interpretation, ongoing coordination and adjustment in relation to the shared direction.

Rather than sitting in a single role or moment, facilitation is woven into how Shared Agendas work day to day. It takes form in how actors interpret situations together, coordinate their actions, name tensions as they arise and adjust their practice over time. While specific facilitation roles may exist, the function itself is distributed across these everyday ways of working.

This becomes particularly apparent when collective action needs to be sustained through persistent tensions over time, and no single decision or intervention can resolve them.

3.3 Working with polarities in systemic change

Working with polarities refers to engaging with tensions that persist when diverse actors act together over time in complex and uncertain contexts. These tensions do not signal failure or misalignment. They are conditions that shape how collective action is organised and sustained.

This becomes particularly visible in situations where outcomes cannot be fully anticipated and causal relationships shift as work progresses. In such contexts, collective action is shaped by interdependent needs that pull in different directions and cannot be settled once and for all. Rather than being resolved through definitive choices, these tensions require ongoing interpretation and adjustment as action unfolds.

Within Shared Agendas, these dynamics appear through recurring polarities observed across places and sectors. For example, one such polarity concerns competitiveness and green and just transitions. Under prevailing economic, institutional and organisational arrangements, these orientations are often experienced as pulling in opposite directions. Efforts to strengthen economic performance are commonly associated with cost reduction, speed and scale, while efforts to advance environmental sustainability and social justice introduce different time horizons, constraints and forms of accountability.

When this tension is handled as a choice between competing priorities, collective work tends to narrow into defensive positions or minimal compliance. Working with this polarity starts from recognising that both orientations are necessary, even though they remain difficult to hold together within dominant practices. The work then focuses on examining how economic activity, investment logics and organisational practices currently reinforce one side or the other, and where limited room for movement exists in relation to the shared direction.

A similar tension appears between short-term results and longer-term change. Political cycles, funding arrangements and urgent needs generate pressure for visible outcomes, while systemic change unfolds through sustained effort, learning and institutional adjustment. When emphasis falls too heavily on immediate delivery, learning and adaptation are constrained. When attention shifts exclusively to long-term orientation, relevance and engagement can weaken. Working with this polarity involves relating near-term action to longer-term direction and adjusting emphasis as conditions change.

Another recurring polarity concerns local relevance and wider influence. Place-based action grounds collective work in concrete conditions and social legitimacy. At the same time, Shared Agendas relate action across contexts through learning, adaptation and institutional uptake. Over-emphasis on local specificity can limit learning beyond the place, while over-emphasis on broader influence risks detaching action from its context. Working with this polarity

involves holding both dynamics in view and moving between them as situations evolve.

Beyond these examples, other tensions reappear in different configurations, including experimentation and institutional stability, autonomy and alignment among actors, and speed of action and inclusiveness of participation. In each case, both sides contribute value and introduce risks when they dominate. What matters is not resolving these tensions, but noticing how their effects play out in practice and how emphasis shifts over time.

Under conditions of uncertainty, no stable balance can be fixed in advance. What is workable at one moment may require adjustment at another. From this perspective, polarity work treats tensions as signals that inform interpretation and coordination, rather than as problems to eliminate.

Facilitation supports this work by helping actors notice tensions as they arise, relate different positions to one another and adjust coordination over time. Dialogue and reflection allow actors to examine the effects of their choices without requiring convergence or halting action.

Working with polarities reshapes how collective action is pursued. Engaging with persistent tensions allows actors to challenge dominant framings, test the limits of existing approaches and open space for alternative ways of advancing change in relation to the shared direction. Polarity work introduces movement by making constraints visible and enabling adjustment as conditions evolve.

4. Bringing it together and looking ahead

Across Shared Agenda processes, collective action is sustained through continued engagement in situations where direction is shared but alignment is partial. Actors act in relation to a shared direction, relate across different positions and roles, and adjust their contributions as conditions evolve. Tension, uncertainty and difference shape how this work unfolds over time.

What matters in these contexts is the capacity to remain engaged as situations change. Collective work moves forward by recognising where movement becomes possible, acting within existing constraints, and revisiting emphasis as circumstances shift. Direction is held through ongoing contribution rather than fixed agreement or stable configurations.

Facilitation and polarity work support this ongoing effort by enabling interpretation, adjustment and learning without interrupting action. They help actors remain oriented and connected as collective work unfolds under conditions that cannot be fully stabilised or anticipated.

Working in this way also depends on shared references that allow actors to relate action, learning and direction over time. Within Shared Agendas, theory of change functions as a working reference rather than a fixed plan, helping actors articulate direction, surface assumptions about contribution, and relate diverse initiatives as collective work evolves. Monitoring and learning operate alongside action, supporting reflection on what is emerging in practice and how coordination, priorities and approaches may need to be adjusted.

It is in relation to these needs that SharedAgendas.org positions its work. The organisation operates as a reference and support infrastructure for Shared Agenda processes, focusing on the conditions that allow collective practice to be sustained over time. Rather than directing or owning Shared Agendas, this role centres on making practices, patterns and conditions visible as they are enacted in real contexts, so that collective work can be maintained, adapted and learned from over time.

This includes supporting facilitation as a systemic function, strengthening monitoring and learning through ongoing action, and maintaining shared references — including a theory of change — that help actors work with tension, uncertainty and partial alignment without suspending collective effort.