

# Working with polarities

**Tools for Shared Agendas, No. 4**

March 2026



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*Tools for Shared Agendas* is a series of practical instruments designed to support collective work on place-based challenges under conditions of complexity. The tools build on established frameworks in systems thinking and transformative innovation policy and are adapted for use within Shared Agenda processes.

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# 1. Why polarities matter in the work with Shared Agendas<sup>1</sup>

In the work with Shared Agendas, collective action can face different orientations that pull action in competing directions, despite actors agreeing on the overall direction of change.

Some actors prioritise short-term results, while others focus on long-term change. Some push for stability and coordination, others for flexibility and experimentation. These tensions tend to reappear over time and cannot be resolved by choosing one side over the other.

In Shared Agendas, we work with these situations as polarities: persistent tensions between orientations that are all necessary, but whose sustained dominance produces limiting effects. Each orientation brings value, yet when one prevails for too long, it reduces the contribution of the other and undermines collective capacity to coordinate, learn and adapt.

This is why polarities matter in the work with Shared Agendas: they provide a way to engage with enduring tensions that shape how systems behave over time, rather than treating them as conflicts to be resolved or trade-offs to be optimised.

## 2. What working with polarities enables actors to do

Working with polarities helps actors engage with complexity in a more productive and sustained way.

First, it reframes disagreement. What often appears as conflict or opposition is recognised as a structural tension, rather than a problem caused by incompatible positions, interests or values.

Second, it shifts attention from intentions and preferences to effects over time. Instead of debating which approach is “right”, actors examine what different orientations produce when they become dominant in practice, and what is lost or undermined as a result.

Third, it redirects collective effort toward shaping conditions rather than choosing sides. The focus moves from selecting solutions to understanding what needs to

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<sup>1</sup> This tool builds on polarity thinking as developed by Johnson, B. (1992). *Polarity Management: Identifying and Managing Unsolvable Problems*. HRD Press. and subsequent work in systems and organisational practice. The present version is adapted and contextualised for Shared Agenda processes.

be in place so that the value of different orientations can be retained without reinforcing their negative consequences.

By making persistent tensions explicit, polarities also support coherence and learning. They help actors understand how different initiatives, decisions and investments interact over time, revealing:

- how some initiatives reinforce one orientation while others counterbalance it,
- how coordination arrangements privilege certain ways of acting,
- how funding and resource allocation lock the system into particular patterns.

They further support learning by making visible negative consequences that often emerge gradually and become normalised in everyday practice. Identifying these effects helps actors define signals to pay attention to and reflect collectively on how conditions need to evolve.

Together, these shifts create a shared basis for coordination and learning, even in situations where priorities and perspectives differ.

### 3. How the polarities template is used

The polarities template is used to structure collective reflection around a specific tension. For each orientation or practice, actors explore:

**Value** – what this orientation enables in practice and why it is necessary for the Shared Agenda to function over time. This includes the contribution it makes to coordination, legitimacy, effectiveness or learning.

**Negative consequences** – what is reduced, undermined or distorted when this orientation dominates over time. These consequences often emerge gradually and can limit collective capacity even when intentions remain aligned.

**Actions** – what can be done to retain the value of this orientation while preventing or counterbalancing its negative consequences. Actions focus on shaping conditions, practices or coordination arrangements rather than choosing one side of the tension.

**Signals** – how negative consequences become visible in practice. Signals point to observable effects in everyday work, such as recurring coordination problems, patterns in decision-making, shifts in behaviour or outcomes that indicate the tension is becoming unbalanced. They help actors notice when attention and adjustment are required.

The purpose of the template is not to resolve the tension or reach agreement. It is to create a shared reference that supports observation, discussion and learning over time, allowing actors to work deliberately with tensions as they evolve.

## 4. When and how the tool is typically used

The polarities tool is typically used when:

- discussions become polarised or repetitive,
- progress stalls despite shared intentions,
- actors struggle to align initiatives that emphasise different orientations.

It is often introduced in early or transitional phases of a Shared Agenda and revisited over time as conditions evolve and new tensions become visible.

## 5. How SharedAgendas.org works with polarities

SharedAgendas.org works with polarities as a core tool for organising collective action in complex, place-based transformation processes.

We use polarities when change depends on holding together different orientations over time, rather than selecting a single approach or optimising trade-offs. In these contexts, progress is shaped less by individual decisions and more by how practices, coordination arrangements and investments interact.

Working with polarities allows us to:

- make persistent tensions explicit without reducing them to conflict,
- focus attention on effects over time rather than positions or intentions,
- support coordination across initiatives that emphasise different orientations,
- strengthen coherence and learning without closing down diversity.

From the perspective of SharedAgendas.org, polarities also help make visible how tensions are shaped by systemic conditions, not just individual choices. They surface rules, incentives, narratives, coordination patterns and investment decisions that privilege one orientation over others and lock systems into one-sided dynamics. In this way, polarities are practical means of understanding how systems behave and of supporting collective action that remains adaptive under changing conditions.

## 6. Template for working with polarities

