

Multi-level perspective framework

Tools for Shared Agendas, No. 1

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 understanding system change dynamics matters in the work with Shared Agendas¹

In the work with Shared Agendas, actors are often actively engaged in change yet struggle to explain why systems respond unevenly over time. Progress may accelerate in some moments and stall in others, even when effort and commitment remain high.

New initiatives can emerge without influencing dominant practices. External pressures may intensify without producing visible shifts. In other cases, change occurs abruptly after long periods of apparent stability. These patterns are not random, but they are difficult to interpret without a shared way of understanding how system change dynamics unfold.

Understanding system change dynamics matters because Shared Agendas operate in contexts where transformation is non-linear, path-dependent and shaped by interactions between the landscape, the dominant system or regime and the emerging alternatives. This understanding draws on insights developed within the Transformative Innovation Policy Consortium (TIPC), which has shown how change depends on the interaction between dominant practices, emerging alternatives and broader contextual pressures over time.

Developing a shared reading of system change dynamics provides a basis for interpreting persistence and disruption in place-based processes. It helps actors connect local action with wider forces, recognise where change is constrained or enabled, and remain oriented toward long-term transformation without relying on linear plans or simplified explanations.

2. What the multi-level perspective framework enables actors to do

Working with the multi-level perspective framework helps actors move from isolated observations to a coherent interpretation of change dynamics.

It enables actors to:

¹ This tool builds on the Multi-Level Perspective on socio-technical transitions (Geels & Schot, 2007) and subsequent practice-oriented developments within the Transformative Innovation Policy Consortium (TIPC), including resources developed in the [TIP Resource Lab](#). The present version is adapted for use within Shared Agenda processes.

- understand why dominant practices tend to remain stable over time and are difficult to shift,
- recognise where pressure for change is building and where it is not,
- identify how, and under what conditions, alternative practices might gain influence,
- relate local initiatives to wider forces shaping the system.

Rather than starting from the question “what should we do?”, the framework helps actors first ask “what is happening, and why?”. This supports more grounded expectations about the pace, direction and form that change may take.

3. How SharedAgendas.org works with the multi-level perspective framework

SharedAgendas.org works with the multi-level perspective framework as a collective sense-making tool embedded in place-based processes.

We use it to:

- organise diverse observations and inputs from actors into a shared interpretation of how change is unfolding,
- clarify how local action relates to dynamics beyond the place,
- avoid over-attributing change or stagnation to individual initiatives or decisions.

The value of this framework lies in the collective discussion and interpretation it enables, helping actors surface assumptions and develop a shared explanation of change dynamics, and it should not be used as a predictive model, nor applied exhaustively.

In practice, this shared reading helps actors coordinate action and learning over time. Rather than aligning around fixed plans, actors use the framework to relate initiatives to system dynamics, adjust expectations as conditions evolve, and interpret learning in relation to changes in system behaviour rather than isolated project results.

4. Three lenses for reading how change unfolds

The multi-level perspective framework structures analysis around three interconnected lenses. These lenses are not defined by who acts, but by how

conditions operate in relation to the place-based system and by the degree of agency local actors have over them.

Together, they help actors understand how change emerges from the interaction between broader context, system stability and local innovation.

Pressures and broader dynamics

This lens focuses on conditions that shape the context in which local action takes place but are largely defined outside the direct control of local actors.

These include:

- social, economic or environmental trends,
- demographic, technological or market shifts,
- long-term risks or external shocks,
- policy or regulatory developments defined at national, European or global level.

Regulation appears in this lens when it operates as an external condition that local actors must respond to, rather than shape directly. In this sense, regulatory developments function similarly to trends: they alter the context of action without being locally negotiable.

This lens helps actors understand why existing arrangements come under pressure, even when local practices have not yet changed.

Dominant practices and system constraints

This lens focuses on what currently structures and stabilises the system locally.

It includes:

- established practices and routines,
- governance arrangements and administrative procedures,
- regulatory interpretations and enforcement practices,
- investment patterns and risk logics,
- infrastructures and dominant narratives or expectations.

Here, regulation is treated as part of dominant practices when it is embedded in everyday routines, interpretations and decision-making processes. Investment

patterns are also located here, as they reflect how resources are currently allocated and what types of activity are considered viable or legitimate.

This lens helps actors understand why change remains difficult, even when pressure for change exists.

Emerging alternatives

This lens focuses on practices that already exist, or could emerge locally, and that operate differently from dominant practices.

These may include:

- experimental initiatives
- alternative forms of coordination or governance
- new service, production or ownership models
- changing roles and relationships between actors

Emerging alternatives are not defined by novelty alone, but by the fact that they have not yet become stabilised or dominant. The focus is not on selecting solutions, but on understanding how such alternatives might connect, expand or influence existing dynamics over time.

This lens helps actors explore how change could take hold, without assuming linear scaling or direct replacement of existing practices.

Visualisation of facilitators and inhibitors

Reading across the three lenses also makes facilitators and inhibitors visible. Inhibitors are conditions that stabilise dominant dynamics and limit change, such as rigid rules, fragmented governance, misaligned incentives or entrenched narratives. Facilitators are conditions that enable coordination, experimentation and collective learning, such as trust between actors, shared data, adaptive governance arrangements or aligned investment.

By locating these conditions across landscape, dominant practices and emerging alternatives, actors can identify systemic leverage points and better understand why certain forms of action gain traction while others remain marginal.

5. When and how the framework is typically used

The multi-level perspective framework is typically used:

- in the early phases of a Shared Agenda, to build a shared understanding of change dynamics,

- with diverse actors who hold different perspectives and responsibilities,
- alongside tools for problem framing, systemic diagnosis, polarities, portfolio design and learning.

It is often revisited over time as part of collective reflection, allowing actors to update their interpretation as the system evolves.

6. The Multi-level perspective template

