

Shared Agendas and governance under complexity

Structural conditions and governance
requirements for sustaining Shared
Agendas

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1. Introduction

In many places, actors working on complex social, environmental and economic challenges, struggle to sustain coordination and shared direction over time. There are often strong commitment and many initiatives under way, yet outcomes depend less on individual decisions than on how actions and choices interact across organisations, sectors and time horizons.

These challenges take shape in specific contexts, where public administrations, businesses, research organisations and civil society actors act simultaneously under different mandates, incentives and responsibilities. Even where substantial work is under way, difficulties arise in keeping initiatives connected, relating action to a shared direction, and ensuring that learning from practice informs ongoing decisions.

From a governance point of view, the issue is not simply setting objectives or designing individual policies or instruments. It concerns how collective action is organised when no single actor can steer outcomes, when knowledge is partial and evolving, and when decisions taken in one arena shape possibilities in others.

Shared Agendas describe a way of organising collective action under these conditions. They provide place-based arrangements through which actors work with existing initiatives, relate them to one another, and maintain shared direction while learning from practice over time. Rather than relying on hierarchical control or fixed prescriptions, they focus on how coordination, learning and directionality are sustained as conditions change.

This document examines Shared Agendas from the perspective of governance under conditions of complexity. It offers a structured way of understanding how collaboration, learning and shared direction are organised in practice, when responsibility is distributed and outcomes cannot be planned in advance. Section 2 examines Shared Agendas as practice-based governance arrangements. Section 3 explores the tensions, structural constraints and risks that arise when organising collective action in this way. Section 4 identifies the infrastructures and place-based experimentation spaces required to sustain such arrangements over time. The concluding section situates the role of SharedAgendas.org in supporting this work through practice and demonstrator cases that make governance under complexity visible and open to collective learning.

2. Shared Agendas as a practice-based governance response

Shared Agendas take shape in practice when actors seek ways to organise collective action over time in contexts characterised by uncertainty, interdependence and distributed responsibility. In such contexts, outcomes depend not on single decisions or isolated initiatives, but on how multiple actions and choices interact across actors and institutional settings over time.

The central issue in these situations is not a lack of activity or engagement. Rather, it is about how collective action can be organised and sustained when no single organisation can steer outcomes, when responsibilities are distributed, and when decisions taken in one arena affect possibilities in others. Shared Agendas focus on this challenge, providing the necessary conditions in which public administrations, businesses, research organisations and civil society actors engage around concrete, place-based challenges, with attention to how collective effort is coordinated, oriented and maintained over time.

A defining feature of Shared Agendas is their grounding in specific place-based contexts. Work starts from challenges as they are experienced in particular places, rather than from abstract problem definitions or predefined solutions. This brings together technical expertise, institutional knowledge and lived experience within the same process. When collective action is grounded within real conditions and constraints, it allows priorities, roles and approaches to be adjusted as responsibilities, opportunities and limitations become clearer over time.

Fragmentation in these contexts reflects the way responsibilities, decisions and instruments are distributed across institutional settings. In practice, initiatives often proceed in parallel, shaped by sectoral mandates, funding logics and accountability frameworks that are not aligned in time or orientation. Shared Agendas address this situation by establishing a shared understanding through which these parallel efforts can be interpreted in relation to one another. This does not integrate initiatives into a single programme or impose a unified plan. Instead, it makes relationships between initiatives visible, including complementarities, tensions and gaps, so that coordination and learning can be organised deliberately over time.

Alignment within Shared Agendas is therefore not assumed or imposed in advance. Shared understanding and direction are built progressively through joint action. Concrete initiatives function as spaces for experimentation, learning and negotiation. Through this work, assumptions are tested in practice, constraints become visible, and approaches are adjusted in response to

experience. This makes it possible for collective action to continue even when objectives are contested, interpretations differ, or knowledge remains incomplete.

Learning is embedded in this ongoing collective work rather than treated as a separate or subsequent activity. Shared Agendas create structured opportunities for actors to reflect on what is emerging from practice, to examine how coordination arrangements are functioning, and to consider how institutional, regulatory or investment conditions are shaping what becomes possible. Through these practices, actors are able to maintain a shared direction while revisiting strategies, coordination mechanisms and roles over time.

The relational dimension of Shared Agendas is integral to this way of organising governance. Sustained facilitation supports spaces in which actors with different roles, responsibilities and forms of knowledge engage with one another over time. Trust-building, listening and the active management of tensions are treated as practical conditions for maintaining coordination and learning under uncertainty. This makes it possible to hold disagreement and plurality productively, without requiring consensus or suppressing difference.

Through these arrangements, collective work is carried out differently in practice. Ongoing initiatives and coordination patterns become more visible, and actors develop a shared basis for interpreting what is happening and why. Over time, this influences how decisions are discussed, revisited and connected across actors, and how responsibility for complex challenges is maintained beyond individual initiatives, projects or funding cycles.

By articulating a shared direction and relating initiatives as portfolios, Shared Agendas also make collective effort more comprehensible to actors beyond the immediate process. This includes funders, research organisations and public bodies that engage from different positions and with different mandates. The shared understanding allows resources, knowledge and engagement to connect to ongoing collective work, without redefining it as a single programme or reducing it to project-based coordination.

At the same time, experience shows that these arrangements do not sustain themselves automatically. Maintaining coordination, learning and shared direction over time depends on how facilitation, coherence-building and learning are supported and recognised within existing institutional and funding settings.

For this reason, what matters for governance under conditions of uncertainty, interdependence and distributed responsibility is how collective action is organised and sustained over time in practice. The following section examines the tensions, constraints and risks that arise when attempting to do so.

3. Governance tensions, structural constraints and risks under conditions of complexity

The conditions under which Shared Agendas are developed reveal persistent tensions and risks. When actors attempt to organise collective action under uncertainty, distributed responsibility and institutional plurality, they face demands that existing governance systems are often not designed to support. As a result, the arrangements required to sustain coordination, learning and shared direction tend to remain fragile when they are not backed by appropriate institutional support.

A first recurring tension concerns continuity over time. Shared Agendas rely on sustained facilitation, relational work and collective memory in order to maintain direction and coherence as conditions evolve. In practice, these functions are often carried by a limited number of individuals. These individuals bridge organisations, translate between institutional logics and help connect learning from practice to ongoing action. While this concentration can enable responsiveness and progress, it also creates vulnerability. Changes in roles, priorities or availability can disrupt coordination and weaken shared orientation, particularly over longer time horizons.

This vulnerability increases when institutional incentives and rhythms are misaligned. Many actors participating in Shared Agendas operate within systems shaped by sectoral mandates, short funding cycles and performance frameworks oriented towards predefined outputs. Within these systems, the work required to sustain collective action under complexity — including facilitation, trust-building, reflection and adaptation — is weakly recognised. As a result, participation in Shared Agenda processes often depends on discretionary effort rather than on roles that are structurally supported. This creates ongoing tension between the demands of collective processes and the priorities of participating organisations.

Learning, although central to Shared Agendas, is also constrained by existing structures. Learning emerges through experimentation and collective reflection within Shared Agenda processes, but it does not automatically influence decisions that shape dominant practices, policies or investment choices. Decision-making arenas often operate according to logics and timelines that are disconnected from learning processes. When these disconnections persist, insights generated through collective action struggle to influence rules, priorities or resource allocation. In such cases, Shared Agendas risk remaining confined to limited spaces of experimentation rather than influencing broader systems.

As Shared Agendas gain visibility and attract additional actors and initiatives, further tensions can arise. Increased participation can bring greater diversity of

perspectives and additional resources into the process. At the same time, it can weaken coherence when initiatives are not clearly related to a shared direction. In such situations, activity may increase while collective orientation erodes, particularly where inclusiveness is prioritised without sufficient attention to coherence-building and shared interpretation.

Related to this dynamic is the risk of instrumentalisation. As interest in collaborative and place-based approaches grows, actors may adopt Shared Agendas as formats or labels rather than as sustained ways of organising collective action. In these cases, practices of learning, adaptation and shared responsibility may be reduced to formal requirements that are absorbed into existing project or programme logics. This can maintain the appearance of collaboration while limiting the capacity of Shared Agendas to influence how decisions are taken in practice.

Territorial asymmetries introduce additional pressure. Not all contexts begin with the same levels of social capital, technical capacity or experience with collaboration. In practice, more consolidated Shared Agendas tend to progress more quickly and attract greater resources, while others struggle to establish momentum.

Underlying these tensions there is a more fundamental constraint: the absence of dedicated infrastructures to support governance under conditions of complexity. Functions such as facilitation, coherence-building, learning and translation across institutional settings are essential when control is distributed and knowledge is partial. However, these functions rarely fit within existing organisational mandates or funding instruments. As a result, Shared Agendas often operate in the gaps between programmes, organisations and policy domains, relying on temporary arrangements rather than stable support.

External pressures can further intensify these risks. Political cycles, funding requirements and demands for rapid results can push actors towards simplification or premature consolidation of Shared Agenda processes. Under these conditions, the adaptive and learning-oriented qualities that make Shared Agendas relevant for governing under complexity become particularly exposed and difficult to sustain.

These tensions are intrinsic to the challenge of organising collective action under conditions of uncertainty, interdependence and distributed responsibility. Making these tensions explicit clarifies what must be addressed if Shared Agendas are to endure over time and influence how broader systems evolve. For this reason, the following section focuses on the governance capacities and infrastructures required to support collective action under these conditions in practice.

4. Organising the infrastructures required for governance under complexity

The experience described in the previous sections leads to a clear implication. Sustaining collective action under conditions of uncertainty, interdependence and distributed responsibility requires that facilitation, learning and coherence are organised deliberately and supported over time. When these functions rely on informal arrangements or individual effort, collective processes struggle to hold.

Place-based experimentation spaces provide the setting in which this organisation can occur. They convene actors already engaged in concrete challenges and situate their collaboration within existing institutional, regulatory and resource constraints. Work unfolds within real mandates and ongoing responsibilities.

In these spaces, actors advance initiatives that matter in practice while making assumptions, interactions and system effects explicit. Experimentation allows action to continue while creating opportunities to observe how initiatives interact with existing conditions and to adjust accordingly.

Organising governance under these conditions places demands on infrastructure. Capacities are required that cut across organisational boundaries and do not align neatly with existing instruments. Sustained spaces are required in which diverse actors can work together while keeping learning visible. Infrastructure shapes how collective action is convened, how direction is maintained as initiatives evolve, how experience is interpreted and how that interpretation connects to decision-making arenas operating at different scales.

Facilitation and relational work form one such infrastructural function. Sustaining collaboration among autonomous yet interdependent actors requires ongoing attention to dialogue, trust and the navigation of tensions. When facilitation is organised structurally, responsibility extends beyond individuals and continuity becomes less dependent on specific roles or funding cycles.

Learning systems constitute another essential function. In complex contexts, learning must remain continuous and connected to action. Experimentation spaces allow actors to observe developments, interpret signals from practice and revisit assumptions through experience. When learning is organised structurally, knowledge accumulates across initiatives and over time.

Coherence-building is equally necessary. As Shared Agendas bring together multiple initiatives and actors, maintaining shared orientation requires sustained effort. Experimentation spaces provide a context in which initiatives can be

related, contributions clarified and tensions surfaced. Collective interpretation remains grounded in what actors are doing together.

Translation across institutional settings is also required. Insights generated through Shared Agenda processes often struggle to influence policy, organisational routines or investment decisions because practice-based learning does not align easily with dominant administrative or financial logics. Experimentation spaces enable such learning to be articulated and connected to broader decision-making arenas.

These infrastructures shape participation, recognition of knowledge and the distribution of power and responsibility across institutional contexts. Establishing experimentation spaces as infrastructures for governance under conditions of complexity is itself a governance decision.