Working with polarity loops

Tools for Shared Agendas, No. 8

July 2026

Shared Agendas

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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 polarity loops matter in Shared Agendas

Shared Agendas work with place-based challenges where people and organisations often face persistent tensions. These tensions cannot always be resolved by choosing one option over another. In many cases, both sides contain value, and both can generate problems when they become too dominant.

Polarity loops help make these tensions visible. They show how different practices, perceptions, rules, behaviours and conditions reinforce each other over time. This helps participants discuss why some patterns persist, where alternatives are emerging, and which conditions may need to change to support movement in the desired direction.

2. What polarity loops are used for

Polarity loops help participants interpret persistent tensions that shape a Shared Agenda.

They can be used to:

- identify recurring tensions in a place-based challenge;
- understand how dominant practices and emerging alternatives interact;
- make visible the effects of maintaining current dynamics;
- identify conditions that could strengthen alternative practices;
- support discussion on communication, action and learning;
- open conversations that are difficult to address through linear diagnosis.

The loops are situated interpretations of system dynamics, grounded in discussions among participants in specific contexts.

3. How polarity loops are used

Each polarity loop includes:

- a title that names the tension;
- nodes that describe relevant practices, perceptions, conditions or effects;
- arrows that show how one element influences another;
- positive and negative signs that indicate the direction of influence;
- two broad dynamics that interact over time.

The loop supports shared interpretation of how these dynamics reinforce or constrain one another over time and helps participants identify where action, communication or learning may be needed.

4. How SharedAgendas.org uses polarity loops

SharedAgendas.org uses polarity loops in facilitated work with people and organisations involved in Shared Agendas.

The loops are usually introduced after an initial diagnosis has identified relevant practices, facilitators, inhibitors or narratives. Participants use them to discuss which dynamics they recognise, which appear most relevant, what they would like to change, and where they see possible openings for action.

The examples in this tool come from work with Shared Agendas in Catalonia. They emerged through discussions on mobility, food systems, school environments, ageing and care, urban resilience, social capital and construction.

The examples provide a reference that other groups can use to recognise similar tensions, question assumptions and develop interpretations grounded in their own context.

5. Examples of polarity loops

The loops presented in this document were prepared for a workshop developed with the OECD and Pathfinder, in collaboration with the Col·legi de Metges de Barcelona and the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, which took place on 8 June 2026.

They build on tensions identified through work with Shared Agendas in Catalonia. These tensions relate to place-based challenges in mobility, food systems, school environments, ageing and care, urban resilience, social capital and construction.

Each loop gives form to a tension identified as relevant for understanding why certain patterns persist and where change may become possible. The loops connect practices, perceptions, conditions and effects drawn from facilitated work, stakeholder discussions and collective sense-making.

Their value lies in helping participants work with complexity in practical terms. They make tensions visible, support structured conversation and help identify where communication, policy, investment, professional practice, community action or learning could contribute to change.

The examples can inspire work in other contexts. Groups can adapt the nodes, relationships and questions to reflect the place-based challenge, institutional context and conditions they are working with.

Each example includes a tension question, an explanation of what the loop shows, and key questions for facilitation.

5.1. Safety and control – Autonomy and daily life

Tension

How can we build safe school environments for children while maintaining opportunities for autonomy, active mobility and everyday community life?

What the loop shows

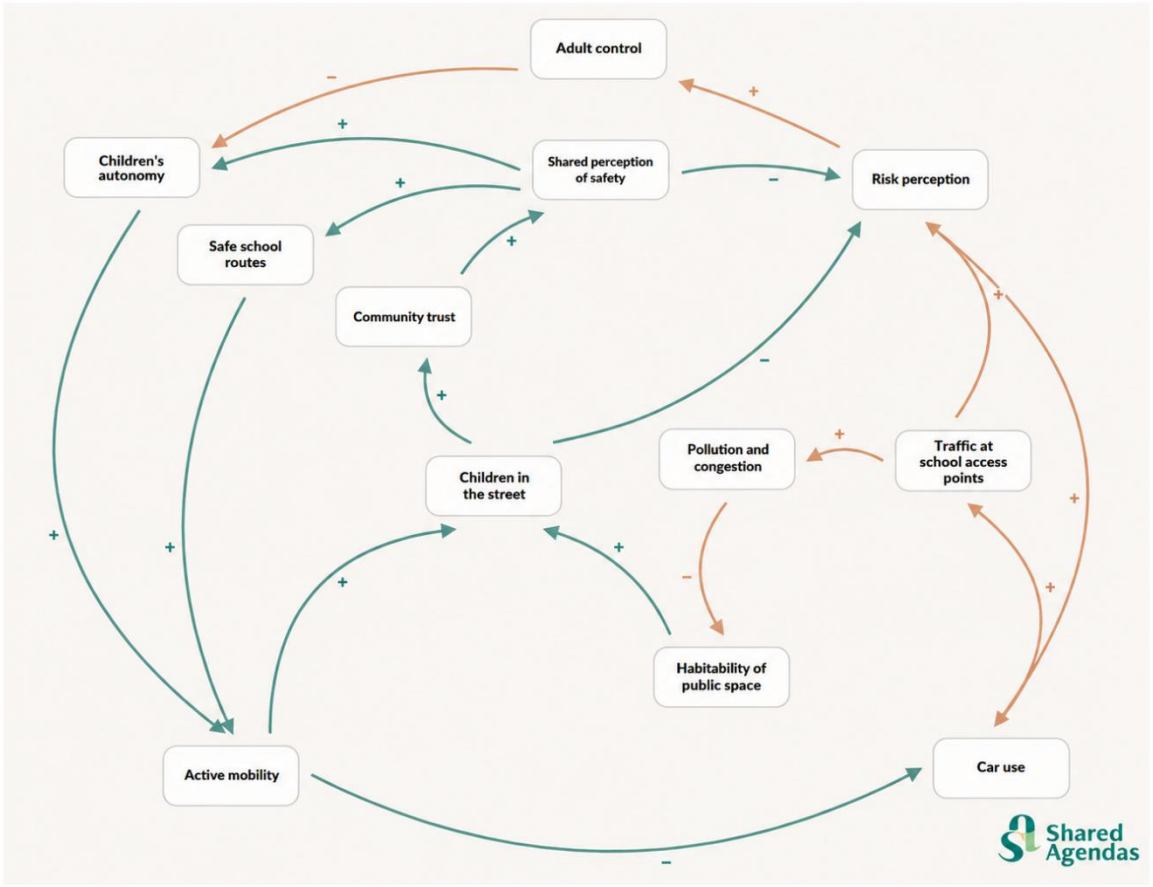
This loop explores how perceived risk in public space can reinforce the need to protect children through adult supervision and car-based mobility. When families perceive school surroundings as unsafe, they often increase adult accompaniment and use private vehicles to reach school. These practices can provide a sense of control and reduce some immediate risks. At the same time, they reduce children's autonomy, their everyday presence in the street and their opportunities for active mobility.

As fewer children walk, cycle or spend time in public space, there are fewer opportunities for everyday interaction, mutual recognition and community trust. Car use around schools also increases traffic, congestion and pollution, which reduces the liveability of public space and can reinforce the perception of risk. In this way, responses aimed at protecting children can **r**einforce some of the conditions that make the environment feel less safe.

The alternative dynamic builds safety through active mobility, safe school routes, bicibus initiatives, traffic calming and the shared use of public space. Here, safety depends not only on adult supervision, but also on the conditions that make children's presence in public space more visible, active and shared.

Key questions

- What factors are currently reinforcing the perception of risk around school environments?
- What conditions support children's progressive autonomy?
- How can school environments build safety through liveability, active mobility and community life?



5.2. Performance and overprotection – Wellbeing and holistic development

Tension

How can we support children's learning and development while maintaining spaces for autonomy, exploration and wellbeing?

What the loop shows

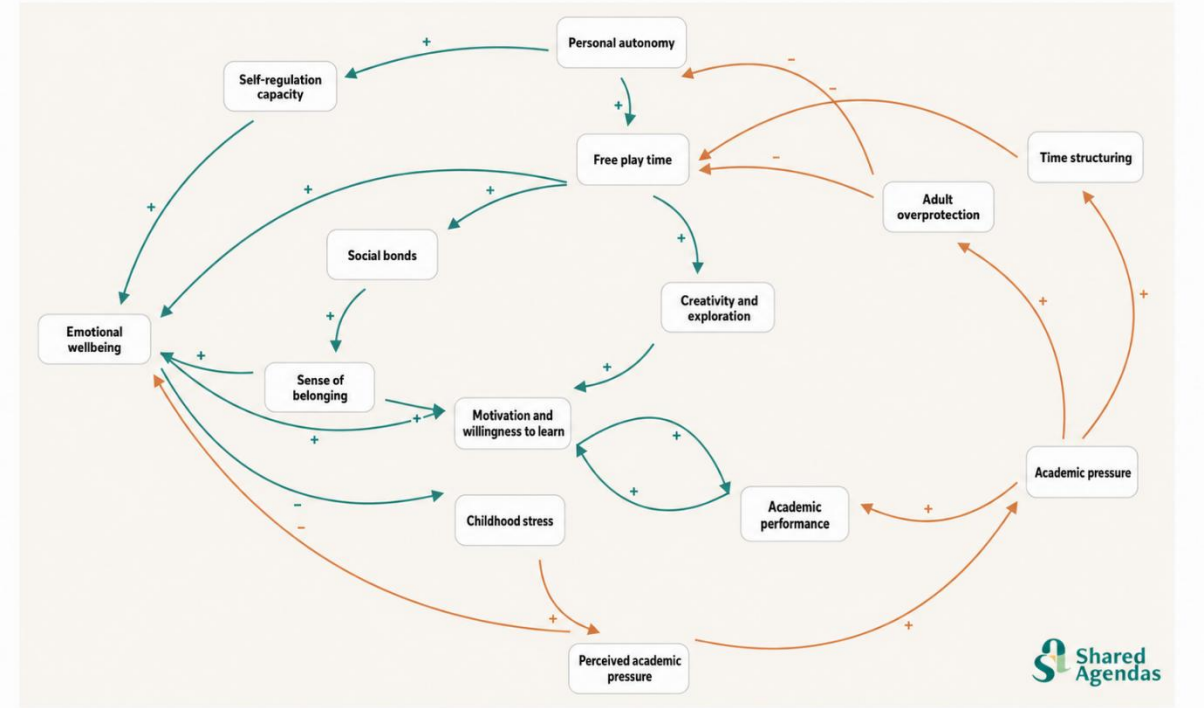
This loop focuses on the tension between academic performance, adult supervision and children's broader development. In many educational and family contexts, concern for successful school trajectories and the prevention of risks has increased. This concern can reinforce perceived academic pressure, structured time and adult supervision of children's everyday activities.

When this orientation becomes dominant, children have less time for free play, fewer spaces for personal autonomy and fewer opportunities to explore, relate to others and make decisions in everyday situations. Children's lives become more organised and more strongly guided by adult-defined objectives. This can reinforce academic performance and a sense of control in the short term, but it can also reduce self-regulation, personal motivation, social ties and a sense of belonging.

The alternative dynamic shows that learning and development also depend on free play, spontaneous relationships and experiences of autonomy. When children have time and space to experiment, take small risks and relate to others with greater autonomy, they develop confidence, self-regulation, adaptability and motivation. The loop therefore shows that learning depends not only on intensifying performance-oriented activities. It also depends on the conditions that allow children to build autonomy, relationships, belonging and wellbeing in everyday life.

Key questions

- How is children's time becoming more structured?
- What opportunities do children have to experience autonomy in everyday life?
- How are academic performance, emotional wellbeing and integral development connected?



5.3. Functional specialisation – Connected educational ecosystem

Tension

How can we coordinate the diversity of people and organisations, knowledge and responsibilities involved in school environments while maintaining each field's capacity to act?

What the loop shows

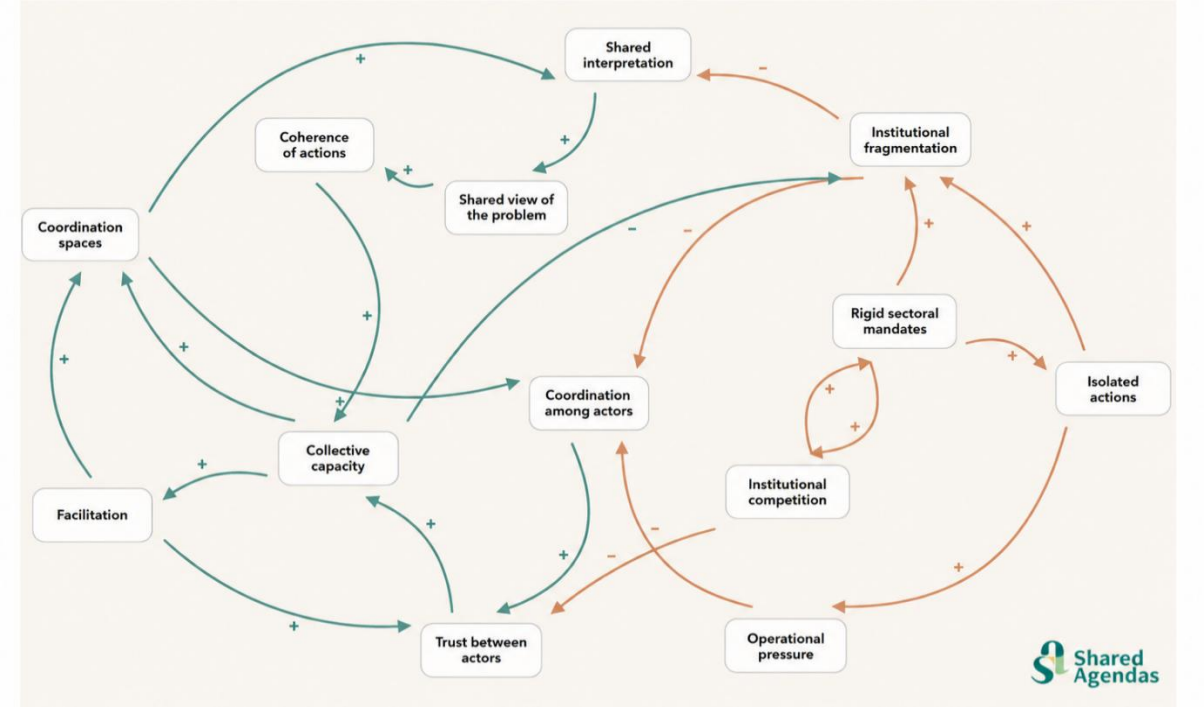
This loop addresses the fragmentation that often appears around school environments. Education, health, urban planning, mobility, social services, community organisations, culture and sport all influence children's development and wellbeing. Functional specialisation allows each field to develop expertise, define clear responsibilities and improve its own capacity to act.

The problem appears when specialisation is combined with rigid sectoral mandates, institutional competition and operational pressure. Each field tends to interpret the challenge mainly through its own frame of action. This makes it harder to build a shared understanding of the problem and to coordinate across fields. As this dynamic consolidates, initiatives can move forward separately, reducing the capacity to address factors that cut across several domains at the same time, such as health, mobility, food, social relationships, use of time or the quality of public space.

The alternative dynamic strengthens coordination spaces, facilitation and trust among the organisations and people involved. These conditions make it possible to build a more shared understanding of the challenge, identify connections between fields, relate initiatives to each other and define shared objectives. Over time, this can create a more connected educational ecosystem with greater capacity to address challenges that no single field can handle alone.

Key questions

- Which factors affecting children's wellbeing and holistic development require coordinated action across different fields?
- Which spaces make it easier to build shared interpretations?
- What conditions allow collaboration and coordination to continue over time?



5.4. Operational efficiency – Relational quality and care

Tension

How can services, families and communities maintain response capacity while also sustaining the quality of relationships and care practices?

What the loop shows

This loop examines care under pressure. Everyday care takes place in contexts marked by time pressure, logistical coordination and the accumulation of family, work and community demands. In response, families, services and institutions often seek arrangements that increase efficiency, organise tasks and resolve immediate needs.

This orientation can strengthen response capacity and make complex situations easier to manage. When it becomes dominant, however, it reduces the time available for care, relational availability and spaces for mutual support. Relationships become increasingly shaped by urgency, task organisation and the need to solve situations quickly.

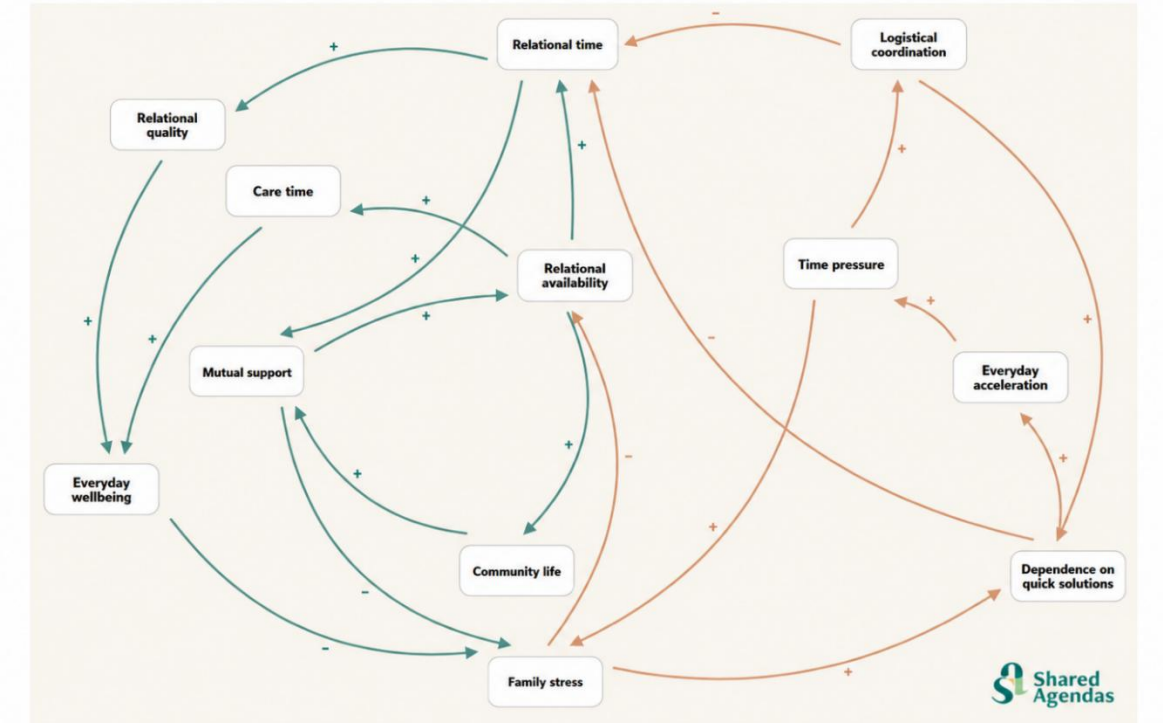
As relational time and mutual support decline, family stress increases and community life weakens. This can reinforce dependence on quick solutions, because people and families have less time, fewer networks and less relational capacity to sustain everyday needs. The alternative dynamic strengthens the conditions that make relational care possible: time for care, relational quality, relational availability and mutual support. These conditions allow needs to be

detected earlier, help people sustain everyday demands and reduce pressure on families and services.

The loop shows that operational efficiency is necessary, but care also depends on relational quality, shared time, mutual support and community life. These conditions help sustain care and reduce reliance on reactive responses.

Key questions

- Which everyday pressures reinforce dependence on quick solutions?
- What conditions sustain care time and relational availability?
- How can response capacity, logistical coordination and relational quality be combined?



5.5. Private vehicle dependence – Proximity and neighbourhood life

Tension

How can everyday mobility be organised safely and efficiently while strengthening proximity, active mobility and neighbourhood life?

What the loop shows

This loop shows how perceived risk, time pressure and the need to organise daily travel quickly can reinforce dependence on private vehicles. When car use increases, traffic, congestion and pollution also increase, especially around school environments and everyday activity nodes.

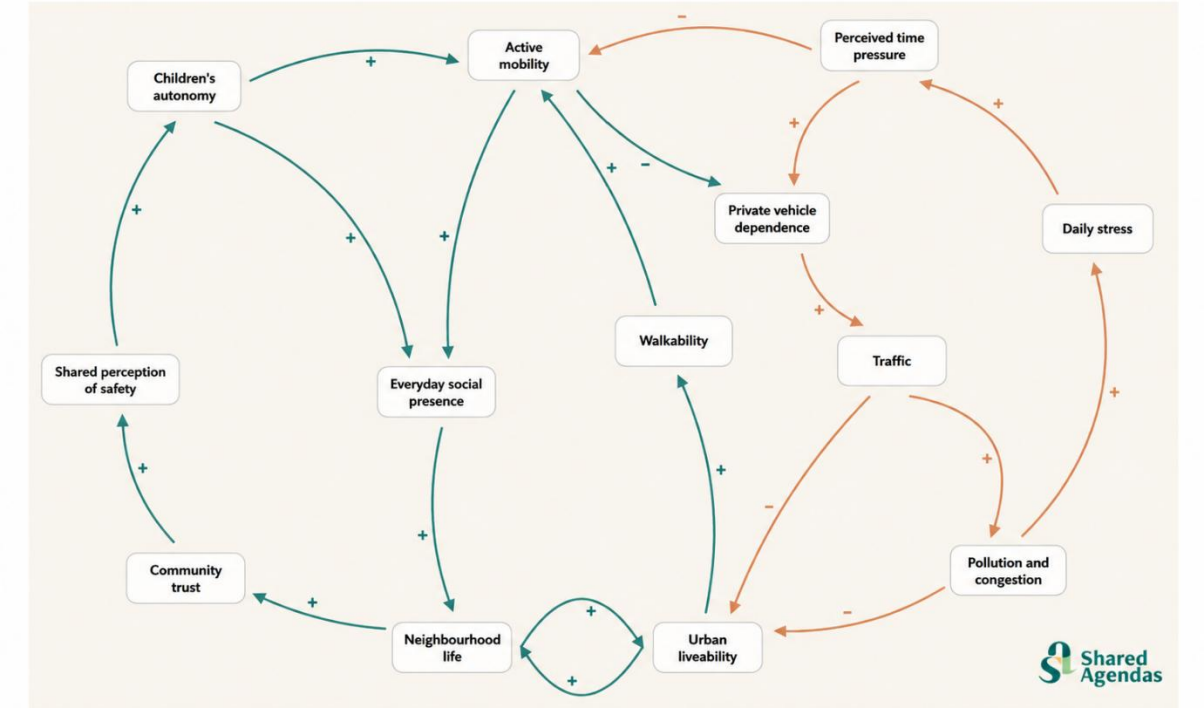
These conditions reduce the liveability of public space and make walking or cycling less attractive. As public space becomes less liveable, there are fewer children in the street, fewer everyday encounters and weaker community trust. This can reinforce the perception that the car is the safest or most practical option, strengthening the cycle of car dependence.

The alternative dynamic builds proximity and neighbourhood life. When services, schools, shops and daily activities are accessible by walking, cycling or public transport, active mobility becomes more viable. As more people use public space in everyday life, streets become more familiar, social presence increases and community trust can grow. This improves liveability and makes proximity-based routines more attractive.

The loop shows that mobility is closely connected to public space, time use, social interaction, safety perception, pollution and the everyday conditions that make neighbourhood life possible.

Key questions

- What factors are reinforcing private vehicle dependence in everyday mobility?
- What conditions make active mobility and proximity more viable?
- How can public space, mobility and neighbourhood life reinforce each other?



5.6. Autonomy and daily life – Protection and institutionalisation

Tension

How can people receive the protection and support they need while maintaining autonomy, participation and everyday life in their community?

What the loop shows

This loop focuses on ageing, care and dependency. Protection, supervision and specialised services are necessary in many situations, especially when people face fragility, chronic conditions or complex support needs. These responses can reduce risks and provide security. When they become the dominant way of organising care, however, they can reduce autonomy, participation and everyday decision-making.

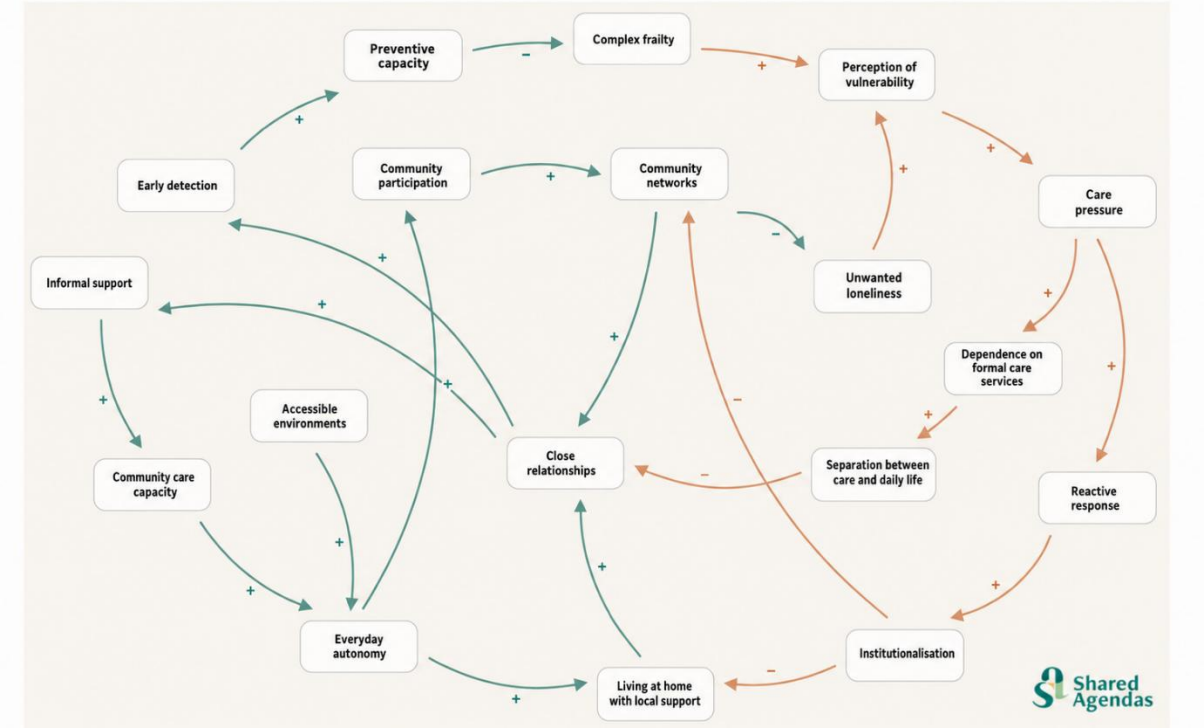
As autonomy declines, people may become more dependent on institutional responses and more disconnected from everyday relationships, neighbourhood life and informal support. This can increase isolation, reduce confidence and weaken the capacity of people and communities to sustain daily life outside formal care settings.

The alternative dynamic strengthens autonomy through accessible services, nearby support, community ties, social participation and arrangements that allow people to remain active in everyday life. In this dynamic, protection can be organised in ways that maintain people's connection to their daily environments, creating the conditions that allow them to live with support, dignity and meaningful participation.

The loop shows that autonomy and protection need to be organised together through care models, housing arrangements, community support and services that maintain people's connection with daily life.

Key questions

- Which forms of protection are necessary, and when can they reduce autonomy?
- What conditions allow people to remain active in everyday life?
- How can care arrangements combine safety, support, autonomy and community participation?



5.7. Functional city – Liveable and relational city

Tension

How can cities maintain functionality and service capacity while strengthening proximity, public life and everyday relationships?

What the loop shows

This loop explores how cities can become organised mainly around functional efficiency: circulation, service provision, land-use specialisation and the management of urban flows. This logic can improve operational capacity and support the functioning of mobility, infrastructure and services.

When this logic becomes dominant, it can increase distances between everyday activities, reduce mixed uses and weaken spaces for encounter. Public space becomes more oriented towards movement and consumption than towards everyday interaction, care, play, rest or community life. As a result, social relationships, neighbourhood commerce and informal support can weaken.

The alternative dynamic strengthens the liveable and relational city. Proximity, walkability, public space quality, neighbourhood commerce and everyday social presence create conditions for interaction and mutual recognition. These conditions support community life, a sense of belonging and local resilience.

The loop shows that city functionality depends on more than speed, access and

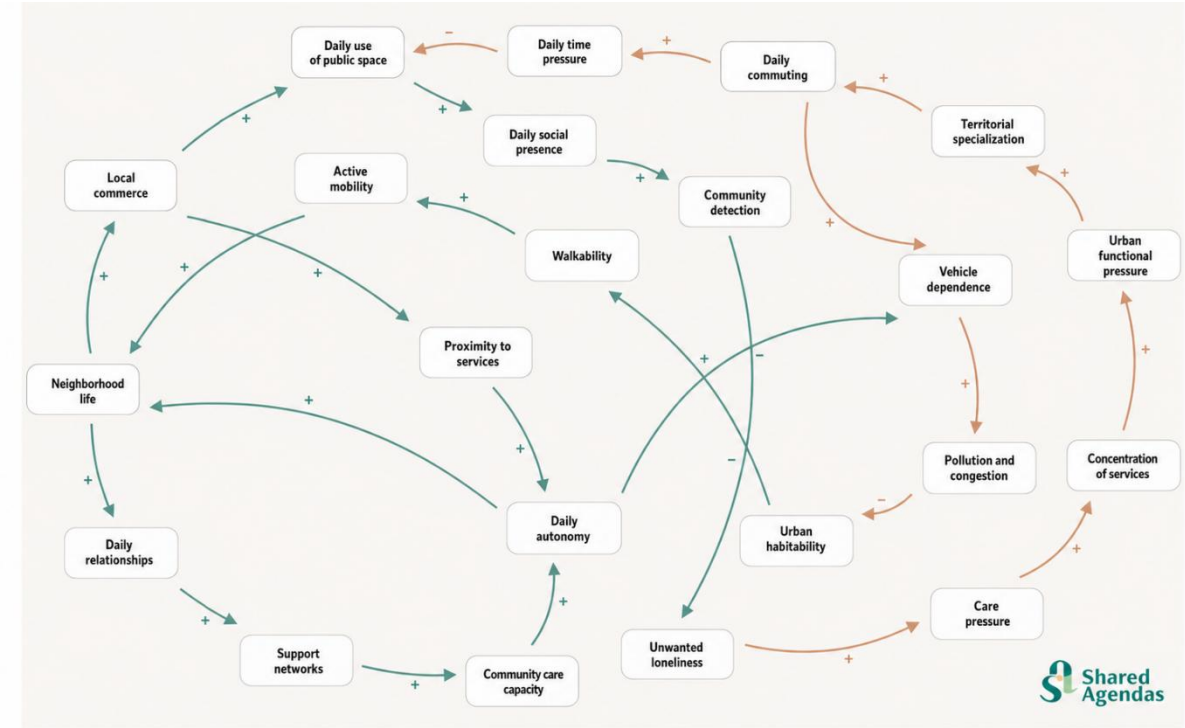
operational performance. A city also needs places where people meet, recognise each other and sustain everyday life. Relational quality is part of how urban systems maintain wellbeing, trust and collective capacity.

Key questions

Which urban dynamics are reinforcing functional specialisation and reducing everyday interaction?

What conditions strengthen proximity, public life and neighbourhood relationships?

How can urban functionality and relational quality be organised together?



5.8. Local food production – Everyday food access

Tension

How can local food production be strengthened while ensuring that local food becomes part of everyday access and consumption?

What the loop shows

This loop addresses the gap between local food production and everyday food consumption. A strong local production base does not necessarily mean that local food reaches households, schools, shops, restaurants or public procurement. Local food may remain visible as a value or aspiration while everyday consumption continues to depend on conventional channels.

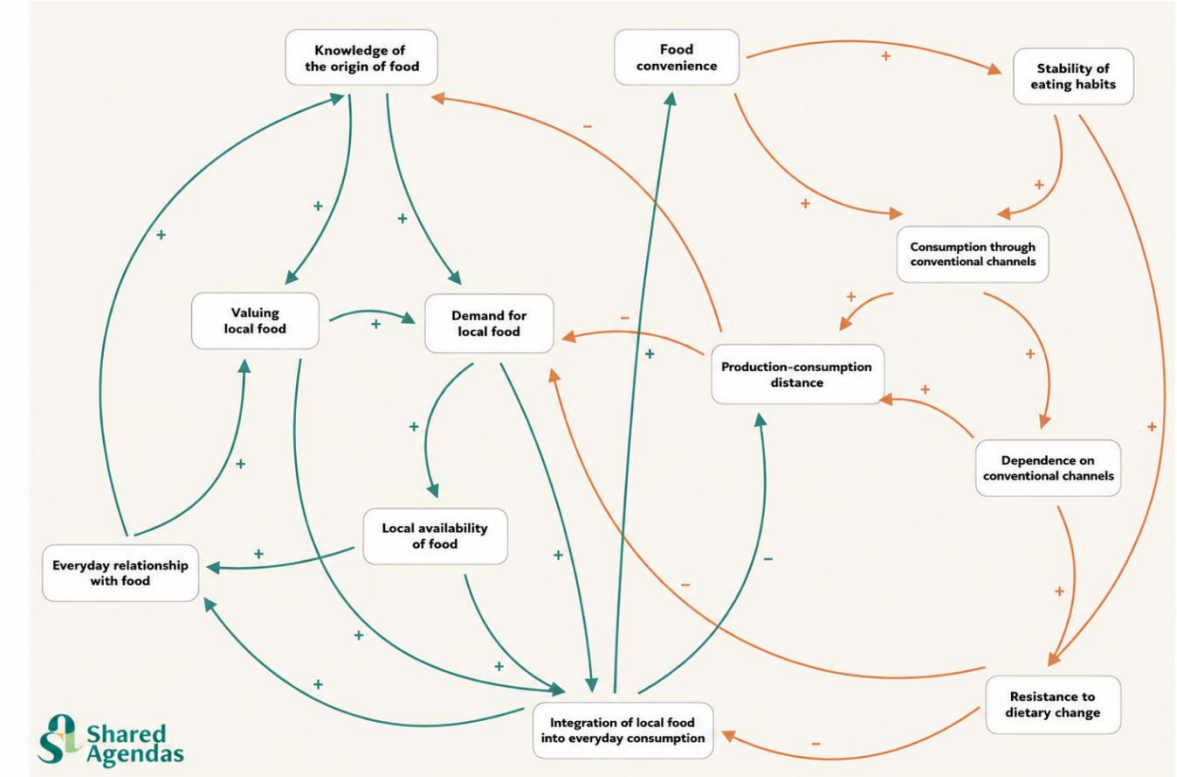
When food access is organised mainly through large-scale distribution, convenience and stable habits, the distance between production and consumption increases. People may know little about the origin of food, local producers may have limited access to daily markets, and local food can remain occasional, symbolic or difficult to incorporate into regular routines.

The alternative dynamic connects production with everyday access. When local food becomes visible, trusted and available through shops, canteens, public procurement, restaurants, markets and neighbourhood circuits, demand for local food can grow. This reinforces the value given to local food and creates more stable opportunities for producers.

The loop shows that food transformation depends on production together with distribution, demand, food habits, access points, trust, knowledge of origin and the practical conditions that make local food part of everyday life.

Key questions

- What prevents local food from becoming part of everyday access and consumption?
- Which channels can connect local production with households, schools, shops, restaurants and public procurement?
- How can trust, visibility and convenience strengthen demand for local food?



5.9. Logistics efficiency – Territorial proximity

Tension

How can food supply remain efficient and reliable while strengthening territorial proximity between production and consumption?

What the loop shows

This loop focuses on food distribution. Large-scale logistics can provide volume, regularity, efficiency and supply stability. These conditions are important for shops, canteens, restaurants and public procurement. When this logic becomes dominant, however, food supply can become increasingly dependent on centralised infrastructures and conventional distribution chains.

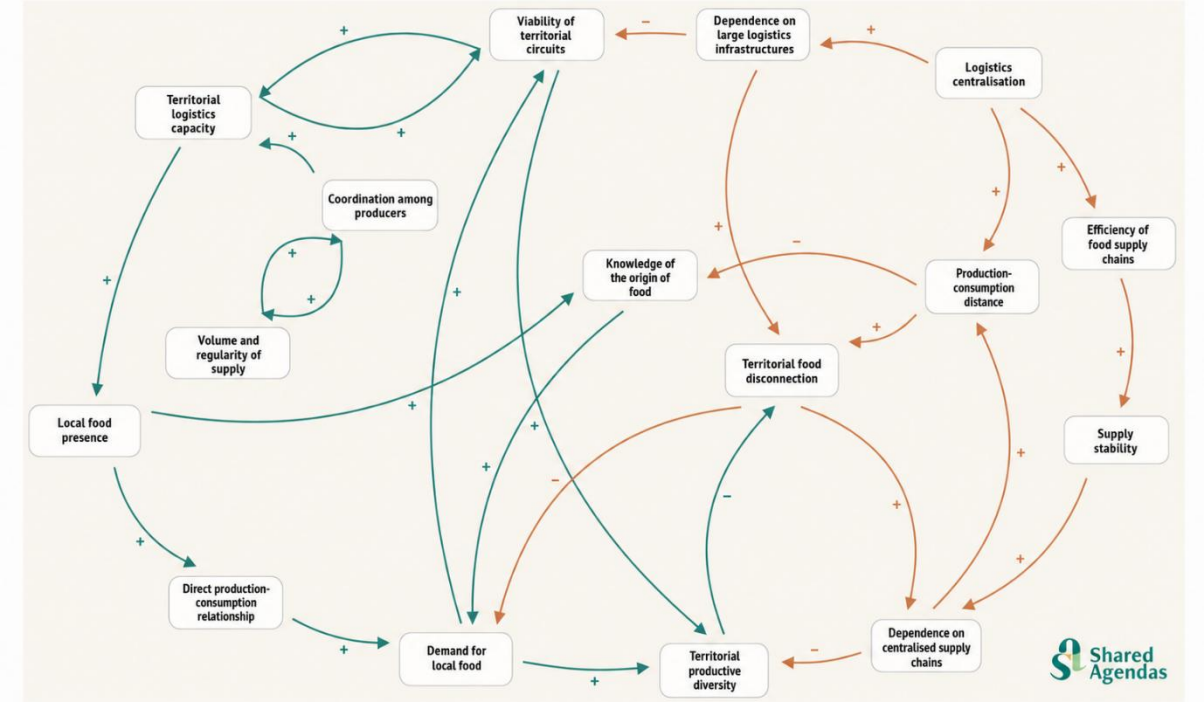
This can increase the distance between production and consumption, reduce the visibility of local producers and weaken territorial food circuits. As dependence on centralised supply chains grows, it becomes harder for smaller producers to provide the volume, regularity and coordination required by daily food access points.

The alternative dynamic strengthens territorial proximity through coordination among producers, territorial logistics capacity, local food presence and direct or shorter relationships between production and consumption. Producer coordination, shared logistics and stable demand can improve the viability of territorial circuits while maintaining supply regularity.

The loop shows that efficiency and proximity need to be organised together. Territorial food systems need logistics capacity, coordination and regularity, together with stronger links between producers, distributors, institutions and everyday consumers.

Key questions

- What forms of logistics efficiency reinforce dependence on centralised food supply chains?
- What conditions make territorial circuits viable and reliable?
- How can producer coordination, shared logistics and stable demand strengthen territorial proximity?



5.10. Surplus recovery – Structural prevention of food waste

Tension

How can food recovery respond to immediate needs while reducing the structural generation of food surplus and waste?

What the loop shows

This loop examines the relationship between food recovery and food waste prevention. Food recovery and redistribution networks are essential when surplus already exists and people need immediate access to food. They reduce losses and respond to urgent needs. At the same time, if the system becomes dependent on surplus redistribution, it can normalise the continued generation of surplus.

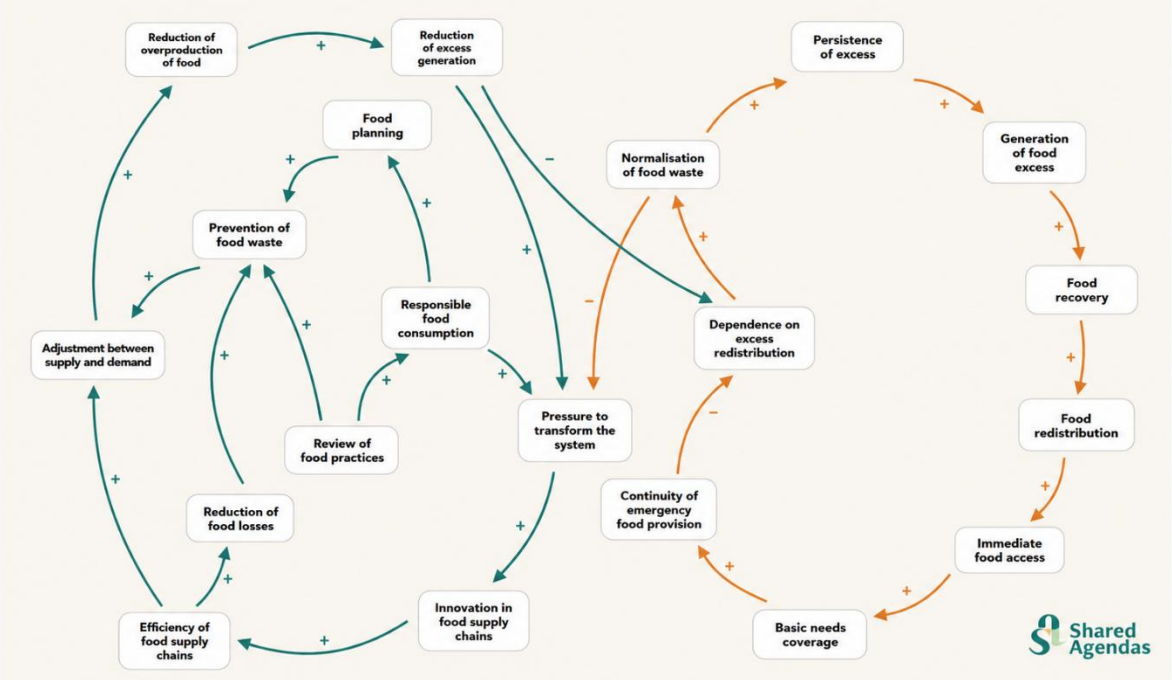
When food surplus is treated mainly as a resource for emergency response, the underlying causes of overproduction, misalignment between supply and demand, and inefficient planning may remain in place. Emergency food support mechanisms can become necessary and permanent, while the structural production of surplus continues.

The alternative dynamic acts earlier. Structural prevention focuses on reducing overproduction, improving food planning, aligning supply and demand, reviewing food practices and reducing losses before surplus appears. This can reduce the recurrent generation of food surplus and strengthen responsible food consumption.

The loop shows that food recovery and food waste prevention need to work together across different moments of the system. Recovery responds to immediate needs, while structural prevention addresses the conditions that generate recurrent surplus and waste.

Key questions

- Where is the current system depending on surplus redistribution?
- What conditions are producing recurrent food surplus?
- How can planning, coordination and alignment between supply and demand reduce food waste structurally?



5.11. Cultural food transformation – Everyday convenience

Tension

How can food cultures evolve towards healthier and more sustainable patterns while recognising the role of convenience in everyday life?

What the loop shows

This loop explores why food habits are difficult to change. Everyday food choices are shaped by time, availability, prices, familiar shopping channels, cooking skills, social norms and convenience. When people face time pressure or limited access to alternatives, they often rely on established food routines and conventional circuits.

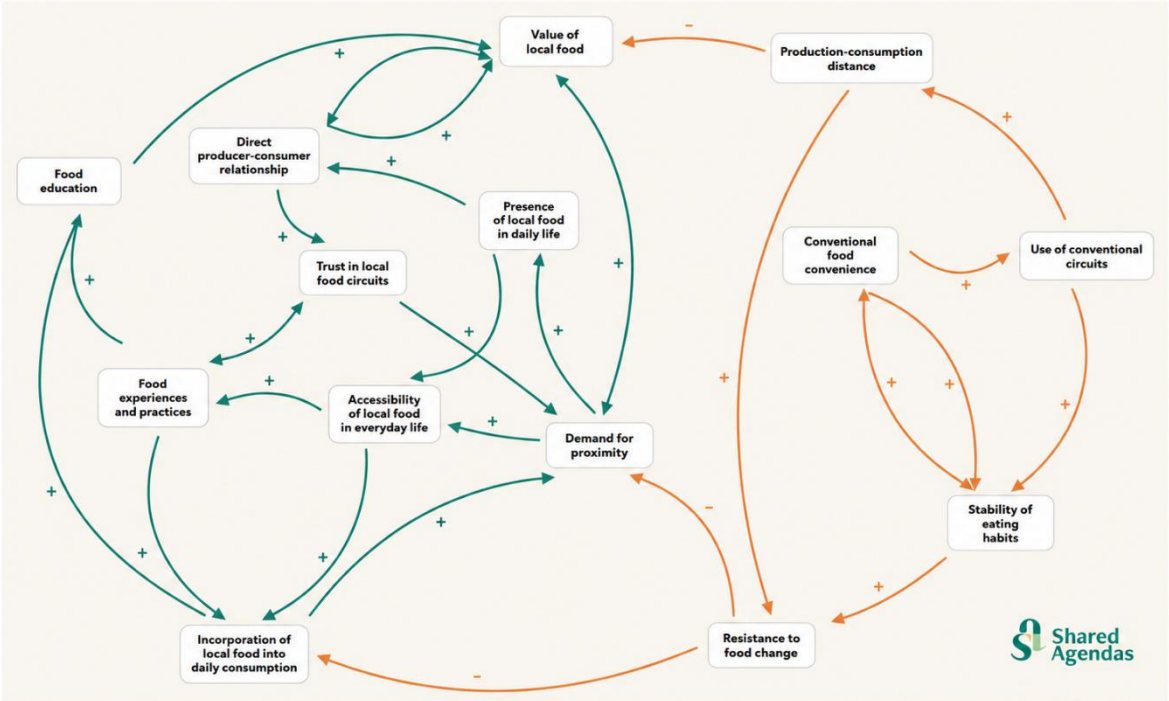
These routines create stability and reduce everyday effort, but they can also make it harder to incorporate local, healthy or sustainable food into regular consumption. The more stable conventional habits become, the more difficult it is for alternative food practices to gain legitimacy, familiarity and practical relevance.

The alternative dynamic shows that cultural food transformation becomes more possible when alternatives are accessible, familiar, trusted and easy to integrate into everyday routines. Food education, practical experiences, local food visibility, community initiatives, public procurement and proximity-based demand can help transform what people perceive as normal, desirable and feasible.

The loop shows that food culture changes not only through information, but also when new practices become socially meaningful and practically convenient in everyday life.

Key questions

- Which everyday conditions are stabilising current food habits?
- What makes healthier, local or more sustainable food practices difficult to adopt?
- How can food education, access, trust and convenience support cultural food transformation?



5.12. Urban concentration – Territorial balance

Tension

How can cities remain strong centres of activity while strengthening territorial balance, distributed capacity and access to services?

What the loop shows

This loop focuses on the concentration of population, services, investment and economic activity in major urban centres. Urban concentration can generate opportunities, efficiency and access to specialised services. When it becomes too dominant, however, it can increase housing pressure, compulsory mobility, infrastructure dependence and territorial inequality.

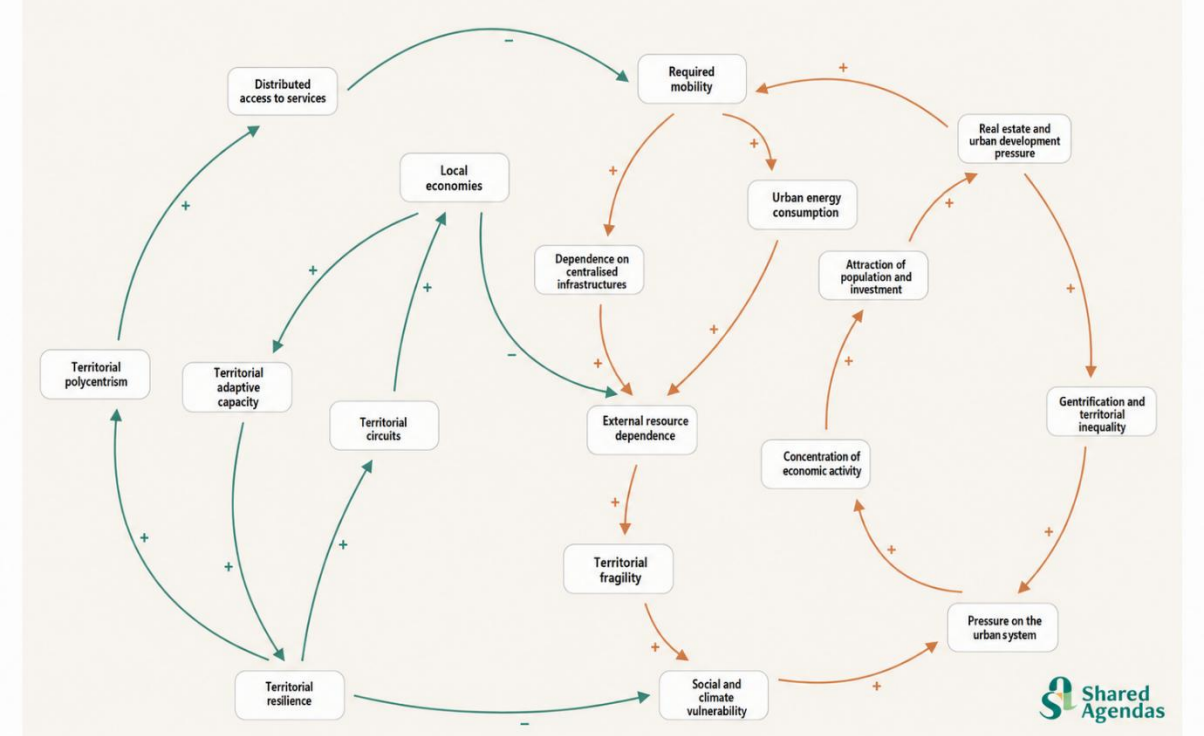
As people, services and investment concentrate in large cities, smaller towns and rural areas can lose economic activity, services, social vitality and decision-making capacity. This reinforces dependence on centralised infrastructures and urban centres. It can also increase vulnerability, because access to opportunities becomes more uneven across the territory.

The alternative dynamic strengthens territorial balance through polycentric organisation, distributed services, local economies, territorial circuits and stronger connections between towns, rural areas and urban centres. The aim is to organise these relationships among urban centres, services, mobility, infrastructures and local economies in a more balanced way.

The loop shows that territorial resilience depends on both strong cities and distributed capacity across the territory. A more balanced territorial system needs access to services, local economic circuits, territorial cooperation and less dependence on centralised infrastructures.

Key questions

- What factors are reinforcing the concentration of activity, services and investment in major urban centres?
- What conditions allow opportunities, services and capacities to be distributed more evenly across the territory?
- How can polycentrism, local economies and territorial circuits strengthen territorial resilience?



5.13. Extractive urban metabolism – Resilient urbanism and ecosystem health

Tension

How can cities maintain functionality and operational capacity while strengthening ecosystem health and climate adaptation?

What the loop shows

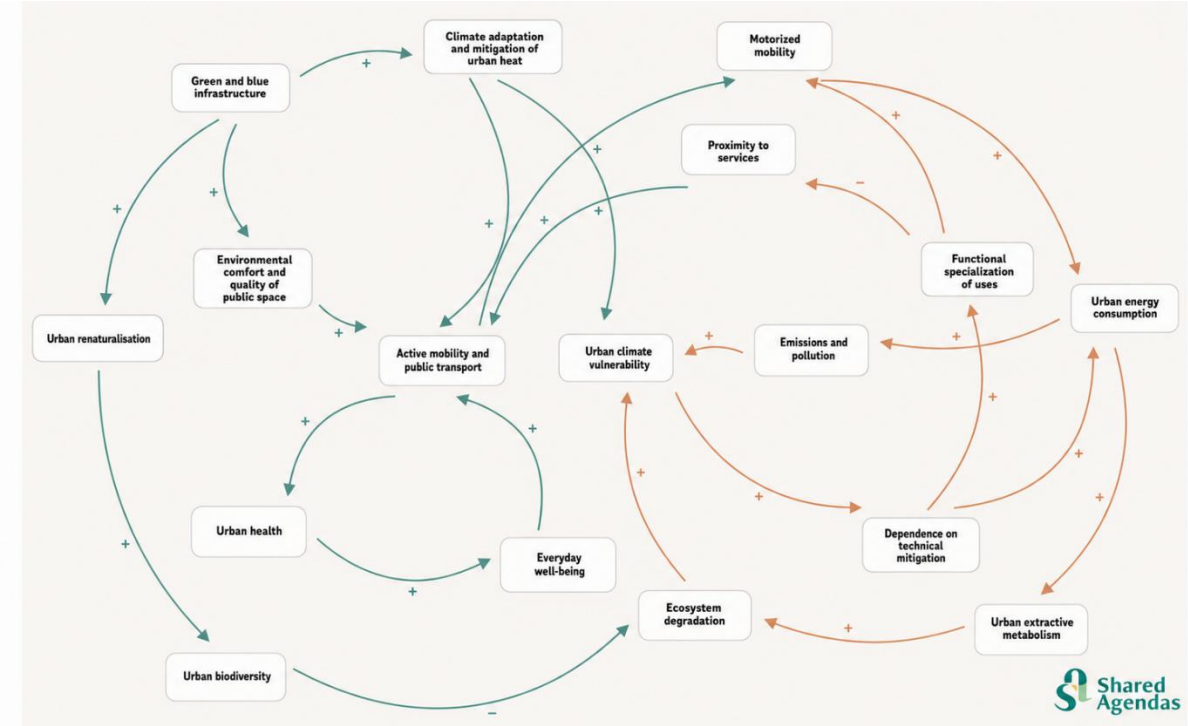
This loop examines urban models organised around fast mobility, land-use segregation, functional specialisation and the large-scale management of urban flows. This orientation can support the organisation of mobility, services, infrastructure and economic activity. When it becomes dominant, however, it can reinforce motorised mobility, energy consumption, emissions, pollution, soil sealing and the fragmentation of natural spaces within the city.

As these conditions accumulate, climate vulnerability increases. Cities become more exposed to heat islands, poor environmental quality and dependence on corrective measures. They require more energy, more technical infrastructure and more compensatory interventions to maintain basic conditions of comfort, mobility and liveability. This consolidates an extractive urban metabolism based on intensive use of energy, materials and resources.

The alternative dynamic links resilient urbanism with green and blue infrastructure, renaturalisation, active mobility, public transport and proximity. These conditions improve ecosystem capacity to regulate temperature, manage

water, support biodiversity and improve environmental quality. They also make walking, active mobility, public life and proximity-based routines more viable.

The loop shows that urban resilience depends on changes in the material and spatial conditions that organise the city, alongside technical solutions. This includes land, mobility, energy, green and blue infrastructure, public space and relationships with ecosystems.



Key questions

- What factors are reinforcing the extractive urban metabolism of cities?
- How do green and blue infrastructure, active mobility, public transport, proximity and renaturalisation contribute to urban resilience?
- What conditions make it possible to strengthen ecosystem health and reduce dependence on corrective measures?

5.14. Individualisation and social erosion – Culture and social capital with collective capacity

Tension

How can individual autonomy and diverse life trajectories be maintained while strengthening social ties and collective capacity to address shared challenges?

What the loop shows

This loop explores how urban precarity, housing pressure, social insecurity and fragmented everyday spaces can progressively weaken social ties. When these conditions accumulate, social individualisation increases and opportunities for encounter, mutual support and everyday cooperation decline.

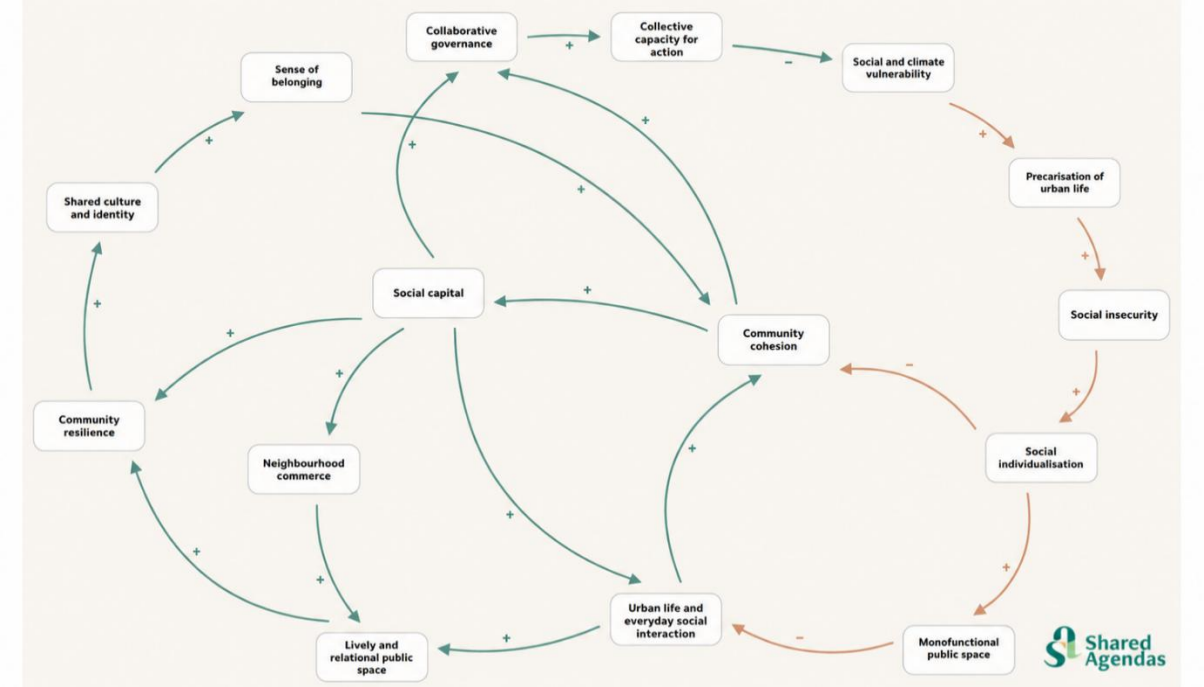
As everyday relationships weaken, community cohesion, social capital and a sense of belonging also decline. People become more dependent on individual resources to address needs that could be partly sustained through closer social, community or institutional networks. This can increase social and climate vulnerability. When collective capacity to interpret problems, mobilise resources and coordinate responses is weaker, communities have less capacity to respond to crises, adapt to change or advance shared transformations.

The alternative dynamic strengthens relational public spaces, everyday urban life, community networks, collaborative initiatives and participation processes. These conditions create opportunities for trust and cooperation. Shared culture, a sense of belonging and community resilience give continuity to social ties and help sustain cooperation over time. Collaborative governance can connect these ties with shared spaces for decision-making, coordination and learning.

The loop shows that individual autonomy is supported by social conditions that make cooperation, mutual support and collective action possible. Strengthening these conditions can help sustain autonomy while increasing collective capacity.

Key questions

- What factors are weakening social ties and mutual support within communities?
- How can trust, cooperation and shared culture be strengthened in everyday neighbourhood life?
- What conditions allow individual autonomy and collective capacity to be combined?



5.15. Extractive construction system – Healthy and regenerative built environments

Tension

How can the capacity to build and adapt inhabited environments be maintained while reducing extractive dependencies and strengthening health, resilience and ecological regeneration?

What the loop shows

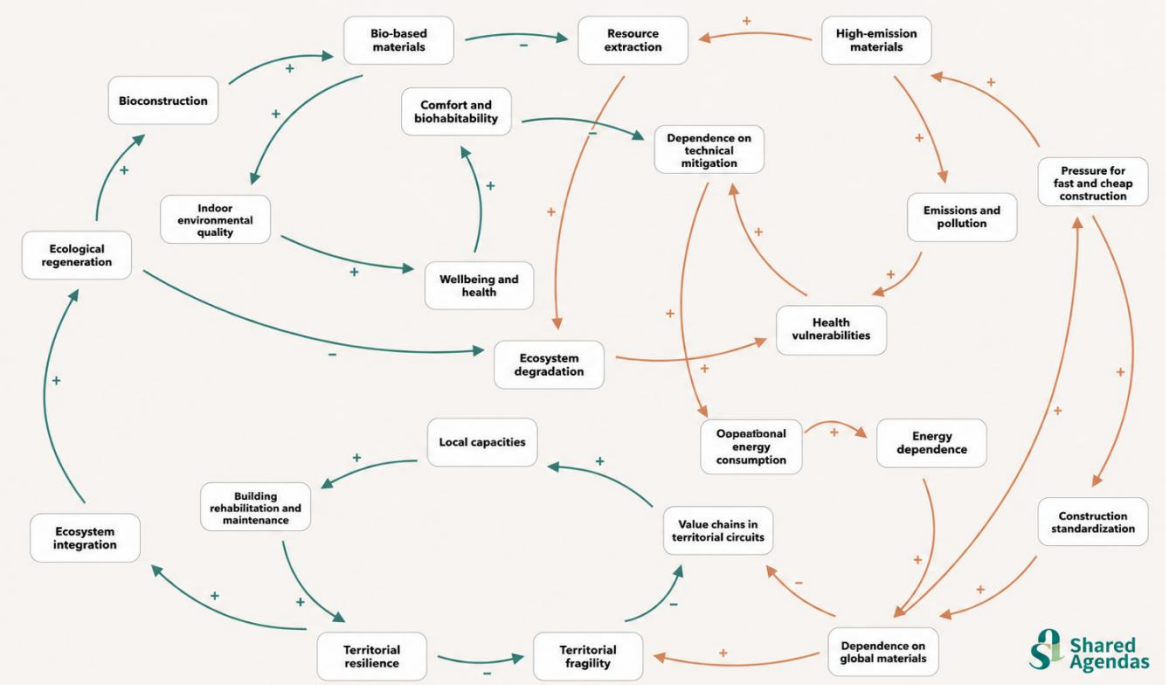
This loop focuses on the construction system. The dominant construction system has developed through intensive resource extraction, high-impact materials, energy dependence and globalised supply chains. This model has increased construction capacity, standardised processes and responded to growing demand for housing, facilities and infrastructure.

When this logic becomes dominant, dependence on global materials, energy and highly industrialised construction systems increases. This exposes the sector to price fluctuations, supply disruptions, energy crises and pressure on resource availability. As operational energy use, emissions and pollution associated with the construction cycle increase, ecosystem degradation also increases. Indoor environmental quality may also be affected by materials, technical systems and construction solutions that do not always support bioclimatic comfort, health or adaptation to local climate conditions.

The alternative dynamic starts from another way of organising construction and the adaptation of inhabited environments. Bio-based materials, reuse,

rehabilitation and building maintenance can reduce dependence on global materials and strengthen territorial value circuits. When these practices consolidate, they increase the capacity to use renewable resources, revalue existing materials, adapt existing buildings and improve indoor environmental quality.

The loop shows that transforming the construction system involves more than replacing materials. It also requires changes in value chains, design criteria, rehabilitation practices, maintenance, indoor health, relationships with ecosystems and territorial forms of production.



Key questions

- What dependencies characterise the dominant construction system today?
- How do bio-based materials, rehabilitation and territorial circuits contribute to territorial resilience?
- What conditions make it possible to move towards biohabitable and regenerative ecosystems?