IMPACT HUB Amsterdam

SOCIAL ECOLOGIES: THE PRACTICE OF ECOSYSTEM-BUILDING

Co-authored by
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Message from Ard and Tatiana:

We are long time practitioners in the field of participatory facilitation and multi-stakeholder collaboration, coupled with a background in integral sustainability and are members of the Impact Hub community. This inquiry was driven by our own curiosity and a need we heard from peers to unpack what ecosystem-building is and how it serves the necessary transition of our times.

We would like to acknowledge the Cloverleaf Foundation for its interest and support of deepening knowledge about social ecologies and ecosystem-building. Gratitude to DOEN Foundation and LNV (the Dutch Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality) for supporting the food ecosystem-building work from which we derived lessons learned that are included in this study. We also especially thank our community and all who engaged in feedback through sharing experiences.

BIOS

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"Love your experiments (as you would an ugly child). Joy is the engine of growth. Exploit the liberty in casting your work as beautiful experiments, iterations, attempts, trials, and errors. Take the long view and allow yourself the fun of failure every day".
- Bruce Mau, creative designer & innovator

1. Setting the Context

With growing urgency for supporting transitions toward a more just and sustainable world, whether they be in food, energy, healthcare or education, there is an increasing need to shift early phases of transition work - which have focused on developing new ways of thinking and doing - into enabling and scaling innovations in entrepreneurial ways. As the need and support for sustainable solutions has grown during the Covid-19 crisis, we have been asking ourselves: How to better create conditions for further adaptation of these new ways? How to create healthy interaction between different organisations - both those entrenched in the current (dominant) system and those that are emerging as innovators - towards shared shift outcomes?

As ecosystem enablers, builders and weavers, we reflected on our experiences in hosting this transition dynamic so as to share learnings on how to further develop and strengthen the practices it takes to do this work. This reflection is based on our experience as part of the Impact Hub Amsterdam community both in terms of building a social ecology of entrepreneurs and willing stakeholders around key issue areas to support the transition from an old system to a new one, and in terms of hosting a wider community of impact makers across diverse contexts. Our research has been guided by conversations with peers and was intended to help us understand the next steps in maturing our ecosystem approach from a nurtured early stage network to a stronger collective impact community that can reach and influence the mainstream. As we talked with peers in the course of our inquiry, we found a shared sense of curiosity about how to improve our abilities to *nurture* and *host* ecosystems that engage people with ideas and energy so as to accelerate the wider change needed in society.

We have found much in conversation but little grounded research or writing explaining how to start and grow social ecosystems; while there are a number of

tools for mapping ecosystems and participatory facilitation techniques, there is little about ecosystem-building as a distinctive process. We have found a general consensus from our conversations that social ecosystems are hard to explain and tough to 'manage' but are still significant as an approach because they enable:

- finding and collaborating with diverse but like-valued partners
- parallel learning, experimentation and embodiment of new ways forward
- the emergence of networks of trust that last beyond 'projects'

This reflection piece has resulted from our 3-month exploration through:

- desk research on social ecosystems and resonant approaches (articles, papers, podcasts)
- interviews with others interested in and/or working with social ecologies
- interviews with a biologist, a researcher on social innovation in sustainability and an academic working with an ecosystem approach for multi-stakeholder processes
- a series of three focus groups with 14 ecosystem builders in diverse contexts
- a focus group with a microcosm of Impact Hub's food ecosystem initiative to reflect on the past 2 years of the ecosystem and to look at its future
- hosting small workshops with peer practitioners in our network - both curated and open to the public - to validate first findings and get feedback
- a review of our own experiences over years of working with and applying various frameworks for collaboration and systemic change

Here we share our learnings on: what do we mean when we say (issue-based) ecosystems (chapter 2), how we see them evolve and mature over time (chapter 3 and appendix A), what are dilemmas encountered (chapter 4), and what are some key competencies that ecosystem-builders have found needed over the evolution of the ecosystem (chapter 5 and appendix B).

As we dove into this inquiry, we recognised the limitations of resources specifically addressing ecosystem-building but have found various related fields such as the growing work exploring (tech) entrepreneurship ecosystems; the field of social innovation; practices such as the Art of Hosting, Liberating Structures, Meshworks and Social Labs; the various domains of multi-stakeholder work; and Transition Theory. Reflecting with peers in this work, we found that practitioners share similar questions as well as the common challenge in how to position the value of the work when it comes to sufficiently resourcing it with capacity and funding. Our curiosity does not

end with this article, but rather we hope that this provides a basis for richer ongoing sharing between practitioners in the Impact Hub community and beyond.

We do want to acknowledge that we have focused this piece on issue-based ecosystems - and while there are other types of social ecosystems that we also encountered, we have been most curious about the *directionality* and *temporality* we have witnessed in how issue-based ecosystems have started and evolved (and also devolved) in response to how they have (or have not) advanced the issue that they first sought to tackle. We understand this experience differs with other ecosystems (geographic, sectoral, organisational, etc) where the focus may well be on sustenance of and continuity of resourcing into the ecosystem over time, and for those we hope our learnings also offer useful insights.

2. What do we mean by issue-based ecosystems and ecosystem-builders?

In its work with entrepreneurs, Impact Hub Amsterdam noticed both the growing number of sustainable food startups and the growing interest in the market (among consumers, investors, policy makers). To support innovative sustainable food enterprises to become market and investment ready, as well as contribute to shortening the chain between food producers and consumers, Impact Hub Amsterdam evolved its incubation and acceleration efforts into convening an ecosystem of relevant stakeholders around the entrepreneurs. The Impact Hub Sustainable Food Ecosystem connects social entrepreneurs, investors, corporates, knowledge institutes, intermediaries and governments with the shared purpose to collaborate in accelerating the transition to a more sustainable food system. Each organisation has its own role and function in the ecosystem: investors to provide capital, social entrepreneurs to innovate, corporates to scale up, intermediaries to enable connections and ensure that knowledge is shared. As the ecosystem continues to evolve, the various innovators and enablers in the Dutch food landscape came together in different temporary coalitions on different topics and initiatives.

In Brazil, the ILO, two business associations and founding partner C&A Institute (Laudes Foundation), supported by Reos Partners Brazil, initiated the Sustainable Fashion Lab in 2017 convening garment workers, retail brands and industry players, entrepreneurs, the public sector, academia, associations and unions, institutes and foundations, international organizations, civil society organizations, media, and others. After constructing four scenarios that describe possible futures for the fashion industry in Brazil, the team developed a systems map and identified key leverage

points for change, created a Theory of Change to achieve its vision of a sustainable and fair fashion industry by 2027, and over the last four years created twenty six multi-sectoral initiatives to tackle six core challenges (working conditions and inequalities, culture and consumption, the business model, education, science and technology, environmental impacts, and public policies) through prototyping, testing and iterating various initiatives.. The Sustainable Fashion Collaboration as it is known today has become a continuous platform for collaboration and innovation to contribute to the transition to a sustainable and fair fashion industry. This is pursued through scaling and developing new and existing solutions, influencing public policy, creating financial mechanisms to invest in sustainable solutions, and continuing to strengthen relationships and foster collaboration among key players in the fashion industry.

These are examples of what we call *issue-based* ecosystems.

Issue-based ecosystems are an interconnected group of organisations that perform complementary functions. These organisations work on a specific issue and around a shared purpose/direction. If you take a closer look, you see that behind the organisations the ecosystem actually consists of *individuals* that work for the organisations. It is on these relationships - or social capital - that people develop with each other that the organisations base their relations and connectivity.

During our research we found that interviewees mentioned very similar **characteristics** of these ecosystems. The *Routledge Handbook of Research Methods for Social-Ecological Systems* describes such characteristics in a complete and coherent way. Based on our reflection, we have experienced our issue-based ecosystems as:

1. **Constituted relationally**, i.e. the relations and interactions between the individuals and organisations in the system are more important than the properties of the individuals and organisations themselves

2. **Having adaptive capacities**. The many interrelations in the system create feedback processes that enable the ecosystem to continuously adjust and adapt to changing conditions, brought about either by the system itself or by external forces. Manon Klein of Impact Hub Amsterdam gave a telling example of this when she explained the changing role of Impact Hub Amsterdam in the local food ecosystem. Impact Hub Amsterdam started organising incubators (2010) and accelerators (2013) for social entrepreneurs and building a community around impact entrepreneurship, working in support of the Sustainable Development Goals. It still continues to do so, but in

recent years Impact Hub Amsterdam decided to focus on specific issues, such as circular economy and sustainable food chains. As Impact Hub Amsterdam noticed a gap between the growing number of sustainable food startups and the growing interest in the market, it decided to develop a specific initiative on food, more than just incubation and acceleration: the Impact Hub Sustainable Food Ecosystem. In the beginning needing to find its specific role and contribution, and due to constant feedback from other actors, Impact Hub Amsterdam found its unique role in scouting innovative social entrepreneurs and matching them with the more mainstream players, next to a more general role of being "the glue" of the social system - keeping existing relations warm, connecting people and organisations, and hosting the emergence of new and deeper relationships.

3. With the dynamic interactions within the ecosystem often **non-linear, complex in causality** and **emergent**, we see that small changes can lead to large and surprising effects, or vice versa. The story shared of an international initiative to work on sustainable food with a series of very intensive workshops and deep dives comes to mind. In the end, a conversation during a 6 hour bus ride in which a corporate employee and an environmental activist serendipitously sat next to each other, turned out to be one of the more powerful moments, as it triggered the corporate employee to set up a extensive sustainability programme that was later seen as leading in the sector. New qualities, relations and solutions will emerge; solutions that cannot be deduced or understood based solely on information relating to their individual parts.

4. Not having clear **boundaries**. It is very difficult to discern which individuals and organisations belong inside the ecosystem and which belong to the broader environment.

5. **Context dependent**. In different contexts, ecosystems will take different shapes. An ecosystem in Brazil around sustainable fashion will have a different form and types of interactions than an ecosystem around diversity and inclusion in the Netherlands. Also if the context changes, the ecosystem will change and elements in the system may take on a different role or function.

These characteristics have been evident through all the stories shared with us, yet one colleague, Alberto Alonso of Impact Hub Madrid, specifically also referenced how the biological concept of an ecosystem usually depicts living organisms and their "nonliving" environment, and how this may especially be relevant when we look at

this work within the wider context of social and environmental change that many of us are working in. This brings to our attention as ecosystem-builders, the relationship with the built environment we may navigate *within* and *with* - be it a physical environment, tacit rules or formal regulatory structures that exist and affect behaviour and perception, perhaps even implicitly influencing the characteristics of an ecosystem and how it evolves (or not).

Differences between networks, communities and ecosystems

During our research we started to notice that some ecosystem-builders used different words in referencing similar work. For example Dona Geagea (PhD NEWAVE-Next Water Governance, former Waterlution) talked about building communities. Christel Scholten (Reos Partners Brazil) talked about creating platforms for collaboration. Annemieke Roobeek (Nyenrode Business University and MeetingMoreMinds consultancy) mentioned networks of networks of networks. We noticed that sometimes the terms were used interchangeably, although we feel there are nuances. We asked our interviewees how they saw the differences.

Based on that, we came up with the following schema. Networks are more transactional: you join them if you feel they add value or are useful for you. Members of communities have a stronger bond and perceive that they share values with other members; it is also clear who is part of the community and who is not. In ecosystems there are more differences and also complementarity between people/organisations as they seek (common) directionality.

Network	Community	Ecosystem
- more transactional - you can choose to be in it while useful - less clear boundaries	- self-declared - more close, intimate - shared values - more static than ecosystem - clear boundaries - strong binding - participants perceive themselves as to have something in common	- interconnected group of organisations that perform complementary functions - more of a systems view - a platform for collaboration, not a specific collaboration - networks of networks of networks - directionality - dynamic, ever-changing

Sometimes we heard described the development from a network to an ecosystem: People meet each other at conferences and events which are typical networking spaces, some get to know each other better and discover they share a perspective

or certain values and seek something in common, and they start organising themselves in communities and deepen their relationships as they share dilemmas and learn together. From that, the impulse can emerge to collaborate and make an impact together, and as a need also arises to connect with other people and organisations outside their own community, they start building and strengthening relationships around that common goal and build out more symbiotic ways of working together in pursuit of that goal.

These three are not mutually exclusive, and can happen simultaneously. Communities could for example be part of several different ecosystems, and any of these can differ in scope and scale. We found the distinction useful to make visible here as we found the frustration of some community and ecosystem-builders with the overuse of such words when they are not accompanied by the depth of practice that is needed for authentic community and/or more complex social ecosystem-building, as meaning gets diluted. As well, some of our international peers highlighted the use of language and cultural context. Network in come cultures connotes loose ties whereas in Portuguese "working together in a network" conveys more intertwined working together than in English. In some contexts, platform is a functional (sometimes technological) reference, whereas in others it means a level playing field we are all on together. Throughout all our conversations, reference was made to true collaboration not being easy and the need to move beyond superficial multi-stakeholder engagement to more interdependent and symbiotic relationship-building over time for long lasting change in the ways systems are set up and the way we behave *with* and *within* them.

Ecosystems as a way of looking at the world

Thus far we have discussed our definition of ecosystems as an interconnected group of organisations that perform complementary functions and how they relate to networks and communities, but another view on what ecosystems are also came up during our research. We were triggered when some people even called a conversation between two people "an ecosystem".

This made clear for us that ecosystems are not only a specific and/or collective thing but also a *perspective on the world* that many ecosystem-builders, including ourselves, hold. It is a perspective where we fundamentally see relationships and interdependencies between different actors and elements first. Remember the optical illusion where you can see an older lady, but if you look differently you see a young woman? One can look at the world and see and focus on the characteristics

of the individuals and organisations - or with an ecosystem lens - see the relationships and the dynamic interplay between them.

The world looks quite differently if you make that shift. In this perspective there is a focus on the whole, the whole system, the dynamic relationships and interactions between people and organisations. In addition to communities where there is also a focus on relationships, the focus in an ecosystems perspective is more on complementarity than on commonality, i.e. not so much looking at how and if people and organisations are the same with the same values, but more how they are rich in plurality and could complement each other.

Ecosystems live

One of the key attributes of this work is an assertion of our social ecosystems as "alive". They are human relations in action, they have a certain culture with sense-making and meaning taking place all the time. Interviewees describe the culture and values of the ecosystems they work with as living into a culture of generosity. Annemieke Roobeek talks about the attitude of giving, giving and giving. In one of the podcasts *Bruggenbouwen met Ecosystemen* hosted by Rolf van Haren and Yves Feijen, they interview Dirk van Meer who is active with student teams in Brainport Eindhoven, an ecosystem of tech corporates, startups, students and knowledge institutes. Dirk describes the culture of the ecosystem in Brainport Eindhoven also as a culture of giving and contributing to the whole. A telling example is that if any student would send an email to the CEO of one of the tech companies with a question, the student would get a response the next day, the CEO would do that from an attitude of *how can I contribute to the whole*. If the whole ecosystem is strong, that is in the end also good for each member in this ecosystem. Stephanie Arrowsmith (Impact Hub Jakarta) pointed out that as the ecosystem develops, she notices in people a growing awareness of the whole, of dependency on the whole and recognition of the interdependencies *between* the different people and organisations.

Margot Vandevoort of Willicroft, a plant-based cheesemaker in Amsterdam, also describes that she first builds relationships with people in the Impact Hub food ecosystem and then later might come up with things to do together, so the focus is primarily on the relationship than on the transaction.

What we also found interesting is how people and organisations relate to competition. People from the Impact Hub food ecosystem describe that as the

ecosystem develops, their perspective develops from a win-lose, what's-in-it-for-me scarcity perspective to a perspective where there is room for all organisations, collaboration is promoted over competition and there is a shift to abundance thinking. Participating organisations receive useful feedback that help them focus on their specific added value; their niche in the ecosystem.

Roel During, researcher of social innovation and cultural heritage at Wageningen Environmental Research, mentioned that for some people in the Dutch culture dependency is seen to be something negative: there is a need to be one's own person and independent. In some more mature ecosystems the attitude changes over time and people start to experience beauty in these interdependencies. More poetically, Andreas Weber, a German biologist, philosopher, and nature writer, talks about ecosystems as *love processes* and how this awareness of interdependency can develop into the feeling and perspective that it is my purpose to strengthen your purpose. Sido van der Meulen of Cloverleaf Foundation and 4Perspectives emphasises the significance of aligning personal purpose with collective purpose when pursuing larger change-in-the-world work.

What does an ecosystem-builder do?

An ecosystem-builder is a person or organisation that takes the perspective of the whole and hosts the emergence of new and deeper relations to create more impact in pursuit of a shared purpose. To use a biological metaphor, an ecosystem builder transports energy and nutrients from one place to the other, and connects different species, helping to nourish the whole living system.

Anouk Talen, facilitator of sustainability transitions and co-founder Proto-Zoöp, pointed out to us that the term 'building' can have a more masculine connotation, and made us see that for us the term contains both the more masculine part of making, directing, creating focus, etc and the more feminine qualities of hosting, enabling, midwifing, weaving and cultivating.

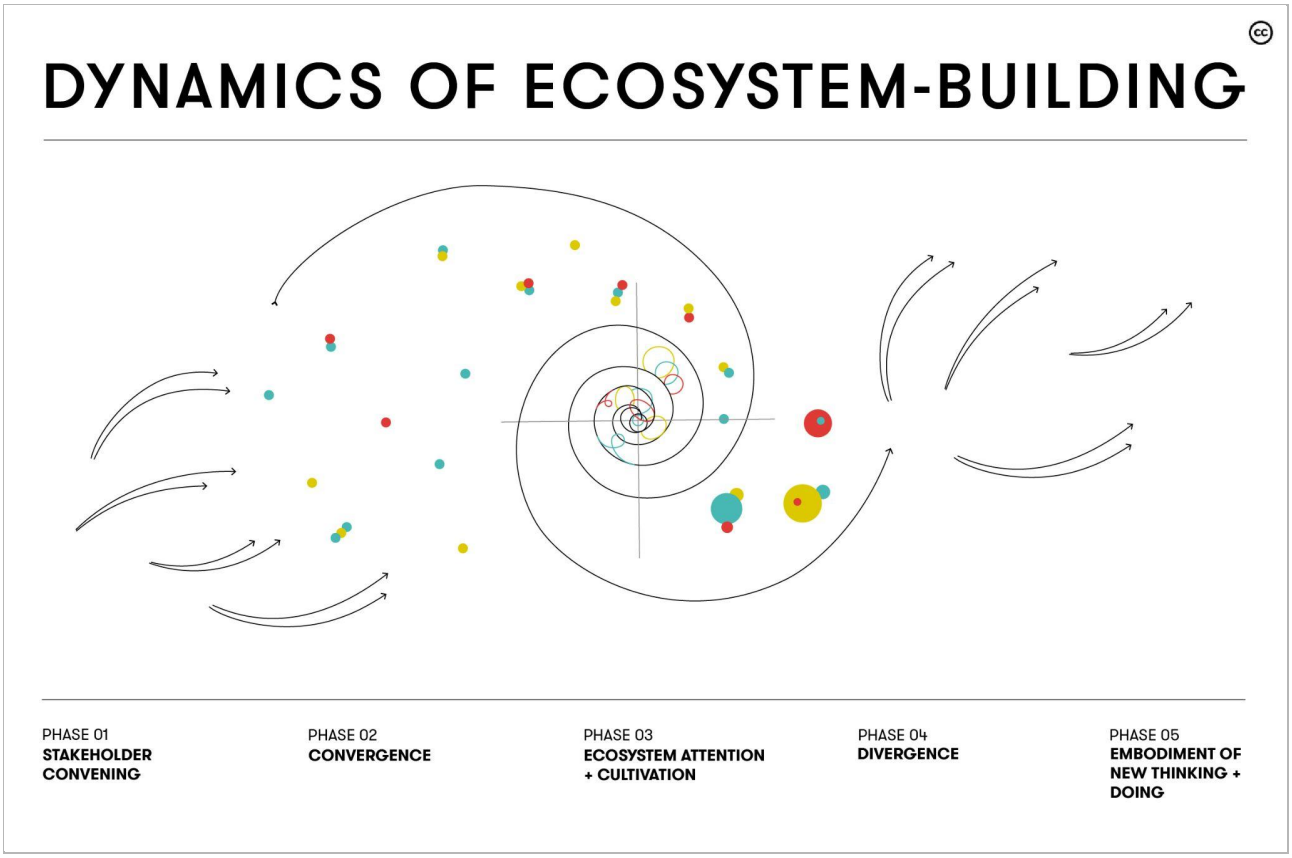
You could see the ecosystem-builder as external to the system, but this is not how most ecosystem-builders see themselves. They are also an integral part of the ecosystem and play a specific role and function. Several ecosystem-builders we spoke with referenced their journeys of self-reflection and growth as they experience and witness the maturation of the ecosystem, and needing to learn more about inclusion and power and social dynamics; expanding their own learning edges along the way. This was usually achieved by widening the diversity of the teams they draw

on so as to have more perspectives and a richer skillset to access in service of the evolution of the ecosystem.

3. An Ecosystem Maturity Pathway

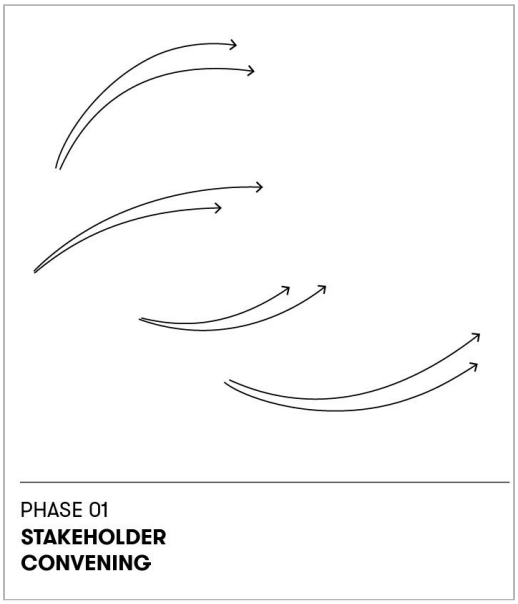
If we look at how ecosystems develop or 'start', as a kind of step 0 or pre-phase, it is important to acknowledge that the ecosystems always already exist. The people and organisations are there and they have certain relationships with each other and the content that they care about. An ecosystem cannot be owned by any one organisation. From the current status quo a new need comes up, something in the ecosystem or in the context has changed, or people see that current practices are running into limits and so a need arises to do things differently - and with that, a need for new and different (inter)actions. As people and organisations in the ecosystem go through the cyclical dynamics we describe below, the complexity of and the variety in the relationships in the ecosystems can increase. This enables the people and organisations in the ecosystem to address ever more complex issues.

The cyclical character of the visual/map that follows (and in appendix A) emerged through different conversations. As we shared stories of how ecosystems we are involved in hosting appear to evolve (or not), it was Tamar Berger, a community development consultant, currently with BIND consultancy and previously with Impact Hub, who pointed out that an ecosystem-builder at a certain point in time starts with a given role, plays out the role and then the role ends. Just as in nature where an organism matures along a natural lifecycle, eventually relinquishing its role in the ecosystem and, in the process, nourishing the whole. We witnessed in issue-based ecosystems the natural tendency towards embodiment or integration of new thinking/doing; other types of ecosystems may well continue on in more structured, resourced or formal ways.



Let us unpack the phases:

Phase 01 | Stakeholder convening

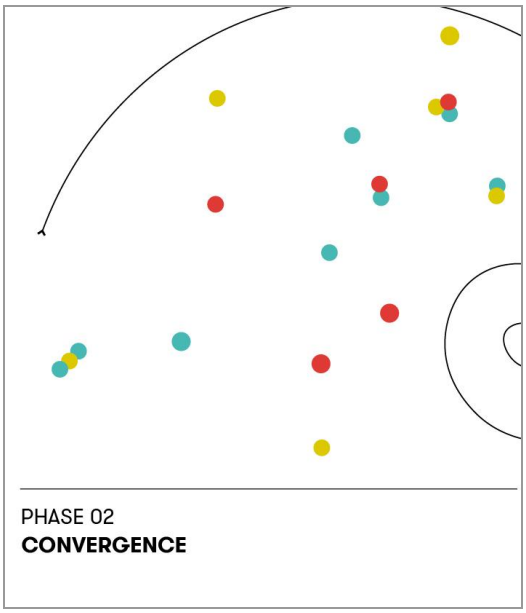


In some ecosystem stories, there were already a number of connections between members in certain stakeholder groups, but some of them welcomed being brought together around a more specific shared sensing of what they can do differently than the status quo of what they are already engaged in, such as corporates in the food sector connecting with new innovators addressing food transition. There may be a growing felt sense for change, and "itch" to do something differently - and a first step in convening those shawho share that 'itch' is in making it explicit by naming and checking "do

you recognise this? how would addressing this be useful for your ongoing work?"

This phase is characterised by a *yearning* for something new, and to discover that together with others in 'the field'. As Anouk Talen shared, it can also be a time for ecosystem players to be letting go of old beliefs in order to step into a new and more generative space. It is in this place that convening may surface naturally from a group itself and/or be called by an organisation (or individual) who sees the potential of bringing the ecosystem together around a shared issue or topic.

Phase 02 | Convergence



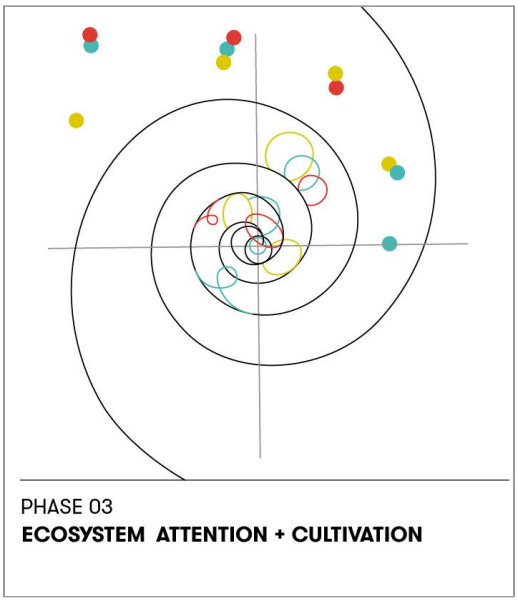
As shared interest grows, diverse players start to converge around a shared purpose - or exploration of purpose if that is not yet clear. Christel shared how the Sustainable Fashion Lab got started in Brazil: the first two years were primarily developing the relationships, the container, sensing possible futures, systems mapping and exploring a shared theory of change. Her role as an ecosystem-builder was largely nurturing the relationships and building a shared systems perspective.

We see that convergence can happen in either of two ways: through commitment to relationship first "we are in this together" and with trust that a compelling shared purpose will emerge to take the group to its next level or through content with a named shift that "x needs to transition" and compelling the players that are interested to jump into a journey together.

However, as Roel shared with us on hearing the stories from other practitioners: from our description so far it can appear as if this phase of convergence flows into its next phase uneventfully when in actual experience this phase is *chaotic* - it is where individuals and organisations are competing for certain roles and resources in the ecosystem, negotiating ideas and ideologies, and trying to make sense of where the whole thing is heading - and if it is worth it for them to invest time and resources in it while embarking on this journey of unpredictable but promised emergence.

It is at this phase where natural convergence takes place and where Annemieke emphasises the importance of onboarding new participants - building trust, hosting with openness and curiosity, also encouraging participants to reflect on their own role as they explore engagement. Practitioners reflected on this phase as a time when attention goes inwards, connecting with each other, making sense of the possible journey and shaping intentionality. At the same time, an ecosystem-builder may notice that a certain role/expertise is not yet represented in the ecosystem and so invite others to participate, and/or others step up from their own initiative and offer to participate.

Phase 03 | Ecosystem Attention + Cultivation



Here the work turns further inward to deepen and build more symbiotic relationships, with the ecosystem-builder paying attention to dynamics such as the relationship between smaller and larger actors and how to enable optimal collaboration, or who else needs to be invited into the ecosystem to bring expertise or a missing perspective. As the ecosystem grows, and starts to initiate actions for external impact, the internal culture evolves and the culture (interior state) and cohesion becomes more important. Christel shares, "Year 3 got more tangible, ideas turned into pilots and programs, recommendations emerged for the sector, financial and regulatory issues as well as power dynamics surfaced". The ecosystem becomes more complex as the interplay between the cultures and practices of *individual* organisations interact with the emerging culture of the *collective* ecosystem. The ecosystem-builder must pay attention to the various dimensions of this stage - here, an *integral* perspective can help.

Drawing on Integral Theory's model of 4 quadrants helps us unpack the different ways to understand the dynamics between the individual-collective and internal-external experiences. An example of how these dynamics manifest can be in terms of ongoing calibration of how one's own beliefs, values, emotions, and thoughts may coalesce (or not) with the collective worldview and culture that

emerges in the group experience. Another example, particularly in transition-type ecosystems, is in the dynamics that emerge around internal understandings and aspiration with the 'real world' systems and structures (sometimes in the form of limitations) that a change-oriented group need to negotiate.

As Chai Locher, organisational development consultant and executive board member at the Institute for Social Banking pointed out, it is not all harmony and In this phase conflicts will come up. This is basically good news and difficult at the same time. Good news because people bring in their information and their insights. All this diverse information is needed for coming up with good ways forward. It is also difficult because conflicts can also easily become destructive. It is the specific role of the ecosystem-builder to create the enabling conditions for constructive conflicts to take place (see also the chapter on competencies needed).

The impulse for manifesting at this phase shows up in prototypes and outputs and new collaboration combinations between players. A looking-in and acting-out can happen at the same time as the system pays attention to what is emerging.

At the same time, as the ecosystem gets tighter, there is also a push for external relevance and "let's take action". We see within the larger realm, fractals of the experience as more collaborations and experiments take place - it is the ecosystem seeing and experiencing more and more of itself. This creates energy, which fuels momentum and at the same time may be experienced as 'messy' with new learning and informal connections emerging, sometimes hard to capture and track. Bonds of trust are important here, so people feel safer in taking up roles and contributing, sometimes in experimental ways. According to Stephanie, the more mature an ecosystem gets, the more specific the roles get and the deeper (and more valuable) the relationships get. Stephanie shares how an entrepreneurship ecosystem they convened and hosted at that point spurred proliferations of other incubators and accelerators and so their own role, or niche in the ecosystem, had to get more specific. As the ecosystem grows, we may critically examine the unique role we (continue to) play. "It was a period of questioning. I felt I had deeper trustful relationships when the ecosystem was smaller." Growth may well lead to contraction or further expansion of an ecosystem's reach, depending on how the impact on the original intent is perceived.

Regarding impact on the original intent, one of the practitioners also shared the experience of starting out with some innovators with a high ambition to transition a sector towards more sustainable practices. In Phase 03 they were confronted with a dilemma as new larger organisations became involved. These organisations brought

scale, but also a necessity to compromise on the original purpose. In the end the innovators ended up with an initiative that diluted the original intent for transition too much.

Phase 04 | Divergence

A few stories of ecosystems who passed through the growth stage and were now in what could be perceived as 'decline' helped us understand how divergence can work in different ways. Divergence has healthy and unhealthy expressions.

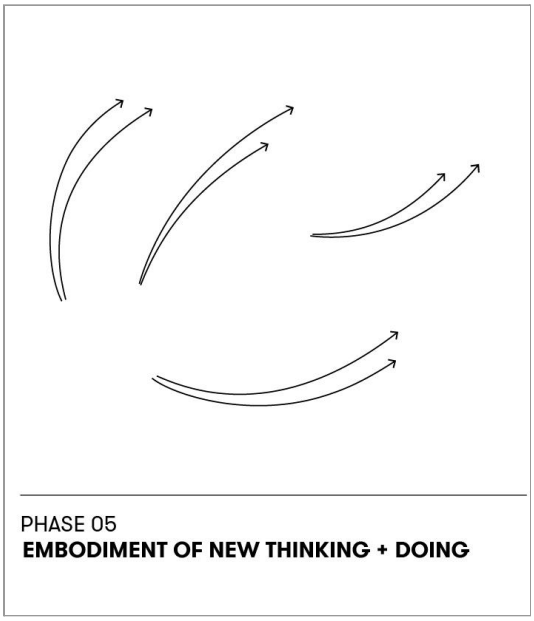
In one regional impact ecosystem, the ecosystem attracted so many keen intermediary parties that it edged out the original beneficiaries that the ecosystem had sought to respond to. And so maturity meant saturation and was very expensive to maintain as it tried to outlive its own utility. In other cases, the system became accustomed to - or comfortable with - itself and so closed itself off and without new fresh air, drew itself to a quick closure. In some cases the organic nature became too formalised "because we needed to write it all down" and/or politics sought to co-opt or extract from successful practices. In some contexts, we are reminded we need to be aware that when ecosystem action is tied to real issues of rights (land rights, food rights, etc), the solutions may counter the prevailing order where continuation of new thinking/doing is not safe.

Other more healthy expressions were characterised by looking for disruption, new infusions of life energy that helped the ecosystem evolve, and energising new ways forward that give birth to new streams of "results". These were coupled with continued catalysing and processes of renewal that ranged from offsites in nature to deepen relationships to serious (financial) investments in experiments. These lead to further embodiment of new thinking and doing.

Speaking with an ecologist, we were reminded how the prevailing mindset of "survival of the fittest" is about competition for scarce resources, where it is actually about being the best adapted - or *fit* - to the circumstances. In living systems there

are many forms of cooperation that enable the system to be more resilient. The challenge at this phase appears to be: how to hold the wisdom of the system as the parts go forth in different ways and speeds?

Phase 05 | Embodiment of New Thinking + Doing



Both Tamar and Jesper Kjellerås (Impact Hub Stockholm) shared examples in their stories of how roles - not just that of the ecosystem-builder but the roles played by various ecosystem participants at any point in time - arise and diminish over the course of the ecosystem, as if continually enriching the 'soil' so that the compost nourishes the next phase or set of emergent initiatives. This is indeed a challenge for facilitators used to more linear processes or process sponsors who expect dedicated (static) roles.

This last phase is one of normalisation - or mainstreaming - where the new perspective, practices, and experiments become embodied into the next level of how the system behaves. This is where, in seeking transition on a specific issue or thematic area, the path that has been illuminated with the vision of what might be possible (Phase 01-03) becomes *integrated* and *grounded* practice. For example, an innovation around local food sourcing and distribution that emerged in an ecosystem initiative grew to be replicated in a number of cities and has contributed to the shift in these contexts for consumers to opt for local purchases. This is the place where we put the ideas into action/behaviour and cultivate new channels for collaboration and visibility. It is often also the beginning of a new cycle , with a new 'itch', and potential new coalitions of stakeholders to convene - and new roles for organisations, including for ecosystem-builders.

Indeed, following through the stories of various ecosystem-builders we witness how significant social capital is built over time; participant testimonials credit the importance of

- a good density of diverse players that keep the energy flowing
- conditions that promote - and resources that invest in - ongoing collaboration and experimentation

- tangible external impact, while attending to internal knowledge capture and sharing

Yet ecosystem-builders continue to have a hard time fulfilling tangible resourcing needs for this work, and several continued the work even when not resourced for it due to a felt sense of responsibility to "keep it going" until new resourcing could be secured. As a number of those we spoke with shared, "not many funders invest in long term ecosystem-building activities - funders focus on concrete results and shorter term impact metrics - but if you don't have the long term container-building, it doesn't work."

So what is the next stage of this work and how do we do it when we are not resourced for it but consider ecosystem-building *critical* for long-term embodied change on the issues we are trying to shift? Ecosystem-builders do not want to hold the role forever, in fact ecosystem-builders more often than not see how the work they do often does not have a path for continuity even when there is enthusiasm in the system. Perhaps then our maturity pathway provides a more realistic and values-aligned way forward - towards natural embodiment and integration - as an alternative to the (rarely) spun out new entity with its own resourcing (such as the Sustainable Food Lab initiated in 2002 that became its own organisation) or full shut-down because an ecosystem initiative couldn't transition (such as an initiative on sustainable mobility in which the key carbon emitting transporters did not stay engaged and so the route to mainstreaming was lost).

4. Dilemmas

Ecosystem-builders run into different dilemmas when journeying along the evolution of an ecosystem. It is almost never a smooth process and it is natural that with the inherent complexity at every phase one runs into problems and issues, so the question is not how can we avoid dilemmas and problems, but how do we *relate* to them and deal with them.

Ecosystem-builders that were interviewed mentioned several dilemmas:

Only systems and structures - Fabio Sgaragli, social innovation expert at the Fondazione Giacomo Brodolini, mentioned that he has worked with an organisation that wanted to strengthen a certain ecosystem, but that had only focused on setting up an incubator, making a specific building and space available for stakeholders to meet and work together and setting up a fund. However, it had not put any effort into

cultivating and strengthening the human relations and connections between people and organisations. The consequence was that the systems and structures were in place, but the ecosystem did not become alive and thus the systems and structures were not used. We heard from several practitioners that this 'lesson learned' about the importance of paying attention to the human relation side (interiors in the integral quadrant) and their exchange with the (exterior) systems and structures, tends to be one of the hardest ones to convey to sponsors and funders of new ecosystem initiatives. Creating the 'social glue' part of the transition is often underestimated - and under-resourced.

Focus on survival - A little bit further in the process, during the itch-convergence phase, some sort of overarching goal must arise based on a growing awareness of dependency on the whole system and importance for each stakeholder to take care for the whole. Several ecosystem-builders pointed out that creating this awareness can be difficult in contexts where there is a lot of scarcity and where people and organisations are literally struggling to survive. Organisations, naturally, focus a lot on their own interests. In a situation of affluence there is more bandwidth to take the perspective of the whole and be willing to invest in strengthening the ecosystem as a whole, even though it is not directly in your own personal or immediate organisational interest.

To address this dilemma, as also described earlier in the description of the phase of convergence, Christel invests a lot of time in co-sensing and creating a common enough view of the current situation and the interdependencies. She also invests in building the capacity to exchange views despite differences and to be able to embrace conflict and connection at the same time. In this way she creates a culture of dialogue and respect, which helps the ecosystem players grow *through* such challenges.

Too much focus on results - Several Dutch-based ecosystem-builders recognise the dilemma that people and organisations focus a lot on achieving concrete results and are very action-oriented, and so they shortcut relationship-building or assume it is sufficient given short timelines. When a retreat or offsite days are suggested to dive into how to make sense of the developments in the context or deepen collective exploration into what this new perspective is that is needed to address the issues, or find out in a deeper way what organisations aim to achieve, often the reaction is: we have no time for that, we do not know what it will lead to beforehand, so let's keep it concrete. This leads to efforts that often have the character of optimisation (more of the same) instead of transformation.

A possible way of addressing this dilemma is going with the stakeholders into action mode and assuming that they will run into problems. A natural need will then arise to tackle the problem and hopefully all will become more curious about exploring the new perspective available.

Premature aging and loss of vitality - In another entrepreneurial ecosystem in its rather early stage, the organisations were so satisfied with the current participation and collaboration with the organisations active in the ecosystem, that they were no longer open to new participants to connect and join in. They essentially closed the boundaries at a fairly early stage, missing out on some of the perspectives and new participants *needed* to evolve their purpose and impact. With that, the group soon lost their vitality and came to a kind of standstill. The dilemma here is how much diversity and newness to strive for. It is not true that more diversity is always better (also not in nature, as there are examples of biological ecosystems that do not have a lot of different species but are extremely stable and robust) but it is about *requisite* diversity to keep the system alive. learning and evolving. Some kind of stability in who is part of the ecosystem and how organisations relate to each other is needed, but too much stability leads to standstill and premature aging and death.

It was also mentioned that too much attention to organising logistics can detract from caring for the fluidity of the experience; and can kill the (potential) life of a system. One suggestion (funding permitting) is to have a secretariat as a backbone organising entity so that the ecosystem-builder and players can have more space to be co-creative. This is where institutional initiatives or sponsors, while well-intentioned to support pioneering efforts, can inadvertently burder innovators with administrative over strategic concerns.

When to stop and how to handover the role - When ecosystem attention is winding down and moving towards divergence and the embodiment of new initiatives, also the role of the ecosystem-builder comes to a natural end. The organisations in the ecosystem should take over and organise themselves, but this is a tricky transition. Often organisations and people do not self-organise and still some form of coordination is needed. The dilemma for an ecosystem-builder is how to (slowly) phase out their role while ensuring that some of the coordination and relationship-building functions that are still needed are assumed by other organisations, or to consciously exit functions that one no longer needs as new thinking/doing is (slowly) embedded in the prevailing system - growing it into its next level.

Some ecosystem-builders also mentioned that they were regularly questioning themselves whether they were still needed or had to wind up their role, were required to transition to another role, or needed to host succession of their role. This transition was often easier and more natural when ecosystem-building capacities had been in-built to the system so that the joint journey is truly collectively hosted, with the capability for any one person/organisation to step in when/if needed by the system.

Reinventing the wheel - Especially in ecosystems where grassroots movements play an important role, the question is how to build an ecosystem if the people are constantly changing? How do you onboard new people without over structuring? Or as Eva Dassen, a political activist, facilitator and performer, puts it: How to do knowledge management if there are cycles of people coming in and going out? "There is a need for keeping the wisdom of the system even if key individuals move or the movement grows."

One does not want to reinvent the wheel again and again of how to go through the phase of ecosystem attention, but at the same time one wants to stay open and curious about new ways of engaging when new people/organisations enter. To address this dilemma, Eva drew on research by social movement researchers (such as the writers of *This is An Uprising*) to develop within Extinction Rebellion a "DNA training" as a specific map of working that captures the way they do things. She trained new people in the DNA, but at the same time kept open for emergence and new learning.

Saturation - In the building of one entrepreneurial ecosystem, it got so much attention that a lot of organisations stepped in and wanted to play a role, not so much as entrepreneurs, but in supporting the entrepreneurs to grow. As Fabio puts it: "At some point it seemed that there were more incubators and intermediaries than entrepreneurs!" Looking at other similar contexts, it appeared incubators that do provide added value and/or differentiate naturally survived and others stopped, until the balance became healthy again

In a pressure cooker - several ecosystem-builders spoke to the need for embedding unstructured reflection time in the process yet feeling the pressure from sponsors to meet targets and keep on a time schedule. One practitioner shared her learning of the need for allowing space for the evolution of targets over time. We noticed some differences in how sponsors and/or stakeholders respond to non-linearity and emergence across different cultural contexts, some are more comfortable than others when things veer off-path for a while as there might be something interesting to discover in the sideroad. Ecosystem-builders who face this pressure value hearing

peer inputs on how they have dealt with the dilemma and any useful means to address sponsor pressure. Engagement of the sponsors in the process itself have shown to make a difference to their understanding - and felt experience - of the value of the process.

At some point in time an ecosystem-builder - or any participant - might feel overwhelmed by the complexity. A key learning from looking at biological ecosystems and their capacity to work with diversity might shed light on our learning edge in social ecologies as we have often witnessed humans reach their own real saturation point at some point. How do we exercise our capacity to work with complexity when it becomes "too much" for us? The invitation at this point is to relax into and accept the inherent complexity that we actually know very well given we too are complex living systems, embedded within a larger complex living system.

5. What competencies are necessary?

As we reflected on the practices of ecosystem-building with facilitators at different phases and in diverse contexts, we found that there was a need for one's role as a host or facilitator, and one's competencies, to *adapt* and *evolve* over the course of the maturation of the ecosystem. The skills and capabilities needed early on to invite, orient and converge participants are different from those needed when the ecosystem tips into mainstreaming the new knowledge and practices and one needs to host divergence, adaptation and embodiment. In appendix B we have summarised our learnings in a competency matrix by phase and by skill set.

Overall, we have seen that as an ecosystem matures, the more specific the roles of ecosystem players get and the deeper (and more valuable) the relationships become. As the ecosystem grows, and engages more players and has more external impact, the internal culture evolves and the culture (interior state) and cohesion becomes more important - seeking a healthy balance between shared values and diversity of players and experiences.

Tamar shares how at a certain stage there is an expectation for an ecosystem to become self-organising but actually it doesn't - and that is when cultivation and the practice of the ecosystem-builder becomes that much more important as does reliable resourcing. "Having access to various digital platforms brings a lure that it is scalable, but it doesn't take care of culture" and those practices that enable us to act well and reliably together in pursuit of our purpose help us create the *conditions* to shift into our next level of operating and impact making.

We have found at each phase of the ecosystem maturity pathway, we can cluster the necessary skills into 4 competency sets that contribute to:

a. **Build Human Relations** - the set of skills around supporting individuals to interact in a healthy manner with others and build strong relationships. This includes looking after the individual and collective experience, building trust and culture, establishing communication channels and supporting deepening of understanding and/or resolution when friction and/or difference arise so as to support the good of the whole.

b. **Curate Content** - the set of skills that cover the gathering, presenting, processing and critical analysis of information that is relevant to a particular topic of interest to a group; supporting meaning-making so that the information becomes knowledge and of value to the collective learning space.

c. **Infuse Vitality and Coherence** - the set of skills that enables an ecosystem-builder to sense into what is needed and possible for the system as a whole and discern how to respond to either energise or calm a group, to either provoke or ease a situation, to either bring a little creative chaos or ground the chaos in order, through conscious interventions that add to the overall learning experience and strengthen the collective.

d. **Earn Mandate** - the set of skills that helps one understand how to lead and how to exert natural authority in guiding a process and being respected and trusted in doing so; also how to host agreement-making and contracting between diverse parties that may often bring assumed power with them due to (perceived) seniority, rank, or resourcing (money).

As one moves along the phases of the ecosystem maturity, we can see the need for an ecosystem-builder to evolve from providing basic context and safety to being able to hold the diversity of interrelationalities that emerge and eventual dispersion into their most meaningful ongoing contributions.

Walking through the pathway

Phase 01 starts with stakeholder convening around a shared ‘itch’ to act; the ecosystem-builder needs to be able to give people the right type and amount of safety, making it safe enough for them to step in. It is important to acknowledge that different kinds of people need different kinds of assurances of safety. Safety includes making sure the goals of the initiative, the norms on how to interact and collaborate,

and the roles that different people play are as transparent as possible. It is also good to make sure that it is clear what is expected of people when they join in. Also, if people in a group feel unsafe they have the tendency to communicate in ways that make others feel unsafe (ambiguous, vague or too much). The role of the ecosystem-builder is to frame what is needed both in terms of process and in content, and to host others to do the same so they can step in and converge (Phase 02) around a shared purpose.

Once people start working together (Phase 02-03) the different interests, perspectives and values of people and organisations that are part of an ecosystem will become more apparent. This will lead to differences of opinion and conflicts. Conflicts on how to go forward, what to prioritise, how to implement, who should take up which role, who should be involved, etc. The key point here is not to want to avoid conflicts, but to host and make sure that conflicts will be resolved constructively, using feedback methods, deep democracy, negotiation based on interests, consensus-building and other conflict resolution methods as relevant. If you find that in a group there is a lot of complaining going on, or even rebellion, these are symptoms that there are different opinions and points of view that need to be handled constructively.

Organisations' interests and power also come into play when participants are vying for powerful positions within the system, are investing capital with the expectation of determining or at least influencing the direction taken, or are taking credit for the system's success. For their own vitality it is important that organisations meet their longer term interests. They also need to be able to show to their internal stakeholders their contribution and how results in the ecosystem serve them. However, ecosystem-builders should strive to host them in a way that strengthens (and not weakens) the ecosystem as a whole.

The competency to sense tensions and sense into the whole is valuable. It comes with experience in sensing the difference energetically between dissonance and urgency, in to how to host awareness of power relations in interactions and historical dynamics, as well as in navigating the (sometimes implicit) role of institutional power.

Ecosystem Attention + Cultivation (Phase 03) requires an ecosystem-builder to maintain one's capacity to see the system from outside-in; to draw on new learning and emerging perspectives so to keep momentum and the co-sensing of fresh possibilities in the wider field of the issue being explored. Deep care in facilitating collaboration needs to be coupled with courage to call the tough conversations and

help the collective face what *is*, as often it is in the toughest spots that the richest insights lay. It is at this point that there is often a need to bring in more (specific) expertise, and the ecosystem-builder may feel ill equipped to be the one to provide this input - it is important to realise that it is not the ecosystem-builder's role to be a content expert, but to be able to source and bring in such inputs as they are needed.

At a certain point in time, there will be natural divergence (Phase 04) within the ecosystem as a newly learned perspective takes root in each ecosystem player and each moves towards integration in its own personal and/or organisational practice. Here the ecosystem-builder plays a crucial role that is often underestimated. While players "let go" of the collective commitment in time and presence, this is actually a key moment for both harvesting (capturing) collective learning and for embedding (new) capacities so to continue this way - or in a new way - as attention shifts from the collective project to embodiment in one's own life/organisation and inter-organisational relations. As creative designer Bruce Mau shares, "When the outcome drives the process we will only ever go where we've already been. If process drives the outcome we may not know where we're going, but we will know we want to be there."

It is important to be mindful of the role of information and knowledge management throughout the lifetime of an ecosystem, Phase 04 is a critical time for the ecosystem-builder to support knowledge transfer and documentation. It is also a time when participants may need coaching in the potential new roles they may take up, and to be hosted in the *letting go* of what is no longer needed. At the same time, the ecosystem-builder may well be questioning one's own role (exit or re-invention) as the core ecosystem work starts to shift and evolve.

As the ecosystem shifts into Phase 05: Embodiment of New Thinking + Doing, there remains a need for the skills of convening and harvesting that the ecosystem-builder has carried along all phases, but that may well be taken up by any one or more parties in the ecosystem: creating opportunities to meet/keep in contact, as well as harvest and feed collective learning back to all as new thinking and doing is integrated.

Evolving one's craft

German journalist and author Andreas Weber, who has degrees in both marine biology and cultural studies, shared in a 2019 lecture how ecological thinking is at odds with the transactional, competitive economy we have come to know, He

advocates that instead, we need ongoing *reciprocity* to stay alive such as the relationship we have with trees: we nourish the plants and are nourished by them, and this is what keeps life flowing - to not take more than you give. “Ecosystems recreate themselves. We have the knowledge because we are part of it.” In the OECD’s recent study of local ecosystems for social innovation, skills are recognised as important; both as a resource that local actors contribute as they engage and partner in larger initiatives and as a key asset that is found in clusters of diverse players that come together around shared interests.

And so as we aim to take and keep a wider perspective, while hosting the ecosystem as it lives and grows and at the same time sometimes having sponsors that expect predictable results, Michel Schuurman of MVO Nederland perhaps put it best in naming the key competency of being able to “work with linear steering in a non-linear context”.

But perhaps when one is faced with the choice of how to intervene, it is Donella Meadows who, with her own deep experience in systems change, said it so eloquently: “Magical leverage points are not easily accessible, even if we know where they are and which direction to push on them. There are no cheap tickets to mastery. You have to work hard at it, whether that means rigorously analyzing a system or rigorously casting off your own paradigms and throwing yourself into the humility of Not Knowing. In the end, it seems that mastery has less to do with pushing leverage points than it does with strategically, profoundly, madly letting go.”

6. Feed-forward

Learning from studies that exist in documenting the world of many tech startup ecosystems, we found Cukier and Kon’s study as being one of the most revealing; the maturity of the ecosystem is characterised by the density of connectivity and the long-term commitment of players and generational reinvestment of wealth into the ecosystem towards its self-sustainability. In our small study we have found a difference with issue-based ecosystems, that rather than becoming self-sustaining systems in their own right, they tend to lean into embodiment and integration into the dominant system to *evolve* it. For example, in our food ecosystem work, while still well underway and not yet phasing out, we have started to see evidence of take up of the innovative practices into the prevailing system and shifting behaviours; the plant-protein transition being the most visible.

As Cukier and Kon also learn through their study, a key skill of ecosystem players is being able to “work together in collaboration, with a shared understanding of the complex structures in which they are embedded.” This is to understand the nature of one’s own initiative and the wider social ecology in which it is interdependent. Tamar shares, “At some point we may have reached an optimal point where everyone understands, and co-evolves naturally” but if anyone stops doing their part - especially if it is a vital contribution - the whole thing could potentially collapse.” Nature’s ecosystems have a self-regulating mechanism; in social ecosystems we are our own self-regulating mechanism. As Stephanie ponders, “how big can it grow before there is confusion?” And so we find ourselves turning back towards biological references, and what we as a human species need to keep learning: that there are limits to growth.

Roel pointed out to us that biological ecosystems organise around the resource that is scarce. For example, in a tropical forest sunlight is scarce, so the whole ecosystem is organised to use and distribute this scarce resource. This makes us curious about the parallel to issue-based ecosystems.

Perhaps the resource that is scarce in social ecosystems is the new perspective: the new way of thinking and doing that is needed for solving the complex issues of our times. Maybe social ecosystems are what nature organises *through* us in order to distribute this scarce resource and maybe - different to biological ecosystems - this new perspective becomes less scarce and more present and abundant over time, so that the problems we set out to tackle can be solved. This is until, with our solutions, new problems arise and the whole process starts over again, each time tending towards more wholeness and complexity while exercising our muscles for collaboration.

With this, there is obviously more to dive into as we go forward and as we explore an ecosystem approach as one that is relevant to the compounding challenges of our time. We see that any one issue opens the door to others, and how matters of power, inclusion, risk and access undoubtedly cut across all themes as we seek to build just and sustainable solutions that stick. We look forward to how further learning in action together can accelerate our fluency in this work - and ultimately in the transitions we seek to make.

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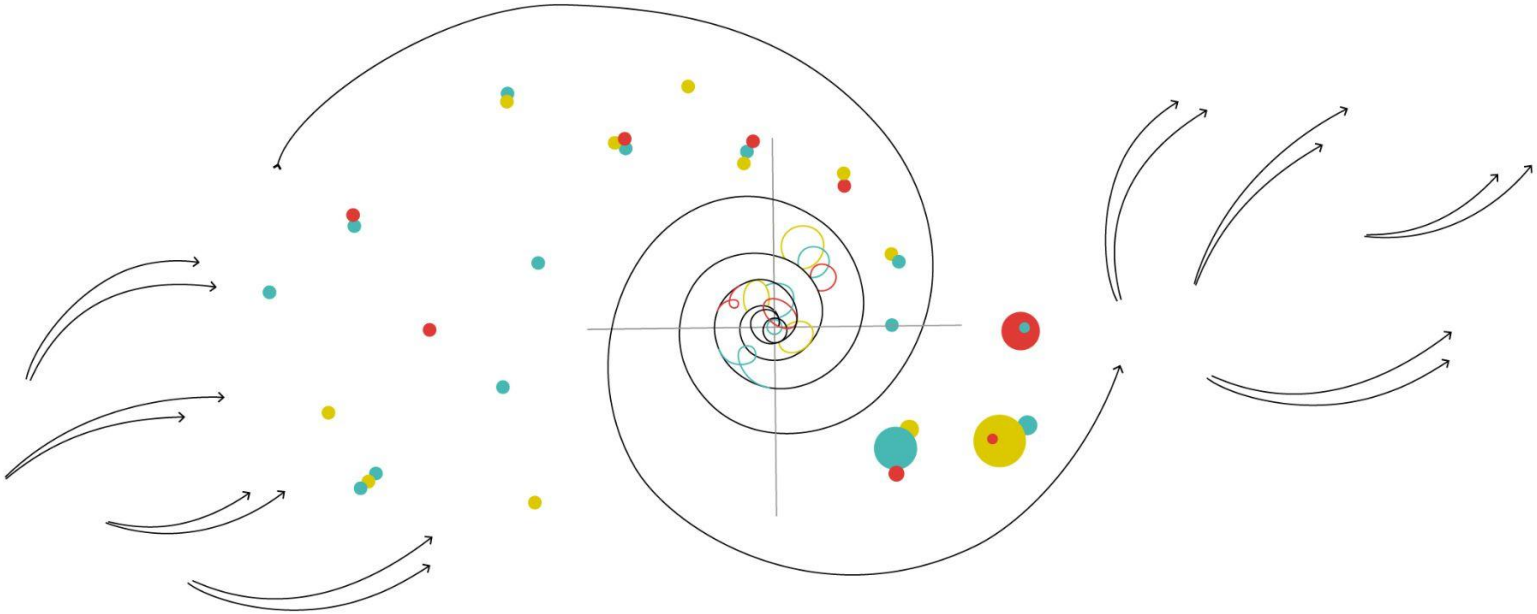
Appendix A | Dynamics of ecosystem building visual

DYNAMICS OF ECOSYSTEM-BUILDING



PHASE 01
STAKEHOLDER CONVENING

PHASE 02
CONVERGENCE

PHASE 03
ECOSYSTEM ATTENTION + CULTIVATION

PHASE 04
DIVERGENCE

PHASE 05
EMBODIMENT OF NEW THINKING + DOING

Appendix B | Competencies Matrix

ECOSYSTEM PHASE: COMPETENCY SET:	1 Stakeholder Convening	2 Itch / Convergence	3 Ecosystem Attention	4 Divergence	5 Embodiment
Build Human Relations	Gathering stakeholders Building one-on-one trust Providing safe environment Throughout all phases; Hosting oneself (meeting and finding ways to process one's own insecurities, activist voice if have deep care for the issue, hurts and no's, and surprises that come up)	Hosting conversations across differences Be able to see dynamics (power, cultural, historical) Listening	Building trust Facilitating collaboration Onboarding new participants Weaving Holding grief, pain Presence & Curiosity Listening, quieting the self Ways o creating different relationalities - help people show up differently (embodiment, out of the head) Mediating conflict	Building capacity to continue this way or in a new way Listening Coaching (new) role take-up Enabling knowledge transfer	Creating opportunities to meet/keep in contact embed in host orgs
Curate Content	Creating the niche Honing the calling question	Mapping key dissonance and acupuncture points	Hosting partners to make choices/paths and take leadership on key issues Seeing what is needed and acting on it (source and bring in expertise) Sensing in & out of the ecosystem, framing & re-framing as needed Thinking & processing Supporting the creation of tangible results	Harvesting of content, learnings Transferring knowledge Documenting	Applying learning to possible new role
Infuse Vitality and Coherence	Spurring enthusiasm Hosting openness and curiosity Inviting Creating the space	Shift attention to the whole/interdependencies Hold the itch internally vs. the urgency Know the difference between facilitating meeting and a whole ecosystem and have the right facilitators	Continuing to bring in new perspectives Creating momentum Sensing the field - for what is needed, for opportunity and tension Sensing tensions and making them visible in a caring and or confronting way	Supporting growth of new branches Exiting the role Letting go of what is no longer need	Spurring enthusiasm for next level Setting tracks for continuity in a way that makes sense
Earn Mandate	Social contracting; enabling give/get Step into authority, leadership Positioning the role: nore as hosting tan as directing	Hosting clear agreements & clarifying investments Articulating and holding clear purpose Managing linear steering of sponsors in a non-linear process	Relating the internal process to the larger system/outside Ability to call the hard conversations and have them well-hosted Move things forward, keep momentum Holding the bigger tension of the whole	Re-negotiating role or exit	Harvest and feed back learning