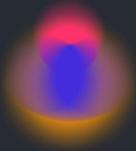


A PRACTICAL GUIDE

# Funding the Transition Towards **Life-Centred** Economies

*Lessons and Recommendations from the Earth Funding Lab*



Earth Funding Lab

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This guide is a summary and set of recommendations emerging from The Earth Funding Lab (hereafter ‘the Lab’), with the intention of passing on practical tools and insights for funding work that supports economies in service to life.

This guide has been written by the Lab's learning partners, Andres Roberts (The Bio-Leadership Project) and Hannah Temple (Teal Co), alongside Christina Williams, with support and input from Jamie Pike, Erica Neve, Sophia Cooke (Environmental Funders Network) and Nick Gardner (Environmental Funders Network).

We write it in the spirit of practical action and open sharing towards greater, collaborative goals.

We are grateful to the many people who have supported the design, worked alongside us, and participated in the Lab.



The Bio-Leadership Project



TEALCO



Environmental  
Funders Network

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# Introduction

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Many of us feel that now is both a fragile and a fertile time to be alive. Whilst the cracks that are forming in our established systems are bringing destabilisation and insecurity, they are also creating spaces within which something new could emerge. But whether or not we manage to embrace the potential of this moment and use it to bring about a future of greater collective flourishing depends on what we do and how we show up now.

Philanthropy is in the business of creating change, of using its unique position and power to shape our reality. It has been critical to many of history's seismic shifts that we now enjoy and take for granted – around mental health, women's rights, disability rights and more. But there is a widening sense that progressive (pro-social, pro-environmental) philanthropy has plateaued. That the parts are not adding up to a greater sum. Study after study demonstrates that collaborative, systemic and trusting funding is key to achieving meaningful, lasting change, and yet these approaches remain rare. Something is holding the sector back from fully stepping into the change it can create and that this moment calls for.

The Earth Funding Lab was an experiment that sought to create the conditions for funders to unlock greater impact and value. To help the ripples of their work to spread further and deeper. It offered participants the headspace, tools, safety, community and structure to work more systemically – conditions that are difficult to find in day-to-day life. It created trusting relationships and safe containers for genuine collaboration. And it worked to practically shift grantmaking practices to enable partners and projects on the ground to thrive. It was rooted in a recognition that philanthropy is a part of the systems it seeks to change, and that it is only by changing itself that it can hope to unleash its greatest potential for positive change in the wider world.

Over four years the Lab showed the value of taking time to build the skills of systemic work and consider the bigger picture of both what and how we fund. It shifted funder conversations and practices, led to some genuinely collaborative funding, and supported a deeper level of connection across the system.

Now that the Lab is composting its current form, this document seeks to share out the tools, methods, innovations, practices and ideas that we found valuable, in the hope that others may pick them up and continue the Lab's work in their own spaces and communities.

- 
- **Part 1** introduces the foundations of the Lab — where it came from and its core guiding assumptions, questions and principles.
  - **Part 2** gives an overview of how the Lab worked, including its three core elements: Spaces to (Un)Learn Together, Real-world Experimentation, and Connection and Community-Building.
  - **Part 3** offers a practical guide to some of the key innovations and learnings that arose through the Lab that we hope others will take forward.
  - **Part 4** dives deeply into the Lab's three collaborative workstreams: Tax for Life, Rights of Nature, and Beyond ESG Investment, and shares some specific opportunities we surfaced for funders working in these areas.
  - Finally, **Part 5** reviews the signals and stories of progress we noticed throughout the Lab and ties these together into some final thoughts about where to go from here, including **five key calls to action for the sector**:
    - Build your capacity for working with uncertainty
    - Give this work time and trust (and money)
    - Create external AND internal conditions for (real) collaboration
    - Challenge your governance structures
    - Be ambitious — about goals, connection, dynamism

In reflecting on and evaluating this work, we feel both satisfaction at a valuable pilot completed and a reinforced sense of the work still to do. We know that continuing to work in the same ways will lead us to the same results, so we leave with a question for the sector: **How can we go beyond piecemeal changes and instead invest as a sector in system-level innovation and learning to help bring about a flourishing future for us all?**

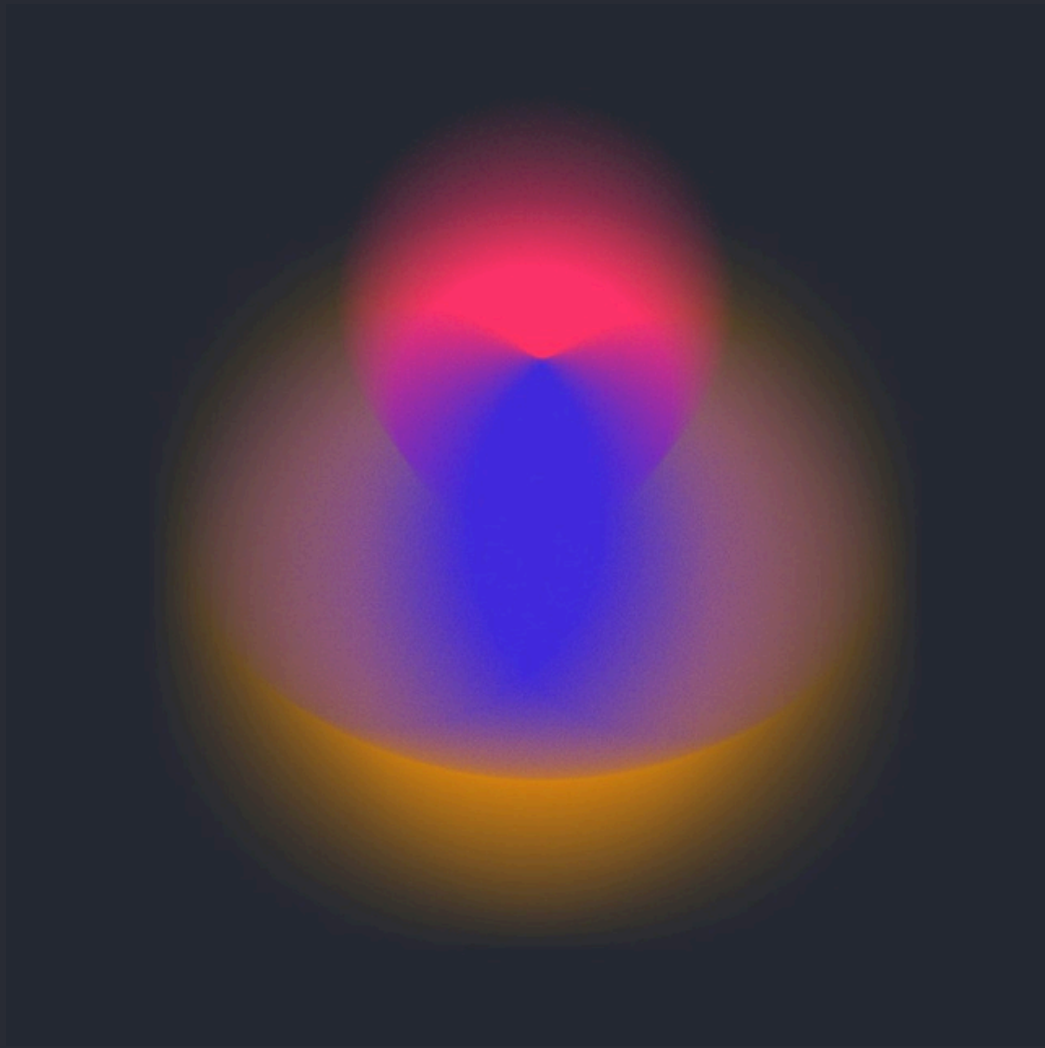
We believe that this time is filled with the possibility for healthier futures to emerge. We collectively offer this document in the hope that it adds nutrients to what we may nurture and plant together for the future.

*With care,*

Andres Roberts (*Bio-Leadership Project*)

Hannah Temple (*TealCo*)

Nick Gardner (*Environmental Funders Network*)



PART ONE

# Foundations of the Lab

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# A Space for the Systemic

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## GUIDING QUESTION

*What would it look like if funders truly worked as a system – not just alongside each other, but in genuine collaboration toward the kind of deep, systemic change that none could drive alone?*

The Lab was founded on the premise that, while progressive philanthropy has achieved many good things, there remain significant gaps in developing the kinds of long-term, large-scale, systemic support that is genuinely required to meet the challenges we face.

The 2024 report from the Environmental Funders Network, [Where the Green Grants Went 9](#), highlights that while the UK environmental funding sector has ‘grown the pie’ of environmental funding (to £606.5m in 2021/22 - equivalent to 8.5% of UK foundation giving), the sector is still operating with what is described as a ‘scattergun’ approach. For example:

- **78% of environmental funding is provided by 10 large funders.**
- Of remaining grants, the average size in the report year was £33,471. However, **a quarter of all foundation grants were found to be for a value of less than £3600** - feasibly less than the cost of applying.
- Overall, grant partners received **an average of 1.5 grants per year.**
- Additional data from 360 Giving shows that **77% of grants are for only one year. Just 3.6% of funding went to ‘radical areas’** (e.g. ‘OnePlanet Fair Shares,’ ‘Environmental Justice’ and ‘Revolutionary’).

The results are fairly clear: outside of big funders funding large projects, there are hundreds of projects that would benefit from more coordinated action and greater systemic ambition as a funding movement.

That said, it is important to recognise that systemic work takes time. Bridgespan’s 2017 report on [Audacious Philanthropy](#) found that 90% of successful large-scale change initiatives required over 20 years to come to fruition, and 75% required coordination of actors across sectors.

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There is also a strong case to be made that the intersecting challenges we face today are created by deeper root causes of infinite economic growth, consumption, extraction, and the legal structures of the dominant paradigm. In setting up the Lab, we were interested in how to create spaces and shared pathways to work at these deeper, systemic levels in order to truly protect and regenerate life.

Despite the increasing popularity and awareness that working systemically is key to shifting the dial, doing so in practice is another matter. As Jonathan Raymond, president of the Stuart Foundation, says:

*“I see a lot of people today advocating for systems change but going about it without systems thinking.”*

A final but vitally important note: funders must also take a systemic view of their own position and role as part of the very same extractive and imbalanced systems they are seeking to change. This is perhaps the most difficult level of work for the sector — but in order to truly support systemic change for the planet, funders need to recognise that they are not outside the system looking in, but within it themselves.

Funders need a space to connect with one another and to explore this sometimes confronting territory alongside peers, guided by facilitators and practitioners, and within a supportive holding structure.

**The Lab was a collective attempt to meet these challenges head on, to build the structures, relationships and shared understanding that progressive philanthropy urgently needs.**

# Going Differently

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## GUIDING QUESTION

*What if the way we fund is just as important as what we fund?*

*How does change happen? How do we create greater impact collectively? What kind of knowledge do we need to help us do that?*

These are the kinds of questions that inspired the setting up of the Lab. It was designed based on the idea that it is not possible to change systems by simply repeating the same approaches, methods and mindsets that brought about the current one. **In order for progressive philanthropy to bring about systemic change, it needs to not just change what it funds, but how it funds.**

In the words of EFN's former Director and one of the initiators of the Lab, Florence Miller:

*"I believe that, even if we could significantly increase the amount of money going into environmental funding, this would not lead to an increase in impact unless we also change the way we are funding."*

The Lab aimed to emphasise alternative structures, processes, forms of connecting, and collaborative work in order to support different approaches to impact. This was expressed through the design and content of the Lab's core learning programmes, the organising principles we worked with, decision-making coordinates and workstream processes, all of which are shared in the pages that follow.

Through all of this work, we were guided and anchored by Nora Bateson's brilliant quote:

*"We are going somewhere different. Let's go there differently."*

# A Guiding Star Goal

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## GUIDING QUESTION

*What if funders could align around a shared guiding star that is compelling enough to draw people out of their silos and into collective action?*

The Lab understood that one of the key ingredients for long-term, large-scale change is a **high-level goal** that cuts across siloes and brings diverse people together. Andy Middleton of the [Wales Transition Lab](#), an ally of the Lab, refers to these goals as “bonfires” – irresistible beacons that attract people from far and wide to come together.



## EXPLORE FURTHER

*Learn more about how to set a guiding star goal in Part 3 → p. 21*

As we began designing the Lab, we carried out a consultation with EFN members and asked them what high-level goals they most wanted to work together with others on. There was one outright winner which became the Guiding Star goal for the Lab, a kind of centre of gravity for the Lab and its work:

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## Shifting economies to be in service to life

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This became the foundational premise of the Lab – the belief that we can do more to protect and regenerate life by transforming economic systems. This formed the focus of the kind of systemic change we wanted to see and gave us an experimentation ground for exploring what it would look like to try to bring about systemic change in this area.

# Design Principles

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## GUIDING QUESTION

*How do you actually 'go differently' – and how do you hold yourself accountable to it?*

In setting up the Lab, we understood that to truly 'go differently,' we needed ways to regularly check in on our approach and progress. In addition to the Guiding Star goal, we developed a set of Design Principles early on that would help guide our work. These were:

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### **Placing life at the centre**

Creating conditions for the greater thriving of all life was the Lab's overarching priority. The needs of life (both current and future generations) guide all decisions, and the Lab sought to listen to and integrate nature's wisdom into all aspects of its operations and activities.

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### **Commitment to a systemic approach**

The Lab recognised the world as complex, messy and alive where everything is entangled and things cannot be neatly separated. It believed that creating change requires intentional and careful engagement with these qualities, and that meaningful, long-term shifts come through engagement with deep systemic roots.

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### **Collective impact over attribution**

Participants in the Lab sought to put the needs of the whole over those of the individual, setting aside the desire for individual or organisational recognition. The Lab recognised that "impact" may unfurl in unpredictable and untraceable ways and focuses on identifying signals rather than proof.

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### **Plurality of approaches and views**

The Lab believed that knowledge exists in multiple forms and that diversity brings richness. The Lab welcomed and wove together a plurality of views, perspectives and ways of knowing, as long as they did not conflict fundamentally with any of the other principles.

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### **Learning, experimentation and inquiry**

The Lab believed linear, static, or reductionist approaches are ill-suited to our emergent, living world. It committed to working in ways fit for that world – continuously learning, sharing feedback, and experimenting. Always evolving and adapting, never static or "done".

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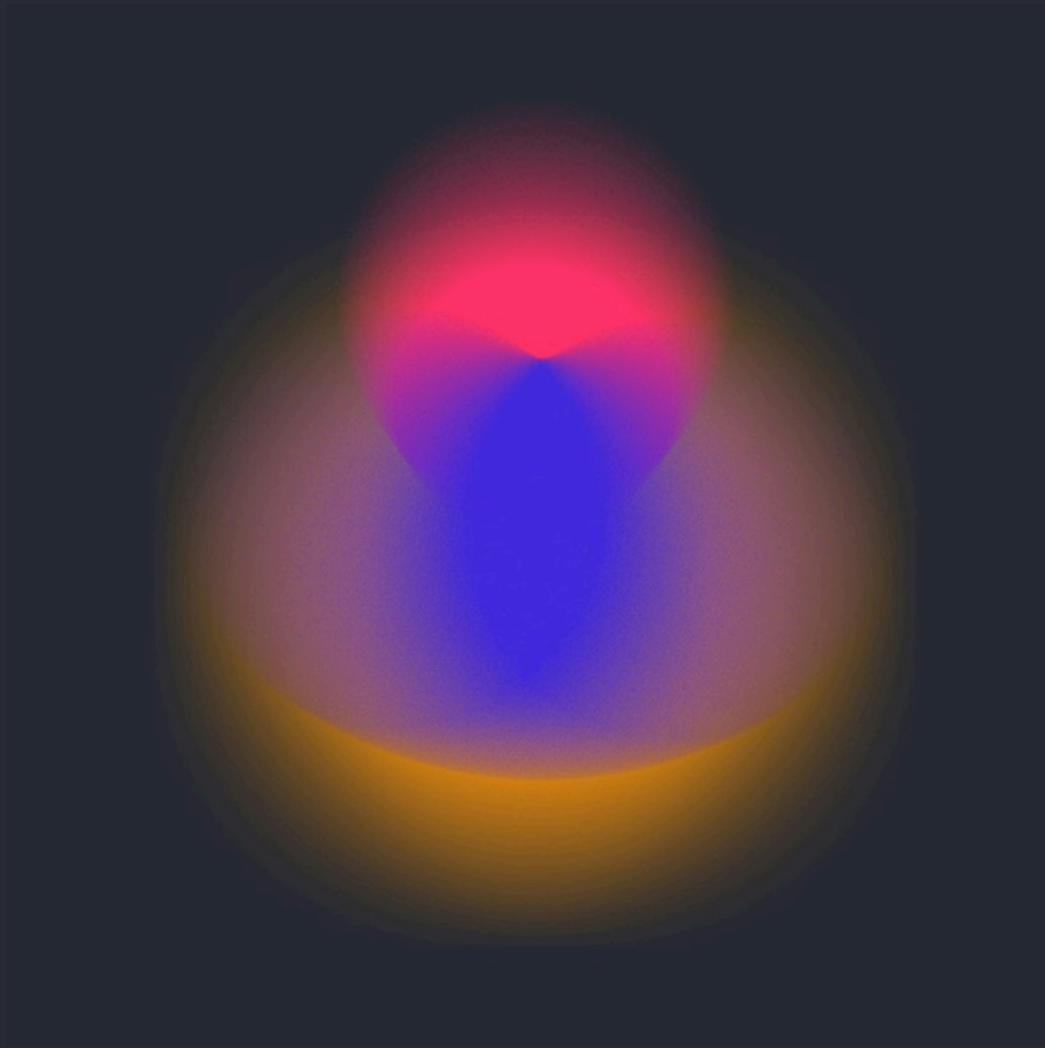
### **Actively addressing and disrupting power**

The Lab recognised that many degenerative consequences of our existing systems stem from unhealthy power imbalances. It committed to acknowledging and naming power wherever it finds it, and to fostering reciprocal, balanced relationships that serve the greater thriving of life.

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### **Allowing emotions to guide us - from joy and grief**

Nothing can be sustained if it does not bring joy. The Lab committed to being an enjoyable, beautiful place that made participants feel more alive. It also committed to being a space where they can be honest about difficulties and grief, and where they are free to be authentic and vulnerable.



PART TWO

# The Lab in Practice

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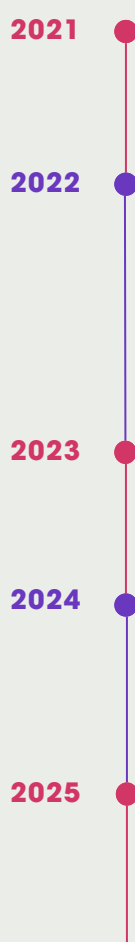
# How It Worked

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The Lab was an experiment held over four years. In the nature of a true experiment, the way the Lab worked evolved and shifted over its lifetime.

What began as an inquiry soon became a research question, followed by a learning programme, followed by a community, offering a range of participation options and which participants stepped in and out of at different stages.

Here is a brief overview of the Lab's story across four years.

- 
- 2021** ● The Environmental Funders Network and The Bio-Leadership Project came together with an idea to develop a 'Re-Imagining Philanthropy Lab'.
  - 2022** ● Early research and design phase: advisory meetings, research, surveys held to identify 'Economies in Service to Life' as the 'guiding star' goal. TealCo joined the team.  
A call for funders, discovery calls, and nine catalyst funders joined. We hosted a first learning journey as a 'Research Stage.'
  - 2023** ● We moved into a 'Development Stage.' An autumn retreat identified three initial collaborative action areas which go on to form workstreams.
  - 2024** ● Workstreams ran and pooled funds distributed grants to projects with systemic potential. We held a summer retreat for all Lab members and hosted the second cohort of our Basecamp learning journey.
  - 2025** ● Workstreams continued to run and distribute funding. We expanded our learning programme to include open sessions. The team undertook a strategic review. A third Basecamp was held Sept-Nov. In late November a decision was taken to compost the Lab.

There were three key elements of the Lab that remained consistent throughout its evolution:

**A** Spaces to  
(Un)Learn Together

**B** Real-world  
Experimentation

**C** Connection &  
Community-Building

# A. Spaces to (Un)Learn Together

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**The mainstream funding landscape is not designed to effectively fund economies that serve life. As such, learning new approaches and unlearning patterns from the old system were a foundational element of the Lab's design.**

Although there are rich bodies of work on new economics, systems change, and improved philanthropic practice from brilliant practitioners and leaders working in these fields, there is also a need for time and space for funders to connect these ideas, perspectives and approaches in an integrated way. The Lab offered such a space through what we called **The Basecamp Journey**.

The Lab ran three rounds of the Basecamp, involving 24 participants from 18 different organisations, plus seven individual funders. We were joined by many inspiring speakers throughout the three cohorts. *(For a full list, please see the Acknowledgements section.)*

The Basecamp was built around the following themes and questions:

## **An Economy that Serves Life**

- *What might an economy that serves life really look like?*
- *Where and how do current mainstream economic models fail to serve life?*

## **Transforming Philanthropy**

- *How are mainstream philanthropic practices obstructing or inhibiting systemic change?*
- *What does it look like to do philanthropy in a way that enables and supports systemic change?*

## **Working in Systems / Reimagining Impact**

- *What does working systemically really mean?*
- *What models and tools can we use to help us bring a systems lens to our work?*
- *What are the key levers for supporting an economic systems change?*

## **Shifting Practices**

- *What do living systems have to teach us about how we can shift our practices to serve life?*
- *What does all of this mean for us and our work and practice going forward?*

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Sessions created space for participants to reflect on their role in the existing system, both as individuals and on behalf of their organisations. They offered opportunities for participants to deepen their connection to themselves, to each other and to nature. And they allowed participants to work with and begin to dismantle some of the deeper values and beliefs within themselves that hold the existing system in place.

## B. Real-world Experimentation

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**A key function of the Lab was to put learning and unlearning into practice. In the spirit of a lab, the intention was to create real-life opportunities for participants to experiment with more collaborative, systemic funding.**

We know that collaboration can be challenging and that trying something different can feel scary. We also know that the governance and risk structures of many philanthropic organisations are not designed to embrace change. Our aim was to develop approaches to real-world experimentation that felt structured and safe.

Through the learning and unlearning process, we looked to build a conversation and a loose ‘map’ of possible points of intervention. Systemic working tools, which we share in Part 3 below, helped us explore different positions of support around economic transitions.

Building on this work, the Lab helped participating funders to align around a set of workstreams – facilitated processes where groups of funders could collaborate together around a particular mission related to the emergence of an economy that serves life.

Three workstreams were developed:

- **Tax for Life:** Shifting the tax system to serve life
- **Beyond ESG Investment:** Investing in ways that truly serve life
- **Rights of Nature:** Supporting the rights of nature movement

Two of these **workstreams** (Tax for Life and Rights of Nature) became pooled funds for grassroots work.



### EXPLORE FURTHER

*We share more about how these workstreams were identified and the work that they did in Part 4 → p. 33*

## C. Connection & Community-Building

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**The work of shifting economies and philanthropic practices to serve life is work that no one can do alone. Across all aspects of the Lab, a core intention was to create fertile conditions for a community to grow.**

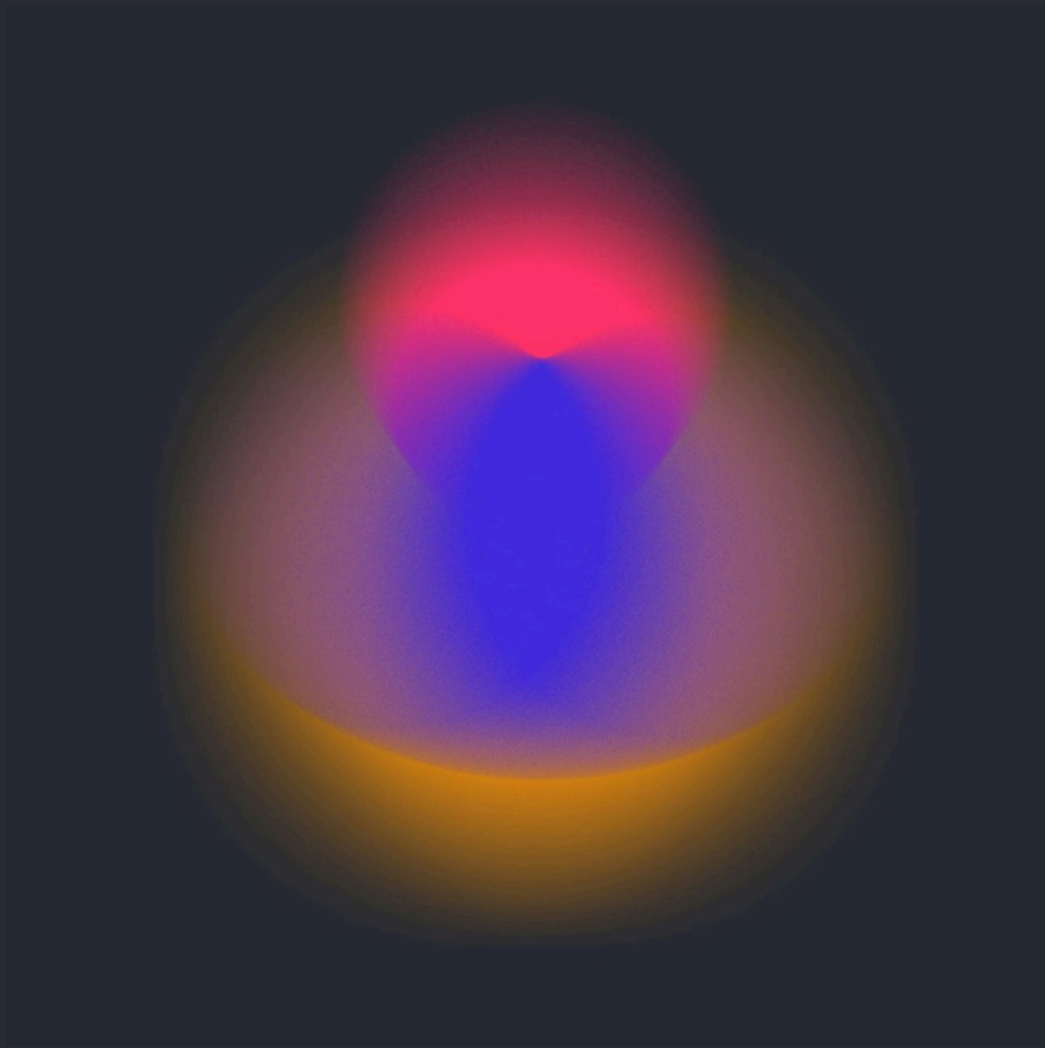
Creating real systemic change requires many people working in many places but with a shared vision and story. It requires a community. We knew from our experiences facilitating and holding other collaborative initiatives that community happens when people trust each other, listen to each other, and are authentic with each other. That is the magical place where lasting and meaningful impact happens.

We held thoughtful in-person gatherings where participants had space to move, laugh, eat and sit around fires together, as well as to explore new ideas and share their work. We incorporated community-building into each session and workstream, giving people opportunities to connect in pairs and small groups to practice listening to, and giving space to, one another. We offered reflective questions and journaling and meditation exercises to help people open up. And we worked to role-model being vulnerable and honest ourselves.

We saw the connective tissue that developed between participants — how much they seemed to enjoy each other’s company, how they showed up in calls, and how open they could be with each other — as a key indicator of the Lab’s success.

“ I felt so grateful to have found kindred spirits. We came from different backgrounds but what we shared was a strong sense of clarity, motivation and curiosity about what is needed for meaningful systemic change.”

– Stephanie Santiano, John Ellerman Foundation



**PART THREE**

# **Learnings and Innovations**

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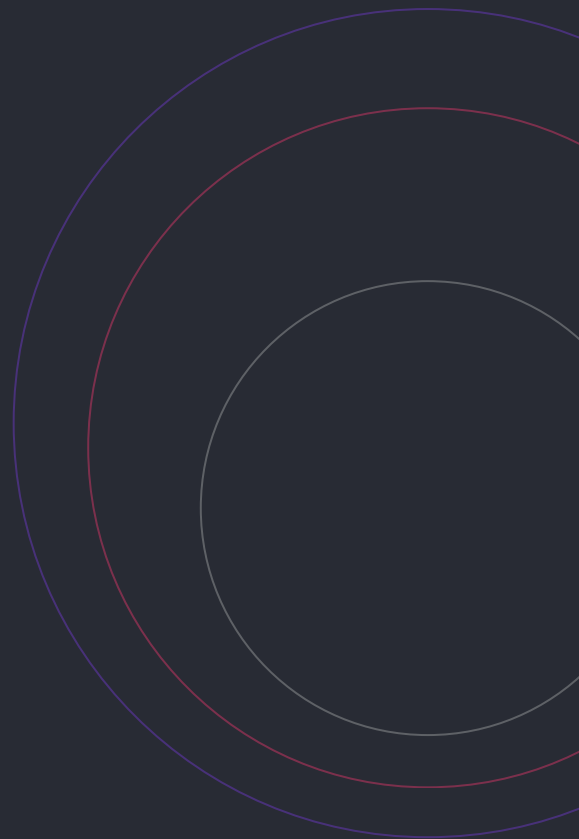
*A Practical Guide*

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Changing how we work is as important as changing what we work on.

The innovations gathered here reflect what we learned about organising and collaborating differently — tools and models that helped us move toward more systemic and collective forms of action. They are drawn from a rich body of work in systems change, collaborative organising, and regenerative practice, built up by thinkers, practitioners and movements over many years.

We have compiled the ones we found most useful in the context of collaborative funding, and we share them here in the hope that others can adapt and build on them.



# Setting a Guiding Star Goal

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When approaching systemic change, there is something powerful in defining a terrain with clear boundaries – one that compels us to work across silos towards goals that no single organisation can achieve alone. And in an increasingly turbulent world, a shared direction enables us to strategise together more effectively, so our connections amount to more than the sum of their parts.

### WHAT IS A GUIDING STAR GOAL?

*A guiding star goal is a compelling, inviting, moonshot-like goal that helps connect diverse actions towards a common purpose. The goal should be clear and intentional enough to provide direction, but broad enough to allow for different forms of action and innovation within that common purpose. And it should be much more than a short-term, quantifiable goal – it should be BIG. The purpose of a guiding star goal is to be ambitious, harness collective energy, and activate the imagination.*

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### KEY OUTCOMES

The Lab's guiding star goal was **to shift economies to be in service to life**. In addition to creating common purpose within the group, this guiding star goal was helpful in the following ways:

- It helped create momentum and a sense of movement towards something.
- It helped foster connections and shared understanding between funders.
- The clarity of the goal helped 'self-select' the funders who were interested in joining the Lab.
- It was broad enough to allow for exploration of different intervention points.
- It helped us decide what we weren't going to do.
- Over time, it helped us learn about other organisations and movements working toward similar goals, allowing us to see the field more widely.



### HELPFUL RESOURCES

In deciding to set a guiding star goal for the Lab, we were inspired by the following work:

- [Collective Impact](#) (SSIR) - demonstrates the importance of creating 'backbones' to collaborative work with collective purpose
- Real-life collaborative projects showing how shared purpose drives impact, including but not limited to: [Wales Transition Lab](#); [Our Future](#); [Civic Square](#)

# Putting Systemic Work at the Centre

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Many organisations across the social and environmental impact space have some form of Theory of Change and develop actions based on this. But how do we know whether these models add up to collective impact? How do we know where they complement each other, where they might overlap, or where new synergies are possible?

### WHAT IS SYSTEMIC WORK?

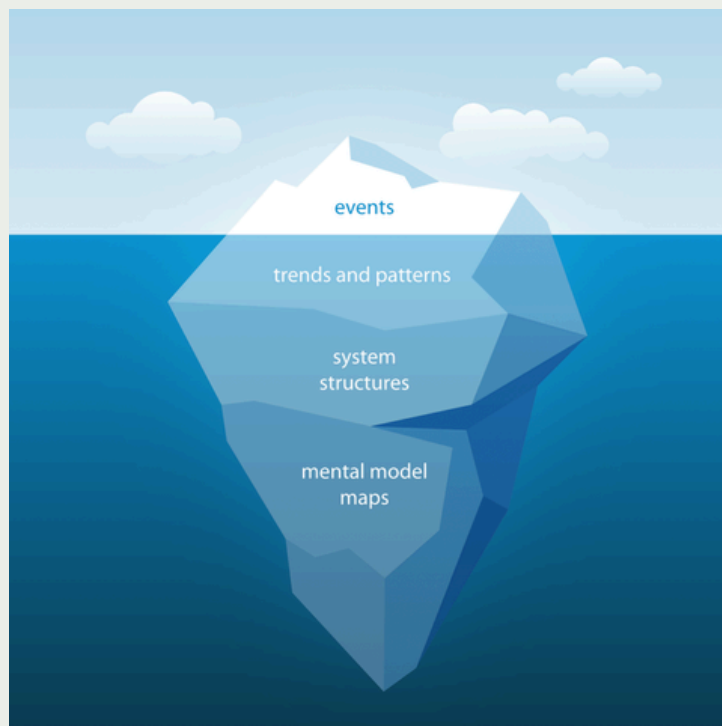
*If we want to support genuinely systemic change, we need to develop alternative approaches that place an emphasis on living systems principles, interconnection, relationships, and underlying influences in a system, such as patterns, structures, cultures, and mindsets. Conventional leadership and impact models can be overly linear and transactional, creating siloed thinking and a tendency to hoard power in restrictive ways. Systems thinking and systemic working tools and models are effective ways to break away from the 'traditional' approaches to problem-solving and instead focus on deepening our understanding of the underlying drivers within a system so we can effectively intervene.*

From the outset we positioned the work of the Lab as being about innovation at the HOW level as much as the WHAT. Our goal was to create alternative forms of working that supported connection, collaborative sense-making, learning and strategising. A number of tools and models were central to this.

# The Iceberg Model

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Introduced by our strategic partner, Charlotte Millar, The Iceberg Model illustrates that beneath the visible, every-day events in a system, there are underlying factors that influence the outcomes we see on the surface. These include social and economic patterns and structures, as well as the mindsets we carry in society. To effect or support deeper change, it is important to work at these deeper levels.



*Image credit: The Centre for Systems Solutions*

In the Lab, we used the Iceberg as a consistent reference to how we could explore funding and impact at different layers of influence in the system. The model was used as a reflective and conversational tool, and to help map potential areas of support and collaboration.

In cohort three, we referenced the brilliant work of Hajar Tazi, who mapped the Iceberg Model against Joanna Macy's frame of the Great Turning and The Great Unravelling. This helped to develop meaningful conversations about supporting work at deeper levels of consciousness, culture, education, and structures of society, as well as practical projects with a more technical focus.

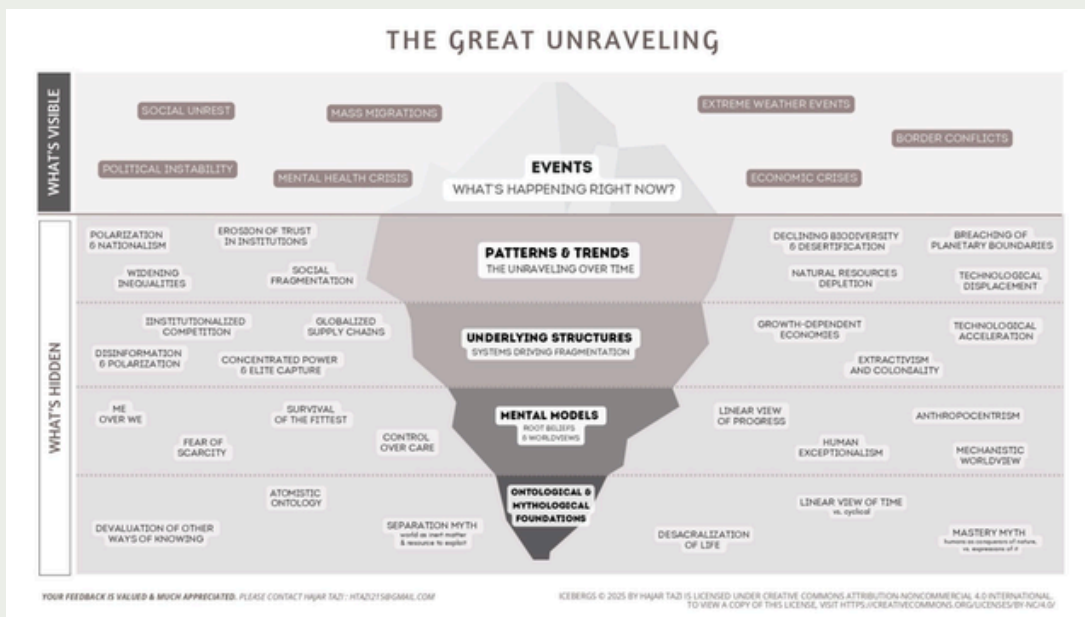


Image credits: ICEBERGS © 2025 by Hajar Tazi

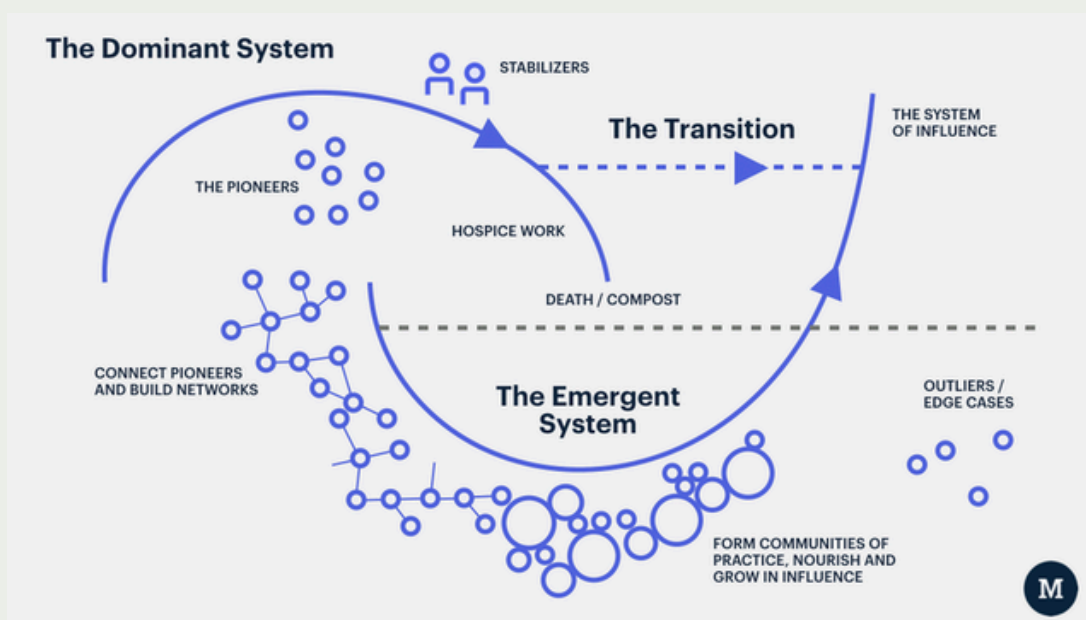
The Iceberg Model helped us to continually probe deeper and explore different layers of systemic depth within the system in which we hope to support change.

# The Berkana Two Loops Model

The Berkana Two Loops Model is a way of mapping how incumbent systems grow, sustain dominance, and ultimately lose energy, die, or are replaced by alternative paradigms. While a dominant system is in prominence, alternative systems are always being seeded beneath the surface. The Berkana Model can help us understand better how these seeds act together, connect, rise and grow to become the new prevalent system.

In the case of the Lab, we were looking to understand how to support a shift from an extractive, life-depleting economy to new forms of economic systems that serve life.

A key aspect of the Berkana model is that it helps people not only explore different kinds of actions to take or innovations to support but also explore the **role or position** they can play in the transition. For example, one might say their energy is in slowing down or ‘hospicing’ unhelpful parts of an incumbent system. Another might be putting energy into finding and supporting the unknown seeds of early innovation. The value comes in hearing each other describe these positions and notice overlaps, connections and gaps.



Developed by Margaret Wheatley and Deborah Frieze at the Berkana Institute

The Berkana model brought about fantastically rich conversations about what individual funders were giving energy to and where work was needed to make further connections or fill gaps.

# The 'Trim Tab' Principle

The 'Trim Tab' principle is less a tool and more an insight about systemic change, made popular by the architect, futurist and writer, Buckminster Fuller. Taken from the field of aeronautics, the principle posits that sometimes a small movement is required in the flow of a system in order to make a larger shift possible.

A concrete example from engineering is how the rudder of a large ship operates. In Buckminster Fuller's words:

*"...there's a tiny thing at the edge of the rudder called a trim tab. It's a miniature rudder. Just moving the little trim tab builds a low pressure that pulls the rudder around. Takes almost no effort at all. So I said that the little individual can be a trim tab. Society thinks it's going right by you, that it's left you altogether. But if you're doing dynamic things mentally, the fact is that you can just put your foot out like that and the whole big ship of state is going to go. So I said, 'Call me Trim Tab.'"*

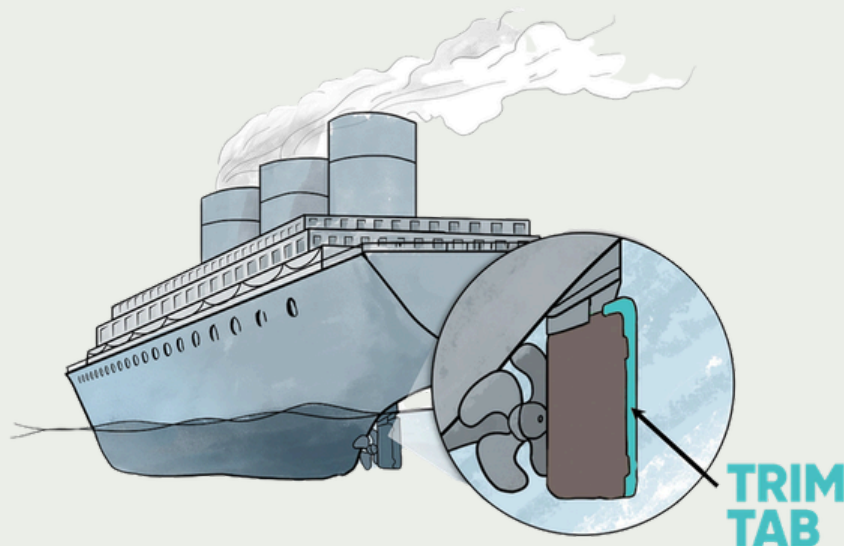


Image credit: Climate 200

As the Lab, we recognised that we were working as a collective of individuals and small to medium-sized foundations, but not larger foundations investing millions. The idea of 'being trim tabs' often proved very energising – and could actually be a crucially important position to take in the system.

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## KEY OUTCOMES

- Tools such as the Iceberg model and the Berkana model proved very helpful in supporting reflection and conversations about where to best position energy in a system.
- Many of these tools were useful for both sensemaking and decision-making, providing a shared framework around which to make decisions. In the case of the Lab, using these tools led to the creation of the three **workstreams** through which we explored collaborative funding approaches.
- The impacts of using these tools also had ripples outside of the Lab ecosystem. For example, some funders shared that the models informed their own approach to funding. Others expressed that, outside of the Lab, they started to work more collaboratively with others. And still others told us that the systemic tools directly informed their own work and strategy – including Wates Family Trust in their work on neighbourhoods, and John Ellerman Foundation in their main strategy launched in 2025.



### EXPLORE FURTHER

Learn more about the Lab's workstreams in Part 4 → p. 33

# Creating Coordinates for Collective Decision-Making

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A founding premise of the Lab was to 'go differently'. We believed that to see and support new outcomes in the world, we needed to develop innovation not only at the solutions level but at the level of how we work together. This meant learning and unlearning how to organise and manage funding structures and processes, and introducing alternative principles for working as a dynamic and collaborative system.

### WHAT ARE COORDINATES, AND WHY USE THEM?

*When working collaboratively across a diverse group, it can be easy to default to familiar decision-making habits. Coordinates offer a different approach: a shared set of questions that a group agrees to use when assessing and prioritising where to direct collective action. The power of coordinates lies in their simplicity. Rather than being prescriptive, they provide a common lens through which a group can evaluate options together – building shared understanding, surfacing assumptions, and making it easier to say both yes and no with confidence. Used well, they can shift decision-making from individual instinct to genuine collective judgement.*

Coordinates work best when they are:

- **Co-created** by the group, so there is shared ownership and understanding
- **Broad enough** to apply across different types of decisions
- **Ambitious enough** to stretch the group beyond 'business as usual' thinking

### THE LAB'S COORDINATES

As the Lab developed, we created a set of coordinates to help us categorise and prioritise actions when it came to choosing what to fund collectively. Over time, they became a reliable anchor for our decision-making as a group.

The coordinates were:

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### **Is the area of work bold and ambitious?**

Are we daring to try something that might not otherwise happen? Are we setting an aim to really make a difference?

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### **Is it the right fit for this group and this moment in time?**

Is it an area of work that we are a good fit for, and something we can really commit to and support?

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### **Can it inspire action in many different places?**

Is the nature of the work spreadable or repeatable in different ways? Are we supporting ideas or actions that can ripple out, inspire, or grow across systems?

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### **Does it embrace connections more than siloes?**

Does the area of work lend itself to us working collaboratively across our own siloes, and does it help bridge siloes out in the world? Are we connecting diverse parts of a system?

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### **Is it something that no one can do alone?**

Is this greater than what individual funders or organisations might do alone? Are we leaning into more diverse forms of work, backing projects or taking risks differently by working together?

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### **Does it have the potential to heal relationships (to ourselves, to nature, to the past)?**

Is the nature of the work also about addressing systemic imbalances, repairing injustice and tending to the quality of relationships in society, in ecosystems, and in the funding sector?

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## **KEY OUTCOMES**

- When identifying potential workstream themes, the Coordinates were a helpful tool, supporting us to generate an initial long list of ideas and then discern wisely between them to identify the three we prioritised and took forward.
- Similarly, the Coordinates became a frequent reference within the workstreams as we worked to make sense of and choose between the many possible opportunities for action and funding that emerged.

# Authentically Working with Nature

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Central to the work of The Bio-Leadership Project and TealCo, the two learning and delivery partners of the Lab, is the notion that the way we have come to organise ourselves in modern life is itself very disconnected from how nature works. What new insights would emerge if we chose to approach the challenges we face with a nature-led lens?

### WHY WORK WITH NATURE?

*Reconnecting our organising principles and working models to nature enables very different forms of knowledge, connection and innovation to emerge in the world. When the intention is to work more as a living system, and in more systemic ways, the experience of stepping outdoors, opening our senses, and reconnecting with nature's principles and wisdom is fundamentally important and valuable. Based on the belief that we cannot solve problems with the same thinking that created them (to paraphrase Albert Einstein), allowing nature to be a guide and teacher opens up new avenues for organising, collaborating, and innovating that transcend 'business as usual' thinking.*

### THE LAB'S APPROACH TO WORKING WITH NATURE

**We introduced key frames of Bio-Leadership, regenerative leadership, and nature-based approaches** to working and collaborating throughout the process.

**We held in-person days for two of the Basecamp cohorts, including a lot of time spent outdoors.** These proved to be very positive platforms for the groups to connect, meet, collaborate, and enjoy time together. Interestingly, we noticed a marked difference in the level of connection and shared understanding between the participants that met in person and those that did not.

**We facilitated the process by inviting different speeds and levels of working.** We incorporated mindfulness and nature-connection practices, creative writing, and time outdoors with walks and movement practices to support the models and tools we were working with.

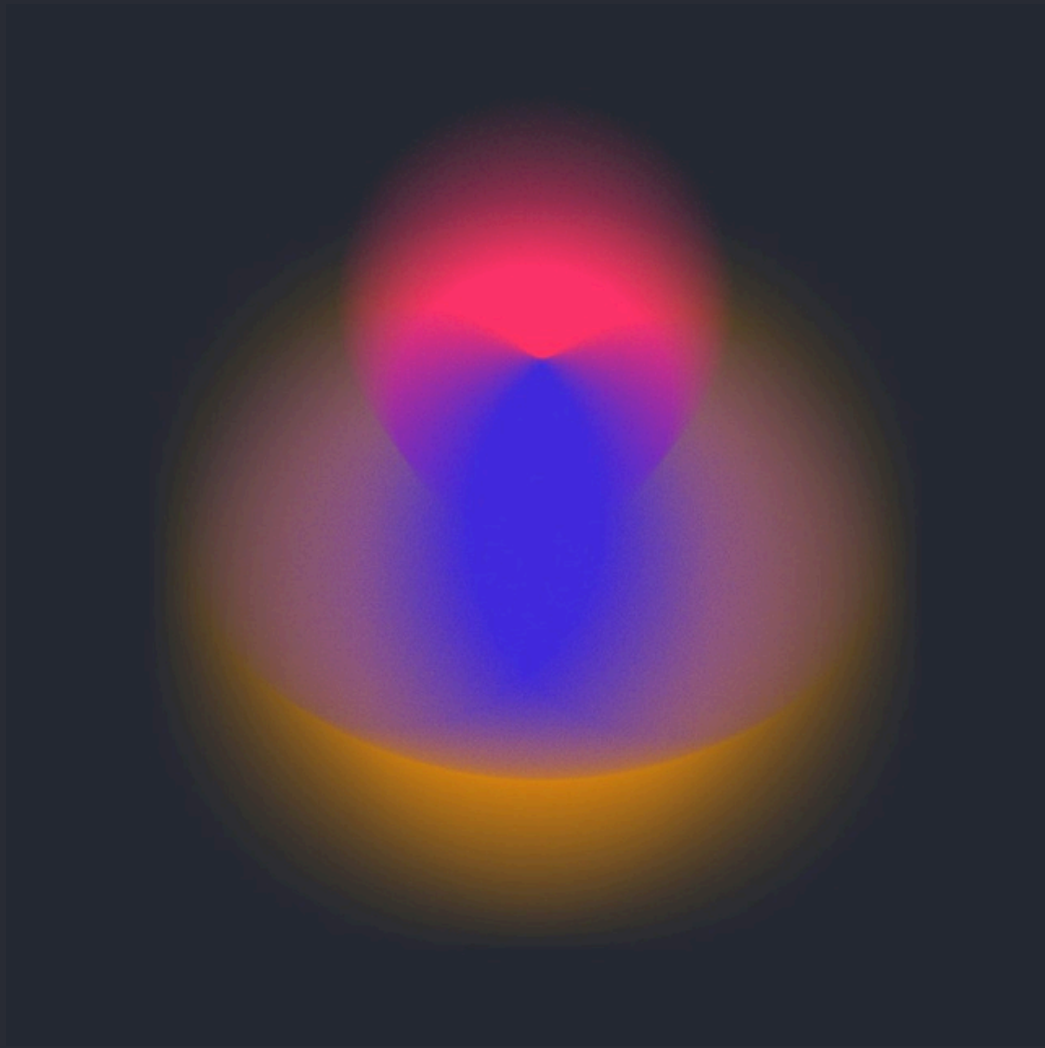
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## KEY OUTCOMES

- Exploring collaborative work in-person, with time outdoors, created a deeper level of connection and shared understanding in the group.
- Working with nature created feelings of positivity and warmth.
- It created a greater appreciation for the work we were doing and a sense of authenticity in the approach to this work.

“ *The major problems in the world are the result of the difference between how nature works and the way people think.*”

– Gregory Bateson (Anthropologist and social scientist)



**PART FOUR**

# **Lab Workstreams: A Deep Dive**

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# Identifying Workstream Themes

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The three workstream topics were selected through an iterative, collaborative process, culminating in a prioritisation day in London in September 2023.

To help us identify a long list of possible areas of collaborative action, we:

**Drew on models and approaches to systems change** to help us discern interventions with a greater chance of contributing to systemic change;

**Gathered inputs from experts** at the Economic Change Unit and Future Economy Scotland on some of the characteristics of an economy that serves life and key areas of leverage to bring it about;

**Shared our own experiences** of initiatives that had led to long-term, large-scale change, identifying common characteristics and patterns;

**Developed a set of coordinates** that brought together some of the key wisdom from the above, alongside points that felt particularly pertinent to us.

We also considered:

**Appetite:** How many funders were keen to be involved in each possible theme (we set a minimum threshold of three funders for a workstream to be viable)

**Timelines:** Where opportunities were particularly pressing due to contextual factors, such as the imminent election of a new Labour government

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Alongside Tax, Investment, and Rights of Nature, the original longlist of themes included:

- Initiatives building coalitions and cultural capital to transform de-industrialised towns and cities
- A partnership vehicle in support of regional change
- The development of a place-based, nature-led economy
- A new set of metrics for success rooted in feminine leadership and principles
- Legislative change on new economy work
- Agro-ecological food production
- Re-setting what we mean by value and systems of valuing
- Ecological legislative frameworks
- Language and frames to engage disconnected groups and sectors

Although only three intervention areas were chosen to form workstreams, we held all others in a “pipeline” – ready to come online if conditions changed. Following the selection of the three themes, we established which funders wanted to join each stream, identified facilitators, and began meeting to explore how we could take action together.



## EXPLORE FURTHER

Learn more about the systemic tools we used in Part 3 → p. 22

You can find a more exhaustive list in Appendix 2.



Read more about the Lab's coordinates in Part 3 → p. 28

# Tax for Life

Facilitated by Hannah Temple

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## WHY TAX FOR LIFE?

*The primary mission of this workstream was to support the emergence of a tax system that serves life. It emerged from a recognition that the existing system is a hugely powerful lever in shaping both the possibilities and appetite for bold action in service to life; it accounts for up to 90% of UK government income and touches the lives of adults across the country. However, the existing system often incentivises life-harming behaviours, reinforces inequalities and narratives which damage life, and fails to optimise available resources for life-positive action. It is a vital locus of change if we are to see an economy that serves life emerge.*

## IDENTIFIED OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTERVENTION

Representatives from Friends Provident Foundation, Be The Earth Foundation, Gower Street and John Ellerman Foundation spent almost a year carrying out interviews with a wide range of actors across the field, reading reports and exploring findings with grassroots actors.

These efforts identified three key opportunities:

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### 1. Increase policy-shaping efficacy

The organisations working in tax justice (whether from a social or an environmental perspective) already have a wealth of brilliant policy ideas for improving the system. What they lack are the capacities and capabilities to get these ideas considered seriously by policy-makers (e.g. detailed modelling capabilities, policy-making knowledge, relationships and reputation with policy-makers). A centralised centre that can offer these capabilities to the sector as a whole would dramatically increase its policy-shaping efficacy.

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### 2. Increase ecosystem connectivity

Our investigations revealed a fragmented ecosystem with many actors working on connected questions and goals without being directly connected to each other. The impact of this sector would be significantly increased if its actors had the space and support to see each other in order to connect to and benefit from each other's work.

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### 3. Shift the (deep) narrative

Shifting deep narratives, values and beliefs is key to any successful systemic change initiative. The public narrative around tax is one of burden — something to be avoided and reduced. The organisations we spoke to were largely working with narrative change at a strategic communications level, focused on immediate policy change campaigns. This work is essential but would be even more effective and long-lasting if work also engaged with shifting deep values and narratives.

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## WHAT WE DID

After speaking with Thirty Percy (an allied funder working in the tax justice space), we learned of their plans to support the establishment of a centre for tax analysis. As a result, we decided to focus our efforts on the other two opportunities we had identified.

We used £30k to fund Tax Justice UK (TJUK) and the Economic Change Unit (ECU) to convene 25-30 ecosystem actors in October 2025 to:

- Boost civil society efforts to shift the dominant public narrative from ‘taxes as a burden’ to ‘taxes as essential for a thriving life on a thriving planet’;
- Facilitate peer-learning on the narrative change efforts in the fields of tax/climate/nature;
- Identify common ‘deep’ narratives underpinning the work, and check the narrative framing of current policy demands against long-term, dominant narratives;
- Identify next steps for embedding these narratives into change-making work.

TJUK and ECU also facilitated the development of a map of the ecosystem. This helped strengthen the connective tissue across the tax justice/nature/climate ecosystems by making organisations and movement infrastructure more visible to participants.

An additional £10k was also granted to TJUK to explore narrative change in social media ahead of the autumn budget.

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## PROVOCATIONS FOR FUTURE ACTION

- **Support policy efficacy:** The centre for tax analysis ([CenTax](#)) is responding to a vital need and needs to have long-term secure funding.
- **Facilitate cross-system connectivity:** Convening participants found it both helpful and unusual to have the opportunity to meet and spend time together, and several valuable connections and ideas emerged as a result. More funding needs to go towards connecting spaces, events and infrastructure.
- **Fund narrative work:** Narrative change is essential to systems change but many funders have stayed away or funded this work in bits and pieces. Testing narratives with different groups and integrating narrative change into everyday work is essential.

# Rights of Nature

Facilitated by Erica Neve

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## WHY RIGHTS OF NATURE?

*This workstream aimed to help shift the legal standing of nature from an asset to a living system with inherent rights. It was recognised that this work has the potential to not only open up new pathways for protecting ecosystems but also to shift deeper cultural narratives about the value of living systems and humans as part of nature. The movement in the UK is emergent and fragmented, but there are growing pockets of activity, such as river rights initiatives and experiments like 'putting nature on the board'. The Lab identified this area as a potentially critical catalyst for wider cultural and structural change.*

## IDENTIFIED OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTERVENTION

Representatives from Friends Provident Foundation, John Ellerman Foundation, A Team Foundation, Wates Family Enterprise Trust, Gower Street, and two individual funders worked together alongside leading rights of nature practitioners and thinkers to begin to map the emerging movement. This work confirmed a multi-layered but immature and fragmented field. We concluded that the most impactful points to intervene were where we could support the young ecosystem to strengthen and spread.

Two catalytic opportunities emerged as priorities:

- **Building connective infrastructure** across the ecosystem (network-building, knowledge sharing, coordination)
- **Supporting place-based implementation** where Rights of Nature can be explored and applied in local contexts through community engagement and legal support

## WHAT WE DID

A pooled fund of £90,000 was established across six funders to support two catalytic initiatives:

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## 1. Establishment of the UK Rights of Nature Network

A multidisciplinary network connecting academics, lawyers, scientists, and activists working to advance Rights of Nature in practice. The network provides a shared space for collaboration, knowledge exchange, and coordinated action, building on grassroots origins as an informal community of practice.

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## 2. Place-Based Knowledge Hubs (established by the Environmental Law Foundation)

A network of local hubs, embedded in university law clinics, providing communities with access to legal knowledge, tools, and support. These hubs enable local people to engage with Rights of Nature and legal support in ways that are context-specific, empowering communities to take action on issues they care about.

Participants also supported an ongoing process of shared learning, evaluation, and ecosystem mapping, ensuring that insights were continuously fed back into future strategy and funding decisions. Instead of reports or more traditional methods of tracking funded projects, funders were able to learn from and alongside the initiatives themselves – much like a live learning lab.

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## PROVOCATIONS FOR FUTURE ACTION

- **Fund the ecosystem:** Rather than funding isolated projects, there is significant potential in funding the conditions for the ecosystem to support itself through collaborations, connections and shared resources. Doing this work effectively requires funders to work together, to fund over longer time-frames, and to cede decision-making powers to those closest to the work.
- **Support place-based initiatives:** The Environmental Law Foundation hubs demonstrated how effective it can be when local communities are empowered to act on behalf of the ecosystems they are connected to (in this case, supported by accessible legal frameworks and knowledge).
- **Trust more, report less:** Funders and grantees alike found the report-light and relational approach to evaluating grants more conducive to impactful work. The use of more expansive signals of progress rather than fixed, pre-determined metrics allowed for a greater breadth of impact to be noticed and fed into learning. And the deep involvement of ecosystem actors in identifying areas for action led to much better decisions being made. Funders must work to balance a need for accountability with trust and space for partners on the ground.

# Beyond ESG Investment

Facilitated by Jamie Pike

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## WHY BEYOND ESG INVESTMENT?

The primary mission was to resolve the systemic "misalignment" between how philanthropic organisations manage investments and how they issue grants. According to the Impact Investing Institute, the top 300 UK foundations invest about £84 billion, and the total UK sector is holding £255 billion in assets. Further, global foundations are holding over \$1.3 trillion in traditional capital markets, most of which is invested without systemic consideration of impact on life.

There is a growing consensus that ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) is an inadequate tool for understanding the true impact of investments and will not deliver significant 'life-positive' outcomes. There is a vital opportunity for global philanthropy to shift this immense capital toward investments that can and do provide measurable benefits to ecosystem health, biodiversity, and human wellbeing. The underlying challenge is overcoming the deeply embedded beliefs, behaviors, and risk tolerance of 'traditional' investment institutions.

## IDENTIFIED OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTERVENTION

Representatives from Gower Street, John Ellerman, and Friends Provident Foundation met periodically over 2 years to inquire into "Beyond ESG Investment". This effort identified the following priorities requiring systemic action:

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### 1. Transparency

Endowments are typically managed by arms-length financial entities (investment companies, family offices, portfolio managers) that are ideologically separated from the foundation's grant-giving function, often shielding investment methods from public scrutiny. Promoting transparency about who and how endowments are invested is necessary to share best practices and encourage wider adoption. John Ellerman Foundation went on to pioneer public advertising of their investment approach. The workstream also explored funding the [Foundation Practice Rating](#), a growing toolkit for benchmarking good practice in ethical investment transparency.

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### 2. Moving Money to Better Places

Despite innovations like Biodiversity Bonds, it remains challenging to identify and assess truly beneficial nature-positive investment options, differentiating them from greenwashing. Resources are needed to help foundations confidently select credible "values aligned investments" beyond traditional markets.

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In addition to these potential interventions, this workstream identified a broader need to shorten the learning curve. Knowledge and experience in aligning investments with values remain limited and unevenly distributed. Field-building organizations like the Environmental Funders Network, and their [Environmental Impact Investing Group](#), should prioritise widening access to best practice examples, peer-learning, and educational initiatives such as the Regenerative Investment Alliance. Without this knowledge, endowments will continue to finance markets that threaten living systems.

## WHAT WE DID

This workstream decided that its power lay in acting as a testing ground rather than a pooled fund. Participants brought practices, questions and ideas from sessions back to their own organisations, role modelling what they wanted to see from the wider sector.

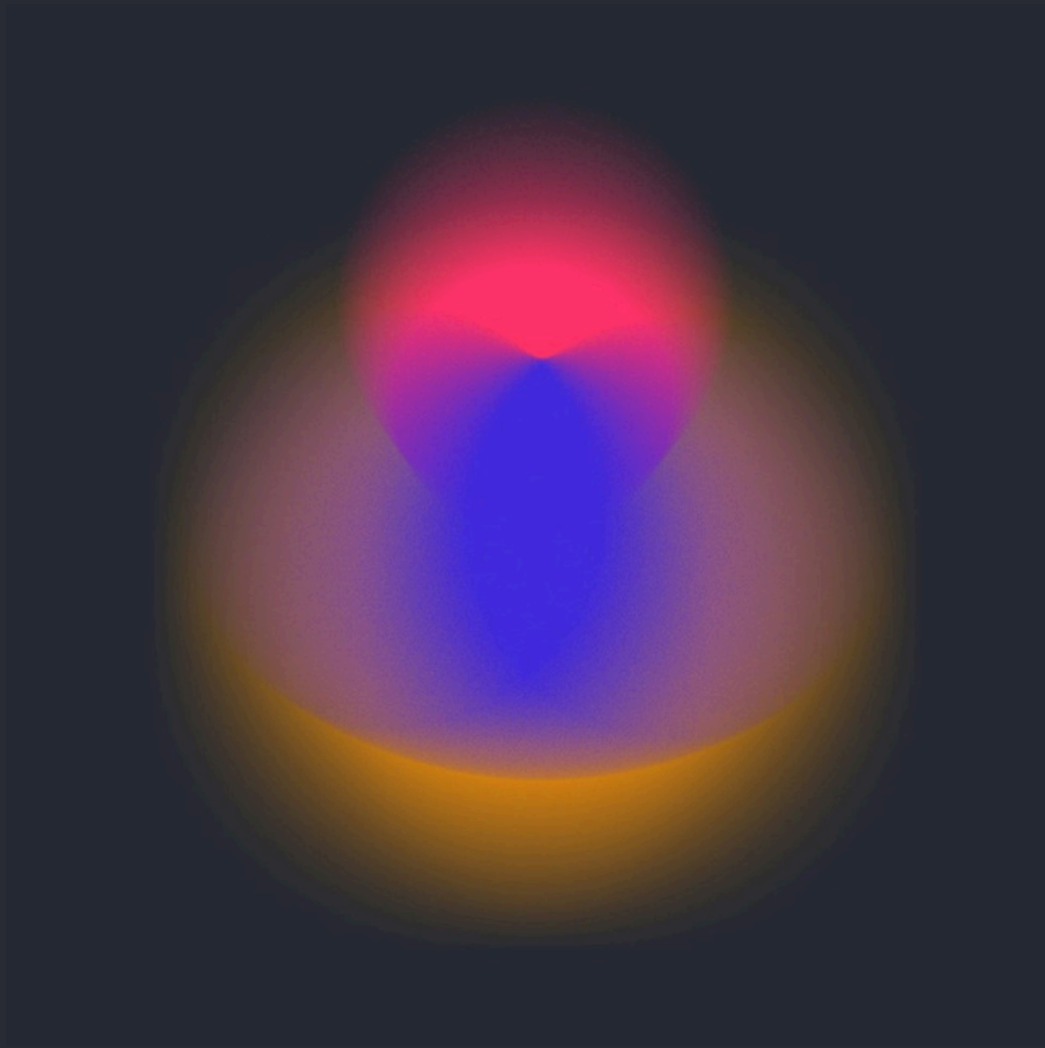
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## PROVOCATIONS FOR FUTURE ACTION

The 'Beyond ESG' workstream generated significant insights for future efforts. The calls to action for those taking up this work are:

- **Promote transparency and benchmarking:** Widely promote the [Foundation Practice Rating](#) to measure alignment of investment practice, grantmaking, and governance. Model and promote sector-wide transparency for endowment investments.  
*Stretch goal: Make investment transparency standard for all foundations.*
- **Curate learning:** Host learning opportunities for decision-makers and practitioners from both investment and grantmaking sides to explore life-centered, nature-positive approaches. These must address both practicalities and underlying belief systems, for example around maximisation.  
*Stretch goal: Encourage major organisations like the Wellcome Trust to integrate their teams to close the values gap.*
- **Showcase alternatives:** Continually promote and celebrate new investment opportunities demonstrating a “beyond ESG” commitment.  
*Stretch goal: Rate all financial products used by trusts and foundations on their measurable impact on nature.*

Beyond this, the fundamental misalignment between grantmaking and endowments is rooted in the extractive and damaging nature of the capitalist system itself, and as long as philanthropy relies on ‘traditional’ markets for its survival, the damage from endowments risks equaling or exceeding the benefits of grants. Addressing these issues demands courage and long term commitment.



PART FIVE

# Stories and Outcomes

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# Stories and Signals of Progress

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The goal of the Lab was to catalyse more effective collaboration and to support deeper, systemic impact. We set out to create something that could help the sector see a bigger picture together and synchronise support to help greater things happen as a whole.

But how do we know if we ‘did well’? What did we learn, and how does one approach evaluation related to systemic change?

In this section we share ideas about learning through a more systemic lens, applying systemic frames to evaluate the work of the Lab. Taking inspiration from the systemic tools we shared earlier, we propose that systemic evaluation calls for consideration of factors such as the quality of connections across a system; diversity; coordination of action at varied levels including structure, pattern, and worldviews; and quality of space for intentional ‘emergence’.

In assessing this work we have drawn inspiration from [Social Finance](#) and the [Freedom Fund](#), among others, who are developing more systemic approaches to evaluation. We are also grateful to Charlotte Millar for her initial evaluation report on the Lab’s work through to the end of 2025.

With this all in mind, we have framed the following areas of evaluation for the Lab:

- A.** Supporting a ‘whole system view’ and coordinated actions;
- B.** Helping to shift funding structures and practices to support better grant partner experience and impact;
- C.** Helping to cultivate deeper connections across the system (linked to more effectiveness, innovation and emergence);
- D.** Growing personal and collective leadership capacities to guide more systemic, nature-centred work (including deeper aspects of ‘inner’ personal work).

Outside of the work and outcomes of the Lab, we learnt a great deal about how to hold it as a collaborative process, which we share more about later in this section. We conclude this section with a set of ‘Calls’ to the sector – coming from the belief that this work is still needed and that the sector must keep exploring innovative ways to see the world and coordinate action as a connected system.

# Four Categories of Evaluation

What did we set out to do as the Lab, and what did we see unfold?

## A. SUPPORTING A WHOLE SYSTEM VIEW AND COORDINATED ACTIONS

AMBITIONS	SIGNALS OF PROGRESS
To help funders see the whole system together	Collaborative mapping leading to better sense-making, and collaborative action to support work around systemic intervention points
To direct more collaborative and coordinated funding towards initiatives with systemic rigour	The development of two pooled funds focused on directing funding towards such initiatives
To move money into underfunded or 'radical' areas of work	£140k of funding distributed by these funds towards four different organisations working to bring about economies that serve life  The involvement of eight different philanthropic organisations and ten individuals in these workstreams  A small increase in funders working towards economic interventions as a root to environmental care

“Being part of the Lab has expanded my understanding around funding practices and foundational issues that are the roots of our systemic challenges. It has connected me to a wider network of funders that also value nature and its voice, while guiding us beautifully through the journey of learning, conceptualizing and acting collaboratively.”

– Renata Minerbo, Be The Earth Foundation

## B. SHIFTING FUNDING STRUCTURES AND PRACTICES TO SUPPORT BETTER GRANT PARTNER EXPERIENCE AND IMPACT

AMBITIONS	SIGNALS OF PROGRESS
To support funders in adopting alternative models of working for more effective collaboration	Participants beginning to fund new areas of work that they had previously not felt confident to venture into
To support innovation towards new models of funding that enable more systemic impact	Participants taking a longer-term view of their funding work
Ultimately, to offer better support to grant partners and practitioners	Changes to the ways participants issued grants outside of the Lab, e.g. by experimenting with different, more trusting approaches to applications
	Conversations and practices around values and design principles leading to a deeper exploration of 'how we work'
	Systemic strategies and tools finding their way into participants' organisational strategies and projects
	Use of very light-touch application and reporting processes for grants issued through Lab workstream pooled funds
	Increasing use of Lab terms and principles such as "putting life at the centre" and "acting as a trim tab"

“ This is really informing our practice – not just our funding but how we manage our endowment and run our organisation. We use Berkana in our strategy and in our own work.”

– Sufina Ahmad, John Ellerman Foundation

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## C. CULTIVATING DEEPER CONNECTIONS ACROSS THE SYSTEM

AMBITIONS	SIGNALS OF PROGRESS
To cultivate greater connective tissue between philanthropic funders	Healthy relationships and deeper conversations developing across funders
To support better spaces for collaborative work across funders and grant partners as a whole system	<p>In certain areas (e.g. the Rights of Nature and Tax for Life workstreams), spaces formed for funders to work more closely with grant partner networks/communities</p> <p>A shift in how funders were communicating – a deeper level of openness, inquiry and vulnerability as the Lab evolved</p> <p>A noticeably deeper experience for the cohorts that we worked with in person compared to the one that worked solely online</p>

“An inspiring couple of days. Everything ran so smoothly, yet we still had the space and time to pause and reflect... The setting, the space, and the company couldn't have been better! I've come away feeling energised and reflective, and I'm already itching to share the experience with the rest of my team.”

– Suzie Paton, Ernest Cook Foundation

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## D. GROWING LEADERSHIP AND INNER CAPACITIES FOR DEEPER SYSTEMIC AND NATURE-CENTRED WORK

AMBITIONS	SIGNALS OF PROGRESS
To offer tools, models and frames to support personal development that supports deeper systemic change	The emergence of better conversations and explorations by facilitating the journey with space to work with different forms of knowledge
To shift perspectives and paradigms of leadership suited to more complex, dynamic landscapes	An openness to new forms of better-connected work through making time for walks, qi gong, and conversations outdoors
To build inquiry-led practice, letting go of 'having an answer' to shape more generative forms of collaborative work	An increased openness to learning-led work, reflection, and alternative organising principles
To support less tangible qualities of work in the system in aspects of resilience, awareness, connection, and the nature of change	Growing confidence in working with nature
	An ongoing tension and continued feeling of 'is it ok?' to give this kind of work time

“ My line manager has shared that she feels my perspective and the things I am sharing have shifted since I took part in the Basecamp. I feel changed. [The Lab] pushed along a change that was already happening.”

– Stephanie Santiano, John Ellerman Foundation

# A Spotlight on Key Questions of Impact

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Beyond the four categories above, it feels important to openly address some deeper questions of assessment. Did we really help to bring new resources and energy into the system? Did we meaningfully change the experience for change-makers and grant partners on the ground? The following reflections explore each in turn.

## **DID WE REALLY HELP TO BRING NEW RESOURCES AND ENERGY INTO THE SYSTEM?**

We saw encouraging signs of progress towards bringing more investment in support of life-centred economies – for example, funders venturing into new areas and money beginning to flow through the workstreams – as a result of the Lab’s work. However, the amounts involved were comparatively small, and we did not reach a point where we could test the model at scale. We believe the Lab’s approach has real potential to shift resource flows more significantly if properly resourced, but this experiment alone cannot confirm that with confidence.

## **DID WE REALLY IMPROVE THE EXPERIENCE FOR CHANGE-MAKERS AND GRANT PARTNERS?**

A practical test of the Lab was whether it genuinely offered better support to grant partners, helping them and their fields to build resilience, strength and quality. We saw real signs of this: both the Rights of Nature and Tax for Life workstreams developed more collaborative, participatory grantmaking processes with the groups they sought to fund. At the same time, longer-term commitments and more deeply trusting practices remained difficult to sustain consistently across the group. The varying governance structures of participating organisations meant that some had greater freedom to embrace alternative approaches than others. A lesson we take away is the importance of establishing shared standards for grantmaking practice at the outset – something for collaborators to agree on together from the start. It also raises broader questions about how to facilitate effective collaboration between organisations of very different scales and types, such as individual funders and larger foundations.

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## WAS IT GOOD VALUE FOR MONEY?

In the spirit of sharing the Lab's learnings with full transparency, it feels important to offer some thoughts on whether the Lab was a worthwhile investment. 'Return on investment' consists of factors that can be measured quantitatively, while other areas of value remain subjective. A key trade off to consider, as ever in funding, is how much money to invest in the 'facilitation' of processes versus moving money directly to projects 'on the ground'.

At headline level, the total core costs of the Lab across four years – covering early stage inception and all facilitation, including that of working groups – came to around £160k. Huge thanks to EFN for providing a big chunk of this support alongside contributions from participants.

Compared to other innovation programmes this is a relatively modest amount, and negligible when set against investment in more extractive forms of economic model.

Two further points are worth making with regards to value:

Firstly, it is worth considering **how the sector invests in exploratory but coordinated innovation**. Work such as Metabolic's *Fertile Ground* report calls for more investment in the 'connective tissue' of the community and its ability to catalyse systemic change. The Lab felt like a valuable contribution to this, and we believe the sector needs to invest more fully in similar initiatives if systemic change is to happen at scale.

Secondly, there is a point to be made about **economies of scale**. While we remained in early stage development, the 'participation cost-per-funder' appeared high. But if something like the Lab were to scale to a community of more than 30 or 40 committed funders – each contributing to continuous, dynamic mapping, knowledge sharing, and collaborative strategising – we believe there could be significant economies of scale and, from there, very valuable and cost-effective contributions to systemic impact.

Overall, especially in contrast to comparable innovation work elsewhere and the cost of sustaining business as usual, the Lab did something valuable with the resources available to it. Looking ahead, what feels important is finding more fluid and genuinely collaborative ways for funders and actors to plan and learn together. We share more on these lessons and make calls for continued action in the *Where to Go from Here* section below.

# Learnings from the Lab Team

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Running the Lab was itself an experiment – and one that taught us a great deal. Alongside the learnings that emerged from the Lab's activities and workstreams, we want to share some honest reflections on what it was like to design, hold and facilitate this new form of collaborative working.

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## **1. Plan in phases; don't overstretch; design for evolution while thinking**

We developed the Lab in an entrepreneurial, 'bootstrap' spirit, without up-front funding and with the kind of 'hustle' energy that is often necessary to get new and more radical initiatives off the ground. But hustle should be a phase, not a foundation. The holding team regret that the Lab never quite found the breathing room or resources to lay the stronger foundations needed to transition towards greater stability. (Refer to 'Was it good value for money?' on the previous page for more information on the financial resources invested.) Remaining in start-up mode for an extended period led to feelings of overstretch and stress – and is one of the reasons we feel we could have designed more intentionally for evolution from the start.

As a team, we also reflect that we should have established clearer, more empowering boundaries earlier. Our commitment and passion for the Lab's work sometimes led us to take on more than available resources allowed. Containing that start-up energy within realistic boundaries proved harder than anticipated, and we would encourage future initiatives of this kind to seek partners for scale and to build structure earlier in the process.

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## **2. Get support systems and backbones ready from the start**

As the Lab developed, it became clear that we needed more robust operational processes for pooling and moving money. As a holding team, we brought considerable expertise in learning and community-building, but failed at points to define clear responsibility for operational and fiscal aspects of the project.

Combined with the overstretch described above, this lack of preparation for the more practical elements of collaborative funding created confusion for funders and added pressure on the team. We are grateful to Gower Street – a participating funder who also stepped in as fiscal partner – and to CIVA, both of whom created the space and flexibility needed to keep projects moving. But we could have done more to establish those processes on a solid footing earlier.

The lesson for ongoing work like the Lab is to develop the technical infrastructure for moving money before – not alongside – the delivery of learning and community elements.

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### **3. Explore ownership, organisational fit, and governance structures from the outset**

Through the Lab, we learned that questions of ownership, responsibility and governance need careful attention from the beginning, both within teams and across organisations. Working collaboratively can be hard – different organisations have different needs and pressures, which can lead to different expectations and ways of operating.

The Lab began as a collaborative endeavour driven by the director of EFN and the founder of the Bio-Leadership Project, with a personal feel and informal boundaries. Hannah from TealCo originally joined as a Bio-Leadership associate but then took on an increasingly central role. Our three organisations are all of different sizes, structures and cultures. As the programme developed, we encountered moments where greater clarity was needed about how the founding team and participants took part in ownership and decision-making, which led to different expectations at times.

What we take from this is the importance of establishing clear terms of engagement from the start and considering questions of ownership, governance, and decision-making (and how these might evolve) from the outset. This would have supported more effective working for everyone involved. We believe that our experience and learnings are relevant for collaborative initiatives of all kinds – and we also encourage organisations across the philanthropic sector to explore and challenge their governance structures to support easier collaboration. *(Read more about this on page 53.)*

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### **4. Resource your own team process**

There can be a tendency across organisations and systems to treat time spent tending to 'internal' processes as less critical than the work happening 'out there'. The Lab was not immune to this – time for team calls and meetings was often squeezed out by tight budgets, with recruiting for the next Basecamp cohort or designing a new session taking precedence. In reality, these were false economies. Time spent together as a team, particularly in person, was always incredibly valuable and improved the quality of everything else we did. The irony is not lost on us that an initiative dedicated to helping others change HOW they work still struggled to find enough resource to properly tend to HOW it was working itself.

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### **5. Know your audience; be clear on your positioning**

A question that emerged over time was who the Lab was really for – and how it should be positioned as other initiatives supporting collaborative funding began to grow around us. In practice, our community was drawn predominantly from EFN's existing network, though funders also joined through Bio-Leadership and wider relationships.

We never fully defined the kind of funder we most wanted to work with in terms of scale or area of work. Looking back, sharper thinking about audience and positioning earlier in the process would have helped us to be more intentional about who we were designing for.

# Where to Go from Here

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## PART 1: PHILANTHROPY

Now is an extraordinary time to be alive. Whilst our proximity to chaos and collapse can feel harrowing, it also adds consequence to our decisions and actions. What we do now *matters*. How we spend our time and energy in these years may end up shaping the future of our planet in ways we cannot imagine.

Philanthropic work is uniquely placed to help steer our collective path towards a future of mutual thriving, but only if progressive philanthropic organisations and the individuals within them are braver than they have been so far. The structures and mindsets that brought us to this precipice will not steer us away from it. If we want to see a flourishing future, we need the courage and integrity to be uncomfortable, disrupt old power dynamics, let go of control, and work together.

**We offer five specific calls for the sector to open up new forms of impact:**

### CALL 1

#### **Build your capacity for working with uncertainty**

The nature of the work most needed in the world is increasingly about wisely navigating uncertainty, volatility and complexity. Like all sectors, philanthropy needs to build its readiness to work with these dynamics if it is to be effective. This involves developing organisations, processes, cultures and teams that are designed for adaptability. But it also involves developing the individual and personal capacities needed.

In our experience hosting the Lab we encountered many individuals who struggled to justify spending time or money on their own personal development. Whilst we salute and support the desire to spend money wisely, we would urge more funders to recognise that building up their skills to work well with complexity and uncertainty is a vital investment that will improve the impact of their grantmaking and investments across the board.

“ I see a lot of people today advocating for systems change but going about it without systems thinking.”

– Jonathan Raymond, The Stuart Foundation

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## CALL 2

### **Give this work time and trust (and money)**

Shifting systems does not happen overnight, and it does not happen through transactional relationships or scattergun grants. As Bridgespan's 2017 report *Audacious Philanthropy* showed, 90% of cases of large-scale systems change required an average of 20 years to achieve (the median was 45 years), and 66% required one or more philanthropic "big bets" of more than \$10m. By contrast, research from EFN's most recent report into UK environmental funding shows that the median size of environmental grants in the UK is just £10k, and 360 Degree Giving's data showed that 77% of UK grants are for less than 1 year.

Progressive philanthropy needs to learn from the successes of conservative funders — fund initiatives for extended periods of time, give large unrestricted grants, allow recipients the room to fail, and trust them to spend money wisely.

“ I think the thing that has been most surprising is that we can and should set aside enough time to work through difficult and complex matters and that whilst working on something for a year can feel daunting, it is also utterly necessary.”

– Sufina Ahmad, John Ellerman Foundation

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### CALL 3

#### **Create external AND internal conditions for (real) collaboration**

Shifting systems is something that no individual or organisation can do alone. It requires simultaneous action across multiple layers of a system – infrastructure, policy, relationships, narratives and values – all at once. And yet we often hear stories of funder “collaborations” that are surface-level at best.

Funders need to cultivate the skills, practices and cultures that enable genuine collaborations to thrive: letting go of control; communicating transparently what you are working on; creating the time and incentives to forge trusting relationships; genuinely listening to others; and adapting your priorities or strategies to better complement – rather than compete with – each other.

“*I am more firmly than ever of the view that effective collaboration at scale, across the whole system, is the way to go.*”

– Jonny Wates, Wates Family Enterprise Trust

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#### CALL 4

### **Challenge your governance structures**

In our experience, many foundations currently rely on governance models built for stability, linearity, and control – things like defined evaluation metrics, linear logic models, and top-down, risk-averse decision-making processes. But we are now living in a time that demands flexibility, adaptability, and collaboration.

We strongly encourage funders to consider how they might experiment with evolving their governance structures to better align with the needs of their work – for example, shifting who has voice and influence in the organisation, interrogating traditional notions of rigour, or expanding the organisation's understanding of risk (such as considering the risk of *not* acting alongside the risk of acting).

“ Governance isn't a neutral backdrop to strategy. It is strategy. And unless foundation boards evolve alongside the world they seek to influence, even the boldest strategies may fall short.”

– Clare Nolan, Engage R+D

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## CALL 5

### **Be ambitious — about goals, connection, dynamism**

Our final call relates to levels of ambition across the system as a whole. Both *Where the Green Grants Went 9* and Metabolic's *Fertile Ground* report draw comparisons with the effectiveness of neo-liberal and right-wing movements in coordinating strategy and funding to build a system — and the lessons for progressive philanthropy are significant.

According to *Fertile Ground*, the amount of money flowing towards a life-centred economy is much lower than that invested to establish neo-liberal dominance. Equally striking is the range of intervention points used to build that dominance — coordinated investment in lobbying, education, campaigning and more, working across multiple levels of a system simultaneously.

Thinking ambitiously, then, may be less about the total amount of money and more about the depth, diversity and connectedness of these nodes across a system.

We believe much more could be done to help funders dynamically share needs, information, ideas and action. The mapping work we undertook in the Lab proved genuinely valuable, not least because of the quality of human connection it supported. In an age of technological acceleration, we think the sector could do more to connect in more human ways, building on this through more dynamic mapping, data sharing and coordination.

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## PART 2: THE LAB

### If the needs the Lab was addressing are still so great, why compost?

We designed the Lab to adapt to changing circumstances by incorporating juncture moments throughout its journey – points at which we could assess how things were going and change tack if needed. In autumn 2025 we reached one such moment. We needed more consistent funding to cover the Lab's core activities – communication, finance, project management, coordination – and developed a membership model to try to bring this in. However, the model didn't work for a sufficient number of funders to be viable. At the same time, a number of participants announced they were unable to continue with workstreams as other priorities had taken over. Rather than ignoring these signals and forcing the Lab to continue in its current form, we decided to listen.

The concept of 'composting' came to us quickly and captured the essence of what we wanted to do. The need for the Lab's work remained, so we wanted to find a way to continue serving its aims. We felt the best way to do this was by lovingly digesting what we had built together, tending to the relationships we had formed, sharing out the fruits and nutrients it had developed, and cultivating fertile soil from which new initiatives could grow. Through this process it became clear that there was sufficient energy within the system to continue the **Rights of Nature workstream**, which will continue to operate and welcome new funders to join.

As a team, we each remain committed to the goals of the Lab and curious about what new initiatives may emerge from the Lab's rich soil. We warmly welcome questions and ideas from those wishing to learn from or build on the Lab's work.



#### CONNECT WITH US

To connect with or join the Rights of Nature workstream, please contact Erica Neve: [erica@yoak.uk](mailto:erica@yoak.uk)



You can find contact details for the Lab team in Appendix 1 → p. 58

# Acknowledgements

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The Lab team wishes to extend a huge and heart-filled thank you to all of the people who have taken part in, supported or contributed to the Lab over its lifetime. Every single person here helped to make the Lab what it was, and we are endlessly grateful to you for your time and energy.

## THE WIDER LAB AND EFN TEAM

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Andres Roberts, Florence Miller, Hannah Temple, Liz Gadd, Nick Gardner, Charlotte Millar, Stella McKenna, Jamie Pike, Erica Neve, Christina Williams, Helen Mian, Sophia Cooke, Tara Cooper, Emma Clyde

## EARLY DESIGN INPUT AND GUIDANCE

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Andy Middleton, Atossa Soltani, Cassie Robinson, Jon Cracknell, Laura Miller, Phoebe Tickell, Rose Longhurst

## FUNDERS AND ALLIES WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE LAB

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Sufina Ahmad – John Ellerman Foundation

Maria Spink – Individual funder

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Jonny Wates – Wates Family Enterprise Trust

Felicity Mallam – Wates Family Enterprise Trust

Rachel Starling – Individual funder

Jonathan Chequers – Individual funder

Lucy Guard – JJ Charitable Trust

Sian Ferguson – JJ Charitable Trust

Eva Beresford – JJ Charitable Trust

Sarah Greenfield-Clark – The Movements Trust

Anna Henry – The Movements Trust

Renata Minerbo – Be The Earth Foundation

Trenna Cormack – Individual funder

Anna Van Der Hurd – A Team Foundation

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Alex Wright – Individual funder

Stuart Mills – Practical Acts

Chandrima Padmanabhan – Climate Emergency Collaboration Group

Charlie Crossley – Friends Provident Foundation

Danielle Walker Palmer – Friends Provident Foundation

Joanne Wilce – Friends Provident Foundation

Kate Rudd – Friends Provident Foundation

Devika Waney – Savitri Waney Trust

Emily Kerr-Muir – Savitri Waney Trust

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## INSPIRING SPEAKERS, CONTRIBUTORS, PARTNERS, AND GUESTS

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Michael Weatherhead – Wellbeing Economy Alliance

Rieta Alijedro – Doughnut Economics Action Lab

Rose Longhurst – Open Society Foundation

Nick Stanhope – Shift Design

Atossa Soltani – Sacred Heartwaters of the Amazon Initiative

Andy Middleton – Wales Transition Lab

Cassie Robinson

Jim Cooke and others – Association of Charitable Foundations

Ruth Andrade – Regenerosity

Emily Bolton – Social Finance, Our Future

Jyoti Bannerjee – North Star Transition

Mehul Sangham – Culture Hack Labs

Jon Alexander – The New Citizenship Project

Alnoor Ladha – Transition Resource Circle

Lynn Murphy – Transition Resource Circle

Dan Burgess – Becoming Crew

Mira Bangel – Sense Tribe

Phoebe Tickell – Moral Imaginations

Chrissy Levett – Creative Conscience

Elaine King – Chilterns Conservation Board

Emma Robertson – the Charities Responsible Investment Network at ShareAction

Jennifer Menke – Regenerative Earth

Hajar Tazi

Faith Gillespie – Regenerosity

Jo Swinson – Partners for a New Economy

Sophie McKecknie – Partners for a New Economy

Stephanie Brobbey – Good Ancestor Movement

Laurie Macfarlane – Future Economy Scotland

Miriam Brett – Future Economy Scotland

Sarah-Jayne Clifton – Economic Change Unit

Tom Railton – Economic Change Unit

Louis Willis – Economic Change Unit

Natasha Yorke-Edgell – Economic Change Unit

Yasmin Ahammad – Impatience Earth

Amy Clarke – Tribe Impact Capital

Sophia Omar – Impact Investing Institute

Gail Cunningham – Charity Investment Governance Principles lead consultant

Robert Palmer – Tax Justice UK

Jake Woodier – Tax Justice UK

Faiza Shaheen – Tax Justice UK

Arun Advani – Centre for Tax Analysis

Natalie Shortall – Oxfam

Rebecca Gowland – Patriotic Millionaires

William Riley – RSPB

Alex Jacobs – Joffe Trust

Daniel Jones – Uplift

Jon Mowell – Thirty Percy Foundation

Thomas Linzey – Center for Democratic and Environmental rights

Emma Mortlake – Lawyers for Nature

James Orr – Friends of the Earth Northern Ireland

James Lock – Opus/River Don Project

Simon Evans – Wye & Usk Foundation

Tom Brennan – Environmental Law Foundation

Robin Pierro – Environmental Law Foundation

Lucy Gavaghan

Paul Powesland – Lawyers for Nature

Brontie Ansell – Lawyers for Nature

Jessie Mond Wedd – Lawyers for Nature

Sara Bender

Thomas Rickard – River Knowing UK

Tessa Durham – Gower Street

Everyone at the [UK Rights of Nature Network](#)

Dominic Burke and Jo Ram – Lankelly Chase

Sarah Teacher and Sophia Omar – Impact Investing Institute

Ebru Kaya – Regenerative Investing Institute

Kathryn Machin – WWF People's Plan for Nature

## APPENDIX 1

# About the Partners

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### THE ENVIRONMENTAL FUNDERS NETWORK (EFN)

The Environmental Funders Network (EFN)'s vision is an effective, flourishing ecosystem of environmental philanthropy that is supporting people and the planet to thrive together. Our mission is to cultivate knowledge and relationships that enable environmental philanthropy to step up its impact in response to the climate and nature emergency.

We provide tailored support across the funding community to strengthen their work – whether that's within our membership network for funders and advisors, or in our forum for fundraisers. We share knowledge, expertise and research; foster connections; and work to motivate and support those not yet funding environmental causes to give.

The need for strategically-deployed environmental philanthropy has never been greater. Our aim is to give the funding community the knowledge, networks and agency they need to address these key challenges of our time.

To be in touch please contact Sophia Cooke: [sophia@greenfunders.org](mailto:sophia@greenfunders.org).

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### THE BIO-LEADERSHIP PROJECT

The Bio-Leadership Project is a global movement of people and projects working with nature towards better forms of human progress. Our work consists of an extraordinary global fellowship, an innovation function catalysing initiatives such as the Earth Funding Lab, and an advisory function supporting nature-centred leadership and impact. In 2025 The Bio-Leadership Project incorporated an international cooperative to act as a platform of mutual support for nature-centred organisations. Later in 2026, Bio-Leadership's founder, Andres Roberts, will launch a new proposition dedicated to deeper forms of support towards life-centred, systemic impact.

To be in touch please contact Andres Roberts: [andres@bio-leadership.org](mailto:andres@bio-leadership.org).

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### THE TEAL COLLECTIVE (TEALCO)

The Teal Collective (TealCo) is a community of specialists and practitioners that supports pioneering organisations to become truly regenerative forces in the world by learning from nature. Using our novel **Organisations as Organisms** framework, we work with systems, organisations and leaders to evolve their practices to cultivate mutual flourishing. We share guidance and examples of regenerative practice through our Rootcamps, events, and the 'A Thriving Future' podcast.

Our vision is for a world where regenerative practice is the new business as usual. We were drawn to the idea of the Lab by its bold ambition for transformative change across philanthropy and economics, its commitment to placing life at the centre, and its focus on spreading tangible ripples into the world.

To be in touch please contact Hannah Temple [hannah@tealco.org](mailto:hannah@tealco.org).

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## APPENDIX 2

# Selected References & Further Reading

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### PAPERS AND RESEARCH

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- Environmental Funders Network, [Where the Green Grants Went 9](#)
- Stanford Social Innovation Review, [Collective Impact](#)
- Bridgespan, [Audacious Philanthropy](#)
- Social Finance, [Navigating System Change Evaluation](#)
- Freedom Fund, [Measuring Systems Change](#)
- Ruth Taylor, [Transforming Narrative Waters](#)
- FSG, [The Water of Systems Change](#)
- Bateson Institute – [Warm Data Labs](#)
- [Buckminster Fuller Institute](#)
- [New Economy Grants in Europe: an analysis of grants made in 2024 by 40 foundations](#) – Report by the Hour is Late/Partners for a New Economy, copies by request

### MODELS AND TOOLS

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- [The Berkana Two Loops Model](#)
- The Iceberg Model
- Bill Sharpe, [Three Horizons Model](#)
- Joanna Macy, [Three Dimensions of the Great Turning](#)
- Donella Meadows, [Twelve Places of Intervention in Systems](#)
- FSG, [The Water of Systems Change](#)
- Social Finance, [The routes to scale](#)
- Social Finance, [Navigating Systems Change Evaluation](#)
- Freedom Fund, [Measuring Systems Change](#)
- [The Work That Reconnects](#)
- Justice Funders, [A Just Transition for Philanthropy](#)

### ORGANISATIONS TO LOOK TO

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*There are many good projects and initiatives that have inspired this work, and we would love to reference them all. Here are just some of the people we would like to spotlight as also doing great work to connect funders and support impact in systemic ways:*

[Good Ancestor Movement](#)

[Regenerosity](#)

[The Bio-Fi Project](#)

[Impatience Earth](#)

[Partners for a New Economy](#)

[EDGE Funders](#)

[Justice Funders](#)

[The School of System Change](#)

[Ostara](#)

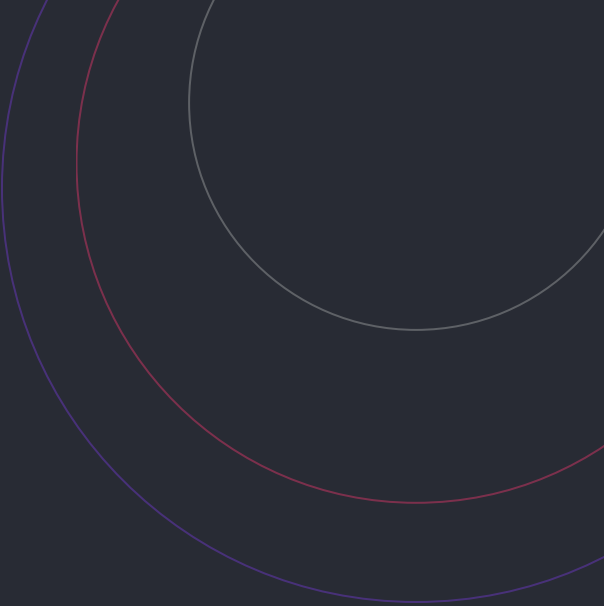
[Our Future](#)

[Civic Square](#)

[Dark Matter Labs](#)

[Regenerative Earth](#)

[Opus](#)

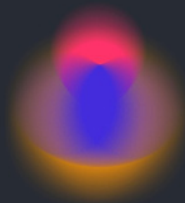


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*“We are going somewhere different.  
Let’s go there differently.”*

— Nora Bateson

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**Earth Funding** Lab

[earthfundinglab.org](http://earthfundinglab.org)