

Dalberg Catalyst

# Our Learnings on Co-creating Visionary Change

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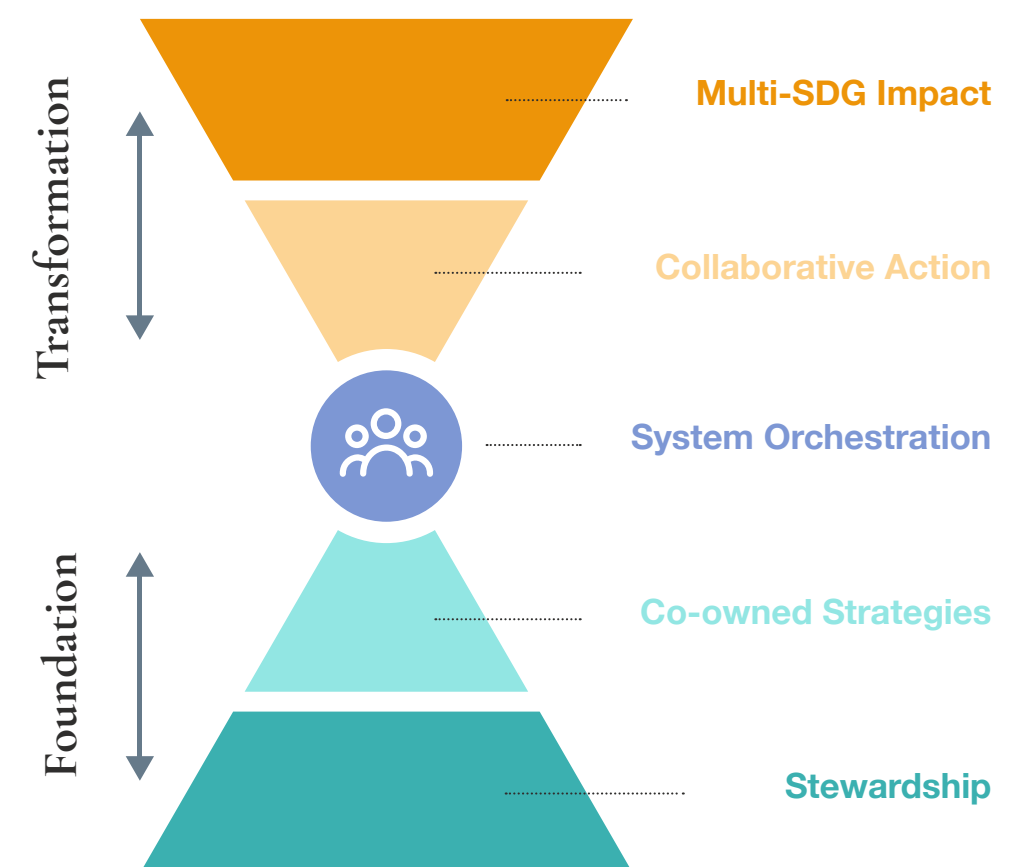
# Introduction

As we reflect on the 5-year anniversary of our initiative portfolio, our team at Dalberg Catalyst is pleased to share key lessons we’ve learned as practitioners of systems work for societal change. This report synthesizes the five-part learning series we shared on social media in early 2025, presenting insights at each level of our theory of change:

- i.) Multi-SDG Impact;
- ii.) Collaborative Action;
- iii.) System Orchestration;
- iv.) Co-owned Strategies; and
- v.) Stewardship.

The challenges we collectively face—from pandemics to climate change—cannot be tackled through siloed, piecemeal approaches. We need integrated solutions, collective action, and strategies that are co-owned and carefully stewarded. Most importantly, we need to embrace a spirit of “continuous adaptation”, and to embed learning and cross-pollination into the very fabric of how we approach our work. We hope readers of this report find these lessons useful and would love to hear what our reflections spark for you!

## Our High-level Theory of Change



# *What are we solving for?*

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are meant to be achieved by 2030, yet despite progress in some areas, we remain woefully off-track. The way we're collectively thinking and acting isn't working - conventional approaches to problem solving, which break problems down into their component parts, do not seem to be moving the needle.

**Complex challenges like pandemic prevention and climate change cannot be addressed without systemic shifts. Breaking problems into quantifiable, attributable metrics may yield small wins, but won't solve the polycrisis. Instead, framing interdependent problems as dilemmas allows us to embrace complexity and invite would-be partners into dialogue. And it allows for the emergence of better narratives about the case for systemic change. Often, our work begins with dialogue amongst a small group of catalysts who spot a contradiction, creative tension, or paradox – points of view that seem to be valid yet incompatible. Through dialogue, we build shared understanding—where we are, where we need to go, and how to get there.**



Take our **Preventing Pandemics at the Source** ([PPATS](#)) initiative. When others asked how to stop an outbreak from becoming a pandemic, we asked: how do we stop outbreaks from happening at all? That meant looking at root causes and broader systems. It meant addressing a key dilemma: how do we prevent pandemics for everyone—including frontline communities—rather than relying on containment solutions that mainly benefit wealthier nations? How do we reduce viral spillover risk when economic incentives drive greater human-wildlife interaction? The complexity of this challenge requires diverse perspectives and a multidisciplinary approach.

Similarly, the cascading crises that engulf our world will persist and worsen as long as we think that siloed, piecemeal problem solving will suffice to address them. A reductionist approach risks trapping us where we are—playing a zero-sum game, failing to make real progress because we focus on individual trees rather than the catastrophe slowly decimating the forest.

**The following sections elevate lessons about what we’ve learned it takes to address some of the greatest dilemmas of our time – it requires moving entire fields toward greater coherence, agility, and impact.**



## Lesson 1

### *Integral Solutions Advance Multiple SDGs at Once*

Too often, funders and social innovators focus narrowly on single-issue solutions, staying within their lanes and treating co-benefits as an afterthought. Funders dangle prizes and promote competition to see which solutions represent highest value for the money—all while our collective success hinges on many context-specific and interdependent efforts moving forward in harmony.

Solutions that are integral to achieving multiple objectives are often overlooked. Because these integral solutions often look second-best (at best) or off-strategy (at worst) when they are viewed through the lens of a single objective or silo of expertise. Yet our experience has shown that the most powerful interventions are those that simultaneously and intentionally advance multiple SDGs.



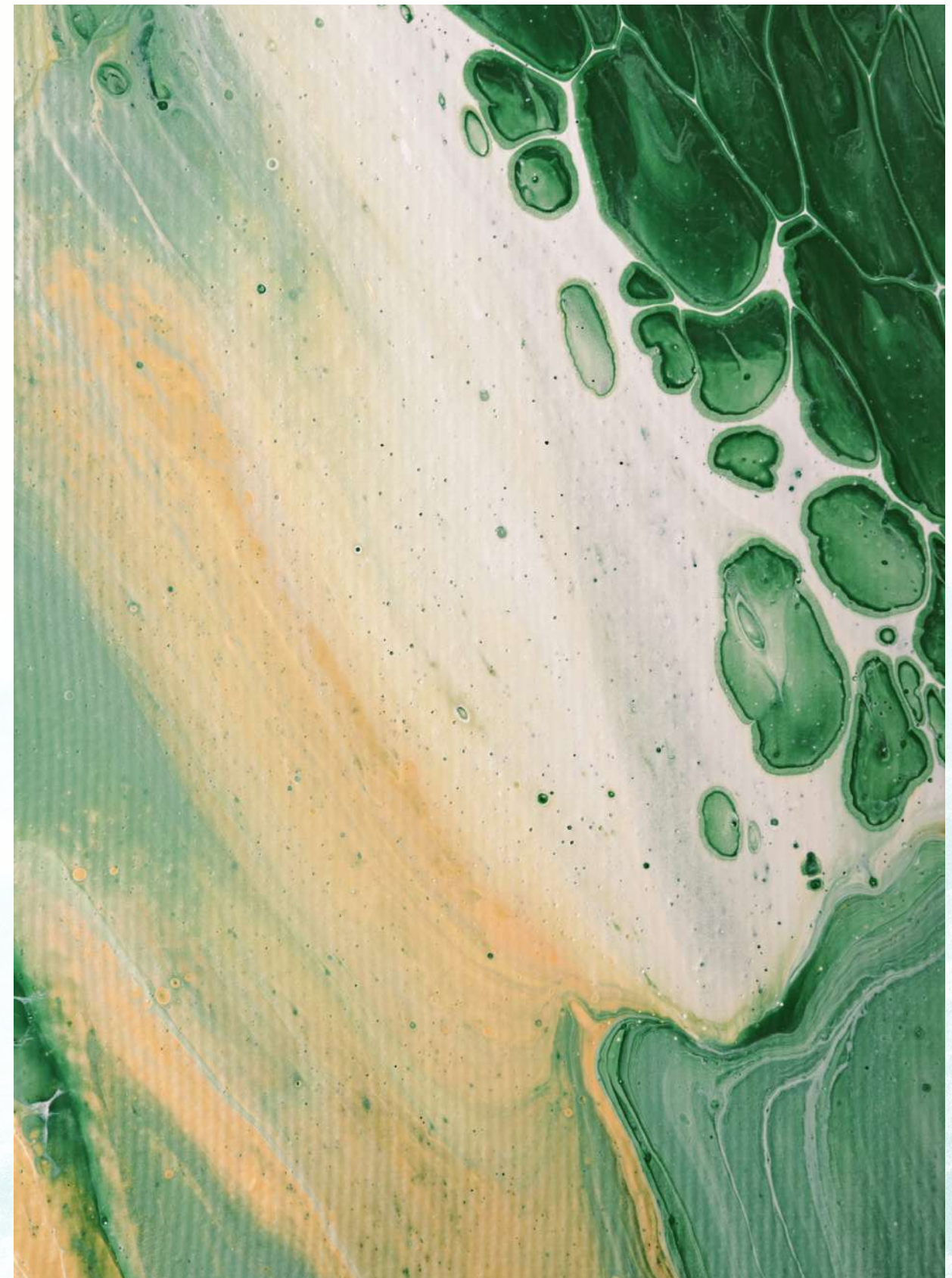


## *For example:*

As co-creators of the Adaptive Cities initiative ([www.adaptivecities.org](http://www.adaptivecities.org)), we've found tools and platforms for data integration and prescriptive analytics are not necessarily “first-best” solutions on any specific agenda. However, they are critical to a range of systemic goals—from mitigating extreme heat impacts to strengthening urban resilience.

While co-creating Adaptive Cities through the 17 Rooms process with Rockefeller Foundation and Brookings Institution, the words of our Brookings colleagues resonated: the SDGs are not “17 silos”, and we can think of any SDG-specific challenge as an entry point for addressing multiple goals at once. In fact, our collective efforts ought to revolve around solutions that are integral to achieving multiple SDGs at once.

**When we shift from narrowly optimizing individual solutions to investing in integral solutions, we unlock opportunities for deeper, systemic transformation – which also involves deeper shifts in how we see ourselves and how we think, make decisions, and work together.**





Going forward, particularly in the face of declining resources, we are looking to uncover more of these multi-SDG solutions. What are the solutions that look second or even third best when viewed in a narrow silo, but are actually the best solutions when looking across silos because they address multiple issues at the root? How can we identify and support these integral solutions that are designed to more efficiently address multiple areas at the same time?



## Lesson 2

# *Collaborative Action Must Flex Between Top-Down and Bottom-Up*

If integral solutions are key to systemic impact, how can we galvanize and lend structure to the collaborative action needed to advance them? Should it be driven from the top down or the bottom up?

We've learned that top-down versus bottom-up is not a design choice; it's a creative tension to continuously manage. Highly effective collaborative action networks integrate and dynamically flex between the two, depending on the moment.





## *In successful collaborative action networks:*

01

**Network members have a common understanding of their situation and a shared sense of purpose**

02

**Network culture balances individual agency with collective responsibility: members aren't required to take actions but can be firmly encouraged to and then held accountable via social enforcement**

03

**Lateral connections are strong: members trust one another and engage in movement-generous exchanges of intel and support**

04

**The (virtual) space where members meet is facilitated by someone everyone trusts**





We have seen these ingredients work well in practice with [Sharing Strategies](#), a global climate/development advocacy network in our portfolio. Hundreds of “Strategy Sharers” have coalesced around the goal of reforming the global financial architecture to jumpstart progress on the SDGs and climate goals (shared sense of purpose). As the external context changes rapidly, they meet in large monthly plenary calls (virtual space) to swap intel, make sense of the evolving situation (common understanding), and plan for upcoming global moments.

Subsets of Strategy Sharers periodically peel off to form catalytic action clusters around focused sub-agendas. In these smaller cluster meetings, partners align on a joint strategy, coordinate actions (strong lateral connections), and hold one another accountable across meetings (social enforcement). And this dynamic process is orchestrated by a seasoned, widely respected advocate (trusted facilitator).

This isn’t just nice-sounding social change theory - it yields results: Sharing Strategies network partners are driving systemic tipping points. Financial architecture reform has risen to the top of the agenda at global summits and international financial institutions are making real changes. Much hard work lies ahead, especially in today’s geopolitical environment, but this agile movement gives us cause for optimism.

Going forward, we’re looking to understand how to create systems for collaborative action, and embed these in all our initiatives. How do we effectively flex between top-down and bottom-up? And when contexts change, how do these solutions seamlessly adapt?



## Lesson 3

### *System Orchestrators Unlock Fieldwide Collaborative Action*

Effective collaboration does not happen on its own. It requires system orchestrators—trusted individuals or teams that facilitate connections, foster alignment, and steward collective action across fields.

In our experience, the demand for orchestration often arises before the individual or team of would-be leaders-of-leaders recognizes the role they could play. The most promising candidates tend not to self-promote. Rather, they are invited into leadership roles by partners who recognize their ability to see beyond individual agendas and unlock synergies across disciplines.





Trust, in our view, is such a critical success factor that it typically makes more sense to first consult across fields to see who could be a trusted orchestrator than to invite interested candidates to make the case for themselves. We have found it necessary to invest in the search for and recruitment of individuals and teams who can play the orchestration role—both at the outset and when it comes time for leadership to transition (as leaders inevitably must).

What do we look for? Relevant technical knowledge, network connections, influence and integrity are obvious table-stakes qualifications. We've come to appreciate that a systems lens, exceptional facilitation and coalition-building skills, the ability to foresee and combine complementary partner strengths, and ability to inspire movement-generous partner behaviour, are often the ultimate differentiators—and these can take decades to develop.



Unlike conductors leading a rigid orchestra, system orchestrators function more like rotating leaders in a jazz ensemble—adapting to the needs of the field as strategies evolve. Identifying, supporting, and transitioning these leaders is a critical yet often overlooked investment in the success of any transformation agenda. In short, while the key differentiators remain the same, the optimal profile of a system orchestrator co-evolves with the field's strategy.

Going forward, we are looking to deepen our understanding of how to identify and support these systems orchestrators. How do they emerge? What type of support do they need? And how can we best equip them to play this role?



## Lesson 4

# *Strategies for Transformative Change Must Be Collectively Owned*

Transformative change does not happen through isolated projects. It happens when a whole field of actors moves together with a shared, co-owned strategy. Our experience with the **Climate Smart Forest Economy Program** ([CSFEP](#)) underscores this point.

Between 2020 and 2023, CSFEP launched 15 ambitious projects globally to test forest economies that could work for people, nature, and climate. However, a year later, we observed mixed results—some projects thrived while others faded.

Why? Because instead of developing co-owned strategies with our partners, we had largely invited partners into projects that advanced our own agenda. That strategy worked to complete those projects, but it didn't build momentum, support other projects, or unlock systemic change.





So in 2024, we made a major shift. Now, we build coalitions in different regions, bringing together stakeholders to develop collectively owned strategies built on the collective wisdom of all partners. Here's what we've learned so far about how to develop these co-owned strategies:

01

**Bring the right people to the table—local leaders, experts, and those who have a direct stake in the outcomes.**

02

**Foster shared understanding and collective agency—so everyone feels invested and empowered to act.**

03

**Ensure strategies evolve with the movement—keeping the momentum going as new challenges and opportunities arise.**



By building coalitions that bring the right local leaders and experts to the table, fostering shared understanding and collective agency, and ensuring that strategies evolve with shifting environments, we create the conditions for long-term impact.

Going forward, we're looking to articulate the conditions necessary for co-owned strategies to emerge. How do we effectively build trust, capacity, and shift power within our coalitions? How do we ensure that coalitions have everything they need to own their agendas over the long-term?



## Lesson 5

### *Stewarding the Transformation Flywheel Builds Long-Term Momentum*

Co-owned strategies require active stewardship—not just of individual initiatives, but of the entire field. Over the past five years, we have come to see healthy, adaptive fields as “Transformation Flywheel Ecosystems” —a “flywheel” in the sense that diverse actors collectively power a self-reinforcing feedback loop that gains and sustains momentum over time. Exemplary Flywheel Ecosystems include the fields of actors who have, collectively, managed to significantly turn back the AIDS epidemic as well as those who have rapidly accelerated solar power, for example.

A functioning Flywheel consists of multilayered actors engaging in four critical actions:

- i.) Inviting participation;**
- ii.) Building capacity;**
- iii.) Driving implementation; and**
- iv.) Shaping narratives**

If any of these elements is missing, the entire ecosystem struggles to gain momentum.

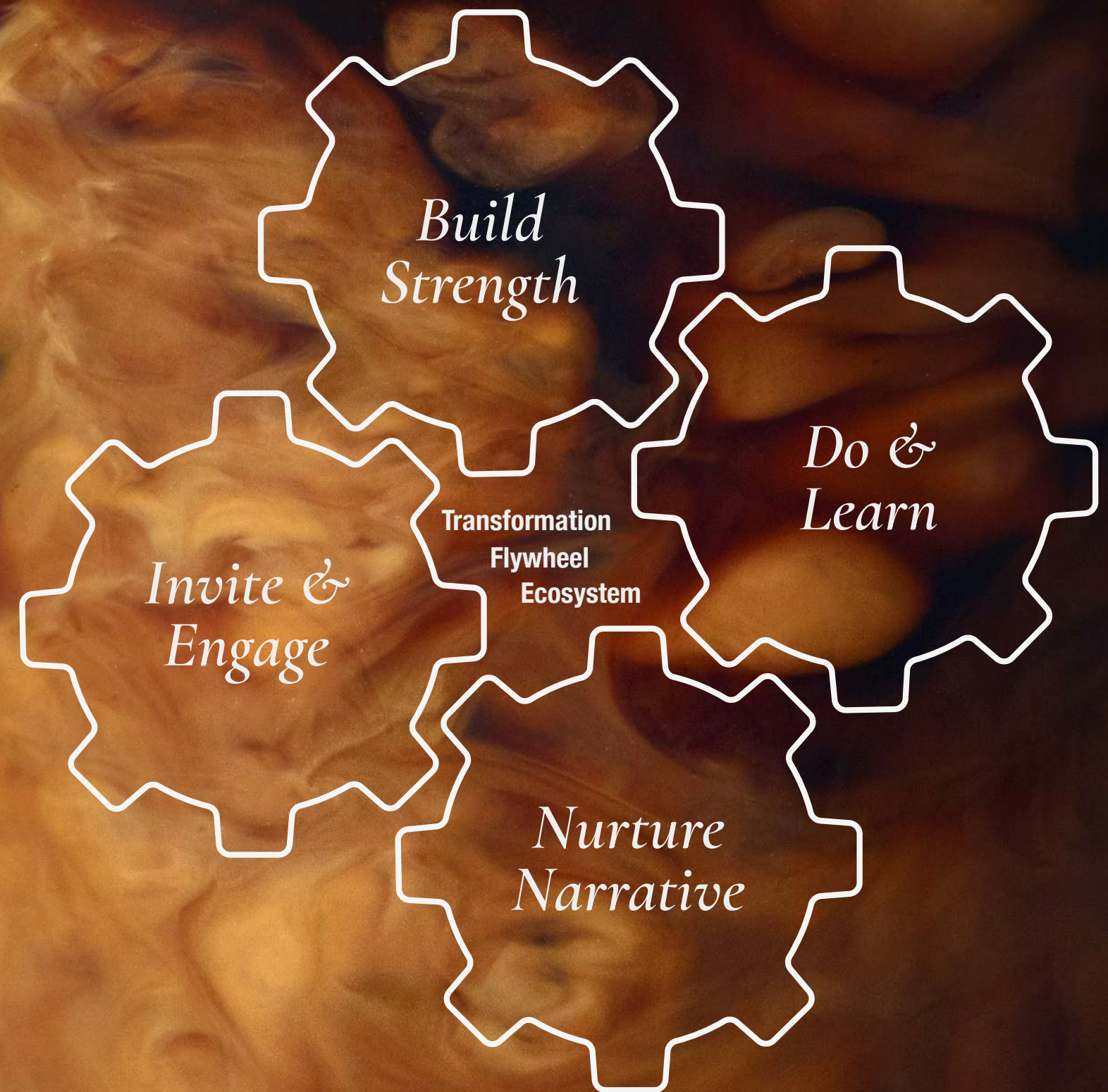




Segments of a functioning Flywheel, in our view, include the entire, multi-layered stacks (plural) of actors working to:

**Invite and Engage, Build Strength, Do and Learn, and Nurture the Narrative.**

The absence or isolation of any of these segments limits an entire Flywheel's ability to power exponential change. And, at the center of these segments, are co-owners of the field's strategy, including those with direct stakes in the consequences, relevant technical expertise, a transdisciplinary view, and the authority and resources to act.





A fieldwide Flywheel is able to adapt and gain momentum over time because, critically, its trusted orchestrators have an unbiased, stable base from which to operate--including strategic, accompanying support and flexible, multi-year funding--a base often distinct from the orchestrator's original organization because it's hard for a field to fully trust an orchestrator whose institutional home is bent on scaling its own services or otherwise actively competing for funding with the field of partners calling for orchestration.

Looking across our platform, we recently used a version of this Flywheel framework to check the pulse—and detect the palpitations—of the mission-led fields we serve. (Spoiler: we and our partners could be doing much more to elevate collective success stories, nurture narrative change, and inspire more audacious mobilization.)



## Conclusion

# *Embedding Learning in Systems Change*

At Dalberg Catalyst, learning is not an add-on—it is embedded in how we work. Systems change is inherently complex, requiring experimentation, iteration, and even failure.



*By continuously engaging in all four loops, we challenge assumptions, adjust course, and ultimately build more effective initiatives. We see this as a quadruple-loop learning journey:*





**We are committed to learning together—openly sharing what works, what doesn't, and how we collectively make sense of the complex challenges we face.**

**We welcome your insights. What have you learned about systems change? What strategies have been most transformational in your work? Let's keep learning, together.**



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