



RIVERS OF CONVERSATIONS

RELATING SYSTEMS THINKING & DESIGN
RSD13 | OCTOBER 2024

Inquiry into Prerequisites for Co-Creating a Culture of Care and Kinship

Luea Ritter, Marco Gyger, and Anaïs Sägesser

This paper presents our findings over the first two years of stewarding the World Ethic Forum (WEFo). It shows the interrelationality of the different schools of thought and bodies of work on which our participatory action research (PAR) is built alongside transdisciplinary approaches. This paper introduces a conceptual lens for WWEFo's PAR, which includes the layers of different cosmologies, a relational ontology, multiple epistemologies, a relational fabric in the pluriverse, practices and capacities for visible outcomes and actions.

It explores two key components or prerequisites of this work: practices and capacities, and the relational fabric in the pluriverse. The analysis explores deeper pattern recognition, navigating power dynamics, and the importance of diverse representation, building trust and common ground and designing effective processes and social architectures.

The paper identifies the significance of surfacing deeply rooted issues, building relational capacities, and engaging with land and place. It acknowledges the inclusion of diverse voices and perspectives as essential, drawing from feminist theory and decolonising approaches to broadening collective understanding.

This paper wants to lay the groundwork for our further participatory action research in the field of co-creating a culture of care and kinship. It identifies gaps in existing knowledge and highlights required inquiry for future empirical studies and practical applications in societal transformation.

KEYWORDS: participatory action research, ecocentrism, epistemologies, relational fabric, transformative learning, practices and capacities

RSD TOPIC(S): Cases & Practice, Methods, Methodology & Theory, Socioecological Design

Introduction

With the World Ethic Forum (WEFo), the organisation we researchers are associated with, and which serves as a case study for this article, the intention is to co-create the prerequisites for a culture of care and kinship. The concept of kinship extends beyond human relationships to encompass the eco-social family system, including animals, plants, rocks, or bodies of water. Drawing on Van Horn et al. (2021)'s work, kinship manifests itself across various dimensions, including Planet, Place, Partners, Persons, and Practices.

The WEFo and we, as long-term reflective practitioners in the field of societal transformation, position ourselves within ecocentrism. Ecocentrism places intrinsic value on nature, considering the entire ecosystem as the central moral focus. It emphasises the interconnectedness and interdependence of all living beings and the natural world. Ecocentrism asserts that humans are not superior to other species but rather an integral part of the larger ecological community (see, e.g. Næss, 2008; Muir, 1911; Weber, 2019).

Founded in 2021, the WEFo initiated its work in 2022 with a wide range of global voices and instigators from diverse sectors, cultures and disciplines, the so-called Firekeepers. The WEFo as a place and organism for converging efforts, knowledge and best practices, is designed in several stages with an initial seven-year journey from 2022 to 2029 accompanied by Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Bradbury, 2022) to inquire into the transformative potential of our times, creating greater coherence in the social field (Pomeroy & Hermann, 2023; Scharmer et al., 2021).

Approaching the intention of the WEFo, the PAR, alongside diverse transformative partnerships with people of the Firekeeper Circle (more than 50 people representing various perspectives and who meet regularly), acts as a pathway to facilitate shifts of

deeply ingrained structures of power, rank, and privilege. WEFo acknowledges its own positionality as an organisation originating and initiated by people based in Switzerland with a strong sense of connection to land and place, intergenerational, intragenerational and interspecies justice and ecological responsibility. Acknowledging hidden biases, it is thus prompted to recognise our responsibility towards the broader societal and global fields, urging us to delve into less explored, charged, uncomfortable and confronting topics, which inevitably involve our own stories and histories. As we, as PARers, each acknowledge our origins and motivations for engaging in this work (see reflexivity statement), we do so collectively to foster a deep and shared understanding of the factors contributing to the divides and fragmentations of the polycrises (Lawrence et al., 2022; Miller & Heinberg, 2023).

This requires us to be aware of our own perspectives and inner conditions as they co-shape the space and process, or, in the words of O'Brien, «The success of an intervention depends on the inner condition of the intervener.» (as cited in Scharmer, 2009, p. 7). Hence, as researchers and process facilitators, we draw from the notion of leadership as stewardship (Ritter et al., 2024; Spiller et al., 2015), highlighting the importance of guiding and nurturing the process rather than exerting hierarchical control.

In the view of the WEFo and building on the research team's experiences, this can only be explored through an inquiry-based approach. The collective process design requires a) time to enable deeper pattern recognition, b) relating and working as individuals and groups with – sometimes even perpetuating – dynamics such as extractive, exploitative or oppressive structures and behaviours, c) curating a group that is representing a high diversity of representatives and actors in the field, d) creating a common ground and a trust-based approach before entering in the prototyping phase of potential solutions and pathways forward and e) process design and social architectures that enable and reflect the very onto-epistemological paradigm cultivated.

As the authors of this paper, we understand process design and social architecture as the intentional design, shaping of social interactions, experiences, and encounters that open up transformative learning (TL) opportunities and potential shifts in 'meaning perspectives' (Förster et al., 2019) in individuals and the collective. We build on the interdisciplinary field of systemic design (e.g. Sevaldson, 2022; Jones & Kijima, 2018),

which seeks to address complex and interconnected challenges by understanding systems in their entirety and designing processes accordingly. In the context of the WEFo, we especially focus on the underlying ecocentric worldview and relational ontology, emphasising our intraconnectedness (Siegel, 2022) and highlighting the intricate web of connections shaping existence.

Drawing from and acknowledging systemic design's origin in systems thinking that emphasises the importance of considering the whole and the relationships within a system rather than focusing solely on isolated parts, the aspect of articulating and excavating the intrinsic inter- and intraconnectedness is a natural link that we hereby want to add to this rapidly evolving domain.

This paper builds on the work of dialogue and collaboration across diverse cultural, academic, and practical domains to address complex social and environmental challenges and introduces a conceptual lens which can serve as a reference for clarity in such transdisciplinary conversations and complex design processes.

Methods

At the WEFo, PAR is the primary methodology for the longer-term research journey. PAR because «Action-oriented research can, indeed should, help us effectively address our unsustainability crisis, bringing intelligent collaboration directly into knowledge creation processes. It does this not by starting with expert understanding of our problems, but by helping those with a stake in an issue to see their own problems more clearly and to take intelligent action with others in response to their shared learning.» (Bradbury et al., 2019, p. 6). In the era of polycrises, we acknowledge that every one of us has a stake in the issue.

The research is conducted iteratively, employing a process of reflection on practice guided by theoretical assumptions. The methodological approach is anchored in the 'reflective practitioner' paradigm (e.g., Jasper, 2013; Schön, 1983), emphasising critical self-analysis and continuous learning within professional practice. Drawing on phenomenological principles, the focus is on delving into the lived experiences of process facilitation, considering and including experiences as co-facilitators.

This paper synthesises the first two years (2022-23) of insight through the PAR on the Firekeeper process. We present our conceptual lens alongside our preliminary findings regarding prerequisites: practices, capacities, and relational fabric.

Reflexive writing, drawings and dialogue of the PARers captured thoughts, emotions, and insights as they emerged during and after the facilitated processes (2022-2023). This allowed for preserving the richness and depth of experiences as facilitators.

Background on the World Ethic Forum

Connecting around radically shared aliveness provides the World Ethic Forum with an ontological north star. This guiding principle draws on ecocentrism and advocates for a shared culture of care and kinship.

As WEFo, we refer to a culture of care and kinship as the inner aptitude that emerges through awareness-based practices in a collective genuinely dedicated to enabling and ensuring well-being for all. It entails embodying values, expressions of compassion and respect for all forms of life. In that sense, a culture of care and kinship can be seen as both the process and the aspired place to reach.

Additionally, WEFos' work is grounded in the proposition of 'radically shared aliveness', coined by Andreas Weber in 2021, with a few principles, such as 'The world is alive', see here <https://www.worldethicforum.com/en/proposition> for the principles and the initial appeal of the World Ethic Forum. This perspective of shared reality evokes a radical shift in the relationship between humans, other living subjects, and entire ecosystems, including rivers and mountains.

This repatterning from an anthropocentric worldview towards an ecocentric one represents part of the inner-to-outer transformative change aimed to be facilitated and is found through our PAR to be a prerequisite for meaningful action. In our exploration of the concept of kinship, inspiration is drawn from scholars such as Topa & Narvaez (2022) and Mutuwa (1996), alongside Haraway (2016), whose work as a deep system thinker sheds light on the significance of caring practices in shaping kinship and worlds. Haraway's call to *Staying with the Trouble* reminds us of the complexities inherent in nurturing relationships with nonhumans and the ethical responsibilities of prioritising care for all beings.

To live into the question (Rilke, 1929) of enabling a shared culture of care and kinship, our overarching research question for this initial phase, 2022-2028, is: 'How do we come to a new responsibility and life-affirming relationship with ourselves, each other and the natural world?'. This collective endeavour relies on going through a TL process with the Firekeepers. What we hypothesise is that through such a process of exploration and sensemaking, we learn about conscious and unconscious patterns of behaviour, diverse contributions, and the interplay between individuals, communities, and their environments in our collective.

The Firekeeper process design and social architectures thus prioritise listening, reflecting, slowing down and integrating. It aims to offer safe enough (Singer-Brodowski et al., 2022) spaces for collective TL in non-formal environments that allow collective wisdom to emerge over time. With approaches and practices such as *Theory U* (Scharmer, 2009), systems sensing and systemic constellation (Ritter & Zamierowski, 2021), and Art of Hosting (Sandfort et al., 2012), we as process designers draw on established bodies of work that are themselves aiming at an extended epistemology (Heron & Reason, 2008) and *Immersive Systemic Knowing* (Rajagopalan, 2020).

Within the Firekeeper Circle process design, we aim to create and cultivate awareness-based spaces – thereby opening a social space (Bourdieu, 1985), which, going beyond Bourdieu, forms a conscious vessel for individual and collective presence and a shared sense of orientation amidst complexity. This provides a common ground to anchor, gently filter or let go of what may distract or is not a priority for unfolding meaningful interactions leading to greater alignment. It brings into focus, emphasises, and surfaces questions, experiences, concerns, and insights often overlooked or forgotten in decision-making processes. Doing so acknowledges the importance of coherent actions and leadership qualities (Ritter et al., 2024).

The concept of social architecture, as employed in this article, considers the qualities of the space and how it resonates with co-creators, as well as how the physical space and its environment inform the space and process. This includes understanding how the space invites co-shaping and recognising that the shapes created and unfolding during the process have a reciprocal impact.

Drawing from the Firekeeper Process's intent and extensive inquiry, this paper aims to emphasise several critical aspects for enabling an awareness-based process design and social architecture, as surfaced during our work at the WEFo. First, the conceptual lens is shared, followed by exploring four prerequisites that facilitate co-creating a culture of care and kinship.

Conceptual Lens

Through our collaborative efforts over the past two years (2022-2023), it has increasingly become clear that different guiding lenses serve us within the journey. The horizontal and vertical elements jointly compose the conceptual lens of the WEFo's PAR.

On a horizontal level (figure 1), the conceptual lens is described starting with our base assumptions or worldview and proceeding to the visible, the actions. Bottom to top: 0. Different cosmologies, I. A relational ontology: ecocentric worldview, II. Multiple epistemologies, III. A relational fabric in the pluriverse, including diverse voices and land-based perspectives, IV. practices and capacities, and V. the visible outcomes and actions. Together, they provide a conceptual lens for understanding, orienting, moving through, and interpreting experiences, behaviours, and interactions within the context of WEFo PAR, leading and informing actions and decisions.

This model, reading it from below to top, supports clarifying and making sense of complex phenomena, guiding perceptions, beliefs, and actions. Examining the underlying assumptions and principles of different and diverse perspectives gives insight into how individuals and groups perceive reality and navigate their social-ecological environments.

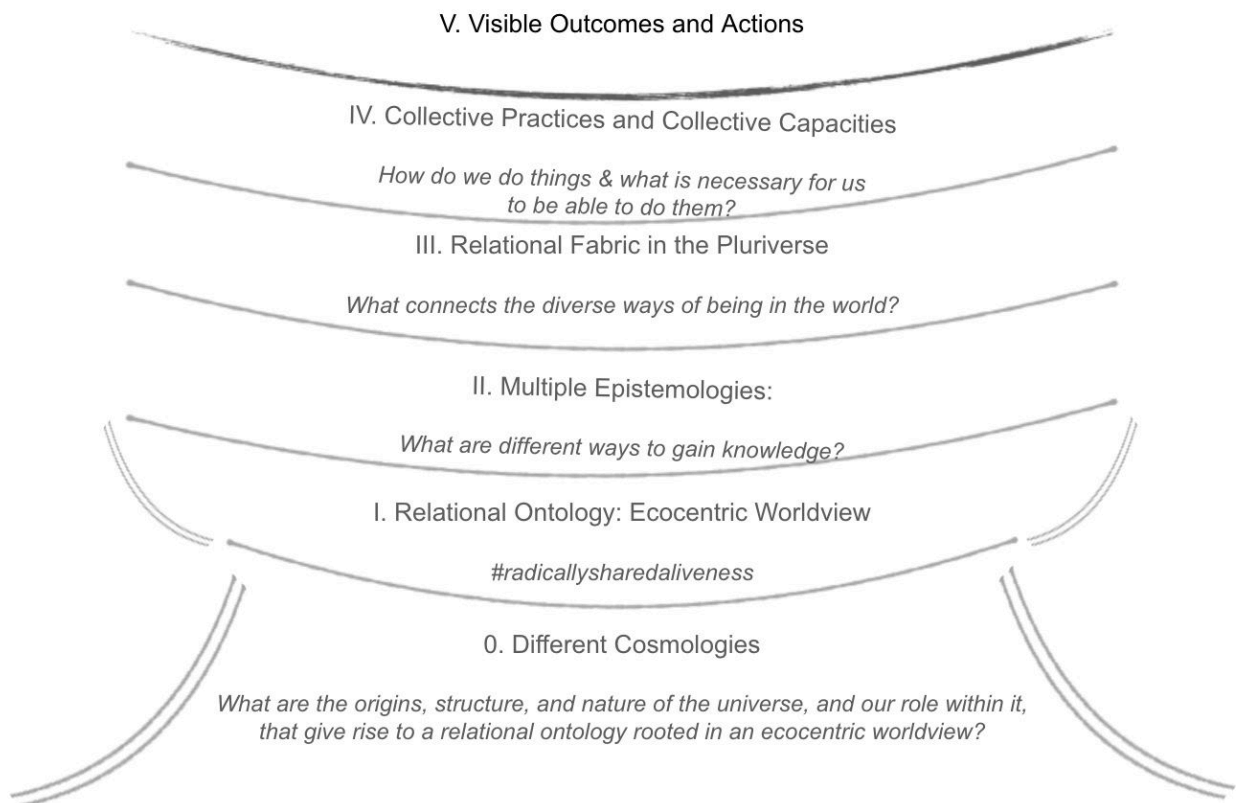


Figure 1: WEFo's PAR Conceptual Lens, horizontal elements only, the thick line indicates the level at which things become visible. Inspired by Arne Naess (2008, p.107).

0. Different Cosmologies

Going beyond the relational ontology and the understanding of the cocentric worldview necessitates acknowledging different underlying cosmologies. Cosmology, meaning different stories to explain the origins, structure, and fundamental nature of the universe, and humanity's role within it. This may include creation narratives that describe how the universe, Earth, and life came into existence as well as detailed accounts of the structure of reality, addressing the physical, spiritual, and metaphysical dimensions of existence. These cosmologies that underpin an ecocentrist ontology describe the interconnectedness of all entities and elucidate the relationships between humans, non-human beings, and natural forces. In our conceptual lens, cosmologies from which relational ontologies originate, we see resonating

with, e.g. Ainu, Dagara, Inuit, Kogi, Lakota, Māori, Stoic, Vedic, Yoruba, Yolŋu, Zulu, or also some Buddhist cosmology.

I. Relational Ontology: Ecocentric Worldview

At the foundation of ecocentrism lies a relational ontology that emphasises the fundamentally relational nature of realities for and with all forms of life and the wider natural world. Rather than viewing the world as a collection of separate, isolated objects, relational ontology highlights the web of relationships and interdependencies that shape existence and posits that entities and phenomena exist and derive their meaning through their relationships and interactions with other entities (see, e.g. Latour, 1993; Haraway, 1991).

II. Multiple Epistemologies

In the realm of societal transformation, knowledge production and dissemination, the notion of multiple epistemologies is key. There is a recognition of the need to decolonise epistemology (see, e.g. Mignolo, 2009; Menon, 2022) and be open to diverse cultural, social, and experiential perspectives that offer new and old insights and understandings of the world. By embracing multiple epistemologies, the move is away from monolithic views of knowledge and expertise, acknowledging the richness and complexity of human and beyond-human experiences. This inclusive approach fosters respect for diverse ways of knowing and encourages collaboration and dialogue across knowledge systems.

III. Relational Fabric in the Pluriverse

The concept of a relational fabric, akin to the interconnected mycelium networks in nature, reflects our inter- and intraconnectedness (Siegel, 2022), envisioning a pluriverse (Escobar, 2018) where diverse perspectives, cultures, and ways of coexisting mutually nurture each other and thrive. This relational approach recognises the inherent value of each voice and perspective within the broader fabric of communities, drawing inspiration from diverse voices and honouring the deep connections between humans and the land. Within this relational

fabric, diverse perspectives and experiences are valued as essential threads, enriching the tapestry of our collective journey. By centring marginalised voices and indigenous knowledge systems, the importance of respecting the land and its inhabitants is recognised, acknowledging histories, cultures, and ecologies.

Through practices rooted in land-based learning, storytelling, and ceremony, connection to place is deepened, fostering a sense of belonging and stewardship (Ritter et al., 2024). This approach nurtures inclusive spaces for dialogue, empowerment, and collective action. As the threads of diverse experiences and relationships with the land are woven together, resilience, reciprocity, and reverence for places are cultivated.

IV. Practices and Capacities

In the quest for transformative change, practices and capacities form the roots of our collective action. Recognising the importance of cultivating skills, knowledge, and attitudes that empower and enact a difference to the status quo is crucial. These practices encompass various activities, from collaborative decision-making and conflict resolution to Ecocentric Leadership as Stewardship (Ritter et al., 2024) and regeneration. It draws upon wider ways of knowing as an important aspect to decolonise our epistemological approaches; see Heron & Reason (2008) with their extended epistemology.

V. Visible Outcomes and Actions

In addition to recognising the unseen dimensions, it is crucial to acknowledge the visible outcomes and actions that result from our interventions within societal transformation processes. Drawing inspiration from the iceberg model, as conceptualised by Booth Sweeny and Meadows (2010), it is understood that while the submerged portion represents the deeper, less visible aspects of our conceptual lens, there are also visible manifestations of our perspectives and actions. These visible outcomes include our engagement in facilitation practices, our contributions to academic discourse, and the tangible results of our research endeavours in the various fields of the Firekeepers. By integrating awareness of

both the visible and hidden dimensions, the aim is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of the WEFo community.

This conceptual lens sets the ground for our journey of inquiry and functions as a compass for our PAR. There are then different root systems within this ground (vertical levels) – some more flat, some deeper, with different stems, shoots, and seedlings showing themselves at the surface as visible outcomes and actions.

On a vertical level (Fig. 2): different thematic strands weave across, like root systems, such for example: a) Leadership as Stewardship goes through layers I-V, b) Transformative Partnerships go through layers I-V, c) specific social practices & individual & group development of care & kinship goes through layers I-V and d) process design and social architecture go through layers I-III. For further details on this vertical level, which is called 'process design & social architecture,' see 'Background'.

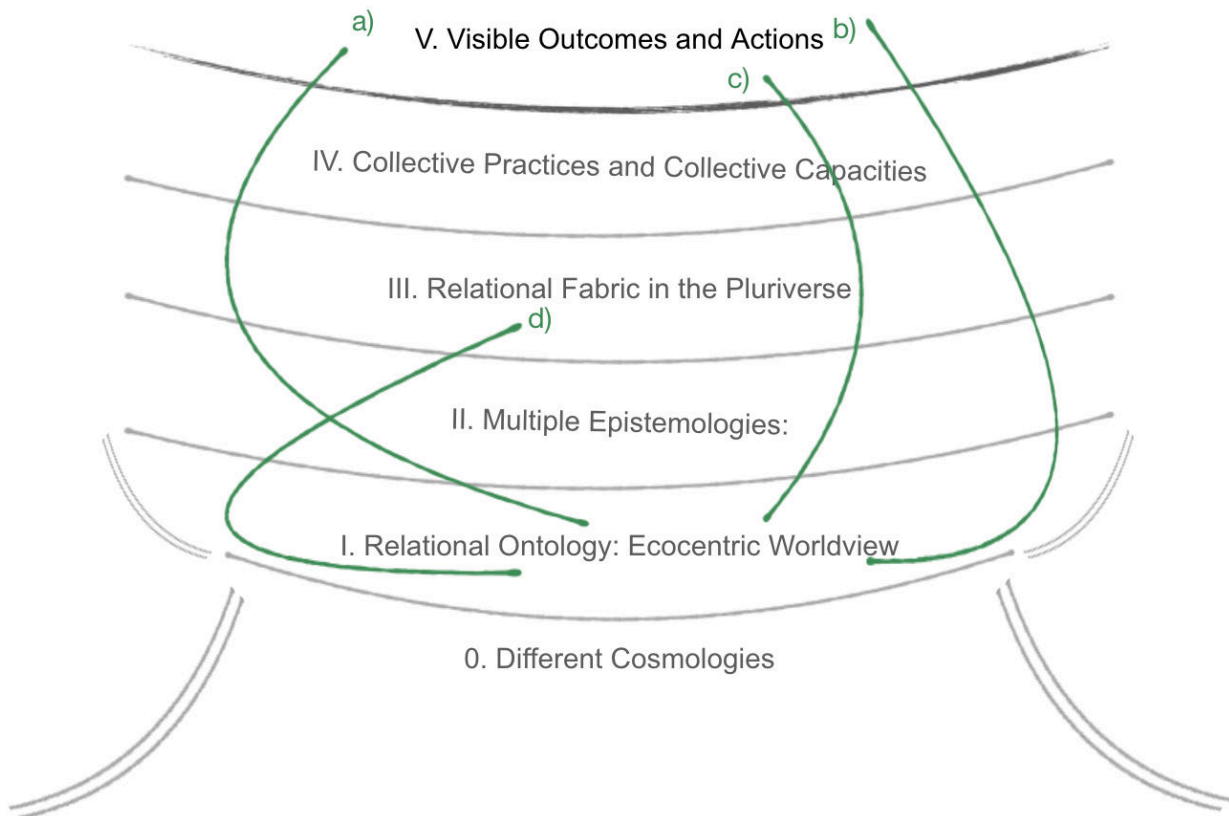


Figure 2: WEFo's PAR Conceptual Lens, with some vertical elements

Prerequisites: Practices, capacities, and relational fabric

In the following section, we want to specifically explore two layers of the conceptual lens, Level III and Level IV, and our findings so far within the Firekeeper Circle process in relation to our research question.

A shared understanding crystallised around prerequisites for fostering a culture of care and kinship, essential for nurturing a responsible and life-affirming relationship with ourselves, each other and the natural world. Our conversations highlighted practices, capacities, and the nurturing of the relational fabric, like our connection to land and place, along with the inclusion of diverse voices and perspectives, both human and beyond, that are essential prerequisites. These interconnected prerequisites we believe require intentional care, embodied actions, awareness-based skills, process stewardship, and deep listening, leading to presencing (Scharmer, 2009) both as individuals and as groups. Through awareness-based process design and structure, and

collaboratively creating and ongoingly maintaining these prerequisites also involves dialogue (Bohm, 1996), compassion, receptiveness and shared alignment while representing a broad spectrum of perspectives for a future anchored in well-being for and of all. By embracing these prerequisites, well-being, understanding across divides, socio-ecological connection, and inclusive decision-making for a regenerative and just world are nurtured.

5.1 Practices

We speak of *practices* as embodied approaches that deepen our understanding through applied actions, foster the 'how' – our individual and collective attitude of doing – and enhance relating to ourselves, each other and the broader context. They include Social Practices (Klitkou et al., 2022), which describe relational aspects and habitual behaviour patterns as individuals and groups. Co-creating social practices that refine and expand awareness, openness, and inclusion is at the centre of focus. To build capacities that enable navigating high levels of complexity and cultivating a culture of care and kinship, practices are required that integrate diverse voices to address challenges and underlying implicit (power) dynamics (Ritter et al., 2023). Making visible differences, commonalities, and conflicts can strengthen relationality by fostering intercultural (Sägesser, 2008) and interspecies hermeneutics. In order to collectively address deeply rooted issues, it is critical to explore how a diverse group of practitioners can practise together over time by calling upon wider ways of knowing while navigating uncharted territory collectively with care and compassion.

These diverse practices and approaches collectively contribute to surfacing and co-holding deeply rooted issues, creating a space for transformative dialogue and action. As these are intentionally practised, they contribute to the artistry of navigating complexity (Ritter & Zamierowski, 2021) and lay the foundation for new ways of relating, interacting and perceiving the world as an interdependent system of systems.

5.2 Capacities

Building on the earlier work of Ritter and Zamierowski (2021), capacity is understood here as the inherent ability to perceive, feel, and interact with the world, encompassing both tangible and subtle aspects. It can be understood as an interface that takes on diverse forms and expressions. Capacities are developed and evolve over time through

individual and collective experiences, enabling individuals and groups to establish relationships and respond to specific situations. Similar to a learning organism, collective capacities function as an interconnected ecosystem of abilities, where each capacity has the potential to adapt, build upon, and reinforce others, facilitating shared evolution through shared experiences.

Collective capacities enable us to embrace diverse perspectives, allowing us to experience specific situations from multiple viewpoints and draw upon diverse ways of knowing. They also support consciously being with the unknown while acknowledging the existence of systemic shadows and hidden interpersonal and cultural dynamics, and tracking the influence of unacknowledged past events. Capacities serve as an essential component in advancing collective processes, enabling us to navigate complex dynamics, embrace diverse perspectives, and actively contribute to transformative change work to foster a culture of care and kinship.

The following are examples of essential capacities to cultivate that relate to the findings of our collective inquiry into a culture of care and kinship:

- Being in inquiry: Not having the answers, being comfortable with holding the questions, and living into the answer (e.g. Reason & Bradbury, 2008)
- Being present, sensing and acknowledging what is: Strengthening a shared intention to be with what is. This includes allowing oneself to sense into and explore a momentary experience with a gentle gaze while including more challenging feelings, emotions (such as anger, loss, grief, joy) and experiences, and consciously deciding with humility what to let pass, integrate or dive into. (e.g. Kabat-Zinn, 2003)
- Being in connection with ourselves, each other and the wider context we are part of: Being in the embodiment, welcoming the connection with others, including the more-than-human and land and place, while strengthening the way we relate, i.e., our 'social muscles' (Brent, 2023; Sägesser, 2022).
- Allowing our diverse ways of knowing to inform us: Opening up to what we are able to perceive and including more subtle signals and impulses equally to our cognitive capacities, Heron and Reason (2008), Rajagopalan (2020). Making space for different ontologies and a pluriverse of worlds (Escobar, 2018).

- Co-creating: Co-hold safe enough spaces (Singer-Brodowski et al., 2022) to go through TL processes together. Weaving diverse, complementary and sometimes contradictory skills together and working in ways that amplify everyone's unique contribution, building a culture of trust and serving a shared purpose.

5.3 Relational Fabric in the Pluriverse: Connection to Land and Place

Engaging with land and place allows for a deeper journey that enables a sense of belonging. Relating to land and place encompasses cherishing and nurturing relationships and connections with all beings and the landscapes inhabited. It involves recognising the reciprocal influence between our actions and the shaping of the environment. The concept of land extends beyond a general understanding to include specific places we live in, feel rooted in, or traverse temporarily.

The International Panel for Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES, 2022, p. 12) highlighted that «people conceive of or relate to nature in multiple and often complementary ways: living from, with, in, and as nature. These different ways of relating to nature reflect people's different worldviews.» Consistent with the IPBES framing living 'as' nature, nature is conceived here as a physical, mental, and spiritual part of ourselves. This understanding is supported by nature practices, as advocated by e.g. Kimmerer (2013), drawing on indigenous sources and encouraging us to reconnect with nature. Authors like Thoreau (1854), Bateson (1991), and Abram (2010) explored the profound reciprocal interconnections between humans and the natural world, urging us to reestablish our bond with the more-than-human world. In line with this, for instance, rivers and mountains are valued, supporting relations of kinship and interdependence.

Reestablishing relationships with all beings, including land and place, necessitates a readiness to connect, listen, and engage in co-creative processes. Further, building on Wahl's (2016) work – focusing on bioregional design for regenerative cultures rather than an approach of borders and national boundaries – acknowledges the communication between biospheres, local, regional, and global dynamics, and reciprocal patterns.

5.4 Relation Fabric in the Pluriverse: Inclusion of diverse voices

Welcoming diverse perspectives and finding common ground is vital to fostering a holistic understanding. Embracing the multitude of stories (e.g. Adichie, 2014), realities, and truths that co-exist acknowledges our interconnectedness and wholeness and is an effort to reweave the relationality between us. This prerequisite also includes recognising the past and the future, which may indirectly or directly affect the present. It is thus not merely about providing a seat at the table for diverse voices, including land, nature and other non-human voices. True inclusion goes beyond token representation and requires creating an environment that values and amplifies diverse voices and their unique perspectives. It involves acknowledging different lived realities, dismantling patriarchal (e.g. Federici, 2019; hooks, 1984), colonial (e.g. Fanon, 1961; Said, 1979; Thiong'o, 1986; Spivak, 1988; Mbembe, 2001), interspecies (e.g., Haraway, 1991, 2016; Weber, 2019), have shed light on the intricate relationships between humans and the natural world and interspecies justice) and other barriers that have marginalised or excluded multiple perspectives.

While not yet knowing, grasping or comprehending all the different perspectives, including diverse voices, invites and expands what is considered true. Depths can be listened to, corners investigated, and hidden spots enlightened (Maté, 2009). Working with wider senses and welcoming ways of being and working that may seem foreign or unknown is crucial. Opening up to other, less-heard voices requires self-reflection, unlearning (often implicit) bias, and cultivating humility. It is an ongoing process that requires a continuous commitment and is an exploration.

Preliminary conclusion, deepening of transcontextual learning and way forward

The research question, "How do we come to a new responsibility and life-affirming relationship with ourselves, each other, and the natural world?" drives our exploration of interconnected relationships and dependencies. Field experiences with the Firekeeper Circle are crucial in examining a culture of care and kinship. Using a conceptual lens, we've deepened our understanding and created a shared framework that helps in the exploration of the underlying complexity.

PAR provides a pathway to address urgent issues, with the proposed approach – combining horizontal and vertical elements – informing the design of processes and social structures that enable a shared responsibility and life-affirming relationship.

In our work with the Firekeeper Circle, we acknowledge that social, environmental, ethical and economic issues are intricately intertwined and require multifaceted approaches that address the complexities of power dynamics and social inequalities.

Challenging the notion of a single truth and embracing the diversity of ways of knowing, we opt for pluriversalism (Escobar, 2018). Pluriversalism encourages dialogue, collaboration, and mutual learning across different cultural, epistemological, and ontological approaches.

Systems thinking and sensing alongside our relational ontology serve as foundational frameworks that underpin the interrelationships among these aspects. Systems thinking enables us to perceive the interconnectedness of various elements and understand how they interact and influence each other. Systems sensing, understood as a «visceral aptitude that draws on innate human capacities for being in relation with, listening deeply to, and momentarily embodying the elements of a system» (Ritter & Zamierowski, 2021, p. 105), emphasises the practice of ‘embodied dialogue’. Further, as discussed earlier, relational ontology highlights the significance of relationships, connections, and interdependencies in shaping our understanding of the world. It invites us to recognise the entangled nature of human and non-human entities and to engage in reciprocal and respectful relationships with the more-than-human world.

By embracing pluriversalism, systems thinking, systems sensing and relational ontology, we develop an approach to societal transformation that acknowledges the complexities, interconnections, and interdependencies of the diverse aspects at play. Whilst doing that, we stay in inquiry, exploring the questions we laid out and embarking on a continuous – individual and group – learning process, sensing what is required, letting go or transforming what no longer serves, acknowledging what must be integrated and opening up to what emerges.

In wrapping up our discussion, we reflect on the five key requirements for the inquiry-based work we facilitate in the WEFo context. These requirements serve as guiding principles, shaping the effectiveness and depth of our endeavours and can inform systemic process design beyond this particular case study:

- a. **Time for Deeper Pattern Recognition:** Allowing sufficient time for thorough exploration and analysis is crucial. This includes slowing down and enables everyone involved to delve deeply into issues, uncover underlying patterns, and develop a comprehensive and shared understanding. This addresses all layers of our conceptual lens.
- b. **Navigating Dynamics of Power and Interaction:** Recognising, addressing, and working with dynamics such as extractive, exploitative, or oppressive behaviours within individuals and groups is essential. Understanding these dynamics helps us navigate power imbalances, and giving space for transformative learning fosters healthier, more equitable long-term interactions. This is strongly related to layer II of our conceptual lens, which includes epistemic decolonisation and layer III, which addresses the relational fabric.
- c. **Diverse Representation:** By curating a diverse range of representatives and actors from various backgrounds and perspectives and pointing out the missing or marginalised, we enrich the collective dialogue and TL potential. This addresses mainly layers II and III of our conceptual lens, looking at how we build relational fabric and which capacities and practices we apply.
- d. **Building Trust and Common Ground:** By cultivating trust-based relationships and creating a common ground, openness and honesty can be fostered, essential for long-term and systemic relevant collaborations among highly diverse stakeholders. We gather around a joint ecocentric ontology, around the notion of radically shared aliveness, which provides our joint fundament (layer I of the conceptual lens and then informs all other layers building from that).
- e. **Designing Effective Processes and Social Architectures:** Lastly, thoughtful process design and social architectures are essential for facilitating

collective inquiry and dialogue. By designing methodologies and structures, we can guide the inquiry process effectively and ensure meaningful engagement and space for emergence. This shows up mostly in layer V and has its roots, especially in layer III (relational fabric) and the actual practices we apply (layer IV).

In summary, by prioritising these five requirements – time for deep reflection, addressing power dynamics, promoting diversity, building trust, and designing effective processes – we can enhance the quality and impact of our inquiry-based work within the WEFo framework. These guiding principles support our path towards more informed, inclusive, and impactful outcomes, nurturing an onto-epistemological shift.

We believe that these learnings can be applied to other collective practices as well as policy-oriented processes and thus add to the transdisciplinary field of systemic design at large. By refining the view on and actively working with the different layers of the conceptual lens as an essential part of understanding a system represents an enhanced opportunity for exploring appropriate design interventions and processes that care for and include all parts of the system.

References

1. Abram, D. (2010). *Becoming animal: An earthly cosmology*. Pantheon Books.
2. Adichie, C. N. (2014, March 10). The danger of a single story [Video]. TED Conferences.
https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story
3. Bateson, G. (1991). *A sacred unity: Further steps to an ecology of mind*. Triarchy Press.
4. Bohm, D. (1996). *On dialogue*. Routledge.
5. Booth Sweeney, L., & Meadows, D. (2010). *The systems thinking playbook*. Chelsea Green Publishing.
6. Bourdieu, P. (1985). The social space and the genesis of groups. *Theory and Society*, 14(6), 723–744. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/657373>
7. Bradbury, H., Waddell, S., O'Brien, K., Apgar, M., Teehankee, B., & Fazey, I. (2019). A call to action research for transformations: The times demand it. *Action Research*, 17(1), 3–10. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476750319829633>

8. Bradbury, H. (2022). *How to do action research for transformations at a time of eco-social crisis*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
9. Brent, Z. W. (2023). Territorializing local public policy: Building social muscle, sustaining participation in food system transformation. *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*, 41(1), 3–19. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23996544221112590>
10. Escobar, A. (2018). *Designs for the pluriverse: Radical interdependence, autonomy, and the making of worlds*. Duke University Press.
11. Fanon, F. (1961). *Les damnés de la terre* (2004 ed.). La Découverte Poche.
12. Federici, S. (2019). *Re-enchanting the world: Feminism and the politics of the commons*. PM Press.
13. Förster, R., Zimmermann, A. B., & Mader, C. (2019). Transformative teaching in higher education for sustainable development: Facing the challenges. *GAIA*, 28(3), 324–326.
14. Haraway, D. (1991). *Simians, cyborgs, and women: The reinvention of nature*. Routledge.
15. Haraway, D. (2016). *Staying with the trouble: Making kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press.
16. Heron, J., & Reason, P. (2008). Extending epistemology within a co-operative inquiry. In P. Reason & H. Bradbury (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of action research* (pp. 366–380). Sage.
17. Hooks, B. (1984). *Feminist theory: From margin to center*. South End Press.
18. IPBES. (2022). Pascual, U., Balvanera, P., Christie, M., Baptiste, B., González-Jiménez, D., Anderson, C. B., ... & Vatn, A. (2022). *Summary for policymakers of the methodological assessment report on the diverse values and valuation of nature of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services*. IPBES Secretariat.
19. Jasper, M. (2013). *Beginning reflective practice* (2nd ed.). Cengage Learning.
20. Jones, P., & Kijima, K. (2018). *Systemic design: Theory, methods, and practice*. Springer.
21. Kabat-Zinn, J. (2003). Mindfulness-based interventions in context: Past, present, and future. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*, 10(2), 144–156.
22. Kimmerer, R. W. (2013). *Braiding sweetgrass: Indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge, and the teachings of plants*. Milkweed Editions.

23. Klitkou, S., Bolwig, A., & Huber, A. (2022). The interconnected dynamics of social practices and their implications for transformative change: A review. *Sustainable Production and Consumption*, 31, 603–614.
24. Latour, B. (1993). *We have never been modern*. Harvard University Press.
25. Lawrence, M., Janzwood, S., & Homer-Dixon, T. (2022). *What is a global polycrisis? And how is it different from a systemic risk?* (Version 2.0, #2022-4). Cascade Institute.
<https://cascadeinstitute.org/technical-paper/what-is-a-global-polycrisis/>
26. Maté, G. (2009). *In the realm of hungry ghosts*. Vintage Canada.
27. Max-Neef, M. (2005). Foundations of transdisciplinarity. *Ecological Economics*, 53(1), 5–16.
28. Mbembe, A. (2001). *On the postcolony*. University of California Press.
29. Menon, D. M. (2022). Changing theory: Thinking concepts from the Global South. *Comparative Literature Studies*, 59(1), 142–162.
<https://doi.org/10.5325/complitstudies.59.1.0142>
30. Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. Jossey-Bass.
31. Mignolo, W. D. (2009). Epistemic disobedience, independent thought, and de-colonial freedom. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 26(7–8), 1–23.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276409349275>
32. Miller, A., & Heinberg, R. (2023, June 15). *Welcome to the great unravelling: Navigating the polycrisis of environmental and social breakdown*. Post Carbon Institute.
<https://www.postcarbon.org/publications/welcome-to-the-great-unraveling/>
33. Muir, J. (1911). *My first summer in the Sierra*. Houghton Mifflin.
34. Mutwa, C. (1996). *Isilwane: The animal: Tales and fables of Africa*. Struik Publishers.
35. Naess, A. (2008). *Ecology of wisdom*. Penguin Books.
36. Pomeroy, E., & Hermann, L. (2023). Social fields: Knowing the water we swim in. *SAGE Journals*. <https://journals.sagepub.com/eprint/WYQ6JZKWCTUQAIPDYJCM/full>
37. Rajagopalan, R. (2020). *Immersive systemic knowing: Advancing systems thinking beyond rational analysis*. Springer.
38. Reason, P., & Bradbury, H. (Eds.). (2008). *The SAGE handbook of action research*. Sage.
39. Rilke, R. M. (1929). *Briefe an einen jungen Dichter*. Insel Verlag.
40. Ritter, L., Gyger, M., & Sägesser, A. (2024). Leadership as stewardship: Fostering transformative partnerships through ecocentrism – Insights from the World Ethic Forum. *Manuscript submitted for publication*.

41. Ritter, L., Gyger, M., Sägeser, A., & Gafinen, M.-P. (2023). Inquiry into inclusive, transformative learning processes for knowledge and wisdom creation on underlying root issues in sustainability: Insights from the WorldEthicForum convening 2023. *Social Innovation Journal*, 22.
42. Ritter, L., & Zamierowski, N. (2021). Systems sensing and systemic constellation for organizational transformation: Building collective capacity for navigating complexity. *Journal of Awareness-Based Systems Change*, 1(2).
<https://doi.org/10.47061/jabsc.v1i2.1181>
43. Rockström, J., Gupta, J., Qin, D., et al. (2023). Safe and just Earth system boundaries. *Nature*. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-023-06083-8>
44. Ross, K., & Mitchell, C. (2018). Transforming transdisciplinarity: An expansion of strong transdisciplinarity and its centrality in enabling effective collaboration. In D. Fam, M. Neuhauser, & P. Gibbs (Eds.), *Transdisciplinary theory, practice and education: The art of collaborative research and collective learning* (pp. 23–39). Springer.
45. Sägeser, A. (2008). *Kultur und IT: Der Einfluss von Kultur auf die Verbreitung von Informationstechnologie in der arabischen Welt*. Südwestdeutscher Verlag für Hochschulschriften.
46. Sägeser, A. (2022, June 27). *Regenerative leadership* [Blog post]. Scaling4Good.
<https://scaling4good.com/2022/06/27/regenerativeleadership/>
47. Said, E. W. (1979). *Orientalism*. Vintage Books.
48. Sandfort, J., Stuber, N., & Quick, K. (2012). Practicing the art of hosting: Exploring what Art of Hosting and Harvesting workshop participants understand and do.
<https://doi.org/10.13140/2.1.2676.8161>
49. Scharmer, O. (2009 & 2016). *Theory U: Leading from the future as it emerges*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
50. Scharmer, O., Pomeroy, E., & Kaufer, K. (2021). Awareness-based action research: Making systems sense and see themselves. In D. Burns, J. Howard, & S. Ospina (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of participatory research* (pp. 633–648). Sage.
51. Schön, D. A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. Basic Books.

52. Sevaldson, B. (2022). *Designing complexity: The methodology and practice of systems oriented design*. Common Ground Research Networks.
<https://doi.org/10.18848/978-1-86335-262-8/CGP>
53. Siegel, D. J. (2022). *IntraConnected: MWe (Me + We) as the integration of self, identity, and belonging*. W. W. Norton & Company.
54. Singer-Brodowski, M., Förster, R., Eschenbacher, S., Biberhofer, P., & Getzin, S. (2022). Facing crises of unsustainability: Creating and holding safe enough spaces for transformative learning in higher education for sustainable development. *Frontiers in Education*, 7.
<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/feduc.2022.787490>
55. Spiller, C., Barclay-Kerr, H., & Panoho, J. (2015). *Wayfinding leadership: Groundbreaking wisdom for developing leaders*. Huia Publishers.
56. Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? *Wedge*, 10, 120–130.
57. Thoreau, H. D. (1854). *Walden*. Macmillan Collector's Library.
58. Thiong'o, N. W. (1986). *Decolonising the mind: The politics of language in African literature*. East African Educational Publishers.
59. Topa, W. (Four Arrows), & Narvaez, D. (2022). *Restoring the kinship worldview: Indigenous voices introduce 28 precepts for rebalancing life on planet Earth*. North Atlantic Books.
60. Van Horn, G., Kimmerer, R. W., & Hausdoerffer, J. (Eds.). (2021). *Kinship: Belonging in a world of relations* (Vols. 1–5). Center for Humans and Nature.
61. Wahl, D. C. (2016). *Designing regenerative cultures*. Triarchy Press.
62. Weber, A. (2019). *Enlivenment: Toward a poetics of the Anthropocene*. The MIT Press.

Authors

Luea Ritter, World Ethic Forum, [LinkedIn](#) | luea.ritter@worldethicforum.com

Marco Gyger, World Ethic Forum, [LinkedIn](#) | marco.gyger@worldethicforum.com

Anais Sägesser, Dr.oec., World Ethic Forum | [LinkedIn](#) | anais.saegesser@worldethicforum.com

Reflexivity

As authors of this paper, we acknowledge our positionality as three cisgender individuals from the global North endowed with the privileges associated with our white identity. We recognise that drawing from our own experiences in a reflective practitioner approach holds limitations, as we have all grown up and lived in societies with deeply embedded bias, structural racism, and diverse patterns and forms of discrimination. These factors inevitably shape our perspectives. Nevertheless, we actively seek to overcome these limitations by engaging in conversations, reflecting on lived experiences, and collaborating with individuals from diverse backgrounds worldwide. Drawing from our collective lived experiences in facilitating societal transformation processes in and across diverse sectors and scales, we offer a diverse array of disciplinary backgrounds, including non-academic perspectives and practices.

Our familial roots are deeply embedded in Switzerland, especially the lineages of farmers, and each of us maintains distinct connections to land and place, with its rich traditions of honouring seasons, rites of passage and century-old rituals also stemming from pagan culture. However, we also grapple with intergenerational and collective trauma from ancestors who were historically marginalised and excluded within Swiss society, for example, Verdingkinder (indentured child labourers), and suppression of women in a broader context, including the right to vote in federal elections which was only granted in 1971, and full voting rights in all cantons (states) were only achieved as late as 1990.

All of us authors bring decades of experience in long-term multistakeholder process design & facilitation, organisational leadership, and teaching about societal transformation, systems change and community building. Additionally, they are

committed to scholarly reflection and sense-making on their actions in the context of societal transformation. From this grounding, they engage in writing this article alongside a literature review.

Acknowledgment

We would like to acknowledge the contribution of Erin Giizhigaate Dixon. Through her reflections and remarks, we refined the conceptual lens by including the different cosmologies as the source for the relational ontology in which our shared work is nested.