



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Special Issue: Transformative Partnerships for a Better World

Transformative partnerships for a better world: Practices, capacities, and opportunities

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Abstract

Transformations toward sustainable, regenerative, and just futures require fundamental changes that can only be achieved by working in partnership. Partnerships across diverse disciplines and perspectives also have the potential to normalize and act on a vision of earth stewardship. In 2023, scholars and practitioners working on transformations gathered at the biennial Transformations Conference to explore how to build, maintain and learn from transformative partnerships for a better world. This article offers a synthesis based on a collective sensemaking of the conference. Drawing on the conference presentations, discussion forums, session outputs and organizer reflections, it takes an appreciative approach to identify capacities and practices that support transformative partnerships and proposes an agenda for further research. The article frames transformative partnerships as processes with six stages: preparing/entering; connecting/relating; cohering/integrating; amplifying/transforming; learning/adapting; and releasing/renewing. These stages are loosely sequential in that each is more prominent at a particular time but progression through them may not be linear. For each stage, multiple supporting practices or capacities are identified, drawing on conference contributions. The article then discusses five priorities for further research, including how to: effectively develop the inner capacities needed for partnership; decolonize partnerships; make partnerships “safe enough” spaces that allow for agonism, action and political struggle; evaluate partnerships; and move from partnerships to building transformation systems.

KEYWORDS

decolonizing, inner development, partnership, sensemaking, sustainability transformations, transformative partnerships

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INTRODUCTION

Transformations are “fundamental changes in structural, functional, relational, and cognitive aspects of socio-technical-ecological systems that lead to new patterns of interactions and outcomes” (Patterson et al., 2017, p. 2). Deliberate transformations are essential to achieve sustainable, regenerative, and just futures (Chapin et al., 2022; Fazey et al., 2018; Patterson et al., 2017; Scoones et al., 2020; Waddock et al., 2022). For earth stewardship scholars, this involves the “proactive shaping of physical, biological, and social conditions to sustain, rather than disrupt, critical earth-system processes in support of nature and human well-being at local-to-planetary scales” (Chapin et al., 2022, p. 1907). Such fundamental changes require collaboration, coproduction, and social learning between actors from diverse cultural backgrounds, geographical contexts, sectors, and professions (Chambers et al., 2022; Chapin et al., 2022; Collins & Ison, 2009; Horan, 2022; MacDonald et al., 2022; van der Bijl-Brouwer et al., 2021). In other words, transformation and earth stewardship require partnership.

We follow Horan (2022, p. 161) in adopting a broad scope of partnership that includes “multi-stakeholder partnerships, public-private partnerships, geo-political partnerships, peace accords, social partnerships, informal diaspora alliances, and sponsorships by philanthropists.” The importance of partnerships for achieving sustainability outcomes has been formally recognized by the United Nations since the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (McAllister & Taylor, 2015; Van Huijstee et al., 2007). Partnerships certainly have limitations, particularly when they are associated with a shift of responsibility from government to the private sector and civil society (McAllister & Taylor, 2015). Nevertheless, effective partnerships, ideally involving private, public, and civil society actors (Chapin et al., 2022; McAllister & Taylor, 2015; Van Huijstee et al., 2007), are essential to progress on sustainability.

The literature on partnerships for sustainability outcomes identifies the following characteristics of effective partnerships. First and obviously, they involve multiple actors—the partners—working together collaboratively. Second, this collaboration is of an enduring or sustained nature (Horton et al., 2009; Stibbe et al., 2020); a partnership is more than a single, quick collaborative project. Third, the partners work together to achieve mutually agreed objectives or a common vision (Brinkerhoff, 2002; Horton et al., 2009; Stibbe et al., 2020). Their shared vision may be emergent (Chambers et al., 2022) but they at least see the potential for alignment of interests. Fourth, the partners should receive some mutual benefits

that they could not achieve working alone (Brinkerhoff, 2002; Stibbe et al., 2020), such as an exchange of knowledge or resources (Horton et al., 2009). Finally, while power imbalances are inevitable, a partnership aims for equitable decision-making, risk, and accountability (Brinkerhoff, 2002; Stibbe et al., 2020). Our specific focus in this paper is on transformative partnerships, which we define as partnerships that form with the specific goal of facilitating transformations toward sustainability in a chosen domain. Such partnerships exist at multiple scales, from the Regen Sydney¹ network focused on envisioning a regenerative future for the city of Sydney, Australia, to the national-scale Costa Rica Regenerativa² program, to international partnerships such as the Inner Development Goals Initiative³ and Transformations Community.⁴

Forming, maintaining, and adapting partnerships to grapple with the complexities of transformative change are challenging. Dominant socioeconomic narratives favor competitive behavior over collaboration and cooperation (Riedy, 2022; Stibbe et al., 2020). Participants bring different worldviews, values, goals, agendas, and practices to a partnership that may not be consistent with the goals of earth stewardship and transformation, creating tensions that are difficult to navigate (Chambers et al., 2022). They may also enter from very different positions of power (Avelino, 2017; Avelino et al., 2023; Avelino & Wittmayer, 2016; Chambers et al., 2022), creating risks of unjust or exploitative relationships. Further, a partnership that seeks transformation needs to grapple with the uncertainty that is inevitable when trying to transform complex social-ecological systems (Scoones, 2020) and negotiate the discord that is ever-present in sustainability transformations (Patterson et al., 2024).

Recognizing these challenges, several authors have offered guidance on effective partnership practices by identifying normative stages of partnership formation and maintenance. Stibbe et al. (2020) define a partnering life cycle with stages of scoping and building, managing and maintaining, reviewing and revising, and moving on/renegotiation/sustaining. In their work on transformation systems, Waddock et al. (2022, p. 80) also foreground the crucial role of partnerships for transformation. They identify stages of connecting, cohering, and amplifying as essential to building partnerships that can deliver transformation systems. Scharmer's (2009) Theory U is also relevant, exploring processes of

¹<https://www.regen.sydney/>.

²<https://en.costaricaregenerativa.org/>.

³<https://innerdevelopmentgoals.org/>.

⁴<https://www.transformationscommunity.org/>.

collective or distributed leadership through movements of co-initiating, co-sensing, co-presencing, cocreating, and coevolving.

While these contributions are valuable, Waddock et al. (2022) present only a single case study, and Stibbe et al. (2020) have written a practical guidebook without explicit reference to the academic literature. Neither has a specific focus on the personal practices and capacities needed to build and maintain transformative partnerships. Scharmer (2009) is more focused on these practices and capacities, but Theory U grew out of work with individual leaders, innovators, and entrepreneurs rather than transformative partnerships. Therefore, this article draws from a broader empirical base to address the following research questions:

1. What practices do participants use to navigate the complexity and uncertainty of building and maintaining multi-stakeholder partnerships for system transformation?
2. What capacities do partners cultivate to support these practices?
3. What are the priorities for future research and action to more reliably build and maintain transformative partnerships?

These questions distinguish between practices (the observable things that participants in partnerships do) and capacities (the interior qualities that participants in partnerships possess). Practice theorists argue (and we agree) that practices and capacities are intertwined and inseparable. For example, Shove et al. (2012) define practices as enduring assemblages of meanings, materials, and competences, none of which can exist without the other elements. Our distinction between practices and capacities is not, therefore, a strict theoretical distinction but a matter of emphasis. Some of our findings focus on practices, while some zoom in on capacities that might be integrated into multiple practices.

The Transformations Conference (2023) explored similar questions to the research questions listed above. The Transformations Conference is the biennial conference of the Transformations Community, a global network of scholars and practitioners focused on increasing people's capacity to transform social-ecological systems to achieve desirable futures that are sustainable, regenerative, just, and equitable. The sixth in the series, the 2023 conference was themed "transformative partnerships for a better world." More than 700 delegates from more than 40 countries participated in the conference and their contributions comprise our primary data source for this paper.⁵ The many transformative partnerships in which delegates participate offered us a very broad empirical

base for understanding practices, capacities, and opportunities that can make such partnerships more effective.

Our focus was on making sense of the practices and capacities that hundreds of conference participants with highly relevant experience collectively understood as essential to transformative partnerships. This synthesis, in itself, is a significant contribution. While the practices and capacities identified may already be covered in the literature on transformations and earth stewardship, another novel contribution of our paper is to associate specific practices and capacities with stages in the formation and development of transformative partnerships. We then go on to define priorities for further research that emerged from the conference.

METHODS

The main in-person event (~250 participants) at the Transformations Conference was held in Sydney from 12 to 14 July 2023. The Sydney event was accompanied by a concurrent in-person event in Prague (~100 participants) and an online conference: total participation was over 700 people across more than 280 sessions. While participants were predominantly from academia, the conference also attracted practitioners, policymakers, activists, and representatives from civil society organizations. Although participants joined from more than 40 countries, concerns about carbon emissions and travel costs meant that many in-person participants were from Australia or Europe, where the in-person events were held. While open to all disciplinary perspectives, the Transformations Conference tends to attract more participants from the social sciences and humanities.

Conference sessions included preconference half-day workshops, panel sessions, "speed talk" sessions where presenters spoke for 7 min before moving into small-group conversations, arts and creative practice sessions, and 90-min workshops engaging participants in transformation practices. Contributions to the conference covered a broad spectrum of transformative partnerships, but knowledge co-production partnerships were particularly common.

The 12 coauthors of this article are social scientists at all career stages, from doctoral candidates to professors. All attended and helped to organize the Sydney event as chairs of the conference or of specific sessions. Some also acted as "catalysts" during the conference, a role responsible for following and reflecting on one of the conference streams. The majority of the coauthors are from the

⁵For more on the conference highlights, see <https://www.transformationscommunity.org/transformations-conference-2023>.

University of Technology Sydney (the host of the Sydney event); one is from the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization (a sponsor of the conference) and two are from other universities—one in Brisbane, Australia, and another based in Aotearoa/New Zealand. The coauthors bring together disciplinary expertise in fields including organization studies, sustainability transitions and transformations, arts-based participatory practices, narrative foresight, Indigenous comanagement, ecosystem science, creative fiction writing, action research, and transformative education.

After the conference, the coauthors met multiple times to reflect on the conference and to document our sensemaking, which ultimately gave rise to this article. We use sensemaking as a label for a process where participants work together to articulate a shared understanding by elaborating mental models and narratives (Waddock et al., 2022). Our sensemaking drew on the following data sources:

1. The conference program, including session abstracts (Transformations Conference, 2023)
2. Video recordings and transcripts of many sessions
3. More than 800 messages were posted to 30 discussion topics on the online conference platform
4. Written material from a physical “sensemaking space” at the conference
5. Interviews and reflective pieces filmed with the conference organizers and catalysts during the conference
6. Graphic illustrations of 16 sessions by graphic recorders Sha8peshifters
7. Photographs taken during the conference
8. A set of “postcards to the future” and “spiral poems” written by conference participants during a final conference sensemaking session
9. Our own notes and reflections written during and after the conference.

Participants were informed that their inputs to the conference could be used for sensemaking, and data collection was undertaken with ethics approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Technology Sydney.

Our sensemaking began with an inductive individual approach, recognizing that each coauthor took a different path through the conference, guided by their disciplinary interests, session commitments, and serendipity. By bringing 12 of us together, we hoped to ensure a reasonably comprehensive coverage of the conference sessions and triangulate the most important findings. Our collective sensemaking started with sharing individual exploratory reflections on the conference verbally and then in

writing. These reflections were shaped by three guiding questions, one associated with each day of the conference:

1. Day 1: What are we carrying into partnership?
2. Day 2: How can we create and practice transformative partnerships?
3. Day 3: How can we scale up partnerships to bring about a better world?

These questions were designed to create a narrative arc for the conference, and sessions each day were chosen to align, as much as possible, with these questions.

We identified themes across our individual reflections, looking for observations that emerged multiple times independently as places to focus our further sensemaking. In the first cycle of sensemaking, we recognized that many of our observations were about the individual capacities that partners need and the collective practices that are effective in partnerships. This led to the articulation of our research questions, as listed in the Introduction. These questions helped to further focus our review of the conference data.

In a second cycle of sensemaking, it became apparent to the group that our emerging themes about practices and capacities could be organized into stages of partnership, at which point we made connections with existing literature that also identified stages of partnership, most notably Tuckman and Jensen (1977), Scharmer (2009), Stibbe et al. (2020), and Waddock et al. (2022). We recognized that these existing models did not fully describe the stages we observed and saw an opportunity to extend and revise their stages. We recognized that transformative partnerships form and evolve in tandem with the understanding of the system they are working with; Donella Meadows (2001) eloquently described this as “dancing with the system.” This led to an evolutionary framing of the development of transformative partnerships through six “stages”:

1. Preparing/entering: individuals entering into a partnership develop their capacity to engage effectively with other partners.
2. Connecting/relating: participants in an emerging partnership get to know each other and begin to identify areas of common ground and conflict.
3. Cohering/integrating: partners align on shared objectives and goals, finding sufficient common ground on which to move forward and work together.
4. Amplifying/transforming: partnership seeks to create transformation through collective action and political struggle.

5. Learning/adapting: partners cyclically reflect on the outcomes of their efforts toward transformation and revise as needed.
6. Releasing/renewing: the partnership ends or moves into a new phase.

These stages are summarized in Figure 1. Although the stages are numbered in the figure, they are only loosely sequential—some are clearly more relevant early in a partnership and others later in a partnership—but we recognize that they overlap and that movement through them is not linear. Partnerships may revisit stages and cycle through them multiple times.

After the identification of these stages, our collective sensemaking shifted. In addition to examples from our memory of the conference, we actively searched the artifacts from the conference for examples of practices and capacities that helped to illustrate the challenges

and opportunities of each stage. Although we explore both challenges and opportunities, our overarching approach was informed by a normative orientation toward what constitutes good partnership. This was consistent with, and guided by, the theme of the conference: how might we create transformative partnerships for a better world? Given this normative orientation, we drew on an appreciative inquiry approach (Reed, 2006) directed at identifying beneficial partnership practices and capacities for transformation, rather than offering a representative sample of all the different modes of partnership. As such, we do not offer an extensive critique of all the challenges that can arise within partnerships, as that is beyond the scope of the article, although we do articulate ways of enabling good partnership across differences.

The sections below examine each stage in turn, starting with a conceptual framing of the stage and then

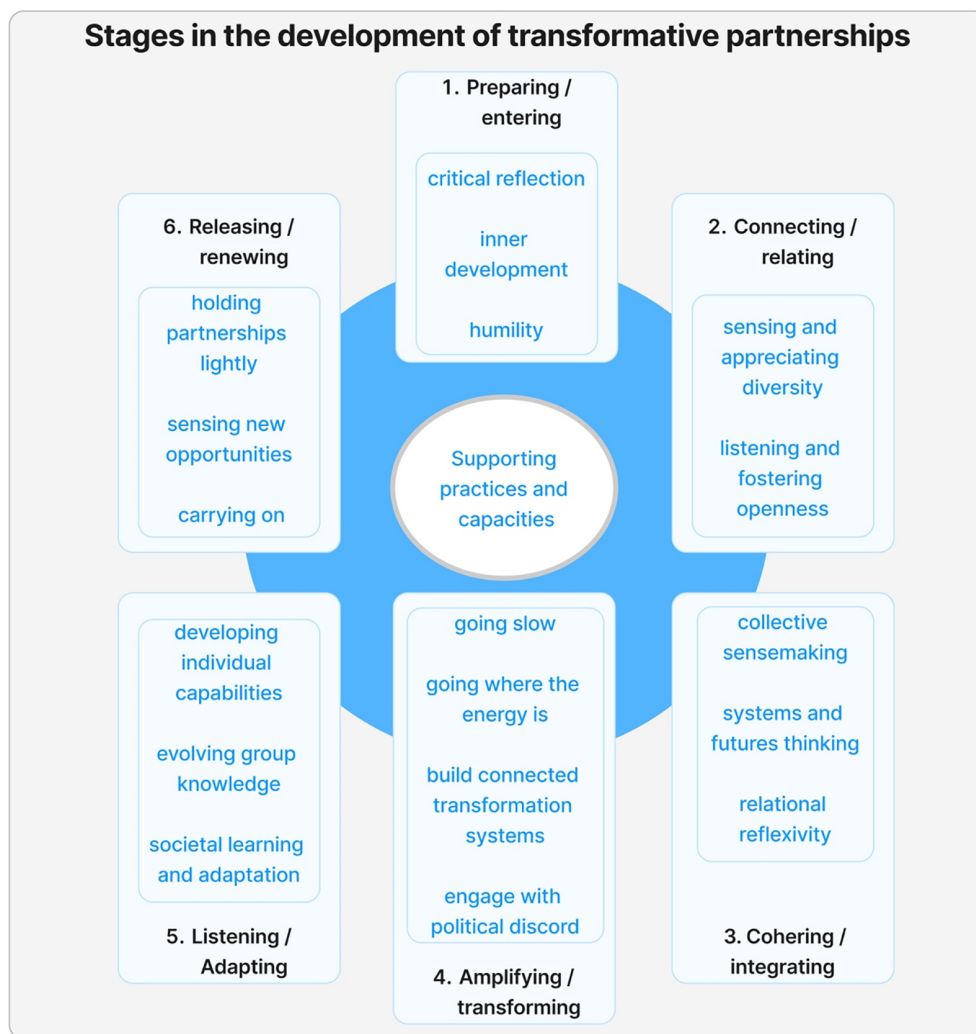


FIGURE 1 Stages, practices, and capacities in the development of transformative partnerships. Note that stage numbering is indicative of a typical flow in the development of transformative partnerships, but the process is rarely this linear.

drawing out and illustrating several practices and capacities emerging from the conference.

RESULTS: SIX STAGES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF TRANSFORMATIVE PARTNERSHIPS

This section presents the results of our sensemaking of the conference, responding specifically to our first two research questions:

1. What practices do participants use to navigate the complexity and uncertainty of building and maintaining multi-stakeholder partnerships for system transformation?
2. What capacities do partners cultivate to support these practices?

Preparing/entering

While some scholarship on partnership starts with the process of making connections between partners (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977; Waddock et al., 2022), we recognize a prior stage of preparing for, or entering into, partnership. This allows us to explore the inner capacities that individuals carry into partnership, which can become assets or burdens for transformation. These inner capacities include “individual and collective mindsets, values, beliefs, world views and associated cognitive, emotional and relational abilities, and capacities” (Ives et al., 2023, p. 2778). It is important to note that transformation scholars do not limit their consideration to individual inner capacities; they also examine collective inner capacities (Ives et al., 2023; Wamsler et al., 2021). However, our focus in the preparing/entering stage is on the inner capacities that individuals carry into partnership. Transformation scholars recognize that certain inner capacities cultivated by individuals are more likely to support system transformation (Ayers et al., 2023; Ives et al., 2023; O'Brien, 2018; Wamsler et al., 2021). Thus, the inner capacities that participants carry into partnership are likely to influence the unfolding and success of that partnership and participants in transformative partnerships need to pay more attention to these capacities than participants in more conventional partnerships. These capacities are considered in the section below on Inner Development. Later sections consider the ways in which collective inner dimensions develop within partnerships.

Including a pre-partnership stage also raises the important question of power in partnerships. For

potential partners, their operating context and relationship to the system under transformation create power differentials that need attention (Avelino, 2017; Avelino et al., 2023; Avelino & Wittmayer, 2016) even before the first steps of forming a partnership. At the conference, critical reflection and humility were proposed as important for preparing to enter transformative partnerships with power in mind. Both are also considered below.

Critical reflection

In the opening plenary of the Transformations Conference, participants were asked: what are we carrying into partnership? In anonymous written responses, some listed attributes that would be assets to partnership, such as “ideas and willingness to listen”; “generosity, curiosity, and open mindedness”; and “positivity, hope, and enthusiasm.” Other responses recognized attributes that could sabotage partnership, such as social / ecological trauma, “suspicion, resistance, or closed mindedness,” “fatigue and anxiety (about potential mistakes)” and “power and privilege.” Participants most commonly used the term critical reflection to refer to the practice of pausing to become aware of what you are carrying into partnership, for better or worse. In the literature, this is also framed as a practice of cultivating self-awareness of thoughts, feelings, strengths, and opportunities for growth (Jordan et al., 2021; Stibbe et al., 2020). Stibbe et al. (2020) extend this call for awareness beyond the self to include contextual awareness of the state of the system, and awareness of how self and context interact.

Engaging in critical reflection or cultivation of awareness can raise difficult questions: what are the most strategic sustainability challenges to address; will a partnership be valuable (and to whom); what is the role of researchers; who convenes the partners; and what does that mean for ongoing power relations? A consistent theme was the need for just and equitable transformations. In multiple presentations, conference participants pointed out the very real risk that the pursuit of transformation becomes another form of colonization, which resonates with earlier scholarship on the potential dark side of transformation (Blythe et al., 2018). Critical reflection can draw out these issues before we blunder into unjust partnerships that do more harm than good.

Inner development

Critical reflection leads to recognition that those pursuing transformation need to first be willing to engage in

their own inner transformation. One conference postcard expressed this as: “Transform yourself before you transform others.” Because we see transformation as an always ongoing process, occurring through engagement with others, a better expression might be: “Be open to your own transformation as you engage in transformational work with others.”

Scholars of transformation increasingly acknowledge the need for individual inner development (Ayers et al., 2023; Ives et al., 2023; Wamsler et al., 2021). One of the semi-plenary sessions at the conference (Transformations Conference, 2023, pp. 119–120) introduced participants to the Inner Development Goals (IDGs) (Jordan et al., 2021; Stålné & Greca, 2022). The IDGs aim to complement the Sustainable Development Goals by developing skills in five inner dimensions: being, thinking, relating, collaborating, and acting. The IDGs framework (Jordan et al., 2021) identifies 23 skills under these five dimensions and argues that they can be proactively developed. Ayers et al. (2023, p. 1181) explore similar territory, identifying eight intrapersonal capacities that help change agents to implement sustainability, including the ability to: “Hold complexity, Foster a learner’s mindset, Deeply value others, Let be, Show up as one’s full self, Regulate and manage the self, Persist with lightness, and Ensure one’s well-being.” Conference participants were clear that cultivating such skills or capacities can prepare individuals to be more effective participants in transformative partnerships.

Several conference contributions argued that the extent to which individuals have worked on their inner dimensions influences the way they “show up” in partnership, which shapes everything that follows. For example:

The inner landscape and our spirit and energy connects to the outer landscape. Let’s not forget that we need to...turn up with good energy (Transformations Conference, 2023, pp. 37–38, Jason de Santolo).

Trust is such an important capital to build. It is so important. It takes time. But the most important thing is you coming forward in a spirit of friendship and goodwill. Aboriginal people can read you like they read country. It will not be long before they realise you’re phoney (Transformations Conference, 2023, pp. 61–62, Anne Poelina).

Waddock et al. (2022, p. 82) concur, arguing for cultivation of a “systems and transformation mindset” that includes “awareness of the whole, stewarding rather than directing, listening deeply for connection, synthesis,

appreciation of emergence, comfort with ambiguity-paradox, curiosity, and an experimenter-learner stance.”

Humility

Of the 23 skills identified in the IDGs Framework, humility received particular attention during the conference as a powerful attribute to carry into partnership. The IDGs Framework (Jordan et al., 2021) identifies humility as one of the “relating” skills and defines it as “being able to act in accordance with the needs of the situation without concern for one’s own importance.” For Ayers et al. (2023), humility is an important element in fostering a learner’s mindset. Humility is also recognized in the literature as an important quality to cultivate when coproducing knowledge (Chambers et al., 2022) and engaging in collaborative research (Fazey et al., 2020; Palmer, 2023), as genuine collaboration across different knowledge perspectives requires participants to accept that they do not have all the knowledge needed to guide transformation.

At the conference, humility was most frequently mentioned in relation to partnership with Indigenous communities. Conference participants called for genuine two-way dialogue with Indigenous peoples, “humility and connection,” and recognition that “when working with Indigenous communities you need to take the perspective that [they have] more experience...than you do” (Transformations Conference, 2023, pp. 37–38, Restoring Country and Revitalizing Economies; also pp. 120–121 Building a Regenerative Economy Movement, and p. 130 Practical Wisdom). All too often, well-meaning change agents impose their views of necessary transformation on Indigenous and other communities rather than listening and recognizing that those communities know much more about their needs than outside “experts.”

Connecting/relating

In their classic work on the development of small groups, Tuckman and Jensen (1977) identified stages of forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning. While not all partnerships are small groups, these stages are nevertheless instructive. In the forming stage, participants test the boundaries of what is acceptable in the group (or emerging partnership), become oriented toward the task they want to achieve together and establish relationships to achieve their goals (Tuckman, 1965). In their work on convening transformation systems, Waddock et al. (2022) similarly identified a first stage called “connecting” where participants become aware of

each other and seek to collectively make sense of the system they aim to transform. Stibbe et al. (2020) call this stage “scoping and building” and draw attention to the need to map the existing landscape and engage key stakeholders to find partnership opportunities.

These frameworks point to the difficult transition from an individual desire to take transformative action to being part of a partnership that has the potential to collectively act in a transformative way. Stibbe et al. (2020) refer to this shift as the “imperative to partner.” It is the stage of finding and connecting with allies that can discern an opportunity for mutual benefit. The way relationships are built, trust is cultivated and power dynamics are navigated at this early stage leaves traces that will influence the future of the partnership.

At the conference, two themes about connecting/relating emerged as particularly important for participants: sensing and appreciating diversity, and listening and fostering openness.

Sensing and appreciating diversity

The conference celebrated epistemological diversity through the conscious juxtaposition of arts, experiential, and traditional scholarly formats. The program included a transdisciplinary collection of scientific papers, arts-based excursions, story-weaving circles, future-creating workshops, transformative practice, and knowledge coproduction panels (Transformations Conference, 2023). The arts-informed conference opening set a tone that valued diversity and avoided knowledge bias. Superorganism Collective performed the artwork *Wish Economy* in the opening plenary (Transformations Conference, 2023, p. 16). Conference participants were invited to write a wish on paper, seal it in beeswax, and then share their sealed wish with another participant to cross-pollinate preferred futures. Experimental and art sessions contrasted with more traditional scientific sessions that focused on climate change and presented natural science research. Navigating this transdisciplinary diversity required participants to be mindful of their epistemological beliefs and preferences.

This mindfulness of epistemological diversity is crucial to the formation of transdisciplinary partnerships that coproduce knowledge and change (Moreno-Cely et al., 2021; Ness & Wahl, 2022; Pohl et al., 2021). Many practical tools and approaches are emerging to help individuals and groups identify, articulate, and work across the diverse ways we see the world and assume it to be (Hubbs et al., 2020; Moreno-Cely et al., 2021; Rossini, 2020), frame system dynamics (Fransman et al., 2021; Priebe et al., 2021; Webb et al., 2018), and partner for change. Palmer & Fam (2023, p. 311) argue

that “art and literature can act as a point of rupture—a suspension or pause in what has gone before, and become a threshold between the known and the new.” These moments of pause or rupture fostered by the arts can help people dwell in the “zone of nonresistance” (Nicolescu, 2014), sensing and appreciating diverse perspectives.

In addition to arts-based formats, the conference included dialogic practices that help partners sense and appreciate diversity in the early stages of partnership formation. For example, the session *Generating a transformations practice toolkit* (Transformations Conference, 2023, p. 67) used a cascading conversational structure to show the value of starting partnerships with activities that help us to appreciate diversity and identify the boundaries and limits of our worldviews and personal development—what is sometimes called “understanding our edges.” Returning to the work on inner development (Ives et al., 2023; Wamsler et al., 2021), this practice of sensing and appreciating diversity can also be understood as getting to know the inner dimensions and capacities of other participants in a partnership.

Listening and fostering openness

At the conference, Indigenous Australian scholars led a consistent decolonial narrative that emphasized the importance of listening to other ways of knowing and being. Robynne Quiggin (Transformations Conference, 2023, p. 38) and Anne Poelina (Transformations Conference, 2023, p. 62) argued that transformation scholarship and practice continues to privilege Western approaches to knowledge generation, governance, and environmental management over Indigenous alternatives. Indigenous scholar Jason de Santolo noted that few sustainability researchers and practitioners seek to establish partnerships with the First Nations of Australia even though “we are holding laws and practices that have sustained us on these lands in Australia for tens of thousands of years” (Transformations Conference, 2023, p. 38). By listening with humility, non-Indigenous allies have an opportunity to learn from “theories and land-based methodologies born of this land, and [see] and [respond] to holistic and relational and complex climate challenges in creative ways that center people and self-determination” (Transformations Conference, 2023, p. 38). The IDGs framework covers similar ground with its openness and learning mindset goal (Jordan et al., 2021).

After listening with openness, non-Indigenous allies can help to amplify Indigenous voices, knowledge systems, and goals as part of their efforts to decolonize and transform partnerships. This does not mean that non-

Indigenous peoples speak for Indigenous peoples or define whose knowledge counts, how knowledge is used, or the goals of transformation. It requires ways of connecting and relating that empower communities who have been harmed and marginalized by Western research traditions, acknowledge contextual laws and practices, and do not perpetuate damage-centered research or narratives (Tuck, 2009).

Several conference sessions actively experimented with listening practices, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. The “Ears of the Heart” session (Transformations Conference, 2023, p. 114) was inspired by the work of Kankawa Nagarra, a Walmatjarri elder. A session by her non-Indigenous allies invited participants to experience listening from different places and levels. Nagarra had a presence in the session through video pieces played to participants. In other workshops, such as the “Connective Tissues” session (Transformations Conference, 2023, p. 70), creative activities provided a focus for deeper listening and dialogue. Listening practices can be particularly useful in the early stages of an emerging partnership to surface diverse perspectives. The challenge that follows is finding common ground, which is the focus of the next stage.

Cohering/integrating

Significantly more difficult than discovering an imperative to partner and learning about other perspectives is cohering around shared action agendas and a coherent set of inner dimensions for a partnership. Waddock et al. (2022) note that the process of cohering and integrating is one of the biggest challenges to the emergence of transformation systems. Tuckman captures the tumultuous nature of this stage as the “storming” before norming takes place. Storming is characterized by conflict and polarization as participants negotiate their roles, resist the influence of the group, and make compromises (Tuckman, 1965; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). Given the widespread recognition that transformation requires diverse actors from very different disciplines, worldviews, and perspectives to come together (e.g., Chambers et al., 2022; Horan, 2022), we propose that the cohering/integrating stage is significantly more challenging for transformative partnerships than conventional partnerships. Conference contributions (Transformations Conference, 2023) drew attention to the need for such partnerships to work across cultures associated with academia and practice (p. 20), gender (p. 84), conflicting values (p. 84), ethnicity (p. 102) and disciplinary training (p. 133), to name a few. If a group makes it through this stage, it emerges as a cohesive partnership with members

that feel they belong and new norms, roles, and standards adopted. As such, this stage is an important crossroads, where partners move from relationship-building into co-designing a shared vision and agenda through co-sensing (observing together) and co-presencing (finding the future that wants to emerge) (Scharmer, 2009).

Achieving this kind of integration is a struggle, where power dynamics are negotiated and partners typically need to relinquish some of their goals to more effectively pursue the collective goals of the partnership (Avelino, 2017; Chambers et al., 2022). In the context of transformative partnerships, members of the partnership have typically pursued transformation for some time and have developed their own epistemologies, values, theories of change, preferred practices and agendas. Often, their identity and professional reputation are tied to these ways of working. Even with the best intentions, letting some of this go to work in a partnership can be a big hurdle. Participants need to cultivate “coproductive agility,” defined as “the willingness and ability of diverse actors to iteratively engage in reflexive dialogues to grow shared ideas and actions that would not have been possible from the outset” (Chambers et al., 2022, p. 102422). Conference participants drew particular attention to the role of collective sensemaking, relational reflexivity, futuring, and systems or multi-scalar thinking in supporting the integration of a partnership.

Collective sensemaking

Participants in a partnership are more likely to accept and “buy into” knowledge that they have coproduced (Plummer et al., 2022). This makes collective sensemaking practices important in helping partnerships to cohere. Multiple conference sessions explored methods for collective sensemaking (Transformations Conference, 2023, e.g., p. 13—Social System Mapping; p. 55 Constructive Sensemaking). The conference itself modeled collective sensemaking by embedding multiple knowledge integration practices. Individuals were appointed as “catalysts,” tasked with following one of the eight topic streams through the conference and reflecting their thinking back to participants via discussion posts and video interviews. In Sydney, a physical sensemaking space invited participants to engage in creative activities, responding to a “question of the day.” Finally, the penultimate conference session (Transformations Conference, 2023, p. 121) was a sensemaking session that invited participants to share their reflections on the conference by writing a spiral poem and a postcard to the 2025 conference participants. These various integrative practices helped to bring coherence to the conference

and supported the ongoing partnership that is the Transformations Community. We hope that reflecting this sensemaking back to the Transformations Community through this paper will help to establish norms and common ground to continue to strengthen coherence.

Systems and futures thinking

The literature on sustainability transformations consistently recognizes the need to consider the big picture through systems and futures thinking (Wiek & Redman, 2022). The collective application of such methods can help partnerships to cohere. Working together through systems and futures methods creates artifacts, such as system diagrams and scenarios, that can serve as boundary objects (Star, 2010), facilitating engagement between participants across disciplinary, ideological, and cultural boundaries.

Taking futures thinking as an example, conference sessions included futuring practices such as scenarios, future mapping, pathways analysis, and exploration of adaptation pathways for establishing shared visions and goals among partners. Futuring (and systems thinking) can act as a tool for explicitly addressing epistemological and power differences. For example, Percy (Transformations Conference, 2023, p. 75) presented on the Pohewa Pae Tawhiti (Visualizing Horizons) program⁶ in New Zealand to illustrate how partnerships between Māori landowner entities and researchers were catalyzed using futuring methods.

Relational reflexivity

Reflexivity is a crucial component of establishing transformative spaces (Pereira et al., 2020) and seeking common ground to take action together. In a learning context, Henwood (Transformations Conference, 2023, p. 79) spoke of engaging in reflexive practice as a tool for creating safe spaces for students to work and learn together. Bradbury and colleagues (Bradbury et al., 2023; Transformations Conference, 2023, p. 81) explored reflexivity as a practice of “letting go,” recognizing that the search for common ground to act together requires compromise. Lazurko (Lazurko et al., 2023; Transformations Conference, 2023, p. 8) integrated reflexive practice within a future (scenario building) context, arguing that engaging in critical reflection in scenario building is a

crucial step in addressing unspoken issues of who determines what is included and excluded from a framing.

Engaging in this kind of reflexivity together can be confronting, and participants can feel vulnerable if their closely held identities come under threat. As such, trust is widely recognized as essential to processes of cohering and integrating (Friedman et al., 2023). Trust takes time to develop, but if partners bring and develop capacity for relationality and solidarity, the potential power imbalances within a partnership can be reduced (Middleby, 2023). This can assist in building trust and facilitate the integration of shared values and goals for the partnership.

Particularly important as a partnership coheres is the ability to reflect on the emerging relationships and actively support “right relations” and trust-building. Having a capacity for relational reflexivity supports the integration of the different ontologies and epistemologies that partners may bring with them. For instance, Tamahou and Henwood (Transformations Conference, 2023, p. 80) described the research program, Revitalise Te Taiao,⁷ where Māori knowledge and cultural practices have been respected and implemented to create more informed responses to environmental challenges. Part of this integration process was increasing the understanding of non-Indigenous participants regarding the concept of *whakapapa*, a Māori concept of genealogical connection between people and also their environment.

Amplifying/transforming

The third stage in Waddock et al.’s (2022) framework is amplifying, where partners implement action plans and build transformation infrastructure together. In Tuckman’s model, this is the stage of performing, when the group has become sufficiently settled to take on tasks (Tuckman, 1965; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). For Stibbe et al. (2020), who focus on the partnership itself rather than the actions it takes, this is the stage of managing and maintaining the partnership so that it can undertake its crucial work. For Scharmer (2009) it is about cocreating and exploring the future by doing.

Given our focus on transformative partnerships, the task of the partnership is to do whatever is within its means to facilitate systemic transformation. This is perhaps the stage where transformative partnerships most differ from other types of partnerships that might be more focused on maintaining the status quo. How partnerships can achieve transformation is increasingly studied. For example, Chambers et al. (2022) examined

⁶See <https://ourlandandwater.nz/project/pohewa-pae-tawhiti/>.

⁷See <https://ourlandandwater.nz/project/revitalise-te-taiao/>.

32 coproduction initiatives to identify four pathways to sustainability transformations through elevating marginalized agendas, questioning dominant agendas, navigating conflicting agendas, and exploring diverse agendas. There has also been substantial work on how partnerships can amplify successful initiatives as a contribution to transformation (Lam et al., 2020; Waddock et al., 2022).

Given the extensive existing scholarship on facilitating transformation, our aim in this section was simply to pay attention to recurring language during the conference—what phrases kept popping up that capture the practical wisdom of conference participants on how to approach transformation? Four are explored below.

Slow is smooth: Smooth is fast

The phrasing in the heading is from Donnie Maclurcan's session on "Embodying post-growth leadership" (Transformations Conference, 2023, p. 119) but it captures a recurring sentiment. Presenters from the Fire to Flourish project described it as "walking at the pace of community" (Transformations Conference, 2023, pp. 116–117). Conference participants are deeply committed to sustainability transformations and feel the urgent need for change. They know the cost of current practices on people and ecosystems around the world and feel that time is running out; the temptation is to rush to action. However, as the discussion of the previous stages makes clear, acting without taking the time to reflect, navigate power relations, get to know diverse perspectives, learn the context, and build trusting relationships will create conflict and friction that will ultimately slow down transformation.

Maclurcan drew an analogy to firefighting. He said that firefighters are trained to stop and put their hands in their pockets when they arrive at the scene, as this forces them to step back and assess the situation holistically before leaping to action. Transformation agents need to do something similar, suspending the need for urgent action to take the time to do the slow relational and systemic groundwork that creates the foundation for fast transformation.

Go where the energy is

Funding sustainability transformations remains extremely challenging. The uncertainties involved and the challenge to dominant systems and narratives can make funders uncomfortable. As a result, transformation practitioners have learned to be flexible—to "go where the energy is." A common way this plays out is to take on the

projects that are available, or can be funded, while keeping an eye on a bigger strategic vision. Like everyone, transformation practitioners still need to sustain their livelihood, and this can mean taking on contracts that are not as transformative as they might like. But through maintaining an eye on a transformative vision, each such contract is an opportunity to make some progress, perhaps by pushing the client just a little bit further than they were intending to go, or planting ideas for future projects.

Lawyer Craig Longman (Transformations Conference, 2023, pp. 37–38) gave an example, which he called "strategic lawyering." Longman works with Indigenous communities, and when they come to him, he explores with them what they want to achieve. Often there is no legal proceeding that can achieve that goal, but he will explore other possibilities with them that could help. This could even mean taking on a case that is destined to lose if the outcome can be used to shift political or media narratives. Doing this kind of work means having a view of the whole system and how the imperfect opportunities available now can become levers for progress.

Build transformation systems

The concept of "transformation systems," which Waddock et al. (2022, p. 80) define as "the collection of people, programs, projects, and entities...working toward generally the same transformational aspirations," was prominent during the conference. The numerous people and organizations working on transformations are poorly connected and coordinated, which diminishes their collective power. Waddock et al. therefore call upon transformation practitioners to see themselves also as part of a larger partnership, to think strategically about their role within that, and to build shared narratives about collective purpose.

While some sessions at the conference specifically used the concept of transformation systems (e.g., Wachs and Noy Meir, Transformations Conference, 2023, p. 100), others focused on the need for translocal networks (e.g., Gordon, p. 96), narrative or discourse coalitions (e.g., Gordon, p. 96; Harris, p. 87) and alliances of frontrunners (e.g., Maru, p. 40 and the session on Government-led transformations toward a well-being economy, p. 61). Just as no individual can change the world alone, no single partnership is sufficient; partnerships need to find ways to connect up into larger systems if they are to achieve transformation. The Transformations Conference itself can be understood as an attempt to connect up transformative initiatives to amplify their effectiveness.

Partnerships are political

The normative orientation of the conference toward transformative partnerships meant that there was a predominant focus on partnerships where the participants all wanted to achieve sustainability transformations. In reality, partnerships find themselves in political contestation with others (often also in partnerships) who resist transformation (Patterson et al., 2024). Contestation and conflict were recognized throughout the conference as an ever-present context, even though the conference themes did not necessarily encourage reflection on how to negotiate this messy politics. Any partnership that hopes to achieve transformation needs to engage in political struggle, and the topic of how to navigate resistance and conflict warrants further attention in future conferences and the literature.

Learning/adapting

Working with complex systems has inherent uncertainty, thus actions to pursue sustainability transformations are frequently framed as experiments, from which a partnership can learn (Bradbury et al., 2019; Luederitz et al., 2017) and coevolve (Scharmer, 2009). Learning can lead to adaptation of the practices used in and by the partnership (Bateson, 1972). Also called “reviewing and revising” (Stibbe et al., 2020, p. 39), the learning and adapting stage has a focus on “monitoring progress toward goals, reviewing the health of the partnership, and making the changes necessary to keep a partnership on track.” This requires mechanisms for sharing and integrating knowledge. In transformative partnerships, deliberate processes are often established to cohere and integrate personal learning into collective knowledge outputs (Pohl et al., 2021; Riedy et al., 2018). This deliberate learning may be coupled with learning that emerges through interactions between people and environments over time (Cundill & Harvey, 2019).

Notably, partnerships for transformation are also often formed with a deliberate intent for learning and knowledge coproduction (Plummer et al., 2022). Thus, learning and adapting should be viewed as a conscious and continuous process throughout a partnership, rather than as a distinct stage. Many scholars emphasize that achieving transformative outcomes in partnerships requires moving beyond conventional monitoring and evaluation for accountability towards Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) approaches that support reflexivity (Stone-Jovicich et al., 2019). Characterized by double-loop and triple-loop learning, this shift in monitoring entails questioning and reframing assumptions

implicit in partnerships (Argyris & Schön, 1996; Barth et al., 2023).

Learning and adapting in transformational partnerships takes place at different scales: as the development of individual competences through partnerships, as the evolution of knowledge and practices within a group (e.g., social learning), and across broader society (Barth et al., 2023).

Development of individual capacities

Practices supporting individual learning and adapting discussed at the conference included education and formalized learning, inquiry into the cultivation of wisdom, and inner transformation (Ives et al., 2023). Linked to the preparing/entering stage, these practices enable individuals to gain the skills and capacities required to participate in transformational partnerships. For example, Monique Potts (Transformations Conference, 2023, p. 23) explored how young people develop meta-competences, and Kligyte, Pratt, and Melvold (p. 27) presented a framework for how individuals learn transdisciplinary capabilities.

Individual learning and adapting through partnerships often includes developing awareness about when and how to adopt new roles. For example, Craig Longman (Transformations Conference, 2023, p. 38) discussed the evolution of his work in legal representation through learning from First Nations communities and understanding the systemic violence perpetrated by the justice system. By taking a stand in public protests, Longman emphasized learning through the affective dimensions of transformative partnerships, including a commitment to a shared purpose and preparedness to “walk the talk.” This type of learning requires embracing self-disruption and being attuned to equity and justice.

Evolution of knowledge within a group

Presentations discussed how, as partnerships develop and adapt, group learning is stimulated by intentional relational work such as building commitment and mutual learning orientation. This process is supported by the connecting/relating and cohering/integrating stages in partnerships, through building and energizing relationships, engaging with different perspectives, questioning assumptions, and contributing to a collaborative effort. For example, West (Transformations Conference, 2023, p. 87) discussed adapting evaluation metrics based on the perspectives of First Nations partners. Examining how project success was defined and measured, the partners

questioned the imposition on First Nations communities of Western metrics and models based on Western value systems. This learning prompted the partnership to modify the reporting approach to funding agencies as a first step toward encouraging structural change.

Societal learning and adapting

Conference examples of learning and adapting at a societal scale include identifying lessons from the partnership relevant to other contexts and extending these to a wider set of beneficiaries, or broader society. This type of learning and adapting requires developing and retaining collective or institutional memory beyond a single project, which can be challenging within fragmented institutional contexts. This was highlighted in the sessions on the Mainstreaming-Transformation Paradox (Transformations Conference, 2023, p. 33) and Reframing Policy-Science-Practice Interface for Transformation (p. 64) which examined partnerships between research and implementing agencies. Learning and adapting at societal scales can be facilitated by robust measurement and evaluation approaches that enable partnership teams to weave the narrative of longer-term impact beyond standard measurement and evaluation for accountability and encompass learning from failures. A collective approach to tracking learning and adapting, along with a portfolio-based view of partnerships, might enable transformations practitioners to build a longer-term view by assembling diverse initiatives around similar themes, communities, or people, and promoting societal learning that extends beyond individual experience and group learning in partnerships.

Releasing/renewing

Finally, it is important to recognize that partnerships end. Tuckman revised his original model of group formation to recognize a stage called “adjourning,” when the work of the group together comes to an end (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). Stibbe et al. (2020) call this stage “moving on,” although it can also involve renegotiation and sustaining. In our experience, the end of a partnership is often the start of new partnerships, so we have borrowed the concept of “release” from work on adaptive cycles in social-ecological systems (Gunderson & Holling, 2012; Westley et al., 2013). Adaptive cycles in ecology are characterized by slow growth and accumulation, followed by a rapid release and reorganization, which may lead to renewal. Similarly, partnerships grow and take collective

action until they reach their own moment of release. Sometimes this moment is coded into the structure of the partnership, for example, when the partnership is associated with a time-bound project or funding stream. When the energy built up in a partnership is released, it may mean the unwelcome collapse of the partnership, or a natural end point for the work together, or a reorganization and renewal to tackle new challenges. During this stage, opportunities for new transformative action emerge, although they may be hazy (Westley et al., 2013).

Holding partnerships lightly

Multiple conference sessions drew attention to the emergent behavior of complex social-ecological systems (e.g., Tabara and Galafassi, p. 4; Sato, p. 17; Roelich, p. 91; Transformations Conference, 2023). In this context, we never quite know how a specific partnership will contribute to transformative goals. Yet partnerships can generate their own momentum; humans are social creatures and can be reluctant to let go of the sociocultural structures we create to support our partnerships. As Yiheyis Maru put it (Transformations Conference, 2023, p. 40), we can get caught in traps where our work is not transformative. Keeping an eye on the transformative vision and being willing to let go of partnerships that are not serving that vision is, therefore, a key capacity that transformation practitioners need to develop. On the other hand, transformations require persistence, so there is a need to find balance between holding on too long and letting go too soon.

Sensing new opportunities

Letting go can be easier when partners are able to sense new opportunities emerging from the foundation of a partnership that is ending. Partnerships represent a substantial investment of time and energy in building relationships, trust, and understanding. If these relationships are strong, capitalizing on some of that investment by finding new ways to work together makes sense.

In 2017, a partnership called the SDG Transformations Forum emerged from the Transformations Conference. This ambitious partnership gathered together transformation practitioners and scholars from around the world to build transformation systems on challenges such as finance, narratives, and evaluation. After numerous in-person and online meetings, the partnership failed to secure long-term funding and came to an end in 2021. However, some of the relationships built through the

Forum remained strong and led to ongoing partnerships. The most prominent is the Bounce Beyond initiative, which works to accelerate pathways to regenerative, life-centered, well-being economies through catalytic actions.⁸ Bounce Beyond emerged when a subset of the partners sensed that the COVID-19 pandemic was creating new opportunities to work on economic system transition. The relationships built through the Forum also led indirectly to the formalization of structures to support the Transformations Conference and ensure that it continued in 2021 and 2023.

Carrying on

Finally, partners may carry valuable knowledge, skills, values, and connections that can serve them in their ongoing transformative work. The likelihood of carrying away something positive is perhaps increased if partners work actively to facilitate a constructive ending and provide a moment of reflection and closure that helps the partnership feel complete. However, the release stage of a partnership is typically given less deliberate attention than earlier stages. Partnerships often fade quietly, as the impetus that drew partners together declines.

Evaluating a partnership is an obvious way to provide a moment of reflection, learning, and closure. The conference included a whole stream on evaluating and assessing transformations. In a session on evaluating international agricultural research partnerships, Winterford et al. (Transformations Conference, 2023, p. 18) argued for evaluating partnerships at three levels: the micro level of individual interpersonal relationships; the macro level of cross-institutional engagements; and the meta level of how institutions (and individuals) come to see their roles and relationships in a system. Perhaps the greatest thing practitioners can leave a partnership with is a better understanding of their potential role in a transformation system and how they can carry on to facilitate transformation or support others to do this.

DISCUSSION: PRIORITIES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH AND ACTION

The article has so far addressed the first two of our research questions by identifying practices and capacities that can support transformative partnerships across six stages. This discussion section focuses on the third research question—priorities for further research and

action. Five priorities are identified and summarized in Figure 2.

Inner development for (and in) transformative partnerships

Self-awareness, critical thinking, openness, sensemaking, visioning, connectedness to social-ecological systems, humility, trust, creativity, and perseverance were inner capacities that received particular attention at the conference. The need to cultivate such capacities is now well understood in transformations literature and practice; all of the above are included in the 23 skills identified in the IDGs Framework (Jordan et al., 2021). Many can also be connected to ongoing work on teaching key competencies in sustainability, identified as systems thinking, futures thinking, values thinking, strategies thinking, implementation, integration, intrapersonal, and interpersonal competencies (Wiek et al., 2011; Wiek & Redman, 2022). What remains a priority for further action research is how best to cultivate and develop these skills at scale—and what to do when, as is almost inevitable, these skills are unevenly distributed between partners. How can partnerships actively support and broaden inner development?

Work on such questions is already underway. An evaluation of the Global Leadership for Sustainable Development Programme—the first specifically based on the IDGs—was released in 2023 and found some success in strengthening the IDGs in participants (Rupprecht & Wamsler, 2023). However, more experiments with developing the IDGs are needed, particularly working with established partnerships. This could be followed by research on how these capacities relate to the effectiveness of transformative partnerships.

Decolonizing partnerships

In any partnership, there will be power imbalances, ranging from mild to severe (Middleby, 2023). Conference participants drew attention to the need for transformative partnerships to surface and navigate power differences, including those between the Global North and South, between Indigenous people and colonial powers, and between humans and non-humans. Arguably, the most prominent question emerging from the Transformations Conference was how to decolonize partnerships—to build effective partnerships that not only navigate but also redress power imbalances. This question is particularly pertinent because the Transformation Community itself remains, to date, largely dominated by the Global

⁸<https://www.bouncebeyond.global/>.

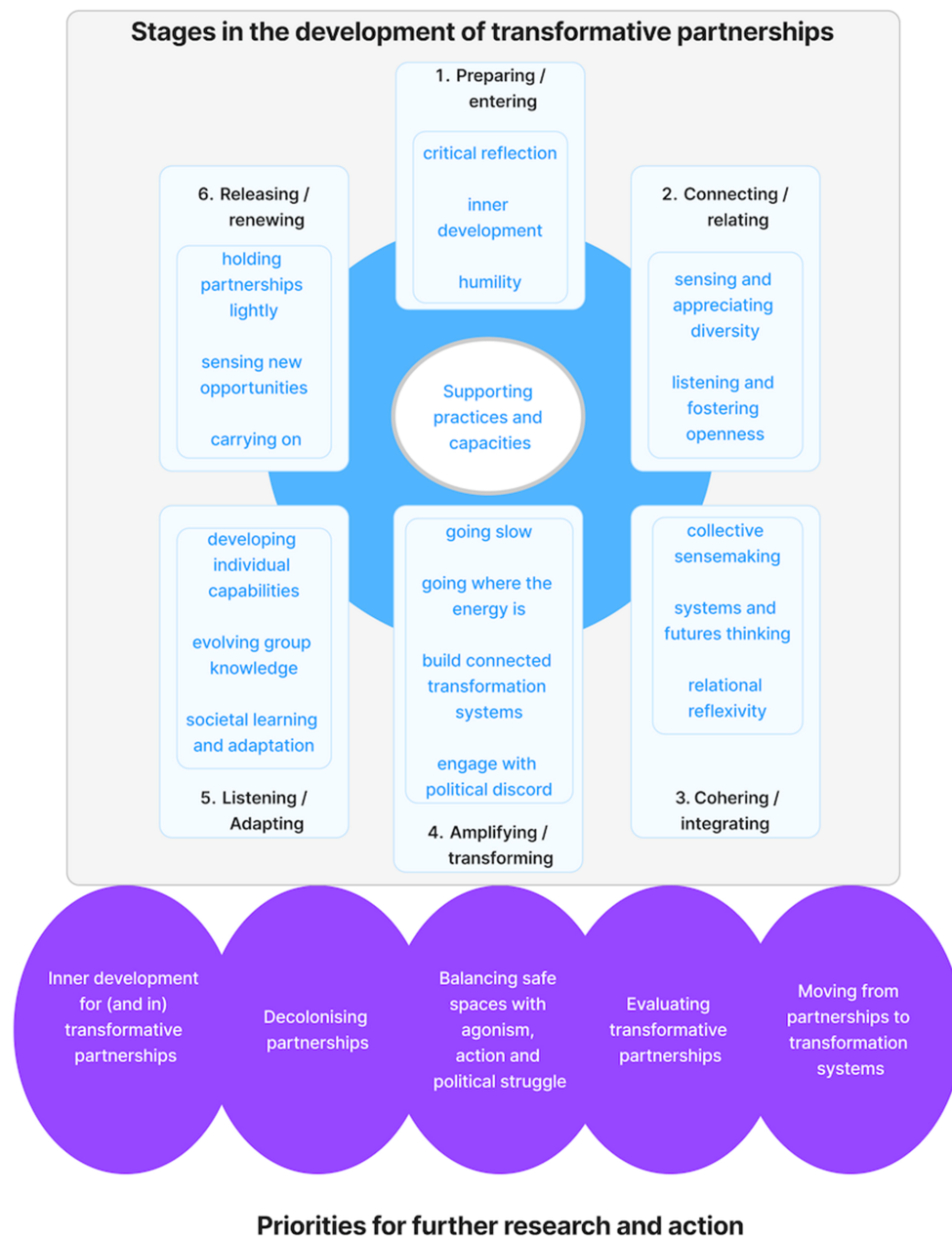


FIGURE 2 Stages, practices, capacities, and opportunities in the development of transformative partnerships. Note that stage numbering is indicative of a typical flow in the development of transformative partnerships, but the process is rarely this linear.

North. Five of the six conferences have been convened in the North, and participants are predominantly from Northern nations.

Participants in the Transformations Conference identified many practices and capacities with the potential to support the decolonizing of partnerships, from a humble approach to sensing and appreciating diversity, to fostering listening and openness. It is crucial that people and organizations of the North use their power and privilege not to dominate partnerships but to open up spaces for more diverse leadership to flourish. There is much still to learn about how to do this sensitively. Scholars in

sustainability transitions have already made progress in drawing attention to the need to decolonize sustainability transitions in the Global South (e.g., Ghosh et al., 2021) and have recently proposed a highly relevant research agenda for just sustainability transitions (Avelino et al., 2024). Transformations scholars can build on this foundation to guide action to decolonize partnerships and share their experiences. Power and diversity issues are highly contextual and unique to each partnership, so while evaluation and reporting on successful decolonial practices are essential, it is unlikely to lead to the codification of approaches.

Further, there can be subtle factors at play that reproduce coloniality even in well-intentioned partnerships. For example, knowledge integration processes in partnerships can flatten differences in language and ontology to fit the imperative to publish in English in academic styles. How can we experiment with different forms of coproduction and diverse outputs to address this? For example, as a way of recognizing non-humans, there have been interesting experiments in Australia where articles have been coauthored by “Country” the Aboriginal term that encompasses the land and all its inhabitants (Country et al., 2016).

Balancing safe spaces with agonism and action

Given the power imbalances discussed above, conference participants frequently mentioned the need for partnerships to create safe spaces where participants can explore other perspectives, engage in “safe to fail” experiments, gradually build trust, and feel confident to let go of some of their personal goals in order to better serve the needs of the partnership and system. Partnerships can also operate as communities of practice that provide support as participants engage in the challenging work of transformation. However, the idea of creating safe spaces in partnership is in tension with other ideas about transformation, raising questions that require further research.

First, when talking about creating safe spaces, building trust, and integrating across plural perspectives, conference participants always drew attention to the significant time required. Are there ways to more rapidly build trust? How can we convince funding agencies of the importance of upfront investment in trust-building when little transformative action is immediately apparent? Alternatively, how might we build trust *through action* so that there is a sense of progress toward transformation even while relationships are being built? There are organizations with significant experience in building trust rapidly or finding ways to collaborate in situations of low trust that the Transformations Community could learn from. For example, Adam Kahane of Reos Partners writes about his experiences of facilitating collaboration in situations of low trust (Kahane, 2017).

Second, a case has been made by authors like Chantal Mouffe (1999) for decision-making through agonistic pluralism, where societal consensus is never possible and the conflict between perspectives is actually a source of creativity. How can we create spaces that are “safe enough” (Pereira et al., 2018) for trust-building but still allow for disagreement and conflict to be present? How

do we strike a balance in partnerships between alignment and diversity?

Mouffe’s work is also a reminder that partnerships are only one aspect of the larger struggle to achieve transformation. Also necessary is the challenging work of negotiating the ever-present discord—conflict, pushback, and resistance—that is a feature of all sustainability transformations (Patterson et al., 2024). Partnerships that include all actors with an interest in sustainability transformations, including those whose interest is resisting transformation, are rarely possible. Instead, transformative partnerships become one collective actor in the negotiation of partial political settlements among divided actors (Patterson et al., 2024). The formation of a partnership may only be the start of an ongoing process of conflictual political struggle. How do transformative partnerships engage effectively with the politics of transformation?

Finally, transformation itself is not a “safe” activity, and can have unintended outcomes, perpetuating existing responsibilities and actions (Blythe et al., 2018). Transforming complex, locked in systems requires risk-taking and confrontation with existing sites of power. Does the creation of safe spaces in our partnerships—what is sometimes called “living in our safe bubbles”—mean losing sight of the big picture of what is needed for transformation? How might we use movement between safe and confrontational spaces to better facilitate transformation?

None of these are necessarily new questions for those interested in sustainability transformations and earth stewardship, but the conference participants were clearly seeking more examples of actions and practices that can inspire new responses to these questions when working through transformative partnerships.

Evaluating transformative partnerships

Michael Quinn Patton (2019) has argued that to evaluate transformation, we need to transform evaluation. The complexity of transformative processes, their scale, and their uncertainty means that traditional approaches of establishing a linear program logic and assessing its achievement are not up to the task, and new logic models for transformative outcomes are emerging (Palavicino et al., 2021). Evaluating transformative partnerships adds a layer of complexity by asking not only what transformation has been achieved but also what role the partnership played in it.

Scholarship on evaluating transformative partnerships is emerging. For example, Plummer et al. (2022) provide a guide on evaluating transdisciplinary

partnerships for sustainability, pointing out the need to evaluate both the performance of the partnership and its impact. While valuable, their guide tends to focus on observable exterior dimensions rather than the inner dimensions we have identified as crucial to successful partnerships. Other work considers how inner transformation can function as a leverage point for system change (Woiwode et al., 2021), but questions requiring more attention remain, including: How are individuals and their relationships changed by participating in partnerships? How do these interior changes prepare the way for future transformation? How does the facilitation of the end of a partnership open up or close down opportunities for future transformation?

Kligyte et al. (2023) build on Mitchell et al. (2015) to propose four “outcome spaces” for transdisciplinary partnerships: changes in situation; knowledge; learning; and relationships. This is helpful—the latter three outcomes can take in interior dimensions and offer an appropriate focus for evaluating transformative partnerships. Further research is needed to apply this new framework to more comprehensively evaluate transformative partnerships.

While not specifically focused on partnerships, a new contribution published since the Transformations Conference proposes 12 principles for transformation-focused evaluation (Buckton et al., 2024). One principle is specifically focused on cultivating mutualistic partnerships of knowledge and action, and others focus on relevant concepts such as justice, values, learning, and transformation. This work is enormously helpful, and further work is now needed to experiment with methods for putting these principles into practice.

From partnerships to transformation systems

At the start of this article, we noted that no individual or organization working alone can transform systems at the scale required for sustainable futures. It is fair to say that no single partnership can achieve transformation either. Transformation will require multiple partnerships working across scales and time. The emerging scholarship on transformation systems (Waddock et al., 2022) is starting to explore how disparate initiatives with similar system transformation goals can begin to connect and see themselves as part of transformation systems. Waddock et al. (2022, p. 80) define a transformation system as “the collection of people, programs, projects, and entities... working toward generally the same transformational aspirations.” Many of those people, programs, projects, and entities will already be engaged in transformative partnerships. Waddock et al. are calling for partnerships

to connect up with other partnerships into larger systems focused on transformation in specific domains. This opens up the possibility of a bigger picture view, where specific partnerships do not have to do it all alone, but can do their part, knowing that others are working on other parts.

The idea of transformation systems is relatively new, and there are few examples of how to step up from partnership thinking to convene and collaborate at the level of transformation systems. Experimenting with ways to connect up partnerships, do collective system mapping, build shared theories of transformation, and act in harmony rather than at cross purposes is a research priority. For example, how can we build trust across a system (rather than within a specific partnership)? This is likely to be important, as those working in one part of the system need to trust that others are doing what is needed in other parts of the system. Further, as Yiheyis Maru (Transformations Conference, 2023, p. 40) urged during the conference, how can we actively engage and come to understand what is already happening in the field rather than continually reinventing partnerships and new initiatives?

CONCLUSION

This paper drew on the collective sensemaking of more than 700 participants in the 2023 Transformations Conference to identify six loosely sequential stages that scholars and practitioners should attend to when pursuing effective partnerships for transformation and earth stewardship: preparing/entering; connecting/relating; cohering/integrating; amplifying/transforming; learning/adapting; releasing/renewing. Although there is an order to these stages, with some clearly being more relevant as a partnership starts and others as it ends, partnerships do not move through these stages in a linear way. Further, a case can be made to see some of the stages as more foundational and cross-cutting than others; for example, the inner capacities discussed under preparing/entering support positive outcomes in other stages, and learning/adapting is a continuous process.

For each of the stages, conference participants identified practices or capacities that could support a partnership to facilitate transformation. Most of these practices and capacities are already widely discussed in the literature on transformations and earth stewardship. The novel contributions of this paper are to identify which practices and capacities a large cohort of transformation scholars believe are most relevant to transformative partnerships and to associate each with stages in the formation and development of such partnerships. This opens the

possibility that participants in partnerships can take a more targeted approach to cultivating specific practices and capacities as they move through the stages. The identified stages and their supporting practices and capacities are summarized in Figure 2. An overarching observation is the importance that conference participants placed on the cultivation and development of inner capacities to work well in partnership. All of the stages ask participants to do inner work that helps them loosen their grip on individual goals in favor of more effectively supporting collective goals.

Finally, we recognize that there is still much to learn about how to form, maintain, and leave transformative partnerships. Five priorities for further research and action that were evident in the conference contributions are summarized in Figure 2, including how to effectively develop the inner capacities needed for partnership, to decolonize partnerships, to make partnerships “safe enough” spaces that allow for agonism, action, and political struggle, to evaluate partnerships, and to move from partnerships to transformation systems. All of these are already receiving attention from scholars of sustainability transformations and earth stewardship, so the contribution here is to connect these enduring concerns with the specific needs of working in transformative partnerships.

The Transformations Conference 2023, with its theme of transformative partnerships for a better world, was a unique opportunity to tap the collective wisdom of scholars and practitioners who are actively working on sustainability transformations. Partnerships are crucial to sustainable, regenerative, and just futures on this planet. Ultimately, we are all partners in the future of the Earth, human and non-human alike. We hope that this collective sensemaking can guide others to form more inclusive partnerships to help steward a thriving planetary future. We also hope that future conferences can draw inspiration from our sensemaking method to use these brief gatherings as an opportunity to synthesize the collective wisdom required for earth stewardship.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Chris Riedy: Conceptualization; formal analysis; methodology; project administration; supervision; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Anja Bless:** Conceptualization; formal analysis; methodology; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Erin Bohensky:** Conceptualization; formal analysis; methodology; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Naomi Carrard:** Conceptualization; formal analysis; methodology; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Federico Davila:** Conceptualization; formal analysis;

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Some of the data that support the findings of this study (the conference program and abstracts) are openly available in the University of Technology Sydney Research Data Portal at <https://doi.org/10.26195/AQSW-MS92>, reference number 01d00a508d9c11ee97111d55566bcc08. Remaining data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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