

# Emerging Potential

An initiative to address complex challenges at scale

## The Challenge

Poverty and inequity, climate change, civil and cross-border war, food security, inadequate health care, education reform, weak governance, and environmental degradation are all examples of large-scale complex system transformation challenges. *Complex systems* evolve in unpredictable ways because of non-linear dynamic interactions. Change involves *large-scale* interactions between multiple agents and agencies. *Transformation* refers to change that involves deep innovation in ways of thinking, acting, power structures and relationships.

Enormous sums of money are spent annually to address challenges around the world to address these issues. Today, strategies to address complex problems are dominated by streams of investment and action that emphasize technological solutions based in linear, hierarchical, expert-driven, planned-to-predefined target, and solution roll-out approaches. Technology can make critical contributions. However, complex challenges require approaches that actively engage those affected and manage constraints to enable Emerging solutions that are adaptable and context-dependent with a clear focus on resilience.

Pioneering approaches already exist for complex change. While originating from different disciplines, they have core elements in common:

- Multi-stakeholder engagement approaches;
- Multi-layered issue and activity based networks;
- System visualization and mapping;

- Shifting perspective by changing interactions;
- Diagnostic and research tools that access collective awareness and capability;
- Large-scale participatory engagement.

Awareness and capability in these new elements exists in small islands of action, and is not easily accessible or sufficiently known. This leads them falling short of their potential impact. A World Bank-funded study<sup>1</sup> found that this fragmentation results in high opportunity costs and slow development of systemic approaches.

Complex change requires a palette of approaches to be applied, and new approaches or variants are required to create sustainable change. Closing the large gap between the common practice of most governments, corporations and organizations and the available knowledge and practice for complex change requires a concerted development effort.

## Our Response

As Einstein said: “We cannot solve our problems with the same level of thinking we used when we created them”. *Emerging Potential* aims to create a new level of thinking and action that advances knowledge and promotes the application of these approaches, and builds capacity to address complex change challenges. To make this happen will require a network of stakeholders: funders, problem owners, experts, practitioners, and capacity developers. The initiative aims to create this through mutual learning, experimental practice and sound theory.

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<sup>1</sup> Waddell, Steve. (2014). [Addressing the world’s critical issues as complex change challenges: The state-of-the-field](#). World Bank and GOLDEN Ecosystems Labs.

## A Unique Response

Potsdam Initiative sees all the following elements as essential:

1. **Enabling application** of cross-methodological and cross-theoretical approaches
2. **Connecting stakeholders** in such challenges in a global network: funders, problem owners, experts, researchers, practitioners, and capacity developers;
3. **Learning from action**, enacting communications and experience across projects;
4. **Working together**, creating a virtuous cycle growing out of linked projects by strengthening connections, tools, knowledge and capacity;
5. **Advancing theory** to build a rigorous evidence-based research and learning agenda

## What is *Emerging Potential's* development plan?

Emerging Potential aims to raise \$25 million in commitments within three years to support its aspirations. Rather than form a new "institution", it aims to develop a decentralized network with participant member organizations leading the activity. We envision four working streams:

- 1) **Connections:** developing multiple connections between stakeholders in addressing intractable problems.
- 2) **Tools and Methods:** comprehensive provision and investment in development priorities. Cataloguing, evaluation and commenting their effective use.
- 3) **Collective Action Projects:** Piloting specific large system change challenges drawing from the breadth of available methodologies
- 4) **Capacity Development:** scaling-up existing and new approaches, to develop the ability of large numbers of people to apply systemic transformation knowledge and practice.

## Who is behind this?

This is the list of the initial conveners of *Emerging Potential* who are supporting exploration of its

development with others. They have all demonstrated that implementation of systemic approaches has an impact on a system's transformation. Reference to people's organization is for biographical description, and does not necessarily imply organizational involvement at this point.



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**Brigitta Villaronga**  
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**Steve Waddell**  
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## What is *Emerging Potential* doing?

*Emerging Potential* is bringing together diverse activities of its participants to realize synergies and greater impact. These can be described in accord with the four work streams:

- 1) **Connections:** *Emerging Potential* initiators are:
  - Reaching out to their own networks to further develop Potsdam Initiative's activities and its participants. This includes approximately 20 organizations identified as working in it the field (see Appendix 1).
  - Investigating a joint virtual space to support the work streams.
  - Holding their next meeting in Rotterdam June 23 to advance the work streams.
  - Planning a large community meeting in the spring of 2016.
- 2) **Tools and Methods:** *Emerging Potential* initiators are:
  - Developing methodologies to support "mash-ups" of diverse tools and methods.
  - Beginning discussions about ways to organize and share diverse approaches;

- Identifying key issues that need addressing to advance systemic transformations.

- 3) *Emerging Potential* initiators are:
  - Reviewing their upcoming projects to identify ones where mash-ups of methods would be possible and of value (eight have been identified so far);
  - Beginning conversations with problem-owners and funders to identify potential projects of theirs that would benefit from *Emerging Potential's* mash-up approach.
- 4) **Capacity Development:** *Emerging Potential* initiators are:
  - Publishing a special issue of the Journal of Corporate Citizenship on large systems change in June 2014.
  - Planning development of a book as a way to further develop the community and its collective knowledge.
  - Beginning discussions about a collaborative Learning Program.

May 5, 2015

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