Everyday Patterns for Shifting Systems

This blog shares exploratory work we have been doing into everyday patterns, and the role and power of re-patterning in systems change. It introduces seven patterns that we have identified across our work and that of others that go some way to making visible active re-patterning for equity and powersharing. To describe what is being re-orientated through this re-patterning we draw on eight different arenas of systems, and extend our visualisation of what is happening in systems as a living relationship between different interconnected parts.

Our Starting Point
Public Services in the twenty first century have formed around concepts such as universal access, service delivery, social safety nets, and public provision of critical infrastructure.   Public management has build into these elements patterns of relationships (based on objectivity, universalism, professional interactions); resourcing (focussed around rationing, efficiency, programmatic resource flows); power (centred on professional expertise, needs assessments, deserving access to spaces and services) - to name just a few of the patterns.

While we often hear of the successes of public services in enabling broad access to services and public infrastructure, there have also been many who have not benefited, who have missed out on access or opportunity and who have actually been harmed by and within the system. We have known this for some decades now. However responses have focussed too much on reform, tweaking the old patterns, or adding in new conditions or resources whilst leaving the established patterns in place. It is becoming clearer that this is unlikely to change the outcomes for people, for whānau (can be translated to mean extended family and is the primary economic unit of Māori society). www.māoridictionary.co.nz), for communities in any fundamental way.

For a growing number of people, communities, whānau, current patterns of 'servicing' are not working and are not providing pathways towards aspirations, but rather, are keeping people in cycles of scarcity. If we are to transform public systems, we need to learn our way towards new patterns that focus not on more efficient ways to deliver more 'services', but on:
   - more diverse and relational ways of responding, healing and strengthening;
   - ways to shift resources towards communities and whānau rather than intermediaries who are removed from their realities; and
   - ways to develop structures of participation and governance that enable more equitable power sharing in designing, delivering and resourcing support in communities.

What is needed is a foundation for public systems that moves away from goals of access to more and better servicing of communities, and towards goals around learning how we can promote patterns of thriving, aspiration, success and 'wellbeing'. Transforming these systems requires designing in justice, equity, diversity - and intentionally addressing the harms perpetrated by colonisation, racism, abuse of power that have occurred in systems dominated by paradigms of scarcity, efficiency and rationing (many of which have been further entrenched by the wholesale adoption of new public management ideologies).

The role of everyday patterns in shifting systems
There are a growing number of people discussing the need for systems change and this seems to be a topic of conversation in many circles now - from service providers, funders, investors, intermediaries and policy makers.

Most of these discussions, however, focus on the big picture tasks of pulling various levers from policy changes to new program design. In our work alongside public servants, we have found it just as important to focus on how we shift the foundational patterns, behaviours, relationships and interactions that underlie all parts of systems - the *everyday patterns* which may look small in the scheme of systems, but which can fundamentally shift people's lived experience of systems, and which are within the reach of every one of us who works in a system to start to learn our way into.

In simple terms **patterns are interconnected behaviours, relationships and structures that together make up a picture of what 'common practice' looks like and how it is ultimately experienced by people interacting with and in the system.**

Humans are extraordinarily good at recognising and responding to patterns. Patterns have always helped us understand, navigate, make sense of and respond to the world around us. When it comes to systemic change, learning to sense, identify, surface and practice new patterns is an important part of starting to detect weak signals of potentials for better outcomes, and begin to frame directions for changes that could lead to 'better' futures.
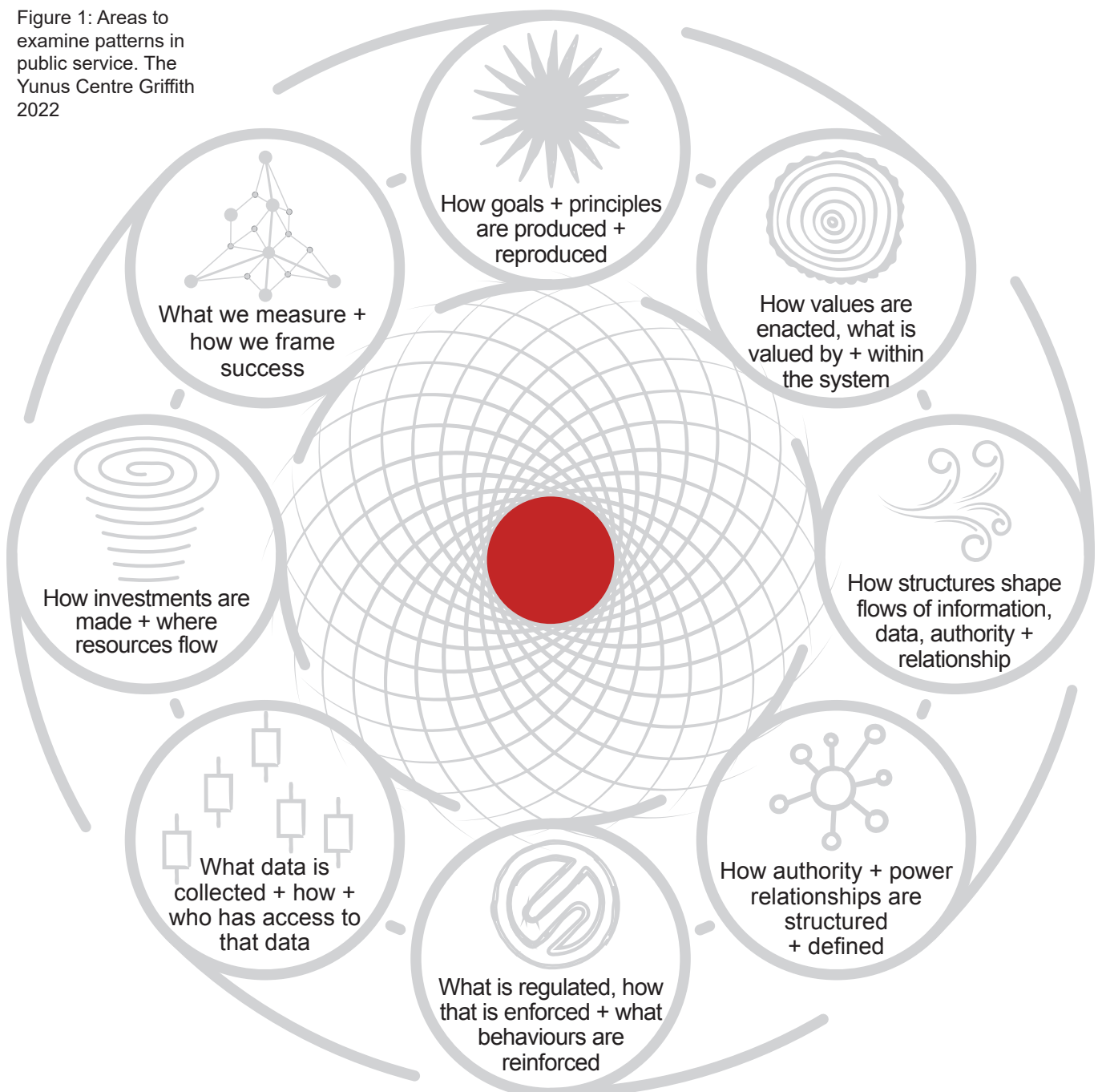
Patterns shape systems and people in systems
Patterns manifest themselves not only in the overall design of systems, but in the behaviours of people who work in or interact with the system, in the values that are espoused by the system, in arrangement of spaces, and through the policies, the structures and the flows of that system. They are embedded in each of these dimensions of the system - and as individuals we can unwittingly reflect and embody them in the ways we work, and in our behaviours.

Every interaction within the system can reflect the values embedded in the system. So if we want to change systems, then we need first to observe or at least begin to understand the patterns underpinning it. This is why changing systems is not just a matter of pulling one lever or another, or changing only one element of a pattern.

Figure 1: Areas to examine patterns in public service. The Yunus Centre Griffith 2022

How goals + principles are produced + reproduced

How values are enacted, what is valued by + within the system

What we measure + how we frame success

How structures shape flows of information, data, authority + relationship

How investments are made + where resources flow

How authority + power relationships are structured + defined

What data is collected + how + who has access to that data

What is regulated, how that is enforced + what behaviours are reinforced

We need to be able to identify existing patterns (and challenge them) not only in the system but in ourselves - and we also need to imagine, learn, test and spread new patterns in small and large ways across systems in order to be able to affect change. In other words, we need to not only learn about patterns in systems, but learn how we can be part of re-patterning systems!

We think that's about uncovering and learning patterns that promote different qualities of relationship, that challenge current power structures, that help us to open up new forms of evidence, resource flows and regulatory structures. Some of the key arenas in which we need to uncover and re-learn patterns that are embedded in public service systems are illustrated in Figure One (which also reflects and draws on the work of both Donella Meadows (1999) and the more recent work of Jennie Winhall and Charlie Leadbeater (2022)).However, whilst patterns across these areas can share common traits and qualities, patterns are not static or stable - they may manifest differently according to contexts and dynamics. So when we talk about patterns within and across public systems we need to acknowledge that their qualities will shift over time and place. So it's important to recognise that:

- **What 'good practice' means is very much tied to context** - and to who is recognised as the powerful arbitrator of what constitutes 'good'. So, in traditional public service orthodoxy 'service delivery' is a pattern that is recognised as 'good', and neoliberal policy frameworks have determined that the pattern of 'efficiency' is good. So, patterns of 'efficient service delivery' dominate the public sector landscape and represent what is thought of as 'good' by funders, and therefore rewarded.

- **Patterns reflect time and power dynamics** - some patterns are archetypal in nature (pertaining to cultural and universal human qualities like trust, love), however patterns reflecting 'good-practice' are time-bound, and reflect power dynamics. When these patterns become embedded in systems they are often assumed to be 'natural' or unquestionable reflections of truth. So, it is not only important to be able to recognise patterns in systems, but to understand how patterns can atrophy into assumptions.

- Most **human patterns reflect complex social norms and relationships** - so they can be less about identification of universal 'good practice' than an expression of what is good in context and for a certain purpose. If we are going to innovate around or imagine and test new patterns in complex human systems we need to *understand the nature of emergent patterns*. It therefore becomes much more important to 'learn' *patterning* rather than just be able to 'recognise' and 'identify' existing patterns at play. If we're interested in systems transformation

we need to become pattern *learners*. The patterns we present here provide a glimpse of transitioning to more equitable, just and healing systems. They have been developed in a context and are still more like starting points than fully developed patterns of good practice.
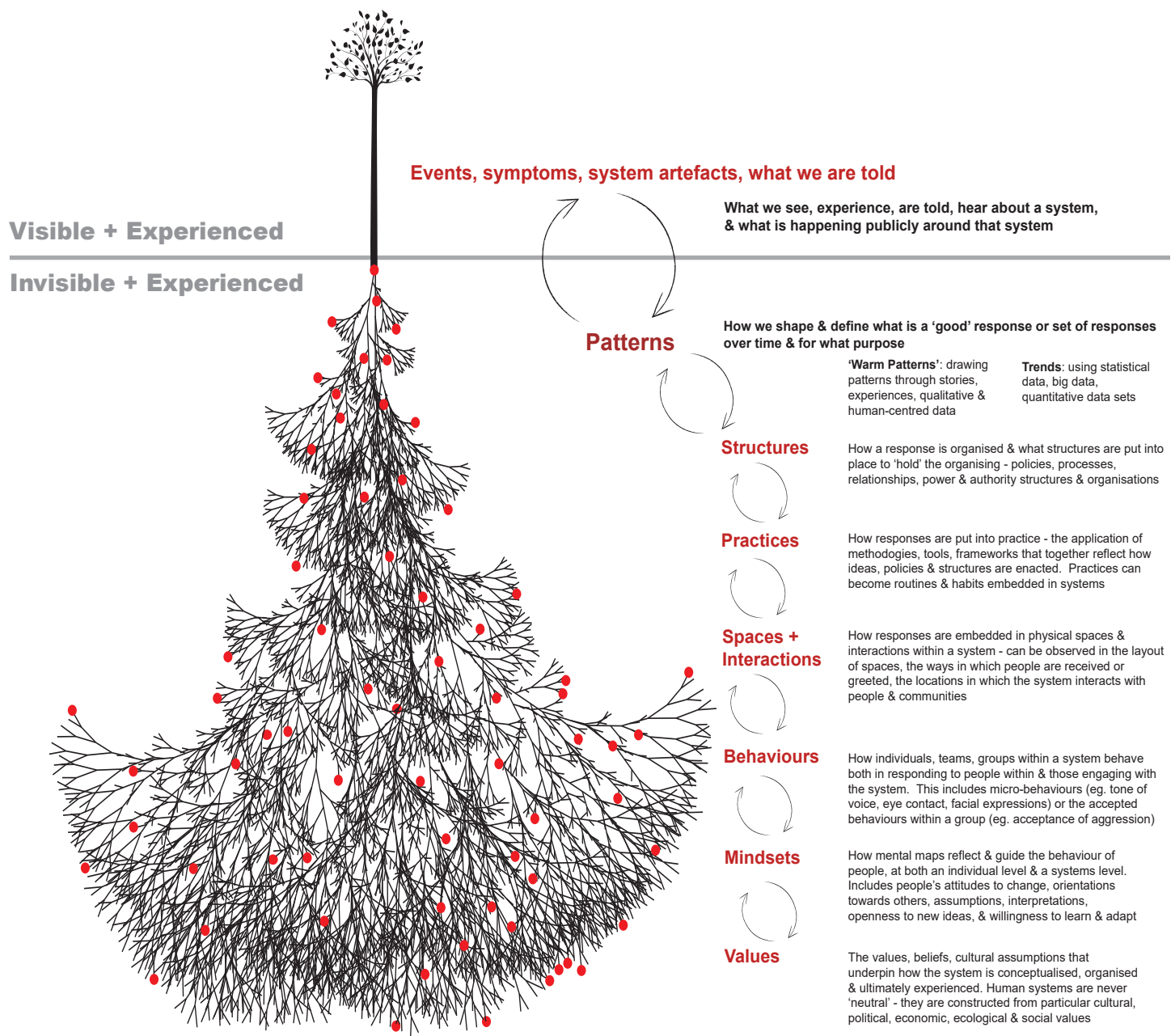
Exploring new patterns in public systems
Systems are not inert monoliths that can only change via top-down structural changes (though they can be critically important of course) - they can also change bottom up - with the actions, behaviours and practices of each of us challenging existing patterns, imagining, identifying and generating new patterns, and then starting to embed these new patterns into systems. It is this work around actively 're-patterning' systems that interests us (not as an alternative to the work others are doing to shift systems, but as an additional and complementary perspective).

Many of the models of systems change don't recognise the power of the every day and of everyone in generating shifts that can start to generate different patterns within, across and in the space in between systems. The models often present systems as static and solid, presented as 'icebergs' or thermostats - rather than dynamic and organic, and made up of very tiny interactions.

So whilst patterns are recognised in some models of systems change, the patterns that are referred to are distant to the everyday, and are structural, mega and meta in nature rather than as being reflected in both the big picture and in the very small interactions between people, in the way we organise spaces, and in the fabric of the practices that shape the work of public services.

We have tried to illustrate this in Figure Two by portraying the patterns of systems in a more organic form, and the change process as occurring in many spaces across the organism of our systems (and almost fractal in nature, meaning that every pattern is reflected in every part of the system).

We use a metaphor that implies dynamism and communication - that of a tree or ants nest or mycelium (even if the image is one dimensional on this page!). Such metaphors may be more representative than static or frozen representations of systems, but of course human systems are even more dynamic in nature and form - metaphors are merely meant to help us engage with the complexity, not be perfect representations.

Visible + Experienced

Invisible + Experienced

Events, symptoms, system artefacts, what we are told

What we see, experience, are told, hear about a system, & what is happening publicly around that system

Patterns

How we shape & define what is a 'good' response or set of responses over time & for what purpose

'Warm Patterns': drawing patterns through stories, experiences, qualitative & human-centred data

Trends: using statistical data, big data, quantitative data sets

Structures

How a response is organised & what structures are put into place to 'hold' the organising - policies, processes, relationships, power & authority structures & organisations

Practices

How responses are put into practice - the application of methodologies, tools, frameworks that together reflect how ideas, policies & structures are enacted. Practices can become routines & habits embedded in systems

Spaces + Interactions

How responses are embedded in physical spaces & interactions within a system - can be observed in the layout of spaces, the ways in which people are received or greeted, the locations in which the system interacts with people & communities

Behaviours

How individuals, teams, groups within a system behave both in responding to people within & those engaging with the system. This includes micro-behaviours (eg. tone of voice, eye contact, facial expressions) or the accepted behaviours within a group (eg. acceptance of aggression)

Mindsets

How mental maps reflect & guide the behaviour of people, at both an individual level & a systems level. Includes people's attitudes to change, orientations towards others, assumptions, interpretations, openness to new ideas, & willingness to learn & adapt

Values

The values, beliefs, cultural assumptions that underpin how the system is conceptualised, organised & ultimately experienced. Human systems are never 'neutral' - they are constructed from particular cultural, political, economic, ecological & social values

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Unlike the traditional 'iceberg' model of systems developed originally by Donella Meadows and then by Peter Senge, a living metaphor (tree roots, mycelium, ant nest) can help us to see how important connection + communication is between layers of the system.

Patterns (and the sort of data we draw on to make patterns visible) can help to create pathways towards opening up dialogue around and making visible deeper structures and mindsets.

Of course all 'biological' metaphors are also limited as human systems are much more complex given the dynamic interactions between autonomous individuals, relationships and social systems.

We have also added additional 'layers' into our metaphor model, beyond those traditionally associated with the 'iceberg' model. We have done this because it can become a little easier to see how patterns have different expressions across systems - from the level of the individual, to teams, departments and then at the systems level.

The traditional levels of systems models make it hard for people to 'see' themselves as having agency within the system. Adding layers such as spaces, interactions and behaviours create opportunities for dialogue about how everyone engaged in a system can become an agent of shifting patterns - rather than just waiting for the system as a whole to change.

What should be clear here is that every system has qualities that are 'fractal' in nature - so the system is reflected not only in whole, but in each 'part' within the whole. Every interaction within the system can reflect the values embedded in the system. So if we want to change systems, then we need first to observe or at least begin to understand the patterns underpinning it.

We then need to learn our way towards supporting different, emerging patterns that could help us to grow systems based on different structures + mindsets. This has to happen across systems...so the little red dots represent the potential for diverse sites of 'learning' new patterns towards more just, equitable systems.

Figure 2: The organic patterns of systems ,The Yunus Centre Griffith and Auckland Co-Design Lab 2022

How we are working with patterns in shifting systems

In our work together The Yunus Centre, Griffith and Auckland Co-Design Lab have done three things:

1. Identified, collected, and collated stories that illustrate emerging new patterns of relationship, flows, structuring, etc. - and which challenge public and human service's orthodox patterns in some way;
2. Generated hypotheses (or hunches) about how these patterns could shape different systemic responses;
3. Begun to explore, test and share these patterns to see how they could generate different kinds of dialogues that could nudge public systems forward towards more just, equitable, diverse responses to some of our most challenging dilemmas.

We have been exploring some of the patterns that have emerged in the work of The Southern Initiative, in South and West Auckland, that could provide some of these weak signals. They have been surfaced through dialogues across the TSI team, and through the collection and analysis of micro-narratives about the nature of the work, relationships, structures and spaces.

We have identified 7 key patterns in this work that signal potentials for transformative systems and enable wellbeing. These patterns are not recipes or checklists. They are more like prompts that help us to learn, makes sense and meaning and deepen dialogue about what it may take to truly create transformed systems for wellbeing in equitable and just ways. We share these patterns to foster collective dialogues about how we can shift systems towards wellbeing, where people and places can flourish rather than just survive.

We are keen to open up deeper, broader, more coherent conversations about how we could transform public service systems - so that they actually create the foundations for thriving and wellbeing rather than merely providing services that increasingly don't work for meeting the needs and aspirations of a growing number of people.

7 Emerging Patterns

signalling potentials for transformative systems & enabling wellbeing

Beyond Services

Moving beyond services as the first response of addressing needs, to a much broader ecology of support for wellbeing. This involves recognition and activation of natural and cultural networks and resources; and an activation of expertise and capital in different ways.

Starting Differently

How we start matters. If we are trying to achieve different kinds of outcomes, or bolder still, create change in a system we need to start differently. If our starting point looks like same as always, it's not going to take us to a different place.
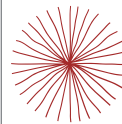
Diversifying Evidence & Value

Challenging evidence and indicators makes explicit the values and worldview underpinning them, and creates room for indicators and measures of success developed through different lenses, cultural perspectives and alongside whānau.

Collective action & ownership

Focusing on what it would take to initiate systemic and collective action and ownership for wellbeing outcomes - from people, families, communities, services, programs and policies. Wellbeing becomes the responsibility of the collective, rather than the individual.
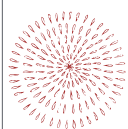
Whānau & relationships as the unit of wellbeing

Working with, connecting to, recording, conceptualising people in relation to their wider context, relationships, whānau. This means seeing wellbeing from a family and intergenerational perspective not just an individual one.
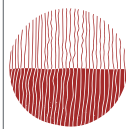
Connecting to place & being in place

Recognising and engaging the role of place and culture in creating and maintaining wellbeing, and potential of spaces in supporting the conditions for wellbeing, especially as places of healing and strengthening.

Right scale

Working within systems in ways that let us more fluidly move between big and wide and deep, understanding the connections between these and seeing them as equally important. This enables us to work across multiple levels at the same time

Conclusion and what's next

Patterns help to make visible or describe the different ways of working that are important to getting different outcomes. It's easy for us to talk about how we think things should work and be different (e.g community-led, partnerships, powersharing). We are hopeful that by trying to go more deeply into the kinds of interconnected changes and patterns that these shifts represent we can make more visible some of the "how" - of change. These seven patterns are transitional patterns - starting points that reflect learning about ways of working that are more likely to create the possibility for different outcomes.

For each of the patterns we introduce the context and nature of the pattern, key shifts they represent, what embedding the pattern might look like and living examples of the pattern in action.

We'd love to know if you recognise these patterns, can see examples of these patterns in your work, or can help us to extend our understanding of these patterns. Equally we would love to work with others to identify additional transitionary patterns that are helping to give further weak signals for systems change towards equity.

References:
Meadows, D. (1999) Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System, Sustainability Institute VT available at: https://donellameadows.org/wp-content/userfiles/Leverage_Points.pdf

Leadbeater, C. and Winhall, J. (2022) The Patterns of Possibility:How to Recast Relationships to Create Healthier Systems and Better Outcomes, Rockefeller Foundation, February, available at: https://www.systeminnovation.org/article-the-patterns-of-possibility

About this work:

This work was undertaken during a twelve month 'executive in residence' program at The Yunus Centre, Griffith University. We appointed the TSI / Auckland Co-Design Lab teams as our 'executive in residence', and set about jointly exploring the question, 'what can we learn from the work in South and West Auckland that could offer potential insights into growing the systemic foundations for civic innovation?'

Many recent discussions about civic innovation and systems change have focussed on big structural changes that need to take place if we are to grow more equitable outcomes. We suspected however that we needed to explore what could happen underneath those structures at the level of more fundamental and 'everyday' values, mindsets, behaviours and interactions that could support civic innovation towards transitions much more readily than just waiting for the bigger picture, structural changes to eventuate.

This piece of work began with the hunch that 'there are already patterns of change that exist and are emerging'. These might be pockets of the future that already exist in the work we are doing that could help transition systems towards equity. This series is the culmination of this exploration - which we offer as demonstration that shifting systems towards equity is possible and that it is the responsibility of everyone to start doing and being differently in every part of every system, everyday.

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THE AUCKLAND CO-DESIGN LAB