

# MASTERCLASS SERIES

## *in Systems Thinking*



## Systems Leadership

### SPEAKERS

David Nabarro, Strategic Director, 4SD

John Atkinson, Systems Leadership and Transformational Change Adviser

Elizabeth Lule, Executive Director, ECDAN

### MODERATOR

Shekufeh Zonji, Global Technical Lead, ECDAN

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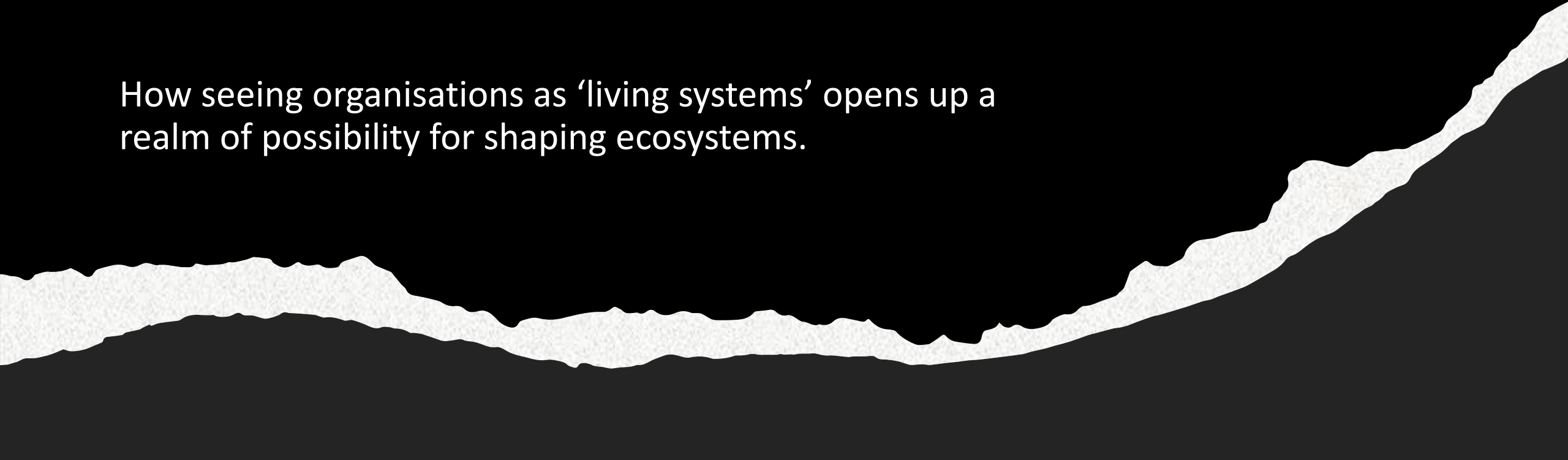
The Systems Thinking for Early Childhood Development (ECD) Initiative is a partnership between ECDAN and Harvard University and supported by Porticus.



**HARVARD T.H. CHAN**  
SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH

# Stepping Across a Threshold

How seeing organisations as 'living systems' opens up a realm of possibility for shaping ecosystems.



# How do human systems work?



# Ecosystems..

- Non-deterministic & generative
- Cause and effect disconnected in time and space
- Small changes in starting conditions can provoke profound changes in outcome

This challenges many premises we hold about how things get done. It introduces variation.





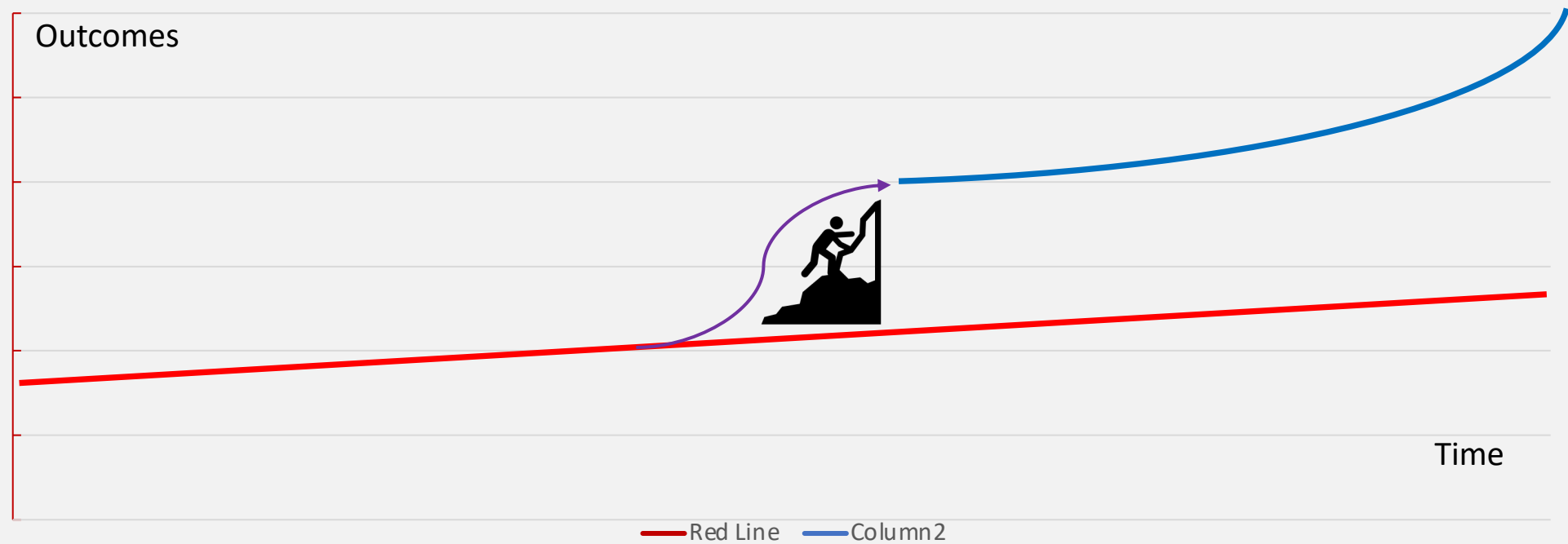
# Living Systems Leadership

- Every action generates unintended consequences
- Establishing links of causality is often impossible
- Management techniques can cause as many problems as they fix

***The leadership act is to seek balance not control***

# 'Red Line' to 'Blue Line'

The Threshold Step



# Finding the moves that shift

Seeing our patterns differently



## **Opportunity**

- moving to *both/and* to craft interventions that shift

## **Insight**

- noticing the *alternative narratives* that exist

## **Vision**

- seeing a pattern through its *dominant narrative*

## **Obscurity**

- not seeing the pattern, just *responding* to it

# Why are Systems Dialogues needed?

Bringing the Sustainable Development Agenda to life presents complex challenges for the Governments, NGOs, business, scientific and international organizations.

For each challenge, different stakeholders each have their own perspectives on what actions should be prioritized and how. They want to be heard and engaged.

Since 2018 4SD has been accompanying development practitioners as they use structured *systems dialogues* to include increasing numbers of stakeholders and involve them in actions aligned to SDGs.

These *systems dialogues* can help stakeholders to contribute when establishing direction for the path ahead and navigating ways forward in responding to specific challenges.

Dialogues are useful when establishing the direction for collective action, engaging new voices, devising collective actions, reviewing progress and enhancing the public discourse.

# Why do people dialogue and what is 4SD's method?

## *History of dialogue*

People within different communities have found their own ways over centuries, through dialogue, to deepen their appreciation of each other's perspectives, to consider different opinions and to seek agreement where possible. Dialogues provide an inclusive and supportive venue for debate, collaboration, consensus-building, and shared commitment making.

## *4SD Foundation's method to "Systems Dialogues"*

The standardized method to convening, curating and facilitating dialogues has been developed and adapted by 4SD Foundation since 2018 and has proven to be effective to align efforts and encourage collaboration.

A standardized method enables:

- clear, consistent guidelines and processes, helping reduce barriers to engagement, ensuring broader and more diverse participation
- streamlining dialogue efforts, eliminating the time and resources needed to conceptualise and test a new dialogue method and process<sup>9</sup>
- more targeted and effective training programs for facilitators leading to higher quality facilitation, more meaningful conversations, and more actionable outcomes
- easier monitoring, evaluation and syntheses of dialogues

# Framing a dialogue event

## Key questions

What is the purpose?

What is the future state that is desired?

What are the discussion topics?

Who will be invited to participate?



# ANATOMY OF A **DIALOGUE**

## OPENING PLENARY

15-25 mins



- The **Curator** opens the dialogue and sets the scene.
- Guest speakers can provide framing remarks

## DISCUSSION GROUPS

75-120 mins



Each **Discussion Group** has:

- a set of 8-12 **diverse Participants** who bring different perspectives
- a forward-looking **discussion topic**
- a trained **Facilitator** capable of ensuring every voice is heard and can navigate contentious issues

## CLOSING PLENARY

60-80 mins

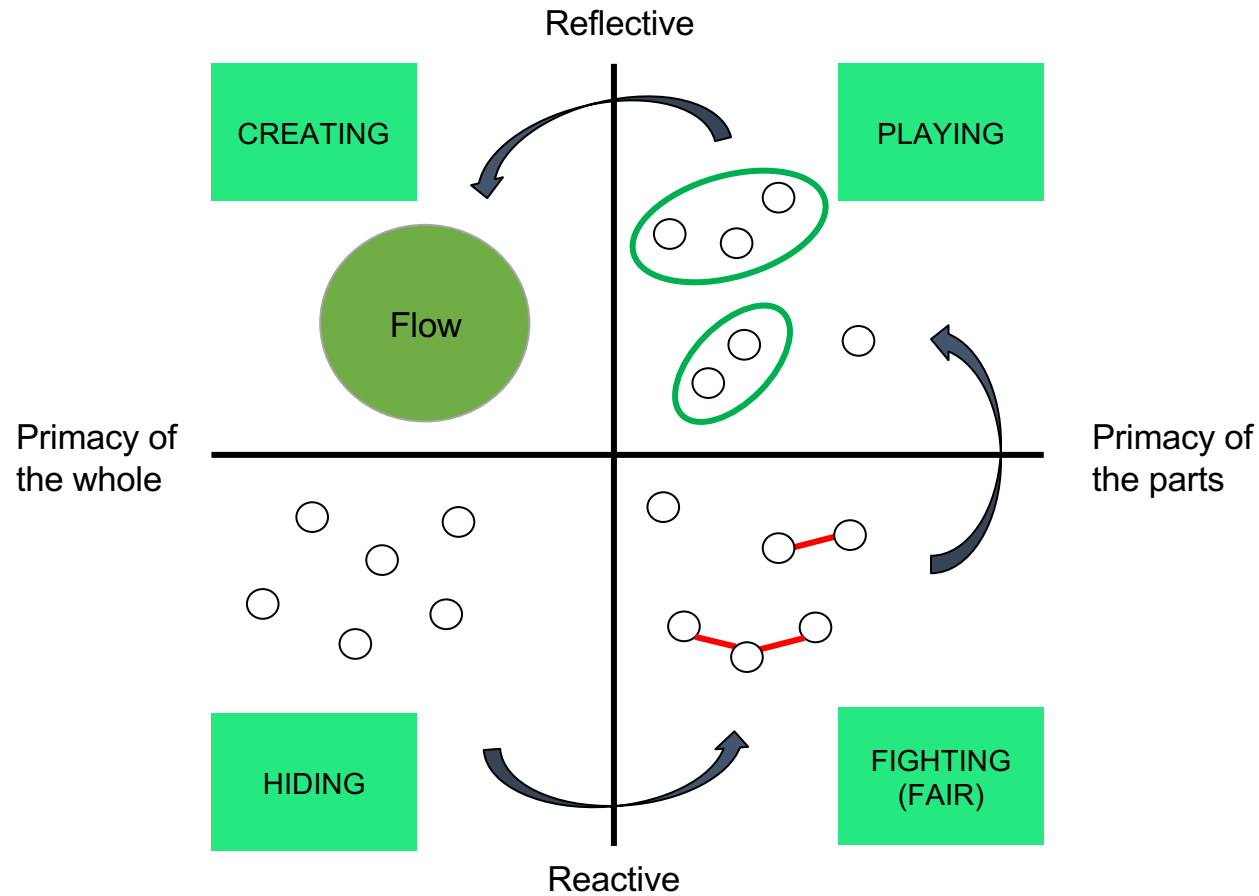


- Each **Facilitator** provides a “report-back” of their group discussions
- The **Curator** provides a powerful synthesis of the discussions and memorable observations to close the dialogue.

**A successful Dialogue should foster open and honest discussion, embracing diverse perspectives that inspire novel ideas and innovative ways of working.**

# FOUR STAGES OF CREATIVE DIALOGUE

2/3



*From KANTOR's four-player model*

# Three areas of confidence for **comfort in complexity**

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## Politics

- It is helpful to be confident when working with those who seek to accumulate and then use power
- Learn to be comfortable operating within this deeply political realm

## Adversity

- The systems leader can become the personification of a new and unwanted direction. Can this be avoided?
- It is important to be resilient in the face of adversity. But how?
- Avoid taking personal responsibility for the difficulties within systems

## Uncertainty

- Be comfortable with, and manage, uncertainty
  - How do we know whether we are being successful?
- Remember collapse and emergence walk hand-in-hand
  - How do I know whether my contribution is meaningful?

# The value of being on the alert and **ready for Non-Linear Change**

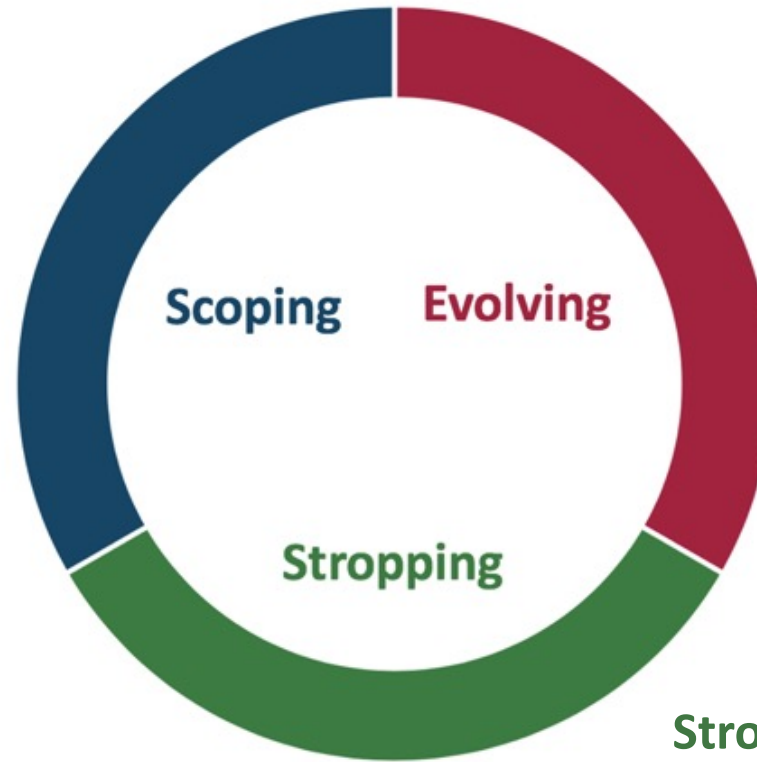
- Systems can change rapidly, in non-linear ways
  - There may be *exponential acceleration*
  - There may be *breakdown and collapse*
  - This means that systems leaders must be alert and anticipate rapid changes.
  - Hold it, stay one step away, remember to care for self
- Leaders should take stock of what is happening from different perspectives – regularly.
- Leaders should be ready to adapt and to find ways to *leap forward together*



# Three important capabilities for living systems leaders

## Scoping

- Scoping on behalf of all
- Maintain the sense of a meaningful direction that appeals to many



## Evolving

- Progressive evolution
- Allowing for detailed plans and outcome measures to become apparent as the work progresses

## Stropping

- Pursuing strategy through opportunity
- Letting the strategy find its own place and pace through the opportunities that appear
- Adapting the strategy: ADAPTEGY

# 5

## QUALITIES OF THOUGHT AND ACTION

1. Hold competing perspectives simultaneously
2. See the whole system differently to its separate parts
3. Feel into the pace, rhythm and readiness
4. See the system in relationship to its environment
5. Meet people right where they really are ...

See <https://4sdfoundation.org/systems-leadership/comfort-in-complexity/>