

Building networks for systemic impact

How bringing people together to build relationships across boundaries has the power to shift situations that would otherwise remain stuck.



THE
AUSTRALIAN
CENTRE FOR
SOCIAL
INNOVATION



Who we are

We're [The Australian Centre for Social Innovation \(TACSI\)](#), a future thinking, not-for-profit organisation helping to navigate big social challenges in Australia.

For over a decade, our multidisciplinary team has partnered with organisations, government and communities navigating Australia's biggest social challenges. We work together to co-design policy, services, capabilities, initiatives and strategies that make a real difference and help to shift the needle in a measurable way.

Our work traverses the systems and policies that all Australians encounter in their lifetime. We believe that the people at the heart of these systems have unique perspectives and answers, and that by harnessing the skills, tools and mindsets of social innovation, we can design better responses to our biggest challenges – together.



Acknowledgement

We acknowledge the Custodians of the lands on which this paper was written, Kurna and Gadigal lands, and pay respect to all First Nations Elders past and present.

We acknowledge that the colonisation of Australia has come at a deep and ongoing cost to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and that all people living in Australia live on unceded land.

We acknowledge in allyship that we have the opportunity to learn from First Nations' cultures of relational connection and celebrate and build networks that are inclusive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of being, doing and knowing.

Contributors

This paper was written by Lauren Anseline, Euan Black, Jemima Taylor, Kerry Jones and Chris Vanstone. Edited by Vanessa Keys and Bathsheba Adams. We would like to acknowledge the organisations and individuals whose work has been so influential to developing our network practices at TACSI and the participants in the networks we have facilitated who have shaped our own practice.

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We hope this paper can give you something in return.

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Introduction

Why we've written this paper, who it's for,
and what this paper explores



Why this paper — and why now?

We live in a time of intense connection, and yet we are also increasingly disconnected. We have no shortage of channels on which to reach people or to follow what they are doing – yet the quality of connections between us is in decline. That decline includes people who share the same social mission; we regularly see how collaboration in the Australian for-purpose sector is constrained by the design of the markets that they operate in.

All this disconnection puts us in a tough place when it comes to making progress on complex challenges that require collaboration between organisations, and between people with seemingly conflicting perspectives.

In response to this, practitioners around the world have been exploring alternative ways to organise people to advance large-scale systemic impact.

Their work designing and running what have come to be called **impact networks**¹ proves that if you bring together diverse people and hold those conversations in a certain way, over time you **can shift situations that would otherwise remain stuck**.

We have written this paper because we believe that **impact networks are an effective way to work on this disconnection**.

“

Our biggest, most intractable problems can't really be addressed by a single organisation...again and again, I see places where the needle is moving on issues that they thought were intractable because organisations have learned to come together so that the whole is more than the sum of the parts.”

**Professor Michelle Shumate,
Northwestern University, USA**

Who this paper is for



You're a leader
looking to address a complex
and dynamic systemic challenge

You're a funder or decision maker
looking to shift behaviours across
a field, industry or sector

You already run a network
and you're looking to increase its impact

You're a facilitator
looking to learn more about TACSI's
approach to impact networks

What this paper explores

This paper explores the promising practice of impact networks, including examples of impact networks from around the world and how these networks work. It also shares insights from the Good Death Impact Network (GDIN), a network TACSI have been involved in convening since 2018, and the four network practices that our GDIN work has helped us put into practice: togetherness, in-betweenness, emergence, and wellbeing.

These practices create a fertile ground for shifting systems by cultivating deep, authentic connections, a shared understanding of systems and collective intelligence.

Our hope is that this paper helps you consider if an impact network could help you make better progress on the systemic challenges you're facing. Our hope is that this paper helps you consider if an impact network could help you make better progress on the systemic challenges you're facing.

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Human beings are fundamentally decent. We don't want to harm others, at our core we want relations and connections. Humans aren't the problem in solving inequity - the way we are networked is.”

Jack Manning Bancroft, Indigenous systems thinker, CEO AIME²



Impact networks explained

What an impact network is, how they're different to other networks, and impressive examples of impact networks around the world and in Australia.



What are impact networks?

You will no doubt be familiar with ‘networking’ to build contacts, with networks that support particular sectors, and networks that support particular professions.

Impact networks are differentiated from these forms of networking by their focus on shifting systemic conditions and by the diverse backgrounds of their members.

Impact networks intentionally create relationships between people working in and between organisations, and then support them to collaborate in a way that shifts the status quo and advances systemic change.

In practice, this means shifting any combination of relationships, mental models, practices, power dynamics, resource flows and policy³ toward a different, more preferable, future.

Impact networks:

- Build accountability, ownership and commitment
- Enable more systemic learning and analysis
- Support the development of systemic strategies and actions
- Increase reach and influence
- Allow for more creative use of resources and capacity
- Build understanding of power dynamics and help shift them
- Enhance meaning, purpose and joy for participating members



“

When we collaborate, things that weren't possible before become possible. And in that possibility is hope. I would say that now, more than ever, we need hope - especially in the face of the climate crisis, in the face of deepening political polarisation and multiple crises right around toxins, microplastics, and so many aspects of our modern lives.”

Russ Gaskin, CoCreative

Some of the most impressive examples of impact networks are:

Food Solutions New England, a network transforming food systems to be sustainable, just, and resilient. Over 12 years they have connected stakeholders across six states. Their focus includes leadership development, policy development and the development of new narratives.⁴

Sterling Network NYC (pdf), a cross sector network of systems leaders collaborating to advance economic mobility in New York City. In its first year, the network increased relationships between members sevenfold (from 3-21) and collaborations fivefold (from 29-124). Their focus in that year included public housing, the labour movement and the census.⁵

Resonance Network, an international network of over 3,000 Black, Indigenous, immigrant, women, femme, trans, two-spirit people and co-conspirators focused on creating a dominant worldview that cultivates mutual care. They focus on creating change through expanding the network, community rooted action and practising a common set of principles in their own families, tribes, teams and communities.

Cancer Free Economy Network, a US network that brings together disproportionately affected communities with experts in science, policy, law, labour, business and communications to address the presence of toxic chemicals in our environment. The network focuses on building grassroots action, growing advocates amongst science and health professionals and shifting market incentives.



Re-Amp Network facilitates collaboration among 165 organisations working on reducing carbon emissions across eight midwestern states. The network has contributed to the closure of numerous heavily-polluting coal facilities and the successful implementation of fresh energy disclosure requirements in the Chicago and Minneapolis areas.

Accountability Lab, a translocal network striving to improve governance. Established in 2012, it has seeded local networks in Nepal, Mali, Zimbabwe, Pakistan, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo that activate change through centring community voices, training young changemakers, community feedback and dialogue.

Santa Cruz Mountain Stewardship Network brings together twenty-four organisations to promote resilience and vitality in the region's ecosystems. Initiatives started through the network include educational tours, a digital atlas project for sustainable landscape assessment, and a project to reduce climate-related vulnerabilities.

The networks listed above are predominantly from the US, where the development of impact networks has been strongly supported by philanthropy. The US is a stronghold of practice and writing about impact networks but it's not the only place they're happening.

Global networks

The [Fitto Network](#)⁶, a network focused on networks, currently has 20 organisational members from countries spanning most continents. Together they've mapped over 1000 other networks based around the globe.

“

It changes your way of thinking as well as your orbit. You start to think, 'Oh, that person, I can link him to that person, I can link into, I can link you to that person'.

And then from that... you create the spaces to have conversations, to create change as well.”

Erin Lister, Our Town network member, Kimba



Impact networks in Australia

And here in Australia, TACSI has (to date) supported five networks to get started, and one existing network to 'reboot':

[Good Death Impact Network](#) aims to create good death outcomes and has over 90 members from across Australia. The network focuses on addressing ageism, promoting death outside institutions, improving death literacy and reducing death denial.

[Yawa](#) is a First Nations-Led network focusing on the relationships between Country, Culture, climate change and health. The network is building First Nations connections and relationships and hosting listening circles to engage local communities of the Kulin Nations.

[Our Town](#) is a network of community members from rural and regional towns in South Australia focused on improving local mental health and wellbeing through community-led innovation. The network has grown to include a hub of 'allies and advocates' from formal systems who share the same vision.

[The Home & Housing Network](#) was focused on improving housing conditions in South Australia and included decision makers from across the housing ecosystem. The network built trust, enabled learning and supported greater alignment in ambitions and actions between diverse parts of the housing system.

[The Chronic Conditions Collaborative](#) amplifies consumer and community voices and champions care that supports people with multiple chronic conditions to thrive. The network creates a space for peak bodies and clinicians in South Australia to share insight, strategies and approaches and identify systemic leverage points.

How impact networks are different to other networks

Impact networks share common characteristics that differentiate them from traditional networks:

- **Systems focus:** Impact networks focus on shifting a system in a particular direction (as distinct to advancing the interests of a specialist group, industry or profession). Often the membership is made up of a diversity of people from across that system.
- **Eco mindsets:** Through deep listening, generative conflict and equity, impact networks promote the development of a shared interest and support the conditions for a diversity of voices to be heard. In impact networks, members are often asked to ‘leave their brand at the door’ and put systems change interest above their own organisational interests.
- **Flexible structures:** Impact networks are typically based on a distributed model that’s anchored by a strong shared purpose. This model enables collective decision-making, decentralised action, and gives members the agency they need to contribute their unique knowledge and strengths to the network.
- **Active methods:** Impact networks, in their pursuit of novel strategies to shift systems, engage in learning through doing. This is often done at a small scale to start with so that members can learn what works and what doesn’t.
- **Aligned independent action:** Impact networks foster aligned yet independent action.⁷ This supports the diversity of members to make their best contribution to change, yet not necessarily by doing the same thing. Members are asked to see the system, their role and influence in it and take action that makes sense from their context.

“

The challenge is to replace practices that distance and disconnect with ones that evoke empathy, caring, and creativity.”

Carol Sanford, founder and designer of The Regenerative Business Development Community.

“

Programmatic interventions help people beat the odds; Systemic interventions help change the odds for people.”

Karen Pittman, Co-Founder of the Forum on Youth Investment, partner at KP Catalysts.





Our four network practices

At TACSI, we found that if we facilitate for four network practices – togetherness, in-betweenness, emergence, and wellbeing – we can support network members to create the ripples that grow into transformative shifts in systems.

Think of impact networks like ripples

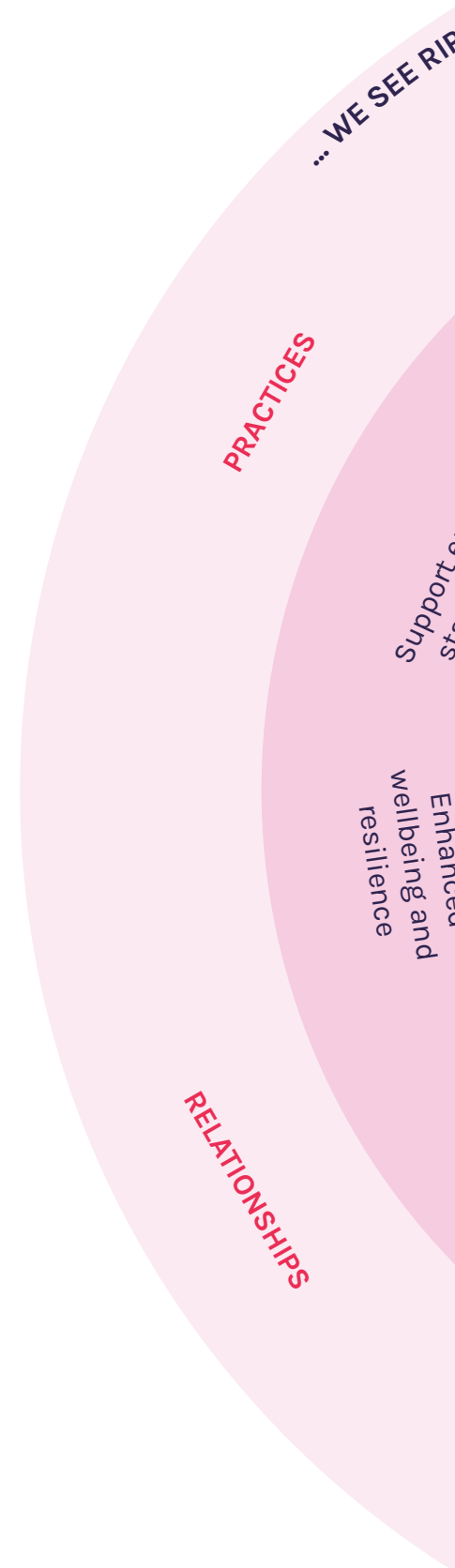
[June Holley](#), a systems practitioner and leader in the field of networks, believes that the impact of impact networks are best understood as “ripples across a system that ultimately lead to changes in policy, practices, resource flows, relationships, power dynamics and mental models”.

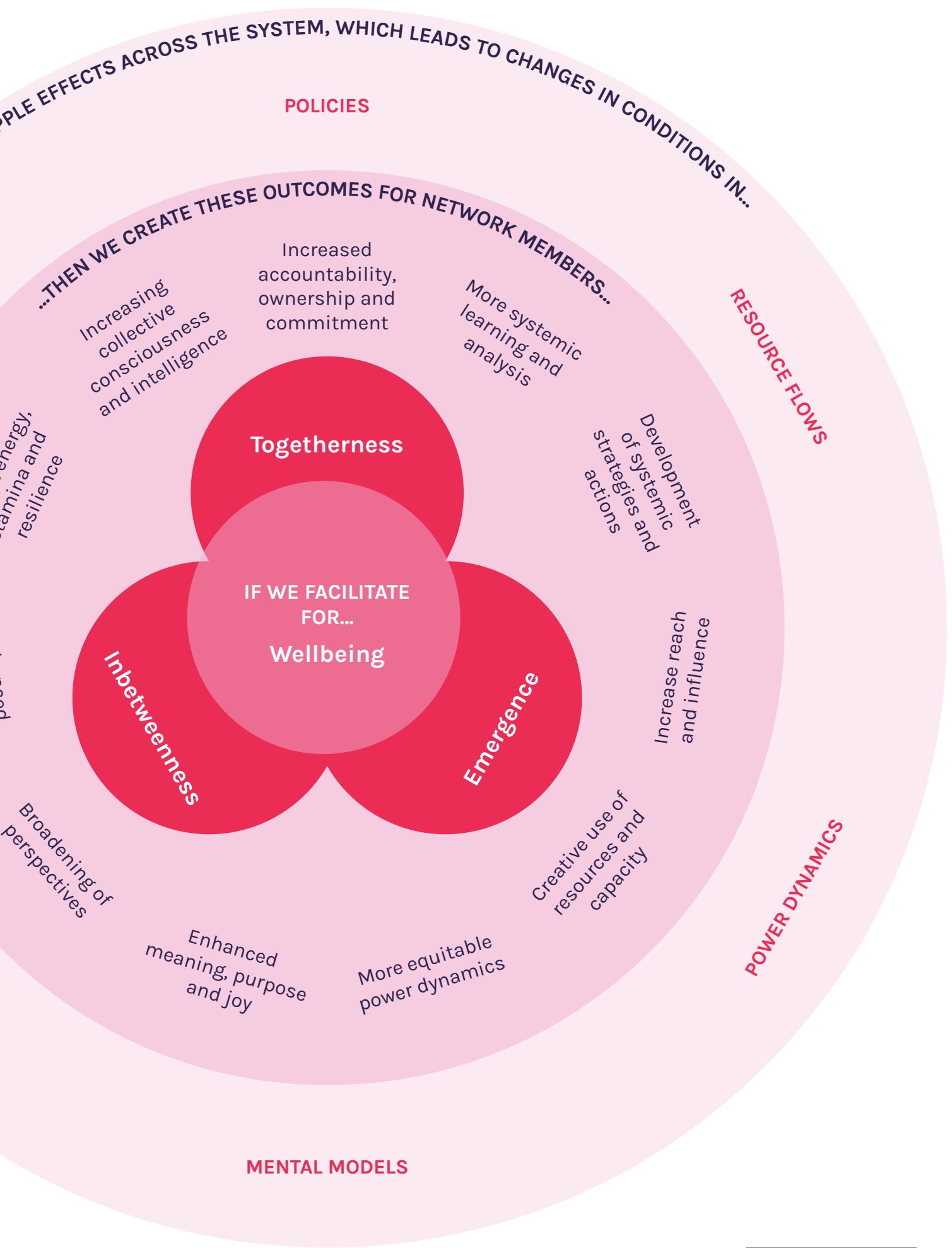
For these ripples to form, the members of impact networks need the opportunity to regularly connect under a very specific set of conditions.

At TACSI, we create this space by facilitating for four things⁸:

- 1. Togetherness:** Promoting diverse connections and meaningful relationships.
- 2. Inbetweenness:** Cultivating ways of ‘being’ that allow individual ‘not-knowing’ and collective wisdom to surface.
- 3. Emergence:** Embracing interconnected actions as and when they become clear.
- 4. Wellbeing:** Creating the conditions for network members to be well and thrive.

Togetherness. In-Betweenness. Emergence. Wellbeing. For us, these four entangled concepts are the essence of impact networks and the tonic that primes members of our networks to create the ripples that grow into transformative shifts in systems.





Facilitating togetherness

Impact networks are perhaps the most social of approaches to social innovation. Unlike approaches that prioritise particular frameworks for organising or developing a specific innovation, impact networks prioritise the needs and capacities of changemakers.

This can make them a good complement to other systems change approaches such as collective impact⁹ or system reform approaches, which often lack an explicit focus on change makers themselves.

Impact networks work by weaving relationships among the changemakers and deepening members understanding that, at the heart, it's relationships that sustain momentum for change. These shifts in relations within the network then ripple out to create broader changes in the system.

Investing time supporting members to 'connect' may sound like a naive¹⁰ indulgence, especially given the scale and urgency of the crisis that impact networks are facing. However, the effectiveness of impact networks hinges on members' familiarity with one another and their comfort level in sharing vulnerabilities.

In the research for their book '[Networks for Social Impact](#)', Shumate and Cooper found that "Trust is the most significant predictor of partnership effectiveness in serendipitous networks. It reduces translation costs, improves relationship stability and stimulates learning, knowledge exchange and innovation".

They go on to suggest that one of the most common reasons networks fail is that they prioritise achieving outcomes at the expense of connections and relationships within the network.¹¹

We also invite you to take time to reflect on how trust—or the lack thereof—has influenced your own readiness to collaborate. Tapping into these personal experiences with trust can provide great insights into the dynamics of successful togetherness.

In our experience you can create togetherness in a network if you...

- Create time and hold space for people to connect with each other as people, outside of their official role, so they can build meaningful trusting relationships.
- Engage members in articulating the purpose of the network and it's principles of operation and evolving them over time.
- Ensure that members are diverse; that they are from diverse backgrounds and have diverse kinds of expertise, including lived, learnt and practice-based expertise.
- Create safe-enough and brave-enough spaces¹², acknowledging that a level of discomfort is needed to move beyond familiar territory and that too much focus on safety can quash the bravery required for new ideas.
- Actively work to 'weave' together people in the network who would benefit from knowing each other better, including connecting people outside of scheduled meeting times.

“

It's far more important who you're being than what you are doing. If you aren't authentically invested in the relationships you're building with the folks you're working with, if you aren't prioritising that, you can have the best strategy, you can have the smartest ideas and they will fail. Whereas if you have a really strong relationship and you build trust and you have a dynamic and safe container, you can make mistakes and the project and the relationships and the initiative can survive.”

Cheryl Dahle (Future of Fish)



Facilitating inbetweenness

Facilitating for ‘in-betweenness’ is about cultivating ways of being that make it okay for individuals to not have the answer and sit in the discomfort of not-knowing.

In-betweenness is about supporting the sharing of diverse perspectives, supporting the development of new insights from the collective wisdom of the group, and cultivating the bravery to put these out into the world.

Impact networks often emerge in muddy spaces where there are unclear responsibilities for leading change, no clear solution and little clarity beyond the fact that the status quo isn’t working. Over time, impact networks support their members to transition from the current reality to ways of seeing, being and doing that will bring about a new future reality.

This means network members spend a lot of time ‘in-between’. In-between their own expertise and the diversity of perspectives and expertise of other network members; in-between their past and newly emerging assumptions about the situation and ideal response; in-between knowing and not knowing if their thoughts are useful and their strategies will be successful.

Sitting in this space is uncomfortable, and unless intentionally facilitated, changemakers can easily lose energy and give up. However, changemakers can also move through the muddy space of in-betweenness too rapidly and, in doing so, miss discovering the new ways of seeing, thinking, being and doing that can unlock change – exactly why the impact network was created.

Embracing In-betweenness can support changemakers to move beyond familiar and often siloed approaches to change that are rooted in a particular world view. By embracing the spaces in-between – changemakers open up to collective imagination and problem-solving, informed by a more diverse set of perspectives - unearthing possible pathways that a single perspective can not.

In our experience you can facilitate togetherness in a network if you...

- Support ways of being that make it safe enough, and the norm, for individuals to ‘not-know’.
- Support the creation of collective wisdom in the group, informed by diverse perspectives.
- Use tried and tested systems thinking processes to support navigating complexity; to reach shared agreement about the status quo, about a preferable future and what needs to be done to get there.
- Use creative practices to drive idea generation of what could be, including creating the time and space to develop new ideas and learn from analogous situations.
- Keep a careful watch on when enough time has been spent in-between and it’s time to pivot to put the network’s best-yet ideas into the world, to try, test and learn from them.

“

People want to default to the comfortable place where we know what we're doing and we know where we're going - instead of saying 'No, we don't know and we're feeling our way through it'. Most of this work is done by getting to know one another better, finding out what we know, what we do, and where our capabilities are. The ability to stay in the uncomfortable place of 'not knowing' is critical to a network's health and long term effectiveness.

Matthew Spence, Converge



Facilitating emergence

Facilitating emergence is about creating the conditions for new possibilities and opportunities to surface, and harnessing the collective sensing and intelligence of the network to foster potential innovation.

Emergence also acknowledges that change often occurs in nonlinear and often decentralised ways, and that small patterns emerging from impact networks can influence change in larger systems.¹³

To surface new thinking and ways of being takes time and space – something easily dismissed in service of timelines – yet offering time to pause and retreat regularly enables people to let go of old patterns and act in more intuitive ways of being.¹⁴

This process enables the group to step back, take stock, sense what is possible, and then test possibilities and continually evolve the network itself.

When working within complex systems, it's rarely clear what will 'work' at the outset. To navigate this uncertainty, we often draw from our innovation toolkit, using processes like prototyping to develop and test opportunities in real-world scenarios. This involves observing the effects of our actions – both intended and unintended – and adjusting strategies accordingly.

Inevitably, over time, the assumptions on which the network and/or its work are founded fall out of step with reality. Facilitating emergence also involves evolving the network's purpose and membership to remain aligned with its dynamic context.

In our experience you can facilitate emergence in a network if you...

- Support the practice of deep listening, reflective dialogue, pattern spotting, and focusing on sensing what is emerging within the group and the broader context.
- Move with awareness based on what you observe in verbal and nonverbal cues. Hold lightly to agendas, listen to what members need, and be flexible and responsive to what is emerging to meet that need.
- Help members surface possibilities, and identify the assumptions they have about that possibility or idea. This could be about context and about the best response to that context. Testing assumptions helps us see our own biases and learn more about what's right for what's emerging.
- Strengthen members' confidence and capabilities to take ideas and actions into the world through structured approaches of learning, like prototyping and practice listening to what emerges in those tests.
- Create space to collectively emerge and evolve the purpose and membership of the network so it can adapt to meet the goals of the network and its members.



“

You don't just end a system and jump right into the middle of a new one. There's this period of transition which is dissolution. It's like what happens inside the chrysalis that we don't get to see - while the caterpillar's body is dissolving and then reorganising to turn into this beautiful butterfly. So we're in that kind of chrysalis phase with all of its beautiful potential...”

**Curtis Ogden, Interaction Institute
for Social Change**



Facilitating wellbeing

Facilitating wellbeing means cultivating conditions for members to feel supported and connected. There is a growing evidence base that supporting the inner wellbeing of change makers can nurture capacity for innovation and collaboration, and ultimately lead to more effective solutions to social and environmental challenges.^{15/16}

Many people focused on shifting systems face overwhelming pressures, and if people feel significant stress, are unwell, or don't feel good about their work, they will struggle with the challenging long-term work of systems change, which inherently pushes against societal and professional norms. This difficulty is often enhanced by changemakers being isolated and unsupported in their organisations or industries.

Without a focus on wellbeing, we risk creating a cycle of declining energy, will and health, at the very time when we need creative and transformational responses. This declining energy can lead to incremental and unimaginative responses.

One simple strategy we enact in networks to promote wellbeing is to create space for members to ask, "How might the network give me what I need and how can I give back in a way that aligns with my capacity and interest?"

In our experience you can facilitate wellbeing in a network if you...

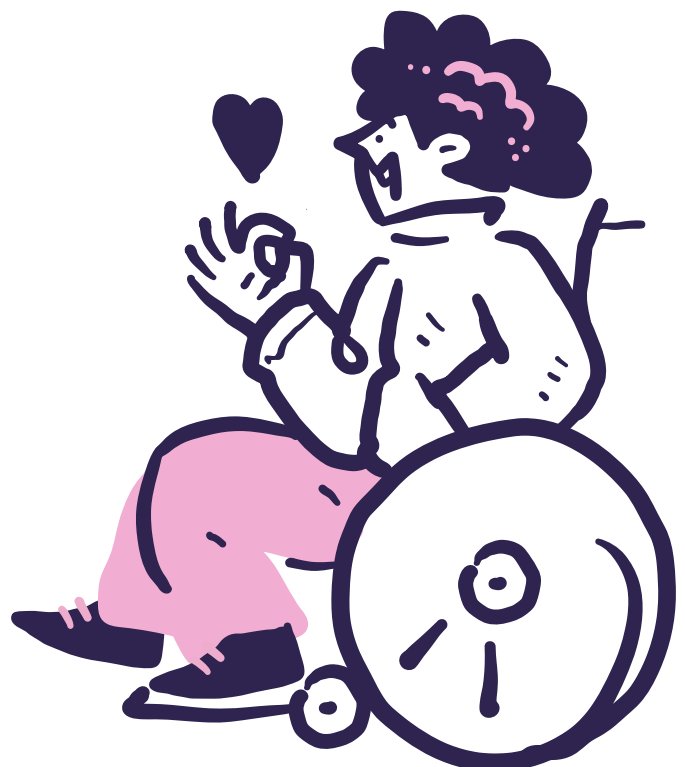
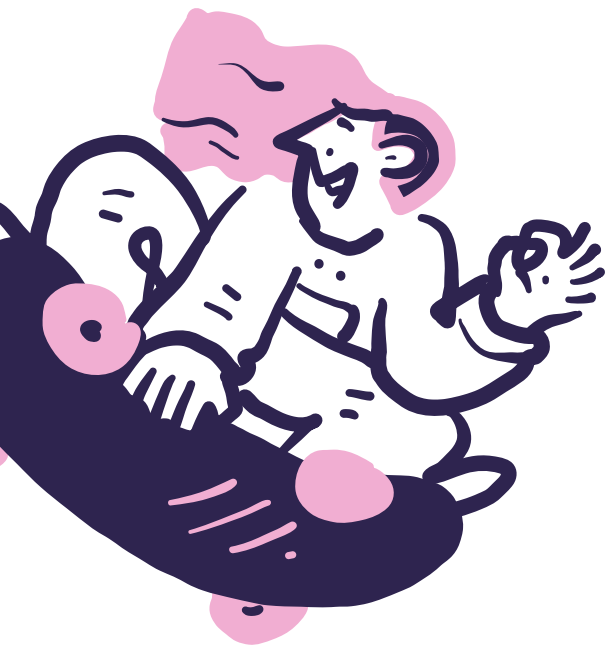
- Take time to check in with network members at the start of convenings. Ask how they are feeling and be open to adjusting the plan in response.
- Promote flexible and distributed participation, enabling members to adjust their involvement as needed. This supports a shift from individual to collective engagement, emphasising the power of 'we' over 'I.'
- Make participation flexible so that members can participate in the way that fits their routine and adjust how they engage over time.
- Create the expectation that no one member will be involved with everything, and support members to contribute where they have strengths.
- Be clear about the time it takes to create change and promote realistic and flexible timelines for network activities.
- Support members to celebrate progress and small wins - starting with their own practices and mindsets - seeing the influence they have inspires momentum, motivation and commitment.



“

One sea change we've seen in the past few years is the shifting from [systems change and innovation] being problem-focused or fixing-focused to asking 'How do we create the conditions in our systems for us all to thrive and be well?'

Russ Gaskin, CoCreative





The lifecycle of an impact network

Follow the journey of The Good Death Network, created to transform the end of life experience in Australia.



Spotlight: *The Good Death Impact Network*

Working under the slogan ‘We can die better Australia’, the [Good Death Impact Network](#) was created to transform the end of life experience in Australia.

Over six years, the network has grown to 90 members who share a systemic focus on addressing ageism, promoting death outside institutions, improving death literacy and reducing death denial.

The network meets online monthly and is facilitated by TACSI.

2017

Choosing an Impact Network

TACSI, in collaboration with the JO & JR Wicking Trust, embarked on a journey to explore innovative end-of-life care solutions in Australia. Through extensive research and interviews across the end-of-life system, the decision was made to establish an impact network to amplify ongoing innovative efforts.

2018

False starts and relationship building

Initial efforts to catalyse the network experienced false starts until a pivotal relationship with a ‘super connector’ laid the groundwork for success. This super connector was able to draw on their relationships to bring together the first iteration of the network.

2019

Starting the network

Thirty people who represented the diversity of the end of life system were invited to become founding members. They saw joining as an opportunity to have time and space to think, be more connected to other changemakers, and to work in a more connected way towards greater change.

2020

Participatory granting round 1

The network’s first participatory granting round funded a hub (sub-network) focused on developing a game to enhance death literacy. This hub explored various formats such as online games, virtual reality experiences, and board games before deciding on a card game.

Systems mapping

2018 also saw the network undertake their first systems mapping through 3D System Sculpting challenges, opportunity mapping, and by identifying common areas of leverage.



LONG TERM PROCESSES

Seeding a network culture

TACSI observed new members felt discomfort as they stepped out of business-as-usual behaviours and into deeper relationships with people they wouldn’t usually interact with. We created a set of mindsets to reinforce the network way of working and these are re-visited regularly, especially when we introduce new members, strengthen network culture and behaviours, and inform decision making processes such as network granting.

Weaving the network

TACSI facilitators consistently work to connecting members that have shared mutual exchange. This happens in many ways, building from an explicit conversation to ‘give’ and ‘get’ from the network.



A bigger ambition

Beyond the end of life system, the network aspires to be a transformative model for social organisation, characterised by mutuality, a departure from self-interest, and a commitment to fostering hope, well-being, and social cohesion. This vision positions the network as a pioneering example to disrupt the competitive dynamic that systems often impose on social purpose organisations.

2021

Participatory granting round 2

The network funded further development and testing of the 'Carked It' game. Seven prototypes of the game were created before the final product was designed. Testing took place in a range of settings, from children's palliative care, in aged care, at a gamers convention, and at the pub.¹⁸

2022

Re-mapping the system

As contexts evolved, the network undertook a comprehensive re-mapping to identify new leverage points, culminating in a playbook that identified strategic levers and guide member conversations. This process included culture mapping, causal loop mapping, and influence mapping.

[Case study:](#) Learn more and download the Systems Playbook.

2023

Participatory granting round 3

Based on the networks recent systems mapping, the network chose to fund a bereavement companionship pilot, a video series on grief literacy, a home hospice pilot based on Buddhist principles, a death festival in Adelaide¹⁹, and the creation of GDIN Website.

2024

Participatory granting round 4

The network revisited previously funded ideas, engaged in idea generation and together decided to fund a community training program for death care, a death festival in NSW, a home hospice toolkit, network evaluation and transition, bursary for a death care retreat, a film screening.

Transitioning the network

The network initiated a 'Transition Hub' to prepare for potential changes in funding and to explore new organisational forms like cooperatives or associations.



to 'weave' the network together –
ed interests or a strong potential for
meetings and in between them, usually
n about what members want to

Participatory granting through the innovation fund

The 'Good Death Innovation Fund' is a pot of money allocated by the network to support activities that work on the systemic leverage points and align with the mission and principles of the network. Every year, submissions are sought from within and beyond the network, and then the network decides how to allocate the money using principles and practices of participatory granting.²⁰

What members tell us they get from

Innovative methods

hope that being BOLD is OK - living a good life means good death literacy - and choice

Hope that there are new ways of thinking and doing in this field - ie ways that through a human rights lens

Be part of pivoting services so that they maximise frail lives and end of life. Particularly focusing right now on the learnings and opportunities presented by the virus

Doing

To make a positive influence in this space

Identifying common threads and gaps

Taking an active role in moving what I'm passionate about forward

chance to feel that I'm learning and contributing despite the minute to minute commitment at work

Space to think

ideas that can expand/leapfrog without getting bogged down with having to explain 'why' - an have ideas and let them build

to feel that I'm getting my head above the weeds for just a while

Meeting nice people who genuinely want a better end of life for Australians

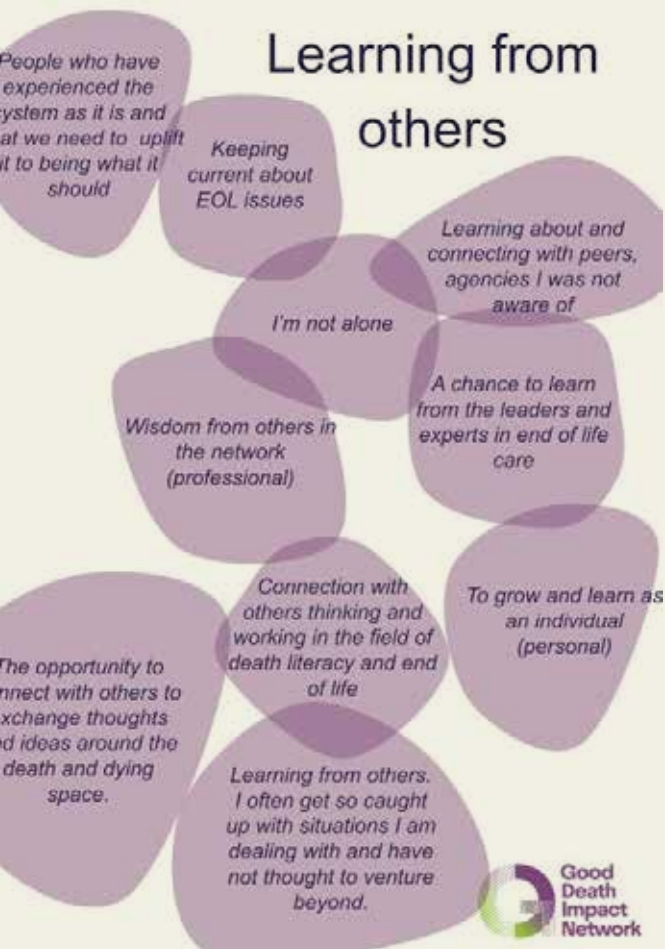
Collective / collaborative drive and passion shared by others with similar interests

A cohort of people who want to be with change

Shared passion



in the Network ...



“

When I look at the Good Death Impact Network, I see organisations and individuals that are highly motivated to be together so they can be better. It's less about working together and more about feeding and nurturing each other, listening, exchanging knowledge, playing back, ideating and supporting.

So it's different from a collaboration, but it can spawn collaboration. It's inhabited by values and purpose aligned people who simply by showing up, acknowledge that they are not the only solution but part of a system. The network participants give each other time, a commodity that every system struggles to find.“

Susie Meagher, Grant Program and Social Impact Manager, JO & JR Wicking Trust, Funders of the Network.





The Good Death Network mindsets

- **Forgive failure:** Be willing to take risks, forgive failure and share what you learn
- **Agree to act:** We don't need consensus, only alignment around the outcomes to be achieved
- **Make friends with conflict:** Create the conditions for conflict to be generative and safe
- **Value difference:** Hard on issues, gentle on people
- **Stay flexibly strong:** Define principles and intentions, not process and structure
- **Commitment makes change:** Stuck systems take a lot of time and effort to shift

“

Our purpose is to offer a caring space for changemakers to re-energise, find support, challenge each other, and make our ideas better with flexible ways to participate that nurture wellbeing.

“

We use a set of principles to think about how we might distribute seed funding across the network. And it's very open and challenging in a positive way.”

“

There are a lot of competing and interesting aspects to the system that we really did need to spend time thinking about and wondering about because we want to think about them differently. We all want to play our role in terms of innovating but we want the network to make a collective impact as well.”

Kerrie Noonan, GDIN Network Member



Is an impact network a good fit for you?

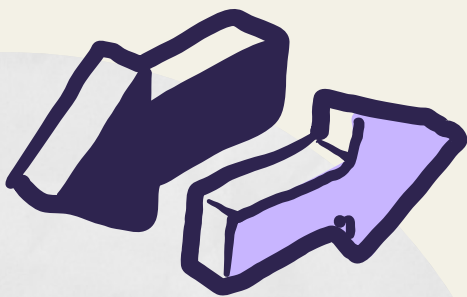
Impact networks are not a quick response, but they may well be the fastest way to the best outcome. Here's how to spot the indicators that an impact network is a good fit, or not.



Impact networks can be powerful – but aren't for everyone

Impact networks are a good choice to advance change when you are working in complex systems, with a diverse set of actors and there is an interest and openness to try something different. Impact networks can also be a good choice to support and connect changemakers already engaged in systemic change and reform.

However, starting an impact network might not be the best response for all situations. In situations where there is a reluctance to work in new ways and a strong short-term focus other strategies may serve the situation better. Impact networks are not a quick response, but they may well be the fastest way to the best outcome.



Indicators that an impact network is a good fit

- Do you need to address a complex and dynamic systemic challenge?
- Do you want to shift behaviours across a field, industry or sector?
- Are there passionate, determined leaders willing to try something different?
- Is there existing knowledge about the problems and conditions that would benefit from being connected up?
- Are there pockets of innovation that would benefit from being more broadly spread?
- Are there other systems change strategies active, but a lack of focus on changemakers?
- Is there the potential to resource the formation and specialist facilitation of a network over multiple years?

Indicators that an impact network may be a poor fit

- There is resistance to widening the diversity of voices included in decision making.
- There is resistance to letting go of control over decisions such as deciding the purpose or goal of the network, deciding who gets invited, determining the analysis and strategic priorities²⁵.
- There is a resistance to working in new ways.
- There is an impatience to see results quickly.
- There is a 'silver bullet' mindset eg "i have the solution and it is this..."

Interested in starting an impact network?

If you're interested in starting an impact network, or if you run a network that you think could be better tuned for systemic impact, we recommend you reach out to your local impact network practitioners for support, or use the resources listed below to build your own facilitation knowledge.

If you're in Australia, [drop TACSI a line](#). We can support the catalysing and convening of networks, and build capabilities in network, innovation, and systems practices. You may also find it useful to use the network readiness assessment on the [Network Weaver website](#).



Resources for learning more about Impact Networks

- Watch the webinar [Networks for Systemic Impact on the TACSI Learning Hub](#), featuring members from the Good Death Impact Network, Yawa, and Our Town. Free with registration and the coupon: `Network_Paper`
- Watch the documentary: [Impact Networks: Creating Change in a Complex World](#) on YouTube (20mins).
- Read [Impact Networks by David Ehrlichman](#). This book offers advice in navigating complexity, building relationships, and has examples of network practice.
- Read [Connecting to Change the World](#) by Peter Plastik, Madeleine Taylor, John Cleveland. The book includes frameworks, case studies and knowledge from network conveners.
- Read [Networks for Social Impact](#) by Michelle Shumate, Katherine R Cooper. This book provides evidence backed insights, practices and case studies on network design, management and collaboration.

Resources for facilitating Impact Networks

- [The Network Weaver Handbook](#) by June Holley. June has been weaving networks for over 40 years and this handbook is foundational to creating or strengthening networks. It provides practical guidance and activities on network practices. In addition, the [Network Weaver website](#) offers insights and tools from people working in networks globally.
- [CoCreative's pool of resources](#) offer many that support collaborative work, innovation process, alignment, systems change and more.
- [Converge's free toolkit](#) includes guidance, frameworks and templates drawn from their own practice.
- [Fito Network's tools and resources](#). This is a community curated toolkit of 500+ tools that support network practitioners.
- [Curtis Odgen's blog on the Interaction Institute](#). Curtis has been building networks and consulting with them, supporting diverse people to come together to create change. There are valuable insights into the mindsets and practices of networks here.

Footnotes; Building networks for systemic impact

1. The term 'Impact Networks' was popularised in Ehrlichman, D. (2021). *Impact networks: Create Connection, Spark Collaboration, and Catalyse Systemic Change*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
2. Bancroft, J. M. (2023). *Hoodie Economics: Changing Our Systems to Value What Matters*.
3. This list is based on the 'Six Conditions of Systems Change Framework' - a framework we often use in TACSI impact networks to introduce what it means to do systems change. In the Good Death Impact Network we observed changes happen in this order. [The Water of Systems Change - FSG \(Kania, Kramer, Senge, 2018\)](#).
4. Food Solutions New England. (2024, January 3). [Food Solutions New England - What we do](#).
5. Robert Sterling Clark Foundation. (2020). *The Sterling Network Impact Report: Key findings*.
6. The Fito Network connects individuals globally involved in networks, aiding funders to enhance their collective impact. Rooted in the Sesotho word "fito," meaning 'unity in diversity', it seeks to address underfunding, disconnection, and misconceptions within networks. In its inaugural year, the network organised events fostering playful connections among networks and developed a collaborative toolkit comprising 500 network methods from 20 organisations. [Global Network of Networks | Fito Network. \(n.d.\)](#).
7. Term adapted from [Five Steps to Building an Effective Impact Network](#), Stanford Social Innovation Review
8. These four things have been heavily informed by cultivating the social field or soil from Otto Scharmer's *Theory U: Leading from the future as it emerges*, 2nd edition, 2016. Berrett-Koehler Scharmer, C. O. (2009). *Theory u: Learning from the Future as It Emerges*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
9. Kramer, M. Kania, J. (2011). [Collective Impact](#), Stanford Social Innovation Review
10. A social impact professional once told us: "you won't get anywhere with that talk fest. It's naive to think that will make change"
11. In the book *Networks for social Impact*, Shumate & Cooper, note that: "Networks reach a dead end when they undervalue human resources in comparison to financial ones... Human resources, including expertise and personal relationships, are just as necessary for networks to achieve impact. Networks can create barriers to accessing these resources by undervaluing them. In networks organised for social impact, financial resources above either type can undermine the goals of the network" Shumate, M., & Cooper, K. R. (2022b). *Networks for social impact*. Oxford University Press (p.116)
12. TACSI Team (2020). [How we create safe and brave spaces at TACSI](#).
13. Brown, A. M. (2017). *Emergent strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*.
14. In his book 'Theory U: Leading from the future as it emerges' Otto Scharmer talks about the importance of creating time to 'listen to the emerging future', this idea itself is informed by a study of the habits of great creatives including artists, scientists and composers through history. Otto Scharmer's *Theory U: Leading from the future as it emerges*, 2nd edition, 2016. Berrett-Koehler Scharmer, C. O. (2009). *Theory u: Learning from the Future as It Emerges*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

15. Grdina, L. Johnson, N. Pereira, A. (2020) [Connecting Individual and Societal Change](#). Stanford Social Innovation Review.

16. Severns Guntzel, J. & Murphy Johnson, N. (2020). [Wellbeing Inspires Welldoing: How Changemakers' Inner Wellbeing Influences Their Work \[Report\]](#).

17. Presencing Institute. (n.d.). [3D Modelling | Presencing Institute](#).

18. Buy the Carked it card game [here](#)

19. [Pureland Home Hospice Death Festival 2024](#).

20. [Participatory Grantmakers, 2022](#)

21. See more about this in Co-Creatives “5 levels of engagement”

Images and Diagram

Image page 29:

Excerpts from ‘We can Die Better Australia’ the Networks’ playbook that identifies levers for systemic transformation in death and dying resulting from mapping processes in 2022.

Image page 30:

Collage of network members in 2024.

Diagram page 32:

Excerpt from the Good Death Impact Network ‘Gives and Gets’ exercise that supports network weaving activities that provide value through mutual exchange.



Connect with us

At TACSI, we see the potential of Impact Networks. This is because over the last six years and together with a brilliant set of partners and network members we've designed impact networks, built the capability of people to run them, and the conditions in organisations to support them. If you're interested in exploring any of the ideas in this paper further, get in touch with us.

tacsi.org.au

