Nurturing innovation:

Weaving containers with care and courage for collective change

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Foreword from Unearthodox

Bold ideas inspire us. We're drawn to the promise of breakthrough approaches that can be found and scaled. And yes, who gets access to support, funding and visibility matters deeply.

But perhaps the real opportunity isn't just in discovering these approaches. It's in rethinking how we foster their emergence and help them thrive.

What if the challenge isn't the rarity of bold thinking, but the conditions we create around it? What if the mainstream systems designed to nurture innovation – often fast, measurable and standardised – aren't built for the kind of transformation we actually need?

Unearthodox's Exploration Co-Lab was created in response to this gap. Launched in May 2024, the Co-Lab is not an incubator in the traditional sense. Rather, it's a space for systemic transformation supporting visionary innovators working at the roots of today's social and environmental challenges on transformative innovations for people and nature.

Why does this matter?

Because we've learned that the system innovators doing this work often face three persistent challenges:

1. They work in isolation without the networks or recognition needed to sustain momentum
2. Their ideas are considered too radical or risky for conventional funding
3. And they often fall through the cracks, because their cross-cutting work doesn't fit established categories

Without new forms of support, these efforts remain invisible, under-resourced, or unsustainable, despite their potential to drive meaningful change.

Authored by the Post Growth Institute, this report explores how we might shape and nurture that shift through co-learning, relational approaches, and a post-capitalist lens that challenges dominant assumptions about innovation, value, and growth.

In commissioning this report, our goal was to shift the spotlight to the conditions that enable transformative work to flourish. Because what we need now are not just novel ideas, but bridging innovations – those that hold systemic depth and relational power while resonating across differences.

The work of transformation rarely arrives fully formed. It unfolds through relationships, through tension, through trust built over time. It asks something more of us, not just in how we design programmes or distribute funding, but in how we show up, how we listen, and how we hold space for uncertainty.

Real innovation is not a race for the exceptional. It's a long, relational practice of nurturing the conditions from which life-affirming change can grow.

Because if we say we want change, we have to back it up. That means investing differently, starting with how we recognise and support those working at the edges: the ones with bold, complex ideas that don't always fit existing boxes yet hold the potential for real, lasting transformation.

Unearthodox Team

Overview

Transformative change is unfolding all around us. This report invites funders, changemakers, and practitioners to rethink how systems-change innovations are supported - especially within alternative innovation-enabling environments, such as incubators and accelerators, referred to here as 'alternative containers' for innovation.

This report builds on Cristina Chaminade's exploration of transformative innovation in Unearthodox's 2024 report, Scaling conservation innovation: the role of incubators and accelerators. Chaminade describes transformative innovation as fundamental, system-wide shifts in values, goals, and paradigms that influence the way societies see themselves and their connection to nature.

Through 27 global interviews, lived experience, and scholarship, this report highlights how care, reflexivity, and relational practices can create fertile ground for more meaningful shifts.

The insights are organised into three interwoven phases - groundwork, onboarding, and tending - each of which is essential for designing enabling alternatives.

Groundwork: Start from strengths, center lived values, embed reflexivity and equity.

Onboarding: Slow down, welcome with care, and cultivate mutual fit.

Tending: Enable authenticity, unstructured time, and adaptive learning.

Report Structure

The report is structured to guide you in this work:

- **Position statement**: we want to tell you who we are. The bodies we're in – our lived experiences – matter, and the position we hold as authors will shape how you interpret what's inside the report.

- **Meet our interviewees**: The insights in this report were crafted from interviews with people who participate in and convene alternative containers for innovation. You'll find out who shared their insights with us – not just their demographics, but where they were speaking from and the perspectives they brought.

- **Our starting definitions**: Words shape worlds. Before diving into insights, we clarify the terms and concepts we use.

- **Insights**: This is the heart of the report. We share what we learned from our conversations – insights that we hope will inform how innovation-enabling programmes are designed and held.

- **Our methods**: We explain how the research was conducted and how knowledge was co-created with participants. We believe that seeing our process may help you better understand the insights.

- **Conclusion, Suggested further resources, Acknowledgements, References**: Closing sections with thoughts on where we go from here.

Summary of insights and key takeaways

Ongoing groundwork

Insight	Key takeaway
So many great things already exist, yet innovation often starts with what's wrong.	Start every process with strengths, nurturing what's already working.
A container is only as strong as the values embodied by its creators.	Deepen into values-aligned practice by differentiating between your 'lived' versus 'aspirational' values.
Use of language is one of the most tangible ways power is (in)appropriately wielded.	Revisit the use of language regularly.
Demonstrated awareness of intersectional power dynamics is critical for containers to feel safe.	Invest in unlearning colonial conditioning.
Embodied self-awareness is a gateway to providing trauma-informed support.	Strengthen your capacity to 'sense' what's going on – for you and others – by engaging with embodied practices.
The most meaningful indicators of success often can't be counted – they're felt, lived and sustained over time.	Widen the indicators for what success is for programmes and containers.

Onboarding

Insight	Key takeaway
Care is both a noun *and* a verb best applied slowly.	Care for participants in ways that make them feel their needs are centred.
Exploring 'the fit' between innovators and programmes should be a two-way process.	Approach onboarding as your first, relational feedback loop for the container you're creating.

Tending

Insight	Key takeaway
Creativity flows when participants feel they can show up as their full selves.	Build unstructured time into programmes.
Learnings are only as valuable as the space you create for receiving and integrating them.	Make the time and create the processes needed for ongoing iteration.

Position statement

Before we invite you into this report, we want to tell you who we are and how to navigate what follows. The bodies we're in – our lived experiences – matter, and the position we hold as authors will shape how you interpret what's inside the report. There's no illusion of objectivity here.

So, who are we, the researchers and authors of this report?

We are four team members from the Post Growth Institute – a US-registered non-profit organisation with a team from across the Global North and South. At the Post Growth Institute, we explore what an equitable, post-capitalist world might look and feel like and how we might get there.

All four of us have been trained in formal, postgraduate academic settings. We all have experience participating in traditional and alternative containers (as described later in the definitions section of this report). Such participation has often been a result of our respective levels of privilege. Marianna is an able-bodied, White woman from France, living in the United Kingdom. Sonia is an able-bodied Black woman from Ethiopia, living in Germany. Elisa is an able-bodied White woman, from and living in Italy. Donnie is an able-bodied White man from Australia, living in Argentina, and is the only team member for whom English is a first language.

Additionally, the Post Growth Institute was chosen to conduct this study, in part because of its experience running an incubation programme (and physical space) for not-for-profit enterprises, as well as cohort experiences for entrepreneurs, activists, artists and academics.

This report was commissioned by Unearthodox, a Switzerland-based non-profit organisation backing bold ideas that have the potential to achieve systems change. They earmarked funds for this particular project (See Fig. 1) and we're grateful for the commitment of Unearthodox to join us on this learning journey, with their ongoing input influencing aspects of the research and report design.

We entered this project aiming to conduct research in ways that acknowledged

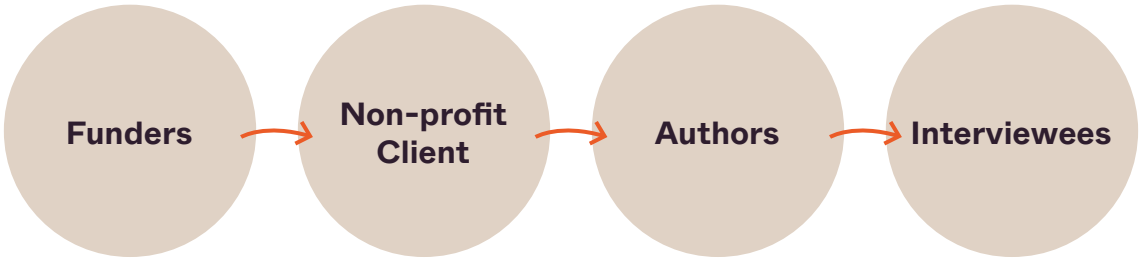

Figure 1: Influential players in our research design

and sought to rectify aspects of our colonial conditioning. But the process of unlearning is slow and often painful. For example, as non-Indigenous researchers who tried to engage with Indigenous perspectives, we were appropriately called into a challenging conversation about co-authorship and identity. As researchers, we sought to lean into discomforts like this in order to shed the layers of our unhelpful conditioning.

As a reader, you also bring your own lived experiences into your reading of this report. In this sense, we encourage you to have an embodied experience as you move through these pages. As you're reading or listening, try to track how you're feeling. Which words, ideas and sections resonate? Which don't? If something feels familiar, can you recognise it? What feels comfortable to read? What feels uncomfortable? In the uncomfortable parts, our invitation is to explore why something might feel that way, and if you feel an uncomfortable truth underlying an emotional reaction, how can you adapt your thoughts and practices to better align with that truth?

To help along the way, we used various formats to keep things engaging: curious titles, interview quotes, snippets from literature, definitions and data graphs.

Meet our interviewees

In this section, we offer some context about the people we interviewed, so you can better understand the insights. We honour interviewees' individual preferences for visibility and anonymity. The default was complete anonymity both for the interviewees and the alternative containers for innovation they have been a part of, which was a necessary condition to building trust and safety in our conversations. As a result, interviewees and their direct quotes are either identified by their preferred names or by a randomly assigned code (I1, I2, I3 and so on).

Our interviewees have values aligned with post-capitalism, some more than others. Almost all stated that they had experience in 'alternative' or 'non-traditional' incubator and accelerator programmes in the past 10 years, while a few were unsure due to varying interpretations of the word 'alternative'.

They are passionate about a variety of fields and concepts (see Fig. 2).

Figure 2: Weighted map of interviewee fields of expertise

Figure 3: Map of interviewee locations at the time of the interviews. Kenya (5), Spain (2), the United States (3), South Africa (2) and one person each from Australia, Bahrain, Barbados, Botswana, Brazil, Canada, China, Ghana, Israel, Lebanon, Morocco, Netherlands, Philippines, Thailand and United Kingdom.

A role does not make a person

Our interviewees brought diverse experiences from a range of roles in innovation-enabling environments, often holding multiple roles, sometimes simultaneously. These included, in descending order of frequency: mentors, advisers, managers, innovators, facilitators, programme designers and funders. Other roles people described included: founder, evaluator, weaver, advocate, vision-holder, community-builder, coordinator, trainer, entrepreneur, and strategist.

A snapshot of interviewees

The people we spoke with were between 26 and 50 years old. They described themselves in many different ways across nine races or ethnicities, four gender identities and two who live with a disability. We recognise the limitation of these categories as social constructs, but we're sharing them to give you a better sense of who the insights come from. The map (Fig. 3) shows where they were living at the time of the interviews.

Contexts are individual

The insights in this report are rooted in the interviewees' unique lived experiences and shaped by the contexts in which they live and work. Their words may not apply everywhere. We ask you to receive what they've shared with openness and discernment. Let it sit alongside your own reflections.

As you read, stay in touch with your own positioning. Where are you situated? What assumptions, values and experiences do you bring with you? How do these shape the way you interpret what's being shared?

Our starting definitions

Words don't just describe reality, they create it

Language holds power. It shapes how ideas take root, who gets to participate and what proposals gain legitimacy. The way we define terms influences the structures, resources and opportunities that emerge from them.

For example, one Indigenous researcher was reluctant to engage in the research partly because of the language of 'market research' we used in initial correspondence. We had failed to recognise the historically extractive power relations associated with such language, particularly as it relates to Indigenous knowledge.

Several of the quotes included here illustrate how the words we choose can either invite participation or create barriers, not only in incubation and acceleration spaces but in any context where inclusion is sought.

"[The word] 'accelerator' will click with the startup tech bros. That's just how it is. It won't mean much to my people at all. So yeah, the words you choose shape who shows up. And that's why being intentional about language matters." I20

"If you label something, you kind of kill it. If you put it in a box and say, 'This is what it is,' you're carving it out." I3

Naming matters, so what happens when the right words don't exist? Language evolves, shifts and is contested, but never static. Definitions are shaped by history, culture and the priorities of those who define them. In this report, we acknowledge that key terms in the innovation ecosystem carry weight, starting with the word 'innovation' itself, which sometimes reinforces dominant narratives and other times opens doors to possibilities.

Interviewees described choosing not to use terms like 'incubator' or 'accelerator', and instead experimenting with new ways of referring to their programmes, such as a 'hybrid of a course', a 'community of practice' or a 'cultivator'. (Ryan Littman-Quinn)

"We will create our own incubators and accelerators that are not really that, but I have to use a word that people understand." I3

Our starting definitions in this report serve as waypoints, inviting critical engagement while providing a common ground for discussion. They are meant to clarify, not constrain. By engaging with these definitions, we encourage readers to recognise the layers in language, question assumptions and contribute to a context-aware approach. Beyond semantics, our definitions are an invitation to imagine innovation ecosystems that contribute to building the futures you want to emerge.

We define ‘post growth’ as a post-capitalist worldview that sees society operating better without the demand of constant economic growth.

What is post growth?

Definition built on work from the Post Growth Institute:

We define ‘post growth’ as a post-capitalist worldview that sees society operating better without the demand of constant economic growth. Post growth proposes that widespread economic justice, social wellbeing and ecological regeneration are only possible when money and power inherently circulate through our economy, enabling interdependent thriving within ecological limits. Post growth is also an asset-based way of being and living together that generates a multitude of holistic living systems and post-growth futures.

For us at the Post Growth Institute, something can be considered post growth if it clearly supports or directly results in increasing individual or collective wellbeing or ecological health without simultaneously increasing the overall, sustained accumulation of money or power.

Mainstream incubators and accelerators

Definition built on work from:

- *Susan Cohen, an associate professor at the University of Georgia who researches entrepreneurship and innovation management*
- *Charlotte Pauwels, Bart Clarysse, Mike Wright and Jonas Van Hove, in the 2016 paper, ‘Understanding a new generation incubation model: The accelerator’*

Incubators and accelerators are organisations dedicated to supporting emerging commercial ventures. Mainstream incubators and accelerators are primarily designed to support early-stage startups and entrepreneurial ventures with high growth potential. These programmes, often backed by venture capital or corporate funding, provide a structured pathway for scaling businesses, focusing on short-term growth, investment readiness and commercialisation. As limited-duration programmes that help cohorts of startups build and launch their ventures, they often provide a small amount of seed capital and working space in exchange for equity stakes. They typically offer networking, educational and mentorship opportunities by drawing in peers and mentors from the wider regional community, such as successful entrepreneurs, accelerator alumni, venture capitalists, angel investors, attorneys, accountants and corporate executives. Most of these programmes end with a grand event, usually called a 'demo day', which provides a chance for participating teams to pitch their ventures to a large audience of investors.

Alternative containers for innovation

Definition built on work from:

- *Mónica Edwards-Schachter and Matthey Wallace, published in the 2017 paper, 'Shaken, but not stirred: Sixty years of defining social innovation'*
- *Charles Leadbeater in the 2014 Wired article, 'Startup "decelerators" would "innovate by slowing down'*

Alternative programmes emphasise values beyond rapid growth and profitability. We included a variety of innovation-enabling organisations, from incubators and accelerators to hackathons, decelerators, social incubators, fellowships, community-driven innovation programmes and relevant cohort experiences or communities of practice that support innovators. These programmes cater to people and ideas focused on social or environmental impact, long-term sustainability or community-driven goals. Rather than maximising market value, they prioritise local engagement, social inclusivity and addressing complex social challenges. For example, incubators for social innovation support projects that aim to address social needs through changing social practices that produce transformation in social relations, systems and structures, so contributing to major socio-technical changes. Decelerators encourage participants to slow down and reflect on their impact, challenging the high-speed and high-pressure model typical of mainstream programmes.

Many alternative programmes do not identify with descriptors like 'incubator' and 'accelerator,' so while we used these terms as starting vocabulary in the interviews, we switched to the terminology of 'alternative containers' and 'programmes that facilitate innovation' in the final report.

Reflexivity at the heart of alternative containers for innovation

Reflexivity is the practice of looking inward, recognising our own beliefs and how they shape what we do. As Donnie Maclurcan, Post Growth Institute's Director of Strategy, put it in his 2010 PhD thesis, reflexivity means "actively acknowledging one's beliefs as well as

Reflexivity is the practice of looking inward, recognising our own beliefs and how they shape what we do.

how they may influence one's actions." Ann Cunliffe, Professor of Organization Studies at FGV-EAESP in Brazil, described her own evolving thinking around reflexivity in a retrospective article from 2016: "[Reflexivity is] questioning what we, and others, might be taking for granted – what is being said and not said – and examining the impact this has or might have." Reflexivity invites us to remain aware of the assumptions underpinning our own decisions, interactions and ways of working.

Programmes that are 'alternative' and 'reflexive' stand in contrast to those that lack a reflexive practice. Even when driven by good intentions, such non-reflexive containers for innovation, no matter how 'alternative' they are, often fail to examine how closely they align with dominant, hegemonic systems, and in doing so, risk reinforcing the very dynamics they aim to disrupt. For example, a programme might focus on funding grassroots innovators but impose rigid reporting structures or timelines that replicate extractive funding models, placing undue burden on communities already facing structural barriers. Without reflexivity, there's no built-in way to recognise when harm is occurring, nor to adapt in response. As a result, these programmes can unintentionally harm the very people they seek to uplift and support.

These layers of reflection are an ongoing commitment to learning from experience, from failure, and from one another. It is both a personal and organisational practice – a way of pausing to ask, "What's working? What isn't? And what needs to change about the programme, the project or ourselves?"

"We had to [...] see the pattern, had to look at the data and say: 'No, this is not working. We were wrong. New hypothesis. We have to move on.' [...] The biggest gift I think we've given ourselves is that ability to evolve [...] to not be completely locked into, 'Well, this is what we said [the programme would be], so we have to stick to it.'" I18

This ability to evolve is anchored in humility and observation. The value of reflexivity lies in its power to keep

'containers for innovation' relevant and responsive to participants' needs. It is a tool for surfacing internal biases, staying open to critique and holding space for both learning and unlearning. Reflexivity happens with intention; it must be built into the fabric of a programme. Interviewees spoke about designing dedicated rhythms of reflection, or moments to pause, take stock and examine feedback loops, especially if the programme is anonymous or facilitated in trusted spaces.

Some reflexive practices might come from feedback surveying, check-ins for feedback, debriefs after events, invitations for reflections from participants and organisers at the end of meetings or events, iterative testing and documenting learnings, all leading to explicit and concrete adaptations and actions as a result of uncovering learnings.

These moments are important mechanisms for transparency and accountability. So, care plays a central role in facilitating reflexivity. When care is embedded into how a programme operates, people feel safer raising concerns, and that, in turn, allows for genuine reflection and growth.

One interviewee explained that reflexivity isn't just about improving the programme, it's also about nurturing the people running it. So, reflexivity must be practised at every level within the programme structure, including in relationships between convenors and participants and engagements with funders.

Figure 4 illustrates the different positionings of innovation-enabling organisations in relation to being 'alternative' and 'reflexive'. Our focus in this report is on how to be an 'alternative reflexive container' (shown in red).

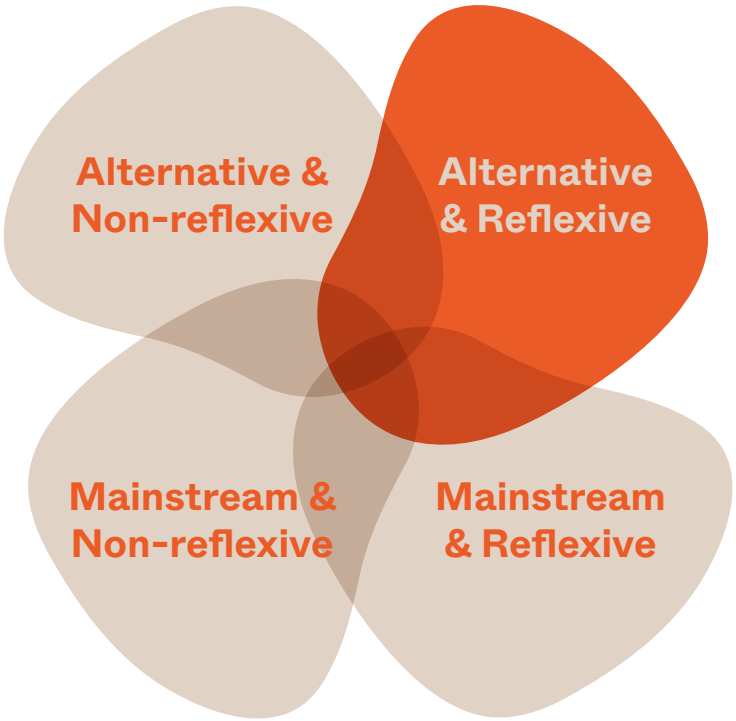

Figure 4: Matrix of innovation containers

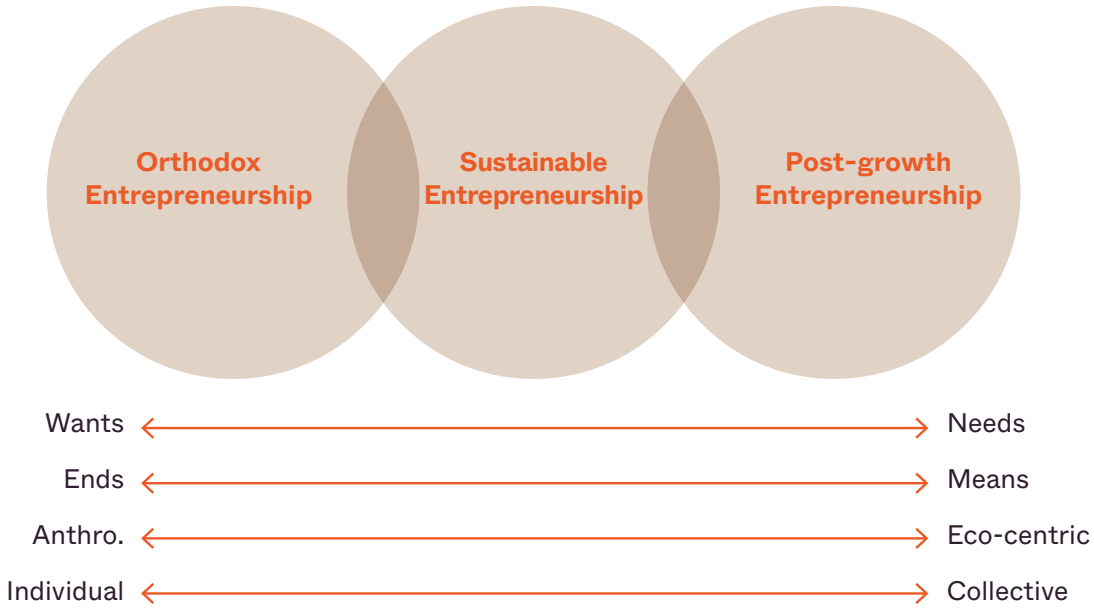

Figure 5: From classical (orthodox) to post-growth entrepreneurship, from Long and Buzzao's framework of 2024. Pre-print.

Post-growth entrepreneurship

In a 2024 paper on post-growth entrepreneurship, two European researchers, Thomas Long and Giacomo Buzzao, proposed a new framework for understanding how some alternative forms of entrepreneurship journey away from what they call 'orthodox forms of entrepreneurship'. They highlight differences in objectives, profit motives, approaches to the natural environment and wealth creation.

Post-growth entrepreneurship challenges the idea that businesses must prioritise profit or maximise owners' wealth and must be redefined, focusing instead on fulfilling social needs. So the relationship to profit of an organisation, which forms the foundation of its purpose, needs to be set up legally through incorporation to allow for the prioritisation of social good over financial gain, as explained by Jennifer Hinton in her 2021 paper on key dimensions of post-growth business.

Containers that are non-profit and also support other non-profits might be one type of alternative container.

Others could be:

Non-growing, flat-economies, non-extractive projects and businesses, and circular economies, such as:

- Non-Profit Incubator
- Post-Growth Innovation Lab
- Post Growth Entrepreneurship

Grassroots movements and local initiatives in rural areas, cooperativism and social economy like:

- Post-Growth Innovation Lab
- Start.coop

Long-term inclusive and relational mentoring programmes like:

- The Not for Profit Way
- The Next Economy MBA

Insights

The insights drawn from our interviews are meant to guide transformative change in every part of the design and implementation of an innovation-enabling programme – from organisational structure, support systems and networks to self-awareness and ongoing reflection about how we engage with each other. These are primarily addressed to those designing and facilitating alternative containers for innovation.

Much of what we share may seem straightforward, even obvious. We've intentionally presented the insights in a way that honours how interviewees fearlessly made the 'obvious explicit', naming truths they believe are often overlooked or taken for granted. In 1979, a psychologist from the United States , William Schutz, presented the idea that understanding of any given situation often passes through three stages: superficial simplicity, confused complexity and profound simplicity. (Fig. 6)

In the first stage, there is a belief that an issue is straightforward. Next, we enter a period where everything appears more complex. Finally, we arrive at 'profound simplicity' having traversed through confusing complexity to discover what may have been the seed of truth in our initial reaction. So, if an insight appears to be very obvious, remember it's likely underpinned by complexity.

While we've stayed close to what interviewees shared, we also bring ourselves into the analysis. What we heard resonated deeply. We recognised patterns that reflected our own experiences of working within – and actively shaping – alternative containers. This report is, in part, an offering from that shared space of learning.

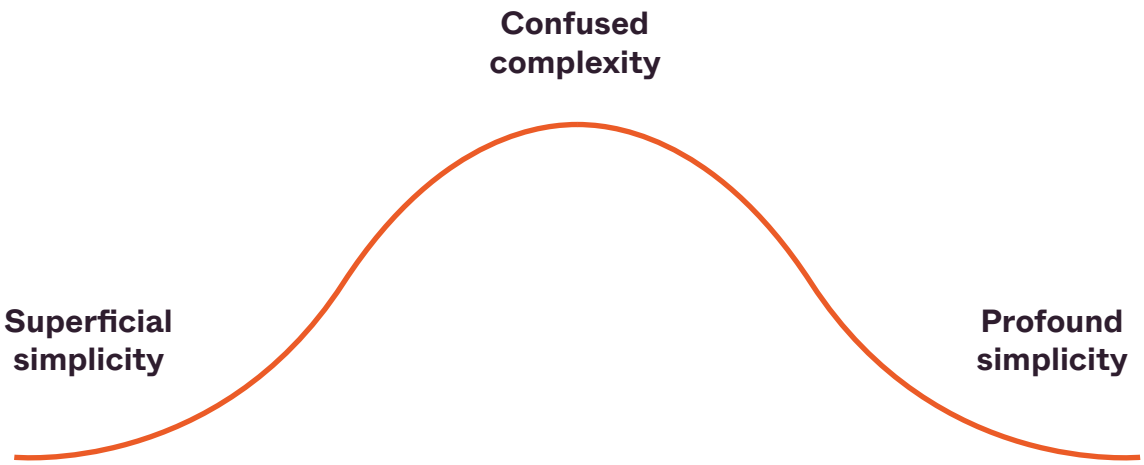

Figure 6: From superficial simplicity to profound simplicity (interpreted from Schutz, 1979).

Phase	Ongoing groundwork	Onboarding	Tending
Includes	Preparatory work specific to a programme, and general preparation that is not programmatically specific but can be influential.	Any exploratory or selection process, as well as the activities following confirmation of programme participation, but preceding programme commencement.	Programme delivery. Integrating learnings from this phase occurs in the ongoing groundwork phase.

Table 1: Sequencing of insights

The insights are organised into three phases:

1. **Ongoing groundwork**
2. **Onboarding**
3. **Tending**

This reflects a form of programmatic sequencing.

Mainstream incubators and accelerators typically have a top-heavy emphasis on programme delivery, often driven by an emphasis on the innovative outcomes of incubation and acceleration, and programme preparation is seen as specific to the delivery.

In alternative containers, we propose an inversion of this approach (Fig. 7).

Insight structure

Each insight in this report follows a structure to support reflection and practical application. The **title** is followed

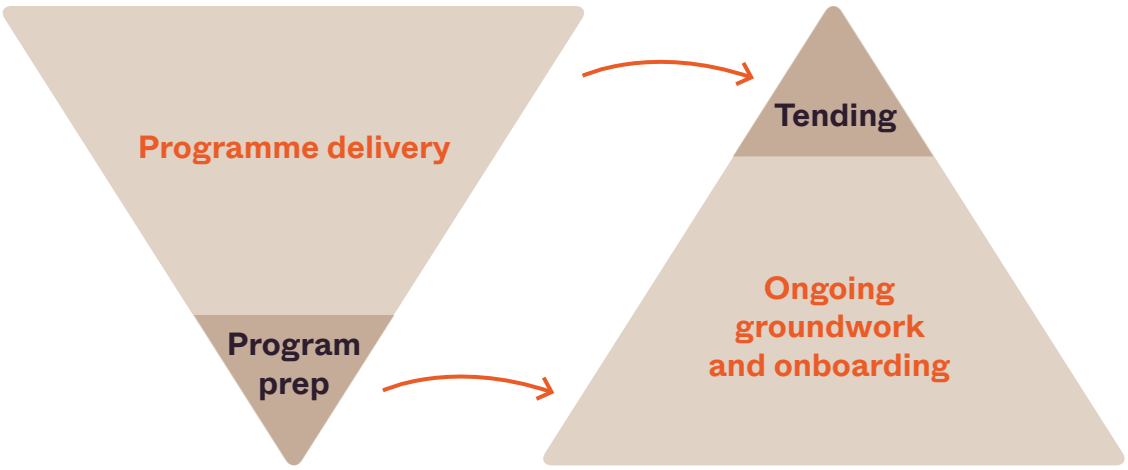

Figure 7: Shifting emphasis in mainstream versus alternative containers

by a contextualising **quote** from an interviewee and an **explanation**. Where relevant, there may also be practical applications from interviewees or a **literature spotlight** connecting the insight to existing research. Each concludes with a **key takeaway** and a set of **reflective questions** that can be explored individually or in teams. At the end of the report, we share relevant **resources.**

Ongoing groundwork

The most critical phase for alternative containers is the preparation of ongoing, reflexive groundwork. This is the phase where most interviewees converged, sharing the richest reflections and spending the most time. It represents the greatest effort in creating alternative and reflexive containers.

Interviewees emphasised the importance of adopting an asset-based approach that starts with and builds on existing strengths rather than focusing on deficits.

Insight 1:
So many great things already exist, yet innovation often starts with what's wrong

"Something that the [organisation] tries to embody is acknowledging people's and an organisation's strength, and not just the weaknesses. Not just what lacks, but starting with what we have and acknowledging and being grateful for what we have." Nathalie Roy

Interviewees emphasised the importance of adopting an **asset-based approach** that starts with and builds on existing strengths rather than focusing on deficits. This perspective challenges the assumption that innovation must always involve creating something new. Instead, it calls for containers to recognise and support what is already working. Several interviewees expressed concern that traditional innovation spaces often overlook or undervalue existing efforts, prioritising novelty over continuity. They highlighted the need to invest in and amplify effective approaches already in place, rather than perpetuating a culture of constant reinvention.

From a systems-change perspective, adopting an asset-based approach enhances the ability to map and leverage existing structures rather than focusing exclusively on identifying gaps. For example, we can choose to engage with those already having an impact, who may require additional resources, networks or validation to expand their work, rather than limiting support to individuals or organisations developing new concepts.

The pursuit of the 'new and shiny' can come at the expense of what already works, as described by Sasha Costanza-Chock in her 2020 book, *Design Justice*. The tech-for-good movement may disregard existing efforts in pursuit of newness. This perpetuates patriarchal values that prioritise innovation over maintenance and caretaking of existing systems, leading to wasted efforts and the exclusion of historically marginalised knowledge systems.

Key takeaway

Start every process with strengths, nurturing what's already working.

Reflective questions

1. What strengths, such as skills, relationships, practices or approaches, already exist in the communities or groups you're working with? What strengths are your team bringing in?
2. Where might you be prioritising newness over what is already having an impact? Which current efforts deserve more recognition, support or continuity?
3. How can you structure your container to amplify, connect or

resource existing efforts rather than reinventing them?

4. When have you experienced the pressure to be innovative at the cost of slowing down, maintaining or caring for something already valuable? What did that feel like?

Link to the next insight

An asset-based approach also shapes how the container itself is designed. Starting with *what's already working in practice* helps surface and define the values that will guide the container from the outset.

Insight 2:
A container is only as strong as the values embodied by its creators

"We have these ideas of equality, equity, justice. Sometimes we maybe do lip service [to these], but then how do we really implement these things? We understand these values in words. What's sometimes more important is to look at what it truly means, whatever the values are." I12

Values that arise through lived experience and everyday practices often shape alternative containers more powerfully than abstract ideals. In many cases, values influence visible design choices: who is included (such as women-only programmes), what kinds of projects are supported (like conservation or commons-based initiatives), and how participating organisations are structured ('non-profit' versus 'for-profit' forms).

Yet, declaring a set of values does not guarantee they are being practised. A women-only programme may describe itself as feminist, but without intentional effort, its structures or interactions may still reproduce harmful patriarchal dynamics. Being guided by values requires ongoing reflection – continually asking what these values mean in practice and how they show up (or don't) across different parts of the work. This is where it becomes helpful to distinguish between the values you already practise versus those that are more aspirational.

Some interviewees named specific values that shaped their containers, such as collaboration, humility, feminism, care, open-source principles, service to people and the planet, authenticity and integrity. What stood out across all the interviews was not which values were named but instead how people stayed in relationship with those values, testing, questioning, adjusting and learning as they went. Interviewees demonstrated to us how values can be meaningfully embedded within the containers for innovation when they are first embodied by the host organisation.

We see this as part of a larger pluriverse of values: multiple ways of relating to innovation that reflect different worldviews, contexts and commitments. Rather than suggesting a single 'right' set of values, explore what matters most in your context. What values are already present in your organisation? What tensions or aspirations are emerging? And how might your practices better align with what you care about?

Be willing to challenge implicit values in your programmes: Lessons from David Ehrlichman's 2021 book, *Impact Networks*

Social norms shape the behaviours and values of systems, often reflecting dominant cultural paradigms that marginalise non-dominant groups. In their *Dismantling Racism* workbook, Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun emphasise the importance of identifying and naming these norms to create space for truly inclusive and multicultural systems. Unacknowledged norms, such as those rooted in individualism, competition and rigid hierarchies (products of White supremacy culture and capitalism) can stifle diverse ways of knowing, suppress collective efforts and maintain systemic inequities.

The power of shifting social norms lies in how tipping points are triggered. Research by United States sociologist Damon Centola suggests that once 25% of actors within a system adopt a new norm, it sets off a cascade of change, influencing the broader population. Taj James of the Movement Strategy Center echoes this sentiment, arguing that systemic change stems from "big groups making big shifts in being".

Insight in practice

Rallying participants around shared values can strengthen the integrity and cohesion of the container.

Example: One interviewee described how shared values can serve as a kind of glue, helping participants stay connected to each other and the purpose of the container.

"I saw, firsthand, the long-term impact that networks have on knowledge exchange, on having a space to figure out questions together. But the key is whether or not they have a goal and they see the value of coming together [...] How can each of us contribute to a question that would impact all of us within that system." David Ehrlichman

Insight in practice

Immersing participants in real-life, values-aligned communities can unlock imagination and connection.

Example: One programme brought participants into a mountainous community where core concepts like money and gifting could be explored in context. This grounded experience helped participants understand what's possible when values are made tangible.

"Going to this type of place to see, for real, this world already exists is a great impact for participants. [We] come to our mountainous community and discuss what 'money' is, what 'gift' is in that context. And people find it much easier [to] understand. And then their creation flood gates open, and they know this is what is possible." Xinlin

Insight in practice

Values can be actively practised within the container.

Example: In one programme, equity was practised tangibly through participatory budgeting. Rather than relying on facilitators to allocate funding, the cohort collectively decided how to distribute a shared pot of money.

"So they'll have a pot of money for these entrepreneurs for the programme, and then they get to do participatory budgeting, to decide how that's allocated amongst and between them based on kind of what they're pitching. These are kinds of examples of post growth in action, almost like lived post growth in this entrepreneurship world." I16

Insight in practice

Collective decision-making can support difficult choices around values-aligned funding.

Example: Several interviewees shared tensions around accepting funding from sources that conflict with the values of the container. One described how shared reflections with participants helped navigate these dilemmas, acknowledging that while all money may be compromised, some funders are more willing to engage in reparative approaches than others.

"We all understand that all money is dirty. If you have amassed enough wealth to be able to have excesses to give through philanthropy in the way that big philanthro-capital exists, most likely you've trampled on someone. Some poor person has subsidised something for your wealth to be amassed, but we'll use it as a reparation and do good things with it. But there are some, at this point, where they're too big, they're too much of a bully. We can say no to those." I27

Key takeaway

Deepen into values-aligned practice by differentiating between your 'lived' versus 'aspirational' values.

Reflective questions

To support deeper reflection on values-based approaches in alternative containers for innovation, we offer the following guiding questions. These are designed to help surface the values already present in your work, examine how they're practised and explore what new or aspirational values might be nurtured.

Recognising embodied values

1. What values are already being practised in your container, whether explicitly named or not?
2. Where in your day-to-day work do these values show up most clearly?
3. How do these values shape your container?

Deepening existing values

4. In what ways would you like to strengthen or deepen the values you already embody?
5. In which parts of your work are those values less visible?
6. What new practices or rhythms might bring greater alignment with these values?

Stretching into new values

7. What values would you like to grow into?
8. Who (past or present) in your organisation, community or beyond has embodied those values in practice? How?
9. What might it look like to bring those values into your organisation's culture, governance or programming? What is one step you could take toward living that value?

Challenging implicit values

10. How might dominant cultural norms, such as individualism,

urgency or perfectionism, be showing up in your organisation and your programmes?

11. What values or norms shape how decisions are made, who speaks and who is heard in your organisation or container?
12. What practices or structures could shift to create more space for collective agency, relational accountability or slower, more inclusive ways of working?

Link to the next insight

Embodied values ground your container, helping you navigate what language to use. The next insight dives into the impact of language.

Insight 3:
Use of language is one of the most tangible ways power is (in)appropriately wielded

"Language creates culture and creates our relationship to something. If you use a word that people have a toxic relationship to [...] you won't attract those people. And it'll perpetuate those toxic behaviours. If you have a word that's inviting for people, it's going to attract that type of audience. [...] It's about who you want to attract. 'Accelerator' will resonate more with the startup tech bros. That's just how it is. It is not going to resonate with my people at all. [...] I think the care that has to go into language is so important. If there was a different word, I wouldn't pick something that implied speed or that was associated with tech startup culture. I would pick a word that felt emergent." I20

Language can open doors or quietly close them. Language can set expectations, signal belonging and exclude those who don't 'speak the right way'. When shaped by an asset-based approach, language becomes a tool for affirmation rather than correction, highlighting strengths and possibilities rather than framing people or communities by way of perceived deficits or problems.

Insight in practice

Shift from heroism to collaboration to dismantle saviourist narratives.

Example: One interviewee shared how their team avoided heroic framing, choosing language that emphasised shared responsibility and collective contribution.

"We did not say that this [innovation programme] was going to save [the endangered animal]. That would be false advertising, right? Instead, we adjusted our framing to set a different expectation. We used words like 'contribute' instead, shifting the emphasis from heroism to collective effort." I18

Recently, Maryam Mohiuddin Ahmed, who works on decolonising social innovation, discussed on LinkedIn the significance of redefining social innovation labs, shifting the narrative from fixed, solution-driven models to one centred on exploration, adaptation and continuous learning. The redefinition was proposed by Sam Rye, who works on social and environmental change projects in Australia and Aotearoa (New Zealand) and writes about social innovation. By moving away from the prescriptive language of 'solutions' and embracing iterative, evolving processes, this approach aligns with decolonial perspectives.

Insight in practice

Co-create language with communities grounded in an understanding of their origins, histories and power dynamics.

Example: When concepts rooted in Indigenous knowledge are rebranded through Western frameworks without acknowledgement or relationship,

they risk erasing the very communities they claim to support. The language that once held deep wisdom within a community can become a barrier when it's repurposed without consent.

[These organisations are] part of a system that introduced development models that took away consciousness and inner dimensions in metrics of development. And then here they come: 'Okay, we're going to say [consciousness and inner dimensions] is important now, and we're going to bring it back.' And it's expecting us to adapt to it, but the models we have to work with in our governments, in our system, are not even ready to allow that." I19

A history of co-opting in innovation-enabling environments:
From Sasha Constanza-Chock's 2020 book, *Design Justice*

Hackerspaces, a type of innovation-enabling container originally rooted in countercultural movements, have a rich history of fostering grassroots innovation that is often ignored in favour of their neoliberal, co-opted versions. As Liz Henry critiques in her article in *Model View Culture*, '*The Rise of Feminist Hackerspaces and How to Make Your Own*', hackerspaces frequently centre privileged, predominantly White, middle-class men while excluding women and other communities with overt and subtle discrimination and assaults. Similarly, in her book, *Design Justice*, Sasha Costanza-Chock highlights how hacker spaces have evolved from politicised sites of social movements to depoliticised hubs dominated by entrepreneurialism and neoliberal values. Despite this co-opting, their radical origins and potential for transformation remain, particularly through efforts to diversify participants along lines of gender and race and to intentionally reconnect these spaces to social movements.

Insight in practice

Interrogate the use of dehumanising innovation jargon.

Example: Terms like 'A/B', 'test' and 'prototype' may offer legitimacy or help secure funding, but when used uncritically, they can unintentionally reduce people to subjects of experimentation. If the language doesn't resonate with the people it aims to serve, what begins as collaboration can quickly become imposition. There can be a disconnect between such jargon and lived realities in the Global South.

"But in the Global South, it's not easy to talk about that. [...] We'll develop a prototype, we'll test it, but you can't really test on people. You can't really experiment. And even the word 'lab' is like, how can you use the lab when people are...you know, here? Lives are at risk." I19

Insight in practice

Protect participants from 'funder language'.

Example: Many interviewees noted how language becomes a tool of power in donor relationships. Speaking in 'funder language' often becomes a requirement, privileging terminology that aligns with donor expectations rather than the lived realities of the communities the programmes aim to support.

"There's a language, a lexicon, a jargon that you need to understand, and donors only speak in that language, which can be very boring and not very helpful." I27

Key takeaway

Revisit the use of language regularly.

Reflective questions

1. Whose language is centred?
2. Where do the terms you use come from? What are their definitions?
3. What language do the people you're working with use?
4. How can you bring in or honour local languages or cultural references that reflect the communities' knowledge systems?
5. Who is speaking, and who is spoken for?
6. Are facilitators and programme leaders reflective of the communities they work with?

Centre participant language

Sam Rye, who writes about social innovation, social labs and experimentation, uses plain language that attempts to rid the definition of social innovation labs from language that excludes people who don't use the same vocabulary.

"Social Innovation Labs bring people together to understand a challenge, come up with a range of ideas, try them out and explore how to turn those ideas into real change. The goal is to build trust and relationships and develop, learn and adapt a range of responses to the challenge over time." (From *The Future of Labs - Part 4*)

Link to the next insight

Examining the language we use and the power it carries is a starting point for unlearning colonial conditioning and rethinking how we show up. The next insight continues this exploration.

Insight 4: Demonstrated awareness of intersectional power dynamics is critical for containers to feel safe

"A lot of people were very harmed through that experience. It was explosive, actually, and what happened was the facilitators did not reflect on identity or have any consciousness of the place that the people were at in the cohort. [They were] bringing together people that are racialised, disabled, queer people that have multiple intersections of identity, disability, and so on, and are coming together around social justice. [...] And yet the facilitators themselves were a team of all cishet White people that were 'educating us' on social justice, and it felt really infuriating because you're 'teaching' us about things that we live. You're telling us the theory of things that we feel and know in our bodies every single day. There was a disconnect from the beginning, [...] not understanding your audience – who you're speaking to – and not allowing them to shape the content." I20

Innovation experiences cut across demographic differences – gender, age, education, race, geography and more. However, organisations and programmes often cause unintentional harm in trying to work across differences. Demonstrated awareness of intersectional power dynamics requires facilitators – and ideally all participants – to begin by accepting the realities of positional power and engaging in the ongoing work of unlearning colonial conditioning. This work includes acknowledging how Whiteness operates in innovation spaces, how systemic racism and exclusion are reinforced even without bad intent, and how your personal fragility can show up in response to discomfort.

The goal should be to create a space where hard conversations can happen without defensiveness, where people can be called in, where harm is addressed openly and with care, and where learning is an ongoing, relational act.

It also means understanding participation through an intersectional lens – recognising how gender, age, levels of formal education, (dis)ability, race, lived experiences and the way that these identities interact when overlapping all shape who is present, how they engage, what gifts they might bring, and what support they might need or want.

Insight in practice

Use an intersectional lens to understand and support participation.

Example: One interviewee emphasised how important it is to integrate gender-responsive design from the beginning, especially in contexts where women face unique structural barriers, such as caregiving responsibilities and limited access to flexible time.

"In Ghana, for example, there is the clear issue of the different rules for men and women, even though it's changing, and more in urban than in peri-urban and rural [areas]. But there's still the traditional roles and responsibilities, and so sometimes you have to factor that in – responsibilities, including childcare, motherhood and all of that. [...]

So it's important that these incubation organisations have policies and practices to be gender-intentional in their programme delivery, in their selection, in the incubation process [...] It's important that organisations realise these things [...] There's something that we call 'time poverty', where she will, by all means, have to do something else for someone else, right? And so once you factor that in, and you're intentional and supporting and putting in some support services for these women, it helps." I7

Example: Another interviewee spoke about the need to recognise innovators beyond people with formal education, advocating for programmes to support people working in deeply local contexts who are often overlooked.

"From a really African perspective, there are guys that have zero [formal] education, haven't really gone to school, but are finding a way and doing incredible stuff in their very localised context. And I often wonder, if they were just given either a little bit more support or recognition even, or just some kind of startup funding, they could really fly and be on a par with some of the big startups that we see in the Global North. So, yeah, I think if I had to design the most ideal incubator, I'd like to really spend some time thinking about how to find the innovators and the things to incubate." I10

Example: Intergenerational participation was also named as key to building inclusive and lasting innovation ecosystems.

"A lot of us are in our 30s, early 40s, bringing this together. We're bringing in elders, we're bringing in youth, and we want that intergenerational part to be just foundational and core to how we operate moving forward." Ryan Littman-Quinn

Insight in practice

Learn to hold the difficult conversations

Example: Techniques to navigate challenges that arise when people feel unseen, insulted, hurt or otherwise wronged include careful screening of participants, development of shared agreements for safe and brave experiences, individual caring support, and skilled mediation when tension can't be resolved collectively. One interviewee described the difference between two containers – one that held space for discussing the war in Gaza with care and openness, and another that avoided it.

"I'm part of [a programme] which includes people on opposite sides of the genocide and the war [in Gaza], and so that imploded on itself [...] especially in the format of like being in WhatsApp groups, where the format of not being face to face, not being able to touch and feel the person, that tone of voice and a lot of nuances get lost. [...] Versus [in another programme], you feel like everyone can contribute. And when myself and a few other fellows felt like this topic wasn't really being tackled, it just felt very easy and comfortable [to bring that up to the facilitators]. So, what's that kind of safe space that you create? The shared understanding, and if you feel comfortable sharing within that space or not. [....] There's obvious double standards in the way that all these topics are being relayed. [...] The way that the war in Ukraine is being handled versus the war in Gaza is being handled. And giving the space to people to actually share their experience." Adib Dada

Insight in practice

Recognise unjust patterns and question them openly.

Example: One interviewee highlighted a pattern in which Black African entrepreneurs only secured investment when partnered with White counterparts, pointing directly to systemic racism and the distribution of trust in innovation spaces.

"In many of these [African] incubation spaces, one of the things that tends to happen is very many young Africans have amazing, brilliant ideas that never get funding until they have a White face with them. Because there is an aspect to do with trust [...] There is that aspect to do with racism, in a way, because then you realise that these incubation spaces are primarily White [...] If you look at the percentage vis-a-vis every African versus non-African, you realise it's quite a disparity." Salim

Key takeaway

Invest in unlearning colonial conditioning.

Reflective questions

1. What tools and resources can help you unlearn colonial conditioning? How are you engaging with these?
2. How are you acknowledging and addressing your own positionality within the container you're facilitating?
3. What tools and support can you collectively source from within your team to help you explore these questions? Where do you need to look outside for guidance?
4. Where in your programme might Whiteness, class or colonial legacies still be shaping access, language or decision-making?
5. What intersectional factors, such as gender, race, generation, (dis)ability or geography, might be affecting who joins your programme, how they participate and what support they need?
6. How do you support people in your space when difficult or painful conversations arise?
7. Have you built in space for conversations about systemic harm and global events? Who decides whether or not those conversations happen?
8. Where are you sourcing expertise from? What would it take – structurally and relationally – to hire, contract or collaborate with people who hold local knowledge and lived experience?

"The cohort that I was a part of was 30 powerful emerging women leaders in the Asia Pacific. But the decision for the [funder] to hire a United States-based woman consultancy programme, I guess that's a bit discouraging [...] Because I personally believe we have enough homegrown talent of powerful and strong women leaders here in the Asia Pacific. And this is – sorry to be harsh – the plague all over the Asia Pacific, right? That when there's a White person that comes in to say that 'We know best'. Even though the things that have been said are probably similar things that a person of colour would say, they would choose the facilitator or the trainer from the Global North." I19

Link to the next insight

To show up with care when tensions arise, facilitators must also cultivate self-awareness of their own reactions, histories and limits, which we explore in the next insight.

Insight 5:
Embodied self-awareness is a gateway to providing trauma-informed support

"A person had a specific relationship to an activity that we were doing, [...] that makes it feel very traumatic, or like their own histories are coming up around that, and they didn't feel safe in that experience, so they left. [...] **After that, my job was to make sure that they felt like they were able to share.** *We were able to take accountability for how we could have better prepared for that."* I20

"The Earth needs healing. We need healing." I9

The ability to notice what's going on, both inside yourself and in the space around you, is a crucial part of creating containers in which people feel safe, seen and respected. This means paying attention to your emotions, feelings and physical reactions in the moment, and using that awareness to guide how you respond.

This kind of self-awareness matters in moments of discomfort, especially for facilitators. If you can recognise when you're feeling defensive or unsettled, you're more likely to pause, listen and reflect rather than react in a way that might cause harm. Emotional awareness can help address cycles of colonial harm and open up possibilities for healing and repair that are trauma-informed. People are more likely to feel supported when they are met with care and presence, not explanations or excuses.

> Trauma-informed care or trauma-and-violence-informed care is a framework for relating to and helping people who have experienced negative consequences after exposure to dangerous experiences, as defined by Bessel van der Kolk, M.D., author of the 2014 book, *The Body Keeps the Score*.

Building this kind of awareness takes time. It often requires emotional support and mentoring. When facilitators feel supported themselves, they're better able to take care of others while navigating difficult moments in the container.

Insight in practice

Creating inclusive containers means recognising who is holding back and making space, with care, for their voices to be heard.

Example: One interviewee shared how a container intentionally created space for Brown women to speak more freely in group settings, recognising cultural dynamics and addressing them directly.

"I was in [a European country] [...] They were like, 'We have this experience from a lot of Brown women that are here that don't actually talk a lot, so we want to really directly address it and create that space [...] that encourages people [to share]'. So sometimes, with care and allyship, if you understand, or if there

is this recognition of these tensions in society, it can be directly addressed and encouraged." I12

Insight in practice

Create space for participants to tune into themselves, each other and their surroundings.

Example: Interviewees shared how they intentionally included practices that help participants slow down, tune in and stay present in their bodies. It's important to note, these practices are not based on co-opted or commercialised mindfulness practices but instead focus on presence, connection and awareness.

Examples of practices included starting meetings with meditative grounding exercises or incorporating mindful movement, such as silent walks followed by reflective sharing (Ryan Littman-Quinn, FMaMeAF18). Some interviewees described inviting reflection on community, ancestry and intergenerational connection (I20, MaF19), or created invitations to relate with the more-than-human world (Wangũi wa Kamonji, I25).

Insight in practice

Create space for emotional support.

Example: Several interviewees highlighted the emotional strain of working towards transformation while still operating within harmful or extractive systems. For many, emotional support, whether from facilitators or peer networks, played a vital role in sustaining their energy and wellbeing. It provided a sense of solidarity and reminded participants that they were not alone in their frustrations, doubts or struggles.

"And there were just people, not incubators, but people along the way that kept me going. [They] provided the support. I think it can be great if we will have that as part of an incubator." I1

Key takeaway

Strengthen your capacity to 'sense' what's going on – for you and others – by engaging with embodied practices.

Reflective questions

Reflexivity, or thinking carefully about your own role, assumptions and reactions, is not just a mental process. It also means noticing how things feel in your body and emotions as you move through a space or conversation. We invite you to explore your awareness and presence.

1. What sensations or emotions arose in your body when something felt uncomfortable, uncertain or tense recently?
2. What words are triggering for you?
3. What can you learn from those feelings?

Link to the next insight

As you build your capacity to notice and reflect, you'll also begin to sense what truly matters in the work. You'll become more attuned to what is impactful, not just for you, but for the people you're in community with. This awareness often leads to a shift from narrow metrics of success to broader, more relational indicators of transformation. That's where we go next.

Insight 6:
The most meaningful indicators of success often can't be counted – they're felt, lived and sustained over time

"We've been trying to use the word 'observe.' Because 'measure' has its own connotations. And, a lot of the time, what you measure doesn't matter. What really matters isn't measured or can't be quantified." I3

What defines 'success' – and who gets to define it – shapes how innovation containers operate. When success is measured narrowly or externally, based on funder expectations or short-term outputs, it can restrict the scope of what is possible. By contrast, alternative containers can reframe success as something co-created, evolving, emergent or observed over time, not simply quantified.

Success might include personal transformation, community healing, lasting networks or a shift in how participants relate to their work. These outcomes often unfold slowly and resist easy measurement. Short-term reporting cycles and growth-oriented funding models often miss these deeper impacts.

We propose that learning and unlearning become central to how success is defined. In this view, meaningful impact and outcomes emerge as a byproduct of ongoing learning and iteration, not as predetermined targets. A learning-driven approach prioritises understanding what participants notice, question or shift about themselves, their initiatives and their environments. It asks: What has changed, and why does it matter to us?

Insight in practice

Co-define success through learning, emotional depth, relational strength and community relevance, not just measurable outcomes.

Example: Interviewees highlighted alternative success indicators, like:

- Moments of emotional connection, such as tears of joy, which pointed to authenticity, healing and deep resonance among participants and facilitators
- Strengthening of networks and relationships with long-term collaborations and mutual support extending beyond the programme
- Positive ripple effects in local communities, such as shared infrastructure or community-led initiatives that emerged from the container
- Several interviewees challenged the idea that success should be defined primarily by funders. They described how reporting requirements often shaped a programme's direction, privileging funder-friendly metrics over locally meaningful change. This can lead to misalignment between a container's intentions and its impact.
- These reflections remind us that success occurs at many levels: individual, collective, structural and relational. And, often, the most meaningful indicators can't be counted – they're felt, lived and sustained over time.

Key takeaway

Widen the indicators for what success means for programmes and containers.

"Whenever we have a [project to create an innovation-enabling container], we always do a reflective, sort of 'pain point' exercise to understand why we're doing this [container]." I18

Reflective questions

1. What motivates your framing of success? What are you trying to achieve and for whom?
2. Who are you inviting in to co-define what success looks like? How are you centring participants and local partners in this process?
3. What values guide your current indicators of success, and whose values are they?
4. In what ways are your success metrics rooted in lived experiences and aligned with the realities of the people directly involved?
5. What kinds of changes are visible (or felt) over time? Are you noticing growth in trust, confidence, healing or community connection?
6. How could you shift from measuring to observing?

Link to the next insight

We've now explored the ongoing groundwork that supports creating alternative containers for innovation. Next, we turn to insights around onboarding – how participants are selected and welcomed into a container.

Insight 7: Onboarding

Onboarding includes any exploratory or selection processes, as well as the activities that take place after participants are confirmed, but before the programme officially begins. It is a relational phase. In our process, interviewees challenged prescriptive ideas about who gets invited and questioned the power dynamics behind who decides who is included or considered.

Onboarding is the time in which you set the tone (**care-centred**) and the pace (**slowing down**). This phase then becomes less about gatekeeping and more about finding the right fit between the programme and the people. That's why we've included what might typically be called the 'selection process' here, because selection is a **two-way process**.

Care is both a noun and a verb, best applied slowly

"It's care by being seen. It's care by people feeling like, 'You get me. I feel understood in this space. I feel safe to share what I've been holding in my body'. It's care by being around and just knowing that you have 30 other people on a call that are all feeling the same way [...] that you feel protected. [...] It's care by the way that it's being facilitated and the invitations for people to be themselves, however they choose to show up throughout the experience. It's care in the aftermath, how we take care of the 'after'. So it's not a care that's like a direct relational one-to-one conversation, but it's care by the entire experience." I20

Care is a fundamental orientation that shapes how people are welcomed and supported in alternative and reflexive containers. As a noun, 'care' can refer to the provision of what is necessary for the health, welfare, maintenance and protection of someone or something. As a verb, it can mean 'to look after and provide for the needs of'.

During onboarding, care goes well beyond a warm welcome – it shows up in the structures, logistics, communication and pace of the programme. If you find yourself rushing to fill seats and launch, it may be time to redirect from speed to care.

When you slow down, you create space to get to know participants as human beings, understand what they're bringing with them, and sense what support might be needed later. It also makes room for participants to engage at their own rhythms, acknowledging that innovation doesn't happen on a fixed timeline. Innovation happens at different paces. Meet people where they are, not where your programme timeline says they should be.

Furthermore, a care-centred container creates space for sharing difficult emotions, encourages presence and helps prevent harm, not by promising perfection, but by embracing what is difficult, holding space for the uncomfortable and doing your best to *prevent* harm, while being open to getting it wrong and learning from it. When care is centred early, people feel safe to share honestly what they need to feel supported and to name when issues arise.

Finally, slowing down your onboarding process and taking more time to care for participants also means thinking long-term. Investing in relationships beyond the cohort timeline – for example, by setting up a network – creates trust. It affirms that care doesn't end when the programme does.

Trust-based relationships

For systemic change to emerge, we need interdisciplinarity, co-design and radical inclusion of diverse perspectives. But none of that matters if it is approached in an over-intellectualised way rather than practiced tangibly.

"Trust-based relationships enable everything else that a network aims to achieve. When people begin to connect and co-create in new ways, bound together by the strength of their relationships, magic happens. Conversations that were previously impossible become possible, alliances form between groups that used to consider each other competitors, audacious goals become attainable, and impact emerges at the system level. If at any point you feel unsure about how to proceed, invest in relationships." David Ehrlichman, *Impact Networks* (2021)

Insight in practice

Approach care from an asset-based perspective.

Example: One interviewee shared how she grounds care in her containers based on learnings from her most loving relationships.

"I think we all inherently know how to care. We just are stuck and indoctrinated in a very careless society, and so our work becomes careless, but maybe when we're with our child, we know what care is. So, we're just not embedding; we're not imparting the principles that we already know inherently into the work. And that's where I would start is to think inwards about what care looks and feels like in your most caring relationships and spaces. And then how does that become actualised through a programme that you're creating?" I20

Insight in practice

Design care into every part of your container.

Example: One interviewee spoke about how practical details like travel times, accommodations and budget constraints reflect whether people's wellbeing is truly considered.

"Asking whether care is across everything, including admin, procurement, travel, logistics...all of that matters. [...] A practical example is: we had this writing retreat with a very limited budget. We're going to the [retreat centre], which is six hours away from [the airport]. People are getting in at all sorts of times. [If they are landing at 3am but we're only picking them up at noon], making sure that we're booking people a hotel space for them to have a shower, a nap if they need to [...].

How many hours is somebody travelling? Is there a shorter way? **Because the [longer] trip might be cheaper, but then it means that they're subsidising your budgets with their bodies and time, and that's really not fair.** *Making sure that there's a feminist underpinning in our finance manuals, in our HR, in all of those things, has been very hard to do without very many reference points for us to borrow from. And we've had to open it up and think for ourselves." I27*

Insight in practice

Invest in people over the long term.

Example: Many programmes operate in fast-paced cycles, onboarding one cohort while already fundraising for the next. This turnover model can weaken relationships, reduce long-term impact and lead participants to feel used rather than supported. One interviewee reflected on this dynamic, describing how organisations often showcase the success of a cohort without being able to reinvest in them because of funding cycles focusing on the next one.

"You have a great group of people that then the organisation fundraises off by saying: 'We gathered these 20 organisations, 20 fellows,' and you then have a really nice report that says 'Our fellows achieved XYZ and impact'...then that funding and resource support doesn't go back to Cohort One, and obviously trust is broken. 'Have we been taken advantage of?'" Adib Dada

Key takeaway

Care for participants in ways that make them feel that their needs are always centred.

Reflective questions

1. What does care look and feel like to you in your most trusted relationships? How might those feelings translate into how you design your container?
2. How are you building rest and wellbeing into the programme – for participants *and* for yourself? Where in your programme are rest and wellbeing acknowledged as part of the work and not separate from it?
3. How do you invite and engage with difficult or emotionally charged topics?
4. What practices are in place to help participants share what they need to feel supported and safe? How are you making that feedback welcome and actionable?
5. What opportunities are you creating for reciprocity in the container? How can participants contribute, offer or ask for what they need from others early in the process?
6. How might you invite participants to connect with the more-than-human world as part of feeling grounded and supported?
7. Have you received training in care-based facilitation? If not, what support or learning could help you grow in your ability to hold space with sensitivity and skill?
8. How are you funding or supporting participants in a way that provides long-term stability?
9. Where in (or between) your programme could you build in more breathing room, like buffers around deliverables, timelines or expectations?
10. What would change if you measured success over several years instead of just months?
11. Is the cohort model the best fit for the people you're working with? What other models, such as on-demand support, coaching or community-based learning, might better reflect their pace and needs?

Link to the next insight

Care sets the tone, slow sets the rhythm. Now, is the container a good fit for the innovators?

Insight 8: Exploring 'the fit' should always be a two-way process

"You need to first identify who are the [innovators] and what their needs are. Then you can see if [your programme] is fitting for them or not." I26

In many programmes, selection is framed as a one-way process: the programme chooses the participants. Here is an alternative slow and relational approach: treat the onboarding process as a mutual exploration of fit – a two-way process in which spaciousness is built to test a genuine mutual fit for both innovators and those coordinating the programme. A process where both hold the power to say yes or no. Imagine that while they're applying to your programme, you're applying to have them involved.

A two-way process recognises that commitment goes both ways. It is an appropriate reorientation of power, based on reciprocity and valuing innovators' needs and expectations. It means seeing facilitators not just as selectors, but as applicants in their own right. Innovators are no longer 'lucky' to be chosen, they're collaborators whose energy, time and insight shape the container. This is why it's also a beneficial reorientation of power: it's in the container's best interest for potential participants to have a say from the very beginning about how the onboarding process and subsequent container are set up.

There is an important precursor to this two-way process. Interviewees noted that while network-driven selection often helped identify values-aligned participants, they warned that it can also reproduce sameness, as people tend to nominate those within their own circles.

To counter this, some emphasised the need for more diverse and inclusive selection teams. By broadening who gets to make decisions across gender, race, geography and class, containers can stay aligned with their commitment to equity. Invite a diverse group of people to take part in your selection process.

When participants feel seen and chosen with care, they show up with greater trust and deeper engagement. The (co-) selection process, in this way, becomes an act of relationship-building, not just filtering.

Key takeaway

Approach onboarding as your first, relational feedback loop for the container you're creating.

Reflective questions

1. How are you limiting your idea of who should join? What barriers are preventing people from considering your programme? And how could you alleviate these?
2. What language can you use in your outreach materials to attract people with a genuine interest and mutual fit?
3. Who is responsible for making selection decisions? What perspectives or experiences might be missing from that team?

4. How are you gathering anonymous feedback from people who go through your selection process – your participants *and* people who do not join the programme – and from people who implemented your selection process? Ask about the details. Ask what landed with participants. What didn't land well? Document, formalise and iterate on your processes based on this feedback.

Link to the next insight

You now have a caring and slow onboarding and selection process, you set the trust and connection, keep going, you are setting the premise for everyone to feel comfortable to show up as they are.

Insight 9: Tending

Creativity flows when participants feel they can show up as their full selves

Because of the container that we have, we are always holding the personal, but with this understanding that the personal reverberates through all of the other layers. Through that [container], we are able to draw out learning that then would [impact our professional lives]. It's really held very tenderly." Wangũi wa Kamonji

Creativity thrives in spaces where people feel safe to be fully themselves – where they can express not only their ideas, but also their emotions, uncertainties and lived experiences. Interviewees emphasised that when participants feel seen and accepted without fear of judgement, trust deepens and authenticity becomes the ground from which creativity can flourish.

To create this kind of environment, containers need a balance of structure and spaciousness. Through programme design, clear agendas and predictable rhythms, structure helps participants feel held and co-regulated. Within these structures, you may facilitate the conditions for vulnerability and emotional safety by using tools and methods that invite people to bring their full selves into the space. This might include storytelling – encouraging participants to share their motivations and life journeys through structured prompts – or reflection prompts on personal and cultural practices, such as ancestry, values or deeply held beliefs. These practices help participants feel seen beyond their roles or outputs.

Within that structure, intentionally designed open time – 'unstructured space' – can allow for emergent conversations, personal reflection and intimate connection. These moments often lead to breakthroughs in creativity because participants can release what may be constraining them and engage more freely with creativity. Interviewees shared specific strategies, including building one-on-one relational time into the programme and hosting in-person gatherings or retreats where unstructured time together abounds during everyday tasks.

Facilitation is what holds the overall programme design structure with care. The number one priority should be holding space for others. There may be times when it is appropriate for the facilitator to model vulnerability. Whether or not the container is strong enough for the facilitator to switch roles in this way is something they need to sense for themselves.

Insight in practice

Small personal moments, even in an online programme, helped create meaningful relationships

Example: One interviewee shared how they have often felt they could either be an innovator or a parent or friend, but have rarely felt permission to be all of these at the same time within a programme.

"There is an entire person that has a profession coming into this space, and I think interventions like check-ins and building out a system that allows for a person to say, "I just did my first 5k!" and you start to build relationships around things like that, and you show care by showing interest and genuinely getting to know somebody. [...] If you can open up a

door to that, then you have a platform for care and allyship." I9

Insight in practice

In-person meetings and activities open space for personal sharing.

Example: One interviewee shared how an in-person retreat allowed for deeper connections through the sharing of everyday tasks.

"The convenings that we did were pretty radical and different, not only in terms of the depth that we went to, but the fact that people are all staying at the same big rental house, or same small retreat centre, which means you're cooking together and cleaning together and you have the in-between moments. You're able to stay up late and do things in the early morning, and you have a lot of unstructured time after having deep experiences with one another. So much of the magic happened in that unstructured time." David Ehrlichman

Key takeaway

Structure unstructured time into programmes.

Reflective questions

1. How are you balancing facilitation and personal sharing?
2. How can you ensure that your incubator programme does not encourage participants to oversell themselves based on their innovations or formal qualifications? How can you create an environment that invites participants to introduce themselves more fully and authentically, beyond just their achievements?
3. How can you use mutually-supportive and non-extractive practices to promote a culture of care between programme participants?
4. How are you encouraging listening and sharing resonance without fixes or judgements? How are you supporting participants in maintaining a safe space with each other?
5. When are you allowing silent moments for reflection?
6. How are you creating a speaking order and giving 'permission' for people to pass if they don't wish to? Is sharing optional or forced?
7. Invite participants to reflect on and share about their personal lives and cultures. Consider prompting to share on ancestry and values as a way for participants to bring their whole selves into the process.

Link to the next insight

Trusted spaces and relationships are necessary for people to share their experiences openly.

Unstructured time for being yourself supports a safer space and offers opportunities to bring up feedback.

Insight 10:
Learnings are only as valuable as the space you create for receiving and integrating them

"And we would be stupid to not apply those learnings to how we are conducting ourselves and how we are conducting [our programme]." I18

When you continue to listen carefully to participant feedback from conversations or surveys, you have a real opportunity to learn and improve your programme. Without an iterative approach, the container risks becoming rigid and ineffective over time.

To the extent that your resources allow, align with what participants express that they need, whether that be emotional support, professional connections, access to funding or something else. Move from a mindset of dictating the programme to the participants to one that nurtures the imagining of new worlds.

The ability to recognise when something is not working and adjust accordingly was described as a necessary skill for both programme implementers and participants. You can then create opportunities for asynchronous collaboration with participants to continue to co-design a better programme for everyone.

Iterative co-design and adaptation must be present at every level: within the programme structure, in relationships between participants and convenors, and interactions between innovation-enabling programmes and funders.

Expect to change course by experimenting, learning from successes and failures, and iterating as conditions evolve through reflexive practice. The container you create will change, must change based on what you are learning.

Rigidity will break you

Containers are often rigid in their structures, imposing standardised curricula and predetermined success metrics. This rigidity risks sidelining the diverse and evolving needs of participants. Incubators and accelerators can exert control over entrepreneurs, with structures that prioritise conformity over autonomy, as discussed by three German researchers, Lorenzo Skade, Matthias Wenzel, and Jochen Koch, in their 2021 paper, "*Do as we say and you'll be successful*". They describe participants adjusting to fit the incubator and accelerator expectations rather than developing approaches aligned with their own strategic goals.

Additionally, funders often take a fixed approach by continuing to finance incubators and accelerators without considering whether different forms of support, such as loan access, might better serve the ecosystem as it evolves.

Western approaches to problem-solving exacerbate these issues by relying on deliberate planning and execution, which are ill-suited for complex, nonlinear challenges, as highlighted by David Ehrlichman in *Impact Networks*.

"Predicting the path may be the obstacle to achieving the purpose." From Peter Block's 2009 book, *Community: The Structure of Belonging*

Insight in practice

Learnings and adaptation are best integrated together in person.

Example: One interviewee explains how their programme design team has annual retreats for reflection and adaptations.

"We have an annual retreat and reflection space where we come together, look at what we did the last year, look at what we'd like to do, what questions are pending, what work did we do last year that we think has pivoted into something else?" I27

Insight in practice

Make yourself available for feedback.

Example: One interviewee emphasised how they make themself available to feedback through one-on-one check-ins as well as creating group support systems.

"The cohort was digital, not in person. [...] We made ourselves available for feedback. We made ourselves available to connect with participants if they had questions. We provided optional check-ins throughout the sessions, as well, so that people could join if they weren't [able to], if something wasn't 'landing' and they wanted more time [to discuss] as a group. [...] So, it's woven in the whole experience." I20

Insight in practice

Adopt flat leadership structures, and encourage peer-to-peer learning, mentorship and support, both formally and informally.

Example: Many programmes claim to provide mentorship expertise or exclusive expert sessions. Yet the criteria for expertise are often ambiguous. Instead of

universalising approaches, decentralise expertise and clarify where and how methods are developed, ensuring they are relevant to participants.

Insight in practice

Instead of dictating the direction, observe how participants naturally connect and form interest groups.

Example: One interviewee points out how they create space for participants to bring up interests and let collaboration emerge.

"So, we also want to have space for interest groups – for anybody who's interested in anything to just connect and then explore what can emerge collaboratively. We don't have strong feelings about that – it's just whatever the community is drawn to." Ryan Littman-Quinn

Example: One interviewee described how the facilitators approached the container as a collaborative space.

"The practices that they were introducing in the incubator were part of the relationship building. [...] They're not coming in like, 'I'm inviting you to be this part of this, and we're going to help make you change,' but rather, 'We see you wanting to innovate something. We're here to work with you.'" I19

Co-design your container through a relational, multi-year process of radical participatory design that centres potential participants of the alternative container, and get inspired by Victor Udoewa's work on radical participatory design.

Key takeaway

Make the time and create the processes needed for ongoing iteration.

Reflective questions

1. Where in the programme do you build in moments for your convening team to pause, reflect and adjust?
2. What (anonymous) feedback mechanisms do you have in place? How are you encouraging transparency and accountability in responding to the feedback?
3. What relationships and activities are organically emerging from participants? How can you best support or amplify these?

Leverage systems thinking tools, such as sense-making, systems mapping of leverage points and barriers, and visioning. Think in a time-bound way:

4. What is needed this year? In the next five years?
5. Are you allowing enough time for meaningful co-design with participants and partners? What would it look like to co-create over months or years instead of a single planning phase?

Link to summary of insights or key takeaways

Be ready to continue to do groundwork as you onboard participants and tend to your alternative container.

Below, we have provided a summary of all the insights and takeaways presented and a list of suggested resources to dive in more deeply as you'd like.

Summary of insights and key takeaways

Ongoing groundwork

Insight	Key takeaway
So many great things already exist, yet innovation often starts with what's wrong.	Start every process with strengths, nurturing what's already working.
A container is only as strong as the values embodied by its creators.	Deepen into values-aligned practice by differentiating between your 'lived' versus 'aspirational' values.
Use of language is one of the most tangible ways power is (in)appropriately wielded.	Revisit the use of language regularly.
Demonstrated awareness of intersectional power dynamics is critical for containers to feel safe.	Invest in unlearning colonial conditioning.
Embodied self-awareness is a gateway to providing trauma-informed support.	Strengthen your capacity to 'sense' what's going on – for you and others – by engaging with embodied practices.
The most meaningful indicators of success often can't be counted – they're felt, lived and sustained over time.	Widen the indicators for what success is for programmes and containers.

Onboarding

Insight	Key takeaway
Care is both a noun *and* a verb best applied slowly.	Care for participants in ways that make them feel their needs are centred.
Exploring 'the fit' between innovators and programmes should be a two-way process.	Approach onboarding as your first, relational feedback loop for the container you're creating.

Tending

Insight	Key takeaway
Creativity flows when participants feel they can show up as their full selves.	Build unstructured time into programmes.
Learnings are only as valuable as the space you create for receiving and integrating them.	Make the time and create the processes needed for ongoing iteration.

Our methods

Research outside the box

We used several traditional research approaches in this project, including a literature review, mapping relevant organisations and groups, a pre-interview survey, and 27 insight-gathering interviews.

We moved *outside the box* in three key areas:

- Our relationships with those participating in the study
- The fluidity of the interview approach and structure
- The process of deciding what to include in the final report

Our hopes for relationality beyond extractivism

In reflecting on whom to invite for an interview, we realised something important: for interviewees to feel safe enough to share openly, they would need to trust us, because sharing openly requires safety. Such safety was unlikely to be created through traditional approaches, such as cold outreach via email. To gain perspectives we could trust, we had to start with people with whom we had already built trusting relationships.

As a result, almost every person we interviewed had been previously connected to someone on our research team. We also welcomed recommendations from others on the Post Growth Institute team and made space for snowball sampling, where interviewees suggested others whose perspectives could contribute to the study.

At the same time, we were committed to centring voices that are typically excluded from or exploited in these kinds of studies: primarily BIPOC, women and non-binary folks, largely from the Global South.

We began with a guiding question: *How do we ensure our interviewees feel excited, included and welcomed in this study?*

This question led to several intentional adaptations:

- Less formal and academic language in our outreach and correspondence
- We asked interviewees what they hoped to gain from the study
- We designed a clear and accessible consent form outlining interviewee rights

In wanting to openly acknowledge the (often unacknowledged) extractive and exploitative history of research engaging participants, particularly from the Majority World, we took intentional steps, including

- We offered stipends to anyone requesting one for their collaboration, while also learning that, for some, the idea of stipends felt transactional (and problematic if requiring a bank account for their receipt)
- We committed to making the final report open-access

- We confirmed with interviewees their full ownership of their transcripts, so they can use what they shared in any way they wish
- We offered interviewees different options for being referenced and acknowledged on their terms in the final report, providing alternatives to the default of anonymity often assumed in traditional research

Engaging in iterative design

For most interviews, two members of our team were intentionally present. This allowed for shared reflection and processing after each conversation and proved especially valuable. When we truly paid attention to interviewees' reactions and feelings during the interviews, we realised there was so much more we could learn, which led us to iteratively reframe our interview questions. We re-evaluated the language and assumptions embedded in our interview questions, which helped us stay attuned to the needs and experiences of our interviewees while still holding to the overall structure of our interview protocol.

Finding patterns, with consent-based decision-making

With a significant amount of data collected – more than 400 pages of transcripts – we considered how to do justice to the nuances shared by the interviewees, especially given the relatively short extent the final report would have.

In response, we took an embodied approach by seeking insights across interviews and then collectively sharing proposals for what we felt those (often assumption-shattering) learnings were. This approach allowed each of us to reflect on whether those proposals felt right, including whether they held genuine alignment with the interviews and reading of the transcripts. As part of our discussions, we explored what we, as researchers, were learning through the process. This helped us acknowledge when our bodies told us that someone was proposing something profound, even if our training, general conditioning and reasoning left us feeling otherwise. We only proceeded with including insights when the whole research team gave consent.

Conclusion

This report offers an invitation to enter into the *practice* of nurturing alternative innovation work, with reflexivity at its centre.

Perhaps, when you began reading, you were expecting or hoping for a toolkit or a list of alternative containers for innovation to mimic or work with. We shied away from such an approach, in part to honour what the interviewees told us. And also, because we're not convinced there's *a singular* formula for creating a container that's relational, responsive and transformative. There is no 'how' that can be pinned down once and for all. Sometimes the *how* is in a pause, a breath, a small shift in tone during a conversation. Other times, it's a decade-long commitment to shaping something that emerges slowly, through trust, connection and iteration.

What we've heard through this research is not a set of technical steps, but a call for an ongoing process of learning. It's a call to listen...deeply. To the people you're working with. To the quieter voices in the room. To yourself.

It's also a call to recognise the privilege of facilitation. Creating and holding a container for others is not neutral work. It carries weight and responsibility. Honouring that role means doing the ongoing groundwork, not just before a programme begins, but throughout and long after it ends.

We know this can be difficult. The conditions within which we work – funding models, capitalist time pressures, expectations and deliverables – often reward speed and certainty over slowness and care. But turning away from those pressures, even a little, opens up something else. A space where alternative values can be lived. Where innovation can feel like healing.

This reflexive work is messy, iterative and often invisible. It's also deeply meaningful. So we invite you to not just *read* this report, but to practise with it. Use it in your conversations, your design sessions, your moments of doubt. We hope it might be something you find value in returning to.

We'd also love to hear how this report landed with you. If something resonated, raised a question or sparked a story of your own, please reach out at research@postgrowth.org.

Suggested further resources

Ongoing groundwork

The Power of Asset-Based Approaches in Mobilizing for Social Change (article)

How to Identify and Eliminate Exclusionary Language at Work (article)

Ableist words and terms to avoid (blog post)

Hospicing Modernity : Facing Humanity's Wrongs and the Implications for Social Activism (book)

(Divorcing) White supremacy culture (website)

How to recognize your white privilege — and use it to fight inequality (talk)

Wheel of Privilege and Power (graphic)

Operationalizing values (toolkit)

Cards for Life (card deck)

Collective Impact (article)

Onboarding

Relational design (podcast episode)

In Praise of Slow (book)

How to Hack hackathons (guide)

Tending

Liberating structures (facilitation toolkit)

Offers and Needs Markets (method)

Holding Change (book)

No More Gold Stars (book)

Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World that Can't Stop Talking (book)

Using design principles to make incubator & accelerator programming more equitable (article)

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