From Changing Systems to Changing Our Capacity to Change

Ten years of practical work with systems innovation in Sweden — and what I believe the next decade will require.

By Pia McAleenan

A few weeks ago, I was invited to take part in a panel discussion at the launch of the report ***State of Systems Innovation*** in Sweden.

It was a good opportunity to reflect on the ten years we have now spent working in this field, and on what the next ten years might hopefully bring.

Relevant links

State of Systems Innovation Paper Launch

I have led Förnyelselabbet since 2016 — roughly as long as systems innovation has been becoming an increasingly established part of Sweden's development landscape. When we started, the language was different. Looking back over these ten years, I am struck by how much has actually happened.

But I also think we are facing a new shift. Not from systems innovation to something else. Rather, we are moving deeper into what systems innovation actually needs to be.

In 2016, we were focused on getting the right people into the room. Then we realised that we needed to change how people work together. Looking ahead, our focus needs to shift to building societies' capacity to learn and change.

When Förnyelselabbet started, much of our work was shaped by service design, user-centred approaches, participation and new forms of collaboration. We wanted other voices to be part of development work: residents, young people, professionals and civil society. That mattered then, and it still matters.

For me, this has always been connected to my background in education and organisational development. I have a fundamental belief in people: they are capable of understanding, creating, learning and changing more than our systems sometimes allow them to.

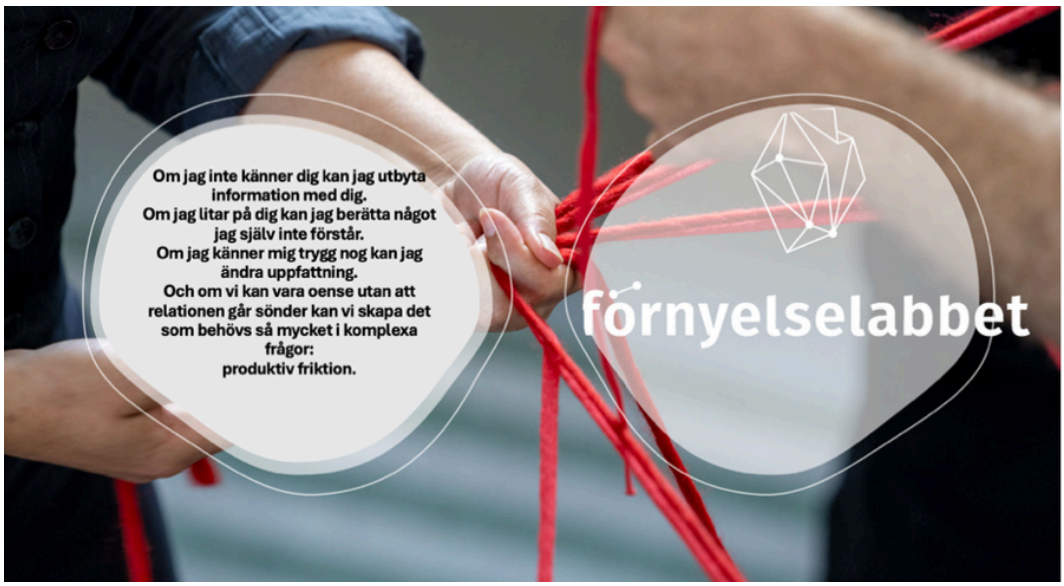
A social worker who meets people every day in the gaps between parts of the system knows things about that system that no organisational chart can show. A young person knows things about society that adults do not always see. A community association knows things about a place that do not appear in municipal statistics. These are not merely “perspectives” to be included in a process. They are knowledge about how systems actually work.

Participation is therefore not only a democratic principle. It is also an epistemological principle. If we want to understand complex systems, the people who live within them must be able to help make them intelligible.

After a few years, however, another question began to emerge: is it enough to get people into the room? We discovered that you can have all the right people around the table and still carry on doing things more or less as before. Perhaps we remain stuck in structures, organisational principles and mental models of how work should best be done. This motivated us at Förnyelselabbet and led us further.

In several of our processes, it became clear that participation and collaboration alone were not enough. We needed to change the relationships between the actors themselves.

The project **Samäga** became an important lesson. Together with, among others, the Police and the County Administrative Board, we worked on issues involving young people, crime and community development. We began with the familiar concept of collaboration. Gradually, though, it became clear that collaboration could be too superficial. You can collaborate while retaining your own perspective, mandate, logic and solution. We needed to try something else: what happens when we genuinely begin to share ownership of a situation? That meant listening to one another differently. Daring to stay with uncertainty. Allowing our different kinds of knowledge to challenge one another. Doing things together before we knew exactly where they would lead. It was a shift from collaboration to shared exploration and responsibility.



And it taught me something important: relationships are not just what make change work more pleasant. Relationships are part of the infrastructure for change and learning.

But this raises another question: if we can now get people to work together in new ways, how do we make continued learning possible? This is where I believe systems innovation stands today. We have become better at understanding systems. We have more methods. More people can work with complexity. We have built a strong ecosystem of research, funding, the public sector, innovation actors, civil society and practitioners. We should take good care of it. But I do not think the next step is primarily to add another toolkit on top of everything we already know.

We need to build our collective capacity to learn. With complex societalchallenges, we cannot always know the solution in advance. We must be able to act without complete certainty, observe what happens, learn from the consequences and change direction. That is why one phrase has become increasingly important to me: “To renew is to learn.” Renewal is not a state we reach. It is a system’s ability to detect change, question its assumptions, develop its judgement and act in new ways. Learning, therefore, does not come after change. Learning is part of change itself.

This also challenges some of the norms around which we have built our organisations:

- Predictability
- Clearly defined outputs
- Short project cycles
- Measurability

These norms are not unimportant. But they become problematic when they lead us to believe that complex societal challenges can be handled as though we already know what needs to be produced. What might happen if, instead, we saw time, relationships, experimentation, reflection and judgement as productive resources rather than costs?

This is why I have become increasingly interested in Per Olsson’s thinking about **transformative backlash**. Change does not only encounter resistance; it can also generate backlash and polarisation, particularly in the in-between period when the old no longer holds but the new has not yet taken shape. Per Olsson and colleagues point to three capacities that can help us navigate this: keeping hope and imagination alive; “hospicing” what needs to be allowed to leave with dignity; and enabling radical collaboration while finding the strength to hold paradoxes and contradictions.

For me, this is another reason to see learning as a central capacity for transition. We need to create provisional spaces where people can be together in difficult situations — where we can understand what happens to us, our relationships and our assumptions as what we know changes. Perhaps only then can we begin to change without losing what genuinely needs to come with us.

This is also why I feel hopeful when I see what is beginning to take shape in Sweden. **SustainGov** interests me because it creates an opportunity to think beyond individual projects — to build capacity, platforms and relationships over time. We need more of this. Systems change needs something our projects rarely have:

Time

Time for relationships to deepen.

Time for learning to accumulate.

Time to see what actually emerges.

Time to connect learning across places and levels.

Time both to build something new and to phase out what no longer works.

This is where I believe the concept of system stewardship becomes important.

People and organisations that do not own the transformation itself, but sustain relationships, create the conditions for learning, connect perspectives and take responsibility for a system's capacity over time. A system steward does not always know where we are going. But they help ensure that the system can keep learning where it needs to go.

Looking back on ten years with Förnyelselabbet, I think our role has changed too: from helping people do innovation to creating spaces where people can learn by doing. That is an important distinction. I do not think people always need to take a course to develop their capacity to work with complexity. Sometimes they need to work on the real issue, with the people actually affected, with the real conflict, in the place where change needs to happen — and be given the time and support to try, reflect, understand and try again.

That is also why we are now exploring local transition labs: places where residents, professionals, organisations and others can develop their community while also developing their own capacity to change it. Timrå's **Framtidsverkstan** is a good example.

A dialogue with young people, among other things, led to the creation of a concrete garage park. But to me, the most interesting thing is not the garage park itself. It is the capacity built through creating it. Young people gain experience of their ideas influencing the place where they live. Public-sector employees gain experience of developing things together with those affected. The municipality gets to practise a different way of creating change. And knowledge emerges through the doing itself. This is learning as societal change.

So, when I think about the coming ten years, I do not want to leave systems innovation behind. I want to go deeper: from getting people into the room, to changing the relationships between people and organisations, to building societies' capacity to learn, renew and change.

I believe we need to move:

- From innovation infrastructure to learning infrastructure.
- From collaboration to shared ownership and stewardship.
- From participation as a method to participation as knowledge and agency.
- From ready-made solutions to learning through action.
- From the system leader who knows the way to the system steward who keeps the capacity alive.

And perhaps above all:

From trying to change systems — to changing our capacity to change.

This is not a call to start again from scratch. On the contrary, it is an attempt to make use of ten years of learning and ask: what do we need to build now, together? I do not believe any single actor has the answer. We need research, funding, politics, government agencies, municipalities, civil society, business, innovation actors, residents and practitioners. We need the different strengths each of us brings. Perhaps this is precisely the next great task for systems innovation in Sweden: not only to build individuals' capacity to think and work systemically, but to build the relationships, places and infrastructures that enable many more people to learn and act together. That is where I believe the real power to create change lies.

Not with the few who know the systems best.

But with the many who live in them.