Spaces for Relational Readiness

How do we build on the experiences we gain through our projects and bring them into a more locally rooted context? Pia reflects on what the path forward might look like.

By Pia McAleenan

We live in a time when words such as resilience, preparedness and civil defence have become part of our everyday vocabulary.

Our conversations often focus on technology, stockpiling, cybersecurity or the distribution of responsibilities. All of these are essential. But perhaps there is something equally important.

I am beginning to think that what we often speak of as trust and relationship-building should be understood as something equally strategic — something that builds capacity.

Because in a complex world, there will always be spaces in between.

Between government agencies, municipalities, research and practice. Between the public sector and business. And between people.

We often try to close these gaps with new structures, new processes or new technologies. But perhaps the most important thing we can build is something else: close relationships and a kind of connective tissue between those of us who make up society.

A form of relational readiness, built from the trust and curiosity that exist between us.

I see this even in my own voluntary work as chair of a small cultural association. Part of the mission becomes simply to connect, in the place where I live, with other people who are living their lives in that same place — and to discover what we might be capable of when strengthened by one another.

Relational readiness does not necessarily show up in organisational charts.

It reveals itself when someone feels able to call a colleague in another organisation before a problem becomes a crisis.

When people from different professions have developed enough shared understanding to make decisions together.

When, by the time a crisis actually arrives, the trust is already there.

This idea has also helped me put words to what I believe Förnyelselabbet has been working with for almost ten years.

We may not always have used this language. But when we design learning communities, futures labs, artistic experiences, shared meals or systems workshops, ultimately we are working with the same thing.

We are not only building knowledge. We are building relational capacity.

We create experiences of thinking together.

We help people practise moving across organisational boundaries.

We build small bridges long before anyone needs to run across them.

Perhaps this is also how we strengthen the resilience of society.

Not only through robust systems.

But through robust relationships.

And perhaps this is another way of understanding preparedness.

Not only as building readiness for what we know might happen.
Relational readiness also helps us meet what we do not yet know.

It is less about optimising the systems we have today, and more about increasing our collective capacity as a society to face the unknown — together.