

Urban Doers Community

Korimako

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Thriving Communities

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Abstract

Korimako is developing Thriving Communities - a collective initiative with a mission to help communities to create radical enough change to thrive in the 21st century.

By thriving we mean that communities attain high levels of wellbeing for everyone, while getting back to living within the ecological and physical limits of their local environment and Planet Earth.

Unfortunately, our communities are dealing with a convergence of crises that have been clear and escalating for some time, while our collective response has been insufficient. Rather than rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented change we are still only managing slow and incremental change. This adds up to a chronic failure that is undermining people's quality of life today and our children's opportunity for a thriving future.

So, Thriving Communities focusses on the core problem of how communities can organise, resource, plan and manage radical enough processes of change so that everyone can genuinely come to live and thrive within planetary boundaries.

We used the Urban Doers opportunity to explore how to better find effective leaders and communities that really demand radical change, and thus want the help and support that we aim to offer with Thriving Communities. We also aimed to address how more suitable funding streams for catalysing urban transformation processes could be designed, and where they might come from.

Our Urban Doers experience reinforced that Thriving Communities is trying to tackle an important but very difficult space. Almost all of our communities' current tools to organise, resource, plan and manage change are reinforcing doing more-of-much-the-same, when this is clearly not good enough. We find people who are genuinely committed to radical urban transformation work, but not many organisations.

If communities will get much better at urban transformation and mission-led change, then we would highlight that they need to create models that free the people who have the aptitude and passion for leading urban transformation and mission-led change to learn and work differently. This means creating organising models that makes this the number one job for these people.

Much aligned effort is also needed to develop suitable models for governing, funding and resourcing mission-led change. This is a challenge that can be taken up by public and philanthropic funders at local, regional, national and EU scales. We need many more of these actors, who hold great power over how public-interest money is spent, to take up this challenge.

The question remains, which communities will emerge as being the first to really commit to doing things radically differently and better, in order to really create a thriving future? Thriving Communities will continue working to create answers.

Key Lessons:

1. Amongst the demands of immediate work, it is still hard for many people who are focussed on 'urban doing' to carve out time to build their capacities for working on the big picture of urban transformation and mission-led change. We get a strong sense that many people are interested, but struggle to free themselves from current time and organisational constraints to learn and work differently.
2. Working on the big picture of urban transformation and mission-led change is not for everyone. We do find people who are genuinely committed to leading radical urban transformation work, but not many organisations are yet ready to fully embed such commitment. We then find that the people who have the aptitude to do this important work are rarely empowered to do so. It is not made their primary job. The question remains how communities can better empower a suitable team to hold the big view and mission (what we call mission incubators), so that other change work can be more effectively aligned to support mission-led change. This requires more dedicated funding and resourcing of suitable roles.
3. In context of the DUT programme, we are not convinced that it is possible to meaningfully embed mission-led urban change work within the frame of research and innovation work. They are rather different things and accordingly require differently designed funding streams. We heard DUT grappling with this question, and suggested development of a complementary funding stream that could meaningfully address this tension and create synergies.
4. Much more work is needed to develop suitable enabling models for governing, organising, funding and resourcing mission-led change at a local community scale. This is a challenge that can be taken up by public and philanthropic funders at local, regional, national and EU scales. We need many more of these actors, who hold great power over how public-interest money is spent, to take up the challenge of effectively supporting mission-led community change.
5. Our Urban Doers experience further highlighted the factors that in are play in the difficult space that Thriving Communities is trying to tackle. We must radically change paths if our communities and humanity will have a thriving future. More-of-much-the-same clearly will not deliver such radical change. Almost of our communities' current tools to organise, resource, plan and manage change are still reinforcing doing more-of-much-the-same. The question remains, which communities will emerge as being the first to really commit to doing things radically differently and better? Thriving Communities will continue working to create answers to this question.

Thriving Communities

Thriving Communities is a collective initiative with a mission to help communities to create radical enough change to thrive in the 21st century.

By thriving we mean that communities attain high levels of wellbeing for everyone, while getting back to living within the ecological and physical limits of their local environment and Planet Earth. This is the safe and just space for humanity famously framed in the 'doughnut' model of sustainable development drawn by Kate Raworth (see <https://doughnuteconomics.org/>). Integrating a couple of other big picture frameworks, we draw a safe and just space for humanity as follows, to use for framing the target for Thriving Communities on a local community scale.

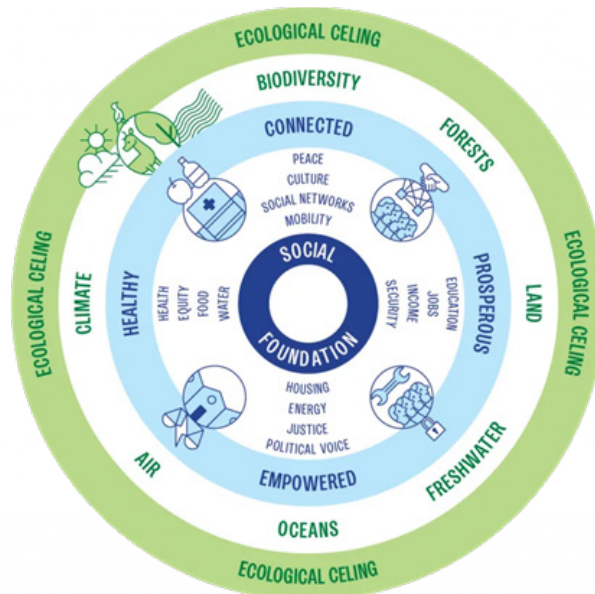


Figure 1: Thriving Communities Framework. Source: Korimako

Unfortunately, our communities are now dealing with a global convergence of challenges: inequality, climate breakdown, injustice, ecological collapse, pollution, recurring financial crises, hunger, corruption, pandemics, kleptocracy, racism and conflict.

Many of these crises facing us have been clear and escalating for some time, but our collective response has been insufficient. Rather than rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented change in response; what we are managing is still too slow, too incremental and too narrow to really address our systemic problems, and their underlying drivers. This adds up to a chronic failure that is undermining most people's quality of life today and our children's future.

We must change course.

Finding different pathways to create truly Thriving Communities is therefore the overall grand challenge facing humanity, and all urban communities.

We essentially know what we need to do to create thriving communities. We need clean energy and mobility systems. We need healthy and comfortable homes and public spaces. We need effective and transparent governments and governance. We need regenerative local food production and bioeconomies. We need economic structures like taxes, money and banking that work for everyone not just a few people. We need circular material flows that sustain our economies. We need meaningful work for all, with time left to enjoy life with friends and family. None of these things are unachievable and we are not short of technical solutions to make them real. We have known for some time what we should do, yet we have not meaningfully done it.

We believe that this overall failure stems from structural problems in how communities are working to create change and progress. Therefore, Thriving Communities focuses on the core problem of how communities can organise, resource, plan and manage radical enough processes of change so that everyone can genuinely come to live and thrive within planetary boundaries.

Korimako is working to develop Thriving Communities as a collective initiative, as we believe that the problems we tackle are beyond what any single organisation can address on their own. We create space and support for collaborative work amongst those who are committed to creating radical change to help their communities thrive.

We are currently focussed on working with communities in South-east Europe, as a region with significant opportunities and challenges.

Our Approach

The Thriving Communities approach to working on the problem of how communities can organise, resource, plan and manage radical enough processes of change is built around the following eight interlinked elements:

- Civic Imagination Regeneration
- Mission-led Change
- Mission Incubators
- Enablers of Change
- Change Process Management
- Portfolio Development & Management
- Transformative Investment
- Collective Learning

These elements provide the basis for the training, learning and support programmes that we have been developing on Mission-led Community Change, as a mission-led way of working helps to anchor the different elements of our approach. Our combination of trainings, learning opportunities and coaching helps to equip community actors with the fundamentals of taking a mission-led approach to holistic change.

To help guide us in tackling the 'how' of making radical change happen, we use the below 'enablers of change' framework. This is drawn from much collective experience of what needs to be done well for any community to create really successful and transformational changes that have deep social benefits. In our experience, work on these critical enablers is often not well enough organised and resourced within project structures, which significantly hinders eventual progress and impact. In this sense, these enablers are like the roots of a tree, without nurturing them we cannot be surprised if the tree does not flourish. We see many positive trends in Europe where greater importance is being placed on improving these enablers, rather than adding them on to technical change and innovation work. At the same time, we still see a need for many more urban transformation initiatives that are better designed for this important work.

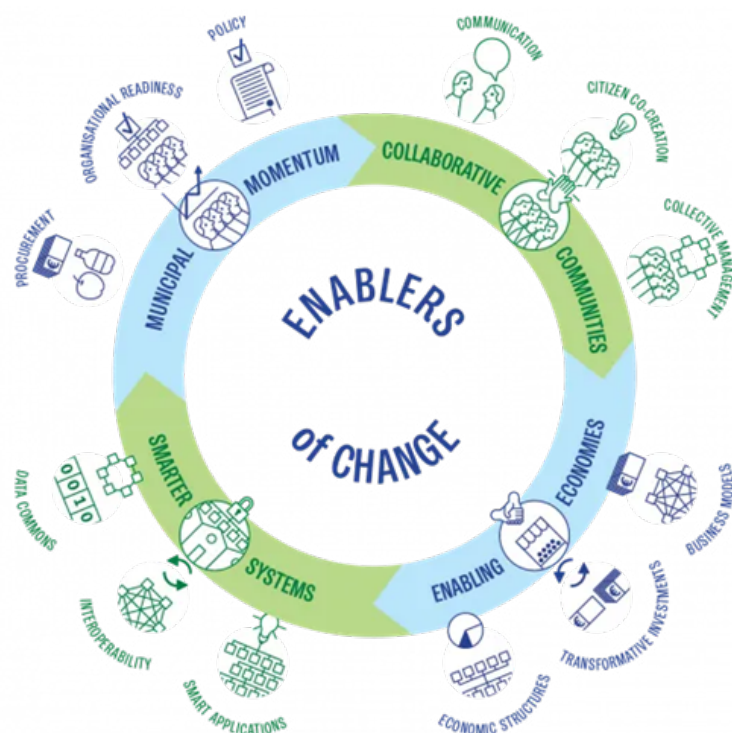


Figure 2: Enablers of Change Framework. Source: Korimako

More information on the elements of our overall approach can be found here: <https://thriving-communities.org/our-approach>

We work to bring together our approach through working with our members and communities across the following key action areas:

- Placemaking for Civic Imagination
- Climate-neutral Cities
- Community Energy
- Regenerative Bioeconomies
- Transforming Community Mobility
- 21st Century Neighbourhoods
- Just Transitions
- Resilience
- National Community Mission Incubators

Do these areas cover everything needed to reach fully thriving communities? Unlikely. But we think that working holistically across these areas will generate a comprehensive spread of action that: responds to where communities are generally starting from; leads to a mix of quicker wins and deeper systems change; aligns to policy priorities in Europe; and will create the confidence that communities need to expand into further areas of work. Over time, we aim to explore further with our collective how to organise and open up additional areas where all communities should also be making radical action happen. Currently, we are working to build up a portfolio of action to cover these areas, integrating our approach. This is still a big challenge.

One strategy that we are trying to advance is bringing these areas of work together into helping communities to create demonstrations of truly thriving 21st Century Neighbourhoods, as exemplars of thriving urban communities on a local scale. We believe working at a neighbourhood scale is a great way for communities to put holistic and radical change into practice. To help communities with this process, we are developing a 21st Century Neighbourhoods Catalyser support programme. The 21st Century Neighbourhoods Catalyser offers a deep learning-by-doing process that would help communities and community leaders to put mission-led change into practice at a neighbourhood scale. Once communities can build confidence around designing and managing processes of mission-led radical change for a neighbourhood, they can move towards creating an integrated mosaic of transformed 21st century neighbourhoods that covers their whole city or region. This is a practical pathway to achieving radical change at scale. So far, we still struggle to get such an integrated support programme properly resourced and funded (on both the local work and supporting advice sides).

Urban Doers Experiences

We gratefully joined the Urban Doers community in 2023, using the opportunity to explore some of the challenges that we face in trying to advance the work of Thriving Communities. One key question that we set out to focus on was how to better find effective leaders and communities that really demand radical change, and thus want the help and support that we offer.

Creating radical, necessary change is of course a real challenge in the current system of governance and funding that overwhelmingly continues to prioritise fragmented change and action - even if there is now a lot more talk of transformational and mission-led change in Europe. We constantly hear that those with greater power in our communities (politicians, managers, funders, investors) want discrete 'concrete solutions' that can be delivered quickly and visibly. This is even true of many funds for research and innovation. As noted above, this tends to reinforce work on incremental over-simplified change, which has not added up to the systemic changes that we actually need. There is of course plenty of need for discrete, well-defined actions, if they fit into a more comprehensive strategic pathway of change - but in many places the bigger picture and enabling work is not sufficient to effectively achieve such a synergy.

In our experience, we do find in every community the individuals who 'get it' and are working hard for radical, transformative change. But we find these people are often tired, disempowered, underfunded, and not well enough connected to reach a critical-mass that can tip their community into a new state of demanding and creating radical change. Without local demand and capacity, it is hard for Thriving Communities to engage and add value. We find we are mostly still supporting a loose network of individuals, not yet really supporting whole organisations and communities.

With the Urban Doers programme, we wanted to focus on how to more effectively find and help to connect the changemakers who really want to lead radical change into a critical mass. In the near term we have decided that we should lean more into the fact that our work with Thriving Communities only yet attracts passionate people, and most organisations are not yet ready to truly commit to this scale of systemic change. If we focus on being a network to empower leading individuals, then we believe their influence can ripple out to impact clusters of individuals, organisations and whole communities. So we are prioritising working in this way.

We think that one of the big reasons that people and organisations struggle to really engage with more radical change work is the limitations of current funding streams. Everyone needs to get by, and if there is no money in radical change work then we cannot be surprised if people follow career paths that seem finan-

cially safer (at least in the short term). So we also set out to explore with the DUT network, how more suitable funding streams for catalysing urban transformation processes could be designed, and where they might come from. If it becomes easier to get funding for unlocking radical urban change processes, it will be easier to build that critical mass of people working on radical change.

During our Urban Doers year, we tested these questions in some different ways, as follows...

In March 2024, we offered the Urban Doers and DUT networks a free opportunity to join one of our Mission-led Community Change Masterclasses. We offered a 3-day intensive course in Maribor, Slovenia - that would help participants to adopt a mission-led mindset; and to explore ways to use a mission-led approach to help organise, plan, and manage radical change for organisations and communities. The aim was that participants would gain knowledge and confidence to help communities take a mission-led approach to change. Unfortunately, there was not enough demand from the DUT networks for this training, and we were not able to run it. Feedback from other Urban Doers was that it seemed too much of a time and travel commitment in context of their immediate work and priorities. Perhaps communications to the wider DUT network did not allow enough time to fully test demand, but we were not swamped with late enquiries either. We were hoping to run this training with an interested audience and generate learnings and feedback in the process. As it turned out, we found that demand for this sort of mission-led change support and capacity development seemed not to be so high in the DUT network (even from partners in the CapaCities project, which is focussed on helping cities and countries with mission-led climate action). It highlighted to us the need to really refine our communications and to also test other ways of structuring such a training (though we struggle to see a viable version that doesn't require participants to commit at least 1-2 days to the in-person component). We also need to allow enough time to seek out those people who would really appreciate this support, and to design delivery to suit them as well as possible.

In late 2023 we ran a two-day version of the Mission-led Community Change Masterclass in Christchurch, New Zealand in synergy with small grant from Christchurch City Council. This training was very well attended by a range of community development leaders, who gave the training very positive reviews.



Figure 3: Mission led Community Change Masterclass in Christchurch, Aotearoa. Source: Tim Taylor

These different experiences of offering mission-led change training support to different audiences have highlighted that demand is higher from practitioners working on the front of community development and action, who want to expand their impact beyond what they currently manage. Travel commitments are also a participation barrier. It can be simpler to offer the training for an audience in a specific local context; but to harness the great benefits of having an international

group of participants in Europe, the course needs to be advertised at least 2-3 months in advance (ideally also with resources to fund participant travel to make the opportunity to participate more equitable).

We also joined the DUT 2024 Conference in April in Brussels, as part of a panel session led by Johannes Riegler focussed on how urban transformation work can be approached in different ways, and really be put into action (Leading Change - Who and what is driving urban transitions?) We started this discussion from the fact that, while science and logic now tells us that radical change is absolutely vital for a thriving future, human nature tells us to hide from radical change. This was a valuable chance to exchange experiences with other panellists, both before and during the event. During the conference we also ran a short roundtable exercise on Mission-Led Urban Transformation, which sparked some valuable new conversations and connections with some of the other participants. We took away from the conference some interesting insights into current EU funding dynamics. We also got a strong sense that the DUT network wants to be at the forefront of supporting urban transformation and mission-led change in practice, but is still rather constrained by the current funding model that is more focused on researching and experimenting with urban change. Wider conversations around this event highlighted the significant barriers that will remain if doing urban transformation work is seen as a subset of research and innovation work. Shouldn't it be the other way around?



Figure 4: Participating at 2024 DUT Conference. Source: DUT

In June we also joined the DUT team at the SRI conference in Helsinki. Conversations here reinforced the issues and questions arising from the DUT conference. We offered up the proposition that DUT could create a new, synergistic funding stream for 'urban doing' that is very focused on supporting leaders and shapers of mission-led urban transformation. This could be on a similar model to the current system that integrates a partnership of national and EU funders, if it could tap different funding bodies that are more focused on supporting community development.

Also in June 2024, thanks to the Urban Doers support, we were able to run a workshop on Mission-Led Urban Transformation during the Urban Future 2024 conference in Rotterdam. This workshop was framed as an opportunity for participants to test their current capacities for mission-led change work, and to explore

some key ingredients of a mission-led approach to change. This was a 90-minute session, designed as a taster for our more comprehensive training. This session was very well attended, and positively received. It was a valuable opportunity to test this short format of an introductory module, which we can also deploy at other events.

We are thankful for the opportunity to join the Urban Doers community for the 2023-24 period. The Urban Doers programme has provided us with a valuable opportunity to invest in the ongoing development of the Thriving Communities initiative. During this time we have expanded our network of collaborators, our capacity development offer, and the range of funding opportunities that we are pursuing (and sometimes securing).

From here we plan to keep developing Thriving Communities as a professional network focussed on how radical community changes can be achieved. We will keep improving our collective support offering, while working on opportunities to connect available funding and resources with our approach and community leaders who are trying to put radical change into practice. We aim to expand our support to communities in SE Europe with meaningful approaches to mission-led change and neighbourhood transformation - especially in context of the EU missions for climate neutral cities, resilient regions and the thriving neighbourhoods envisaged by the New European Bauhaus initiative. We are always interested to collaborate with changemakers and innovators who have a similar vision for radical change towards Thriving Communities. Do get in touch.