A patchwork perspective:

How small-scale connections creates large scale transitions

Hans Vermaak

Summary

Change management has traditionally focused on organisations as objects and management as subjects. In societal challenges this proves limiting, as such issues cross organisational boundaries and require change agents all over. Complexity is best navigated through small-scale efforts, yet this appears at odds with the magnitude of societal transitions. The tension can be reconciled when individuals make change locally while also building connections beyond that. A connection cycle and connective palette offer methodological guidance for sufficient craftsmanship. When many engage in connective practices, networked responses arise that are resilient enough to address networked problems—provided they retain a patchwork character through distributed agency. A network organisation will not suffice. Thus, no one need wait on the sidelines for others to address issues close to their heart. Connection work is essential for tackling contemporary issues and deserves to be at the heart of the change profession – now and in the future.

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Introduction

I am often asked what ‘change management’ entails. My shortest answer is that it concerns how you make something happen what matters to you together with others. For me, change thus begins with change agents—individuals who turn something into a problem or ambition, and who do the necessary groundwork to get somewhere. It is therefore not only a profession for dreamers (what is desirable?) but even more so for doers (what is workable?). Change agents always navigate the tension between agency and structure (Dowding, 2008). Agency refers to our capacity to shape context as subjects. Structure, by contrast, regulates our behaviour as objects through rules, norms, beliefs, and power relations. Voluntarists place their faith in agency; determinists regard structures as decisive. Change agents operate paradoxically in between: their entrepreneurship can influence structures, yet their actions are simultaneously shaped and constrained by these structures.

This brings me to two boundaries of this field that have always bothered me. The first is treating organisations as the system limit of our work, hinting at a deterministic belief that what lies beyond is out of reach. The second is the focus on management, hinting at a voluntaristic belief that managers rule the world. These demarcations are evident in the prevailing terms for our discipline—'organisational development’ & ‘change management’—and in industry labels such as ‘organisational advisers’ and ‘management consultants’. If our expertise is to be meaningful in addressing societal challenges such as the energy transition, persistent inequality or biodiversity loss, we must move beyond these boundaries.

More than management and broader than organisations

Societal challenges can be regarded as ‘wicked problems that are characterized by complexity of different kinds (Vermaak, 2015). This pertains not only to content (multi-factor). Complexity can also be social (multi-actor), contextual (multi-level) and psychological (multi-uncertain). A key principle is to match such complexity with an equally complex approach (Ashby, 1956). Only then can you do these issues justice and prevent superficial N-step plans from taking over. This seems obvious: if many actors and factors are involved, diverse perspectives, contributions and interests are essential. Yet the opposite

often occurs: the more complex an issue, the greater the discomfort and the stronger the temptation to retreat to simple solutions. But simplification makes complex issues incomprehensible and your actions unworkable. (Conversely, there is also a tendency to overcomplicate simple issues, which then also become tough to tackle.) Such simplification in change efforts is largely emotion-driven: a temporary relief of discomfort rather than a substantive response.

This has implications for agency around such issues. Actors cannot grasp or address complexity if they are too far removed. Only those immersed in practices where these issues play out can perceive their richness and discern underlying patterns. Only they can translate such insights into actions suited to their possibilities and address them deeply enough to make a difference. In change efforts, the scope of change thus often conflicts with its depth (Termeer & Metze, 2019). It is no coincidence that innovations frequently arise in niches—bounded local practices. Many societal challenges demand such depth. Hence the notion that change agents are mainly found in 'management' is misguided. They exist in many places and niches, across all kinds of practices. Change is not the work of a few but of many: 'everyone changes'—especially around complex issues (Vermaak, 2017).

The nature of these issues also problematizes clear demarcations of where the work takes place. Problems such as global warming or racism do not stop at organisational walls or fit within job descriptions. Yet this does not mean nothing can be done locally: if such issues play out in society at large, they also manifest closer to home. In your own discrete practice(s) you can pursue depth of change. At the same time, much also lies beyond your reach. Take raising children—an increasingly difficult challenge in present day society. It is not only about establishing wholesome family life, but also about what happens in neighbourhoods, schools, churches or public services, and above all their interplay. Here you depend on others. Furthermore, such interplay can be frustrated by inadequate educational funding, discontinuity due to rigid procurement, or legislation hindering information sharing. Progress requires good things to happen not only within one's own localized practice – where you have some control - but also in the interplay with others beyond it—where nobody has true control. Half of the work crosses organisational walls, especially with wicked problems.

Stacking small scale changes and small-scale connections

Where does this leave us? First, with a plea for small-scale efforts —where many people learn to navigate complexity and make a difference without being overwhelmed. This raises the question: is that enough? Does the desired scope of societal change not get lost in favour of depth in some localized spaces? Fortunately, the tension between scope and depth can be reconciled—indirectly and gradually—by accumulating small, deep successes. Weick

(1984) called these ‘small wins’, in contrast to ‘quick wins’, the low-hanging fruit achieved through simple steps. The more you create small wins in parallel and series, the more they add up. It seems the only way to combine scale and depth. Working on a small scale towards large-scale transitions can thus be remarkably effective.

Second, this leads to a plea for a two-pronged change practice—regardless of where people are active: inside or outside organisations, on the shop floor or in management, in companies or communities.

- One part is the familiar change work within your own local practice, where you perform daily tasks, deliver results, know what you are doing and have considerable control. It will always remain relevant to make change happen there. You are also legitimised to do so. It is within your circle of influence.
- The other part is the less usual work of connecting with others whose practices affect your own, and with whom you can have more impact on broader issues that belong to everyone and no one. Here you interact with people you know and see less often and impact results not from what you do but from your interplay with interdependent others. You do this even though it is not expected from you. You expand your circle of influence.

I see this connection work as a much-needed extension of familiar change, not a replacement. Discrete local practices remain the only places where you can go in depth and create transformative results—that is your home base. Connective practices are about building relationships that strengthen, rather than frustrate, each other’s localized practices. Local change and broader connections serve different purposes but also need one another. The stronger your local practice, the more relevant you are for others to connect with.

The value of working small-scale applies to both. If working on climate or education reform is already complex within your own practice, it is certainly no less so in broader collaboration. Also in connection work, handling complexity only becomes workable at a human scale. Stacking small wins happens in two ways: by stringing together local successes over time, and by building on one another rather than being the sole place of innovation.

Palette of connections: spreading, switching and digging

What shape connections take is anything but straightforward. Everyone has different ideas, shaped by their job and experience. For some it implies professional exchange, for others institutional win-win relations, or bottom-up cooperation. Such preferences are often tied to convictions and routines: people believe their way extends their influence best and repeat what worked for them before. Yet the more one-sided our repertoire, the less effective our connective practice. Moreover, people are rarely aware of such one-sidedness.

Hence the need for a common language for connection work: to broaden our repertoires and make wiser choices. Simply jumping into a networking event or organizing a round-table conference does not add up to powerful connective practice. Such common language has existed for decades for approaches to change, such as 'the colours of change' (de Caluwé & Vermaak, 2003) but not as much for approaches to connecting. Building on Moore et al. (2015), I distinguish three contrasting types of connection work: spreading, switching and digging.

Table 5.1 The three dimensions of connection work at a glance.

	Spreading: Connecting professionally	**Switching: Connecting institutionally**	**Digging: Connecting culturally**
Achieve more by...	sharing professional knowledge and skills	reconciling dissimilar systems	shifting underlying structures
using as working methods …	learning processes between professionals	mirroring, dovetailing and embedding	destabilising and innovating
in contexts where…	logics and cultures resonate	people do not easily understand each other	this is experienced as 'out of order'
It can take different forms…..	from procedures to principles	from harmonious coordination to frictional experimentation	unsettling dominant structures of meaning or power
in contrasting spaces …	within your practice, with related and different practices	between and within organisational-, issue- and eco-systems	in the public arena, in your own practices and as a person
while striving for...	growth in know-how, not too many protocols	exploiting contradictions, not thinking for others	regaining freedom, no superficial answers

Spreading

Spreading is about professional connections: sharing knowhow with peers through learning. This can take many forms, but is often equated with teaching—lectures, manuals, skills training. Yet it need not be about 'transmitting'; you may also 'receive' know-how developed elsewhere, or exchange it both ways, like in communities of practice. Fortunately, professionals are often intrinsically motivated: they enjoy talking with peers and growing professionally. As their cultures and logics resonate, understanding comes easefully, allowing spreading to go viral at times. Instrumental learning often comes first to mind—sharing N-step plans and protocols that simplify professionalism and – though useful - risk turning others into followers. Fortunately, learning can also be about sharing

underlying principles that enables people to tailor their own approaches (Engeström, 1994). Spreading often occurs between similar professionals in distinctive contexts, like radiologists in different hospitals. But it may also happen closer to home when people learn from one another within the same practice; or alternatively may occur across professions — radiologists learning from designers how to visualise data which is something that they both need to do.

Switching

Switching is about institutional connection. Consider how innovations may be stymied by legislation or policy. Recognising interdependence, skilled boundary workers can try to reconcile such different arenas. Because practices differ, spreading your knowhow is hardly useful. It makes more sense to inquire how they affect one another. Because logics and cultures inevitably contrast, translation is required to understand each other. Each arena does not know the other without being caught up and shown around. Moreover, they cannot gauge how they impact each other's world without feedback and confrontation. That can still happen harmoniously but more often involves friction. Contradictions between different systems is something to value: it puts change on the map and switching allows it to expand (Engeström, 2008). Yet switching can feel like a chore; it may seem nicer if systems would automatically align. People usually associate switching with organisational systems: coordinating across silos and levels, between sectors and value chains. Organisational liaising is worthwhile but also the most sluggish as positions and interests come into play. Fortunately, switching can be more informal and inclusive when it occurs between and within issue-systems or ecosystems. Tackling an issue like inequality, for instance, may link with programmes addressing housing, education or health care. When people working on one issue have something fruitful to add to other issues, their contribution is often welcomed. This is also the case when it comes to comes to switching within or between ecosystems, like neighbourhoods.

Digging

Digging is about cultural connection. Spreading and switching can only do so much when underlying structures of meaning and power maintain the status quo. Fossil fuels, for example, appear cheap only as long as it remains hidden how they are subsidized for decades, making it hard for other energy sources and technologies to compete. Digging exposes how systems are rigged and how that unfairness is covered over: it destabilises dominant structures and increases space for alternatives. But exploring such alternatives in depth, will require some digging as well. Thos two processes are related because destruction is excessive when systems collapse faster than alternatives emerge (Wheatley, 2019). Even gradual digging provokes resistance; actions are deemed "out of order" because they unsettle what seemed uncontroversial. That makes it a cultural act. Digging may focus on structures of meaning, as in protests declaring 'system change, not climate change' or 'America should have no kings'. It may also focus on power structures, as in

citizens' panels breaking political stalemates on climate change or EU courts curbing the power of big IT. These are examples in the public arena but as culture permeates everywhere, digging can also take place locally and under the radar, allowing more depth and eliciting less aggression. Think of enhancing social safety in your own team by problematising unwanted behaviour, setting new norms and exploring how to interact accordingly. Or to form support groups to gather insights and courage personally when you feel too confused and despondent to dig within your practice, let alone publicly.

Senior housing in the city: spotting opportunities for connection

A manager of a social housing association struggled to develop affordable homes for senior citizens. Land was scarce or too costly, small apartments were unattractive, and the association's traditional business model—building and renting—was faltering. Routine connections consisted of ***switching*** *between* ***organisational systems****—formal exchanges between the housing association, city planning departments, and clients. While these transactional connections are the default for many organisations, they offered little advancement. Exploring alternative forms of connection proved promising.*

We considered ***switching*** *more organically and opportunistically, as between* ***issue-systems****. The city already runs programmes to reduce loneliness, inequality, and demographic imbalance, all of which seek partners. A housing association that enables seniors to remain in the city would be a welcome collaborator. Another option was to involve prospective residents directly in co-designing communal housing and shared gardens. Such participation is likely to make smaller living spaces more acceptable, while shifting connections from transactive to interactive. Instead of relocating seniors to new estates, the association could also support them in renovating existing homes, allowing them to remain and share unused space. Such initiatives might foster multigenerational households. If more houses join up these may lead to courtyard communities: form of switching within an* ***ecosystem***

Beyond switching, ***spreading*** *offers further possibilities. The association's outreach was limited to current tenants, constraining their switching efforts. Universities and community organizers, however, excel at engaging prospective participants. The housing corporation could learn from their practices how to foster community-based initiatives.*

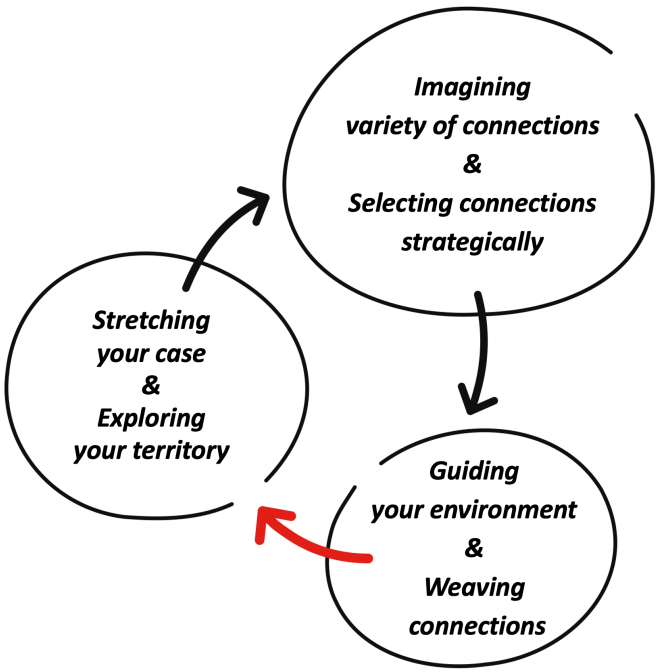
Finally, ***digging*** *addresses the cultural patterns that sustain the status quo. Whereas city planning departments often prioritise land values over social aims, city programs advocating such aims can benefit from political backing by senior citizens' action groups demanding the right to grow old in the city. The housing association can join forces with such groups. Another avenue was to challenge entrenched beliefs that ageing necessarily requires specialised care homes. Fuelling public*

debate on intergenerational living as a sustainable and socially enriching alternative can do just that.
Exploring these new possibilities reframed the manager's mission – from merely building and renting homes to enabling seniors to thrive in the city - a shift that requires digging not only in publicly but also within the organization itself.

Networking as craft: connection cycle

A discussion such as illustrated here broadens horizons and shows that more is possible. Yet one conversation is not enough to continuously shape powerful connections. This requires skillful, iterative work: spotting opportunities, gauging which may bear fruit, and bringing them to life. Our change profession is rightly preoccupied with such craftsmanship, as it determines whether a patchwork perspective bears fruit or not. This is especially so in the case of new or innovative approaches, where we are often blind and clumsy about what they entail until experience accumulates. If connection work is to be intrinsic to our profession, some guidance is needed. Hence, I present a connection cycle (Figure 5.1) as a working method. Like the more familiar change cycle (De Caluwé & Vermaak, 2003), it follows an iterative process of strengthening understanding, strategy and action. The difference is that where the change cycle relates to working within one's local practice where one has some overview and control and overview, the connection cycle relates to relating with others beyond that practice, where uncertainty is greater.

Figure 5.1 The connection cycle



The connection cycle is exploratory. Understanding of complex problems grows by working on them. Using a linear model of planned change, where you try to analyse everything beforehand, is fruitless. The longer you think about them, the more questions arise. If you want to know everything before acting, such a linearity leads to analysis paralysis (Langley, 1995). Meanwhile, problems worsen, prompting calls for decisive action. This often results in pulling routine approaches from the shelf—easy to grasp and reassuring, but too superficial and generic to make a difference. Such initiative-itis ignores complexity and produces 'more of the same'. This is frustrating when you aim for transitions that are transformative in some way. A better way of working is deliberately cyclical. As you proceed, you gain insight into the environment surrounding your practice, make smarter choices about how and with whom to connect, and weave powerful relationships that impact broader societal issues. Analysis, planning and action grow incrementally and remain imperfect. It also allows performance and learning to continuously reinforce each other—essential when dealing with complex challenges. Resulting approaches are situated and tailor-made, with outcomes emergent rather than predetermined. The connection cycle corresponds more to a process of puzzling and experimenting than of knowing and implementing.

Characterizing the cycle's activities

Let me shed some light on what the six activities entail. Together, these activities constitute an iterative framework for developing and sustaining meaningful connections between situated practices and broader societal issues. Each activity represents a distinct mode of inquiry and action that, when combined, fosters both situated experimentation and systemic engagement.

Stretching your case

It starts with stretching your ambition beyond what you are formally responsible for. First, specify your local practice in concrete terms - where you presently perform and learn (act local). Second, articulate a broader issue in glowing terms that you want to contribute to and that is connected to your local practice (think global). In the example, the local practice concerns 'building, renting and servicing' by the housing association: it is what they autonomously do and can be in charge of. The broader issue is 'ensuring Amsterdam's senior citizens can enjoy their old age': this they cannot achieve without much collaboration, and nobody is in charge of all that. There should be a felt tension between local practice and broader issue. It will encourage you to seek connections beyond your own turf to contribute more meaningfully (connect territorial). The tension provides both impetus and direction (Fritz, 1991).

Exploring your territory

You explore whose activities in the vicinity of your practice are affecting the broader issue, be it with other know-how and from different home bases. You also look at factors and developments that affect present and future collaborations. Such curious browsing through information and networks is key, as it is impossible to imagine meaningful connections otherwise. In the illustrated case, we made do without such exploration, limiting our creativity. Fortunately, we stumbled upon his uncle's renovation story, my networks in city government and university outreach programs: all three sparked ideas. Yet you want much more. Creating rich informational maps helps. Think of two kinds of such maps: a) evidence-walls with images, quotes and facts such as used by the police and b) actor-maps outlining people, groups, institutions and their interrelations. The most useful maps are messy and detailed. The term 'territory' refers to the human scale of your lived environment rather than the vast network related to a societal issue. It is precisely within such bounded environments that people experience interdependence, enabling them to move beyond polarizing ideological debates in favour of figuring out meaningful, practical ways forward (Latour, 2018).

Imagining variety of connections

Searching for variety of connections is the most creative part of the cycle. It is not possible to deduce a list of best options analytically. Instead, you think of as many connection possibilities as you can, each in concrete terms: names and faces of who to connect with, ideas about what to exchange, images of how to collaborate. In the example, it is better not to speak in abstractions such as 'alignment with the policy priorities of the city government' but rather of 'approaching Kees, who is spearheading a program to reduce loneliness and welcomes neighbourhood initiatives'. Or to inquire 'who do we know in the senior citizens' action group Old-Mokum' rather than suggest 'organizing external pressure on the municipality'. Concreteness allows you both to generate many more options and to assess their worth. Variety is crucial: not more of the same organisational liaisons but contrasting types of connections. Brainstorming helps, preferably with others and using territory exploration as input. Searching consciously in lesser-used parts of the connection palette also boosts variation. In the example this led to other types of switching (with issue-systems and with ecosystems) and also added spreading and digging as connection options. Whereas the discussion illustrated here yielded a mere 10–15 possibilities, a proper imaginative search will produce many dozens: you then really have something to choose from.

Selecting connections strategically

Strategy stands for achieving as much as possible around a broader issue with the least amount of effort. The more options you generate, the stronger the urge to select those that may make a difference. This is rightly so, as not all options make equal sense and spreading yourself thinly over too many efforts will be self-defeating. In the example we did not know

enough of municipal programmes, action groups or neighbourhood initiatives to predict what would work. Such uncertainty is quite common, and knowledge only comes from making such connections. Strategy thus calls for reasoning which selection seems right, weighing chances and risks rather than facts and figures. Weick (2001) stresses mindfulness and heedfulness to deal with uncertainty. Mindful refers to potentiality: awareness of likely effects of specific options, drawing on how bricoleurs operate (Di Domenico et al., 2010). Heedful refers to awareness of possible effects if things turn out radically different than expected - sensing severe consequences of unlikely coincidences. Here Taleb's (2013) notions of (anti)fragility are relevant. This two-sided look helps reason which options to pursue, and how deeply and broadly to do so. You also consider how many options you can handle and where they complement or conflict. All this results in an outline of selected connections and how they may build on one another for maximum impact: a 'weaving pattern'.

Guiding your environment

Guiding others becomes necessary once you start connecting beyond your own practice. Such connective work is bound to raise questions as it is rarely part of job descriptions. It is unusual to address a broader issue in this way and even more so to make up your own mind how to go about it. The more you extend your influence the wider the circles where such questions are raised. For others to go along or join forces, a 'connection story' is required: a narrative that makes sense of what your reasoning is to go about it in this way. In the example such a narrative will be helpful when the manager unexpectedly knocks on the doors of municipal programmes, citizens' action groups, neighbourhood initiatives or university outreach. It also has value when relating with colleagues who notice you move in different circles and seem to redefine the business. Often, meta-narratives are needed as well to stretch beliefs about how change is supposed to happen, allowing actors to be more open to a patchwork perspective (Van Twist, 2023). Scale matters here: you cannot guide everyone everywhere without compromising the depth of both your change practice and connection practice. A rule of thumb is to guide from the inside out, prioritising those relations with whom most value is added: actors with whom you are actually working together, and not bothering too much with critical bystanders. In this way, your sphere of influence grows at a pace matching your capacity, without eroding the quality of your work.

Weaving connections

Weaving connections results from bringing strategically selected options to life as powerfully as you can. Those options are initially sketchy: in the example, ideas to 'link up with inequality programmes' or 'renovate city buildings with residents to enliven neighbourhoods' leave much to the imagination. What they turn into is still open-ended and co-determined within collaborative relationships. It materialises along the way as you discover what really contributes to the broader issue and why certain connections work or fail. In this way you combine performing and learning. Your experiences and insights in turn

help clarify your ambitions and enrich understanding of your territory, revealing new connective possibilities that you combine with what you have already undertaken: the connection cycle continues. Thus, a relational web grows around your practice. Where your weaving intertwines with that of others, growth of impact and know-how can be more exciting than you dared hope for (Samwel et al., 2025).

Plentiful patchwork results in organic networks

As soon as you engage in varied connections, relational threads weave into a network around your practice. When many others do the same, these modest networks interlace into a much larger one. Connection work is thus the generative engine behind such a network approach, rather than the other way around. Such organic networks are robust: they do not vanish when certain actors or initiatives cease to exist. They consist of a multitude of practices knotted together through a multitude of connections created by the distributed leadership of a multitude of people. Precisely because of their complexity, they can be a match for societal challenges. It is implausible that any small group with a ready-made plan could respond effectively to entrenched issues. Consider the fossil-based economy, the mental health crisis or institutional racism. None are new; they have been created over decades by the interlaced practices of many, not the planned change efforts of a few. Persistence may be a blessing when it concerns desired phenomena; it is frustrating where transformation is needed. To make change happen around such issues, you require an approach as networked as what brought the problem into being.

To be clear, this is not about any specific network approach or network organisation to solve big hairy issues, but about a massive messy network handling such issues. Simplifying it to a single approach or organisational form centralises leadership or, at best, shares it among a limited group who dictate how the broader field should behave. What we seek instead are networks that grow because many people shape them without anyone having control or oversight. A network organisation may be a sensible form of organisational ‘switching’, but that is only one of many types of connections that weave such a powerful network. Another pitfall is to rely on liaison officers or network coordinators: outsourcing connection work to a specialised few makes the others disregard it as their normal responsibility. When only a few individuals do the weaving, networks become weaker, not stronger. Skilled individuals can act as temporary resources to help others master connection work – but that is something else entirely.

I refer to this logic as a patchwork perspective: a metaphor evoking patches (practices) stitched together by threads (connections) to create a quilted structure (network) tackling a broader issue. It is the product of diligent labour involving many minds, hearts and hands. Think of ‘crazy quilts’ created by patchwork that is anything but orderly. Such imagery

contrasts sharply with dominant metaphors in organisational and change practices: navigation (someone at the helm, charting a course, rallying the troops), war (overcoming resistance, breaking barriers, winning hearts and minds) and machines (engineering change, scaling up and rolling out). These three metaphors favour and further control, unity, transparency and stability (Vermaak, 2015). Yet such values are ill-suited to complex issues. Diversity of views and contributions matters more than unity, distributed entrepreneurship more than control by a few. Moreover, relevant dynamics are often not clear and transparent, but subtle and informal. And stability is what you don't want - dynamism makes more sense. Inspiration from the patchwork metaphor seems far more fitting.

Acquiring a taste for patchwork characteristics

To better grasp and hold on to the characteristics of this metaphor, I draw on the literature on patchiness – an anthropological and ecological concept (Tsing et al. 2024) – and, to a lesser extent, on rhizomes and swarms. Many patchwork traits may seem undesirable at first glance but prove a blessing when tackling wicked problems. Let me highlight three such characteristics that one can learn to appreciate.

A first characteristic is that sensible initiatives emerge from situated collaborations. We often think first of people relating to one another, but it also includes relations with other species and the non-living. Responses are shaped with and by all involved: only then can they even be ecological and democratic. Decisions taken over everybody's heads cannot achieve this. From a distance you produce simplified responses, failing to see the richness of the relational fabric when you zoom out (or in) too much. Only by being part of it yourself do you gain access. This makes the use of generic visions, standardised approaches or pilot scale-ups problematic, even though we often cling to them.

A second characteristic is that patchiness implies porous borders, cross-connections and entanglements. No practice is self-contained and scales never fit neatly: change in one place inevitably creates tension beyond its borders. The advantage of such crosscutting relationships is that change can be contagious. Gatherings become happenings; encounters yield unexpected assemblages. Outcomes are unpredictable and emergent, but this enables responsiveness and serendipity. Yet such unruliness can feel like a sacrifice if you prefer planned change that is pre-approved and results-oriented.

A third characteristic is that participation in patchworks feels messy and precarious: again, terms that do not sound positive at first. Messiness reflects the realisation that the world cannot be captured in objective models or glossy visions but can be understood through radical curiosity – including about what is trivial, ugly or layered. This makes reality richer but not neat and clear. Precariousness reflects the recognition that progress is not a steady step-by-step process and that modernity itself is part of the problem. Transitions are therefore not only constructive but also destabilising and without guarantees.

Concluding remarks

Reflections

In this chapter, I have outlined a way of acting (connection work) and a way of thinking (patchwork perspective) as an appropriate response to societal issues too large for anyone to tackle. Two caveats apply. First, what I outline supplements rather than replaces change within local practices. Second, it is situationally contingent: applicable to complex cross-boundary issues, but dysfunctional to simple contained ones.

Making connections from a patchwork perspective is an extension of the change profession: a direction for the future of this field. Yet it also presents challenges. Although this extension resonates with the intuition of many, it is far less developed professionally than the 'change management' or 'organisational development' we are used to. Working this way within present-day institutions is controversial, as it runs counter to dominant practices. The risk is that such work is done so clumsily that it lacks impact. Or worse, the terminology is used in name only while adhering to traditional routines. Such co-option is quite common (Giddens, 1979). In my book on the patchwork perspective (Vermaak, 2025), I share common misconceptions that subvert its power often unconsciously, but also deliberately– such as 'this is bottom-up change', 'a selected few still need to work large scale, 'patchwork is nice and harmonious' or 'it is about letting a thousand flowers bloom'.

Both mastering and legitimising this way of working are necessary for impact. This means it cannot simply be scaled up or rolled out. In that sense, the patchwork perspective applies not only to the societal issues it helps address, but also to the spread of professionalism needed to make it work. Growth in impact and professionalism can ultimately be attributed to the agency of change agents who master the art of connecting. Through their activity, professionalism may gradually embed in more concrete forms such as knowledge products, professional standards, research funding or educational programmes. In doing so, they shift the contextual structure bit by bit: the dominant patterns of how we conceptualise and practise change.

This emphasis on agency also reflects the trend that organisations, once relatively stable entities for tackling societal challenges, now seem less so. Contexts and organisations shift more frequently and abruptly, and employees partake in that shift. Their organisational positions are more temporary, and they often belong to multiple teams with changing compositions. Building teams and organisations thus becomes challenging: it feels as if you have to start over all the time. Instead of these structures, professionalism becomes a more viable anchor, not only to address wicked problems but also to cope with institutional fluidity.

Such agency can lie with many more people than managers or consultants: the expansion I advocated at the start of this chapter. By considering it everybody's work to make change within their own practice and build connections around it, both impact and professionalism can grow well and that growth is hard to stop. A meaningful bonus is the relief many feel because they need not wait on the sidelines for others to tackle issues close to their hearts. This reduces powerlessness even before achievements or lessons are evident. The societal issues of our time will not disappear soon, and their entangled nature will only increase. Connection work is therefore essential to make a difference. In my view, it places this labour at the heart of the change profession – now and in the future.

Research directions

Research can play a significant part in embedding connection work within the change profession. This may involve action researchers capturing embodied knowledge while furthering impact and professionalism (prioritising utility and resonance), or academic researchers theorizing the dynamics of change and positioning the patchwork perspective alongside other paradigms (prioritising validity and rigour). Four areas in particular warrant sustained attention.

1) Connecting as craft: the strength of connection work determines whether a patchwork perspective proves worthwhile. Successful practice can be enabled by describing and conceptualising how skilled connectors operate: how they navigate the activities of the connection cycle, devise weaving strategies, and foster exciting growth patterns by intertwining patchworks. It also deserves to understand how practitioners heedfully engage with the unlikely and the unexpected, building on Taleb's insights into (anti)fragility. Mechanisms of "digging" within everyday organisational life requires study, so they are not confined to activism or personal development. Attention to connective micro-dynamics such as resonance and agonism will deepen the iterative framework.

2) Multiplying agency: not only extended human agency lies at the heart of a patchwork paradigm, but patchwork literature also emphasizes ecological inclusion of 'more than human' agency. With the rise of AI it seems apt to also acknowledge 'silicon agency'. These multiplications of agency do justice to connective dynamics, yet our field remains uneasy in enabling them. Efforts to distribute agency often lapse into repressive tolerance—for instance, neighbourhood participation framed by city government, or including a river ecosystem in decision making by turning it into human spokesperson. Research that captures forms and mechanisms for more heterogeneous network involvement can advance the field.

3) Legitimising a patchwork paradigm: dominant change traditions privilege managerial logics and organisational embedding yet there are many more actors involved and they inhabit multiple contexts simultaneously, like issue systems and ecosystems, social and professional networks, urban and virtual environments. Research can highlight these richer relational fabrics, showing how radical curiosity fuels varied connections with real impact. Historical studies can reveal how myths of decisive leadership obscure the distributed nature of transitions whereby smaller situated changes interweave for impact. Such insights help position the patchwork perspective not as novel or untested, but as an already effective paradigm deserving space alongside hegemonic traditions.

4) Resilience against co-optation: research can address how patchwork perspectives can resist co-optation and endure in times of societal instability or systemic collapse. Subversion seems inevitable—whether unconsciously through dominant routines or deliberately in defence of the status quo. Exposing these dynamics can help counter them. Where this does not suffice, tactics of elusiveness— like acephalous organisation, tactical mobility or hacking—may serve as responses to public brutalism and regressive politics. Such strategies deserve study as dealing with hostile conditions is an intrinsic part of any serious transition.

Taken together, these four directions invite a research agenda that deepens the craft of networking, reconceptualises agency, broadens change paradigms, and explores defiance. They add to the robustness of a patchwork perspective for transformative change in troubling times.

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