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Seeing the 'Craft for Empowerment System' in Pakistan

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Title: **Seeing the ‘Craft for Empowerment System’ in Pakistan –
A basis for collective learning opportunities to address manifested
structures, processes, values and mind-sets**

At RSD9 I will present a systems approach into craft projects in contexts of grassroots empowerment in Pakistan, resulting from my – still unpublished – PhD design research conducted between 2011 and 2019.

First I briefly outline the empirical research, that investigates initiatives that link craft making to financial, human and cultural empowerment of marginalized craft producers. Then I introduce the ‘craft for empowerment system’ that I defined and termed after extracting it from the empirical data, visualizing it, and characterizing it as large, locked-in and dissatisfying for many stakeholders, especially craft producers. Finally I introduce the concept of the ‘co-release craft lab’, as a collaborative space for those engaging in craft projects, with the objective to contribute to democratic and inclusive systems change and more sustainable value chains through open-ended mutual learning opportunities.

Craft for empowerment projects are usually embedded in activities of international development aid, philanthropy and social entrepreneurship, and address concerns at the intersection of poverty alleviation, social justice, and cultural heritage preservation. Those large development concerns feature numerous complex and wicked problems with no single cause and hence no simple (design) solution (Burns & Worsley, 2015; Ramalingam, 2013), especially not through craft making alone. They are systemic problems, from which craft projects cannot be separated.

Rich empirical data was gathered over a prolonged period of time through applying the Bricolage methodology, which describes the researcher as a patch-worker who collects information, diverse in kind, and arranges them as emerging fields of interest (Kincheloe & Berry, 2004). This research process had a strong conversational character, capturing first hand experiences and perspectives from multiple individuals (Fig. 1 & 2).

The case study investigated projects across Pakistan, from large internationally funded aid schemes to small private initiatives, social enterprises, holistic community development projects with a craft component and activities in the cultural sector, including arts education. The action research project explored craft collaboration opportunities with a group of women in a village near to the university campus in Lahore where I taught design for many years. Two focus groups invited a diverse set of stakeholders to debate challenges of sustainable craft businesses. Mingling and participating in sector events such as round tables, grant information sessions or sales fairs added to the insights.



Fig. 1 / left
Reflection session
after a crisis in the
action research
project



Fig. 2 / right
Focus groups with
diverse stakeholders
involved in craft
projects in grassroots
empowerment
contexts

Based on the data analysis and informed by the GIGA-Mapping method, developed at the Oslo School of Art and Architecture (Sevaldson, 2012, 2017), stakeholders were mapped out from a bird's eye perspective, including donor agencies, government organizations, NGOs, academia, social enterprises, individual initiatives, designers, philanthropists, and marginalized craft producers (Fig. 3). The qualities of their relations were visualized. This mapping enabled to define the 'craft for empowerment system', and see its shape and operational dynamics. It also allowed to draw conclusions regarding its structure, processes, values and mind-sets of the involved stakeholders. Those turned out to demonstrate high levels of manifested ideological and practical top-down dominance, bottom-up dependencies, and disrupted value chains, with stakeholders in powerful positions at the top passing down guidelines and knowledge, whereas those further down in the hierarchy struggle to bridge the gap between upward accountability e.g. towards donors and local conditions which hardly allow for fulfilling their expectations (Fig. 4), e.g. connecting large numbers of marginalized producers to markets in short periods of time. Those are unrealistic, often due to stakeholders' disconnect from each others worlds (Fig. 5).

Fig. 3
Mapping of stake-
holders and their
connections

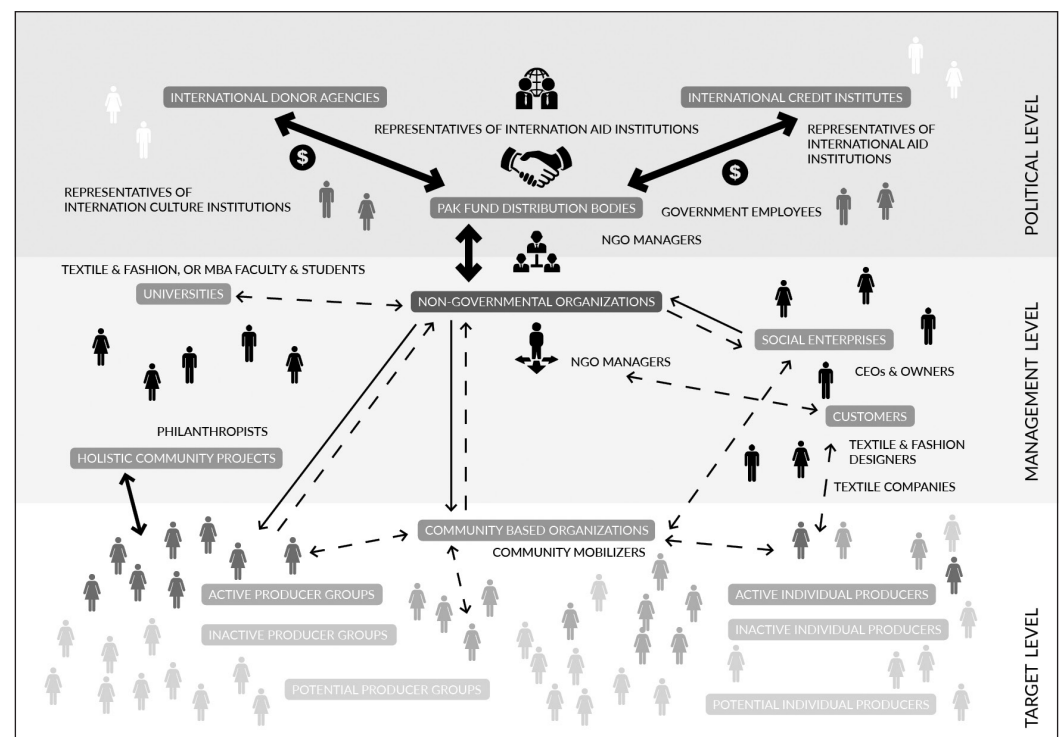


Fig. 4
Flows of funds,
accountabilities and
business revenues

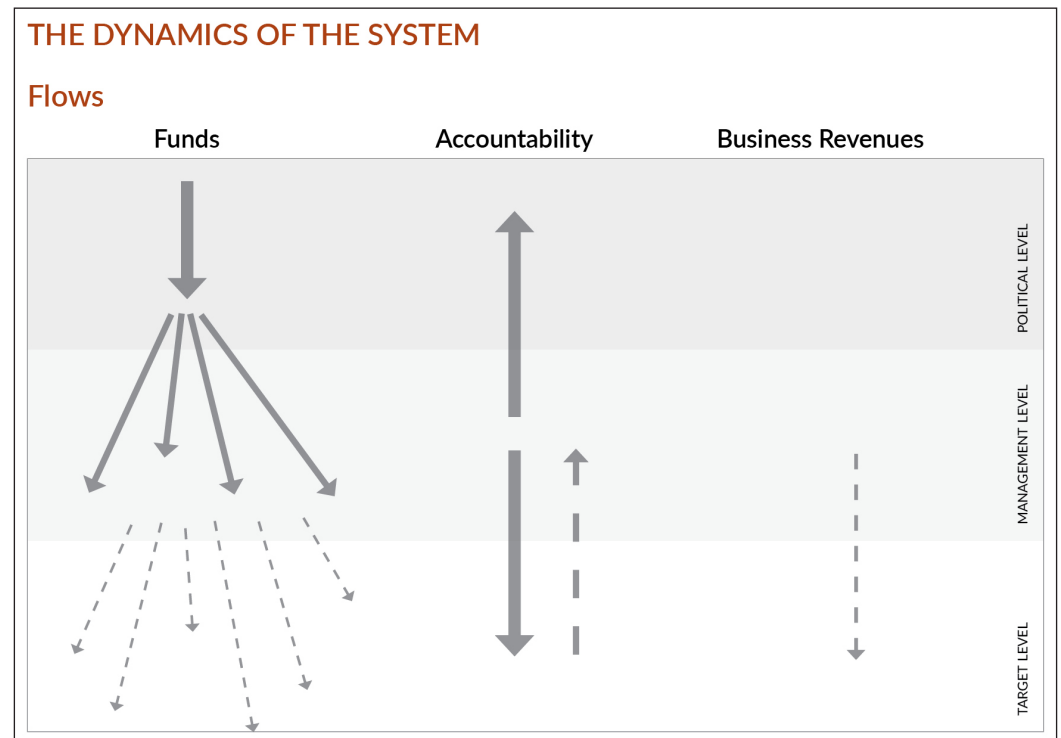
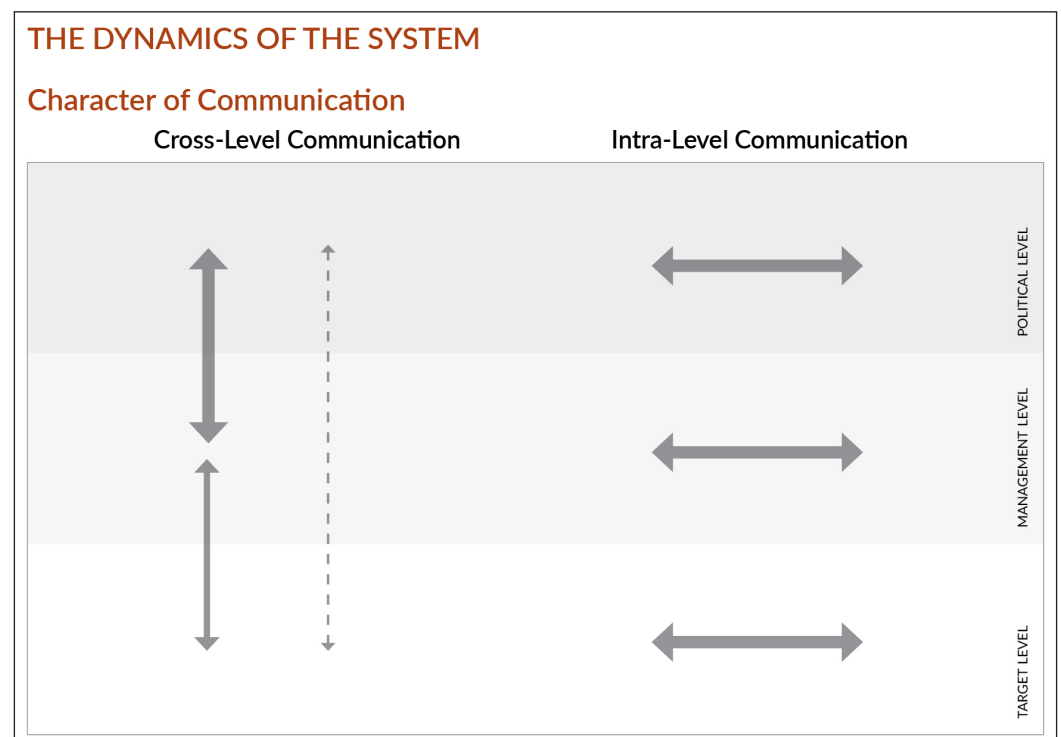


Fig. 5
Intensity of
communication
between stakeholders
of different levels in
the craft for empow-
erment system



The 'co-release craft lab' is conceived as a concept for an independent entity or space, where stakeholders from diverse craft projects have the opportunity to meet and learn together about each other's circumstances, skills and perspectives, take those insights back to their own projects and tasks, e.g. managers to their NGO, designers to their label, entrepreneurs to their enterprise, faculty and students to their study programs, producers to their community or donors to their grant scheme planning sessions. Possibly they generate new alliances for more democratically managed craft projects and sustainable value chains. This concept acknowledges that most stakeholders have good intentions and gathered extensive experience and knowledge over a long time,

especially local project managers. They understand other stakeholders' realities, especially those of the poor producers, better than e.g. international donors. They don't require a designer to tell them what to do. Rather I consider the design task to create opportunities for collective learning-by-doing.

Conceptually this research is informed by Etienne Wenger's 'Community of Practice', Paulo Freire's 'Critical Consciousness' (2005; 1970), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's 'Planarity' (1999) and 'Subalternity' (2008), Ezio Manzini's emerging design cultures (2015), and Arturo Escobar's pluriversal approach (2017), and by historical and contemporary discourses on design for development, especially in South Asia (e.g. NID, 1979).

The presentation relates to many of the RSD9 topics but possibly most to 'Pedagogics of systemic design, holistic pedagogy frameworks for inclusive development of individuals, teams, and surroundings'.

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