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Public authorities are increasingly using collaborative governance practices to tackle the complex societal challenges of today and tomorrow. They integrate different types of knowledge and experience to co-create public value and promote change. Engaging in co-design and co-creation processes entails a kind of learning in itself. Particularly at the local level, a growing number of collaborative governance arrangements have been shown to be successful in addressing a wide range of challenges. In these processes, crucial learning happens in situ, in communities and in other social spaces. However, when transferring and spreading these learning effects across levels, i.e. from smaller to larger social systems, from local niches to other government departments, these attempts often fail. So, how do we learn across multi-level collaborative governance?

This conceptual overview examines the literature and frameworks on learning across multiple levels of collaborative governance, with a focus on public authorities and government. Based on the double- and triple-loop learning framework, as well as the concept of social learning, the conceptual overview identifies three principles that help to promote learning across different levels of collaborative governance: Linking formal and informal learning, navigating through landscapes of practice with knowledgeability, and strategically addressing tensions.

KEYWORDS: learning, social learning, policy learning, organisational learning, collaboration, co-design, multi-level governance

RSD TOPICS: Learning & Education, Policy & Governance

Presentation summary

Learning across multi-level collaborative governance to tackle complex challenges

Governments are facing complex societal challenges,[1] such as those addressed by the sustainable development goals (SDGs) or so-called *mission-oriented policy*,[2] i.e. the EU Mission of 100 climate-neutral and smart cities by 2030. Public authorities increasingly adapt collaborative governance approaches and other co-design practices to address such challenges by involving citizens and other stakeholders. Collaborative governance refers here to consensus-oriented, deliberate agenda and decision-making processes between public and non-public stakeholders (Ansell & Gash 2008).

Learning from these local, bottom-up interventions and experiments is crucial to making progress towards tackling complex societal challenges that affect larger systems. However, learning is not easily scalable, and the involved actors struggle to transfer it across multiple levels of governance and implementation (i.e. from the city level via the federal state to the country level). Adapting knowledge from one learning context to another is often either too specific or too generic. Most learning is not explicit but tacit and dynamic: it cannot be written down and is more than the sum of individual learning and knowledge. It is an organic process that happens in situ and in context, mostly through learning-by-doing and social interactions.

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[1] The author acknowledges that the term "mission-oriented policy" is seen as problematic in regions impacted by colonialism (see Burkett 2023).

[2] Also called "grand challenges."

This conceptual overview addresses the question: "How do we learn across multi-level collaborative governance?" and particularly tackles issues such as: How does learning from local levels and experiments feed into governmental strategies and missions, and vice versa? How do we link and dovetail learning across different levels of government and policy?

Learning as change in understanding

Multi-level collaborative governance arrangements require social learning that is happening in feedback loops in order to be transferred across levels and help orchestrate complex societal challenges and change in larger systems.

In this section, the paper introduces the frameworks of loop learning (Pahl-Wostl) and the human learning system (Lowe & Hesselgreaves & Lowe) as viable approaches in policy and public service management.

Social learning and loop learning

Social learning is a process that involves change in individuals as well as across wider social units. When social learning takes place, it "demonstrate[s] that a change in understanding has taken place in the individuals involved; demonstrate[s] that this change goes beyond the individual and becomes situated within wider social units or communities of practice; and occur[s] through social interactions and processes between actors within a social network," (Reed et al. 2010, p. 1).

Communities of practice have often been described as a social unit where social learning takes place. They are "groups of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly," (Wenger-Trayner et al. 2023, p. 11). This paper refers to the relevance of an adapted concept of communities of practice for social learning within larger social units: the concept of landscapes of practices. Change within larger social units, as referred to above, requires loop learning. Based on Agyris and Schön (1978), learning happens as feedback on different kinds of reflective levels or learning stages, often depicted as nested in loops, cycles or spirals. Pahl-Wostl (2015, p. 36, see figure below), building on Argyris and Schön (ibid.) and the concept of social learning, describes these different types of learning the following: single-loop, double-loop and triple-loop.
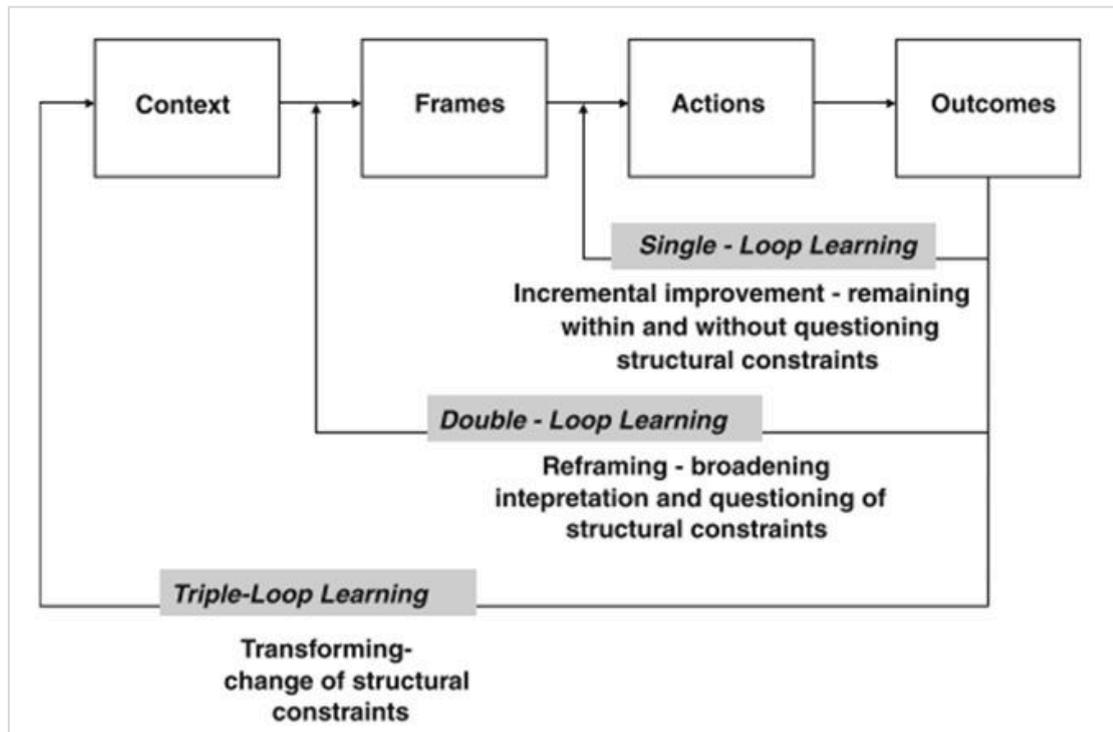
Figure 1. Triple-loop learning. Source: Pahl-Wostl 2015, p. 36.

- Single-loop learning creates incremental improvement: It improves established routines or creates more efficient processes. It questions if we are doing things right, but it does not question structural constraints in systems (such as, Are we doing the right things?). Single-loop learning influences actions and outcomes.
- Double-loop learning leads to reframing or reinterpretation: the questioning of structural constraints, i.e. the questioning of common values, strategies, hypotheses, or behaviour (as in, We've always done it this way). This kind of learning also influences frames, i.e. an established way of measuring goals.
- Triple-loop learning means transforming, for example, the transformation of institutions: "the change of structural constraints" (Figure. 1). Triple-loop learning influences the whole context.

The human learning systems approach

The human learning system (HLS) approach is a practical system approach to public service and public management that understands learning as the only viable strategy to deal with constantly changing complex systems and to make sustainable change. Here, "learning is not a discrete phase, but the ongoing underpinning of all work," (Lowe & Hesselgreaves 2021, p. 61). Public service agencies and authorities need to engage in a "learning relationship" with the public for a more expansive understanding of the system (see Lowe 2021). These learning relationships take place in so-called "learning cycles" at different scales of the system: from people's lives to teams/organisations, places, and countries. Each cycle on every scale of the system starts with understanding its system, then co-designing experiments/exploration and running them in the next phase with feedback and reflection loops. The cycle closes with embedding changes in behaviour and structure in the systems and influencing other learning cycles connected vertically and horizontally. Overall, a stewarding role (provided by a public authority) manages and governs the learning cycle. Learning partners support the building of organisational capacities for learning and experimentation. While cycles learn from other cycles, HLS is not about scaling the learnt content - as this often fails in complex environments - but to scale "the capacity of learning itself" (Lowe & Hesselgreaves 2021, p. 62). Also, on a national level, "guardrails" may be necessary to allow for knowledge coproduction between national and local actors. As HLS is still a new approach, questions remain, e.g. about horizontal and possible diagonal relationships between learning cycles (including learning form scales above) and cross-system learning (Brogan et al. 2021, pp. 419–421).
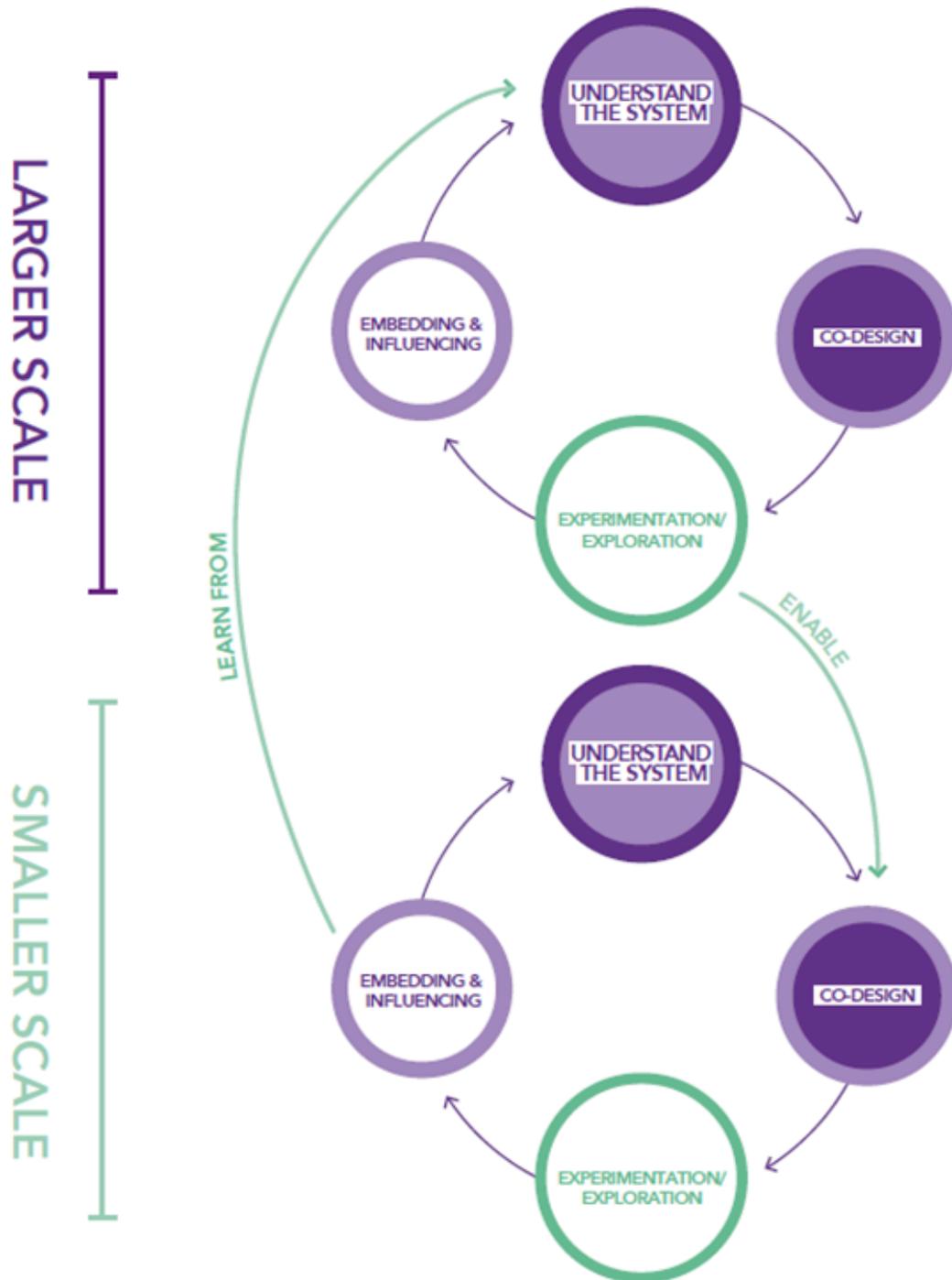
Figure 2. A dyad (pair) of learning cycles. Source: Lowe 2021, p. 153.

Principles to learn across multi-level collaborative governance

With the above understanding of social learning and the importance of learning cycles and loops, the paper looks now closer at how to learn across multiple levels of collaborative governance and other co-design practices. In order to answer this question, a literature review was carried out to identify research findings in the field of social learning and learning cycles/loop learning. Each of the following three subchapters sums up one principle based on specific literature.

Linking formal and informal learning

In her work on multi-level and social learning processes, Pahl-Wostl (2015) combines the concept of loop learning and learning cycles with *policy cycles* to conceptualise integrated governance structures (Figure 3). She uses the three learning loops in a process model of change in governance in which informal learning cycles are linked with formal policy cycles: The formal policy cycles mainly deal with the incremental improvement of established routines and are, therefore, acting foremost in a single-loop learning space. The informal learning cycles provide a space for experimentation. These could be local or regional innovation pilot projects which allow for revising assumptions and paradigms, thus supporting double-loop and triple-loop learning. Both cycles are important for change in governance as the outcomes of informal learning cycles require formal policy cycles to become effective by securing learning outcomes and developing binding commitment. In this way, effective links between informal learning and formal policy processes enable transformative change in governance.

According to Pahl-Wostl et al. (2013), policy and learning cycles are linked in many ways in different phases through so-called *action situations*, which describe the aggregation of social processes (e.g. the adoption of a federal water law). In this process, an adaptive learning cycle will trigger single- or partly double-loop learning, mainly through implementation and monitoring, i.e. by starting reframing processes (such as flood management moving from an issue of safety to also an issue of ecology), but not yet changing a paradigm or technical infrastructure. The transformative learning cycle allows for triple-loop learning with changes in strategic goals and policy formulation, like regulatory frameworks, a new paradigm, or technical design principles.
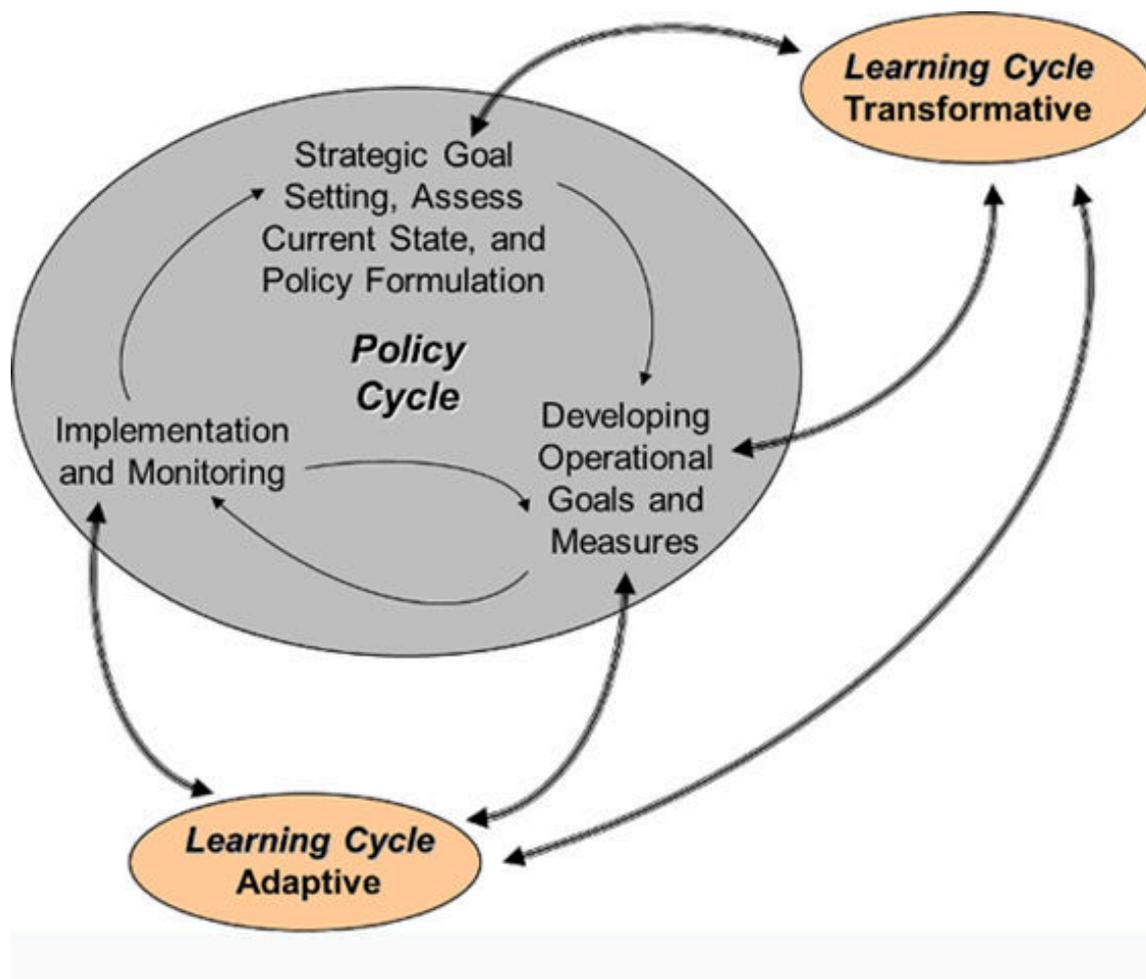
Figure 3. Links between formal policy and informal learning cycles. Source: Pahl-Wostl et al. 2013, p. 58.

Knowledgeability: Navigating through landscapes of practice

Another interesting framework encompassing the interplay of different levels and spaces for learning is that of mobilising landscapes of practice to address complex societal challenges (Figure 4). If communities of practice are local communities, landscapes of practice (LoP) describe the totality of local communities relevant to a given knowing area (Wenger-Trayner et al. 2015, Ackerman et al. 2022). LoP make up a living body of knowledge situated in a meta-community that crosses boundaries between diverse communities. The boundaries between the different communities make up for many tensions and misunderstandings (Wenger-Trayner et al. [2015] imagine having lunch with computer geeks as an example), but they also account for learning assets as unexpected learning opportunities (Wenger-Trayner et al. 2015, p. 17–18). Ackerman et al. (2022), in their framework, depict tensions between the formal sides of the organisation and the informal ones, like tensions between intended collaboration and organic knowledge sharing and learning interests. Both sides have to be integrated through self-governed forms of organisation (local communities), collaborative leadership, and the latter's competence to sense changing situations and concrete opportunities for mobilisation. For this, individuals need what Wenger-Trayner et al. (2015) term competence and *knowledgeability;* when competence refers to the knowledge about a single community, knowledgeability refers to multiple relations of a person across the landscape of practices (ibid. p. 13). Thus, individuals have to learn about the given knowing area (the grand challenge), but also about the composition of their landscape of practice. "LoPs help to understand that deploying participatory architectures for addressing GCs [grand challenges] means learning how to learn across the landscape, talk and understand the different technical languages, and navigate different organisational interfaces" (Ackerman et al. 2022, p. 22).
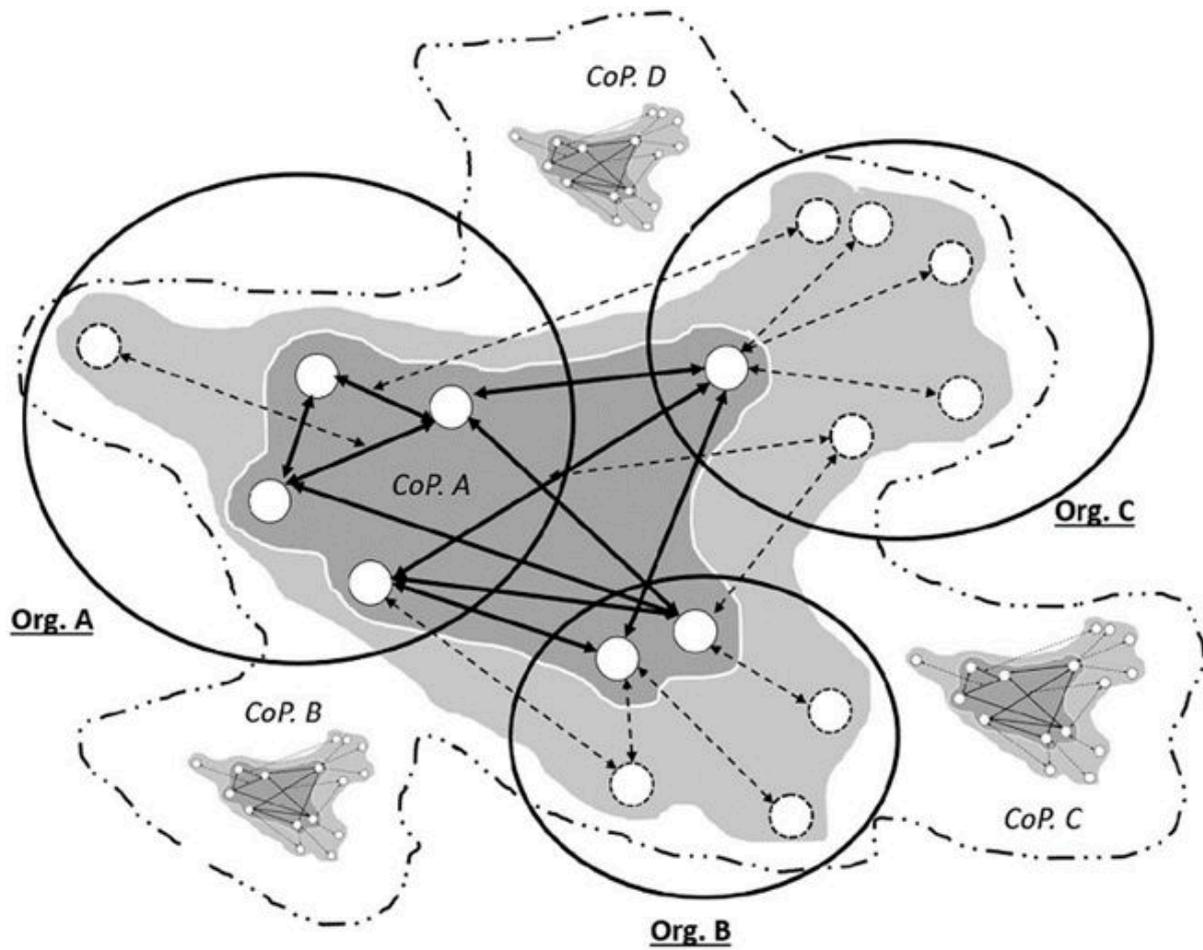
Figure 4. Model of landscapes of practice across organisations. Source: Pyrko, Dörfler & Eden 2019, p. 490.

Strategically address tensions

On an organisational level, Aguirre Ullou (2020) describes how public organisations can build up a co-design culture and become co-designing communities: This happens through constructive interactions between the emergent co-design culture and the dominant culture without alienating the latter. According to her "Rippple [!] model", an organisational culture exists in three dimensions: paradigm (mindsets, beliefs and fundamental assumptions), practice (roles, routines, and patterns of behaviour), and physical (artefacts & spaces). Introducing new capacities, such as co-design, will evoke productive and unproductive tensions between formal and informal settings as well as between the emerging and dominant cultures along the three dimensions. For example, in a case described by Aguirre Ullou, Lego as a prototyping tool in workshops caused too much tension for some participants as it clashed with their work ethic, which excludes "playing" at work. Such tensions need to be addressed strategically and become integrated. Furthermore, Aguirre Ullou (2020) expands her model to an ecosystem view of social transformation with different systemic levels of co-designing cultures, from smaller and faster changing social systems (e.g. a co-designing culture emerging within an organisational capacity building program) up to a co-designing culture on a larger and slower-changing social system level (e.g. within the general public). The levels are intertwined with the emerging culture influencing from the bottom-up, while the dominant culture produces stability and continuity from the top-down, remembering its dominant culture. This creates dynamics between renewal and stability in the ecosystem.

Conclusion

Increasingly, public authorities are using co-design and collaborative governance practices to leverage a wealth of knowledge and experience to tackle complex societal challenges. The kind of learning that happens in such practices is highly valuable but difficult to transfer across different levels of government and policy. Nevertheless, learning has the potential to contribute to addressing societal challenges if learning comes with a change in understanding across wider social units ("social learning"), and particularly if the learning takes place at a highly reflective level ("triple-loop learning").

This conceptual overview explored literature on how to learn across multi-level collaborative governance. It identified three principles to promote learning across different levels of collaborative governance:

1. **Linking formal and informal learning:** Informal learning cycles allow for experimentation and transformative change in governance and have to be linked with formal policy cycles to become effective. Both informal and formal learning is necessary in order to keep a balance between change through informal learning on the one hand and securing the learning outcomes in formal learning cycles on the other hand.

2. **Navigating through landscapes of practice with knowledgeability:** Landscapes of practice make up a totality of local communities relevant to a given knowing area. To foster collaborative governance, individuals need to understand the composition of their landscapes of practice and maintain multiple relationships across the landscapes.

3. **Strategically addressing tensions:** Introducing a culture that promotes co-design and collaborative governance should anticipate and address tensions between the emergent (co-design) culture, coming from a smaller social system, and the dominant and stabilising culture, coming from the larger system above.

Following these principles will make it easier for actors in collaborative governance to align around a common agenda, such as addressing complex societal challenges and change. It will also facilitate the impact of collaborative governance.

Future research would benefit from assessing formal and informal cultures and cycles, and how such an assessment and other instruments can be used to manage and address tensions between them. It may be worth exploring tools that help actors visualise and navigate across different communities and relationships.
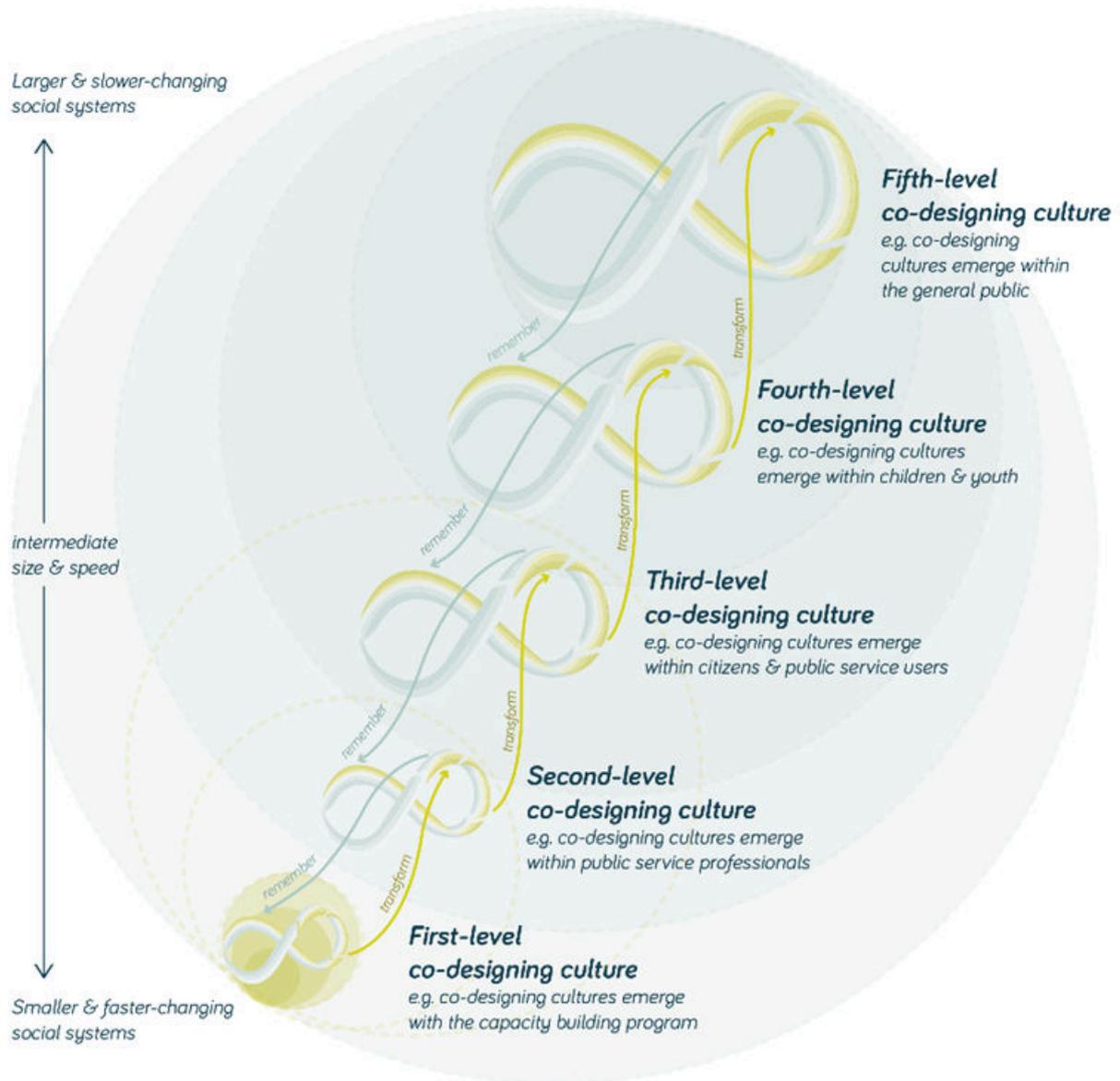
Figure 5. The Ripppling [!] ecosystem and its five systemic levels for spreading co-designing culture. Source: Aguirre Ulluo 2020, p. 208.

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