



CREATURES

Creative practices for better futures

Recommendations for policy and funders on how and why to engage with creative practice to bring about change towards more sustainable futures

Summary

This brief contains key ideas and insights from the European-funded CreaTures project on the role of creative practices in stimulating action toward more sustainable futures. This three-year project brought together creative practitioners and researchers to learn collectively. It involved engagement with funders, policy makers and networks operating in different national contexts and with interest in sustainability and cultural change.

The insights from the project are presented here, including a tool – the 9 Dimensions of change – that can be used to help set intentions and reflect on the outcomes of employing creative practices.

When we use the term **creative practices** we are referring to the arts in their fullest sense, including related practices, such as design. We include professional and non-professional work which uses personal and/or collective craft skills and ingenuity to make something new, renew or reinterpret some aspect of the world: from writing, art and theatre to designing to participatory community development to storytelling.

The dimensions of change identified are organized by three types of change: changing meanings (embodying, learning, imagining), changing connections (caring, organizing, inspiring), and changing power (co-creating, empowering, subverting). The 9 Dimensions tool is designed to inform policy and practice as well providing valuable insight for researchers and creative practitioners. It can be used:

- **Before projects start, or when funding requirements are designed** – to offer starting points for outlining intended directions for activity and potential influence.
- **Framing project foci** – the identified dimensions open up the space for creative practices to pursue different transformative pathways
- **During data organization and interpretation** – as part of reflective and evaluative processes
- **To understand and evaluate the *unexpected*** – it is valuable to build in space for this through the course of the creative practice

Alongside the 9 Dimensions tool, we propose six key considerations for funders and policymakers when evaluating the role of creative practice in stimulating action:

1. **Transformative societal change does not fit within single projects** – Evaluations need to take a wider view, moving beyond linear, short-term results project-level reporting. Collaboration is key here between funders, policy makers, artists, academics, and should develop in a way that provides real structural support for system-level questions
2. **Unexpected outcomes are valuable** – Creative practices are very good at helping facilitate new perspectives and creating unpredictable results in the form of new initiatives and new connections between people
3. **Evaluations are about power and meaning-making** – Rather than being neutral, evaluations shaped by processes of dialogue, rhetoric, power and meaning-making involve many different people and organizations.

4. **Evaluation is creative, and should be recognized as such** – When we set out what success and failure look like for creative practices, we are either explicitly or implicitly imagining the parameters of the future we want, even if that future is still rather open
5. **Creative practices can subvert existing societal processes** – There should be a much stronger focus on how creative practices help subvert, disrupt and unmake damaging elements of societies. This requires a different way of thinking and evaluating that keeps track of which parts of existing realities have a higher chance of being unmade as a result of creative practices
6. **Safety is needed for learning** – Creating a safe environment that enables learning is crucial, especially in the context of societal transformations, which bring significant uncertainties and instabilities

1. A crisis of the imagination

As the global ecological and climate crisis grows, it becomes more and more clear that the ‘usual’ ways of dealing with change are not going to be enough. This is not just a crisis of management or of the pace and roll-out of new technologies. It is more fundamentally a crisis of political and social imagination – a limited ability to imagine, and therefore enact, better futures beyond current, destructive modes of being. But this raises other questions: What do societies need to be able to imagine better futures in a way that actually matters for change? Who gets to imagine these futures and who is left out? How do they relate to the everyday experiences of diverse groups of people? Implicit in this is the need to go beyond individual behavior change, with shifts in relationships, cultures and structures across society.

Eco-social sustainability is about a way of living that is just, and does not privilege any person or group of people at the expense of other people, other beings or the planet. A way of living that is multi-generational, multi scalar, relational, and pluralistic. It is a way of co-existing between species that is of benefit to all living beings, and that pays attention to the most fundamental question – what does it mean to thrive in the world, and who gets to thrive?

This is where we can turn to creative practices as a source of change. There is an intuitive, though often implicit understanding that creative practices have a unique power to engage people, communities and organizations at the deepest levels of emotion, meaning and imagination. But there is limited understanding about the connection between creative practice and societal change, and a need for greater direction about what can really be done to support powerful creative practices.

Transformation refers to major societal change – in material conditions, in the ways things are done and the skills that exist to do them, and the meanings people give to the world. We can understand transformations as happening all around us constantly – through politics, technology and cultural changes. However, we can also think of the better future we are imagining as needing transformation. How do we fundamentally shift existing systems, economies, institutions to create a better world?

2. The CreaTures approach

The CreaTures project is an EU-funded collaborative effort between creative practitioners and researchers across Europe to help unlock the potential of creative practices for more sustainable, eco-

social futures. At the heart of the project is [the Laboratory](#), in which we commissioned 20 ‘experimental productions’.

In parallel, [the Observatory](#) reviews 140 further examples of transformative creative practice. Here we identified 25 ways that creative practitioners are working towards change – what can be called Creative Pathways towards better futures.

The CreaTures project also focuses on [engagement](#) – reaching out to publics everywhere across Europe with festivals, presentations and interactive sessions, and reaching over 337.000 people in 15 countries.

While representing a rich diversity of approaches, these examples shared the ambition of inspiring societal transformation involving deep and structural change.

Throughout the CreaTures project, we have spoken with policy makers, funders and others that support creative practice. We have focused on variations of the question: how can policy, funding, and other types of support help unlock the power of creative practices for better futures?

3. How creative practice stimulates transformative change – nine dimensions

“One of the important things about the creative sector is helping us to understand what we think, why we think it and to challenge some of those thoughts in serious or in humorous ways [it is], hugely important in revealing ourselves to ourselves and in generating the storylines that people use to shape our understandings of the world and how it works” - Policy interviews, Scotland

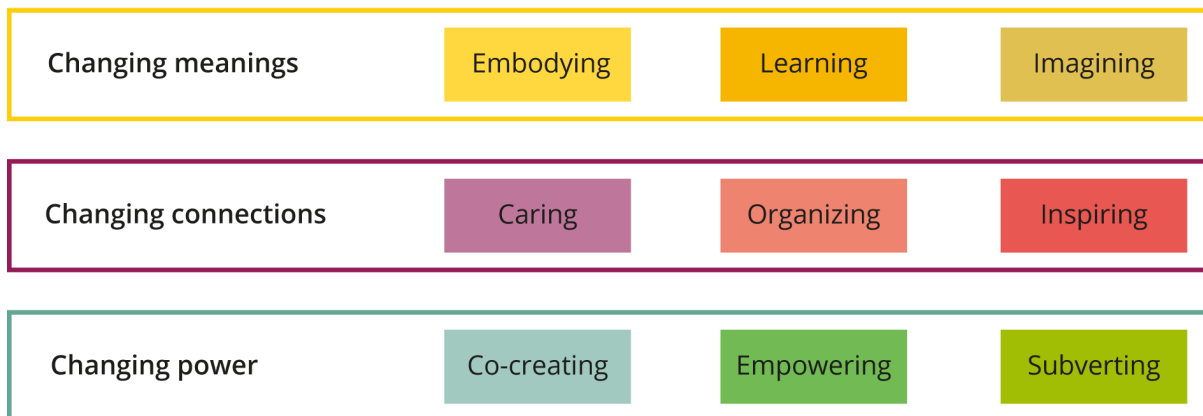
“Policy needs to up its game. It needs to be more ambitious. There’s a lot of focus on psychological approach to behaviour change. I don’t buy into the psychological approach, I am more into the sociological approach to change” - Policy interviews, Scotland

A key focus for CreaTures is the [evaluation](#) of creative practices for transformative change. We have found that creative practitioners, policy makers, funders and researchers struggle to communicate with each other regarding the value of creative practices as a way to stimulate change. Relationships between creative practices and change processes are complex and often hard to grasp. They run the risk of being flattened and oversimplified on the one hand, or kept very vague and anecdotal on the other.

The *Nine Dimensions* tool was developed to help reflective evaluations of how creative practice can bring about change – providing a multidimensional frame that captures the richness of creative practice while still making it manageable. This tool emerged from in-depth design processes with our creative practitioners and from dialogues with policy makers and funders. Importantly, the tool is also supported by an extensive literature review that helps provide a research basis for its change mechanisms. The full version of the Nine Dimensions tool [can be found here](#).

The tool contains descriptions of each dimension, a summary of literature showing how each dimension links to societal change, and guiding questions for investigating each dimension. These questions include descriptive questions – which help map and track what is happening; and ‘so what?’ questions – which help make sense of why it matters, who was involved and not involved, and more.

Nine dimensions – ways to talk about creative practice and change



The nine dimensions are organized by three overarching categories.

First, creative practice, at its best, can stimulate *changing meanings*:

- *Embodying*: Creative practices focus on new ways of embodying which allows for people individually and collectively to tap into the full intelligence of the body, the senses, and experience to engage with the full complexity of life, and experience different realities first-hand.
- *Learning*: Creative practices offer unique opportunities for learning. Deep assumptions and worldviews can be questioned through creative practice; and new ways of seeing, being and doing can be learned.
- *Imagining*: Imagination is a key component of all change actions. Creative practices can help in imagining different futures in ways that can be vivid, emotionally resonant and challenging.

Second, creative practices can help change *connections*:

- *Caring*: New ways of caring for each other and the world open up the safety, support and empathy needed for better futures, as well as for finding the energy and courage to work towards them together.
- *Organizing*: Complementing care are the ways in which creative practices might stimulate new ways of organizing – new communities, networks and support structures that can help create change.
- *Inspiring*: Creative practices can be core to inspiring action way beyond their immediate interactions by providing emotional energy, ideas and examples.

Third, creative practice can help stimulate changes in *power*:

- *Co-creating*: Through co-creative processes, people can harness the power of creative practice to imagine and realize new futures together. Co-creating bolsters the benefits of all other dimensions.
- *Empowering*: creative practices can be *empowering* by raising and strengthening voices and perspectives in systems that normally don't have any space for them.
- *Subverting*: It is not enough to only build new systems, many current systems have to also be dismantled. Creative practices can be used for subverting – symbolically and also practically – existing broken systems and ways of doing things.

Of course, most creative practices don't engage with all of these dimensions. They might focus mostly on embodying or imagining, for instance; or on learning and care. But the Nine Dimensions tool provides a practical tool for reflection at different moments. Before projects start, or when funding requirements are designed, the nine dimensions can offer starting points for outlining intended directions for activity and potential influence. The Nine Dimensions tool can also be used to organize and interpret data – for instance from interviews, focus groups, questionnaires or observation notes. Of particular interest is understanding the *unexpected* through the course of the creative practice, and it is valuable to build in space for this.

“These dimensions offer a useful starting point for a conversation with creatives seeking funding, and for dialogues with other funders” – Policy interviews, the Netherlands

“Creative practitioners and funders can benefit from reflecting together to see whether their theories of change can align” - Policy interviews, the Netherlands

4. Examples of creative practices stimulating transformative change

What does creative practice look like that actively aims to create a better future? How can the Nine Dimensions be applied to understand the change? Here we provide examples from the 20 'experimental productions' that formed part of the CreaTures project in relation to how stimulate transformative action and change.

Example 1: [The Treaty of Finsbury Park 2025](#) explores new ways to build empathy with non-human lifeforms through play in a London park. It is a collaborative storytelling project that depicts the dawning of interspecies democracy. It begins by describing a new era of equal rights for all living beings, where species come together to organise and shape the environments and cultures they inhabit in Finsbury Park. Based around a set of live and online LARPs — or live action roleplay games — the Treaty of Finsbury Park 2025 is played from more-than-human perspectives to encourage blooming biodiversity and interspecies political action. Thinking like a dog, bee or even grass and help change the way we all see and participate in our local urban green spaces.



This is an example of stimulating action through:

- **Embodying:** The Treaty production really shines when it comes to the ‘meanings’ dimensions. Participants in the roleplaying describe many new sensations, experiences and reflections associated with actively embodying other species. Descriptions of this embodiment contain many descriptions of surprise and emotional impact. *“This is a whole other way of being, which was really exciting. Suddenly I felt different. Even though I didn't know how to feel different.”* – player reflection
- **Caring:** Participants reported an expanded sense of wanting to care for other species, but also commented on the tension, intended by the project organizers, between representing other species while still being human players. Players commented that it was sometimes challenging to really engage in the conflicts that might have to be worked through between different species, because players wanted to stay civil with other players, most of whom they'd never met before. *“I very much like the idea actually that poo is not just waste, but it's actually our very language. If you think about it, that's something we all share, that's how we collaborate, how we live together.”* – player reflection
- **Co-creating:** Players create roles, interactions and ideas for park activities together, building a shared world of experience and action. *“It was interesting when we touched on what is necessary for each species and what's your highest desire if you like. In terms of thinking about managing the park to best serve biodiversity I think that there's a question about what extent do you consider needs and desires.”* – player reflection

Example 2 – Commonsply is a non-profit, opensource board game that encourages a culture of cooperation, and questions the violent model of neoliberal privatisation. Players must cooperate with other players to prevent privatisation and liberate as many goods as possible. The goal is to turn them into public goods or, even better, common ones. Players work together as a team to fight against an atomised dystopia.



This is an example of stimulating action through:

- **Learning:** The game provides opportunity to reflect on basic assumptions and worldviews embedded in neoliberal socio-economic systems. It works towards eco-social change by bringing together stakeholders interested in commons to negotiate and imagine various strategies and engage in critical discussion. It encourages critical thinking about hegemonic ideas and unsustainable practices through the commoning principles embedded in the game.
- **Organising:** The game creates a foundation for on-the-ground actions, like community buyouts, redistribution of resources that benefit local places & communities, and can help groups organise around shared understandings of the benefits of commons and direct

democracy. The collective sense-making that takes place during the game contributes to people's ability to tackle complex issues like inequality and the uneven distribution of resources together, while creating a community of practice around these themes.

- **Co-creating:** The game allows for collective creating of methods and processes, shaping the possibility space for action in sustainability. Editable game files are available on the project website to encourage collaborative game development, which is further supported through co-creative events with diverse local communities.

Using the dimensions to reflect across 20 CreaTures experiments

We have used the Nine Dimensions tool to analyze all 20 CreaTures experiments to arrive at key insights across these projects. From this analysis, we conclude that creative practices with the most transformative potential combined 1) learning and imagining based in deep, situated embodiment with 2) lots of possibilities for growth and adaptation of the practice by others. Care stands out as a powerful dimension in CreaTures. Outside of the project this is far less of a focus, but theory and practice show this as having strong transformative potential. Co-creative approaches almost always seem to offer many benefits over less co-creative approaches – allowing participants to develop co-ownership, share ideas, develop relationships, and develop skills. Empowerment and subversion were evident among many of the project experiments, but there is scope for more development here: about the 'who' of empowerment, about how challenging/subversive transformative creative work should be, and about gentle versus more aggressive subversion.

5. Stepping back: considerations when evaluating the role of creative practice in stimulating change

"We really need the helicopter to go up a bit to a higher level, and to look at our challenges across the system together" – Policy interviews, the Netherlands

"one of the important things about the creative sector is helping us to understand what we think, why we think it and to challenge some of those thoughts in serious or in humorous ways" – Policy interviews, Scotland

We set out below some key considerations when evaluating the role of creative practice in stimulating action, based on conversations with policy makers and funders, as well as through a review of literature on evaluation and impact. These considerations are especially focused on the role of evaluation, agenda setting and impact thinking as real leverage points for change.

1. **Transformative societal change does not fit within single projects.** Evaluations of creative practices are often focused on linear, short-term results project-level reporting. This does very little to help gain insights into the links between creative practices and societal transformations. Evaluations need to take a wider view, based on the understanding that societal transformations often happen because many groups, projects and organizations are trying to create change in very different ways. Contexts are very important. Collaborations between different groups — funders, policy makers, artists, academics — are needed, and should develop in a way that provides real structural support for system-level questions. Attention should be given to:
 - What can we learn about the impacts of creative practitioners as they go from one project to the next?
 - What is the impact across many different projects engaging with the same challenge or societal issue?
 - What are the impacts of large-scale programs, policies and strategies?

2. **Unexpected outcomes are valuable.** Societal transformations, whether we see them as good or bad from our particular perspectives, are unpredictable and often require truly novel ways of seeing and acting. Creative practices are very good at helping facilitate new perspectives and creating unpredictable results in the form of new initiatives, new connections between people, and more. Questions here can include:
 - How do we create space for unexpected outcomes?
 - How can theories of change support evaluations that are flexible and adaptive, as well as able to recognise and make changes based on the unexpected?

3. **Evaluations are about power and meaning-making.** Rather than being neutral, evaluations shaped by processes of dialogue, rhetoric, power and meaning-making involve many different people and organizations. Each of these use ideas, evidence, and stories as rhetoric to support their positions, secure funding and frame policy action. This should include consideration of:
 - What are the power dynamics inherent in what is valued?
 - Who gets to determine who the major stakeholders are?
 - What are the ethical questions involved?

4. **Evaluation is creative, and should be recognized as such.** When we set out what success and failure look like for creative practices, we are operating in a design mode. We are either explicitly or implicitly imagining the parameters of the future we want, even if that future is still rather open. But the contexts which provide these parameters, and therefore frame our future imaginaries, are not stable - they are themselves transforming rapidly. Questions here can focus on:
 - How do our ideas about what change we want to see, and how we get there, relate to this awareness of a changing world?
 - What are the dominant fears of the future?
 - How do we tell our stories well?

5. **Creative practices can subvert existing societal processes.** Much about our current realities are fundamentally destructive and counter to a more sustainable future. Evaluations often focus on how to improve things, make new processes and actions work. But from the perspective of societal transformations, there should be a much stronger focus on how creative practices help subvert, disrupt and unmake damaging elements of societies. This requires a different way of thinking that keeps track of which parts of existing realities have a higher chance of being unmade as a result of creative practices. Attention should be given to:
 - How do we create evaluations that actively stimulate the dismantling of current, destructive systems?

6. **Safety is needed for learning.** Organizations in the culture sector and more generally experience a profound lack of safety that does not allow them to investigate honestly whether projects and processes have succeeded or failed. Evaluation then, becomes more about advocacy and defence than learning. Creating a safe environment that enables learning is crucial, especially in the context of societal transformations, which bring significant uncertainties and instabilities. This can include the following questions:
 - How do we make sure evaluation doesn't destroy learning opportunities?
 - How do we actively support learning?

“Don't lie! We all know you're lying creatives; we know you're lying when you tell us that you've got straight lines between creative practice and social transformation, you don't! You have vague, diffuse lines, we all accept that it's true, we really do! It's when you try to pen them in as straight lines we all

go, 'yeah maybe not'. So don't try, just explain that the function of creative practice is to create conditions where other things happen - it doesn't make things happen" – Policy interviews, Scotland

7. Find out more

The key insights presented in this brief will be found in our new CreaTures Framework:

<http://creaturesframework.org>

For everything CreaTures, and to get in touch:

<http://creatures-eu.org>

8. Credits

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