



# In-between Spaces: Intermediaries rethinking funding practices

A learning paper on Funding and Entrepreneurship  
Support for Adaptation & Resilience

In Partnership With:



Led by:



Convened by the Climate Adaptation Innovation & Learning initiative and  
the Systems Innovation Learning Partnership (SILP)



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# Introduction

If you work toward positive impact, there is a good chance you recognise this feeling:

You are holding relationships that don't neatly align. Translating between languages that don't quite match. Expected to deliver certainty in situations defined by uncertainty and be accountable to multiple worlds at once (funders, communities, institutions, partners) all with different incentives, timelines and definitions of success.

This is the work of being *in-between*.

Whether or not you call yourself an “intermediary”, many people working across climate adaptation, resilience, development, philanthropy, innovation and systems change occupy this space. You may sit between policy and practice, capital and communities, global strategies and local realities, long-term transformation and short-term funding cycles. You may be a convener, translator, broker, ecosystem-builder, learning partner or support organisation...or all of these at once. This type of work is essential and it is hard.

Climate adaptation and resilience at scale require systems to change. This means collaboration across sectors, geographies, and power structures that were not designed to work together. Yet much of the funding, accountability, and organisational structures we operate within is oriented towards linear planning, predefined outcomes and short-term projects. The result is a growing mismatch between the complexity of the challenges we face and the tools we have to address them.

Intermediaries sit at the centre of this mismatch.

Occupying the “meso level” between macro-level actors who shape policy, strategy, and capital flows, and micro-level actors who implement, innovate, and hold ground-level knowledge, intermediaries can have a unique vantage point. They can see patterns others cannot. They can connect actors who would otherwise never meet. When they are working well, intermediaries help systems learn, adapt and move forward together. At the same time, this position comes with significant tension.

Intermediaries are always expected to move resources to the front lines while sustaining their own organisations. To comply with existing funding structures while quietly trying to change them. To balance accountability with experimentation. To translate across power, language, and worldview differences without distorting meaning or reinforcing inequity. A lot of this labour is relational, emotional and invisible and therefore difficult to fund, measure or currently legitimise.

These tensions cannot always be directly “resolved” but they can be navigated when deep trust and our rationale is understood. This learning paper emerged from a shared inquiry into how people are navigating these tensions in practice.

In late 2025, the [Climate Adaptation Innovation & Learning initiative](#) and the Systems Innovation Learning Partnership (SILP) convened a community of practice bringing together around 25 practitioners working across intermediary roles in the climate adaptation and resilience ecosystem. The purpose was not to define a single model of “good intermediation” but to surface lived experiences: the tensions people and organisations are holding, the practices they are developing and the trade-offs they are making in real-world conditions.

Through four facilitated sessions, alongside preparatory one-to-one conversations, participants shared stories from their work - moments of friction, adaptation, compromise, and possibility. From these conversations, a set of recurring tensions and practice areas became visible.

To help make sense of these dynamics, this paper introduces the idea of polarities: interdependent tensions that cannot be solved by choosing one side over the other but must be continually navigated to stay true to the realities present. These polarities are not prescriptions. They are lenses - a way of naming what many practitioners already feel in their bodies and their work.

Alongside these lenses, the paper highlights practices that intermediaries are using to work in “spaces between”: between funded activities, layers of actors, certainty and discovery, and across power differentials. These practices are not exhaustive, nor universally applicable. They are examples (grounded in experience) of how people are trying to do this work with care, integrity and effectiveness.

This paper is offered as a learning resource, a provocation and invitation.

It is not a toolkit, nor a blueprint. It does not claim a single voice or a unified position. Instead, it invites readers (whether funders, intermediaries, implementers, policymakers, or partners) to reflect on their own role within the systems they inhabit:

**Where is your role, and where does it sit?**

**What tensions feel most alive in your work right now?**

**Which of your efforts remains unseen or unfunded?**

**What might become possible if that work was better recognised, resourced and shared?**



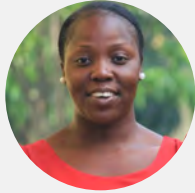
**Intermediary organisations sit between funders and communities. They vary in their proximity to funders or implementors, their local or global orientation and other characteristics.**

**However, all intermediaries are in some form boundary-spanning agents acting as bridges, conveners, sense-makers, and catalysts who connect actors across ecosystems. The community that informed this paper included a diverse set of intermediaries and so we take a broad and inclusive definition of intermediary organisation.**



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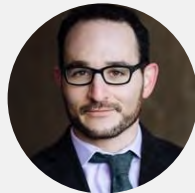
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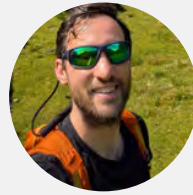
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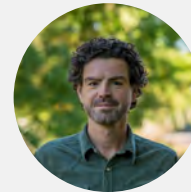
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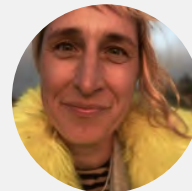


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# Acknowledgement

This paper reflects learning generated through the convened community of practice. Participants were primarily organisations working in intermediary roles within the climate adaptation and resilience ecosystem operating at the interface between funders, policy and implementation. The group brought a diversity of organisational types, geographies and professional experiences. At the same time, participation was shaped by existing networks, language, time availability, and the ability to engage in an English-language, online process. As with much work in this field, voices from larger institutions and internationally connected organisations were more present than those of smaller, grassroots actors.

The insights in this paper should therefore be read as situated learning (grounded in lived practice) but not representative of all intermediary experiences. Some perspectives, particularly from community-led and locally rooted organisations, are reflected primarily through case studies and shared stories rather than direct participation in the conversations.

Naming these dynamics is not an exercise in critique for its own sake but an acknowledgement of how power and access shape whose learning becomes visible. These questions remain live and future iterations of this work would benefit from deeper participation by actors who are currently underrepresented in such spaces.

See page 43 to find out more about the conveners.



# Six Polarities

# Six Critical Polarities:

for intermediaries in climate adaptation and resilience

Polarities describe tensions that intermediaries do not solve. Rather, they are conditions of the work. Intermediaries move back and forth along these axes depending on context, relationships, funding structures and moment in time.



**Difficulties arise not from the existence of these tensions but from pretending they are not there.**

# Accountability ↔ Adaptability

Awareness of Compliance and Planned Disturbance: Following donor norms and existing structures, while intervening/contributing as a change agent for, and midwife of, new approaches, structures, and discourse.

Intermediaries often find themselves pulled between accountability and adaptability. This polarity speaks to the dual role that intermediaries, funders, and practitioners often play. On one side is the need to navigate and comply with existing donor norms, regulatory frameworks, and institutional structures. These are often rigid, top-down, and shaped by Global Minority (Global North) priorities. These systems provide access, legitimacy, and resources, but can also constrain creativity, local agency, and transformative potential.

On the other side is the role of planned disturbance: intentionally working within and on the cracks of these systems to catalyse new discourses, shift power dynamics, and co-create alternative structures. This includes enabling local actors, developing new partnerships and platforms, challenging status quo biases, and fostering systemic change through experimentation, advocacy, and capacity-building. The tension is not simply about rule-following versus rule-breaking, but about knowing when and how to play within the system - and when to help rewrite it.

Navigating this polarity raises questions about the role of intermediaries and ESOs in influencing/changing the funding/investment system and supporting beneficiaries/ A&R start-ups to navigate them.



Ian Matimba

"...our grants are not necessarily for formal.. companies/organisations that have got structure, but we look for hard-to-reach groups, those that don't normally get monies, but are doing some climate work knowingly and unknowingly. There's an aspect of them obviously being informal - there's a high risk - and to what extent are the donors willing to take-in that risk?...Normally we end up with a situation where donors look more at the risk than what the impact those groups can provide.

At the end of the day, we go back to the 'normal' projects because those [informal actors] do not have the system that we want them to put in place. Of course there's risk: we can't run away from that. But to what extent to do we need to...be flexible enough to allow some of those risks...to see how they will affect the programme?"



# Project Delivery ↔ Long-Term System Learning

**Demonstrating Results and Deep Learning:** The need to achieve and account for results (targeted outputs and outcomes) from the investment of resources, while also engaging in true experimentation and deep learning.

This polarity reflects a core tension in investment in innovation, development and philanthropic funding: the need to demonstrate and communicate tangible, validated results and the imperative to explore, learn, and adapt in/to complexity, staying in uncertain contexts. On one side, funders - especially public institutions - are accountable for showing value for money through measurable outputs and outcomes. These are often tied to pre-defined indicators and strategic priorities, reinforcing known pathways and leveraging existing institutional knowledge. On the other side, there is a growing recognition that systemic change and innovation require open-ended inquiry, experimentation, and emergent learning - especially in contexts where challenges are complex, solutions are not yet known, and local capacity-building for operating in the messy middle is key - utilising local and indigenous knowledge and know-how. The tension is not between right and wrong, but between two valuable orientations: one toward higher levels of certainty of impact/outcomes and accountability for these, and the other toward discovery and transformation. Some situations may call for clear, predictable, measurable outcomes; others may benefit from exploratory, adaptive approaches.

Additionally, adaptation and resilience work is funded through time-bound projects. Yet the changes these projects aim to contribute to unfold over much longer horizons. Intermediaries hold both timescales. Their job is to deliver within defined project boundaries while also holding learning that only becomes meaningful across multiple initiatives, partners, and years. Relationships, trust and insight often extend well beyond the life of a grant... even when funding does not.

This raises questions about what is valued, counted, and resourced. When learning is tied too tightly to individual projects, system-level insight can be lost. When long-term learning is prioritised without attention to delivery, credibility can suffer. Navigating this tension is central to the intermediary role.



Will Wade

"There is a dichotomy between success and failure...in this polarity... 'successful outcomes' are what is normally driving people's set up of MEL frameworks and the likes, whereas [learning from] failure is an integral part of innovation and change."



Moritz Hauer

"We certainly cannot observe whether something has truly become more resilient within the context of a 2-3 year project cycle or not. Resilience is something that happens at an undefined time scale and it includes the growth of systems, the formulation of systems, reorganisation, collapse; it includes vast things. The question is, how does what we do count towards resilience? And then how do we even recognise if resilience increases?"


# Alignment ↔ Difference

Adaptation & Resilience as a separate Sector and Adaptation & Resilience as cross-cutting lens applicable to all activities

Intermediaries are frequently expected to align actors around shared goals, strategies, or narratives. At the same time, they work in systems shaped by genuinely different values, incentives and worldviews. Funders, policymakers, investors, and communities often want different things, and for good reason. Intermediaries operate in the space where these differences meet, translating across languages and logics without flattening them into false consensus.

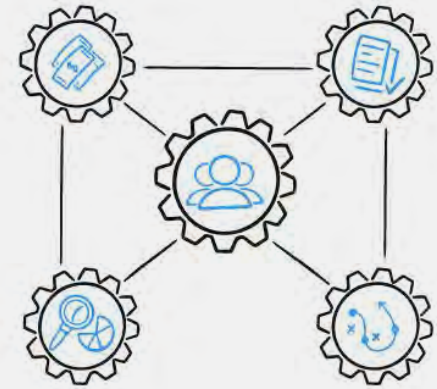
One crucial example of this is between treating adaptation as a sector with its own funding and accountability systems, or as a lens that permeates all innovation. Naming adaptation as a sector helps it attract dedicated capital and policy attention, yet the very act of ringfencing it risks turning adaptation into a niche, when the real ambition is to reshape how all innovation and investment works. In a broader sense, this is further exacerbated when challenges at local levels intersect across multiple needs, strategies, categories and narratives - such as water, health, agriculture, climate mitigation, economic development, local identity and traditions. The tension that intermediaries hold - and translate across - is the need for alignment of multiple priorities in order to access funding and policy systems/instruments, while equally upholding the difference of worldviews and incentives to drive local ownership, engagement, and sustainable momentum.

This polarity becomes difficult when alignment is prioritised at the expense of difference, or when difference is treated as a problem to be resolved rather than a reality to be worked with. The challenge is not to eliminate disagreement, but to create conditions where difference can coexist without blocking action.



Amina Kashoro

"There should be a sense of inclusiveness in any project design or any adaptation project which is...to be designed. But it should bring out the gaps and distance...To make a fund more resilient: whoever is designing the project should have a Plan B."



# Speed & Scale ↔ Inclusion

Being Rooted in Context and Scaling Solutions: Locally defined, community-led adaptation & resilience outcomes; and scalable, comparable impact & metrics.

Climate impacts create urgency. Funding decisions, responses, and interventions are often under pressure to move quickly and be replicable for effectiveness. At the same time, inclusive processes (particularly those involving communities most affected) take time, trust and care. Financiers seek comparability and quantifiable metrics to justify investment and aggregate capital, while meaningful Adaptation & Resilience work is often seen as inherently place-based, shaped by local risks, cultures, and priorities. Standardisation risks overlooking community needs, while local focus risks being seen as unscalable or “uninvestable.” Moreover, the pursuit of best practices that can be scaled is often linked to maladaptation that isn’t contextualised.

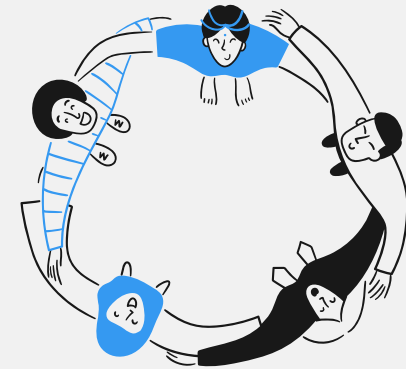
Intermediaries often feel this tension acutely. Moving too fast can exclude voices, reinforce existing power dynamics, or lead to poorly grounded interventions. Moving too slowly can mean missing windows of opportunity or failing to respond to immediate needs. Furthermore, the tendency to scalable outputs/impacts often excludes informal communities and “non-traditional” actors for grants or investment and potentially restricts innovation and adaptability. On the other hand, well-developed strategies with underpinning theories of change can bring increased focus and resources, and leverage complementary programmes and funding, to achieve greater impacts.

This polarity is not about choosing speed/scale or deeply inclusive/embedded, but about recognising the trade-offs involved and being explicit about them. Decisions about pace and scale are also decisions about power and participation. If we seek to scale solutions anchored in the local context and being adapted at the community level, many questions around how success is measured, by who and when, remain. Intermediaries and ESOs hold potential in bridging this tension by aligning financiers with community leadership, and advocating metrics that balance breadth with depth.



Andrew Eil

"Not only are these [solutions at scale and context-specific] not in conflict but solutions that scale become foundations or anchors for the local context that then can be adapted situationally at the community or local level. There's such a deficit of scaled resources and solutions in the Adaptation and Resilience space that I don't think 'scale' crowds out context as it might in other spaces...Usually, scale is seen as threatening local context; or, quite frequently, it's seen that way...I'm seeing scale as empowering context rather than crowding out context."



# Intermediation ↔ Direct Relationships

Directing Value and Creating Value: Intermediaries and ESOs as value and resource custodians operating in the name of the system, and intermediaries and ESOs as connectors, weavers, facilitators, peers, and partners serving multiple value-creation goals.

Intermediaries connect actors who might not otherwise work together. Yet the presence of intermediaries can also create additional layers between funders and communities or between policy and practice. On one side, intermediation enables translation, coordination and learning across complex systems. On the other, it risks adding distance, opacity or competition for resources if roles are unclear or accountability becomes diffuse. This tension invites reflection on when intermediation adds value and when it may need to evolve, reduce or step aside in favour of more direct relationships.

This polarity speaks to the dual role that intermediaries, funders, and practitioners often play in development cooperation, philanthropic, and innovation (support) ecosystems. They act as custodians of value - translating funder strategies into measurable goals, managing and deploying resources, and ensuring compliance with top-down frameworks to maximise the consumption of these resources. At the same time, intermediaries have the potential to create and amplify value from the bottom up - serving as ecosystem builders and weavers, peer facilitators, and co-creators of locally relevant solutions.

The tension lies in how intermediaries navigate their position: when are they serving the stated/received interests of the funds/resources (top-down), and when are they amplifying the system's collective potential for impact? When overly focused on directing value, intermediaries risk duplication, generic/ill-fitting implementation, and becoming gatekeepers. By actively engaging this polarity, intermediaries and ESOs can move beyond transactional roles and become strategic enablers of ecosystem-wide value co-creation, fostering alignment across actors, and supporting the emergence of shared frameworks for defining and measuring value.



Chitembo  
Kawimbe Chunga

"What should be supported is addressing key barriers to systemic funding and support for adaptation. To remove the fragmentation of financing; to enhance coordination, which is something very important and very critical".



# Financial Value ↔ Broader notions of value

Money as Instrument and Money as Enabler: Capital as driver of activity, prioritising returns and tangible outcomes; and capital as a supportive enabler of community needs and long-term resilience.

As adaptation and resilience are increasingly brought to the attention of private finance, questions of value become more pronounced. Private finance seeks measurable returns. Financial metrics bring clarity and comparability while not capturing everything that matters: adaptation value often shows up as avoided losses, co-benefits, or long-term resilience, which are harder to monetise. If capital flows to clear-return projects, and we fail to demonstrate return in the most critical adaptation and resilience needs – particularly in the world’s most climate vulnerable communities – these risks remain underfunded.

At the same time, there is growing evidence of high returns of investment in adaptation and resilience. Intermediaries often operate at the boundary between financial value and other forms of value: social, relational, cultural, ecological, and justice based. A lot of the work that enables adaptation (building trust, supporting collective action, strengthening local capacity) is difficult to monetise but essential to long-term outcomes. This polarity becomes challenging when one form of value dominates decision-making. Intermediaries are often tasked with holding multiple value frames at once, helping systems recognise what is important even when it is not easily measured.

Recognising the value of both ends of the polarity in a systemic manner could unlock innovative pathways for investments in adaptation and resilience and shift the narrative from one of dependency to one of self-reliance and sustainable economic development.




Tamara Mohr

“Usually, the people who are ‘higher up’, they have more access to information and more power and more money. So, we need to advocate for access to climate funding for local communities, and we all have a role to play to make this happen... If we would recognise and listen and develop things much more together and much less top down and make sure that local groups are also being heard and resourced, I think that would make a huge difference and not feel like we are above, or we are more... knowledgeable, and know better what is needed than the groups that know their context best and what is possible and needed, but that have less access and less support.”



Across all six polarities, the work of intermediaries is less about finding the “right” position and more about staying attentive to movement.

Where an intermediary sits on any given polarity may shift over time and that movement is often a sign of responsiveness rather than inconsistency.



# The Emerging Practices of Intermediaries

# At its heart, the work of an intermediary is not about choosing sides or resolving contradictions. It is about holding difference.

Intermediaries play a critical role in systems change by enabling multiple (and sometimes conflicting) agendas, worldviews, ways of working and needs to exist at the same time. Their value lies in preventing one perspective from dominating simply because it holds more power, funding or legitimacy. Instead, intermediaries work in the tension between these positions, creating the conditions for learning, adaptation and new possibilities to emerge.

This section explores four practice areas that surfaced through conversations in the Community of Practice. They are not intended as a comprehensive list or a set of best practices. They reflect patterns in how practitioners are navigating their roles in real-world conditions.

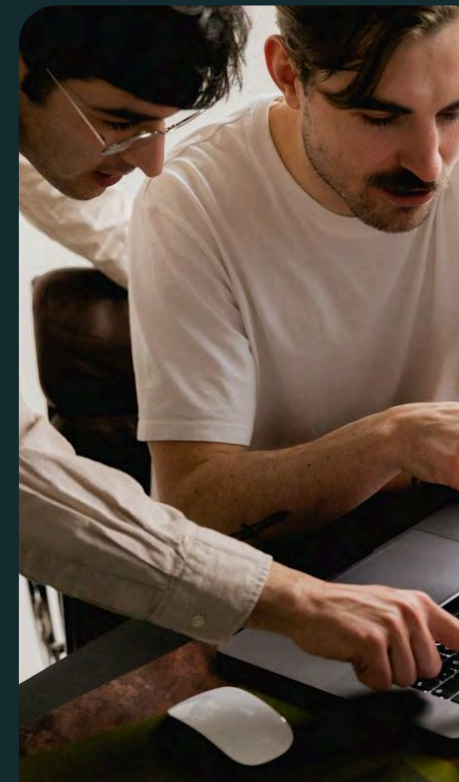
These practices cut across the tensions described earlier and are organised around four kinds of “spaces” that intermediaries are often required to hold and bridge:

- The space beyond individual projects and funding cycles
- The space between different actors and institutions
- The space between certainty and discovery
- And the space where power differences shape who decides and who benefits

Some of these spaces are practical and visible, like connecting work across projects or convening actors who do not usually meet. Others are less tangible, involving questions of uncertainty, learning and power that are felt more than they are easily named.

Holding these spaces is the everyday work of intermediaries. It involves recognising that different actors operate with different incentives, languages, mental models and constraints ...these cannot simply be aligned or overcome.

**The task is not to erase difference but to work with it to create enough trust, translation and shared understanding for diverse forms of value to coexist and contribute to change.**



# The Space...

SPACE 1



Beyond Individual Projects  
and Funding Cycles

SPACE 2



Between Different  
Actors and Institutions

SPACE 3



Between Certainty  
and Discovery

SPACE 4



Where Power Differences Shape  
Who Decides and Who Benefits

# Beyond Individual Projects and Funding Cycles

Most funding (whether public, philanthropic or private) is organised around projects. Projects have start and end dates, defined activities, agreed outputs and reporting requirements. They create clarity, accountability, and also create boundaries.

In practice, this work enables real learning and systems change happens outside these boundaries. Relationships continue after projects end. Insights emerge late or in the spaces between one initiative and the next. Patterns only become visible when experiences from multiple projects are held together over time. Yet funding structures often reward delivery within a single intervention rather than learning across them. As a result, hard-won lessons remain trapped in reports, teams disband and the same mistakes are repeated in new programmes with different names. Intermediaries are often the actors best placed to work across these edges because they sit across multiple initiatives, partners, and funding streams — thus being able to hold longer-term learning agendas that are not owned by any one project. They can connect insights from different contexts, identify what is emerging across the system and help ensure that learning informs future programme design — not just retrospective reporting. Practitioners in the community described several ways they do this in practice. These include developing learning questions that extend beyond individual funding cycles; embedding reflection and learning from the earliest stages of programme design; and investing in synthesis —

the often-invisible work of noticing patterns across projects, places and time. Some intermediaries also emphasised the importance of building partnerships that are designed for continuity, not just for the duration of a grant, allowing trust and shared understanding to deepen over time.

This work is rarely neutral. It requires intermediaries to hold tensions between funder expectations and field realities, between accountability and adaptation, and between short-term delivery and long-term change. It also requires resources (time, skills, and capacity) that are often not explicitly funded.

Working beyond project boundaries is therefore not about rejecting projects or funding requirements. It is about recognising their limits, and intentionally creating space for learning, relationships and system-level insight to travel further than any single intervention allows.



Prerna Singh

"I think the research skill set of being able to synthesise findings and identify commonalities and differences across projects in the same space is incredibly important for intermediaries. It enables them to distil insights and share clearly with funders what is working and what isn't."



**Treat learning as a long-term responsibility,**  
not something that starts and ends with a grant. Rather than tying reflection solely to reporting cycles, they develop learning questions that carry across multiple projects and funding streams. This allows insights to accumulate over time, rather than being lost when a project closes.



**Value synthesis.**

Step back to look across initiatives, contexts, and partners to notice patterns that are not visible within a single programme. This work often involves drawing on external perspectives, whether through researchers, technical partners, or peer organisations, and using these insights to inform future funding design and strategic decisions.



**Embed learning from the very beginning.**

Rather than treating learning as an add-on, design programmes with reflection built in from the outset — creating space to pause, adapt, and feed learning back into practice alongside delivery.



**Build partnerships that extend beyond individual funding cycles.**

When relationships are oriented toward long-term collaboration rather than short-term contracts, it becomes easier to share learning honestly, take risks together, and contribute to system-level change rather than isolated outputs.

# Case Insight

## An adaptive approach to generating data for learning, Europe – Africa Diaspora

**Practices in action:** Embed learning from the start; centre the experiences and needs of local communities, recognise and share emergent systemic changes rather than solely focus on own contribution, work with existing relationship networks

**Context:** GIZ, a German funder wanted to support micro-entrepreneurs in Africa but faced the challenge of generating evidence without overburdening small, informal businesses that often don't have capacity for extensive reporting.

**Their response:** They partnered with members of the African diaspora in Europe who had connections to micro-enterprises. The accountability was shared between the diaspora partner in Europe and the on-ground local entrepreneur in Africa. They created a relatively flexible platform where either party could update information and provide evidence.

**The breakthrough:** After six years, they now have comprehensive data on what information local entrepreneurs and informal entrepreneurs can actually provide versus where they need support. They used local coaches to train and support the micro-entrepreneurs on smaller aspects that were needed from their end.

**Result:** They generated robust evidence across multiple years without overwhelming entrepreneurs, and created knowledge that could inform the broader ecosystem about realistic expectations for reporting from small, informal enterprises.

**Key insight:** "A lot of funders would make good use of that information on what's easier for budding entrepreneurs, small organizations, what can they actually provide without it being overwhelming versus where they probably will need support."

### Why this case matters

This case shows one way how intermediaries can hold learning beyond individual funding cycles, generating evidence that is realistic, proportional, and useful over time without overburdening small or informal actors. It illustrates how long-term relationships and synthesis can produce system-level insight that no single project could deliver.



# Case Insight

## Integrating learning into programme design, Uganda

**Practices in action:** Embed learning from the beginning; centre local communities in all stages

**Context:** Join for Water in Uganda was initially receiving financing from the DGD (Belgian) government and responding to quite targeted results. However, they had flexible 20% funding from other foundations which enabled them to learn as an institution about how learning can transform systems.

When the opportunity came for a new programme, they redesigned their approach. They developed "pilot projects anchored on learning" with learning at the centre from the beginning. They created indicators at the design stage for how they would integrate learning throughout the entire programme - covering investment, knowledge components, and advocacy.

**The key shift:** Learning indicators were developed alongside output indicators and submitted to the donor from the start, rather than treating learning as an afterthought. Importantly, the design was co-created with communities from the beginning, ensuring local voices were integrated right from the programme design phase.

**Result:** This approach balanced the need to demonstrate results while creating legitimate space for deep learning and adaptation throughout the programme lifecycle.

### Why this case matters

This case shows one way how intermediaries can hold learning beyond individual funding cycles, generating evidence that is realistic, proportional, and useful over time without overburdening small or informal actors. It illustrates how long-term relationships and synthesis can produce system-level insight that no single project could deliver.



# Questions to Ask Together

● **What learning is generated between projects? What would change if this was valued?**

● **Which relationships matter most beyond a single grant, and how are they supported?**

● **How do funding cycles shape what work is possible and what work is cut short?**

● **What incentives exist to prioritise delivery over continuity?**

# Between Different Actors and Institutions

No single organisation, community or institution can deliver climate adaptation and resilience alone. Progress depends on many actors working together — often across different sectors, geographies, and levels of power. Intermediaries are frequently the ones asked to make this collaboration possible.

In practice, this work is less about coordination on paper and more about building trust across difference.

Practitioners described the importance of creating spaces for genuine dialogue, not just negotiation. These are spaces where actors can step outside the constraints of specific projects or funding arrangements to explore what is really shaping decisions, incentives, and outcomes. By helping systems reflect on themselves (making power dynamics, assumptions, and blind spots visible) intermediaries enable more honest and productive collaboration. Access is a central part of this role. Intermediaries often do the structural work of connecting actors whose networks do not naturally overlap, or who lack the resources, language, or legitimacy to participate in formal processes. This includes ensuring that community-based organisations, grassroots groups, and smaller intermediaries are able to enter conversations that are typically dominated by larger institutions.

Alongside this, intermediaries undertake the quieter work of translation. Different actors use different languages and mental models: funders speak in terms of accountability and outcomes; investors focus on risk and return; communities prioritise lived experience and immediate needs. Intermediaries move between these worlds, translating not just terminology, but values — helping people understand where perspectives align and where they diverge.

Practitioners also emphasised the importance of building multi-level partnerships. Effective collaboration often requires working simultaneously with local organisations, national governments, technical experts, international agencies, and funders — recognising the distinct influence each holds within the system. Intermediaries help identify where relationships already exist, where alliances can be strengthened, and who is best placed to speak to whom.

Finally, participants noted that overlap is not only inevitable but necessary. In complex systems, multiple actors will often be working on similar issues in parallel. Rather than treating this as competition, intermediaries recognise that scale and speed require many efforts moving at once. The role is not to eliminate duplication entirely, but to ensure efforts are connected, complementary, and oriented toward shared outcomes.

Bridging people, institutions, and worlds is therefore not a technical task. It is relational work (grounded in trust, translation, and an acceptance of difference) that enables collective action in systems that were never designed to work together.



Ian Matimba

"The polarity that we have, is what donors see as the most important impact and what the community sees as the most important impact. Normally those things are not really the same at the end of the day."



**Create spaces where people with different roles, power, and perspectives can think together.**

Not just negotiate terms. Practitioners spoke about the importance of convening conversations that allow systems to become aware of themselves: making assumptions, incentives, and power dynamics visible so they can be discussed rather than ignored.



**Actively create access.**

Enable participation by actors who are usually excluded (whether due to geography, resources, language, or institutional barriers) and the relational work of helping people understand one another's realities, constraints, and values.



**Treat translation as a core skill.**

Different actors use different languages and mental models: funders speak in outcomes, investors in returns, communities in lived priorities. Intermediaries work across these worlds, translating not just terminology, but meaning — helping actors recognise where their goals overlap and where they genuinely differ.



**Accept necessary overlaps in efforts.**

Rather than competing for territory or uniqueness, intermediaries recognise that complex challenges require multiple actors working in parallel, sometimes imperfectly. The task is not to eliminate duplication entirely, but to ensure efforts are complementary and connected.

# Case Insight

## Bridging the distance between funders and communities, Germany

**Practices in action:** create spaces for generative dialogue (not just negotiation); create spaces and understanding between different actors who wouldn't normally connect.

**Context:** Artha Impact, an organisation in Berlin, created a recurring convening format called "Breakfast for Impact." The purpose is to organise conversations between philanthropy/funders and the voices that really matter - the implementers and communities affected by funding decisions.

**Their response:** Anyone can sign up to participate. It's designed to be accessible and creates regular space and time for dialogue across the funding ecosystem. The goal is to ensure that conversations among funders aren't just happening between themselves (even though those are valuable), but also include the real voices from the field.

**The breakthrough:** Philanthropy often has conversations among themselves about development, adaptation, and resilience funding. These conversations happen in spaces that are not accessible to community-based organisations, small intermediaries, or implementers.

**Result:** Creating regular, accessible convening spaces is one-way intermediaries can address power imbalances in the funding system by ensuring that those closest to implementation have voice in shaping funding strategies and approaches.

**Key insight:** Intermediaries are well-placed to create such spaces because they have relationships across different levels of the system. They can facilitate making visible "who receives what and who gets what" and address blind spots where "the system feeds the same people again and again."

### Why this case matters

This case highlights the often-invisible translation work intermediaries do to align funder expectations with local realities. It shows how making capacity constraints visible can lead to more proportionate accountability and better-informed funding design.



# Questions to Ask Together

●Which actors do we feel most comfortable working with?  
Which do we tend to avoid, and why?

●Whose language dominates our meetings, proposals, and decisions?

●How do we respond when different perspectives conflict?

●How often do we create spaces for dialogue that are not tied to a specific project, contract, or negotiation?

●What practical barriers (time, money, language, legitimacy) prevent some actors from participating and how are we addressing them?

●Where are relationships doing the work that formal structures cannot? Where might overlapping efforts with others actually be beneficial for the system?

# Between Certainty and Discovery

Much of the work of climate adaptation and resilience unfolds in conditions that cannot be fully predicted or controlled. Yet the systems that fund and govern this work are often built on the assumption that outcomes can be known in advance. Intermediaries sit directly in this tension.

On the one hand, funders, investors, and institutions need clarity: plans, indicators, milestones, and assurances that resources are being used responsibly. On the other, meaningful change in complex systems rarely follows a straight line. New information emerges, relationships shift, external shocks occur, and interventions need to adapt in response. The most important changes (shifts in power, trust, and behaviour) are often those that cannot be guaranteed at the outset.

Practitioners described developing ways to work honestly with uncertainty, rather than trying to hide it. One common practice is planning for adaptation from the beginning. This includes building flexibility into budgets, timelines, and governance arrangements, and making the possibility of change explicit rather than exceptional. By naming uncertainty early, intermediaries are better able to respond to what emerges without undermining trust or accountability. Several practitioners also described using story-based or scenario-based reporting alongside traditional indicators.

These approaches allow them to remain accountable while acknowledging multiple possible pathways and outcomes, and to share learning about what is changing and why — not just what has been delivered. Another recurring theme was the importance of being accountable to proportional contribution rather than sole attribution.

In complex systems, no single actor can claim full responsibility for outcomes. Intermediaries work to make visible how their actions contribute to broader shifts (for example, enabling collaboration, unlocking learning, or changing how decisions are made) even when these effects cannot be precisely measured or directly attributed.

Across these practices, accountability is not abandoned. It is reframed. Rather than demanding false certainty, practitioners described accountability as a shared commitment to learning, transparency, and responsible adaptation over time. Working with uncertainty while staying accountable is therefore not about lowering standards. It is about aligning accountability with the realities of complex change so that learning, responsiveness and integrity are seen as signs of rigour... not weakness.



Georgina  
Ward-Booth

"Managing and nourishing partnership takes time. It takes a lot of time and it need to be accounted for. It should be clear that is the role of intermediary organisations and should be budgeted and fundraised for."



Kanika Verma

"The horizontal connections that intermediaries can create slowly begin to break down the vertical structures that exist."



## Plan for adaptability from the outset.

When working in environments that demand certainty while operating in systems defined by uncertainty, make room in budgets, timelines, and governance structures for change, rather than treating deviation as failure.



## Use narrative or scenario-based reporting.

To complement traditional indicators. This allows them to remain accountable while acknowledging that outcomes may evolve in unexpected ways and that learning itself is a meaningful result.



## Account for proportional contribution.

Rather than sole attribution. Change in systems rarely results from a single intervention. Intermediaries work to make visible how their actions contribute to broader shifts (in relationships, behaviours, and decision-making) even when these cannot be fully quantified.

# Case Insight

## Designing a new humanitarian funding mechanism, USA

**Practices in action:** Co-create from the beginning

**Context:** USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) developed a new funding mechanism called the Rapid Response Mechanism (RRM) intended to provide faster, more flexible funding for humanitarian crises by reducing the typical lag time between when a humanitarian crisis occurs and when funding and assistance actually reaches affected populations.

**Their response:** It involved pre-positioning agreements with implementing partners who could rapidly activate when crises emerged. The mechanism was designed collaboratively over 18 months through a process that included extensive research with potential implementing partners.

**The breakthrough:** The mechanism represented a significant shift in how USAID approached humanitarian response. It demonstrated that large bureaucratic institutions like USAID could adapt and innovate their funding approaches and influenced thinking beyond USAID about flexible, rapid-response funding. It also showed the value of co-designing funding mechanisms with implementing partners rather than imposing top-down requirements.

**Result:** The long term effectiveness of the RRM remains uncertain in terms of if it truly achieved its goals of faster, more effective response over time in practice. In addition there are a number of potential unintended consequences which are still not fully understood, including:

- Did the pre-positioning approach created its own rigidities or barriers
- Whether it inadvertently favoured certain types of organisations over others
- Questions about whether bureaucratic pressures eventually constrained the original flexibility
- While the mechanism changed funder behaviour, did it meaningfully improved outcomes for affected populations- the distance between funding mechanism design and actual ground-level impact makes attribution difficult
- Questions about what conditions made it successful (or not) that might not exist elsewhere

**Key insight:** Ultimately, “humility is needed when designing interventions—and recognising that even well-intentioned, carefully designed mechanisms may not achieve their intended effects, and that understanding true impact requires ongoing learning and adaptation”.

### Why this case matters

This case provides a reflective counterpoint, illustrating both the potential and the limits of designing for flexibility within large systems. It underscores the importance of humility, ongoing learning, and accountability to contribution rather than attribution in complex change efforts.



# Questions to Ask Together

●Where are we being asked for certainty that we don't genuinely have?

●What assumptions are built into our plans, indicators, or theories of change and which of these are most fragile?

●How easy is it for us to adapt to the course once work is underway? What makes this harder than it needs to be?

●Do our funding and reporting structures allow us to talk honestly about what is changing or only about what was planned?

●Who decides what counts as success when outcomes evolve?

●How do we explain contribution in a system where many actors shape outcomes together?

● Where might greater transparency about uncertainty actually build trust, rather than undermine it?

# Where Power Differences Shape Who Decides and Who Benefits

Power is present in every system. It shapes whose knowledge is valued, who gets to decide and where resources flow. In climate adaptation and resilience work, these power differences are often stark, particularly between those most affected by climate impacts and those who control funding, policy, and institutional agendas. Intermediaries sit directly inside these dynamics.

They are rarely neutral brokers between equal actors. More often, they are working across deeply uneven relationships, where some voices carry institutional authority and others struggle to be heard at all. Ignoring these differences does not make them disappear. Practitioners described the importance of working with power consciously, rather than attempting to work around it. A central practice is supporting communities to define their own challenges and solutions, rather than having needs predetermined through external frameworks. This involves shifting the flow of decision-making away from money alone, and creating space for communities to articulate priorities in ways that reflect local realities, values, and knowledge systems.

Many practitioners emphasised the importance of co-creating from the very beginning. Designing funding mechanisms, programmes, and learning processes with communities (not after decisions have already been made) helps redistribute agency and reduce extractive dynamics. Participatory approaches such as community profiling, locally owned data collection, and creative application processes were highlighted as practical ways to support this shift. Centring local organisations throughout the entire process also emerged as critical. Practitioners described working to recognise and strengthen existing capacity, rather than importing expertise or bypassing local institutions. This includes engaging local experts for contextual insight, building on established relationships, and ensuring that learning and resources remain anchored locally.

At the same time, intermediaries described the value of connecting local experience across contexts. Supporting the synthesis and sharing of ideas between grassroots organisations allows learning to travel without flattening difference — avoiding both cut-and-paste solutions and isolated reinvention. Several practitioners reflected on how dominant frames (particularly financial ones) shape what is seen as legitimate or valuable. When adaptation and resilience are framed primarily through finance, certain forms of value become visible while others are discounted. Intermediaries play a role in broadening these frames, helping systems recognise relational, social and justice-based forms of value alongside financial metrics.

Working with power, not around it, is not about positioning intermediaries as saviours or advocates for one group over another. It is about making power visible, creating conditions for more equitable participation, and supporting decision-making processes that are better aligned with the realities of those most affected.



## Make power visible.

Relationships are never neutral or equal. Power differences are an unavoidable feature of adaptation and resilience work — particularly between those most affected by climate impacts and those with control over resources.



## Support communities to define their own challenges and solutions.

Resisting funding processes that assume needs can be predetermined from the outside. This includes facilitating community-led assessment, proposal development, and decision-making in forms that make sense locally.



## Co-create from the beginning.

Designing programmes, funding mechanisms, and learning processes with communities rather than for them. Participatory tools such as community profiling, locally owned data collection, and creative application processes were cited as ways to redistribute agency.



## Centre local organisations throughout the entire process

Recognising and strengthening existing capacity rather than importing expertise. At the same time, they noted the importance of supporting connections across contexts, allowing grassroots organisations to share insights and build solidarity beyond their immediate setting.

# Case Insight

## Navigating Crisis as an Opportunity for Transformation: Presencing Institute's UN Labs, Global

**Practices in action:** Facilitate spaces for generative dialogue rather than just negotiation and co-create from the beginning

**Context:** Since 2019 The Presencing Institute had been running UN Innovation Transformation Labs in 34 countries, funded by different donors with the most recent being USAID. These labs aimed to create conditions for collaboration between UN agencies, civil society, private sector, and governments at country level. When USAID funding ended abruptly, they faced a critical decision point with a network of alumni spanning humanitarian contexts across and predominantly in countries experiencing humanitarian crises. Rather than immediately seeking replacement funding, they chose to "harvest this crisis" as an opportunity. They convened the network of 34-country alumni and asked fundamental questions: "What do you think the UN multilateralism or the system of development or humanitarian system really needs in this moment? How can you as an organisation, and how can we as Presencing Institute, support this deeper transformation?"

**Their response:** The Institute completely re-evaluated their strategy. Instead of their previous approach of securing large traditional funding and then mediating between funder requirements and country-level priorities, they're now reversing the process: First, setting priorities with communities and funders who are part of those communities. Building alliances with beneficiaries and going "one step beyond" - for example, asking UN directors to help connect with regional actors. Conducting "sensing journeys" with these actors. And only then bringing in traditional funders where needed (and they've found some interested parties).

**The breakthrough:** This approach wouldn't have been possible without holding the tension of the crisis moment rather than immediately defaulting to "end all activities." Despite needing to go through redundancies, the willingness to continue convening the group based on "the legitimacy of engagement through the process" has catalysed potential for systemic change.

**Result:** The critical practice was resisting the "temptation to actually end all activities" and instead trusting that holding space for emergence would reveal pathways forward that wouldn't have been visible through traditional funding-seeking approaches.

**Key insight:** As Georgiana Ward-Booth reflected: "They hold information that we don't. So, our role is to hold them in a generative space, where such information can be shared, and something new can be co-imagined, hopefully catalysing the change that the world needs right now."

### Why this case matters

This example demonstrates how moments of crisis can be used to renegotiate power and re-sequence decision-making. It shows how intermediaries can work with institutional power directly prioritising community-defined needs before funding considerations.



# Case Insight

## The Next Level Grant Facility, Zambia

**Practices in action:** Centre communities in the design process, develop processes that let communities identify their own needs, readdress power relations in funding flows.

**Context:** The Next Level Grant Facility in Zambia (supported by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs under the Voices for Just Climate Action programme) redesigned accessibility from the ground up.

**Their response:** Applications could be submitted via WhatsApp Videos in local languages (Nanja, Bemba, Tonga). The process was simplified to be accessible "to the lowest level possible within the communities". Communities weren't just seen as recipients but as owners of the grant process

**The breakthrough:** Communities were empowered to do their own profiling and enumeration, own their data, and decide who to share information with and how to use it. Ian Matimba said that was critical because "data on its own, looks like it's good for the betterment of the community, but it can also be misused and actually causes problems for those communities if it goes in the wrong hands."

**Result:** Over 1,000 applications received in just 10 districts. 60% of grants went to women and youth. Youth-led innovations were successfully supported and high level of community interest due to genuine accessibility.

**Key insight:** Ian Matimba also reflected "It's all about building the capacity of communities for them to hold the information and then later share it with different intermediaries who they think they should have access to." This example demonstrates how intermediaries can redesign processes to fundamentally shift who has power in the funding relationship.

### Why this case matters

This case shows how power can be redistributed through the design of funding processes themselves. By rethinking access, language, and legitimacy, it demonstrates how communities can move from being recipients of funding decisions to owners of the process.



# Questions to Inform Judgement in Your Work:

These are designed to prompt honest reflection, not self-assessment or judgement.

● **Where does decision-making power currently sit in our work and who has limited influence?**

● **Whose knowledge shapes priorities, funding criteria, and definitions of success?**

● **How early are communities involved in shaping programmes or funding mechanisms and what has already been decided before they enter the room?**

● **What assumptions are built into our processes about capacity, legitimacy, or “readiness”?**

● **Who owns the data, learning, and narratives produced through our work and who decides how they are used?**

● **When trade-offs arise, whose needs tend to be prioritised?**

# Map of Case Insights



LOCATIONS OF PEOPLE INVOLVED

# Contributing Practitioners



**Eva Rehee**  
WINGS



**Michael MacHarg**  
MERCY CORPS



**Chitenbo Kawimbe Chunga**  
CLIMATE INVESTMENT FUNDS (CIF)



**Andrew Ell**  
CLIMATE FINANCE ADVISORS



**Maria Paula Gomez**  
MERCY CORPS VENTURES



**Pauke G. van Dun**  
HUMANIA, BRAZIL



**Ahmed Idris**  
ENOVATE LAB



**Ivan Newton Loovalaga**  
GREENEDGE VENTURES



**Marion Iceeduna**  
JOIN FOR WATER



**Edwin Anyolo**  
RIPPLE TECH



**Larry Ayo**  
SMARTLAB, TANZANIA



**Amina Kashoro**  
GREENER TANZANIA LIVELIHOOD ORGANIZATIONS



**Ian Matimba**  
PEOPLES PROCESS ON HOUSING & POVERTY IN ZAMBIA



**Karika Verma**  
DEVELOPMENT ALTERNATIVES GROUP



**Prema Singh**  
TRANSITIONS RESEARCH



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Moritz Hauser  
THE THINK TANK



Jordan Walken  
ROOTS OF IMPACT



Aurélie Larnedj  
Espace



Georgina Ward-Booth  
PRESENCING INSTITUTE



# What Next?

# Questions We Are Not Finished With

This paper reflects learning generated through a specific community of practice at a particular moment in time. It does not attempt to resolve the tensions described, nor to offer definitive answers.

However, the exploration did surface valuable insights and shared experiences about how adaptation and resilience work is currently funded, supported and practiced. Through dialogue across different roles in the system, participants were able to name patterns, articulate tensions that often remain implicit, and identify areas where existing approaches may need to evolve.

What emerged is not a finished set of conclusions but a clearer picture of the questions that continue to shape this work.

**The following questions reflect the areas participants felt require deeper inquiry, experimentation and collective reflection going forward. They are not presented as an agenda for others to follow, but as invitations to continue exploring how funding and support structures for adaptation and resilience might develop in more responsive and equitable ways.**

# What Becomes Visible

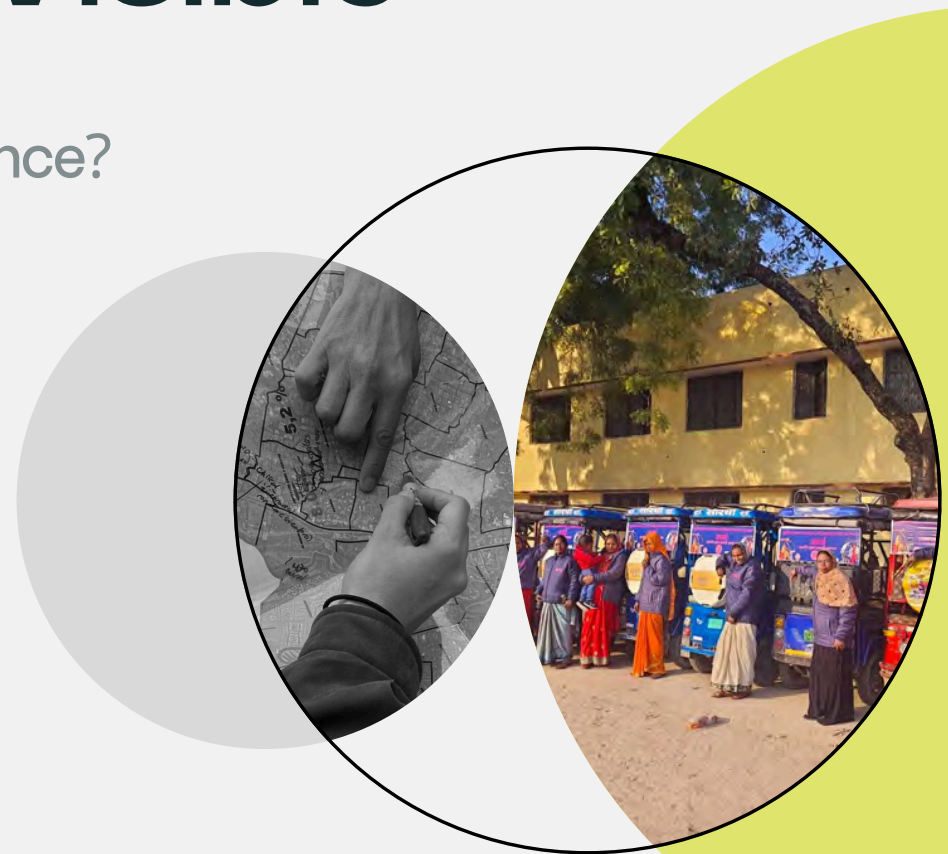
(and what is lost) when we search for a “business case” for adaptation and resilience?

As public funding becomes more constrained, there is increasing emphasis on mobilising private capital for adaptation and resilience. In many contexts, the question has shifted from whether adaptation is necessary to how it can be made investable.

While this has opened new possibilities, it has also raised concerns. Business-case logic shapes what is seen as viable, valuable and fundable. Some forms of adaptation (particularly those rooted in relationships, justice or long-term resilience) are difficult to monetise and risk becoming invisible.

## Questions that remain open include:

- Which aspects of adaptation and resilience lend themselves to business-case logic and which do not?
- How do public, private and philanthropic conceptions of “return” differ?
- What kinds of work are deprioritised when financial return becomes the dominant frame?
- How might intermediaries help hold multiple value frames at once?



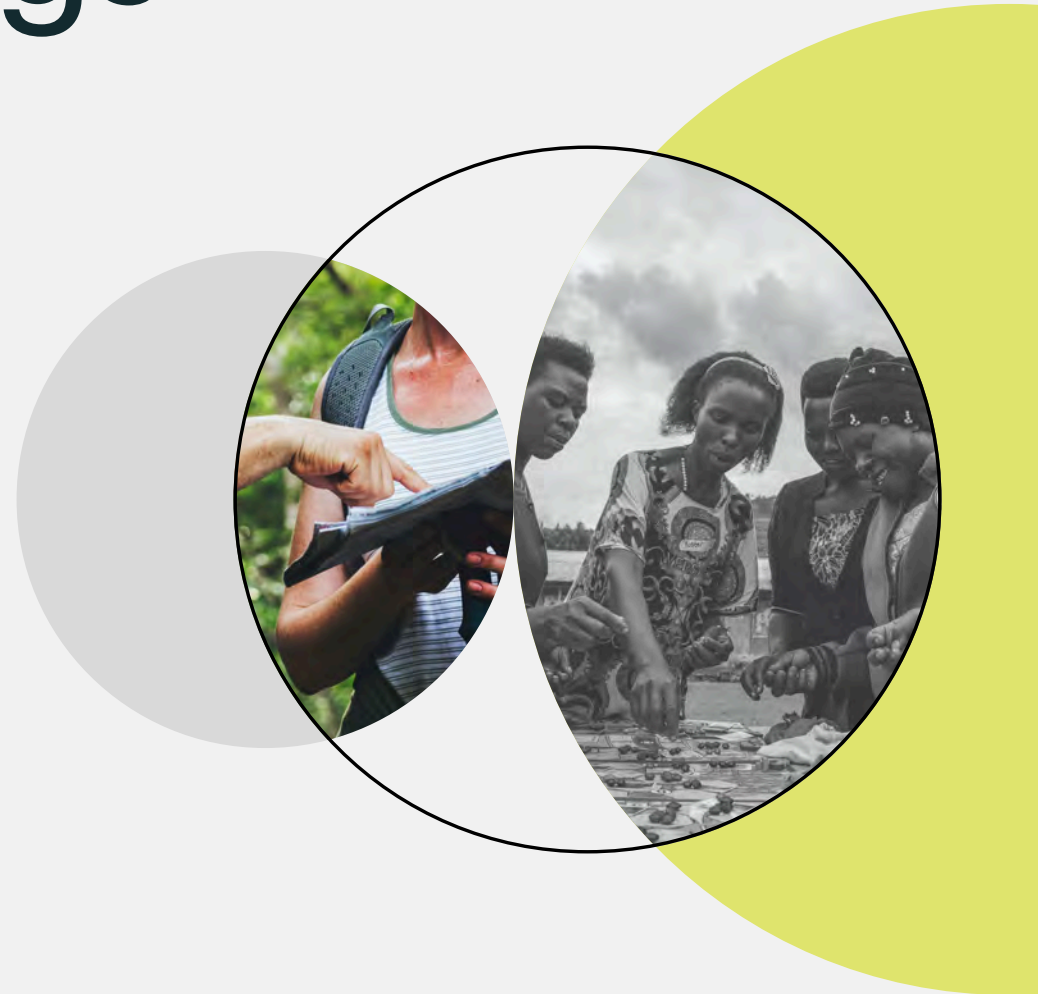
# How Do We Bridge

fundamentally different ways of knowing,  
valuing and deciding?

Systemic change work brings together actors with very different motivations, languages and logics. Communities may prioritise livelihoods and safety; funders may prioritise accountability and scale; investors may prioritise risk and return; governments may prioritise political and social outcomes.

## Questions that remain open include:

- **When is alignment necessary and when is difference something to be held rather than resolved?**
- **How much shared language or practice is required for effective collaboration?**
- **Where does translation support learning and where might it dilute or distort meaning?**
- **What skills, capacities and forms of support do intermediaries need to continue doing this work well?**



# When Does Intermediation Enable Change

and when might it get in the way?

Intermediaries are often positioned as essential connectors within complex systems. At the same time, their role raises important structural questions: because intermediaries work through others, accountability can become diffuse. Additional layers can add value, but they can also introduce opacity, delay or competition for resources.

## Questions that remain open include:

- How can intermediaries make their value visible without reverting to compliance-heavy models?
- What does meaningful accountability look like for intermediary organisations?
- At what point does a system reach “peak intermediation” where additional layers reduce rather than increase effectiveness?
- How can intermediaries recognise when their role should evolve, reduce or step aside?



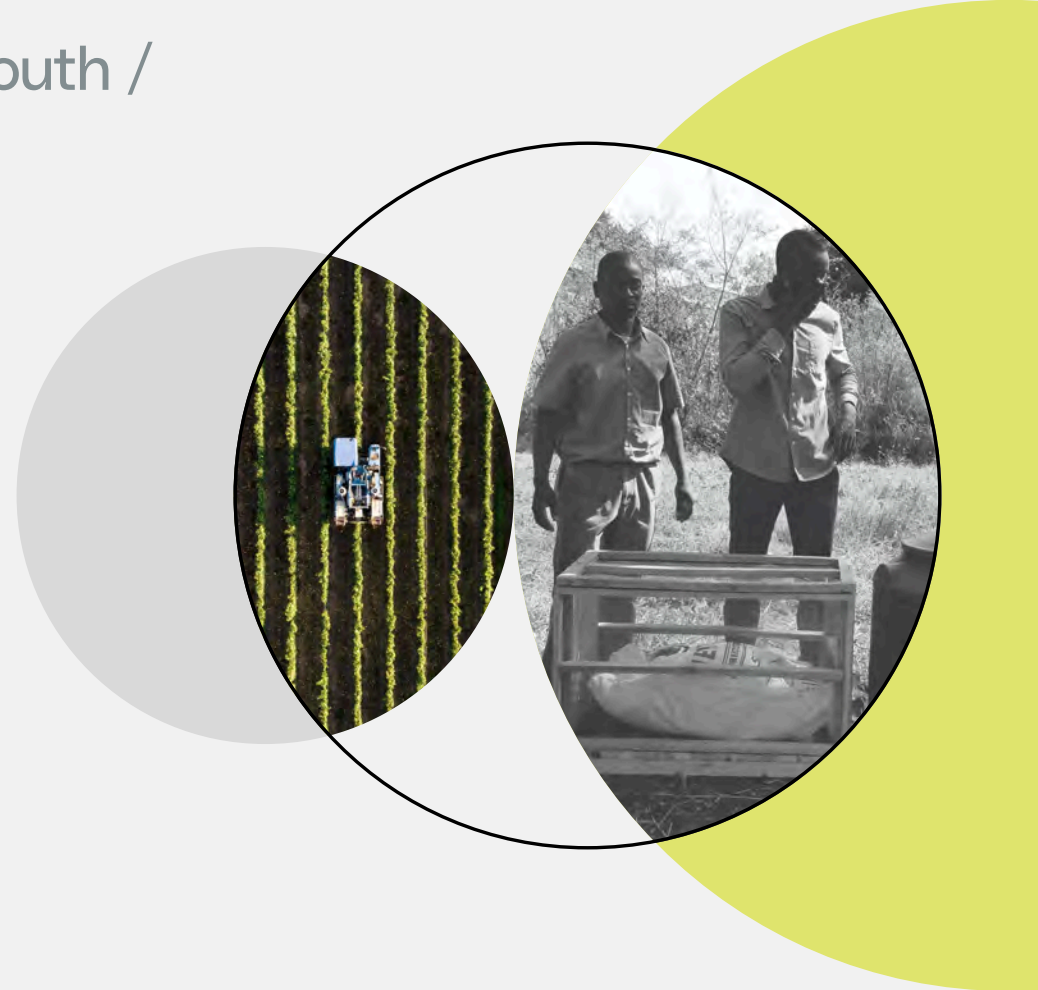
# What Would it Take

for more intermediaries from the Global South / Majority World to lead?

Many intermediaries operate within structures shaped by Global North institutions, funding norms and languages. This influences whose knowledge is centred, whose risks are tolerated and whose leadership is recognised.

## Questions that remain open include:

- **What funding, governance and procurement practices currently limit leadership from the Majority World?**
- **How do language, risk tolerance and reporting norms reinforce existing power dynamics?**
- **What role can existing intermediaries play in redistributing influence, not just resources?**





# Reflections

# How might this learning continue beyond this paper?

Participants consistently emphasised that the value of this exploration extended well beyond producing a written report. For many, the most meaningful outcome was the opportunity to connect with peers facing similar challenges across different roles in the system — from funders and intermediaries to practitioners working directly with communities.

The conversations created space to speak openly about the realities of adaptation and resilience work: the complexity of partnership building, the uncertainty involved in navigating evolving contexts, and the often invisible relational labour required to support locally led change.

Several participants reflected that these kinds of exchanges are rare in formal programme or reporting environments, yet are essential for honest learning. As a result, the process itself became a form of collective sense-making.

Participants were able to recognise shared patterns across different regions and institutions, test ideas in conversation with others, and reflect on their own roles within the broader system. The relationships and trust built through these discussions were widely seen as outcomes in their own right.

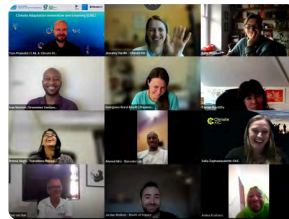
Looking ahead, participants identified several ways this learning could continue to evolve beyond this paper:



**Maintaining informal peer connections and support**



**Treating this body of learning as a living resource, open to new stories and reflection**



**Designing power-conscious convenings that bring funders, intermediaries and communities into shared spaces**



**Creating low-burden spaces for practitioners to test ideas, ask for help and learn together**

**Taken together, these possibilities suggest that the value of this work lies not only in documenting insights, but in continuing to create spaces where collective learning can unfold. Supporting this kind of ongoing exchange will require attention to facilitation, resourcing and representation — making sure that future conversations remain inclusive, reflective and grounded in the realities of practice.**

# Our Roles, Intent and Learning Reflections

## Who we are in this work

### [The Systems Innovation Learning Partnership \(SILP\)](#)

explores how systems innovation can help us rethink our responses to some of the world's most complex challenges. From increasing the capacity of individuals and organisations to creating novel or alternative approaches to systemic challenges, SILP aims to embrace ideas outside our knowledge and build a community of practice for like-minded innovators and pioneers in the field.

Supported by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) and hosted by Climate KIC, SILP works with practitioners, funders, intermediaries and institutions navigating complex social and environmental challenges. Rather than delivering programmes or scaling predefined solutions, SILP focuses on the conditions that shape how decisions are made — particularly where complexity, uncertainty and power dynamics make traditional delivery and accountability models insufficient.

Practically, this involves creating structured spaces for reflection, experimentation and collective sense-making. Through communities of practice, learning journeys and convenings, SILP supports people working across systems to question assumptions, surface tensions and explore how funding, governance and institutional dynamics shape what becomes possible in practice.

## The world we are working towards

At the heart of this work is a simple belief: systems perform better when learning is treated as core infrastructure rather than a discretionary add-on. In the systems we are working towards:

- decisions are informed by lived experience as well as data
- uncertainty is acknowledged rather than hidden
- power dynamics are examined rather than assumed away
- funding supports adaptation and learning, not only delivery

When people are supported to think clearly together under conditions of uncertainty, resources are used more effectively, relationships become stronger and systems become more capable of responding to the challenges they face.

# About the Climate Adaptation Innovation and Learning Project

[The Climate Adaptation Innovation Learning project](#) is financed by the Global Environment Facility (GEF) and implemented by the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) in collaboration with Climate KIC, the Global Adaptation and Resilience Investment Working Group (GARI) and the United Nations Environment Programme Finance Initiative (UNEP FI). The project's overarching objective is to strengthen knowledge-sharing systems, demonstrate the value of adaptation investments and support the development of effective enabling environments for climate adaptation in Least Developed Countries (LDCs), Small Island Developing States (SIDs), and, other emerging markets.



**Tom Pruunsild**

LEARNING  
EXPERIENCES LEAD

[CLIMATE KIC](#)

## About the community of practice on MSME Incubation and Acceleration

As part of the Climate Adaptation Innovation Learning project, Climate KIC has convened a global community of practice network of individuals engaged with or having a stake in micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises focused on climate adaptation initiatives. This encompasses Entrepreneurship Support Organisations (ESOs) such as innovation agencies, incubators, accelerators, ecosystem builders, venture capital investors, co-working spaces and hubs, development and non-profit organisations, academic institutions, universities and research entities, angel and early-stage investors, and corporates. The main purpose of this community has been to exchange insights allowing members to develop and implement incubation and acceleration programmes tailored to support climate adaptation solutions from the private sector, particularly in emerging markets, LDCs and SIDs.

Throughout 2024-2025 the community has hosted a series of virtual and physical convenings for peer learning on key topics on climate adaptation entrepreneurship support

strategies. In 2026, the goal is to consolidate learnings from the series with further research on adaptation innovation and entrepreneurship ecosystem development and produce a white paper outlining guidance for ESOs and intermediaries to better support the growth of climate adaptation businesses in emerging markets, LDCs and SIDs. Learn more and become a member on the [Climate Adaptation Innovation and Learning projects knowledge portal](#).

The key learning inquiries for the Climate Adaptation Innovation and Learning project's entrepreneurship support community are:

- How can we build better incubators and accelerators, or new types of business support programmes that truly meet the needs of adaptation and resilience (A&R) innovators in emerging markets, LDCs and SIDs?
- What are the priority activities that could really help build stronger, more cohesive A&R innovation ecosystems in emerging markets, LDCs and SIDs?
- How can blended finance be deployed to overcome systemic barriers that A&R entrepreneurs face?
- How can programs be designed to create scalable A&R solutions while staying rooted in the needs of local contexts?

# Why Funding for Learning Matters

In a tightening economic climate, the cost of poor decisions made under false certainty is rising. When organisations cannot question assumptions, surface uncertainty or reflect openly on risk, decisions often become defensive rather than strategic — protecting individuals in the short term but undermining learning and long-term impact.

Research consistently shows that the quality of decision-making is closely linked to the conditions in which people are able to speak up and reflect honestly. Where people feel unable to raise concerns or question prevailing assumptions, organisations are more likely to repeat mistakes, overlook emerging risks and misallocate resources. Conversely, environments that support psychological safety and open dialogue are significantly more likely to demonstrate learning behaviours, innovation and effective collaboration — all of which contribute to stronger strategic judgement and more resilient action. <sup>(1) (2)</sup>

For work such as climate adaptation, where uncertainty is inherent and contexts change rapidly, these conditions become even more important. The ability to reflect collectively, test assumptions and learn across institutional boundaries is not a luxury; it is part of the infrastructure required to respond effectively to complex challenges.

This learning paper captures learning generated through a community of practice connected to [The Climate Adaptation Innovation Learning](#) initiative.

The Climate Adaptation Innovation Learning project, led by UNIDO, focuses on accelerating climate adaptation by strengthening innovation ecosystems and increasing private sector engagement in climate resilience. The initiative supports innovation and knowledge exchange across three communities of practice: MSME acceleration and innovation, investment funds, and impact measurement and information flows.

While the Climate Adaptation Innovation Learning project concentrates on enabling adaptation innovation and supporting climate-resilient technologies and business models, [SILP's](#) role within this collaboration has been to explore the learning conditions around these efforts — examining how funding practices, intermediary roles and power dynamics shape how adaptation work is supported and implemented.

This learning paper reflects the insights and questions that emerged through that exploration.

1 - [Science Direct](#)

2 - [Open Psychology Journal](#)

# An Invitation to the Curious and the Experimenting

SILP thrives on curiosity, shared inquiry, and the collective work of reimagining how funding, learning, and decision-making can serve systemic change more effectively. As we look ahead, we're opening our doors wider - to practitioners, intermediaries, funders and allies who are exploring similar questions, or who want to learn in the open alongside others.

We're particularly eager to connect with people and organisations who are interested in:

- experimenting with learning-led approaches and ecosystem capacity building approaches to change in complex adaptive systems/challenges;
- exploring questions of power and distributive decision-making;
- co-developing evidence on when different funding approaches are effective, and in what context.

We want to deepen this inquiry with a broader and more diverse community. There are rich stories, lessons and challenges emerging across the funding landscape and communities it serves - instances in which trust-based, learning-centred, and ecosystem-building funding has enabled something transformative, times when it has fallen short, and cases where the more structured and results-driven approaches have been more effective. Making sense of this requires sharing widely and across contexts, and collective reflection.

We're committed to holding a space where this can happen: experimentation, shared learning, and comparative insight across contexts and approaches. And we're excited to welcome partners who want to help shape what this next phase looks like — whether through collaboration, shared enquiry, or supporting the infrastructure that allows this learning to happen.

If these questions resonate with you, if you're experimenting in your own practice, or if you're curious about co-creating what comes next, we would love to hear from you. Your involvement — in any form — helps keep this community of practice vibrant and forward-looking.

The questions are not going away. Neither is the need to explore them, together.

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The background features several glowing envelopes in shades of blue and orange, scattered across a dark field. The envelopes are illuminated from within, creating a soft glow and casting subtle shadows. The overall aesthetic is modern and digital.

# How to Share this Paper?

# How to Share This Paper?

**This learning paper was written to be used. Not just read.**

It speaks to different people in different ways: funders, intermediaries, local organisations, policymakers, researchers and internal teams. Rather than sending the whole report with a generic message, we encourage you to share it selectively. Pointing people to the sections that are most relevant to their role, interests or current questions.

Below are a set of short email templates that you can adapt and personalise. They are not scripts and they don't need to be used verbatim. Think of them as starting points. Language you can borrow, adjust or ignore entirely.

What matters most is the intention behind sharing: to open conversation, invite reflection and support more honest dialogue about how this work actually happens... including the tensions, trade-offs and invisible labour that often go unnamed.

Please feel free to use, adapt, and pass these on in whatever way feels most appropriate.

# For Funders/Donors

**Subject:** A reflection on funding, learning and the work in between

Hi [Name],

I wanted to share a short learning paper that may be relevant to current conversations around funding for adaptation and resilience. |

The paper draws on a community of practice of organisations working in intermediary roles — those operating between funders, communities, policy and implementation. Rather than offering a model or toolkit, it reflects on the tensions this work involves and the practices people are developing to navigate them.

You may find the following sections particularly relevant:

- Working beyond project boundaries – on learning that extends beyond individual grants
- Working with uncertainty while staying accountable – on balancing accountability with adaptation
- Working with power, not around it – on how funding processes shape who decides and who benefits

It's offered as a provocation rather than a prescription, and I hope it supports ongoing reflection on how funding structures can better enable the kinds of change we're all trying to see.

Warmly,  
[Name]

**Use case:**

**Rethinking how funding supports systemic change.**



# For Intermediaries/ Ecosystem Builders

**Subject:** A reflection on funding, learning and the work in between

Hi [Name],

I wanted to share a learning paper that came out of a recent community of practice on intermediation in climate adaptation and resilience.

Many of us occupy “in-between” roles (translating, convening, holding relationships, navigating power and uncertainty) often without clear language or recognition for that work. This paper attempts to name some of those realities, without simplifying them.

You might especially resonate with:

- Bridging people, institutions and worlds
- Working with uncertainty while staying accountable
- The diagnostic questions throughout the practice sections

It's not a how-to guide but a space to reflect and situate your own practice. I'd be curious what resonates and what doesn't.

Best,  
[Name]

**Use case:**

**Seeing your own work reflected and named.**



# For Local Organisations/ Grassroots partners

**Subject:** A resource you might find useful in funding conversations

Hi [Name],

I wanted to share a short learning paper that reflects on how funding and support systems are experienced by organisations working closest to communities.

The paper includes examples and reflections on:

- How learning and reporting expectations affect smaller organisations
- How power shows up in funding processes
- How communities can be more meaningfully involved in shaping programmes

The section Working with power, not around it may be particularly relevant, as well as some of the case studies drawn from community-led approaches.

You may find this useful as a reference point in conversations with funders or partners or simply as language that puts words to things many organisations already experience.

With appreciation,  
[Name]

**Use case:**

**Using the report as an  
advocacy or conversation tool.**



# For Policymakers/ Public Institutions

**Subject:** Reflections on the role of intermediaries in adaptation and resilience

Dear [Name],

I'm sharing a learning paper that explores the role of intermediary organisations in climate adaptation and resilience, particularly how they support coordination, learning and implementation across complex systems.

The paper may be of interest if you're thinking about:

- How learning travels (or doesn't) across programmes
- How accountability frameworks interact with uncertainty
- How policy, funding, and local delivery connect in practice

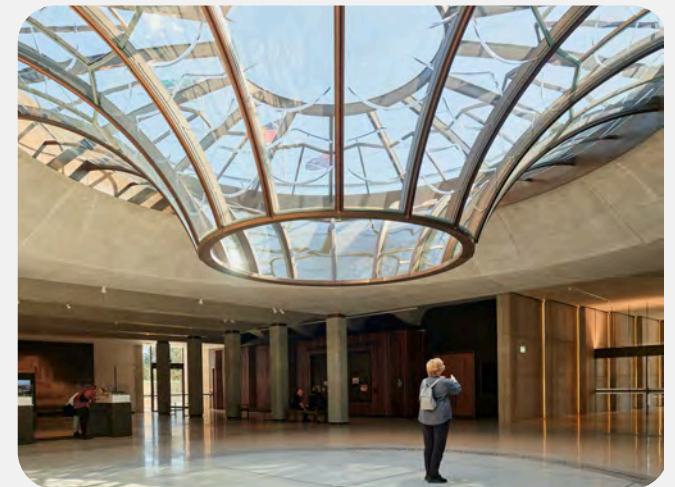
The sections Working beyond project boundaries and Bridging people, institutions and worlds speak directly to these dynamics.

It's intended as a reflective resource rather than a set of recommendations and I hope it's useful in ongoing policy and programme discussions.

Kind regards,  
[Name]

**Use case:**

**Understanding the role of intermediaries in system performance.**



# For Researchers/ Learning Partners

**Subject:** A learning paper you might want to build on

Hi [Name],

I wanted to share a learning paper that emerged from a practitioner-led community of practice on intermediation in climate adaptation and resilience.

Rather than presenting findings or conclusions, it surfaces tensions, practices, and open questions...particularly around learning, power, and accountability in complex systems.

You might be especially interested in:

- The framing of polarities as navigational tension
- The practice sections and diagnostic questions
- The Further exploration section, which explicitly names unresolved questions

It's very much intended as a contribution to an ongoing conversation, and I'd welcome any dialogue or critique.

Best wishes,  
[Name]

**Use case:**

**Building on the work, not  
treating it as finished**



# For Internal Teams

**Subject:** A paper that speaks to some of the tensions we're holding

Hi all,

I wanted to share a learning paper that reflects on the role of intermediaries in complex change work. Many of the tensions it describes feel familiar to our own work.

You might find the following sections particularly relevant:

- Working beyond project boundaries – on learning across programmes
- Working with uncertainty while staying accountable
- The diagnostic questions within each section

It's not required reading but I thought it might offer useful language for some of the trade-offs we navigate day to day.

Happy to discuss if helpful.  
[Name]

**Use case:**

**Bringing learning back into organisations.**



# Appendix

# Editorial note: Authorship, Process and Scope

This paper reflects learning generated through a time-bound Community of Practice convened by the Climate Adaptation Innovation Learning project and SILP.

The insights shared are grounded in lived experience and collective reflection, rather than consensus or formal evaluation.

In developing this version of the paper, editorial choices were made to preserve the integrity of the community's contributions while improving clarity, accessibility and usability for a wider audience. The six polarities remain a framing introduced by the convenors; the practices and examples are drawn directly from participant conversations and shared stories. Where language has been adapted, this has been done to improve readability rather than to reinterpret meaning.

Feedback on earlier drafts included both clarifications of language and more substantive perspectives. Comments relating to clarity and accessibility have been incorporated; where feedback reflected individual viewpoints that moved beyond what was generated collectively in the sessions, these have been acknowledged but not embedded as new positions. This reflects a conscious decision to avoid over-authoring or attributing views to the community that were not collectively held.

The original standalone "Practices in Action" section has been removed, with case studies instead integrated into the relevant practice sections. This was done to bring examples closer to the practices they illustrate, while retaining all case material shared in Version 2. No new case studies have been added and none removed.

Some contributors are quoted and named in this report where permission has been given, while others have chosen to remain anonymous. Attribution is included where consent has been indicated, with final confirmation obtained prior to public dissemination.

This paper is offered as situated learning a contribution to ongoing dialogue rather than a definitive account of intermediation in climate adaptation and resilience. It does not aim to provide a toolkit, evaluation or universal model but to surface tensions, practices, and questions that merit continued exploration.

The first version of this report was synthesised and written by Kate Simpson of Wasafiri. Kate has used Claude as an AI research assistant to process the data created in through the series.

Strategically restructured + humanised by [Sophie Rucker](#) and designed by Creative Director [Max Lilley](#) at [Common Field](#).

Illustrations by Streamline.

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# Get in Touch

We're excited to connect with individuals and organisations who share our passion for climate innovation and system transformation. Whether you're interested in learning more about the SILP experiments, engaging with our cohorts, or collaborating with Climate KIC and Sida, we'd love to hear from you.

## Connect with Climate KIC

If you have questions about Climate KIC's mission, upcoming projects, or partnership opportunities, please get in touch with us. We're always eager to explore new avenues for collaboration and innovation.

[SILP Website](#)  
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[Climate KIC Instagram](#)  
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Convened by the Climate Adaptation Innovation & Learning initiative and the Systems Innovation Learning Partnership (SILP)