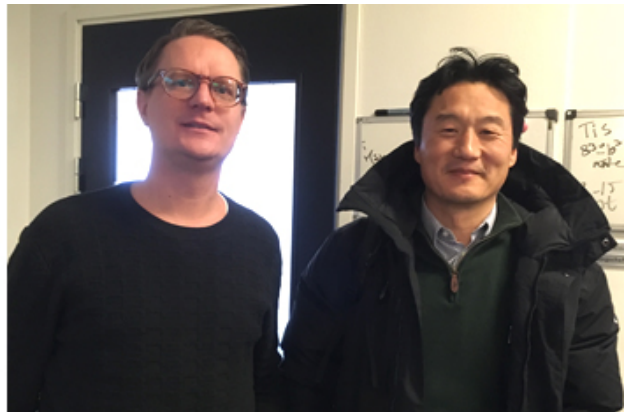# CONFLICTUAL HARMONY X FWD MALMÖ

What might be fruitful principles and questions guiding the design of a transdisciplinary process involving a wide array of stakeholders addressing issues of poverty, violence and segregation affecting youth in Malmö? What are potential possibilities and challenges of linking change movements and points of analysis coming from a majority culture management perspective on the one hand and a marginalized activist perspective on the other?

In my previous blog post, Re-imagining the Swedish welfare state, I introduced the network "Sustainable Malmö", initiated by non-profit Save the Children in Malmö. Over the Christmas break, I had the opportunity to get more in-depth knowledge of their work, strategies and process – internal within their own organization as well as external in relation to the other members of the network.


I will use this blog post to process my thoughts and share back some of my observations. In my analysis, I will draw from basic principles of my Intervention-Philosophy-in-the making,

Conflictual Harmony. I will also share experiences and knowledge from parallel contexts in Stockholm, linking to a national as well as a global cultural landscape, some of it manifested in my performance research piece Love/Fuck Sweden. My desire to spark reflection and continued conversation, recognizing that select thoughts or interpretations may apply to the specific situation at hand at varying degrees.

COMMON GROUND CONFLICTUAL HARMONY AND FWD MALMÖ

So let's start with what I find most interesting and inspiring with the approach that Save the Children is taking. Number one, their courage and persistence in terms of holding a space of uncertainty while co-creating a path forward. The key insight behind this approach – that the culture of "we got all the answers" is one of the major issues in any attempt at creating lasting change – I believe is absolutely fundamental to work attempting to break down barriers between different sectors, disciplines, social groups etc. Linked to this, is their approach to speak about strategic intentions rather than clear goals and visions, based on an understanding that making things too solid, set and clear from the start oftentimes prevents co-creation, discovery and innovation. Rather, inspired by Peter Senge's theories, trying to stimulate a learning culture, held together by a shared desire to together invent the practices and thought models that will transition the welfare state into a welfare society, comprised of a multitude of actors taking a shared responsibility for the the well-being of the overall system.

I also resonate a lot with the problem analysis at the foundation of their work, illustrated in the graphic below.
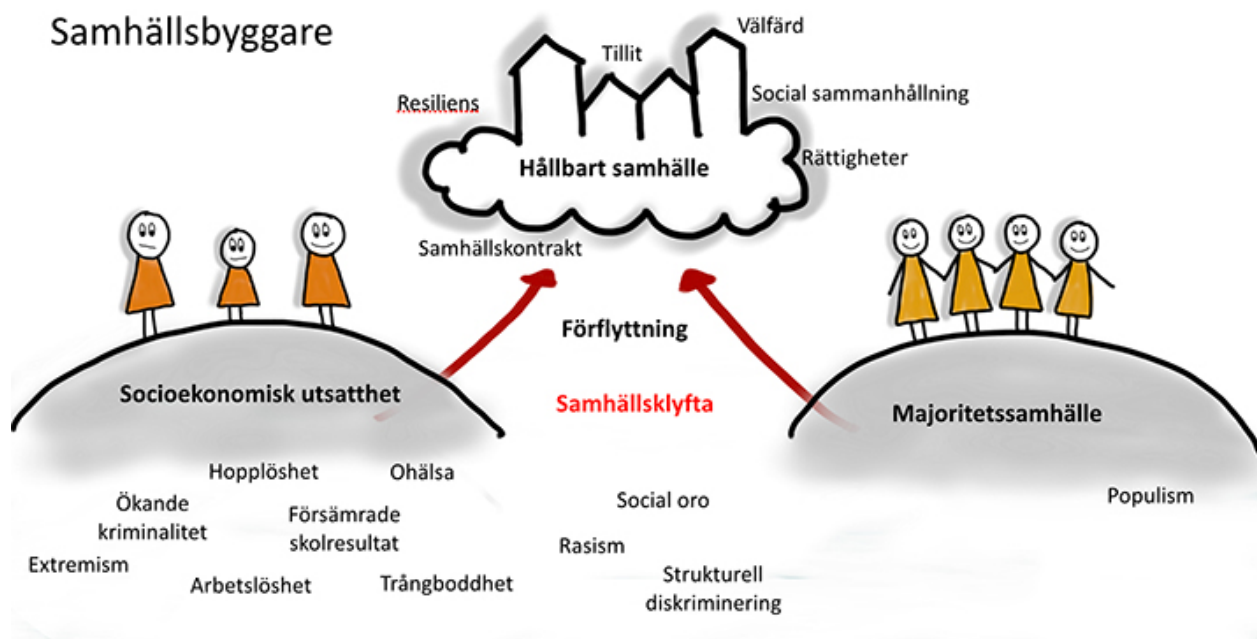
This graph shows the growing socio economic and cultural gap between the majority segment of the population and the growing population of people, mostly with non-European immigrant background, living in or near poverty, violence, lacking health, unemployment and extremism. In-between barriers of racism, structural discrimination and social tension, with symptoms of right-wing extremism and populism emerging in certain parts of the majority population. Contained in this analysis, is also the understanding that for the overall system to change, both sides need to move together towards a sustainable society. Meaning, the majority culture and practices are no more sustainable than the challenges facing the other side of the pond, and for real change to happen, we need to change mindsets, tools and practices connected to the current system.

The question from here, how one might design a transdisciplinary process, weaving the threads across the current gap together to create a shared path forward? The tactic within Save the Children as of now to start with change makers and innovative thinkers and doers within the majority sectors (tied to the public sector, academia, non-profits and for-profits), establishing common ground, infrastructures for exchange, shared projects and new ways of evaluating effects. Then along the way, create processes for inclusion of the target audience (on the other side of the current gap) in equal ways.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT AND EXPLORATION OF THE WORLDS INVOLVED

So, what are some principles I believe could guide and help the design of such a process? Just like the work initiated by Save the Children, a process like this obviously cannot be a one two three step formula but needs to be developed organically, through careful attention to what each step forward produces in the system involved. I do believe there are some guidelines that could assist in the overall strategy of the work however, and will do my best to outline them below.

A main principle of Conflictual Harmony, is to best as you can adopt a "bird's eye view" of the social systems and the world connected to them that are involved in the overall system you are trying to change. This to prevent the perspective of one side to govern the problem analysis and proposed solutions, rather have these "worlds" meet on equal terms, to

get a fuller picture of the overall problem, but also to use this meeting to stimulate true innovation.

Identifying what these worlds may be in a complex landscape requires some synthesizing abilities, in the creation of a "bigger picture" or a systems map that is always a simplification of the real world. I do believe it is necessary to create these kind of models however, just like the graphic above which simplifies the overall current social gap as one between the majority population and those living in socio economic vulnerability. If we were to decide to map the "worlds" connected to these two sides, questions to consider would be: What are the problem analyses on each side? Within the diversity of perspectives contained in each "bubble", what are overlapping themes? Interpretations and meanings?

Designing this kind of a process would of course differ depending on the situation at hand, and might involve ethnographic explorations and interviews, performance work similar to the ones I have conducted previously (see [Love/Fuck Sweden](#) and [Designing for end of life care](#)) as well as understanding theoretical underpinnings of each world. For the sake of this analysis, I will draw from my own experiences of these two "worlds", as connected to a larger national and global web of meaning making and culture, and outline a few characteristics that may appear in a mapping of this kind.

As far as the majority culture side, and specifically the change makers and innovators within the organizational cultures tied to different sectors, I see a lot of parallels to global change movements connected to new modes of management. These movements identify the demand-and-control-culture of traditional management techniques as inadequate in responding to the complex challenges of our times, and emphasize a re-thinking of hierarchies, silos and simple cause and effect solutions towards increased collaboration, network cultures and shared sense making. Many of these movements also point to the importance of experimentation, embracing risk and failure, and establishing room for vulnerability and the non-rational aspects of organizational life. Design thinking as implemented in the management world can be seen as part of this trend towards increased creativity and resilience. I also see it advocated by academic movements tied to majority culture arts contexts, who lift the importance of the unknown, the particular, the embodied, practice and making.

When we explore these worlds and the change movements within, it's always in the search of a more complete picture of the overall problem. The issues identified by the analyses above, are

indeed an important slice of the pie. They are also things that are oftentimes hard to see from an activist social justice perspective who, on the other hand, can contribute with important insights connected to the overall problem from their angle.

If we move to this side next, and take a look at "the world" of the change movements directly connected to socio economically vulnerable communities. Drawing from my own experience within these circles, much of the theory here is connected to post colonial analyses, speaking of power dynamics, and structures of privilege along lines of race and ethnic heritage. Much focus is on the particular bodies and perspectives inhabiting or being excluded from certain positions and spheres of influence, revealing culturally ingrained stereotypes of "non-whites" as culturally inferior, dangerous, uncivilized etc.

Based on my own activist experience from this side of things, the projections on these areas and the people that inhabit them by the majority culture are quite strong. In simple terms, it's projections of people as victims (with the majority culture responding identity of "the helper"), aggressors (majority flip side: "the protector"), and sometimes, heroes (majority flip side: "the self-deprecating person aware of their privilege"). Over the years, I have observed how these identities and power relations are upheld, through body language, tone of voice, media narratives, language, problem formulations. Seen recurring patterns of actors seeking participation and inclusion, not realizing that the frameworks and problem definitions are already set, and that these might look different from a perspective different than your own. Also not being open to participation on people's own terms, rather seeking grateful victims willing to

accept a kind of participation where they are still kept in their place. This includes the common behavior of expecting the participatory process to be jolly and nice the whole way, shying away from conflict and challenge around one's own power position. I've heard people confronted with "unexpected confrontation" describe it as "bad energy", sometimes withdrawing their resources when a bump appears in the road. On the side of these communities, I've seen this dynamic anger people, confuse them, disempower them, sometimes leading to withdrawal from much contact with majority culture overall.

ESTABLISHING ACTORS FROM EACH SIDE, EXPLORING IDENTITIES & BUILDING CAPACITY AND PRINCIPLES FOR TRUE MEETING

So, what kind of a process design might make a meeting between these two worlds fruitful and creative? One prerequisite, I would say, is establishing an openness on both sides to the meeting, something that may need to happen on separate sides at first. Part of this openness I would say is identifying the change makers and innovators on the majority culture side, just like Save the Children are doing. Even so, just speculating about some of the gaps in realities, again drawing from previous experience of some of these clashes in the US as well as in Sweden, one can easily imagine a situation where the "majority culture innovators" approach these communities with a mindset of "Let's experiment! Embrace failure! Be vulnerable!", just to meet "Embrace failure? You are already failing and we are suffering because of it! We don't want to be your lab rats! What you need to understand is your privilege!". Not a very fruitful situation for creative work unless the right process design is in place to lead it forward ;p.

So what might be frameworks or starting points for a process that might prepare both sides for a meeting that creates real change? One thing that is crucial to laying a solid foundation for truly innovative work according to the Conflictual Harmony philosophy, is carefully examining and working with identities and norms and expectations tied to these. The sense of "I", closely connected to an "us", and the projections of an "Other" that comes with these identities, oftentimes function as energy knots, or energy trapped in a system, preventing it to establish new connections, new relationships, new ideas and practices. It´s not about giving up a sense of identity (without our identities we´d all be either Buddha or pretty lost in this world, and it probably would´t be wise to set the bar too high as a start). It´s more about having a reflective approach to your own identity and the performed identities within an

organization, so that you can detach yourself from them, and reconfigure what does not serve what you are trying to achieve.

Let us start with the "majority side", again drawing from previous experiences to better be able to see what this part of the process might encompass. According to my research, the role of "the helper" in relation to social change work performed by "majority actors" is one that is ingrained into many organizational cultures. As I have discussed, this role along with the corresponding role of "the victim", I see as as one main influencer on much social dynamic that plays out in these areas. It´s a relationship I have explored in depth through my performance work, and a role that people from these areas recognize immediately through body language, tone of voice, approach etc.

From a social justice perspective, this role can be broken down according to a post colonial perspective, but it can also be seen (which rarely happens) through the lens of the management theories outlined above. In this case, tied to expectations of being in control, on top of things, having all the answers. With it, comes a fear of doing the wrong thing, being "bad" and being punished for this, perhaps even a fear of standing up for yourself in a charged situation beyond exercising power in an oppressive way towards your counter part. It´s a role which carries little capacity of dealing with confrontation in a productive way, that by its design is not very open to learning and co-creation.

Looking at roles and identities this way, one can also identify what happens when people try to break out of them. In Stockholm suburb Tensta, I have on many occasions seen people who are aware of the problematic aspects of this role, try to break out of it by going to the other extreme: letting go of agency altogether into a laissez faire type of leadership where the people in these areas are suddenly "all-knowing experts". A strategy that usually ends up in some form of chaos which easily leads to either burnout/withdrawal or suddenly disciplinary actions and power tripping when things get out of hand. As part of this process, other perceived roles and norms could be explored as well, with the goal of increasing the capacity of the organizations to break out of their own identifications with particular roles, thus create foundations for more authentic relationships and healthier organizational cultures.

Exploring roles this way, is also about understanding what roles others expect you to fill. Being confronted with people who expect you to behave like the helper for instance, can make it hard to break out of the role, just like being seen as a representative of a system that people feel

betrayed by, can easily trigger reactions that are not productive for the overall situation. Basically, through these discussions, opening up a space for what Sabina Dethorey at Malmö City, called the "deeper conversations". Out of these conversations, prepare people for a journey that can also be tough at times, that requires some personal and collective reflection, but that points to possibilities of real growth (personal and organizational), way beyond simply an "awareness of your privilege".

One crucial note before talking about possible preparation on the "marginalized side of things", is the importance of carefully thinking through who might be included, and in what way. This to ensure we are creating a foundation for a truly conflictually harmonious situation, characterized by both parties inclusion in the strategic framework, problem analysis and narrative around the strategic intention.
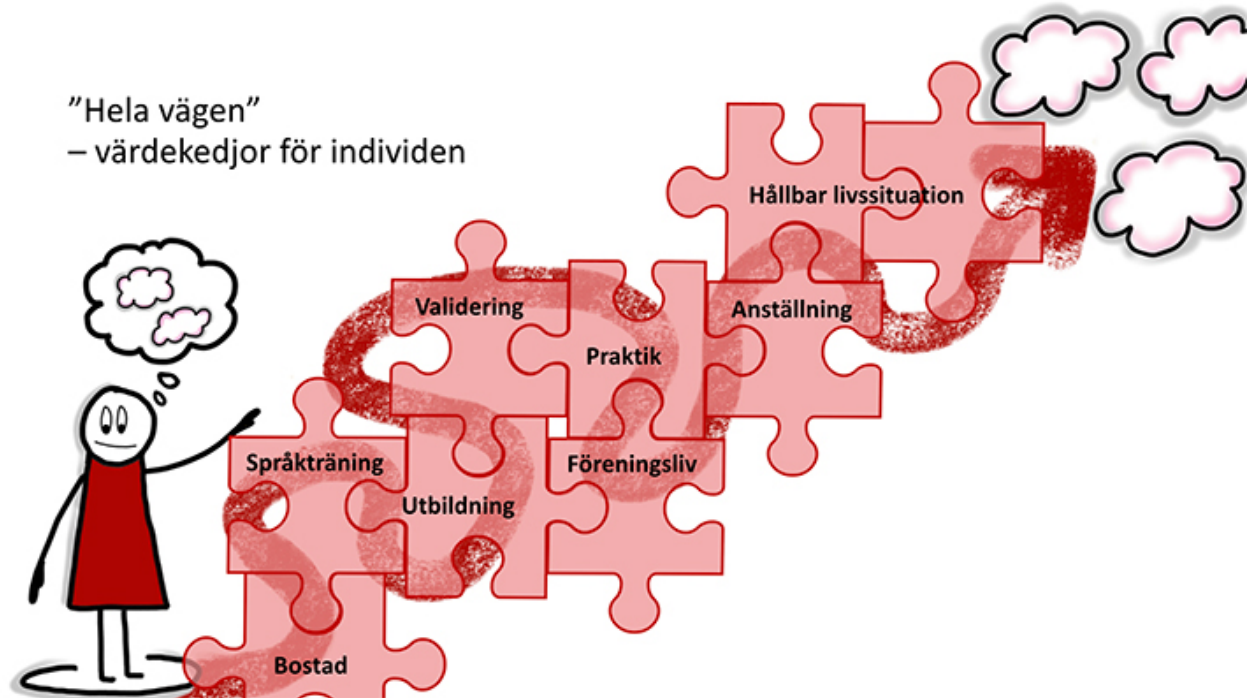
According to a Conflictual Harmony approach, paying careful attention to the principles that govern the "playing ground" where two worlds meet is of utmost importance. Transformative processes are in my experience extremely sensitive to issues of power, which just like the rigid identities tied to them, function in a way where power exercised in ways unconscious to the way it might be perceived and experienced by the other, oftentimes trap creative energy and possibilities for true innovation. Declaring that the "target audience" is to be included in equal ways is a start, but I would suggest the inclusion and co-design of more carefully considered principles for the playing ground where these two worlds are to meet.

In this paragraph I will include a few thoughts and considerations that may be part of the process of arriving at these principles. In many of the majority culture management theories mentioned above, as well as in much participatory design practices, the "target audience" is now included in the design of the services they are offered, in this case the new collaborative and inclusive welfare society. I see this thinking reflected also in the emphasis on the value chain in the analysis done by Save the Children (see image below), placing the individual welfare recipient at the center of a new coordinated and systemic approach to the journey they need to go through to arrive at a sustainable living situation.

This focus on the individual as a sort of client surely has value, and I am not suggesting that this strategy be reconsidered altogether. What I am pointing to, is the importance of also including representation tied to these communities in the strategic framework and the problem analysis, which would happen from a position of representing a kind of collective experience. This in

recognition of the major gap in power in-between them, leaving the single individual at the bottom of the food chain in a vulnerable situation to negotiate their inclusion in the design of the service they are provided.

"Hela vägen"
– värdekedjor för individen

Validering
Praktik
Anställning
Hållbar livssituation
Språkträning
Utbildning
Föreningsliv
Bostad

Even rethinking the idea of target audience of the change effort I think needs to be included in the process design. According to a Conflictual Harmony perspective, when one seeks to transform an entire system, we need to also break out of conditioned ways of thinking and talking about these kind of relationships, in this case the target audience on the marginalized side and the providers on the other. Rather, for a truly transformative situation to appear, they would both be co-creators of the new welfare system, meaning that the insights of the marginalized population are used to transform the culture within the various sectors there to serve them.

Redefining relationships this way is always a tricky process which involves letting go of old identities for everyone involved. A conflictually harmonious situation would necessarily mean a shift also in the established identity of the "welfare recipient with no power" or "the activist". Thus, the necessity for preparation and/or on-going reflection in regards to issues of identity also on this side of things. In my experience, the position of "activist" is an identity that

easily puts you in an oppositional stance, a sort of fight mode, that can be hard to break out of. Any kind of identity formation also intrinsically involves a certain kind of righteousness, "we are right and they are wrong", with the risk of closing you off from collaboration, embracing a more nuanced view of things or switch modes from opposition to engagement and creativity. Same goes for the distrusting welfare recipient who has withdrawn from the system, accepting a new role necessarily involves a shift.

The best way to shift these identities is of course to very carefully design the "playing ground" in a way that allows for both sides to grow into their new and healthier power relationship and roles of collaborators. In systems thinking, these identity shifts could be called "delays" in the system that one needs to be wary of and prepared for, on both sides of things. Thus, in a change process like this, expecting or demanding immediate large scale results like much management practice does, would not be wise. Rather, I would design into the process this awareness of and sensitivity to the importance of relationship and identity in any kind of change effort of this nature, and work strategically and patiently with both sides in their shared growth in this regard.

EXPLORING THE ROLE OF WORKING CULTURE IN REGARDS TO OUR WORLDS

Another important element that I would like to lift in regards to crafting this overall strategy for creating a conflictually harmonious situation between the "two worlds" we have discussed, is the consideration of the issue of working culture. This, as exemplified by the work already initiated by Save the Children, is an outspoken agenda of the network, including creating a new type of balance between theory and practice, chaos and order, planning and doing. What I would like to add to this strategic framework, is the consideration of the relationship between grassroots practices and more established management practices. For the sake of clarity, I will again make some generalizations to be able to grasp the "bigger picture". As we have discussed previously, the present day established management systems value control over chaos, reason over intuition, silos over cross-collaboration, planning or theory over doing and practice. In my experience, many grassroots initiatives operate according to "the other side" of the spectrum, often responding to immediate social challenges through a trial-and-error-approach, collaborative methods, employing a kind of flexibility and sensibility to the process.

On both "sides" can be outlined upsides and downsides in terms of achieving goals of social sustainability, main issue from a Conflictual Harmony perspective the lack of balance in-between, including the marginalization of the grassroots side. This was a dynamic I witnessed and lived in for many years in Stockholm suburb Tensta, where the domination of the "established ways of working" versus the grassroots approaches developed on the ground, was one aspect of the feeling of living in a colony, where the grassroots players constantly had to justify themselves, seek for approval, or simply not be valued for their competence by the more powerful players. In the design of a process bridging the gap between a majority society and socio economically vulnerable communities, I would therefore dedicate a portion to exploring how to set up a learning culture between a grassroots way of responding to social challenges, and a more institutional way, recognizing also the gap in power in-between.

SHARED AND EVOLVING PROBLEM ANALYSIS AND FORWARD DIRECTION

Important for this kind of shared path or common ground between these "two worlds" that we have discussed, is also to design into the process, an element of somehow visualizing or verbally communicating a shared understanding of the problem and thus, a direction for what we are aiming for. I see much of this incapsulated in the image above that I have referred to as the problem analysis, with the two islands, the gap in-between and the necessary "weaving" of the two towards a path pointing to the sustainable society.

I also think it could be helpful to put together a more detailed direction, that incorporates some of the elements I have discussed above. So, thoughts, from both sides, in terms of relationships, new roles (within and between) both clusters, working cultures etc, outlining a new type of balance, connection points and links, holding whatever contradictions or differences that exist, yet identifying that which is shared. Any type of successful movement I believe, needs this new "us", again, not to erase the differences, but to establish a common ground, a door we can all agree to walk through. With the tactic of starting with the majority culture actors, this "us" is already in the making. It is that which makes people excited about the initiative, that draws energy and moves things forward. What I would pay close attention to in the design of the process forward, is to make sure that this "us" does not solidify before a proper "meeting" with the affected communities is established. Rather, to stay in the very brave zone of openness and exploration that the initiative was founded upon, and allow this upcoming process of creating an equal playing ground with "the other side of the pond", to continue to evolve also frameworks,

infrastructures, strategic intentions and problem analysis, all the things that in practice translate to a shared "us".

LOOKING AT THE ORGANIZATIONAL SELF: PASSIONS, THEORIES OF CHANGE, ROLE.

Nearing the end of this long piece on strategy and process design, I would like to add a few reflective words about the internal world of Save the Children, which I´ve had the opportunity to get a small look into. A central principle of Conflictual Harmony is to always locate yourself in relation to whatever change you are trying to achieve. Understanding your role, your own knowledge or blind spots, your own position in terms of power dynamics and more than anything, your own motivation and sense of deeper purpose in relation to the area in which you are trying to intervene.

From my perspective, I see a non-profit like Save the Children like an ideal actor to initiate a network like this, with its "in-between" position in regards to the public sector, academia, corporations and citizens. I also find the wealth of perspectives and modes of working within the organization fascinating, ranging from the more traditional "lobbyist-charity role" to an activist

and mobilizing role, and in the case of Sustainable Malmö, mediators and visionaries. From what I have come to learn from my conversations with different actors within the organization, I also understand that these perspectives are oftentimes not aligned, sometimes conflicting or competing. The stance I would take, is to along with leading the Sustainable Malmö initiative forward, use the richness within the organization to explore different theories of change. Perhaps there should be no "one way" within the organization, but the multiplicity of strategies and the opportunity to learn from each other, is what makes the organization unique? As with any growth process, some roles will be outgrown with time, others filled, others merged or working in conjunction with each other. Either way, I would add these reflective conversations within Save the Children into the process design along the way, using the feedback and resistance in regards to the initiative as "practice" for the push-backs that will surely come from the outside in one form or another.

FINAL WORDS

So a few words to wrap this up! Sitting in New York reflecting on a process design and a strategy for this specific case study obviously comes with some limitations. I hope however that my reflections can be the start of an open conversation with various actors connected to the network. A learning and sharing process that can add value to everyone involved, and hopefully, the work moving forward.

Some questions I would be interested in would be: What in my reflections sparked your interest or brought a new perspective? What made you curious or surprised? What resonates, what do you think would be valuable to consider in the process moving forward? What feels unrealistic, strange or confusing? What are things you think I should consider, or things that need to be clarified?