



# BEYOND CARBON FIXATION

PATHWAYS TO REGENERATIVE FUTURES

*OVERVIEW*



## Liberation from the Enclosures of Capitalism and Colonialism

Recent global crises, such as extreme climate events and rising inequality, are part of a broader system of interconnected social, political, and economic challenges known as the metacrisis. At its core is an anthropocentric capitalist system that prioritizes growth and profit over the well-being of people and the planet. Climate philanthropy often reflects these values, focusing on market-driven solutions that overlook the root causes of climate change. Land ownership, central to capitalism and colonialism, sits at the heart of this metacrisis, perpetuating cycles of exploitation and extraction. Addressing these interconnected issues requires a fundamental rethinking of our economic and social systems and ultimately our relationship with the living world.

In this research, we examine the intersection of redistribution of wealth and planetary health which builds on two narrative research initiatives that CHL conducted this past year. First, *wealth as a transition pathway*: means by which to transition from our current metacrisis to postcapitalist realities that serve Life. Second, explorations of the narrative space around land ownership and an intervention calling for *land back to right relations*. Ma Earth sits at the intersection of these two inquiries, with the mission of creating enabling infrastructure for resources to flow toward the regeneration of lands, waters, ecosystems, and communities.

Through this exploration, we aim to map the ecosystem and find where we can weave the connective tissue to highlight points of collective action to serve as a navigational tool for systems change. **The intention of this research is to find pathways to liberate lands, waters, ecosystems, and communities from the enclosures of capitalism and colonialism.**

## The Carbon Fixation: How Philanthropy and Aid Miss the Real Crisis

At a time of intersecting crises—war and genocide, climate disaster, energy and food shortages, and economic collapse—the **question of how to build alternatives has become urgent for those committed to true and sustained transformation.** Our current systems continue to shape much of our collective future, yet alternative models of social relations, economic structures, and political frameworks offer promising pathways toward hope. The challenge lies in moving beyond surface-level solutions that may inadvertently replicate the very issues they seek to resolve.

**To forge effective alternatives, we must fundamentally rethink the very foundations of our thought**—the ontological and epistemic paradigms that shape our actions. Only by challenging and reshaping these deep-seated frameworks can we hope to address the systemic roots of the crises defining our era. These systems, rooted in the logics of capitalism,

colonialism, and the commodification of nature, perpetuate cycles of exploitation and harm. **Traditional approaches to these crises, fixated on surface-level solutions, have failed to address their underlying causes.** Instead, they often replicate and exacerbate the very problems they aim to solve.

**At the heart of the failure of climate mitigation strategies is an obsession with carbon.** Dominating climate philanthropy and international aid, this carbon-centric paradigm views emission reductions as the sole metric of success. Billions of dollars are funneled into projects focused on carbon sequestration and technological innovation, under the illusion that technical fixes alone can resolve the climate crisis. In 2022, for example, \$7.8 billion was directed toward such initiatives, yet global emissions continued to rise by 1.6%. These efforts, while seemingly progressive, create an illusion of progress. **They neglect the deeper drivers of ecological degradation—resource extraction, systemic inequality, and overconsumption—allowing the broader destructive system to remain unchallenged.**

This carbon fixation is symptomatic of a deeper issue: our entrapment within an invisible prison of thought. Dominant paradigms treat the climate crisis as a technical problem solvable through market mechanisms and carbon accounting, leaving unaddressed the structures of power and exploitation that generate environmental harm. This reductionist view not only ignores the interconnected nature of our crises but also reinforces the systems of inequality that fuel them. By focusing narrowly on emissions, we manage symptoms rather than causes, perpetuating cycles of harm. We have outlined this detailed structural analysis in the issue *The Carbon Fixation*.

**Breaking free from this constrained thinking requires a fundamental shift—beyond mere mitigation toward reimagining our relationship with the world.** Our research delves into this necessary transformation, exploring how communities are pioneering new ways of thinking and being that challenge this dominant paradigm. Through extensive narrative analysis and in-depth interviews, we uncovered a unifying thread among diverse movements: the emergence of *prefigurative ontologies*, and the pursuit of *experimental epistemologies* that are grounded in the praxis of *possibility models*.

More simply put, these movements are modeling the kind of world they want to see. They are experimenting with new ways of learning, understanding, and acting outside of the dominant culture. They are putting into practice models of what they envision as possible alternatives to the current systems learning and iterating along the way.



## Mapping the Narrative Landscape: From Carbon to Crystal

Recognizing the limitations of this carbon-centric approach, our research turns to a more robust analysis of the narrative landscape—the frameworks and worldviews that shape how different communities are approaching the metacrisis. Through a combination of big data analysis and in-depth interviews, we mapped out key narrative communities working to address the fundamental issues of the climate crisis from new perspectives.

In this analysis, we identified narrative communities actively experimenting with local, contextual solutions to the metacrisis. Examples of these narrative communities include:

- 1. Bioregional Governance:** promotes land management by ecological and geographical rather than political features (like the nation-state). It is both a philosophical movement and an empirical and experimental alternative.
- 2. Community Land Trusts:** focused on pursuing different models of land ownership, moving from enclosure of land to being entrusted with the care of land.
- 3. Regenerative Foodways:** focused on redesigning food systems toward systems that are regenerative. Various strains include regenerative agriculture, agroecology, and food sovereignty, which all recognize the fundamental right to control, decide and manage the means of producing the food we consume.
- 4. Indigenous Lifeways:** led by Indigenous communities, focusing on restoring their lifeways through repatriation, land reunion, and a “coming home” to right relations.
- 5. Rights of Nature:** focuses unconventional but Western-based legal tools to protect land and/or hold accountability for environmental destruction, recognising the intrinsic value of nature. It includes conversations around Rights of Nature and Ecocide.

Our research revealed that the dominant discourse around the climate crisis—rooted in carbon reduction—directs funds, energy, and attention toward superficial solutions that fail to address the broader system. These narrative communities, by contrast, are experimenting with new ontologies and epistemologies that fundamentally challenge the underlying assumptions of the current system. **They are not merely working within the constraints of the old logic but are actively building alternatives that embody new ways of thinking, being, and acting.**

Within this landscape, we found that many of the narrative communities are deeply engaged in what we call *justice plus ontoshift* approaches - approaches that marry demands of justice with a concurrent shift in ways of being and relating to the world (ontologies). As Philosopher Bayo Akomolafe has argued: “Demands for social justice may get us a seat at the table, but they will never let us leave the house of modernity”. To leave the house of modernity, we need new ontologies. **These narrative communities are not just advocating for justice in terms of land rights or resource distribution, but they are also pushing for a fundamental ontological shift in how we understand our relationship to the Earth and to each other.**

Narrative communities that embody certain values, norms, or ideas within a larger society can often act as catalysts for broader cultural and social transformations. These ‘cultural crystals,’ have the capacity to transform spaces that challenge prevailing paradigms, inspire collective action, and ultimately pave the way for a more just and regenerative future—one that moves beyond carbon fixation toward community and ecological care.

For a more detailed analysis of the narrative communities, where the current window of discourse (the range of ideas the public is willing to accept) sits and where we want to shift it, please see the [Narrative Mapping](#) section.



## Possibility Models and Prefigurative Ontologies: Embodying the Change

A key insight that emerged from our interviews was the frame of “possibility models” rooted in prefigurative ontologies—the idea of building new systems within the body of the old, by embodying the change we hope to see in the world through our current actions and practices. This concept reflects a fundamental departure from the market-driven, rational, instrumental and responsive logic<sup>1</sup> that defines current climate strategies. Instead, “possibility models” focus on experimentation and radical imagination, allowing communities to engage in practices that create new possibilities for the future.

Participants in our interviews consistently pointed to the importance of prefigurative experiments, where communities at the fringes of collapse are engaging with imaginative, speculative dimensions to create new practical systems at the points of contextual breakdown. These experiments are often situated in places where the old systems are failing, allowing for new, emergent systems to take shape through practice rather than theory.

This insight is what led to identifying possibility models as a critical semantic frame underlying the work of these narrative communities. **Possibility models are not abstract ideals; they are lived, empirical experiments in new ways of being. From food sovereignty movements to Indigenous land practices and bioregional governance, these models offer real-world examples of how alternative ontologies and epistemologies can transform breakdowns into possibility.**

At the core of the metacrisis is not just a failure of ecological stewardship, social justice, or economic governance—it is fundamentally a crisis of imagination. Our inability to think outside the invisible prison of instrumental rationality, growth-centered ideologies, and capitalist extraction has trapped us in a cycle of replication and exacerbation. The communities working on the fringes of these breakdowns are showing us that another way is possible, but it requires us to free ourselves from the constraints of this dominant paradigm.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.culturehack.io/issues/issue-06-the-carbon-fixation-how-philanthropy-and-aid-miss-the-real-crisis/>

## Possibility Models as “Islands of Coherence”

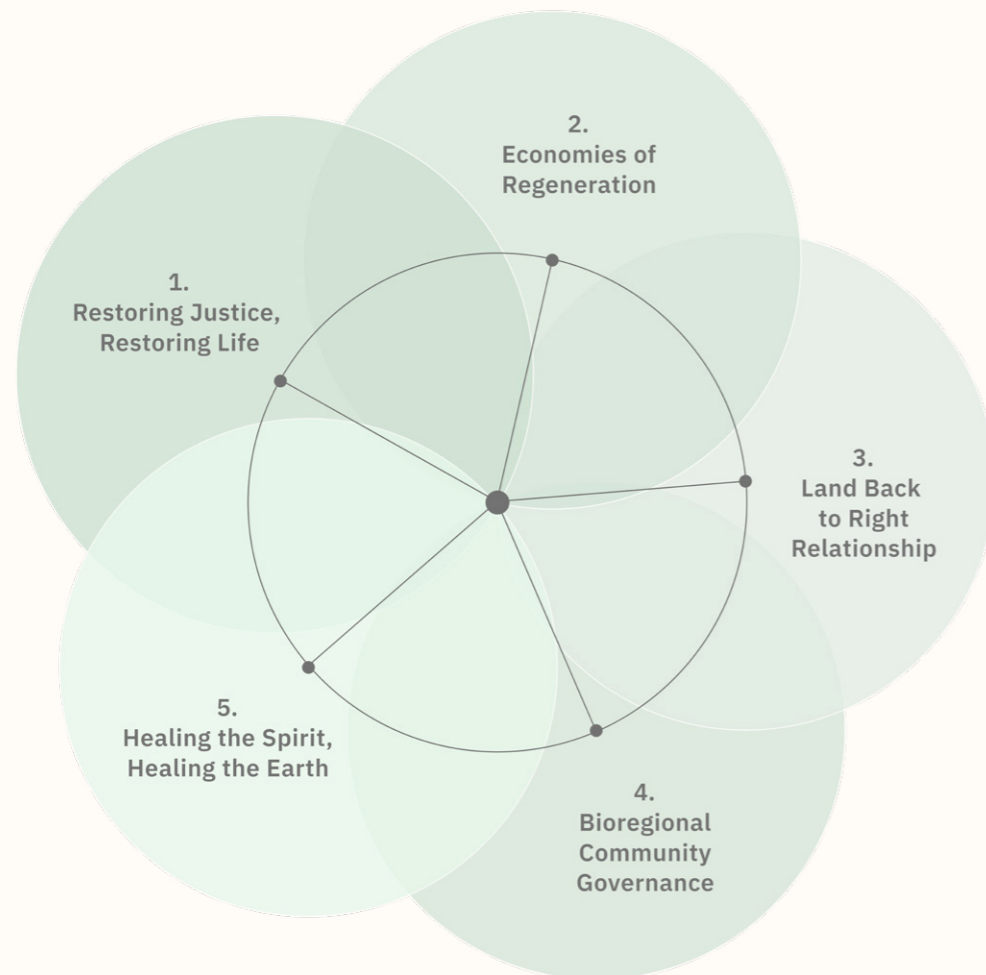
We introduce the metaphor of *islands of coherence* to describe the localized experiments in justice, regeneration, and governance that many of the identified narrative communities are already embodying. These islands of coherence, from bioregional communities, to community land trusts to agroecology practices, are making the path as they walk it, offering powerful models of a future unshackled from an old, fragile paradigm. As Complexity Scientist Ilya Prigogine observed, “when a complex system is far from equilibrium, small islands of coherence in a sea of chaos have the capacity to shift the entire system to a higher order.” These possibility models—rooted in reciprocal relationships with land and regenerative systems—demonstrate that radical imagination and real-world experimentation can create measurable change.

The evolutionary capacity of these islands of coherence is that they are already embodying the change in the system. They are akin to imaginal cells - the specialized cells found in caterpillars that play a crucial role in their transformation into butterflies. When we look at that evolutionary process in nature, it is when the cells start to connect with each other and shift from acting as discrete individual cells to a multi-cell organism, that the process of metamorphosis occurs. Imagine if these islands of coherence begin to connect—via shared resources, knowledge exchange, or cooperative networks—they carry the potential to shift the entire system, transforming what seem like isolated efforts into a broader wave of systemic change.

Please see our [reframe section](#) for more detail on the *reframe* and narrative change strategy.

## The Pathways to Regeneration Are Interwoven

Finally, our research culminated in the identification of five causal mechanisms for change. This refers to the processes or factors that directly contribute to bringing about change in a system. Through our in-depth interviews and analysis, we identified patterns in how participants described the pathways through which systemic change could occur. These five empirical pathways represent interwoven processes that must work together to create sustainable, regenerative systems. Progress in one must be coupled with progress in others for there to be real, transformative change.



The five pathways we identified are:

- 1. Restoring Justice, Restoring Life:** This pathway emphasizes the inseparable connection between ecological restoration and social justice. Addressing colonial and capitalist exploitation is necessary for healing ecosystems .
- 2. Economies of Regeneration:** Moving away from extractive economies toward regenerative, circular models that prioritize community resilience and ecological wellbeing.
- 3. Land Back to Right Relationship:** Advocating for collective ownership models, like Community Land Trusts, to return land to the stewardship of communities rather than corporations.
- 4. Bioregional Community Governance:** Promoting decentralized, participatory governance structures that empower communities to manage their resources and environments in ways that align with ecological limits.
- 5. Healing the Spirit, Healing the Earth:** Reconnecting with spiritual and cultural practices that honor the Earth and challenge the disconnection and alienation that drives exploitation. This pathway points to the need for deep shifts in knowing (epistemology) and being (ontology) that allow for the enacting of new possibility models.

The research has given a detailed explanation of these pathways as a *Systems Capability Matrix*. This matrix is a high-level guide designed to assess and support initiatives focused on land regeneration and broader systemic transitions. It offers a framework for evaluating how projects contribute to social, ecological, and economic change by focusing on the five pathways mentioned above. This guide provides a starting point for assessing initiatives across six key dimensions: processes, outcomes, interrelationships, causal mechanisms, transformational capacity, and monitoring.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, moving beyond carbon fixation is not simply about changing our metrics—it's about radically transforming the systems that fuel the crisis. The narrow focus on emissions reduction traps us in a cycle of superficial solutions, reinforcing the very forces of exploitation and extraction we need to dismantle. As our research shows, real transformation lies in addressing these root causes—private ownership, capitalism, colonialism, and the commodification of nature—and reimagining how we relate to the Earth and to each other. This shift is not technical but fundamental, requiring a reframing of how we think, govern, and live in community.

The five pathways we've identified form an integrated framework to understand how this transition can unfold. They provide an integrated structure for developing the taxonomy, language, and metrics essential to grasp how real transition can happen. These pathways are not just abstract ideas but interconnected processes that chart a course through the complexities of system transformation. By engaging this framework, we gain both a vision of possibility and a practical guide for enacting it, step by step, as these islands of coherence begin to shift the entire landscape. Nurtured and resourced, these islands can grow and multiply, connecting to create networks and synergies that amplify their impact, ultimately driving the large-scale systemic change needed to address the metacrisis.

