Companion Guide

Can Meaningful Change Still Be Delivered Today?

Adam Tugwell | 2 November 2026



Introduction

Can Meaningful Change Still Be Delivered Today? began with a practical question rather than a predetermined conclusion.

The purpose of the inquiry was not to advocate for a particular political ideology, governance model or economic system. Nor was it intended to prove that meaningful change was impossible.

Instead, the objective was to examine a deceptively simple question:

Can meaningful change still be delivered today?

If meaningful improvements remain possible within the systems we already inhabit, what is helping or preventing them from being realised?

What began as a search for practical reform gradually became an investigation into recurring patterns that appeared across governance, public services, organisations, communities and wider society.

Along the way, the inquiry explored the relationships between incentives, responsibility, authority, value, capability, judgement and human agency.

This document provides a concise overview of the journey, the major discoveries and the questions that remained.

The Central Question

The entire inquiry revolves around a single question:

Can meaningful change still be delivered today?

Not after a crisis.

Not after the collapse of existing institutions.

Not after the emergence of an entirely new system.

Today.

Within the structures and systems that already exist.

The investigation deliberately adopted a constraint:

Rather than beginning with assumptions about what should replace existing systems, it would first examine whether meaningful improvement remained possible within them.

The Journey of Discovery

The inquiry unfolded through a series of discoveries.

Initially, the focus was on identifying practical routes to meaningful reform. Instead of finding straightforward solutions, recurring patterns began to emerge.

Problems that appeared unrelated often seemed to share surprisingly similar characteristics.

This led to a series of discoveries that gradually formed a coherent framework.

Cost Externalisation

The first major discovery was that many problems do not disappear. Their consequences simply move elsewhere.

Costs are often transferred:

- Into the future
- Onto other organisations
- Into communities
- Onto individuals with little influence over the original decision

This pattern became known as **Cost Externalisation**.

The key insight was simple:

Problems are often not solved. Their consequences are merely redistributed.

Human Value Externalisation

The next stage of the inquiry explored the gap between what systems measure and what people actually value.

Many of the things people consider most important are difficult to quantify:

- Trust
- Community
- Belonging
- Security
- Dignity
- Purpose

These things remain important regardless of whether they appear in institutional measures.

This became known as **Human Value Externalisation**.

The central observation was that value can remain present while becoming increasingly invisible to the systems intended to recognise it.

Capability Externalisation

The inquiry then turned to capability.

Repeatedly, situations emerged in which genuine capability existed but was poorly recognised or utilised.

At the same time, proxies for capability increasingly influenced opportunity and recognition.

Examples included:

- Qualifications
- Credentials
- Status
- Formal indicators of competence

This pattern became known as **Capability Externalisation**.

The inquiry challenged the assumption that capability and recognised capability are always the same thing.

The Role of Proxies

The discovery that connected earlier observations was the role of proxies.

A proxy is a representation of reality rather than reality itself.

Examples include:

- Targets
- Metrics
- Qualifications
- Performance indicators
- Reports

Proxies are necessary.

Modern systems could not function without them.

The challenge emerges when proxies become more important than the realities they were created to represent.

Proxy Authority

As the role of proxies became clearer, another discovery followed.

Proxies do not merely represent reality.

They also influence behaviour.

Targets shape priorities.

Metrics shape incentives.

Performance indicators shape decisions.

This influence became known as **Proxy Authority**.

Proxy Sovereignty

The inquiry then explored what happens when this influence continues to grow.

Under certain conditions, systems begin to organise themselves around measures and representations rather than the purposes they were originally created to serve.

This became known as **Proxy Sovereignty**.

The defining characteristic is that the proxy effectively becomes more important than the reality it was created to represent.

Judgement Displacement

The concept that ultimately became central to the framework was **Judgement Displacement**.

Modern institutions increasingly emphasise:

- Compliance
- Consistency
- Process
- Targets
- Risk management

These things may provide benefits.

However, they can also reduce opportunities for human judgement.

The inquiry suggests that many systems increasingly reward adherence to representation rather than interpretation of reality.

The consequence is that judgement becomes constrained, displaced or transferred elsewhere.

Authority and Responsibility

The inquiry repeatedly uncovered a growing separation between authority and responsibility.

Responsibility often remains attached to individuals.

Authority increasingly becomes embedded within systems, procedures, frameworks and proxies.

This can create situations in which people remain accountable for outcomes while possessing diminishing influence over them.

The implications for meaningful change are substantial.

Destination States

The concept of **Destination States** emerged as the inquiry turned towards future implications.

Destination States are not predictions.

They are logical end points toward which systems appear to move when existing incentives remain unchanged.

The purpose of the concept is not to forecast events.

It is to help identify the direction of travel.

Understanding direction may often matter more than predicting specific outcomes.

Agency

The final stage of the inquiry focused on people.

Meaningful change ultimately depends on meaningful agency.

Agency is defined as the practical ability of individuals and communities to influence the outcomes affecting their lives.

This became one of the most important conclusions of the investigation.

Without agency, adaptation becomes increasingly difficult.

Without adaptation, meaningful change becomes increasingly constrained.

The Core Framework

The inquiry produced a connected sequence of discoveries:

Cost Externalisation

Human Value Externalisation

Capability Externalisation

Proxies

Proxy Authority

Proxy Sovereignty

Judgement Displacement

Authority and Responsibility

Agency

Together these concepts describe a process through which systems can become progressively detached from the realities they were created to serve.

What the Book Does Not Claim

The book does not claim that:

- Meaningful change is impossible
- Collapse is inevitable
- One political ideology provides all the answers
- A single group or institution is responsible for every problem examined
- A perfect system exists

Instead, the inquiry seeks to understand the conditions that make meaningful change either easier or more difficult to achieve.

Key Takeaways

1. Many Problems May Share Common Dynamics

Problems that appear unrelated may be connected by underlying systemic patterns.

2. Representation Can Become More Influential Than Reality

The systems used to represent reality can gradually become more important than reality itself.

3. Judgement Remains Essential

Human judgement continues to play a critical role wherever reality exceeds the capacity of systems to represent it fully.

4. Authority and Responsibility Matter

When authority and responsibility become separated, accountability and adaptation become increasingly difficult.

5. Agency Matters

Meaningful change depends upon the ability of people and communities to influence outcomes.

6. Direction Matters More Than Prediction

The inquiry is concerned less with forecasting events and more with understanding trajectories.

7. Understanding Comes Before Reform

Before meaningful change can occur, it is necessary to understand the mechanisms creating current outcomes.

The Unresolved Question

Although the inquiry began as a question about change, it ultimately arrived at a deeper question about agency.

One possibility emerged repeatedly throughout the investigation:

What if the greatest challenge is not accepting responsibility for others, but accepting the agency of others as equal to our own?

The inquiry does not claim to answer that question.

It simply arrived there.

Conclusion

Can Meaningful Change Still Be Delivered Today? does not offer certainty.

It offers a framework.

A way of recognising recurring patterns.

A way of examining the relationship between systems, institutions, communities and individuals.

A way of thinking about adaptation, responsibility, authority and change.

The inquiry began with a practical question.

It ended with a deeper understanding of why that question may be far more difficult, and far more important, than it first appears.

Can meaningful change still be delivered today?

The answer may depend less upon what we believe and more upon what we are prepared to recognise, understand and act upon while the opportunity still exists.

Further Information

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