THE PROT⊙PIA LAB

Concept Note

May 2021

⇒ People increasingly live in separate, very different realities and ideological bubbles, and public conversation around our most pressing issues has become highly dysfunctional. The shutdown of pluralistic conversation stifles the creativity that is needed for solving the most pressing deep-rooted social and ecological problems.

⇒ With this project we will plant the seeds for a non-dogmatic dialogue and explore and prototype ground-breaking, but non-ideologically biased, solutions and strategies on our most pressing ecological and social issues.

Project Name:	The Protopia Lab
Time schedule:	Summer 2021 – Summer 2023 (2 years)
Organisation:	Asociación Activistas en Transición (Spain)
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Project Summary

The core questions at the heart of the Protopia Lab are:

⇒ How can we become wise agents of change to help make lasting change in our complex world so that life on Earth can flourish?

⇒ How can we become designers of evolutionary processes that can effectively upgrade our civilisation and help prevent its collapse?

Tackling our most pressing problems like climate change requires ground-breaking solutions that can reach broad societal consensus, but that are impossible to achieve in the context of an increasingly polarised discourse in Western societies. People increasingly live in separate, very different realities and ideological bubbles, and public conversation around our most pressing issues has become highly dysfunctional.

The shutdown of pluralistic conversation stifles the creativity that is needed for solving the most pressing deep-rooted social and ecological problems.

With this project, we will create innovative tools and work with change agents from across civil society to step out of our ideological frames and exemplify non-dogmatic pluralistic dialogue. We will seek deeper wisdom and truth from a plurality of disciplines and ideologies.

Our aim is not the perfect world, but protopia, which is a process that takes into account multiple perspectives, acknowledges that there are always multiple trade-offs to consider and avoids throwing the baby out with the bathwater when making changes to the system. Nobody has all the answers for how a better system will ultimately work and look like. We propose a process of trial and error, an evolutionary search process towards protopia.

We hope to contribute with this project to the emergence of new alliances and syntheses of ideas across ideologies and movements with a high potential for renewing societal trust and cohesion and creating high levels of societal support for solutions and pathways for ecological transition.

Context

At the beginning of the pandemic a thought crossed our minds: would Covid-19 bring us closer together? Would the spiral of polarisation fade? The past year has taught us the opposite: it is tearing us further apart, and we are more polarised than before.

The algorithms of Facebook, Twitter, Google and YouTube are fuelling this tribalism and polarisation across the world. In many conflicts – whether it is about Covid-19, immigration, identity politics or, in America, Trump – the opposing camps move in such different worlds of communication that they can only interpret each other as the result of conspiracies, and thus are no longer accessible for arguments and facts. Collective sensemaking becomes impossible.

Many activists who identify as progressive see the polarised context as a fight between Good and Evil, with progressive activists positioned as the good ones and anyone who disagrees positions as the evil ones, or at least brainwashed by evil. However, according to moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt, the deeper problem behind the current political situation is a conflict not between good and evil, but between different moralities, where each side is convinced that they are fighting for a good cause rather than out of self-interest. Haidt's empirical work on morality across human cultures shows that the morality of people who are passionate about social justice has made the world a better place with less discrimination and oppressions. But his work also showed that conservative values like authority and loyalty have also been important tools in human evolution. Together, these two sets of values have helped bind people together and thereby helped advance human cooperation and the building of civilisation. Haidt believes that all moral foundations have been essential tools that enabled the success of human civilisation.

Most progressive civil society organisations and activist networks understand the systemic economic disparities of our times, but many fail to see that the crisis of the Western liberal paradigm is not only economic in nature but cultural as well. The reactionary and far-right populism we have been experiencing in many Western countries in recent times is a rebellion not only against the excesses of economic globalisation but also against the dominant cultural paradigm of the past few decades.

Western institutions (universities, media, cultural and governmental institutions, big business and civil society organisations) are increasingly influenced by a type of fundamentalist thinking that sees the world primarily through the lenses of patriarchy, colonialism and racism. It is vital for our societies to discuss, mitigate and heal oppressions – historical and contemporary –, but these issues are complex and require nuance and listening to a broad range of perspectives. However, these institutions now increasingly follow a narrow agenda that leads to conversations only among conformists with approved viewpoints. People who dare to cross the multiple red lines are seeing their careers crashed and reputations destroyed.

These trends fuel the spiral of polarisation and tribalism in Western societies. In particular, the working classes don't see themselves represented by these ideas and often feel threatened in their collective identity and culture. What's even worse is that this dogmatism and the

shutdown of pluralistic conversation also stifles the creativity that is needed for solving the most pressing deep-rooted social and ecological problems.

In the US and the UK we're already seeing a number of new organisations aimed at healing societal division and improving discourse. This includes Braver Angels, The Equiano Project and Heterodox Academy (this last one with a focus on US academia).

However, across the European continent, there continues to be a lack of initiatives that are truly pluralistic and heterodox and that promote seeing issues from multiple perspectives. And none of them takes an evolutionary perspective aimed at tackling humanity's biggest problems. In order to find better and workable solutions for our most pressing problems like climate change and inspire audiences beyond the environmentalist milieu, we need creative processes that are inevitably messy and that involve exploring heresies and making mistakes. We need a very different new conversation.

Rationale

We call this new project The Protopia Lab to convey the idea that historically utopian movements have often led to totalitarian systems and ended in dystopia.

Our aim is not the perfect world, but protopia, which is a process that takes into account multiple perspectives, acknowledges that there are always multiple trade-offs to consider and avoids throwing the baby out with the bathwater when making changes to the system. Nobody has all the answers for how a better system will ultimately work and look like. We propose a process of trial and error, an evolutionary search process towards protopia.

The Protopia Lab is based on the core belief and wisdom expressed by the philosopher John Stuart Mill that "conflicting doctrines, instead of one being true and the other false, share the truth between them."

This quote by Jerry Taylor, who was once a prominent US libertarian, gets right to the point to why attachment to ideology is problematic for tackling our most complex problems:

> "Even if we embrace ideology merely as a conceptual lens to help us better understand what is most likely to promote human well-being (ideology as a pattern-recognition device), we run into difficult problems. The incredible complexity of social and economic relationships, the heterogeneity of human beings, and the ubiquitous and irresolvable problem of unintended consequences will frustrate dogmatic shortcuts to problem-solving. Given our very human tendency to filter out information that does not comport with our worldviews – and excessive attention to information that comports with the same – the more we repair to our ideological lenses, the more distorted they become thanks to a spiralling process of confirmation bias."

We have launched the Protopia Lab because in our work with civil society organisations we have realised that conversations about our most pressing social and ecological issues in the activist sphere are increasingly dominated by dogmatic, ideologically narrow thinking. The assumptions that underpin most campaigns, visions and proposed solutions are almost never questioned and

critically assessed. The grievances and inequalities that many activists are dedicated to solving are real and in need of resolution, but the theories of power, privilege and oppression that dominate activist discourse are often inadequate in helping to discover solutions because they can't explain the full breadth and complexity of social phenomena they are attempting to explain, and the explanations they generally offer are often misleading.

The conventional approaches, tools and theories of change used by civil society organisations who call for systemic change towards a sustainable society are often not based on an accurate understanding of the underlying dynamics of society. This understanding includes the evolutionary foundations our society and social phenomena such as inequality or tribalism are based upon. Tribalism is a deep-seated human drive. Developing a good understanding of the social, biological and psychological mechanisms that collapse us into tribal mode is a prerequisite for developing systems, institutions and cultures that can best deactivate that mode.

Ideological bubbles keep us trapped in certain ways of thinking and encourage us to reject anything that challenges them. This isn't just a social issue, it's also cognitive and psychological.

We can't just talk our way toward new more inclusive, complex ways of seeing the world. We have to use cognitive and psychological techniques like mindfulness and Socratic dialogue to change our minds - a reality supported by the latest neuroscience and cognitive science (in particular the work of Mark Lewis and John Vervaeke).
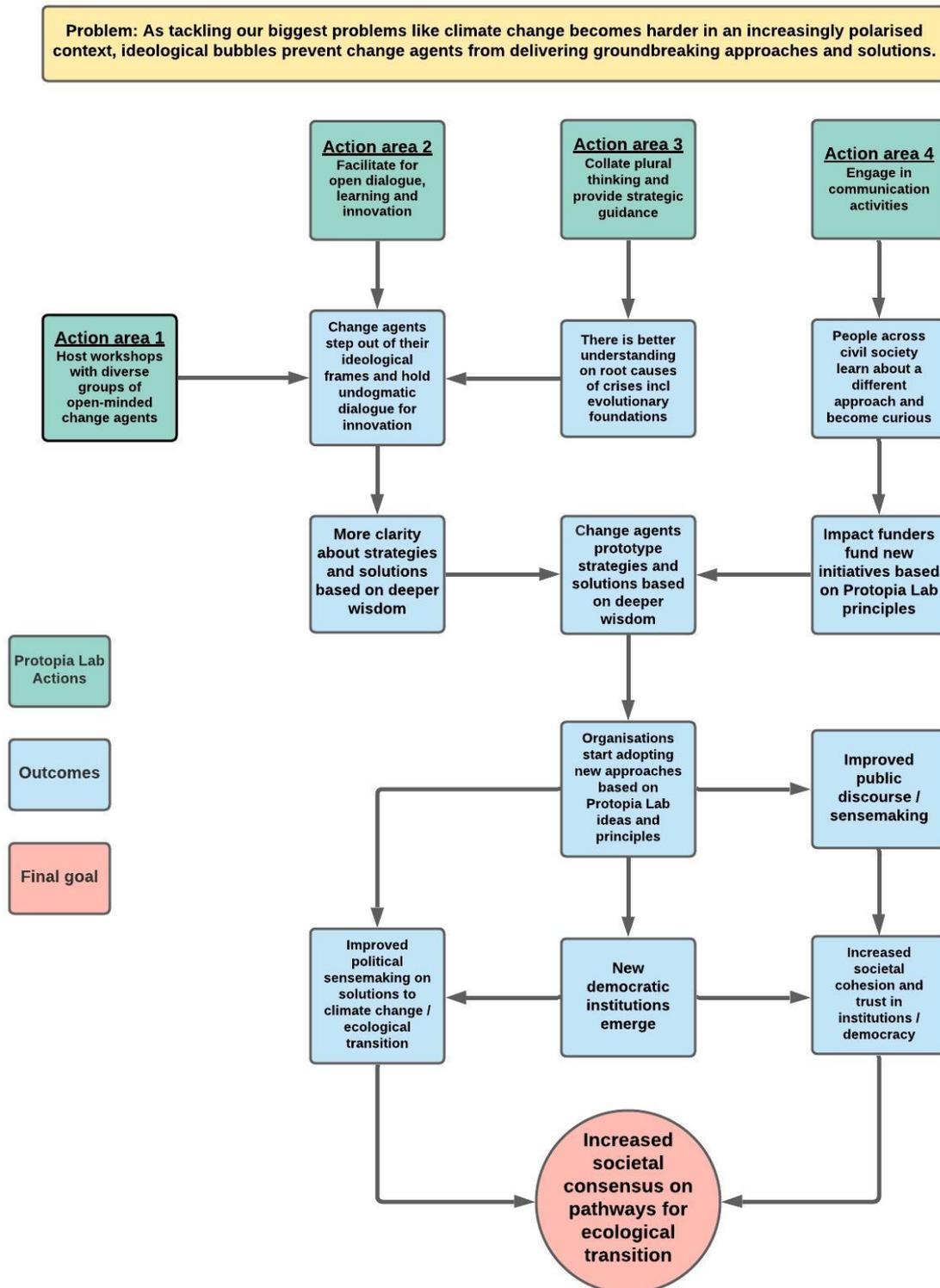
We have to grow beyond these bubbles if we want to meet the considerable challenges we face in our societies. When we question our preconceptions, we tap into new ways of seeing and new insights that can make a significant impact.

This project will create a space where we can model non-dogmatic dialogue and non-tribalistic narratives in order to explore and prototype ground-breaking, but non-ideologically biased, solutions and strategies.

We understand from the interest and feedback in our wider network that there is demand for such spaces. We believe that we can plant the seeds for new non-tribalistic discourse focused on ground-breaking solutions that will ultimately lead to the political and social change that is urgently needed to solve some of the world's most urgent and widely recognized problems.

Theory of change

The following chart shows the chain of plausible outcomes and conditions and how we expect these to cause (or contribute to) the desired final outcome of broader societal consensus on our most pressing ecological and social issues:

Problem: As tackling our biggest problems like climate change becomes harder in an increasingly polarised context, ideological bubbles prevent change agents from delivering groundbreaking approaches and solutions.

Action area 2
Facilitate for open dialogue, learning and innovation

Action area 3
Collate plural thinking and provide strategic guidance

Action area 4
Engage in communication activities

Action area 1
Host workshops with diverse groups of open-minded change agents

Change agents step out of their ideological frames and hold undogmatic dialogue for innovation

There is better understanding on root causes of crises incl evolutionary foundations

People across civil society learn about a different approach and become curious

More clarity about strategies and solutions based on deeper wisdom

Change agents prototype strategies and solutions based on deeper wisdom

Impact funders fund new initiatives based on Protopia Lab principles

Protopia Lab Actions

Outcomes

Final goal

Organisations start adopting new approaches based on Protopia Lab ideas and principles

Improved public discourse / sensemaking

Improved political sensemaking on solutions to climate change / ecological transition

New democratic institutions emerge

Increased societal cohesion and trust in institutions / democracy

Increased societal consensus on pathways for ecological transition

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The problem: Tackling our most pressing problems like climate change requires ground-breaking solutions that can reach broad societal consensus, but that are impossible to achieve in the context of an increasingly polarised discourse in Western societies.

The following is the chain of plausible outcomes and conditions, which is the hypothesis that we are testing with this project:

This project will address this problem by modelling a new pluralistic conversation aimed at synthesising ideas from different bodies of wisdom. This will attract and develop trust with new audiences beyond the environmentalist milieu. It will also develop a culture of open-mindedness and pluralistic thinking within the ecological transition space.

Based on the latest insights from cognitive science, our facilitated processes with diverse groups of change agents will help us develop awareness of our own biases and step out of our ideological frames. We expect that these new undogmatic conversations will unleash people's full creative potential and collective wisdom. We expect our think tank work to inspire these dialogues and our communication activities to make our new approach well known and create curiosity across civil society and beyond.

We expect new alliances of activists to emerge from these dialogues based on the new thinking that crosses ideological boundaries.

We hope that funders will start seeing the potential of our new approach and will fund the prototyping of new Protopia Lab strategies and ideas.

The more organisations adopt pluralistic approaches and undogmatic dialogues the more impact we expect them to have on depolarising public discourse and on improving societal consensus on climate change and other core issues.

Our project works at the level of planting the seeds of this new conversation. We will work with influential change agents with constituencies in a range of countries and diverse segments of society. Our hypothesis is that we will create enough interest in both civil society entrepreneurs and funders so that a range of new engagement strategies and on-the-ground experiments with solutions can be prototyped and their effectiveness be tested.

Overall project goal

Increased societal consensus on pathways for ecological transition – Our ultimate aim is to contribute to the development of ideas, political discourse and ultimately high societal support for solutions and pathways that create human wellbeing within ecological limits.

Project aims

- Inspire and support change agents and civil society leaders to step out of their ideological frames and build capacity for seeing issues from multiple perspectives.

- Plant the seeds for a new, non-dogmatic dialogue aimed at depolarising civil society and public discourse.

- Create awareness among the wider civil society and funder community on how to address societal polarisation and tackle core systemic issues like climate change and inequality in more effective ways.

- Inspire and support change agents and civil society actors to develop a deep understanding of the root causes of the current political and societal crisis as well as of the underlying evolutionary foundations (genetic and cultural).

- Inspire and support change agents and civil society actors to synthesise ideas and solutions from different bodies of wisdom across different ideologies.

- Inspire and support change agents and civil society actors to develop practical approaches to become wise actors for systems change in the current political landscape.

- Inspire and enable change agents to prototype innovative strategies and solutions based on deeper wisdom for thriving societies within planetary boundaries.

Planned actions

Action area 1: Host workshops with diverse groups of open-minded change agents

⇒ We will create a core group of partners and advisors for the project and organise a first workshop with them to deepen our common understanding and create commitment with the project.

⇒ We will interview a range of our civil society stakeholders in order to deepen our understanding of their thinking, motivations and interests in depolarisation/non-dogmatic dialogue and their role within it.

⇒ We will actively approach people who share our intentions and contribute different perspectives and invite about 100 to 150 of them to a large conference that we will host and facilitate (we envisage this for late 2021 after lockdown restrictions are lifted).

⇒ We will organise and host further workshops and smaller meetings. We will combine face-to-face meetings with online sessions but will prioritise participants getting to know one other via face-to-face workshops.

⇒ We will invite inspirational speakers to our events to set the scene for the conversations.

Action area 2: Facilitate for open dialogue, learning and innovation

⇒ We will design and facilitate our conferences and workshops with a focus on creating awareness about our own cognitive biases and build capacity for seeing issues from multiple perspectives.

⇒ We will put emphasis on psychological education to aid people in stepping back from and sometimes challenging their own ideological frames (becoming aware of one's own thoughts, feelings and sensations objectively).

- ○ This will include training in mindfulness, decentering and exercises from 3rd wave cognitive behavioural therapies such as ACT (Acceptance and Commitment Therapy).
- ○ We will use techniques from practices like Circling and Authentic Relating which are already popular in many activist communities and can help to practice non-dogmatic dialogue.
- ○ We anticipate the primary output of this training to be increased levels of mindfulness, which we will measure using a validated psychological questionnaire, the FFMQ (Five Facets of Mindfulness Questionnaire)
- ○ We will also ask participants to reflect on their ability to consider and discuss contradictory viewpoints before and after the events. This reflection will have the dual purpose of helping participants develop their skills, and giving us qualitative data to help us improve the process

⇒ Alongside this, we will use facilitation techniques from practices like systems innovation and design thinking to explore evolutionary processes and prototypes that might help make lasting change in our complex world so that life on Earth can flourish.

Action area 3: Collate state-of-the-art plural thinking and put forward strategic frameworks and guidance

⇒ We will seek deeper wisdom and truth from a plurality of disciplines and ideologies. A synthesis of ideas rooted in evolutionary sciences will help change agents make more informed choices about which design features and which change strategies towards just and ecologically sustainable cultures are more likely to work and which aren't, given our biological (genetic and cultural) predispositions.

⇒ We will focus on the core questions that guide the Protopia Lab: How can we become wise agents of change to help make lasting change in our complex world so that life on Earth can flourish? How can we become designers of evolutionary processes that can effectively upgrade our civilisation and help prevent its collapse?

⇒ We will invite an intellectually diverse range of thinkers and practitioners from different disciplines to discuss these challenging questions and provide impulses to the Protopia Lab community.

⇒ We will develop instructional processes, reading lists and discussion groups in order to gain a deep understanding of the root causes of the current political and societal crisis as well as of the underlying evolutionary foundations (genetic and cultural).

⇒ We will create and publish a publication with strategic guidelines for civil society organisations to speak to new audiences and approach their goals in non-dogmatic, non-polarising ways.

⇒ We will create and publish a publication with a set of tools and facilitation methods to hold dialectics and for collective sensemaking (including creating awareness in groups about their cognitive biases).

Action area 4: Engage in communication activities

⇒ We will improve and broaden our existing social media and newsletter activities to inform and inspire a broader international audience of civil society leaders, funders and change agents.

⇒ We will disseminate all material created in the project to the widest possible audience. On our website we will make available all learning material and facilitation methods for others to be able to make use of them at their own meetings.

⇒ We will continue to publish articles, essays and books ourselves but will also provide space for others to publish their ideas. Where adequate and feasible, we will use audiovisual tools to communicate ideas in a more effective way

(The final scope of the project and activities is subject to the total amount of funding we can secure from funders as well as from other fundraising activities. We will adjust the scope and the ambition of the project accordingly.)

Organisation / Team

Our organisation is based in Barcelona, Spain. We are a Spanish non-for-profit association. In 2011, we set up the [Smart CSOs Lab](#) and have helped civil society organisations across Europe to see climate change, biodiversity or poverty as complex, interconnected issues instead of treating them as single issues that can be solved at the symptoms level. Our approach as a think tank and social innovation lab has enabled these organisations to develop and experiment with strategies that embrace the cultural and systemic root causes lying behind the social and environmental crises of our times.

During this time we have [organised and facilitated nine core conferences and workshops](#) with civil society leaders and researchers from across Europe as well as a range of local workshops on learning and capacity building.

In parallel we have collaborated with researchers, academics and practitioners from a variety of fields to create new thinking, perform action research on civil society strategies and publish [learning materials and tools for civil society](#).

With the Protopia Lab we aim to build on the 10 years of experience with the Smart CSOs Lab.

The project team will be led by:

Michael Narberhaus co-founded the Smart CSOs Lab and is the founder of the Protopia Lab. Since 2004, he has worked at the interface between research and activism with a deep interest in systems thinking and theories of systems change. Recently, he undertook extensive research on the causes of polarisation and on how to advance the ecological transition in the current political context. This work led to the publication of the book Switching off the autopilot: An evolutionary toolbox for the Great Transition.

Alexander Beiner is co-founder of Rebel Wisdom (www.rebelwisdom.co.uk), a media and events organisation focused on understanding systems change, culture and overcoming ideological polarisation. He is an experienced facilitator and trained as both a mindfulness instructor and counsellor, skills he has used to create events focused on mediating cultural differences, collective intelligence and personal development. He has a background in conceiving and producing innovative experiences, having previously worked in some of the world's top events agencies.

Governance

We will create an international advisory board for the project and are inviting accomplished academics and civil society leaders with relevant experience and knowledge to help us improve the project and to make the project widely known.