

Pioneering Ideas in Strategy and Design at the Convergence of International Conservation and Development Practice

The Case for Working Differently

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Abstract

Whether we are conservationists or development practitioners, we increasingly find ourselves working in close geographic proximity and at times employing elements of each other's methodologies. We work along with our humanitarian colleagues more and more often with the very same communities within the same fragile ecosystems, where diverse threats to life and the environment compound and multiply. Theoretical distinctions between conflict, disaster and environmental loss blur. Our impact more and more depends on each other's, not just on each of our disciplines doing its part, but doing it well, with thoughtful strategy, sound design, integrity of approach, and appreciation for the integral necessity of working with a balanced vision.

While twin disciplines, and amidst decades of increasingly professionalized and specialized practice, the conservation and development fields remain too often still apart, with evident cost. The calls for closer integration remain fundamentally cautious. Despite the loftier treatises within the pages of our more erudite journals, as practitioners we are too often confronting conventional pressures that produce and reinforce a binary paradigm -- either we preserve, protect and sustain human life, or we preserve, protect and sustain what's wild. In too many places, this remains still the "frame" quietly, if reluctantly, accepted around our work. It is no wonder then that conservationists question why development practitioners aren't more attentive to habitat and biodiversity loss as crucially pressing, measurable events, and equally that development practitioners marvel at why conservationists seem to call up development models whose promise, they believe, has long diminished. While of universal concern, the decisions that flow from these tensions are more urgent, heartbreaking and consequential (to either the survival of human or wildlife populations) in developing countries and emerging economies than they are elsewhere.

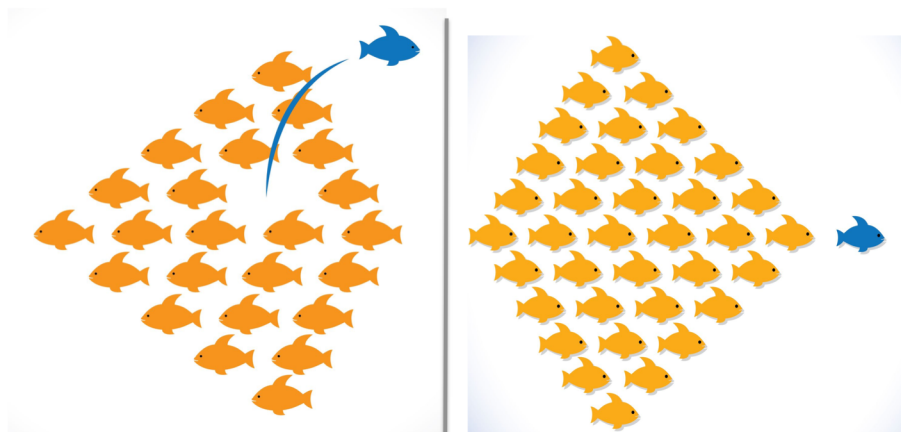
What might it take to change the course of our work for a more enduring impact? What practical, field-focused insights sit untapped at the convergence of the conservation and development disciplines that have potential to positively transform how we practice? What happens when we upend constraining assumptions about how we approach our work? What happens when we expand what falls within our responsibility to consider,

balance or protect? What happens when we don't accept that coordination meetings and occasional project-level collaborations between our organizations evidence sufficient progress? What happens when, instead of speaking of "complementarity," "linkages," "mainstreaming," "integrating metrics" or "combining evidence base," we elevate the conversation between us to one of unifying vision and common strategy across our fields?

We change the conversation in fundamental ways. We stop confusing complementarity and tactics for vision and strategy. We re-imagine an approach to what we do that unites us in cause, elevates our dialogue, resists adherence to stale methodologies and metrics, replaces tired terminology, and keeps focus at once visionary and strategic. We reshape our disciplines into a singularly impactful practice that reflects a more dynamic, expansive understanding and embrace of our obligations to anchor our work to a strategy transcendent of discipline and brand, no matter our core field, whether operating alone or in partnership. We move from an interdisciplinary to a transdisciplinary outlook.

Drawing on more than twenty years of field and strategy work across our disciplines, the author will examine the case for opening what may be a watershed frontier in our work together. It is a paradigm shift from conventional practice and breaks with common interdisciplinary models. It puts a new frame to our work, one with authentic potential to transform how we think, how we design and deliver, and how we research, accelerating our ability to lead and achieve change at greater scale. It defies the prevailing purviews and biases keeping the conservation and development fields too often still briefing and working apart and each at the center of their own working models. Rather than keep our peripheral sights on "integrated programming" and "integrated research," it calls for our central sights to fix on a more powerful convergence of approach.

What Might It Take?



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What Might It Take?

What might it take to change the course of our fields, the conservation and development disciplines? To change not just our cause, but our organizations themselves, our approach to our work, and the very practice we ground ourselves in? Is there a compelling case to be made for doing so and, if so, what's preventing us from doing it? Are our very motivations strangled by our own disciplines? Have we become too comfortable with convention, too loyal to brand, or even too complacent to renew, rethink and reform? While forecasts of the early demise of the conservation or development movements may be exaggerated, we are surely right – and overdue – to look, again if necessary, at what is possible at a deep convergence of our fields, at the change it can produce and inspire.

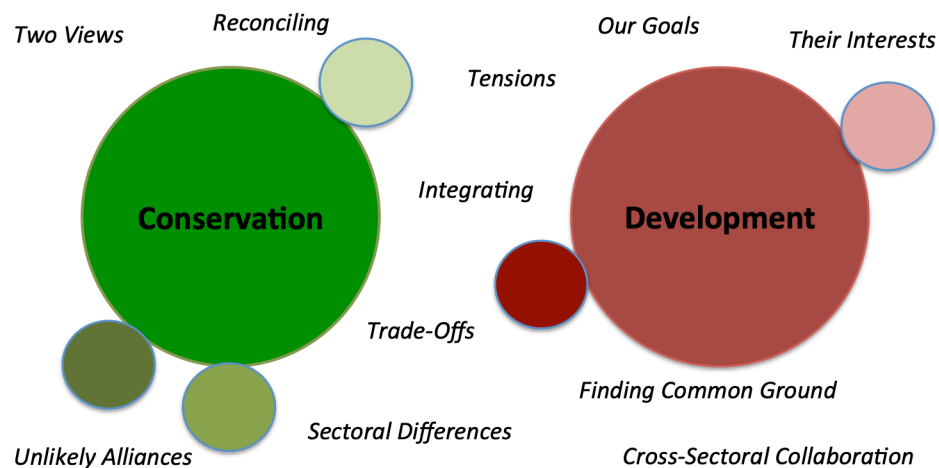
The Power of the Binary

It's useful to explore briefly the “environment” our fields find ourselves in. It has been, is and remains a binary environment – a system of two parts -- that still today governs and influences, and limits and constrains, how we operate and think. We perceive and describe ourselves – fundamentally, still – as either conservationists or development practitioners. We work for either a conservation organization or a development agency. While we acknowledge that ours are twin disciplines and that our impact depends on each other's, our fields remain still quite far apart, with evident cost. We insist on our separate spheres of influence and guard our specializations and representation before committees, boards and donors. Acquisitions and organizational alliances are forged far more often within our fields, than between them. We seldom see one another in our respective professional venues, and if called together, we tend to listen protectively for how we can sustain our role or our resources. Too often still we act and brief apart, rather than together, whether we are attempting to influence choices, policy or financial investment.

Consider the common language we use when we find ourselves in the same space – we speak of “two views,” “unlikely alliances,” “sectoral differences,” needing to “manage trade-offs” or “tensions,” of “reconciling” or “finding common ground,” of pursuing “cross-sectoral” collaboration, of “convincing that *our* goals are also in *their* interests.” We speak routinely in recent years of “integrating” objectives or projects. These words are

fundamentally reflective of a binary perspective. The trouble is they don't just reflect, they reinforce and bias; and they are *consistently* reinforcing and biasing the conventional view that we are two (two disciplines, two fields, two sectors). We may find common cause on occasion, but our ideas are not born nor do we work from a common practice or strategy.

The Power of the Binary



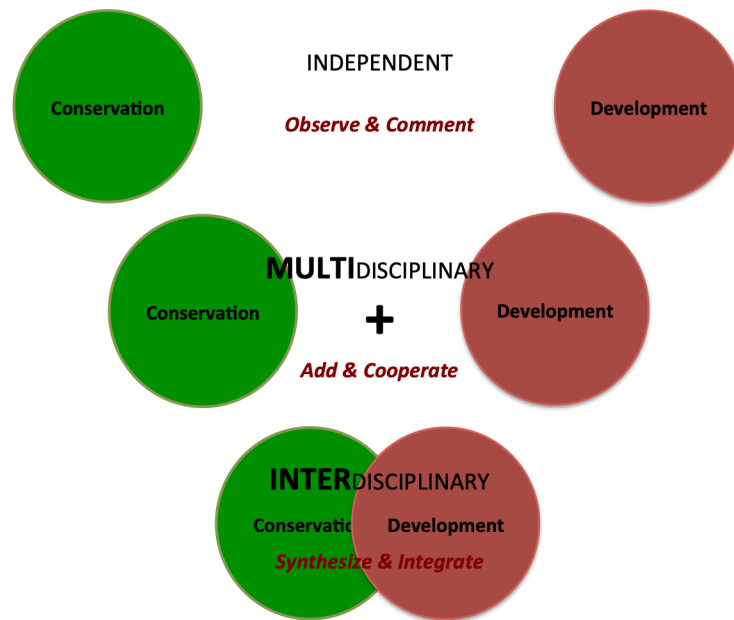
Despite the chatter, this is our reality.

This is not yesterday's trending issue – it can feel it at times within the bubble of headquarters and loftier interagency briefings, or within the pages of our more erudite academic and research journals, but the reality on the ground – in the field and at the project site – stands still largely in testament to a conventional perspective that our fields work, or work best, necessarily (mostly) apart.

The Cautious Path of Progress

Admittedly, our disciplines have drawn closer together over the decades. We have challenged and flexed the presumptions and biases of a binary system – with good intention and some good outcomes. We have evolved, though rather slowly, cautiously and protectively. We have moved from a largely *independent* approach, where we were distantly observant of each other's work but not engaged in open collaboration, to a *multidisciplinary* approach where we at times invited each other's expertise (and others) to the table for additional perspective when we had common interests, all the while staying quite firmly boundaried in our own disciplines. We have moved more recently still to an *interdisciplinary* approach where we are working to synthesize and integrate select elements of each other's methodologies and principles into our own work and at times into the fabric of our own organizations. Nevertheless, we have not yet bent or broken the binary paradigm in service to our reaching for a far greater, more enduring impact.

The Cautious Path of Progress



The Interdisciplinary Appeal

Nearly everything now is spoken of in an “interdisciplinary” vocabulary. We find “synergies.” We leverage “complementarity.” We strengthen “linkages.” We “integrate” metrics and “combine” evidence bases.

Why do we find the interdisciplinary approach so appealing? Why have we been relatively quick to showcase it as a kind of solution to a multi-dimensional world? The answer may lie in what it calls us to do, and what it allows us still to do.

An interdisciplinary approach calls for the introduction of specific design elements or isolated considerations drawn from each other’s work *into our own*. We see a community-managed conservancy. We see a project integrating a community WASH component into watershed management. We see an economic and governance project with a coastal community built in part around natural resource management. We see wildlife protection and anti-poaching messages advocated within a public health and livelihoods program. We see small-scale economic initiatives built around sustainable resource use or sustainable yield. We see periodic geographic-dependent collaboration between our organizations, usually a jointly agreed division of labor, in areas peripheral to wetlands, fisheries, forests or protected areas. The integration, in other words, is selective. It’s limited, context-specific, and often donor-specific.

We are able still to focus the bulk of our organizational attention and resources in areas within our disciplinary depth. We are able to coordinate, adopt and adapt, without expectation to blend or replicate. We are able to respond to market incentives and opportunities to “integrate” while protecting and preserving what we feel proprietary to

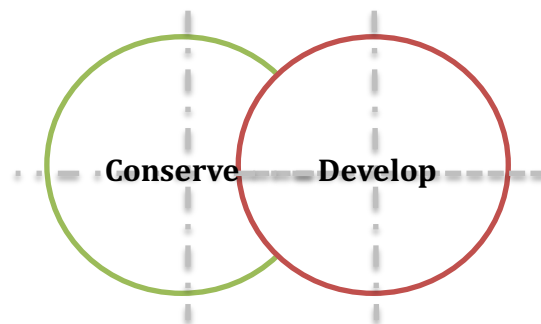
our organizations' methodologies and brand, distinguishing (read marketable), and ultimately supportive of revenue.

I'm left to conclude that an interdisciplinary approach has a powerful appeal because it stretches and includes us, without threatening our organizations or our more fundamental paradigm. Is it though the right goal? In the boardroom and in practice, each of our disciplines' own working business models offer an interesting insight to whether interdisciplinary approaches that emphasize "integrated programs" and "integrated research" are indeed right or even enough.

The Risk of Interdisciplinary Models

The conservation and development disciplines have each built their own interdisciplinary models with *themselves at the center*. Biodiversity conservation typically sits at the center of a two-dimensional "wheel," with other fields of relevance or impact to conservation work depicted on "spokes," be it the regulatory environment, law enforcement, social/cultural considerations, economics or ethics. Likewise, the development community sits at the center of its own working model, with variations of economics, ethics, governance, education, health and even the environment on its spokes.

In essence, despite progress towards a kind of cautious convergence of our interests, an "interdisciplinary approach" leaves each of our disciplines at the center of our working models, and therefore doesn't fundamentally challenge a binary system predicated on the assumption that, by virtue of our objectives, the disciplines are not wholly compatible.



The consequence of this is that we remain still reflexively boundaried, our central sights fixed on our own reflection, our organizational missions at the center of our own worldviews. The great weight of our work, both across our organizations and within our respective methodologies, remains unchanged, and our design paradigms remain largely unchallenged. Our imagination is limited to building a discreet environmental practice within a development organization, or incorporating choice development principles within receptive conservation strategies. There is no wonder why conservation groups question why development practitioners aren't more attentive to environmental concerns and consequence as part of the unbreakable link between nature and humanity's survival, and equally why development practitioners marvel at why conservationists seem still to call up stale development models whose promise they believe has long diminished.

Our interdisciplinary vocabulary, while by now well in practice, is cautious. Our words of “integration,” and our language of “synergies” and “linkages,” sound increasingly hollow, tired and protective. They are words that reflect an approach that is fundamentally careful, iterative and incremental, an approach therefore that doesn’t threaten our relevance.

The Risk of Getting – and Staying - Stuck

We are comfortable. The boundaries that separate and define us are familiar. They are enforced and re-enforced by our interagency, our boards, our donors, and by our very own language. We are quick to fear that a further convergence risks diminishing our specializations (and thereby our branding and funding) or diluting and disrupting our signature methodologies or our science. Our national inclination both as organizations and as practitioners is to stand our ground and protect convention and conventional practice.

By keeping our focus and our metrics simply on integrating each other’s expertise or methodology into our own disciplines, by selectively adopting or incorporating where we find opportunity, common cause, or investment, we are “sticking.” *We are getting stuck confusing complementarity and tactics for vision and strategy.* Our work, as a result, will fail to produce systemic change at large scale and at a pace commensurate with the very great challenges of our era.

What If?

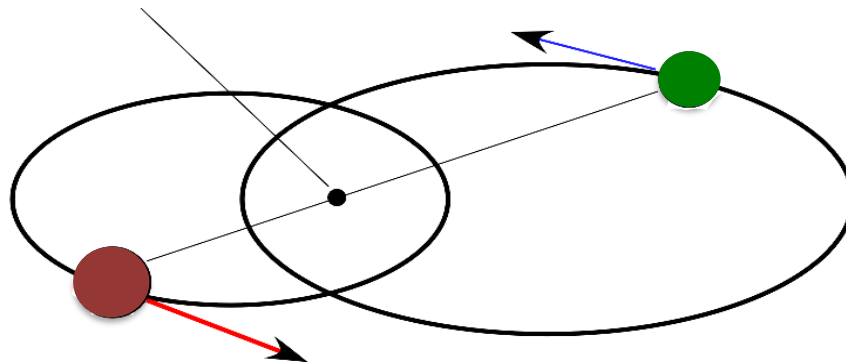
What if something amazing – something big – is sitting within reach that could have a profound impact on our ability to make a difference and to secure the kind of future we aspire to? What practical and impactful insights sit untapped at the deep convergence of our fields? What are the implications for our disciplines and our organizations?

Is it time that we stop integrating and start converging? Is it time that we envision and build a single practice that transcends our disciplines? A practice united behind a common strategy? How much more effective could we be?

Our Center of Gravity

It’s interesting – and perhaps fun – to return for a minute to the definition of a binary system. It is a system of two objects that, in stellar terms, are in a kind of orbital dance around an often-invisible center of mass. This center of mass – this center of gravity – is not within either object. It stands between and apart.

Center of mass



The question it raises is: what is – what should be -- our center of mass, our center of *real* gravity, our center of greatest impact? And should our goal be to redefine our disciplines and our organizations, not in orbit of it, but ultimately *within it*? To converge *to it*? Could this center of gravity be a new kind of practice? A practice that actually breaks the binary?

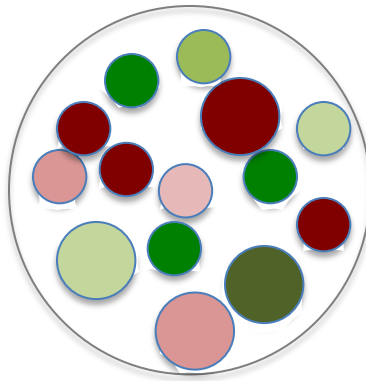
What Happens When We Change the Paradigm?

What happens when we acknowledge that disciplinary boundaries remain in interdisciplinary models? That the presumptions and tensions they bias erode progress? *That our selective, periodic integration of disciplines is nowhere near on pace to produce systemic change at large scale?*

What happens when we re-imagine an approach to what we do that upends constraining assumptions? Retires tired terminology? Replaces stale methodologies and metrics? Elevates our dialogue? Unites us in cause and accountability? And keeps our focus at once visionary and strategic?

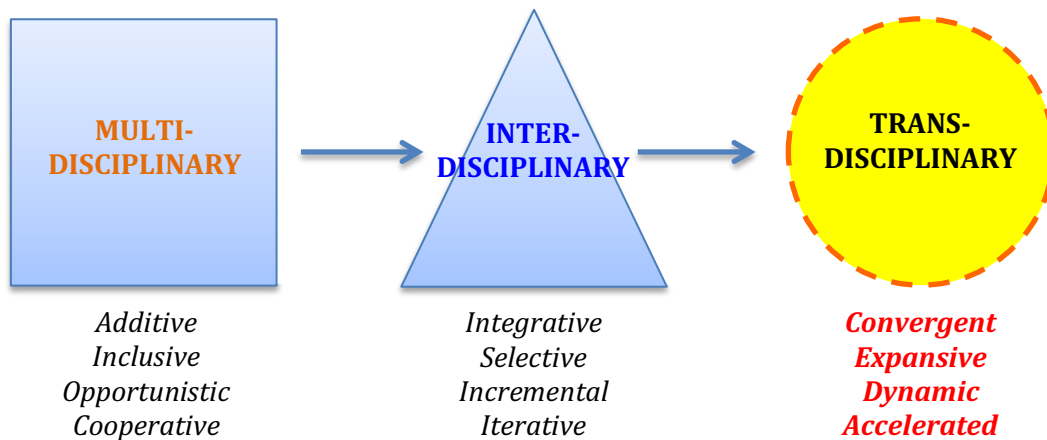
What happens when we institutionalize not just an appreciation for the other's discipline, but a foundational understanding of our reciprocal and indisputable obligation to work with a single purpose, within a shared strategy?

We change the conversation in fundamentally transformative ways, as we do our approach. We change the paradigm. Rather than selectively incorporating people-centered development principles within conservation strategies, or building a limited environmental practice area within a development organization, rather than speaking of the “human dimensions” of conservation work or of the “environmental dimensions” of development work, rather than rendering our conservation work within a human framework (be it about valuation, survival, or security) or our development work within an environmental framework (be it about resilience, adaptation or climate change), we instead talk as a matter of course about the full and necessary dimensions of any engagement that seeks to sustain and protect life in all its forms, in any circumstance, in any setting.



We ground the *totality* of our work within *each* of our organizations in a shared strategic framework – a framework that truly marries *sustainability, stewardship and development* across concept and practice, informing *each and every element of project design*, answerable to the *requirements and aspirations* of our era.

We transform our practice. We break out from within the conventional boundaries of our fields. We achieve a deep convergence that positively transforms how we work. In essence, we move from an interdisciplinary outlook to one that transcends disciplines -- that is transdisciplinary -- that calls not for integration, but rather for convergence. We seek and embrace a more dynamic and expansive understanding of our work and obligations in order to lead and accelerate change at greater scale.



The Extraordinary Power of Language

I'm struck by the remarkable power of language. It draws our attention, and it focuses it. It defines. It clarifies. It reveals intent. It creates expectations. It sets our pace. And ultimately it demands our accountability.

Despite the best of intentions, research and erudite scholarship, the trending vocabulary inevitably becomes a kind of white noise, masking the chasm between theory and project site, and functioning primarily as a kind of ready "on-ramp" for donors. Our disciplines for

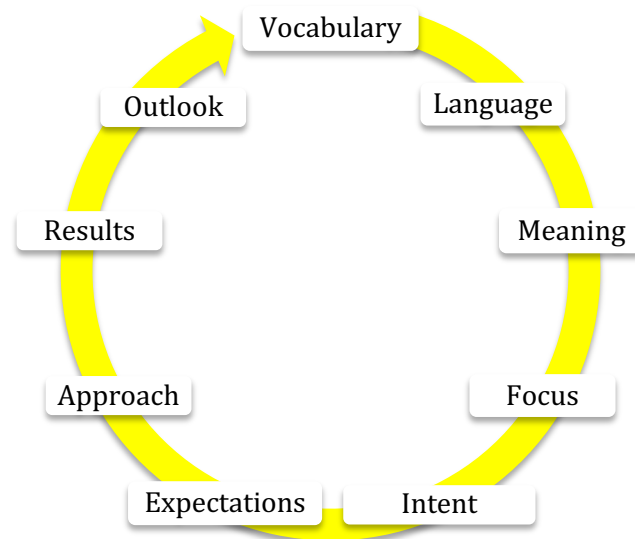
too long have continued the pattern whereby every few years a new dictionary of descriptors is adopted to update our marketing, but less so our practice.

Let's retire the popular turns of phrase like "complementarity, synergies, linkages and mainstreaming" that have become ubiquitous, but have lost meaning and too often have failed to translate on the ground to measurable change. Before we overlay the buzzwords of our tech colleagues, before we "scale, innovate and incubate," let's take another look at our intent, the end goal, and whether our disciplines are keeping pace.

To transcend discipline and convention, we must speak a *practically* transformative language. We must employ language that doesn't "window dress," but rather (perhaps uncomfortably at times) demands a fundamental – and recognizable – shift to how we approach and design our work on the ground.

Let's substitute transdisciplinary for interdisciplinary. Let's stop talking about "integration" and start talking about "convergence." Let's unite our disciplines behind a strategy built on language that reflects a deep convergence in philosophy and practice transcendent of our fields. If we can find that language, it can change a lot, perhaps everything.

Change the language, and we change the meaning. Change the meaning, and we change the conversation. Change the conversation, and we change expectations. Succeed, and we change the future of our practice.



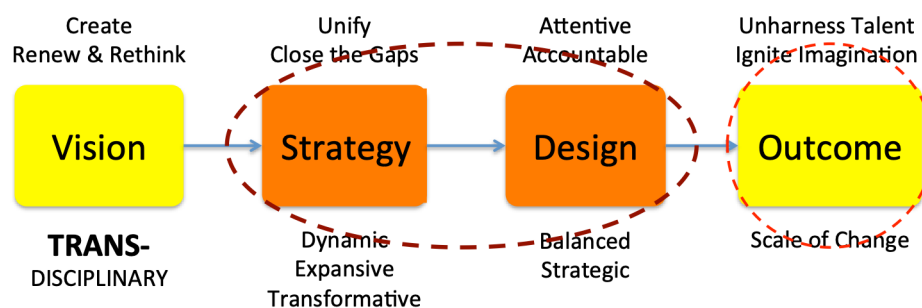
We are intermittently hearing new language that reflects a transdisciplinary movement, whether intended or not. For some years, the conflict management and climate change communities have been furthest out front in this spirit, with discussion of "environmental security," "climate security," "climate and social resilience" and "ecosystem-based adaptation," for example. The work done by Michele Marvier and Peter Kareiva introducing "conservation science," and advocating strategies that maximize benefits to

biodiversity and people are also of note. The “One Health” movement is one of the more recent phenomenon to catalyze interest. More recently yet, we have the Breakthrough Institute’s and others’ call for an “eco-modernist” or “eco-pragmatist” paradigm. Irrespective of what we may think of their various dimensions, of the promise or limits of their application, or even of their controversies, these are provocative changes that recognize the power and bias in our vocabulary. Most importantly of all, they begin to illuminate that a working framework that unites and transcends our disciplines is indeed within reach.

The Extraordinary Power of a Unifying Strategy

A new outlook is within reach if we converge on a strategy that, while acknowledging of our disciplinary strengths, is not kept hostage to them.

A Unifying Strategy Matters



Designing from a common strategic framework, that transcends our disciplines, unites us in cause and accountability.

We seek an improved outcome on the ground at our project sites. We seek to put new, promising ideas to work on the ground now that marry the best thinking across disciplines, in a manner and pace that gives us a greater scale of change. That turns on our unharnessing talent and imagination. In *everything* we do, the value of any engagement should be measured through a single metric: are we delivering better, deeper, faster, and more promising work? As Winston Churchill said, “However beautiful the strategy, you should occasionally look at the results.”

An improved outcome turns on exceptional project design, design that commits our attention and resources in a balanced and strategic way, that holds us accountable to a higher bar of understanding, performance and impact -- precisely because we would be moving away from conventional designs that fragment our work by discipline and instead creating designs that transcend them, regardless of scale. As I have told nearly every

organization I have worked with, we have far more design problems than we do resource problems.

Exceptional design is as much the purview of strategists as it is of technicians. A technically sound design absent a compelling strategy produces outcomes that cannot last or be replicated. A good strategy will call for us to tend to interests traditionally guarded within others' purview, to prioritize work outside the scope of our conventional technical interests. Exceptional design is therefore born from strategy that closes the gaps between our fields, and celebrates the connections and obligations between them. It's a strategy that is dynamic, expansive and transformative.

A strategy unanchored by vision is simply a framework of tactics. We seek a framework of ideas, one that reflects a vision of our fields as more than a collection of specialists, but an extraordinary well of talent that can be moved to renew and rethink conventional practice. Innovation – however we understand that word -- is not a luxury; it is a responsibility.

In order to deliver impact, our focus must be on our strategy and, through it, our design. This seems just good common sense, and it is a compulsory part of every proposal and briefing, but at an institutional level, we consistently expend far more time and treasure on fundraising than we do minding strategy and refining our work's design.

By grounding our work in a common strategic framework that reflects a transdisciplinary vision, born not from concern for self-preservation but for common aspiration, we bind ourselves together in cause and accountability – and this, I believe, is powerful and transformative.

Can We Do It?

Can we develop a common strategic framework that:

- Inspires movement away from the language of a conservation and development binary?
- Is elegant *and* persuasive not in its complexity, but in its simplicity?
- Illuminates and guides, *without* prescribing or demanding uniformity?
- Tests *and* advances a promising theory of change?
- Challenges *each and every* engagement our organizations undertake, whether alone or in partnership, to be considerate of, informed by, and *answerable to* a difficult, but pivotal, balance of disciplines?
- Promotes an *internal rebalance* within our own organizations between specialization and generalization, recognizing that fielding experts *and* versatile generalists (scientists and strategists) is essential?

And if we want to recognize that on some level, a conservation and development binary is a fair reflection of the trade-offs at times in our choices, then can we set it carefully within a framework that uses that binary not to bind our work, but to lift it?

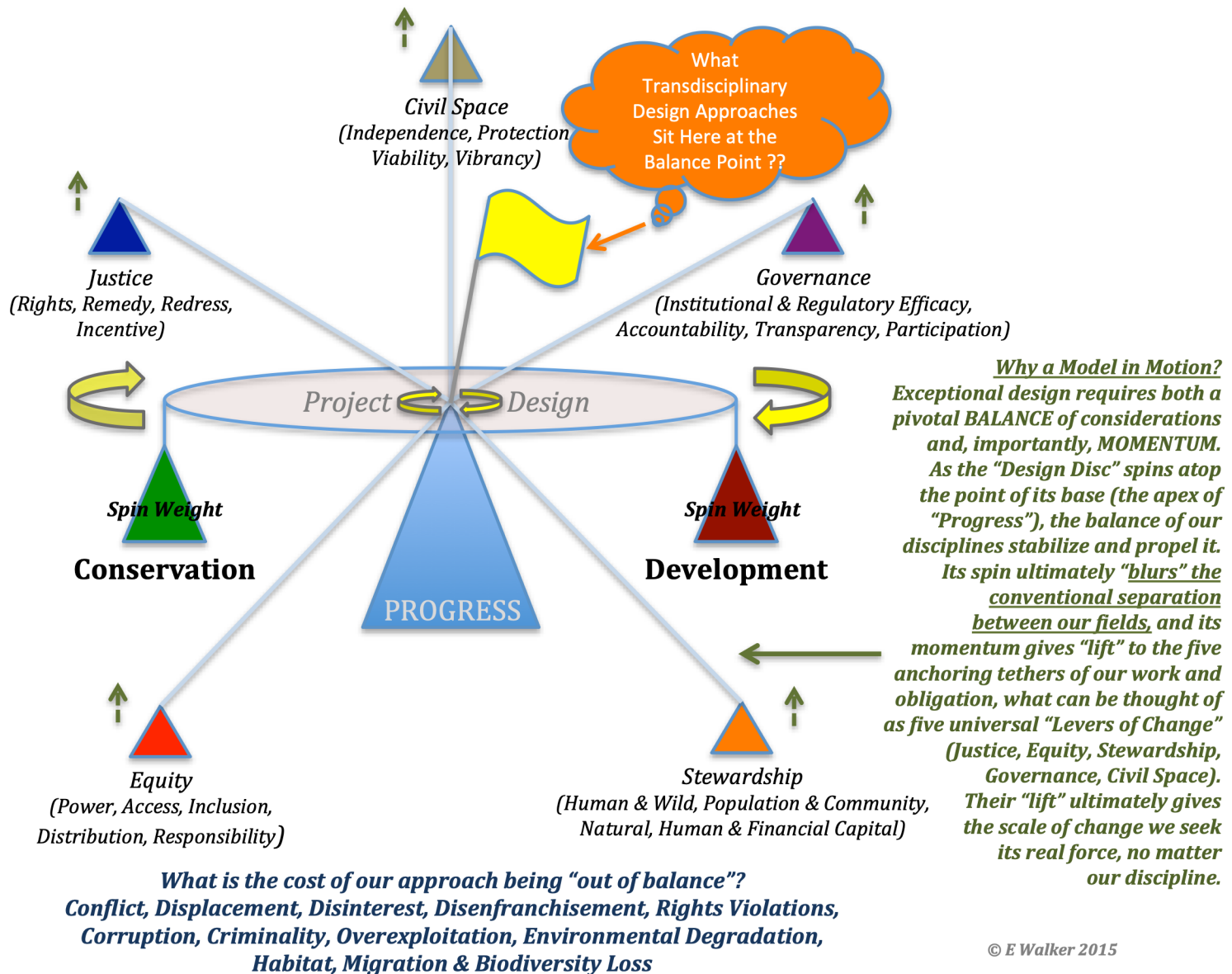
We can.

An Illustrative Strategic Framework – A Model in Motion

What follows is an idea...just one. There could be many. There could be many better. But it is an idea for what could be an illustrative strategic framework that helps to break the binary, and serve in parallel as a practical design tool, no matter our core discipline.

Prevailing conventional models are two-dimensional and stationary. They are flat depictions of “flat” concepts. They’re unable to capture the often-dynamic nature of the challenges we confront, and the consequences we generate. They usually fail as a result to stimulate truly break-out thinking or break-out results. What follows is a different kind of model. While it’s unable to “animate” itself from the page, it is intended to be visualized in a three-dimensional space, and to be both set and kept in motion.

Illustrative Strategic Framework



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The model's carousel-like mechanics are likely the best way to speak to the framework in narrative. Exceptional project design requires both a pivotal balance of considerations and, importantly, momentum. As the "design disc" spins atop the point of its base (the apex of "progress"), the balance of our disciplines stabilizes and propels it. Its spin ultimately *"blurs" the conventional separation between our fields*, and its momentum gives "lift" to the five anchoring tethers of our work and obligation, what can be thought of as five universal "levers of change" (justice, equity, stewardship, governance, and civil space). Their "lift" (imagine a game of multi-ball tetherball) ultimately gives the scale of change we seek its real force, no matter our discipline, whether we be conservationists, humanitarians, or development practitioners.

We know too well the cost of our understanding and approach being "out of balance," its deadly and corrupting implications touching deeply across discipline, geography, species and interest. At the model's central "sweet spot," where its motion is thoughtfully kept driven and balanced, we're invited to consider its central contention, that it is the transdisciplinary design approaches sitting at this very balance point that will enable change at far greater scale and pace.

A framework like this is intended to speak *implicitly* to the common origin of the challenges we confront, and *explicitly* to the shared requirements of our response. It's meant to underscore that each of the challenges we confront, no matter where we find them or how we are called to them, are manifestations of a combined failure of conservation and development. The two cannot be separated in causation. Nor can they be separated from the critical dimensions that anchor and animate them.

It is meant to underscore that if, in our actions or reactions, we fail to conserve *and* develop – no matter the frame we put around our work – we will fail to meet the demands of our time. While our projects may meet short-term objectives, our work will fail to ignite systemic change at large scale. If, for example, our focus remains fundamentally about ecological research, sustainable livelihoods and law enforcement on one hand, or about poverty alleviation, livelihood preservation and democratic governance on the other, our work will remain out of balance, out of depth and will fail to really impact.

An interesting case study, just one, to look at through the prism of a framework such as this is how each of our disciplines confronts the twin atrocities of the illegal wildlife trade on one hand and human trafficking on the other. Trafficking of any kind results from the same fundamental and potent mix of destitution and opportunity. Their commonalities are striking, and so too must be our response. Does a framework like this help demonstrate that both forms of illegal cross-border crime showcase a failure of policy, enforcement and incentive – that trafficking by its nature, no matter its target, is born from a combined failure of conservation and development – that where illegal trafficking occurs, the disc is not spinning so to speak, the tethers that should anchor our work and give momentum to the change we seek (justice, equity, governance, civil space, and stewardship) are not adequately tended? If so, it would suggest that were they to be, such multi-dimensional efforts to eradicate one form of trafficking would weaken the systemic foundation of its

other forms. How much more effective could we be were we to recognize the common roots of our targets and act on them together?

The framework as strategy is meant to inspire unifying movement towards a focus on full *ecosystem or network integrity*, human and wild, biological, social, political, judicial and economic, in *all* settings and circumstance, *regardless* of the scale of what we are addressing or designing. As such, it breaks with conventional interdisciplinary models. It calls for a more dynamic and expansive understanding, and embrace, of our obligations as practitioners and organizational leaders to anchor our work *across* disciplines, no matter our core field.

A framework like it represents a new paradigm. It reflects a transdisciplinary vision for a singularly impactful practice and one that defies the conventional pressures keeping our fields too often still apart and at the center of our own working models, our sights fixed on selectively "integrated programming" and "integrated research," rather than on a more powerful convergence of approach.

A New Paradigm in Motion

There are several "working" attributes to the framework worth additional mention. They carry potentially ground-breaking implications – and certainly convention-breaking implications – for its adoption in practice.

1. The "center" of the framework is not either of our disciplines, not biodiversity conservation, environmental protection, or human development, but rather and simply "progress." The more we actually visualize – back to the stellar system – *that the center of gravity (of impact) lies apart and between us*, the more impactful we will be, and the less reflexively protective we are likely to be of convention, field or brand.

2. The framework suggests something important that we tend to readily recognize but often fail to adequately incorporate in our design work. It is an argument for a "whole-of-system" or "whole-of-network" approach, so that our work can be effective and enduring. We each must expand what falls within our range of responsibility to consider, balance, mitigate or protect, or what we should be mindful not to trigger or escalate. Our impact will otherwise be hollow, counterproductive, muted over time by a failure of individual or institutional incentive, and too often short-lived. Without attention to the integrity of justice systems, for example, enforcement (whether it be of poaching or human rights protections) is weak; without equity, governance and regulation are hollow; without viable civilian space, little of what we support or help create can be sustained.

3. Setting the framework in motion is to underscore that the system of life itself is dynamic and its parts dynamically at play. There is a kind of "unity of the whole; autonomy of the parts" philosophy that underpins both the central contention of this paper as well as the framework model itself. Exceptional design comes from understanding how the system operates, how it is kept in sustainable motion, and how the creative tension and feedback loops that exist between its various parts magnify, or disable, progress. Its parts –

representative of the very dimensions of our work -- balance, restrain and propel each other in accordance to the attention we give them, creating a kind of multidimensional system of weight, balance, and speed. These dimensions are not in conflict with one another, not philosophically, not conceptually, nor in practice. They are *wholly* interdependent. If they are thoughtfully tended, we have then a kind of harmonization of effort, *a harmony of design* that gives us balance, momentum and lift, symbolic of an accelerated scale of change. We can even reach a kind of positive “tipping point” where momentum is maintained through the model’s mutually reinforcing efficiencies, where ongoing impact on any one dimension of work can help sustain the speed and lift of others.

4. It’s fair to question the potential (significant) implications of a model like this to our organizations. Would it compel our teams to address *equally* every dimension, every tether and variable, reflected here, or to expect our projects to impact them all equally? No. That would be impractical, inadvisable and, from a physics standpoint with the model in motion, unnecessary. Leverage and sequencing, and prioritization, will always matter. Would it challenge us however to look with fresh eyes at what span of engagement is possible *and necessary*? Yes. Would it invite us to rethink and remap our own organization’s “boundaries” -- our core competencies – as doing so would in fact preserve our core values, not dilute them? Yes. Would it inspire our organizations to begin to re-mold and re-define, to evolve into something more than purely a conservation organization, or a development agency? Perhaps. Would it support an argument, as a matter of strategy, that a coalition of organizations, capable of a broad, balanced and harmonized scope of creative work, be a prerequisite to any engagement? Perhaps. Would it compel us to recognize the significant “impact dividend” a deeper convergence of disciplinary expertise brings, not just across a coalition of our organizations but *within them*? Yes.

5. Irrespective of all of this, the framework suggests something immediate and important purely from a conservation standpoint. We’ve got to do better than simply brand our work “people-centered” or “community-centered” conservation, and define that approach by our attention to perceptions, behaviors, incentives, and resource strategies, our study of communication and theories of behavior change, or our incorporation of rights-based models and social research. Conservation is much more than just a “social process,” and we must do more than take account of human needs and agency. While new attention to design concepts such as “working landscapes,” “ecosystem-based adaptation,” and “spatial planning” are promising, our obligations to people and societies – and to the system of life itself -- in fact far exceed it. Equally, the framework suggests we’ve got to do better than simply re-brand our development work under the now popular guise of “climate change adaptation or resilience” or “climate and social security.” While this new labeling can make for a kind of easy on-ramp to capture donors oriented or pivoting towards environmental causes, it has largely failed to produce a proportionate change to development methodology or design. Nor, can we continue to shield development work from ripe critique by emphasizing our commitment to “sustainable development.” Without *recognizable* change to how we perceive our fundamental obligations as practitioners, the labels are trendy but too often hollow.

Whether or not we use a strategic framework and design tool like this commonly, *across disciplines and organizations in a transdisciplinary spirit*, we should at the very least mine it, or something like it, for what it can remind us we may be failing to consider, engage and influence within our own work. Should a coalition of organizations stand up at a site, perhaps it can remind us as well of the crucial scope and balance necessary for our joint efforts to really impact.

Our Imperative

Winston Churchill is famously known to have said, “However beautiful the strategy, you should occasionally look at the results.”

We have a single supreme imperative with any effort at the introduction of a new paradigm for our practice: *Is it in positive service to the field, in practice? Will it make impact, now?*

“In theory, there’s no difference between theory and practice. In practice, there is.”

Yogi Berra, Celebrated American Baseball Player

We’re right to ask the tough questions, and to work together to pursue a proof of concept and application to answer them, to ensure we close any gap between theory and practice.

In that spirit, if we put a new framework like this in the hands of our colleagues, will it positively change how they view their work and responsibilities? How nimbly they lead? How skillfully they strategize? How creatively they design?

Can it improve concretely how we develop and implement our work? How we talk about our projects? How we staff them? What we expect from them?

Is it a different kind of thinking tool? Does it invite us to move outside our institutional comfort zones, to think more broadly, flexibly, or creatively, to re-frame or re-design?

Does it challenge conventional models of practice and the binary paradigm? Does it allow for more, encourage more, and expect more? Can it change how we work, not just within readily receptive projects or portfolios, but across *each* of our organization’s engagements?

Can it influence how we partner, how we approach government, policy and financial engagements, or how we think about systems and markets as a force for change? Might it change how we fund and market our work?

Can its use help lead a redefinition and reinvention of our practice, a practice united behind a transdisciplinary vision that binds us together in cause and accountability, with practical tools that guide and reinforce a “whole-of-network” approach at every project site and in every meeting room?

If the answer to these questions is no, then what will? Turning over the answer to these questions is the calling of our time; it is our obligation. This contribution of ideas is an invitation to work together to answer that call.

The Future It Can Inspire

It is an invitation to inspire a future that is an exciting, and overdue, one. It's a future where, as organizations and practitioners, no matter whether we are conservationists, humanitarians or development specialists:

- We *reject binaries*; we retire talk of tensions, trade-offs and divisions.
- We strive for exceptional *delivery to a shared strategy*, not to dominate, preserve or capture space in a field
- We design from a new paradigm answerable to both the *requirements and aspirations* of our era
- We *connect* our organizations and our ideas in service to an enduring impact; we don't entrench and shield them in service to a funding line or a brand
- We place a premium on staying *relevant*, not viable
- We insist on *creative license and experimentation* as telltale marks of transformative leadership
- We critique our own marketing and *abandon stale methodologies*
- We embrace a *fuller accountability* on the ground, recognizing our obligation to anchor our work across disciplines and old boundaries
- We harness visionary funders *to our ideas*, rather than our ideas to available funding

This is a future – this is a practice – worth creating, and attracting.

"It is better to fail in originality than to succeed in imitation."

Herman Melville, 19th Century American Author & Poet



What might we succeed at if we look (again) at what lies at the deep convergence of our talents, understanding and expertise – a convergence that defies conventional boundaries, purviews and biases? What can it unleash and inspire?

In Conclusion

It is time to move from an interdisciplinary to a transdisciplinary outlook – not in theory, but in practice and to real effect. It has authentic potential to positively transform how we think, how we work, and how we research. It has promise to accelerate our ability to lead and achieve systemic, more enduring change at greater scale and faster pace. It calls out our brightest minds and our best impulses to break from convention – be it within our interagency, our own organizations, our funding instruments, our board rooms, or our very own language – that, despite good intention, has for too long constrained innovation, investment and impact, and very possibly, the smart evolution of our fields and organizations into something courageously transcendent of discipline and brand.

About the Author



Elizabeth is a field practitioner and nonprofit executive with 20+ years' experience leading strategy, programming, and funding portfolios for international conservation, humanitarian, and development entities. She has held appointments across government, public, and private sectors, including as Executive Advisor, Vice President of Global Programs, and COO. She now works independently, supporting organizations, big and small, with high-impact improvements to leadership, strategy, and on-the-ground performance. She works with executive and field teams to ensure cogent vision; probe, conceptualize and articulate strategy; interrogate and strengthen project design; unpack leadership constraints; re-imagine and re-invigorate funding and operational partnerships; implement strategies to excite brand and thought leadership; and cultivate alliances within and outside sectors to inspire investment and innovation.

She is in demand as a change leader and field mentor, known for her work in recent years opening new frontiers at the convergence of conservation and development practice. She is an invited speaker at international fora, presenting most recently in Kenya at a global gathering of leading conservation practitioners, researchers, and scholars, introducing groundbreaking ideas to accelerate change at the intersection of the fields. She has implemented with foundation, corporate, bilateral and multilateral funding, and led USAID grant-making teams. She has worked in executive and advisory capacities with Fauna & Flora International, Counterpart International, CARE, IRC, PLAN, and Relief International. She has led human rights investigations for the US State Dept, served as a UN Senior Policy Advisor, and been appointed expert advisor on civil-military affairs to the US Dept of Defense. She has worked in nearly 40 countries, across conflict lines, in refugee/IDP settlements, and in the aftermath of disasters. She holds degrees from Harvard, the Tufts School of Nutrition Science and Policy, and the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy.