

Innovations in Praxis Article

# Shining a Light on Hidden Containers and Invisible Systems

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## Abstract

This article presents an analysis from the perspective of a participant-observer in the "Rethinking DF 2030" project, conducted in Brazil. In this project, Theory U was applied as a journey to foster integration between policymakers and the citizens for whom these policies are designed. The article sheds light on the importance of building both hidden and visible "containers"—purposefully held environments where the quality of collective attention aligns with intention. Through the author's active engagement in this project, the article simultaneously explores the methodological and experiential aspects of Theory U, including its capacity to guide and weave into the application of various other methodologies. The findings highlight both the challenges and potential of a Theory U practitioner's role in a highly complex participatory process.

## Keywords

Theory U, citizen, system transformation, container building, participatory process, innovation

## Introduction

The planning and execution of the Rethink DF 2030 Project, involving around two thousand citizens across 12 cities in the Brazilian Federal District, and 46 dedicated facilitators from five states for one year, showed that innovations can transform the system with the citizen at the center. It was the first time that a project of this magnitude was carried out in Brazil, bringing together more than two thousand citizens and dozens of leaders, proving that it is possible to listen deeply to many people online and move towards transformative action using systems change methodologies. It also showed what for me was the most significant innovation of the project, which was the way we were able to create and maintain our Safe Container, to hold the space for everything that would emerge. Deep listening is not just a tool, but a necessity for change. In the Rethink DF 2030 project developed in the following case study, listening to the citizens was fundamental.

During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 I served as a lead facilitator and as a participant observer (Anguera, 1989) in the Rethink DF 2030 Project. The Fifth Discipline (Senge, 2006) and Theory U (Scharmer, 2007) guided my work described in this article. In recent years, I have been integrating my professional and academic life to create reciprocal learning between practice and theory, and the Rethink DF 2030 Project provided a valuable opportunity to apply Theory U to participatory processes involving large groups of participants. Due to the lockdown, the project was conducted 100% online. I relied on a solid theoretical foundation, drawing from Scharmer (2007), Habermas (1981), Cooperrider (2008), and Wilber (2000) to coordinate the sessions in Taguatinga, one of the 12 cities selected for the project. As I deepened my studies of these authors and engaged daily—albeit virtually—with dozens of people, I no longer felt isolated.

## My Positionality and Finding My Work

Social exclusion shaped my life from an early age. I grew up in Brazil, in a White family of Portuguese and Italian ancestry, but I developed a deep awareness of social and racial exclusion through my close relationship with my primary attachment figure, an Afro-Brazilian woman who lived and worked in my home for 42 years. This relationship, with someone who was like a mother to me, shaped my worldview and my lived understanding of racial and social exclusion dynamics.

Even before my spiritual development—through studying and practicing Taoism, Raja Yoga meditation, and other traditions that helped me cultivate self-awareness and harmonize with life's natural flow—I was already surrendering my significant decisions to the universe. This allowed me to cross paths with people and opportunities that I embraced, often before fully understanding, rationally, what they were.

In 2005, at Lead, the communication agency I founded in 1991—Brazil's first agency dedicated exclusively to NGOs and corporate social responsibility

projects—a client referred me to a fellow’s program. This program was being crafted by a small group at MIT, which included professors Peter Senge and Otto Scharmer. A coalition of NGOs, government agencies, and corporations supported it. By participating in the Emerging Leaders for Innovation Across Sectors (ELIAS) program, I began experiencing Theory U (Scharmer, 2007), created by Otto Scharmer, senior lecturer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). At 37, I realized what my actual Work in this life was—for me, a small group of people, when well-supported and united by a common intention, can drive deep and lasting transformations. I experienced this during my adolescence when, as President of the student’s association, together with four or five colleagues, decided to change the menu of our canteen to a healthier one. I strive to recreate this approach in my work.

## Building the Foundations for My Praxis

I link my hopes to my ambitions. I hope for a fairer world with a systemic vision, where each of us, as systems and within systems, impacts in a chain reaction. In the last two decades, I invested in becoming a channel for Brazilians to access the U-journey. More recently, I was introduced to Action Research (Lewin, 1997) after deeply exploring this and others Awareness Based System Change methodologies.

Applying methodologies that facilitate systemic transformations, such as Theory U (Scharmer, 2010) and Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider, 2008), is one of the ways we help systems see themselves (Lewin, 1997), allowing them to take the first step toward their transformations, which are often complex and slow-moving. Many systems need transformation to evolve. Through facilitation, I’ve learned that we can spark some changes, beginning through small cracks where a small quantity of knowledge or compassion shines through, initiating relationships that later become the foundation for the necessary transformations. I learned this early in my career when I was already creating connections that became productive bonds in the future. When I worked as public relations (PR) of W/Brazil—a worldwide awarded advertising agency—I did pro-bono work on my own for NGOs I believe in, like Projeto Axé from Bahia state. When I quit to open my PR firm, Projeto Axé became one of my first paid clients. Today, we are still developing some change actions together. They recently nominated community leader from the periphery of Salvador to join the Ecosystems Leadership Program in Latin America, developed by the Presencing Institute.

Even though I am aware of the political, social, economic and climate crises, I believe in the world’s capacity to transform positively, focusing on the changing social pyramid. I see this daily, across class divides. The old models are dying because the perceived majority is actually a minority. The 2022 Census in Brazil shows that, of the 215 million inhabitants, just 9.5 million are from the upper class. The middle and lower classes are recognizing their power, such as voting and refusing unfair jobs. For example, recently, we had a mayor and councilor election in Brazil. We have happily observed that candidates with simple

campaigns and little investment were elected in some cities where vote-buying used to prevail. People voted for those they believed in rather than for those who offered gifts or promised benefits to be delivered after taking office.

Facilitation plays a crucial role in supporting the transformation of organizations across all sectors. Today, I witness CEOs discussing love in the workplace—something unthinkable 20 years ago. I see women in decision-making roles without needing to masculinize themselves.

Writing from Tocantins, in the northern region of Brazil, I sadly observe the scarcity of a formal education for children and adolescents that values the development of relationships. What I hear from families is a narrative that prioritizes higher grades and students who excel by gaining admission to the country's top universities. It does not matter if this student does not even greet the school's doorman or mistreats the teacher, often offending them. In Brazil, a teacher is not supposed to fail a student; however, a student can initiate proceedings that may result in the teacher's dismissal. In this environment, I have endeavored to be an “island of coherence” (Prigogine & Stengers, 1984), advocating for less commercial, competitive, and short-term values in the workplace.<sup>1</sup> However, before we can even begin to foster a productive climate, I find myself encouraging people to constantly seek new perspectives on the obstacles they face, and, above all, to feel and listen to what transcends them—to what the environment around them must teach.

## The Rethink DF 2030 Project

### Purpose

The Rethink DF 2030 project, created in 2019, aimed to develop a Strategic Public Policy Plan with a ten-year duration for the 35 administrative regions (cities) of the Federal District (DF), the administrative region of Brazil, where our capital, Brasília, and its surrounding cities are located. In the first phase, 12 municipalities were involved, including Taguatinga, which I coordinated as a Lead Facilitator. One of the coordinator's functions was to guarantee the quality of listening during the sessions with the participants. This practice was often done in online simultaneous rooms, a tool offered by the ZoomOnline conference platform. It was common to have more than 10 simultaneous rooms in the same

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<sup>1</sup> Ilya Prigogine—Nobel Prize in Chemistry—in the context of his theory on complex systems and dissipative structures, describes “islands of coherence” as regions of emergent order within chaotic or highly disordered dynamic systems. These islands represent moments or spaces where system elements spontaneously organize in a coherent manner, allowing the emergence of stable patterns amidst entropy.

session. Rethink DF was idealized by senator Izalci Lucas (PSDB)<sup>2</sup>, then president of the Federal Senate's Development and Tourism Commission. To create this strategic plan, a team of professional system's change facilitators (including myself) was hired through one of the governmental agencies, the Center for Management and Strategic Studies (CGEE), connected to the Ministry of Science, Technology, and Innovation (MCTI). The Rethink DF 2030 project process promoted an environment conducive to listening to citizens' concerns. More than this, our appreciative proposal has always been to help citizens understand that no one is better than them to suggest the necessary transformations in their city. Because they are there, inside and living in the city system, they are the most suitable actors to point out the necessary changes to be implemented on a large scale through public policies.

When structured, aiming for its effectiveness, the Project predicted that the problems pointed by citizens and their suggestions for solutions should be organized into themes such as Infrastructure, Health, Education, Housing, Transport, Social Well-being, Commerce, and Development, among others. For each topic, the Project invited an expert—someone related to the DF government (a district deputy, a professional with many years of technical career in the government, etc.)—who had two prominent roles: first, providing knowledge by bringing information on the topic, such as example data on housing conditions in cities; and second, by being a bridge between solutions suggested by citizens and law makers.

The facilitators were organized into subgroups as I will detail below. Our collective responsibilities included organizing our group's governance, proposing a process, and selecting the U-Journey as the guiding framework while incorporating other methodologies that support systemic transformations. This was a collaborative effort that involved the full team composed by 46 professional facilitators. Because of COVID-19, we carried out the project online using the Zoom online conferencing platform.

Our goals as facilitators were to: 1) show citizens they were being heard; 2) avoid judging any of the ideas; 3) welcome each suggestion; and 4) organize these suggestions in a way that gives them a real chance of moving quickly from ideas and paper into action.

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<sup>2</sup>The PSDB (Brazilian Social Democracy Party) is a centrist political party in Brazil, founded in 1988, advocating for principles such as representative democracy, a market economy with social responsibility, and public policies focused on education and sustainable development.

## From Seed to Project

The seed of the Rethink DF 2030 Project was planted more than one year before its initiation. Senator Izalci Lucas,<sup>3</sup> then president of the Tourism and Development Commission of the Federal District participated in a U-Journey, facilitated by Wilson Nobre, a former professor at Getúlio Vargas Foundation, one of the few institutions to hold the three most important international accreditations (AACSB, EQUIS, and AMBA). Nobre is specialized in sustainability and innovation, focusing on systemic management and the interdependence between organizations, society, and the environment. There, on that U-Journey, the senator realized the U's potential to listen and promote the inclusion of citizens from the DF's municipalities when drafting laws.

Due to its magnitude and complexity, the Project required human, technological and financial resources before the first meeting. The research and invitation to local leaders and experts, the careful selection of facilitators, and the back office were all fundamental. The intention to listen to the citizens was declared and confirmed from the first step. Already internalizing that intention is the only force, as Scharmer mentions having heard from the economist Brian Arthur in one of the interviews for his book (Scharmer, 2007), our team experienced what some had only seen in theory or on slides: that the U-Journey is, in fact, a series of essential mini-U-journeys—a small-scale application of the Theory U process, where a group or individual quickly moves through the stages of opening the mind, heart, and will, enabling moments of reflection, insight, and action in specific and short-term contexts (Scharmer, 2014)—that consistently lead to the next stage. As a runner, I compare this process to a marathon, where one only reaches the finish line at 42.1 km after first experiencing the pain and joy of mentally and physically completing each of the previous kilometers. In running, most of the time, it's about letting go of real pain and letting in the motivating cheers from strangers on the sidewalk.

Our challenges included political polarization, with leaders recommending only citizens participate who supported their ideas. It was challenging to break the initial ego cycle among the leaders invited to the project. One of the most memorable mini-U-Journeys I experienced was when I persisted in seeking and inviting people who were against the project. In this instance, I found myself going through a mini-U, opening my mind, heart, and will, enabling moments of reflection, being opened to new insights, and acting in that specific situation. I observed the coincidence of everyone being in favor of the project; I sensed that I might be facing a threat to the success of what I was about to lead. I reflected on the advantages and disadvantages of stepping out of that comfort zone (the fan

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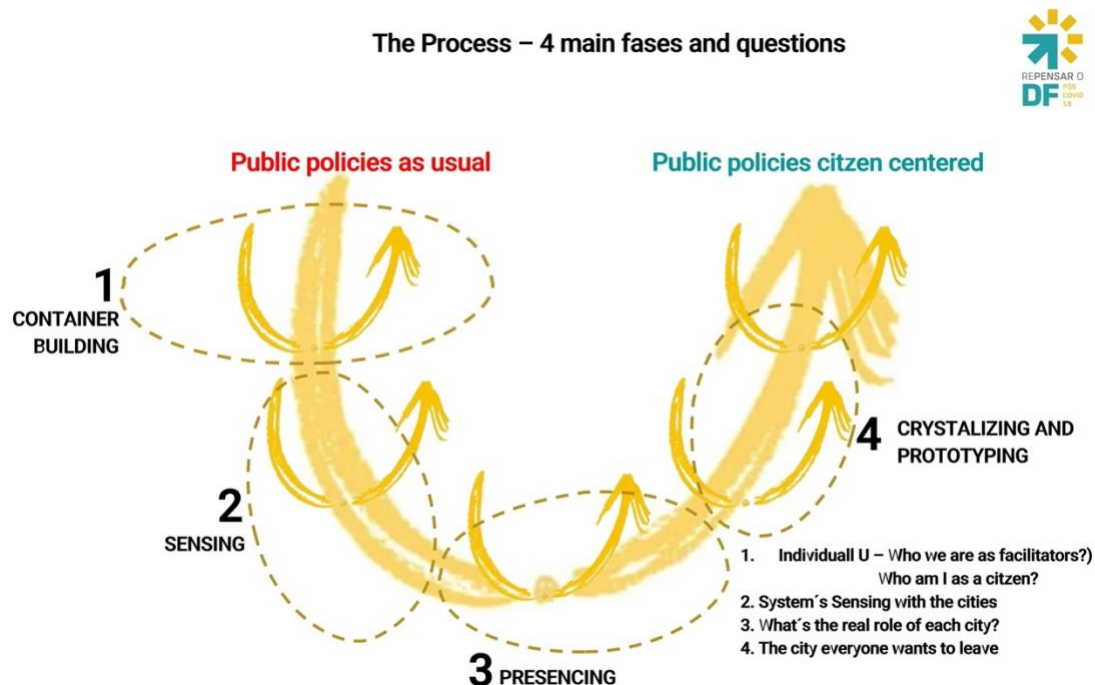
<sup>3</sup> Izalci Lucas is a Brazilian politician, accountant, and professor, currently serving as a senator for the Federal District since 2019; he has previously held positions as a federal deputy and district deputy, with a strong focus on education, science, and technology.

list); I let go of the comfort and faced the courage to escape the list, even when I was questioned—"Why are you looking for other leaders if you have already received a list?"—asked one of the politically involved individuals. I paused, took a deep breath, and felt that my Work was to understand the system to support its transformation, and that supporters and opponents had to be part of it.

I stood by my decision firmly and went in search of other leaders for the Rethink DF 2030 Project. One of them, a doctor who, upon understanding my role as a participant researcher requested anonymity, contributed immensely by granting me a long interview, to which he also invited an internationally recognized sociologist. They both revealed to me the "backside of the tapestry" that I was about to begin weaving. I left feeling relieved, yet simultaneously worried and alert about our internal process. What were we genuinely serving? Which principles and values would I, Janine, not compromise? How far would my flexibility as a lead facilitator go?

## The U-Journey of Rethink DF 2030

During the first phase of the project, 12 municipalities, in teams of citizens, facilitators, rapporteurs, and government professionals, carried out their U processes.



*Figure 1: The four main fases of the U-Journey in the Rethink DF 2030 Project.*



Figure 2: Rethink DF 2030 pathway – Taguatinga’s communication schedule for participants.

In each of the steps provided for in the U methodology, our team worked on an intention and sought a certain result. The figure below, referring to one of the municipalities, Taguatinga, summarizes this well:

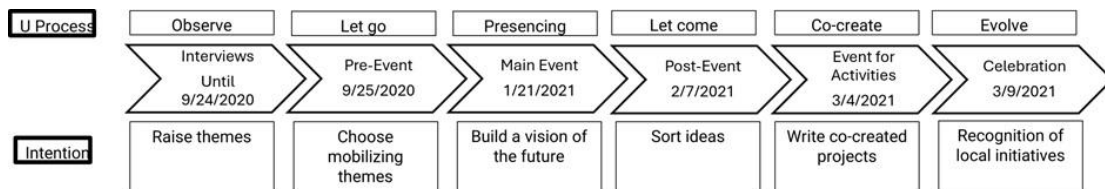


Figure 3: Organization of events according to U-Journey.

**Co-initiating:** We formed teams in each municipality to support the online sessions and maintain the engagement of local leaders in the development of public policies.

**Co-sensing:** With a small group of local leaders, we prioritized the mobilizing themes of each municipality, activating the citizen’s intention for the collective intention.

**Presencing:** Meeting with 312 citizens prepared for Presencing—fully being in the moment and deeply connecting to the context and what wanted to emerge—reflecting on their role in the municipality and the project. In smaller groups, we collected 1,480 improvement suggestions to be worked on in upcoming events and transformed into projects using the Project Canvas Template—a visual management tool that organizes the key elements of a project, such as objectives, resources, risks, and deliverables, in a

simple and collaborative way to facilitate planning and team communication.

*Co-creating:* We grouped suggestions with the citizens, selecting the main ones for developing public policies, such as providing accessibility to disabled people in public parks. The final choice was made by the citizens.

*Prototyping:* Facilitated by our team, citizens selected the ideas with the greatest potential for practical actions using the Project Canvas Template. Many citizens left with meetings scheduled for next steps.

*Evolution:* Final meeting for the 12 municipalities to recognize participation and the co-constructed process. We celebrated the most viable projects presented by each municipality, with three out of six Taguatinga's projects partially implemented.

## Building the Participant Container: Our Transformation System

We called the “container” a safe space created to facilitate profound changes and collective transformations, allowing suspension of judgments, attentive listening, and deep connection to emerge new solutions. (Scharmer, 2018, p. 13)

Providing the container implies creating a setting where the quality of collective attention is focused and can be made increasingly vivid, so that habits of projection and reaction can be systematically observed and inquired into. (Isaacs, 1999, p. 242)

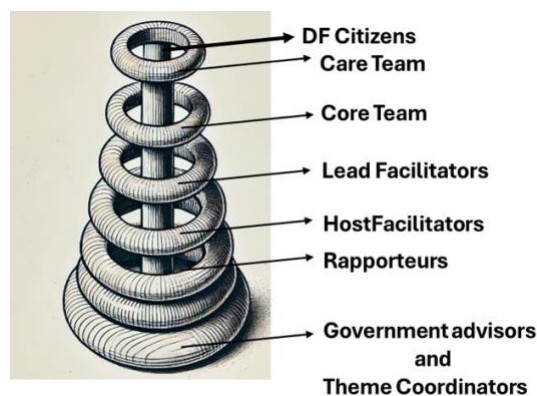
### Concentric Circles

The human and teams' structure of Rethink DF 2030 were organized in concentric circles with the citizen at the center. We had: 1) Care Team—a group composed of five (2 women and 3 men) of the 12 Lead facilitators (including me) with the mission of taking care of each other and taking care of the entire team to sustain the system internally; 2) Core Team—of five different people, 2 women and 3 men, from the Care Team which had the function of meeting to make significant and difficult decisions, such as whether or not to cancel a session with participants; 3) Lead Facilitators—12 facilitators ( 8 women and 4 men) who coordinated and led each of the 12 cities involved with the Project. 4) Host facilitators—the remaining 34 facilitators who, in the city sessions, were hosts of the simultaneous rooms in which we practiced deep listening and other activities; 5) Rapporteurs—group made up of 46 residents from the 12 cities, selected by the Project's organization, that reported on the sessions and had the fundamental

mission of being a connection between citizens and the project organization. They also performed technical functions, such as recording sessions, preparing the list of participants and commenting on each person's attitude during the meetings. They participated in a Theory U course in eight meetings, taught by Nobre and myself, to facilitate better understanding of how the journey would work; 6) Government Advisors and Thematic Coordinators—the largest concentric circle, with around seventy people, included 12 advisors of Senator Izalci Lucas and fifty-six thematic coordinators—government professionals who are experts in topics such as Infrastructure, Education, Health, Housing, etc., invited to participate in the Project to bring knowledge about each theme and to provide the citizens ideas and solutions suggestions for the legislators.

These government professionals observed the demands of each municipality, evaluated improvements, and considered the demands into projects and proposed laws, with a goal to developing public policies to meet these needs to be presented to the legislature in the coming years.

Organized in this way around the citizens, we formed a System of Transformation (Waddock et al., 2022), with mutual respect, non-judgment, and connection, enabling our co-development. The group of 46 facilitators (Lead and Hosts) also held weekly meetings called “Pulse Meetings” to take care of ourselves and our concerns, like doctors taking patients' pulses to sense their conditions. We knew that “the quality of the intervention depends on the inner condition of the intervener” (Scharmer, 2020, p. 6) and we were always aware of this. Many of us, who didn't know each other before the project, are now friends or work colleagues. Our team was large and diverse—46 people from different cities, professions, and educational backgrounds, and we bonded like a family we chose during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown.



*Figure 4: Citizen-Centered Team Structure.*

## Sharing Methodologies

We relied on facilitators with specific competencies. For example, Heloisa Biscaia delved into Appreciative Inquiry, which we used as a meta-methodology to discover what worked well in the cities and build upon those positive qualities

through appreciative and collaborative questioning. We were optimistic but without losing sight of our goal to guide participants toward Presencing, where we believed the most important individual and collective transformations would emerge, as we sought to provide participants with a safe space for self-reflection. As mentioned previously, the Project organizers chose the U-Journey to serve as a process through which facilitators would guide participating citizens from their situations of stagnation to the proposition of ideas and possible prototyping.

## Theory U and World Café

From the beginning of the project, we were concerned that citizens might tend to bring only their complaints, potentially leading the entire process into a cycle of Absencing—a destructive pattern in which individuals or systems disconnect from reality, acting out of bias, selfishness, or ignorance, resulting in negative impacts on themselves and the whole—rather than Presencing—a process in which individuals or systems deeply connect with reality, opening themselves to empathy, collective vision, and co-creation, generating positive impacts for themselves and the whole (Scharmer, 2007). The cross-pollination of ideas through the World Café—a collaborative dialogue methodology aimed at engaging people in meaningful conversations and leveraging collective intelligence to address relevant issues in organizations and communities, was a crucial phase in setting the tone for the project.

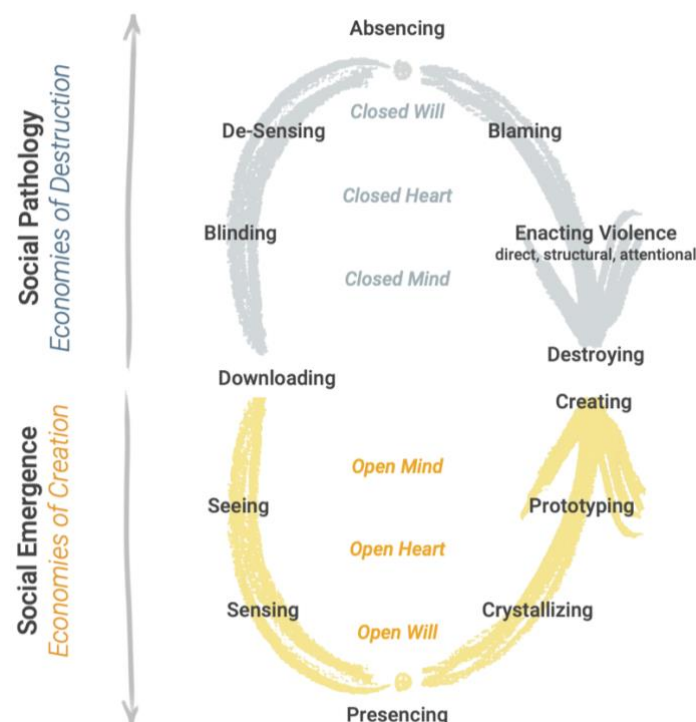


Figure 5: Opposite cycles: Absencing and Presencing (Scharmer, 2016, p. xxx).

## 1,800 Citizen Ideas

As a researcher, I recognized this as a precious chance for action research which, I must confess, filled me with excitement and anxiety. However, throughout the project, I realized that the systemic transformation methodologies we employed, such as Appreciative Inquiry and Theory U, were most effective when applied at the phases aligned with their strengths. For example, we used World Café to gather and cross-pollinate ideas in a welcoming yet dynamic environment with multiple simultaneous rooms. Through this, we collected and systematized over 1,800 ideas from around 2,000 citizens on improving life in the Federal District. To stimulate the citizen conversations further, we layered Appreciative Inquiry over the World Café process to avoid focusing solely on complaints and grievances. We acknowledged these grievances as expressions of the shadows, an essential part of the system, but we aimed to direct our attention to the leverage points for change.

Right away, we clustered these ideas using insights from Richard Barrett (1998) and Ken Wilber (2000), classifying them by their individual and collective impacts and the different levels of consciousness from which they originated. While I believe we were somewhat superficial in the analysis due to deadlines and the enormous volume of material, in the facilitator's group we still concluded that the work was consistent enough for what we needed at that moment. The result was sufficient to support the next stages.

## Sensemaking

Facilitators Ricardo Catto and Eduardo Giacomazzi also played a critical role. They introduced us to "Sensemaking," a concept developed by Karl Weick (1995), through which individuals and organizations interpret and create meaning from ambiguous, complex, or uncertain situations. At the Rethink DF 2030 project, this was precisely our scenario. Sensemaking involves constructing a coherent narrative to make sense of events or environments, enabling individuals and groups to act effectively. Its use helped clarify for all the facilitators how people construct meaning from ambiguous and uncertain situations, individually and collectively. With their guiding and deep knowledge of Wilber's Integral Theory, the facilitators (Catto and Giacomazzi), along with others, helped us analyze the citizens' contributions more holistically, using Wilber's four dimensions: Interior-individual, Exterior-individual, Interior-collective, and Exterior-collective, corresponding to the subjective, objective, intersubjective, and inter-objective dimensions of reality.

## Observer as Intervenor

Although we were an experienced group, we had to learn to observe. Observation and listening were fundamental, because, as facilitators, we were the catalysts for the desires of a diverse community. Taking a neutral position, suspending judgments and limiting beliefs was essential. In each conversation room, two of

us (one host facilitator and one rapporteur) documented everything, and these reports drove the process. If any facilitator allowed bias to affect the harvesting of content, the entire process would be harmed. Our responsibility increased as our involvement grew.

We learned that observing is an essential silent skill for accessing emerging ideas for necessary changes. Observers needed to be fully present with a clear mind and stay open to new perspectives; meaningful contributions start with seeing things from the perspectives of others. The risk of not knowing how to observe was the loss of perspective, focusing only on the details. Without the broad vision, we would not be able to strategically plan structures for new citizen-centered public policies. As facilitators we were managing all the time the balance between focusing (stillness) and landscaping (movement) like the vital equilibrium between the sun and the planets.

## Building the Hidden Container

"Facilitators are human too," I remember saying in one of our weekly meetings—always a mini-U process for us—defending the idea that we would need to respect our limits and, if necessary, respond professionally, even in the middle of a session. And so, I stepped into the next kilometer with another mini-U under my belt. There were many mini-U-Journeys—both individual and collective—with the various professionals and participants, right up to the end of the project.

Creating and maintaining our own container was necessary and challenging at the same time. We organized a parallel safe space called the "Care Team," to support our "Core Team" and, in a cascade effect, the other circles of the organizational structure and the participants. At the Care Team, compassion was essential; whoever was strong in a session could, in another, fall apart among colleagues who listened to him with an open heart. No information would come out of that space. The idea for the Care Team came from a conversation about the lack of support Professor Nobre might be experiencing, the project director, showing our perception of each other's strengths and vulnerabilities. Professor Nobre was always the one among all the teams, seeking to support the balance of each team's multiple levels of demands and deliveries. Many times, it was up to him to make decisions that would impact the entire project, like the one he took at the end, to hold a last session with all the cities together instead of one for each city. Care Team meetings were called as needed, and generative conversation made time pass quickly in these meetings.

The combination of our team's intentions—to support ourselves before supporting the participants—was crucial to creating what we called a "safe container," a space where we felt secure enough to engage in deep reflection, authentic dialogue, and transformative learning. This environment was essential for Rethink DF 2030 project participants to let go of habitual patterns, judgments, and assumptions, allowing them to access more profound awareness. This safe space supported vulnerability, trust, suspension of judgment, and emergent conversations. This container involved intentional facilitation, mindful

leadership, especially from Wilson Nobre's role, and the cultivation of practices like active listening, presence, and empathy. By establishing this space, we ensured that the other facilitators and the participants navigated the "U" process—from sensing and presencing to realizing innovative solutions.

From my perspective, the way we were able to create and maintain our Safe Container, to hold the space for everything that would emerge, was the most significant innovation of the project. I realized that my personal and professional journey not only deepened my appreciation for transparent and inclusive communication, but also showed me how the experiences of other facilitators shaped their own approaches to these values. Each one of us brought our previous learnings and genuinely put them in service of helping others, so that no one had to reinvent the wheel during this process. Many of us facilitators shared the loneliness we felt as agents of transformation. During one of our weekly meetings, a colleague mentioned, "I eagerly await Mondays to be sure that someone else is feeling like I do: a pillar of organization in the middle of the chaos that all of this has become for my family." Some of us lost very close loved ones to Covid-19 during the time of the project. With each of these testimonies, it was as if my battery was recharged to do more, realizing we were trying to be an "island of coherence" (Prigogine & Stengers, 1984), in our habitat. In the unique historical moment in which all of this took place it felt important to create a space (a container) where united by a common intention, we could be our authentic selves—sometimes very strong, sometimes very vulnerable—without diminishing the respect or admiration we had for each other.

When professor Nobre invited me to participate as his right hand in the Rethink DF 2030 project, he already recognized the importance that the governance of the subgroups would have. The scale and diversity—46 facilitators from over five Brazilian states—and the lengthy timeline of over 12 months, conducted online and during lockdown, required us to define roles and responsibilities clearly. We had the necessary flexibility to understand and accept internal movements. After all, even within the group, new arrangements were naturally formed based on the affinities people developed with one another. For example, when a city lead facilitator needed help, they would turn to other facilitators with whom they had already developed empathy. Pairs and trios formed naturally, and we understood that not recognizing these natural human dynamics would have been a significant oversight on our part. As humans, we gravitate toward or away from people and things that bring us comfort and security.

On a spiritual level, we also encouraged practices like daily journaling, meditation, and access to courses that united us as a group of people—most of whom did not previously know each other but were brought together by a common intention and shared a great responsibility: to let emerge what needed to emerge during the project while pursuing a goal—to reach the Evolving phase of the U-Journey with prototypes to help public policymakers focus their following initiatives. One of the highlights of the process was the "Strengths and

Appreciation" course taught by Heloisa Biscaia. Frequently, we opened our meetings with moments of mindfulness, led by some of us. These practices provided us with a much-needed space to express our vulnerabilities and fears that accompanied us throughout the pandemic.

There was a day when I was about to lead a large and meaningful session, but I realized I wasn't in the proper internal condition. I sent a direct message to a colleague, asking for immediate help to regain my center. Together, we ensured that I could be Present during the session. I felt him standing guard in one of the Zoom windows, which gave me even more confidence to proceed. I knew I had a soft cushion to fall on if needed.

The freedom to embrace our weaknesses and celebrate our victories, combined with the intimacy we built with some of our colleagues, allowed all of us to become better members of the system of transformation we were creating. Looking back, I understand it was the generative conversations as well as the courage to admit that we all have our kryptonite days.

It is essential also to highlight that the technical factor, including the support from an online education company that organized all our materials (files, spreadsheets, recordings, links, etc.), made a huge difference in our ability to access data very easily, which was essential in the short time we had to carry out weekly tasks between meetings in each city.

## Navigating Differences

Meanwhile, Richard Barrett's work on the Levels of Consciousness significantly expanded our respect for differences. At this point, I want to revisit something I mentioned earlier. I had the sense that we oversimplified the analysis of citizens' narratives. In doing the analysis of the citizen conversations, the work involved carefully analyzing isolated phrases from citizens. We searched for words that would classify the statements into levels from 1 to 7. Concerned about disregarding the broader context and analyzing only the phrases, I questioned the effectiveness this analysis, but I was outvoted within the group. As someone who works in groups, I know that we are all subject to moments of group self-preservation. In the name of maintaining harmony within the facilitators' group, I suspended my criticisms, accepted, and trusted in what the process was bringing us.

Each one of us facilitators needed to understand the big picture and feel the system (Scharmer, 2020), while acting locally. As facilitators, we had tough conversations, with freedom to help colleagues perceive their misleads. This happened a few times, and generally, facilitators would ask for help from their colleagues with whom they had developed stronger connections. In two situations, colleagues asked me for support in leading their sessions. This highlights the value of supporting each other in our roles.

Another situation I experienced was gently alerting a colleague leading an interaction in a breakout room that they were going beyond their role as a

facilitator and instead directing what the citizens were bringing to the table. It was challenging to intervene with lightness and empathy. However, it was necessary to ensure we kept the conversation at a generative level, always mindful of the space we created for the citizens. As coordinator, with the responsibility of ensuring the quality of listening during sessions, I observed the rooms and helped facilitators to qualify their performances, for example by alerting them to not interpret the citizens ideas, just collect them as they were. These attitudes were possible because we saw ourselves as a transformation system (Waddock et al., 2022) at the service of inclusion and listening to citizens. A colleague with a light tone of voice and a loving attitude felt that she was not being effective in facilitating her sessions. We worked to help her adopt a safer and firmer posture. We concluded together that it was not about her voice but rather her posture as the leader of that city.

Several activities in our transformation system were essential because they helped us evolve as individuals and, above all, as active parts of the container we created. I would highlight the following:

- Connection: we understand together the dynamics, structures, and relationships of the system.
- Coherence: we align the project’s objectives with those of the citizens, incorporating their ideas and solutions.
- Amplification: we developed a transformation infrastructure with courses and technical support for citizens.

## Learnings and Outcomes

### I Am Heard; Therefore, I Exist

Our objective was to include citizens in the preparation of a strategic government plan for the next ten years, in 35 municipalities of Federal District. This was partially achieved with contributions of 36% of the project (12 municipalities), before it was interrupted by political changes.

My observations and deepening of studies after the end of the Project helped me to conclude that the emerged impacts relate to citizens experiencing a greater sense of being heard. We promoted deep listening to citizens and technicians, facilitating an exchange of information, feelings and perceptions, expanding awareness as intended. It is the first time a project like this happened in Brazil; the project proved that it is possible to listen deeply to many people online and move towards transformative action using systems change methodologies.

Through teaching and practicing deep listening—ranging from factual to generative levels (Scharmer, 2010)—with the citizens, they felt listened to and recognized their own voices, gaining an understanding of their role in collective transformation. People from all social classes participated, with equal speaking times, promoting awareness of their role in the system.

When we started the Project, we had both specific and general goals. During the 12 months we decide to trust the process and be open to its flux (Scharmer, 2010). Some outcomes outside our control appeared. These included the loss of participants and their relatives due to Covid-19; an outage caused by hackers; the reproduction of gender inequality with most participants being men; citizens in leadership positions trying to impose themselves, demanding attention in facilitation to maintain equal participation, and the departure of two of our facilitators before the completion of the project as they were not trusting in the Project's purpose.

The project, initiated by a senator who ran for governor in the next elections (one year after), generated questions about whether we were contributing to a state strategic plan or to the senator's electoral campaign. There was a lot of reflection and discussions on this matter. The most decisive and unexpected consequence was the discontinuation of the project into its second phase, due to internal political issues within the government.

## Evaluating Rethink DF 2030

At the end of the project, we hired Raro Treinamento e Desenvolvimento Profissional—consultancy specialized in research—to conduct a survey among the participants. The percentage of 21.3% of the participants responded by pointing us to the following data: 96% said they think more about their municipality due to the Rethink DF project, and 97% expressed a wish for the project to be continued.

When asked to rate their interest in solving their city's problems through the "Rethink DF 2030" project, 90.5% of those responding to our evaluation survey gave positive responses. Regarding their interest in sharing the project idea, 87% reported that they talked about Rethink DF with other people.

We received spontaneous positive and negative comments, the positive ranging from reflections on the importance of participating and making a difference, and the negative from participants who felt the meetings did not convey concrete information or generate visible results. Examples of comments included: "I thought it was important for other people to participate"; "I want to make a difference in my municipality"; "Little concrete information"; "I didn't see results from the meetings I attended."

We have already seen some impacts and recognize that there are other impacts on different scales that may not be as noticeable, such as some neighbors working together since participating in the Project to benefit the square in front of their houses. A case of direct impact happened in the municipality of Taguatinga, which has 280 thousand inhabitants. In one of the prototypes, the citizens' main concern was the concentration of public security efforts in the central region of the municipality. It was necessary to decentralize the execution of public security. Using the Project Canvas Template, a group of eight citizens, led by a woman activist, understood how to structure the objectives, value chain,

fundraising system, and so on to create conditions for the decentralization of public security. They created and implemented the Community Security Council (CONSEG) in the northern region of Taguatinga, a place with many social weaknesses. Particularly, five members of the group came together (one woman and four men) and activated the transformation.

## Theory U in Participatory Processes

I wondered whether Theory U could contribute for participatory processes to be more inclusive. After participating and deepening my studies about it, I believe it can.

The inclusion of different stakeholders—even within the main container, the one composed by the different groups of facilitators and the citizens—enables everyone to reflect and transform at their own pace. Over nearly two decades of practicing the U-Journey with various organizations across sectors (governments, companies, and NGOs), I have observed that an experienced practitioner understands that there are multiple mini-U-journeys within a single U-journey. This awareness leads the entire process into constant iteration. When we recognize this spiral movement of iterations and allow it to unfold at its own pace, we ensure that each phase's expansion of awareness prepares for a deeper subsequent phase. There is a complexity in these simultaneous movements: following the journey as a path driven to arrive at a transformative moment, while also leaving space for the “mini-U”s to occur without guilt or haste. Their sum creates conditions for a greater expansion of awareness throughout the entire system—both within the individual agent and in the external field—allowing genuine transformation to happen.



*Figure 6: The mini-U-s throughout the U-Journey.*

In the Rethink DF 2030 project, the U-Journey also proved to be effective as a guide for weaving in the use of other specific methodologies in each phase, such as design thinking in prototyping as detailed before in this article.

## Navigating Resistance Patterns

There was resistance. We recognized the risks, but maybe not how much effort we needed to make for the system to see itself (Lewin, 1997) and transform itself. Bringing citizens closer to the process of creating public policies was bold for the Federal District (DF) context. The project brought new perspectives in Brazil, using Theory U to articulate interactions between citizens and stakeholders (public servants, technicians, and politicians). However, there was resistance both among some citizens and civil servants. Not everyone engaged, and in the formation stage of the process, some in power pursued personal interests, resulting in a guest list that could have been more diverse in terms of ideas and political proposals for the municipality.

One of the challenges during the 12 months of the project concerned questions over the real objective of the project: whether it was electoral or genuinely sought to listen to the population and encourage participation. To strengthen the community, we ensured that diverse voices were heard and respected. We kept our heads and hearts open, respecting each person's personal position. However, two lead facilitators left the project because they were not convinced that the Project did not just have electoral purposes.

For Habermas, there is a fight for influence, differentiating organizers, speakers and listeners, between arena and gallery (Habermas, 1997). For him, the public sphere is “a *communicational structure* of acting guided by understanding, which has to do with the *social space* generated in communicative action, not with the *functions* nor with the *contents* of everyday communication” (Habermas, 1981, p. 211).

Another notable episode was dealing with a member of my Taguatinga municipality team, who defended his own interests. I relied on Habermas (1981) and Scharmer (2007) to understand that this kind of behavior is expected and drives to unbalance the process if not appropriately addressed. The authors helped me to understand the situation in which power was the reason for this man to defend his own interests. For Scharmer, power focuses on the transformative potential of presence and co-creation, whereas Habermas emphasizes the role of rational, undistorted communication as the foundation of legitimate power. He acknowledges that power is often exerted through strategic action and manipulation, leading to distorted communication. This was exactly the case. Both theories offer valuable insights into how power can be understood and utilized for meaningful change, though they approach it from different dimensions. For me, the constant back and forth between practice and knowledge, during the 12 months of the project Rethink DF 2030, was exhausting but enriching, like a chef adjusting seasonings.

## Processing the Process

We learned on several levels. My concern about the continuity of the project was constant. The uncertainty about the future of a project in which I invested so much energy and time always caused me unease. Many times, in my professional journey, I volunteered to continue after our program's budget ended. Seeing results, whether subtle or concrete, has always been my goal, and this concern was manifested in the Rethink DF 2030 Project. We start with an intention, but without certainty of implementation, letting the flow guide us and accessing our hidden intelligence—open mind, open heart, open will (Scharmer, 2010).

Even though we know we must trust in the process, there was apprehension. In three-hour sessions with around one hundred citizens, many questions arose for me as a facilitator: How to present myself? How much to share? How far to let the flow go? How to instill confidence in the times when I didn't have it? Our team had more and less resilient people; the most resilient supported or replaced the most vulnerable ones in the crises we had, including when one of the facilitators was insecure in continuing to conduct her sessions with participants.

The project had a transformative impact on citizens, government members, and our team, as highlighted by research conducted at the end of the project by Raro, an online education company. We built and strengthened relationships, and some facilitators established a study group that still exists today. Additionally, there was recognition and enhancement of professionals connected to Theory U in Brazil. Networking was structured between citizens of DF 2030, resulting in collaborations such as neighbors taking care of squares and groups calling for improvements in parks, which continue up to today.

The learning included intensive training on expanding individual awareness and responsibilities as change agents. This transformed me profoundly, valuing my talents and exposing, understanding, and embracing my vulnerabilities. I have many observations to believe many colleagues felt the same. I no longer accept being in teams that do not understand their members as complex beings. I learned that we move from the cycle of Presence to Absence (Scharmer, 2010) by not allowing for vulnerabilities.

The Absencing cycle is the counterpart to Presencing cycle in Theory U (Scharmer, 2010). While the Presencing cycle represents a process of connecting deeply to one's highest potential and emerging future, the Absencing cycle describes the opposite—a descent into disconnection and destructive behaviors. I would highlight how individuals, organizations, and societies can fall into this cycle when they turn away from possibilities for renewal and growth, often leading to a harmful spiral marked by rigidity and detachment.

## What's Next?

Not having all the answers is always encouraging, at least for me! Thus, we left the Rethink DF 2030 project stimulated by unanswered questions, which moved us to seek continuous learning. I can summarize this: we still have a long

pathway to learn how to build safe environments quickly and more comfortably for all of us leaders, facilitators, and participants. I tend to believe that it is essentially about activating the learning and leadership of the ecosystem and what this involves, such as the daily need to exercise the expansion of consciousness to act in a more systemic way. Recognizing the influences caused by one stakeholder on another or others is a significant step forward. Three years after the end of the Rethink DF 2030 Project, I still feel challenged to observe and study how the containers that best support systemic transformations have been formed.

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