

DESiS Thematic Cluster

Power of Collaboration (PoC)

Rethinking the roots of transformative social innovation

Coordination team/

Yumei Dong

Jiangnan University

dong.yumei2008@163.com

Miaosen Gong

Jiangnan University

miaosen.gong@foxmail.com

Ezio Manzini

DESiS Network

ezio.manzini@gmail.com



**DESiS
NETWORK**
Design for
Social Innovation
and Sustainability

CCC
power
of
collaboration

Invitation to participate

January 2026

Summary

From the very beginning of the journey that led to DESIS, the common thread in what we called transformative social innovation was the observation that, at its core, there were people who, defying the prevailing tendencies toward isolation and competition, chose to collaborate. That is, they found a way to do something together that seemed important to them, for themselves, for their community, and for the planet.

Nearly two decades later, we feel it's necessary to return to this initial observation and update it. This is for three main reasons.

The first, and most obvious, reason is that we need to see how those collaborative activities, which we observed in their nascent phase and which are now mature, have evolved over time. This topic has certainly been observed and discussed step by step in recent years. However, it's useful to try to provide an overview today and observe current trends.

The second reason is that the spread of digital technologies and connectivity, while accelerating processes of individualization and the crisis of traditional social forms, has also offered unprecedented tools to support collaboration. But that's not all. It has also changed the people who collaborate: those who collaborate today, in some ways, are anthropologically different from those who did so years ago. Furthermore, the expansion of artificial intelligence (and its future integration with robotics) will certainly amplify these phenomena, opening up unprecedented problems and opportunities and requiring us to pay greater attention to the emerging forms of collaboration that will most likely appear.

The third reason for addressing this topic is the need to redefine its meaning in diverse cultural contexts. In past years, we have used the term "collaboration" in different regions of the world as if it had the same meaning everywhere. Over time, however, it has emerged that this was not the case: the transformative collaboration we are addressing exists everywhere, but it has different meanings, stems from different motivations, and implements equally diverse practices. What we need to do today is better understand how this happens: how are collaborative relationships perceived and practiced in different cultural contexts? What is universal and what is culturally specific in the ways they are realized? What can design do to stimulate and support both this universal and context-specific dimension?

Within this framework, with these motivations, and with this perspective, we have launched a new Thematic Cluster entitled The Power of Collaboration. This Thematic Cluster began with some preparatory activities carried out by a "core group" that helped to better define the theme and criteria and to propose some cases as examples of what should be researched. Now, with this invitation to participate, we intend to open the participation to a wider range of potential interested parties.

Proposal

Background

To address the ecological, social, and political challenges that we find ourselves confronting today on different grounds and at different scales, we should deploy all the resources we have as human beings. First and foremost, the capacity to collaborate. That is, to share objectives and work together to achieve them.

The dominant dynamics in modernization processes, however, go in the opposite direction: toward a society of increasingly isolated and passive individuals: a society of people who are unlearning how to collaborate. A trend that the present diffusion of digital technologies, new media, and AI tend to exacerbate, generating increasingly widespread phenomena of isolation, loss of sense of reality, and social desertification.

Fortunately, this trend is not the only force at play. Everywhere in the world, we also see opposite tendencies at work: transformative social innovation that takes very different forms but has this common character: they are all based on the rediscovery of the value and transformative power of collaboration.

Indeed, by establishing relationships of trust, dialogue, and proximity among people, new collaborative practices change the profile of people in the social systems they are part of: from that of isolated and powerless individuals to that of active and collaborative citizens capable of building new social networks. This allows them to contribute to solving otherwise intractable problems and, at the same time, to regenerate the social fabric of the territories in which they operate.

The central role of collaboration in transformative social innovation initiatives has been observed since the founding of DESIS Network. Today, however, there is a need to resume the discussion on this theme. Indeed, while the importance of collaboration has remained the same, or rather has increased, the ways in which it presents itself and the effects that derive from it have changed and are rapidly changing.

Theme

Collaboration between people as a way to break isolation, build new social networks, and achieve results that advance the transition toward ecological and just societies.

Objectives

- To update ideas and practices of collaboration, and design for collaboration, in different social, cultural and technological contexts: How and when do people collaborate, overcoming isolation, building new social networks, and achieving otherwise unattainable results? How can design stimulate and support these collaborative processes?
- To update the cultural, social and political meaning of collaboration in contexts characterized different social, cultural and political systems and by different technological infrastructures: how can collaboration reduce inequalities (generating social justice)? How can collaboration enrich the democratic ecosystem (introducing forms of agonistic pluralism)? What can design do in all this?

Preparatory activities

This Thematic Cluster started with some preparatory activities done by a “core group” with the aim of better defining the theme and criteria and to propose some cases as examples of what should be researched.

Preparatory events

The Thematic Cluster has been presented at Jiangnan University in China last October and has been the core of the DESIS event, titled Collaboration and Ubuntu, before the Cumulus Conference 2025, in Johannesburg.



Core group (for the preparation activities)

- Jiangnan University DESIS Lab (Wuxi, China), Miaosen Gong and Yumei Dong, serve as technical secretariat
- Aalborg DESIS Lab (Copenhagen, Denmark), Nicola Morelli
- Aveiro University DESIS Lab (Aveiro, Portugal), Teresa Franqueira
- Knust Kumasi DESIS Lab (Ghana), Ralitsa Debrah
- NID (Ahmadabad, India), Amresh Panigrahi
- Tsinghua (Beijing, China), Fang Zhong
- UFRJ DESIS Lab (Brazil), Carla Cipolla
- PoliMi DESIS Lab (Milano, Italy), Daniela Selloni, Daniela Sangiorgi, Stefana Broadbent
- UAL DESIS Lab (London, UK), Adam Thorpe

Coordination team

Yumei Dong

Jiangnan University
dong.yumei2008@163.com

Miaosen Gong

Jiangnan University
miaosen.gong@foxmail.com

Ezio Manzini

DESIS network
ezio.manzini@gmail.com

What to do to participate: criteria and procedures

To participate in this Thematic Cluster, you need to have an interest in the topic and submit one or more cases to share and discuss, adopting the criteria that emerged from the preparatory activities and indicated below.

Field of observation

Since the concept of collaboration is very broad, it is useful to delimit the field of observation to the aspects that seem most contemporary and problematic. A preliminary discussion on this theme has led to proposing to place at the center of our attention collaborative relationships that present these distinctive characteristics.

1. They are forms of “Horizontal collaboration” .

We assume **horizontal** as mutualistic, opposed to vertical as hierarchical. In turn, this horizontal relationship can be seen in two modalities:

- Peer mutualism: different actors have the same role (examples: community gardening).
- Symbiotic mutualism: different actors have different, complementary roles (example: intergenerational initiatives; time bank).

2. They are forms of “Intentional collaboration” .

We assume **intentional** as “by choice” , opposed to “by conventions” as traditional. In turn this intentionality can be seen in two modalities:

- Individual choice: done by each actor, on the basis of his/her individual judgement (examples: Clean-up initiatives and Time Bank in Europe).
- Collective choice: a decision made by a community (directly or through representatives) that is mandatory, strongly incentivized, or highly convenient (examples: Clean-up day in Rwanda and Time Bank in China).

3. They are forms of “transformative collaboration” .

That is, they have to be capable of breaking down people's isolation, generating new social energies, and changing the shape of the sociotechnical systems in which they occur and of which they are a part.

Another delimitation of the observation field of this TC is given by the observation that forms of horizontal collaboration are particularly significant in relation to some major themes, which are:

- The search for human well-being: horizontal collaboration as widespread mutual help.
- The regeneration of environmental commons: horizontal collaboration as capillary care of the environment.
- The creation of social economy initiatives: horizontal collaboration to make fair and sustainable production systems practicable.

Case Selection Criteria

1. Select meaningful cases characterized by an important role of horizontal and intentional collaboration. Consider that every form of collaboration has two dimensions:

Performative dimension (which refers to what can be achieved through collaboration) and relational dimension (which refers to the social forms generated by collaboration and, therefore, to the quality of the social fabric that collaboration helps to create).

Both dimensions always exist (even if sometimes one of the two prevails in intentions or is more evident in the results). Focus on both, and discuss their relationship.

2. Focus on the collaborative encounters scale. Consider that some of the selected cases are complex organizations in which a larger project (framework program) works as common platform for a variety of projects and activities (molecular initiatives), each one of them emerging from a variety of individual people collaborative relationships (collaborative encounters). Focus on these collaborative encounters and consider:

- Motivations: why do these people collaborate?
- Organization: which sociotechnical system enable them in doing it?
- Performative dimension: which result does this collaborative encounter achieve?
- Relational dimension: which kind of social networks does this collaborative encounter build?

Collaborative Relationship Analysis

1. Horizontal collaborative relationships which characterize the selected molecular initiatives.

- Mutual trust: how trust is built (or rebuilt) among those who should collaborate.
- Shared objectives: how to generate a shared vision of what to achieve.
- Shared modalities: how to agree on what to do, who does it and how.

2. Enabling system that made these collaborative relationships possible.

- Infrastructure: spaces, digital platforms, services, products which make collaboration possible and probable.
- Skills: capabilities and capacities necessary to collaborate.
- Triggers: ideas and events which activated the collaboration

3. Design interventions to create these enabling systems.

- Who designed the different components
- When the different components have been designed
- How this design process occurred.

A first group of cases, as examples

3 > Table1. case list
(roughly categorized and sorted by country)

In the preparatory phase, some cases have been identified which are proposed as examples as shown in Table 1 (to be discussed) . The detailed introduction will be presented in Annex 1 (case posters) .

NO.	Case title	Ideas	Country
1	One drop store	Participatory Charity Store Management	China
2	Nanjing Time Bank	Mutual Help For Ageing Care	China
3	Shared mom	Mutual Help For Children Care	China
4	Mutual Assistance Agreement for Parents Away from Home	Ageing Care	China
5	Longmen Mountain raptors monitor	Citizen Science	China
6	Porta Moneta	Co-Housing	Italy
7	The Silvers	Active Ageing	Denmark
8	Cafe Liveskraft	Cancer Patient Support	Denmark
9	Østergro Tag Farm	Roof Farm	Denmark
10	Renten Transition northwest	Participatory Community Building	Denmark
11	Collaborative Village Renewal The Ralegan Siddhi Experience	Collaborative Village Renewal	India
12	Amul Empowering Farmers Through Cooperative Collaboration	Milk Production And Marketing Cooperation	India
13	Design-led Collaborative Learning for Rural Self-Reliance	Rural Development Through Craft	India
14	Center of Production and Sharing – Lights of Tomorrow	Agroforest – community garden	Brazil
15	SUSU - Money go round	Collaborative Financial Service	Ghana
16	The Clean Ghana Project Sanitation as Collective Responsibility	A Nationwide Environmental Sanitation Campaign	Ghana
17	Tree Planting Exercise in Ghana NoboaA Collaborative Tradition for Environmental	Community-Based Tree Planting Initiatives	Ghana
18	Umuganda – Rwanda’ s Model of Collective Action for National Development Coming Together for the Common Good	Nationwide Community Work	Rwanda
19	Hillside Dams Conservancy Restoring Nature through Community Collaboration Citizens Transform Urban Green Space	Urban Ecosystems Protection And Restoration	Zimbabwe

How to indicate interest

Those intending to participate should signal their intention by completing a simple form and sending it to the Coordination Team: Miaosen Gong, Jiangnan University, miaosen.gong@foxmail.com

Next steps

The following work in 2026 will be structured as follows:

