



AFRICAN YOUTH REINVENTING THE FUTURE

Opening Paper

the
fifth
element



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Reframing the Future of Human Development from the World's Most Youthful Continent.

This paper aims to initiate a debate with partners interested in the topic and the approach described. The intention is to imagine together and hopefully implement further activities co-designed with the spirit of this paper in mind.

Our Reading of the Context

Globally, 52% of the world's population is under 30 [1]. And Africa has the youngest population in the world, with 70% of the Sub-Saharan population aged under 30 [2]. This is all on the backdrop of the expected population growth of 1,5 billion people by the year 2050, by far most of it happening in Africa [3]. This makes clear that the world's future rests within the African continent. Whether it is ecologically (60% of uncultivated arable land [4]) or by demography, what will happen in Africa will largely influence what will happen with humanity as a whole. And hence there is a significant opportunity **to foster a global transformation from this continent.**

African youth are, however, currently facing a myriad of issues like high rates of unemployment (South Africa 46.3% [5], Africa 60% [6]); social and economic instability due to the COVID-19 pandemic; climate change impacts; and political unrest. These challenges are exacerbated by growing inequality and the relations of forced dependency inherited from colonial times, which seem to calcify these issues and limit young people's ability to have a good life in a healthy environment. Not to forget the broader context of geopolitics, Africa often being the stage where global power struggles unfold.

These challenges have captured the attention of various players on the global and regional stages. This has resulted in discourse, initiatives and policies intended to assist African youth that seem not to produce the systemic change required to address the problem. There are many reasons behind the failure. One explanation is that the youth are perceived as victims with minimal agency waiting to be rescued and embedded into a model built to disenfranchise them systematically. This has doomed many interventions that do not address the core of this systemic dispossession. Young African unemployed people are, consequently, seen as the future of cheap labour in the next frontier of industrialisation. They are seen by many leaders today as a growing problem or pariah. Globally, leaders are puzzled about what to do and have resigned themselves to whispering grievances about overpopulation. Meanwhile, African leaders have accepted the assumption that, at the very least, this demographic will be an abundant labour resource to be leveraged for conventional economic development strategies.

Moreover, it is becoming increasingly clear that "development", still conceived in terms of accelerated urbanisation, industrialisation and over-exploitation of resources and ecosystems, is feeding the possibility of the collapse of human civilisations. If the pathway proposed to African youth is to be subservient or, at best, replicate unsustainable modes of development, the ground exists to question the whole idea from a systemic framework built on different assumptions.

Our Perspective on Systemic Change

Our approach to this and other major challenges is informed by decades of experience and reflection by thinkers and practitioners in the domains of socio-ecological transformations, systems thinking, and complexity theory. From that background we assume a few hypotheses:

Criticality

Deep changes only happen when living systems face situations where different kinds of tensions accumulate simultaneously, to the point of creating large fractures. We obviously live in such a situation. Confusing and overwhelming as critical points might be, they also open the space of possibilities: from them, a complete reconfiguration of patterns can emerge, which would have been unconceivable beforehand.

Transformation as learning

Living systems change by learning new patterns. The process is very different from teaching well-defined recipes. It is an exploration of largely uncharted territories in which the transformative potential of learning for collective action is fully liberated. Hence, the value of “roadmaps” based on pre-existing frameworks is limited. One has to make the way by walking.

Emergence

Shifting to new patterns cannot be engineered as the construction of a bridge or an airplane. To a very large extent it is a spontaneous, emergent process which cannot be controlled from positions of omniscient power or expertise. The focus of transformative action itself has to shift to learning mode and inquiring on the proper conditions for emergence.

Self-organisation at the edge

The seeds of the new patterns come from places where pain is big enough to move people to learn and act by themselves. And they are everywhere, often since one or two decades, or even more. As for Life itself, there is no obvious hierarchy behind the transformative experiments: they are largely built by people liberating themselves from existing scripts and practicing a high degree of self-organisation. Governance comes in at some point, but not before it makes sense.

Pollination through new meanings

The process of diffusion of new patterns is different from the conventional “scaling up” of some recipes having been successful in one place. Life is always contextual, and no responses are universal. It is from the recognition of pluriversality that experiences can be shared and lead to fruitful pollination across contexts. While all conditions (material and psychological) are important, in human systems the emergence of new meanings is often the catalyst for change.

Resonance for a new synthesis

At a critical point, small perturbations can lead to reconfiguration. But the quality of the outcome is not guaranteed: criticality is always a crossroad, and some branches lead to gridlocks or self-destruction, as we see every day. A new weaving is possible by using threads from relational cultures, ancient wisdom, modern science and a deep sense of humanity. But it requires resonance, mutuality and reciprocity among the people and organisations intentionally engaged in the transformation.

All this said these “principles” are not meant to be taught nor to provide just an academic perspective. We see them as “sparks in the dark” about how Life works that can be practically experienced by everybody in collective learning processes. The aim of this perspective on systemic change is to nurture practices and foster conditions for the emergence of new responses to the dramatic challenges we face.

Our Intuition

The possibility exists to catalyse systemic change by building opportunities for African youth through self-liberation and self-organisation. Allowing for self-designed models of development, from the bottom-up. Both personally and collectively. By asking critical questions, an environment could be created to raise among African youth and various actors the awareness and realisation of this opportunity. It could lead to:

- Mobilising youth to develop an understanding of self that is outside the domestic and global narratives. Who are we? Whom should we become?
- Developing the pathways for these ideas to permeate broader society by transitioning out of the dominant mechanisms that shape (and inhibit) their lives.

A youth-led self-liberation movement is not new to the continent. The South African black consciousness movement (BCM), formed in 1968, was started by student leaders to mobilise the black population to fight the apartheid system through self-liberation. The movement shaped black South African culture, beginning with a rejection of the state definition of non-white but rather owning their identity of black. The BCM is an example of the view that self-liberation movements often work to change the perspective of those they touch. And they struggle to permeate broader society to drive overall systems change.

The BCM initiated various efforts for wide-scale adoption. The movement formed partnerships with high schools to induct teens into the movement. Many students who had dropped out of university became the torchbearers of the movement as they transitioned into the teaching profession. The [LEAP Science & Maths Schools](#) are a present-day example: located in townships, they created an environment for children to redefine themselves beyond their circumstances as they develop 21st-century skills. In terms of students’ achievements, including massive access to higher education, the LEAP Schools are a great success. But, like the BCM, the LEAP model still struggles to permeate the national education system. Many factors came together to impede a larger impact of the BCM values and approach and to maintain imported development models imposed by colonial and neo-colonial practices (7), (8). Fortunately, there could never be a better time than now. With the convergence of many destabilising factors, more people have started to have a growing appetite for change in South Africa (9) and elsewhere in the continent.

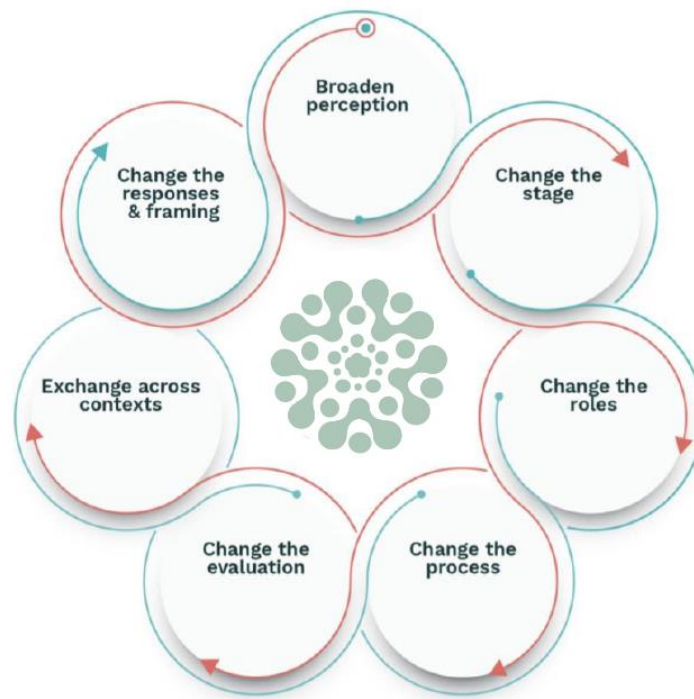
Our intuition is also built on the **availability of new approaches and tools to address current challenges** by building both on lessons from the past and new perspectives helpful for today. The Fifth Element programme hosted by the Club of Rome proposes an open manner to explore the opportunity described above. The Fifth Element is the flagship initiative by the [Emerging New Civilisation Impact Hub](#) of the Club of Rome that seeks to catalyse the transformations for a mutually just transition into global equity for a healthy planet. As part of this activity, the [Afrik-Akili Declaration](#), developed by the Club of Rome African Chapter, brings a positive definition of Africa by Africans. It is well poised as a launch point for exploring the self-definition required at the start of the self-liberation process.

In addition, [The 50 Percent](#), a platform for youth engagement supported by the Club of Rome, has been prototyping and exploring the asynchronous convening capacity of young people globally. Peer-to-peer listening sessions have created an environment for young people from diverse communities to ask questions and voice their concerns about their environment, communities and opportunities that are available to them. This has culminated in a series of findings such as:

- Relationships are a living example of interdependence that can foster the convening power for young people to explore how to liberate themselves.
- Young people have a strong appetite to showcase their skills and are anxious to have meaningful opportunities to make a difference. Simple engagement is not enough. Efforts towards observable outcomes generate the commitment that catalyses change.
- Intergenerational support in its many forms cannot be bypassed. It is important to create the opportunity to facilitate sharing knowledge of self, heritage, values and skills. The intergenerational support has to be expanded beyond expertise but must include resources and the opportunities to co-design the solutions geared toward systemic change.

These learnings from The 50 Percent are relevant to the purpose of this document. Developing relationships between peers and intergenerationally, sharing perspectives from lived experience, re-learning intrinsic values from shared wisdom: all these ingredients can be used as catalysts of collective action and lead to learn new ways of creating opportunities.

As part of its methodological approach, The Fifth Element also proposes a number of actions to host a coalition of willing partners and increase the chances that new patterns emerge from the exploration. This takes the form of an invitation to explore together.



Convening the Exploration

Broaden the perception – Change the questions

The present situation does not bode well for African youth. It seems that all roads lead towards their exploitation and the further destruction of their communities, environment, and culture. A rejection of this path is critical for African youth to liberate themselves from this presumed despair. It is the aim of this initiative to foster the environment to counteract these dispossessive mechanisms, with a view to mobilising youth to liberate themselves from the global narrative and trajectory determining their future. To start with, our best bet is to catalyse by inquiring from an African perspective on a different set of questions, such as the following:

- What does it mean to be a valuable person to society?
- How can we regain the self-confidence in our values and capacities that will allow us to create opportunities that will foster wellbeing?
- What opportunities are we creating for ourselves?
- Will adopting an indigenous (local) approach to entrepreneurship create better opportunities and reverse the effects of inequality?
- What happens when we work from a perspective of abundance?

These and other questions intend to shed light on our usual blind spots, particularly that of the huge dissonance between African values, cultures and identities and the superimposed Western norms, institutions and perception of scarcity (10)

Change the stage

Places and communities on the ground, not modern offices in remote cities nor international conferences, are the appropriate stage to explore the reinvention of the future by African youth. This shift requires sensing, listening and engaging with people generally ignored, working in their own contexts and communities. A substantial part of the foreseen activities will go into the creation of relationships and networks within

different geographic scopes. Local organizations for youth empowerment and civic engagement are obvious candidates to populate these new stages, along with social entrepreneurs and educators addressing real-world issues in specific places and contexts. Through catalysing elements such as local schools, whole communities could be engaged. Sensing what is already happening and creating warm and safe spaces for sharing are a crucial part of the new setting.

Change the roles

The owners of human development processes in Africa are the African people, not the international development agencies. And especially African young people, who are majorities and will live the future with the consequences of present decisions and actions, also of those which are not being taken. A key ambition of The Fifth Element is to go beyond existing structures of power and expertise in order to liberate the potential for collective learning. This requires overcoming the concept of “stakeholders”. At moments of existential challenges, all stakes are at risks. Holding them can only lead to minimal improvements. Allowing all of us to be active participants, as people, might create a strong motivation to learn together, also from local and traditional knowledge and forms of artistic expression.

Change the process

The intuition described above comes from the question: what if Africa holds the keys for its own development, in a way both equitable and in healthy balance with the biosphere? This means a fundamental shift in the conversations about African development. Instead of being taught how to “catch up” with current Western ways of being “developed”, the process becomes an exploration and co-creation of new inquiries. It is about an emerging leading-edge synthesis of relational cultures reconnecting ourselves with our own humanity and with Life, together with the best of modern science. It is also about the repossession of processes of design of the future, including new collective choices on which institutions and technologies could be most useful for the wellbeing-footprint conundrum, from the concrete experience of local communities and ecosystems.

Change the evaluation

Conventional ways to assess success and development are a big part of the issue we face. The observation of current trajectories (f.i. those in the space of Human Development Index vs Ecological Footprint) shows that countries are not moving into “sustainable development”: growth of HDI indicators is fully correlated with the growth of Ecological Footprint, and hence leads to unsustainable situations. Moreover, macro-types of assessment, as those practiced at national or global levels (f.i. GDP), do not provide meaningful guidance. It is more than time to sense what counts and where it counts, instead of measuring what can be counted, at scales which dispossess people and make them helpless. The opportunity lies in creating new ways of making sense, close to the people and the ecosystems, and liberate the untapped potential of motivation for change.

Exchange across contexts

As mentioned, our intuition says that the seeds of the shift we are describing already exist in many places across the African continent and elsewhere. The [LEAP Schools](#) in

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South Africa and the [Tamkeen Foundation for Human Development](#) in Morocco are just two examples. They are seeds of the larger process of emergence, and at the same time consolidated realities in their own contexts, for more than a decade. [The Constellation](#) is an example of a network connecting many communities in more than 50 countries around the world. In other words, there is already a huge amount of knowledge and lived experiences from which African youth (and the world at large) could profit to reinvent the future. Exchanging across contexts in a self-reinforcing way without falling into the trap of “scaling up” could accelerate the diffusion of experiences and elements of response and ultimately the emergence of new patterns in a stronger manner.

Change the framing and responses

The convergence of all ingredients of the exploration described above is meant to create a new dynamic. First, an intergenerational community of mutually supportive individuals and organizations will emerge to work together on shared issues. This would have the potential to reframe the conversations at the grassroots level and also in the public discourse on African youth, to highlight the huge opportunity we are invoking here, away from conventional approaches about unemployment and “catching up”. The reframing can take many shapes, through a series of actions, convenings and publications geared towards communities as well as decision-makers positioned to foster the environment for transformation and a broader access to resources by African youth. The co-design of multiple strategies of interventions will naturally come out of the exploration, in order to nurture future cycles in this dynamic of transformation.

Playing in time

For the exploration described here to be most effective, some kind of orchestration in time is also required. The Club of Rome has already been working with this approach for a while, and significant knowledge and networks already exist. While the challenge being explored exists continentally, it makes sense to start from existing strengths. This can be defined in terms of geographic scope. The Club of Rome network is most developed in the Southern African region, where it can convene the commitment and knowledge of members such as Dr Mamphela Ramphele (Co-President of the Club and a well-known personality, initiator of the BCM in South Africa), John Gilmour (founder of the LEAP Schools), Dr Morne Mostert and Professor Mark Swilling (both with decades of experience in policy and foresight).

As already mentioned, the leading challenge for existing and previous self-liberation movements has been the permeation into broader society, in part due to opposition from political establishment. In South Africa, the current time window presents an opportunity to influence discourse while the public’s disenchantment is at its peak. The horizon of the 2024 national election could be put at profit by allowing us to benefit from the fertile ground of political discussion and action as the entire society contemplates its values, needs and priorities.

Other African geographies are obviously relevant to the purposes here exposed, such as Nigeria, Egypt, Morocco, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Kenya, to name a few. In order to ensure relevance to both the subject matter and the changing circumstances of the participants and collaborators in different places, activities would be phased according to a “respiration cycle” specific to each geography:

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- **Invite and Sense:** convene and engage with youth organizations and communities. Create and develop the relationships and networks in the chosen geography. Nurture an ecosystem of partners and collaborators working from a diversity of perspectives.
- **Explore and Discover:** inquire and reveal relevant findings in response to the critical questions addressed. Explore the potential for self-definition and self-organization. Gather contributions for further understanding. Identify pathways to transformation.
- **Partner and Share:** Foster collaboration and co-develop strategies for change. Develop a series of recommendations and focus areas directed at both youth and civic society overall. Disseminate findings to decision-makers and the public alike.

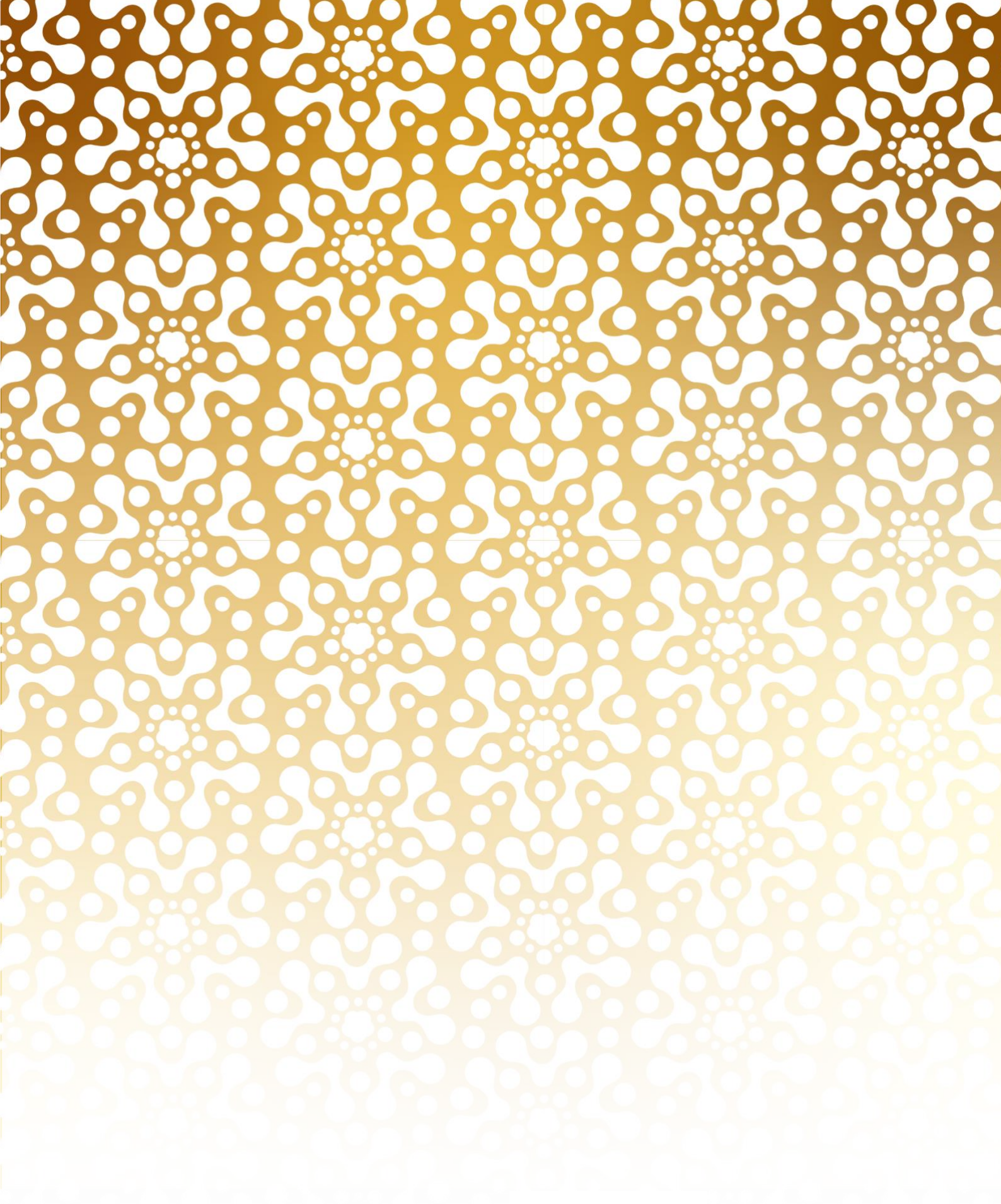
The Invitation to Readers

You are kindly invited to give feedback, and especially to engage in the journey we propose.

If not now, when? If not us, who?

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