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Designing for coalescence –

A design framework resulting from a participatory research process about ethical craft initiatives in Pakistan

Dr. Gwendolyn Kulick

Abstract

In Pakistan ethical craft initiatives are often embedded in development aid and grassroots empowerment activities of different character – from large internationally funded aid programs to small private initiatives or social enterprises of different scales. Besides marginalised craft producers such as home-based women workers or artisans with workshops but few customers, naturally, a large variety of stakeholders from the international development aid field, the local NGO sector, academia, social businesses, philanthropy, and different design fields are associated with ethical craft initiatives. Operating in Pakistan's large and exploitative craft sector, project objectives are usually located at the intersection of poverty alleviation, social justice and cultural heritage preservation. This paper will outline an open-ended, participatory and critically reflective research process that aimed at understanding motivations, experiences and relationships of stakeholders in ethical craft

projects better, and how the mutual impact between the research environment, the research participants and the researcher caused the result of this design research project to take an unexpected direction; instead of focusing product development or value chain management, the data was used to establish the craft for empowerment system, which enabled to analyse structures, processes and mindsets, including preconceived notions of stakeholder roles as beneficiaries or providers of aid. Through the collective research activities also the research participants were impacted in an empowering way, pondering emerging questions regarding their own initiatives and implementing strategic experiments, or in the case of a group of home-based women workers diverting from the stereotypical role of being beneficiaries by offering support to university students and faculty members. The result of this research project, the design framework 'designing for coalescence' will also be introduced.

Keywords:*Participatory design research, Shared stakeholder agency, Craft in grassroots empowerment*

1. Introduction

When commencing a PhD design research project about ethical craft initiatives in Pakistan, the objective was to address the exploitative conditions under which a large number of craft producers work in Pakistan, and the challenges faced by ethical initiatives in the craft sector.

The scale and character of Pakistan's extensive craft sector highlight the relevance of such research. While it is difficult to determine the exact number of people working in the country's craft sector, the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics provides numbers that allow insightful conclusions to be drawn. In 2023, almost 242 million people lived in Pakistan, with 51.48 percent men and 48.51 percent women (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2023, p. 116). Of the 51.91 percent of employed men and 15.34 percent of employed women (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2022, p. 22), 13.7% work in the category 'craft and related trade workers (p. 24). In this category men work on average 51.7 hours per week and earn about 107 euros per month, and women work 31.5 hours per week and earn 52 euros per month (p. 30 & p. 41). 87.8% of those working in the category 'craft and related trades' work in the informal sector, for example, in small single-household enterprises, and are excluded from state and private sector benefits (International Labour Organization, 2018).

These statistics do not provide information regarding any specific craft or region, but they do show that the craft sector is a significant factor in Pakistan's economy and that millions of people, including a large number of women, are engaged in it. It also illustrates that craft production is a profession of poor people who earn little and are vulnerable to financial and social exploitation.

Several different ethical craft initiatives aim to improve these precarious conditions, including social enterprises, human and legal rights NGOs, community development projects, craft focused apparel, and interior design labels or outreach projects at universities. Their goals usually intersect in the areas of cultural heritage preservation, social justice, and poverty alleviation. Often, they aim to achieve this through vocational training, which should

enable craft producers to satisfy customer demands, such as fashion and textile designers, or even individual customers who attend craft fairs or shops specialised in craft products.

These ethical craft initiatives have a positive impact on many of their trainees, either by establishing sustainable links to customers in the fashion or textile industry or simply through a better sense of how to run an individual micro-enterprise in small local markets or craft fairs. In addition, some NGOs work tirelessly to advocate for better labour rights for people in the informal sector, especially for home-based women workers, and gradually achieve improvements. However, for many training attendees, their situation does not improve after training, which worries project managers and other stakeholders who genuinely aim to support them.

What frequently happens is that after initial training, funded or not funded, it becomes difficult to find a sufficient number of customers who order from craft producers on a regular basis, and with the growing number of training graduates, facilitating communication between craft producers and customers reaches a scale that is difficult to manage. This is especially true for the thousands of home-based women workers who participate in such training offered by different organizations that cannot follow up with all of them. But why can fair crafts value chains and increased income opportunities for craft producers be achieved in some instances but in many others not?

How to address this situation from a design research perspective was not initially clearly defined. Anticipated research outcomes included formulating guidelines for the development of appealing craft products that could be sold at a fair price or a blueprint for

managing an ethical craft project or fair value chains. Through a case study, the idea was to identify strategies to support craft producers in gaining income opportunities by identifying successful strategies in existing ethical craft initiatives.

This linear plan went through a significant change during the research process that became more immersive, participatory, and open-ended than expected. The case study did indeed become one of the core research methods. However, when observing and partially collaborating with some of the case project stakeholders over a period of five to six years, the focus on how to support craft producers gradually shifted towards understanding their empowerment in relation to the motivations and experiences of other stakeholders in ethical craft initiatives, especially those who initiate and manage them.

The range of these stakeholders is wide and includes managers of large NGOs; academics in fields such as design, social sciences, and business administration; fashion and product designers; social entrepreneurs; micro-credit banks; philanthropists; and representatives of donor agencies. Craft producers, such as home-based women workers, micro-entrepreneurs, and artisans with small established workshops but few fair market avenues are, of course, the central stakeholders. After all, their support is one main reason for such projects to exist. However, they are often not in a position to initiate and plan them, but are included to follow an already finalised process, once the budgeting and planning are completed by others. Such a unidirectional strategy of top-down management of empowerment processes, though, faces challenges in achieving its goal: creating income opportunities, social justice and cultural heritage preservation, let alone addressing the lack of agency of the

craft producers. Realising through first hand qualitative research how closely their empowerment is entangled with the motivations, perspectives, and methods of other stakeholders in ethical craft initiatives, the research methodology became increasingly participatory in nature, involving craft producers as well as other stakeholders. In unexpected ways, the researcher and the participants through conversations and collaborations mutually impacted each other's work. As such this article will outline not 'design for all' but a 'design research process for all.'

This research process also embodied the theory of second-order cybernetics, an area of systems thinking in which the elements – or participants – of a system are also the observers of a system. In an ideal scenario, this is thought to result in more ethical and holistic decisions for each participant because he or she would consider the benefit of the overall system (Glanville, 2003, pp. 3-8). While this might not always reflect reality, in this research process, the interplay between researcher, research participants, and the research environment provided a more holistic research result. Rather than singling out the empowerment of the craft producers, the research objective became to develop a strategy that supports the 'empowerment of all stakeholders.'

Systems thinking also played a vital role in the analysis of data resulting from this research process. Inspired by the GIGA-Mapping method, developed by the systems-oriented design group at the Oslo School of Architecture and Design (Sevaldson, 2022, n.p.) the large amount of data gathered in this research process, diverse in scope and nature, was used to visualise and as such establish the 'craft for empowerment system.' This step enabled to analyse how the system operates, informed by structures, processes, mindsets, and

stakeholder relationships that had consolidated over a long period of time (Fig 1). The noticeable strong top-down dynamic, unequal power relations, and stakeholders' often stark alienation and non-awareness of each other's circumstances, experiences, and perspectives gave the impetus to formulate the design framework 'designing for coalescence.' Translating as 'growing together' it aims to advance ethical craft initiatives' positive impact by encouraging inclusive collaboration and mutual learning from the early stage of ethical craft initiatives.

The following paper will first outline the immersive and participatory research process that became an increasingly collective journey of critical reflection and practice not only for the researcher but also for some of the research participants, who are also stakeholders in ethical craft initiatives. It will then discuss how this mutual impact prompted the development of a design framework that aims to encourage stakeholders to mutually learn from one another across inherent structural hierarchies, different positions of power, and diverse socioeconomic, educational, and cultural backgrounds. The framework 'designing for coalescence' will be introduced, as well as a lab format that serves as a projection of how the implementation of 'coalescence'—or 'growing together'—could possibly be envisioned. Rooted in extensive qualitative data, an understanding of 'design for all,' is presented in which not only the research result might benefit many, but in which already the collective inquiry of the research journey, enabled empowering experiences for many who participated in it.

2. Immersion and stakeholder participation in the research process

The research process started in a rather linear way by conducting interviews with founders and project managers of ethical craft initiatives in Pakistan and partially in India, all together approximately 20[1]. Four of these were followed more in depth over a period of five to six years as one of the main research methods, a case study. While the initial interviews provided interesting insights into how ethical craft initiatives are managed, they also revealed the range of stakeholders involved in different capacities and their diverse motivations and experiences, as well as the multitude and complexity of concerns they routinely address. To better understand these stakeholders and their relationships, further research was conducted with a strong focus on participatory research activities, namely an action research project, focus groups, and general engagement in the field of ethical craft initiatives in Pakistan.

'Participatory research', as an umbrella term, summarises a range of names and frameworks related to action research, anthropological investigation methods, and human-centred inquiries (Vaughn and Jacquez, 2020, pp. 3-4). Their main common characteristic is that people who are not researchers themselves are involved in collecting data, because their concerns are the research focus. The value of such involvement is not only the genuine character of the gathered information, but also the possibility of engaging those research participants to different extents in developing research results. The extent to which this might be helpful depends on the research

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[1]*Some were just visited once, others more continuously before choosing the final four case project sets. Also, some case study projects are so closely entangled that it is difficult to determine whether to count them individually or together. All four case project sets had close connections to other projects that could even be counted as separate case projects.*

interest and nature and whether particular expert knowledge is crucial. Involving research participants in developing strategies and solutions can potentially increase their level of empowerment (p. 2 and pp. 5-6). Similarly, 'participatory design' refers to a design practice that involves concerned stakeholders, including target groups and collaborators, from the very early stage of a project, even when the actual design concern still needs to be clearly defined until the development and testing of a design (Sanders and Stappers, 2014, pp. 5-18). Such early involvement can increase the long-term impact of a design strategy by fostering ownership and agency among concerned people.

The potential impact of participation in research and design on participants therefore resonates with definitions of empowerment, which commonly highlight the condition of having access to information as well as the means and platforms to voice opinions and to take part in decision-making (Eyben, Kabeer and Cornwall, 2008; Rowlands, 1997, pp. 13-15). They are also in line with Amartya Sen's definition of development as a set of freedoms as opportunities for making choices (2000, pp. 37-40). Additionally, the collective experiences of the researcher and research participants and the critical reflection on them contribute to the rigor of the data and can constructively influence further research steps (Cornish, Breton, Moreno-Tabarez, U., et al., 2023, p. 2).

Participation becomes more challenging when stark inequities of status and power characterise collective activities. Here the field of subaltern studies provides aspects to consider, with 'subaltern' describing people who are not only poor but who are marginalised because of other aspects such as ethnicity, caste, gender or culture, and therefore they are left out from historical narratives (Sardar,

1999, p. 13 and p. 79). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak describes how they are unable to voice their own perspectives because usually others speak for them (Spivak, 2008; Nandi, 2009, pp. 41-42 and pp. 84-87). Both Spivak and Brazilian educator Paulo Freire argue that the ability and opportunity for critical reflection and articulation lie at the core of empowering experiences (Freire, 1970, pp. 113-116 and p. 129). The take-away from Freire and Spivak is the understanding that people living in precarious conditions lack the self-awareness that they live in those unfair conditions, as well as the platforms and audiences for presenting and debating them and the opportunities to take part in decision-making processes concerning their lives.

Considering that ethical craft initiatives focus on the economic, social, and cultural empowerment of marginalised craft producers, the empowering potential of conversation and participation in research and design was a supportive factor for taking this direction. In addition to the case study research activities, 2) an action research project over a time period of four to five years with a group of home-based women workers in a village near the university campus in Lahore, Pakistan, where the researcher was teaching design at the time of the project; 3) two focus groups with research participants of the case study, action research, and other stakeholders known from the ethical craft sector; and 4) observations through a general presence in the field of ethical craft activities through attending events such as temporary bazaars or round tables.

For the case study (Kulick, 2024, pp. 150-180) four sets of case projects in Pakistan with different organizational set-ups and conceptual approaches were analysed. One was a holistic community

development project that commenced when a German retired design professor moved to a village in rural Punjab in the 1990s, invited by her former Pakistani exchange student. She began by developing toys with the people of the village, and together with volunteers of different professions, a wide range of initiatives in the village followed, including two schools, a health centre with trained midwives, infrastructure such as a sewage system and solar energy, agricultural experiments, and a village radio. Another project started as a joint venture in the early 2000s between a community organization in the Hindukush Mountains, in the Chitral region, and an apparel industrialist in Lahore. The latter founded an apparel label, which applies Chitrali craft to products, while manufacturing and finishing are done in Lahore at the apparel factory. The other case sets are two NGOs with one having its roots in micro-finance and the other one in legal rights, that aim to establish social craft enterprises with a large number of home-based women workers who have completed their vocational training. These case projects were followed over a course of five to six years through field visits, interviews with different stakeholders and affiliated organizations, and partially collaboration.

One common strategy for all case study sets was to integrate the target group, the craft producers, into managerial and creative processes by selecting craft producer representative as board members, training them as managers of craft producer groups, including them as shareholders of a social enterprise so that they have a say in its concerns, or registering them as members in artisan directories for customers to contact them (pp. 194-201).

The action research project (Kulick, 2024, pp. 218-233) was initiated at the request of a group of women with embroidery skills

in a village at walking distance to the university where the researcher taught design at the time. The aim was to explore the possibilities of a supportive neighbourhood between women and academics and students of art and design. As a first step, the researcher facilitated several workshops on developing embroidered products. The project came to an abrupt halt when tools and materials went missing. It took a year until the women confided that they had taken them, but only because they had heard from peers in other villages that usually projects that promise income opportunities do not result in long-lasting impact; therefore, the best would be to take the items that are provided. Upon reconciling, all participants gained valuable insights. The researcher understood how people in precarious circumstances, who belong to the typical target group of development aid, view initiatives to support them based on experiences of little impact. While income generation was one of the initial objectives of this action research project, the women said that collective activity was their main motivation to attend the workshops and they began thinking about what they could possibly contribute to the university's design programs. This was a significant shift in how they saw their role in this project: no longer as beneficiaries but as people who have the expertise to share (pp. 246-247).

Focus groups (Kulick, 2024, pp. 234-252) were conducted to discuss strategies for sustainable craft business. Most participants also participated in previous research activities and represented a variety of typical ethical craft stakeholders such as directors and faculty members of design institutions, fashion designers, NGO project managers and CEOs, public relations experts for educational institutions, a middle man in the common craft sector, a female

micro-entrepreneur who is doing stitching and embroidery, and three home-based female workers of the Action Research Project. While no particularly new insights regarding value chains surfaced in the discussion, focus groups became a turning point in the research project. The participants began discussing each other's projects, goals, and expertise. NGOs that work on training home-based women workers and linking them to markets, design faculties that familiarise students with cultural heritage and traditional craft techniques, fashion designers who enhance their lines, and social enterprises that aim to establish fair value chains – they all have built expertise in different areas, such as grant application writing, business administration, social work, product design, marketing, and education. In the months following the focus groups, they identified opportunities to mutually support each other, independent of this research. Faculty members of the textile design department, for example, began working with one NGO on curriculum components such as colour and composition to be integrated into vocational craft training. These emerging mutually supportive activities were also a response to a focus group debate about the perpetual dependency of many ethical craft initiatives on development aid grants, which often come with attached strings such as pre-defined project requirements, implementation strategies, and success indicators. If stakeholders form supportive alliances their ethical craft initiative approaches become stronger, so that they can convince those who conceptualise grant schemes of better practices Another key moment was when the village women from the action research near the campus proposed their idea of having a room on campus where they could teach students traditional embroidery. After several years of working on product design workshops and after their revelation of

their views on typical grassroots empowerment that people living under similar conditions experience, they flipped their assigned 'role' around. Instead of viewing themselves as beneficiaries of aid they offered their assistance to the students and faculty of a university. They proposed a laboratory without knowing the term, and the concept of mutual learning (Kulick, 2024, pp. 246-247).

The overall research process can be characterised as organic, often following word-of-mouth recommendations regarding projects and events, such as craft fairs, grant information sessions, or round table discussions. The case study projects' plans, activities, and experiences were followed up. The action research project applied a critically reflective process by deciding on what to do next after each activity. The focus groups were planned in detail, including participants, topic, location, setup, and documentation, and resulted in independent and unforeseen participant collaborations. From an early stage, the characteristics of the research process were in line with the above definitions of participatory research and participatory design. Stakeholders of ethical craft initiatives were not only involved in gathering information and defining challenges and successful strategies, but also impacted the research direction and its result through activities. The independent collaborations after the focus groups, for example, provided a push to go forward with the concept of 'coalescence'.

The research participants played a vital role in the decision not to formulate guidelines for developing craft products or value chains. It became clear that these stakeholders, especially founders and managers, had gathered a wealth of expertise in many years of dedication and experience with rigorously applied critically reflective practices in the field. They did not need a researcher to tell them

how to do their projects better, and no road map could guide them through the inevitable challenges.

3. The relationship between the research environment and the research direction

At first sight, Pakistan can be perceived as difficult to conduct research in due to its unpredictability at times; for example, security measures are applied in response to natural disasters or incidents of violence, so that research activities might be cancelled on short notice occasionally. However, what by far outweighs this perception is that the country's people demonstrate high levels of resilience, as did the research participants. They responded with flexibility, effort, courtesy, enthusiasm, and general support to requests, enabling insights into their experiences in ethical craft initiatives in all their eclectic and genuine truths. Eye-opening information revealed itself in unexpected ways, which would have been impossible to plan or gather meticulously by following a linear research process.

Other characteristics of the research environment included social restrictions, especially for home-based women workers, who might require permission from their families to participate in workshops, meetings, or craft fairs; urgent concerns in grassroots communities that need to be prioritised over craft production and research activities, such as rebuilding houses after floods or securing a harvest from the fields; and gaps in communication with research participants not always speaking English or Urdu but local dialects and the researcher speaking English and only basic Urdu.

On the other hand, participants showed commitment, enthusiasm, and creativity when coping with such challenges. Little bureaucratic red tape and a general culture of ad hoc, in which plans can change quickly, often worked in the benefit of the research rather than hindering it, for example, when research participants were spontaneously available for requested activities. For the researcher, this meant adopting the same flexibility and spontaneity without giving up on planning or in to convenience by only collecting what presented itself. This meant to develop the ability to judge when the data about a certain topic is saturated and does not require seeing, for example, more case projects of the same kind, or to have questions, equipment, and consent agreements at hand at most times, in case a research opportunity occurs. (Kulick, 2015, pp. 3-5; Kulick, 2024, pp. 51-52)

 The advantage of this research process was that the interaction between the researcher and the research participants set in motion changes in each other's views, analyses, and subsequent activities. Not only did the researcher change the direction towards formulating the framework 'designing for coalescence' as a research outcome; similarly, the research participants engaged with questions that emerged in collective activities. Many of them commented on how conversations and collaborations became valuable reflections for their own work in NGOs, enterprises, and educational institutions.

The interplay and mutual impact between the researcher, research participants, and environment can be described as the embodied experience of second-order cybernetics, which happened initially less consciously but was gradually more consciously planned and

taken forward. Consequently, data analysis was approached from a discursive and systemic perspective, too.

The craft for empowerment system

The large amount of collected data was diverse in format and nature and included many hours of audio and video recordings, pictures, interview transcripts, handcrafted artifacts from workshops, and case study projects.

In the first step, using the bricolage method (Kincheloe and Berry, 2004, pp. 108-114), thematic fields were clustered and discussed from different perspectives. In this research, these clusters included 1) conceptual approaches and organizational formats, 2) skills and knowledge transfer, and 3) stakeholder concerns. This step was important in recapping and structuring many aspects of ethical craft initiatives. By better understanding these areas, it became possible to map stakeholders and their relationships from a bird's eye perspective (Kulick, 2024, pp. 253-256).
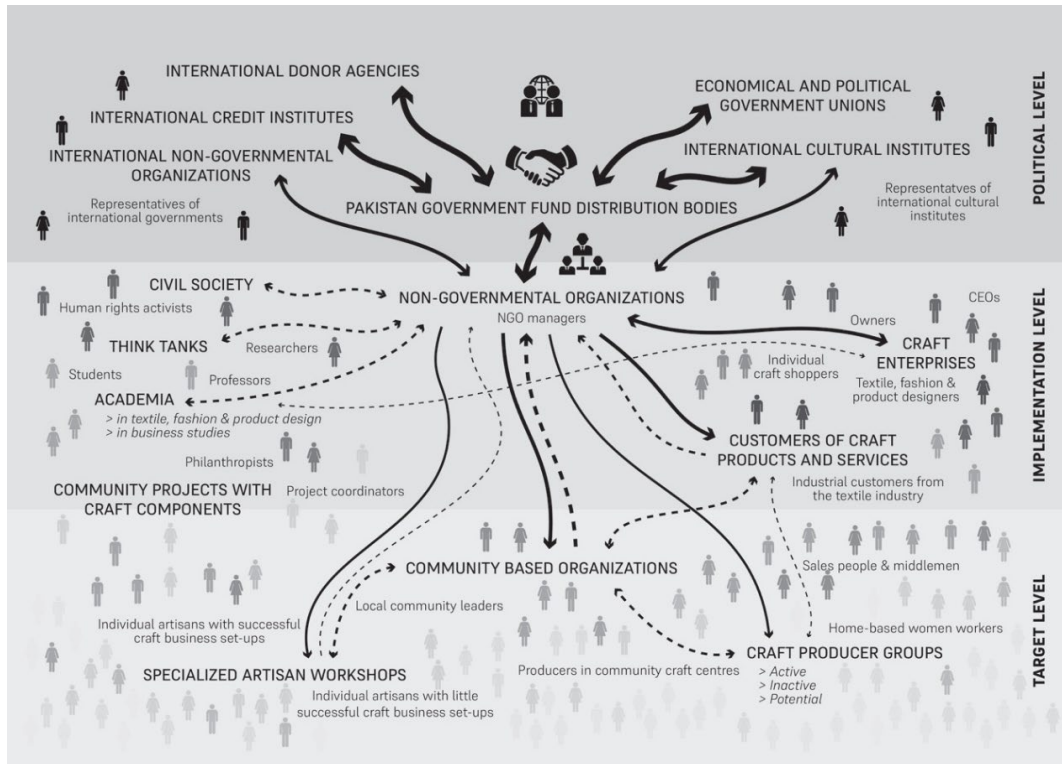
Fig. 1. GIGA-map of the craft for empowerment sector (Kulick, 2024, 257)

This step enabled to view craft for empowerment in Pakistan as a sector in its own right, instead of viewing craft related aspects as subparts of other sectors of development aid such as women empowerment, employability, financial inclusion, heritage conservation, rural development and more.

Making the sector tangible as the craft for empowerment system created the basis for describing and analysing the shape and performance of the system informed by typical processes, structures, and mindsets, which over time has become a consolidated and questionable routine (Kulick, 2024, 253-282). This analysis provided insights into where ethical craft initiatives fall short of their expected goals, despite the genuinely good intentions, dedication, and expertise of those who conceptualise, support, and coordinate them.

Three levels can be identified in the craft for empowerment system.

1. **The political level at the top:** international donor agencies, governments, fund distribution bodies of the Pakistan government, and organizations and institutions that typically apply for aid grants.

2. **Implementation level in the middle:** entities and people applying for aid grants such as NGOs, government organizations, community organizations, educational institutions, research institutes, businesses, private initiatives, civil society, human rights advocates, philanthropists, and customers of craft products, individuals, and those with their own labels and product lines.

3. **The target level is at the bottom:** individual craft producers who are mostly home-based women workers, artisans with workshops, and craft producer groups and their communities

The main characteristics of and dynamics between the levels of the system are also identified:

- Large in scale with fuzzy boundaries spanning from local communities to international relations and to related fields such as development, culture, business and education
- Top-down dynamics of grant distributions, implementation strategies and measures for success

- Differing supportive network strengths in regards to ethical craft processes, with strong networks on the upper levels and fragmented ones towards the target level at the bottom
- Fading contours of stakeholders' identities at the bottom level, where they appear as an anonymous mass, whereas the ones on the upper levels have names and positions
- Alienation between stakeholders who do not know about each other's circumstances, perspectives, and in some case existence

Stakeholder relationships were visualised regarding the following aspects: flows of funding; skills and knowledge transfer; intensity, nature and direction of communication; and perceptions of each other's tasks and roles (Kulick, 2024, pp. 261-274).

In summary, funds flow top-down when grant schemes are decided at the political level and utilised by stakeholders at the implementation level who apply for them to work with people on the target level. Target-level craft producers usually do not have access to information about grant application opportunities and not the experience, ability or insights needed to apply.

Communication is initiated in most cases on the political or the implementation level; for example, when a call for proposal for a grant is launched, or when on the implementation level, stakeholders have a project idea and contact both donor organizations as well as target-level craft producers as their beneficiaries. The latter can initiate communication and project ideas only when they have a contact, perhaps from a previous project, at the implementation level. Communication within each

level and between peers, colleagues, and project partners generally functions well.

How stakeholders perceive each other depends on how far apart in the system they are and their ability to access information. For example, most target-level craft producers cannot distinguish people who work with them during vocational training, especially if it lasts for only a few months with sporadic workshops. Apart from craft producer group coordinators, many training participants find it difficult to distinguish between project managers, design workshop leaders, and others. Generally speaking, target-level craft producers are not aware of the political level and how it communicates aid concepts and principles to the implementation level. Even if someone at the political level visits their community, the person is perceived as one more person who wants to help them. On the other hand, political-level stakeholders lack awareness of real-life conditions and concerns at the target level, as sporadic visits do not provide sufficient insights. Yet, they are in a position of power to develop programs to help people on the target level, for which they depend on information from implementation-level stakeholders. NGO and social enterprise managers who work more frequently with craft producers have a good understanding of the target level, and so do those academics who focus on outreach projects and craft traditions.

 Marginalization, therefore, was not only identified as a feature of target-level craft producers but also of people who work at the political level. The significant difference is that political-level marginalization is a privileged form; if grant schemes do not achieve the desired impact, it has little to no impact on the lives and job opportunities of political-level stakeholders. They will launch the next programme. For target-level craft producers, whose

marginalization is an underprivileged one, the lack of impact when attending an ethical craft training means either no change in their lives or in rare cases even a worsening, for example in case they gave up an underpaid job, hoping to have better chances after joining vocational training.

As a result, implementation-level stakeholders, play a vital role in the craft for empowerment system, because they are familiar with the structures, processes, and mindsets of the political level where they apply for grants as well as with the target level where they work frequently with craft producers. They also play a vital role because they have a longtime commitment to their work, often projects that they have founded or are associated with over long time periods, usually decades.

 An interesting realization was that the craft for empowerment system, despite showing inequity and alienation between stakeholders and shortcomings in achieving the anticipated goals, was that it keeps generating ethical craft initiatives. Grant schemes for which ethical craft initiatives can continue to be launched; project managers, founders, owners, and academics continue to dedicate themselves to their projects; designers continue to engage with craft producers; and craft producers continue to see the potential to earn or achieve other benefits from attending activities (Kulick, 2024, p. 280).

This observation was important for the development of the coalescence-focused framework, because if the majority of stakeholders already have good intentions, show dedication, and have many years of experience, what can a design researcher contribute? Surely not guidelines. Especially the stakeholders on the

implementation level, work in a very critically reflective manner, reacting to different obstacles with consideration, flexibility, and creativity.

5. Designing for coalescence – Empowerment as processes of growing together in a multi-stakeholder setting

As a result of this research project, a theoretical design framework was developed consisting of seven components: 1) paradigm, 2) goal, 3) impact, 4) principles, 5) design methods, 6) values, and 7) character (Fig. 2) (Kulick, 2024, pp. 283-299).

5.1. Deconstructing a framework of the current craft for empowerment system

As an intermediate step, these seven components were defined for the current craft for empowerment system's performance based on the systems analysis (Fig. 2), that found it to be dominated by strong hierarchies and top-down dynamics. Empowerment in the current system is considered an upward integration of craft producers into existing value chains; consequently, training and industry meetings focus on how they can fulfil customer demands. Therefore, the paradigm of the current ethical craft initiatives was defined as 'appropriation,' with the goal of helping them become partners in craft markets, risking a disappointing impact with continuous external fund dependency when this integration cannot be achieved. The principle is market orientation, and therefore, design methods in current ethical craft projects focus on product design trends and marketing strategies. The values informing this scenario are thoroughly honourable, building on solidarity,

philanthropy and the wish to help those in need of it. There is no better starting point for grassroots empowerment. However, they also characterise ethical craft initiatives as being implemented in a formalised manner, focusing on teaching universal standards rather than learning about contextual conditions, limitations, and opportunities in the diverse environments of craft producers.

This current craft for empowerment system by all means deserves respect. It emerged and consolidated over time with the best knowledge and intentions. The underlying equation is that by making craft producers fit for the existing circumstances in the market, they can earn a decent income. However, reality rarely unfolds in such a linear way, and ethical craft initiatives are more frequent than not faced with unexpected challenges and wicked, or complex, unsolvable problems.

5.2. Designing for coalescence – an alternative design framework towards shared agency in the craft for empowerment system

The alternative framework (Fig. 2) focuses on the importance of gradually overcoming the alienation between stakeholders, especially those at the political and target levels, but also implementation-level stakeholders who are not always aware of each other's expertise and projects.

DECONSTRUCTED DESIGN FRAMEWORK OF THE CURRENT CRAFT FOR EMPOWERMENT SYSTEM	FRAMEWORK	PROPOSED DESIGN FRAMEWORK OF A DESIRED EMERGENT CRAFT FOR EMPOWERMENT SYSTEM
Designing for appropriation	**FRAMEWORK**	Designing for coalescence
Appropriation of craft producers' skills to mainstream market expectations from across the system	**PARADIGM**	Coalescence of people, perspectives, practices & processes from across the system
Craft producers' empowerment as partners in existing craft markets	**GOAL**	Equally shared agency in sustainable craft value chains
Universally streamlined project implementation Risk of disappointing experiences in craft value chains Dependency on relaunching project grants	**IMPACT**	Contextually sensible, feasible and connected initiatives Rewarding experiences in craft value chains Gradually increasing autonomy from top-down dependencies
Market orientation Adjusting to existing standards	**PRINCIPLES**	Co-release Reciprocal care
Unidirectional skills training for craft producers Product development Marketing strategies	**DESIGN METHODS**	Looping cross-level & peer-to-peer learning Forming supportive alliances Complementing each others' projects
Inclusion into mainstream Patronage Philanthropy	**VALUES**	Mutuality Equality Participation Integration
Universal Formalised Project based Taught	**CHARACTER**	Contextual Pluriversal Open-ended Emergent

Fig. 2: Juxtaposition of the proposed designing for coalescence framework with a deconstructed framework based on the current craft for empowerment system's performance (adapted from Kulick, 2024, p. 295)

Considering this alienation one of the main obstacles in implementing ethical craft initiatives, creating opportunities for mutual learning, better contextual understanding and making was considered a viable direction for this design research. As such the focus was not primarily on developing design strategies towards integrating target-level craft producers upwards into markets and

value chains. While that is also important, instead, the focus of this research shifted towards enabling strategies for all stakeholders to critically assess and gradually change the existing structures, processes, and mindsets, so that the agency of craft producers increases in projects that aim to support them and their communities.

The alternative framework's paradigm 'coalescence' translates as 'growing together' and aims to encourage stakeholders in ethical craft initiatives to learn mutually from each other about their respective perspectives, approaches and circumstances, and to collectively develop craft practices that are relevant, feasible and therefore empowering in the local context for craft producers and other ethical craft stakeholders. This may well involve thinking differently about how to respond to grant scheme requirements, for example, by suggesting more locally relevant strategies, or to conduct collaborations differently, for example, by involving people with different expertise for newly suggested and more relevant project components.

Suggesting 'coalescence' as guiding paradigm is a result of the participatory research process, in which small opportunities for growing and learning together were accepted and taken further with much enthusiasm and promising results, such as the new collaborations after the focus groups.

'Coalescence' serves as overarching paradigm, that informs the other six components (Fig. 6). The goal is to achieve more equally shared agency among all stakeholders, but especially for target-level

craft producers, meaning to find ways of involving them at the beginning of a project, making information about other stakeholders and project conditions accessible to them, and letting them take the lead in identifying concerns regarding their lives, communities, and financial situation. The coalescence-informed impact is expected to achieve contextual relevance and autonomy for craft producers in their environments rather than universally streamlined processes that may lead to disappointing experiences and continuous dependency on grants. The principles 'co-release' and 'mutual care' suggest the importance of collectively changing the consolidated current system operations while being empathic and non-judgemental about the way other stakeholders approach projects, even if not agreeing with their behaviours and perspectives. The design methods in coalescence spirit exceed product development and marketing strategies and focus on building strong supportive alliances with other ethical craft stakeholders to make use of complementing expertise. Important is facilitating critical reflection, together with stakeholders from different system levels as a form of cross-level and peer-to-peer learning. Values support mutuality, equality, and participation more than integration into well-meaning hierarchies of philanthropy and patronage, whose roles remain important when they support initiatives towards autonomy and contextual relevance. Lastly, the alternative framework's character encourages pluriversal worldviews and contextual diversity, rather than trying to bend diverse contexts into universal standards.

The main objective of 'designing for coalescence' is that implementation-level and target-level stakeholders form lively, strong and constructive ethical craft coalitions in order to become more independent and autonomous to imposed instructions from the

political level or gain a collective voice in decisions of the political-level. Taking reference from design anthropologist, development critic and postcolonial theorist Arturo Escobar's pluriversal understanding of 'autonomía', in the true sense of autonomy this does not mean to quit collaboration with political-level stakeholders, but to achieve an interaction on more equal terms, in which the local expertise and contextual relevance guide collaborations and supportive activities (Escobar, 2018, 172-176)

Changing the current craft for empowerment systems cannot happen fast or easily because its behaviour is impacted by structures, processes and mindsets that were perpetuated, established, and consolidated over several decades. In addition, systems change is emergent and open-ended. It cannot be prescribed. Instead, systems change happens through leveraging a change, small or large, into a system, and then observe how the system's performance changes (Meadows, 2009, pp. 145-165)

5.3. A lab concept as an implementation possibility of 'designing for coalescence'

To illustrate a possibility of implementing the coalescence framework, a lab format was conceptualised, rooted in insights and real-life activities observed in the research process (Kulick, 2024, pp. 300-324). The lab is thought of as an independent entity, not associated with any NGO, business, or university (Fig. 3). At this point the lab is a projection, for how stakeholders of all backgrounds and levels are encouraged to come together and collectively conceive new approaches to ethical craft initiatives or components for their already existing ones. Through
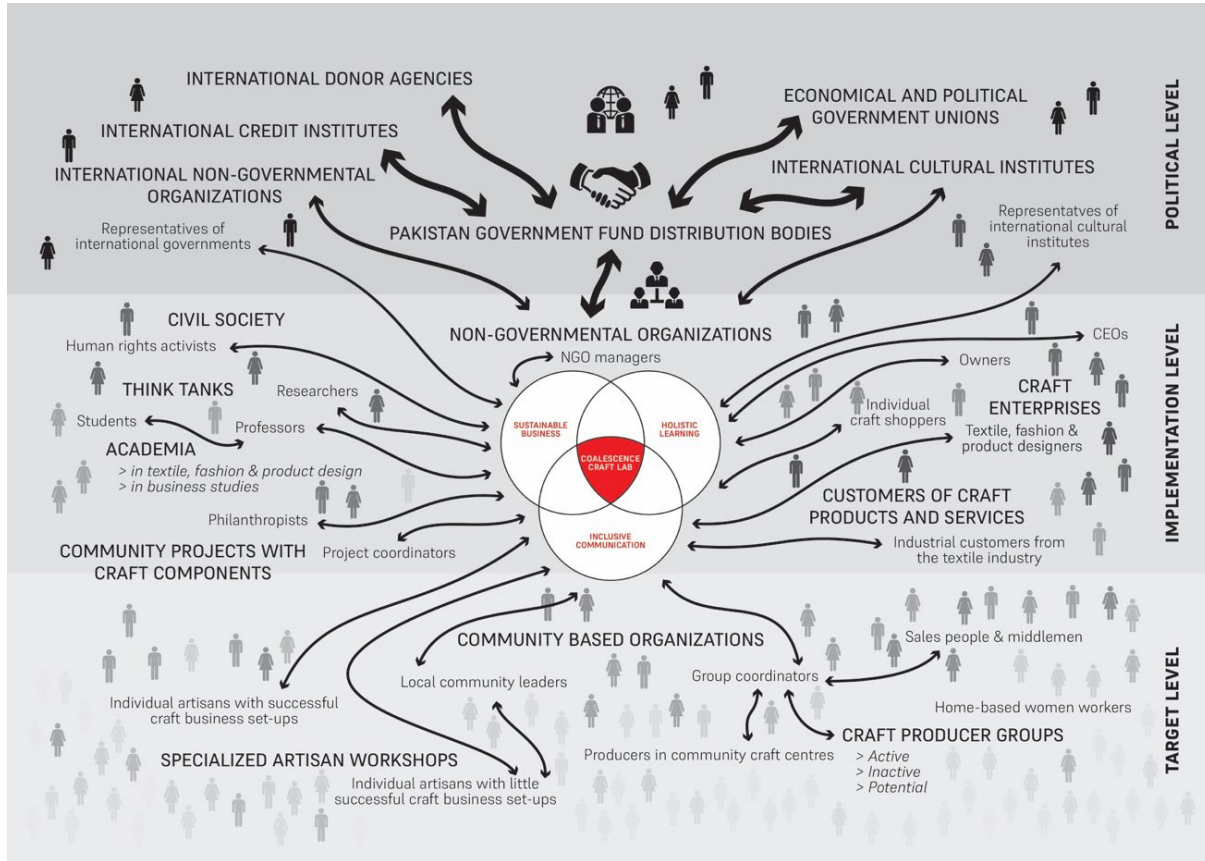
Fig. 3. The lab in the craft for empowerment system (Kulick, 2024, p. 301)

conversations, critical reflections, and collaborative practices, different stakeholders can benefit for their own respective projects by sharing their expertise and agency. Particular emphasis is on involving the target-level craft producers, because as the systems analysis showed, for them it is difficult to take the first step of initiating a project. The lab is envisioned as a self-organising laboratory with different membership and participation options that encourage commitment to the collaboration and the task of improving the impact of ethical craft initiatives. The lab's characteristics therefore resonate with those of a 'community of

practice,' which requires a domain (shared interest to improve the performance of the craft for empowerment system), a community (ethical craft stakeholders from all system levels) and a practice (ethical craft initiatives implementation approaches) (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002, pp. 29-40; Wenger Trayner and Wenger-Trainer, 2015, p. 2).

The lab combines the features of sustainable business, with craft production taking place at small scale at the lab as well as in different craft communities of Pakistan; holistic learning that enables lab members and participants to understand different circumstances, challenges and perspectives better; and inclusive communication that ensures transparency to all members and participants, including those target-level stakeholders that might be illiterate, or those stakeholders from any level that do not speak English or Urdu fluently.

6. Conclusions

The participatory research methodology significantly impacted the direction of this research project. The mutual impact between the research environment and its specific conditions, the research participants' openness and flexibility, and the researcher's immersive engagement in the field of ethical crafts enabled not only information about product designs, customer demands, and value chains, but more importantly, provided deep insights into the dynamics and relationships between different stakeholders.

Using this data, the craft for empowerment system was visualised, showing how top-down dominance, alienation, privileged and underprivileged marginalization, and preconceived roles of

beneficiaries and supporters repeat and impact the implementation of ethical craft projects.

On a positive note, this established system dynamic allows ethical craft projects to have a continuous place in the development aid and grassroots empowerment portfolio of international and local organizations and governments, and therefore grant schemes that fit ethical craft initiatives' objectives continue to launch.

On the other hand, the continuation of old patterns, rooted in unquestioned mindsets about structures, processes, and preconceived stakeholder roles as beneficiaries and helpers, also poses limitations as they see empowerment as a unidirectional adjustment into mainstream. While grant schemes enable this process, they are not in line with real-life conditions in the concerned communities of craft producers.

The open-ended nature of this research process enabled both participants and researchers to challenge preconceived notions of concerns, definitions of empowerment, and stereotypical stakeholder roles. It was only possible though, because the evolving research process extended over about six to seven years, following up with some research participants even afterwards.

The collective critical reflections impacted both, their different activities, such as the case study projects or university outreach projects of the participants, and the way the researcher planned and conducted the action research project, the case study and the focus groups. Frequent exchange of experiences showed that it is possible to translate insights and ideas from such critical reflection into activities that have more contextual relevance than top-down

imposed strategies. While top-down dynamics and stakeholder alienation cannot be changed easily, quickly, or through instruction, systemic change might be possible in small steps and projects, closely linked to stakeholders' better understanding of each other's motivations, experiences, lives, and work conditions.

One core insight of the research is that stakeholder relationships can gradually become more supportive by creating situations for mutual learning and exploring the realities of stakeholders distant from the own position in the craft for empowerment systems. The focus groups were one example in which stakeholders realised how they could mutually support each other's projects by sharing their expertise and resources, and this small opportunity for exchange was welcomed with enthusiasm and constructive ideas.

What was most unexpected and encouraging was that village women from the action research project presented their idea of supporting design students and academics by helping them with their projects if they could get a small room in the university. The fact that they not only had this idea but also felt that they had a platform, the audience, and the opportunity to voice this idea is possibly one of the most empowering moments of this research project, because a typical characteristic of not being empowered is the acceptance of not having a voice. Theories such as subaltern studies (Spivak, 2008) and critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), as well as the concept of development as a set of freedoms (Sen, 2000) unfolded here in real-life research.

The design framework 'designing for coalescence' aims to encourage stakeholders of ethical craft projects to collaborate towards a

critically reflective and mutually supportive dynamic of the craft for empowerment system. While founders and managers of ethical craft initiatives deserve nothing but respect for their oftentimes decades-long dedication and experiences, they themselves have critically reflected on the limitations posed by the requirements imposed on them from the political level, but they have learned how navigate this re-occurring challenge. Because they know also the conditions on the target level well, they are in a position to assist the target-level craft producers in gaining a voice. Generally, implementation-level stakeholders may play a central role in tackling the challenge of alienation in the craft for empowerment system as they are equipped with knowledge and expertise to facilitate well between all levels.

Lastly, the lab concept could not be tried and tested during the research process because it would have taken another few years to do so and to determine its impact on the craft for empowerment system. This research result, though, offers opportunities for further, more design-led research and practice about how to implement 'coalescence' in grassroots empowerment.

The most constructive impact of this design research would be if stakeholders in ethical craft initiatives in Pakistan or similar environments, are encouraged to experiment with their practical approaches, guided by coalescence. Such activities in the craft sector can include product development and sustainable value chain management, but more importantly practical strategies for bringing ethical craft stakeholders together who currently do not interact much while impacting each other's projects.

One risk is that even emerging methods and practices manifest through unquestioned repetition. Therefore, it remains important to apply a combination of immersion, participation and collective critical engagement – similar to that in the discussed research process – when developing coalescence-led practice. Designers can play a vital role here in different ways, as they can contribute methods of visualisation, conceptualisation, and hands-on practical experiments, whether in a lab format or in other formats that are feasible.

Finally, if through such communities of practice 'growing together' as the translation of 'coalescence' does not only refer to 'coming closer', but also to 'becoming better together' the performance of the craft for empowerment system might show changes towards more shared agency.

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