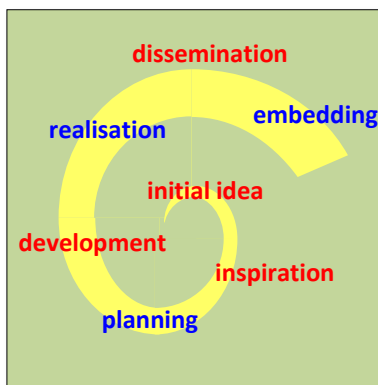


The Spiral of Initiatives

focuses on content



The Spiral of Initiatives illustrates the various stages in the development of an initiative.

What is the initiative? How far has it developed? Who needs to be involved at what stage? And what can be done to take it one step further?

It is not a linear process from A to B. Sometimes it is necessary to take a step backwards. This is why the process is presented as a spiral, rather than a line.

- An initiative begins with an **initial idea**. It may come from an individual or emerge from a group.
- When they start talking about it, it may **inspire** others. An informal network develops. Sooner or later this network wants to move towards action.
- Then the **planning** stage starts. Tasks are divided and the network tries to acquire space to work out their idea.
- With this space they can experiment and **develop** a practice that appears to work.
- This should convince stakeholders to move towards **realising** the initiative.
- When it is successful, the new practice **disseminates** to others, who will emulate it.
- When the new practice becomes normal practice, procedures are adapted to it and it becomes **embedded** in the structure.

Of course, not all initiatives proceed so smoothly through the spiral. The process can get stuck, fall back, and resume to earlier stages. Each stage demands different types of activities, and different actors' involvement. It is helpful to know what stage you are at, which priorities to set and pitfalls to avoid.

Initial Idea

Someone thinks outside of the box. Maybe they have been exposed to different people, places or ideas. External pressure can also force people outside of their comfort zones, kick-starting the spiral. Healthy interaction within a network can also lead to co-creation and the launch of a new idea.

Inspiration

Initiators look for likeminded people, those with similar interests, and risk takers. They meet informally and start dreaming together. When a dream is shared, this increases the chance that it might come true. This generates energy. When the shared ambition gets more powerful, an informal network of change agents emerges.

A note on ambitions: They are not the same as targets. They are about dreams. Genuine ambitions are not selfish. Acquiring money and power are not ambitions but means to an end.

Planning

The change agents start to organise themselves. Perhaps they already have the means to proceed with a plan of action to the next stage. But more often than not, they must acquire space from others; perhaps in the form of funding, or permission from those who can provide room for experimentation (ie. the 'enabling community' of financiers and managers).

They negotiate. The challenge here is to agree on a structure that allows for development, making mistakes and learning. At this stage, it is not necessary for the enabling community to fully share the vision of the change agents. Indeed, it may be a waste of time trying to convince them. The gatekeepers will provide room if they feel it may serve their interests.

Although it helps when ambitions are shared, it is not a precondition to get things moving at this stage. What the change agents really need now is to buy time; to prove that their idea is worthwhile at a later stage, when it's really necessary.

For now, agreements should include a mechanism which makes the gatekeeper confident that the space granted is being used well.

Development

The change agents try to develop a practise that works. They should not try to change all at once, but first show that change is possible. They can do this by collating proof and examples. That is what they have acquired the space for.

This is the nature of many scientific experiments and pilot projects in sustainable development.

At this stage, they may engage outside expertise and other assistance. It is also wise to involve stakeholders who must move in the next phase. Doing so now may strengthen the informal network of change agents needed in the inevitable power struggle. Contacts can be built up gradually and low key.

Realisation

For the new practice to be implemented on a wider scale, actors must move. This means change. Negotiation, strategic positioning and power play dominate this stage. A balance must be found between give and take.

The change agents need to use all the proof they have to persuade others that the benefits of the change will outweigh the costs and risks. The negotiations are about interests and targets. Everyone must compromise somewhat to make things fit. This process takes energy (in contrast to the sharing of ambitions at the Inspiration stage).

Dissemination

If the initiative is a success, others will want to adopt it. This may happen spontaneously or perhaps the original change agents wish to pass it on. Then they must consider their target group, and which channels and links are best to reach them.

In the context of development work, access to information and resources is often critical. Access is often used as a weapon in power struggles.

Embedding

The change becomes regular practice to which the structure adapts itself. Those who maintain the structure need to be engaged. Where structure and practice do not fit well together, new ideas and initiatives will emerge, and the spiral will start again...

Origin of the tool

In its original form this model was called the Spiral of Innovations. It was developed by Eelke Wielinga and Wim Zaalmink within the framework of the experiment "Networks in Livestock Farming (2004-2007)". The experiment dealt with networks of farmers who came with initiatives for sustainable innovations in their sector. This tool visualised what stages the facilitators might be assisting in over a period of one year; the stages of inspiration, planning and development.

First published in:

Wielinga, H.E., Zaalmink, B.W., Bergevoet, R.H.M., Geerling-Eiff, F.A., Holster, H., Hoogerwerf, L., Vrolijk, M. (2007): *Networks with Free Actors: encouraging sustainable innovations in animal husbandry by using the FAN approach (Free Actors in Networks)*. Wageningen University and Research.