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Social Compounding

Critical Principles

Twelve principles

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CRITICAL PRINCIPLES

The practices that we share here aren't automatically "good". Community-led systems can build up trust, care, and capacity. But they can just as easily build up shame, obligation, gatekeeping, surveillance, unpaid work, and dependency. These principles are meant to travel with the social compounding mechanisms we identified. Keep them in mind as you read or come up with new ideas.

01 / 12

Access is not the same as power

Being able to use a shared system isn’t the same as having a say in how it’s run. The real question is who gets to change the rules, control the data, manage what it owns, and shape where it goes.

02 / 12

Taking part isn’t the same as having a voice

Meetings, votes, and assemblies can still be dominated by whoever has more time, confidence, status, education, fluency in the language, or better access to the technology.

03 / 12

Conflict is not failure

Any shared system needs fair ways to handle disagreement, hold people to account, make repairs, and change the rules. Falling out is part of the work, not a sign it’s broken.

04 / 12

Local doesn’t always mean freeing

Local systems can build accountability and belonging, but they can also harden exclusion, suspicion of outsiders, and old hierarchies.

05 / 12

Informal can be a strength and a risk

Informal systems tend to be fast, flexible, and caring. They can also lack transparency, legal protection, and safeguards when something goes wrong.

06 / 12

Resilience can become a trap

Praising people for coping can excuse the conditions forcing them to cope in the first place – conditions they shouldn’t have to endure at all.

07 / 12

Boundaries can shut people out

Every shared system needs rules about who can use it, benefit from it, contribute, and decide. Those rules have to be clear, open to change, and mindful of the people at the edges.

08 / 12

Leaving has to be possible

Trust and belonging keep care alive, but they can also make it hard to say no. Healthy systems leave room to disagree, step back, walk away, and mend.

09 / 12

The future shouldn’t silence the present

Thinking ahead for future generations matters – but it can’t be used to wave away urgent needs people have right now.

10 / 12

Nature isn’t a side issue

Land, water, seeds, forests, energy, repair, and waste aren’t separate from collective wealth. They’re a critical part of it.

11 / 12

Memory is political

Archives, maps, oral histories, datasets, and inherited knowledge decide whose suffering counts, whose expertise is recognised, and whose claims get taken seriously.

12 / 12

What you measure can distort what you value

Impact metrics tend to reward what’s easy to count, while missing what isn’t – trust, dignity, confidence, less fear, shared knowledge, collective imagination.