

A report on reimagining the future of transformative climate research funding



Impossible Projects



This report is a collaborative effort by Alex Szwaj, Kornelia Dimitrova, Jonas Torrens, Mattijs Taanman, Stephanie Holst. The views, recommendations and insights are not representative of the NWO's position or practices, but of the New Ways of Funding team. This research and report has been made possible by Klimaatonderzoek Initiatief Nederland (KIN) and Foundation We Are.



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What is at stake?

Research funding sustains academic knowledge production—its methods, standards, and institutional guarantees. But it is also asked to help realize public missions. Pursuing the latter requires including other types of knowledge and ways of producing it, and investing in the difficult work of integration. This can conflict with, or shift attention and resources away from, the very structures that often define academic legitimacy. Yet the stakes are not only institutional. Addressing urgent challenges such as climate change or social inclusion requires not just knowledge, but change—often faster than academic cycles allow, and no less rigorous for that.

Over time, layers of past decisions have created a complex landscape of funding constraints that determine what gets researched, by whom, and to what ends. In tandem with university policies, labour regulations, and an ever-evolving academic culture, these systems can make or break careers, research lines, and infrastructures. Many of these systemic impacts fall outside the traditional remit of funding agencies and arise as unintended consequences of well-intended efforts. Continuing to fund research in the same ways predictably yields the same kinds of results, outcomes that many now see as falling short of what urgent challenges demand. It is therefore essential to periodically reflect on the assumptions that inform funding and to assess their implications.

This report is the culmination of an attempt to foster this reflexivity, carried out by the New Ways of Funding team, through the **Impossible Projects** call for ideas and co-creative process. New Ways of Funding was motivated by a recognition that the current funding landscape in the Netherlands faces increasing demand to do more for transformative and transdisciplinary climate research. There is a growing appetite among funders and researchers for fresh perspectives on how to address this challenge. We proposed an experimental co-design research to deepen understanding of how the current funding system could operate differently, catering more closely to the (knowledge) demands of a rapidly changing climate. Our collaboration explored and identified systemic enablers and constraints to alternative ways of funding, co-creating and testing new forms with key actors.

The funding system was not designed with the open bill to fund "transformative climate research". It has evolved over time incorporating many layers of changes, reforms, adaptations, cut-backs, agendas, policies and legal constraints that served and still serve a purpose. The system is complex, so no single actor has a perfect overview, and no single actor has the ability to change the system. While there is substantial expertise dedicated to running, maintaining and updating this system, and every call can set its own exceptions, it can be hard for funders to 'know what they don't know'—in effect, funding calls invite participation of very particular kinds of research and consortia, and as a result they end up 'seeing' the research they already illuminate, and the actors that fit their criteria.

The **Impossible Projects** call examined in this report, offers an opportunity to feel in the dark, i.e. to probe into the areas of research that NWO and KIN would usually not go, not because they aren't relevant, but because these areas, their needs and added value, are perhaps unfamiliar or unknown to them. By framing an open call around a set of promising ideas, which are currently impossible to fund, we turned our attention to new spaces of possibility. We ran a co-creation process for creating prototypes of funding instruments, reverse-engineered from five 'un-fundable gems'. As a result, we identified novel insights, first recommendations and a promising new approach for reflecting on research priorities, processes, and possibilities, and designing pioneering and innovative calls.

This report is for those involved in conceiving, running, regulating, and overseeing research funding processes and who are concerned with the (untapped) possibilities for funding more transformative and transdisciplinary research, and who are open to exploring alternative approaches. Rather than offering a one-size-fits-all answer, it outlines an approach that 'flips the script' to foreground research ideas unconstrained by existing funding schemes and reverse-engineers funding possibilities to make those gems possible. That approach, and aspects of the process we have devised, may be applicable in other settings. We hope to foster a more reflexive and co-creative exploration of what could and should happen to make the most of transformative research, believing it offers the strongest pathway for systemic change and addressing complex societal challenges.

How did we do it?

This collaboration was started from the mutual recognition and interest for co-creative and bottom-up processes geared to expand what is considered possible within the funding system. *Klimaatonderzoek Initiatief Nederland (KIN)* initiated consultations with various institutes and individual researchers invested in exploring new forms of collaboration, and, through matchmaking, brought together the group that came to be known as the *New Ways of Funding* initiative.

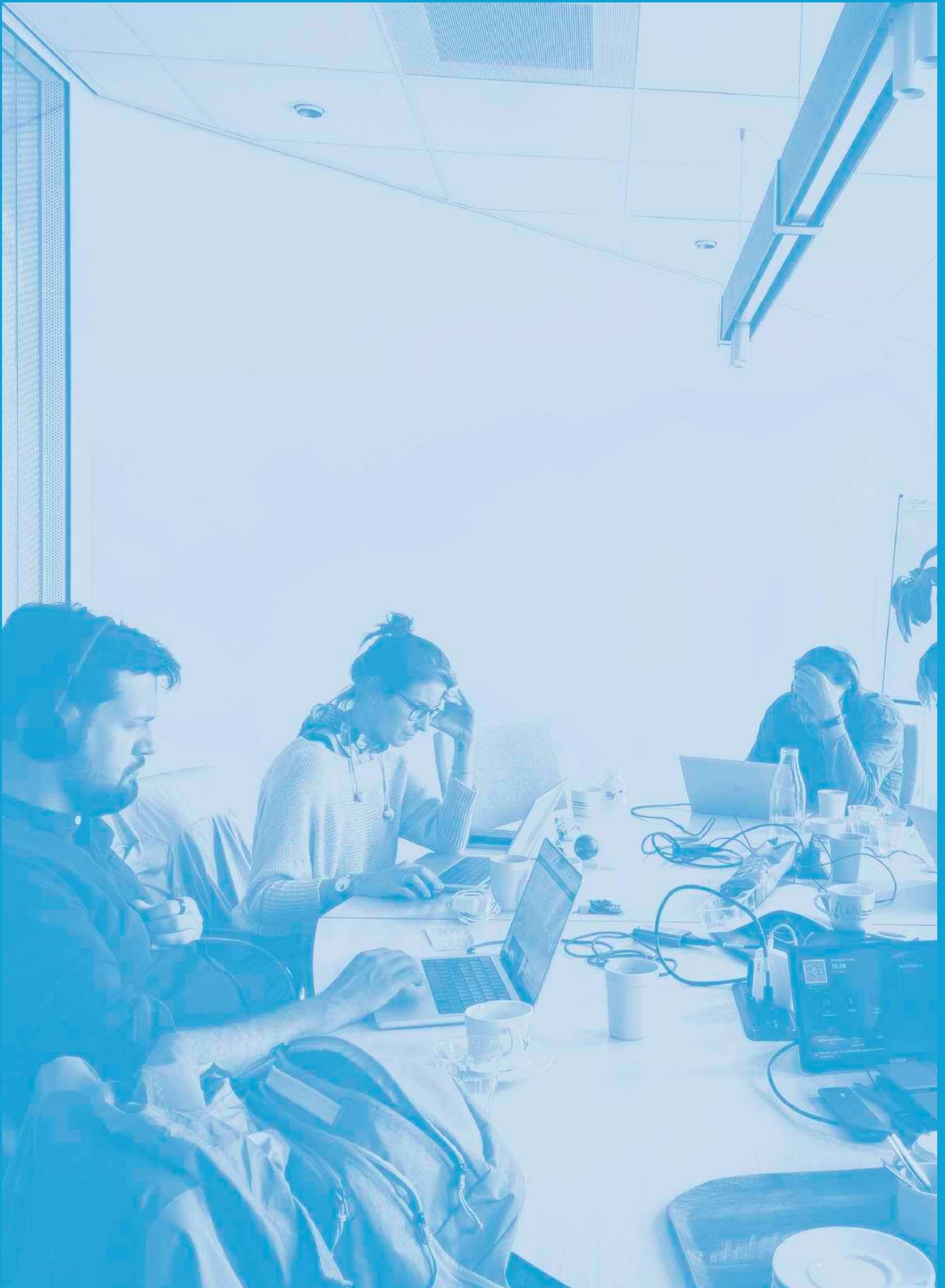
First, we assembled to explore mutual interests and opportunities. Rather than treating this as a traditional research process, it was clear that the collaboration with KIN afforded more interesting possibilities for using calls strategically to surface unseen and unexpected forms of research. We realised early on that we needed insight from others who have either helped build the funding system as it is (elders) or who have been exploring other ways of navigating it (mavericks), and conducted six interviews with these groups. Those interviews served to sensitise us to:

- The complexity and diversity of the funding system, but also to the gaps, cracks and attitudes it creates, and the ways interactions with university policies, labour laws, and specific academic cultures create a range of unintended and at times problematic outcomes.
- The ambivalent relationship that many researchers have with the funding system and the structures it creates, e.g. many successful researchers are successful in spite of funding rules, not because of them.
- Attempts to render academic funding more responsive to societal needs sometimes also backfire, creating increasingly prescriptive modes of research that constrain rather than enable transformative research.

The interviews highlighted the need for engagement with researchers who are not the usual or frequent beneficiaries of the existing system, who may indeed be (systematically) disadvantaged or disqualified in the current settings.

For this reason, we set out an alternative approach—issuing a call for so-called "unfundable gems". In this process, one idea was essential—that in order to better grasp the constraints of the existing system we need to devise 'probes' that push against visible and invisible boundaries that define what's 'possible' – and that the respondents of the call for ideas could provide us with such probes. Each idea submitted highlighted different elements of the funding system and served to provoke a reassessment of why those constraints existed, and how could the system be thought of otherwise.

The spirit of this effort can be summarised in the questions "what else is possible?" and "how might we make this possible or normal?". This ethos was present throughout, from how we organised our internal meetings, to the format of the call for ideas, to how we chose to share our results (a podcast). An intentional, design-led approach, with quick reflexive cycles, allowed us to identify promising avenues for change and to creatively surface multiple possibilities for funding otherwise.



What happened?

1

A call for unfundable ideas

To map out the unknown unknowns (ideas that never get presented at funders), we set up an experimental open call for ideas asking for brief descriptions of 'unfundable gems': research that is considered impossible to fund, not because it can't be done, but because it creates friction with, or simply falls outside of existing funding structures. In return, we offered a €500 development budget for selected authors to elaborate their idea in a short document, which would form the basis of a co-design workshop with peers, funders, and system actors to 'reverse engineer' potential new schemes and instruments capable of supporting such alternative or underexplored ways of working.

To keep the call for ideas accessible for researchers in the broadest sense, especially those whose practice is often marginalised or 'unseen' by mainstream funding, and to avoid unpaid application labour, we designed a low-effort entry process consisting of a 3-minute audio submission (in either Dutch or English) through a dedicated webform on KIN's website.

2

Evaluation

Pre-selection: The play-off evaluation method

The open call for ideas received 37 submissions, from which a selection of five needed to be made. We did this in two rounds: the first round (or pre-selection) was conducted by the NWF team and looked for the uniqueness of the ideas ("gem quality"), their possibility to achieve more than they set out for ("upside risk"), and to what extent they were 'interestingly unfundable'. It involved a listening session where each team member was assigned a list of ideas, paired for a comparative evaluation / play-off evaluation method.

After each idea had been listened to and had been evaluated by three different team members, we discussed the high ranking ideas to create a shortlist consisting of twelve submissions and ended the pre-selection with a collective reflection.

Focus session

The second evaluation round was conducted by a committee. Their aim was to make a final selection of five ideas that would reflect a diverse range of systemic constraints, not simply the "best" ideas, but those that collectively offered the most learning potential for future funding tools for KIN and NWO.

During the focus session itself, the committee discussed what interesting questions and challenges the ideas exposed, and which of these showed promising potential.

3

Podcasts

We held individual calls with the selected authors and received documents in which they elaborated on their ideas, following individual questions tailored from the focus session. We analyzed and cross-checked the ideas 'rough edges' (pioneering aspects and points where the idea might create friction with existing funding schemes) and perceived constraints with insights from our interviews. This naturally gave rise to generative discussions and first ideas for new funding models, which prompted us to record key reflections in a team dialogue podcast, in order to give insight into our process, share our first research insights and give the 'unseen ideas' a platform in an accessible way.

4

Co-design session

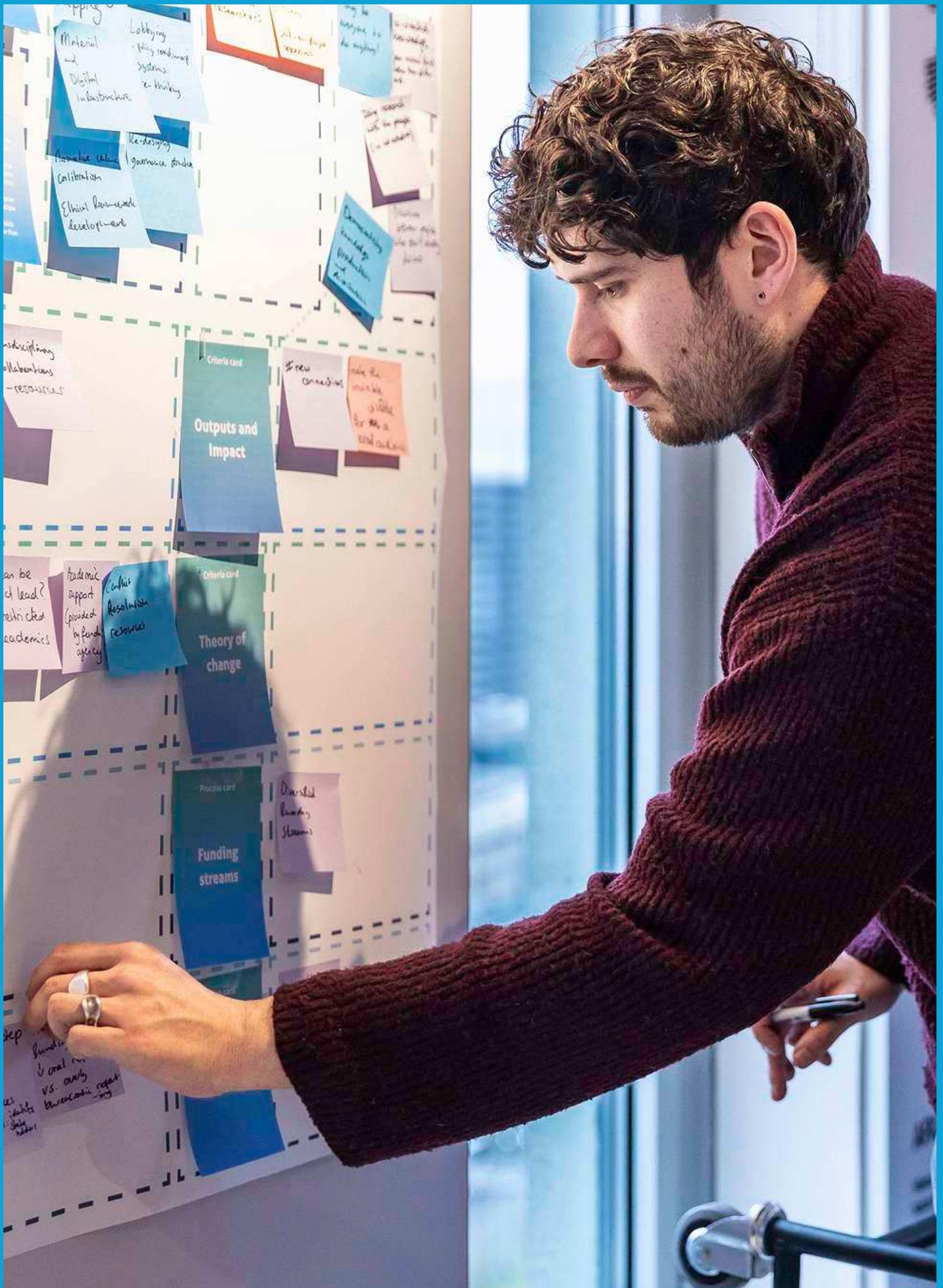
Treating each idea as a concrete example of a broader typology of research, currently overlooked by existing funding models, the submitted documents were analysed and translated into workshop prompts which could focus the discussion not only on the individual proposal, but on the larger category it represents.

For the workshop, we invited funders from a range of public funding organisations (beyond the scientific sector) but also relevant researchers, innovators, and facilitators and curated dedicated tables so that each *Impossible Project* idea had its own group with relevant expertise which could brainstorm on the funding structures needed to support its idea typology.

The aim was to work backwards, or reverse-engineer, the missing question / funding call or scheme behind these ideas. I.e. "If we want to receive an application such as this idea, what funding scheme would need to exist?"

Each group discussed and sketched out a possible scheme, detailing its purpose and supported activities, target applicants and collaboration types, underlying goals and definitions of research, as well as proposed funding criteria, structures, and processes.

Beyond the brainstorming activity, we centred collective reflections on the co-creative process in the session.



What did we find?

By experimenting with an open call and submission format, and bringing funders and researchers together to co-design, we were able to test different mental models and how they shape funding schemes, generating early insights with low risk.

From boundaries to flags

In the co-design session, the challenge of balancing complete openness of calls with constraints, and specifically identifying which constraints are enabling versus disabling, was highlighted. Indeed, we encountered this same challenge when creating the *Impossible Projects* open call for ideas experiment. Testing the call for ideas in a small scale co-design session at KNMI, we realised that 'flag thinking' rather than 'boundary thinking' was needed: even open questions tend to spark debates about what counts as 'in' or 'out', making preparation overly focused on exclusions. Defining the aim (the flag, why the call exists and what it seeks to achieve) with extreme clarity and ensuring it is credible and consistently communicated (as KIN helped ensure), allowed us to keep exclusion criteria loose, while still attracting fitting submissions.

Funders unable to define or embody this aim often revert to boundary-setting, producing safe but predictable proposals. Truly open calls remain difficult: transdisciplinary and design research carry jargon and implicit expectations. We resisted listing 'normal' exclusions, which would have narrowed responses and created a Catch-22: trying to keep the call open while specifying what closes it. The experiment allowed us to see whether researchers could respond to truly open calls and how they would steer for value and impact rather than checklists and compliance.

Engagement and inspiration

The call for ideas generated considerable excitement. Despite skepticism around the modest compensation offered (€ 500 ex. VAT), researchers from academia, the cultural sector and various NGOs were eager to share their ideas and get the opportunity to 'be seen' and/or to receive some form of validation and feedback, either in terms that, "Yes, your idea is indeed unfundable", or "Yes, your idea has the potential to create a certain value that is needed".

While the framing of the open call for ideas focused on motivation and uncovering 'hidden gems', which in part generated this excitement and engagement, the aim to promote ideas with strong transformative character and potential could have been emphasised more. The submissions emphasised that getting the aim right, and testing variants on its formulation and on the language used, is very important, as they have a strong influence on who responds and the kind of proposals received.

What is changing?

The submissions validated known constraints while exposing new and sometimes paradigm-shifting perspectives on research, knowledge production, and the role funders can play. The patterns of unfundable proposals point to several vectors for change, identifying forces that drive or resist transformation in the research funding system.

Vectors of change:

Expanding definitions of research

What qualifies as research? Who qualifies as a researcher? The answers to these questions are not straightforward, yet they determine who is eligible for NWO funding.

Ideas were considered unfundable because they fell outside conventional definitions of research, exposing narrow assumptions about valid knowledge production. Some proposed art as an epistemic mode rather than mere communication. A large portion of proposals urged expanding who can be funded and whose knowledge counts. This trend is largely connected to conventional scientists becoming increasingly aware that the polycrisis requires all forms of knowledge to work together, rather than to operate in silos.

Prioritisation of academic over practice-based research

Many conventional funding models tend to focus on generating 'new' knowledge, while translation of scientific knowledge into alternative formats is impactful but undervalued academically.

Several applicants sought to build collaborative infrastructures without narrow goals or to create data collections, databases, or knowledge products openly accessible to the public, which current schemes rarely fund or prioritise. Impact-driven dissemination and weaving academic and practical knowledge, which is necessary for widespread societal transition, often falls between the gaps of funding streams.

Structural funding constraints

Siloed funding streams and state aid laws also contribute to non-equal collaborations, as not all participants can be (equally) funded. These are seen as constraints for several transdisciplinary ideas, where knowledge and practice interweave, those end up sitting between existing funding mechanisms, partially overlapping with many, but not strongly fitting any in particular, thus facing intersectional exclusion bias.

From funders to co-carers

The warm up exercises and reflections in the co-design session exposed a lot of heavy emotional baggage or 'trauma' from the competitive nature of academia and negative examples from past interactions with some of the funding organisations involved, which by the end of the session were replaced by feelings of hope and excitement. Being open to dialogue with applicants, in honest and humble ways, while also taking up responsibility and duty of care to the field and its practitioners is a novel and noble role funders should take if they hope to partner up with the field and build shared resilience, rather than staying in the convention role of arbiter and gatekeeper.

Policy, KPI's, procedures and risk

Learning- or reflection-driven approaches with open-ended outcomes, process-based research that focus on creating shared mental models, values and/or meaning do not fit typical research output structures. Deep impacts (such as emotional, systemic, relational, or behavioural change) are deemed difficult to measure, and speculative or imaginative methods are hard to evaluate within traditional criteria. Other projects that were deemed unfundable strived for impacts which would unfold on timescales beyond standard funding horizons.

Proposals that require long-term, multi-party commitments beyond the mandate or risk appetite of research funders, and slow, relational, or administrative processes which are crucial to sustain collaborations are often unsupported. Essential pre-project or post-project activities lack support, thus, such collaborations may be deemed practically unfundable.

These evaluation criteria are NWO policy decisions and are down to a mix of funder's policies and legal constraints.

Power, paradigms and justice

Research that seeks to redistribute power or challenge assumptions embedded in funding structures is often deemed unfundable, including decolonial, critical, or activist research. Here we can think of research proposals that aim to redistribute expertise or open access to scientific and professional authority, while others highlighted the need for cultural interventions while questioning who decides which values are legitimised. Other examples emphasise supporting researchers or 'transition pioneers' directly (through personal capacity-making grants), improved working conditions, or personal resilience, rather than tying support to project-based outputs.

The open call for ideas and co-design experiment demonstrate that there is a lot of existing imagination on how funding can be both more inclusive and transformative. By experimenting with formats, embracing open-ended exploration, and fostering trust between funders and researchers, it is possible to uncover hidden potential, challenge assumptions, and test new approaches to research support.

But what would it look like to act on these vectors of change, feeding or shrinking them? The following section provides an overview of the *Impossible Project* ideas selected, the gaps or constraints in current funding they reveal, and the funding scheme concepts generated in the co-design session attempting to close those gaps.

Overview of the 5 Impossible Project Ideas and their 'Almost Impossible Funding Schemes'

Centering Designing the Otherwise (by Irene Luque Martin)

Brief description

In a set of ateliers where diverse spatial design practices co-exist, the discipline is dismantled and new, just, bottom up parameters and forms of knowledge are centred and legitimised.

Typology

Critical, open-ended, participatory research process as a support infrastructure for practice-based, marginalised and paradigm-shifting research to co-exist and exchange

Added value

- Expanding narrow definitions of "research" and "knowledge" from bottom-up
- Connecting diverse knowledge holders (scientific and non-)
- Supporting different epistemologies and their exchange
- Advancing open science by integrating multiple ways of knowing

Unfundable aspects

- Beyond current definitions of "scientific research"
- Non-scientific forms or formats of outputs
- Practitioners as co-researchers beyond conventional academic roles
- Open and emergent processes and methodologies, beyond standard evaluation criteria

Funding scheme(s) prototyped

Pluralising Knowledge Program

- Process-based funding to pluralise a discipline
- Supports dialogue, unlearning, and epistemic friction
- Multiple grant sizes, including long-term trajectories
- Dialogue-based evaluation with 'soft' support

Practice-Based /

Adaptive Network Building Grants

- Funds transdisciplinary networks beyond researchers
- Prioritises leadership, care, and equitable collaboration
- Supports ateliers, exchanges, and shared infrastructures
- Open-ended timelines with phase-based funding

Adaptive Intelligence for Everyone (by Mattijn van Hoek and Ton Botterhuis)

Brief description

In an investigation on how to make technical and policy expertise accessible to citizens via an AI platform, the monopoly of closed expertise is broken and grassroots initiatives gain a voice.

Typology

Participatory infrastructure and emerging technologies as a tool for paradigm shifts in research and dissemination

Added value

- Focusing research funding on practical, real-world applications
- Democratising science through participatory, bottom-up approaches
- Using research to question and rebalance government and market power
- Leveraging existing data and expertise for meaningful social change

Unfundable aspects

- Focus on developing infrastructure, tools, or products, not new academic knowledge
- Outputs centered on dissemination and access, not discovery
- Questions current publishing and validation practices
- Rapid technological evolution clashes with traditional research cycles

Funding scheme(s) prototyped

Supportive Structures for Citizen Initiatives

- Builds infrastructure for equal citizen-institution partnerships
- Funds iterative prototyping and adaptive redesign
- Assesses collaboration quality and shared ownership
- Backed by cross-sector funding coalitions

Critical Validation Infrastructures

- Funds public infrastructure for validating knowledge claims
- Combines citizens with formal validation authorities
- Three-stage pathway from high-risk development to public ownership
- Open-source, publicly governed decision support

Transition Income (by Ad Vlems and Monique Vissers)

Brief description

The expertise, positive energy and experience necessary for the climate transition is directed to where it is most needed by funding transition research pioneers instead of projects.

Typology

Person based funding with open-ended effect, as a means to direct knowledge towards practical application and transformative work

Added value

- Fair pay and realistic cost coverage
- Shift from proposal writing to meaningful research and impact work
- Reduce pressure from unhelpful metrics, competition, and publication cycles
- Prioritise collaboration and transparency

Unfundable aspects

- Prioritisation of individual economic support over projects
- Practitioners beyond the traditional definition of 'researcher'
- Open-ended outcomes that complicate assessments
- Exploratory and long-term approaches beyond narrowly defined calls or scopes

Funding scheme(s) prototyped

Impact Fellowships (Transition Income)

- Person-based funding for transition pioneers
- 3-4 years of income support with regular check-ins
- Focus on personal development, reflection, and social value
- Enables sustained practice beyond project logic

The Port as a Pulse (by Dr Lucy Gilliam and Tanner Tuttle)

Brief description

The role of Rotterdam port is reimagined from 'linear throughput hub' to 'regenerative climate resilient economic node' where diverse actors co-create transition pathways beyond growth

Typology

Long-term, speculative, location-based research as a catalyst for collective and systemic transitions

Added value

- Collective action across science, citizens, and policy actors
- Long-term partnerships, shared responsibility and learning
- Scaling learnings from local contexts across regions and systems
- Funding as a strategic investment for social and ecological returns

Unfundable aspects

- Work beyond traditional project formats or short-term deliverables
- Action-oriented, entrepreneurial research, beyond traditional academic research
- Complex scope and scale spanning multiple domains and timescales
- Impact unfolding over the long term, beyond funding cycles

Funding scheme(s) prototyped

Collective Learning and Discovery / Dynamic Collaboration Grants

- Funds open-ended, multi-stakeholder learning processes
- Uses Theory of Action instead of fixed outcomes
- Rhythm-based funding with adaptive review
- Designed for contested, uncertain transition contexts

Baseline Social Responsibility Funding

- Core capacity funding to ensure continuity
- Support for research time, governance, and admin
- Supports evolving consortia tackling systemic issues
- Funds conditions for impact, not projects

Choir of the Sea (by Remco de Kluizenaar)

Brief description

In an exchange with marine ecology researchers, a sound artist develops songs for amateur choirs, inspiring many to connect with marine ecologies and learn about human impact.

Typology

Participatory cultural production as a vehicle for disseminating knowledge and generating new perspectives, research questions and networks

Added value

- New research questions, frameworks and methodologies
- Cross-disciplinary networks and collaboration
- Deeper embedding of science in society and culture
- Co-creation and dialogue for open, reflexive research cultures

Unfundable aspects

- Does not fit current definitions of "scientific research"
- Non-scientific outputs that cross into cultural or social domains
- Non-academic or practice-based collaborators

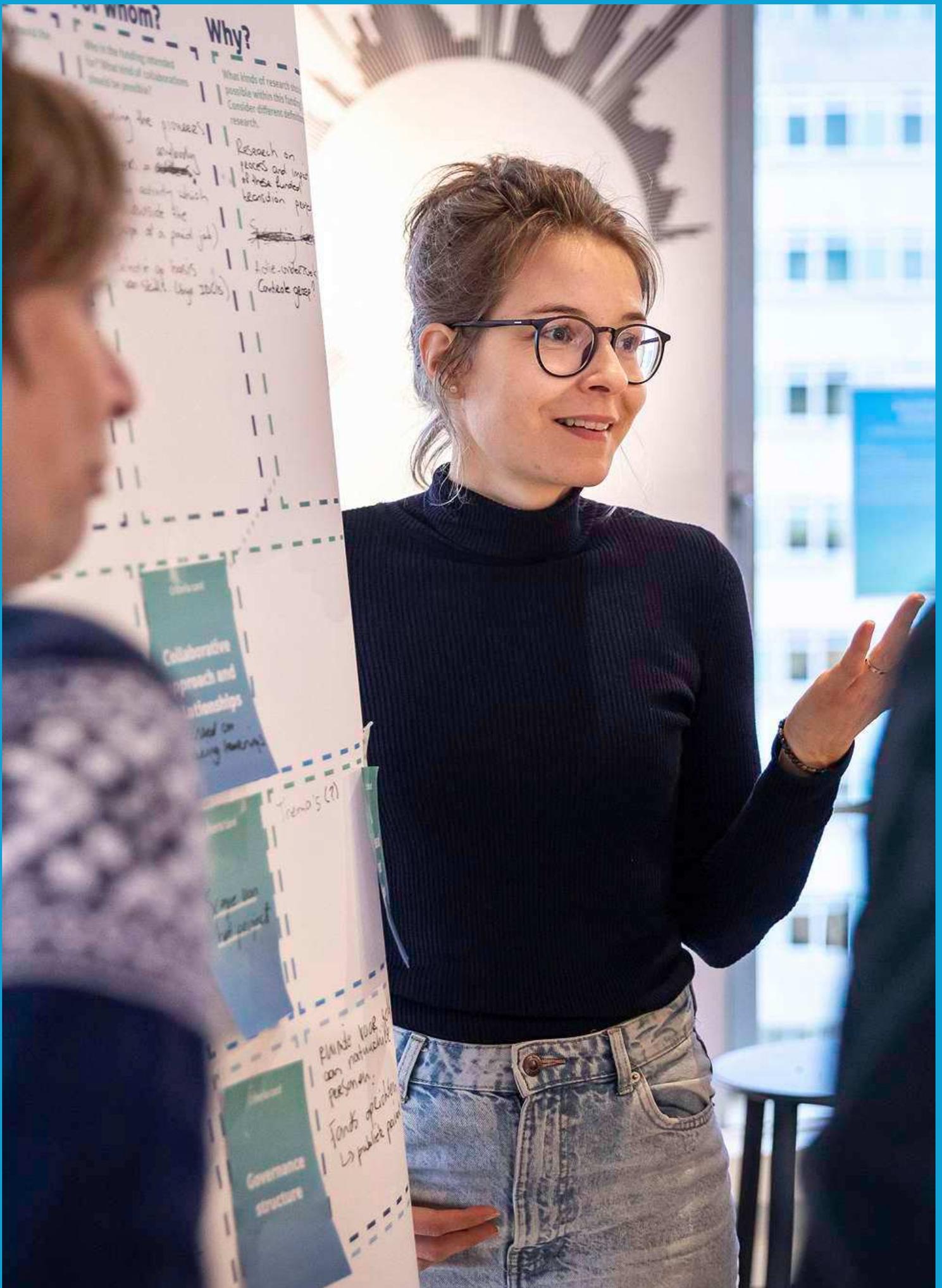
Funding scheme(s) prototyped

The Lean Open Call

- Light-weight entry with quality check and lottery allocation
- Centres cultural production and participatory knowledge-making
- Lump-sum funding with minimal administration
- Bridges cultural and scientific funding; seeds future networks

Scaled Impact Initiatives

- Impact-first funding for long-term climate transition work
- Transition track record based allocation
- Three scales: experimenting, scaling, institutionalising
- Moves beyond short-term project funding



Project

The Port as a Pulse

Project description

The Port as a Pulse explores the integration of the 100% renewable port zone, major international hub of regenerative climate solutions towards 2050.

The Observatory of Trade, Materials, Energy, and Justice Pulse is a key platform to transform the Port of Rotterdam from a fossil-fueled development hub into a regenerative node within a sufficiency-based economy. By integrating satellite data, shipping records, led accounts, and citizen science, it creates a public-facing interface for systemic insight and policy integration. Through scenario modeling, storytelling, and participatory design the Observatory invites diverse actors to co-create transition pathways beyond growth. This project challenges traditional silos and dominant metrics, making the invisible visible and catalyzing a just, climate-resilient transformation rooted in planetary boundaries.

The Port as a Pulse

Project potential

- Inspire collective action across science, citizens, and policy makers
- Shift from local contexts and scale learning across regions and systems
- Strengthen interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary collaboration for societal transitions
- Use funding as a strategic investment for social and ecological returns
- Support long-term partnerships that build ethical responsibility and learning

Project constraints

- The work does not align with traditional project formats or short-term deliverables
- It emphasizes action-oriented or entrepreneurial research practices, beyond traditional academic research
- Scope and scale of the initiative are complex, spanning multiple domains or timescales
- The expected impact unfolds over the long term rather than within funding cycles

What for?

What type of activities should the funding support?

- VALUES - CONGRUENT
- OUTCOME - BASED
- ITERATIVE / INCREMENTAL
- FLEXIBLE
- EXPLORATORY (GRASPING IN THE DARK)
- Impact people
- ALIGNMENT / FACILITATION /
- EMPHASIS ON "SOCIAL GOOD"
- ENABLING PROCESSES, EVENTS & ARTIFACTS
- WHICH BRING ABOUT THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOLUTIONS
- POSITIVE / MENETIC PROPAGATION

For wh

Who is the funding for? What kind of support should be provided?

- IMPACT P
- OBSERVERS MONITORING
- ENABLE IN ENGAGEMENT CONTRIBUT
- FUNDING C
- ACT / CRE (ISTS) NARRATI
- (INTEGRATED)
- OPEN, ACCO
- INTERGENER

Criteria card

ENABLE: Freedom

Criteria card

Criteria card

What shifted?

The impact of this project reaches far beyond its tangible outputs, touching relationships, language and the very way we understand knowledge and research. It has opened a deeper, more 'soft' space for working collectively and acknowledging different perspectives.

New coalitions and perspectives

The process created new coalitions, not only within the working group but also among participants in the co-design sessions, who began to see each other's roles, strengths, and struggles with fresh eyes. People gained insight into the funding side — *"I found it surprisingly difficult to come up with the right constraints."* *"It opened up a complete new world"* — while also questioning assumptions such as that *"scientists already get money for what they want to do, they don't need more,"* and recognizing the often invisible impact work done in their own time. By looking at ideas together from different perspectives, the group made them *"better, clearer and more inclusive,"* and gently unsettled fixed beliefs about what research is and what counts as knowledge.

We operate from certain beliefs and world views and by bringing different people from different backgrounds together it challenges our views and language. We saw the benefits for our working group and the participants to look at an idea from different perspectives—to make it better, clearer and more inclusive.

"The gathering today and the human warmth that's here and the exploration and the energy that I'm getting from this is intangible, but massively valuable."

New language and dialogue

Furthermore, a new shared language started to emerge, but not without discomfort. *"When the two of you started to put it in words of how a fund application should look like and what kind of goals it reaches, then the level of words becomes a bit more abstract. And it is the kind of language that I really hardly speak. So it was really interesting to hear this. And I don't know whether I need to be able to speak that language or not, or whether the funds should adapt and make it more simple."*

Terms such as 'Impact Practitioners' and 'Collective' instead of collaboration were adopted, starting a small shift towards roles and structures that hold space between worlds, translating and connecting rather than reinforcing silos.

Opening conversations on knowledge and science

The project opened new conversations about how the knowledge system has evolved, what should remain, what needs to be broadened, and what is currently left out. Participants asked, *"What knowledge we have overseen, what practices we have forgotten, what things have we classified as non-scientific when they deserve also a place in the scientific world,"* and reflected on how the *"now impossible"* might become a real option. It became clear that if *"you really study the historical development of science, there's been all kinds of definitions of science,"* and that science is not fixed in stone but an *"organic way of talking about the critical questions of a time collectively."*

Making the invisible visible

The open call and podcasts aimed to shine light on currently overlooked areas of the research and funding landscape in order to broaden our imagination of what these fields, research and funding, can do for climate transitions. Beyond that, the value of spotlighting unseen ideas was also felt on a deep emotional level. By giving a voice and actively listening to those that are currently left behind by the funding system, past and potential future users gained more trust/reassurance and began healing past injuries. *"I felt really seen and heard in the quality of it and the possibility of it making change."**; *"That was emotional. Yeah. It was nice to feel that. Somehow healing a bit of trauma."**

Collective inspiration

The co-design session brought together stakeholders who want to be an active part in shaping the future of the funding landscape. The dialogues gave rise to new hope that the future of funding can be bright and address collective needs, while also inspiring new ways of approaching how we can evolve and proceed as funders and researchers. It also served as a reminder that we are not alone in our endeavor, and that those we need to work with are closer than we may think.

*"We are often working isolated, working in autopilot in ways we have always done or how we are asked to do, but this whole process has shifted the perspectives of all involved and reminded us" [...] "that there is a critical mass of people that sort of have their hearts and soul into the work that collectively can make our society a better place."**

*"We have this system, and the system isn't bad, it's just it needs freshening up. We made it ourselves and with good reasons, and with our rules for finance it's the same. We made them up for reasons, and now we have to freshen them up. And also skip rules."**

Uncertainty and trust

The co-design session highlighted the need / desire for 'soft-skills' and values such as trust, closer relationships of care, instead of neutral check-ins and evaluations. In times of uncertainty, being able to stay adaptive and reflexive in processes and being comfortable in the 'unknown' is increasingly valued, while fixed outcomes and monitoring can provide a false sense of control and feel limiting.

The collective reflections raised questions such as:

- How can we move from control to more trust?
- Do we need new values and frames? What are they?
- How can we be comfortable in the uncomfortable/ unknown?





What now?

Science funding systems will never be perfect and all-inclusive, and needs evolve over time. Traditional funding still plays an important role for more curiosity driven research, but doesn't cover the full scope of current needs and developments. We set up *Impossible Projects* to find out how we might imagine a proactive, adaptive funding system that takes inspiration and is shaped from the outside in. Design approaches as the one we've put together here are perfect for that, and we see the value of setting up an approach for a more design-minded funding system able to transform. So where can we go from here? There are really two sides to this story, what's relevant for the funding system at large, and what's next for the New Ways of Funding initiative.

What we recommend:

Below we have outlined several recommendations on the basis of NWO and KIN's areas of interest and toolkits that emerged from the co-designed funding scheme prototypes.

Large knowledge infrastructures

Practice-based / Adaptive Network Building Grants, Supportive Structures for Citizen Initiatives, and Critical Validation Infrastructures redefine climate research infrastructure as a shared public good rather than a technical asset for private profit. They support long-term systems for collaboration, knowledge integration, and validation, with equal partnerships between researchers, citizens, and institutions. By prioritising care, repair, open-source outcomes, and transparent, value-based decision-making, these infrastructures strengthen the trust, credibility, and democratic legitimacy in climate research. They also enrich and expand the roles climate scientists can play, grounding research in everyday practice, measurement and validation, and supporting collective action at scale.

Talent development

Impact Fellowships and *Collective Learning and Discovery Grants* contribute to transformative climate research by investing in people and collectives who operate across disciplinary, institutional, and societal boundaries. Person-based income support, rhythm-based funding, and regular reflective check-ins sustain transition pioneers and learning consortia over time. By valuing inner development, collaborative capacity, and social handprint, these schemes develop skills essential for navigating complexity, conflict, and uncertainty in climate transitions. These capacities are largely invisible in standard academic career paths, but the interview series with the mavericks and the insights from the *Impossible Projects* open call show that there is a need and demand for that to make the academic career landscape more sustainable and adaptive to the realities of climate change.

Societal impact

Scaled Impact Initiatives and *Baseline Social Responsibility* funding scheme ideas demonstrate how climate impact can be treated as a long-term practice rather than a short-term deliverable. By funding experimentation, scaling, and institutionalisation in sequence, and by providing academic capacity, governance, and continuity during 'slack' periods, these schemes enable durable changes in societal practices. Impact is cumulative and embedded, grounded in track record and real-world engagement rather than abstract promises, making climate research actionable at systemic scale. Current theories of change rely on linear and predictable models, the mavericks we interviewed and our experience as designers shows that true impact is understood only further down the road when the funding has been granted and the real work has begun.

New scopes & collaborations for funders

When supporting transdisciplinary and collaborative research, authorities can set an example by embodying the same principles they seek to promote.

- Open-endedness and generativity as evaluation criteria: Rather than assessing only predefined outcomes, funding schemes can value the capacity of a project to generate new questions, relationships, and directions over time.

- Follow-through funding:

Moving beyond project funding with a fixed start and finish, for some research fields, such as more impact oriented research, periodic funding is much more appropriate, productive and conducive to network development, professional growth, deepening and iteration. Demanding highly specified steps early on can kill multiple forms of emergent, open ended collaborations and hinder continuity for long-term change. Sequential funding, such as creating generic 'top-up' funds, providing baseline support or funding focusing on scalability with growing potential is already explored in public funds in the creative sector and philanthropic funds.

- Scope expansion:

Each fund has a scope and target beneficiaries. While conducive to supporting specific goals or domains, it often excludes collaborations with other forms of valuable and relevant knowledge production. Often, the solution to expanding that is in joining forces with other funds who target different groups. Transdisciplinary collaborations could be funded by a collaboration between funders. By collaborating with public, municipal, philanthropic, and other funds, funders can enable collaborations that no single funding stream could support on its own.

- Consolidation:

Themes such as climate change and social justice are inherently transdisciplinary, but the boundaries of NWO constrain what is possible. New 'issue-based' programs and funds can be created that expand what is possible.

- Other types of knowledge:

Collaborative funding structures can explicitly recognise and support non-academic, practice-based, and experiential knowledge alongside scientific expertise while also strengthening this expertise within NWO, particularly in staff and committee roles.

Transformative funding toolbox

The Lean Open Call and *Pluralising Knowledge Program* show how funding instruments can actively enable transformative climate research by lowering entry barriers and legitimising uncertainty. Lean proposals, quality checks followed by lotteries, and lump-sum or phased funding reduce administrative burden and bias, making space for cultural, practice-based, and exploratory work where climate questions are still emerging. Process-based evaluation, encouraging iterative processes, fair pay for all contributors, and dialogue-based assessment and monitoring allow funders to support learning, unlearning, and paradigm shifts that conventional project funding systematically excludes.

There are several tools developed for the purposes of this design research that already show potential to support a shift in this direction and can be applied at different stages of the funding process:

- Initiation phase:

funding calls can be co-created with the field they aim to stimulate. Such a co-creation process can mirror the open call for *Impossible Project* ideas, scanning the field for the kind of blind spots and untapped potential

- Preparation and opening call:

Phased application procedures are vastly less wasteful of limited academic and administrative resources, while being more inclusive and than traditional full proposal calls. Short, uncomplicated idea-centred early stages activate researchers' imagination and excitement.

- Assessment and selection:

Experimenting with selection and evaluation processes and the stakeholders involved can reduce administrative burden and ensure fairness. The pre-selection process can already be content-driven, and a 'play-off' process can be set up and is already possible within the current legal frameworks.

- Funding period and evaluation:

When thinking of the funders role we are inspired to be more imaginative: rather than acting primarily as an arbiter, funders can take on a role of stewardship, maintaining closer relationships, co-shaping projects and evaluation processes, and working through continuous dialogue, checks, and reflection. This allows for open-endedness and positions scientific funding as a way to guide fields through care and shared learning, rather than competition. Other examples include 'smart money' approaches, peer-to-peer learning and moderated intervision formats.

What next?

The project and co-creation process have been a fertile ground, which led us to several concrete forms and formats we believe need to be pursued in the coming years. Together with KIN, NWO and other funding organisations that are eager to examine their current approaches and explore new, more adaptive ways of supporting transdisciplinary and transformative research, the New Ways of Funding initiative aims to continue this exploration and uncover ever evolving 'hidden' desires among researchers and their collaborators.

By implementing new funding approaches through experimentation, connecting networks of funders and researchers, the initiative can create lasting impact and can help accelerate transitions. On the basis of the insights and results from this design research, we see the following concrete forms as important and promising next steps towards **implementation** and **strengthening**.

1. Implementation

Implementation involves continuing the hands-on work through a focused design intervention based on the concrete insights, prototypes and ideas presented in this report. This work will be developed through co-creation across stakeholders and departments and will be accompanied by an impact study to evaluate the transformative effect on the field of climate research and on accelerating transitions.

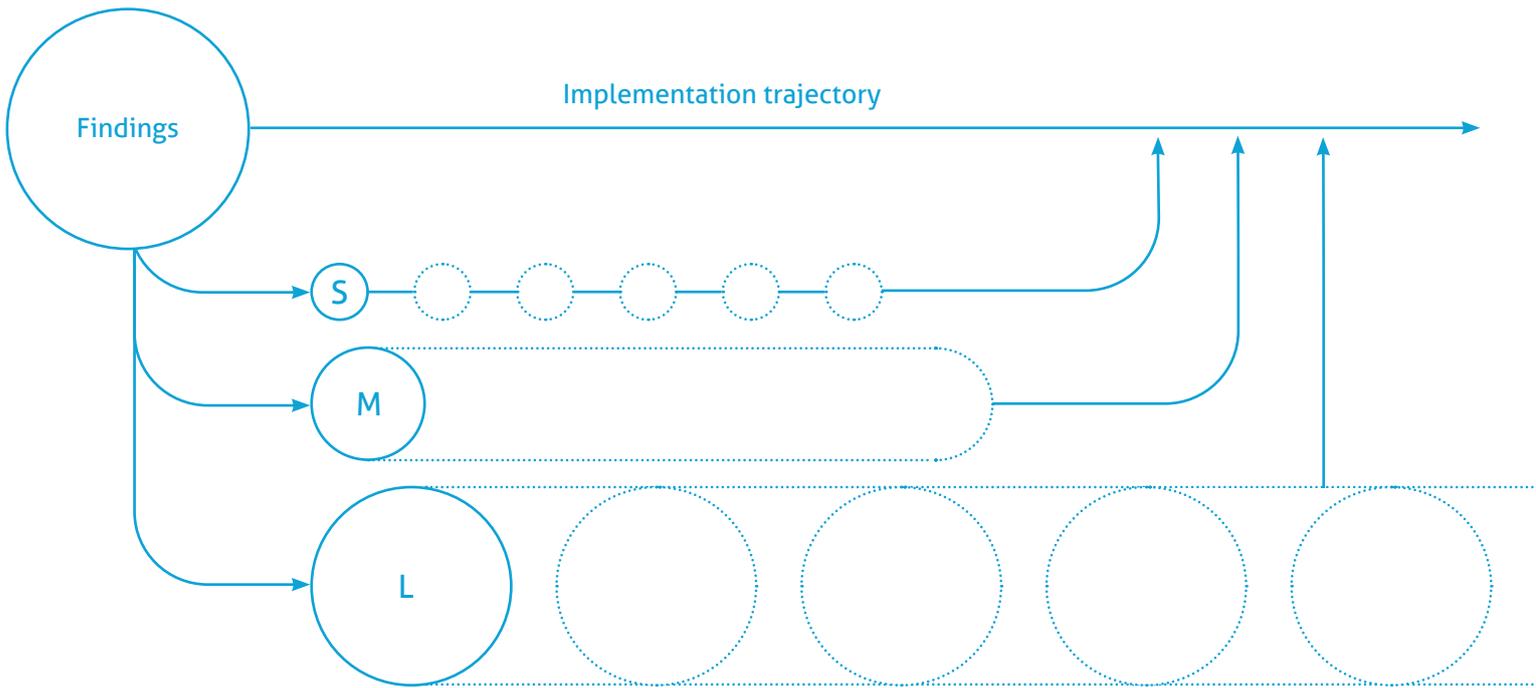
Under implementation, we see three distinct interventions, each focused on developing a more transformative funding environment by addressing process, calls and scope, respectively. These range from incorporating smaller experiments and tests within upcoming or existing programs, to starting a whole new program from scratch, and possibly even involving a collaboration between different funding organisations to combine funding streams and expand scopes. Together, these interventions are geared towards implementing the insights in an integrated, tangible and measurable way.

• Small (S) — Embedded process experiments

Within existing programmes and calls, focused experiments can be embedded at specific moments of the funding process—application, assessment, selection, monitoring, support or reporting. These experiments do not change what research is funded, but how decisions are made and relationships are shaped. By testing value-based criteria such as trust, openness and reflexivity in practice, funders can improve the experience of applicants and program officers alike, while learning how transformative and transdisciplinary principles can be enacted within current legal and institutional frameworks.

• Medium (M) — Experimental call as design lab

At a medium scale, an experimental call can be developed that functions as a design lab for alternative funding approaches. While funding real research, the call is intentionally designed to test open-ended and generative evaluation criteria, adapted assessment practices, and forms of follow-through or sequential funding. Program officers, reviewers, researchers and other stakeholders are involved not only as participants, but as co-learners, reflecting on the call as it unfolds. This creates concrete evidence, shared learning and transferable design principles for funding transdisciplinary and transformative research, without yet restructuring the wider system.

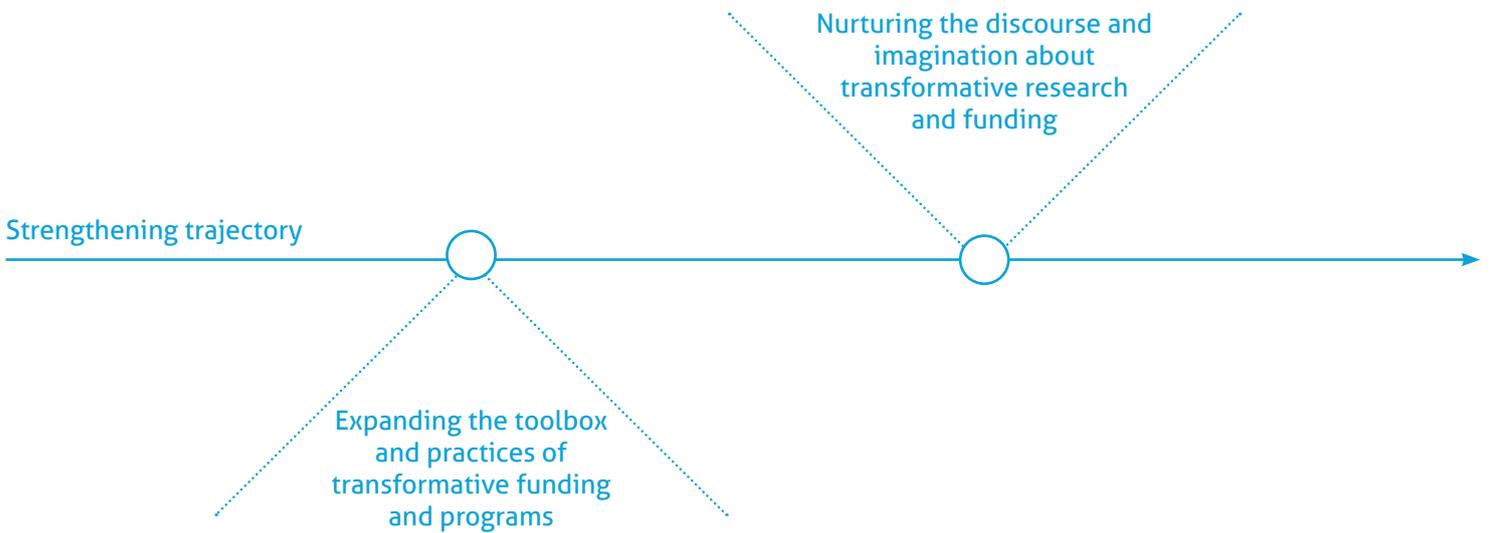


(Three approaches to implementation on the basis of the scale of the interventions – Small, Medium and Large)

• **Large (L) — System-level scope and mandate exploration**

At the largest scale, the focus shifts to the funding system itself: its scope, mandates and boundaries. This includes exploring issue-based programmes around inherently transdisciplinary themes such as climate change and social justice, developing collaborative funding structures across public, municipal and philanthropic funds, and explicitly recognising non-academic, practice-based and experiential forms of knowledge. Such an approach requires long-term collaboration with governance bodies, legal teams and partner funders, and aims to expand what is institutionally possible by aligning funding structures with the realities of complex societal challenges.

While each of these options builds on the work done so far and shows clear promise for impact and implementation, initiating a new experimental funding call would enable the most direct and tangible impact. It would allow KIN to fund promising research that currently remains unexplored or unsupported, while approaching funding practice itself as a site of learning and design. Starting from a blank sheet creates the flexibility to identify relevant collaborators and to co-create a call tailored to the specific requirements of transformative, transdisciplinary and paradigm-shifting research. In doing so, the initiative does not sit outside NWO’s mandate, but deepens and informs its existing responsibilities in talent development, societal impact and large scientific infrastructure, translating these mandates into funding logics that are better attuned to complexity, collaboration and long-term change.



(Approach to strengthening trajectory – through two distinct interventions)

2. Strengthening

By focusing on the concrete tools, language, ideas and shared understanding of pioneers, we can further strengthen their ability to work both individually and collectively on improving the way our current funding system enables and nurtures transformative climate research. Under strengthening, we see two distinct interventions, both of which can be synergetic to any of the proposed implementation steps.

• Podcast season 2

A follow-up podcast season digging deeper into the questions our podcast and co-design session raised. In a second podcast season, we would follow up with the authors of the *Impossible Project* ideas submitted, as well as with several eager participants of the co-design session, to expand the discussion on alternative funding models and what they could make possible. Furthermore, a KIN team member or fellow NWO colleague could join as a guest at every episode, expanding the internal discourse, vocabulary and imagination around transformative funding. The podcast format proved an accessible and engaging way to share and reflect on the impact and next steps of the research. In the next stages, it would serve both as a tool to continue the research and as a platform to share, exchange and strengthen literacy around transformative research, inviting new stakeholders, expanding the network and making new connections.

• A toolkit for pioneers in funding

A toolkit to encourage reflection and innovation in the initiation and call development phases. Such a toolkit would allow KIN and other funding organisations to engage with the initial insights from this research and already implement elements from the NWF approach in their own practices. By translating the insights into a simple, sharable and expandable format, the toolkit would invite program teams to reflect on the kinds of proposals they exclude, and to be inspired by a variety of unconventional but perfectly legal selection procedures and approaches to shaping open calls. The toolkit could be activated through workshops or conferences in collaboration with the NWF team, encouraging exchange and collaboration between diverse stakeholders. These activities could also serve as a first step toward building bridges between funding organisations, laying the groundwork for the proposed system-level scope and mandate exploration within the implementation trajectory.

The approach outlined in this report can complement traditional approaches for call formulation, expanding the ability of funders to engage beyond their current, familiar territories. Co-creatively exploring the possibilities for research that remain in the shadows of current systems—with researchers and other beneficiaries—is a promising avenue for revitalising and expanding research capabilities in the new frontiers of knowledge production. And a first glimpse at what lies in these shadows has already shown great imagination, excitement, skill, and commitment to making funding inclusive, adaptive, and transformative.

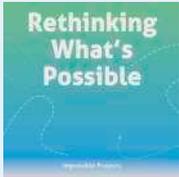
This is an invitation to continue exploring together, not toward a single solution, but toward a funding system that learns, adapts, and nurtures what truly matters, enabling research that pushes boundaries, bridges disciplines, and contributes to meaningful societal and environmental change.





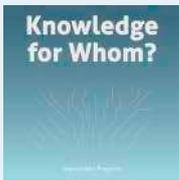
Podcast Series

If you want to hear more, listen to the Impossible Projects podcast series:



Episode 1 — Rethinking What's Possible

Introduction to Impossible Projects. This opening episode dives into why and how new ways of funding research need to be explored, setting the stage for a discussion on how existing funding models shape the knowledge we produce and what we risk by sticking to them.



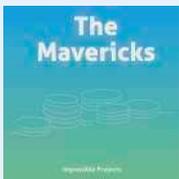
Episode 2 — Knowledge for Whom?

Adaptive Intelligence for Everyone by Mattijn van Hoek and Ton Botterhuis. This episode explores how AI and emerging technologies could democratise science by transforming who creates, accesses, and benefits from knowledge.



Episode 3 — Beyond Project Thinking

Featuring Port as a Pulse by Dr. Lucy Gilliam and Tanner Tuttle. The discussion focuses on moving past short-term, project-based funding toward place-based, long-term research that grows from communities and ecologies.



Episode 4 — The Mavericks

Featuring Transition Income by Ad Vlems and Monique Vissers. This conversation examines how we can better support transition pioneers and "mavericks" who challenge academic conventions and push boundaries across systems and disciplines.



Episode 5 — Creativity, Curiosity and Collaboration

Featuring Choir of the Sea by Remco de Kluienaar. The episode explores how artistic practices can reshape research, questioning what counts as science and how art-science collaborations can open new pathways for funding and imagination.



Episode 6 — Including, Opening and Adapting

Featuring Designing the Otherwise by Irene Luque Martín. This final episode reflects on how feminist, decolonial, and indigenous perspectives could transform how we value and fund knowledge, advocating for more plural, open-ended, and community-led approaches to research.

Listen to the Impossible Projects podcast episodes:



Credits and Thanks

Editors Report:

Alex Sz waj
Kornelia Dimitrova
Jonas Torrens
Mattijs Taanman
Stephi Holst

Report Design:

Foundation We Are

Images:

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This project and insights would not have been possible without the invaluable contribution of:

Maarten Hajer, Martijn Arnoldus, Frans Vollenbroek, Jos de Jonge, Laurens Hessels, Michiel van den Hout, Derk Loorbach, Lizanne Schepers, Frederike Schmitz, Thomas Kelderman, Tatjana van der Sluis and Mariëtte Hiemstra, the team of KIN, as well as the of the imagination, courage and determination of the *Impossible Project* idea authors Remco de Kluizenaar, Ad Vlems and Monique Vissers, Dr Lucy Gilliam and Tanner Tuttle, Irene Luque Martín and Mattijn van Hoek and Ton Botterhuis, and many other anonymous unsung heroes in transformative climate research. A warm thank you to all participants in the co-design session and to the listeners of the podcast.

You can find more information about the project on www.hetkin.nl and www.foundationweare.org





Impossible Projects



A collaboration between
KIN and Foundation We Are