Proposal Outline: Building the Science of Social Fields

Toward an MRI Equivalent for the Collective Brain

Over the past two decades, neuroscience has taken mindfulness from the fringes to the mainstream and, in doing so, has contributed to individual wellness worldwide. Yet while we now understand the individual brain, the 'collective brain'—the quality of awareness that shapes our social systems—remains largely invisible. Drawing on the same methodological rigour and scientific validation that mainstreamed mindfulness, we see an opportunity to do the same for the *social field*. The social field considers not just what is observable and tangible in a social system, but also the less visible dimensions and dynamics that shape it.

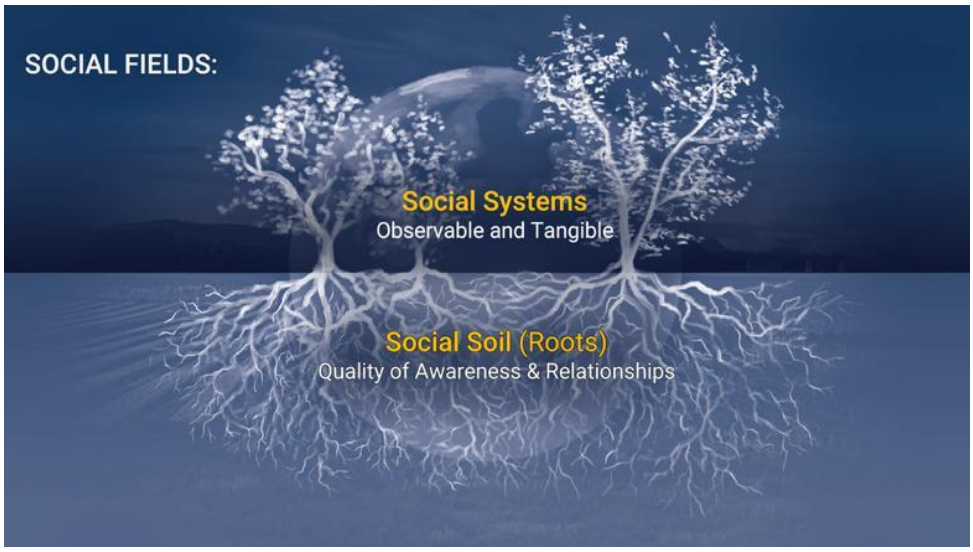

Figure 1: Social Fields = Social Systems + Social Soil (Source: Scharmer and Kaufer, 2025)

Just as healthy soil determines a harvest, the 'social soil' of awareness shapes outcomes in health, education, governance, and community life (Fig. 1). In short: form follows consciousness. But field consciousness remains at the fringes of science and public attention—much like mindfulness did twenty years ago. After more than two decades of global action research, we have learned that leaders and changemakers, when using the right kinds of methods and tools, have the capacity to shift social fields from one quality of relationship (and awareness) to another. These social field shifts are essential in every example of profound change we have studied or participated in. As Capra, paraphrasing Prigogine, put it, when a system is far from equilibrium, small islands of coherence in a sea of chaos have the capacity to lift the entire system to a higher order. This is more than a metaphor. It is a process that we have witnessed across contexts and geographies.

New awareness becomes available: Cross-agency collaboration in Liberia

The shift began in a three-day gathering in Monrovia, Liberia. Thirty leaders — UN agency heads, civil society figures, government officials — gathered around an urgent question: *How do we stop doing yesterday better?* Despite decades of investment, Liberia ranks 178th among 191 countries on the UN Human Development Index. Programs were well-designed, the expertise and intention for change was strong, but the system remained stuck. The group moved through a facilitated process of awareness-based systems change. What happened difficult to categorize within existing frameworks of organizational learning or leadership development, yet it is both repeatable and recognizable to those who have experienced it. At the gathering in Monrovia, the group was guided to develop a system map. This map was *embodied* with participants literally stepping into the roles played in the ecosystem: the government, the land, the children, those on the margins. System dynamics weren't analyzing them from a distance but rather felt from within. Something became accessible on a level beyond cognition. In the words of the Resident Coordinator: *it was a feeling that there was an ecosystem which actually enabled people to understand that they all had an importance, and their absence in terms of commitment would have been difficult.* Something shifted in leaders' perceptions of themselves and their role. One young civil society leader said: *I wouldn't have been able to imagine that I could influence change at a country or national level. But I have.*

The facilitation team felt it too — the generativity of the collective, the sense of helping hands working invisibly in support. One facilitator put it plainly: *it felt as though we were on the precipice of what wanted to happen next, as if something was communicating with us.*

The prototypes and projects that unfolded from this experience is astonishing in its scale and significance:

- The "We are One Liberia" national PR campaign seeded a narrative of the election that produced Liberia's first peaceful transfer of presidential power in modern history.
- A service hub reached a region cut off for months each year by impassable roads.
- An initiative to end female genital mutilation placed practitioners themselves at the center of designing the alternative.

Thirty people. Six months. The source knowing of the field and the dormant potential it holds, is always available however, it is not always evident. Generative social fields make it accessible, knowable and actionable.

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When the field speaks: Bold action in the Baltic Region

In spring 2020, as the world locked down, Nebojsa Illijevski joined GAIA, a global initiative launched by the Presencing Institute that brought together over 15,000 changemakers to sense into the moment of acute disruption and seed new possibilities. Nebojsa was leading Public, an association in North Macedonia running a street paper sold by people from marginalized communities and developing a social mentoring program to help hard-to-employ people enter the labor market. He participated in global sessions that brought together hundreds of people from around the world to sense into the current moment of disruption together, using awareness-based practices. He also took part in a smaller circle that gathered every two weeks, engaging in stillness, journaling and deep dialogue. The gatherings were designed to create the conditions for a *generative social field,* where individually and collectively those present could tap into the deeper sources of knowing that often lie just beyond conscious awareness. In one journaling practice, participants were invited to imagine GAIA as a living being and asked what message she would share. What came to Nebojsa surprised him: "If the social field of GAIA can speak, it says, 'It's open: pass.' The voice is not that gentle. It's a very determined voice. 'Pass, it's open.' It's a very clear calling." The voice was not his own. The knowing it conveyed was not of him but rather working through him. It was the source knowing of the field.

This first experience in a generative social field precipitated a second, inner shift, felt and articulated only later. Something lost its grip on him. "It felt like I was putting my mask down, losing my persona, so I could come more authentically into the spaces where I was gathering with people. Since then, it feels like I have turned into a magnet that attracts the people I really want to be with."

And that new way of showing up changed what became possible. As Nebojsa himself put it: "That has led to really tangible results. I would say it's something that I can see." Public expanded its social mentoring methodology across four other Balkan countries and drew in partners like GIZ and the UN. The role of Work Integration Mentor was formally written into North Macedonia's national occupational classification, a new profession recognized in law, and twenty certified mentors have supported more than 70 mentees.

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Healing at the level of an ecosystem: Latin America

San Esteban, Chile, March 2024. Two-hundred and seventy changemakers from seventeen Latin American countries gathered for the second annual convening of the Ecosystem Leadership Program, a multi-year journey co-initiated by the Presencing Institute and Laura Pastorini.

On the third day, eleven Indigenous, social, and spiritual leaders stepped into a vision council. The first voices brought the region's wound and trauma directly into the space, covering territory from the Amazon to the south of Chile, bringing into the circle awareness of the Indigenous leaders had been threatened and killed. People wept. Then the healers then spoke. Amalia Tum, a Mayan medicine woman from Guatemala, entered with healing words .Ubiraci from the Brazilian Pataxós sang a reconciliation song that reached from the stage to every participant. Laura Pastorini, co-initiator of ELP LATAM, described what happened in the room: "I felt that everyone was healing their own wound, witnessing it being healed in real time. What happened there was profound and totally emergent."

What followed was a reorientation in how participants understood their own work and role. Coral Herencia, whose conservation work in Palguín Alto had until then been framed primarily as a technical project, described it this way: "Through each experience we got closer to understanding the true nature and the source that guides our work. It became clear we needed to make this much more visible and central to our purpose." For Pedro Pérez Guillón, working to protect the Maipo River basin, something shifted in how he understood his own leadership: "I have moved from a more individual view of leadership to a more systemic and collective view; from a more anthropocentric perspective to a more biocentric one." Felipe Navarrete reflected on what the contact with the social field had opened: "The greatest lesson has been the importance of the social field — the shared heart that unites us. To care for forests, we have had to learn to be forests ourselves. Not only finding techniques, but finding people who, with open hearts, want to support us in this work." That support came. Coral and Felipe secured funding and partnerships to protect 76 hectares of critical forest in Palguín Alto, establishing the Guardians of the Forest network. Pedro's Maipo Sanctuary grew from a seed idea into a bioregional platform convening leaders across Chile under the banner of "Weaving Regenerative Bioregions." Across the continent, fifty-five prototype initiatives have been launched, and a regenerative network spanning Latin America continues to grow, seeded and sourced in a generative social field which created the conditions for the deeper sources of knowing to surface, make themselves known and inspire action.

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We have seen this pattern again and again. It shows up in workshops and multi-day processes after a few days as a shift in the quality of the shared space that people feel and recognize but have difficult naming. It might be experienced as a deepening or thickening of the space, as warmth, a slowing down of time, or a spaciousness in the dialogue marked by silences between words. The impact of these spaces and experiences is not negligible, as the stories above illuminate. They reflect action that is bold and grounded, aligned with what is needed of a system and the world now.

What is most significant here is that these are not once-in-a-lifetime experiences; we can create the conditions for social field shifts of this kind reliably. What is needed is to make these social field shifts, and the conditions that enable them, *visible* and therefore legitimate in the public eye in the same way that mindfulness did. In that sense, investigating the dynamics of deep social structures—social soil—with methods that allow them to be made observable, measurable, and researchable focuses on a critical leverage point on which all deep change efforts in larger social systems hinge. This is why we propose to build the **MRI equivalent for the collective brain**.

The Vision: A Global Research Ecosystem

Our vision is to co-activate a **global research ecosystem for social field science and practice**, with two interrelated initiatives at its core:

1. The Social Field MRI Project

A multi-method, multi-site research program integrating:

- **Third-person data:** wearables, hyperscanning, biosensing, neuro- and biofeedback.
- **First- and second-person methods:** qualitative and participatory research.
- **Fourth-person methods:** collective deep sensing practices (e.g., Social Presencing Theater, Visual Presencing).

Together, these methods—supported by AI for scalability—will make visible the invisible dimensions that shape systemic outcomes and generate new **metrics and methods** for shifting social fields toward greater health, generativity and flourishing.

For example, one early application of the multi-modal research is a Social Field Assessment Tool, helping large and distributed ecosystems see and sense their deeper structures of awareness and wellbeing.

It is our experience that to truly change a social system you need to transform consciousness; and to transform consciousness you need places and tools that make a system *see and sense itself*. In other words, the lack of deep systems change today is, among others, a function of lacking science-based infrastructures that help these systems to see and sense themselves. Building a robust tool to support systems in their transformation efforts is an early-stage intention of the research program, an idea which has already had strong resonance with potential partners in health, education, regenerative agriculture, and business.

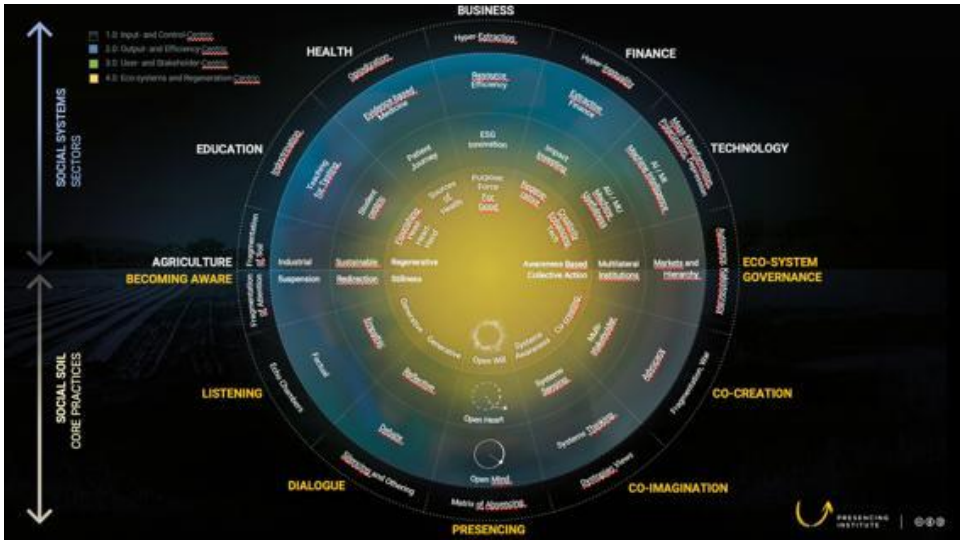

Figure 2: The Wheel of Deep Change As Base for a System Assessment Tool (Source: Scharmer and Kaufer, 2025)

2. Social Field Research Ecosystem Activation (Summer School, Journal)

Our intention is to activate a global ecosystem of researchers who co-pioneer new methodologies, research and applications that bring the science of social fields to life. At the heart of this endeavor is an annual Summer School where emerging scholars and research practitioners connect with senior researchers, thought leaders and cutting-edge systems transformation practitioners from around the world.

Modeled after the Mind & Life Summer Research Institutes, the Social Field Research Summer School functions as the living **heartbeat of the new field**—where collaboration and mentorship are seeded, new methodologies incubated, and the emergence of social field science is accelerated by being made visible to itself. A digital platform and virtual touchpoints throughout the year support on-going cross-pollination, information flow and mutually enhancing feedback loops across research areas. Grants for doctoral students and/or early-stage research projects, further amplify the initiative.

The Journal of Awareness-based Systems Change (an already existing DOAJ listed, peer reviewed journal with over 320,000 downloads in the first five years), serves as a further support infrastructure, both attracting aligned researchers and disseminating the high quality research emerging from the research ecosystem.

Assets

This initiative builds on the Presencing Institute's significant foundations already in place:

- **Scholarly Infrastructure:** *Journal of Awareness-Based Systems Change* (240,000+ downloads).
- **Methodological Innovations:** Pioneering practices such as Social Presencing Theater and Visual Presencing, applied across cultures and sectors.

- **Democratized Social Technologies**: Portfolio of open-access tools and methods of awareness-based systems change.
- **Global Practice Network:** Leaders and practitioners advancing consciousness-based change initiatives worldwide.
- **Portfolio of Initiatives:** Proven systems-change projects worldwide in health, education, climate, and governance.
- **Institutional Partnerships:** MIT, Charité Hospital Berlin, LMU Munich, and others.
- **Learning Platforms:** MITx u.lab and u-school, reaching global audiences at scale.

Timeline

- **Phase I (2026–27): Planning & Partnering**
  Establish infrastructures, refine methodologies, secure partnerships, and convene the first design workshop.
- **Phase II (2027–2032): Launch & Deep Activation**
  Launch the Social Field MRI Project and Annual Summer School. Expand into a global ecosystem with cross-institutional research, emerging scholar support, practitioner integration, publication platforms, and experimental labs. Produce a steady stream of evidence, train the next generation of researchers, and mainstream social field methodologies across health, education, gevernance, climate, and business

Investment and Invitation

We seek an initial **12 month planning grant ($250,000)** to align partners, pilot methods, and design the research infrastructure.

The follow-on is a **five-year initiative ($1,500,000 annually)** that will establish the **science of social fields** as a recognized, evidence-based field—bringing proven methods and tools for awareness-based systems change from marginal to mainstream.

While much consciousness research has focused on the individual, the social field remains under-researched and under-supported. Bridging this gap—moving from individual mindfulness to collective transformation—is both urgent and possible. With a focused collaboration over the next five years, we can create the scientific and practical foundations for this field, making visible and actionable the deeper structures of collective awareness needed to navigate civilizational collapse and renewal. This research program, ambitious in scope and plausible in execution, holds the potential for societal transformation by shifting the landscape of thinking, discourse and action around collective experience and, more specifically, systems change.

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