Integrating Stewardship into the Management and Leadership Paradigm for a Regenerative Future

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Abstract: For several decades, global management discourse has been anchored in neoliberal doctrines that prioritise shareholder value and individual prosperity. This 'me-we' paradigm, focused on individual actors and organisations seeking to optimise welfare in a competitive, market-driven landscape, has proven structurally inadequate to address the escalating pressures of climate change, resource depletion, and social fragmentation. This paper advocates a profound paradigmatic transition towards a 'we-all' perspective, a governance model in which the collective common good prevails without compromising individual well-being. As a position paper, this work centres on conceptually reconstructing the governance triad: Management, Leadership, and Stewardship. By theoretically deconstructing these distinct cognitive orientations, the paper argues that while Management focuses on rationalisation and optimisation and Leadership on innovation and creativity, Stewardship provides the essential focus on future-orientation, continuity, and the responsible care of resources. Through this conceptual lens, we highlight that the essential challenge for modern organisations lies in balancing this triad to ensure that organisational self-interest remains subordinate to the general interest. Furthermore, the paper deconstructs the prevailing 'extractive' logic—the systematic taking of resources and labour without replenishment—and contrasts it with a regenerative economic model. It critically analyses the limitations of universal monetisation, particularly the 'financialisation of the Earth'. It argues that quantifying biodiversity and ecological functions in purely monetary terms collapses complex, non-linear systems into discrete commodities, reinforcing the anthropocentric and extractive mindsets that a regenerative economy seeks to replace. To facilitate this shift, the research calls for a fundamental re-evaluation of the dogmas of psychological ownership, absolute scarcity, and egocentrism. The paper concludes that integrating stewardship into institutional governance is not merely an ethical choice but a systemic necessity for survival in a physically finite world. By adopting a 'Me-We-All' approach, organisations can move beyond past destructive dogmas and foster a resilient society in which every action strengthens the system for future generations.

Keywords: Stewardship, Regenerative economics, Me-We-All paradigm, Circular green public procurement, Governance triad, Ecojustice

1. Introduction: The Neoclassical Framework and the Logic of Extractivism

Since the 1980s, global societal and organisational structures have been anchored in neoclassical and neoliberal doctrines (Palley, 2023). This ideological movement, vigorously initiated and cultivated by key political figures such as Ronald Reagan in the United States and Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom, has led to a profound restructuring of institutions (Maschette, 2026). Within this neoliberal paradigm, the prioritising of shareholder value, individual property, and personal prosperity is central. Analysed through the 'Me-We-All' framework of, this structure can be characterised as a dominant 'Me-We' mindset. Within this framework, individual actors ('Me') and discrete organisations ('We') focus primarily on optimising their own welfare and competitive advantage within a market-driven landscape, leaving the collective interest ('All') largely unaddressed.

This line of thinking aligns closely with what contemporary literature describes as extractivism (or extractionism) (Capitals Coalition, 2024; CE Delft, 2023; Mentcon, n.d.). Extractivism is the systematic economic logic of unilaterally extracting resources from nature and society, converting them into short-lived goods, and discarding them as worthless waste after use. This linear 'take-make-waste' chain treats the natural world as an inexhaustible source of free raw materials and a passive sink for the negative externalities of industrial production. The market-driven approach uses profit-maximisation-based economic thinking as the universal yardstick for societal success (Brand, 2022).

The structural deficiencies of this extractivist and neoliberal order are now obvious (Brand & Wissen, 2018). Through its blind focus on quarterly figures and individual capital accumulation, the model is inherently blind to the escalating, cumulative pressures of climate change, the depletion of vital natural resources, and widespread social fragmentation (Chancel et al., 2025). Because neoliberal 'Me-We' thinking refuses to recognise planetary boundaries and social foundations as hard limits, it destabilises the ecological and social systems it depends on for its own survival (Abcouwer, Takács, Schilstra, et al., 2022; Steffen et al., 2015).

1.1 The Need for a Paradigm Shift Towards Regenerative Thinking

The escalating crises of the Anthropocene, as the most recent geological epoch in the history of the Earth, during which humans have become the most influential species and are having a significant impact on the planet's climate and ecosystems, compel a fundamental paradigm shift, which is increasingly defined in scholarly literature as regenerative thinking (Crossreis, 2024; Hawken, 2021). Whereas traditional concepts of sustainability often limit themselves to minimising harm or maintaining a status quo (so-called 'net-zero' thinking), regenerative thinking strives to actively restore, revitalise, and strengthen both ecological and social systems. It represents a shift from merely exploiting reserves to building adaptive resilience (Meijering et al., 2020).

Within the 'Me-We-All' framework, embracing regenerative thinking means permanently abandoning the reductionist 'Me-We' paradigm in favour of a comprehensive 'We-All' paradigm. This transition requires a fundamental revision of organisational and governmental objectives. The emphasis must shift towards a governance model in which the collective common good- the well-being of the entire socio-ecological community prevails without compromising individual well-being. Regenerative thinking recognises that the individual ('Me') and the organisation ('We') cannot flourish if the broader context ('All') in which they operate collapses.

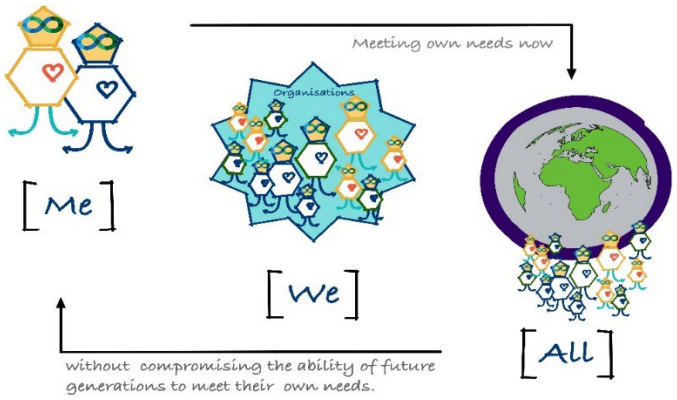

Figure 1: The 'Me-We-All' approach (Abcouwer, Takács, Schilstra, et al., 2022)

The model posits that healthy human and organisational development can occur only when embedded within vital, self-restoring natural and social systems (HEC Paris, 2025; Mentcon, n.d.; Regenerate Tampa Bay, 2025). But this doesn't mean that the individual is secondary within this triad. Here, the concept of eco-justice comes into play.

2. Ecojustice: Fair Distribution for all Living Beings and the Need for Circular Green Public Procurement

As society navigates the regenerative transition, it must extend the dialogue beyond the technical parameters of sustainability and circularity and actively embrace the concept of Ecojustice. Ecojustice defines the core values progressive institutions must aspire to, emphasising that genuine ecological equilibrium cannot exist in a vacuum. Rather, it is achieved only when resources and systemic values are distributed fairly and are equally accessible to all living beings (Martusewicz et al., 2014; Morrison, 2018; Washington et al., 2018).

Crucially, the ecological and social crises we currently face are not single-sourced; they are deeply entangled with intersecting systems of power, privilege, and marginalisation (Mikulewicz et al., 2023). Understanding these crises requires an intersectional lens that reveals how environmental injustices disproportionately affect vulnerable human communities while also threatening non-human life (Atapattu et al., 2021). Intersectionality shows that structural barriers to planetary health are compounded by overlapping systems of oppression, making it impossible to solve environmental issues without addressing social inequalities (Runyan, 2018). Dismantling these traditional divides between human progress and planetary health demands a long-term perspective that prioritises learning both from and for our natural environment. Translating ecojustice into a tangible societal reality requires a systemic restructuring of institutional cultures, a process spearheaded by joint

initiatives such as the European Union's Erasmus+ 'Lead for EcoJustice' project (Takács et al., 2024). This initiative ensures that deep sustainability is not treated as a secondary addition, but as the primary driving force of future societal systems. However, addressing these complex, intersectional problems ultimately requires that affected communities and institutions gain access to the relevant resources. Because the equitable allocation and acquisition of these resources is fundamentally a public issue, society must critically examine how they are procured.

As the world rapidly shifts toward regenerative thinking, Circular and Green Public Procurement (CGPP) emerges as a strategic and necessary instrument (Ortega Carrasco et al., 2024; Patrucco et al., 2024). Public procurement accounts for a substantial portion of global spending, giving governments and public institutions immense leverage to advance social justice and ecological restoration simultaneously. By embedding stringent sustainability criteria into public contracts, CGPP shifts from a mere administrative function to a catalyst for the circular economy, driving the market toward products and services with reduced environmental footprints throughout their life cycles. Realising a regenerative transition therefore relies heavily on utilising green procurement to ensure that public spending actively nourishes the 'We-All' ecosystem.

This necessary shift from extractive resource acquisition to regenerative public procurement highlights the limitations of traditional operational models. Consequently, this calls for a different view of management and leadership, requiring us to dig deeper into governance concepts to secure a resilient future.

3. Deconstructing the Traditional Distinction Between Management and Leadership

To understand why the current organisational landscape struggles with this regenerative transition, we need to deconstruct the dominant cognitive orientations within organisations. Classical organisation theory draws a sharp distinction between management and leadership. Lunenburg (2013) summarises this theoretical underpinning, arguing that management and leadership represent two fundamentally different yet complementary systems of action.

In this view, management focuses primarily on rationalisation, optimisation, and stability. The manager's core activities include planning, budgeting, detailing, controlling, and problem-solving to reduce uncertainty and maintain the existing order efficiently. Leadership, by contrast, aims to initiate change and cope with uncertainty. The leader focuses on formulating an inspiring vision, communicating and aligning people around it, and motivating and empowering employees to stimulate innovation and creativity.

Although these two approaches contrast in theory, in practice both management and leadership function exceptionally well within the logic of neoclassical and neoliberal thought (Bal & Dóci, 2018). Both concepts are deeply intertwined with the interests of individual organisations striving for market success and economic growth (Takács & Abcouwer, 2024). The manager optimises extractivist processes to maximise margins, whilst the leader drives the creative change necessary to pioneer new markets.

The fundamental problem of this traditional dichotomy is its limited temporal orientation. As a rule, both management and leadership focus on the short and medium term on solving the problems of today and tomorrow. The capacity to reason in terms of the day after tomorrow and the interests of future generations is virtually non-existent. Because neoliberalism has shortened the time horizon to the next reporting period, it systematically undervalues long-term aspects such as ecological stability and intergenerational justice. Consequently, the current governance paradigm lacks the cognitive tools to anticipate the long-term consequences of present actions. A structural solution must urgently be found for this deep-seated temporal and ethical shortcoming within management and leadership thinking. Studying who takes responsibility is crucial.

4. Responsibility and Governance: Towards Cooperation and Autonomy

The logical next question is who can and must bear responsibility for this long-term orientation, and which governance mechanism is relevant. To clarify this, a fruitful link can be made between Keidel (1995) thought-architecture model and De Geus’s (1989) political-philosophical organisational concepts.

Keidel's thought-architecture model posits that any organisational pattern and design can be understood as a dynamic balance among three fundamental variables: control, cooperation, and autonomy. This triad closely parallels the three classical organisational concepts De Geus’s (1989) distinguished, based on an analysis of 2500 years of political philosophers. In his doctoral dissertation, Organisatietheorie in de Politieke Filosofie (in Dutch), he distinguishes three organisational concepts:

1. ***Rational***: This concept aligns with Keidel's control variable. The emphasis here is on centralisation, strict hierarchy, formal rules, and top-down governance to guarantee uniformity and predictability.
2. ***Integrating***: This concept corresponds to Keidel's variable of cooperation. Here, collaborative decision-making, shared values, mutual interdependence, and the active integration of individual interest into the larger whole stand central.
3. ***Libertarian***: This concept reflects Keidel's variable of autonomy. The focus is on decentralisation, self-organisation, individual freedom, and creating 'spaces of freedom' in which actors can respond autonomously to their immediate context.

In contemporary organisational development, a clear shift is observable from the rigid rational/control concept towards a significantly higher appreciation of the integrating/cooperative and libertarian/autonomous concepts (Keidel, 1995). In a hyper-connected and dynamic world, we see a development towards a challenge that can be characterised as Open, Dynamic, Complex and Networked (Dorst, 2015). In such a challenging setting, the hierarchical control model fails because centrally led systems lack the necessary processing capacity to interpret complex, rapidly changing environmental signals.

Table 1: Paradigm shift in organisational designs

Organisational Variable (Keidel, 1995)	Organisational Concept (De Geus, 1989)	Characteristics and Decision-making	Role in the Paradigm shift from Extractivist to Regenerative
Control	Rational concept	Hierarchy, centralisation, top-down governance, rigid regulation	**Extractivist foundation:** Treats humans and nature as mechanical, controllable entities for the sake of efficiency
Cooperation	Integrating concept	Shared values, network relationships, reciprocity, collective responsibility	**Regenerative connector:** Facilitates the shift to 'We-All' thinking; builds social capital and ecological resilience
Autonomy	Libertarian concept	Self-organisation, decentralisation, flexibility, 'ordering of freedom'	**Regenerative adapter:** Enables local communities and teams to respond directly and organically to unique ecological contexts

This shift in organisational designs is inherently linked to the transition from an extractivist to a regenerative economy. Extractivism relies heavily on the rational organisational concept: it attempts to control, standardise, and exploit natural systems as if they were inanimate machines. This model is 'locked-in' by debt-based systems and legal structures prioritising shareholder value. In contrast, ‘regeneration’ (from 'generare') means ‘to create’, aims beyond sustainability, focusing on self-renewal and positive impacts on the biosphere and society, similar to natural systems' restorative processes (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2022). The goal is not just to do “less bad”, but to generate a net-positive impact on the biosphere and society (Mentcon, n.d.).

Conversely, a regenerative model requires actively integrating cooperation and autonomy (Abcouwer et al., 2024; Keidel, 1995). Because ecological and social systems are non-linear and complex, mechanical control cannot sustain them (Folke, 2006). Regenerative governance requires an integrating approach in which organisations understand themselves as part of a larger biological and societal network (ecosystem thinking), combined with the autonomy of local actors to act resiliently and adaptively (Yunibandhu & Hallinger, 2025).

5. Navigating the Transition: The Adaptive Cycle of Resilience as a Framework for Change

The transition to regeneration within the **Adaptive Cycle of Resilience (ACoR)** framework (Abcouwer, Takács, & Banga, 2022; Meijering et al., 2020) is illustrated by a lemniscate (infinity loop), explaining how social-ecological systems evolve through four distinct phases:

- **Equilibrium (Certainty):** The starting state of the extractive model where operations are optimised and managers work well within established norms (Want-Must-Can alignment (Heene, 2002)).
- **Challenge (Disturbance):** Internal or external disruptions (e.g., climate crisis, resource scarcity) move the system away from its certainty in existing abilities (Can).
- **New Combinations (Adaptation/Uncertainty):** A phase of creative search where leadership is required to find regenerative solutions and new ways of creating value.

- **Operationalisation:** Setting the new regenerative model into practice to reach a new, more resilient equilibrium.



Figure 2: The ACoR model (Takács & Abcouwer, 2024)

Within the ACoR framework, the adaptation process is driven by the "Want-Must-Can" dilemma (Heene, 2002). This involves balancing what stakeholders desire (Want), what ecological boundaries and regulations require (Must), and what resources and skills permit (Can).

5.1 Systemic Traps and the Role of Stewardship

Regenerative transitions are often obstructed by specific systemic traps within the adaptive cycle (Holling, 1996; Takács & Abcouwer, 2021):

- *Lock-in trap*: Management fails to perceive the ecological crisis or the "economic invisibility" of nature.
- *Poverty trap*: A lack of creativity or non-monetary metrics to develop circular business models.
- *Isolation trap*: The inability to align diverse stakeholders across the Me-We-All scales.
- *Rigidity trap*: Resistance to changing traditional extractive ownership and governance structures.

Dealing with these traps demands significant effort from those involved. They must contribute to the best of their abilities, operating in a world where the emphasis shifts from an individualistic focus to a more societal one. But how to measure the contribution the change realises in terms of regenerative thinking?

5.2 Extractivism versus Regenerative Thinking: The Limits of Universal Monetisation

A crucial challenge in the transition to regeneration is that many of the most valuable things, such as forests capturing carbon or pollination by bees, have traditionally been valued at zero in the market economy (Boell, 2015; Central Bureau of Statistics The Netherlands, 2025; Monbiot, 2014). This "economic invisibility of nature" creates perverse incentives in which destruction is more profitable than preservation (Boell, 2015; Monbiot, 2014).

The need to move away from the extractivist model becomes even more urgent when we critically analyse the so-called 'financialisation of the Earth'. Within the dominant neoclassical economic logic, it is argued that the ongoing destruction of biodiversity and ecosystems stems from the fact that nature has no market value. The proposed neoliberal solution is to assign a monetary price to 'ecosystem services', after which they can be traded via market mechanisms, such as carbon credits, biodiversity offsets, and 'natural asset companies'. While proponents argue that monetary valuation is the only way to give nature a voice in the boardroom, critics warn that pricing nature paves the way for complete commodification (Boell, 2015; Monbiot, 2014). To integrate these values into decision-making, economists use techniques such as shadow pricing, replacement cost, and contingent valuation to calculate Total Economic Value (TEV) as the sum of Use Values (UV) and Non-Use Values (NUV). Where UV includes direct and indirect uses, and NUV represents intrinsic existence values (Canoy et al., 2026; Plottu & Plottu, 2007; University of Queensland, 2019).

However, this attempt at universal monetisation suffers from fundamental flaws. Attempts to express complex, non-linear ecological systems purely in monetary terms reduce these dynamic wholes to discrete, simplistic commodities. A forest is not merely the sum of isolatable units of carbon storage and categorised species that are mutually exchangeable; it is a living, indivisible network of interdependencies with the right to ecojustice. Financialisation reduces this rich ecological reality to a one-dimensional abstraction for speculative market players, where circular/green public procurement criteria can turn it into regenerative thinking.

Furthermore, this approach reinforces the very anthropocentric and extractivist mindsets that a regenerative economy seeks to replace. Instead of recognising nature's intrinsic value, monetisation subjects the biosphere to the accumulation drives of global capital. This traces directly to extractivism's inability to account for the long-term effects of current economic activities. Market-based instruments are inherently designed for short-term transactions and ignore the radical uncertainties and irreversible threshold effects within ecosystems. By commercialising the ecological crisis, the system refuses to transform its destructive foundations, instead creating new speculative markets at the expense of the biosphere.

6. Rethinking Societal Dogmas: Property, Value, and Reality

To successfully shift to a regenerative 'We-All' paradigm, we must thoroughly rethink several deeply entrenched societal dogmas. This intellectual deconstruction aligns closely with Sheldrake (2012) in thesis *The Science Delusion*, where he shows that contemporary science is constrained by dogmatic assumptions mistakenly treated as absolute truths. Similarly, our contemporary societal design is held hostage by three persistent socio-economic dogmas: absolute property rights, short-term value, and the supremacy of legal reality over natural reality.

6.1 The Dogma of Property

Within the neoliberal structure, the absolute, individual right to property is regarded as an inviolable core value, In light of the necessity to think long-term, however, this dogma is untenable (Burdon, 2014). Can one truly claim absolute ownership of the Earth, land, or vital ecosystems?

The empirical reality of this property maximisation is painfully exposed in the *World Inequality Report 2026*, published in late 2025 by the World Inequality Lab (Chancel et al., 2025). The data in this report show that the gap between the owners of capital and the rest of the world has reached unprecedented, destructive proportions. The findings are summarised in the table below.

Table 2: Inequalities arising from the dogma of Property

Inequality category	Key statistic from the World Inequality Report 2026	Governance and systemic consequence
Global wealth concentration	The wealthiest 0.001% (fewer than 60,000 individuals) owns three times more wealth than the entire bottom half of humanity combined.	Extreme concentration of decision-making power over means of production and resources, which blocks democratic and regenerative steering.
Wealth distribution by decile	The richest 10% owns 75% of global wealth, whilst the poorest 50% holds just 2%.	The bottom half of humanity is entirely excluded from basic economic stability and possesses no adaptive capacity to absorb ecological shocks.
Climate inequality (capital)	The poorest half of the world's population is responsible for just 3% of carbon emissions linked to private capital ownership, whilst the wealthiest 10% claims a staggering 77%.	The ecological footprint and climate change are primarily driven by the investment choices of a wealthy elite, rather than merely by individual consumption.

As the report shows this extreme inequality proves that the concept of absolute property can no longer be sustained if we wish to guarantee social cohesion and ecological continuity (Chancel et al., 2025). Instead of absolute appropriation, we must shift towards a concept where we only receive parts of the world on *loan* or as *usufruct* (Bosselmann, 2015). Humanity does not own the Earth; we merely steward it temporarily for successive generations.

6.2 The Dogma of Value

In the current neoliberal economy, value is synonymous with short-term value maximisation for the individual subject or corporate entity (Mazzucato, 2018; Palley, 2023). This reductionism ignores the fact that genuine value is rooted in the vitality of the commons, - the collective resources, social networks, and ecological foundations of our existence (Bosselmann, 2015). Regenerative rethinking redefines value in terms of sustainability, equality, and equity across generations. Value creation is then no longer measured by the amount of capital extracted from a system, but by the extent to which the system is strengthened and nourished as a whole.

6.3 The Dogma of Reality

In contemporary society, we reason primarily within a 'legal reality'. The rule of law, with its human-constructed laws, property titles, and contractual obligations, is treated as near-sacred and absolute (Alexander, 2011). This

creates the absurd situation where economic and legal growth systems are legally protected while the biophysical systems that make them possible are systematically destroyed. We must invert this dogma: ground ourselves in a *nature-given reality*, with its inexorable biophysical laws and ecological limits(Montini, 2017). Our legal and economic institutions are human constructs and must adapt to the laws of nature, rather than demanding that nature adapt to the laws of the market.

7. Stewardship as the Necessary Third Concept: Integrating Thinking in Me-We-All

Rethinking these societal dogmas exposes the limits of an organisational world that relies solely on the familiar concepts of Management and Leadership (Lunenburg, 2013). To truly prepare organisations for the future and transition to a regenerative paradigm, organisations need to introduce a third concept: Stewardship (Takács & Abcouwer, 2024).

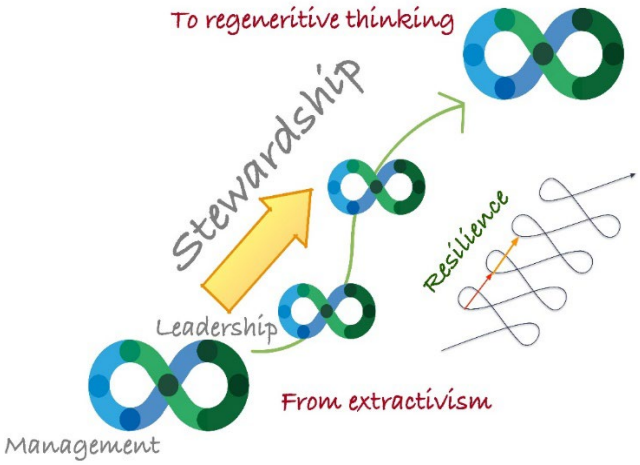

Figure 3: Stewardship for a fair and sustainable future (own work)

Stewardship transcends the traditional boundaries of business operations. Whilst management focuses on internal processes and efficiency (the 'how' question), and leadership on direction and innovation (the 'where to' question), stewardship is fundamentally oriented towards ethical and moral responsibility for the larger whole and the long term (the 'why' and 'for whom' questions) (Hernandez, 2012). Stewardship embodies the human and organisational duty to carefully manage, protect, and hand over entrusted natural, social, and economic resources in a restored state to future generations.

By explicitly integrating stewardship into the governance triangle alongside management and leadership, a balanced governance model emerges that can leave the destructive dogmas of the past behind. Stewardship compels organisations to subordinate self-interest to the general interest and to act from a deep awareness of ecological and social interconnectedness.

Table 3: Comparison: Management-Leadership-Stewardship

Governance concept	Primary focus area	Temporal orientation	Primary Value System
Management	Rationalisation, optimisation, stability, process control.	Short term (Today).	Efficiency and transactional value.
Leadership	Innovation, vision, creativity, motivation, change.	Medium term (Tomorrow).	Transformational and strategic value.
Stewardship	Careful management, resource preservation, ethics, system integrity.	Long term (After tomorrow and future generations).	Regenerative value and intergenerational justice.

8. Conclusion

By integrating Stewardship into the Management and Leadership paradigm for a Regenerative Future, organisations can shift from extractivist entities to active vehicles of societal resilience. Applying this integrated model through the 'Me-We-All' approach can build a shared understanding of ecojustice and responsibility to future generations.

Education, sensitisation, knowledge, and capacity building in organisations are ways to start shifting the paradigm for a Regenerative Future. Decision makers in public authorities and private entities should lead by example and serve as role models for caring about the Planet. Applying CGGP is one way to start the change: when public procurers handle public money with care for All and a stewardship attitude, and when providers shift from profit maximisation to the welfare of All.

The actions of the individual employee ('Me') and the strategy of the organisation ('We') are thereby directly linked to the survival and flourishing of the wider world ('All'). In this way, organisational actions no longer deplete the system but strengthen and regenerate the biophysical and social structure for generations to come.

Ethics Declaration: For this paper, no ethics clearance is required.

AI Declaration: AI tools are used to improve the language.

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