Open Social Protocols

Agency as Technology for a World in Motion

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Abstract

The systems through which we form companies, organize work, distribute ownership, exercise authority, and recognize contribution carry assumptions about people and society. Many arose under conditions different from those we now inhabit. Although institutions contain mechanisms for change, those mechanisms often begin from inherited assumptions and move too slowly for a period of rapid social, ecological, and technological transformation.

This paper proposes Open Social Protocols (OSP) as a different starting point. An Open Social Protocol is an articulated, reusable, and revisable proposal for organizing relationships or coordinated action. Its purpose, assumptions, terms, and history are transparent; people can personally adopt it, enact it with others, learn from its consequences, and contribute adaptations or alternatives.

The central shift is from following social arrangements imposed as finished rules to adopting protocols as living commitments. OSP treats agency itself as a technology: a repeatable capability through which people can participate in forming and evolving the systems they inhabit. The Common Ground Protocol (CGP) helps steward protocols and their learning across conversations, documents, applications, and interactions with AI. rProtocols demonstrates how this possibility can become practical.

OSP is not offered as a complete answer to institutional power or as a replacement for law. It is infrastructure for making social alternatives expressible, personally adoptable, testable, connectable, and capable of learning across contexts.

1. When Our Systems No Longer Serve

Every social system begins with assumptions.

Our companies, institutions, management practices, ownership structures, and systems of remuneration were shaped by particular ideas about people, work, value, authority, scarcity, and coordination. Many made sense within the conditions in which they emerged.

But conditions change. Our understanding changes too.

Work now crosses organizational boundaries. Knowledge and productive capacity are widely distributed. People have greater access to information, one another, and the means of participating in collective work. Ecological and social consequences can no longer be treated as external. Artificial intelligence is rapidly changing what people can create, understand, and coordinate together.

Yet the systems through which we organize remain rooted in older assumptions.

We feel the resulting mismatch when legal ownership conflicts with the reality of collective contribution; when imposed hierarchy obstructs the intelligence of a team; when remuneration fails to reflect how value is created; or when policy preserves order at the cost of responsiveness.

AI makes this mismatch more urgent. Applied uncritically, it can automate inherited assumptions and reproduce outdated patterns at unprecedented speed and scale. Used differently, it can help people surface assumptions, compare alternatives, observe consequences, and participate in the continuing development of their social systems.

These are not isolated design problems. They are signs that inherited social patterns are falling out of phase with the life they organize.

Most are difficult to examine because they no longer appear to be choices. They arrive as accepted forms: this is how a company is structured, how a team is managed, how ownership works, how decisions are made. Their assumptions have faded from view, but their consequences remain embedded in institutions, documents, software, and habits.

The challenge is not simply to create better agreements. It is to support our need and capacity to shape the social systems through which we live and work.

2. How Social Patterns Become Fixed

Social patterns do not persist simply because people continue to choose them. They are reproduced by the structures through which people learn, qualify, work, invest, regulate, and participate.

Educational systems necessarily organize knowledge into teachable forms. In doing so, they can present the provisional settlements of a field without preserving the disagreements, assumptions, and changing evidence from which they emerged. Professional training prepares people to operate within established systems, while examinations and credentials reward mastery of recognized knowledge and practice.

Licensing and regulation can protect people from genuine harm and preserve lessons learned through serious failure. They can also define which forms of knowledge, practice, and organization are institutionally legible. Established forms benefit because their risks, categories, and compliance pathways are already understood. Departing from them may mean losing employment, funding, insurance, legal recognition, or the right to practice.

The same pattern extends through contracts, accounting standards, investment models, organizational software, and public policy. Each layer assumes the others. A company adopts conventional management because its legal, financial, and technical infrastructure expects it. Professionals reproduce the model because their education prepared them for it. Regulators can assess it because its categories are familiar.

No single person needs to enforce the whole system. Its parts continually reproduce one another.

Institutional research describes related processes as path dependence: once a course is established, learning, investment, coordination, and legitimacy accumulate around it, raising the cost of alternatives.[1] Institutions do change, but inherited assumptions can limit which alternatives are considered and how readily people can pursue them.

Many reforms therefore adjust actions without reopening the assumptions that produced them. Chris Argyris described the difference between correcting an error within existing governing values and learning that questions those values themselves.[2] OSP begins at this deeper level.

It offers a different starting point: instead of asking how to modify the accepted system, people can ask what they are trying to make possible and what way of organizing they are willing to adopt now.

3. Open Social Protocols

Open Social Protocols begins with a simple proposition: the ways we organize can be made visible and designed to evolve.

A **social pattern** is a recurring way in which relationships or coordinated activity are organized. Social patterns appear in ownership arrangements, roles, routines, contracts, software, professional standards, cultural expectations, and informal habits.

A social pattern becomes an **articulated protocol** when it is expressed clearly enough for people to understand, adopt, and enact.

An **Open Social Protocol** is an articulated, reusable, and revisable proposal for organizing relationships or coordinated action. Its purpose, assumptions, conditions, commitments, and history are transparent. People can personally adopt it, enact it with others, learn from its consequences, and contribute adaptations or alternatives.

In this sense, **open** draws from two related traditions. It means transparent: the pattern and its assumptions can be inspected. And it means open in the sense of open source: the protocol can be used, adapted, and developed into related versions while its origins and lineage remain visible.[3]

Openness can be considered through several working dimensions:

- its purpose and assumptions are visible;
- its terms, roles, permissions, and processes are accessible;
- its origins, stewardship, and versions can be traced;
- adoption is explicit and personal;
- experience, consequences, and disagreement can be contributed;
- adaptations and alternatives can remain connected; and
- people have credible paths to question, revise, refuse, or leave it.

These dimensions describe a direction, not a certification that makes a protocol legitimate. A protocol may be open and still be harmful, coercive, or poorly designed.

The central shift is adoption.

Organizations do not adopt protocols in the human sense intended here. People do. An organization may publish a protocol, coordinate its use, record it as an organizational commitment, or require conduct through policy or law. But the agency-bearing act of adoption belongs to the people who choose a protocol as their way of participating with others.

This does not turn collective life into private preference. People can adopt strong, durable, and demanding commitments together. Their coordinated adoptions and enactments can constitute a team, cooperative, company, community, or institution. The difference is the starting point: the social system grows from the commitments people adopt rather than treating people only as subjects of a system already complete.

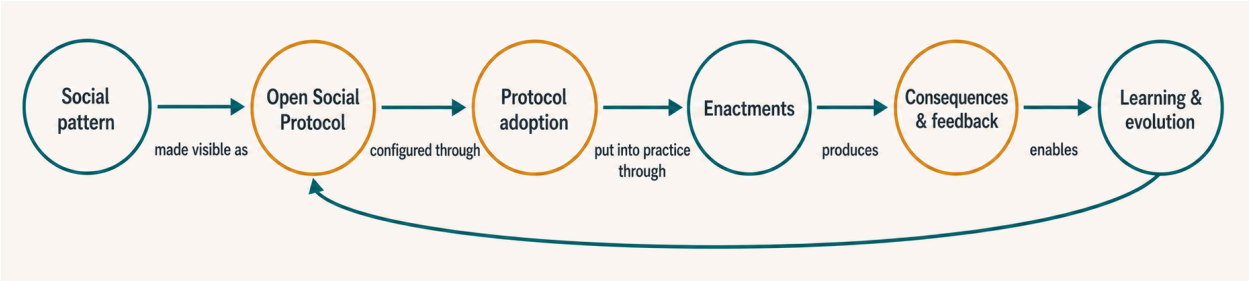


Figure 1. From social pattern to shared learning. *Personal adoption connects an articulated protocol to enactment; consequences and feedback inform its continuing evolution.*

A **Protocol** describes the reusable proposal. A **Protocol Adoption** records a person's commitment to a particular version and the context in which they intend to enact it. An **Enactment** is an occasion on which one or more people put their adopted protocols into practice together. Consequences and feedback arise through enactment and can inform continued adoption, revision, replacement, or forks.

OSP does not attempt to prescribe an ideal society. It gives people a shared way to bring inherited and emerging patterns into view and to participate in their evolution.

4. Agency as Technology

A social system cannot learn from the people within it if they cannot meaningfully affect it.

People often encounter a system's failures before its formal mechanisms do. They experience the policy that no longer fits, the role that obstructs the work, the incentive that produces the wrong behavior, or the consequence that remains invisible from above. This distributed experience is one of the richest sources of information available to any social system.

Information alone does not create adaptation. People need ways to question an existing pattern, describe what they are experiencing, propose alternatives, adopt a different approach with others, and influence what happens next. Without that agency, feedback becomes complaint, compliance, withdrawal, or resistance while the system loses access to the intelligence of those living with its consequences.

Agency does not mean that every person controls every decision or that all commitments remain optional. Collaboration requires boundaries, responsibilities, expertise, and dependable action. Agency means having a meaningful relationship to the systems that shape one's

participation: being able to understand them, respond to them, and—with others—help them evolve.

Self-Determination Theory distinguishes autonomous action from action experienced primarily as external control. Commitments are more likely to sustain motivation and participation when people experience them as freely chosen rather than made under perceived duress.[4] Albert Hirschman's account of **exit** and **voice** similarly shows that people need meaningful ways to leave deteriorating arrangements or influence them from within.[5] Participatory design contributes a related principle: people affected by a technology or arrangement have legitimate reasons to participate in shaping it.[6]

OSP makes agency a repeatable social technology through which everyone can contribute. When our perspectives can matter without having to prevail, we may feel less need to fight to be right.

Technology is not limited to machines. It can be a method that changes what people can do. Writing extended memory. The scientific method organized inquiry. Open-source development made distributed technical creation possible across distance and difference.

Agency is a living need. OSP proposes building technology around that need: structuring systems so people can shape their participation, contribute their perspectives, and evolve their commitments, rather than organizing primarily to control their behavior.

The mental pattern changes from:

> What are the rules, policies, and structures I am required to follow?

to:

> What am I trying to make possible, and what protocol am I willing to adopt with others?

This shift does not make laws, power, or dependency disappear. Nor does personal adoption make every constraint voluntary. It creates a different domain of action within those realities: people can recognize that a social pattern is a constructed response, encounter alternatives, and participate in forming commitments of their own.

Not everyone must design protocols. As with open-source software, many people may simply use a protocol that works for them. What matters is that inspection, adaptation, and contribution are genuine possibilities—and that adoption remains visible as a human act rather than disappearing behind the fiction that an institution has chosen on everyone's behalf.

5. From Ownership to a Living Protocol

Every inherited social pattern carries an answer to questions we may no longer be asking.

Consider ownership. A conventional company may bundle economic benefit, governance power, transfer rights, decision authority, and responsibility into a single structure. The package is often selected before the people involved examine why these elements are connected or what each is intended to make possible.

OSP begins by reopening those questions:

- Who is contributing what, and over what period?
- Who carries financial, relational, operational, and ecological risk?
- Who should benefit when value is created?
- Who should steward the purpose and resources of the enterprise?
- Which rights need to remain connected, and which could be separated?
- What should change when contributions or relationships change?

Suppose four people are forming a company. One contributes initial capital, two contribute full-time labor and specialized knowledge, and one brings a community relationship on which the work depends. Instead of accepting a standard ownership package, they articulate a candidate protocol that separates three functions:

1. **Economic participation** recognizes capital at risk and continuing contribution through distinct, reviewable allocations.
2. **Governance participation** belongs to people carrying active stewardship responsibilities and changes as those responsibilities change.
3. **Purpose stewardship** protects the company's stated contribution to the community and cannot be sold as an ordinary economic asset.

This is not presented as the correct ownership protocol. It is a hypothesis:

> Under these conditions, separating economic participation, governance, and purpose stewardship will better reflect contribution, sustain commitment, and protect the enterprise's purpose.

Each founder can inspect the proposal, question its assumptions, and record their own adoption of the version they are willing to enact. The company is then constituted, in part, by the compatibility of those personal adoptions. Their commitments can be reflected in appropriate legal agreements without being reduced to the legal form.

Enactment occurs through real events. Capital is invested, and work is performed. Governance decisions are made, and responsibilities can change. Revenue is distributed. A founder leaves. Consequences become visible.

The participants may discover that the arrangement supports stewardship but makes new investment difficult. They may find that contribution is difficult to assess, that informal influence exceeds formal authority, or that the community bears consequences that the founders do not see. Their experiences may support continued adoption, changes to individual commitments, a revised shared version, or a fork for different circumstances.

For example, the founders may disagree about whether revenue should reward current work or preserve reserves against future risk. They adopt a three-month allocation protocol while recording their distinct concerns.

During enactment, they track both participants' ability to sustain their work and the enterprise's financial resilience. At review, they consider what each perspective helped reveal and whether to continue or revise the arrangement. Their temporary agreement enables action without treating the underlying disagreement as settled.

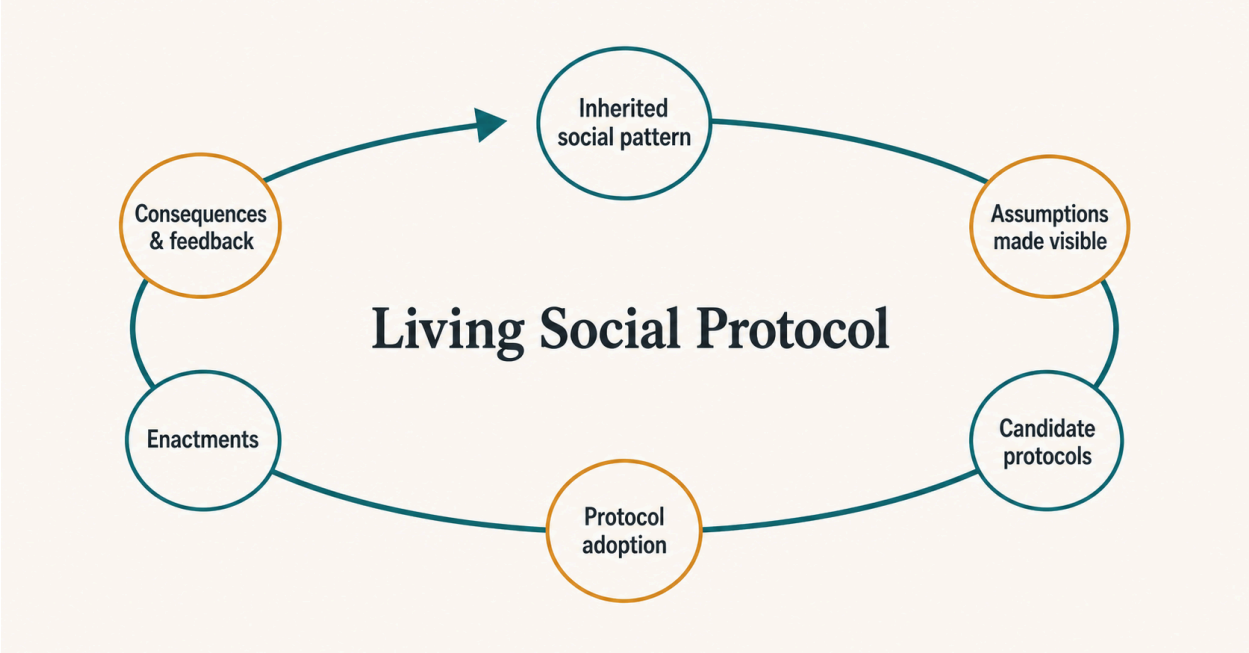


Figure 2. A living social protocol. *Making assumptions visible opens patterns to adoption, enactment, and revision through experience.*

Social patterns do not exist in isolation. Changing one can affect legal obligations, livelihoods, dependencies, and people who did not choose the experiment. Opening a pattern therefore requires attention to power, risk, reversibility, and who will bear the consequences if it fails.

The aim is not experimentation for its own sake. It is to replace unconscious repetition with deliberate social learning.

6. Difference Is a Source of Learning

Opening a social pattern does not mean that everyone will agree on what should replace it.

People may understand a situation differently. They may be affected by it in different ways, identify different needs, or make different judgments about risk and responsibility. Even when they share a purpose, they may not be willing to adopt the same protocol.

Traditional systems often treat these differences as obstacles to resolution. The goal becomes convergence on a single answer, after which remaining disagreement is framed as resistance or noncompliance.

Open Social Protocols treats difference as information. A disagreement may reveal an unexamined assumption, a consequence visible to one person but not another, or a need the proposed protocol does not serve. Preserving these differences allows learning to extend beyond the dominant interpretation.

The purpose is not to resolve every disagreement. Distinct perspectives can reveal different needs, relationships, and consequences within the same situation. Preserving them serves life by keeping these realities available to inform action. Premature convergence can remove precisely the information people need to recognize whose needs remain unmet, where harm is emerging, or how circumstances are changing.

People may still need to make a shared decision. Agreement on what to do next, however, need not imply agreement on how everyone understands the situation. A bridging protocol can support coordinated action while preserving the distinct commitments, concerns, and expectations participants bring to it. Enactment then becomes an opportunity to learn from those differences: what does each perspective help people notice, and what do the consequences reveal that no single perspective anticipated?

Consider a protocol intended to make organizational decisions transparent. Public documentation may support accountability and shared understanding. It may also expose sensitive information or place vulnerable people at risk. The tension is not resolved by declaring either transparency or privacy universally correct. Different people may adopt different but compatible commitments: public decisions with protected testimony, confidential review with public summaries, or another arrangement suited to their context.

Different protocols can coexist around a shared purpose. They may be compared, adapted, combined, or forked without requiring one to become universal. Where coordination is needed, a bridging protocol can make interaction possible without erasing the underlying differences.

Complex social forms will usually involve suites of protocols. A company may be constituted through compatible personal adoptions concerning ownership, contribution, authority, information access, decision-making, conflict, and resource distribution. Another company may compose those commitments differently while retaining enough shared structure to exchange knowledge or work together.

This plurality is not valuable merely because it creates more options. It allows alternatives to develop through practice and makes comparison possible. Some protocols may become widely adopted because experience supports their use across many contexts. Others may remain valuable because they serve people or conditions that a dominant approach does not. Elinor Ostrom's research on commons governance similarly demonstrated the importance of institutional diversity and arrangements adapted to local conditions rather than one universal governance form.[7]

For this learning to be credible, dissent cannot disappear when a protocol works for the majority. Minority experiences, unresolved objections, exclusions, and failures remain part of what can be learned.

Common ground does not require one final answer. It requires enough shared understanding to see where approaches differ, why they differ, and what their consequences reveal.

7. Technology for Shared Social Learning

Social protocols live through people. They emerge in conversation, take shape through shared understanding, and become real through practice.

Historically, much of the learning produced through this process has been lost. A conversation becomes a document. The document becomes a policy or practice. Copies circulate. People adapt them locally. Experience accumulates, while origins, assumptions, disagreements, and reasons for change become scattered or disappear.

Today's technology offers another possibility. A protocol can move from conversation to adoption, enactment, reflection, and interaction with AI while maintaining fidelity to its living development. Its wording can change and its representations can differ while its identity, origins, relationships, versions, and learning remain connected.

The Common Ground Protocol provides the foundation for stewarding that continuity.[8] CGP connects protocols with the observations, evidence, interpretations, adoptions, enactments, consequences, feedback, and alternatives through which they develop. A person can encounter the same protocol through a conversation, publication, application, or AI interaction without each form becoming a disconnected account.

Two complementary technologies are in development. Life Space Protocol provides a three-dimensional space for locating what CGP describes. LifeFingerprint is being developed to assess the life-serving direction of protocols within that space.[9] These assessments would inform inquiry, not determine which protocol should prevail.

The larger CGP architecture is developed in a companion paper. For the present argument, its role is simple: OSP opens social patterns to personal adoption and evolution; CGP helps the resulting learning remain connected and available.

rProtocols is an early application of this possibility. It demonstrates how a person might discover a protocol, ask why it exists, inspect its assumptions and history, adopt a version, interact with it through AI, record experience, and explore alternatives.

The symposium demonstration is intended to make the shift tangible. A person begins not with a catalogue of rules, but with something they are trying to do. Through conversation, rProtocols helps them surface the assumptions and social patterns involved, encounter relevant protocols, examine alternatives, and identify a version they may choose to adopt. The interaction can then remain connected to later enactment, experience, and revision. The interface is a prototype; the capability it demonstrates is the important part: social-system design becoming something people can personally understand and participate in.

AI has a defined role within this process. It can help people:

- surface assumptions embedded in a social pattern;
- understand complex protocols in accessible language;
- trace relationships among protocols, experiences, and consequences;
- compare enactments across contexts;
- articulate feedback and candidate alternatives; and
- interact with a protocol without reducing it to a static document.

AI does not adopt a social protocol on a person's behalf, determine what that person needs, or become the authority over which protocol should prevail. Its role is to expand human comprehension and participation while its own contributions remain visible and open to challenge.

This is how technology can make agency practical at scale: not by deciding for people, but by helping people understand and participate in the systems they choose to enact together.

8. Openness Alone Is Not Enough

Making a social pattern visible does not make it fair. Calling a commitment an adoption does not make it free.

People may formally be able to question or refuse a protocol while lacking the practical freedom to do so. Employment, income, legal status, access to care, community membership, or other dependencies can make participation difficult to negotiate and exit costly or impossible.

Agency must therefore be understood in relation to power.

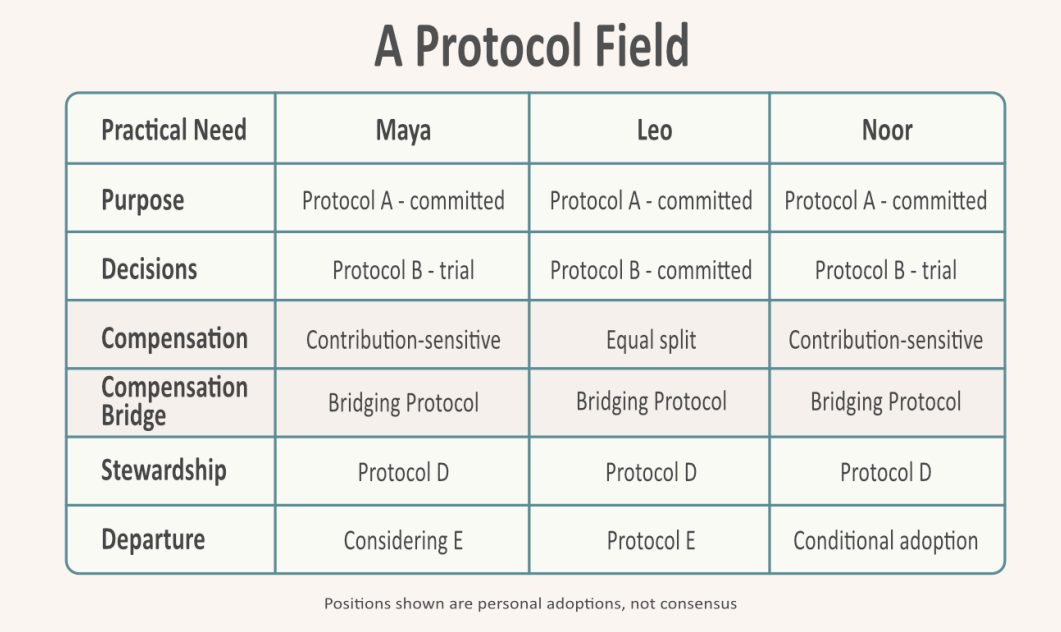


Figure 3. A field of personal commitments. *Distinct perspectives remain visible while bridging protocols support shared action without requiring consensus.*

Who can propose a protocol? Who can influence which options become visible? Whose experience is treated as credible? Who has the time, knowledge, safety, and technical access required to participate? Who receives the benefits, and who bears the consequences if an enactment fails?

OSP cannot answer these questions through transparency alone. It can establish commitments for how they are held:

- adoption is not represented as voluntary when refusal carries concealed or intolerable consequences;
- people affected by an enactment can contribute experience even when they are not adopters, with clear ways to raise concerns safely and receive a response from those responsible;

- power, dependency, risk, and conflicts of interest remain visible;
- consequential experiments require greater care, consent, and reversibility;
- dissent and minority experience are not erased by majority success;
- commercial, institutional, and political interests remain attributable; and
- AI participation never obscures human responsibility.

Laws, regulations, professional standards, and established practices may preserve essential protections and coordinate action at scale. OSP does not make them optional. It creates a way to expose the social assumptions they carry, articulate alternatives, and accumulate learning that may eventually inform institutional change.

Nor does OSP make structural power disappear. Organizing, law, finance, politics, and institutional reform remain necessary. OSP contributes infrastructure through which alternatives can become expressible, personally adoptable, comparable, and capable of accumulating practical legitimacy.

"Serving life" does not mean that OSP, CGP, or any steward can determine one correct social order. It names an obligation to remain answerable to affected people, ecological conditions, observed consequences, evidence, and legitimate disagreement.

A protocol is not worthy of trust merely because it is open. Trust grows when people can understand it, participate meaningfully, observe its consequences, challenge its assumptions, and hold its stewardship accountable to the life it affects.

9. A World We Can Shape Together

The systems through which we live and work are not beyond our reach. They were created by people responding to the conditions they understood. We can respond to the conditions we understand now.

Around the world, people are already developing new ways to share ownership, organize work, steward resources, make decisions, recognize contribution, educate, provide care, and restore ecological relationships. OSP proposes a shared way to connect these efforts, make their assumptions visible, preserve learning from their consequences, and help others adopt and build upon them.

Open Social Protocols can help create that connective tissue.

A team developing a better way to share authority should not have to begin from nothing. A cooperative exploring new forms of ownership should be able to learn from people who have faced similar questions. A community developing practices of care, accountability, or shared stewardship should be able to preserve what it discovers without turning its response into a universal rule.

Each protocol can become a contribution to a growing commons of social possibility.

Technology makes this possible at a new scale. People can develop protocols through conversation, understand them through accessible interfaces, adopt them personally, enact them together, and contribute what they learn. AI can help translate complexity, surface assumptions, connect experience, and make institutional design accessible to more people.

This does not require redesigning society all at once. It allows us to begin wherever people are already working together.

As protocols connect, people can compose new teams, companies, communities, care networks, public services, and stewardship arrangements that no single designer could have anticipated. Over time, these contributions can form an ecology of living social protocols: diverse enough to respond to different realities, connected enough to learn across them, and open enough to evolve as life changes.

The opportunity is larger than improving existing institutions. We can expand the range of social forms people are able to imagine and create. We can move from inheriting systems as fixed realities to participating in their continuing development.

There is a world to make better, a life to serve, and more to create than any one person, organization, or generation can accomplish alone.

Open Social Protocols is an emerging proposal for a new paradigm in how people organize. With a beta planned for October 2026, we invite you to explore it, contribute your perspectives, and join us in developing the work.

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