What are the Challenges to Being an Effective Transformations Practitioner?

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Abstract

Transformation work is central to addressing environmental sustainability challenges in the present day. However, engaging in transformations can be a challenge in itself. This paper draws on the experiences of current transformations practitioner-academics (practitioners) to discuss the challenges and obstacles they face at different levels – personal, professional, and systemic – throughout their transformations journey. What kinds of challenges are faced by those engaged in sustainability transformations work? Are these challenges largely professional or more personal? Do they reflect the rigidity of systems within which transformations work is carried out? How does resistance to change or 'transform' take shape? What has been the experience of the Transformations Community in this regard? These questions drive the discussion around challenges to transformations designed to support sustainable systems. The challenges identified by the interviewees include lack of financial resources, rigid systems, and institutional structures, challenges to collaborative work, low priority for action-oriented work, and personal struggles of those engaged in transformation work. We also highlight solutions discussed by the interviewees and the need to address these challenges by leveraging the collective experiences of the Transformations Community.

Introduction

The Transformations Community (see next section for a description of the community) is an association of action researchers and reflective practitioners who seek to foster a just transition toward a more sustainable future. So how do they do this vitally important systems change work, and what abilities do they need to do it well? What kind of obstacles do they face in the process? In this paper, we discuss the various challenges the Transformations Community faces in undertaking transformative work. This is the first effort to investigate the collective experiences of transformations practitioners by asking 56 of them to describe their practice. Prior empirical work on this topic has made inferences from large-scale literature reviews of transformations projects (Rose and Wanner 2018) or examined research and practice in specific initiatives (Bulten et al. 2021; Hilger, Chien 2022).

Walker et al. (2004) define transformations as the ability to create new "stable landscapes" with emergent variables defined by renewed relationships or ways of being when old social, economic, and ecological systems can no longer be maintained. It is now widely acknowledged that transformations are essential for addressing environmental sustainability challenges (Herrfahrdt-Pähle et al., 2020). However, engaging in transformative work comes with its own set of challenges. One of the most pertinent of them continues to be the lack of financial resources to support sustainability transformations undertakings, both in practice and research. Funding is still heavily focused on narrow disciplines, especially the natural sciences, and given its transdisciplinary nature, there is a need to improve the financing of transformations work (Shrivastava et al. 2020). But funding is only one of the many challenges that slow down or obstruct such work.

For one, transformations have been restricted by the existing socio-political and ecological structures and processes within which practitioners operate (Herrfahrdt-Pähle et al., 2020Inherent power dynamics within these systems can both facilitate or inhibit transformations work (Pelling and Manuel-Navarrete 2011). In our interviews, transformations practitioners recalled their experiences dealing with rigid institutional procedures and power structures; many concluded that breaking out of the 'status quo' is key to transformations work (Manuel-Navarrete et al., 2022). For this, radical changes are believed to be crucial; what inspires radical shifts – fear-driven compliance or hope-driven democratic choice – is key to the process of transformations (Stirling 2015). Therefore, sustainability transformations must be focused on rethinking decision-making processes and reimagining knowledge creation (Wyborn et al., 2019).

Sustainability transformations rest on transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary work as it deals with complex social-ecological systems, but much of the work in sustainability has not focused on 'holistic integrated research' (Shrivastava et al. 2020). Collaborative efforts required for knowledge co-production and sharing through integrated research are thwarted by institutional and organizational boundaries (Reed and Abernethy 2018). In addition, what is considered legitimate research and valued in the sustainability space has been contested, and action-oriented, practical knowledge is still not well-recognized as 'science' (Caniglia et al. 2021). This lack of recognition of multiple knowledge systems extends to indigenous and local knowledge (ILK) and its contributions to sustainability, calling for a more inclusive approach and acknowledging diverse knowledge systems that contribute to sustainability knowledge (Lam et al. 2020).

In a series of dialogues, practitioners share challenges they experienced throughout their engagement with transformations work. Most of these reinforce what has been discussed within the literature. In addition, practitioners expressed deep concern about personal well-being and care, an aspect rarely discussed in transformations literature. The nature of transformations work involves emotionally demanding and often uncomfortable situations, making practitioners and researchers more vulnerable (Cox 2011). However, few studies highlight the challenges the Transformations Community faces at a personal/individual level. We hope this narrative paper is

a step in this direction and can provide insights into the various limitations within the Transformations Community function.

What Is the Transformations Community?

The Transformations Community is a global community of action-oriented researchers and reflective practitioners who support transformations to a sustainable and regenerative future. The community consists of experienced academics and professionals who work in various organizations, including sustainability-oriented academic programs, government and intergovernmental agencies, research institutes, agile non-profit organizations, consulting firms, and foundations. The community began in Norway in 2013, with the first Transformations conference hosted by the University of Oslo to explore how to bring about a deliberate, ethical, and sustainable transformation in response to climate change. Since then, Transformations conferences have taken place at Stockholm University in Sweden, The University of Dundee in Scotland, and The University of Chile in Santiago, Chile, online in 2021, and the University of Technology in Sydney, Australia, in 2023. In addition to the conference series, the Community organizes workshops and communities of practice to develop new leadership practices, institutional arrangements, and participatory techniques to bring desirable transformations to life.

Methods

This project began as a joint effort between the University of Colorado Boulder Masters of the Environment Program (MENV) and the Arizona State University (ASU) Graduate Programs on Sustainability. We embarked on this project to:

- Provide students interested in systems change with an opportunity to engage with members of the Transformations Community.
- Check-in with the Transformations Community membership on how the community can better serve them.
- Use the Transformations Community as a case study to develop and share our understanding of the emerging field of transformations-in-practice.

In August 2021, the Transformations Community solicited interview subjects in our quarterly newsletter, which is sent to approximately 1500 transformations practitioners, most of whom had attended one or more of the five conferences convened by the Transformations Community biennially since 2014. We screened the 80 positive responses to this request to obtain a broad representation and diversity of perspectives and selected 60 subjects for interviews, four of which were not completed. The 56 members of the Transformations Community that we interviewed:

- Were about equally divided between males (26) and females (30) (note that we did not ask them for this information, and our estimate is based on their online biographies).

- 22 identified an academic institution as their organizational affiliation, 20 were from non-profits/government or private sector, and 14 were from both.
- 29 were from the U.S. and Canada, nine from Latin America and the Caribbean, eight from Europe, six from Australia/Oceania, three from Asia, and one from Africa.

This sample is more heavily weighted toward the U.S. and Canada than the Transformations Community as a whole, perhaps because they were more likely to volunteer to be a part of a project conducted by two U.S. universities and U.S.-based graduate students. Most of those associated with academic institutions gave their field/discipline affiliation as one of the fields where social and ecological systems are jointly studied. These included Anthropology, Applied Ecology, Environmental Science, and Geography. Table 1 lists the terms they used to describe their applied research domain and professional practice.

Table 1: Domains of applied research and professional practice

Adaptive management	Organizational change
Biodiversity conservation	Organizational learning and change process
Climate adaptation	Permaculture design
Climate change adaptation and resilience	Policy and governance
Community-based policy development	Policy research and analysis
Corporate responsibility	Polycentric governance
Creative arts	Public Participation
Ecosystem management	Reducing social inequality
Ecosystem services	Regenerative economics
Environmental governance	Social entrepreneurship and social innovation
Food sovereignty	Social-ecological resilience
Inter-organizational collaboration	Sustainability
Management and governance transitions	Sustainable Food systems
Monitoring and evaluation	Urban agriculture
Natural resource management	Urban/smallholder agricultural systems
Network management and governance	Visioning and futuring
Organizational behavior	

Prof. Goldstein and Prof. Manuel-Navarrete, co-authors of this paper, organized interviewing teams of three graduate students each, two from MENV and one from ASU. Student groups were able to select their interview subjects from the pool of fifty-six practitioners based on their alignment with their interests on a first-come, first-served basis. On each campus, faculty trained the students in semi-structured interviewing techniques, including opening the interview, establishing rapport, and probing for detail and examples.

Students scheduled an initial meeting to meet the other members of their interviewing team and then coordinated with the practitioners to schedule one-hour interviews in October 2021. Before the interview, students emailed their interview subjects an informational memo and consent form that stated that the interview data would not be publicly shared and that we planned to publish and distribute the results of the interviews without personal attribution. Students informed respondents that they could choose not to answer any questions and could request at any time that they leave the study and have their data deleted.

One student conducted the ninety-minute interview, one managed the Zoom platform, and the final member of the team took notes and identified key moments for later analysis. Questions from a semi-structured interview protocol examined these themes:

- What do they understand transformations practice to be, and how does it show up in their lives and work?
- How did they develop their capacity to engage in transformation practice, both personally and professionally?
- What are their challenges to achieving transformation, and how do they address them?
- How do the institutions they are currently engaged in support or hinder their transformations work?
- How could the Transformation Community help them become more professionally and personally fulfilled?

Students created an automated transcript which they corrected and uploaded onto a shared Google drive folder. By the end of November 2021, student groups prepared a memo containing their insights and reflections on their own career development, which they discussed in class. The contents of these memos were not analyzed further or incorporated into this analysis.

During Spring 2022, the authors coded and analyzed the interview transcripts using Delve content analysis software. Grounded Theory (Corbin and Strauss, 2015) guided analysis of individual cases, emphasizing identifying emergent themes and insights (Law, 2004). We edited the transcripts to enhance their clarity and enable them to stand alone in this format. We limited these edits to changing tense or pronouns and removing elements characteristic of verbal speech (e.g., phrases like "um" and "well").

This article is one of four articles created from this analysis that appear in this special issue – the other three examine the meaning of transformations (Goldstein et al. 2022), how to become a transformations practitioner (Navarrete et al. 2022), and the transdisciplinary and metadisciplinary nature of sustainability transformations practice (Goldstein et al. 2022).

Results

1. Acute lack of resources and a conducive environment

1.1 Lack of funding/ financial resources

One of the most prevalent challenges noted by transformations practitioners is the lack of available funding for organizations or individuals involved in transformation work.

- "It's very challenging, especially when you're working in a not-for-profit context. Usually there's never enough resources; everybody's understaffed, underfunded. And that's a chronic problem."
- "Personally, my barriers are funding; and because I work internationally it's just hard to do this work in the depth and time commitments that it requires."
  As a result, underfunded organizations are forced to offer low pay to their employees and collaborators. Most of the Transformations Community working for non-profits and voluntary organizations note that monetary compensation provided by non-profits is insufficient.
- "If you're working in a non-profit sector, there are no resources. I mean, a third of the time I worked for free."
- "The other day, I was talking to a lady who was also interested. And she said, 'You put a lot of effort in something that you don't earn any money for.'"
- "I have been working in a voluntary organization. And so, I have never earned any money in the work that I do there."

This dearth of financial resources is not just limited to the practice field; there is a severe lack of funding for undertaking research initiatives within the transformation space.

- "What we're lacking is resources and time. It would be really nice if they could actually throw a bit more cash at these sorts of things, to jumpstart some new research initiatives."
- "Creating research funding pathways that recognize the realities of doing ethical, deep, authentic kinds of co-production of knowledge; I think we're not quite there yet."

1.2 Bureaucratic structures and rigid institutions

What could be at the root of insufficient financial support? In most cases, systems that deal with financial transactions at different scales have rigid processes that exacerbate the challenge of low funding. Institutional requirements to follow certain set procedures, especially for financial disbursements, often cause delays. Requirements of funding agencies and set conditions for receiving organizations worsen the issue further.

- "There are institutional barriers in working with a community partner. We got a grant from the university and it is taking two and a half months to get any payment for. I cannot ask my community partners to work for free or to work in the hope that sometime the red tape will come in, and we'll finish with all the paperwork."
- "We need to acquire projects and only the chairholders of the groups are paid. We've had money for education, but we have to put a lot of time and energy into writing proposals,

which is sometimes a very nice transdisciplinary learning process. But you have to adjust to the formats and the criteria of the main funders; these are getting more and more elaborate and crazy. It's an immense task."

In addition, the processes of undertaking research and the following publication and dissemination phase of the research study are very structured and time-consuming. In this sense, this institutional rigidity extends to knowledge production and knowledge sharing, making transformations work less accessible.

- "Particularly with transformation, we don't have time to wait for three-to-four-year cycles of research, production and publication. Civilizations could collapse by the time anything interesting gets published."

1.3 Vested interests and political agendas

This rigidity exists at multiple levels of organizations and affects how sustainability transformations practice is carried out. Organizational politics, as well as the political leanings of leaders, play an important role in supporting (or not) transformative work, especially in implementing projects in the field. Ideological differences, personal interests, and politically motivated plans of the ruling class often come in the way of this work.

- "We are in a province with a staunchly conservative government that went to war with the public sector. So, we have been cash constrained because of provincial government decisions for a number of years."
- "In the month after we finished the podcasts the political leaders of that committee changed. Now they don't want to use the podcast because some of the CEOs of their local organization aren't there anymore.
  Needless to say, laws that govern the implementation of sustainability work on the ground determine the progress of sustainability transformations. These laws are often projections of the current political system that holds the 'power.'
- "Our current laws of Colorado specifically and other Western states based on water law are barriers to our transformation work. We can get around some of these laws, but then there's a lot of things that we can't do because of water law in particular."
- "So, who is going to implement — that is a big challenge in the country. I felt this from experiences with the National Planning Commission or Ministry of Forest — it's a challenge for us to convince them. They have a stake, they enrolled the whole plan and are implementers, and we don't have a say."

1.4 Rigid systems and resistance to breaking out of the 'status quo'

Rigid systems resist transformational change. Therefore, moving away or breaking away from the routine, or the 'status quo' situation, is a crucial first step that requires personal or inner work

(Manuel-Navarrete et al. 2022). While change at an individual level is an important first step, building systems supportive of those changes is essential to sustain long-term transformation.

- "It's not enough that I changed my value for sustainability. It's not enough that I become vegan, but rather is there a system that would support me becoming vegan? There's no system. There's no policy, there's no incentive, no financial mechanism that would support those changes."

Conventional, structured ways of working promote planning over action and don't provide the opportunity for 'emergence.' Additionally, standardized procedures/ routines hinder the reflective thinking required for transformations.

- "There's still this old-fashioned desire to have a strategy and a plan and it's one of my complaints with the Transformations Community. Some members spend an extreme amount of time on planning and strategy; basically, nothing relative to all this effort comes out of it. So, I'm much more for emergence."
- "One of the reasons practice becomes business-as-usual rather than transformative is because when you're working and you have a job, you often don't have the time to step back and explore alternative modalities or ways of thinking. Furthermore, the organization or entity that you're working for often expects things to be done in the recipe or the formula that they're used to. Oftentimes that's what we need to break out of to be transformational."

Racial and gender bias still exists within the Transformations Community and the sustainability field, perpetuating the same old patterns of work and leadership. Being restricted to old ways of functioning hinders transformation work, which essentially seeks to break out of standard operating modes.

- "...it was coming out of this recognition that there is a particularly strong, not just male, but white male leadership happening. That is almost treated as de facto, like this is just how it is. That's the norm not just within the Transformations Community, but in so many different spaces and in our own country. But with something like the Transformations Community, we are missing the boat here if we are just going to perpetuate that same old model."

1.5 Logistical challenges for forging collaborations

Transformations work requires collaborative efforts of actors across disciplines and geographies. Many of the barriers mentioned above hinder collaborative work, affecting sustainability transformations. Cultural, racial, and gender biases and a lack of social connection between people results in the sense of not belonging to the group and feeling unsafe in spaces, feelings that are pretty common while working with different groups of people.

- "…there are definitely psychological barriers about not feeling like I'm belonging, feeling siloed, or having fear about outcomes or set boundaries — a concept called structural balance, that makes it difficult for people to cross boundaries. The fusion of ideas, get stuck in these clumps, you can't get beyond."

Coordinating between several actors, geographical locations, time zones, and socio-cultural settings poses logistical challenges to the evolution of collaborative processes. The varied disciplinary backgrounds of different actors can make it challenging to forge collaborations.

- "Often, I can see that there are too many actors; they end up facing the same situation or trying to achieve the same goals while working on different sites. The integration is often difficult."
- "I think that the main barrier relates to the expectation-versus-reality of transdisciplinary knowledge. Because I am a social scientist working in a group of biologists, we had to have a lot of time to even understand each other's jargon and also to talk about the issues that we wanted in order to align expectations in terms of generating a research project that was actually understandable to all of us."
- "Timing is a serious issue for people like me in the developing world. There have been places where I have been very interested in so I have woken up at 1:00 in the night to attend seminars. But you can't do it all the time."

> **Responses to challenges:**
>
> While the interviewees identified several challenges pertaining to financial resources, they also recognized some limitations that should be addressed.
>
> - "I could say 'Oh there's financial barriers, we can't get the money' but then you could say, 'Well they're not actually financial barriers, they're barriers to connecting to people that can get you the money'."
>
> Finding common interests helps strengthen collaborative efforts in sustainability transformations.
>
> - "The best thing to do, and this could be helpful in any community, is to have common themes. It's less about 'Oh, I do theory or I do mapping'. It's like, 'I'm interested in climate change'. Everyone is interested in a common issue and should hopefully help to overcome some of that boundary work that people work so hard on because there is that common issue."

2. Deep divide/ disconnect between science/ academia and practice

2.1 Practice is not valued in the same measure as academic work

What is defined as success within the field of sustainability is often limited to the realm of academics and knowledge production, and sustainability practice, an essential element of sustainability transformations, is not valued in the same measure as research, at least within academia.

- "Many times, the work you do as a practitioner, doesn't count for your academic career. I think that's one of the biggest problems. That's something that actually has to change, especially for the kind of work we do, because the line that separates being an academic and being a practitioner is kind of blurry because we engage in a different way of knowledge production."
- "We're not like a physicist or chemist in the lab, or biologist, or even a traditional anthropologist, or sociologists, right? We're not engaged with a system in a way in which we just describe the system from outside. We engage in it, and that's why we're kind of practitioners. The point is that that specific aspect of our work should be acknowledged."

The university system values academic work above sustainability practice. Some interviewees believe that valuing just academic research undermines the relevance of the university system, especially in a world faced with sustainability challenges.

- "Are universities fit for purpose for the 21st century? I think in many cases they are factories of degrees, rather than actually generating the knowledge that's needed; and communicating and enacting that knowledge. Universities exist, ultimately for the public good. I think we've lost track of the scale of challenges that face us as a society today. We need to think differently about what these institutions are doing."
- "To be a practitioner-academic is not well recognized in the universities. The way they value knowledge is that it's very important that you publish scientific papers for review. Scientific papers don't have the same value of working with practitioners."

2.2 'Scientific language' is less accessible to practitioners

Most of the academic literature is developed in English, excluding a large population of Transformations practitioners who are not fluent in the language. In addition, the scientific literature is not easily accessible to non-scientists.

- "Some practitioners are in developing countries. They don't know English; how can they read in scientific literature that is 90% written in English? Science is written in scientific language, and, if I want to read a paper that is not in my discipline, I don't understand it. The language we use is very complicated for people that are not scientists; and in more developed countries, practitioners read a little bit more scientific literature, but in developing countries, it is not there."

> **Responses to challenges:**
>
> Being a Transformations practitioner involves bridging this gap between science and practice. Language is an integral part of that effort.
>
> - "It's very important to work in this interface between science and practitioners and try to write in a language that everybody can understand."
>
> While this disconnect is something that most interviewees identified, some thought that the practitioners are placed in a unique position to play the role of an academic and a practitioner, contributing to bridging the gap between the world of academics and practice. Embracing this duality is essential for their own growth as practitioners.
>
> - "Actually, you have a double job, a double life to lead and as soon as you understand that the better. We have to leave some readings behind to understand how to communicate, and then leave the field work behind a little bit and work on a paper to publish in a really good journal for about two months. You have to go around those two lives all the time.
>
> Engaging in impactful work with communities is a defining factor for Transformations professionals. Irrespective of the kind of evaluations they are subject to, they value their work in the transformations field equally or more than those expectations set for them by the system.
>
> - "In my professional life, I care less about my evaluation as a professor and I care more about doing something useful for society with my work. I think that is a very fundamental change for me. I encourage myself to do what I think is more useful, even if that is not what the knowledge system and the university value as most important. By now, knowing transformation has given me freedom and helped empower myself to do things differently."

3. Lack of personal well-being

3.1 Transformations work is a lonely journey

People work in their own silos and seldom interact with those from other schools, disciplines or streams of practice; interaction between academicians and practitioners is also limited.

- "I feel quite lonely, and I don't get any feedback."
- "I can't only focus on the practical. I have to find that liminal space; and I do often feel lonely there because I'm in the College of Earth, Ocean Atmospheric Sciences. And most

people in the College are doing basic science. There are some who are trying to figure out how humans are using these new technologies and new understandings, but I'm in the minority for sure."

The work-life balance for Transformations professionals is often neglected; a poor work culture in organizations undermines personal care and attention. In addition, practicing self-care and giving importance to one's life is a practice that one has to prioritize. For most people working in this field, this does not come easy.

- "It was a private foundation and it had a dismal work culture and I felt it was very unsupportive for the workplace, personal life balance and transformational change for the individual."
- "Well-being is something that I just was talking about getting more involved on a professional level, but on a very personal level as well. Looking at sustainable well-being is a concept that I have been using for years. But for myself, it's been one of the most challenging things to focus on. As a social worker, as an academic, as anybody who's deeply passionate about justice or transformation, it's in our nature to burn out. I believe wholeheartedly that's the name of the game. And if you're not willing to burn out, then you're not authentically engaged in this."

Responses to challenges:

Creating an environment that puts personal-well-being at the forefront is an essential first-step. Personal well-being is crucial for enabling personal transformations, which in turn inspire sustainability transformations work.

- "Even in the work that we do, it is not sustainable if we don't focus on well-being to some extent. And not just focus on it for ourselves, but try to create an environment that prioritizes that at the very top level."
- "One of the best things you can have in this space is teamwork and collaboration and giving people the space to recharge with each other. When you're doing messy and tangible, often undervalued work, you need people around you who are in the same position, understand it and will keep each other going."

Reflexivity is another aspect of personal well-being that some of the interviewees practice as a solution to deal with negative emotions/ feelings that result from unsupportive work environments.

- "It comes back to recognizing the intersectionality between human to human, human environment relationships, and how much that impacts me and others to be a part of this. And that reflectivity, that awareness, and that opportunity to reflect is where we have to start."

> - "From a total wellbeing perspective there's increasingly a lot more work that could be intentionally and thoughtfully brought into the sustainability transformation space. And that is around mindfulness and meditation practices and all of that linked to things like resiliency, and total well-being."

Conclusion

This analysis of 56 interviews with the Transformations Community highlights that transformations work is often challenging. The heavy focus on challenges, compared with the responses or solutions to the challenges, is a testimony to this fact.

It is important to consider what these challenges mean to the sustainability of transformations work and why it is essential to address them. Some challenges mentioned here are deeply ingrained and institutionalized, including ideological differences, power, and socio-cultural discrimination. Working on these challenges requires long-term, aggregated efforts. However, other challenges that negatively impact transformation work, such as lack of effective communication, collaborative work, and personal well-being, are more feasible to address by the Transformations Community.

The big question that remains is: How? How can more spaces be created for the community to discuss and address these challenges together? Can the Transformations Community apply the solutions they bring to communities and themselves? Inspiring radical shifts and embracing personal transformations is key to enabling sustainability transformations; how do we ensure an environment supportive of such change? Transformations work is deeply embedded within social justice frameworks; tackling challenges that hinder transformations work goes beyond inciting transformative changes in ways of thinking and doing for achieving sustainability to addressing moral dilemmas inherent in climate action and climate policy (Grasso and Tàbara 2019). Therefore, creating spaces that nurture transformative change should be prioritized; and addressing challenges to being an effective transformations practitioner should be recognized as a vital aspect of sustaining transformational change.

Acknowledgments

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