

Summary of Online Panel: Transformative Policy & Paradigms

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Abstract

The online panel discussion “Transformative Policy & Paradigms” was held as part of the 2023 Transformations Conference “Transformative Partnerships for a Better World” on July 12th. Two presentations were given titled “*Exploring the roles and capacities of large-scale actor coalitions for sustainability transformations*” and “*Co-creating a Toolbox for building Transformative Coalitions: Lessons from Latin America.*” The first panelist presented a project that aims to explore how coalitions that consist of powerful actors (such as transnational corporations, investors, philanthropies, and international organizations) may support sustainability transformations and challenge existing norms, practices, and regulations within their sectors. Preliminary results from five case studies from the food and finance sectors were presented. The second group presented the “Transformative Urban Labs” project, which focuses on convening multi-stakeholder urban labs active in five Latin American cities for decarbonization and social justice objectives. They shared insights from developing a toolbox of best practices for supporting coalition building and maintaining active coalitions over time. One of the best-practice tools from the Argentinian lab in *Villa 20* was presented in more detail. The toolbox, which is informed by the evaluation of 200 tools on the topics of usefulness, effectiveness, and implementation potential, is scheduled to become available in late 2023. Overall, this online panel discussion highlighted the importance of co-designing and co-creating the rules of engagement in a partnership while also acknowledging power asymmetries.

Summary of Each Presentation

a. Exploring the roles and capacities of large-scale actor coalitions for sustainability transformations

Sofia Maniatakou presented an analytical framework developed by the authors of this project to explore how large-scale actor coalitions (LSACs) relate to transformative processes within the food and finance sectors. Preliminary findings from using this framework as a coding structure to analyze data from five LSACs were presented. These included a description of the multiple roles and distinct strategies LSACs use to reach their goals and how these strategies changed when LSACs started responding to the COVID-19 disruption. Maniatakou concluded the presentation by pointing to three key considerations. First, complementary capacities present in LSACs might work synergistically and enable transformative changes within the food and finance sectors. For example, coalitions that are set up with specific timelines and goals seem to have a ‘catalyzer’ role, whereas others that are set up ‘for process’ might be more capable of learning, adapting, and navigating change due to the mechanisms they already have put in place. Second, LSACs were able to switch a variety of capacities when responding to the crisis, which empirically supports the notion that transformative capacities are dynamic. Last, there are risks of derailing transformations, especially if large-scale actors are not willing to transform issues of power or if other changemakers within the same systems are lacking capacities to shape the dynamics of these processes.

b. Co-creating a Toolbox for building Transformative Coalitions: Lessons from Latin America

This presentation was given by Nathalie Sanger, Jorge Martın Motta, and Laura Arevalos. They introduced the Transformative Urban Coalitions (TUC) project, which seeks to transform the social, technological, and political structures and value systems that have fostered high-carbon and resource-intensive urban developments. Five urban labs located in Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina are part of the TUC project. The Buenos Aires Urban Lab was presented as an example to discuss how urban actors can succeed in co-designing, building, and sustaining diverse multi-stakeholder coalitions that involve the most vulnerable groups. Experiences from best practices that support the TUC project’s goals are currently being analyzed for their usefulness, effectiveness, and implementation potential and are collated into a toolbox of best practices to help urban coalitions steer their cities toward more just and carbon-free development trajectories. Tools include participatory design and mapping methodologies (e.g., participatory collage methodology), awareness-raising games, and consensus-building exercises that have been developed and adapted in and with the urban labs to meet local needs. Through the toolbox development process, opportunities and challenges for its implementation were identified, which were also shared by the presenters. The presentation ended with critical reflections on how processes of co-design and co-production of knowledge can reflect collective visions and build effective partnerships that enable transformative change toward sustainable and just urban futures.

Summary of Panel Discussion

The discussion was mainly focused on how to achieve collaboration and sustain motivation and engagement in sustainability-themed partnerships. Experiences from working with the Buenos Aires Urban Lab were shared by Laura Arévalos, Territorial Referent of the *Villa 20* lab. These highlighted the importance of participatory processes in increasing awareness about the interrelatedness of climate change and daily challenges so that urban dwellers realize that climate change amplifies the problems of their daily lives (e.g., poor infrastructure and/or lack of ventilation in homes, a problem that is exacerbated by climate change). These experiences support engagement in interventions aligned with the coalition's objectives (such as planting activities), which, in turn, sustain participants' motivation to improve their quality of life in *Villa 20*. Participants also discussed the challenge of long-term stakeholder engagement when a project becomes independent from external actors. The audience and panelists emphasized the importance of participation and inclusion of all stakeholders, especially the most vulnerable ones, in co-designing and co-creating transformational processes. It was also mentioned that partnerships play different roles at different phases and scales, and these roles can act complementarity and enable transformative changes.

Key Insights

How a partnership has been set up, matters

A cross-cutting theme was that the way a partnership has been set up will be reflected in its activities. For example, whether the partnership involves all relevant stakeholders will determine the long-term sustainability of the initiative, especially in local settings. For LSACs, partnerships that have been set up with specific timeframes and goals tend to work towards their goals differently compared to those LSACs that have a focus on supporting learning objectives among their members.

The importance of “co” – co-design and co-produce

Stakeholder participation from the initial phases of a coalition formation is key for the initiative's sustainability and effectiveness. Participation encourages stakeholder engagement and strengthens coalitions' capacities to achieve their stated objectives.

Conclusion

Overall, this session highlighted a common challenge partnerships face, namely, how to work towards transformations that are both socially just and ecologically regenerative from local to transnational environmental governance contexts. The focus of the discussion was more tilted on the justice aspect. Representation of all relevant stakeholders is necessary, but not sufficient, for a coalition to be sustainable in the long run. Mechanisms to 1) allow for participation and collective ownership of the activities, and 2) deal with power asymmetries that need to be in place to enable the emergence of inclusive transformative processes, even when external funding comes to an end.

Additional Notes and Resources

- The first version of the toolbox is scheduled to be released by the end of 2023 at <https://urbancoalitions.org/en/resources/toolbox>

- Co-authors of the “*Exploring the roles and capacities of large-scale actor coalitions for sustainability transformations*” manuscript presented at the conference are Per Olsson and Peter Søgaaard Jørgensen from the Stockholm Resilience Centre.

Process and Structure of the Dialogue

- Presentations (10 minutes each)
- Break-out rooms (approx. three participants/group) to discuss the presentations, guided by the following three questions (15 minutes):
 - *What’s standing out for you in this conversation?*
 - *The conference theme is transformative partnerships – what do you envision here?*
 - *Under which conditions can partnerships consisting of influential actors support just transformations?*
- Return to plenary; each group was encouraged to share their insights.

The panel moderator was Nick Graham, with the support of Paul Chukwuma. The discussion became more inclusive by giving participants the opportunity to speak in their native language with the support of the Whova platform’s real-time captioning for simultaneous translation.

Panelists’ Abstracts

1. **Proposal Title:** Exploring the roles and capacities of large-scale actor coalitions for sustainability transformations

Abstract: Several transnational corporations, investors, and philanthropic organizations have formed coalitions to respond to the global social and environmental challenges of the Anthropocene. The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified calls for such partnerships to increase transformative actions, including new forms of governance and business models. Do these coalitions, consisting of large-scale actors, have the capacities to contribute to the fast, broad and deep transformations that are needed, or do they perpetuate the system dynamics that created the problem in the first place? In this paper, we explore how large-scale actor coalitions (LSACs) may contribute to transformations toward equitable and sustainable futures. We use a “rapid assessment” 20-variable framework to collect and analyze empirical data from a total of five food and finance coalitions to identify their role and capacities for transformative change. To better understand how capacities might change according to certain conditions, we used additional data from the COVID-19 crisis. Our results indicate that LSACs take on several roles and implement distinct strategies to reach their goals. More specifically, LSACs raise awareness of sustainability issues, utilize ties to push forward agendas, and/or deal with push-back from actors that resist change. Our findings also show that LSACs responded differently to the COVID-19 disruption and were able to switch a variety of capacities when responding to the crisis. We contribute with a more nuanced understanding of the promises and pitfalls of LSACs in transformative processes and conclude that a combination of strategies and capacities (reflected through diverse LSAC set-ups) may support transformative changes within the food and finance sectors.

2. **Proposal Title:** Co-creating a Toolbox for building Transformative Coalitions: Lessons from Latin America

Abstract: Cities are responsible for 75% of carbon emissions. Rapid and radical decarbonization is needed to meet global emission targets. However, this can only be sustainable if it is also socially just. Such a goal requires collaboration across urban dwellers. But how can urban actors succeed in building and sustaining diverse coalitions? The Transformative Urban Coalitions (TUC) project seeks to transform the social, technological, and political structures and value systems that have so far fostered high-carbon and resource-intensive urban developments. The project focuses on Latin America, where cities are already feeling the effects of the climate crisis in addition to structural problems like inequalities, poverty, and informality. In five urban labs in Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina, catalyst projects for transformation are being co-designed and co-implemented by multi-stakeholder coalitions involving the most vulnerable groups. The goal of the toolbox is to help urban actors steer their cities toward more just and carbon-free development trajectories. Tools include participatory design and mapping methodologies, awareness-raising games, and consensus-building exercises that are developed and adapted in and with the urban labs to meet local needs. In parallel to its development, the toolbox is also being researched for its effectiveness regarding contribution to transformative change in different urban contexts. Results are then constantly being fed back into the further development process. This presentation will discuss the opportunities and challenges arising from the toolbox development process, with a focus on experiences from the Buenos Aires Urban Lab. In doing so, it will draw on experiences as well as on empirical data from the development and implementation process. The presentation ends with critical reflections on how processes of co-design and co-production of knowledge can reflect collective visions and build effective partnerships that enable transformative change toward sustainable and just urban futures.