

Transformative Leadership

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Abstract

This paper is a summary of the Transformative leadership panel that took place during the 2023 Transformations Community Conference. It synthesizes key insights regarding the following questions: (1) What skills, capacities, and awareness are needed for transformative leadership in diverse settings? (2) What does leadership mean in the context of partnership? (3) How does diversity of knowledges, perspectives, cultures, disciplines, and narratives contribute to sustainability transformations? and (4) How can we build coalitions that respect such diversity while developing the unified power to deliver purposive sustainability transformations? The discussion was structured around generative dialogue, breakout rooms, and open discussion between panelists and the audience. The main insight of the panel is that leadership is key to stirring collective efforts toward common goals and achieving beneficial social transformations.

Panel Logistics

- Date: 07/11/2023
- Start Time: 11:00 AM CEST
- Duration: 90 mins
- Participants: Simon Beaudoin (Earth System Governance Project); Christopher Ives (University of Nottingham); Angela Moriggi (University of Padua); Michael Bernstein (Austrian Institute of Technology and Arizona State University); Per Olsson (Stockholm Resilience Center)
- Moderator: Nick Graham (Transformations Community)

Introduction

The Transformative Leadership panel brought together panelists and participants with diverse expertise, including global environmental governance, urban social-ecological systems, transdisciplinary sustainability, new and emerging technologies, and system entrepreneurship. This is done by touching upon four guiding questions namely (1) What skills, capacities, and awareness are needed for transformative leadership in diverse settings? (2) What does leadership mean in the context of partnership? (3) How does diversity of knowledges, perspectives, cultures, disciplines, and narratives contribute to sustainability transformations? and (4) How can

we build coalitions that respect such diversity while developing the unified power to deliver purposive sustainability transformations?

The panelists discussed the dimensions, enabling factors, and challenges of leadership for transformative change. This brief synthesis of the discussion highlights the key message and insights of the panel.

Key Insights

The session on transformative leadership highlighted the value of partnerships that work across sectors of activities, such as academia, industry, urban planning, and policies, to support leadership by many actors. Participants discussed the growing recognition of the need for transformative change. In this context, competencies for sustainability and valuable skills, understood through the lens of leadership, are seen as valuable. Indeed, the panel members highlighted leadership as an essential feature for social transformation. Participants also recognized that leadership is multifaceted, complex, and contested, as any powerful boundary object. Despite the absence of a consensual definition of leadership, all agreed that it is key to guide future actions in a context of accelerating ecological, socio-cultural, and political turbulence. For leadership to emerge, safe spaces for thinking, relating, collaborating, and acting are vital as they open up opportunities for critical thinking and consultation with peers and diverse stakeholders. In this light, participants emphasized the value of awareness of what surrounds us and the facilitating conditions for leadership to emerge. Such awareness can then facilitate transformative change, as well as encourage the development of other competencies, skills, and values, such as complexity thinking, global solidarity, and collective care.

These skills and values are also critical to broadening visions of where we should go and how we should get there. Participants stressed the possibility of unveiling new worldviews and encouraging thinking that goes beyond the business as usual when such skills and competencies are fostered. They also showed, through empirical evidence gathered in their ongoing research projects, that people hold contradictory worldviews and beliefs, which are hardly defined in fixed and binary terms (e.g., ego vs eco). The challenge, for those enabling transformative work, is to embrace ambiguity, navigating complexities and nuances.

Participants also underscored that transformations are multifaceted and multi-leveled processes. Despite the complexity of grappling with transformations, participants were reminded that transformations are part of everyday life as well as the long term. Moreover, contemporary polycrises can be seen as formative moments that open the door to profound systemic transformations. In this context, change agents across the globe evaluate alternatives, encourage reflexivity, and engage in radical collaborations. Participants also touched upon the value of preparing the ground for change by supporting conversations about “societal readiness.” Whereas technological readiness models usually focus on technology development and application independent of societal concerns, societal readiness invokes critical reflection on the goals, distributions of burdens and benefits, and potential undesirable impacts that might arise from technological development – as well as how to reconfigure social and technical arrangements to better serve society.

Challenges for Transformative Change

Exploring key contemporary challenges, participants emphasized the benefit of strengthening ecological leadership. The notion is seen as a way to move beyond traditional conceptions of leadership to include ecological conceptions of change and shift away from impersonal objectives toward deeper collaboration and involvement by embracing a plurality of modes of leadership. Transformative change requires such a shift in our thinking and approaches. In addition, systemic transformation also implies systems entrepreneurship and distributive forms of agency. This reminds us that we need collective forms of leadership, engaging a diversity of people from different cultural backgrounds and socio-economic contexts, to advance profound transformations.

Next Steps

Exploring some of the next steps, participants encouraged broadening our definitions of leadership. For instance, imaginative leadership, seen as the possibility to unveil inner dimensions of mindsets, values, worldviews, and radically alternative (future) thinking, is key to overcoming the enduring crisis of imagination. Another next step could consist of encouraging dialogues aiming to bridge a diversity of knowledge in a way that facilitates social transformations but also embraces regenerative thinking – a fundamental milestone for broadening our inclusion of the natural world in our actions and decision-making processes.

Moreover, if leadership is to be collective, we need to empower collectivity and not only individuals. This also calls for facilitating the pooling of leadership through new models for thinking, working, and acting together. Existing platforms and networks can and should be leveraged for the cultivation of leadership capacities required for the 21st century. For leadership to think out of the box, build bridges, and navigate uncharted territories, care is vital, both as a collective disposition and as an individual practice. Leaders, therefore, need space to take breaks, to grieve, and to move beyond the things left behind when experimenting with new directions. As challenges multiply, we need to facilitate the emergence of leadership at all levels, and for collective leadership to materialize, a sense of collective care is needed.

Annex: Panelists' Abstracts

Proposal Title: Synergies for Transformations

Name: Simon Beaudoin

Abstract: Fifty years after the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (UNCHE), a comprehensive environmental governance architecture is still needed. This article investigates the potential for adapting policies to synergies among socio-ecological issues. Aiming to identify promising avenues for transformative change, it presents lenses through which adapted governance arrangements across sectors can be crafted. The guiding question of the research asks, 'How can interdependent social and environmental issues be governed synergistically?' Seeking to move beyond inconsistencies, deadlocks, fragmentation, and overlaps in global environmental governance, it argues in favor of a comprehensive approach to the governance of socio-ecological issues. Through multidisciplinary lenses, the paper offers pragmatic pathways toward governing synergies among social and ecological spheres and building adapted governance architecture. I first identify key connections stretching across the Earth System and societies. Second, I identify interdependencies and overlaps between areas where integrated and coordinated governance arrangements could prove beneficial. Third, building on the notion of synergies, I propose a framework for their integration. Based on the analysis of international, national, and local realities and programs, I show that synergies can be harnessed under a comprehensive multi-level framework within common timeframes and lead to concerted actions. This paper brings together the theoretical and empirical insights of the last decades of research in social and natural sciences to develop governance architectures that work 'beyond silos.' It closes with the investigation of how governing synergies could help achieve collective goals. Ultimately, it aims to support the work underway to deploy and support solutions to contemporary socio-ecological issues.

Proposal Title: Sustainability in a turbulent future: A horizon scan of necessary leadership capabilities

Name: Christopher Ives

Abstract: In the context of impending climate breakdown and ecosystem collapse, future scenarios are often framed as two possible pathways: system 'breakdown' where planetary thresholds are transgressed, or 'breakthrough' where societies are reoriented towards sustainability. However, growing evidence highlights interactions that may accelerate feedback among phenomena such as climate extremes, crop failure, energy stress, and geopolitical conflict. To date, there has been scant consideration of the kind of leadership that will be required to guide future action in this context of accelerating ecological, socio-cultural, and political turbulence. This study aimed to address this gap through an interview-based horizon-scanning exercise to explore (1) What mental models of the future do environmental practitioners possess? (2) What challenges to leading change may emerge with increasing uncertainty and turbulence? and (3) What skills and competencies may be required to deliver effective change in 2040? While horizon scanning has been widely used to anticipate future trends or events, this study innovatively applies it to capacities for leading change. 28 members of the Institute of Environmental Management and Assessment (IEMA) from various

professional contexts were interviewed by students from the University of Nottingham in March 2023. Thematic coding of transcripts was employed to elicit key insights, and deliberative discussion amongst students and IEMA staff was used to distill core challenges for future sustainability leadership. Results showed that environmental professionals displayed limited awareness of future global systemic complexities and how these may challenge current leadership norms. In many instances, there was a disconnect between personal visions of the future and current professional practices. Anticipatory competence for sustainability (c.f. Wiek et al., 2011) must, therefore, be extended to include future practical responses. There is an urgent need to translate insights from global sustainability science to practical leadership. Communities of practice such as IEMA will be vital in this endeavor.

Proposal Title: Cross-sectoral partnerships & knowledge co-production to activate regenerative place-based mindsets in youth

Name: Angela Moriggi

Abstract: Young people are key stakeholders in the sustainable transformations of any territory, and yet often left out of planning and decision-making processes. Youth engagement is crucial not only to voice ideas and desires but also to enhance knowledge and skills, including the capacity to think and act in regenerative ways. This is especially needed in rural areas affected by marginalization, depopulation, ecological degradation, and socio-economic decay, amongst other issues. Such processes often push young people away from their territories in search of “better” opportunities in urban centers. This presentation focuses on a partnership established amongst inter-disciplinary scholars at the University of Padova and a local Foundation (Fondazione Angelini - Centre for Mountain Studies) active in a rural area in the Italian South-Eastern Alps, within the context of two concurrent (2022-2024) projects: VERVE and RIGENERA MONTAGNA. Both projects aim to enhance young people’s awareness of key sustainability topics, including biodiversity loss and conservation, sustainable water management, place-based regeneration, abandonment and rewilding processes in rural areas, and climate crises. We combine scientific and technical knowledge with emotional and embodied approaches to elicit participants’ sense of place, care, and agency. To do so, we experiment with innovative creative, visual, and experiential methods (also outdoor), engaging youth between 16 and 30 years of age. In the presentation, we focus on a series of Creative Labs that combine the use of Photo-Voice with nature-based experiential and somatic exercises. We introduce the conceptual framework guiding the activities, which aims to activate “regenerative mindsets,” understood here as ways of thinking, beliefs, and assumptions that value the interconnections between humans and non-humans and that inform practices for the well-being and thriving of both. We also provide key insights regarding the process of knowledge co-production between the actors engaged in the partnership, highlighting crucial enabling and dis-enabling factors.

Proposal Title: Re-imagining “Societal Readiness” in Research and Innovation Policy for Transformation

Name: Michael Bernstein

Abstract: An increasing concern of research and innovation (R&I) policy in Europe, in the context of the twin green and digital transitions, is to ensure scientific, technological, and social

innovations do not undermine transformation for sustainability. There has been increasing attention to aligning R&I to similar ends across European R&I policy Framework Programmes. One may observe the success of such efforts over the long-term, for example, with gender equality—started in Framework Programme 5, and now, several decades later, an eligibility requirement for all organizations seeking European Research funding in Framework Programme 9 (although still far from fully realized). In Framework Programme 8 (H2020), the predominant character of efforts to center societal concerns could be found in the “societal challenges” funding pillar, as well as a cross-cutting set of concerns: “responsible research and innovation” (RRI). Responsible research and innovation sought to enhance general regard and care for future social and environmental impacts of research. As a cross-cutting investment in H2020, almost 500 million euros went toward building the RRI community, methods, and toolkits. Implementation of RRI, however, faced numerous challenges, from being obscure and siloed to overly fixated on projects rather than research agendas or Framework Programmes themselves. Now, in Framework Programme 9, RRI has been “mainstreamed” (i.e., discontinued), and there is increasing talk about an initiative related to the “societal readiness” of R&I. Challenges with current thinking about societal readiness include homogenized views of society; linear thinking equating “readiness” with “acceptability”; an under-theorization of how readiness is moderated by various social phenomena (e.g., trust, legitimacy, etc.); and falling prey to the pitfalls of operationalizing “readiness” in the same manner as RRI without learning from failures. In this presentation, I invite a reimagining of “societal readiness” in R&I and discuss the potential of this policy idiom for sustainability transformations.

Proposal Title: Navigating transformation in times of uncertainty and crisis

Name: Per Olsson

Abstract: For those focused on transforming complex and problematic system dynamics, the question is whether the current polycrisis (including climate change, COVID-19 pandemic, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine) could create a formative moment in which transformative change could become possible. Our studies from across the world examine the experiences of leading change agents engaged in efforts to create or support transformative change processes. To better understand the relationship between crisis, agency, and transformation, we explored how they navigated their changed conditions and responses to crises. In the context of impacts such as economic impacts, hunger, and gender-based violence, we examine how they (re)shaped the opportunity contexts for change. We have also identified different kinds of uncertainties that emerged as a result of policy responses, including uncertainty about the (1) robustness of preparing a system to sustain a transformative trajectory, (2) sequencing and scaling of changes within and across systems, (3) hesitancy and exhaustion effects, and (4) long-term effects of surveillance, and we describe the associated change agent strategies. We suggest these uncertainties represent new theoretical ground for future transformations research.