

Partnerships in Transformations: A Synthesis

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Abstract

This article synthesizes six linked online sessions at the Transformations 2023 Conference, a biennial conference of sustainability researchers and practitioners dedicated to fostering equitable, sustainable, and regenerative futures. We identify four unifying conceptual threads: 1) the interrelated nature of inner and outer transformation; 2) how transformations leadership is fluid and collective; 3) the ongoing journey of transformation; and 4) the centrality of inclusive community building in sustainability transformations. Overall, presenters emphasized the need for a multi-dimensional, adaptive, and inclusive approach to transformation. This article also includes actionable steps associated with each theme that can further progress the work of the Transformations Community and the broader field of transformations research and practice.

Introduction

The July 2023 Transformations 2023 Conference featured nearly three hundred sessions on just and sustainable transformations. Of these, six online sessions were delivered to address different core themes related to transformative partnerships:

- Session 1: Inner transformation and wellbeing
- Session 2: Evaluation and assessment of transformation
- Session 3: Transformative policy and paradigms
- Session 4: Engaging new narratives for a transformed future
- Session 5: Transformative leadership
- Session 6: Transformative policy, institutions, and organizations

The six sessions were each summarized in individual articles elsewhere in this Special Edition. In this article, the six sessions are thematically reviewed as a collection that captures conference core themes and synthesized into four conceptual threads:

1. The interrelated nature of inner and outer transformation
2. Transformational leadership as a fluid and collective process
3. The ongoing journey of transformation

4. The centrality of community building and collaboration in sustainability transformations

In the following synthesis, we trace these threads, providing specific references to the relevant session(s). We offer actionable recommendations to inform the work of the Transformations Community to support transformations practitioners and academics by developing innovative techniques and integrative leadership practices, creative systems pedagogies, and reflexive theorizing on practice.

The Transformations Community and Conference

The Transformations Community is a global network of action researchers and reflective practitioners dedicated to advancing transformations to just, sustainable, and regenerative futures. The community consists of experienced researchers and professionals from diverse backgrounds, including sustainability-oriented academic programs, government, intergovernmental agencies, research institutes, non-profit organizations, consulting firms, and foundations. The Transformation Community organizes dialogues, workshops, and communities of practice to enable practitioners to actualize desirable transformations. Since its establishment in 2013, the Transformations Community has hosted biennial conferences in Norway, Sweden, Scotland, and Chile, with a virtual gathering during the pandemic in 2021. Emphasizing transdisciplinary engagement, these events provide a creative platform for transformative researchers and professionals to share ideas, connect, and collaborate. The 2023 conference was in Sydney, Australia, concurrently with an online conference and a European Hub Conference in Prague, Czechia, and followed by the North American workshop in Portland, Maine. Under the theme of “Partnerships for a better future,” the conference featured 250+ sessions, attracting over 700+ attendees from 40+ countries, and presented insights from 400+ speakers.

Results and Discussion

Thread 1: The interrelated nature of inner and outer transformation

In the discourse on transformations, a recurrent theme emphasizes the intricate dance between 'inner' personal transformation and 'outer' systemic change. This interrelationship, as depicted in Image 1, suggests a cyclical and intertwined evolution across individual, interpersonal, and systemic dimensions. The illustration underscores the VUCA framework—Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity and suggests how external shifts resonate with and influence internal experiences and vice versa.

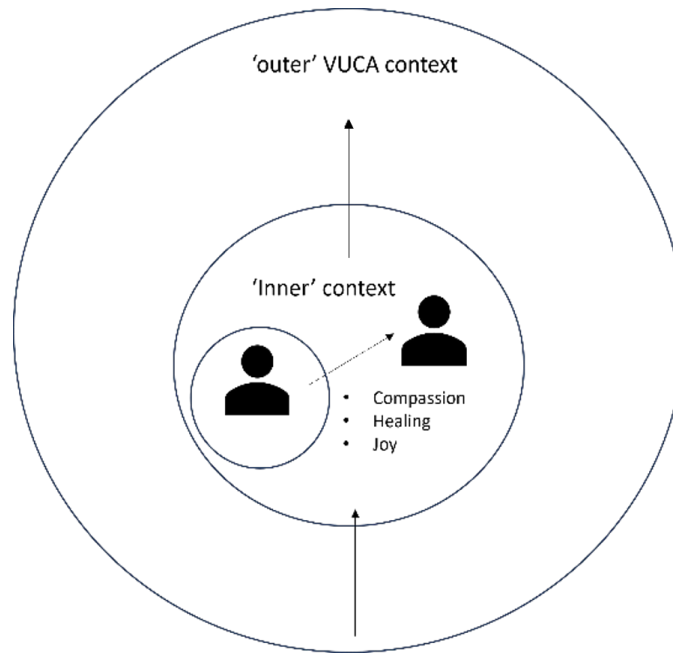


Image 1: Illustration of the cyclical nature of transformation across individual, interpersonal, and systemic dimensions.

The sessions during the conference illuminated this interplay, drawing analytical insights from varied perspectives:

- Mark Cabaj noted that *"The first scale of change [is] at the level of the individual...outer transformation of systems requires inner transformation of all of us"* (Session 2: Evaluation and Assessment of Transformation).
- Angela Moriggi emphasized the primacy of observation and mindfulness as cornerstones for transformative change, noting that *"Observing, noticing, and becoming attentive to what's around us is really the first foundational step for any transformative change to take place"* (Session 5: Transformative Leadership).
- Moriggi's perspective converges with Sofia Maniatakou and her colleagues' assertion (Session 3: Transformative Policy and Paradigms), spotlighting the importance of co-creation and co-production in the context of climate change awareness. This study accentuated the symbiotic relationship between heightened holistic awareness of individual actors and their ability to engage in systems change.
- Marwan El Hassan discusses applying resilience theory in his job, emphasizing the importance of self-care and maintaining one's function during transformation (Session 6: Transformative Policy, Institutions, and Organizations).
- The New Zealand practice of praying to acknowledge transitions, "Karakia," was offered as an example of how individual spirituality can play a role in systems evaluation (Session 2: Evaluation).

Synthesis:

The intricate dance between personal inner transformation and broader systemic change was a recurrent theme in the conference sessions. At the heart of this discourse is the evident symbiotic relationship: changes within individuals can drive systemic evolution, and vice

versa. This concept finds resonance in the broader Transformations literature, such as the findings of Johan Rockstrom et al. (2018), which highlight how inner growth can complement policy change. In Session 5 (Transformative leadership), Angela Moriggi suggested that the Inner Development Goals (a framework of personal growth and psychological skills that can enable societal transformation) might offer a comprehensive lens to evaluate these dual transformations, along with innovative approaches, like 'photo voice labs' involving youth, that offer potential methodologies to track these changes. Transformative leadership discussions emphasized the pivotal role of personal awareness as a precursor to instigating broader societal shifts. This idea is further echoed in the works of Scharmer and Kaufer (2013), which stress the need for a system to achieve self-awareness by integrating its actors into a united, conscious whole. Moreover, practices like the Karakia in New Zealand highlight the profound role spirituality can play in fostering unifying individual and collective change.

Actionable Steps:

- The Role of the Individual in Systemic Change: Recognize and emphasize the cyclical relationship between personal transformation and systemic change, ensuring both are addressed in transformation strategies
- Prioritize Self-Care in Transformation: Embed self-care principles, including spiritual practices and mindfulness techniques, into transformation practices, recognizing their role in maintaining functionality during change
- Developmental Evaluation: Set goals and monitor transformations through metrics that holistically gauge both personal and systemic evolutions, potentially drawing on the Inner Development Goals

Summary:

The synergy between personal growth and systemic change is cyclical and mutually reinforcing. Genuine, lasting change mandates a dual focus on individual development and broader societal shifts, emphasizing the significance of inner well-being and the use of comprehensive metrics in transformational endeavors.

Thread 2: Transformational leadership as a fluid and collective process

The theme of leadership is a critical and multifaceted element of transformations practice, with particular focus on its fluid and interconnected nature that transcends mere organizational hierarchies. Within this framework, transformative leadership is collective and far removed from any prescriptive list of tasks, actions, or behaviors. Rather, it is a dynamic process involving relatedness and reflexivity (Session 5: Transformative Leadership). Building on these ideas, sessions explored how transformational leaders avoid overt use of their authority and share power and promote agency to cultivate an effective organizational environment for changemaking. The fluid nature of leadership often involves creating the conditions for others to step in and intervene in the system. These conditions could include the creation of 'safe' or 'brave' spaces to develop policy changes that challenge existing power relations that inhibit systems change (Romo and Zafeirakopoulos, Session 6: Transformative policy, institutions, and organizations).

The idea of building and maintaining active coalitions for sustainability transformations implies a coalitional form of leadership where leaders work with other leaders to listen, adapt, and co-create *in ways that are "mindful of power imbalances"* (Session 3: Transformative policy and paradigms). As one panelist described, leadership embraces system complexity by connecting organizational and sectoral missions into a larger whole: *"The end of apartheid in South Africa involved people working inside, people working outside, people working on regulations, on finance, on education, on sports, and on changing the portfolios of foundations. There was this collective action where everybody does their piece"* (Session 2: Evaluation).

The way that this approach to leadership actively cultivates transformational initiative is encapsulated in panelist Mutizwa Mukute's "Ukama" framework (Session 2: Evaluation). Ukama moves beyond traditional notions of authority and hierarchy to encompass a *"holistic interconnectedness among individuals, culture, and nature."* Ukama is a sister concept of the African philosophy of Ubuntu. Ukama involves acknowledging the interdependence between the self, others, culture, and nature and creating temporal links between the past, present, and future. Ukama is about weaving a complex web of relationships that span time and space, which is particularly useful when attempting to address simultaneous challenges, or 'polycrisis.'

Actionable recommendations:

- Transformational Leadership Training: Offer programs that teach the interconnected and fluid nature of leadership, focusing on "relatedness, reconnection, reflexivity, and recalibration"
- Cultivate Brave Dialogue Spaces: Establish environments that promote open, transformative policy discussions, challenging traditional power dynamic
- Coalitional Leadership Gatherings: Organize events for leaders to collaboratively address power imbalances and emphasize collective action and co-creation

Summary:

Transformational leadership is not a set of prescribed actions but can be seen as a fluid and evolving process. It is a collective endeavor that resonates with the previous theme as it encourages individual growth and envisioning a more desirable future.

Thread 3: Transformational change as journey

Addressing significant challenges, such as the current climate crisis, requires ongoing and dynamic involvement. As Dorst (2015) highlights, these problems are "inherently open, complex, interconnected, and fluid." This perspective on complexity was supported by findings from five case studies in Session 3: Transformative Policy and Paradigms. Session speakers noted that while there are discrete goals, such as building regenerative economies or reducing carbon footprints, transformation is an ongoing journey, and we have limited capability to foresee long-term outcomes of our actions within these systems.

In Session 3: Transformative Policy and Paradigms, Bryan Jenkins noted that strategies can be developed for all four phases of the adaptive cycle: exploitation, accumulation, disturbance, intervention, or reorganization. Effective transformation necessitates having

diverse tools and frameworks at hand, such as the toolbox developed by the Transformative Urban Labs project, which aids in building and maintaining active coalitions (shared by speakers Nathalie Sanger and Laura Arevalos).

Panelists drew on the well-known concept of the Butterfly Effect (Lorenz in Abraham, R, and Ueda, 2000) to underscore that minor interventions can lead to significant systemic impacts (Sessions 4: Engaging new narratives for a transformed future and 6: Transformative policy, institutions, and organizations). Given the nonlinear and processual nature of transformations, assessment requires a blend of traditional and innovative evaluation methods. While some transformation aspects may benefit from standard evaluations, others demand unique techniques (Session 2: Evaluation). An example is the Te Korekoreka evaluation approach, which leverages Indigenous systems to inform Maori futures, underscoring the need for diverse perspectives in assessing complex transformations.

Actionable recommendations:

- Adaptive Cycle Strategies: As Bryan Jenkins recommended, develop strategies tailored for all four phases of the adaptive cycle: exploitation, accumulation, disturbance, and reorganization
- Diverse Transformational Tools: Utilize varied tools and frameworks, such as the Transformative Urban Labs' toolbox, to facilitate the formation and sustenance of active coalitions
- Innovative Evaluation: While standard assessments can be useful, unique techniques like the Te Korekoreka approach, rooted in Indigenous systems, can be crucial for evaluating intricate transformations

Summary:

Transformation is an ongoing journey, not a fixed endpoint. Challenges like the climate crisis are complex and continuously changing. Although we may have shared goals, such as transitioning to sustainable economies, long-term predictions are uncertain, and so effective evaluation requires blending traditional and innovative methods, like the Indigenous-based Te Korekoreka approach. Engaging fully with a system, acknowledging emotions, and seeking collaboration are vital. While the challenges may seem vast, minor shifts can yield significant systemic benefits, underscoring transformation's adaptive nature.

Thread 4: Inclusive Community Collaboration

Pursuing transformative change fundamentally hinges on community building across differences. As Susi Moser suggested: “*when we create a sense of ‘othering’ of people who are not part of whatever we do, that becomes an obstacle to making progress*” (Session 6: Transforming Policy, Institutions and Organizations). Recognizing and addressing power dynamics within coalitions and collaboratives was identified by Laura Arevalos (Session 3: Transformative Policy & Paradigms), who underscored the importance of recognizing and addressing power disparities through robust participation and co-creation.

Developing approaches to enhance diversity in community-building efforts was explored in session 6 (Which), which considered how to incorporate African perspectives in transformation discussions. Bryan Jenkins presented a Tanzanian case study that tied

successful landscape transformation to efforts to synergize technical expertise provided by the government with local farmers' traditional knowledge (Session 3: Transformative Policy & Paradigms).

Actionable Recommendations:

- **Strengthen Alliances:** Invest in forming and nurturing partnerships and alliances that drive transformative change
- **Mitigate Power Disparities:** Develop frameworks for recognizing and addressing power imbalances in collaborations

Summary:

Sustainable transformations are predicated on robust community engagement and collaboration. Indigenous insights, such as the "Ukama" framework, are a means to incorporate collective wisdom in community-driven, collaborative transformations initiatives.

Conclusion

During six online sessions of the Transformations 2023 Conference, participants highlighted the interconnectedness of personal growth and systemic change. Leadership was addressed not as mere hierarchical 'command and control' but deeply rooted in shared responsibility, adaptability, and persistent engagement with the multifaceted challenges of our time. Transformative change was described as a continuous process requiring innovative and adaptive strategies to address the ever-changing complexities of the polycrisis. Discussions converged on the pivotal role of community involvement, highlighting the necessity of recognizing and balancing power dynamics, fostering inclusivity, and valuing diverse voices in shaping transformational strategies. The conference underscored that transformative systems change requires a combination of individual and collective growth, co-creation, and adaptive leadership in order to foster a collaborative environment that actively addresses power imbalances and integrates diverse insights.

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