



Transformation Literacy as a Collective Stewardship Task

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The recent years have seen the increasing use of the term *transformations* in the context of the multiple crises of climate change, biodiversity loss, and global health challenges. Transformations encompass conscious change efforts that involve collaboration, innovation, societal learning, institutional strategy changes, and individual approaches towards thinking and acting. They include shifts in power structures and relationships and are built on the assumption that positive change for a future, a more sustainable state of the world, can be achieved. The premise is that human behavior can change at a collective scale. The envisaged transformations would alter the way human beings operate with each other and the planet Earth in the Era of the Anthropocene in favor of a world that works for 100% of humanity and the planet.

Societal transformations have always happened in human history, and many have been consciously and actively promoted. What is new about the situation at the beginning of the 21st century is both scale and depth. The scale of transformations needed—as a result of the impacts of climate change—is almost globally acknowledged. No country, no government, no company, and no citizen can escape the consequences of global warming. But the depth of change needed is only partly accepted. This is not surprising as the institutional and political structures on which our globalized current systems are built, tend to perpetuate the existence of the multi-faceted global arrangement that took us to the sustainability challenges we face.

The story about how the world works, how reality emerges, and how people can or cannot co-create the future, gives rise to narratives of possibilities, which are one of the key leverage points for *transformation literacy*. **Transformation literacy is the knowledge and capacity of collectives of decision-makers, change agents, and institutional actors to steward sustainability transformations effectively together across institutions, societal sectors, and nations** (Kuenkel 2019). It rests on people's ability to collaborate or act in complementarity, and refers to multiple actors in multiple places that can hardly be coordinated, yet need to find local solutions to global challenges, or drive global turning points that support local changes. There is already a scientific history of the call for mindset-shifts towards seeing the world as an interconnected living system that has a long history, which has been emerging as a backdrop to the increasing destruction of the living world.

Two complementary forms of narratives have been emerging in support of transformations in the last decade. The first is a narrative of **emergency**, evidenced in the frequent use of terms such as climate emergency or more recently called “planetary emergency” in which the

scientifically predicted threats and the actual experience of such predictions such as extreme weather events, ocean level rising or droughts accelerate substantiated *anxiety* which leads to taking a more responsible decision, both individually and collectively. Examples are the Club of Rome report on 'Limits to Growth' (Meadows et al. 1972) and its updates (Meadows et al. 1992; 2004); the concept of peak resources and the corresponding effect on the global economy (Heinberg 2011); the concept of a 'safe operating space for humanity to thrive' in the context of avoiding further transgression of the biophysical planetary boundaries (Cornell 2012; Rockström et al. 2009); the image of 'Hothouse Earth' (Steffen et al. 2018); the declaration of a 'Planetary Emergency' (Club of Rome 2020); the warning by more than 100 scientists of a 'climate emergency' (Ripple et al. 2020), the outlining of a 10 point action plan for a circular bioeconomy for sustainable wellbeing (Fath et al. 2020), and the emphasis on a 'global crisis' (Dasgupta 2021). The *emergency narrative* assumes that the operating system of humankind can be improved while using the existing institutional and political structures. Enhancing *transformation literacy* for implementing pathways to a regenerative civilization here means to foster the ability of institutional actors and political governance to decide, orchestrate and implement these solutions at scale.

The *second* narrative can be seen as one of **emergence** (Preiser et al. 2020). It has grown in the last decade more prominently around pathways to different futures that acknowledge the possibility of wellbeing on a healthy planet. It is a narrative that emphasizes the human potential, the ability to co-create the future more consciously, and, above all, the role of planetary care-taking as the likely route to Anthropocene responsibility. It is a narrative of possibilities and of inventing a different future in an interconnected world, while acknowledging that there will be plural futures and multiple pathways to enacting them. The *emergence narrative* is naturally complex, less directive, and open to fundamental, if not revolutionary shifts. It is a narrative of learning societies that are capable of adapting and also has a long history already. Scientific examples of the *emergence narrative* are the human responsibility to 'further life-enhancing structures and patterns' in the Potsdam Manifesto (Dürr et al. 2005); the concept of an 'Earth Community' (Korten 2007); the 'wellbeing' approach (OECD [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development] 2015); the concept of the 'regenerative economy' (Fullerton 2015); the concept of 'Earthland' (Raskin 2016); the B-Team's 'Great Transformation' approach*, the 'Meadows Memorandum' (Leading4Wellbeing 2017); or the concept of pluraversality (Preiser et al. 2020). *Emergence narratives* often emphasize the need to fundamentally shift the operating system of human action on the planet, call for reconstructing a more just global society, and a redefinition of the purpose of the economy to recalibrate its essential principles in line with planetary life support systems.

Both narratives influence the global discourse as much as local action. Some of the required transformative efforts get integrated into the tasks of companies, governments or international institutions. Other transformative efforts take place outside the dominant institutional structures, partly out of the frustration that change from within structures is too slow, partly, because transformative social innovations have always emerged from niches outside the mainstream (Verbong and Loorbach 2012). In transformation as well as

* Source accessed on 15th April 2017: <http://bteam.org/>

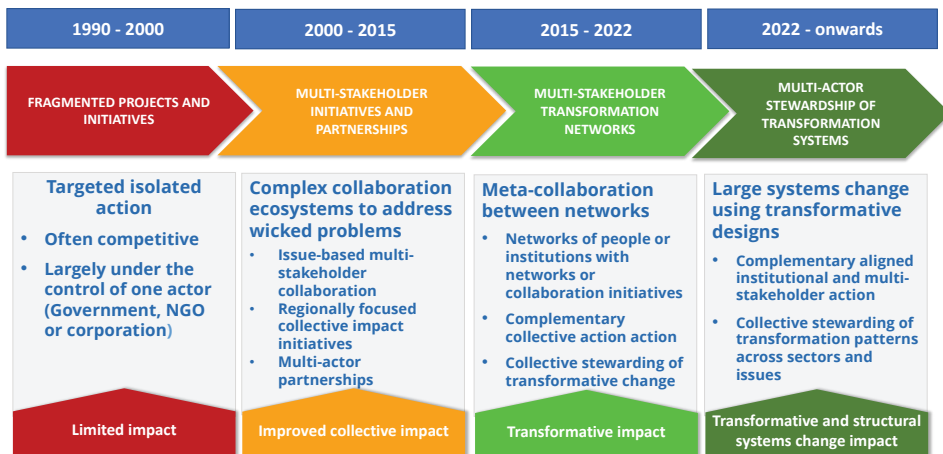
transition research, it is widely acknowledged that social change at scale requires deliberate strategies: top-down approaches, such as advanced and future-oriented policy decisions, as well as bottom-up approaches which model the societal or even global change (Avelino et al. 2014, Rotmans and Loorbach 2010; Loorbach et al. 2016). In addition to administrative transformation efforts and innovative communities, a new phenomenon has emerged in the last ten years: global alliances and networks of networks that subscribe to transformative change at scale and organize around issues and themes across the globe (Kuenkel et al. 2020; Waddell 2016, Waddell et al. 2015). Networked action is a patterned constellation that mirrors dynamic life structures much more than the ordinary, most often clearly delineated and hierarchical institutional set-up.

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What is important to understand for *transformation literacy* is that partnerships and collaborative initiatives begin to knit new communicative and action-oriented structures into the given institutional arrangements. While in the last decade of the 20th century it was certainly strange to sit at the same table with company representatives, civil society activities, and government officials, today, this is perfectly normal. These multi-stakeholder partnerships have not always been easy to implement and may have had questionable results, but they contributed to cross-societal learning, overcoming stereotyped thinking, and developing new working relationships across societal sectors (Bierman et al. 2007; Kuenkel et al. 2020), which is a prerequisite for the collaborative capacity pro-active transformations need. Meanwhile, and partly parallel, the above-mentioned networks and alliances emerged. Some are composed of international communities of people and institutions who pursue the same sustainability goals in their different practices, others are deliberate networks of actors that intend to accelerate change in institutions at scale. Their purpose is to influence institutional and political actors in many entities across the globe at the same time. Often, they create meta-collaborations between existing initiatives and networks. Hence, they, again, create dynamic, new, non-hierarchical, cross-sectoral, and complex structures that bring forward transformative change across and within the existing institutional set-up. These multi-stakeholder transformation networks are at the forefront of pathways to regenerative civilizations, because they model many aspects of future societies that will be crucial for the way such societies will operate, such as complex adaptive structures, broad strategizing, and joint responsibilities. They allow fast communication across silos and institutional boundaries. Subsequently, they are able to adapt and adjust strategies more quickly; or, they develop strategies, information and action plans collectively in communication loops, which are non-hierarchical and allow for co-created results, and contextualized implementation in different areas. They have the potential to enliven not only their own members to experience that co-creating future is possible, but also bring the vision of regenerative civilizations into existing institutions.

These networks of networks and alliances are laboratories for a regenerative future. Stewarding transformative change in patterns of collaborative networked action will sooner or later become the main and conscious managerial task of politicians, administrators, companies, societal actors, and citizens. Cross-sectoral and cross-institutional structures can better cope with the speed that sustainability transformations require. But there is a next step on the horizon of the trajectories towards transformations for which networked action as described above is the basis: the stewardship of *transformation systems*. The complexity of sustainability challenges is coupled with the insight that loosely coordinated intentional and collaborative systems of actors from within and outside institutional structures need to work together in a complementary way. Today, the many initiatives that operate globally begin to connect with each other, but tend to stay oblivious to understanding themselves as loosely connected parts of *transformation systems*. These interventions need to be implemented in appreciative acknowledgment of each other, without centralized coordination, and they also need to function as a collective learning system. Fig. 1 shows the trajectories of emerging forms of networked and collaborative section towards stewarding transformative and structural systems change. Of course, the periods overlap: there are still many isolated projects happening driven by institutional or sectoral silos, and only a few countries have adopted a collaborative multi-stakeholder partnership approach to overcoming sustainability challenges. But the trends are clear: pathways to regenerative civilizations require networked action and large systems change requires the stewarding of complex transformation systems with many institutional and non-institutional actors involved. We are only at the beginning to understand what it really means to build and leverage *transformation systems* for the transformative and structural systems change our planet and humankind needs.

Figure 1: Trajectories in Transformative Change (Copyrighted to the author)



Taking the perspective of *transformation systems* invites us to take care of the many small and large change efforts that already exist. Pathways to regenerative civilizations are organic

processes that involve multiple approaches and practices. They are decidedly nonlinear based on multiple visions of regenerative civilizations that require translation into different contexts. There is no ‘one right way’ to drive transformations. The more freedom there is to experiment with pioneering the future, the higher is the potential that transformative change happens. Yet, the experiments need to be exposed to collective learning, and ultimately, they need to be integrated in both existing and new structures. For the enhancement of *transformation literacy*, this means that actors from within and outside institutions need to become familiar with new approaches that tune into the emerging trend of dealing with the complexity of transformations in a more effective way. There are three strategic core approaches that require conscious attention in *transformation literacy*: *Collective stewardship* as the pro-active engagement for a regenerative future in mutually supportive strategies (Kuenkel 2019, Kuenkel and Waddock 2019, Kuenkel et al. 2020); *visionary multiplicity* as the acknowledgement of plural approaches to the quality of life as an underlying principle of regenerative civilizations; and *network leverage* as the deliberate and reflective use of power and influence across sectors and institutions. Table 15.1 shows an overview of how these strategic core approaches of *transformation literacy* manifest.

Table 1: Strategic Core Approaches of Transformation Literacy

Collective Stewardship	The pro-active engagement for a regenerative future takes place collaboratively by many complementary actors without centralized control. Mutually supportive strategies towards safeguarding planetary and human wellbeing at different levels of the global society connect in transformation systems.
Visionary Multiplicity	The strategic acceptance that the potential of humankind’s future lies in its diversity allows for plural approaches to the quality of life as an underlying principle of regenerative civilizations. There cannot be one vision that fits all circumstances and contexts. The broad agreement on the properties of regenerative civilizations allows for a plurality of interpretations and manifestations to be anchored in the political and institutional landscape.
Network Leverage	Network leverage crosses boundaries to make use of the power and influence of the variety of actors involved in networks, alliances, movements or communities. Bridges between pioneering niche initiatives and the institutional landscapes create leverage to influence and finally shift structures and strategies of existing institutions.

In the complexity of transformative systems change with multiple actors in diverse places and various institutions who have different interests and capabilities, it is important to

recognize that no one network, movement or alliance can solve the multi-faceted sustainability problem because of their very embeddedness. Only multiple contributions by many networks, all referring to the broad vision of properties of a regenerative civilization, are the pathway to better functioning, more vital systems. No matter how small or large change initiatives are, they are evenly important, because multiple small system change is the cornerstone of large systems change. *Transformation literacy* integrates complementary approaches: from technical to social to cultural to economic. It is built on the understanding of essential features of life's processes which guide evolutionary processes. The design of transformative change needs to reach people's hearts and minds—because this is the pathway to dynamic and self-driven change in behavior. The agent of change is human, hence leveraging human competencies is central to the acceleration of change.

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