# What Constitutes Societal Transformation?

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It is widely acknowledged that the pressing global crises today are societal rather than purely environmental issues. Challenges such as climate change and global warming, the loss of biodiversity, or the global water crisis call for deep societal transformations. Even the most adamant natural scientists or advocates of technological solutions concede that addressing the current challenges requires *societal* efforts since environmental, social, cultural, and economic issues are inextricably interlinked in today's crises.

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Despite a high level of consensus on the diagnosis, there is great dispute about how to initiate the necessary change towards a more sustainable society. Political top-down strategies have undeniably had some degree of success in the past. International climate agreements, for example, set boundaries for greenhouse gas emissions and stimulated change in energy supply in many countries of the world. Global education programs, on the other hand, brought questions of sustainable development to the classroom and broadened curricula worldwide.

Yet it has become obvious in recent years that top-down approaches often face significant obstacles to implementation and are not sufficient to increase the speed and depth of the needed societal transformations. First, because they tend to impose "one size fits all" solutions that discount the need for culturally and regionally differentiated pathways towards global sustainability. Second, top-down approaches often disregard the knowledge and expertise of everyday actors and ignore their desire for making their own choices instead of executing imposed strategies. Transformations towards living sustainably are much more likely to be accepted if they are developed jointly by everyday people, specific stakeholders, and policy-makers at all levels working together with academic experts and scientists.

Promoting societal change requires efforts in many domains and at all levels. There are three pillars I would like to emphasize in particular.

## 1. Creating Laboratories of Change

A first pillar for pushing forward social transformations is to create (more) laboratories of change in the public sphere. Municipalities and universities are best suited to exemplarily lead this change. Local and regional governments, for e.g., can serve as a model for how to spark, develop and implement technological and social innovations at the very scale at which global change becomes tangible. Local authorities can explore new ways of

engaging communities in collaborative decision-making processes and develop cross-sectoral networks with local businesses, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders to promote sustainability. Municipalities and regions can thus also counteract problematic or irresolute national policies. Universities, on the other hand, are not only arenas of academic knowledge production and education of future decision-makers, but also shape their local contexts in ecological, economic, social, and cultural regard. As operators of buildings and other infrastructures, as major consumers of energy and materials, as employers and training providers, universities themselves create "real-world problems" and can thus also contribute to their solution. Turning campuses into "living labs" can both help enhance sustainability at the local level and contribute to strengthening the authenticity of scientific institutions, thus helping to (re-)build public trust in science.

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## 2. Education as Key

Education is another key factor to facilitate change and shape societal transformations. Educational institutions and organizations like schools and universities, and also centers for adult education, public libraries, or museums promote understanding of the world and help build capacities for transformative action. Given the complex nature of today's "wicked" problems, however, traditional ways of organizing knowledge must be called into question and new forms of teaching and learning need to be developed. Despite the inclusion of sustainability-related topics in many curricula today, it is necessary to push teaching and learning beyond the boundaries of fragmented canonical knowledge and strongly promote the capacity to analyze across disciplines and school subjects. In schools, for instance, greater weight should be given to theme- or project-based approaches, in order to mobilize knowledge in a more integrated way. Learning by the example of locally embedded "real-world problems" will better enable learners to understand connections that remain undiscovered from a purely disciplinary standpoint. Education for sustainable development thus also entails fundamental questions about the organization of knowledge production and mobilization.

## 3. The Role of the Arts

A third pillar of societal transformation is the development of a new aesthetic for dealing with the natural and the social world. Un-/sustainable development is deeply linked to culturally embedded mindsets and resulting daily routines and habits. How we do things depends very much on what they signify to us, and how we see the world and our place in it. The arts in all their forms can provide novel perspectives on the relationships of humans to the natural world and to each other, and help envision and catalyze societal change. Works of art can create emotional impacts and empathy that can hardly be achieved by mere

knowledge transfer, thus helping to mobilize everyday actors to engage for bottom-up social transformations. Art can give a voice to marginalized communities and raise awareness of their concerns. It can spark creativity and thinking-outside-the-box to explore new ways of living sustainably in all cultural and regional varieties. Ultimately, artistic practices are also embedded in local communities and can help drive transformations. Individual artists and cultural facilities, for instance, can lead the sustainability shift by consistently adopting principles of sustainability in their operations.

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# Reference

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