

State of the Transformations Community

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Abstract

A panel of previous conference organizers at the Transformations 2023 conference traced the community's evolution over the past decade and identified the Community's emerging opportunities. Central to the discussion was the role of community building in fostering transformative change, focusing on creating an inclusive space where tough conversations can lead to visions of hope and paradigm shifts. The panelists promoted developing both the Community's ability to cultivate individual transformations and a collective identity for transformation practitioners to amplify collaborations beyond the academic sphere, achieving more than the sum of their individual capacities. Panelists explored how to build capacity and infrastructure, with a focus on encouraging knowledge co-production and stakeholder engagement and developing a stronger collective voice outside of academia on how to foster large-scale systems transformations. They mapped out a future for the Transformations Community that would enable its membership to continue prototyping how to enable just and sustainable transformations.

Introduction

The panel began by tracing the evolution of the Transformations Conferences over the past decade, as recounted by the panelists, each of whom was a lead conference organizer. The series commenced in Oslo in 2013, at a time when transformations were emerging more prominently within the discourse around climate change. The 2015 conference in Stockholm diverged from conventional formats, adopting an 'unconference' approach centered around the Anthropocene and the intricacies of human-planet interaction. By 2017, the Dundee conference further advanced this trajectory by reconceptualizing the event as an embodiment of transformation itself, integrating artistic elements and practice-oriented sessions while employing the 'Three Horizons' futures method for collective visioning.

The 2019 Santiago conference marked a significant geographical and thematic shift and emphasized a global North-South dialogue, overcoming language barriers and the challenges of meeting at a time of tumultuous change in Chile. Adaptation to a virtual format in 2021, necessitated by the pandemic, paved the way for a more hybrid and globally accessible model, as exemplified in the most recent conferences in Sydney, Prague, Maine, and online.

Each conference has been a stepping stone, reflecting the community's journey and the evolving nature of transformation discourse, emphasizing innovative formats, inclusivity, and the importance of adapting to changing global circumstances.

During the remainder of the panel, the discussion revolved around the Transformations Community's potential contribution to catalyzing societal change. Central to the discussion was the community's expansion from academic circles to include a broader range of thinkers and practitioners, emphasizing its significance in fostering a worldwide dialogue on transformation. The need to actively define transformation, countering its oversimplification in government rhetoric, was a focal point. The importance of inner transformation, focusing on personal engagement and authenticity, was linked to enhancing youth involvement in climate action. Panelists also emphasized the community's role in bridging local initiatives with global systemic changes and overcoming structural barriers. Panelists offered a variety of ways that the Transformations Community could guide transdisciplinary research and reflective practice through collaborative approaches and by supporting collective action. They concluded with a call to action for the community.

The Panel

Karen O'Brien is a Professor of Human Geography at the University of Oslo and co-founder of cCHANGE, an organization that focuses on public engagement and action toward sustainable transformation. She played a key role in initiating the Transformations Community and chaired the first Transformations Conference in Oslo in 2013. Karen co-chairs the IPBES Transformations Assessment, aiming to bridge academic research with real-world applications. Her academic and practical endeavors are directed towards empowering stakeholders to maximize the impact of their sustainability initiatives, leading to substantive and measurable transformative outcomes.

Per Olsson, the organizer of the 2015 conference in Stockholm, is an Associate Professor and the Deputy Science Director at the Stockholm Resilience Centre (SRC). His work focuses on equitable and sustainable transformations, where he spearheads numerous transdisciplinary initiatives that merge research with practice. Per has co-led the Rockefeller Foundation's Global Fellowship Program on Social Innovation and Resilience, directed both the BALICLEAD and the Transforming Change programs, and is currently leading the Catalyzing Change program and the Robert Bosch Stiftung's Postdoc Academy for Transformational Leadership. Additionally, he delivers the Executive Education program at the Stockholm Resilience Centre and provides strategic advice on sustainability transformations to CEOs, entrepreneurs, and philanthropic organizations.

Ioan Fazey is a Professor of the Social Dimensions of Environment and Change and Director of Strategy for the Department of Environment and Geography at the University of York, UK. He is a co-founder of the Transformations Community and chaired the 2017 conference in Dundee. Ioan's scholarly work addresses transformations to regenerative futures in a rapidly changing world and frequently integrates shamanic practices. His current projects include facilitating the system change initiative FixOurFood, a transdisciplinary action research project seeking to transform Yorkshire's food system in the UK. Furthermore, Ioan serves as a trustee of H3Uni, which fosters transformative thinking and capacity building.

Paulina Aldunce is a Professor at the University of Chile and an Associate Researcher at both the Center for Risk and Disaster Reduction (CITRID) and the Center for Climate and Resilience Research (CR2). Specializing in the social dimensions of climate change adaptation, transformation, and disaster risk management, she has contributed to three of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Reports. Paulina chaired the Transformations 2019 Conference in Santiago.

J. David Tàbara is an independent researcher in the field of interdisciplinary research on knowledge integration for sustainability. He co-chaired the 2021 Transformations Conference in Barcelona, adeptly transitioning it to an online format due to the COVID-19 pandemic. David is a member of the Earth Commission Working Group on Transformations within the Global Commons Alliance and serves as an Associate Researcher at both the Global Climate Forum and the Autonomous University of Barcelona. He has played significant roles in EU research projects, including GREEN-WIN, IMPRESSIONS, TIPPING+, and TRANSPATH.

Bruce Goldstein, the moderator of the panel, serves as the Lead Weaver of the Transformations Community and Associate Professor at the University of Colorado Boulder in the Program in Environmental Design. He specializes in partnerships with transformations organizations to understand how communities combine forces to adapt to social and ecological challenges and foster transformational change.

The Transformations Community and Conference

The Transformations Community is a global network of action-oriented researchers and reflective practitioners who support 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 bring desirable transformations to life. Since 2013, the Transformations Community has hosted biennial conferences in Norway, Sweden, Scotland, Chile, and online during the pandemic in 2021. These events are deliberately transdisciplinary and seek to provide a creative and welcoming space for transformations researchers and professionals to come together in dialogue and practice. The 2023 conference was in Sydney, Australia, with a simultaneous online conference and a European Hub Conference in Prague, Czechia, followed by the North American Hub Workshop in Portland, Maine. The global theme was “Partnerships for a better future.” The 2023 conference program offered 250+ sessions, participation from 40+ countries, 700+ attendees, and insights shared by 400+ speakers.

Dialogue About the State of the Transformations Community

Ten years of Transformations Conferences

2013

Karen recounted the early days of the Transformations Community, beginning over a decade ago with an ambitious yet unfunded proposal for a Center of Excellence on transformations in a changing climate. The idea came up during a pivotal time when transformation emerged as

a prominent topic in the climate change discourse, alongside the fifth IPCC assessment. Despite the lack of financial support, Karen O'Brien, Ioan Fazey, Per Olsson, Mark Howden, and Linda Sygna took the initiative to move forward independently. Karen highlighted a critical gap in discourse: "*At the time, the sociotechnical community was very vibrant, but there was no space to have deeper conversations about what we mean by transformation and how it happens.*" Their collaborative effort, driven by the determination to enhance the understanding of transformations, laid the groundwork for what would become the first Transformations Conference in Oslo, kickstarting the community's development.

2015

Per reflected on the legacy of the first Transformations Conference, which inspired the following conference in Stockholm to focus on the people-planet relationship. The incorporation of the Anthropocene concept as a main theme sought to broaden the perspective of attendees beyond localized efforts toward the planetary scale. A distinctive feature of these conferences, the 'unconference' format, was deliberately designed to foster new interactions and dialogues pivotal for initiating large-scale changes. Per emphasized the importance of this setup, stating, "*Many large-scale changes start with a new conversation, so we wanted to maximize people's opportunity for that.*" This approach underpinned the creative and dynamic environment of the conferences, encouraging innovative discussions through unconventional formats like T-Labs and thematic speed talks.

2017

As the organizer of the 2017 Dundee Transformations Conference, Ioan Fazey aimed to mirror the process of transformation within the conference's structure itself. He explained, "*I tried to design the conference as a transition in its own right with a beginning, a middle, and an end,*" which outlined the conference's intent to be a microcosm for transformative experiences. The objective was to break away from traditional conference formats by integrating the arts and practice-oriented sessions as core components for transformation. Central to his approach was the integration of a collective envisioning approach, using the 'Three Horizons' futures method, which generated a shared outcome beyond the conference. Ioan's efforts set a precedent for future conferences, evidenced by the Department of Magic collaborative at the 2023 conference, which continues this tradition of experimenting with how to create transformative spaces.

2019

Paulina Aldunce shared her insights on shifting the Transformations Conference to the Global South in Santiago de Chile. Her efforts in hosting the conference underscored the necessity of a balanced focus between the North and the South. She reflected on the initial skepticism faced by scientists in Chile and how the event ultimately demonstrated the potential to transform scientific practice. Referring to the challenges the organizers faced, she underlined that "*Even if we find ourselves in a very complex and difficult world today, we have to look for the opportunities to transform.*" Additionally, Paulina asserted that the path to change must be rooted in constructive, peaceful strategies, not the replication of historical violence. She added that, while acknowledging the need for discomfort in the face of change, true transformation is irrefutably inclusive and equitable because "*If we think and justify transformation in the old fashioned way, based in violence, we are failing.*" Paulina also

addressed the language barriers between international scholars and the non-academic audience in a predominantly non-English-speaking region, highlighting the role of the arts in bridging communication gaps.

2021

David Tàbara recounted the challenges of organizing the fifth Transformations Conference during the unexpected onset of the pandemic. While the conference was planned to take place in Barcelona, the rapid changes required a swift adaptation to digital platforms. Despite the success of adjusting to an online format and engaging 500+ participants, he recognized the personal difficulties experienced during this period. David stressed that "*We must not forget that the world was different three years ago,*" emphasizing the need to recognize these shifts and the opportunities they present for rethinking established norms and how we relate differently to each other and to the natural world. He suggested a collective reimagination of the world by stating that "*Now there is an opportunity to engage with the world and try to learn and reframe how we used to think about it.*"

The Community and the Concept of Transformation

Bruce reflected on the innovations the community has pioneered, particularly emphasizing the continued experimentation with new forms of engagement. He acknowledged the community's expansion beyond traditional Western academic metropolises, highlighting an inclusive vision to foster a genuinely global conversation on transformation.

While the urgency of transformation in light of escalating risks is becoming increasingly clear, Karen expressed her concern that "*Governments are calling for transformative change, but the concept is being used and abused in so many ways that it becomes meaningless due to a lack of understanding.*" This hinders the necessary rapid, scalable, and profound changes. According to her, the Transformations Community plays a pivotal role in guiding this journey—shifting dialogues, influencing politics, altering power dynamics, and supporting member efforts to achieve tangible outcomes. Addressing the fear that many are feeling today, Karen urged the community to embrace the discomfort that accompanies systemic breakdowns. She closed with an optimistic note, observing that the world is now more receptive to transformation than it was a decade ago.

Embracing Inner Transformation

Ioan reflected on the transformative journey and suggested that "*Inner transformation is about letting go of the things that might be holding back the transformation.*" He articulated the importance of inclusivity and personal engagement within the Transformations Community, underscoring the value of being fully present and authentic in discussions about change. Ioan particularly underscored the importance of "*bringing our whole selves into the room,*" as it fosters an environment where conference attendees engage intellectually, emotionally, physically, and spiritually in ways that engage the head, heart, and will to become active agents of change. This active participation, he believed, was crucial for actualizing transformation both internally and within the broader community. These insights pointed towards a collective responsibility to nurture spaces of open-hearted dialogue and action, reinforcing the ethos that true transformation is a deeply personal yet shared experience.

Channeling Effective Climate Action

Paulina shifted the focus toward youth, recognizing their readiness and eagerness for change. She stressed, "*There is an opportunity to help young people to navigate transformation because they are ready for transformation, without putting all the responsibility on them.*" This underlines how adults ought to take on responsibility for the state of the world and support the youth in navigating the path to sustainable futures. Having been involved in the publication of several IPCC reports, Paulina stressed the pressing need to shift from knowledge accumulation to action. With urgency, she declared, "*Now that the IPCC synthesis report has been released, it is time for action.*" This period presents a critical window for society to catalyze knowledge into proactive steps towards sustainability.

Embracing Increasing Uncertainty

Per built upon the ongoing discourse by emphasizing the complexity and unpredictability that comes with societal change. He stated, "*We are in large-scale transformations right now, and we can expect increased uncertainty,*" pinpointing the inherent unpredictability that characterizes transformative processes. While transformations can unify groups with a common goal, they also reveal underlying conflicts once the initial objective is achieved. Per sees the Transformations Community as a crucial support system in navigating these turbulences of change, providing a sense of a shared path forward.

Bridging Global-Local Transformation Gaps

David highlighted the critical need to integrate a global systems approach to sustainability transformations, highlighting a gap between local efforts and the broader requirements of global systemic change. He called for innovative solutions that would link these two spheres, stating, "*We need to find ways of connecting the global and the local, and identifying the types of structural barriers that we have to transformation.*" Structural barriers to this approach, such as dominant market forces and corporate power dynamics, must be identified, destabilized, and transformed, often through cross-sectoral partnerships that leverage local knowledge and global networks. David underscored the urgency of adapting to a world with an anticipated population of ten billion that needs linking rapid and profound actions towards a "*safe and just corridor*" that balances environmental sustainability with social equity for all.

Harnessing the Power of Community

Bruce emphasized the critical nature of the Transformations Community's role in the current era, marking it as both a challenging and opportune time. Ioan highlighted the evolution of the community from simple conferences to a complex, interactive network, offering a platform for wider engagement. He emphasized the importance of sharing the values of the community, saying, "*It is crucial to hold the ethos of why we engaged with transformation in the first place.*"

Karen elaborated on the concept of individual and collective impact, proposing that the interplay between them is often underestimated. She argued that transformation is not merely a series of linear events but a dynamic process enriched by new conversations and actions, urging us to pay attention to the qualities of our actions and agency. "*We are underestimating our collective capacity for social change,*" she stated, emphasizing the importance of novel,

imaginative approaches to foster large-scale system changes. Furthermore, Karen advocated for engaging beyond academic circles to spur social change. By stressing that "*Working with society is probably the most important step we can take to foster large-scale systems change,*" she urged the community to have the courage to step out of their comfort zones and seize the opportunity to take action immediately during the time we have to act.

Visions of Hope

David raised a concern regarding the discrepancy between the narrative of transformation and the reality of its implementation. He criticized the prevailing 'business as usual' mindset, cloaking projects in the language of sustainability yet staying aligned with current unsustainable systems. He asked, "*Is it just finding new ways to do the same thing instead of actually doing things differently from a different paradigm?*"

To catalyze deep transformation, David proposed 'visions of hope' that are regenerative, equity-enhancing, and grounded in reality. As a next step, "*We need to translate those visions in particular contexts and identify the positive tipping points for their implementation.*" By discovering actionable positive tipping points — those in which relatively small additional actions can have greater structural and beneficial effects for all — he underscored the urgency of transitioning from mere conceptual transformations to tangible, self-propelling systemic changes. With confidence in those who take these brave steps and show that positive change is possible, fear can turn into hope and eventually lead to just and effective transformations.

Going Beyond Individualism

Paulina suggested that a collective reassessment of values within a community could lead to profound societal shifts, concluding that "*Talking about values is a very important opportunity and a pillar of a transformative change.*" Furthermore, she challenges the pervasive notion of individualism, asserting the interconnectedness of people and nature. Paulina explained, "*We think that we are individuals, and we are not. We are all connected.*" She believes that recognizing this interconnectedness is crucial for a transformational shift in how humans perceive and impact the world.

Fostering Transformative Spaces Beyond Academia

Per reflected on his community-building efforts beyond academia, emphasizing his focus on connecting change-makers who embody complexity and systems thinking. Describing his philosophy, he explained, "*For me, community building is trying to connect with different people and bring them together with others who normally would not meet in this polarized society.*" Per underscored the transformative potential of these meetings, suggesting that while transformation literacy might not be widespread, there is a substantial desire and momentum for change.

The Transformations Community

To conclude, Bruce spoke about the growth and direction of the Transformations Community in the field of transdisciplinary action research and reflective practice. He claimed, "*We consider ourselves to be capacity builders and a backbone organization that can enable you to achieve more than you could achieve on your own.*" Recognizing the challenges of a lack

of cohesion and limited political influence, the community strives to identify specific areas in which they could contribute. Finally, Bruce invited the audience to participate in workshops conferences, and to co-create the Transformations Community with its members.

Conclusion and Stepping Forward

At the heart of the "State of Transformations Community" panel was a spirited and forward-looking discussion about the Transformations Community, buzzing with ideas about its evolving role in the ever-changing tapestry of societal change. The gathering painted a picture of a community stretching its wings beyond the confines of academia, embracing a global stage. This leap is not just about expansion; it's about redefining the essence of transformation, especially as the term gets tossed around in government corridors, often losing its depth and urgency.

Currently, the community seems to be dancing with the idea of inner transformation, weaving personal engagement and authenticity into the fabric of change. This human-centric approach is seen as pivotal, especially when considering the role of youth in climate action, echoing the need to turn knowledge into passionate action, in line with the alarms rung by recent IPCC reports. The panelists also ventured into the unpredictable and sometimes messy nature of societal transformation. Here, the community was envisioned as a hybrid and boundary-crossing organization, bridging the gap between grassroots efforts and sweeping global systemic change.

As the discussion unfolded, the Transformations Community was envisaged as a beacon of hope and action, a melting pot of ideas, and a collaborative spirit. The emphasis was on nurturing a community ethos that champions collective action. Looking to the future, the community is poised to be a powerhouse in transdisciplinary research and reflective practice, a catalyst activating the crucible of global transformation. The symposium wrapped up with a collective rallying cry for community members to dive in and play an active part in shaping a world brimming with transformative possibilities.

Next Steps and Ways to Connect

cCHANGE supports other organizations in taking effective action toward sustainable transformation. Learn more here: <https://www.cchange.no/>

Stockholm Resilience Centre is a leading research institute on resilience and sustainability science at Stockholm University. The Centre advances the scientific understanding of the complex, dynamic interactions of people and nature in the biosphere. Check out their publications and courses: <https://www.stockholmresilience.org/>

FixOurFood is a multi-disciplinary research project running from January 2021 to January 2026, anchored at the University of York, which aims to transform the Yorkshire food system. Find out more: <https://fixourfood.org/>

H3Uni is a new enterprise for transformative human learning. They offer methods that support practitioners in developing regenerative responses to urgent global issues affecting their local communities. Get engaged: <https://www.h3uni.org/>

If you are not a member of the **Transformations Community** and wish to be part of this global network of reflective practitioners and action researchers, join the community at <https://transformationscommunity.org>.

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