

## **Transformative Policy, Institutions and Organizations**

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**Keywords:** policy, transformation, governance, gender research, agriculture, artificial intelligence

### **Abstract**

The track of Transformations Conference 2023 on “Transformative Policy, Institutions and Organizations” explored structural and agency-related aspects of transformation. These structural and agency factors included looking at institutional and governance arrangements that facilitate transformation and how diverse communities in policy-making might be more inclusive and involved. Two examples were presented: research into the enabling mechanisms for gender research in the agriculture, aquaculture, and natural resources sector in the Philippines; and an Australian/UK/USA case study into inclusive practices of exploring emerging national security issues like the human experience of artificial intelligence in cybersecurity. In this synthesis, we reviewed the presentations and discussions and created affinities between the discussed concepts. This synthesis has generated a series of insights, key discussion points, and principles for transformation in policy change within public institutions.

### **Introduction**

Our paper is structured by highlighting the insights from the workshop. These insights included:

- a. perceptions that are seemingly unproductive efforts in the short-term may turn out to be important in the long-run;
- b. there are always like-minded people, allies, or partners to explore new possibilities together, but equally, individual intrinsic drivers can be enough to generate change;
- c. creating change needs to be targeted to the unique needs of each organization, and
- d. leadership has a role in creating the conditions that allow change.

In this paper, we first describe the insights and then provide examples of key stories or discussion points shared by workshop participants. Next, this paper discusses how transformation in public service institutions can be created. It emphasizes the importance of focusing change at both the individual and community levels, as well as ensuring that inclusive practices are designed into the transformation agenda. Finally, we conclude this synthesis with a summary of principles to support transformation in public and policy settings.

## **Key Insights**

### **a. Effort in the now can unexpectedly result in longer-term productivity**

Creating change within established institutions is often difficult because the work it takes to create the change may not result in immediate results. The effort invested by individuals can sometimes feel disproportionate to the change desired. Repeated actions in the now might feel wasted, dismissed, or unhelpful because no overt change is being observed. These apparently small and slow changes may seem to be unfulfilling and unproductive to an individual. However, in hindsight, these repeated and persistent actions trigger longer-term outcomes. The persistence of an individual's efforts to create change is not the responsibility of one person, as elaborated by Sancak (2023) in his paper about the management of change and sustainability transformations in business organizations. Individual efforts belong to a system of relationships that is shared and distributed over time. When one individual has worked consistently to create change, but moves on from a role or the work, someone else steps in and takes up the change work. In this way, the change work continues long after the individual who has commenced the effort has left.

**Participant story 1:** *A conference quote of inspiration for one participant was: "Look for the cracks and use a crowbar. Use a crowbar to open these cracks. And if there is no crack, bang your head against the wall." This made her reflect on her own experiences while working within the government, where there were also head-banging moments. At the time, the participant initially perceived this as negative, but this speaker helped her think about these moments from a positive perspective. While her own 'headbanging moment' [- feeling as though one is not making any progress by repeating the same action without any change in the result or to an outcome -] may not be the one that cracks the wall, someone else's work in this same space might finally cause the wall to crack leading to some progress in this area.*

**Participant story 2:** *One participant shared there are big expectations from people on how transformative thinking concepts can result in significant transformations. In contrast, she has yet to find tangible proof of the impact of this thinking. For her, further work has to be done to understand what these concepts really are and how transformation is measured. She acknowledged, however, that discussing the latter part may not be a good direction to take.*

**Participant story 3:** *This participant responded by sharing that the terms 'safe-to-fail experimentation,' a term in resilience theory, transformation, and the meaning of this experimentation in the context of transformation are not usually captured in official documents, program guidelines, or program websites. However, the provision of public venues where these concepts are discussed is already a major step.*

In summary, thinking holistically is a principle of resilience thinking, which encourages failure as long as the final desirable outcome is achieved (Peterson *et al.*, 2008). The resistance to holistic and systems thinking was acknowledged as thinking on a large scale is difficult to conceptualize (Krznic, 2020). Nevertheless, subtle interventions – that may be hard to measure, see, or experience – can have profound impacts overall.

**b. There are always like-minded people, allies, or partners to explore new possibilities together**

There are like-minded people who are interested in exploring areas of change and improvement in government and research partnerships. As shared by Mutz (2002), these people can encourage one another to build on their ideas and act collectively. They are interested in creating and experimenting with other people and places where new ideas can be explored together.

**Participant story 4:** *One participant suggested that if there is difficulty creating change within an organization, it can be helpful to hold spaces outside formal structures to explore change in parallel. If there are like-minded people who are interested in exploring spaces, approval environments such as Innovation fora, Regulatory Sandboxes, Hackathons, and other events can help people see what might be possible before introducing it into their own organizations. Experimenting outside an organization can be a helpful way to reduce uncertainty before bringing new ideas into a risk-averse environment; hence, these seed incremental changes into bureaucracies to create a desired transformation. It was also acknowledged by the participants that while partnership and allies are important elements to create change, equally, individual intrinsic drivers can be enough to generate change.*

**Participant story 5:** *One participant asked if it was possible for the skills of some people to cascade to other members of the organization and what conditions are needed for this to happen. She further asked if there are elements that are contextual but “also allow for context to be transcended” and be created around the limitations of these being contextual. The second participant responded by saying that personal motivation and intrinsic drive in a team setting may lead to people empowering each other instead of a ‘top-bottom’ approach.*

**c. Rather than generalizing approaches, creating change needs to be targeted to the unique needs of each organization**

The participants shared individual experiences of challenges and successes in creating change in organizations. For some, the experience was more optimistic, being able to identify incremental changes, while for others, the experience of shifting the cultural environment felt bleaker. By sharing these individual stories, it was suggested that it might be helpful to look at each organization with its own characteristics, challenges, and enabling conditions. Potentially, exploring change within ‘public sector’ organizations, as opposed to organizations more generally, may be unhelpful when it comes to thinking about what interventions are needed to create change. Although there may be some common cultural, structural, or governance factors that make a public sector organization distinct from a private sector organization, using labels like ‘public sector’ might be unhelpful when it comes to thinking about the best approach to change or innovate. For instance, for some government organizations, bringing external consultants into their organization to help shift sticky or stubborn problems may be a useful intervention. Bringing in external help can be a useful way for organizations to reframe problems, or to get a fresh perspective on something they have been working through for some time. However, other organizations at a different stage of maturity in their innovation journey might benefit from it. There is a limitation to what consultants can achieve in supporting an organization in their change processes, as discussed by Wright *et al.* (2012). For instance, they might be a helpful mirror to identify

problematic cultural features in an organization, but the strategies proposed to intervene in the change may be left in a report and not implemented. Creating traction for change requires the people inside the organization to have ownership over the problem and be involved in the process of dialogue and change (see, for example, Akinboade et al., 2023 and Chadfield et al., 2022).

Another feature of change that is not often accounted for is the need to create mental or emotional space for people to grieve what they may be losing as a result of the change. For instance, perhaps someone might feel confident in their ability because they are an expert at a process, and a change in a process might make the individual fearful or worried that they might not be perceived as an expert because of the change. It might be worth discussing how people are made to feel safe in the process of change or how spaces for raising the heat and confronting the emotional aspects are addressed.

**Participant story 6:** *One participant shared an example of bringing initiatives of change into an organization: the communities of practice of Filipino alumni of Australian universities in the Philippines as part of the Australia Alumni Communities Philippines (AACPh). These communities of practice are in the areas of social innovations and enterprise, technology, gender equality, disability, and social inclusion (GEDSI). Since the members of these communities also play key roles in their institutions in the private, public or non-governmental sector, they are able to bring some learnings that they get from the regular activities of these communities back to their institutions.*

**Participant story 7:** *In the context of a defense organization, hierarchy was a useful tool for change because once the voice of authority was convinced of the benefit of the change, other participants were more open-minded to the change. Much debate and exploration ensued, but the benefit of having a respected voice of authority set the conditions to allow participants to engage in more open ways than they would.*

Professional advocacy may also be extended to personal advocacy. For instance, *one participant who mentioned “Enabling mechanisms for Gender Research in Agriculture, Aquaculture, and Natural Resources Sector in the Philippines and their Transformative Impact to the Sector” shared that she initiates activities in line with her advocacy for gender equality and women empowerment.*

#### **d. Enabling conditions for transformation:**

##### **d.1. Leadership**

While change does not have to come from the top, leadership creates the conditions that allow others to embark on change. There is a need to develop transformational leaders who can champion and lead change (Warrick, 2023). The appreciation and affirmation of internal and external stakeholders’ initiatives in transformative thinking encourage people to continue applying this thinking in their work (Biloslavo et al., 2020).

**Participant story 8:** *One participant shared that he was able to attend the futures thinking session and had the chance to discuss climate and drought resilience with respect to change and transformation. Allowing major changes to happen to address the impact of change is quite important. It helps that there is heightened awareness about the intensity of this impact.*

*The public desire to take strong action emboldened by political will demonstrated that the public sector is more open to change than may be originally conceived. He has observed that institutional barriers and people's experiences could hinder these people from taking the lead in transformative and systems thinking. On the other hand, the managers at these same institutions who appreciate and affirm the efforts of their employees to initiate transformative thinking creates a culture of innovation in the organization more widely. Other people are also encouraged to do the same, resulting in a "tribe" that embraces transformative thinking, adopts systems language, and applies these concepts to the institutions' projects. This participant also shared that similar reactions from stakeholders outside of these institutions further inspire people to take on projects that reflect this approach.*

## **d.2 Partnerships**

Partnerships and teams will only function well if the environment enables open communication.

**Participant story 9:** *One participant emphasized the importance of partnerships and teams in generating transformative thinking. These partnerships and teams will only function well if people are able to express their thoughts clearly and listen to each other. This is enhanced through the inner work of each individual that is anchored on individual self-care.*

## **Discussion**

Two themes were drawn out of the aspect of progressing transformative policy: 1) the need to explore at both individual and community levels and 2) the need for inclusive practices in transformation work.

### **1. Exploring transformation at the individual and collective levels.**

To achieve transformative policy, change is required at an individual level as well as at a collective level. Individual transformation might involve a process of stepping outside of what is comfortable and familiar using a reflective practice such as meditation or reflexivity - where one's own standing in relation to others in the system is engaged with. To step outside of what feels comfortable for each individual, it can be helpful to have a community of support that acknowledges transformation at scale and can begin with micro-changes, which can begin with making changes to ourselves. Transformation also means not rushing the change process. As another participant acknowledged, change often results in a loss or letting something go to make way for something new. Hence, the change process may be nurtured but cannot be forced into a timeline because it is ultimately a human experience. The need to go with the ebb and flow of individual paces of change can be challenging for a number of reasons. Humans often prefer the comfort of situations of certainty and are quick to converge on answers. However, for transformative change, part of the transformation journey involves learning how to be comfortable with uncertainty and complexity.

### **2. Ensuring inclusive practices in transformation work**

One participant noted the need to better include African perspectives in conversations on transformation, particularly given the continent's increase in population and development. Inclusivity was acknowledged as an important global issue that has been nurtured in the last ten years through partnerships, co-design activities, and publications. There is also an opportunity to improve on inclusivity and transformation through exposure to new training

materials, application of complex adaptive leadership, and partnership between different organizations with opposing perspectives on an issue to develop new concepts for knowledge sharing, partnerships, and educational materials. Transformation is not just about finding connections with partners but also nurturing relationships between these communities. Moreover, the concept of ‘community of practice’ is a relational concept that needs to meet the needs of individuals, the community, and the relationships between communities-of-practice levels.

### **Summary of principles for transformative change**

From these themes, there were a range of principles or recommendations for how to create transformative change such as: 1) infuse new elements (e.g. new ideas) into what exists (e.g. projects); 2) taking the time needed for change to occur; 3) learn to sit with the complexity and uncertainty; 4) persevere with the change as your work will help someone else to step in and continue the work; 5) create institutional norms to enable positive transformation, including creating space and time for self-care and reconnection with other individuals to nurture the humility needed to embrace change; 6) inclusivity is key to a successful transformation; 7) transformation is working with like-minded partners and bringing together different organisations with different positions on issues to generate new knowledge, education, and training; 8) “grow the tribe” by creating cohesion among communities of practice; and 9) view government institutions for their own unique organisational cultures and characteristics and not generalising or attributing a generic notion of what is a public sector organisation.

### **Conclusion**

Creating change begins with people supporting the disruption of an organization’s norms by helping people to discuss and understand the required change according to their needs. This may come from using methodologies like learning from peers to develop new practices and building an individual’s capacity for change. To create transformation, perseverance, stubbornness, and passion are important attributes for an individual to help build a tribe of like-minded partners to communicate the change needed. This tribe needs to be composed of different stakeholders who are actively involved in transformation and policy development. To nurture a community of practice, building relationships first with people with the most energy and who resonate with the change is recommended. Through these connections, communities gradually build where discussions can begin around creating a safe space for collaboration activities such as sharing resources and publication opportunities.

### **Acknowledgment**

The synthesizers/authors of this paper would like to acknowledge and thank all the participants who contributed to the policy transformation stream for their stories, experiences, and contributions that helped to generate this synthesis. They would also like to thank the Department of Science and Technology – Philippine Council for Agriculture, Aquatic and Natural Resources Research and Development (DOST-PCAARRD) for funding the gender research mentioned in the paper.

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