

Lektio

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Advancing sustainability transformations – Co-design for sustainable development policies

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I have been privileged to work towards a more sustainable society in different roles for more than 15 years. It is a long enough time to also observe societal changes. In 2010, when I started to work at the think tank Demos Helsinki, we were running a project called Peloton. In that project, we organised an idea competition for entrepreneur-minded frontrunners in climate topics to co-create visions and develop concepts on products and services that support low-carbon lifestyles. The results were visualised and communicated as "future advertisements". One of the results was an advertisement for a vegan burger called "Freshburger". "Becoming true soon", was stated in the advertisement. In 2010, it was hard to imagine that in 14 years it would be normal to order a vegan burger from basically anywhere.

The freshburger becoming real from utopia is an example of systemic change that is currently ongoing in our food systems. The phrase "transformation towards sustainability" refers to fundamental changes in our socio-technical-ecological systems. As you know, numerous global problems – such as the climate crisis, biodiversity loss and widening social inequality – require a reorientation of our societies and economies. Rapid policy and governance action is needed, and at the same time there is a need to look further ahead. However, the current political debate is often dominated by short-term economic interests. When looking only to the near future, it can be difficult to see the future price tag for not investing now to more sustainable futures.

Sustainable development

The burger example shows the importance of visioning more sustainable alternatives. Different people and organisations may have very different views and visions on what sustainable futures would look like. Therefore, there have been attempts to create a common vision of sustainable futures. One attempt of a common, global vision, are

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the Sustainable development goals (SDGs) by the United Nations. With 17 goals and 169 concrete targets, the agenda calls for transforming the world. The SDGs are a result of political negotiations and they have been criticised a lot, for example, being "Stupid Development Goals". However, I see them quite transformative if only they would be implemented, as actually not a single country is on the way to meeting all the goals by 2030.

Link to design

Nowadays it is widely acknowledged that design can play a crucial role in sustainability transformations. The role of design in sustainability has traditionally been in products and technologies, and it has expanded from there to designing systems and services. This research looks into the third level of this figure, designing policies, which means high-level problem solving and sense making in order to create solutions that tackle the complex environmental and social challenges. This is something that no one can do alone, which is why I talk about co-design – design done together with diverse groups of people.

The co-design method that I studied and further developed in this research is called Transition Arena. It is originally from the Netherlands and it has been developed further in Finland. It is a facilitated workshop process designed to address complex systemic transition topics and to co-design transition pathways that enhance desired development. It consists of a series of workshops in which the identification of challenges, vision building, and the construction of change pathways take place within diverse stakeholder groups. Stakeholders are typically carefully selected experts and frontrunners, coming from different backgrounds. In the seven transition arenas that I facilitated during the last years, the amount of participants in one arena varied from 10 to 60. Originally, the time frame for the pathway work was long, from 40 to 80 years, and it has been further developed towards a mid-range time-scale, meaning 10 to 15 years. This time frame better ensures the policy relevance that is often missing from the long-term visions.

Transition arena processes can be led by research projects, or by, for example, ministries or cities. The focus has often been in informing ongoing policy processes on how to advance sustainability transitions in certain topics. The methods have been criticised for several issues. One critique has been that transition arenas are often separate from official policy processes. This means that their impacts on policy making can be limited, relying on individual, committed participants. I also found it frustrating when organising and facilitating these arenas and similar co-creation processes: people come to the workshops, get new ideas, get empowered, and then what? They go back to their work and the rush of everyday life and the good ideas are often forgotten. Valuable results and outcomes are produced and published from these processes, but are they being read afterwards? If the process is part of a project, the project ends and there is a risk that soon no one remembers what was done. For me, thinking on how to do this better was one important motivation and starting point for this research.

Research of the thesis

This research is situated in the nexus between three research areas: sustainability transformations, design and transition management. Co-design for transitions, or transition co-design, is an emerging area bringing together these scholarships. More empirical studies are needed on what transition co-design actually means and what it can offer for sustainability transformations especially in the governance and policy contexts. My dissertation consists of five articles that are linked to these research areas and contributes to this research gap by empirically studying sustainable development policies and the possibilities of co-design in advancing them. My main research question is the following:

What can transition co-design offer in governance and policy processes related to sustainability transformations?

The data of my research was collected in four case studies discovering the topic from different angles. I collected the data between 2018 and 2022. All of the cases are from Finland and all of them were conducted together with at least one ministry. ”The first, PATH2030 – Developmental evaluation of the Finnish sustainable development policies and transformation pathways” was commissioned by the Prime Minister’s Office and led by me. It was the first comprehensive sustainable development policy evaluation and one of the first to globally evaluate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The second, ”KESTO – Leadership and implementation of sustainability – Action research on the localisation of the SDGs in Finnish municipalities”, studied the sustainable development leadership models at the local level. There, I was part of the project team. The third, ”Citizen Energy transition arena”, addressed the increasing renewable energy production in the housing companies. I was one of the facilitators of the arena. From this case, I have two articles included in the dissertation. Last, I lead a transition arena process in 2021 as part of a national 2030 Agenda roadmap creation process. The roadmap served as a basis for the new national sustainable development strategy, published in 2022. My research is based on qualitative methods, including document analysis, co-design workshops and interviews conducted after these projects.

Policy edition of the transition arena

As one of the main results, I designed a so-called ”policy edition” of the transition arena method. It means that I have further developed the mid-range transition arena process, enabling a closer integration of the tools for official policy processes. Having them as part of the official processes reduces the risk that the impact remains limited. The idea is that a transition arena is organised in an early, so-called agenda-setting phase of a policy process. In order to succeed with that, I developed and tested the method further within several strategic transition arena processes.

The policy edition of the transition arena slightly differs from the original transition arenas, bringing it closer to the formal policy arenas. First, the time-span in these arenas is mid-term, looking at 10-15 years ahead. The same 15 years as in the burger example. Second, the participant selection process can be different in the policy edition. While in the original transition arenas the participants are carefully hand-picked experts and front-runners, the policy edition includes participants that are already part of a certain policy process.

This means that also the role of participants can be different. In the original transition arena methodology, it is highlighted that the participants should participate as individuals and not represent their background organisations. This cannot be fully applied in the policy edition if the participants have been elected to represent a certain group or a party, and this needs to be considered in the process design. While the original transition arenas aim for free co-creation and regular policy arenas often focus on detailed short-term negotiation, the policy edition has elements of both, including also negotiations.

My results describe the main advantages of utilising transition arenas in advancing sustainable development policies. First, the participants of the arenas reported increased understanding of systemic change. Arenas offer a space for thinking further than typical political cycles of four to six years, and the pathway work made visible both the linkages between different steps and actions and the fact that (often) the current actions are not enough to reach the goals. Transition arenas can also bring in new topics to political discussion, and they can work as a space in which to discuss broader topics than those that is possible to discuss in the everyday work of policy and governance. The second main advantage of the use of transition arenas, according to the findings of my dissertation,

is that the arenas can expand the agency of different actors in sustainability transformations. The description of the needed actors in each pathway step led to increased understanding of the roles and agencies of different stakeholders, and most importantly, it led to increased understanding of one's own role in transformations.

To sum up, my dissertation provides contributions to all three fields of research it is located in. For sustainability transformation studies, I provide new knowledge on the transformative potential of the SDG implementation both at a national and local level. The findings manifest the value of small, continuous wins, as they seem to pave the way for more transformative reforms. For design studies, I provide empirically supported knowledge on what transition co-design may consist of. The findings indicate that successfully designing transitions entails consistently blending existing forms of design work. Co-designing for transitions requires hybrid expertise that covers different design levels, and it requires understanding the transformation needs in the content that is being co-designed. Therefore, in transition co-design processes, a multidisciplinary team composition is a practical necessity. For transition management studies, I further developed the transition arena methodology and introduced a policy edition of it. The policy edition of the transition arena could and should be used in governance and policy processes related to sustainability transformations, as it enables mid-term pathway creation, increase the understanding of systemic change and expand the agency of different actors in sustainability transformations.

I want to conclude by highlighting that, obviously, co-design alone will not solve the environmental and social crisis we are living in. To accelerate sustainability transformations, we need binding regulation, strong financial instruments, and massive investments from both public and private sectors. However, in democratic societies, the expectations for rapid transformations have not materialised, and hence, strategies combining both incremental and more transformative changes are needed. Thus, I see significant value in transition co-design as a way to induce peaceful transformations.

While there is a need for more empirical studies on the topic, this research recommends utilising transition co-design methods in the agenda setting phase of complex sustainability-related policy processes.

Thesis information

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