

How to create space for change? Key insights for policy- makers and grassroots activists



The InContext team initiated three pilot ‘community arenas’ and observed four existing initiatives for alternative living in local communities across Europe. It combined action-orientated interventions with conceptual thinking about sustainable behaviour. During the three-year process, the team has gained many insights on change towards sustainability. Currently in the final phase of InContext, we are digesting and trying to work out the full implications of our results and how they might be used elsewhere.

Thus, the following key messages should not be read as a scientific synthesis of our results, nor are they a cookbook for policy-makers with easy-to-follow recipes. Rather, we propose them as discussion points, as an invitation to give us feedback and ask more questions. In addition, this document provides links to our more detailed policy briefs and reports, which can be downloaded from our website.

Change is happening anyway. Policy-makers cannot engineer it, but they can foster it.

Further reading: The role of transformative communities in addressing societal challenges. InContext synthesis report (to be published in August 2013)

Diverse grassroots initiatives that emerge at the local level contribute to a transformation of our society towards sustainability. They are a valid and rich part of the response to our pressing societal challenges. At the same time, the uniqueness of each project and process and the diversity of the settings in which they develop, cautions against any attempt to define a blueprint for planting bottom-up initiatives. Rather, policy-makers at all levels of government should try to build on ongoing dynamics and create a favourable environment for long-term change. Transition management is a powerful approach to shape ongoing change, but it is *one* approach, not a solution to everything.

Starting with something that is concrete and relevant is a good way of engaging people.

Further reading: The community arena. Methodological guidelines

Applying transition management at the local level has taught us that concrete issues at the place in question are the best entry point for mobilising people. Facilitators have to be sensitive to the ongoing local dynamics, understand what touches people and build on this. These entry points can be social issues, questions of individual or collective well-being, or they can relate to symbolic institutions or places in the community.

Shared visions can drive change—even in diverse groups.

Further reading: Pilot project reports for year 1, 2 and 3

Working on a common vision for a desirable future can unleash the transformative power of individuals, groups and communities. Visions can help guide transitions. They make small steps become an element of a much bigger picture and thereby encourage people to become and remain active. If carefully moderated, the process of developing a vision can become a powerful tool for unifying even extremely diverse groups, because discussion is turned away from daily battles to reveal a shared purpose for the long term.

Sustainable development is not a helpful term, but opening the debate to the long-term and faraway places is.

Further reading: Synthesis report on pilot projects (to be published in July 2013)

In the local change processes started within InContext, sustainable development was felt to be too abstract and too worn-out a term for sparking constructive debate. However, the issues addressed in the concept do matter to people. When introducing the long term into the debate and evoking linkages to communities across the globe, sustainability issues are vividly discussed. Change towards a more sustainable future becomes a means for people to feel well in their communities instead of being an end in itself. That said, it is too early to judge how the processes will impact sustainability in the communities over the long haul. Adequate methods for evaluation remain to be developed.

Individual motivations and structures need to change in tandem.

Further reading: [Foundations for a common approach](#)

Our research is built on the hypothesis that long-lasting change in individual and collective behaviour will only come about if both external structures, such as norms, policies and infrastructure, as well as the inner context, consisting of values, motivation and beliefs, change in tandem. It has been more difficult than expected to address the values, beliefs and motivations of individuals. But judging from self-reporting of participants involved, our research does nonetheless confirm that individual and society-based factors interact when new forms of behaviour emerge. The interplay needs to be mutually reinforcing. Having a new perspective or a new motivation is critical for achieving changes in one's surrounding. In turn, the ability to achieve even small changes in the external environment becomes the source of empowerment for individuals and groups, enticing them to continue the process.

Change has a physical place.

Further reading: [Empirical case study report](#)

Place-based approaches make sustainable development more tangible to people. InContext shows that implementing transition management at the local level is a promising approach for sparking transformation, even though it is not always easy to draw the borders of the local community in question. Moreover, in all observed processes, the shaping of a concrete physical space—be it a community centre or organic farmland—has appeared vital for change to actually take place. The physical space shaped by the group becomes a symbol of what is possible.

Change needs space for experimenting and learning.

Further reading: [Alternative collective consumption and production niches. Case Study Synthesis Report](#)

Finding new ways of organising how we consume, produce and govern is a joint searching process. The cases we observed and the processes we initiated within InContext clearly indicated that one of the most appropriate ways for governments to support these learning processes is to open space for them. Space in this sense means physical room, time for exchange, flexibility in applying rules and standard procedures, and sometimes also mindful non-interference (not to be confused with ignorance).

Making change happen asks for renegotiation of roles and identities.

Further reading: [Policy Brief. Going out of the townhall](#)

The alternative models of consuming and producing we observed in our research are very diverse. They share, however, the common feature of redefining what a consumer or a producer is and does. This redefinition does not happen at once, but takes place in a continuous, collective negotiation process. A similar insight emerged in the local community arenas: Lasting change will depend on citizens and policy-makers rethinking their respective roles in driving decision-making in their communities. Citizens and policy-makers meeting as people (rather than as representatives of institutions) is a potent means to start this reflection process.

Change processes profit from able facilitators.

Further reading: Research Brief. Action research for sustainability. Reflections on transition in practice

Regardless of the type of initiative—be it a village starting its own energy cooperative or a participation process organised by a local government—open-ended processes aiming for transformation at the local level profit from skilled facilitators. To allow for learning and empowerment, participants first need to develop trust. For this to happen, activists, administrators or—as in our case—action-researchers need to be dedicated, delicate and reflective moderators, sensitive to the local dynamics and the participants’ values, needs, and emotions. Facilitation methods also matter greatly and have to be carefully chosen in each stage of the process.

Action-orientated research needs tailored funding.

Further reading: Policy Brief. How the EU can support local transition processes

InContext shows that to address the societal challenges that Europe faces, it is worthwhile to explore new types of action-orientated research together with citizens. This type of research requires additional skills, different evaluation criteria and longer funding periods than more traditional research. Thus, to show its full potential, action-orientated research needs openness and support from both governments and research bodies. The European Union’s Horizon2020 programme provides an invaluable opportunity to bring this type of research forward in—jointly with Structural and Cohesion Funds.

Glossary

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| Community arena | The community arena is a co-creation tool for sustainable behaviour by local communities integrating insights from transition management, backcasting and social psychology. Through collaboratively working on understanding the current challenges, envisioning a common future, identifying pathways and starting the first experiments to put these into practice, this tool supports a multi-actor learning process in the transition towards sustainability. |
| Transition management | Transition Management (TM) aims to deal with persistent societal problems by proposing an innovative governance concept based on complexity theory, social theories, and insights from the field of governance. TM focuses on creating space for and organizing a societal searching and learning process. |

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