Exploring the transformative potential of communities

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Abstract

This discussion paper engages with the transformative potential of communities, meaning the potential of communities to transform themselves and their surroundings so as to address persistent problems (i.e. societal challenges) and to contribute to a sustainability transition. Through a review of sustainability transitions and social innovation literature as well as two case studies of transition management in local communities we explore this concept further and propose six elements that make up the transformative potential of communities, namely: 1) a shared and acted-upon perspective on the present and a desired future which integrates diversity; 2) (inclusive) networks across actor categories, domains and levels, 3) a learning environment, based upon experimentation and/or reflexivity and accompanied by empowerment, 4) needs of the community are met now and in the future, 5) alterable social relations in an environment of participation and direct action, and 6) access to resources (e.g. money, time, power, networks, political will).

Introduction

The field of sustainability transitions has to date focused on policy domains such as energy or water (e.g. Grin et al. 2010, Markard et al. 2012) and to a lesser extent on regional or urban development. This also holds for the field of transition governance, where transition management (Loorbach 2010, 2007) has mainly been applied and researched on a sectoral level (Zijlstra & Avelino 2012, Frantzeskaki et al. 2012, Verbong & Loorbach 2012). As part of a three year European research project, InContext, the transition management approach was contextualized for use in local communities. InContext not only had the aim to better understand the contexts that influence the ability of individuals and local communities to deal with societal challenges but also to facilitate processes that enhance their transformative potential. For this reason an action research approach was chosen which followed the so-called community arena methodology which is based on insights from transition management, backcasting and social psychology (Wittmayer et al. 2011).

This discussion paper focuses on the outcomes of three years of action research employing the community arena methodology in three communities in Austria, Germany and the Netherlands. It has a twofold aim: a) to explore an understanding of a transformative potential of communities from a transitions perspective and b) to address the extent to which and how the transformative potential of communities in addressing societal challenges and persistent problems can be enhanced.

Doing so, the paper is structured as follows. First we establish an understanding of the transformative potential of communities as an analytical frame. Secondly, we outline two cases of transition management at a community level aimed at enhancing this potential. Based on these cases, the discussion explores how transformative potential of communities can be understood and enhanced by adopting a transition (management) perspective.

Transformative potential of communities: Drawing up an analytical frame

Before analysing two cases of action research employing the community arena methodology, we draw on literature of sustainability transitions as well as of social innovation to establish an analytical frame regarding the transformative potential of communities.

Sustainability transitions, as defined by Grin et al. (2010: 1) are "radical transformation towards a sustainable society as a response to a number of persistent problems confronting contemporary modern societies". In taking this perspective, scientists have to date mainly be looking at transitions in sectors (e.g. water, energy) to the detriment of fundamental changes on more local level, such as e.g. in communities in neighbourhoods or villages. By focusing on the latter in the context of persistent problems and societal challenges, one of the questions that arises is whether communities have the potential to transform themselves (community transformation) and their surroundings (system transformation) so as to address these problems and become more sustainable. This relates to questions of agency, which in the sustainability transitions literature is mainly dealt with under the denominator of 'transition management' (Loorbach 2010, Grin et al. 2010). Transition management is studying ways (and translating them in governance prescriptions) in which transitions can be influenced so as to contribute to sustainable development. It is based on a number of principles, which are derived from complexity theory, governance and sociology (Loorbach 2007, 2010). To name a few: long-term thinking as the basis for short term policy, thinking in terms of multiple domains (multi-domain), different actors (multi-actor), different levels (multi-level), learning as an important aim for policy ('learning-by-doing' and 'doing-by-learning') orient governance towards system innovation besides system improvement, keeping options open, and exploring multiple pathways (Loorbach 2010, 2007). In revisiting these, we can formulate a number of elements composing the transformative potential of communities based on a sustainability transitions perspective, namely:

- a shared perspective of the present and the future (i.e. a vision of a sustainable future)

- a diversity of perspectives with regards to pathways

- an attitude connecting short term actions and long term vision

- (inclusive) networks across actor categories, domains and levels

- an environment that is supportive of learning, experimentation and reflexivity

While the transition management perspective is marked by a linkage of innovation and sustainability (Frantzeskaki et al. 2012), it is also rooted in the field of socio-technical innovation and functional systems (e.g. sectors) (Grin et al. 2010). Turning to the field of social innovation can counterbalance this focus and account for more social aspects as well as the local level (Moulaert et al. 2005, 2010). These authors stress three dimensions of social innovation, which are 1) the satisfaction of human needs (content/product dimension), 2) changes in social relations, especially with regard to governance and participation (process dimension) and 3) increasing the socio-political capability and

access to resources needed to satisfy needs and participation (empowerment dimension). These can be translated into elements of a transformative potential of communities in the context of sustainability transitions, namely:

- needs of the community are met now and in the future,
- alterable social relations in an environment of participation and direct action,
- access to resources (e.g. money, time, power, networks, political will),
- an emphasis on empowerment and learning.

These nine elements taken together describe characteristics of a community with transformative potential in the context of sustainability transitions: the potential of communities to transform themselves and their surroundings

Case Studies

Having established an understanding of what we mean by transformative potential of communities, we now turn to an in depth description of two case studies, namely Rotterdam Carnisse, and Finkenstein. After having outlined the research context we outline for each case study first the local context, followed by the implementation of the community arena process and the outcomes thereof. Doing so we focus on elements that might help us to better understand the transformative potential of these communities and how this can be enhanced.

Research context

InContext is a three-year EU-financed FP7 research project aimed at identifying the framework conditions that enable a societal transition towards an ecologically sound, economically successful and culturally diverse future locally. In doing so, the project developed and applied innovative methods for dealing with societal challenges. The quest of InContext in supporting sustainability transitions in local communities was twofold: First to better understand how factors internal to the actors, at individual and group level, interrelate with their external context (within InContext this was referred to as the inner and outer context of behaviour). Second, it aimed to understand how the transformative potentials of local communities could be unleashed.

Table 1: Overview of the Community Arena methodology (underlined are the participatory meetings)
(Source: Wittmayer et al. 2011)

| | Phases of the Community Arena | |
	Key activities	Key output
0. Pre-preparation	A. Case orientation B. Transition team formation	A. Initial case description for each pilot B. Transition team
1. Preparation & Exploration	A. Process design B. System analysis C. Actor analysis (long-list and short-list of relevant actors) incl. interviews D Set up Monitoring framework	A. Community Arena process plan B. Insightful overview of major issues/tensions to focus on C. Actor identification and categorisation + insight inner context D Monitoring framework
2. Problem structuring & Envisioning	A. Community Arena formation B. <u>Participatory problem structuring</u> C. Selection of key priorities D. <u>Participatory vision building</u>	A. Frontrunner network B. Individual and shared problem perceptions & change topics C. Guiding sustainability principles D. Individual and shared visions
3. Backcasting, Pathways & Agenda Building	A. <u>Participatory backcasting</u> & definition of transition paths B. <u>Formulation agenda and specific activities</u> C. Monitoring interviews	A. Backcasting analysis & transition paths B. Transition agenda and formation of possible sub-groups C. Learning & process feedback
4. Experimenting & Implementing	A. Dissemination of visions, pathways and agenda B. Coalition forming & broadening the network C. Conducting experiments	A. Broader public awareness & extended involvement B. Change agents network & experiment portfolio C. Learning & implementation
5. Monitoring & Evaluation	A. Participatory evaluation of method, content and process* B. Monitoring interviews	A. Adapted methodological framework, strategy and lessons learned for local and EU-level governance B. Insight in drivers and barriers for sustainable behaviour

To address these questions, an action research methodology (referred to as the community arena methodology) integrating insights from transition management, backcasting and social psychology was developed and implemented in three communities (Wittmayer et al. 2011). The community arena process is a co-creation process where the tacit knowledge of engaged citizens is integrated with the scientific and process knowledge of researchers and experts to result in a long-term sustainability vision and agenda, as well as in immediate action within the community in question. By reflecting on the process and its outcomes, new methodological and theoretical insights have been gained. The aim was threefold, 1) to learn about the InContext quest, 2) to lead to reflection processes at the individual and group levels allowing for the emergence of new more sustainable strategies, as well as experiments with innovative practices as alternatives to established ones and 3) to gain theoretical and methodological insights into an iterative process.

The community arena methodology (as outlined in Table 1, Wittmayer et al. 2011) was implemented in three European communities (see Figure 1). Like in other TM processes, here we also refer to geographical markers: Rather than starting from the concept of a community that is defined by shared values and experiences, we focused on 'spatialised' communities and their administrative boundaries. It is implemented by a transition team consisting of the InContext action researchers and locally relevant persons. This team not

only prepares, documents, analyses, monitors, co-ordinates, manages, facilitates and evaluates the whole process, but also selects participants. It brings together the various parties, is responsible for internal and external communication, acts as intermediary in discordant situations and has an overview of all the activities in and between arena meetings. After having done some preliminary analysis, the transition team brings some 15 people of the local community together for a participatory, searching and learning co-creation process. These change agents hold divergent worldviews and are brought together to meet several times in the community arena setting. Throughout this deliberative process, the change agents discuss the current status quo (what is the problem and what are the current sustainability challenges?), envision a sustainable future in about 30-50 years from now and then follow a backcasting methodology to come up with pathways and milestones. The process results in a change narrative and immediate action points, the transition agenda. Subsequently the agenda is put into practice through a number of experiments or projects.

Figure 1: Overview of InContext pilot projects (Source: Wittmayer et al. 2013a).
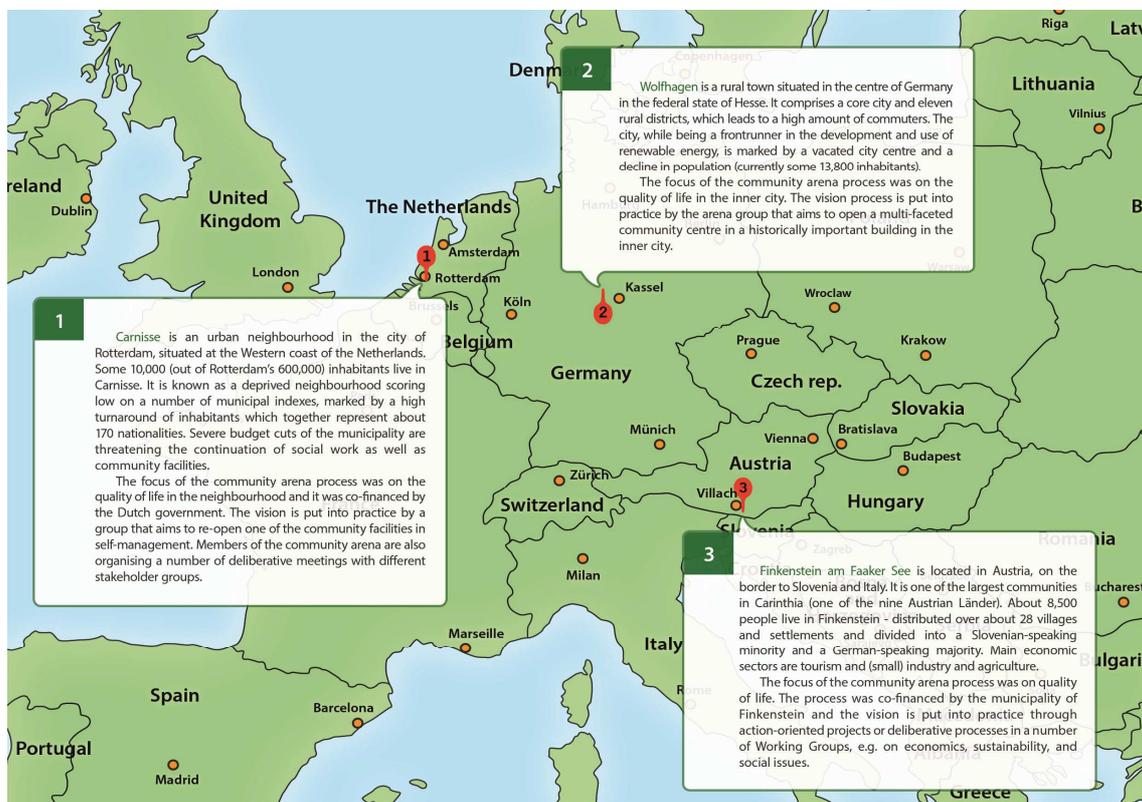
Case 1: Rotterdam Carnisse, The Netherlands

Local Context

Carnisse is a neighbourhood of the harbour city Rotterdam, the Netherlands. In 2007, Carnisse (as part of Rotterdam South) was listed as one of the 40 neighbourhoods nationwide that the national government labelled as 'neighbourhoods of extra interest' ('aandachtswijken'). These neighbourhoods are all seen as having problems in multiple domains (social, physical and economic) and receive special attention and funds from the national government.

The context of Carnisse in 2011 was strongly influenced by the current economic crisis, which led to huge government budget cuts and a withdrawal of the welfare-state. Although old welfare structures were being dismantled, there remained a high level of (non-) governmental activity, as well as a long history of local participatory processes and interventions by professionals and/or researchers. The inhabitants of Carnisse who took part in the Community Arena process (either through interviews or as arena participants) expressed their frustration with the above, but were also eager to relativize the picture of a deprived neighbourhood by pointing to the many initiatives that were arising from within the community..

Process

The Community Arena process started in August 2011. In the period until February 2012, the transition team was doing the system and actor analysis (including interviews, attending meetings, getting acquainted with the locality), which led to a selection of potential participants for the arena process, as well as a problem description based on interviews, observations and secondary data. On the basis of the system analysis, which also pointed to a weariness of participatory processes in the neighbourhood, the final process design was informed by a meeting with five frontrunners from Carnisse in November 2011 (a 'pre-arena meeting'). This resulted in an adjusted process design: deliberative participatory meetings (as suggested by the methodology in phases 2 and 3) and a more action- and implementation-oriented experiment (as originally suggested in phase 4) were started simultaneously in February 2012 (see Figure 2).

During the first meeting, held in February 2012, the problem analysis (i.e. system analysis) was presented and the main topics of interests were identified through a group discussion: powerful/-less policy, rich and turbulent history, government cuts, diversity, connections, and the maintenance of housing. In the two following meetings in March and April 2012, participants explored their needs with regard to the community centre (the focus of the action-oriented trajectory) and drew up a vision for the neighbourhood in 2030 in which the community centre plays an important role. The vision is called 'Blossoming Carnisse' and includes the following topics: 1) …to living with each other, 2) …to a green sustainable oasis, 3) …to diverse housing styles, 4) …to places for everybody, and 5) …to working together for blossoming. In May 2012, a forth Community Arena meeting was held with a focus on backcasting and developing pathways from the future vision back to the present. After having discussed and reached an agreement on the vision, three small groups worked on exploring pathways for the six topics of the vision. These were, together with activities that already took place, described in the final vision document. In November 2012, the vision was presented to a broader audience in the neighbourhood during an official community forum organized by the district municipality of Charlois where the vision was put on the agenda and attracted twice as many attendants as other community forum evenings.

Figure 2: Contextualisation of the Community Arena Methodology for Carnisse (Source: Wittmayer et al. 2013b)
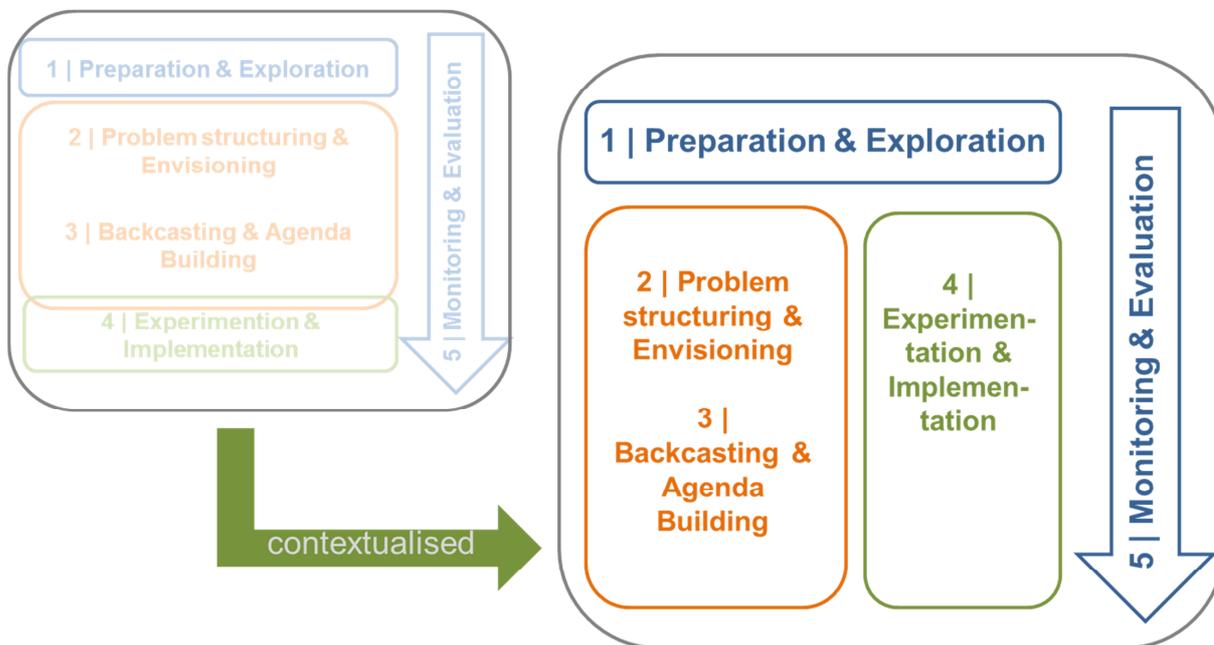
As outlined earlier, a more practice-centred process was started in parallel with the deliberative meetings of the Community Arena (see Figure 2). The community centre, which ultimately closed in January 2012 due to the bankruptcy of the welfare-organization running it, served as a clear symbol for the changing landscape and context of Carnisse (budget cuts, the dismantling of old welfare structures and a lack of social cohesion). It was the object of four meetings that took place in February and March 2012 where a local action group was formed to work on its re-opening. Afterwards, the core of the local action group stayed in contact through Email and telephone, and worked on a number of strategies. It drew up a business plan, reached more than 300 people through a petition and lobbied different representatives of the sub-municipality, the welfare organization and the larger municipality. When the group felt that they could take it over themselves, the researchers withdrew from the process after two more broad meetings. Currently the foundation, supported by the professional, is managing the community centre, fulfilling all daily tasks through volunteer work from the board members and continuing the dialogue with the municipality. The latter has accepted ownership of the building and is now in the phase of negotiating the rental sum with the foundation.

In February 2013, an evaluation meeting took place where the participants evaluated the process and the outcomes and formulated future ambitions.

Outcome

In this section we look into the dynamics within the groups that were formed through the process, as well as their relation to the political and wider societal context, before considering empowerment and learning as aspects of such processes. In Carnisse, we can distinguish between the community arena process and the experiment focusing on reopening the community centre. The latter shows clear signs of leadership. In the course of a one-year process, a group of three women emerged and established a foundation,

which is now formally responsible for operating the community centre. However, the community arena itself formally ceased to exist after the facilitated meetings. There were no attempts by the participants to keep this structure alive through regular formal meetings.

With regard to the political context, the community and policy makers are rather tired of participatory processes. These processes are mainly initiated by the municipality and are meant to inform rather than to consult or to involve the public. Previous participation processes were often seen as being unsuccessful or at least judged critically by residents. Recent municipal budget cuts increased these sentiments. Therefore, the pilot process was eyed with suspicion because both local policy makers and inhabitants of Carnisse were sceptical of whether the arena process could deliver the concrete results they were seeking. In this context, the community arena methodology was perceived as unique by the participants: a process with an open agenda that was to be set by the participants and was not initiated by the municipality. The local municipality, on the other hand, perceived the openness of the arena process as problematic; especially that it could not be controlled in terms of output and outcome. Overall, because of the weariness of previous participatory trajectories and other projects, there was a low level of trust between the different parties involved. The participants could not all adapt to this new form of participation and at times fell into the roles which they were accustomed to from previous municipality-led participatory processes. The participants, for example, saw the realisation of the vision as being closely connected to actors from policy, business or housing. Some participants put these actors in the driver's seat in hope that the municipality, district municipality, housing corporations or similar actors release funds for investments in Carnisse so as to realize the vision of ´Blossoming Carnisse´.

In Carnisse, the relationship between the transition team and local decision makers ranged from disinterest to rejection because of the interplay between transition activities and political decisions: it was dynamic and changed over time. Reservation and scepticism against the transition team in the beginning, turned into support in Carnisse, but could have also turned out the other way around. This very much depends on targets and their linkages to current policies, but it is also strongly influenced by the specific local political culture and current local challenges (e.g. shrinking budgets).

Additionally, in Carnisse the dynamics between those actors that aimed to re-open the community centre and the local government or political actors changed drastically when the time came for tangible action and the possibility of funding though subsidies or other mechanisms. Participants involved in the reopening of the community centre were looking to these actors for financial support, but instead they were kept at a distance and both policy and political actors were sending contradictory responses. This led to an increased indecisiveness on the part of all involved. The lack of transparency and the lack of trust mentioned earlier resulted in a lengthy implementation process with mutual conflict and frustrations, in spite of the best intentions of all actors involved.

For discussing the relation of the group with the wider context, we turn to the relation of those in the community arena group, i.e. the frontrunners, and those who were not invited. Frontrunners were identified as those individuals who were passionate about the neighbourhood and were active in it (rather than using the criterion of simply living in the neighbourhood), with new ideas and creative actions. Next to demographic criteria, it was important that the group should be diverse in terms of background (inhabitants, artists, local entrepreneurs, public officials, etc.). It was possible to get people involved with less formal education and/or low incomes, but it proved to be challenging to include people from a variety of ethnic groups. The arena group, consisting predominantly of so-called 'white Dutch natives', had indicated throughout the process that they miss diversity and

the perspectives of others that also live in the neighbourhood, e.g. people with Turkish, Antillean or Moroccan roots (almost 60% of the inhabitants of Carnisse are of 'non-Dutch descent'). Their voice was partly brought in through the initial interview round, but none wanted to take part in the arena group itself (although some joined an incidental session). The integration of participants younger than 25-30 years was also challenging. Nevertheless, the transition intervention was successful overall in creating a new communicative space and in diffusing and translating paths for ideas.

Empowerment and social learning, both explicit aims of transition management approaches (Avelino 2011, Loorbach 2007), can also be taken to be outcomes of the arena process in Carnisse. Especially the open-ended agenda of the process gave people the feeling of being able to choose what to put on the agenda and that no certain policy agenda was "imposed" on them (which they feel is often the case). This gave them a sense of choice and, because they could put forth topics important to them, a sense of meaningfulness, both aspects of intrinsic motivation (Avelino 2011). For participants in Carnisse, this also positively distinguished this project from other processes carried out in the neighbourhood in recent years. People followed the invitation to join the process so as to gain a better picture of the whole context in which they were living and working or very specifically to keep the community centre open. Engaging in the arena was described by some even as part of their responsibility as a citizen. Exchange and discussions in a diverse group created a fruitful atmosphere for collaboration and learning. The latter was reported by participants in terms of knowledge about the neighbourhood or specific skills (e.g. speaking in front of a larger audience) as well as a change in perspectives.

Case 2: Finkenstein, Austria

Local context

Finkenstein am Faaker See is located in Austria, on the border to Slovenia and Italy. It is one of the largest communities in Carinthia (one of the 9 Austrian Länder) with regard to population and area. About 8,500 people live in Finkenstein - distributed over about 28 villages and settlements and divided into a Slovenian-speaking minority and a German-speaking majority. The main economic sectors are tourism and (small-scale) industry; agriculture also plays a role. The focus of the community arena process was on quality of life. The process was co-financed by the municipality and the vision has been realized through action-oriented projects or deliberative processes in a number of Working Groups, e.g. on economics, sustainability and social issues.

Process

The pre-preparation phase consisted of desk research and around 65 personal and telephone interviews. This provided the basis for the system analysis and the identification of frontrunners. After a press release was published in local newspapers, a kick-off meeting was held in January 2012. High attendance (over 100 participants) demonstrated a keen public interest in the initiative.

The concept of the transition team was filled in differently in Finkenstein. Rather than driving the process, which was done by the researchers, the transition team was made up by stakeholders representing the community from a variety of dominant institutions and political parties. They first met in March 2012 to clarify members' expectations and discuss the project process. Shortly thereafter, during their second meeting, the team

decided to set up two working groups with broader community participation to follow up on two of the main themes (e.g. economy) arising from the scoping and visioning phase.

The community arena – fifteen community members from diverse backgrounds in terms of place of residence, age, gender and professional or educational background – was convened between March and June 2012. Using the dynamic facilitation method, the main topics of interest were identified: environment, energy, mobility/tourism, economy, agriculture, local supply, social topics and population. The arena's second meeting focused on vision building. It resulted in a collage of pictures representing Finkenstein 2030, as desired by the participants, a theatre play, a fictional interview with a local newspaper and the definition of a set of core statements for the vision. The third meeting started with a discussion between arena participants and transition team representatives over possibilities for citizens' involvement in political processes. In response, more space was given to the envisioning process, during which abstract long-term visions are separated from short-term wishes and demands. By the end of the meeting, visions for Finkenstein's sustainable and liveable future were drafted. These were then combined into a shared vision at the beginning of the fourth community arena meeting which also served to determine what measures were to be taken in order to achieve the joint vision using the backcasting methodology. In addition to the guidelines for the vision, a logo was created representing the joint vision. The words used to formulate the vision were chosen to represent some of the values central to the community arena members – translated from German it says: "We shape Finkenstein for the benefit of citizens and nature in freedom, with joy and love of life."

Eight thematic working groups were then formed to develop measures fitting the vision and one to two participants were recruited to coordinate them: "Sustainable Economy" (with three subgroups covering tourism, local businesses and local retailers); "Environment and Sustainability"; "LifeEnergy" / "Lebensenergie" (systemic perspective); "Social Affairs"; "Participation"; "Energy supply" (later merged with the WG on 'Environment & Sustainability'); "Culture"; "Kanzianiberg" (integration and traditions); and "Mobility" (later merged with the WG on 'Environment & Sustainability').

A public event in early August was used to disseminate the common vision, pathways and agenda. Expanding the transition network was the other key purpose of the meeting and a world café (each table hosted one working group) was held for community members to join the working groups and provide feedback on the work done so far. To further extend public involvement in and knowledge of the project, a short report and a call for participation were published in the community newspaper. During the summer, the working groups were busy organizing themselves and discussing which topics they should focus on. Finding a suitable way to work together (How many meetings? Who will lead them? How to take decisions in the working group? etc.) took quite a lot of time and energy for some of the groups. In September, the researchers organized a meeting for all people involved in the project. The aims were as follows: connecting the activities carried out by the different working groups, stimulating communication between them, identifying where support was needed and raising motivation. After an extended round of updates from all working groups, the remaining time was used to discuss and agree on how to work together and how to organize communication within as well as between the groups. The need for more trust and thoughtfulness was often expressed, especially concerning concrete actions and measures.

After this meeting, an intense working phase began, characterized by several meetings within the working groups, as well as the development of measures and efforts to integrate more community members. A password-protected space was created on the project website, making available all working group minutes and documents, and a

newsletter was sent out in October, which reported on the past and upcoming activities of the working groups. In November, the researchers organised and facilitated the next project meeting that started off with an exchange of information on the proceedings of the working groups; discussions and project ideas were shared among participants. The focus was on making decisions about possible measures, which were presented and checked for consistency with the common vision. Measures considered to be incomplete were returned to the appropriate working group for revisions. Table 2 presents a selection of approved measures. Most of them have been implemented; some are still in progress.

Table 2: Selected measures in Finkenstein (as of June 2013, Wittmayer et al. 2013b)

Title	Working group	Description	Status
« Town reporter » / « Dorfjournalist »	Participation	The participants of these workshops should acquire basic knowledge about writing articles for the community newspaper. The aim was to write the community newspaper in a more participatory way with contributions of a higher quality.	Completed: workshops held on 18 January 2013 and 1 March 2013
« Hello Neighbour » / « Hallo Nachbar »	Social Affairs	This meeting takes place once a month and aims at closing the gap between people who grew up in Finkenstein and those who moved in later. For this reason, people from the working group « Social Affairs » invite some neighbours to an informal meeting in an inn or restaurant and encourage them to invite other people along as well (snowball effect).	Ongoing: monthly meetings
"Terra amicitiae – application for a climate and energy model region " / "Terra amicitiae – Bewerbung zur Klima- und Energie-Modellregion"	Sustainable Economy (Energy)	In collaboration with the neighbouring communities Arnoldstein and St. Jakob im Rosental, Finkenstein forms a region that aims for energy independency and for improving sustainable transport.	Completed: application was accepted, measures in progress
« Event Series Sustainability » / « Veranstaltungsreihe Nachhaltigkeit »	Environment and Sustainability	Six public talks from experts on main topics in the area of sustainability (nutrition, mobility, housing, etc.) should be organized. Through this measure awareness of topics concerning sustainability should be increased and best practices should be publicized throughout the community.	In Progress: First talk planned for mid-2013

Outcome

In the following we look into the dynamics within the groups that were formed through the process, as well as their relation to the political and wider societal context, before considering empowerment and learning as aspects of such processes.

After the end of the facilitated group meetings, participants articulated their need for someone to take over a portion of the research team's tasks (e.g. internal and external communication, organisation of meetings, etc.). Those actively involved in the project

elected eight representatives to comprise the 'coordination team' in a 'sociocratic election'. It is noteworthy that the election process was organised and facilitated by participants of the community arena themselves (which in itself is connected to group empowerment). The research team was only consulted on minor issues. At present, this elected coordination team leads the process of realising the vision for Finkenstein 2030 and organizes primarily the interplay of the working groups for the coming two years. Again each of these working groups is led by one person on a voluntary basis – the resulting structures show a high degree of organization.

As well as the co-funding by the local government, the direct involvement of local political actors and decision makers in the community arena was different than in Carnisse. Similar to other (particularly rural) areas in Austria, Finkenstein currently hardly knows participatory governance. The curiosity and interest of the community in such a process was immediately clear during the well-attended public launch event, where the research team outlined the process and goal. This meant that the participatory approach was a new experience for the community arena participants. Also, during the process interest by local policymakers and politicians was so high that the methodology was adapted and the transition team received a different function (see above). In this team, they could be given a role in the process. During the arena process, some people from within the municipal government and administration started to act as important contact persons for citizens in Finkenstein. Overall, the relationship between local government actors and the community arena was perceived as a positive one. Government actors were supportive during the implementation phase. However, there was scepticism in the beginning by the conservative and rather right-wing parties (three of them exist in Finkenstein). The co-funding had to be approved by the city council and it did not pass by a particularly large margin (51%). Conservative and right-wing party members remained critical throughout the process, with only one exception.

In relation to the wider societal context, the research team made an effort to identify and select engaged citizens for the Community Arena who reflected the diversity of Finkenstein, while not being representatives of the predominant political or institutional system. Although it was difficult to achieve an ethnically mixed group in Finkenstein, groups were quite diverse in terms of age, gender, professions, etc. The participants appreciated this diversity, as it gave them the possibility to gain new perspectives and unconventional insights, a very important condition for social learning. The implementation of the community arena methodology led to new local networks with unique compositions and was identified as being very important by the participants themselves. A participant described the networks as offering a platform for discussing ideas and worries about the shared living space: "Through the process the group got stronger than the sum of its single members."

In terms of empowerment, community members were generally interested in co-creating their environment in order to increase quality of life – some participants even described this engagement as part of their responsibility as a citizen. Asked during the evaluation phase, participants generally believed that they could have an impact on the local environment, though some were sceptical of such claims mainly due to their high expectations about the process that involved large segments of the public and lead to too many measurable outcomes. These concerns were addressed through the learning process, which emphasized that transitions occur in small steps and need time. The wish to have an impact on the community also led to an increased interest in local politics – some of the arena members organised themselves as a group to participate at a local council meeting ("we want to know how this works"). Additionally, two participants decided to stand as candidates for the local council.

Participants reported that they learned about their possible impact, their roles and the roles of others in the project. This increased awareness led many participants of the community arena to change their attitude towards the future. They stated that they could encounter future developments in a more relaxed way and put a greater focus on the present after experiencing that can actively influence developments. Participants also reported an increased self-reflexivity and attention through contact with other, formerly unknown people. Some participants described themselves as being more open and having fewer prejudices in interactions with others. These second order learning processes are complemented by more first order learning processes, which centre on concrete skills, e.g. facilitating meetings and working respectfully together in diverse groups. Trust-building processes were successful and guaranteed a safe space for fostering second order learning. Participants explicitly reported some surprises ('eureka moments') they came across during the project, e.g., the insight that some apparently individual worries (but also ideas) are shared by others or that social cohesion is not very strong among the long-established population in Finkenstein.

Discussion

In this section we explore an emerging understanding of what a transformative potential of communities stands for and to what extent and how it can be enhanced. We do so by referring back to the analytical frame drawn up in the beginning and by comparing the two cases. The analytical frame contained nine elements which taken together describe characteristics of communities with transformative potential the potential of communities to transform themselves and their surroundings. These characteristics are:

- a shared perspective of the present and the future (i.e. a vision of a sustainable future)

- a diversity of perspectives with regards to pathways

- an attitude connecting short term actions and long term vision

- (inclusive) networks across actor categories, domains and levels

- an environment that is supportive of learning, experimentation and reflexivity

- needs of the community are met now and in the future,

- alterable social relations in an environment of participation and direct action,

- access to resources (e.g. money, time, power, networks, political will),

- an emphasis on empowerment and learning.

In the following we discuss the case studies along these nine characteristics so as deepen our understanding of the transformative capacity of communities in the context of sustainability transitions.

We propose to cluster the first three elements for this discussion: they relate to the shared and acted-upon perspective on the present and a desired future which integrates diversity. In discussing these elements a number of questions arise, most prominently is the question with regard to who are the ones to share a perspective on the present and the future. In the case of Carnisse there had been a vision drawn up in 2009 under the guidance of the municipality, district municipality and housing co-operations. But only a minority of interviewees were pointing to this vision in the very beginning of the involvement of the InContext researchers in Carnisse. In Finkenstein there was no vision for the community drawn up to date that involved inhabitants.

The community arena process resulted in a shared problem perception and vision, including a number of pathways for both communities. Shared by whom is also the question here: In Carnisse it was a group of about 15 people drawing it up. A much smaller group out of these 15 felt ownership for presenting and disseminating it further in the neighbourhood and to actually acting upon it. The action in turn, amongst others the re-opening of a community centre has an influence on the whole neighbourhood. In Finkenstein, the ownership was felt much broader, including political actors in the transition team – which opens the opportunity of the vision, or its underlying principles dripping into and influencing local policy making.

Having a shared understanding of the present and the future results into a group of like-minded people who have aligned their thinking and reasoning about the life of the community and build a new network. This brings us to the next element, underline inclusive networks across actors, domains and levels. Such a network has not been deliberately build earlier in the two cases. The networks that existed included people who knew each other, amongst others through sharing personal or professional interests, or from living close to each other. These networks could be politicised in terms of party political affiliations in Finkenstein, but not in terms of sharing a well-founded deliberatively reached perspective on the present and a vision for the future.

The latter is an outcomes of the community arena process, namely the creation of new action-oriented networks sharing a perspective on the present and the future. Especially in Finkenstein the network shows a promising potential for broader networking activities and an intensified exchange of ideas towards sustainable developments, i.e. the realization of the visions that the communities drew up (more on this below under social relations). These networks comprise people from a variety of perspectives and backgrounds that have not interacted previously and now meet in an open and trustful atmosphere. This leads to an enhancement of the social capital of the community (in terms of establishing new relations within and between groups).

The following element, an environment that is supportive of learning, experimentation and reflexivity, can be discussed together with the emphasis on empowerment and learning. Both touch upon the importance of learning in general, based upon experimentation and/or reflexivity and accompanied by empowerment.

Based on evaluation and monitoring interviews (to enhance reflexivity of the process) that have been held at the end of the community arena process, the participants self-reported that the process contributed to an on-going learning and empowerment process in their communities. Through the processes, the participants' belief that they are able to direct their actions to desired ends could be strengthened. Participants of all pilot projects reported several learning experiences, including first as well as second order learning (Argyris & Schön 1978). In Carnisse as well as in Finkenstein, people reported that they learned about their possible impact (see below) and their own and others' roles in the project. A very important learning experience shared by all pilot project participants was the experience of working together in a respectful and constructive way even with previously unknown people and in a very diverse group. All learning experiences mentioned so far can be defined as second order learning processes. They all touch upon underlying values and assumptions – about the roles of different actors in shaping the local environment, ways of collaborating with different people and, subsequently, attitudes towards the future. Second order learning processes of this kind are crucial for transition processes as they open windows for behavioural changes and help deal with increasing uncertainty and complexity. These second order learning processes are complemented by more first order learning processes, which centre on concrete skills. Examples for these are: speaking one's mind in public and in front of a large group of

people (e.g., 100 people); facilitating meetings; working respectfully together in diverse (e.g., intergenerational) groups.

Defining empowerment as increased intrinsic motivation, the community arena process had positive effects on all four intrinsic task assessments outlined by Avelino (2011): choice, impact, meaningfulness, and competence. The fact that the process had an open agenda contributed greatly to the participants' feeling of self-determination: they could choose what to put on the agenda and no specific policy agenda was 'imposed' on them. In both Carnisse and Finkenstein, most of the participants stated that they can have an impact on the local environment. Others were more sceptical, an attitude mainly resulting from the high expectations of participants in terms of the process (e.g. it should involve a large part of the public and lead to many measurable rather large-scale outcomes). These expectations were addressed through the learning process, emphasising that transitions occur in small steps and need time. Participating in the process also led to a heightened interest in local politics and in becoming a candidate in the local council elections in Finkenstein. The link between a project's goal and the ideals of individual participants is assumed to have an empowering effect. In both cases, participants stated that topics important to them have been tackled throughout the process. The last task that was assessed was the gaining of competences, which is closely related to social learning. Participants gained competence in a number of skills (e.g., speaking in front of many people, working together) and also changed some underlying values and assumptions (i.e., related to people with different backgrounds). All of this strengthens the perceived competence and therefore has an empowering effect. This points to the importance of taking into account different levels where transformative potential can reside and be brought into play: in transforming the individual, in transforming the community and in transforming the wider surroundings.

From learning we turn to the element of the <u>needs of the community which should be met now and in the future</u>. Discussing needs asks for the definition of what is meant with needs. Mouleart et al. (2010) refer to the basic needs of humans. Within the context of InContext, the concept was used in terms of the conceptualisation of Max-Neef (1991), who differentiates between the following ten abstract needs: subsistence, protection, affection, understanding, participation, idleness, creation, identity, freedom, and transcendence (Schäpke and Rauschmayer 2011, Rauschmayer et al 2011).

Meeting the needs of the community as the content dimension can be discussed by first analysing the system analysis of both communities where unmet needs are part of the puzzle. Further we can look at the different measures that have been implemented in both communities, as well as at the visions drawn up by both communities. These reveal needs and associated values such as belonging, economic security, entrepreneurship, or environmental values, all underlying the transformative potential of the communities.

The following element to consider are <u>alterable social relations in an environment of participation and direct action.</u> Important to scrutinize here is the local contexts and the differences between the cases. In Finkenstein, neither the inhabitants nor policy makers had a lot of experiences with participatory processes, thus no difficult reference experiences existed. In Rotterdam-Carnisse, on the other hand, previous experiences with participatory processes overshadowed the process especially in the beginning, but also had its repercussions during the presentation of the vision to the neighbourhood.

The changes in social relations can be traced in Carnisse and Finkenstein when looking at the relations of the community arena and the political context. Recalling the processes outlined earlier, we can distinguish between different development trajectories of such a community arena group:

- The community arena group selects a 'coordinating team' from its participants, which organizes the different working groups that have been created to realize the group's vision, i.e. Finkenstein;

- The community arena group ceases to exist formally after the facilitated meetings, while the working group on a specific experiment evolves into a formalized structure, i.e. a foundation as in Carnisse.

These trajectories each show a different degree of formalization of leadership (or social relations). What distinguishes the foundation from the sociocratically elected coordinating team are the legal and financial implications of the former. Alternative practices and structures are part and parcel of a sustainability transition. In this respect, the Finkenstein trajectory is interesting: Holding a sociocratic election can be seen as experimenting with a new way of decision-making that does not fit the current majority vote system. Through this election, Finkenstein is also pioneering new practices and roles with regard to decision-making and participation, as well as emphasising different underlying values. Taking the context into account, establishing an inhabitant-led foundation can clearly be seen as a social innovation in Carnisse, re-ordering the relations between 'inhabitants', politicians and policy officers – a long and intense process where all actors struggle with filling their new roles.

Overall, Finkenstein had a more intense process resulting in a number of working groups and including network meetings. The latter aimed at bringing together the transition team and the community arena. While in Carnisse, the transition team was much more operational, in Finkenstein it involved stakeholders representing the community from a variety of dominant institutions and different political parties. Both cases are part of a vivid discussion about whether these kinds of interventions should be of a temporary nature (disperse and spread the vision narrative into individual networks) or formalised and integrated into pre-existing legal structures. Based on the findings, the less local governments or political actors are involved, the more independently the community arena can operate. This means that the outcomes of the arena (e.g. the vision, the local agenda or the experiments) are less influenced by policy agendas. This, however, can be perceived as both positive and negative. Less policy or political interference also implies more pressure on local communities to deliver results or undertake actions themselves. On the other hand, it also contributes to a stronger feeling of ownership and empowerment. But what are the consequences of a more intense and positive relationship with policy or political actors? The case of Finkenstein shows that this can lead to more support and decisiveness in the implementation phase, which relieves the community arena participants of their (time and/or financial) investments and responsibilities. All in all, the involvement of policy and political influence in a community process is a balancing act for both the local government and arena participants. The choice to go for more or less involvement depends strongly on the described context and historical relationships and projects, as well as on the motivations and aims of the participating frontrunners and community actors. In the cases at hand, the co-financing through the local government also played a role. In Finkenstein some political parties were very critical and considered it a waste of money, while others were very positive.

The latter point also needs to be taken into account when thinking about the access to resources, in terms of access to power networks. In terms of financial resources, the aspect of co-funding is interesting in both pilots. Co-funding creates opportunities for a more intense process (both in terms of commitment and interest of actors, e.g. political actors as well as of number of meetings) and for increased exposure. Through the co-funding and governance context, political actors in Finkenstein showed a high level of interest and commitment. Co-funding might increase the relevance of the process and its

outcomes, as well as its embedding in on-going processes and institutions. It can also lead others to join into the process of change and adopt (part of) the systemic perspective that the group worked on or it can provide the organising team with additional resources in organising the process. At the same time, co-financing might also introduce power imbalances or political tensions, money-oriented interests or dependencies, and influence the way others perceive the research team. It increases the need for accountability (not only to the additional funders but also to other stakeholders) and the possibility of critique as the process might be seen as the playing field of different interests.

Synthesis: Individual, community and system transformation

In this paper our aim was to explore an understanding of the transformative potential of communities and whether and to what extent it can be enhanced. In this section we synthesise the discussion and put forth some elements of the community arena process that more generically can be seen to enhance transformative potential of communities.

From applying the analytical framework to two cases, we can adapt the understanding of transformative potential of communities that we brought forth in the beginning and which was based on insights from the literature on sustainability transitions (management) and social innovation. This adaptation concerns two aspects.

1. When referring to the transformative potential of communities, we focus on the potential of communities to transform themselves and their surroundings so as to address persistent problems (i.e. societal challenges) and to contribute to a sustainability transition. From the discussion above, we are inclined to add another dimension, namely the potential of communities to create space for the transformation of its individuals, next to their potential to transform themselves and their surroundings.

2. The nine elements brought forth in the beginning for constituting transformative potential of communities from a sustainability transitions and social innovation perspective, can be merged to result into the following six elements:

    1) a shared and acted-upon perspective on the present and a desired future which integrates diversity
    2) (inclusive) networks across actor categories, domains and levels
    3) a learning environment, based upon experimentation and/or reflexivity and accompanied by empowerment
    4) needs of the community are met now and in the future,
    5) alterable social relations in an environment of participation and direct action,
    6) access to resources (e.g. money, time, power, networks, political will),

The case studies and the interventions (in form of the community arena) discussed, where based on the same sustainability transitions perspective as is the explorative understanding of transformative potential. This brings with it that the elements of transformative potential as put forth by the sustainability transitions perspective are also elements and goals of the community arena process – which asks for some more critical reflection. Using insights from social innovation literature, which has to date not been connected to sustainability transitions, shows overlap in terms of empowerment and learning but also valuable additions, such as the view on social relations and access to resources. These latter two are helpful in gaining more insights into how communities can use their potential to transform themselves and their surroundings.

This transformative potential can be enhanced through outside interventions that create an open, diverse and emancipatory space for societal learning. This space can enhance the transformative potential of communities in a number of ways:

1) provide direction (i.e. sustainability)
2) support the creation of networks for people who feel the need for change
3) emphasize learning and reflexivity (including reflections on values, beliefs and assumptions)
4) increase a feeling of impact, choice, meaningfulness and competence of individuals and groups (i.e. empowerment) in addressing local needs
5) support changes in social relations of individuals, organizations and institutions (i.e. create networks, change role activities)
6) offer access to resources through e.g. third-party funding, establishing new networks.

Overall, the transformative potential of communities in the light of societal challenges can be enhanced through empowering processes such as the community arena methodology. Change-minded people are coming together in an open and diverse setting and, by thinking about the future, they not only reflect on their own perspectives and values, but are also confronted with those of others. The process aligns perspectives, while nourishing diversity. Envisioning the future in images, texts and emotions supports this individual and group reflection and opens heads, hands and hearts. Linking this vision to the tangible present provides a space for the inner and outer contexts to interact: the process provides levers to participants for enhancing their transformative potential as a community. The extent to which such a space can be created very much depends on the local context (e.g. history with participatory processes) and the skills of the researcher and/or facilitator.

Acknowledgements

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Discussion Report

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Moderator: Katharina Umpfenbach, Ecologic

The discussion, moderated by Katharina Umpfenbach, started around the 'group think' phenomena, with participants raising the issue of how people interact with each other in groups in either scenario building or visioning exercises, the main themes of this working session. 'Group think' tends to have a negative connotation, but perhaps there's a more positive side to the coin? The main thrust of the Pesch paper is that people like to reach consensus in a group, but in some cases the goal may not be to reach consensus but rather to show that different scenarios are possible, and that there are diverging scenarios. Methods used will depend on what goal we wish to achieve, a point that we returned to later in the discussion.

The question of culture and personalities came up, or how people from different countries and contexts, and with different personalities can come together in a workshop. Culture is also significant when determining how to design a workshop, for example when working with a community that is known for being 'at risk', it would be important to not play up that factor in a future scenario – to avoid people feeling defensive or boxed into a stereotype. This should not be the starting point. But at the same time you must also take into account history, getting people to understand how they got to the present, before thinking about the future.

In visioning, different creative methods can be used, such as interviewing someone from the future, or creating a theatre play or collage. A discussion ensued over the fine line between letting people project different imagined futures, being realistic about what is possible, and limiting the ideas to those that are 'sustainable'. This leads to the question, who decides what is 'sustainable' and for whom? One way of dealing with this is to pose questions, to impart systems thinking, to raise the ecological consequences of certain decisions, asking what is the consequence of your decision? Why do you think it is important? In some cases, it's good to let things go, while in others you want people to be aware of the different connections. Again what is important is the goal you are trying to achieve. This could be a distinction between visions and scenarios: scenarios are more practical, while visions may be valuable in bringing people together from different domains. Scenarios may be for groups who have a shared function and purposes, which are more homogenous.