

How the EU can support local transition processes

Key points:

- InContext shows that to address the societal challenges Europe faces, it is worthwhile to explore new types of action-oriented research together with citizens.
- This type of research requires additional skills, different evaluation criteria, longer funding periods and long-term monitoring of results.
- Thus, to show its full potential, action-oriented research needs openness and support from both governments and research bodies.
- Traditional governance approaches based on a (more or less) linear understanding of policy-making should evolve into reflexive governance with built-in social searching processes.
- Horizon2020 provides an invaluable opportunity to bring this research forward—ideally through a research stream funded jointly by DG Research and DG Regio.

Authors:

Jill Jäger
Anneke von Raggamby



HOW CAN WE UNLEASH THE TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES? —THE INCONTEXT PROJECT

In an exemplary manner, InContext has identified framework conditions that enable societal transitions towards an environmentally sound, economically successful, and culturally diverse future. The goal was to better understand how sustainable behaviour is shaped by an interplay between external factors (e.g. social norms, policies, and infrastructure) and internal conditions (e.g. values and beliefs). Research was carried out in four case studies and three pilot projects: The case studies looked at existing cases of alternative practices in energy and food consumption. The pilot projects developed an innovative action-research method, the ‘community arena’, and applied it in three local communities. The processes aimed at empowering individuals to develop a long-term vision for a sustainable community and to take immediate action.

The three-year project was carried out by Ecologic Institute, Dutch Research Institute for Transitions (DRIFT), ICLEI- Local Governments for Sustainability, Institute for Agriculture and Forest Environment of the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAN), Sustainable Europe Research Institute (SERI), Delft University of Technology (TU-Delft), Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research (UFZ) and L’Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB).

InContext promotes a new form of open and exploratory research for addressing societal challenges together with citizens

Setting the scene

A main aim of HORIZON 2020, the EU's next framework for research, demonstration, and innovation that will begin in 2014, is to address people's concerns about their livelihoods, safety, and environment. One of the three pillars of HORIZON 2020 will focus on a number of societal challenges:

- Health, demographic change, and wellbeing;
- Food security, sustainable agriculture, marine and maritime research, and the bioeconomy;
- Secure, clean, and efficient energy;
- Smart, green, and integrated transport;
- Climate action, resource efficiency, and raw materials;
- Inclusive, innovative, and secure societies.

The InContext project has developed and implemented an approach that directly addresses people's and communities' concerns as listed above, and this approach could support finding and implementing solutions to societal challenges. The project builds on and adds to new ideas about knowledge production and the role of science, as it presumes that scientific knowledge alone is not enough to fully understand the challenges or will lead to knowledge that is supported and adopted by society. Impacting societal challenges in the InContext perspective requires engaged, open, and exploratory research processes in which scientists and practitioners co-create new insights and ideas. This policy brief outlines the main characteristics of this approach and the challenges that these pose for research funders. It discusses whether and how this kind of research can be scaled up and how EU funding mechanisms could support action-oriented, transformative research in the future.

What kind of research needs support?

In times of unpredictable and urgent economic, environmental, and societal challenges, resilience of communities is a necessary condition for long-term prosperity. By definition, this is not something that can be developed top-down or prescribed in a generic way, but needs to be developed from within and bottom-up. In other words, communities need to develop a certain level of self-organisation, empowerment, communication, and a shared perspective on their external context so as to enable them to take control over their own lives as well as to be able to adapt to unforeseen changes. From the perspective of transition studies (Rotmans et al., 2001), this implies a new attitude, behaviour, and structure to be (re)developed in each context. The InContext project therefore began with the assumption that addressing the inner context of individuals (their beliefs, needs, values, expectations, and aspirations) in structured group settings, in which collective visions, strategies, and actions are developed, could promote sustainability transitions at the local level.

The pilot projects have initiated such transition processes through the transition-arena methodology (Loorbach, 2007) and have demonstrated the following challenges for funding and organizing this kind of work:

Participatory, action-oriented research needs special skills in organizing and moderating engagement with stakeholders. These skills are needed in addition to conventional research skills and are usually not given credit in proposal evaluation, project evaluation, or in general in academia.

Local processes of engagement can foster motivation to act by addressing the concrete, local consequences of societal challenges

Transition processes are stakeholder-driven. Before the project begins, it is not possible to determine the exact outcome of the process. This is a challenge for proposal evaluation, since conventionally, the outcomes must be defined before the project begins. The nature of this kind of work requires flexibility in evaluation of proposals as well as outcomes. Ways have to be found to give credit for the achievements of transition processes in opening space for innovation through guided experimentation.

Transition processes take time. The InContext project has demonstrated that the design and implementation of transition processes requires a considerable investment of time in the setting up of the process (e.g., identifying and engaging the participants, carrying out an initial scoping exercise, planning the meetings, and selecting appropriate methods for engagement). In one pilot project area (Austria), there was a considerable initial delay because the originally proposed area was infeasible and a new pilot project area had to be found.

The impacts of transition processes are indirect. Rather than focusing on predictable project deliverables, transition processes are targeted at empowerment and sustained engagement of a community around a shared vision and agenda. In terms of goal-setting as well as evaluation of project results, the more intangible outcomes are often hard to quantify and/or measure within the time span of the project. Such effects are new initiatives undertaken by participants, policy changes, increased participation, new forms of collaboration, etc. This calls for novel ways to assess both short- and long-term effectiveness of such transition processes.

There is a need for long-term monitoring of the results. While a three-year project can initiate transition processes and achieve some very interesting insights and results, a longer-term monitoring of the results would be necessary to draw more robust conclusions about the value for transition processes to address the inner context in group settings. This monitoring is in itself challenging, because of the difficulty in establishing causal relationships for change.

Scaling up and broadening transition processes

The results of the InContext project indicate that the “transition arena” approach holds great potential for addressing societal challenges. In this project, however, the approach has been tested in only three pilot projects. Can this experience be scaled up to higher geographical levels and broadened to other issue areas?

Of course, it is tempting to think that finding and implementing solutions to societal challenges would be supported by simply multiplying the number of transition processes undertaken. There are two major arguments against this: First, at the European and global levels, there is no framework for linking together individual processes and checking if they contribute to an overall transition to sustainable development. This framework needs to encompass the three pillars of sustainable development, all relevant sectors, and view the system as a whole. Without such a framework, initiatives to improve human well-being and solve environmental problems could succeed at the local level or for one particular issue, while “exporting” problems to other places or sectors. Second, in times of austerity, it is difficult to find the necessary financial support for organizing long-term processes of engagement and transition.

Nevertheless, given the enormity of the challenges faced by society at the beginning of the 21st Century (e.g., climate change, biodiversity loss, land degradation, air and water pollution, the growing gap between rich and poor, unemployment, and

Local processes of engagement can foster motivation to act by addressing the concrete, local consequences of societal challenges

societal and environmental tipping points), there are strong arguments in favour of local processes of engagement. It is on the local level that these grand societal challenges have concrete consequences, are actually felt, and interact with local specificities.

- Local processes, if well-organized using the kind of approach adopted in the InContext project, address local concerns and foster a strong motivation to take action.
- Addressing local concerns provides strong arguments for local funding of the initiatives.
- Local processes provide a strong basis for an “open knowledge society”¹, recognizing that scientists are not the only “holders of knowledge”, and in the face of uncertainty, complexity, and the inevitable trade-offs that will have to be made, space for a facilitated societal dialogue is required.

¹ See, for example, *Responding to the Challenges of our Unstable Earth*, www.esf.org/rescue

The current EU Framework to support such initiatives

The EU usually does not have a direct say on local issues. However, EU institutions, processes, or documents often call for action at local levels in order to help implementing EU strategies. Another contact point—probably the most direct one—is the funding of research and regional development through the structural and cohesion funds. Through these initiatives, the EU sets framework conditions, shapes the spirit for EU-induced action at local levels, and, in some cases, even has direct powers to support action at local levels.

Elements of the framework are provided in the following table. The overall EU approach is not consistent and provides a mixed picture. The strategies focusing on Sustainable Development mention and/or address behavioural change, bottom-up initiatives, or the role of regional or local levels. However, the EU leaves it up to the regional or local levels to decide how or what action to take. This provides justification for regional or local levels to initiate action, but they face the problem of funding and difficulties in the acceptance of projects that are based on experimentation and for which the outcomes are difficult to predict. Apart from that, most of the EU strategies follow a governance approach that is top-down and expects local and regional levels to deliver on EU aims.

Table: Role of local governments and bottom-up strategies in central EU strategies

Policy or strategy	Focus	Role of local governments and bottom-up initiatives
EU Sustainable Development Strategy	Sustainable development	Implicitly addresses societal and individual behavioral change addressed under the themes of Sustainable Consumption and Production (SCP) and Good Governance. Importance of local and regional authorities taking ownership of the strategy is stressed, but it remains unclear how to do so in practice.
Europe 2020	Green economy	Asks local governments to define their own 2020 vision or to translate their country's National Reform Programme into locally adapted targets, supported by a handbook. Role of local governments is mainly limited to implementation, not focusing on agenda setting.
7th Environmental Action Programme	SCP	Provides a solid framework supporting the type of community processes examined within InContext and supports networking and dissemination of best practices.
SCP Action Plan	SCP	Puts a strong emphasis on changing individual behaviour, but focuses on business-side reforms such as labelling and consumer information rather than innovative consumption strategies and/or transition processes at local level.
Structural and Cohesion Funds	Funding	Funding covers a broad range from large infrastructure projects to ‘softer’ and smaller projects such as training programmes or innovative initiatives. Are a promising source of funding for the initiatives, if the qualitative focus can be further strengthened.

How could the EU level better support transition processes?

—
Top-down policies and bottom-up processes of social innovation should evolve in tandem in a reflexive governance framework

FROM A POLICY OR GOVERNANCE POINT OF VIEW:

To respond to societal challenges, new kinds of multi-level change processes are required that involve a dynamic interplay between gradually introduced, top-down changes and self-organizing, bottom-up processes of social innovation. Traditional expert-driven, top-down approaches to problem solving are not flexible enough to address complex, non-linear, and rapidly changing situations effectively. These change processes require the active involvement of agents from science, policy, civil society, and business, both in the development of new knowledge and in its application (see for example O’Riordan 2008). The processes are iterative and involve developing a joint framing of a problem, a shared vision of the future, experimenting with solutions, evaluation, and learning. Bottom-up solutions developed in this way should contribute to improving local sustainability and also reinforce the initial top-down changes and support their further extension (Weaver 2011). This is also proposed by the German Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU 2011), which points to the need to empower the state to determine priorities and underline them with clear signals, while at the same time giving citizens more extensive opportunities to have a voice, to get involved in decision making, and to take a more active role in politics. Inclusion of this type of policy-making, so-called reflexive governance (Newig and Voß 2010), in the above-mentioned strategies and initiatives at EU level would create an approach that allows for failure and is open to the non-linearity of transition experiments.

—
By providing a separate funding stream for action research, the EU could effectively support local transition processes

FROM A RESEARCH POLICY OR FUNDING POINT OF VIEW:

Overall, the InContext project underlines the need to open spaces for transformative experiments and to build supportive research environments for action-oriented projects. This could be supported at the EU-level through:

- Calls for proposals (jointly funded by DG Research and DG Regio) for the organization and implementation of transition processes addressing the societal challenges that are addressed in Horizon 2020;
- Proposal evaluation criteria that emphasize the societal relevance of such initiatives, that give credit for the extra skills required to facilitate transition processes, and that embrace the goal-searching nature of transition processes, as opposed to the goal-driven nature of conventional research;
- Provision of a platform for ongoing documentation and evaluation of the results of transition processes, with information on good practice, on methodological advances, and on the longer-term monitoring of results.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCHERS ENGAGING IN TRANSITION PROCESSES

The InContext project has designed and implemented transition processes to address the “inner context”. The experiences of the individual researchers and the teams demonstrate that several issues need attention, if this kind of work is to be supported by EU research funds in the future.

Action research as demonstrated in the InContext pilot studies goes beyond the scope of what is usually considered as science. It requires additional skills, particularly in moderation and facilitation, that are not given credit in the evaluation of proposals (Loorbach 2011). Evaluation criteria that put specific emphasis on the need for these skills, on the societal value of the process, and on the implementation orientation of the endeavour are needed. Excellence in action research is very different from excellence in conventional research.

References:

— Greenwood, D.J. & Levin, M. (2007) *Introduction to Action Research. Social Research for Social Change 2nd Edition*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

— Loorbach, D. (2007) *Transition management: new mode of governance for sustainable development*. Utrecht: International Books.

— Loorbach, D., N. Frantzeskaki and W. Thissen (2011) *A Transition Research Perspective on Governance for Sustainability*, in: C.C. Jaeger, J.D. Tàbara and J. Jaeger (eds.): *European Research on Sustainable Development: Vol.1: Transformative Science Approaches for Sustainability*, pp. 73-89.

— Newig, J.; Voß, J.-P. (2010) *Steuerung nachhaltiger Entwicklung*, in: Steurer, R.; Trattnigg, R. (eds.): *Nachhaltigkeit regieren. Eine Bilanz zu Governance-Prinzipien und -Praktiken*. Munich: oekom, pp. 239-258.

— O’Riordan, T. (2008) *Some reflections on the conditions for favouring integrated sustainability assessment*. *International Journal of Innovation and Sustainable Development*, 3: 1-2, 153-162.

— Rotmans, J., Kemp, R. and Asselt, M. (2001) *More Evolution than Revolution: Transition Management in Public Policy*, *Foresight. The Journal of Futures Studies, Strategic Thinking and Policy*, 3(1): 15-31.

— Weaver, P.M. (2011) *Pragmatism and pluralism: Creating clumsy and context-specific approaches to sustainability science*, in: C.C. Jaeger, J.D. Tàbara and J. Jaeger (eds) *European Research on Sustainable Development: Vol.1: Transformative Science Approaches for Sustainability*, pp. 173-186.

— WBGU (2011) *World In Transition. A Social Contract for Sustainability*. German Advisory Council on Global Change, Berlin.

Given the special characteristics of this kind of research compared with more conventional basic and applied research, consideration should be given to providing a separate funding stream. This would be important for those who wish to establish a career path in collaborative, action-oriented research. At the present time, the small amounts of ad hoc funding for this kind of research mean that it is difficult to build a reputation and a continuous record of success.

As noted above, the kind of work carried out in the InContext pilot projects takes time. Funding in explicit phases would support meeting the objectives of collaborative action-oriented research:

- A pre-phase to set up the team and to carry out the initial scoping;
- A main phase of visioning, backcasting, experimenting, evaluation, and learning;
- A final phase in which there is a “handing over” of the process to the community, further dissemination of the results, and a longer-term, continued monitoring and documentation of the process and results.

GLOSSARY:

Action research	“[A] way of working in the field, of utilizing multiple research techniques aimed at enhancing change and generating data for scientific knowledge production. AR rests on processes of collaborative knowledge development and action design involving local stakeholders as full partners in mutual learning processes.” (Greenwood and Levin 2007: 1)
Co-creation	Co-creation is creating collaboratively something new. Co-creation takes place in open searching participative processes.
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.
Reflexive Governance	A concept of governance that takes account of ambivalence of goals, uncertainty, and distributed power in societal change. Assuming that acting with respect to an object of steering also affects the subject and its ability to steer it aims for reflexivity regarding the limits of prognostic knowledge and actual control of complex processes of change (Newig and Voß 2010).
Transition	A transition can be defined as a gradual, continuous process of change where the structural character of a society (or a complex sub-system of society) transforms. Transitions are not uniform nor is the transition process deterministic: there are large differences in the scale of change and the period over which it occurs. Transitions involve a range of possible development paths, whose direction, scale and speed government policy can influence, but never entirely control (Rotmans et al 2001).
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.

The authors would like to thank the InContext consortium and the Advisory Board for valuable comments on earlier drafts of the brief.