EFFECTIVE LEVERAGE POINTS  
FOR THE GREAT TRANSITION

A group exercise at the Agora for the Great Transition in Paris

AIM OF THE EXERCISE

Group conversations to discuss how to identify effective leverage points for the Great Transition and which actions could be more effective than others.

OBJECTIVES

• Explore criteria for effective leverage points for the Great Transition.
• Apply these criteria to specific strategies in order to identify whether certain strategies could be more effective than others.
• Participate in Smart CSOs research on building tools that will help activists develop more systemic strategies.

SESSION OUTLINE

Participants considered eight actions and evaluated their potential for tackling effective leverage points for the Great Transition (for a description of these actions, see page 5). These actions were chosen by the organisers and discussed in a survey on leverage points prior to the event. They were selected because they are frequently mentioned in discussions about strategies for system change. A high leverage point is defined as a place in the system where a small change could lead to a large shift in behaviour.

Participants discussed whether the actions had the potential to tackle effective leverage points towards the Great Transition according to a set of criteria (see list of criteria below). The criteria are a work in progress, part of the Pathways to the Great Transition project that is currently run in collaboration with Oxford University researcher Dina Hestad. The purpose of these criteria is to help CSOs and grant-
making organisations make better strategic decisions in their pursuit of systemic change.

Participants discussed the criteria with each other: did the criteria change any of their views on any of the actions? Were there criteria missing from the list? Did any of them need clarification? Were any of them not relevant? Has this approach helped us better understand effective leverage points and the potential different actions have to address them? The participants discussed each criterion in turn and wrote down their comments.

INTRODUCTION BY RESEARCHER DINA HESTAD

All of us on this planet today are part of Generation One, according to futurist Barbara Marx Hubbard — this means we are faced with radical newness and unprecedented levels of crisis as well as opportunities. And we have no elders to ask for advice on what to do. Whilst in past generations there were some prospects of certainty, for our generation the only certainty is uncertainty.

The question is how we deal with this newness and uncertainty. Do we keep organising in ways that have contributed to the many crises we’re currently experiencing? Or do we experiment with new methods and ways of organising and test whether these could help us tackle effective leverage points and encourage conscious evolution towards a future that is characterised by stable abundance, which Brett and Heather talked about.

The Smart CSOs Lab’s Pathways to the Great Transitions project wants to practice and experiment with new strategies and approaches for systemic change to achieve the Great Transition.

There is a lack of tools that would help activists and organisations, especially smaller organisations, identify potential leverage points, develop systemic actions and monitor and evaluate their impact. Monitoring and evaluation are especially important and can be a great tool for learning through the gathering and analysis of information, and without it we are quite frankly only guessing at whether we are moving in the right direction. So, we decided to try and create a tool ourselves. And the initial results are what we are discussing in this session, trying to harness our collective intelligence to explore ways of thinking about systems change that could help us design more systemic and effective strategies.

Leverage points are places in the system where a small change could lead to a large shift in behaviour. Such leverage points can be places, actions or people, and you even find them in our myths, through stories about things like magic passwords, miracle cures or the lone hero that saves the day. In complex systems, leverage points are often counter-intuitive and hard to find, and if you do find them, it can be hard to convince people to act on them.

Donella Meadows argued that there are places in systems with higher potential for leverage than others. On the low end of the scale, you have changing numbers or markets; in the middle, you find changing the rules of the game or the goals of the system; and towards the high end, you have changing paradigms, ending with transcending paradigms themselves. When transcending paradigms, you let go of control and certainty and instead listen to the universe to find your purpose and ways of achieving it.
It’s from this frame of mind that our research has emerged, which builds on a range of theories from complexity perspectives and that are based on empirical evidence. The underlying theory of systems change is that to generate transformations towards sustainability, we need visions for the future, such as stable abundance; we need to build transformative capacities at individual, organisational and societal scales; and we need pathways of solutions and strategies. If organisations link and understand the interactions between their visions, capacities and strategies in an iterative and continual way, they have greater potential to find and experiment with different leverage points or generate prototypes for new system configurations.

We have started exploring this way of thinking with the Guerrilla Foundation, which aims to get better at funding systemic activism around Europe. Through this work we realised that if we are to understand whether actions have the potential to be systemic, we need some sort of guiding questions or criteria, as we’ve chosen to call them. But for these to make sense they need to be based on theories and empirical evidence. Therefore, we based these criteria on a set of theories and frames that can help explain some of the root causes of our societal problems and how to deal with them.

1. The first of these theories is social acceleration by the sociologist Hartmut Rosa. He argues that our current social, economic and political systems are characterised by dysfunctional stabilisation driven by growth and acceleration of technology, social change and our pace of life. He especially focusses on the concept of resonance as a way of disrupting this acceleration and slowing down.

2. The second revolves around the theory of moral foundations by psychologist Jonathan Haidt, which argues that the ways that we define and value moral foundations, such as care, fairness, authority, liberty, loyalty and purity, is currently dividing us, creating ‘echo chambers’ and resulting in identity politics, and that instead we should be more open to different moral intuitions to generate sustainable solutions for everyone.

3. The third is not so much a theory but is in my view vital, which is the concept of capacities. Capacities are especially important in complex adaptive systems as it’s not possible to predict, if, when, how or where transformations towards sustainability might occur, as they are non-linear, cumulative and complex. But it is possible to identify and appraise what capacities could help implement potentially transformative strategies. The capacities that I’ve worked with the most are reconnecting humans with our ecological life support systems, developing healthy human agency and developing strong social cohesion — which are all reflected in the criteria.

In this session, we want to explore these criteria and see whether they can help us understand whether different strategies and actions have the potential to tackle effective leverage points.

First, we are going to explore the actions in the light of these criteria and discuss whether they have high, medium or low potential to be effective leverage points. Then we will explore the criteria themselves and see if they’re helpful, what doesn’t work or what’s missing.

This session is an invitation to help co-develop this tool and the criteria into something that could be useful for promoting and furthering systemic activism. And it
is clear that we are much better off when we work together to explore and experiment with how we could go about dealing with this radical newness and uncomfortable uncertainty and consciously evolve towards the Great Transition.

**CRITERIA TO EVALUATE THE POTENTIAL OF AN ACTIVIST ACTION TO TACKLE EFFECTIVE LEVERAGE POINTS**

Does the action have the potential to...

1. work towards a vision which reflects the need to live in balance with the carrying capacity of the earth, where all life flourishes?
2. consider that change in complex systems cannot be controlled due to uncertainty?
3. avoid displacing problems to other locations or times, which could prevent wider systems change?
4. tackle the root causes of acceleration and growth — the feedback loops that cause most of today’s ecological and social crises?
5. work towards systems that avoid unchecked imbalances of power and help avoid triggering humans’ (destructive) ancient tribal circuits?

6. promote understanding that humans are part of a much larger whole, create possibilities for resonance and for creating meaningful and affective relationships between people and nature?

7. develop healthy human agency at individual and collective levels for transforming and co-creating our future?

8. communicate a compelling and inspiring story of system change that names the problems and identifies commensurate leverage points and resonates with people from all walks of life and across ideologies?

9. promote social cohesion and a sense of togetherness at different levels, which includes trust, sense of belonging and a willingness to participate and help?

10. promote critical thinking, generosity of spirit and openness to learn from diverse ideas and perspectives and understanding the underlying belief systems of other people?

EIGHT ACTIONS

Day of the Good Life (community organising) – Started in 2013 in a neighbourhood in Cologne, Germany, the Day of the Good Life is now spreading to other cities in Germany and beyond. It’s a long-term process of community organising with a yearly hook where residents come together for one day to create a future-oriented neighbourhood. It is a day of encounters and togetherness. The streets are closed for traffic which provides space for neighbours, associations, initiatives as well as artists to use the space as laboratories for ideas and joint action. They listen to music, test their plant knowledge, plant trees or discuss local development plans. As a result, people start to organise politically and get to know many of their neighbours.

Reclaim economics – Campaign for fundamental changes in the curricula of the university discipline of economics to make it a much more pluralist discipline, instead of being mainly based on classical economic thinking. “The Club of Rome’s Reclaim Economics project aims to bring together change-makers and shift the way economics is taught, practiced and understood in universities, policy-making institutions, and society. We want to encourage radically different economic ideas, and to put people and the planet back at the centre of our thinking.” Pluralist economists entering all important institutions could create the foundation of a more future-proof system.

Promote and campaign for a circular economy – Marine litter is a human created pollutant that has severe ecological impacts, as well as economic costs to marine industries and local authorities. It has no boundaries, and is not caused by one single culprit, but is a symptom of our consumer society and the production of endless goods and the inappropriate methods of disposing of them. Seas at Risk and other NGOs campaign, lobby and work with stakeholders to achieve a shift towards a closed loop production system, a circular economy. “Keeping waste in the material cycle would create 860,000 jobs and save 415 Mt of carbon emissions by 2030. It would also make the European economy more resilient to resource shortages and price increases. Ambitious EU waste policies would improve Europe’s resource efficiency and quality of life by moving towards a circular economy.”

Global citizen movement for a planetary civilisation – Reaching a flourishing future requires the revitalization of the basis of planetary civilization, a Great Transition in
culture and institutions. Paul Raskin: “The coalescence of a powerful global citizen movement would be the critical social innovation for driving a Great Transition. By forging a globalized community of fate, the Planetary Phase makes this rise historically plausible. We see precursors in the proliferating movements, organizations, and campaigns for a more just, resilient, and fulfilling world. The central challenge becomes how to embrace this diversity while bringing the nascent meta-movement fully to life institutions.”

**Campaign for unconditional basic income** – Economists, think tanks, activists and politicians have toyed with the idea of governments giving every citizen or resident a minimum income of which to live. This cash transfer could either replace or supplement existing welfare payments. Support for a basic income comes from very different political and ideological circles. It could resolve the growing problems of structural unemployment and inequality and help to make the economy more independent from economic growth and therefore more ecologically sustainable. Pilot projects and feasibility studies have been run or are under way in the Netherlands, India, Canada, Finland, France and elsewhere.

**Women’s march** – The 2018 Women’s March was a repeat protest march on the anniversary of the 2017 March. This event coordinated mass rallies, with hundreds of thousands of participants, in hundreds of cities and towns across the United States and the world. “The mission of Women’s March is to harness the political power of diverse women and their communities to create transformative social change. Women’s March is a women-led movement providing intersectional education on a diverse range of issues and creating entry points for new grassroots activists & organizers to engage in their local communities through training, outreach programs and events. The Women’s March is committed to dismantling systems of oppression through nonviolent resistance and building inclusive structures guided by self-determination, dignity and respect.”

**Municipalist movement** – The late Benjamin Barber argued that modern cities are the incubators for problem-solving while national governments are doomed to fail, locked in the old national paradigm unfit for our age of global interdependence. “In the United States, cities are on the front line of resistance to Trump, standing up for diversity, women’s and LGBTQI rights, and working to tackle climate change. Sanctuary Cities gained global admiration for recognizing the contributions and rights of undocumented residents and protecting them from deportation. [...] In Turkey and Syria, Kurdish cities are a beacon of participatory democracy, feminism and human rights in a sea of violence and discrimination. [...] Democracy was born at local level, and that’s where we can win it back.” (Fearless Cities) Can a global translocal municipal movement emerge, build global networks of solidarity and hope among city halls and citizens and spur democratic transformation across the world?

**Blockchain** – Should we all promote the blockchain as key leverage point for the Great Transition? A blockchain is a distributed database that is continuously updated and verified by its users. Each added block of data is “chained” and becomes part of a growing list of records, under the surveillance of network members. This technology enables the transfer of assets and the recording of transactions through a secure database. “Imagine a world in which carbon emissions and credits can be tracked transparently and reliably. Retailers will be able to sell a product and take into account the carbon impact it creates at the same time. Governments will be able to measure, track and trade emissions transparently. And crucially, for the first time, consumers will be able to understand the environmental impact of the products they are buying — both positive and negative — at the point of sale and mitigate this in an
instant, with millions of micro-transactions scaling up to make a huge collective impact.” (WEF)

RESULTS AND FEEDBACK FROM THE AGORA DISCUSSION

A majority of participants thought that municipalist movement and reclaim economics were the two actions with the best potential for high leverage.

Overarching feedback

• The approach and criteria were useful, especially since many are looking for measures that work, and therefore there is a need for tools that can help analyse different actions — with several saying they will use them in their work.
• The exercise and the criteria were useful to stimulate debate.
• However, there were too many criteria, many were too complex, and there was not enough time to consider them all.

Specific feedback

• Criterion no. 4 (tackling root causes) is vital and should have greater importance.
• Criterion no. 2 (on uncertainty) needs reformulation and emphasis on the processes that can help deal with uncertainty.
• Need a criterion on prototypes as well as on methods to learn and continually improve.
• Criterion no. 3 (not displacing problems) is especially important.
• There is a criterion missing on how self-catalysing an initiative is — in other words its potential to spread.
• Jargon might be problematic for many people (i.e. applicants to funding organisations), but it is useful as an internal tool, and it would be useful to continue this work within the funding community to test its applicability.
• Should have a brief explanation alongside each criterion.
• We run the risk of becoming reductionist if these criteria are treated like a checklist.