Emerging Myth Gaps for Great Transition Stories

A working document prepared for the Smart CSOs Storytelling Workshop on 29th/30th November 2012 in Cologne

What is the underlying purpose of this workshop?
In order to tackle our global ecological and social crises, we need a cultural transformation away from consumerism and nationalism and towards a culture of wellbeing with simpler living and a sense of planetary identity. One of the key aims of the Smart CSOs Lab is to learn how civil society can develop effective strategies to enable and support such a cultural transformation for the Great Transition (a new narrative).

What is most characteristic about the vision and the process of the Great Transition?

**Tackling multiple dimensions through a systemic approach:** The Great Transition is a vision created by the Global Scenario Group of how humanity could create a civilization that reflects egalitarian social and ecological values, affirms diversity, and defeats poverty, war, and environmental destruction. The elements of the Great Transition vision are increased human interconnectedness, improved quality of life, and a healthy planet.

**Cultural transformation:** The Great Transition will require a cultural transformation away from today’s consumerism and nationalism and towards a culture of wellbeing with simpler living and a sense of planetary identity. This can only happen through a societal project; pure technocratic top down approaches won’t succeed.

**Overcoming the market paradigm:** The Great Transition clearly distances itself from the idea that our current global crises can be solved within the rationale of today’s dominant economic and political institutions. It calls for fundamentally reinventing and redefining what we call progress and how to achieve it. The market rationale and its competitive pressure for economic growth have now invaded most of our spheres of life and have contributed to the current spiritual, ecological and social crisis that cannot be fixed through technical fixes, but require a much more fundamental approach. In the Great Transition markets and the rationale of the ‘homo economicus’ play a far less dominant role than today.

**Not just localism:** The Great Transition clearly acknowledges and demands the development of more localised economic structures that would bring about positive effects on all three types of crises (ecological, social, spiritual), but it also concludes that the sole bottom up approach of developing new economic models in niches, mostly at the local level in itself won’t bring the necessary change. Humanity is too interdependent to be able to solve its problems just through localism and community action. We need a planetary governance system that allows us to tackle our global problems and to manage our global commons together as a planetary community.
The global citizen movement: The Great Transition requires a global citizen movement, overcoming the current fragmentation of movements and rising to the status of a new driving force of fundamental system change and planetary solidarity.

Experiments at all levels: Nobody knows all the answers for how we can create the new economy and how it will look like. The Great Transition requires a learning approach with experiments at all levels, it requires asking new questions instead of providing old answers.

What role does the Smart CSOs Lab aim to play in this process?

The Smart CSOs Lab wants to inspire and empower change agents in civil society who want to play a stronger role in supporting the Great Transition. The framework, approaches and ideas we have developed so far and we still aim to develop should help change agents create more effective strategies for systemic change.

The key conclusion from our analysis is that civil society is currently not focussing sufficiently on a deeper systemic change and that it has not yet developed sufficient capacity to be able to work effectively towards such a vision. The Smart CSOs Lab provides a space for multi disciplinary learning where change agents but also academics and researchers (etc.) come together to learn and test new approaches for Great Transition strategies.

In an initial research dialogue that happened in 2010 we developed a framework for change and five leverage points for people and organisations that want to develop effective strategies for a Great Transition. The resulting Smart CSOs report is the basis for your work. It was and is still seen as very helpful. It makes sense to many people. But it is also seen as quite complex and not necessarily accessible to everyone immediately.

In summary the recommendations for civil society are:

• Embrace the complex challenges in a less linear and more systemic way – here systems thinking can be a very useful discipline to apply.

• Focus on much more on the opportunities and need for a cultural transformation (values, worldviews, mental frames) instead of just focussing on policy and technical ways of trying to win the argument.

• Understand that a deeper transformation of the economic system is needed and that the models of the new economy require protected niches of innovation. Civil society should learn how to support these innovations and radical change agents to eventually institutionalise them.

• Overcome the fragmentation of civil society movements. Become united in diversity under a common vision of the Great Transition that would help to address all these different single-issue causes in a more fundamental way.

• Engage funders in the rationale for a Great Transition and new ways of working towards that vision.

The lab wants to help change agents on three levels:

• Personal: Providing learning programmes that support and empower change agents (help them on their personal journey)

• Organisational: By supporting change agents in their organisational change efforts

• Societal: By developing and testing ideas for more effective strategies for social and political change
Which audiences are we targeting? Where might we find our hero(s)?

It is suggested that we focus on two different levels for this storytelling project/workshop:

- **Our civil society change agent** – our hero would be the activist seriously engaged in finding ways to solve global issues like climate change, poverty, human rights etc. and who realises or is starting to realise that the ways his organisation (or civil society sector) is trying to fix these problems don’t seem to work anymore. She realises that while we have won many battles we are losing the planet. She has the energy to do something about it (she wants to try new ways) but lacks the resources and the support.

- **The disoriented citizen** – our hero would be someone not seriously engaged in civil society but who senses that there are some serious gaps emerging in the world she has believed in until not so long ago. The old story was of an economy that despite its usual cycles is ultimately on an eternal path of progress and growth. The ever-globalising economy, the technical progress and its wealth creation process – so the old story went – would ultimately benefit everyone. And while environmental problems were clearly acknowledged, there was an assumption that we would – if really needed – develop the technologies to solve them. The global economic crisis where a small global class (investment bankers, investors etc.) seems to become ever richer and millions of people in the middle class are seriously damaged, has contributed to a loss of belief in the system. But our hero is sensing that this is a crisis that goes beyond the current situation. She feels that a world where the primary goal is to create economic growth is creating too many victims. Competition in the marketplace and an ever-accelerating economy is putting increased pressure on workers. She is muddling through a world where nobody seems to have time anymore; social relations are suffering.

Which is the geographical scope?

It is suggested that while keeping a global perspective, we put the primary focus on Europe. This is where most of the organisations currently engaged in Smart CSOs are primarily operating (or at least have their home base in the case of organisations in the field of development cooperation). Europe is also the context where (to different degrees in different countries) the ideas for a new economy and Great Transition seem to be falling on more fertile ground than in other parts of the world.

However, we should evaluate and line out where we believe that the myth gaps and the resulting story strategies have a more global validity – the more we identify myth gaps that are emerging in different parts of the world, the wider impact the story strategies could have.

Within Europe there are some clear differences with regard to culture and the current economic and political situation. We will look at some of these different contexts, e.g. the Southern European countries most hit by the economic crisis as well as the Central and Northern European countries that are less affected.
1. The broken world (myth gaps) of our disoriented citizen:

**Myth Gap: The failing story of economic growth**

**What is the “myth” that is no longer working?**

Our economy, despite its usual cycles, is on an eternal path of progress and growth. The ever-globalising economy, the technical progress and its wealth creation process will ultimately benefit everyone.

**How did it once offer explanation, meaning and ritual?**

This myth went a long way to explaining the morality of an unequal society. As long as there was continued growth, everyone could look forward to a better future even if some controlled so much more than others. We all worked within the system believing there would be increasing amounts to go around if we continued to apply our best efforts. As long as ecological damage coming from our growing economic activities could be dealt with through technological fixes and local regulation, the existing planetary boundaries were not visible.

**What factors have caused this myth to lose resonance?**

- The current global economic crisis where a small global class (investment bankers, investors etc.) seems to become ever richer and millions of people in the middle class are damaged, has contributed to a loss of belief and trust in the political, financial and economic system.
- There is a growing sense that this crisis won’t go away like previous ones. Research suggests that living standards of the bottom half might be in steady decline over the coming decade in a number of European countries. Whereas previous generations assumed their children would be better off than they were, the reverse is starting to become the case. The growth-dependent system as such is at stake (e.g. approx. 80% of Germans and Austrians wish to have a different economic system according to a recent survey by the Bertelsmann Foundation).
- There is a growing group of people in developed countries who question the treadmill of working harder and more to be able to consume more. They search for a more profound and meaningful way of life beyond consumption (an interesting example of this is the majority vote by Munich’s citizens against the expansion of Munich airport, thereby accepting limits to more air travel).
- Infinite growth cannot happen in a finite planet. There is a growing sense and understanding that the limited resources of the planet soon will have to be shared by 9 billion people and that the material throughput of our current consumer class will have to be drastically reduced. It is increasingly perceived that such a scenario is not compatible with systems that are dependent on economic growth.

**What story and ritual has begun to replace it?**

**Story:** We can build an economic system that provides sufficient material wellbeing to be equitably shared by 9 billion people while leaving sufficient resources for future generations. A happier and better society will emerge from a refocus from material and economic wealth to spiritual and social wealth.

**Ritual:**

- Downshifting – people working less and adapting to simpler life style
- De-growth movement – practicing and promoting a whole range of alternative economic models outside the growth economy and shifting to simpler living – a section of these (the vanishing middle class, especially in countries like Spain and Greece) is forced into reduced living standards and to step out of the consumer economy.
- Transition town movement – shifting towards more local and less energy intensive economic practices outside the mainstream economy (e.g. local agriculture networks)
- Sharing economy – (or collaborative consumption or peer to peer marketplace) has been clearly on the rise in the last two years especially facilitated by the internet. It’s principle is to make better use of existing assets and share living space (Airbnb) or cars (car sharing) or household stuff (ecomodo.com).
Myth Gap: The failing story of the ‘invisible hand’

What is the “myth” that is no longer working?

“It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own self-interest…” (Adam Smith, Wealth of the Nations)

Humans are genetically prepared to create the maximum wealth if we are allowed to operate under conditions of competition. The ‘invisible hand’ of the market makes it possible that the focus on self-interest creates wider societal wellbeing and spreads wealth across societies. Individual rights and freedom are essential goods to make the market work and they require maximum protection (by the state).

How did it once offer explanation, meaning and ritual?

Developed at a time when mostly direct personal relationships characterised the market, this story explained how markets could indeed serve the greater good of societal wellbeing and equitable material wealth (in his theory this was a result of self-interest playing together with the other important human condition of ‘sympathy’ as he explained in Smith’s second famous work ‘The Theory of Moral Sentiments’).

This story continued to hold resonance over the last 200 years as the market expanded fuelled by unprecedented technological development and economic wealth.

In a time where resources were abundant and the planet much less crowded (1 billion in 1800), the protection and promotion of individual rights and freedom helped release large portions of the world population from oppression.

What factors have caused this myth to lose resonance?

• After a few decades of neoliberal economic politics, markets have now invaded almost every sphere of people’s lives (from market economy to market society) and more and more people have begun to ask themselves where we should put limits on the influence of markets (see e.g. Michael Sandel: What money can’t buy)

• The excessive protection of private property rights has created uncontrollable global corporations and financial markets that evade any accountability and fiscal obligations. This phenomenon is being perceived increasingly as undemocratic and a creator of social injustice.

• Inequality is a global phenomenon and poverty is now increasingly affecting developed countries e.g. southern European countries – the belief in the invisible hand is vanishing.

• The very nature of markets is increasingly understood as a driver of the externalisation of social and environmental costs. Under the laws of competition, it is extremely difficult or impossible to control and avoid extremely dangerous externalisations.

• Much of what is interpreted as being essential to individual freedom is in clear conflict with an interpretation of human rights under the new reality of ecological limits. Individual freedom (including the right to consume, to travel, drive big cars etc.) is in reality reducing the freedom of other parts of society and future generations.

• Nobel Prize winner Elinor Ostrom’s empirical research has demonstrated that human cooperation; collective action and resource management outside market and state are successful alternatives.

What story and ritual has begun to replace it?

Story: Cooperation and collaboration are as natural to humans as competition. In an economy that focuses much more on humans’ predisposition and will to collaborate, humans and the planet will thrive. A redefined concept of ‘freedom’ is the right of all humans and future generations to equitably share the resources of our planet.

Ritual: New collaborative models working outside of conventional markets are emerging everywhere, but especially through the internet (Wikipedia its most prominent example). It includes e.g. crowd sourcing, crowd surfing and, importantly, the creative commons as a way to share knowledge and art as widely as possible and avoid the enclosure of the (creative) commons. The growing Commons movement promotes the idea of the commons as a structural principle for an economy beyond market and state.
**Myth Gap: The failing story of the nation state identity**

**What is the “myth” that is no longer working?**
Our identity as citizens starts at the level of the nation. Only after we consider national self-interest we should look to the wider interest of humanity and the planet.

**How did it once offer explanation, meaning and ritual?**
When most social problems could be dealt with on a national level, the nation state was a good level of governance and national pride was useful in creating cohesion in societies. Thus, it made sense for citizens to see themselves involved in building a nation rather than building something more global.

**What factors have caused this myth to lose resonance?**
The internet is connecting our global community at an unprecedented level. While the economic crisis is leading to an escape into nationalistic patterns as well as to a renewed desire for local belonging on the one hand, there are signs on the other hand of an emerging sense of planetary empathy that makes the story of nation state identity outdated and even counterproductive.

Our world is more interconnected that ever. Corporations don’t know about national borders – the economy and financial systems has globalised to unprecedented levels while no effective governance systems have been created to deal with its crises and externalities. Ecological issues and fair distribution of the world’s resources cannot be dealt with at the national level. National self-interest is blocking the creation of governance models that might solve these problems.

**What story and ritual has begun to replace it?**

**Story:** All that we share: Together as humanity and planetary citizens we have to take care of the earth’s resources and distribute them fairly, leaving a rich planet for future generations. We will create a rich and thriving global community if we share our abundant and our scarce commons.

It enriches our life if we hold multiple levels of identity (local, regional and planetary).

**Ritual:**
- The Commons movement is living the new story in practice.
- Global empathic reactions in catastrophic situations like the Haiti earthquake in 2010 show that our sense of connectness with people across the world is higher then ever.
- Internet campaigns that have gone viral globally like the ‘Kony 2012’ internet video (seen more than 100 million times) demonstrate a global interest in the fate of communities far removed from our own national interest.
2. The broken world (myth gaps) of our civil society change agent:

Myth Gap: The failing story of incremental change

What is the “myth” that is no longer working?

If we work hard and offer an alternative to the current policy on the national/international level, we will have huge impact on millions of people and possible the whole planet. And by winning many battles, in the long run we will win the planet (solve the ecological crises).

How did it once offer explanation, meaning and ritual?

Explanation: The environmental movement has had many successes in mitigating pollution through local and national legislation and through technical end-of-pipe solutions. Similarly development cooperation has played a role in the economic development of many developing countries and which brought millions of people into the global consumer class. Market mechanisms like labels have had a certain success in mainstreaming environmental and social criteria: MSC, FSC, fairtrade etc. All of this has provided deep meaning and validation to activists who have won these battles.

By focussing on feasible, concrete and measurable policy objectives and providing knowledge and expertise, CSOs/NGOs became respected stakeholders for policy makers and businesses.

Ritual: Campaigns have to show clear measurable results. Campaigners have a high sense for opportunities and changes that are winnable.

What factors have caused this myth to lose resonance?

• The failures of Copenhagen and Rio: Both summits were built on the hope that today’s dominant institutions were capable of tackling the increasing multiple global crises through a steady reform agenda from within as long as civil society would only push the rational arguments hard enough. But there is now a growing realisation that the current dominant institutions cannot offer the solutions because they are themselves part of the problem and won’t be capable to reform from inside.

• More and more people in civil society realise that they themselves are part of the problem by focussing too much on the symptoms rather than on root causes as well as on single issues rather than comprehensive solutions to tackle deeply systemic problems. At Copenhagen and at Rio it was obvious that different civil society sectors were promoting conflicting solutions.

• There is a growing sense that CSOs are losing the public’s trust by being perceived as being too tactical and focussed on their organisation’s self-interest (money, jobs etc.) rather than on the greater good they are supposedly pursuing.

• The emerging network society is showing and demanding completely new patterns of citizen participation in societal and political change agendas (Arab Spring, Occupy, spontaneous twitter campaigns etc.). Old style campaigns from the broadcast era are losing their touch, such are first generation internet campaigns (clicktivism).

What story and ritual has begun to replace it?

Story: If civil society concentrates on and lives the values it wants to see in the world, it can be an example for and a leading actor in a cultural transformation towards planetary solidarity, cooperation and simpler living. If civil society across its sectors learns how to unite forces for a deeper transformation of the current political and economic institutions, it can tackle much more effectively the multiple urgent crises it is facing.

Ritual: New types of system change innovation networks and communities are emerging everywhere. Examples are The Finance Lab (thefinancelab.org), co*lab (colab.info) and the Global Ecovillage Network. They are based on the assumption that complex systemic problems require niches of radical innovation where change agents come together to learn and experiment with the models for the new economy. They are building on the power of collaboration, trust and shared intelligence. They are themselves already embodying the seeds of the new system.
Myth Gap: The failing story of development

What is the “myth” that is no longer working?
Driven by our deeper motivation of global justice, we want to help the global south create similar models of society, economy and wealth to those we have in the north. We want to use as many resources as possible from the north (money, knowledge and expertise) to support the south in their development efforts.

How did it once offer explanation, meaning and ritual?
Explanation: We know what is good for the south and we are able to help to bring them on a path of economic development.
Ritual: We receive large amounts of money from donors to administer them according to strict criteria of cost effectiveness and efficiency. We show the measurable impact on the ground like e.g. reduced poverty rates, water access etc.

What factors have caused this myth to lose resonance?
• The north - south divide is not valid anymore because a global consumer class has emerged and is creating similar patterns of environmental pressure everywhere in the world.
• There is a growing realisation that ecological limits will make it impossible to reach the level of consumption of the current global consumer for 8-9 billion people.
• While poverty has been falling globally and child survival rates are rising, inequality and social failure rates are rising in many countries as well (including the global north).
• While there are many small interesting experiments to create thriving sustainable and resilient communities, none of them is changing the overall tendency of an increased concentration of power and wealth in the hands of a few.
• There is a growing sense that many of the current market-based solutions and technological fixes promoted by developmental organisations are not improving the situation but are actually part of the problem as they perpetuate an unsustainable and unequal system.
• Developmental NGOs are increasingly under financial pressure in many European countries as public budgets in the sector are being cut severely. These NGOs therefore see an urgent need to reconsider their role and purpose.

What story and ritual has begun to replace it?
Story: While historic inequalities and injustices require more economic transfers from rich countries to poorer countries and the support in using the resources in a meaningful way, the main focus in our fight for global justice and sustainability is to collaborate with change agents across the planet to create the foundations and the cultural shift that brings us on a path towards a new economy based on the commons as a structural principle.
Ritual: Forward-looking development agencies are replacing a “north knows best” approach with deeper collaborations with partners from the South. New models are emerging to develop locally appropriate solutions that highlight strengths of local cultures rather than apply northern models to them.
**Myth Gap: The failing story of efficiency & technology**

**What is the “myth” that is no longer working?**

We have to convince governments, businesses and consumers to embark on a journey of technological revolution (renewable energy, efficient buildings, efficient vehicles, efficient products) to solve our environmental problems. This will bring about solutions we need without requiring us to change our way of life.

**How did it once offer explanation, meaning and ritual?**

Explanation: We built a joint sense of purpose in bringing about technological progress and the sci-fi vision of a world dominated by human made technology. The optimism of engineers made us believe that if we can create nuclear energy and travel to the moon, we will be able to solve climate change through technology.

Ritual: We worked hard to create scenarios and reports for how the world could eventually function without emitting any CO2 emissions only by pursuing the right technology deployment and investments. We endorsed the Stern Report in 2006 and promoted the idea that the economic cost of investing in the right technologies would only be 2% of GDP per year whereas the cost of inaction would be so much higher.

**What factors have caused this myth to lose resonance?**

- Governments, businesses and consumers are still not taking commensurate action on climate change. They even seem to have lost momentum and given more priority to creating growth and jobs.
- Research is increasingly showing that the deployment of more efficient technologies does not always lead to the desired reduction of energy use but sometimes can even increase the total energy use (Jevons paradox or more generally called the rebound effect). The famous Wuppertal Institute built its reputation on the promotion of a factor-4 or factor-10 energy and resource revolution but is now admitting that it was wrong to promote this idea without taking into account sufficiently the rebound effect.
- We are increasingly realising that economic growth is consistently outweighing the positive effects of more efficient technologies and production.
- The reality of planetary boundaries seems to be so much more complex and more difficult to deal with than we had previously thought in our days of technology optimism.
- As Tim Jackson wrote: “The profit motive stimulates a continual search for newer, better or cheaper products and services. Our own relentless search for novelty and social status locks us into an iron cage of consumerism. Affluence has itself betrayed us.” Technology alone will not be able to deal with these deeper destructive drivers.
- The Environmental movement is starting to realise that is has always tried to bring other civil society sectors into their own cause. This has not been an effective strategy as it didn’t lead to strategies that would make sufficient justice to the concerns of other movements like human rights etc.

**What story and ritual has begun to replace it?**

**Story:** While we still need to pursue the opportunities of more efficient and environmentally friendly technologies, we need to focus much more on the root causes of environmental destruction and support a cultural and economic transformation away from today’s consumerism and narrow-minded national economic interest.

**Ritual:** Some organisations and networks like new economic foundation, Smart CSOs Lab, Common Cause, the Commons movement etc. are working with others in civil society towards such a deeper transition beyond the technical fix.