Theories of change and the vision of the Great Transition

Results and conclusions from an initial exploration at and around the Smart CSOs Workshop in October 2016
At the Smart CSOs Lab we have been discussing theories of change since we started our dialogue about more effective civil society strategies towards a Great Transition six years ago.

Here is a definition of theory of change that seems useful for our context: “Theories of change are the ideas and hypotheses (theories) people and organisations have about how change happens.”

These theories are based on assumptions about reality, about what is at stake and how change can be brought about. They may be conscious or unconscious, implicit or (made) explicit, personal or scientifically studied.

Right from the beginning of our journey, we tried connecting the latest insights from social sciences about how change happens to create the most comprehensive framework that we could imagine. We call this framework the Smart CSOs Model.

The model includes a normative vision that is based on the assumption that we need a deep systemic change of the global economic and political system if we want to avoid the collapse of the ecological foundations of life on earth and enable a peaceful coexistence of humans on the planet. Back then we did not specify the details of such vision. We believe that no one person or group has the blueprint for our future. As Michael Edwards said recently: “We all have different interests, and different views about the good society, the provision of public goods, and the ethical issues involved in decisions about technology. These views and interests have to be aired, debated and negotiated through democratic politics, which – at least in theory – both produces friction and reconciles the results so that no-one’s voice is excluded and meaningful consensus can be built.”

Nevertheless, we did agree that there are certain pillars that are sufficiently scientifically robust to guide us on our journey of the Great Transition, including:

- consumerist culture must be replaced by a culture of sufficiency;
- we need a post-growth economic system;
- we need to rethink the role of the market – it has to serve society and not the reverse.

We gathered insights from cognitive sciences and linguistics that helped us understand how CSOs can have a positive influence on cultural change. Research from political sciences about the lock-ins and path dependencies at the institutional level confirmed our own doubts about the efficacy of attempting to achieve transformation via lobbying governments or collaborating with big business. In addition, transition studies showed us how radical innovations emerge and can be institutionalised.

Since we started the Smart CSOs Lab, this flexible framework for a new vision based on solidarity, sufficiency and wellbeing, as well as a new way to think about change happening at different levels, has helped a broad range of diverse activists to reflect on their organisational strategies and to unpack their own assumptions about change.

As a result of this in-depth dialogue and research, the Smart CSOs Community has developed a level of common understanding about pillars for change that is rather rare in other spaces and discussions of civil society and activists. Few people in the Smart CSOs Lab would question that we need to move towards a post-growth society, or that cultural change is an essential element of the Great Transition, or that traditional ways of policy advocacy are insufficient to tackle systemic problems.

2 | For a discussion in relation to sustainable food initiatives, see: https://tinyurl.com/lv6gkyg.
3 | See for example http://www.theoryofchange.org.
4 | Who wants to live in a frictionless world?, Michael Edwards, openDemocracy Transformation, January 30th, 2017
5 | For more details on the Smart CSOs Model for system change see: Re.imagining Activism – a practical guide for the Great Transition, pp 33-37
This level of cohesion has helped us to have fruitful and constructive discussions at our workshops. However, when we listen carefully to each other, we should be able to notice that there are nevertheless significant differences in the theories of change and visions that we hold. Often these are hidden behind an apparent consensus and common use of language, such as when we all use the term system change while often meaning different things. For example some refer to a normative vision that substitutes capitalism, while others refer to the process of collaboratively exploring change in any given system in a holistic way.

With this project we want to provide impulses to this discussion and critically reflect upon this landscape of discourses and theories of change. Part of this project is a research dialogue – we are going to engage researchers and practitioners on two guiding questions:

1) The vision question (what): What are the key elements of the emerging new/next system that we are confident about? Where do we need more debate or experimentation?

2) The strategies question (how): Can we identify a number of promising pathways for activists and funders towards the Great Transition?

An initial exploration at our annual workshop in Barcelona

At our last annual workshop in Barcelona in October 2016 we wanted to kick-start this dialogue. As usual we had a mix of participants who have been involved for a longer time in the Lab (19), and others who were new (10). Most participants were working in NGOs (social justice, environment etc.) or in academia / research organisations.

Via a pre-workshop survey and a number of participatory exercises at the event (the Annex provides a summary of the most interesting results of the survey and the exercises) we created an initial picture about what was important to participants about their visions of a sustainable and just future, and about how they imagined a transition to such a future could happen. We suspected that in this group there would be common patterns, but also important differences with regard to visions and theories of change. We wanted to make these differences visible and have people enter into a dialogue about them, as well as to start unpicking the assumptions that lie underneath both visions and theories of change. We don’t think that we achieved all of these ambitious goals, but nevertheless it was a promising start. We were able to identify a number of strong views, common patterns and differences that we would like to look into in more depth during the course of the research dialogue. What follows is a brief summary of the most important trends we have identified.

»We need to identify the subtle differences between our visions and theories of change and uncover the assumptions behind these.«
**CSOs should work at the level of culture – the question is how** – Among participants there was widespread belief that CSOs should work to influence culture, addressing the *rules* or *institutions* that capitalist, consumerist societies are based on, by communicating different values, changing mindsets, creating new narratives, and telling new stories – even at the level of worldviews. The importance given to this level of change contrasts with the acknowledgement that most CSOs still find it hard to identify ways to do this and lack the capacity for this work. Questions for us to focus on are: how to develop capacity on cognitive linguistics in organisations? How to be or create positive examples? How to change the norm(al)?

**The transition won’t be smooth – anger is high** – The survey showed that the vast majority of participants don’t believe that the transition will be peaceful. It was remarkable that almost nobody thought that civil society could still be a driver for a transition without violence. This coincides with responses to another question, where we saw that a majority of participants feel angry about the systemic crises. Some feel specifically motivated by anger. This raises the questions: Are fear and pessimism useful conditions to work on systemic change? Or do we need a higher dose of optimism to become successful leaders in the Great Transition and to inspire others to become part of the movement?

**Shaking up the system** – Our workshop happened before the US elections, before Trump was elected president. We knew that many (especially young) supporters in the Bernie Sanders movement felt that Clinton was not a better alternative than Trump – we now know that many of them didn’t vote for her. We asked our participants if they thought that it would be a good idea that Trump became president as a strategy to shake up the system and start the revolution. The group was split in two: approximately half the group tended towards this position; half tended towards the other way. One participant said, “Activism and public engagement and alternative economics develop during crises.” Back then, few thought that Trump would win, but now we might have the chance to observe if this theory of change is right, or if instead the suffering for many increases for a long, dark period of time. Should we drive the current system towards collapse by supporting right-wing authoritarian regimes, all the while worsening the situation for vulnerable groups? Or should we support the *lesser of two evils*? How can we know that a better world emerges from the ashes of nationalistic, authoritarian regimes?

**Patriarchy as the most important root cause of our systemic crises?** – One question that has come up strongly more recently in the Lab is the question as to whether patriarchy is ultimately the most important root cause lying underneath climate change, inequality etc., the rationale being that male dominance was responsible for creating the power structures of a system based on competition, violence, domination, colonialism and oppression, whereas a feminisation of politics and the economy would be a core leverage point to resolve the crises. At our workshop a majority of participants were inclined towards patriarchy as a more important root cause than capitalism. (We asked this question to provoke discussion and reflection about root causes; not to make people position themselves on one side.) One definition of a root cause is: “It’s clearly a major cause of the symptoms, it has no worthwhile deeper cause and it can be resolved.” Most of us would agree that, if we understand the feminisation of politics and the economic system as a change towards the values of inclusiveness, collaboration and the common good, it would be a key element of the Great Transition. Maybe rather than discussing if the root cause is the economic system or patriarchy we should ask ourselves: Would it make any difference to our work? Or, to return to a key element in the definition of a root cause, can it be resolved?

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4 Adapted from thwink.org: http://www.thwink.org/sustain/glossary/RootCause.htm
Power of the few as the most important political challenge we are facing? – We asked participants what aspect of the current political system poses the most important challenge to systemic change. More than half of the responses stated that the biggest problem was power (and preservation of power) in the hands of a tiny political and wealthy elite. This view was not uncontested, however. Some participants felt that the lack of effective global governance is the biggest challenge. Indeed, the case has been made that under the current regime of globalisation, the core challenge is rather the powerlessness of national governments and indeed of the democratic system. The Korean-German philosopher Byung-Chul Han adds another perspective that might conflict with the conventional power narrative and might hold true especially for middle-class citizenry: “The system-preserving power [of the neoliberal system] no longer works through repression, but through seduction – that is, it leads us astray. It is no longer visible, as was the case under the regime of discipline. Now, there is no longer a concrete opponent, no enemy suppressing freedom that one might resist... The subjugated subject does not even recognize that it has been subjugated. The subject thinks she is free. This mode of domination neutralizes resistance quite effectively.” This is the beginning of a deeper dig into the concept of power, what types of power are important, who has the power in the current system and what all this means for our theories of change and strategies for the Great Transition.

The vision (and dream?) of local sovereignty – We asked participants what they felt the role of current national and supra-national institutions would be in their vision of the Great Transition. This was a contested question. More than a third of participants responded that national and international institutions should either disappear or lose importance in favour of local institutions. One participant said: “The nation state is now the problem. Change will come from cities and regions and they will destroy the state.” However, another mentioned: “This version of localisation seen now is dangerous. (We) need good glocal leadership to coordinate localism.” There is a widespread vision of localism in social movements e.g. the degrowth movement. The question is: how desirable and realistic are visions where we mostly ignore governance systems on levels higher than regional and local ones? Is the concept of sovereignty a useful one in times of climate change and high integration of the global economy?

We will continue to investigate these questions in greater depth and detail in the coming phase of our Pathways to the Great Transition project.

7 | Why revolution is no longer possible, Byung-Chul Han, openDemocracy, October 23rd, 2015
Annex – summary survey results and workshop harvest

We collected responses from 27 responses to a survey sent to participants of the Smart CSOs Lab’s October 2016 workshop, *Pathways to the Great Transition*, and harvested further data at the workshop itself. This Annex summarises key highlights from both the survey and workshop harvest.

Influencing culture, values, and worldviews is a key leverage point for CSOs

Nine of the 27 survey respondents stated that the most important leverage point for a CSO to work on to catalyse systemic change was to *Design and create a new system*; seven respondents answered *Changing narratives*, and three answered *Working together*.

Ten of the 27 survey respondents stated that the most important thing their organisation could do to influence culture, values, and worldviews was to *Communicate vision and foster debate*; four responded that they should *Become an example to follow*.

When asked what is the biggest challenge their organisations face with regard to changing culture, many pointed towards the lack of clear strategy or capacity to be able to do this effectively. One respondent said: “The lack of knowledge on cognitive / behavioural psychology – this is an area we feel that most NGOs have invested very little in.” Another one answered: “The challenge is that our own people have not yet moved beyond framing on a self-interest basis.”

Will the transition be smooth?

When we asked this question in the pre-workshop survey, we provided five options as a response. Three options began *Yes, because...*; two began *No, because...* Of the 27 respondents, only one referred to an answer beginning with *Yes...*, and this response also included reference to two of the *No...* responses. The most common response (1/3 of participants gave this answer) was “No, because a smooth transition will take more time than is left and climate change, resource scarcity, inequality, and mass migrations will result in vi-
olent turmoil”. Only three respondents were positive / hopeful for a smooth transition, and this was always a mild positivity / hopefulness. Others (4/27) were unsure, and two believed the transition was already neither peaceful nor smooth. Four thought that “nationalist sentiment, egoism and xenophobia will prevent the kind of collaboration needed for a smooth transition.”

These results from the survey show some similarity with the results from a question we asked during the sociometry exercise at the workshop. We asked how participants were personally feeling about the systemic crises we are facing. Participants mainly felt angry and afraid in relation to the systemic crises faced, as opposed to happy or sad. Two participants highlighted that anger was a motivation to act, or that it provided them with energy to work on the issues.

8 Sociometry is a facilitation method where participants are asked to position themselves in a space according to their opinion with regard to a statement or question offered by the facilitator. http://competendo.net/en/Sociometry
Voting Trump to shake up the system?

The group was asked with which of the following two statements they agreed more:

- I think that during the US primaries Bernie Sanders supporters have strengthened the narrative that Hillary Clinton is unelectable because she is a key representative of the neoliberal establishment. Many young Sanders supporters will not vote for her. As a result there is (still) a risk that Trump will be elected and the world will be a worse place to live in for a long time.
- I think that Sanders supporters were right to fight Clinton that harshly. She is so deeply stuck in the neoliberal system that her presidency would perpetuate inequalities. A Trump presidency is a grim alternative, but as Clinton is not much better, we might as well get Trump and start the revolution.

Respondents were divided. Four people stood at each extreme point. Six people stood exactly at the mid-point. The distribution in general was skewed towards the second viewpoint. Those who worried about Sanders’ movement increasing the risk of Trump being elected pointed to the idea of minimising damage on the way to the Great Transition, and that it was a privileged view to take that it wouldn’t matter who won.

With Which of the Two Statements Do You Identify More?

Bernie Sanders supporters have contributed to the risk that Trump will be elected.

Clinton is not a better alternative, we might as well get Trump and start the revolution.
Is patriarchy or capitalism the most important root cause?

The overwhelming majority of participants were positioned closer to *Patriarchy* than *Capitalism* when asked which was the more important root cause (of the systemic crises faced). That said, there was a sizeable group at the midpoint between the two options; when asked, participants at this location seemed to be doubting between the two, rather than saying they were equally important. For example, one participant clearly stated “We cannot know”; another asked “Did patriarchy lead to capitalism?”, and a third mentioned that it was “a question of nature.”

The group was asked with which of the following two statements they agreed more:

**Patriarchy** – Men created the capitalist system. Women would have done a different job had they been in charge.

**Capitalism** – The problem goes beyond the question of who was in charge of creating the system. A matriarchy might have created a system with similar problems.
Power in the hand of narrow elites as the biggest challenge to systemic change

Thirteen of the 27 respondents to the survey stated that the biggest challenge to systemic change within the current political system was *Power in the hands of narrow elites*. The remaining 14 responses were evenly distributed across six other responses, including *The economic growth narrative, Patriarchy, Rigidity, and Short-termism*.

To some extent, this aligns with the results from the sociometry exercise from the workshop, where participants were asked to position themselves according to which of the following they felt to be the biggest challenge we are facing:

- The power of corporate multi-nationals
- The systemic focus on growth
- The short-termist thinking and elitist decision-making of policy-makers
- People being accustomed to consumerist culture
Eight of the 27 participants positioned themselves to state that *The power of corporate multi-nationals* was – to a greater or lesser extent – the biggest challenge faced. Seven thought *Short-termist* thinking was the biggest challenge, although only one person positioned themselves as clearly stating this as the sole issue – all others combined this response with *Consumerist culture*. Four participants believed that *Consumerist culture* was the biggest issue. Approximately six participants were unable to choose between the four responses.

The biggest challenge we’re faced with when working towards the Great Transition is:
Regionalism vs. global and national governance

When asked “What is the role of current national and supranational institutions in your vision of the Great Transition?”, 13 respondents believed current institutions would exist in some form – either with less importance, or with some transformation. Two further respondents believed international institutions would disappear. This contrasts slightly with the results from the sociometry exercise at the workshop relating to whether National laws or Self-organised forms of citizen collaboration would be the most effective driver for the Great Transition, where the distribution was skewed towards the lawmakers. Nine out of the 27 participants of the sociometry exercise positioned themselves closer to National laws than to Self-organised forms of citizen collaboration.

What is a more effective driver for the Great Transition?

EFFECTIVE NATIONAL LAWS
that tax resource use / emissions and protect public goods.

- Vested interests and power at play can only be challenged by changes to laws and regulations.
- We need enough ordinary people involved for institutional change to happen.
- We need more diverse types of laws.
- One is system change; the other is culture change. We need both.
- People have to move from the bottom to change laws.
- The system has to see new ideas in order to want to change.
- New laws / taxes lead to new ways to avoid them – we need resilient communities.
- For systemic change we need to act at the mass level.
- I worry when people are in denial that national laws are important. Need more focus on this.
- The system has to see new ideas in order to want to change.

SELF-ORGANISED FORMS OF CITIZEN COLLABORATION,
e.g. urban gardening, consumer co-operatives, local currencies, transition towns initiatives, etc.
Splitting up nation states as a step to the Great Transition?

When asked with which of the following two statements they agreed more, the group was again divided:

- I think a potential national independence of Scotland or Catalonia might be a positive step towards the Great Transition as it would break old centralist structures of national establishment and provide the opportunity to create regional political and economic structures that are much more democratic.

- I fear that such fragmentation of nation states is not a solution at all. It would create more inward focus and nationalism and would make international collaboration on solving global problems much harder.

There was one person at the extreme end of pro-fragmentation. There was nobody at the extreme end of anti-fragmentation. There was a group of five people at 75% towards anti-fragmentation. There was a group of four at the mid-point. The distribution was skewed towards devolution to small communities, but most people were somewhere between the two extremes.

With which of the two statements do you identify more?