

Transformations to Sustainability Programme

The Transformations to Sustainability Programme is a research initiative of the International Social Science Council (ISSC), implemented in partnership with members of the Belmont Forum.

Introduction and context

Research on global environmental change and sustainability increasingly goes hand-in-hand with calls for deep social change. It is impossible to address today's great challenges of global environmental change and sustainability without a better understanding of how real and enduring social transformation comes about and how – if at all – it can be initiated, fostered or steered. What do we know about possibilities for transformation in places that face converging problems of climate change, environmental degradation, poverty, social conflict, corruption and inequality, and in societies that might be considered the sources of some of these problems? What changes at individual, organisational, cultural and systemic levels would be regarded as transformative in these situations and how can they be realised in ways that are socially acceptable? What novel visions for change exist, whose visions count, and how do powerful interests influence trajectories of change? What are the possible levers and who are the potential agents of change? What types of decision-making processes are required to foster democratic processes of transformation, to overcome path-dependencies and entrenched self-interests and unjust power distribution? What is the role of research in such processes?

The Transformations to Sustainability Programme seeks to address these types of questions by supporting research on the complex processes of social transformation needed to secure effective, equitable and durable solutions to urgent problems of global environmental change – such as climate change, biodiversity loss, water and food security, energy production and consumption, rapid urbanisation – and their complex relationships with persistent social problems such as poverty, inequality and social discontent.

The programme is intended both to strengthen social science leadership in global change and sustainability research and to foster on-the-ground progress towards greater sustainability. It will enable social scientists from all parts of the world, including low- and middle-income countries, to lead “Transformative Knowledge Networks” that will:

- Undertake research on the needs and opportunities for social transformation in concrete socio-ecological contexts;
- Bring together researchers from different disciplines and fields of science, as well as different regions of the world;
- Engage stakeholders meaningfully in the co-design and co-production of solutions-oriented knowledge and the development of networks of mutual learning, and;
- Build capacity for international research collaboration and support early career social scientists.

This initiative is intended as a major contribution to the work of Future Earth¹, a global research platform that provides knowledge and support to accelerate transformations to a sustainable world. Future Earth is co-sponsored by the members of the International Science and Technology Alliance for Global Sustainability².

Programme objectives

The Transformations Programme ultimately wishes to help inform and enable transformations to more sustainable and equitable societies around the globe. By broadening and deepening our understanding of transformative social change, it is hoped that the programme will help to:

- Craft more effective, durable and equitable solutions to the problems of global change and sustainability;
- Increase the use of such knowledge by policy makers, practitioners, the private sector, citizens and activists, and;
- Create a Global Knowledge Trust on social transformation: a repository of knowledge and a reference point for expertise on social transformation that will continue to inform the development of solutions beyond the formal lifespan of the programme.

To achieve these broader objectives, the programme intends to:

- Mobilise a broader community of social scientists to become involved in solutions-oriented research for global sustainability and to make use of the best existing social science knowledge on social change and transformation for this purpose;
- Help to fully integrate social scientists into important international initiatives such as Future Earth, and infuse knowledge on social transformation into other Future Earth and Belmont Forum-supported projects;³
- Develop and test new approaches to the co-design and co-production of solutions-oriented knowledge for sustainability, and;
- Provide a basis for the building of innovative, multi-stakeholder networks of knowledge creation, dissemination and mutual learning for longer-term collaboration on processes of transformative change.

Thematic focus

The thematic focus of the research activities supported by the programme is on processes of deep social change and needs and opportunities for transformation to more sustainable and equitable societies. This focus has two dimensions:

- *Social transformations to sustainability*: Transformative Knowledge Networks will conduct internationally comparative research on processes of social transformation, building on the ISSC's 'Transformative Cornerstones of Social Science Research for Global Change'⁴ framework (see summary, Annex 1). In their efforts to produce new knowledge, Transformative Knowledge Networks should explicitly seek to draw on the existing body of

¹ For further information: www.futureearth.org

² Membership of the Alliance includes the ISSC, the International Council for Science (ICSU), the Belmont Forum and International Group of Funding Agencies for Global Change Research, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the United Nations University (UNU) and the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO). For further information: www.stalliance.org

³ The Belmont Forum is a group of representatives of the world's major and emerging funders of research on global environmental change and international science councils. <https://igfagcr.org/>

⁴ Hackmann, H. and St. Clair, A. (2012), *Transformative Cornerstones of Social Science Research for Global Change*, International Social Science Council. www.worldsocialscience.org/documents/transformative-cornerstones.pdf

knowledge on processes of social transformation and change from a variety of social and human science disciplines.

- *Concrete contexts of application:* The research on social transformations should be conducted in relation to concrete problems of global environmental change and sustainability in specific social-ecological settings. Such problems include, for example, climate change, water and food security, biodiversity loss, energy production and consumption, waste management or urbanisation, and their complex interactions with unsustainable patterns of growth, persistent poverty, growing inequalities and social discontent. Proposals that do not make a link between a social transformation need/opportunity and a specific environmental or sustainability challenge will not be considered.

Principles of the Programme

The Programme is built on the following principles:

- *Social science leadership:*
 - Transformative Knowledge Networks must be coordinated by social science researchers (with a PhD in a social science or at least five years' equivalent research experience) from academic institutions or other organisations that have a strong focus on research.
 - Transformative Knowledge Networks should be coordinated either by one social scientist from a low- or middle-income country⁵ or by a team of two social scientists with at least one from a low- or middle-income country. In the latter case of shared coordination, the distribution of leadership responsibilities must be justified.
- *Internationally comparative research:* Comparative research must be conducted across at least three countries, spanning at least two regions⁶ of the world and including at least one low- to middle-income country, and including local knowledge partners in each country involved in the research.
- *Interdisciplinary research:* Transformative Knowledge Networks should involve researchers from the relevant academic disciplines, depending on the concrete problem focus, including, as appropriate, the social, human, natural, engineering and health/medical sciences. Particular emphasis should be placed on connecting research communities from global environmental change, poverty, and development fields.
- *Transdisciplinary research:* Transformative Knowledge Networks should pursue the co-design, co-production and co-dissemination of knowledge with the relevant academic and non-academic knowledge partners, e.g. practitioners, civil society, NGOs, policy-makers, managers, business leaders, and the media. The proposal itself must demonstrate evidence of having been co-designed with the relevant academic and non-academic partners.
- *Integrated collaboration:* Each partner should contribute meaningfully to the achievement of the objectives of the network, which should also be reflected in the distribution of responsibilities and funding. Proposals should clearly demonstrate the added value of the collaboration.

⁵ From low- to upper-middle-income countries, according to the World Bank categorization: <http://data.worldbank.org/about/country-and-lending-groups>

⁶ Following the World Bank classification resulting in seven regions: Sub-Saharan Africa; East Asia and Pacific; Europe and Central Asia; Latin America & Caribbean; Middle East & North Africa; South Asia; High-income countries.

- *Capacity-building*: Transformative Knowledge Networks should:
 - Involve knowledge partners from low- and middle-income countries;
 - Demonstrate direct benefits to early career social scientists who obtained their PhDs no more than 10 years ago;
 - Enable non-academic knowledge partners to participate meaningfully in Transformative Knowledge Networks.

Activities should link with and strengthen relevant academic educational networks and outreach activities, particularly in developing countries.

Mechanisms

The Programme was launched with an open call for seed grant proposals in March 2014, finally awarding 38 grants to facilitate the formation of knowledge partnerships with a view to responding to the subsequent call for proposals for Transformative Knowledge Networks.⁷ The seed grant period ran from September 2014 to March 2015. In December 2014 an open call for proposals for Transformative Knowledge Networks was launched. The selected networks are expected to run from October 2015 to September 2018.

Networking

In order to ensure that the Transformative Knowledge Networks contribute to building the envisaged Global Knowledge Trust on social transformation, the programme will bring Network Coordinators and their main network partners together on an annual basis. The annual Transformations Knowledge Workshops will facilitate cross-network knowledge-sharing and learning, assist with capacity building within the Knowledge Trust, stimulate theoretical and methodological reflection, widen and extend outreach opportunities and activities, strengthen network leadership, and encourage joint publication on social transformation as well as on the practices of transdisciplinary science.

Funding framework

The Transformations to Sustainability Programme is being supported with core funding from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) for an initial period of four years (2014-2018). Ad hoc support for individual calls or networks may come from other sources.

Programme Steering Committee

The Transformations to Sustainability programme is guided and overseen by an international, multi- and transdisciplinary [Programme Steering Committee](#) appointed by the ISSC. In addition to its responsibilities for advising on strategy development and resource mobilisation and for overseeing programme management, the Steering Committee makes final decisions on the selection of proposals and the associated allocation of funds. In order to avoid conflicts of interest, Steering

⁷ With core funding from Sida and supplementary support from the Economic and Social Research Council UK (ESRC) through the Newton Fund, the Swedish Secretariat for Environmental Earth System Sciences (SSEESS), the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) and the National Research Foundation of South Africa (NRF), seed funding was provided to 38 groups. Successful proposals received up to €30,000 to be used within 6.5 months (September 2014 to March 2015).

Committee members cannot participate or serve in advisory functions to the applicants or funded Transformative Knowledge Networks.

Funding organisations supporting the Programme have observer status on the Steering Committee.

Milestones

- Call for seed grant proposals, 31 March 2014
- Call for TKN Proposals, 18 December 2014
- Expected launch of Transformative Knowledge Networks, October 2015
- Transformative Knowledge Workshop 2015, 11-12 September 2015, Durban
- World Social Science Forum 2015, 13-16 September 2015, Durban

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Annex 1: Transformative Cornerstones of Social Science Research for Global Change

The ISSC's *Transformative Cornerstones* report provides a research framework for understanding climate and other environmental changes as social processes embedded in specific social systems. The framework provides tools to question and rethink the shape and course of those processes and systems through time. They are called transformative because answers to the questions raised in each cornerstone should inform actions that result in ethical and equitable transformations to sustainability.

Cornerstone 1: Historical and contextual complexity

The first cornerstone concerns the complexity of global change. Social science needs to understand the political economy of these processes, and how they relate to other social problems, including persistent poverty. The task here is to distinguish between the interconnected drivers of global change, and to clarify the interdependencies of people's vulnerabilities to these and other social processes, such as migration or conflict. In-depth historical analyses are needed to explain the complex trajectories that have led to today's unsustainable lifestyles and models of progress, and to draw lessons from earlier instances of transformative change. It is also important to understand the influence of context: to address how global change risks, impacts, perceptions, experiences and responses differ across the world, across social classes, gender, race or faith, and between personal or professional identities.

Cornerstone 2: Consequences

Identifying and mapping current and future threats from global environmental change and their impacts on people and communities is the work of the second cornerstone. It is about exposing the diverse realities of living with such change, and calls for a special focus on poor and vulnerable communities. Research on the consequences of environmental change advances our understanding of the lives of those affected by processes such as climate change, including their coping mechanisms, responses, innovations and limitations. It raises important questions about social boundaries and tipping points related to environmental pressures on human systems, economies and the social fabric of life. This cornerstone also requires study of the outcomes of policy solutions and technologies, and how both can be improved.

Cornerstone 3: Conditions and visions for change

This cornerstone is about social change: how it happens, at what levels and scales, and what directions it might take. The purpose is to understand what drives individual and collective change, including changing social practices. It identifies what kind of leadership and what other capacities are required for successful change to occur, while being absolutely clear about the limitations and democratic pitfalls of deliberate intervention. Another goal is to shed light on criteria for successful, transformative actions towards equitable sustainability at the local, community level, and on how to scale these up into transformative global thinking. Feasible visions for change matter, but so do the methods and procedures by which they are built and the ways in which global change and its consequences are framed. This cornerstone raises questions about different narratives of socially desirable change, lifestyles and alternative futures. It also addresses concerns about social engineering, and asks about the feasibility of participatory approaches to achieving alternative visions of the future. Building consensus in ways that include marginalised and non-scientific views is a key challenge.

Cornerstone 4: Interpretation and subjective sense making

This cornerstone confronts the values, beliefs, interests, worldviews, hopes, needs and desires that underlie people's experiences of and responses (or lack thereof) to global change. These in turn shape personal narratives and social discourses about the nature of the world and the environment, and so drive people's views on the necessity for a transformation to global sustainability. It challenges social scientists to make sense of the assumptions and blind spots that underlie choices and priorities. These assumptions can block awareness of what needs to change and keep systems deadlocked in inaction. This cornerstone raises questions about the nature and role of transformative learning, and investigates the reasons for indifference, scepticism and denialism in the face of potential cataclysms such as climate change.

Cornerstone 5: Responsibilities

The double injustice imposed by the effects of environmental change on already vulnerable populations and on those without a voice calls for urgent work on what it takes to foster global and intergenerational solidarity and justice. It cannot be assumed that all responses will be “just” interventions. This cornerstone foregrounds obligations, duties and responsibilities to poor and vulnerable people and to future generations, bringing these concerns into the legitimate space of scientific inquiry, policy and practice. It addresses methods, evaluation systems and policy mechanisms, and ensures ethical approaches in the development of new visions and the building of new social systems. It focuses an ethical lens on all interpretations of and responses to environmental change, be they of a technical, political, economic or discursive nature.

Cornerstone 6: Governance and decision making

Many of the policy processes related to environmental change are poorly understood. Social science knowledge is needed on how decisions are made in the face of uncertainty; what pathways are available for influencing decision making; what determines the success or failure of political agreements; and what drives political will. Knowledge is also needed of the possible effects of different ways of framing environmental change on policy makers and practitioners. Not all expert input has the same policy appeal or is given an equal hearing by those in power. It is important to understand the role of science in policy processes, to know what makes knowledge work, whose knowledge counts, and where the limits of expert knowledge lie. This cornerstone focuses on institutional design and reform, and on building structures to enable dialogue across competing interests, values and worldviews, under conditions of uncertainty.

Source: Hackmann, H. and A. Lera St. Clair (2012), *Transformative Cornerstones of Social Science Research for Global Change*, International Social Science Council.

www.worldsocialscience.org/documents/transformative-cornerstones.pdf