



## **Municipalities in Transition - Navigating Through Mitigation and Adaptation**

**Pedro Macedo**

Centre for Ecology, Evolution and Environmental Changes, Faculdade de Ciências, Universidade de Lisboa, 1749-016 Lisbon, Portugal

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### **Background of the paper**

Facing limits, such as planetary boundaries, it is an opportunity to reimagine society [1]. Worldwide an increasing number of citizens are proactively joining together in their communities to create positive change, to strengthen resilience and sustainability [2]. One of the most prominent examples of these community-led initiatives is the Transition movement, with active groups present in around 1,400 communities in 50 countries [3]. Self-sufficiency (e.g. locally grown food) and optimism are promoted, with the intention of ‘making a difference’ or just getting to know neighbours.

Some community-led initiatives have unintended results, like promoting inequality or raising conflict with local public administration [4]. In fact, the collaboration between civil society and local governments have been considered an oxymoron [5]. Extensive research promoted in past years demonstrates that these interactions, depending on their nature, can either obstruct the process of emergence and persistence of community-led initiatives or act as powerful enablers [6].

With the aim of facing these challenges and creating synergies, the Transition movement started the ‘Municipalities in Transition’ project [7], which can be considered a grassroots policy innovation. The main objective is to create a clear framework for how transition initiatives and municipalities can create sustainable change together, combining community engagement, reach and resources. It looks for practical knowledge that tries to respond to the urgent need to move from examining transformation to accelerating learning about facilitating it [8].

In synthesis, climate change and other environmental crises encompass grand societal challenges, demanding research to support governance for transitions [9]. To increase our chances of limiting global



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warming to 1.5°C and to strengthen adaptation pathways, new systemic instruments for promoting community participation and collaboration across all levels are needed [10] (p.352). In this context, our research question is how to promote synergies between local governments and community-led initiatives in their pursuits of (local) sustainability.

### Methods Used

A participatory action research approach was set in place from the beginning of the process since it has proven to be valuable in supporting sustainability and transformative efforts at a local level by mixing the production of knowledge and societal action [11].

The work developed included the preliminary formulation of a partnership model, mapping and assessing 71 impactful collaborative experiences in 16 countries [12], co-designing an agreed framework, testing and refining in six pilots<sup>1</sup> [13], promoting a community of practice and reaching out to decision-makers.

The framework was grounded in learnings born out of collaboration on energy and climate issues between the Transition movement, a Municipalities Association and Research partners in Italy [14].

### Main Results

Using a metaphor, the framework developed is comparable to a cooperative game: a grid is used with columns corresponding to different local actors and rows to categories of actions (e.g. using new technologies or fostering relations) (see Fig. 1). The first step in this ‘board game’ is to set out the main transformative initiatives already happening in the community, providing a ‘big picture’ (including mitigation and adaptation efforts and other sustainability actions). Initiatives are also valued according to their degree of transformative capacity and fairness (are they educated, caring, tangible and inclusive?). The game unfolds by using joint efforts to occupy new ‘squares’, some of which are considered to be leverage points (therefore providing extra ‘points’). From each ‘house’ players can get access to ‘cards’

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<sup>1</sup> Communities that tested the framework so far needed around one year to go through an initial process of training, setting a governance model, using the framework to prepare a baseline, planning, implementing actions and evaluating. Besides human resources from the municipality and the community-led initiative, an amount between 15.000 and 45.000 euros was invested in each pilot.



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presenting a diversity of tools and guidelines on how to use them (a database using pattern language). The rules of the game also include how to team up: the governance model and facilitation reinforce the social learning process and lead to a new culture of collaboration. This is expected to cross the boundaries of the experiments by way of the community of practice.

## The game

Transformation Grid >>	Actions	Actors							
		Municip. political	Municip. organization	Controlled entities	Suppliers	Organizations	Businesses	Public	Network
+ Governance model	Vision	▲				●	●		
	Organization		●						
+ Evaluation cycles	Planning	●	▲			●	●	●	
	Technical aspects								
+ Tools database	Relations								
+ Community of Practice	Cultural change					●	●	▲	
	Network								

**Fig. 1.** The elements of the ‘transformative game’, included in the Municipalities in Transition framework. Some cells in the transformation grid are considered to be ‘leverage points’ with higher activation capacity and are marked with circles and triangles (greater effect) – for example, it is assumed that when local politicians fully develop a transformative vision and officials are involved in new ways of organizing and planning, this can lead to a significant evolution in the community.

The ‘transformation grid’ stores the collective learning that can be mobilized in turbulent times, increasing the resilience of the overall system by nurturing renewal [15]. Moreover limitations, the framework can also measure transformation. A grid score can be calculated and considered as a proxy of the impact of transformative efforts happening in the community. By using the mentioned evaluation cycles, it can additionally provide a qualitative score. Eventually, this framework can help radical positive change to become the new norm.

The framework does not focus on ‘fixing’ actors and their specific roles or in trying to promote illusionary consensus. Instead, it concentrates on fostering interdependencies and synchronous action with a pluralist perspective. The framework works by (1) improving the ability of the change system to self-organize; (2) setting new rules (through evaluation cycles) and goals (a measurable transformation score); (3) spreading a paradigm of collaboration and transcending the (sometimes) conflicting norms



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and values that puts us in apparent oppositional barricades. These are the levers [16] to change the system of local transformative collaborations and bring emerging opportunities.

### Conclusions

Climate change demands a deep and collaborative transformation. The present research intends to explore partnerships between local governments and community-led initiatives that meet the needs for transformation towards sustainability. It is focused on looking for practical solutions that can move beyond the dichotomy of governmental versus non-governmental, climate action versus other sustainable goals, mitigation versus adaptation, and avoid the ephemeral nature of experiments (focusing on improving permanent processes and not transitory projects).

We can argue that the Municipalities in Transition framework can both be used as a transformation tool (making sense of how transformation processes happen) and a transformative tool (developing strategies for enhancing transformation processes). It is an instrument that promotes reflexivity in governance – collaborations are set to take stock and learn with the transformative collaborations already happening. It allows to map and measure collective transformative action and to identify leverage points in each community. The development of local coalitions supported by mutual principles, acting as ‘learning arenas’, is expected to lead to institutional change and a new culture of collaboration.

Implications for sustainability transitions: a systemic and operational framework was developed and tested through participatory action research in order to promote synergies in the interplay between local governments and civil society, challenging existing practices and founding a supportive environment for new “transition patterns” to emerge and develop, believing this can act as a leverage point for wider social transformation.

New efforts are being developed to further test and refine this systemic instrument for local reflexive governance and explore possible ways to integrate it within global action on sustainability.



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