



RESILIENCE, COMMUNITY ACTION AND SOCIETAL TRANSFORMATION

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People, Place,
Practice, Power, Politics
and Possibility in Transition



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2.0. Citizen-led pathways to sustainability

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Meeting today's sustainability challenges requires structural changes that move economies and societies away from business as usual, and onto greener and fairer paths. The changes needed are not just technical and economic, but fundamentally political. Politics and power are important to how pathways are defined and shaped, towards which versions of 'sustainability' and 'green'; which pathways win out and why, and who benefits from them – how far they serve issues of justice and fairness.



Figure 2.0.1 – Melissa Leach. Credit: Gesa Maschkowski.

The politics of transformations to sustainability must embrace more fully community resilience and empowerment, and citizen knowledge, action, capacities and mobilisations. These can contribute to transformations from below, in ways that vitally complement technology-led, market-led and state-led approaches.

Citizen-led and grassroots innovation show that valuable solutions do not just originate in the hi-tech laboratories of firms and technology start-ups in the global North or the emerging economies of China, India or Brazil. Instead, in cities and rural settings, networks of individuals, development workers, community groups and neighbours have been generating technological and social innovations in sectors as diverse as water and sanitation, housing and habitats, food and agriculture, energy, mobility, manufacturing, health, education, communications, and many others. Examples include the thousands documented by the *Honey Bee Network* in India, now supported by government through the *National Innovation Foundation*.

There are also citizen-led alternative economies and mobilisations around them, including transition towns, alternative agri-food and food sovereignty movements. Civil society groups

have also proposed alternative ways of 'living well', such as plans for *Buen Vivir*, now endorsed by government ministries in Ecuador, that combine environmental justice, common goods, agro-ecology and food sovereignty.

Such citizen innovation and mobilisation processes are frequently motivated by a mesh of socio-cultural and livelihood concerns - and understandings of ecology and sustainability - that diverge from the narrow notions of 'green', 'environment' and 'economic benefit' encompassed in more technocentric sustainability and green economy discourses.

Far from being just confined to the local, citizen and community perspectives and action illustrate and offer broader contributions to the politics of green transformations.

First, they embrace a **politics of knowledge**: they emphasise diversifying and democratising knowledge for transformations, beyond official expertise and formal science, to include

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experiential, informal and indigenous expertise. Attention to citizen knowledge can help to 'open up' discussions, allowing for discursive reframing, and deliberation and dialogue as part of a process of knowledge production for and within transformations.

Second, through **networking**, green citizen and community action often moves well beyond the local. Thus we have seen the potential of place-based struggles to resonate and 'globalise' through transnational advocacy networks in examples from movements like agro-ecology and food sovereignty, or those around carbon justice. The challenge is to retain a balance of autonomy and groundedness, and the vital traction on people's hopes, fears and energies, with scale-up and wider institutionalisation.

Third, citizen movements **challenge and shape powerful structures**, often with other actors, becoming part of an important politics of alliance building. For example, activists have sought to mobilise the power of finance capital given its heightened power to drive decarbonisation. Such civil society challenges often emphasise justice as well as greenness; or at least versions of green that are also socially just. Thus mobilisations for alternative pathways in which rights to food, water or energy often have a central role, are combined with resistance to existing forms of extractivism and business-as-usual development.

We therefore need to include citizen perspectives and actions more centrally across the ways we articulate and pursue pathways to sustainability and green transformations.



Figure 2.0.2 – French Organic Farmers Working on Land Funded by Terre de Liens. Credit: Gesa Maschkowski.

Civic action to disrupt, discontinue and challenge incumbent power, and offer alternatives, has always been a central part of historical transformations – whether the ending of slavery, or feminism - and will continue to be part of future ones. As the past also tells us, transformations will be messy – although with hindsight they may look like planned linear change or be imagined as such, the reality is always contested, overlapping strategies and alliances. And they will be context specific – given the diversity of accumulation strategies being pursued by states and corporations in different parts of the world and the ways in which they enrol and collide with so many other social actors, we can expect a diversity of pathways, and should be wary of ‘blueprints’, ‘models’ and ‘transfers’ from ‘success’ stories. These politics will continue to play out on a terrain of competing discourses, institutions and material interests in diverse contexts. The challenge for all of us is to engage on that terrain in defining and realising pathways that are both green and just.



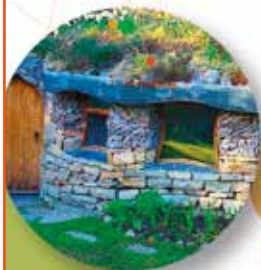
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Resilience has become a familiar buzz word in mainstream politics, most commonly as an excuse for 'business as usual'. Both resilience science and practical experience of community-led action for social change suggest an alternative view, in which resilience implies deep and far-reaching transformation of society.

This collection helps bring that vision into focus through a compelling blend of insights, ideas and action points from community activists, activist-scholars and leading resilience scientists. It includes direct accounts of practical efforts to build resilience at community level, theoretical reflections from a range of academic fields, and calls for collaboration among diverse efforts to create and defend community resilience worldwide.



UK £14.95

US \$24.95

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Distributed in the USA by Chelsea Green