



RESILIENCE, COMMUNITY ACTION AND SOCIETAL TRANSFORMATION

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



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3.1. Learning from Co-Founders of Grassroots Initiatives: Personal Resilience, Transition, and Behavioral Change – a Salutogenic Approach

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3.1.1. Introduction

The societal transformation toward a sustainable and low carbon society faces a number of technical and structural challenges. But it has become more and more obvious that among the main barriers blocking the desired change are basic ‘mental infrastructures’ - that is, how the promise of infinite economic growth has been embraced in the minds and hearts and in the hopes and dreams of Western societies.⁶⁶ Sustainability and climate change discourses reveal the inherent tension between this desire for permanent economic growth and the claim for a fair division of the Earth’s resources within and across generations.⁶⁷ People often find themselves in moral predicaments when ecologically harmful practices are invested with worthy purposes through social, national, and economic justifications.

Moreover, the situation is characterized by displacement and diffusion of responsibility.⁶⁸ Some attribute the responsibility to take action to governments whereas others attribute it to consumer citizens.⁶⁹ As a result, the vast majority of citizens do not engage sufficiently into pro-environmental behaviour.⁷⁰ On the contrary, environmental campaigning and media

66 Welzer, H., 2011. *Mental Infrastructures: How Growth Entered the World and Our Souls*. Berlin: Heinrich Böll Foundation.

67 Jackson, T., 2009. *Wirtschaft ohne Wachstum*. Munich: Oekom.

68 Bandura, A. 2007. Impeding ecological sustainability through selective moral disengagement. *Int. Journal of Innovation and Sustainable Development* 2(1):8–35.

69 Grunwald, A. 2010. Wider die Privatisierung der Nachhaltigkeit – Warum ökologisch korrekter Konsum die Umwelt nicht retten kann. [Against Privatisation of Sustainability – Why Consuming Ecologically Correct Products Will Not Save the Environment] *GAIA - Ecological Perspectives for Science and Society* 19(3):178-182.

70 Osbaldiston, R. & J.P. Schott. 2012. Environmental Sustainability and Behavioral Science: Meta Analysis of Proenvironmental Behavior Experiments. *Environment and Behavior* 44(2):257-299.

coverage about causes and effects of climate change can provoke a backlash and ‘climate fatigue’, ‘eco-anxiety or ‘post-petroleum stress disorder’.⁷¹ Kenis and Mathijs observed several obstacles for civic engagement such as the feeling of powerlessness, ‘strategy scepticism’ and resistance towards being ‘conditioned’ by awareness-raising campaigns.⁷²

In this situation characterized by complexity and unclear responsibilities there exist rising numbers of people and groupings that search for alternative answers peripheral to what can be called the ‘mainstream’. They take responsibility and experiment with sustainable ways of life: in food production (e. g., Consumer Supported Agriculture, Consumer Supported Enterprises), energy (Energy Cooperatives), transportation (Car sharing, free public transport) but also regarding new economic concepts and projects for a post-growth economy (e.g. Gift Economy, local currencies, ‘REconomy’ projects). According to Seyfang and Smith, these so-called grassroots movements are

“[I]nnovative networks of activists and organisations that lead bottom-up solutions for sustainable development; solutions that respond to the local situation and the interests and values of the communities involved. In contrast to the greening of mainstream business, grassroots initiatives tend to operate in civil society arenas and involve committed activists who experiment with social innovations as well as using greener technologies and techniques.”⁷³

On the level of societal niches grassroots movements adopt the role of change agents. Recent research has demonstrated that change agents in general and engaged citizens in particular can initiate societal processes of change and contribute to the transformation of societies, provided that certain motivations, competencies, activities, learning processes and structural frame-conditions concur.⁷⁴

Research on the success conditions of grassroots initiatives reveals that the number of participants is an important factor influencing the success of initiatives or the so-called ‘upscaling’ of movements.⁷⁵ An interesting research direction therefore is to understand better the

71 Kerr R. A., 2009. Amid worrisome signs of warming, ‘Climate Fatigue’ sets in. *Science*, 326(5955): 926-928. Doherty T.J. & S. Clayton, 2011. The Psychological Impacts of Global Climate Change. *American Psychologist* 66 (4), 265–276 Hopkins, R., 2008. *The Transition Handbook: From Oil Dependency to Local Resilience*. Totnes: Green Books.

72 Kenis A. & E. Mathijs, 2012. Beyond individual behaviour change: the role of power, knowledge and strategy in tackling climate change. *Environmental Education Research* 18(1):45–65.

73 Seyfang, G. & A. Smith, 2007. Grassroots innovations for sustainable development: towards a new research and policy agenda. *Environmental Politics* 16(4), p 585.

74 Ornetzeder M. & H. Rohrer, 2013. Of Solar Collectors, Wind Power, and Car Sharing: Comparing and Understanding Successful Cases of Grassroots Innovations. *Global Environmental Change*, 23(5):856-867. WBGU, 2011. World in Transition – A Social Contract for Sustainability. Flagship Report, German Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU). Berlin: WBGU, Pp 241ff. Kristof, K. 2010: *Wege zum Wandel. Wie wir gesellschaftliche Veränderungen erfolgreich gestalten können*. Munich: Oekom, p 520.

75 Feola G. & Nunes. R.J. 2013. *Failure and Success of Transition Initiatives: a study of the international replication of the Transition Movement*, Research Note 4. Walker Institute for Climate System Research, University of Reading, August 2013. Seyfang, G. & A. Smith (eds.). 2013. Grassroots Innovations. *Global Environmental Change*. Special issue, Vol. 23. Middlemiss, L. & B. Parrish. 2009. Building capacity for low-carbon communities: The role of Grassroots initiatives. *Energy policy* 38: 7559-7566.

preconditions for engagement. Kristof points out that the essential psychological difference between change agents (those already active) and their target audience are their experiences and the associated progress they have already made.⁷⁶ They have passed through cognitive, motivational, and behavioral developments that made them change agents.

Perspicuous as this appears, it brings up a number of additional questions with regard to a deeper understanding of the processes through which people become change agents. This research is therefore motivated by the following questions:

- i. Why do grassroots actors behave differently from the majority; what motivates them to engage and start an initiative?
- ii. What can we learn from grassroots innovators with regard to causes and conditions of civic engagement?
- iii. To what extent is it possible to 'mainstream' these determinants?

To develop a deeper understanding of the psychological processes through which people become change agents, we adopted a qualitative case study approach to analyze three different German grassroots movements. We assumed that their engagement can be interpreted as a healthy reaction, a form of (self-) empowerment confronted with a complex and frightening situation which causes widespread human harm and environmental degradation. To analyze their engagement we relied on the concept of salutogenesis. The concept of salutogenesis is related to positive psychology and personal resilience.

Grassroots engagement could be interpreted as a healthy reaction, a form of (self-) empowerment confronted with a complex and frightening situation which causes widespread human harm and environmental degradation.

Subsequent sections are structured as follows. Section 2 presents an overview of the salutogenic concept. Section 3 summarizes our aims and research questions. Section 4 provides a brief summary of the three cases and our research method. Section 5 presents our initial findings. In section 6 we discuss some insights on the potential and the limitations of grassroots movements for social transformation. Section 7 concludes by highlighting the suitability of the salutogenetic approach for understanding grassroots engagement. Applying the

76 Kristof, K. 2010. *Wege zum Wandel. Wie wir gesellschaftliche Veränderungen erfolgreich gestalten können*. Munich: Oekom, p 515.



Figure 3.1.1 – Potato Harvest 2014, CSA-Bonn. Credit: Gesa Maschkowski.

approach points towards the need for rethinking the aims that founders of initiatives pursue and considering what are the most promising levers for upscaling grassroots movements.

3.1.2. Salutogenesis: Why?

The term and theory of salutogenesis were developed in the 1970s by the medical sociologist Aaron Antonovsky. The word salutogenesis consists of the Latin term 'salus' (health, well-being) and the Greek word 'genesis' meaning emergence or creation. In his work, Antonovsky discovered that some people stay healthy despite traumatic experiences such as imprisonment in a concentration camp or flight during wartime. This observation evoked a shift in his intellectual orientation from looking at risk factors of health to the identification of the strengths of an individual. A salutogenic orientation does not analyze why people get sick. Rather, it addresses the question, 'What explains the movement toward the health pole of the health ease/dis-ease continuum?'. According to Antonovsky, health is not a static condition; rather, it can be seen as a continuum that ranges from complete well-being to total dysfunction. The central factor which enables humans to overcome the omnipresent external and internal stressors and stimuli is the Sense of Coherence (SOC).

The SOC is a “way of looking at the world”, defined as an enduring but flexible...

“...feeling of confidence that (a) the stimuli deriving from one’s internal and external environments in the course of living are structured, predictable and explicable; (b) the resources are available to her/him to meet the demands posed by these stimuli; and (c) these demands are challenges worthy of investment and engagement.”⁷⁷

He thereby merges three different psychological factors: comprehensibility on a cognitive level; manageability on a behavioral level; and meaningfulness on an emotional level, in other words the sense that, “[L]ife is worth the effort, it’s meaningful and creates happiness.”⁷⁸ Figure 3.1.2 summarizes these interrelations.

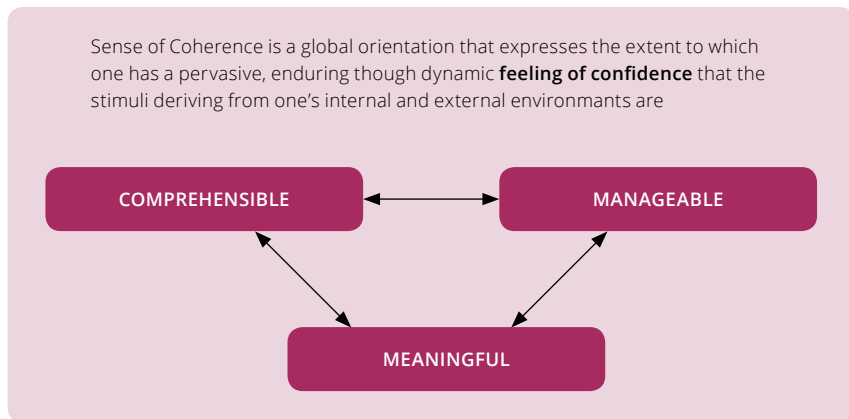


Figure 3.1.2 – Dimensions of Sense of Coherence (Based on Antonovsky 1997).

The sense of coherence (SOC) concept has been applied successfully in biomedicine and public health research to assess personal resilience in areas such as health promotion, education, working life, and war and post-conflict settings.⁷⁹ Bengel et al. have demonstrated that SOC is essentially a construct of psychological health and is linked to personal resilience.⁸⁰

77 Antonovsky, A. 1997. *Salutogenese. Zur Entmystifizierung der Gesundheit*. DGVT, Tübingen.

78 Antonovsky A., 1996. The salutogenic model as a theory to guide health promotion. *Health Promo Intl.* 11(1):11-18.

79 Almedon, A.M., Tesfamichael, B., Saeed Mohammed, Z., Mascietaylor C. G. N. and A. Zemui, 2007. Use of ‘sense of coherence (SOC)’ Scale to measure Resilience in Eritrea: Interrogating Both, the Data and the Scale. *Journal of Biosocial Science* 39 (1): 91-107. Eriksson M. and B.J. Lindström, 2007. Antonovsky’s sense of coherence scale and its relation with quality of life: a systematic review. *Epidemiol Community Health.* 61(11): 938-44.

80 Bengel J., Strittmatter R. and H. Willmann, 2001. *Was erhält Menschen gesund? Antonovskys Modell der Salutogenese - Diskussionsstand und Stellenwert*. Köln: BzGA.

Other results show positive relations between SOC and self-efficacy,⁸¹ and between SOC and quality of life.⁸² These findings have led to the integration of the salutogenic approach into competence-oriented health promotion and education.⁸³

3.1.3. Goal and Research Questions

To the authors' knowledge, the theory of salutogenesis has not yet been applied to new social movements. In this paper, we use it to analyze why and how protagonists in grassroots movements manage to engage for change despite a situation marked by uncertainty and unclear responsibilities. We operationalize the concept of salutogenesis as the following core research questions:

- › Comprehensibility: How do founders of grassroots initiatives understand and explain the current problems and challenges of our society?
- › Meaningfulness: Why do they believe that their commitments make enough sense to be worth the effort?
- › Manageability: Why do they feel capable of making a difference?
- › Quality of Life: How does the commitment of the actors influence their perceived quality of life?

3.1.4. Cases Studied and Methods Used

This exploratory case study focuses on six key persons, co-founders of three grassroots movements present in Germany, namely:

- i. *Carrot Mob Cologne*: organisers of temporary 'buycotts' in the form of purchase flash mobs by a crowd of carrot mobbers. They buy a lot of goods from one company in a small time period to encourage sustainable business behavior and initiate substantial carbon reductions in the selected (food) retail market;
- ii. *Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)* in Bonn: a locally-based economic model of food production and distribution that directly connects farmers and consumers;
- iii. *The Food Sharing and Food Saving Network*: tackling food waste by facilitating the non-monetary exchange of 'to-be-wasted' foodstuffs between private persons and groceries, retailers and supermarkets;

A more in-depth explanation of the three initiatives can be found in Table 3.1.1.

81 Kröniger-Jungaberle, H. & D. Grevenstein, 2013. Development of salutogenetic factors in mental health - Antonovsky's sense of coherence and Bandura's self-efficacy related to Derogatis'symptom check list (SCL-90-R). *Health and Quality of Life Outcomes* 11(80):3-9.

82 Eriksson M. & B.J. Lindström, 2007. Antonovsky's sense of coherence scale and its relation with quality of life: a systematic review. *Epidemiol Community Health*. 61(11): 938-44.

83 Krause, C., 2011. Der salutogenetische Blick. Fachstandard in der Arbeit von Erzieher/innen? In: Textor M.R.(ed.) *Kindergartenpädagogik- Online-Handbuch*. <http://www.kindergartenpaedagogik.de/dg.html>.
Methfessel, B., 2007. Salutogenese – ein Modell fordert zum Umdenken heraus. *Ernährungs-Umschau* 54:704-709.

Table 3.1.1 – Comparative Overview of the Three Movements.

	CARROT MOB (CM) COLOGNE	FOODSHARING GERMANY AND FOODSHARING COLOGNE	CSA BONN
Founded in	2009	2012	2013
Level of activity	City level	City level and nationwide	City and its surroundings
Success measures	Share of turnover invested in CO ₂ savings, 6 mobs in Cologne between 2010-2012, currently limited activity	Almost 35,000 kg food saved (03.06.2014)	Various: e.g. creation of 2.5 workplaces, high levels of satisfaction among members, organization of 7 community events per year, 6-7 voluntary work assignments per member per year
Core group characteristic	6 core members. In the four weeks before a mob: 50 hours per week	20 persons working 200 hours per week on voluntary basis	10 persons working 80 hours per week on voluntary basis
Number of members	Large number of 'mobbers' (up to 350). 350 followers on Twitter	3,500 activists saving food, 40,000 users registered online, 660 traders and manufacturers	120 members
Budget, annual	No budget. Flyers etc. financed by donations and the team	€40,000 for external services such as programming work, posters etc.	€105,000 for organic agriculture, including €2,000 for the expenses of the core group
Organisation form	No formal organization, voluntary work	Registered charity, voluntary work	No formal organization, voluntary work

Hypotheses were generated on the basis of a broad literature review on grassroots movements' motivations and success factors and drawing on different theories. Based on our hypotheses we established and tested a semi-structured interview schedule, including questions about the main components of salutogenesis described above. Analysis of interview data took an inductive approach, using the principles of qualitative content analysis,⁸⁴ meaning that inductive codes were formulated step by step out of the material. We subsequently analysed connections between the codes and the components of the concept of salutogenesis using Atlas.ti 7.1.8 software for computer-based analysis of qualitative data.

84 Mayring, P., 2000. Qualitative Content Analysis. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 1(2), Art. 20, <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/viewArticle/1089/2385>.

In the following section we present initial findings, organised into four categories that map onto the four components of salutogenesis. The category 'comprehensibility' includes statements that explain problems with our current societal system: their dimensions, individual evaluations, and feelings and thoughts on the topic. The category 'meaningfulness' is based on answers to the question, "Why is your engagement worth the effort?", along with relevant responses elsewhere in interviews. We define 'manageability' as the extent to which a person believes that he or she can mobilise the resources necessary to execute a project successfully. This category encompasses answers to the question, "Why do you feel capable of making a difference?". It also includes other factors enhancing self-efficacy mentioned by the interviewees, such as attitudes. Quality of life (QoL), the fourth category, includes statements about the effects engagement has on interviewees' perceived quality of life. QoL is not directly a part of SOC. Longitudinal studies confirm the predictive value of SOC for a good QoL: the stronger the SOC, the better the QoL.⁸⁵ We therefore used QoL as control variable.

3.1.5. Results

Comprehensibility: How do Founders of Grassroots Initiatives Explain the Current Challenges?

Interviewees highlighted two different problem areas. The first consists of problems that describe tangible negative effects of our present economic and societal systems on the environment and people, such as lack of resources, waste of food, inequality, population increase and globalization.

"I just said trash, CO₂ overpopulation, sealing of the soil, heaps of things have been going on - over indebtedness - it is LUNATIC a lot of what has been going on."
(CSA, P1:64)

In particular, co-founders of the German foodsaving movement stressed the systemic tendency of the current monetary system towards increasing injustice and obligating people to act against their values and needs. The massive slaughter of animals, for example, would never be done voluntarily. It happens because people are paid for doing it:

"If we somehow boil it down to the people who like to kill animals while aiming to do society a huge favor, there would be far fewer people doing it than at the moment."
(Foodsharing 2, P8:42)

The second problem area emphasised in the interviews is the way our society deals with the aforementioned problems, including system-based constraints and anxieties.

85 Eriksson M. & B.J. Lindström, 2007. Antonovsky's sense of coherence scale and its relation with quality of life: a systematic review. *Epidemiol. Community Health.* 61(11): 938-44.

"It is like a huge clockwork [device] and everybody is caught in their own little cogwheel, everything is entangled and it is so darned difficult to get out, because the wheels are turning and turning and you yourself are only a small cog in a big machine. And you have to try very actively and consciously to stop your cogwheel and step out of the system. And when you have taken the first step, the next one is easier, but the majority of people is caught in the cogwheel ...and dependency and fear as well..."

(CSA, P3:44)

One aspect that many interviewees mentioned is widespread ignorance and even suppression of the problems, meaning people accept and make do with the current state of the system, instead of acknowledging the problem and taking responsibility for changing the situation. This leads to the acceptance of conditions that violate basic social values.

"... through Foodsharing many [managers of] grocery stores for the first time realized how much they actually throw away. The employees knew this, since they were doing it on a daily basis. But, since there were no numbers, no transcripts, this was sacrificed for a commercial logic: the shelves must always be filled ..."

(Foodsharing 1, P6:58)

Feelings in the Face of the Problems

Frustration, powerlessness, anxiety, monotony – these were feelings associated with the predominant problems. Anger was the most commonly-mentioned emotion. It arose, for instance, when the current system was perceived to be violating strongly held personal values of interviewees (e.g. on the nature of food):

"Good food and good drinks and food culture in itself has always fascinated me and the more I understood about the food industry over the years the more repulsed and also angry I got (...). That is our source of life. We are what we eat and if we don't produce our food in a sustainable way we destroy everything and we destroy the soil, we destroy our energy resources through influences of the market."

(CSA 2, P3:20)

Many interviewees perceived problems as complicated and overwhelming:

"It's maddeningly complicated [...] you never understand everything. At least you have to develop a certain attitude, without saying, 'I have to become an expert' because you can only be an expert on a small area, you have to try to keep an overview."

(Foodsharing 1, P6:54)

Meaningfulness: Why do Co-founders of Grassroots Initiatives Consider these Challenges Worthy of Investment and Commitment?

From interviewees' responses we could infer strategies to cope with challenging problems such as the wish to act in accordance with intrinsic values and to stay authentic and credible.

"To keep face and to not go with the flow and well, to create also for oneself a livable life, a livable environment, and a livable structure, that is the change I want to achieve."
(CSA 2 P3:60)

"So I really do only what I am convinced of 100 percent."
(Foodsharing 2, P8:48)

Other major sources of meaningfulness were positive emotions, such as joy and fun, arising from connecting positive visions with positive action and building of social cohesion:

"In the CSA and in the Transition Town Movement you do something that creates joy. It is a positive impulse. It is not going against [the mainstream], rather just doing it differently, without asking the politicians, this is fascinating. That you can choose a different way in a society and just realize it. And that by these means, a lot of other things are made possible."
(CSA 2, P3: 25)

"The main reason [for my engagement] is, as I just explained, the personal contact, the people."
(CSA 1, P1: 33)

Personal engagement is assessed as valuable because it is a way to reach people in different social classes. Common sources of motivation mentioned include the wish to create awareness and to give a thought-provoking impulse in order to encourage rethinking. This awareness-impulse was in some cases classified as more important than the project itself.

"When the entrepreneur AFTER the activity said, 'Hey that was awesome', and his turnover was increased and he would now look forward to new investments also on matters of the environment. THAT has persuaded me more and more. (...) One could easily notice: something moved in his head."
(Carrotmob 1, P5:74)

"And I believe that something is happening in the background which is AT LEAST just as important, that everyone who shares their food or receives food gets their mind nudged about why we throw so much away. And they start to reconsider their consumer behavior. Essentially, that is an important goal for me because the mere distribution of excess food is not a proper solution in the strict ecological sense."
(Foodsharing 1 P6:58)

Manageability: What Makes People Confident they have Access to the Resources Necessary to Meet the Challenges?

Interviewees mentioned numerous factors that support them to feel capable of making a difference. These include:

- › External factors such as positive role models, best practice examples, supporters and mentors:
“There are enough positive examples, why shouldn’t we make it?” (Laughs out)
(CSA 2, P3:64)
- › Personal factors such as previous positive life experiences with change (mastery experiences)
- › Strategies such as expectation management, meaning that anticipated and targeted results are concrete, feasible and realistic:
“I am soberingly realistic... I do not expect that my action has so much impact, that’s a great relief.”
(CSA 2, P3: 59)
“I start with small baby steps and I don’t have the feeling of being able to change much [...], but it’s fun to work together with the group, to work together with the farmer and it would be even more fun to work on the field.”
(CSA 1, P1:77)
- › Positive experiences and emotions associated with the engagement itself, in particular positive group processes and complimentary feedback:
“This is the first time that I feel a great success by reaching people, but also for myself, that I am happier instead of getting annoyed with something.”
(Foodsharing 2, P8:72)

When we asked about conditions necessary for up-scaling movements, interviewees stressed the importance of enabling other people to gain positive and concrete experiences, for instance by providing low-threshold opportunities to engage:

“People have to be invited; I think [...] therefore, the Foodsharing and Foodsaving movement is a good starting point. It is practical, it is easy to understand, and when people deal with that problem they can recognize that this concrete example is only a symptom. And then, they can look for the causes of the problem.”
(Foodsharing 2, P8:392)

Attitudes for Action

Interviewees mentioned several attitudes associated with personal engagement, namely: Non-conformity or radicalism, naivety, curiosity, cooperation instead of domination, healthy confidence, courage and a healthy megalomania, and feelings of responsibility.

Quality of Life

Our examination of the SOC would be incomplete if we omitted the question of how dedication affects the quality of actors’ lives. Answers were comparatively simple. When asking the question, “Do you have the feeling that you are giving up something due to your commitment?”

all interviewees reacted with surprise and disagreement, and highlighted the positive sides of their dedication such as:

- › Creativity and learning
- › Feelings of connectedness to the city and the people
- › New social relations
- › Pleasure and health following the motto 'less is more'

Restrictions of the freedom of choice, such as in food, was either ranked as insignificant or even as time saving and a relief. It is also notable how often positive feelings were mentioned when interviewees explained personal experiences they had during their engagement.

"I think it is totally beautiful and I am totally happy that I am able to be part of this. Having taken this step and being able to initiate this. Well, being able to bring the topic here."
(Foodsharing 2, P8:253)

Interviewees mentioned positive feelings such as luck or enthusiasm far more frequently than they did feelings such as anger or frustration. The latter did come up when interviewees talked about root problems. This points towards a key result of the engagement: engaging in the grassroots initiatives in a manageable, meaningful and thus salutogenic way seems to be correlated with a higher quality of life.

3.1.6. Discussion

The characteristics of the grassroots movements analyzed are different. Dimensions of variation include their target groups (customers, retailers, or citizens), their budget (none to several thousand Euros per year) and their scale (city-wide to nation-wide). Analysis of interviews, however, reveals a number of common patterns.

Comprehensibility and the Limits of Cognitive Knowledge

The collective action frame of the grassroots activists described the conflict between the growth paradigm on the one side and the exhaustion of earthly resources on the other. Even though interviewees did not explicitly identify themselves as members of global justice movements, the issues mentioned showed a close connection to these.⁸⁶ Co-founders of the initiatives felt anxious and powerless considering the very large dimensions of current social and ecological problems. Similar results have already been reported in the literature.⁸⁷

Despite these feelings, grassroots actors were still able to engage for change. This leads to our research question of, "How do they achieve comprehensibility, as the ability to make

⁸⁶ Schlichting, I. & A. Schmidt. 2012. Strategische Deutungen des Klimawandels. Frames und ihre Sponsoren. *Forschungsjournal Soziale Bewegungen* 25 (2): 29–41.

⁸⁷ Kenis, A. & E. Mathijs, 2012. Beyond individual behaviour change: the role of power, knowledge and strategy in tackling climate change. *Environmental Education Research* 18(1):45–65.

sense of extreme and stressful events?" It is notable that the co-founders of grassroots initiatives relied on attitudes and values to explain and structure the problems, as mentioned by Foodsharing 1, "...you [will] never understand everything. At least you have to develop a certain attitude." From a salutogenic point of view the positive deviance of grassroots actors, i.e. taking action in the face of widespread ignorance and/or apathy, seems to rely on values and attitudes rather than purely cognitive assessments of problems. This finding is supported by Kay Milton's work who argues that, "[T]he emotional and constitutive role of nature and natural things has been underplayed in western environmental debates, which have been dominated by a rationalist scientific discourse in which emotion is suppressed and emotionalism denigrated."⁸⁸ Our findings underscore the crucial role of emotions as the link between the appraisal of a situation and the motivation to take action (see Figure 3.1.3).⁸⁹

Meaningfulness and Quality of Life Through Civic Engagement

The aims of the three initiatives as expressed by their co-founders challenge the ideological foundation of the consumer society which still adheres to the narrative of, '*The more we consume the better off we are.*' In the latter line of thought, demands to reduce the material impact of human activities are likely to be perceived as constraining human welfare and threatening quality of life.⁹⁰ Accordingly, co-founders of grassroots initiatives can be expected to suffer from lower quality of life, due to their reduced consumption and time-consuming activism.

The results of the study however show that different narratives and effects prevail: interviewees reported that it is gratifying to act in ways consistent with their own values. Personal commitment and assumption of responsibility for one's own environment leads to empowerment and social learning for oneself and others. Social capital is created by social cohesion in initiatives and connections among people who would not otherwise have met. Interviewees were inspired by the possibility to create awareness and initiate small system changes. 'Meaningfulness'

'Meaningfulness' in the salutogenic sense was created by their attempts to express positive and constructive attitudes and values in their own lives.

in the salutogenic sense was created by their attempts to express positive and constructive attitudes and values in their own lives. Tensions between the inability of the current economic system to reproduce fundamental values such as justice and human rights and the desire of

88 Milton, K. 2002. *Loving Nature: Towards an Ecology of Emotion*. London: Routledge, p.91

89 Klandermans, B. 2004. The demand and supply of participation: Social psychological correlates of participation in a social movement. Pp. 360-379 in: Snow D.A., Soule, S. & HP Kriesi (eds.) *Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*. Oxford: Blackwell.

90 Jackson, T., 2005. Live better by consuming less? Is there a double dividend in sustainable consumption? *Journal of Industrial Ecology* 9(1-2): 19-36.

Personal Drivers of Engagement

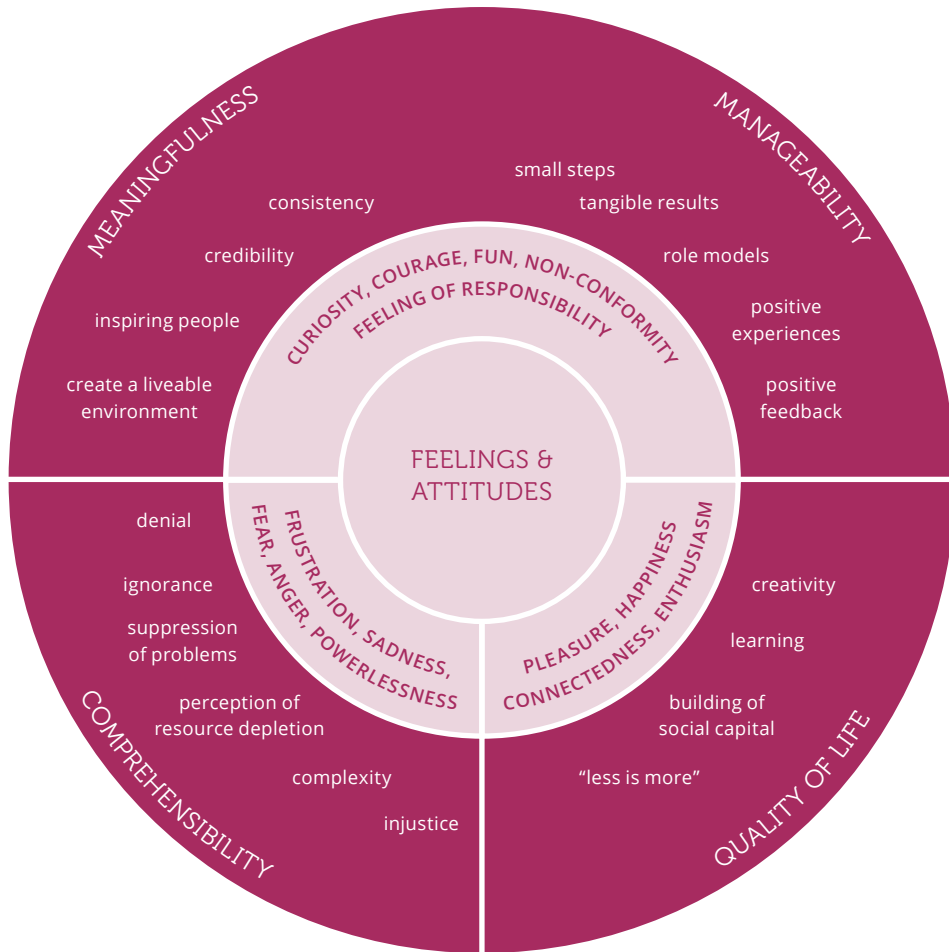


Figure 3.1.3 – Personal Drivers of Engagement in the Dimensions Comprehensibility, Manageability, Meaningfulness and Quality of Life.

grassroot actors to act according to these values were resolved by their refusal to tolerate the situation and the assumption of personal responsibility for change. In that regard, founders acted in the tradition of ‘classic’ social movements.⁹¹

By cultivating inner consistency, building social capital and initiating processes of social learning, the grassroots actors reported to have improved their perceived quality of life.

⁹¹ Della Porta, D. & M. Diani, 2006. *Social movements: an introduction*. Malden, MA: Blackwell. Pp. 64ff.

Recent research similarly showed that commitment to a Transition Together Initiative had positive effects on various aspects of health and well-being,⁹² primarily attributed to community engagement and collaborating with immediate neighbors. This relates to Tim Jackson's suggested 'double dividend' potentially inherent in sustainable consumption: the ability to live better by consuming less, to reduce our impact on the environment and to become more human as a result. Nevertheless, Jackson himself is cautious about the prospects for a double dividend and draws attention to the role of societal frameworks: "Such 'win-win' solutions may exist but will require a concerted societal effort to realize [on a broader scale]."⁹³

Manageability: Enhancing Self-Efficacy through Concrete and Collective Action

Conditions supporting manageability include factors around behavior change highlighted as relevant also by other theories relevant in the field of behaviour change such as the Social Cognitive Theory developed by Albert Bandura⁹⁴. Our research findings demonstrate the high relevance for mastery experiences, regarded in the SOC approach as the strongest influence on perceived self-efficacy.⁹⁵ Given the complex and frightening social and ecological problems that are mentioned in 5.1, realistic expectations regarding potential outcomes also seem to be very important. Feasible action plans allow for the transformation of frustration and anxiety into motivation and a sense of achievement. This finding is in accordance with research of Kristof, who reported that establishing concrete and realistic steps is a necessary prerequisite for reducing fear of transformation and change.⁹⁶

Interviewees also mentioned best practice examples and role models as supporting factors. This so called 'social modeling' is reported to be an important strategy for behavior change, successfully used in health and environmental education⁹⁷. Grassroots networks, such as the Transition network, the Network of Consumer Supported Agriculture, Foodsharing Network or the Carrotmob Network fulfil an important role by providing these examples and models.

Finally, our research shows that grassroots initiatives provide opportunities to build positive emotions, for instance through group processes and collective action. Improving the emotional state is also regarded as an important strategy for increasing beliefs of self-efficacy.⁹⁸

92 Richardson, J., Nichols, A. & T. Henry, 2012. Do transition towns have the potential to promote health and well-being? A health impact assessment of a transition town initiative. *Public Health* 126(11): 982-9.

93 Jackson, T., 2005. Live better by consuming less? Is there a double dividend in sustainable consumption? *Journal of Industrial Ecology* 9(1-2): 19-36.

94 Bandura, A., 2002. Environmental sustainability by sociocognitive deceleration of population growth. Pp. 209-238 in Schmuck P. & W. Schultz (eds.). *The Psychology of Sustainable Development*. Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer.

95 McAlister, A., Perry, C. & G. Parcel, 2008. How individuals, environments and health behaviors interact. In K. Glanz, B. Rimer, and K. Viswanath (eds.) *Health Behavior and Health Education*. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, Calif, USA, 4th edition: 167-188.

96 Kristof, K. 2010. *Wege zum Wandel. Wie wir gesellschaftliche Veränderungen erfolgreich gestalten können*. Munich: Oekom, p 542.

97 see footnote 31.

98 McAlister, A., Perry, C. & G. Parcel, 2008. How individuals, environments and health behaviors interact. In K. Glanz, B. Rimer, and K. Viswanath (eds.) *Health Behavior and Health Education*. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, Calif, USA, 4th edition: 167-188.

Moreover, positive action provoked positive feedback loops, enhancing feelings of manageability and contributing to empowerment of those involved.

The study however should not create the impression that constraints, failures, and negative experiences are absent from grassroots initiatives.⁹⁹ A common example is when scarcity of resources such as time and money provokes the decomposition of an initiative. In the case of the Foodsharing initiative it led to a sustained effort to be independent from money in order to achieve more autonomy and free up time for grassroots work. Group dynamics are another crucial factor, not

Positive action provoked positive feedback loops, enhancing feelings of manageability and contributing to empowerment of those involved.

only with regard to success as already mentioned, but also in relation to failure of initiatives. This requires further analysis, beyond the scope of this paper.

3.1.7. Conclusion: Potentials and Limitations of Grassroots Initiatives

In this study we aimed to understand reasons for the engagement of individuals in grassroots initiatives. We understood this engagement as a ‘salutogenetic’ process: a healthy reaction to being confronted with the intellectually and morally overwhelming situation of current unsustainability. To understand the psychological processes underlying this positive action, and thus identify potential levers for upscaling engagement in initiatives, we used Antonovsky’s concept of salutogenesis. According to Antonovsky, the ability of a person confronted with a major challenge to take constructive action depends on the sense of coherence they are able to maintain. This sense of coherence in turn can be broken down into aspects of manageability, comprehensibility and meaningfulness. We used these concepts to analyze interviews with founders of grassroots movements.

A core result of this study is that the use of the concept of salutogenesis can provide a deeper understanding of psychological factors motivating change agents to initiate grassroots movements. Founders of initiatives perceive the given, unsustainable situation as a challenging, potentially frightening one. They try to stay healthy and active in this situation by developing meaningful engagement, based on a comprehensive interpretation of the given situation and challenges, and taking manageable actions. In particular, the salutogenetic approach as applied here may contribute the following three insights to the discourse:

⁹⁹ Feola, G. & R.J. Nunes, 2013. *Failure and Success of Transition Initiatives: a study of the international replication of the Transition Movement*, Research Note 4. Walker Institute for Climate System Research, University of Reading, August 2013.

1. The scale and complexity of current problems are beyond the scope of attempts at purely cognitive explanation. The ability to comprehend associated challenges in a salutogenic way is connected to the role of attitudes and values, helping actors to explain and organize otherwise overwhelming information. Learning from grassroots co-founders as persons acting in a salutogenic way would imply that people need opportunities to (re-) connect with internal values and to act accordingly. At this point, one should consider to what extent expert-dominated discourses about climate and social change, and associated striving for objectivity, are both patronizing and constitute a potential obstacle to '*comprehensibility*' in itself: are they hindering the (re-) connection with attitudes and values necessary to understand, explain and deal with the problems? Do we need a shift of awareness from detached observers to engaged participants, from objectivity to critical subjectivity?¹⁰⁰ And would this critical subjectivity be needed in many parts of society - from citizens, to politics, the media and science?

2. The *manageability* of action on current challenges is enhanced by positive action, realistic aims, and best practice models, and in particular by positive group processes. This is a completely different approach from current governmental strategies to foster sustainable lifestyles by addressing individuals in their roles as consumers. It raises the question of when, how and where the majority of people have the opportunity to make positive, collective experiences of change, enhancing self-efficacy and therefore feelings of manageability.

3. Interviews with co-founders of grassroots movements contain a great diversity of positive narratives explaining why it is joyful and *meaningful* to work for change. Those who hoped that wider society can learn from grassroots initiatives how to make consumerism 'greener' within our hegemonic social system will be disappointed on this point. The goal of the co-founders is not in the first place to change consumer behavior within the given system. They identify the system itself, its environmental and social problems, as targets of collective action. They create awareness of the need of systemic change and start to build alternatives on a niche basis. In this case, the change of consumer behavior is a positive and certainly desirable consequence but not the main motivation, which is the prospect of deeper societal change.

These insights have consequences concerning potential levers to upscale involvement in grassroots initiatives as a mechanism for societal change. To identify these levers, the very processes that allow initiatives to contribute to societal change need to be reconsidered: upscaling and mainstreaming the activities and experiences of the co-founders of grassroots initiatives would thus mean upscaling and mainstreaming opportunities for citizens to engage collectively, to shape their environments, and thus gain positive experiences by making small realistic steps with the support of others. Or in Otto Scharmer's words, "[By] *creat[ing]*

100 Sterling, S. 2007. *Riding the Storm: towards a connective cultural consciousness*. Pp. 63-82 in: Wals, A.E.J., 2007. (eds.) *Social Learning Towards a Sustainable World, Principle, perspectives and praxis*. Wageningen: Wageningen Academic Publishers.

*infrastructure innovations that allow all citizens to become aware of their real power in co-creating the intentional ecosystem economy and in deepening our democracy.*¹⁰¹ We are not, therefore, discussing the upscaling of green consumerism and some general green or sustainability engagement schemes applicable to defined contexts, but the upscaling of social learning and empowerment allowing people to take action in their particular way: manageable, meaningful and comprehensive. We therewith agree with recent discussions pointing towards the need of



Figure 3.1.3 – First Carrotmob, Cologne. Credit: Martin Terber.

101 Scharmer, O., 2009. Seven Acupuncture Points for Shifting Capitalism to Create a Regenerative Ecosystem Economy. Paper prepared for presentation at the: Roundtable on Transforming Capitalism to Create a Regenerative Economy MIT, June 8-9; Sept. 21, 2009. P.2. http://www.ottoscharmer.com/sites/default/files/2009_SevenAcupuncturePoints.pdf

scaling-up processes instead of objects or product designs¹⁰² and to understanding societal transformation as a process of social learning.¹⁰³

It would be an excessive demand, however, to place the responsibility for social transformation solely on the shoulders of citizens. Successful projects for lifestyle change have always been supported by multi-level approaches. This was impressively shown by the Finnish project 'Health in all Policies' which changed the food habits of the entire Finnish society over a 20 year time frame and led to tremendous reductions in mortality rates from cardiovascular diseases. The project pursued a community-based approach, accompanied by effective measures in public health care, social modeling, media campaigns (local and national), the economy (new products), and politics (taxes).¹⁰⁴ When aiming for widespread societal

Upscaling and mainstreaming the activities and experiences of the co-founders of grassroots initiatives would thus mean upscaling and mainstreaming opportunities for citizens to engage collectively, to shape their environments, and thus gain positive experiences by making small realistic steps with the support of others.

change it therefore could be indicative to ask the salutogenic question on every level: What do politicians, businesses, scientists, teachers, students, the administration, and citizens, or in other words, what does our society need to gain a deeper and simultaneously more flexible feeling of trust that the transformation towards a sustainable low carbon society is comprehensible, manageable and makes sense?

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102 Smith A., 2014. *Scaling-up Inclusive Innovation: Asking the Right Questions?* <http://steps-centre.org/2014/blog/scaling-up-inclusive-innovation/>.

103 e.g. InContext <http://www.incontext-fp7.eu/>.

104 Puska P. & T. Ståhl, 2010. Health in All Policies — The Finnish Initiative: Background, Principles, and Current Issues. *Annual Review of Public Health* (31):315-28.

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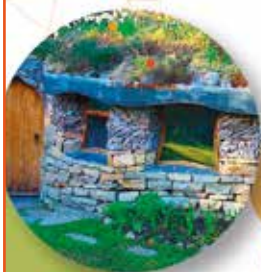
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