

The Great Sustainability Transformation and Mesopartner's role

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Introduction

The global fossil fuel-based economic growth and the mass consumption model has pushed us to the edge of planetary boundaries. The concept of planetary boundaries was developed by world-class scientists and Nobel laureates in 2009 (Rockström et al., 2009). The concept builds on the argument that we have reached the Anthropocene era, which emphasises that humans are influencing most global cycles and processes in the biosphere and have become the dominant species which is determining the future path of the planet. The public debate is often reduced to the threat of climate change, but we are facing many other interrelated challenges such as soil degradation, biodiversity loss or access to fresh water. Additionally, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasise the need for more inclusive development so that no one will be left behind. The increase of populist movements, in combination with global migration trends, disclose the fragility of democratic structures and show the need for a more inclusive development paradigm driven by well-being. Kate Raworth combines the planetary boundaries and the SDGs in her “doughnut economy” which defines a new normative compass (Raworth, 2017).

The current Covid-19 pandemic demonstrates that challenges to resilience require international action. Globalisation has led to the world becoming a tightly knit system of travel and trade, allowing new diseases such as Covid-19 to spread across the entire planet within months. This also demonstrates the turmoil of our supply chains and production processes.

The need for a Great Transformation urges all of us to rethink our role in and contribution to a more socially, economically and ecologically healthy way of life. The German Advisory Council on Global Change asks for a new global “Social Contract for Sustainability” (WBGU, 2011). Such a transformation or transition questions the current form of economic growth itself and emphasises the need for better equilibrium between economic activity and sustainable development.

What is Mesopartner’s viewpoint on the need for a Great Transformation? What was our understanding of a transformative model in the past, and how could it evolve in the future? How do we try to define our role in advancing the sustainability transformation? In this article, we reflect on our past and future orientation in this respect.



How we have seen transformative development in the past

During the last 17 years, Mesopartner has gained a reputation for a transformative way of promoting local and regional economic development and innovation systems. We base our work on a set of principles that are different from those of many other consultancies and donor organisations. Our work focuses on endogenous potentials, which means the promotion of locally focused (yet nationally and internationally linked) and locally owned development strategies and on a more systemic and complexity-sensitive intervention approach.

We avoided taking a strongly normative approach to development and supported our partners in finding their development direction and dynamics. In this respect, we believe in the responsibility and ability of people to define their unique development path. By helping to strengthen their knowledge and technological capabilities, we aim to enhance their capacity to find context-relevant solutions and continuously adapt to changing contexts.

We believe that we have contributed to transformative change in the countries and locations where we have worked. However, if we were asked whether our consultancy work during the past two decades has contributed to sustainable transformation, our answer would be: "Possibly not!"

Despite our principles and locally led development path, we still implicitly followed the dominant catch-up development belief system that has shaped development assistance over the past 60 years. It assumes that developing countries and weaker regions have to track the development patterns of industrialised countries.

Looking forward, Mesopartner would like to become a more active promoter and co-

creator of the Great Sustainability Transformation at the local, regional and global levels. Our experiences of how business development happens, how innovation is strengthened and applied and how knowledge networks can be supported in a complex environment may help us to find various entry points for this work. Many Mesopartner principles and methodologies could support a more explicitly transformative development model.



At the same time, we still adhere to our belief that only self-driven and self-guided development is genuinely sustainable. We cannot bring in normatively validated solutions from the outside. Yet, among local actors, we can convey an understanding of the planetary boundaries and the role that people and organisations have to play to remain within these boundaries. This would help to explore locally adapted ways of living and of doing business within the planetary boundaries. Under these conditions, it will not be necessary to be too prescriptive about the use of specific solutions, such as green energy. Finally, the company as an organisation and the partners as individuals should make a stronger effort to live and work in line with the world we envisage.

Our contributions to sustainable economic development during the past few years

Although we have not done a formal evaluation of our contribution to sustainable development during the past few years, we have worked in different ways to contribute to it:

- **Green Study Tours in Germany.** We organised several green development study tours which especially demonstrated the systemic perspective of the energy revolution in Germany and gave examples of respective policies, which supported organisational efforts and implementation projects at the business level.



- **The Annual Reflection 2014** on “Green Economic Development” gives a good overview of the different projects we were involved in, such as the promotion of energy-efficient solutions, promotion of green value chains, the identification of resilient interventions for climate change, etc.
- **Reflection on a more human-centred development approach.** In 2019, in commemoration of the 10th anniversary of the passing away of our co-founder and partner Dr Jörg Meyer-Stamer, we organised a workshop on human-centred development with academic and work colleagues of Dr Meyer-Stamer. The reflection centred around the question of how we can contribute to a more sustainable and human-centred development path in our work.
- **The start of our "Smartes Land" reflection** (www.smartes.land) . This entails an internal reflection on how we can link economic with social and ecological development efforts.
- **Consideration of circular economy aspects.** In our work on local economic development, quality infrastructure and value chain, we started integrating considerations on recycling, reducing and reusing and stronger analysis of environmental and social aspects.
- **Avoiding domestic flights whenever possible.** In January 2020 we decided to replace domestic flights by alternative, more climate-friendly modes of transport, such as taking the train in countries where this is possible, above all in Germany.

Future entry points for us in the promotion of transformative change

In Germany, the term „Zukunftskunst“ (translated into English as "future art") defines seven transition fields that need to be tackled for the Great Transformation to happen. These are: 1) the well-being and consumption transition, 2) the energy transition, 3) the resource transition, 4) the nutrition transition, 5) the urban transition, and 6) the industrial transition. Each transition requires new development paths and initiatives in four different dimensions to become successful: technological, economic, institutional and cultural (see Table 1).

Table 1: Required transitions and relevant dimensions for intervention

	Technological	Economic	Institutional	Cultural
Well-being and consumption transition	Digitisation as the engine of an economy of sharing Information and reflection tools	Sufficiency as a business model Living Labs and transformative design	Eco routine Sufficiency policy	New prosperity understanding Clearing out, deceleration, de-commercialisation, unbundling
Energy transition	Technological system transformation Intelligent sector coupling	Innovation and exnovation processes New market designs	Accompanying policy designs (global, European, regional, local)	Cultural acceptance Exploiting cultural dynamics
Resource transition	Making use of digital data information and new technologies for resource efficiency and circular resource use	Product redesign innovations New resource-effective and circular economy-oriented business models	Resource and circular economy-oriented policies	Culture of waste prevention Circular economy and resource-sensitive consumer awareness
Nutrition transition	Precision farming, promotion of small farming structures and technologies	Biological, seasonal and nutrition-healthy product innovations, food sharing, slow food, local production and trade cycles of products	International: a reconsideration of the world trade rules, EU and national Agricultural and Environmental Policy, an increase of consumer information and product transparency	Learning about changing nutritional styles, health- and nutrition-oriented lifestyle
Mobility transition	New environmentally friendly technologies, a combination of mobility models, smart mobility grids	Capacity utilisation of all vehicles and transport opportunities, innovations for new mobility solutions	Mobility regulations: increase of more sustainable mobility solutions and infrastructure (trains, bikes, e-cars, etc.)	Awareness and opportunities for more environmentally friendly mobility, creation of a new mobility culture
Urban transition	Sustainable smart city solutions	Application of product and process innovations	Economic development promotion 4.0, creation of transformation laboratories in cities	Green City requests, life quality requests, health and well-being values
Industrial transition	Decarbonisation technologies Chemical product and process design Use of industrial synergies Digitisation	Combination of innovation and exnovation for the identification of new products and processes	Rethinking industrial policy and combining it with climate policy, energy policy and research policy	New narratives on how industrial development can be approached differently but also innovatively

Source: Own design based on Schneidewind (2018) and own additional inputs

The following bullet points mention lines of action where we see our contributions to these transitions and dimensions.

- **Technological dimension.** The promotion of knowledge-based research and applied science solutions; promoting context-specific new environmentally friendly business models jointly with knowledge organisations and businesses; identifying more environmentally friendly solutions and development initiatives at the local level and circular economy opportunities in different sectors and value chains; integrating waste management and renewable energy application into our analysis; promoting local and regional transport system solutions; promotion of dialogues between green technological experts and policy and organisational representatives; considering smart city and decarbonisation technologies. For Mesopartner, this will require stronger cooperation with experts in the respective fields.
- **Economic dimension.** The promotion of local and regional policies as well as the cooperation and promotion of support organisations that are focusing on the combination of innovative, inclusive and sustainable economic development efforts; more in-depth analysis of business opportunities and value chain opportunities related to circular economy cycles (including redesign, refuse, reuse, repair, refurbish, remanufacture, repurpose, recycle opportunities); identification of environmentally friendly and healthy product and service promotion, etc.
- **Institutional dimension.** Promotion of institutional framework conditions that support the development of more sustainable solutions and shift the selection pressure in the economy towards such solutions. This can include the integration and promotion of organisations active in transformation promotion; the development of transformation networks and labs; support in the promotion of transformation policies at the local and regional level; the initiation of dialogue fora and institutional learning inside the countries and with colleagues from other countries, e.g. through study tours of good examples.
- **Cultural dimension.** Promoting green and more sustainable innovation initiatives that show potential and mindset shifts; promoting awareness campaigns; promoting dialogue between different interest groups and development of joint future scenario processes; strengthening stakeholders that are moving towards green innovations, etc.

The considerations of these different dimensions are relevant for all the sectors and localities in which we are working. It also fits well with our systemic and context-sensitive work perspective. Our partners at different levels (businesses, organisations, policy providers) require support to strengthen these dimensions in their work.

Finding our role to promote the transformation agenda

Currently we are still in the process of finding our role in the transformation agenda. To walk this talk, we will have to adopt a new, more normative compass that we will have to apply when working with partners in developing countries. This will create a dilemma, as it contradicts our belief of not imposing our ideas rather than supporting partners to develop their ideas. How to manage this dilemma will be a continuous challenge and is still an open question. At the same time, we realise that the transformation perspective is not only on the agenda of many developed countries, but also deeply rooted in the interest of most citizens, businesses and supporting organisations in developing countries. Many are searching for ways, methodologies and systemic interventions that will ensure decent prosperity, sustainability and resilience.

We want to avoid becoming drivers of a normative agenda, demanding radical

changes from our partners in developing countries. We consider ourselves process facilitators guiding local actors through an exploration process and bringing in different perspectives. Strengthening the transformation process should become a discovery process co-created with partners, support organisations and policy representatives in developing and industrialised countries.

Strengthening dialogue, sharing of good practices and widening the scope for development opportunities will be necessary. Also, we still need to learn to be able to reconsider our understanding of innovation, the set-up of our partner structures and the ways we facilitate dialogue processes, make a diagnosis and help develop strategies. This will keep us on our toes and force us to continuously learn and improve.

References

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