How to accelerate sustainability transitions?

Messages for local governments and transition initiatives

This document is the last of the series of Transition Reads published as part of the ARTS project, an EU-funded research project which aimed to benefit theory, policy and practice related to accelerating sustainability transitions. The 6 key messages presented below are based on the research conducted in 5 city-regions in Europe: Brighton and Hove (UK), Budapest (Hungary), Dresden (Germany), Genk (Belgium) and Stockholm (Sweden).

Defining transition initiatives

Within the ARTS project sustainability transition initiatives are defined as locally-based activities which aim to drive transformative change towards environmental sustainability of existing societal systems in multiple dimensions. This means that a transition initiative is driven by multiple actors that live or work in the city region, and its activities are directly aimed at transforming services, approaches, routines, practices and/or infrastructures existing within the city region boundaries.

Key messages

1. Establish institutional spaces that connect different urban change agents and facilitate partnerships for urban sustainability transitions across sectors and domains.
2. Engage with local transition initiatives to foster a culture of collaboration for urban sustainability transitions.
3. Cultivate urban governance that embraces social diversity to effectively tap into the diverse capacities and passions of local people.
4. Develop capacities to navigate specific multi-level governance contexts within which local sustainability action takes places.
5. The access to and use of public urban areas and vacant spaces are a critical resource for transition initiatives.
6. Long-term public funding is required for transition initiatives whose activities deliver co-benefits of a public good character.
Key message #1: Establish institutional spaces that connect different urban change agents and facilitate partnerships for urban sustainability transitions across sectors and domains.

Cities are places where new ideas are developed and where the localisation of sustainable solutions from elsewhere takes place. For the development of innovative ideas or the localisation of sustainable solutions transition initiatives require spaces to interact, debate and connect with other innovators and resourceful actors of the city. Local governments offer formal spaces of interaction for example through public consultations, and many local initiatives take it upon themselves to organise meetings for like-minded people.

However, our research shows that existing spaces for interaction are not enough. Public consultations often focus on discussing a very specific issue or even merely on consulting an already pre-defined solution, while sustainability-themed meetings tend to attract only the usual suspects. We therefore advocate the creation of new institutional spaces and interfaces in which actors from the public, private and third sector can come together. This would allow for new ideas to emerge and contribute to the establishment of new partnerships for urban sustainability transitions, bridging sectors and domains. Such new ideas and partnerships can provide a boost in creativity for local governance and economy. These new institutional spaces need to be open and facilitated in a flexible way. Only in this way will they tap into current developments in the city and be democratic spaces of sustainability, meaning transparent, self-organised and open to all. The establishment of new spaces for interaction represent a challenge for local governments that need to develop their capacities to act as mediators, translators and network facilitators.

Our research shows that creating new partnerships can facilitate progress towards sustainability. For example in the city-region of Stockholm, the transition initiatives that have been most successful in promoting city-regional level acceleration are those that have in place partnerships with different actors. Individual actors willing to engage in a partnership face transaction costs (e.g. they need to invest time and resources to find an appropriate partner) and risks (no partner might be found) that might discourage them from taking action. The proposed creation of institutional spaces and interfaces for urban change agents can address this barrier by facilitating interactions between local actors and providing necessary coordination. Our results point to the importance of creating a positive feedback loop, where following the examples of successful partnerships in the past, the intensity of partnering increases, which in turn will enhance its added value for forging synergies for resources and knowledge.

In Brighton and Hove a Sustainable Cities Working Group has been established in order to promote and embed the sustainable development of the city-region’s built infrastructure. The working group aims to bring together expertise from within the region and influence the pace and direction of progress towards sustainability by engaging with formal policy development and practical action.
Key Message #2: Engage with local transition initiatives to foster a culture of collaboration for urban sustainability transitions.

The debate over new forms of governance for urban development has flourished for more than a decade. It argues for urban governance to be more open, inclusive, and participatory. Participatory governance is seen as instrumental for contributing to sustainability transitions as transition initiatives are important in developing sustainable solutions to local problems and develop momentum. This implies that local governments should encourage the early participation of citizens in strategic debates and planning processes for urban development. Open dialogues involving entrepreneurial and engaged citizens (of the transition initiatives) should be promoted from the very beginning, before policy drafts are formulated and policy ideas become already “fixed” to some extent. Local public authorities should actively seek to engage with local transition initiatives.

This openness for collaboration and mutual learning entails a re-definition of the role of civil servant, including skills, competences and professional expectations. For example the municipality in the city-region of Stockholm included the cooperation with local transition initiatives in the official job profiles of civil servants to encourage collaboration and co-creation. Local governments should pursue an “open door policy” and encourage transition initiatives to interact with the administration. For example the public administration of Genk established a contact point for local transition initiatives. This contact point is guided by the principle “Make impossible possible!” and their role is to help transition initiatives in implementing their ideas and overcoming obstacles.

For transition initiatives this means being open to new knowledge and expertise, recognizing that different skill sets and competences may be required to progress the initiative and achieve greater impact. Mobilising and capitalizing on diverse knowledge in the city-region can help initiate and maintain city-regional acceleration, through questioning existing (unsustainable) ways of doing, organizing and thinking, creating a challenging but supportive context, and, influencing the pace and direction of change. Overall, it means that transition initiatives and local governments need to be open for and engage in knowledge co-production processes in different phases of their development (for transition initiatives) or planning (for local government).

The openness and willingness of individual civil servants to engage with transition initiatives from various sectors - public, private, or third sector – should be fostered. Ideological differences between these different sectors may exist in some instances but we believe it is important to encourage an open dialogue guided by a logic of arguing and learning from each other. To support collaboration, local government could create and maintain an inventory of local transition initiatives that they should make available to the public, for instance by publishing it online.
Key Message #3: Cultivate urban governance that embraces social diversity to effectively tap into the diverse capacities and passions of local people.

Diversity in a city can be a driver for variety of ideas and sustainable solutions and in this way contributes to urban sustainability and transitions. Transition initiatives with their diverse ways of doing, organising and thinking contribute actively to social diversity in cities, further contributing to resilience of local communities by enabling them to be self-organising and innovative. In order to tap into the diversity of urban communities through engaging with transition initiatives, local governments have to understand diversity as an asset and a prerequisite of resilience. As such, transition initiatives can provide numerous examples of how diversity of practices and solutions can co-exist and contribute to local sustainability.

In Stockholm most of the transition initiatives address the social dimensions of sustainability as a natural part of their objectives and means to fulfil those. In some cases, social inclusion is understood as a precondition to fulfil environmental goals, e.g. in the case of Miljöverkstan Flaten. On the other hand, embracing diversity can also represent a challenge for transition initiatives, slowing down the progress and leading to internal tensions. Many of the transition initiatives in Stockholm mentioned difficulties in reaching out to the majority that doesn’t care about sustainable development, an effort necessary to achieve genuine acceleration.

Key Message #4: Develop capacities to navigate specific multi-level governance contexts within which local sustainability action takes places.

Our comparative analysis across five European city regions shows that while they share a common European context that contains some stimuli and opportunities for accelerating sustainability transitions, many of the important political dynamics unfold on the national or sub-national level. How these political processes unfold and what opportunities they provide for the agency of local transition initiatives very much depends on the political system: some of our case studies are located in political systems which centralise political power at the national level (e.g. UK and Hungary), while others give a lot of autonomy to the local or subnational level (Sweden, Germany, Belgium). This has implications for the strategies local transition initiatives can pursue: if the local governance provides limited opportunities for financial support and desired activities are mainly influenced by national legislation and policy making (such as in the UK), then attempts to benefit from ongoing developments (e.g. policy support) will naturally focus on the national level. Conversely, in a federal system with strong local autonomy (such as in Germany), local transition initiatives have a range of opportunities to benefit from national, state and local level funding, policy-making and support.

For example the Brighton and Hove case study showed the limited opportunities for transition initiatives to obtain funding from the local municipality where budgets have been cut significantly due to the austerity policy of the national Conservative government even if the previous Green local administration was very favourable to sustainability issues. Transition initiatives such as the Brighton Energy Coop...
therefore relied on national funding (through the feed-in-tariff for renewables deployment and funding from the then Department of Energy through the urban community energy fund) to develop their activities. This made their business model vulnerable to changes in the national policy context (with subsequent cuts in the tariffs).

In contrast, transition initiatives in Dresden can pursue opportunities with the local city council, search for funding or other forms of support from the state of Saxony while also benefitting from national legislation or funding. For example, in Dresden the European Regional Development Fund has provided funding for the youth work of a ‘do-it-yourself’ initiative and its urban gardening project in Löbtau while sub-national funding from the Saxon Ministry for Environment and Agriculture has financed a study on ecological agriculture in Saxony in the early 1990s which was an important source of funding for the employees of a local food cooperative, which was conducive to establishing and stabilising the cooperative in its early phase.

Our findings show that to some extent transition initiatives are well aware of this and orient their strategies accordingly. However, successfully operating within such multi-level governance contexts requires a very good understanding of these contexts and what opportunities they provide which is often challenging and has a resource cost (mainly time). For example engaging with European funding schemes is very demanding and seen as bureaucratic. We therefore argue that capacity building is required in order to maximise the ability of local transition initiatives to navigate and benefit from such a complex and dynamic context. We see a role for local government to provide advice about opportunities and seed funding for transition initiatives to support capacity building in order to enable for example funding applications on other governance levels (e.g. national or European funds) if local funds are not available or not sufficient.

**Key message #5: The access to and use of public urban areas and vacant spaces are a critical resource for transition initiatives.**

Physical space in the city, its allocation and accessibility are critical factors in sustainability transitions. Spatial demand of transition initiatives reaches from land for urban gardening and community supported agriculture, the use of rooftops for photovoltaic installations to buildings for open workshops, office space and public meeting places to enable interaction, new collaborations and visibility. Under the conditions of a real estate market that is based on the private land ownership and restrictions resulting from urban land use planning, many transition initiatives struggle to get access to appropriate space. Our research shows that it is important to support – or at least not hinder – use of public areas and vacant spaces to experiment with and showcase new ways of thinking, doing and organising as crucial elements of urban sustainability transition dynamics.
Findings from the ARTS project provide evidence for innovative approaches to tackle this issue. For example in Dresden the green space department of the city administration brings together urban gardening initiatives with owners of vacant land in order to facilitate its temporary use. Following the same logic, the roofs of public buildings (e.g. schools) are made available for citizen-owned photovoltaic installations. The value of using these spaces for experimenting with sustainable solutions is shown by the outcomes the engagement across multiple transition initiatives produced. In Brighton the city council has started to develop a new Open Spaces Strategy. The strategy aims to guide the development of open spaces for the next 10 years. The council hopes that a new collaborative approach – between communities, businesses and local government – will foster greater community involvement in the management of open spaces, thus offering possibilities of more sustainable management practices and a variety of activities taking place. In Stockholm one of the most concrete suggestions from the transition initiatives is the need of a political mind shift regarding urban land use towards easier and more flexible access to space.
Transition Initiatives
Promoting environmental sustainability

in Genk city, Belgium

Sheef Café

Gedurde projecten in Genk

Tuin van Betty
Heempark
Fietspunt
Samenhuizen
Energiesnoeiers
Voedselteams
Horeca
Kringloopwinkel
Bijen collectief
Compostschooltje
Veel Genk
Absolutely Free Festival
Naturnpunt Genk
Bijenplan

Genk Beboont
Doorseefwinkels
Eco-modeltuin
Naturnalplageen
Samentuinen
Geomat

Zatjes
Mijn Boetum Bret
Compostmeesters
Fable
Bijenplan
Schooltuin Bret
**Key Message #6: Long-term public funding is required for transition initiatives whose activities benefit deliver co-benefits of a public good character.**

A change in the logic of what we value and how is needed because many transition initiatives create values and co-benefits (e.g., increased public health, social cohesion, reconnecting citizens to nature, environmental protection) that are neither captured nor appreciated by the current value system. Thus, long-term funding is required for transition initiatives whose activities deliver co-benefits of a public good character that can reinforce new value creation thinking in the city-regions. This requires a nuanced understanding of the activities of the local transition initiatives. Some of them create values and co-benefits that are exclusive while others provide co-benefits that have the character of a public good.

(a) Multiple benefits with an exclusive character: These transition initiatives can establish a self-sustaining financing model, for instance by charging memberships fees or prices for the goods and services they provide.

(b) Co-benefits with the character of a public good: The access to these co-benefits is public and no one can be excluded from them. This leads to collective action problems and problems of freeriding. Therefore, it is impossible for these transition initiatives to create a self-sustaining financing model. They rely on external support, either through private donations or public funding. Yet, this is accompanied by the tension between the dependence on external financial support and the autonomy of the transition initiatives. A dependence on external funding can undermine the autonomy and the core values of the TIs.

Consequently, while transition initiatives should be encouraged to become self-sustaining to protect their independence, it needs to be acknowledged that this is only feasible for some of them. Public funding and support schemes for local transition initiatives should be extended and designed with long-term horizon in mind. They should not only help to establish new initiatives, but also to sustain them over the long-term.

For example, the “Ehrenamtspauschaule” is a public funding scheme that supports the voluntary engagement of individuals by paying them a monthly allowance. However, it should be extended in scope to also cover the novel activities of local TIs. In the city of Genk, the local currency “Zetjes” seeks to support the local economy by developing local chains of value creation and value exchange.