

# **Effective strategies for the great transition**

## **A roadmap for civil society organisations**

Discussion Paper for the Steady State Economy Conference, Leeds - June 19<sup>th</sup>, 2010

### **Purpose**

This paper briefly describes the rationale and preliminary conclusions of an ongoing European research project, run by WWF-UK and CSCP (Wuppertal, Germany): *Effective strategies for the great transition - A roadmap for civil society organisations*. This project is part of a larger FP7 funded project called *Action Town*.

At the Barcelona De-Growth conference many contributions were discussing the rationale for a de-growth / steady state economy in addition to focussing the debate on the emerging concepts and ideas for a de-growth policy framework.

But while this is an essential discussion and research agenda, it doesn't in itself guarantee the implementation of the vision for a steady state economy. As the recent failure of the Copenhagen conference showed, making the rational argument for change is often not enough. We need to understand much better how research and civil society organisations can effectively influence the political system and how to catalyse the necessary social change for a transition to sustainable economy.

The paper intends to contribute to a critical discussion at the Leeds conference on this action oriented research agenda and civil society strategy debate.

### **Introduction to the project**

Due to the huge magnitude of the global environmental and social crises and the lack of progress in tackling them, there is a need for civil society organisations (CSOs) to reconsider their strategies in support of the great transition to a sustainable economy and society.

The aim of the roadmap project is to make the case for new approaches in dealing with the systemic global crises we are facing. This is done through a critical analysis of current CSO activities and their strengths and weaknesses and by outlining a series of opportunities for CSOs to strengthen their position and become more effective (and how funders can support these efforts).

The roadmap will argue for new collaborative and inter-disciplinary research and knowledge transfer programmes aimed at supporting CSOs in their work towards the great transition.

In February 2011 a large European conference aimed at CSOs, researchers and funders will be organised in London to debate the ideas and recommendations of the roadmap project.

### **A vision for the great transition**

Reconsidering their strategies to tackle the global environmental crisis for many environmental organisations requires reconsidering their vision for a sustainable future. In many cases a debate is still needed that can help to build a much better

understanding of the deeply rooted systemic nature of many of today's social and environmental problems.

Any successful CSO strategies for the future will have to acknowledge that the current paradigm of technical fix cannot work. Achieving the technical decarbonisation of the global economy while maintaining a BAU trajectory of life styles and economic growth, might still seem plausible in theory for some. But if seen in the context of a planet that is hitting its planetary boundaries at many different levels (biodiversity, land use, toxics, fresh water etc.), it becomes clear that any sustainable vision of the future requires a total rethinking of our systems of consumption and production with a combination of sufficiency, efficiency and consistency strategies to achieve that vision.

The changes needed are fundamental and can only happen through a co-evolving cultural and political transition from consumerism to sustainability. Prevailing materialistic social norms and societal values will have to shift towards more intrinsic ones. The current global economic growth paradigm will have to be replaced by a societal well being paradigm.

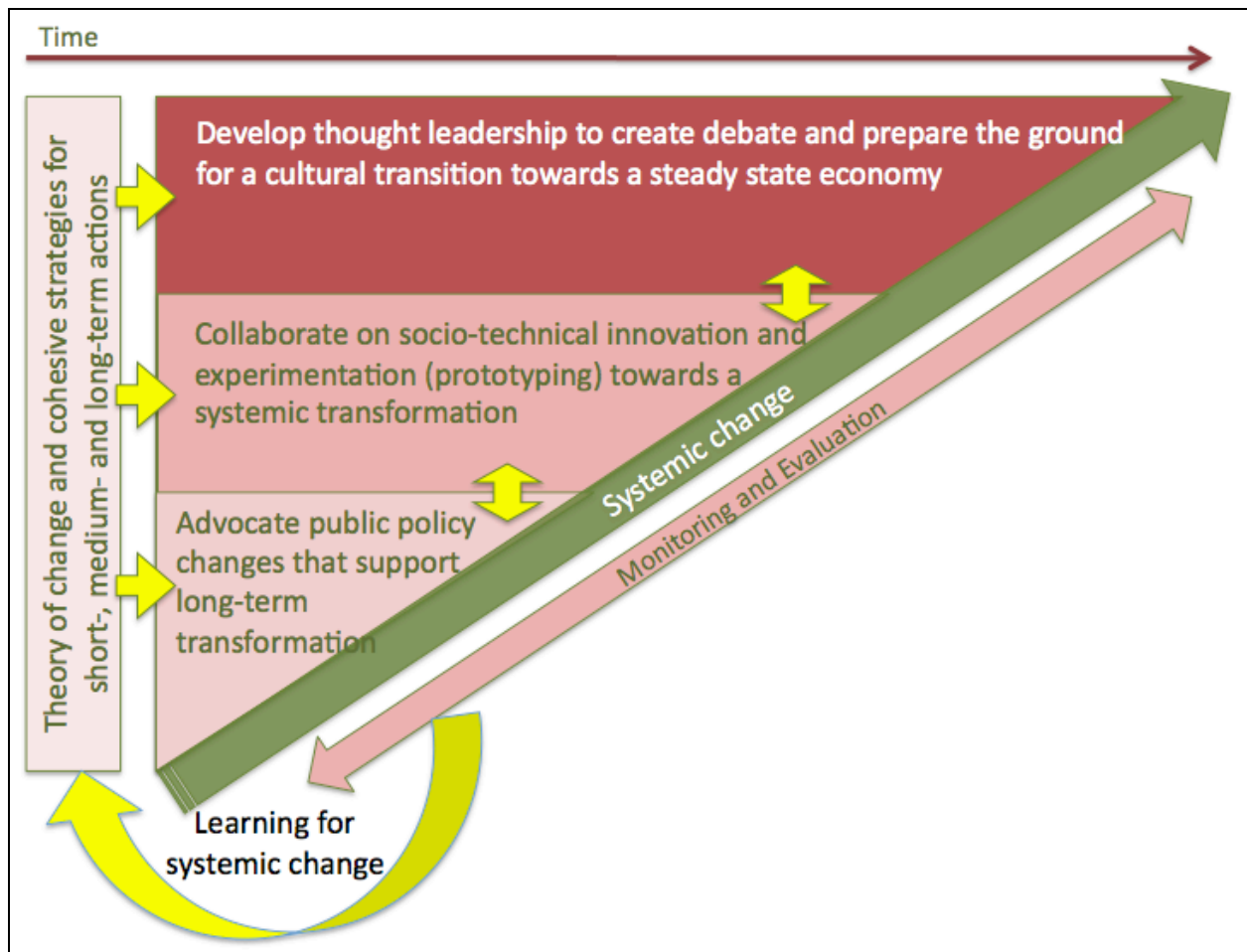
The political and economic institutions of our current system will have to be radically reformed or be replaced by new ones that become fit for purpose for the new paradigm of sustainability, planetary boundaries and wellbeing. Economies will become more localised and the currently prevailing model of shareholder driven global corporations will be replaced by new ownership models of companies that are much better placed to serve society and the planet.

### **Critical analysis of current civil society strategies to tackle environmental crisis**

A literature review undertaken for the Roadmap project show that there exists already a rich discussion among leading thinkers about the change in direction needed by CSOs to be able to support the Great Transition to a sustainable economy and about their shortcomings in capacity and knowledge to be able to achieve this. The literature review was complemented by a small survey among NGOs and a workshop discussion held for the roadmap project. The following thesis with regard to barriers of current civil society work emerged:

- Too much focus on single issues and symptoms rather than on the systemic challenges and the root causes
- Not enough understanding of how to effectively influence complex social, political and human systems (i.e. applying knowledge from social sciences)
- Not enough cross cutting alliances among civil society groups with different goals (poverty, democracy, environment)
- There are institutional constraints in civil society organisations that are not supportive to more systemic strategies

## A framework for civil society strategies towards systemic change - meta theory of change



The above diagram suggests a framework for how civil society organisations can holistically develop strategies in support of the Great Transition. A meta theory of change is the assumption for how the different actions and projects of civil society together will achieve the systemic change required.

Advocacy is useful where real short-term opportunities for policy changes exist that can support the long term Great Transition.

To spur and catalyse the necessary socio-technical innovation processes for the Great Transition, CSOs can partner with other actors to demonstrate and prototype the new models of economy.

Research, thought leadership and public debate are necessary to prepare the ground for policy implementation and innovation processes. CSOs can have a vital role in this field.

In order to become successful in these three areas of action, constant evaluation and learning is required to improve how CSOs influence the political and social processes towards the Great Transition. Some opportunities for better strategies are explored in the next section.

## Opportunities for more effective strategies

The Roadmap project is still developing the thinking on opportunities for more effective strategies. The following ideas are emerging:

### 1. Apply systems thinking to tackle root causes

Systems thinking is a discipline aimed at identifying strategies to intervene in a system that can successfully deliver the desired outcomes. As it is the case in other types of organisations, environmental organisations often choose strategies without understanding the feedback loops in the system and as a result don't achieve the objectives. The often cited rebound effect is an example of such a feedback loop.

If applied strategically, system thinking can help to identify root causes of system failure and help environmental organisations to set appropriate objectives and strategies for system change. The emphasis of current strategies on single issues and symptoms (e.g. more efficient cars to mitigate climate change) could shift towards tackling the root causes of the unsustainable system (e.g. new model of mobility that reduces the need for transport / car free cities etc.)

Ways to mitigate the current lack of systemic thinking and strategy development in CSOs could be the development of capacity building programmes (e.g. [Thinking in Systems Webinar, Sustainability Institute](#)).

Another (possibly more promising) approach would be the development of a learning culture in CSOs that would help organisations to deal with complex problems.

### 2. Tackle change resistance as a root cause

As a result of the lack of applying system thinking, the environmental movement is largely focussed on developing and lobbying for solutions that could mitigate the current environmental degradation. This is what Jack Harich calls 'proper coupling' (Change resistance as the crux of the environmental sustainability problem, 2010). According to Harich what the environmental movement is largely omitting is the need to tackle change resistance. He argues that without tackling this root cause of the global environmental crisis, any other efforts of intervening in the system will only trigger a reaction that re-balances the system. Harich identifies the profit maximisation goal of global corporations as a key root cause.

### 3. A new narrative

A future sustainable economy that will have to radically reduce its material throughput is at odds with today's dominant materialistic and individualistic values. However, many communication strategies aimed at behaviour change are appealing to these dominant values (e.g. financial benefits from housing insulation) and are hereby reinforcing them. Academics like George Lakoff argue that the environment movement should consistently appeal to those values that are more supportive to its goals (like intrinsic / community values).

A new narrative would help to activate or embed deep frames in people (the mental structures that allow human beings to understand reality) that are supportive of pro-environmental behaviour.

CSOs could therefore develop a narrative that reflects core values that are consistent with the goals of the Great Transition. It could then identify campaigns where a new narrative can be useful and tell stories that communicate values in compelling and positive ways.

#### 4. New alliances

The fragmentation of the CSO sector and a focus on specific short-term policy goals rather than tackling the underlying root causes, can have the effect of reinforcing the self-interest driven behaviour that supports the type of policies targeted as problematic in the first place.

CSOs (environmental, poverty, democracy and others) should therefore develop alliances that go beyond environmental considerations and can create the scale that the environmental movement alone doesn't have.

A starting point is to identify strategic overlaps between NGOs and map out where the common interests lie. Collaboration can be designed accordingly.

CSOs could develop approaches to educate their members, constituencies, funders towards this new type of work.

#### **Roadmap work ahead**

The above list of opportunities is incomplete. More ideas will be further developed during the coming months. Among the issues that will be addressed are current institutional constraints of CSOs and the need for new self-organising networks for systemic change and the role CSOs can play in convening or catalysing processes for systemic change/innovation.

A key task ahead is to identify an agenda for inter-disciplinary research aimed at supporting the further improvement of CSO strategies towards the great transition. The roadmap will call for new funding from foundations and public funding programmes to fund this research agenda and the CSO work in this field.

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