

## Personal Reflections on the NGO Dialogue on Transformation

November 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2012

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### Was this a dialogue about Great Transition?

Since the initial discussions about the conference plans I had with Tilman (Santarius) and Stefan (Rostock) earlier in 2012, I knew that part of the plans for the conference was to have a policy dialogue between the food and the climate communities. This was definitely a different approach than the one we were taking with the Smart CSOs Lab (with a stronger emphasis on questioning NGO theories of change more holistically). I was curious to see how this would be organised and how the dialogue would bring us closer to Great Transition (GT) strategies. When I was asked to comment on the draft agenda (as part of my role on the steering board), it became even clearer that the whole rationale of the process was built on the analysis that the climate and food/agriculture communities were working in their respective silos and the purpose of this conference was to make them have a meaningful dialogue and start developing joint 'strategies'.

There were a few doubts I had about the flow of the conference (more on this later), but mainly what stuck me was that there was very little in the conference agenda or in the preparatory conference material that reminded me of what I have come to learn about the vision of the Great Transition and its implications for NGO work. And indeed at the conference there was only an introductory speech by Tilman that made reference to the need of a deeper systemic shift as a result of the multiple crises humanity and the planet are facing. Subsequently there was a lot of talk about the in-communication between the southern led grassroots agriculture movements and the international policy oriented climate community (which was great). But the ideas about what the GT might be and what might differentiate the GT from other visions did not spring to the front of the dialogue very obviously.

With all my respects to the purpose of the conference and to the value of initiating a dialogue between the food and climate community, I missed a discussion and some inspirational inputs about what the GT vision means for NGO work and what the core distinctive factors (need for deep cultural transition for example) are. An absolutely legitimate alternative could have been to position the whole dialogue not as a dialogue on Great Transition but on food and climate policy.

## Why I left the conference with a positive spirit

While the above was the critical part of my experience, I came to feel that the huge efforts undertaken by the conference organisers to bridge the gap between the two mentioned NGO communities was a very worthwhile exercise. Also, the fact that so many southern NGO representatives found their way to Bonn enriched the discussion enormously.

It is clear that the huge diversity of actors present at the dialogue with all their different history and deeply held assumptions about how to go about the transformation to a more sustainable world, could not easily lead to the development of partnerships and joint strategies in a three day conference. Clearly this will take much more time. And even if people start to question their long held assumptions and are willing to collaborate on a personal level, there is still the organisational level that needs to be addressed. Often it is much harder to change organisations.

Nevertheless bringing civil society communities together to have a meaningful dialogue is an immensely important task that should not be underestimated, regardless if there are concrete outcomes or not. This NGO dialogue made an important contribution to this.

## A strategic choice for the future

As said above, I strongly believe that broader dialogues need to be held between the different 'silos' of a fragmented civil society. I would even say that even more diverse groups than in Bonn could enrich the dialogues even further. But it has to be clear that these broad dialogues with diverse people cannot be expected to lead to concrete coalitions, outcomes or joint strategies in a short time frame. Moreover this shouldn't be their objective. The objective of these dialogues should be to plant seeds to overcome fragmentation and create bridges between movements and civil society groups and circles.

But in my opinion these in-discriminated dialogues where the 'system' of civil society is being invited to participate is not the only strategy that should be pursued. In parallel I believe in the importance of focussing on developing deeper partnerships and communities of practice around a clear common purpose, where people who join, share an initial strategic analysis about what needs to change in the way civil society works. By bringing together these 'change agents' (or also called 'movement

diplomats’) the process to get to meaningful collaborations and outcomes can be accelerated. These movement diplomats for a GT can then help to spread learning across movements more quickly than if this happened through completely diverse groups.

If any activities are planned to build on this conference, I would recommend making a conscious decision and choice between these two options – both very much needed.

### **A process recommendation**

For future dialogues I would consider a broader range of social technologies (process techniques) that would make such an event more advantageous. I would start with using a much more flexible venue without any fixed chairs or tables and would increase the group participation using all kinds of tools including world café and open space techniques.