

Growing from “sustainability inside-out” into the emergence of a relational approach to transformation

The story of the project “A Mindset for the Anthropocene” (AMA)

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Abstract: In this chapter, we reflect on the development and impact of the project “A Mindset for the Anthropocene” a transformative transdisciplinary research process at the IASS Potsdam. The project started as an internal initiative of a few researchers who were interested in the role of inner qualities such as mindfulness and compassion in the context of sustainability. We examine the tensions and boundaries between purpose-driven transformative engagement as researchers, on the one hand, and the requirements and incentive structures of an academic working environment, on the other hand. We reflect on the challenges that the transformative aspiration of the project brought to the members when trying to integrate reflexive practices under the joint umbrella of a transdisciplinary research project. Finally, we evaluate the specific results and more ambiguous changes related to the work of the research project and discuss how these insights have influenced the plans for the next phase of the project.

1. The inception of the AMA project at the IASS Potsdam

The project “A Mindset for the Anthropocene” (AMA) emerged in 2015 from conversations among Mark Lawrence, a scientific director of the IASS, and a few natural science researchers in his team, especially Maheswar Rupakheti and Thomas Bruhn.

Original motivation and purpose

In the discourse about sustainability, we experienced a dominance of technology- and governance-oriented research while aspects regarding the cultivation of our inner states of mind and consciousness seemed largely neglected. We also experienced that inter- and transdisciplinary dialogues were often dysfunctional, not because of lacking or insufficient knowledge, but because of a lack of openness and trust among the participants, and because of an atmosphere of disconnection and competition. We

were convinced that facilitating sustainable transformations was also a challenge to ourselves as human beings – to our attitudes, our values and belief systems, and our modes of thought. And we were convinced that engaging in this field would make our transdisciplinary research efforts more effective and meaningful.

Against this background, the main purpose of the AMA project was to provide a safe space for reflection, exchange, and empowerment where the connections between inner transformation and sustainability could be explored openly. Through this process, we aimed at creating a more comprehensive academic understanding as a foundation for the discourse on this topic. And finally, it was an intention to support sustainable mindset practices at the IASS Potsdam as a contribution to a cultural and systemic change in our own local environment. The project members aspired to cultivate sustainable modes of being, living and working that were consistent with the investigations of the research work.

Initial idea and setup – Trusting an emergent process based on shared purpose

The project started as a loosely organized “study group” of researchers who invested some of their spare time into this field of interest. A lot of emphasis was put on crafting a “purpose document” articulating the motivation and values as well as a set of guiding questions. This one-page document was used as the boundary object (Trompette & Vinck, 2009) to which the initiators would regularly return to reflect the progress of their activities.

An explicit guidance suggested by one of the authors (ML) was to “imagine something that can become limitlessly big but is meaningful with every small step”. Guided by this notion, the other author (TB) developed a project scope and strategy. The main idea was to offer a space for people who were attracted to the project due to its purpose and guiding questions, and then host and facilitate an open and co-creative reflexive learning process that allows for a diversity of context specific answers and implications for the different participants. The other key element since the beginning was to always see the project as space for practice. The aspiration was to not only do research but also embody and practice the insights related to the research. The way how the research was being done should be reflected with respect to its coherence and hence be a subject to transformation and learning itself.

2. Activities and development over the years

As the research project was set up as an emergent, self-organized process, it went through several phases with unexpected dynamics and outcomes. In hindsight, we can summarize four phases:

1. Scoping phase (2015–2016) – Exploring the topic and specifying the (research) agenda
2. Action phase (2017–2019) – Being creative and generating initial output

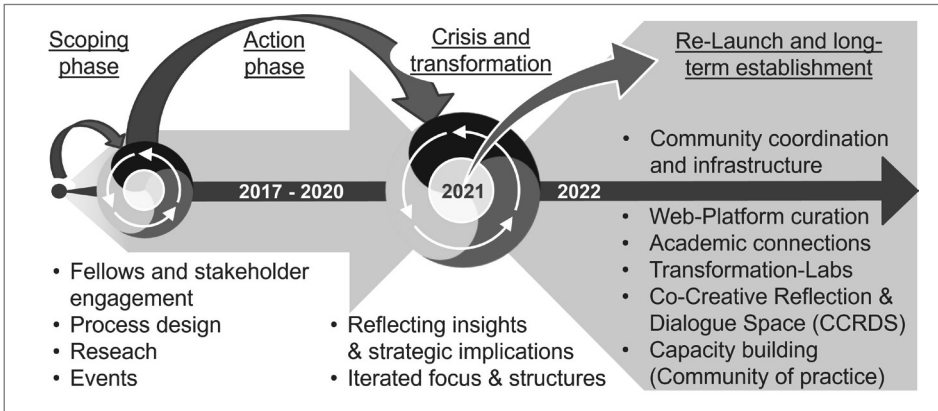


Fig. 1: Schematic overview of the different phases of the AMA project

3. Crisis and transformation (2020/2021) – Finalizing activities and separation of the team
4. Re-launch (2022) – Reflection of outcomes and strategic (re-)orientation

Scoping phase (2015–2016)

In 2015, the initiators held a series of workshops inviting IASS colleagues to give feedback and constructive comments about the idea and approach. Early in 2016, a modest amount of discretionary funding (~135,000€) was available for the IASS scientific directors and was applied by the authors as seed funding to host several further gatherings and invite short-term fellows into further co-creating the project.

During the scoping phase, we learned that there was a lot of both public and scientific interest in consciousness development outside the context of sustainability, for example, in the context of well-being and health, personal development, and (business) leadership. As we started engaging with people among sustainability-related stakeholders, we observed that – while often not mentioned in public – the interest in mindsets and the integration of reflexive practice was much further spread than expected. At the same time, many of our peers expressed concerns that such aspects of an “inner” transformation might be perceived as private or personal and be considered as non-scientific or spiritual or even “esoteric”. Thus, we became interested in finding ways to “break the taboo” and support a greater “legitimization” of open dialogue on this topic. In the exchange with various stakeholders, we identified three main activity fields:

- *Understand* – Developing both scientifically and practically a clearer understanding (also in academic and other publications) of how certain mindsets could be beneficial for sustainability

- *Connect* – Connecting individuals and stakeholders who are attracted by the overarching questions and purpose of the project (i.e., by establishing a web-based platform and database)
- *Practice & Inspire* – Experimenting with formats of research practice and stakeholder engagement that integrate the insights from the research about the relevance of inner transformation and virtues like mindfulness and compassion. This also included offering practical support for partnering institutions and stakeholders in their own similar efforts.

Further details about the stakeholder engagement process, especially the web-based platform and database, have been published elsewhere (Bruhn, Meier & Lawrence 2022).

Action phase (2017–2020)

Starting in 2017, the AMA project became a regular research project with 1.5–1.75 full time equivalents per year, supplemented by up to two student assistants. Within the three activity fields *Understand*, *Connect*, and *Practice & Inspire* the project conducted the following specific activities:

Literature research – Some of the staff members and fellows focused on reviewing existing research in the fields of philosophy, systems science, contemplative studies, and (social) psychology.

Stakeholder mapping and network development – Between 2016 and 2019, the project hosted in total 24 different fellows and guest researchers from different academic disciplines and non-academic sectors as well as from different cultural contexts. These guests connected the project with their own networks and communities. To share and visualize the growing field of connections, stakeholders and resources, the project developed a web-based database and platform: www.ama-project.org.

Hosting dialogue events and conferences – The project designed and (co-)hosted various kinds of events with invited experts and practitioners. Inspired by the traditions that the team members and guests brought into the project, these events experimented with formats that integrated academic discourse with aspects to inner transformation (experience, affect, reflection etc.) leading to the development and regular execution of a format for so-called “transformation lab”.

Developing integrated working structures – The group spent significant time and effort in structuring its work process. At the same time, during daily work all structures were treated with a leeway and iterated regularly as the project progressed. This included the above-mentioned purpose document, as well as visualizations of the different roles, objectives, and priorities within the group.

Figure 2 provides a schematic overview on the fellows and staff members engaged with the project over the years.

Crisis and transformation (2020–21)

In 2020, the project dynamics changed due to the combination of various crises, particularly in the time period between March 2020 and June 2021. Some team members left the IASS, also in connection with the Covid-19 pandemic and unclear perspectives. At the same time, several work streams (e.g., PhD theses) came to their finalization and future funding of the project was not secured. Consequently, no new personnel were hired, and ongoing activities were finalized before making new plans for the future.

Re-launch and long-term establishment (2022)

In autumn 2021, after a successful evaluation of its work, the project received positive signals regarding its future funding. Consequently, the project harvested insights about the working structures and strategic focus and orientation. Based on these reflections, new structures and routines were developed for a new phase of the project. The focus of the group was adjusted and renamed “Transformative Spaces and Mindsets” (TranS-Mind) with the commitment to continue (key elements of) the AMA project as one work stream under the umbrella of this new research group. With these new institutional and structural settings, the newly formed research group TranS-Mind started working on new research ventures in August 2022.

3. Results and impact reflection

Throughout its entire duration, the AMA project flourished in the tension between its purpose-driven origin and the output-driven evaluation schemes of its institutional context.

3.1 Growing around the question “What is impact?”

From its original inception, the AMA project was conceived from the notion of the envisioned (societal) impact. Simultaneously, its institutional setting required the project to also perform continuously within more conventional academic metrics. This tension was not exclusive to the AMA project and similarly impacted various research groups and discourses in the IASS, and it was connected to changing understandings in the academic discourse about the impact of transformative science. Given the innovative nature of this kind of research it was largely unclear to the respective researchers which kind of new criteria would be suitable to evaluate the impact of their work. At the same time, the experience from previous evaluations had shown that funding bodies and evaluation committees would – despite indications to the contrary and maybe due to the lack of better alternatives – look primarily at conventional metrics like peer-reviewed journal articles and related citation numbers and impact factors.

3.2 Research insights

During the duration of the project, it became clear that the field of complex systems science (Capra & Luisi, 2014; Clemens, 2009; Espinosa & Porter, 2011; Kauffman, 2015; Kay, 1999; Morin, 1992; Nicolis & Nicolis, 2012) offered a framework to integrate the aspects of mindsets and sustainability. Research showed that the human-earth system can be understood as a *cognitive* complex system (Manuel-Navarrete, 2015; Manuel-Navarrete, 2001; Sawyer, 2005) and that human mindsets (including intentionality, ethical orientation etc.) are aspects of subjectivity with great transformative potential. Following this perspective, it became clear that the distinction between “inner” and “outer” transformation might reproduce understandings in which one aspect was used in utility for the other. Overcoming this dichotomy and moving towards a relational approach to sustainability became a central theme for the project.

At the same time, many of our peers appreciated the emphasis on “inner transformation” as it highlighted a dimension of systemic change (namely the subjective one) that was usually underrepresented or marginalized. So, the project continued using the term while simultaneously becoming more and more critical about it. From this emerging “relational” perspective, the challenges of the transformation to sustainability were seen as a challenge for systems change which in turn required a change in relationship patterns across a systemic context (Capra & Luisi, 2014; Kuenkel, 2016). And while it was acknowledged that certain systemic conditions incentivize the emergence of specific relationship patterns, a specific characteristic of humans was seen in the ability to intentionally change their subjectivity (e.g., through reflexivity) and hence the nature and patterns of their own relationships across all kinds of relationality within the system (Manuel-Navarrete, 2015).

Based on this understanding, the project developed the format of “Transformation Labs”, mentioned above, as a practical approach to facilitate group processes in ways that were coherent with the results of the research. This approach was influenced by existing co-creative approaches such as Theory U, Art of Hosting, Design Thinking and others, and simultaneously integrated practices related to mindset change, inspired for example by formats from psycho-dynamic supervision, systemic coaching or other reflexive or diffractive practices. The project experimented with offering these transformation labs in various (cultural) contexts (China, U.S., Europe ...) and with different stakeholder groups (academics, activists, political decision makers, spiritual groups, businesses ...) learning how to offer spaces that were safe enough for individuals and groups to expose themselves to the potentially existential discomfort that it may mean to question their own mental models. Mutual trust and ability for constructive conflict were identified as key elements of such spaces which therefore demanded sophisticated process knowledge (Lawrence, Williams, Nanz & Renn, 2022) and adequate moderation or maybe therapeutic expertise.

3.3 Academic output

Between its inception in 2015 and its relaunch in 2022, the AMA project generated the following academic output:

- 12 peer-reviewed articles first-authored by a member of the project
- 3 peer-reviewed articles co-authored by a member of the project
- 2 PhD theses
- 4 M. A. theses
- 12 book chapters
- 1 popular science book
- 1 report
- 5 articles in other formats (blogs articles, discussion papers etc.)
- 147 contributions to conferences or workshops (talks, panels, sessions ...)
- 45 dialogue events
- 4 larger conferences (transformation labs)
- 8 transformation labs facilitated as service to external partners
- 20+ public media appearances (media interviews, YouTube videos, podcasts, etc. incl. Frankfurter Rundschau, Süddeutsche Zeitung and others)

3.4 Emergent developments

While most of the outcomes of the project can be considered “emergent” because they were not planned but resulted from the co-creative dynamic of the group in its changing constellation, a few specific developments can be mentioned here to exemplify dynamics that had not been anticipated at any stage of the strategic planning of the project:

- Building on a *Transcultural Dialogue Series* (Fang, 2022), a former member of the core group established a volunteer network and later founded a consulting company, Man Diao Transcultural Consulting, which offers coaching and empowerment formats for groups of change agents.
- An intervention of one of the team members at the UNFCCC COP24 created so much resonance inside and outside the IASS that it developed into a large-scale activity and eventually an ongoing project called the *Co-Creative Reflection & Dialogue Space (CCRDS)*. This CCRDS became one of the most successful activities of the AMA project and was regularly used to exemplify the IASS’ approach towards science communication and transformative research. (Fraude et al., 2021; Mar et al., 2021; Wamsler et al., 2020)
- The format of the “Transformation Labs” was received so positively that the group has been receiving a growing number of requests from academic institutions to offer such format(s) as service to support the inter- and transdisciplinary work of these organizations. In 2022 alone, a total number of 8 transformations labs were offered in this way.

3.5 Network effects

Throughout the years, the project has experienced itself increasingly as a node in a lively and rapidly growing network of people and organizations that share a certain sense of purpose and key values. This includes cooperation with academic organizations as well as spiritual organizations or other non-academic organizations. As these connections grow and mature, the project can further sharpen its focus on what it can uniquely contribute to this emerging network.

Being part of this network, a repeated experience was that the project envisioned a certain activity related to its purpose and then realized that another organization was already developing something very similar. For example, the non-profit organization “Inner Development Goals” was launched around the year 2019 and became highly active and successful. Only later, the AMA project realized that several of its network partners were directly or indirectly involved in the establishment of this initiative.

Also, the project repeatedly discovered similar initiatives emerging in various other contexts, such as the Conscious Food Systems Alliance (CoFSA) of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). Clearly, the topic of mindsets is no longer a niche topic addressed by disconnected and marginalized players. Much to the contrary, it seems to be an issue growing rapidly “under the radar”. While the initiators of the project (and their peers) originally felt quite vulnerable in exposing their interest in mindsets and inner transformation, it is now perceived as an important issue within the discourse on sustainability and transformation (Wamsler et al., 2019; Wamsler et al., 2021; Woiwode et al., 2021) that is also being picked up in IPCC reports (IPCC, 2022).

While the impression of the project members was often that the impact of the project was much smaller than its aspirations, the repeated feedback from various peers has been that the project was perceived as a “lighthouse project” and “powerful and encouraging inspiration” or a “beacon and symbol of hope for this crucial topic”. Feedback like this has prompted the project to continuously reflect on and revise its understanding of impact. It seems that even with its very limited personnel and financial capacities and limited visibility, the project has been serving an important role for the network of stakeholders that focus on the integration of mindsets and sustainability. Interestingly, several partners emphasized that even more than its academic quality they particularly appreciated the honesty and genuineness of the project and its purpose. In our perspective, the quality of the relationships that emerged around the carefully crafted purpose behind the AMA project is the most transformative “resource” that has been developed through the activities of the project.

4. Discussion: Reflecting the dynamics and outcome of seven years

The key motivation of the initiators of the AMA project was to create a space for networking and co-creative discourse among academic and non-academic perspectives on mindsets and sustainability. The hope was to find an academically suitable

language for the topic, stimulate network effects and overcome experiences of marginalization both personally and for the field of research. While the project has been successful in many aspects it is also clear that many developments have been different from what the initiators had envisioned.

4.1 Successfully growing around the purpose of the project

Reflecting where the project stands after seven years, the initiators and leaders of the project consider it a great success. Having started from a personal interest and curiosity combined with subjective experience and intuition, we now feel comfortable addressing the topic in a way that we consider academically viable. The project has shown that people and stakeholders interested in this field (including its initiators) are not as alone and marginalized as they may have once believed, and the research work of the past years has contributed to making this field of people, organizations, and activities more visible and accessible. Also, the project has helped in connecting and catalyzing the relationships among many stakeholders. And finally, the project has developed ways to regularly host spaces that allow for the integration of issues around mindsets and sustainability.

So, clearly, the aspects formulated in the original purpose document have successfully guided the project during the period 2015–2021. During the process of doing so, it felt somewhat slow and “unproductive” compared to our usual research work. In hindsight, however, we are grateful for having spent so much time on crafting and deepening this shared sense of purpose. The development of the project confirms that the efforts spent on this purpose document have provided an essential contribution to the successful development of the AMA project.

4.2 Shortcomings and failures of the project

At the same time, the project has come with substantial disillusionment and experiences which one might consider as failures. For example, an explicit aspiration of the initiators had been to learn “not only to do research on sustainability but also to do research sustainably”. And while substantial steps were made in this direction, we cannot claim to have arrived at this goal. The activities of the project involve the use of substantial amounts of resources (energy, CO₂ emissions, money, etc.) that are not directly compensated or regenerated adequately by the project. Furthermore, while the vision of the project was to contribute to a more mindful and compassionate working culture at the IASS and its environment, the authors acknowledge that the last years have come along with substantial conflicts that – despite all practice of mindfulness and compassion – were not resolved as harmoniously and mutually supportively as the authors would have hoped or expected. And at the same time, we are aware that many of these aspects were probably outside the influence of the project’s activities, and also some of the project’s aspirations may have been overly ambitious.

Another insight is that the project overstretched its capacities to integrate many diverse perspectives on eye-level. Throughout its duration, the project experienced substantial changes and adjustments, both in terms of structure and personnel. Particularly, the fellows and guest researchers were involved in various ways and for different durations. Some of them were co-designing the framing and scope of the entire project while others made more focused contributions. The fluctuations of personnel created repeated discussions about the focus, strategic objectives, and (temporary) understandings of key terms whenever new people joined and brought a new perspective into the project. This created tensions like frustration and impatience in the group. Consequently, after engaging intensely with a high number of fellows and guests in 2016 and 2017, the project focused on developing a functional routine for the core group of 4 members and one long-term fellow (as a permanent guest) which stayed together between mid-2018 and spring 2020.

An important learning resulted from mingling the boundaries between personal involvement and professional engagement. While the focus on a shared sense of purpose invited all group members to engage personally with the project, this personal involvement caused conflicts that challenged the project and its leadership. For instance, the (shared) aspiration to integrate reflexive practices about one's own mindsets, worldviews, and assumptions into the work routines opened dynamics and exposed vulnerabilities that several team members felt uncomfortable with. It became clear that a space for these kinds of practices required advanced professional skills that the project leadership had not yet acquired and that were usually not foreseen for the leadership of an academic project. These experiences shaped the project's understanding of transformative spaces and prompted one of the authors (the group leader TB) to participate in a 3-year M. A. study program on psycho-dynamic leadership (see section 5.3).

4.3 Embracing the impermanence and uncertainty of transformative processes

Interestingly, these reflections resonate in some sense also with the insights of the research process, and more generally with many transdisciplinary research processes (Lawrence et al., 2022). Originally, the project started with a notion that mindsets such as mindfulness and compassion would open pathways towards more sustainable futures. The research work revealed, however, that it is more adequate to consider mindsets not as "inner" qualities but as *relational* qualities. In this relational understanding, we cannot see mindsets as tools for achieving preconceived visions of the future. Rather, we understand mindsets as subjective manifestations of and contributions to a systemic change that is based on changing relationship patterns. This systemic transformation of relationship patterns is a process that involves tension and conflict as aspects and drivers of change towards unknown emergent futures. Mindsets and "inner" qualities such as mindfulness and compassion are part of the subjective contributions humans can make as participants of this systemic transformation process.

The project was initiated out of a combination of scientific curiosity and normative conviction. This tension was new to the initiators who had previously worked almost exclusively in the natural sciences. Yet, as the project progressed, this tension seemed to be a relatively common feature of the transformative research activities we connected with: Firstly, our research was oriented towards sustainability, i.e., it was fundamentally guided by normative understandings and respective assumptions (which in themselves can be subject to change). Secondly, as researchers we were used to being experts on a certain topic and thus tended to assume that – after respective research – we could know what is true or false. However, thirdly, as hosts of a transdisciplinary learning process (Lawrence et al., 2022) we had to hold a space sufficiently open for co-creation among various stakeholders and perspectives towards an unplanned outcome. The depth of this tension was unknown to the initiators when the project was started. Many of the dynamics experienced during the project can be interpreted at least partly as results from the lack of structures that allowed us and others to deal with this tension. And at the same time, the experience of this tension allowed the project to actively develop its own structures and routines as an expression of its approach toward transformative research.

So, the reflections on the impact of the project present the authors with insights that are very meaningful and yet, at least in parts, quite different from the aspirations originally leading to the establishment of the project. Maybe this phenomenon can also be considered an element that characterizes the research project as a *transformative research* process.

5. Outlook: Lessons and concrete plans for the next phase

Considering these above-mentioned ambiguities and unexpected developments, there are a few lessons from the last seven years that the authors would like to highlight for further consideration and some of which have shaped the planning for the next project phase. Essentially, they all relate to the challenges of operating in ambiguous settings and navigating the tensions between structural stability and planning, on the one hand, and flexibility and space for emergence, on the other hand. Here, we would like to focus on a few selected aspects related to creating strategic orientation, effective working structures, and adequate leadership.

5.1 Balancing impact-driven and incentive-driven work

Clearly, it created a tension for the project to continuously balance its orientation towards a (normative) purpose with the needs of its institutional context. For the group members and group leadership, it seems clear that the primary impact of the project may not be adequately assessed by indicators that are conventionally used in the scientific system (number and citations of publications, h-index, impact factors, etc.). At the same time, the funding of the project has come from an institutional setup that primarily uses these established indicators to assess the impact of research activities.

In the past, the researchers within the AMA project would often prioritize asking themselves how *meaningful* their activities were and focus less on the performance or accomplishments of the project with respect to established academic metrics. The leadership of the project, however, felt an obligation to ensure that also the conventional metrics are served adequately in order to be able to justify the activities to the funders. As long as the AMA project is conducted in a context of a system that primarily uses conventional evaluation metrics, this tension will continue to be present and have an influence on the project. For the future, therefore, the project aims to foster research about innovative, academically viable criteria for assessing the impact of its transformative research work. Such research would help both the AMA project and its peers in showcasing the academic viability of their results without giving up their impact-driven transformative orientation.

5.2 Effective work structures for transformative research team

While the *purpose* of the project has been clear and shared by all group members, it was a challenge for the project that the different group members did not necessarily pursue shared goals and *outcomes*. In hindsight the structures of the project were effective to provide inspiration and mutual enrichment for a *group* of researchers. However, they were not effective for working as a *team* towards joint objectives. The tension that will continue to exist lies in the aspiration to provide a space for mutual learning that is open enough to allow for a diversity of outcomes and simultaneously maintain a certain coherence of the group. A learning from the past is that – beyond a shared sense of purpose – also the commitment towards (at least some) joint activities and objectives is crucial for the coherence of the group.

For the near future, the project has developed a visual strategy compass that integrates an earlier visual compass mentioned in section 2.2. with a mapping of roles and activities. This new strategy compass (see figure 3) provides a visual overview of the following questions:

- What is the purpose and what are the guiding (research) questions of the project?
- Which objectives does the project pursue?
- What are the activity types the project is running?
- What specific activities are currently active in the group?
- Who is currently working in the group and ...
 - what are the tasks, activities, and responsibilities of the different group members?
- How do the different activities contribute to specific objectives of the project?
- Which other organizations and stakeholders is the group connecting with?

In this strategy compass, the set of objectives results from a combination of conventional metrics such as publications with additional objectives such as “good relationships”, “vivid community”, and even completely subjective indicators like “joy” and

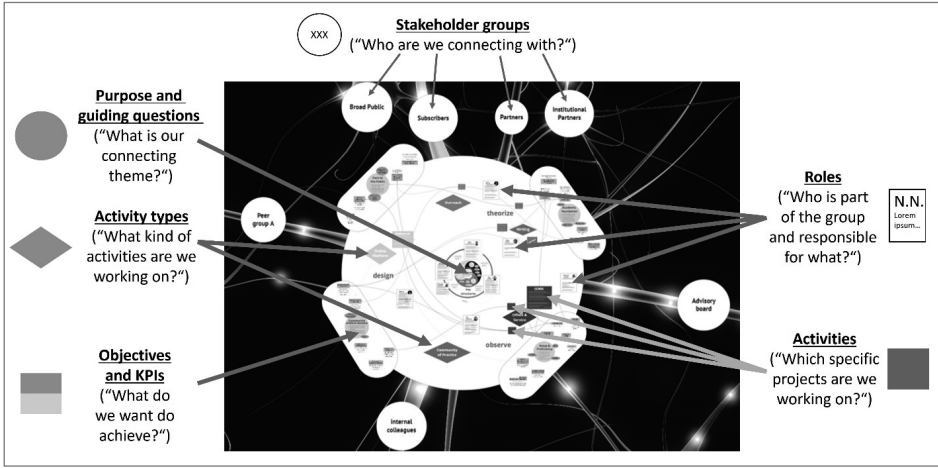


Fig. 2: New visual strategy compass of the research group Trans-Mind. This tool provides an overview of the purpose and all objectives, roles, and ongoing activities of the group and is used for strategic overview and decision-making. Lines are used to indicate responsibilities of people for specific activities and contributions of activities to specific objectives.

“meaning”. All objectives are treated on eye-level and the aspiration of the project is to grow continuously with respect to all these indicators. Around the shared purpose and within the space between these objectives, individual group members are creating, reflecting, and iterating their roles in a way that meets the needs and priorities for their career and simultaneously contributes to the strategic goals of the project they belong to. In specific “strategy meetings”, the group reflects regularly if and to what extent some objectives are prioritized over others and how this affects the strategic balance and orientation for the development of the project.

Based on the learnings from the previous phase the group has now a regular routine of weekly meetings with rotating foci. All meetings are designed in such a way that they do not require personal presence.

- I. *Strategy* – Here, the strategy compass serves as a foundation for all group members to present and discuss ideas for new and ongoing activities and provide a basis for decisions on how to prioritize and allocate resources.
- II. *Discourse* – Meetings to discuss specific concepts and research questions that are of interest to the entire group.
- III. *Social activities* – Opportunity to meet outside the work context and spend time together for free-flowing conversation and other activities.
- IV. *Updates and administration* – Meetings for all issues related to administration and leadership.
- V. *Process Reflection* – Here, the team uses an online whiteboard with a survey of ~20 qualitative and quantitative questions to reflect internal dynamics, conflicts, and needs of the project and its members in relation to the work.

5.3 Life-long learning as researchers and leaders

The developments around the AMA project invite its members to continuously develop new skills and understandings. With the decision to initiate the AMA project, we as project initiators and leaders have left the comfort zone of our previous academic expertise and stepped into a field of research that we were not adequately prepared for, neither with respect to our academical expertise nor with respect to our personal leadership skills. In making this step, we opened ourselves to experiences that challenged our previous perspective and capacities, and we acknowledge that we were not able to provide the kind of leadership that this topic would ideally have required. Acknowledging these professional and personal limitations, one of the authors (the group leader TB) has participated in a three-year master program on psycho-dynamic leadership and consulting. The insights from this master program have influenced the projects' transdisciplinary understanding of transformation processes and simultaneously helped in developing the capacities to lead a group on such a research topic more adequately.

At the same time, precisely these steps outside our academic comfort zone initiated a learning process that created immense professional and personal fulfilment and meaningful impact on ourselves, our research work, and our peers. In hindsight, our impression is that the activities and results of the AMA project have inspired many people to rethink and re-design fundamental aspects of their approaches to sustainability-related transformation. And just as we seem to have encouraged others, we feel encouraged by the resonances and support we have been experiencing. We have embraced our learning edges and treated them as invitations to grow into new capacities, and we will continue to take on the challenge to integrate the conceptual findings of the AMA project into our daily routines and into our approach to transformative research and leadership.

Presented with these challenges we can identify several aspects for the near future: While many approaches to transformative leadership and mindsets emphasize qualities of "trusting the process of emergence", we have experienced the limitations of these approaches in certain institutional contexts. The task for the future seems to be to give space for emergence while acknowledging the contextual limitations. The challenge is to remain functional with respect to the metrics of the context while simultaneously reflecting and challenging these metrics and conditions. We do not want to be pushed into an "either-or" perspective on this tension but embrace this tension constructively as a source for the transformative impact of our research work. Remaining sensitive to the balance within this tension – both institutionally and from a leadership perspective – and learning to "dance with our system" (Meadows, 2001) seems to be the key challenge for the next phase of the AMA project.

6. Summary: Clarity of purpose as invisible leader of the project

In this chapter, we have reflected on some key aspects of the transformative research project AMA at the IASS Potsdam. Starting from an interest in integrating reflexive approaches of inner transformation in the context of sustainability, the AMA project has developed in unexpected ways. The entire project was possible only due to opportunities and flexibilities in the funding of the IASS allowing us to orient the project primarily around a sense of purpose and less toward conventional academic outputs. While the project has been fruitful in many ways, we see its primary success in the network dynamics that have been catalyzed through the project. Around the AMA project a network of previously isolated or marginalized people, stakeholders, and organizations has formed that is active as a lively driver of sustainability transformations. The topic of mindsets has become a well-established element in the discourse on sustainability science and many stakeholders have integrated reflexive practices successfully into their efforts for socio-ecological transformation. Also, we as researchers feel no longer uncomfortable in speaking up for this topic but feel encouraged and supported by the resonances we have experienced. While many of the specific plans developed very differently compared to our original notions, our observations largely confirm the fundamental aspirations we had when establishing the project in the year 2015. We would like to emphasize, that we often cannot attribute these phenomena directly as “impact” to the work of the AMA project. Those outcomes, however, which we can identify as direct effects resulting from the efforts of the AMA project, are viable enough to justify continued research and other transformative activities in this field.

The time spent on developing the purpose has turned out to be well-invested time, providing strategic orientation and a sense of identity to the project while many of the specific activities and outcomes of the project developed very differently from what the initiators could have imagined. And while the project itself continues to grow, its aspirations are continuously shrinking as the project is becoming part of an emerging network of people and organizations with similar purposes. For its next phase, the contributions that the AMA project needs and wishes to make to this network in order to serve its purpose are becoming more and more focused, without losing sight of its overarching aspiration and vision.

Authors

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