
RIFS WORKSHOP SUMMARY

Research Institute for Sustainability (RIFS)

A Journey of Collective Scientific Learning

A Networking Event on Transformative Research
Hosted by the Austrian Institute of Technology

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Summary

What is Transformative Research? What kind of knowledge and capacities can research contribute to societal transformation? And how (much) should scientists reflect and adapt their own roles in complex processes of societal change and transform their practice?

These questions took centre-stage at a workshop on "Advancing Transformative Research" hosted by the Centre for Innovation Systems & Policy Austrian Institute of Technology (AIT) in December 2022. Around 25 participants from universities and research centres across Europe and beyond accepted the invitation to the hybrid event in Vienna. Together, participants discussed definitions, theories, and the challenge of gaining social legitimacy for transformative research, as well as the shifting roles of transformative scientists.

In this report, the authors reflect on three key lessons they learned for the community from the two-day event that led to follow-up questions and elaborations:

- Transformative research critically advances from collaborative questioning: Is it really a matter of combining efforts to formulate the right questions instead of generating fast knowledge and solutions?
- Transformative research benefits from a shared identity: Who are we and what does transformative research change for us in our role and every-day scientific practice?
- Embodying participatory practices is key for transformative research: What kind of attitudes and formats do we use to come together in meaningful ways?

At the end of the event, participants sought further debate and collaboration to expand the potential of transformative research. In this regard, the TranS-Mind research group at RIFS would be happy to facilitate this discussion as a next step of a collective learning journey in Potsdam as we explore further opportunities for collaboration, sharing, and engagement.

Acknowledgements

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* Both authors contributed equally and are to be considered as first authors of the report

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1. Introduction

What is Transformative Research? What kind of knowledge and capacities can research contribute to societal transformation? How (much) should scientists reflect and adapt their roles in complex processes of change and transform their practice?

These questions took centre-stage at a workshop titled “**Advancing Transformative Research: Towards a research community that makes a difference**” organized and hosted by the [Center for Innovation Systems & Policy Austrian Institute of Technology \(AIT\)](#). An international group of scholars and practitioners from the emerging field of transformation-oriented research and practice followed the call to winterly Vienna. The two-day workshop in December 2022 was based on the idea that the emerging field of transformative research could be promoted by bringing together researchers who are pursuing this explorative path. In the following we want to reflect on our impressions and insights as well as the questions resulting from the event.

Transformative research focuses on understanding real-world problems of unsustainability and on developing knowledge to solve problems. It builds on the acknowledgement that real-world problems are persistent, complex, ambiguous and require fundamental societal change processes (so called “transformations”) to be overcome. This research stream takes an explicitly interventionist approach, aiming to catalyse societal change processes by contributing target, transformation, system and process knowledge in various forms. Here, current scholarship emphasizes the need for interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary collaborations, which is in itself a great challenge. It also highlights the importance of ethical aspects and considering the impact on and involvement of (marginalized) communities and their knowledge while focusing on long-lasting and foundational change. Transformative research builds on ambitious processes that need to be well designed and continuously reflected upon, representing a new form of science that aims to transcend traditional understandings and roles. This process may carry the potential of new perspectives on why and how research is done and can translate into action and an opening up for cooperation across various disciplines. The scientific community is working on transformative research from different angles and disciplines where debate and co-creation is vital. Jointly discussing recurring questions, formulating emerging issues, and learning to think across and beyond disciplinary boundaries may foster community building and academic advancement.

The creation of a learning and collaboration platform connecting various transformation-oriented researchers and practitioners can be vital to advance the emergence of the field. In this context the AIT organized a two-day workshop and created space for discussing definitions, delimitations, theoretical approaches, and further development towards a common research agenda on transformative research, as well as possible future collaboration. The hybrid event was attended by just under 25 participants from the universities of Lund, Strasbourg, Utrecht, TU Dortmund, Freiburg, Copenhagen Business School and Arizona State University. The Dutch Research Institute for Transitions, Fraunhofer ISI and the European Commission's Joint Research Centre also followed the invitation. RIFS participated with three researchers from the research group on Transformative Spaces and Mindsets. Titel



Figure 1. Participants of the workshop “Advancing Transformative Research”, initiated by the Austrian Institute of Technology in Vienna, December 2022.

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Transformative Spaces and Mindsets (TranS-Mind) in a nutshell

RIFS aims to conduct and advance transformative research in close collaboration with policymakers, industry representatives and civil society organizations. Here, the research group TranS-Mind researches on and develops innovative formats to facilitate reflection, social learning and improve agency, including a co-creative reflection and dialogue space at the UNFCCC COP climate negotiations. TranS-Mind is interested in facilitating a network and hosting communities that connect different stakeholders from science, society, and spirituality to explore how transformation processes can benefit from the integration of such diverse perspectives. TranS-Mind contributes to the larger research area on [Transdisciplinary Methods, Processes and Practices](#).

Guided by the three core questions mentioned above, discussions during the workshop focused on definitions, terminologies, and concepts. Critical reflections regarding experiences from the field were shared. Participants shared their experiences on the struggle to gain societal legitimacy for transformation-oriented research projects and respective researcher roles. A multi-method approach to transformative research was discussed, which enables researchers to meet scientific standards but also to do justice to societal interests. Transformative policy research also loomed large in discussions, with a particular focus on elements such as the high degree of uncertainty, system-based theory of change, contextualization, strategic ambition, subjectivity, reflexive practice, mixed-methods, co-creation and normative deliberation. RIFS’ contributions focused on practicing reflexivity and enabling social learning in transformative research (Felix Beyers and Valerie Voggenreiter) and on essentials of action-oriented and second order transitions and transformations research (Niko Schöpke).

2. Advancing transformative research: Three insights and possible next steps

Keep asking questions

The workshop allowed participants to gain a better understanding of what we collectively mean by transformative research and to advance critical questioning. Instead of developing clear and foreclosing answers, participants explored the multiple perspectives and understandings of transformative research. Such open exchange on emerging issues is desirable. For example, the newly evolving role of scientists as active members and interveners in transformation processes gives rise to many facets that require constant reflection. One obvious struggle that the participants shared was the aspiration for objectivity of often context-specific scientific results, which is compounded by the pressure to produce results that serve both science and society. The claim to address both spheres, knowledge production as well as transformative action, requires a constant balancing and brings the challenge of entanglement with it. Unforeseen questions are constant companions during this process. The workshop offered the great opportunity to discuss the different elements, the advantages and disadvantages, definitions and modes of the complex field of transformation-oriented research. Discussions stimulated new ideas and thoughts, generating resources for further steps. As such, maybe the simplest but nonetheless fundamental outcome was the broad agreement on a need for continuing the dialogue and scientific conversations. This should aim to collaboratively advance the conceptual, empirical and practice-oriented understanding of transformative research by continuously challenging assumptions and asking questions.

Move beyond exploration by developing shared purpose

During the last hours of the workshop, participants discussed the possibility of initiating communities of practice for transformative research. Participants were both overwhelmed by the diversity of actors, approaches and projects presented, and simultaneously felt inspired and encouraged. A participant from one North American university commented that, at the beginning of (any kind of) group formation, there is often diversity, chaos, and a lack of mutual understanding. The value of this exploratory phase was emphasized. Yet, there was agreement on the need to move beyond exploration by developing a common orientation and sense of purpose. Here, a safe-enough space and commitment to exchange on a regular basis may create an atmosphere for appreciative communication of existing values and interests, as well as insecurities, doubts and potential conflicts. Patience, trust and an error-friendly culture can develop. On this basis, a shared purpose can be formulated and agreed upon, which may serve as a source for creating a common identity.

However, the added value of yet another research community committed to serving society was questioned. What would be the difference to existing communities? The necessity was seen to initially investigate existing groups that are shaping the field, such as the Transformations Community, Sustainability Transition Research Network, Action Research Plus, swiss TD-Net, Action Research Plus community and the upcoming German “Fachgesellschaft für transdisziplinäre und partizipative Forschung” based at TU Berlin.

Transformation-oriented research already plays a role in various existing communities. However, these research approaches are scattered and there may be room to fruitfully organize exchange and learning with a focus on building connections between transformative research and existing dynamics and schools. This is not to say that diversity in research communities is not desirable. But more could be done to figure out how to support one another. Linking actors from the nexus between transformative research and co-creative policymaking was also identified as a potential gap and opportunity. A strategy to move forward could be to clarify a possible shared intention while celebrating different definitions and approaches of the group in relation to existing communities first. Then, to decide whether the workshop should be seen as a step towards intentional community-building or rather as a network development and learning event in its own right.

Embody transformative, participatory research practice

The third learning addresses the necessity of authenticity within the field. If transformation is demanded, it is indispensable to reflect one's own thinking, acting, and working as researcher and/or facilitator. Conscious and mindful facilitation is crucial both in the design of networking events as well as in project implementation processes. Active engagement of researchers (amongst themselves as well as stakeholders) and the development of a trustful environment (for example by allowing questions constantly and an error-friendly atmosphere) within a group of participants can facilitate reflection and a form of agency and are key for meaningful experiences. Hence, a participatory research practice may eventually lead to co-production of knowledge between scientists and stakeholders. One participant suggested focusing on the potentials that emerge once scientists go beyond the philosophical realm and e.g., embody their knowledge by initiating or being part of projects that address real-world problems. The possibility of science gaining power again by moving from knowledge to action, through implementation and by engaging with the arts for example, was highlighted too.

The need to encourage greater acceptance, exploration, and use of participatory, transformative methods to facilitate dialogue between stakeholders, also within research teams and communities may be worth striving for. The learning takes place as the experience unfolds and asks for constant reflexivity and meaning making for each process.

3. Outlook: A continuous learning journey for transformative research

The questions with which the AIT invited, and which led to meaningful discussions and questions during the time in Vienna highlighted the importance of paying more attention to process knowledge in sustainability research. As mentioned in the previous section, each step towards fostering Transformative Research requires a form of inventory. It might be beneficial to consider the path as a source of knowledge before considering the spheres of transformation-, systems and target knowledge. Process knowledge might encourage especially non-academic stakeholders to initiate and support transformations towards sustainability.

Contrary to the habit of focusing on fast solutions, it can be beneficial to put linear thinking aside and focus on transformative potentials in oneself and one's environment. This requires practice, time, and community-building with clear purpose and room for experimentation. The Vienna workshop provided insights on collaborative transformative research and can be built upon by creating formats that encourage cross-pollination and less hierarchical structures. It's important for research communities to foster reflexivity and learning within institutions despite the lack of transformative practices. Researchers within this realm support and initiate projects, engage stakeholders, lead, and moderate collaboration. They generate new practical knowledge through engaging stakeholders, leading cooperation, and supporting projects, which can open up new fields of knowledge, action, and reflection on a joint learning journey.

To enable such a joint learning journey towards a transformative research community, a collaborative and dynamic process is necessary that fosters innovative ideas, interdisciplinary cooperation and mutual understanding as well as trust and a shared vision. In this way, diverse perspectives can converge, leading to new insights and solutions beyond silo-thinking. As the workshop in Vienna has shown, we need to create and facilitate opportunities for open communication, value diverse opinions and recognize the collective potential for transformative research by enhancing motivation and enthusiasm to work together. Continuous Learning is a crucial element and needs to be nurtured within the research community in order to foster continuous growth within a learning-oriented culture. Transformational research often involves venturing into uncharted territories and requires transparent discussion of the potential impacts (both positive and negative) of transformative research on individuals, communities, and the environment. This type of research benefits from joint reflection and taking the time and space to engage with critical questions as well as external perspectives that enrich the research process and facilitate the translation of research findings into real-world applications.

By enabling a joint learning journey, researchers can harness the collective power of their diverse perspectives and expertise. Consequently, we want to thank the AIT and all participants for opening and holding the space as well as for committing time to be able to connect and ask powerful questions in a welcoming, appreciative setting. In this regard, we would like to build upon this workshop and invite the community to join us at RIFS in Potsdam for further debate on the importance of a continuous learning journey for transformative research. The TranS-Mind research group at RIFS would be happy to facilitate as we explore further opportunities for collaboration, sharing, and engagement.

4. About the authors

Valerie Voggenreiter

is a social scientist who sees herself as a generalist and works on the question of how sustainability can be cultivated as a life-serving mindset for social-ecological transformation. Self-efficacy, reflection and courage to act are constant companions for her to transform deep-seated ways of thinking, feeling, and acting together.

Felix Beyers

is a research associate seeking to deepen theory and practical design for transdisciplinary research processes. He is particularly interested in the design and exploration of transformative spaces for collaborative governance and social learning among heterogeneous actors in diverse political contexts to foster sustainable transformation.



The **Research Institute for Sustainability (RIFS)** conducts research with the aim of investigating, identifying, and advancing development pathways for transformation processes towards sustainability in Germany and abroad. The Institute joined the Helmholtz Association in 2023 and is affiliated with the Helmholtz Centre Potsdam – GFZ German Research Centre for Geosciences. Its research approach is transdisciplinary, transformative, and co-creative. The Institute cooperates with partners in science, political and administrative institutions, the business community, and civil society to develop solutions for sustainability challenges that enjoy broad public support. Its central research topics include the energy transition, climate change and socio-technical transformations, as well as sustainable governance and participation. A strong network of national and international partners and a Fellow Programme supports the work of the Institute.

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