

## RIFS-Blogpost

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[Dachzeile]

# Transformative Partnerships: Reflections on the 2023 Transformations Conference Hub in Prague

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In July, RIFS researchers participated in the 2023 Transformation Conference at the [European Hub in Prague](#) hosted by [Czech Globe - Global Change Research Institute CAS](#). The [Transformations Conference](#), with the main theme: "Transformative Partnerships for a Better World" was actually held on-site in Sydney from 12-14 July 2023, but due to environmental considerations to reduce international travel by activists and researchers, it was extended to include a workshop in Portland, Maine, and a European Hub in Prague. The different strands were brought together via an online platform with live broadcasts and networking opportunities. Together, they were able to discuss and highlight the role of effective, inclusive, and transformative partnerships in practice.

The event was not about imparting complex theories or outsmarting each other with scientific concepts. The idea was rather that the concept of transformation has something to do with all of us and our personalities and can be felt and experienced on an individual level. One participant, for example, argued that from her point of view transformation is hardly possible as long as we do not understand change as part of our self and we train our abilities of acting and sensing in this regard. The speakers and participants also spoke more about the importance of personal relationships for transformative partnerships between science and practice. Transformation could be understood as a personal state that unfolds in each moment and is influenced by how we perform and become active in social relationships. Accordingly, conference participants discussed not only the usual foci of transformation, namely those of knowing and doing, but also and especially those of feeling and sensing, which in turn gives us hope that positive change is not only possible but can also be experienced from the heart.

These and other observations were collected by a group of so-called "sense-makers" at the three different physical spaces of the conference. Selected researchers from the RIFS "[Transformative Spaces and Mindsets](#)" project and other conference participants who were part of the Sense-Makers conducted interviews and video recordings with speakers and participants, asking questions about the day's theme such as: "How do we use different sources of knowledge for transformative partnerships?", "How do we mobilize knowledge and create agency for transformative partnerships?" and "What is missing for systems change?" The sense-makers had the opportunity to share their experiences via the online platform and then reflect on them collectively. In Sydney, a sense-making space was set up to support these collective reflection processes online. According to the motto: "We

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are more feeling than thinking beings", which was underlined by a keynote speaker in Prague on the topic of "Sense-Makers", the participants were able to collectively classify and reflect on the effects of new encounters, insights, and interactions.

Following these processes, we would like to present two reflective stories on the question of what constitutes a transformative partnership to continue the discussions of the conference.

**1 A personal reflection by Carolin Fraude: Informal breaks serve meaningful encounters.**

Breaks or informal evening settings after a long conference day are often a precious space for deep conversations. These discussions can serve to make conference insights more personal and context-specific. Walking with another conference participant over the beautiful bridges and riverbanks of Prague, we started to talk about the conference and its broader contexts, the challenging global crises of environmental destruction. We agreed that understanding processes of transformation is extremely important and that the conference and its participants were offering valuable concepts and insights into transformations.

At the same time, however, we concluded that we must admit that humanity will no longer be able to prevent processes of global destruction. This way, we were able to talk about our emerging feelings. Surprisingly, both of us were in peace with this idea and even felt that there was a deeper meaning to this. If humanity must face such reality, it seems that accepting and opening up to it can allow for an experience that connects intellectual, logical understanding with an inner perception (knowing) of a deeper truth. As if one's sensing expands and opens towards something invisible and subtle. It evokes David Bohm's theory of the infinite order, that describes a cosmic order of life. We felt deep trust in life and in an underlying meaning of everything that happens. We also saw benefits of certain complex systems failing, even if it this may mean facing death. -We felt that there was something infinite, something that would transcend death.

Attending conferences like this one can be very enriching not only on the intellectual level, but also on an emotional and relational level. If space is given to process (difficult) feelings and participants can feel safe enough to talk about these challenging ideas by sharing unusual or perspectives that are not normally talked about, these encounters can support collective shifts of consciousness.



An informal break during the conference in Prague. RIFS/Nicolai Herzog

## **2 A personal reflection by David Manuel-Navarrete: No Transformations without Unlearning**

There is a huge difference between talking about transformations as something done to systems “out there” and taking transformations personally. In Prague 2023 the genie got out of the bottle.

Conceptualizing system transformations is still needed and intellectually stimulating, but it must start with transforming ourselves, our practices and institutions, because we and they are the roots of global unsustainability.

I entered Transformations 2023 with the will of unlearning old habits, such as showing up with an extractive mentality (What's in it for me?), defending my status/reputation, elevating brain activity over other human and more-than-human dimensions, or being strategical when building relationships. Thankfully I found that most participants held similar un-learning attitudes.

As the conference unfolded, unlearning opportunities multiplied. They came through small gestures like spontaneous displays of affection, honest conversations or a keynote speaker making himself vulnerable by sharing a poem, but they were also embedded in the program with sessions on embodying transformations, and discussions on big challenges that were designed to promote sensing, intimacy, mutual support, and onto-epistemological openness.

Knowledge per se, scientific or otherwise, is not the problem, but the primacy of materialist cultures is. These cultures have long been supported by academia and inculcated through education, health, market, and other science-infused institutions. Can we unlearn the identities many of us have built from because they seem to be the most successful in the very systems we seek to transform?

We still have a lot to unlearn. The most practitioner-oriented amongst us and colleagues from the Global South can help to bring new unlearning opportunities to the fore as we all remain centered in self-transformation; understood as a collective and relational process rather than an individual achievement.

## **3 What do the two stories say about transformative partnerships?**



A transformative element of a partnership is certainly the deeply rooted intrinsic motivation to contribute to or drive a transformation towards sustainability. But it can also mean going beyond professional status and taking an interest in the personal level of partnership - namely friendships. It can mean sharing fears and emotions with each other, connecting with all our personality and sensitivity, and showing vulnerability, as well as adopting an attitude of unlearning. One of the co-authors had heard of the term "frie-leagues"; that is, a mixture of **friends** and **colleagues**, which seems very appropriate to us in the context of strong social relationships in transformative partnerships.

Finally, the question arises: what does it look like in a scientific conference environment? Can true transformative partnerships evolve to reach levels of friendships that go beyond professional status? This sounds illogical at first, as we all know the feeling of nervousness when attending such work-related conferences to speak eloquently in front of an audience or to pursue the need to make professional contacts for our future careers. The Transformation Conference was different, fostering relationships and opening up shared and sensitive personal reflections that empowered us to unlearn and show paths to transformative partnerships that may emerge naturally rather than calculated or strategic.