

Transformational Adaptation – Wishful thinking or the secret to success?

Workshop Summary

Purpose

Adaptation Scotland ran a T Lab on 31st August 2017 at the Transformations 2017 conference. The T Lab aimed to explore whether transformational adaptation is ‘wishful thinking or the secret to success?’

This document provides a summary of the workshop and participant feedback to address the question – Transformational adaptation – wishful thinking or the secret to success?

Introduction

Twenty members of Adaptation Scotland’s peer to peer Adaptation Learning Exchange took part in the T Lab as well as three delegates from the Transformations Conference.

The T Lab included an introduction to Transformational Adaptation provided by [Susanne Mosser](#) a leading US expert on adaptation, resilience and transformation. This was followed by scenario based group work where participants explored transformation in practice for different locations across the city of Edinburgh. Presentations from the T Lab are available from the workshop web page: <http://www.adaptationscotland.org.uk/get-involved/our-projects/adaptation-learning-exchange/transformations-conference-2017-t-lab>

The T Lab concluded with a feedback session where participants considered:

1. Benefits and challenges of approaching adaptation from a transformative perspective
2. How and when transformation should be introduced as part of adaptation planning

Introduction to transformation

The following definitions were used to introduce transformation and are more fully explored in Susanne’s presentation which is available on the Adaptation Scotland website:

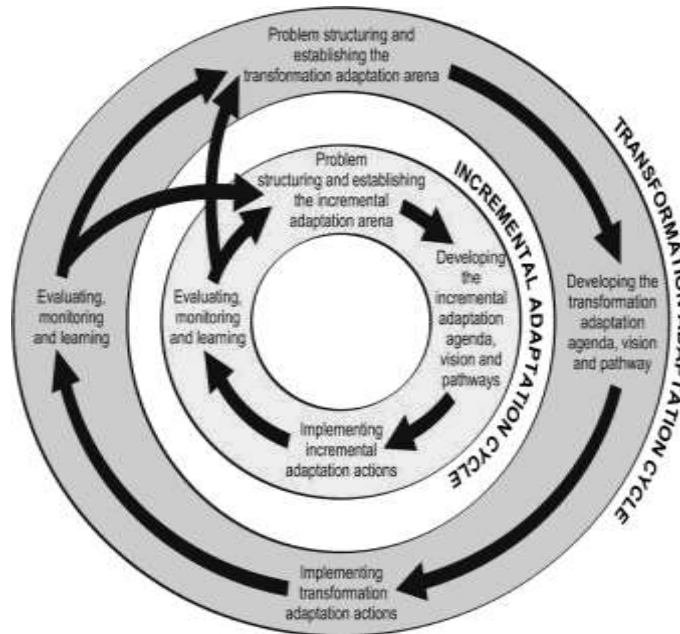
- **Adaptation** is an ‘adjustment in natural or human system in response to actual or expected climatic stimuli of their effects, which moderates harms or exploits beneficial opportunities.’
- **Transformation** is ‘a change in the fundamental attributes of natural and human systems.’

The key message is that transformation addresses large scale, fundamental systemic change and extends beyond small scale incremental adjustments that are taken in isolation.

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Incremental actions are important but should be considered in light of larger transformative processes as described by the diagram below:



Source: Park et al., 2012

The introduction to transformation was well received by participants who reported that it provided a clear understanding of the concept of transformation and how it relates to climate change adaptation.

Transforming Edinburgh case studies

The city of Edinburgh was used as a case study for exploring transformation in practice.

The Edinburgh Adapts Vision and Action Plan was published in December 2016. The vision extends to 2050 and includes many transformative elements that would require large scale, fundamental change to systems. The action plan is a five year plan that focusses on incremental actions and laying the ground work for building deeper systemic change.

Participants divided in to three groups to explore what a transformed place would be like for different locations around the city:

- City centre
- Leith
- North West Edinburgh

Using the Edinburgh Adapts vision as a starting point the groups discussed the transformation of systems and assets such as transport systems, food systems, new housing, retrofitting existing neighbourhoods, coastal change and the role of the natural

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environment. They then mapped out pathways to transformation looking at the actions required to achieve the transformation that they identified.

This process enabled participants to test out the practicalities of applying transformation to specific locations and challenges and in doing so explore the potential challenges and benefits of approaching adaptation from a transformative perspective within their own contexts.

The workshops generated many ideas for transformation including:

- Fundamental changes to road use and private car ownership, turning roads in to linear parks alongside whole scale change of use/ system with far wider social and economic implications
- The role of tiny house communities and more sustainable, resilient communities connected to the city through active travel corridors.

The groups found that articulating the transformation that they were aiming to achieve was inspiring and motivating. It was also relatively easy to identify first steps and incremental actions to support pathways towards the transformations. However, it was much more difficult to articulate medium to long term actions particularly within the limited time available for the workshop activities.

Feedback on the value of addressing adaptation from a transformative perspective

The workshop concluded with a session to reflect on:

1. Benefits and challenges of approaching adaptation from a transformative perspective
2. How and when transformation should be introduced as part of adaptation planning

1. Benefits and challenges of approaching adaptation from a transformative perspective

Discussion about the challenges of approaching adaptation from a transformative perspective raised issues around dealing with uncertainty, the challenge of looking beyond the here and now and engaging organisations and colleagues who are resistant to change. Participants identified a lack of understanding and awareness about transformative approaches as a barrier. Transformation is not included in the strategic planning processes used by organisations and it's not in anyone's job role to make sure that transformation is considered.

In spite of these challenges participants gave very positive feedback on the benefits of transformation. The words innovation, opportunity and positive frequently came up. Many felt that transformation offered a fresh and inspiring perspective and an opportunity to push beyond short term thinking and inspire change. Short term goals also felt more

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manageable and meaningful when considered in the context of a longer term transformative vision.

Figure 1: Words used by participants to describe the benefits of transformation



2. How and when transformation should be introduced as part of adaptation planning?

Discussion about the timings of when transformation should be included in adaptation planning processes was unanimous – approaches that include transformation at an early stage have the best chance of success. In particular waiting for a crisis or trigger event is not a feasible option – there is not social or institutional capacity or time to develop transformative responses during/ immediately after a crisis/ trigger event – having a plan in place that can be implemented is by far the best option and supports democratic processes.

Participants reflected that by nature transformative processes do not address single issues or challenges, including climate change adaptation, in isolation. Emphasis should be placed on viewing transformative adaptation as part of a wider transformation process. The need to adapt could be a catalyst for wider transformation but transformation pathways that enable adaptation need to be developed in light of a deeper understanding of the wider social, economic and environmental context.

‘Wishful thinking or the secret to success?’

The concept of transformation and the benefits of establishing a transformative vision, short term incremental actions and pathways to transformation were viewed favourably by participants.

The practical challenges of applying transformation in practice were recognised but did not outweigh the perceived benefits; transformation was viewed as an innovative and useful

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approach and the workshop provided participants with a practical grounding from which to consider opportunities for incorporating transformation in to future projects and initiatives.

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