



Group Assembly Process (GAP) - Stirring Paper

Stirring Paper: Towards a new activism to effectively support a transition to a de-growth economy

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1. Mainstream activism is reinforcing the current paradigm rather than making effective contributions to a de-growth society

To this day not many civil society organisations are promoting the much-needed transition to a new economic system based on the principles of ecological limits, solidarity, human wellbeing and intergenerational justice. Neither are many organisations embracing the complexity of systemic change in their strategies, campaigns and projects.

Many activists realise that the ways their organisations (or civil society sector) are trying to fix these problems don't seem to work anymore. They believe that while they have won many battles, we as humanity are losing the planet (meaning that while the world would be worse off without the battles that have been won, in the end things are not improving, but only getting less bad than they would have been without these actions). These activists and change agents have the energy to do something about it – and want to try new ways – but lack the resources and the support.

The frustrations that these civil society change agents are experiencing are resulting from the collapse of long held beliefs about who they are and how they as activists can bring about change in the world. This is what we call broken civil society stories:

Our economy is capable of developing the technological solutions that can and will ultimately solve our ecological and humanitarian crises – This story is broken. We are ourselves so deeply entrenched in the western worldview based on deep beliefs in the positive forces of technological progress and economic growth that we can't see that this worldview and the system themselves are the root cause of current crises and that the system is not given by nature and not set in stone. Instead it is a social construction that we can and must change, but it will require a process of changing worldviews.

We have to work towards what is possible instead of what is needed – This story is broken because although there are many advantages and it seems less risky to be pragmatic rather than utopian, too much pragmatism and too much tactics reinforces the unsustainable status quo. Only if activists shift their actions much more towards what is needed and allow for utopia to be part of our strategy, will activism have a chance to shift

the logic of the debate. The space for what is possible will then shift over time.

Policy advocacy and lobbying are the best way to be influential – This story is broken because although it can't be denied that civil society has an impact in the political game, the margins ultimately are very small and even what looks like a big success, very often in the long run doesn't really change much. The institutions themselves are failing, so playing the game through the institutional processes cannot achieve system change.

We need to raise more funds and lobby for more aid budgets for the global south to develop and eradicate poverty – This story is broken because the messages that still most CSOs send through their fundraising campaigns are as successful as they are harmful in perpetuating false stereotypes and hiding the real causes of poverty. The whole logic of the aid industry is still based on a hierarchy relationship between donors and recipients, far from the idea of a relationship of solidarity.

We are the experts on our issue, so we should focus on concrete feasible proposals to improve the issues – This story is broken because given the systemic and complex nature of so many of today's problems, the responses through this silo work are often inadequate. Only a multi issue perspective makes it completely obvious that we have to tackle the deeper economic and cultural root causes instead of proposing technical fixes.

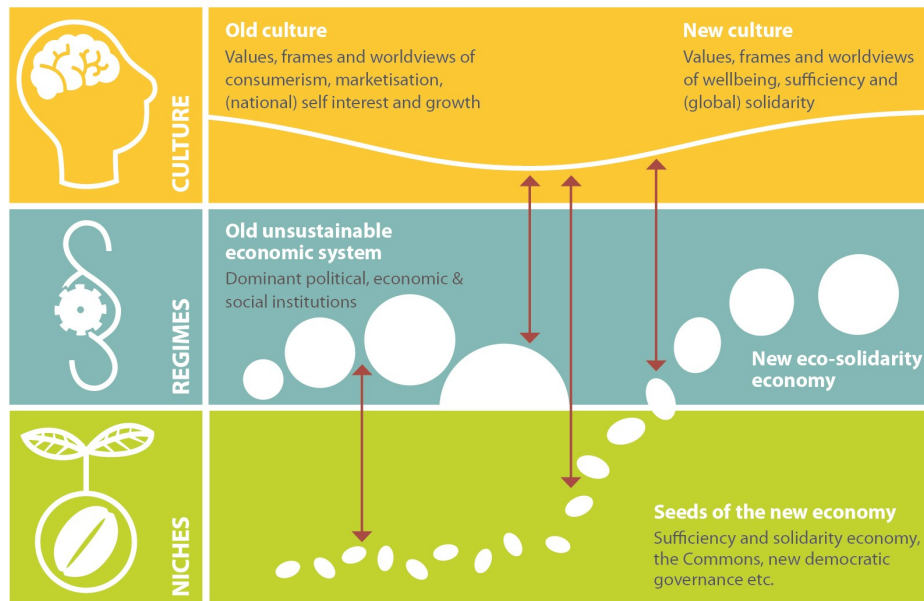
The world is divided between the good and the bad. We are on the good side and to achieve social change we have to fight the bad – This is a broken story because the systemic problems of our times are not mainly the fault of one group or another. Instead, there is one main enemy it is the *system*. The systemic shift that is needed requires changes at many different levels. Whilst the abuse of power by certain privileged groups resisting systemic change without doubt requires more and better organised protests and fights, the main task we have to confront is one of collective realisation that we all have to change and give up some of our deep beliefs and habits and embark on a process of searching and finding the new societal and economic models. In other words, the '99% vs. 1%' Occupy slogan was very useful in highlighting the dramatic increase in global inequality. But it is misleading in that the fight for system change is not one of the 99% against the 1%. It omits the fact that the growing global consumer classes and those aspiring to become part of them are resisting to change almost as much as the 1%.



2. A model to help activists explore effective strategies for change

To help activists have an informed discussion on how they can improve our theories and strategies of change, we propose a model of change.

The model's purpose is primarily to help activists develop, refine and improve their theories of change when designing system change strategies. Or in other words it is about learning what different aspects and levels of change have to be taken into account and how activists have to change the way they work if they want to become successful change agents for a de-growth economy.

Multi-level model: A systemic Transition to a de-growth economy



-  Economic system is path dependent, self stabilising and growth and market oriented.
-  Many niches and often isolated change agents. Niches are tolerated by the mainstream system.

The model works at three levels:

- **Culture:** This is where the current cultural values, frames and worldviews lie. These are currently dominated by consumerism, marketization, nationalism and self-interest. Here a shift to a culture of sufficiency, wellbeing and solidarity has to emerge to support the transition to the new economy.
- **Regimes:** This is where the dominant political, economic and social institutions of the old unsustainable economic system lie and where –to succeed in the transition– the institutions of the de-growth economy have to consolidate.
- **Niches:** These are the protected spaces where the seeds of the new system emerge and are experimented with and where in the case of a successful transition the most promising innovations become stronger and get the sufficient support to eventually institutionalise.

The model is based on the understanding that all three levels are important for a transition to the new economic system. Each of the levels holds important *core messages* to be aware of:

Culture: Activists, organisations and campaigns need to embody the values of the new system to support the transition. The current reality is that they are still too often communicating and representing the values of self interest, consumerism and growth

and are contributing to perpetuate the current culture.

Regimes: Institutions are highly path dependent, self-stabilising and generally rejecting a fundamental transformation. Much of the current policy advocacy work of civil society organisations while successful in promoting incremental changes, is (or would be) ineffective if it comes to promoting systemic change. By playing the political game, they cannot expect to make effective contributions to change.

Niches: While there is a growing number of experiments with alternative economic models, these are normally either tolerated by the mainstream institutions or co-opted by the system to play by the market rules. In many civil society organisations there is a lack of understanding of the emerging radical system innovations and insufficient belief in one's own potential to support and nurture niches to eventually become systems of influence.

But the main value of the model becomes apparent when looked at it as a whole and we explore the existing and the potential feedback loops between the three change levels. Here the main message is that for a successful transition to a de-growth economy it will require strong positive feedback loops between all levels. It will require strong impulses from a cultural shift and strengthening the niches to create a virtuous circle of feedback loops to eventually unlock the institutional lock-ins at the regimes level.

The reverse message is that the model loses most of its value if we interpret it in a simplistic way for example by classifying any given civil society strategy or approach into one of the three levels without evaluating what core message the change level holds and what feedback loops it might create, support or weaken.

To conclude, the multi-level model can help activists to assess their current strategies against their potential to encourage (or hinder) a systemic transition and it can support strategic conversations about possible new system change strategies and how they could eventually mutually reinforce each other.

While the model is a useful and flexible tool for strategic conversations, it is not an all-explaining wonder box. It has to be populated little by little with knowledge and wisdom from theory and practice to improve understanding about more effective activism for systemic change.