

Transformation Laboratories as spaces for co-designing social-ecological transformation: learning from different contexts and approaches

Abstract

Experimental spaces for supporting collective processes of deliberation and learning about sustainability challenges, and testing possible solutions, are of increasing interest. An example of these are *T-Labs* ('transformation laboratories'), which are highly facilitated, multi-stakeholder spaces of interaction and dialogue aimed at co-creating new visions and practices for social-ecological sustainability in specific settings.

Three projects from the Transformations to Sustainability programme, *T-Learning*, *Pathways* and *ACKnowl-EJ*, have experimented with and reframed T-Labs, enriching our understanding of transformation itself, and of specific, complex social-ecological systems and their challenges in a wide range of contexts. This TransAction Workshop will bring together a wide range of participants to engage in dialogue, exchange of experience and exploration of the T-Lab framework, and to critically assess its potential to support processes of social-ecological transformation. The framework and its methods will be applied to two cases related to extractive sectors in Latin America. The first case is mining, drawing on the knowledge of the new T2S project *Gold Matters*. The second case is agriculture, building upon *Pathways* experience. The use of T-Lab processes has great potential for exploring the role of extractive sectors in enabling and advancing transformations to sustainability in Latin America. The workshop will propose tools not only to academics but also to policy makers, practitioners, activists and everyone who is interested in designing multi-stakeholder spaces of transformation in the context of sustainability challenges in general and in extractive sectors such as mining and agriculture in particular.

The workshop will be carried out in Spanish. In the case that some participants do not speak Spanish, it is expected that translation will be collaborative, with the aid of participants both from the T2S projects and external attendants.

Introduction

Dealing with today's interconnected and pervasive sustainability challenges demands transformations at multiple levels and scales, all over the world. However, which changes might be considered transformative, which transformations are desirable, how they can or should be realized, and by whom they should be driven, are all contested questions. To help produce new and shared understandings, practices, technologies and institutions that are capable of mobilizing people around the goal of social-ecological sustainability, it is critical that sectors of society learn how to work together.

Experimental spaces for supporting collective processes of deliberation and learning about sustainability challenges, and testing possible solutions, are therefore of increasing interest. An example of these are *T-Labs* ('transformation laboratories'), which are highly facilitated, multi-stakeholder spaces of interaction and dialogue aimed at co-creating new visions, understandings, practices and interventions for social-ecological sustainability. T-Labs bring together diverse groups of people to work together to understand, sometimes in new ways, complex systems and the problems they generate, and to identify, co-design, and test novel ways of addressing the underlying causes of those problems, often by experimenting with new configurations of actors, institutions and practices. T-Labs can be organized in a variety of ways, and the choice of techniques can promote certain outcomes or results (for example, transdisciplinary learning, reflexivity and a shared understanding of the nature of a complex problem). T-Labs are typically thought of as a series of discrete but connected events that

constitute a process; hence, this workshop can feature only a sample of the activities and aims we have explored in our T-Labs.

By exploring, reflecting and exchanging experiences of transformation in different contexts, carried out by a diversity of actors and motivations, the TransAction Workshop will contribute to (at least) two of the themes of Transformations 2019: Learning from Transformational Stories and Narratives, and Learning from Each Other. Four projects will engage in dialogue, exchange of experience, practice and exploration of the T-Lab framework, and critically assess its potential to support processes of social-ecological transformation. Three projects from the first cohort of the Transformations to Sustainability (T2S) programme (2016-2019), *T-Learning*, *Pathways* and *ACKnowl-EJ*, will bring representatives who have experimented with and reframed T-Labs over the past three years, enriching understanding of transformation itself, and of social-ecological systems and their challenges in a wide range of contexts and places. The *Gold Matters* project of the second cohort of Transformations to Sustainability projects (2019-2021) will bring its local knowledge of and experience with the extractive sectors to the workshop.

To give the workshop a strong thematic and practical dimension, the framework and its methods will be applied to the context of the extractive sectors in Latin America, using the T-Lab approach to explore the potential role of the extractive sectors in enabling and advancing transformations to sustainability.

Activities and methodology

A one-day workshop will be developed to experience and reflect critically on the T-Lab approach and processes. The workshop will have four parts, in which we will combine a set of methods and techniques designed and/or applied by the T2S projects. The facilitation will be carried out in teams of two (a responsible facilitator and an assistant). The teams will be distributed depending on their expertise and the technique of facilitation.

First, keynote speakers will explain the objectives of the workshop and give a brief introduction to T-Labs and their features. Participants will then experience a T-lab focusing on the extractive sectors in Latin America and their role in helping or hindering social transformation.

The practical experience of the T-Lab will begin by using the ‘Three Horizons’ methodology to reflect in groups about the desired future of extractive industries. In a world café we will reflect on the current and the desired extractive sector, and the changes that would be necessary to reach the desired state. The method involves three rounds. During the first round, the groups will discuss the current state of the extractive industries and the challenges they represent for sustainability; then, they will envision the desired extractive sector, and in the last and third round, each group will work on the actions that would be necessary to achieve a transformation in the sector towards the desired vision. We will then move to the individual level, with participants reflecting on and recognizing their own role and agency in the transformation process by creating *Avatars*.

After eliciting powers that the *Avatars* have to achieve the desired actions, we will then channel these actions into a ‘dragon dreaming’ and a sociocracy exercise to distill and filter actions that follow the SMART principles (specific, measurable or memorable, achievable, realistic, and timely) and that can be carried out by the workshop participants, during the congress and afterwards. With this tool we will be able to determine goals, first steps, tasks, collaborations, responsibilities, deadlines and budgets. We will finish the session by presenting the proposed actions and getting ‘gifts’ (feedback) from all participants in the form of constructive criticism.

After lunch, we will begin the session with some reflections on the co-design process – tensions and pearls – using the fishbowl tool. Building on these reflections, each

representative from the T2S networks, *T-learning*, *Pathways* and *ACKnowl-EJ*, will interact in the fishbowl discussion drawing on their experience from the projects. They will also critically and comparatively discuss how the concept of T-labs fostered transformation processes in the T2S projects. All the participants can interact with the fishbowl to contribute their own experiences – have you ever participated in something similar? Which methods did you use? Which were most/least useful for you? – receiving feedback from other participants based on their own experience of similar tools or approaches.

After the fishbowl discussion, participants and T2S representatives will work in groups around the design principles for T-labs considered essential by each of the T2S projects. Based on their own experiences they will give feedback and include other principles if pertinent. The trigger question will be: ‘What does a T-lab need to have to fulfil its potential for addressing sustainability transformations?’ To finish this exercise, each group will work on a short statement that synthesizes understandings about T-labs as tools for addressing sustainability transformations.

In the fourth part of the workshop, based on ‘sociocracy’, a synthesizing group will be created amongst facilitators and participants to generate a single statement from the short group statements of the previous exercise. Another synthesizing group (or two, if there are conflicting points of view) will work on a final short statement or insight directed at the extractive sector that synthesizes discussions and understandings from the morning sessions (this exercise can be done in the same group or in new groups if participants feel more comfortable).

Finally, through a dragon dreaming exercise, we will collectively generate the final versions of the statements to be shared in the plenary with the rest of the participants during the Transformations 2019 conference. The facilitators will write the phrases on a piece of paper, the participants will modify them if needed in turns and in silence, for a short period of time. Being respectful of the group process, they will cross out, change, or add words and concepts they think are needed, until the time to make changes is finished: the phrases will be representative of all the group as they were collectively constructed.

Participants

The workshop will be participative, bringing together researchers from T2S projects, representatives from the extractive industry (including mining and agriculture, both large and small-scale), public policy experts, government agencies, environmental agencies, NGOs, indigenous elders and community leadership, practitioners, academics. A maximum of 25 participants are expected. Tentative confirmations at the moment include representatives from indigenous groups of the Amazon, from artisanal mining associations in Chile and Brazil, and from a Brazilian public prosecutor’s office involved in artisanal mining issues. The workshop conveners also have contacts in the Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo (BID), who are interested in participating. The workshop is open to anyone interested in the T-Lab methodology or in methods of engaged research and praxis in the context of sustainability challenges and the extractive industries and agriculture in particular. The workshop will bring tools not only to academics but also to policy makers, practitioners, activists and everyone who is interested in designing multi-stakeholder spaces for transformations to sustainability.

The workshop will be carried out in Spanish. In the case that some participants do not speak Spanish, it is expected that translation will be collaborative, with the aid of participants both from the T2S projects and external attendants.

Intended outcomes

The main planned outcomes of the session, though others may emerge, are: 1) critical understanding of the extent to which T-labs are useful for addressing specific challenges

towards transformations to sustainability; 2) a set of principles/methods/strategies that could be useful for T-lab processes (booklet) and/or a joint article; 3) a basic understanding of the sustainability challenges faced and posed by extractive sectors in Latin America, a statement from the group directed to this sector and some concrete actions to be carried out during the congress and after by participants; 4) reflections about the changes necessary for achieving transformation in the extractive sector in Latin America, which could be used as an input for further discussions during Transformations 2019.

Space and equipment needed

We will need a large workshop space, with tables for groups of between 4 and 6 people, stationery such as markers, large sheets of paper, post-its and adhesive tape.

Workshop facilitators

Almendra Cremaschi is an agronomist by training, doing her PhD about transitions to sustainability in the seed sector in Argentina. She is a member of the STEPS América Latina hub of the Pathways to Sustainability Global Consortium, where she worked on the project 'Transformative Pathways to Sustainability' (Pathways) within the Transformations to Sustainability programme. She is interested in transdisciplinary work on rural issues such as family farming and sustainability, and participatory research to address complex problems.

Anabel Marin is a researcher specializing in innovation and development. Her initial training is in economics and she has a master's degree in development and a PhD in science and technology policy studies (Science Policy Research Unit (SPRU), University of Sussex). Since 2010, she has been a researcher for the National Scientific and Technical Research Council (CONICET), Argentina, and teaches at the University of Buenos Aires and University of Mar del Plata. She also leads several research projects in Latin America about sustainability in agriculture and the future of seeds. She is a member of the STEPS America Latina hub of the Pathways to Sustainability Global Consortium.

Lakshmi Charli-Joseph works at the Laboratorio Nacional de Ciencias de la Sostenibilidad (LANCIS), of the Institute of Ecology, at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) in research projects related to governance and transformations to sustainability in Mexico. She was part of the project 'Transformative Pathways to Sustainability (Pathways)' within the Transformations to Sustainability programme, where she co-coordinates the North America Hub. She has a B.Sc. in biology (UNAM) and two M.Sc. in environmental planning and management (UAX; IHE-Delft), and is a PhD candidate at the Graduate Program in Sustainability Sciences (UNAM).

Martha Chaves is founder and director of the Transitional Minds Foundation, and a biologist with a Master's degree in Forest and Nature Conservation from the University of Wageningen, where she also completed her PhD studies in Sociology of Development and Change. She has experience in participatory action research, transformative learning, dragon dreaming, permaculture, the art of hosting and participatory leadership, participatory video for change and other tools of social innovation, that she uses in processes with members of Afro, indigenous, rural and urban communities. She is currently working on the development of a Local Innovation Center for Regenerative Action and in other participatory processes with grassroots organizations and regional government institutions in Quindío, Colombia. She was part of the Transgressive Learning (T-Learning) network within the Transformations to Sustainability programme,

Mirna Liz Inturias is a Bolivian sociologist with a Masters in Sustainable Development. She is a social researcher, specializing in indigenous issues, identity and interculturality, indigenous education and transformation of environmental conflicts. She has carried out

research on environmental conflicts in protected areas and indigenous territories in the East, Chaco and Bolivian Amazon. She is a founding member of Grupo Confluencias and involved in various Latin American networks of reflection and research. She is a lecturer at Nur University, Santa Cruz, Bolivia. She was part of the [‘Academic-Activist Co-Produced Knowledge for Environmental Justice’ \(ACKnowl-EJ\) network](#) within the Transformations to Sustainability programme,

Agenda

- 8:30-9:20 - Welcome, introduction & participants presentations
- 9:20-10:20 - World Café: ‘Three Horizons’ - present and desired future of extractive industries
- 10:20-10:35 - *Coffee break*
- 10:35-11:10 - Avatars and powers
- 11:10-13:15 - Dragon dreaming & sociocracy exercises
- 13:15-14:30 - *Lunch*
- 14:30-14:45 - Warm up activity
- 14:45-16:00 - Fishbowl group discussion
- 16:00-16:15 - *Coffee break*
- 16:15-17:15 - Group work around T-lab principles and collective conclusions
- 17:20-17:50 - Sociocracy & dragon dreaming exercise of synthesizing groups for collective statements
- 17:50-18:00 - Closing circle and conclusions



The Pathways to Sustainability Game, an activity carried out during the T-Lab process of the North America Hub - Pathways Network
(from: <https://steps-centre.org/blog/creating-bridges-through-the-pathways-to-sustainability-game/>)



The GEN Sustainability game used in several T-labs of the Colombian T-learning case, in the photo the activity was carried out with members of the peasant grassroots organization ANUC, Filandia, Quindío,
(from: <http://transgressivelearning.org/portfolio-items/colombia/>)