

Transforming Well-Being in Wuppertal: Conditions and Constraints

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Abstract

Sustainable development as a global challenge brings about several implications not only for society, economy and politics, but also for 21st century science. 'Transformative science' therefore starts out from real-world problems of sustainability transitions and aims at creating socially robust knowledge, thereby crossing the boundaries between both disciplines and science and society. Here, scientists become agents of change themselves, fostering transformation processes as scientists, often in collaborations with societal stakeholders as carriers of practical knowledge.

One of the most pressing issues in this field is the transformation of cities towards meeting the needs of sustainability, as was recently emphasised by latest Flagship Report of the German Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU 2016). What are the conditions and constraints of urban transformation towards sustainability and of the role of scientists in this endeavour? The Centre for Transformation Research and Sustainability, jointly established by the University of Wuppertal and the Wuppertal Institute in October 2013, researches urban sustainability transformation in a local transformative research project, called "Well-Being Transformation Wuppertal (WTW)". We research concepts of local sustainable welfare production, therefore mapping relevant civil society initiatives, developing an indicator system on a participatory basis for measuring sustainable well-being in Wuppertal, and supporting scientifically so-called real-world laboratories in the production and evaluation of their contributions towards urban sustainable well-being transformation. The city of Wuppertal is a very interesting case for researching urban sustainability transformation, for it still undergoes large structural changes and struggles with scarce municipal resources, making room and pressing for civic engagement.

In order to gather and analyse the conditions and constraints of the well-being transformation in Wuppertal and of 'being transformative' as scientists in this context, we briefly introduce both the approaches of transdisciplinary research and transformative science in the context of urban sustainability transformation. Based on these theoretical and methodological approaches, issues that might condition or constrain successful transformation processes in Wuppertal are derived. Here we focus on staff and resources, process, the context and the normativity of the transformative sustainability approach. The framework conditions of the WTW project are analysed in order to identify the most relevant conditions and constraints for transforming well-being in Wuppertal, thereby referring back to the relevant academic debates and discussing preliminary conclusions for WTW and the broader issues at hand. As part of the results, the role of 'transformative scientist' in urban sustainability transformation is both constrained and challenging due to time and financial constraints as well as by different demands from science and practice. Practice partners need to be funded, too, which is constrained by the current research funding structure that also hampers true co-design from the very beginning. Furthermore, open-minded stakeholders are crucial, as well as a subjective perception that city-quarters have bottomed out, developing new visions and achieving tangible, motivating results. Moreover, the normative sustainability claims of the transformative research project are not fully shared by all stakeholders, thus generating trade-offs and complicating the research process.

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