

Transforming Well-Being in Wuppertal – the Chances for Change

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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” starts out from realworld problems of sustainability transitions and aims at creating socially robust knowledge, thereby crossing boundaries between both disciplines and science and society. Here, scientists become agents of change themselves, fostering transformation processes as scientists in collaborations with societal stakeholders as carriers of practical knowledge.

In order to increase the local capacities for transformative research, the University of Wuppertal and the Wuppertal Institute for Climate, Environment and Energy jointly founded the Center for Transformation Research and Sustainability (TransZent), synergizing disciplinary knowledge and competence in applied sustainability research. While becoming a new focal point of the theory and practice of transformative science, TransZent directs large parts of its transdisciplinary research and service-learning activities towards its host city Wuppertal. What distinguishes this city in its potential for sustainability transformation?

During the 18th and 19th century, Wuppertal was one of the largest German centers of textile industry, chemical industry and tool manufacturing. As globalization and structural changes of European industries increased, Wuppertal underwent a social and economic upheaval. Due to the collapse of huge parts of the local industry, many inhabitants left the city. From 1964 to 2011 population numbers fell from 423.000 to 343.000, leaving many properties untended until today. Also, Wuppertal’s population is a very heterogeneous one. For the moment, population has stabilized and recovers at a level of 355.000 inhabitants in 2015. Wuppertal still ranks consistently very low in city rankings, but improved in dynamic indices lately. However, public debt rose to a record of 2.2 billion Euros in 2014.

Already during industrialization, Wuppertal, birthplace of Friedrich Engels, was a city of social innovation and labor movements. The “Elberfelder Model”, a system of social assistance for the poor based on volunteer officers, was developed around 1850 in Wuppertal to cope with changing social structure in industrial societies. Today, untended properties and tight city finances stimulate many citizens to utilize this vacancy for bottom-up urban development. Encouraged by the recent developments, Wuppertal thrives on vivid and diverse civic engagement, socially and ecologically committed entrepreneurs, an increasingly caring local government and activities of several Wuppertal-based research institutions. This specific combination of different actors, already involved in and actively shaping transformation processes makes Wuppertal a fertile ground for transdisciplinary research on urban transformation.

In order to cultivate this ground through transformative research, TransZent initiated the transdisciplinary research project “Well-Being Transformation Wuppertal” (WTW), setting up an urban transition laboratory for sustainable economy. Due to the specific development of Wuppertal, the city is especially well-suited to explore and reinforce concepts for sustainable urban well-being. Therefore, partnering with civic, municipal and economic stakeholders, WTW established real-world laboratories in several city quarters as innovative spaces of tangible

well-being transformation. Furthermore, Wuppertal's various civil society initiatives are mapped, interlinked and evaluated regarding their effects on well-being. To conceptualize this urban well-being more systematically, a set of urban well-being indicators is being developed, drawing both on the OECD's Better Life Index and the well-being perceptions of the citizens of Wuppertal. Moreover, the transferability of the locally obtained knowledge is assessed, refining the generic concepts and mechanisms of urban sustainability transformations. These efforts will be pooled in a separate competence center. Its aim is to ensure the transfer of scientific and practical knowledge in and beyond Wuppertal and to expand and deepen the network of transformative agents both in science and society. Wuppertal is not an easy place for transforming well-being, but its shortcomings turn into strengths when they destabilize old patterns and make room for new developments.

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