



“The Woodstock of Sustainability Science”

Impulses from the Wuppertal Making Utopia Possible Conference Week

On the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the Wuppertal Institute for Climate, Environment and Energy, several events took place in Wuppertal under the motto of Making Utopia Possible.

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“The Woodstock of Sustainability Science”. Impulses from the Wuppertal Making Utopia Possible Conference Week | GAIA 25/3 (2016): 207–209

Keywords: green economy, science festival, sustainable transition management, transformative science

The Design of the Conference Week

From September 5 to 9, 2016, a total of six events were held under the thematic umbrella of Wuppertal’s Conference Week:

- the 7th *International Sustainability Transitions Conference (IST Conference 2016)*. This is the annual international conference of the *Sustainability Transitions Research Network (STRN)*, which has established itself as a leading international network for research on transformation processes for sustainable development.¹
- the annual conference of the *Low Carbon Society Research Network (LCS-RNet)*². The network of leading climate and energy research institutions within the context of the G7 states supports decarbonisation and climate strategies in these countries. It facilitates close exchange between science, politics and stakeholders for science-based policy decisions on the path to low carbon societies.
- the *Status Conference* of the BMBF’s *Green Economy* programme³. With this programme, the German Federal Ministry for Education and Research (BMBF) supports 30 projects that demonstrate development prospects for sustainable management at economic and entrepreneurial level. As part of the *Socio-Ecological Research funding scheme (SÖF)*, the projects are subject to transdisciplinary

standards. At the Conference Week the projects were at the half-way mark.

- meeting of the *NRW Fortschrittskolleg (Progress College)*. Using the instrument *Fortschrittskolleg*, the North Rhine-Westphalian Ministry of Science funds twelve doctoral research groups that work on societal challenges and are inter- and transdisciplinary in nature. These research groups are part of the research strategy *Fortschritt NRW (Progress NRW)* and intended to introduce young scientists to transdisciplinary work.⁴
- The ceremony on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the Wuppertal Institute for Climate, Environment and Energy (WI) at the Wuppertal Municipal Hall, attended by some 600 guests (figure 1, p. 208). In particular, the ceremony highlighted the importance of German and North Rhine-Westphalian contributions to global transformation processes for sustainable development. As

a further highlight, the Stifterverband für die Deutsche Wissenschaft (Stifterverband Association for the Promotion of Sciences in Germany) announced the inception of a transformative science award for young scientists. The WI will assume responsibility for this.

- Within the context of the celebrations and conferences, over 700 participants visited Wuppertal’s *Klimaquartier Arrenberg (Arrenberg Climate District)*. This city district is considered to be one of the leading transformation districts in Germany and has already received several awards.⁵ The district has combined social transformation approaches with innovative strategies to promote sustainability in the areas of energy supply, mobility and nutrition. Over 100 active participants from the district prepared 25 transformation locations to discuss pro

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1 www.transitionsnetwork.org, *IST Conference*: <http://ist2016.org>

2 http://lcs-rnet.org/about_lcsrnet

3 <https://www.fona.de/en/flagship-initiative-green-economy-19689.html>

4 www.wissenschaft.nrw.de/ministerium/leitlinien-des-ministeriums/fortschritt-nrw

5 www.klimaexpo.nrw/mitmachen/projekte-vorreiter/vorreitergefunden/klimaquartierarrenberg

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cesses and strategies of change. In the evening, guests and residents of Arrenberg together celebrated *Open Restaurant Day* at more than 20 locations.

In addition to the day in the Arrenberg district, other events also provided opportunities to get together. Besides, the conferences during the week were thematically and spatially connected by various events. The joint organisation at Wuppertal University Auditorium Centre also offered possibilities for the different communities to meet.

The motto *Making Utopia Possible*, inspired by the 500th anniversary of Thomas Morus' *Utopia*, was the programmatic umbrella for the Conference Week. The focus was on addressing the enabling function of science in processes of social change: What does it mean conceptually, methodically and also institutionally, if science is to enable far-reaching processes of social change? All three dimensions are evident

in the current debate regarding transformative and transdisciplinary science and formed the main theme of the *IST Conference, Exploring Transition Research as Transformative Science*.

The Conference Week brought several thematic strands together, as well as numerous institutions within the scientific system. The importance of institutional cooperation was also reflected in Wuppertal itself: The international *IST Conference*, jointly organised by the WI and the University of Wuppertal, was supported by the Interdisciplinary Centre for Transformation Research and Sustainability (TransZent)⁶, a joint think tank for the university and the WI, which was established in 2013.

Three Levels of Integration for Sustainability Science

The Wuppertal Conference Week is characterised by three lines of integration that are important to science for sustainability:

Thematic and Multidisciplinary Integration

Sustainability science has always been multidisciplinary. The BMBF framework programme, *Research for Sustainable Development (FONA)*, and the SÖF funding concept represent this, as does the STRN network. However, the formation of certain sub-communities is also evident within the sustainability debate. During the week, the different topics and communities successfully related to each other and worked out which topics are of importance to the sustainability and transformation debate. In particular, the economic debate has to be more firmly embedded in transformation discourse. The close connection between the status conference *Green Economy* and the *IST Conference* with joint thematic sessions represents this, as does the prominent involvement of the *How's-Life* unit of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which is currently leading the debate on alternative

FIGURE 1: *Making Utopia Possible* was the motto of Wuppertal's Conference Week to bring sustainability and science closer together. The picture shows the ceremony to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the Wuppertal Institute for Climate, Environment and Energy at Wuppertal's historic Municipal Hall.



measurements of well-being. The appearance of Gunter Pauli as a pioneer of a blue economy pointed in the same direction, as did the presentation of Maja Göpel's new book, *The Great Mindshift* (2016), the subtitle of which pinpoints this connection: *How a New Economic Paradigm and Sustainability Transformations Go Hand in Hand*.

Integration of Stakeholders

Co-design and *co-production*, integrating the knowledge of stakeholders and scientists on an equal footing, are guiding ideas in the debate regarding transformation science and transdisciplinarity. Nevertheless, there are only a few places where this has been happening to date. In the case of scientific conferences scientists generally keep to themselves. The Conference Week created the opportunity for numerous personal encounters during a visit to *Klimaquartier Arrenberg*. The enthusiastic reactions of conference participants and those involved in the *Klimaquartier* show the importance of such places of encounter.

For science, the example of *Klimaquartier Arrenberg* clearly illustrated the potential of using urban real world laboratories. This was also demonstrated by the many discussions on the concept and methodology of real world laboratories – especially as the city of Wuppertal facilitates the analysis of urban change at various levels through several such transformation districts and the close involvement of scientific institutions on-site. The recent proposal by the Federal Government's German Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU 2016) for the establishment of 50 global urban real laboratories over 50 years was thus given a definite form.

During the event, positive effects on the motivation and regional commitment and place identity of the stakeholders were also observed. This was intensified by media coverage and the accompanying art projects: a new district map was designed specifically for the event, showing the most important transformation locations, a film showed the personal utopias of Wuppertal citizens, and a permanent light installation is now to be seen at one of the most significant industrial buildings in the Arrenberg district. Thus, the encounters also repre-



sented the new relationship between science and society, which representatives of transformative science call for. The national and international debate on transformative science was summarised for the *IST Conference* in the contribution *Pledge for a Transformative Science. A Conceptual Framework* (Schneidewind et al. 2016). And the new award for transformative science provides an excellent basis for further consolidation of the debate.

National and International Integration

National impulses from Germany such as the *Energiewende* (energy transition) play a key role in the sustainability debate. They are highly important for sustainability science, as they are noted internationally; for example, the BMBF's *FONA* programme, the Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies (IASS), Leuphana University Lüneburg or the Ecornet Institutes. But there is still great potential for the German community to make itself and its approaches more visible. At the same time, even more innovative impulses from the international debate could be integrated into the German discussion. The structure of the Conference Week offered various opportunities to do so and also addressed the question of innovative impulses that the individual federal states could implement under the specific conditions of the federal system.

Networks such as the *LCS-RNet* or the *T20 initiative* – established in parallel to the G20 process by the leading think tanks of G20 countries – underline the relevance of the question as to how the initiative energy of scientific institutions can be applied at international level through pioneering coalitions. One example was the new *German-Japanese Energy Council*, a platform for joint efforts to transform the energy systems of the leading European and Asian industrial nations – as a close alliance of partners from science and politics.⁷

Do We Need Science Festivals?

In view of the success of the Conference Week, we should talk about whether or not more such complex science festivals are needed. At a time when the scientific system is leaving its previous mode of action behind, and society demands that scientists take a stance regarding their research topics, such new formats are becoming more important. A new mode of science and of theory-practice cooperation must be experienced to mobilise impulses and energies to bring about change processes. New conference formats can achieve this – especially in contrast to the often energy-consuming experience of traditional conference formats. Looking at all of this in summary, considering how the week unfolded, with a wonderful atmosphere, great late summer weather and about 1,000 participants, the image drawn by one of them is not too far off the mark: “This is a kind of Woodstock of sustainability science!”

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6 www.transzent.uni-wuppertal.de/home.html

7 www.dbu.de/123artikel/36734_2539.html