DOI Number 10.24135/link 2021.v2i1.172



# Transition Design: An approach to addressing wicked problems (and catalysing societal transitions toward more sustainable futures)

Keywords

Transition Design; Ecologies of interventions; Transdisciplinary Design; Wicked problems; Sustainable futures.

In this lecture, Terry Irwin will introduce Transition Design, a new area of transdisciplinary design focus aimed at addressing complex wicked problems and catalysing transitions toward sustainable, equitable and desirable long-term futures. Terry will discuss how change happens within our complex socio-technical systems and how addressing wicked problems can be a strategy for changing the trajectory of these transitions. Transition Design is a transdisciplinary approach aimed at addressing the many 'wicked' problems confronting 21st century societies: climate change, forced migration, political and social polarisation, global pandemics, lack of access to affordable housing/ healthcare/education and countless others. These problems are considered systems problems because of their many challenging characteristics such as: every wicked problem is connected to other wicked problems; they are comprised of multiple stakeholder groups with conflicting agendas and no clear shared understanding of the problem; they are constantly changing and evolving; and wicked problems always manifest in place and culture-specific ways. Because of their high level of complexity, wicked problems cannot be solved by a single group of people or discipline. Addressing such problems requires radical collaboration among many fields and disciplines, but even more importantly it requires leveraging the knowledge and perspectives of the stakeholder groups connected to and affected by the problem. Transition Design argues that new transdisciplinary knowledge and skill-sets are required to address these problems, and that wicked problem resolution is a strategy for igniting positive, systems-level change and societal transitions toward more sustainable, equitable and desirable long-term futures. The Transition Design approach emphasises:

- The need to frame problems within radically large, spatio-temporal contexts that include the past (how the problem evolved over long periods of time), present (how the problem manifests at different levels of scale) and future (visions of the long-term future in which the problem has been resolved).
- The need for the stakeholders connected to and affected by the problem to be involved throughout the problem framing, visioning and solutioning process. This challenges many dominant processes in which professional or disciplinary experts from outside the system solve/design "for" the communities affected by the problem(s). Transition Design aspires to continually leverage the knowledge and wisdom from inside the system and build community capacity to self-organize, advocate and problem solve.
- The need for stakeholders to co-create long-term visions of desirable futures, as a way to transcend their differences in the present and focus on a future space in which they are more likely to agree.
- The need to develop "ecologies of synergistic interventions" (solutions) that are connected to each other and the long-term vision as a strategy for transitioning entire societies toward a desirable, equitable, long-term futures.
- The need to think and work for long horizons of time. Resolving wicked problems and transitioning entire societies toward sustainable long-term futures will unfold over many years or even decades and will require patience, tenacity and an ongoing process of visioning and solutioning to remain on course during the transition.

Transition Design is essentially an approach for appropriately framing these complex problems within more appropriate contexts. Many existing problem-solving methodologies and process can be used in creating the "ecologies of interventions" needed to address them.