Connecting people to place: sustainable place-shaping practices as transformative power

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The article describes a process of preparing a research design on place-shaping, as outcome of a process of co-design between academic actors and non-academic actors in Brazil, South Africa and The Netherlands, taking place in the context of the project TRANSPLACE. The joint research design addresses varied sustainability issues as well as common challenges across areas of environmental change, in nine specific social–ecological settings in these countries. Key is the identification of innovative place-shaping practices or 'seeds of change', embedded in social–ecological systems and place-based assets. These seeds of change offer insight into how to support a place based approach to development, via the engagement and collaboration of varied actors. The article first reviews the literature on place and transformation. Furthermore the process of co-designing a joint research agenda is described. This process resulted in varied outcomes, such as a joint research agenda, the identification of 'seeds of change', and an overview of sustainability issues, learning challenges and involved stakeholders in the nine research sites. The article shows how engagement and learning in knowledge networks can be supported on different scales, and ends with lessons learned and perceived benefits of having gone through a co-design process.

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Introduction

Places all over the world are affected by ordering processes of globalization which have resulted in a worldwide encompassing web of relations and interconnected practices, making goods, capital, knowledge, ideas, humans etc. flow from place to place around the world [1]. These processes are often considered as hegemonic forces, which have resulted in cultural uniformity [2], a disconnection between places of production and consumption [3], sustainability problems, and the commodification of land and landscapes [4]. Some scholars even speak of the 'erasure of place' [5], 'non-places' [6], or 'place-lessness' [7] as outcomes of globalization.

However, generic processes have spatially differentiated impacts on places and lead to spatially dispersed sustainability problems, such as resource depletion, economic inequalities, mobilities and social exclusion, resulting in 'territories of difference' [8]. Furthermore, social actors should not be considered as passive victims of hegemonic processes affecting their place [9,10]. Via specific engagements in global ordering processes social actors are capable of altering the web of relations and interconnected practices which they are part of. Understanding these relations requires "*paying attention to the agency of local actors, whilst also examining the broader economic and social relations — both historical and contemporary — which locate places within wider networks*" ([11], p. 212).

This paper researches and problematizes how social actors shape places, based on an extensive literature review on place and by analyzing a project called TRANSPLACE. This project was set out to build a knowledge network and research agenda via a process of co-design and co-production between academic and non-academic partners in three countries from September 2014 till March 2015. TRANSPLACE addresses concrete problems and sustainability issues in varied areas of global environmental change in nine specific social–ecological settings in South Africa (Eastern Cape), Brazil (Minas Gerais) and the Netherlands (southern part). In these areas problems emerge from complex interactions between people's livelihoods, loss of biodiversity and food-security, the persistent poverty in the southern countries, growing inequalities between people, social discontent and health. The starting point was to reflect on these challenges jointly, and develop insights via a process of co-design and co-learning by connecting people and places from different continents. The aim was to

study place-shaping practices and identify transformative capacities, contributing to sustainable places.

Connecting people to place refers in the first place to the co-design process itself, defined as the joint formulation of the research problem, collaboration between academic and non-academic actors (including NGOs, practitioners and representatives from governments) and the joint formulation of research questions. The rationale behind this is that in order to advance our understanding of social transformation it is important to engage relevant stakeholders, to help define what exactly needs to be understood in the context of their own places, and how to make their 'place-based' knowledge most relevant, useful, accessible, and actionable to potential users. In the co-design process we have taken a first step in joint formulation of the research problem, developing collaboration and defining research questions.

Secondly, connecting people to place refers to place-shaping practices. We assume that place-shaping can be transformative by re-grounding innovative agro-ecological and sustainable practices in place-based assets and social–ecological systems. This can support a place-based approach to development.

Below, we first review the literature and discuss notions of place, social transformation and sustainable place-shaping. Second, we will focus on how the research agenda was constructed as a process of co-design, involving key stakeholders from all the research sites, in order to support engagement and learning in and between the sites. The paper outlines perceived benefits of having gone through a co-design process and ends with lessons learned and recommendations.

Review: transformation of places

Place has a range of meanings according to the context, varying from bounded administrative areas, to subjective and phenomenological meanings to relational perspectives [12]. We consider place here not as a geographical, administrative area, but apply a relational unbounded perspective, building on the large body of literature on relational space and place. In these literatures place is considered as not pre-given, but constructed; it is a node in a network and part of wider networks and relations, linked to other places through social, economic and political relations [13,14]. Varied scholars refer to a relational notion of place, using different terms such as place as an assemblage of actors and practices [15] or an entanglement of processes [16]. Places are dynamic and continuously transformed by global forces that are depicted as drivers of exploitation and capital accumulation that penetrate and alter the relations and place-shaping practices, thus vesting global hierarchies and dependencies. However the spatially differentiated impacts of globalization processes have received limited

consideration until now ([11], p. 21). Furthermore we have to acknowledge that social actors transform places by their meaningful conduct [13,10]. Key questions are then how to understand place-specific relations to the global, how social actors negotiate their engagement in these processes and how they express transformative agency, capable to change a place to their needs, ideas and values.

We would argue that in the context of the much needed societal transformation toward sustainability, place is especially relevant in the following ways.

(1) As an arena of place-based debates, power struggles and negotiations. Such place-based struggles have for example been understood as place-protective protests rooted in place-identity with the danger of succumbing to 'militant particularism' or 'particular localism' [17], but have also been considered as alternative strategies of localization [5] or agency which can alter the very mechanisms of the global itself [13].
(2) As spaces endowed with meaning and values. People perceive and experience place and attribute values to places. Especially cultural geographers have emphasized that place remains fundamentally important to our sense of identity, our sense of community and our humanity ([18], p. 5). People have a 'sense of place' defined as the process by which individuals and groups derive meanings, beliefs, symbols, values and feelings from a particular locality, based on human experience, thoughts, emotions and social relationships [19].
(3) As site of policy-interventions. There is an increasing attention for place-based policies toward sustainable development which requires new modes of innovation including recognition and power to grassroots innovation actors and processes, and involving them with inclusive multi-scale innovation politics [20].

Figure 1 shows a framework which considers place at the intersection of unbound and spatially differentiating, socio-cultural, political-economic and ecological processes [21]. These unbound processes result not just in spatially varied sustainability problems, but also provide the space for people to position themselves toward these processes and perform agency via place-shaping practices. This is a perspective which emphasizes connectivity, transcending often-used dichotomies between 'nature' and 'society', the 'local' and 'global', the 'rural' and 'urban'. Processes of sustainable place-shaping 'connect people to place'. Examples are place-specific forms of food production, rooted in agro-ecological principles, place-based arrangements for the provision of eco-system services and place-based development strategies, valorizing the specific assets of a place [22]. Such processes can be supported via processes of social learning between actors, but also via policies supporting connectivity