

THANCS – a process to address tensions that emerge in/with a transition towards sustainable development

Keywords: sustainability transition, needs, tensions, sustainable lifestyles, quality of life

Narrative step: strategies for transformation)

Special session: Degrowth & quality of life: needs and capabilities

Short Abstract

THANCS (Thriving for Awareness for Non-Conflicting Strategies) is a group process consisting of four steps, which allows the participants to deal with tensions that arise in trying to pursue a sustainable lifestyle. It is evident (in particular for this conference) that a transition towards sustainability is needed. We do currently not have a sustainable development which allows everybody to live a decent life with a certain quality of life now and in future. Pursuing a sustainable lifestyle could allow on the one hand to use less resources and on the other to feel well by meeting one's own needs.

In order to meet their needs, people behave in a certain way, they apply strategies (having a hobby, buying food for cooking, executing a job...). As the strategies we implement neither necessarily realise all our needs nor concord with all our values, tensions occur in our daily life and even more in sustainability transitions. These tensions can be classified along three types: intra-individual, intra-societal, and inter-generational tensions.

THANCS supports in particular reflecting about the tension(s), its origins and the connection to one's lifestyles and needs fulfilment. This reflection can lead to understanding and by communicating the results of the reflection with others, solutions to overcome the tensions might emerge. This process aims for thriving through awareness for non-conflicting strategies and is therefore called 'THANCS'.

Long Abstract

Quality of life for everybody now and in future has recently been used several times as being the central or at least one central aim of sustainable development (European Commission 2007; Eurostat 2009). Lane (1996) defines quality of life "as subjective well-being and personal growth in a healthy and prosperous environment". Here we can distinguish between two determinants of quality of life, an objective one relating to the environment and a subjective one relating to well-being and personal growth. We understand the objective side of quality of life as the capabilities a person has to fulfil his or her needs. The subjective side of quality of life can be understood as the perception of the fulfilment of the needs.

But what do we exactly mean with the concept of **needs**? The philosopher Finnis (Grisez, Boyle et al. 1987) has defined needs as the most fundamental dimension of human flourishing. In practice this means that actions to fulfil needs require no further reasoning, or,

put in other words, one could use the why-laddering (Wittmayer, Steenbergen et al. 2011): when, asked why you have done such and such action, you cannot answer it any more but with a term that fundamentally refers to your flourishing, then you are at the level of needs.

In this understanding, needs are an important internal driving force. In their essence, they are non-negotiable, as they are indispensable for the health and the well-being of people. Of course you can negotiate when and how to meet these fundamental needs, but not their fundamental importance for human well-being. Needs in this sense are universal in type, and therefore abstract. Examples for such needs are subsistence, participation, or freedom. Therefore, needs are neither sustainable nor unsustainable; they just are. The **strategies** to meet the needs, though, can be sustainable or unsustainable. The selection of the strategies depends on the values, the culture, the preferences, the resources and technologies available, the chances for realising the strategies etc. An example may help to see the (un)sustainability of strategies as well as their dependence on many factors: some people realize their need for freedom through driving with a Porsche on a German motorway without speed limit – others decide to live in a monastery to be free of mundane temptations.

The set of strategies herewith determines the lifestyle. These strategies can be related to the criterion of sustainability e.g. through the material consumption required to their implementation. Here, it is clear that the fundamental human need for subsistence requires material-rich strategies whereas other needs such as freedom or identity could be realised with strategies that require much less material than a SUV, a luxurious villa, or the newest I-thing. In this sense the choice of strategies and lifestyles with heavy ecological rucksacks has led to unsustainable development. But as strategies are negotiable (contrary to needs), other, more sustainable choices are possible.

As the strategies we implement neither necessarily realize all our needs nor concord with all our values, tensions occur in our daily life and even more in sustainability transitions.

We encounter sustainability-related **intra-individual tensions** when we experience an inner conflict between a strategy (or a set of strategies) that is prescribed or recommended by sustainable development and our usual (or alternative) behaviour. Examples of this are the inner conflicts on whether to use a bike or a car for personal mobility, or the question whether to fly to a conference, vacations etc.

Intra-societal tensions occur when needs of an individual or societal group that wants to pursue sustainable strategies in our society are affected by the strategies of other individuals or groups. An example could be the introduction of a “veggie day” in a specific organisation. The strategy of the group that proposes days with only vegetarian meals in a canteen affects the needs for identity and leisure of those who want to pursue eating meat.

Inter-generational tensions, finally, come about through certain societal strategies that, by caring for next generations, inhibit the realisation of current needs or, rather, vice versa. Examples for this is the societal practice of flying to holidays, conferences, business meetings

etc., or the practice of using resource intensive goods such as IT facilities – it is rather difficult in our societies to meet needs without the use of computers, mobile phones, or other IT devices. Especially this last type of tensions demonstrates that the distinction between these three types is somewhat artificial. Inter-generational tensions are uppermost intra-individual tensions as the next generations are not present yet. It is only through the intra-individual or intra-societal representation that the next generations get a voice and become heard.

In the paper we present a four-step process that first aims to acknowledge these tensions, second helps the participant to reflect upon the internal reasons for the tensions, third supports the communication of the reflection results to others, and fourth, introduces a process of creativity to find ways of dealing with or even overcoming the tension(s). This process aims for thriving through awareness for non-conflicting strategies and is therefore called ‘THANCS’ (developed by Omann and Rauschmayer 2011). In the full paper we include a small example of one of the authors in the presentation of the process and describe an exemplary group process afterwards.

In this abstract we shortly present the four steps.

1. When selecting or implementing a strategy, attachments to unsustainable practices can be perceived as feelings of uneasiness related to the value of sustainability. It is the aim of the first step to acknowledge these tensions. Cognitively, their perception may be facilitated by trying to communicate them to others such as close persons or to persons who chose the same or a similar strategy. Another possibility to become aware of these tensions is to recognise the resistance from others against one's own strategy. The active acknowledgement of everyday life tensions, e.g. between the comfort procured by using a car to drive to office and the wish to protect the environment, includes the analysis of strategies that are selected to realize one's needs. This acknowledgement may lead to a momentary decrease in well-being.
2. In the next step, participants reflect on the reasons for the tension: Why has the tension been triggered? Often, the cause is a conflict with several dimensions: habits, belief systems and convictions, values, and need prioritizations. As for the first step, no regulation or law can induce this inner reflection. But again, close persons, media, educational programs, and professional training such as coaching can support this step.

This second step requires a deeper reflection than the first one which focused on the strategies and the perception of tensions caused by their selection or implementation. Whenever the tensions appear within social decision processes, then reflections should not only comprehend the decision makers' dimensions, but also the needs, values, and convictions of those persons who are represented by this decision maker. An interpersonal exchange on these dimensions can increase the acceptance of decisions and lead to mutual understanding.

3. In step 3, the participant of the group process, being aware of the tension and of its causes, is starting to communicate with other persons about common tensions and strategies. Ideally, those are people concerned by the strategy and its implementation. In the case of an intra-individual conflict, communication can consist of writing down the results of the reflection in steps 1 and 2, or by talking about these results with a close person. It is important to look for a dialogue with concrete persons and to find a common language.
4. The first three steps serve to acknowledge, reflect and communicate the tensions in order to create awareness that there is far more than one strategy to meet a certain need. The fourth step helps developing alternative strategies that had not been considered before. Through the first three steps, we can more easily leave the narrow-mindedness of habitual behaviour. Implementing and experiencing new strategies requires a process of creativity (herewith, by the way, meeting the need for creativity) that can be organized on a personal as well as on a societal level. The fourth step hence aims that individuals effectively change their behaviour by implementing new strategies, ideally supported through political change and backed up by knowledge on how this newly elaborated strategy can contribute to sustainability transitions.

A high quality of life is, as we all know, not necessarily realized with the help of sustainable strategies. THANCS is introduced as a four-step process to deal with tensions that appear when realizing strategies, and particularly, when changing behaviour, mind-sets, culture or the systems in which people act. Combining THANCS and political actions would mean to start any intervention with reflecting on possible tensions, i.e. to acknowledge and deal with feelings, convictions and needs that are involved when people try to increase their quality of life.

References:

- European Commission. 2007. Progress Report on the Sustainable Development Strategy 2007. Brussels. COM(2007) 642 final.
- Eurostat. 2009. Sustainable development in the European Union - 2009 monitoring report of the EU sustainable development strategy. Statistical books.
- Grisez, G., J. Boyle, et al. 1987. 'Practical principles, moral truth and ultimate ends' in *American Journal of Jurisprudence* 32: 99-151.
- Lane, R. E. 1996. 'Quality of Life and Quality of Persons: A New Role for Government' in O. A. (Ed.) *In Pursuit of the Quality of Life*. New York: Oxford University Press: 256-293.
- Omman I, Rauschmayer F. (2011). Transition towards sustainable development: Which tensions emerge? How do deal with them? In *Sustainable Development: Capabilities, Needs, and Well-Being*, Rauschmayer, F., Omann, I. and Frühmann, J. (eds.). Routledge: London.

Wittmayer, J., F. v. Steenbergen, et al. 2011. The Community Arena: A co-creation tool for sustainable behaviour by local communities. InContext. Berlin.