Towards a Bioregional Model of Regenerative Communities and Transformative Learning

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Abstract

Regional, social and business models and communities are the foundation for sustainable transition. But what makes these communities and models truly tick? And what makes them truly sustainable and transformative? In this conceptual paper we unify two main concepts: bioregions and transformative learning, linking both to the regeneration of local social and ecological living ecosystems, going beyond sustainability. We advocate to use the landscape of regenerative bioregions as the place-based strategy context of multi-stakeholder organisational systems and the design of regenerative cultures.

We describe the design of a "support system" needed to help provide the connecting tissue for transformative change at a bioregional level. At its center is a Bioregional Regenerative Hub with a "Conversation as a Service" model (CAAS), facilitating "conversations that matter" in knowledge creation, learning, innovation and policy making. It facilitates the ecosystem of transformative movements, networks, communities, organizations etc. We describe how practitioners may co-create and collaborate in new movements, networks and communities and shift from individual to collective learning, supported by platforms designed for this purpose.

We propose three vital areas of shared commitment, needed to enact the radical, whole-system change needed: (a) consciousness (the Inner Work), (b) relationship (the Inter Work) and (c) impact (the Outer Work). We envision that learning will evolve from the individual to the collective, based on a next stage in human consciousness. And we promote Transformative Communities of Practice (TCoP) as a novel way of transforming 'new business models' towards regional regeneration.

Keywords

Bioregions, Regeneration, Transformative Learning, Hub, Transformative Communities of Practice

1. Introduction

Regional, social and business models and communities are the foundation for sustainable transition. There are many examples of these models and communities. For instance, regional circular economy business models and communities that work on policy issues.

But what makes these communities and models truly tick? And what makes them truly sustainable?

In this paper we will explore two additional aspects for regional business models: bioregions and transformative learning. We will clarify how the concept of regeneration has led us to these two aspects and we will introduce them based on knowledge and thinking of several thought leaders in this area. We will include some first concepts of our own, with the notion that we – just like regeneration and transformation movements- are just at the beginning of this process of gathering, learning and conceptualizing.

Parallel to design efforts on new business models, new thinking and knowledge in the field of sustainability - regeneration – has arisen. Regeneration is 'The New Sustainability' (J. Walter Thompson Intelligence, 2019). Doing no more harm to communities and ecosystems is no longer good enough. Regeneration is about the aim to have a positive - a regenerative - impact on the living complex adaptive (eco)systems we participate in.

Regeneration and regenerative leadership goes beyond ecosystem thinking. It also involves "the process of aligning one's own way of being, one's actions, ways of communicating and being in relationship with the wider pattern of life's evolutionary journey towards increasing complexity and coherence within the nested wholeness of community, ecosystems, biosphere and Universe we participate in" (Wahl, 2019).

Government policymaking is starting to look upon regenerative networks and communities addressing wicked problems, as key players in a transition and transformation to a more inclusive, green and open economy, wise democracy and sustainable society. National (Kennisprogramma Duurzaam Door) and international programs such as the Green Deal (European Commission) and the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations) emphasise the importance of and actively support collaboration between entities from different realms of society to address wicked problems (Kamm, 2019)

Re-patterning the future regeneratively requires the transformation of the whole playing field, the redesign of our economic system and our monetary system, and — ultimately — the collective redesign of the human presence and impact on Earth. The path towards achieving this is through myriads of locally attuned projects carefully adapted to the bio-cultural uniqueness of the places and bioregions we inhabit, and this requires global collaboration and solidarity (Wahl, 2016)

Regeneration increases the importance of regional approach. It also increases system complexity and the importance of interrelationship and intersubjective collaboration, for which individual and collective consciousness, learning and transformation is needed.

2. Landscape of Regenerative Bioregions

A regional approach involves not only geographical boundaries. It includes ecology, organizing principles and human behavior and consciousness.

Companies, governments, and civil society organizations all face the abyss of three great *divides*: the ecological divide, i.e., the disconnect between self and nature; the social divide, i.e., the disconnect between self and other; and the spiritual divide, i.e., the disconnect between self and self. We need to enter in the spirit of practice in all key dimensions of our lives, inner, interpersonal and outer. Innovations on the scale of the whole system are needed in order to address these divides (Scharmer, 2019).

We can't face today's disruption by turning backwards ("making X great again") but by leaning forward, by sensing and actualizing the future as it emerges. At the core of such a profound transformation is the awakening of curiosity (open mind), compassion (open heart), and courage (open will) as powerful antidotes to the self-limiting voices of doubt, cynicism, and fear that tend to keep us in the grip of the old. We need to come together with a radical

commitment to co-create and live on the basis of entirely new patterns as we emerge from networks to communities into systems of influence (Wheathly, 2019)

Against this background, the sustainability discipline is also shifting its focus from sustainability towards regeneration, from organizations (= microlevel) towards bioregions as complex living systems at the meso level (Reporting 3.0, 2019), from mono-capitalism to multi capitalism (McElroy & Van Engelen, 2012) and from context-free to context-based measurement and reporting (UNRISD, 2019)

But what is a bioregion? A bio-region is a land and water territory whose limits are defined not by political boundaries, but by the geographical limits of human communities and ecological systems. A bioregion is a way to describe the natural geography where one lives. It also identifies a locale for carrying out activities that are appropriate for maintaining those natural characteristics. Bioregions have distinct features such as climate, soils, landforms, watersheds, and native plants and animals. They have also been sites for adaptive long-term inhabitation by native peoples in the past, and they can be re-inhabited by their present occupants.

Bioregion refers both to a geographical terrain and a terrain of consciousness — to a place and the ideas that have developed about how to live in that place. Within a bioregion the conditions that influence life are similar and these in turn have influenced human occupancy.

We advocate to use the landscape of regenerative bioregions as the place-based strategy context of multi-stakeholder organisational systems and the design of regenerative cultures in complexity. The time is now to co-create a future where humanity has a regenerative impact on the planet while we also regenerate social cohesion, vibrant regional economies, and a rediscovered sense of meaning and purpose.
At the bioregional level, the social contract between Market (business), State (government) and the Commons is broken (Faber & Hadders, 2019) . This setting of multi-actors/ multi-stakeholders needs a new multicapital social contract for sustainability, with science as a fourth partner, where the focus is on "relational justice and fairness": distributive justice, procedural justice and interactive fairness for *all*. A bioregional social contract is all about collaboration and shared goals, shared measurement and shared tools between stakeholders. Multicapital social contracts need multicapital accounting, multicapital reporting and multicapital scorecards.

Bioregions that can demonstrate a strong commitment to a long-term, self-organizing collaboration among the ecosystem of movements, business, non-profit, governmental, academic, and other sectors are encouraged to explore becoming a *Regenerative Hub* within a regenerative communities network. This collaboration should include a basic commitment to the principles of a regenerative economy. Participation in the network and its services should come at no cost to those demonstrating a strong commitment to regenerative development. We propose a - "Conversation as a Service" (CAAS) model for such a hub facilitating services around "generative conversations that matter" in knowledge creation, deep listening, learning, innovation and policy making. The hub might use the concepts of a Table Democracy (Noorden Duurzaam, 2019) and perform functions like: transformational leadership support, community-based storytelling, hosting Regenerative Communities Platform, data mapping, measurement and metrics, learning, workshops and training etc.

To connect such a transformative ecosystem of entities, an ecosystem of transformative platforms is often needed and to be built with tools like the Platform Design Kit (Cicero, 2019). Smart ecosystem or bioregional (re)engineering needs the use of smart IT (Regen Network, 2019). Most of all, we need to reinvent democracy at the regional level by giving all stakeholders a voice and a vote to self-organize around sustainability agendas, laws,

electing representatives etc. Smart IT or blockchain has to provide the technical architecture for a <u>Global Social Network for Voters</u>, as a meta-layer for restoring democracy and open society (Firestone & Hadders, 2012). This network has to combine learning, innovation, knowledge creation, sustainability management and policy making at both the meso- and macro level.

3. Regenerative Learning in Landscapes of Practice

Out came a vision of a number of centers where information and models about resources and the environment are housed. These would need to be many of these centers, all over the world, each one responsible for a distinct bioregion. Donella Meadows (1983)

We are in a learning and educational crisis. The general structure of this crisis, the mismatch between the demands made on us by the world and the capabilities we have to work with is the greatest metacrisis of our time, characterizing the struggle of individuals, organizations and nation-states (Stein, 2019)

Many key challenges are primarily educational in nature. This is just another way of saying that changing the trajectory of the world-system requires changing how people think and act, which can only be done by finding ways to affect valued and needed transformations of human capabilities. Human development, learning and education are often the elephant in the room when it comes to calls for system-level change.

Sustainable systems are bioregional, local, and self-organizing, and we need a way to practice dancing with emergence in service to life systems on Earth. We need to "unlearn" and to learn anew the ways to live regeneratively even when there are not enough social support-systems available at present to make this transition (Brewer, 2019). Humans are built to learn; education, learning and human potential are infinite resources. The world we live in now is hypercomplex and crisis-ridden; this calls for new self-understanding and new forms of human capability. These require new forms of learning and education.

Do we love life deeply enough to have the curiosity to look into those complex conditions, to have the courage to turn towards each other in transformative communities of practice, and to have the competence to build a better future? We need a new trinity for our time: soil, soul and society to be brought about with our heads, hearts and minds.

We need to enter into the spirit of *practice* in all key dimensions of our lives. How to relate to life as practice as seen through the lens of wholeness instead of the perspective of the isolated, separate self-sense (the inner work)? How to deepen and intensify as a we-tribe (the interpersonal work). How to make a practical difference in our world (the outer work). Making the radical commitment necessary to awaken together from the consensus trance to co-create a new pattern.

The world we have known is disappearing and a new world is being born. Practitioners start to co-create and collaborate in new movements, networks and communities and start to shift from individual to collective learning (collective awakening, awareness and action): from communities of learners towards communities that learn, sense etc. We need to grow the competencies necessary to develop the "more beautiful world that our hearts know is possible." How to support and help facilitate this transformative vertical learning in small groups ? In the early 1980's Donella Meadows described how the only way she could find to make the transition to sustainability was to create bioregional learning centers around local living economies that respect ecological limits.

Within many bioregional initiatives we see people help design new forms of regenerative education and transformative learning by means of a bioregional Regenerative Learning Center (as part of the regional Hub) to help facilitate transformation of self, organizations/communities and societies. In the province of Drenthe with its two bioregions we collaborate with thought leaders like Noorden Duurzaam (Bootsma, 2018) and Politiek Netwerk Drenthe to help co-design such new concepts, constructs and innovations in the educational infrastructure (next to other innovations in the economic and governance infrastructure).

To meet the new challenges we face, we need social support services to equip people with the skills to cope, and to give priority to participatory discovery, and experiential learning. Within the bioregional knowledge ecology, the learning center often provides ecoliteracy education for children and schools, courses for adults etc. It also provides a safe learning and practice space for pioneers such as evolutionary change agents and ecosystem catalysts to help and support them to become better at what they do.

We need to transform the way we learn together in the future. Education is the cornerstone of democracy not because it produces human capital, but because it enables participatory citizenship and the full actualization of self. The focus is shifting towards teal and vertical learning (Laloux, 2014) and transcontextual and mutual learning (Bateson, 2017)

A special point of attention in our research is the shift from Communities of Practice (CoPs) (Wenger, 2015) towards Transformative Communities of Practice (TCoPs) (Por, 2019) We believe that TCoPs are going to play an important role in this transformation and transition. Relationships happen one on one. Relationships don't scale up, they scale sideways, from networks to communities to systems of influence as an attractor for a massive Game B tipping point. We need more of these inter-movement and cross-boundary learning conversations until the whole ecosystem of transformative "symmathesy" (Bateson, 2017) awakens with the buzzing joy of growing new capabilities for replacing our obsolete institutions. We need intersubjective awareness, awakening and aliveness; how would we act, if that intersubjective space has eyes?

4. Discussion

> *How can that happen? I wondered. How does a society develop the capacity to invent institutions and technologies that truly fit its own culture and environment? How can it filter through the inventions and impositions of the rest of the world and choose what really works in its own context? How can it learn enough about its own resources, environment, needs, and potentials? Does any society now have that capacity? What does such a capacity even look like? Donella Meadows (1983)*

In this short paper we made an attempt to better grasp a bioregional approach to regenerative hubs, regenerative communities and regional learning centers, combined with the domain of learning. In a context of multi-stakeholders collaboration and co-creation, we envision that learning will evolve from the individual to the collective, based on a next stage in human consciousness.

More serious research is needed to understand how people in collaborative hubs and communities work, play, learn and govern together in new settings of value co-creation. Further investigation is needed with a more systemic theoretical comparison of newly emerging regenerative hubs, learning centers hubs and TcoPs versus more traditional ways of organizing to illustrate in what way and to what extent these constructs are more appropriate to enhance new economic, governance and learning models. In our research we are especially focused on a shift of CoPs to Transformative CoPs and their role in the bioregional transformative journey. TCoPs are a novel way of next stage organizing and combined with new business models, we think they will help facilitate transformation towards regional sustainability and regeneration. Clearly, all this is an example of "work in progress" .

Our findings and knowledge claims to date are fully open for debate and in need of a most critical knowledge-claim evaluation.

The conceptual framework we proposed is linked to other international initiatives and it can come only alive if tested and applied in a "laboratory" of committed participants. In close collaboration with thought leaders like Politiek Netwerk Drenthe and Noorden Duurzaamwe we aim to create a living lab in the province of Drenthe. This contribution provides a number of theoretical/conceptual issues around bioregions and learning. We end this paper with a high level specification of three radical transformations needed and three critical "front-lines" to be further detailed later.

Communities of serious practitioners are needed in an existential inquiry that integrates the three vital areas of shared commitment, needed to enact the radical, whole-system change needed to bring our world back into balance: (a) consciousness (the Inner Work), (b) relationship (the Inter Work) and (c) impact (the Outer Work) (Patten, 2019)

(a) Consciousness (the Inner Work)

A conscious mind is an essential stepping stone for whole-system change. With a conscious mind individuals in the process continuously are in contact with their purpose and meaning and open to evolve as an individual. This is a precondition for developing a collective consciousness and evolving in bioregionalism. Unless our individual and collective consciousness are evolving, any new system will only reproduce the old problems in new ways (G.Por)

How to relate to Life as practice ? How to shift from the perspective of the isolated, separate self-sense to Life as a practice seen through the lens of Wholeness (Capra & Luisi, 2014) ? And to start appreciating and valuing the diverse values and points of view that contribute to our fullest and deepest expression, cooperation and service. These are amongst many others, essential self-reflection questions for the necessary inner work.

(b) Relationship (the Inter Work)

Building communities (regional, social, business) is all about inter-relationships. We tend to look at these inter-relations from a horizontal, lineair 'value chain' perspective. However, we need to deepen our we-space. We need to learn, practice and understand how it is affected by meditative depth, sensitivity, trust and intimacy as well as shared perspectives, values, agreements, and intentions. We need to cultivate and strengthen capacities to be with others, to see and be seen. Besides the horizontal development we are used to, we need this vertical development as well.

In order to make bioregional models 'tick', the dimension of inter-relationship between (conscious) human beings needs to be taken into account as well. Bioregionalism involves relational aspects and concepts. True transformation takes place when there is a shift from individual sensing and learning to collective sensing and learning .… while shifting from a community of learners to a community that learns collectively. The question is: How to participate in a "we" that is itself learning, evolving and awakening ?

(c) Impact (The Outer Work)

We live in a complex and uncertain world, and here we explore action and what it takes to make a meaningful practical difference in our world. How do you impact your world ? It is about commitment, responsibility, integrity, duties and obligations. Often the "outer " dimension of transformation is more often described than the interior "inner" one.

No system can be transformed in isolation from the other. We also need to learn to host platforms for galvanizing the vast ecosystem for change: platforms with cross boundary crossing collaboration. Making practices worth replicating accessible to other movements so they can give wings to the new story. No system can be transformed in isolation from the other. With outer work all this comes together.

(d) New Patterns

Through bioregional models of regenerative communities and transformative learning new patterns emerge. People come together in small groups (Block, 2007) to live on the basis of an entirely new emergent pattern and to constructively reassert wholeness. These patterns will make us choose to both (1) relate creatively and positively to an emergent future *as practitioners* through whom emergence might become possible, and (2) to engage change not just in political terms, but integral - on psychospiritual, relational, cultural and ecological terms as well. Here we co-create a new pattern and explore radical commitments. We will declare ourselves aspiring citizens of the heart and inhabit it together, and in the process learn what it takes.

We -as authors- see the contours of a new discipline arising that would emerge from the mutual learning across "symmasthesy - learning together in living systems - and warm data" (Bateson, 2017)), Platform Design Toolkit (PDT) -inspired "ecosystem catalyzing" (Cicero, 2018) and "Learning in Landscapes of Practice" (Wenger, 2015). Activists using warm datalabs to ground their collaboration in a broader, more interconnected view of reality could well be the source from which a truly new bioregional story may emerge.

Our closing statement: a bioregional approach and transformative learning, including inner, inter and outer work are important stepping stones towards 'ticking' regional business models and communities and true sustainable - regenerative- regions.

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